



### **China Gold *Searching for the golden takin***

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As we climbed a ridge in western China's Quin Lung Mountains – home of the fabled golden takin – we passed slowly from maples and hardwoods to aspen and then to thick bamboo. This was the exact reverse of the progression I would have expected, but at least I now understood how a wild animal could be colored bright gold. The ground and the forest floor were covered with fallen golden leaves. A whole herd of golden takin could stand on a bed of these and, just like a proverbial Cheshire cat, all you'd ever see would be their grins.

I, for one, wasn't grinning. After five hours of climbing, I was getting pooped. The sun was hot on our backs as we climbed. I really hadn't anticipated a sheep-type climb, so I had brought no water. To make matters more of a challenge, the bamboo was now so thick that it impeded our progress. We had to physically divide the bamboo to create an opening and continue climbing. Even then, we weren't sure of our footing.

### **Hooked**

The whole thing began at an SCI convention. There, I turned a corner and came face to face with a mounted golden takin. It was a real show-stopper, and I marveled at it. It was glowing like spun gold, exotic and infinitely desirable. It was chunky and powerful, with small rear legs and big, bulging front shoulder muscles. I was hooked, right there, right then.

Golden takin are found exclusively in a small area of far western China that is visited by few Western sportsmen. Only five to seven permits are issued each year by the Chinese government. Therefore, the number of golden takin in the SCI Record Book is quite small – currently, I believe, there are still fewer than 10 entries.

### **Silicon Valley Hunt**

Our hunt began in October 2001 with a comfortable flight from San Francisco to Beijing. My wife, Pam, and I did the usual tourist sightseeing and tried to adjust to the time difference. We toured Xian extensively and even viewed its famed terra-cotta warriors. We were steeped in Tang Dynasty lore – including a Las Vegas-style Tang floor show, complete with flowing costumes and the de rigueur Asian teahouse in the background.

Xian had been the capital of China during the Tang Dynasty, and much of what we saw there proudly reflected its past imperial glory. At one point in history, the beautiful bell tower in Xian's center (from which roads radiate like the spokes of a wheel) was the center of China and, arguably, the civilized world, as well. On a more modern note, Xian today is a center for medical research, hosting several universities, as well as China's version of California's Silicon Valley.

After several days in Xian, we began our westward journey to the Qin Lung Mountains. The events of Sept. 11 were only a few days in the past, so we were accompanied everywhere by a police escort. The little police car that preceded us showed no reluctance – and, indeed, perhaps perverse pleasure – in using its siren and flashing roof lights at the slightest provocation, clearing the road of traffic for us.

As we rode along, Wang told us that some recent takin hunters had had some pretty tough luck. The takin female is often as large as the male, and it is problematic for someone not intimately familiar with the takin to tell the male from female. The horns, as in the case of the Rocky Mountain goat, are quite small, so it is easy to mistake male for female in the heavy cover where takin are usually found. Consequently, these hunters had inadvertently shot females. However, because I had booked a seven-day hunt, I wasn't too concerned. I would have plenty of time to sort things out.

The road began to climb, and Wang further explained it had been cut by the People's Liberation Army in the mid-1950s. It was considered a major avenue for military supplies in case of operations in Tibet or India. This may have been the initial situation, but the chuckholes our driver dodged would have swallowed up a medium tank without difficulty. We were told that because of what was considered the militarily sensitive nature of the area, only a handful of foreigners had ever been admitted.

### **The Ritz It Ain't**

Late in the afternoon, we pulled into the village of Foping. Our cars stopped in the courtyard of what we immediately dubbed the "Foping Hilton." Painted in a faded yellow, the hotel had obviously seen much better days, and a faint odor of uncollected garbage pervaded the air.

During dinner, our guide, Tiger, told me it had been raining the entire week prior to our arrival. The next day was the only one we could count on to be clear before the heavy rains resumed. Therefore, in practical effect, we were looking at a one-day hunt. It was do or die.

### **Hit or Miss?**



**The great bell tower of Xian. Roads emanate from it like the spokes of a wheel, at one time uniting China.**



**Tang Dynasty floor show**



**Author with golden takin which is a powerful, chunky animal, and surprisingly broad. It is quite a bit heavier than the Rocky Mountain goat.**



**The Chinese were very hospitable and friendly. After posing with their corn, this village family invited us in for tea and cookies.**

Tiger knocked on our door about 4:30 a.m., with the sky still the deepest black. We pulled on our boots (shaking them out first), brushed our teeth and wended our way down the hall. After a surprisingly good breakfast, we gathered our gear and ourselves together and drove out of Foping up into the National Forest. For once, thankfully, the police escort jeep did not use its siren.

The terrain was quite steep, but quite beautiful in the dawning light. Streams cascaded down mountainsides. Buddhist shrines nestled among the hills, and the vibrant reds and golds of autumn maples glowed everywhere. Narrow fields hosted shocked cornstalks standing in rows, highlighted by morning dew or frost. We stopped at the base of a 2,000-foot ridge from which Forest Service personnel fanned out like flushing quail.

I was told that golden takin were so rare (maybe 5,000 total) that there was a Forest Service officer detailed exclusively to track and protect them. I had thought takin needed little day-to-day protection but was told that progressive habitat loss is an ongoing problem. Additionally, I was surprised that Tiger evidently knew exactly where the main body could be found and was in radio contact with the Forest Service observer.

We proceeded up a track that local residents supposedly skipped up. I was heartened by this and, in fact, the first 20 feet were quite level. The first two hours passed in climbing a slowly increasing slope, but nothing too rigorous.

A rushing river in a deep gorge paralleled our path. I estimated the gorge at 300 to 400 feet deep and about 600 feet on the far side, which was somewhat higher than where we hiked. The stream in the bottom of the draw consisted of apple-green water and white foam. Tall maples hung precariously over the canyon edge, shading the gorge.

