

... Montana ...  
**WILD SHEEP**  
FOUNDATION  
KEEPING SHEEP ON THE MOUNTAIN

# WildSheep

Winter 2020 | Volume 28, Issue 1

**Cover: Feature Story**

*Time & Effort Pay Off*

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All contributed material will be published at the discretion of the Editorial Board of the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation (MTWSF). The Editorial Board consists of the editor of the newsletter, the executive director of the chapter, and the president of the chapter.

**Cover photo credit** - Riley Pearson

## CONNECT with Montana WSF


Visit us online at [www.montanawsf.org](http://www.montanawsf.org)!

While there, visit the **Photo Gallery** page. If you would like to have a picture posted, email ([photos@montanawsf.org](mailto:photos@montanawsf.org)) your name, the photo (jpeg format preferred) along with a brief one to two sentence description of the hunt.



The Montana Wild Sheep Foundation will give a reward of up to \$1000 for information leading to the arrest and conviction of cases involving the illegal taking of bighorn sheep in the State of Montana. If you have information of any illegal act, contact 1-800-TIP-MONT (1-800-847-6668).

## HAVE YOU LIKED US ON FACEBOOK?

 Besides our newsletter, you can stay up to date on news, activities & current events by visiting our Facebook page:

[www.facebook.com/MontanaWildSheepFoundation](http://www.facebook.com/MontanaWildSheepFoundation)

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# President's Message

*I hope this message finds you well and that your Holidays were full of joy. I especially hope that you had a very successful hunting season. I didn't draw any special permits this year so I put all of my backcountry time into chasing elk in the Selway Bitterroot wilderness. We had some great opportunities to get an elk during bow season, but I was unable to get a shot. I spent many days filled with quality time with my hunting partners in some of the wildest country in the lower 48 states. Even though we didn't bag an elk during our hunts I am reminded that the pursuit is 99 percent of why I love to hunt. Our success was found in camaraderie, in the communing with God's unblighted wilderness and our safe return to our families.*

As a Montana Wild Sheep Foundation (MTWSF) board member I have to remind myself that our successes as a chapter have to be measured in our journey as well. As our fundraiser and banquet approaches on February 28th and 29th I am reminded that MTWSF is building funds so that our chapter will be prepared when a land purchase or wild sheep transplant opportunity arises. Know that we are working to accomplish both of those things in the near future and those two projects will take a substantial amount of resources to accomplish.

MTWSF is continuing to reach out to the Montana legislature and Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks (MTFWP) with other collaborative stakeholders to push for new transplants of wild sheep into approved areas where risk is at a minimum. Our chapter is also working to help purchase more strategic properties that will enhance habitat and public access in perpetuity. **Make sure to go to our website and purchase a ticket to the fundraiser and banquet on February 28th and 29th at the Billings Convention Center and Hotel <https://MTWSF2020.givesmart.com>.** This event will help us all build memories and resources to accomplish the objectives our chapter has set to achieve.

*Shane Clouse*

Montana Wild Sheep Foundation President  
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## ANNUAL BANQUET & LIFE MEMBER RAFFLE

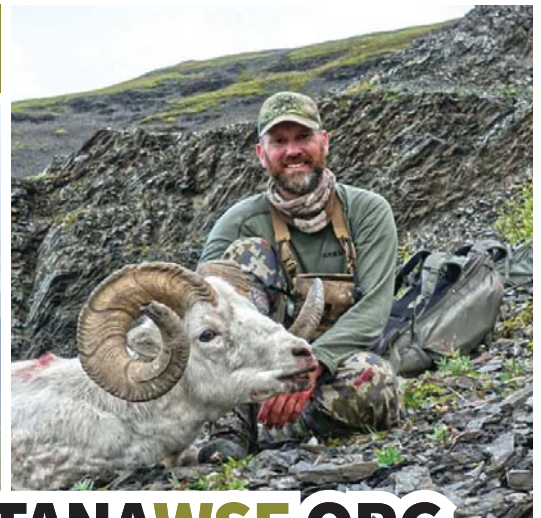


SPONSORS



**BECOME A LIFE MEMBER** of the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation today for your chance to WIN! In the month of August, you will venture into the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge with Ovis Outfitters on a 10 day, one-on-one, backpack style hunt. This remote and untouched wilderness is the perfect setting for stalking monster rams in the Brooks Range. Caribou, wolf and fishing are available as add-ons. Hunters are expected to be in good physical shape.

## PAST WINNERS



[MONTANAWSF.ORG](http://MONTANAWSF.ORG)





**ALL TICKET SALES MUST BE PURCHASED AT:** [www.MTWSF2020.givesmart.com](http://www.MTWSF2020.givesmart.com)

All tickets purchased online (Raffle & Saturday Banquet) will be held for pickup at the registration table at the event.

**FRIDAY - February 28, 2020 (Exhibitors are open 7pm - 10pm)**

**7pm MEMBERSHIP MEETING & SOCIAL**

General Membership meeting and Social with exhibitors. Friday Only Raffles & Prizes.

*The FRIDAY EVENING EVENT is open to all, FREE OF CHARGE!*

*Appetizers provided and \$25 MTWSF bottomless pint glasses of available.*

**8pm STORIES WITH STHEALTHY HUNTER – Ryan Lampers**

Evening of stories– STHEALTHY Hunter & Hunt, Harvest, Health Podcast.

*“Stories are what connect us all. Our stories define the deeper meaning of why this lifestyle is important to us and tackle topics that we can all relate to when it comes to nature, health, and the relationships we have with them. These roots run deep.”*



**SATURDAY - February 29, 2020 (Exhibitors are open 9am - 6pm)**

**9am Statewide Bighorn Research – Prairie Population Transplant Opportunities & Missouri River Breaks**

Dr. Robert Garrott - Montana State University (No tickets required, Exhibitors Open)

**10am Statewide Bighorn Research – Genetics Pilot Project Update (no tickets required, Exhibitors Open)**

Dr. Robert Garrott - Montana State University

**11am To be Determined (No tickets required, Exhibitors Open)**

**3pm Social with Exhibitors - We are opening the doors EARLIER THIS YEAR!!**

*\*\*\$25 for a MTWSF pint glass with all the beer you can drink!!! Appetizers. A no-host full bar.*

**6pm ANNUAL FUNDRAISER Dinner & Auction**

Silent & Live Auction, Raffles, Dinner – All Auction Items & TICKETS here: [www.MTWSF2020.givesmart.com](http://www.MTWSF2020.givesmart.com)

**WE WILL SELL OUT SO PURCHASE YOUR TICKETS ONLINE ASAP!!**

- Adult Dinner Ticket @ \$75 Each
- Youth Dinner Ticket @ \$40 Each
- Table Sponsor @ \$1,000 Each \*Includes (8) tickets and YETI Tundra 45 Custom MTWSF Cooler

[www.MTWSF2020.givesmart.com](http://www.MTWSF2020.givesmart.com)

**PREMIUM RAFFLE TICKETS – Many more available during the fundraiser, but these are our favorites!!**

- **CUSTOM RIFLE @\$20 Each** - PROOF Research .30 Nosler w/ Defiance Action & Zeiss Z4 4-16x44 scope. Only (400) Tickets available at \$20 each. Need not be present to win. Can be purchased before banquet.
- **SHEEP CAMP @\$10 Each or 12/\$100** - MT Canvas Wall Tent, Riley Stove, Sleeping Bags, Cots, Camp Gear Only (400) Tickets available. Need not be present to win. Can be purchased before banquet.
- **YETI RAMBLER PACKAGE:** (40) YETI Ramblers with MTWSF logo will be sold only on banquet night. Each includes (1) Premium Raffle Ticket for a Kimber Mountain Ascent, Zeiss Scope & \$100 worth of Bucket Raffle Tickets. Ramblers are \$300 each and only (40) will be sold. Must be present to win.
- **TAXIDERMY RAFFLE:** Bring in a wild sheep mount for display and you are entered to win a rifle. Must be present to win.
- **A.T.F. RAFFLE:** A Fine Whiskey, box of Cigars and a Firearm. Tickets sold only at the banquet. Must be present to win.
- **NEW MEMBER RAFFLE:** One new member who joined in the past year will win a rifle. Need not be present to win.
- **LIFE MEMBER RAFFLE:** One Life Member in the audience will be drawn for a fully guided **2020 Alaska Dall Sheep Hunt** with OVIS Outfitters in August 2020. All LIFE MEMBERS in the mix. Must be present to win. Only transferable to another Life Member also present. To Join as a Life Member visit <https://montanawsf.org/>

Raffle tickets cannot be purchased with credit cards. Cash, Check or Debit Card only as required by MT Law.