As we plodded up the trail, Tiger grabbed my arm and excitedly whispered, "Takin!"

There, standing in the shadows under the lip of the canyon on the far side, stood an adult takin. As it observed us with bovine calm, I took Tiger's backpack and laid it on a stump in the bend of the trail. I asked him if the takin was a good one. It was.

I laid the .340 over the pack and realized the stump was too high for a prone shot but too low for a kneeling shot – somewhat clumsy. Nevertheless, I had a good sight picture and squeezed off at the 250-yard-distant takin. Tiger announced a miss.

I responded that it was impossible to miss a standing broadside shot like that. Tiger looked again through the binocular. The takin was leisurely hauling itself over the canyon rim, so Tiger reiterated that he was sure the shot had been a miss.

Because we had checked the zero quickly the night before, my suspicion was that the powerful .340 Weatherby had, in fact, punched right through the takin. Tiger, on the other hand, said he had seen dirt kick up under the takin. I commented that if the bullets had just punched through, they would appear just so.

The hillside was crawling with Forest Service officers, so I asked Tiger to radio anyone who could see the animal and find out if it looked odd, was limping or appeared wounded. Tiger told me that an officer had observed the takin join its herd and go galumphing off uphill for quite a distance, apparently untouched.

I was still not satisfied and suggested we climb until we could ford the creek. We could then descend the far side

and look for any blood trail. Tiger recommended otherwise because we had only one day to hunt. Furthermore, he was sure I'd missed. Several Forest Service officers joined us in our now rather heated debate. They all agreed with Tiger and received my doubts with rising indignation. Finally, outnumbered about eight to one, I gave in and said if they were that certain, we wouldn't cross the creek.

The morning was turning hot and muggy, and we had a really tough climb in front of us. Apparently, spooked takin simply climb until they run out of mountain, and it was a long way to the summit.

As I levered myself up a particularly steep section, my left foot slipped. Something in my left knee gave out, and I fell again, heavily. I couldn't figure out what had happened. There was no strength in my knee, no control of my leg movements without conscious thought, and my leg wanted to hyperextend. On the other hand, I had no particular pain.

I was getting my second wind, however, and resolved that left knee or no, I wasn't going to be the

laughingstock of the Chinese Forest Service. I looked up and saw Tiger only a few yards above me on the ridge summit. I climbed up, right foot first, negotiating the fallen logs, stumps and bamboo, and finally reached the ridgeline.

As we caught our breath, Tiger told me the takin had come to rest in a swale about a kilometer up the ridge. Tiger had some cold meat and apples, and as I rested and devoured the apples, their moisture revived me.

We got up and began moving along a well-worn ridgeline trail. Walking was fairly easy and – apple-fueled – I began to feel better. There was a small, pine-covered knob about 300 yards this side of where the main body of takin had bedded. We hoped to get there and spot the herd in the swale below the knob, thereby setting up for a nice downhill shot. It was now 3 p.m., and shadows were beginning to lengthen.



**Bamboo forest.**

### **Gut-Buster Bust**

We hobbled along at a fairly decent clip, eventually reaching the knob and entering the foliage canopy. Tiger was about 10 yards in front of me. As we began a slow descent, he suddenly turned toward me and yelled, "Takin! Hurray! Shoot!"

I pulled the rifle off my shoulder and cranked a .340 into the chamber. I could see a patch of yellow below me and danced to one side to get a clear, safe shot. I had a quick glimpse of something very big and gold with startled black eyes diving into the foliage to my right. Tiger yelled that there were two more but that the first was female.

### **"Shoot the second one!"**

I spotted the second takin as it looked up at me with coal-black eyes and horns. I put the crosshairs on the clearly visible point of the outside shoulder for a plunging shot down into the heart and fired.

The takin dropped so hard that it seemed to bounce. Tiger let out a whoop of joy and ran down while I threaded my way over limbs, deadfalls, huckleberries and deep bamboo.

When I got to the fallen takin, Tiger seemed rather quiet. He explained that the big males are usually the last to spook, letting females and the young precede them. In this case, though, and contrary to all experience, the big male had bolted first. The takin I had shot was a representative male specimen roughly eight years old, with a perfect coat – but it wasn't a huge trophy. Tiger was clearly disappointed.



There isn't much one can say or do under these circumstances. I had made the shot, and I had to take responsibility. Taking a snap shot in very heavy cover with someone yelling, "Shoot!" is probably not the wisest thing I've ever done. I therefore sincerely thanked Tiger for his concern and noted that we had a nice golden takin. If it wasn't a gut-buster, at least it was a representative male with a soft, rich, orange-sherbet/golden coat.

It was now 4:30 and, after dragging the 400-plus-pound takin to a more open area for pictures, my chief concern was to get down the mountain because my leg was really bothering me. Leaving Forest Service officers to take care of the cape and highly prized meat, we took off – straight down. Despite numerous slips and slides, we made reasonable time. Pam danced lightly in the path I bulldozed as I labored through bamboo, berries, deadfalls, stumps, springs and other assorted obstacles.

### **Return to Foping**

About two hours later, we spied the lights of the Land Cruiser, where Wang was waiting to congratulate us. We drove back to Foping in the dark. Behind us, the warm air collided with cold air from Tibet, and vivid flashes and sheets of lightning ripped through the sky.

The weather showed no prospect of improvement, so we jounced and bounced our way to Xian and flew on to Beijing. Then it was back to foggy, cool and welcoming San Francisco.

In retrospect, I could have wished for a bigger takin. But that's life, and I am content to have had the experience and good fortune to acquire one of the world's rarest trophies. And the beautiful golden takin has become a very special and unique addition to my trophy room.