# *Time and Effort Pay Off*

Story by: Riley Pearson





***I grew up in Western Montana, about 30 miles east of Missoula near a place that some sheep enthusiasts may have heard of. The Fall seasons of my childhood and high school were spent hunting deer and elk on the slopes above Rock Creek, mediocre hunting for my quarry, but famed for Bighorn Sheep. I would see them, some of them very large - often. They would rut on the hillside above the house and occasionally slam heads in the yard. I was just a kid when Jim Weatherly killed the largest Bighorn Ram ever taken by a hunter in the world (at that time).***

In what must have been 2000 or 2001, young me was on Babcock Mountain with my mother, who had drawn a 210 Mule Deer buck tag. As we sat silently in the snow, a group of bighorns came right up to us. I remember it like it was yesterday.

At that time, I didn't understand exactly what was so special about wild sheep. I did know that I wanted to hunt one, and I knew in the back of my mind that one day I would.

By 2003 I was old enough to get my own hunting licenses. I applied for a ewe license behind the Stimson Lumber Company mill in Bonner, and I drew. Success was found on that hunt, and the following years were spent hunting deer and elk and applying for Rock Creek for sheep. In 2005, the 210 Gods blessed me with the moose tag, but the ram tag never came.

By the summer of 2014, I was a newly married, 23 year old Land Surveyor who had just moved to Billings. I had spent as much time as physically and financially possible over the prior 10 years hunting elk, and I was ready for a new challenge. Having already been in the Beartooth Mountains a few times, I knew it was a place I wanted to see more of. I was keenly aware of the dismal draw odds of ever obtaining a Bighorn tag via Montana's lottery, so I did what seemed logical. In 2015, I kissed my bonus points goodbye and purchased a license for an unlimited unit in the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness. I had no idea what I had just started.

I scouted a few times that summer and I purchased better gear as I could afford it. By late summer I had a plan and a partner to go in with opening week. I would learn some lessons on that trip. The first was how to change seized and rusted, 15-year-old ball joints on an ATV, on the side of a mountain trail with minimal tools. The second, was a lesson that the Beartooth teaches nearly every year around opener. It was the lesson of being prepared for any and all types of weather at 10,000 feet. The days leading up to the September 15th season opener were beautiful. We were even able to glass up a few sub legal rams. Indian Summer quickly turned into a soaked in rainstorm the evening before opener, which turned to an ice storm, then a

snow storm that would persist for days. After several days of sheltering in a small, inadequate tent, with no sign of clearing in the forecast before we had to get back to work, we tucked our tails and hiked out in snow over our knees. It was white out conditions, requiring us to use GPS to find the narrow mountain pass that would lead to the trailhead.

I would hunt for sheep more that season, and take a beautiful wolf in the process, but a legal ram was never seen.

That year's hunts left me wanting more. I also wanted to be more prepared, have better equipment for the weather and go on a hunt that would be longer, both in distance and time. I talked to everybody I could about these units. I read research thesis, and observed rams on their winter range. In late spring a buddy and I took a multi night snowshoe trip in to try to locate rams on their winter range. This was a productive trip. It was my first time seeing a legal ram in the unit. Now I just needed to find one in the unit during hunting season.

The summer of 2016 was full of planning and scouting, which led to a hunt plan for opener that consisted of hiking into a remote group of mountain peaks, and systematically hunting basin to basin, in hopes of finding a ram. On the seventh morning of the hunt, after enduring another Beartooth opener blizzard, and a 25-mile hike, with great elevation gain and ice covered, glacial moraine boulder fields to get to this ridgeline, Bob Horne and I found what we had come for. Catching the morning sun, in a high alpine basin were 5 bighorn rams. Three of these rams were easily legal  $\frac{3}{4}$  curl. One was noticeably larger than the others. A broomed off ram that still broke the bridge of his nose with his horns. I could tell through the spotter that he was 10+ years old. I would later learn that he was 13 or 14 and was believed to be dead, as he had not been seen in surveys or on the winter range for several years. This was a ram of many lifetimes.

After a half day stalk, and hours waiting for the right combination of the ram to be in a shootable position, and the Beartooth winds to not be ripping so hard, I settled in behind my rifle. I botched the shot. I don't know why or what happened but I missed and the ram

## *Time & Effort Pay Off continued from page 7*

and his cohorts disappeared into the rock. Little did I know then, that it would be over 3 years before I would take my safety off on a ram again.

I jumped what I believe to be the same ram I missed, 10 days later, while carelessly moving glassing positions through a stand of scrub pine. We locked eyes at under 30 yards and he vanished like a flash before I could even come close to being able to shoot. The following weekend, I made the hard decision to not shoot a pretty looking 6 or 7 year old ram that I found in a good spot to kill, all by himself. After seeing what was out there, I really wanted an older ram. I was also starting to really learn the area and thoroughly enjoy myself. By this point, I had made enough contacts that had killed sheep in the unlimiteds to hear all about the dreaded 7 year wait, something that I decided I was in no hurry to experience for just any ram. I was seeing ewes nearly every time I went out, and one late October morning, caught a glimpse of a large ram in a band of 4 working his way across a cliff ledge. It was too far, too windy, the rams were too close together, and the fall it would take even if I could hit it was too much. No shot was attempted, but my hopes and motivation were at an all-time high. I knew it would come together, but I never imagined how many more trips it would take. I hunted for a total of 35 days in 2016, trying to get another opportunity at an old ram. This windy morning on the cliff ledge with the out of range rams would be the last time for 37 months that I would see a legal ram in the district, during season. I finished off the season through November, taking another wolf and hunting the last day at nearly 11,000 feet, which is quite an experience that late in the year.

In January of 2017, I headed to Reno, Nevada for the Sheep Show. Things have a funny way of working themselves out. After the misfortunes and difficult decisions of the 2016 season, I was the lucky winner of the Gana River Outfitters <1 club dall sheep hunt. This hunt is chronicled in the WSF film 'Kicked Out'.

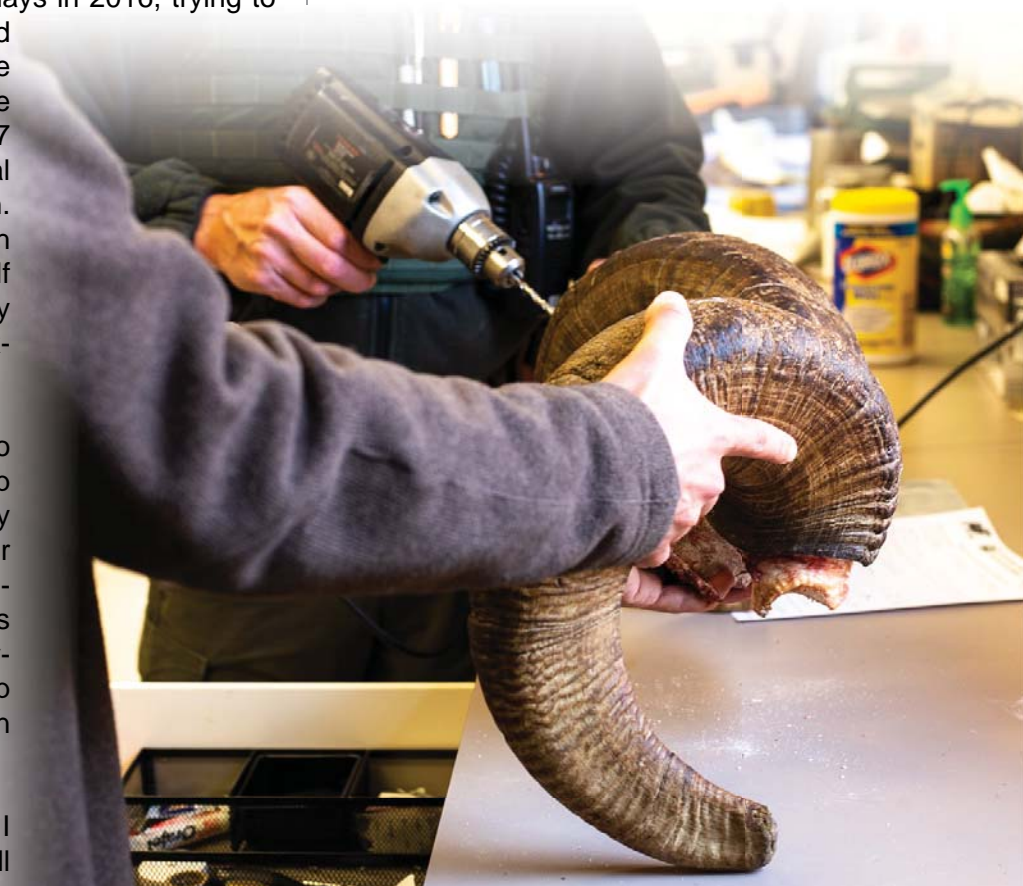
By the summer and fall of 2017, I had just started a new job as well

as spent 17 days in the Northwest Territories. I would not be hunting bighorns near as much as I wanted.

After a successful summer scouting trip that turned up a band of rams, with a 5 day window to hunt at opener, my friend Brian and I headed into where we felt we had the best odds of finding a ram. The weather was....you guessed it; a downpour turned snowstorm. It snowed and snowed some more. A few days in, it began to clear and we headed for a high plateau to glass. To our surprise there was a camp there. This was my first time seeing someone off of the trail in the backcountry, and I was a bit caught off guard with not much of a plan B.

This was not the last time I'd see this motivated ram hunter, which is fine because we have become well acquainted since, and worked together on covering the country the following two years. After devising a bit of a plan, we worked through some country and eventually dropped out to the trail and headed for the truck. That trip was as cold as September can get, and didn't yield any sheep sightings for us.

I hunted as time allowed for the rest of the season, without much to show for it.





Coming into 2018, I felt confident that I just needed some good weather and some time and I would have a great chance at taking a ram. This trip would be with my friend Isaac, whom I'd hunted sheep with a few times the past couple years. 2018 was beautiful weather. On a 12 day trip it was nasty for one day. That day wasn't even bad, we just lost visibility from fog. That trip was a 40+ mile loop, which consisted of lengthy trail miles on both ends and slow, methodical hunting in between. Our glass yielded one ewe and one lamb. There was almost no sheep sign on the mountain either. I could not have been more wrong in my confidence of success. Perhaps my luck in this area was coming to an end, just as I was learning it well enough to know the important things. Things like the knowledge of what couloirs and chutes were passable and what wasn't, where the water sources were, where to get out of the wind to set up a tent, etc.

The 2018 season came to a quick close with the filling of the quota a couple days after our hunt ended.

2019 found me as a nonresident, living in Arizona while my wife pursues her doctorate in the medical field. Thankfully, I was able to secure a great job, with ample vacation time. After helping as a packer in the Chugach Mountains in August for a dall sheep outfitter, my legs were feeling pretty good for someone living at a whopping 1100 feet.

September 2019 found Isaac and I back in familiar country, hoping that the lack of sheep we experienced the year prior was a fluke. We would spend 10 days, most of them behind the glass in some great country, on this trip. There was a thunder-snow storm mid-hunt that kept us on edge as we camped well above timberline, but it mainly skirted around us, rocking the other side of the drainage. A big snow storm came in for the end of the hunt, keeping us in the tent on the last day. We headed for the truck in near zero visibility with big, wet flakes coming down. During our down time the last couple evenings of this trip we began discussing the 2020 plan. Having only seen a handful of ewes a few mornings prior, our plan for 2020 would be to mix it up a bit, and explore some country that we had never been in.

As the season dragged on, and the quota remained open, it became apparent that we didn't need to wait until 2020 to hunt sheep again. I booked a flight to Billings for November and crossed my fingers. That week arrived, agonizingly slow, and with an open quota.



The trip would be 5 days, half as long as we would like. The forecast predicted decent temperatures and clear skies for the first few, then some snow and sub zero lows to close out the trip. Our packs were heavy for such a short trip, due to the gear needed for Winter in the mountains. We hoisted them onto our backs at the trailhead before daylight and began hiking up the trail. The day I've been waiting for came on a Friday around noon. We sat down to do some glassing in a spot where a lot of country could be seen in many directions. I got comfortable on my foam pad and put my binoculars on my tripod. I quickly scanned a few cliff ledges and open faces, then turned my attention to glass a little knob that was facing the sun and the wind. This knob was mostly void of snow and covered in grass. As I settled my binoculars on this area, I realized that there was a ram laying in the middle of my field of view. He was tucked in behind some trees, just laying there eating some grass and soaking in the sun. I knew immediately that he was legal, but needed him to turn his head to get a better idea on size and age. I quickly switched out binoculars for my spotting scope. As he turned his head side to side while chewing on his lunch, it was immediately obvious that he was a great ram and at least 8 years old.

It wouldn't be long before I would be laying behind my rifle and the ram would be standing broadside to feed. A few moments later the ram would lay down on the talus mountainside for the last time and take a few final breathes. The work involved to get to this moment took a marathon of effort and determination, and now

## Time & Effort Pay Off *continued from page 9*

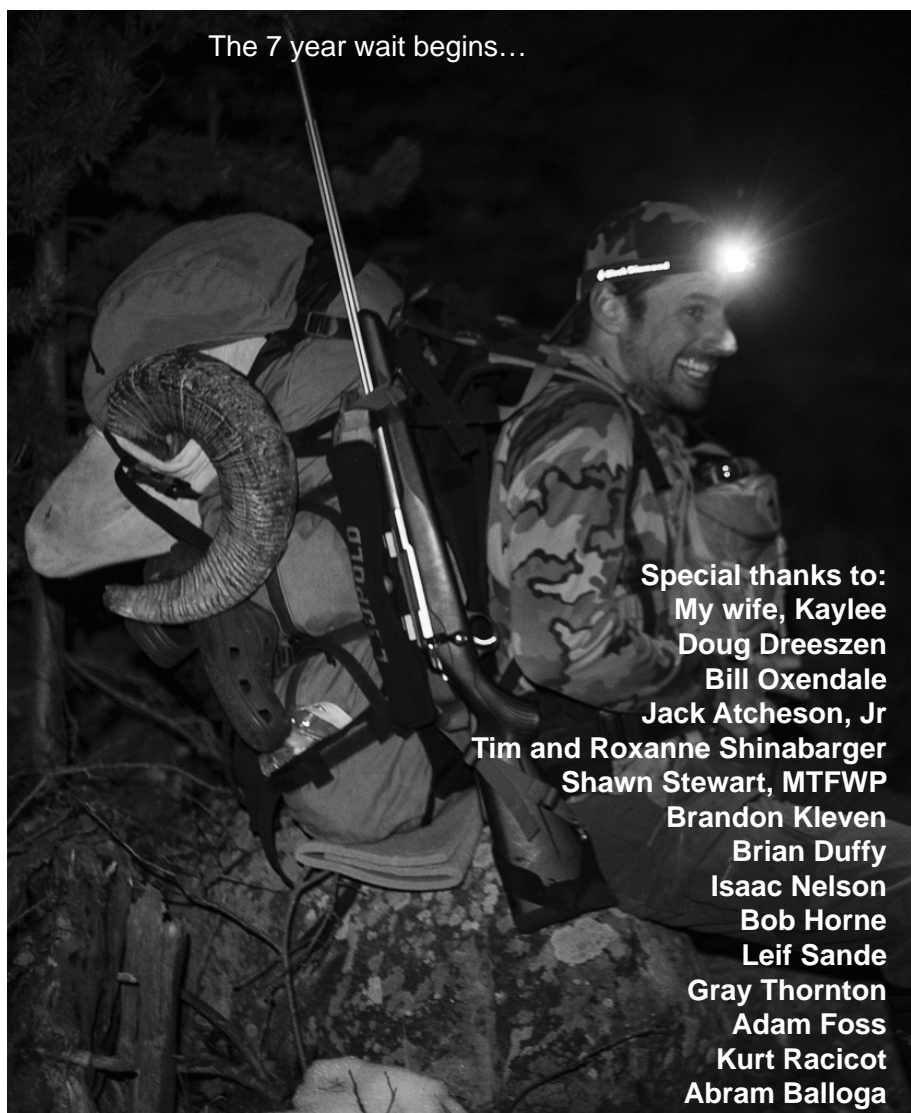
it was over. His annuli, which smell of pine sap from a lifetime of timber living, show that he is 10 years old – everything I could hope for.

A heart breaking miss, countless miles hiked, difficult decisions on whether or not to shoot, over 100 days of hunting, dozens more of scouting, hours that amount to days of scouring Google Earth, researching sheep ecology, bouncing endless ideas off friends and acquaintances, lightning storms, blizzards, wolf tags filled, grizzly bear encounters, wearing everything from sunscreen and sunglasses to crampons, snowshoes and ski goggles. I've slept under the stars on clear nights and been locked in a 1 man Hilleberg alone for 40 hours waiting out the most hellacious snow storm I've ever seen in October. I've watched a friend catch himself with his ice axe just feet before falling to what would be certain death on a glacier. I stared in disbelief during my first encounter with a wolverine as it approached our tent on a barren plateau. Stranger yet, I've stumbled across a preacher man during an Easter snowstorm, with a horse and a dog, living off the land in a lean-to, wearing handmade leather clothes, sharing scripture from a leather-bound Bible. Over a year later, I read in the paper that he was found deceased by snowmobilers on a high mountain pass, dozens of miles away after succumbing to hypothermia. That summer, while scouting for sheep, Bob and I rounded a bend in a trail and walked right into his belongings he had left behind, including saddle, with the Bible still attached to the horn. Unbeknownst to us, the horse Grace, had been rescued just up the trail the day prior after spending several months alone, fending for herself.

That fall, I befriended an elderly gentleman with his dog that was unable to speak due to his cancer diagnosis and treatment. He was hunting deer and black bear out of a packed-in drop camp along the trail in late October. We worked together for 4 days, communicating with hand signals and a note pad. He graciously shared his meals of sausage and bacon with me around the light of his lantern, inside the toasty wall-tent he was making home. He shared his last days of hunting in his life with me, and passed away shortly after. That is a heavy

thing for me to think about.

This adventure has lead me to having mountain goat kids unknowingly walk nearly into my lap in the summer. I've misjudged the depth of snow and gone into the highcountry without snowshoes or skis, post holed for 14 hours to reach a destination that should take 6, arriving so exhausted, cramped, wet and cold, it was all I could do to set my tent up in the battering winds and get through the night. I've laid awake listening to the lonely howl of a distant wolf, and sprang from my tent, rifle in hand to fend off a nosy grizzly bear, just to find the ruckus outside to be a group of goats beside camp. This hunt started as a desire to hunt a ram, and became a time consuming, expensive, lifelong obsession that has consumed my thoughts, my vacation time, my wife's patience and at times, my sanity. I don't think I will ever get enough of the Beartooth Mountains or the few sheep that carve out an existence there. 🍷



The 7 year wait begins...

**Special thanks to:**  
My wife, Kaylee  
Doug Dreeszen  
Bill Oxendale  
Jack Atcheson, Jr  
Tim and Roxanne Shinabarger  
Shawn Stewart, MTFWP  
Brandon Kleven  
Brian Duffy  
Isaac Nelson  
Bob Horne  
Leif Sande  
Gray Thornton  
Adam Foss  
Kurt Racicot  
Abram Balloga





# Inspiring Youth

Story by: Ryan Brock, Wild Sheep Foundation

***The Wild Sheep Foundation (WSF) is in its eighth year of having a Shooting, Hunting and Ethics Education Program, or S.H.E.E.P. as it is often referred to as. The goal of the youth program is to get kids passionate about the outdoors through conservation, hunting, the shooting sports, and just excitement about nature.***

The program has taken off since its early years, when the first three years saw us impacting just over 3000, 4500, and then 8300 kids. In fact, of the last six years of impacting kids, WSF has seen participation increase an average of 41% a year. Last year we were involved in 76 events in one way or another, impacting 23,908 young minds.

Our chapters, such as Montana Wild Sheep Foundation (MTWSF), have helped to make that possible due to a parallel belief in teaching our kids the importance of outdoor recreation and conservation. They will be the next conservationists and it is up to us to teach them both how to be stewards of the land and why we do what we do.

This past fall, MTWSF, along with three other chapters, raised \$4500 to go towards printing a new shipment of animal wheels. These animal wheels are a sought-after give-away at most of our youth events. They allow the individual to turn a cardstock wheel to select a big game animal, revealing key information about the particular species.

Probably more importantly, when writing a grant to Bass Pro Shop and Cabela's Outdoor Fund this fall, our ability to state these other revenue sources most likely had an impact in helping us receive a \$20,000 grant to help fund our Shooting, Hunting and Ethics Education Program this year. Thank you Montana WSF for being a key driver in the movement to educate our future conservationists. 🍂





# Sharing the Experience

Story by: Joseph Mariner



***I think everyone has that same feeling on the day of “The Drawing”. It’s the same feeling you get when you are waiting for the last few minutes to tick away on opening morning. “This could be my day; it could happen today.” For me, it did. I was lucky. I drew my sheep tag. I was going to get to hunt the Rocky Mountain Front.***

I started scouting the Front in late summer to get a lay of the land and get an idea of what was in store for me. I was amazed at the stories people were sharing with me. As I talked to people along the trail and mentioned that I had a sheep tag, they would share their stories. They shared about the sheep hunt that they took with their son, what they did, and where the best places were to find the sheep. I met hunters that had been putting in for a sheep tag their whole life and were just so happy that I drew a tag. One guy even offered up his elk base camp when we met him packing into the backcountry. “All you have to bring is a sleeping bag, it will be a little tight, but we can make it work,” he said.

The idea of a sheep hunt makes everyone want to do what they can to make your hunt a success.

I have two friends, Clark and Kevin, who wanted nothing else but to be part of this sheep hunt. Like me, these two chose Montana as home because of the hunting opportunities it offered. It’s kind of fitting that they joined me on my sheep hunt, because 15 years ago, they did the same thing for me on my mountain goat hunt.

Early in the season, I did some sheep hunting on my own, but the mature rams weren’t on the Front, yet. The first weekend that Kevin could make it was when I finally saw my first  $\frac{3}{4}$  curl ram of my hunt. Seeing this  $\frac{3}{4}$  curl was a great sign for me. This was a sign that the rams had started to move down out of the back country and to the Front!

On the second day of the hunt, we headed up a ridge to get a look at the base of Castle Reef. When we got up to the saddle, we spotted our first ram just one ridge over. As we glassed the area, we found five more rams. The two towards the top of the ridge were bedded down and looked to be the biggest. One we called, “Pretty Boy.” He had a nice full curl and still had both his lamb tips and a chocolate colored cape. We decided we needed to get closer to take a better look at Pretty Boy. As we worked across the draw, Kevin looked up towards Castle Reef and spotted another really nice ram about 400 yards away. “That’s the one we are going to hunt,” I thought.

We worked our way within 275 yards of him. I stared through my binoculars at him and it was decision time. “He’s a good ram,” I thought. “Do I want to end my sheep hunt now?”

The ram turned and started walking along the ridge, in and



out of the scrub pines. “Yep let’s do this,” I decided.

One last check with Kevin to make sure the ram was as good I thought he was, and I was ready to take him. Then, the ram stepped behind a tree. He’d had enough of us, he was going up. I saw him again at 400 yards, then he escaped out of sight. We followed him up the mountain, tracking him through waist deep snow. We made it just beyond the trees and we lost him. It started snowing and the clouds dropped in. We couldn’t see 50 feet. That was it, time to go back down. Our hunt was over.

Veterans Day offered the opportunity for a two-day hunt with Clark and Kevin. We made it up to the Front and it was one of those days where the wind was blowing so hard that you didn’t know if you were going to be able to stand up. We decided to jump in Kevin’s truck and go for a drive to see if we could even see any sheep in those conditions. We pulled up to the base of Castle Reef and got out the binoculars to see if anything was even up and moving in the wind. To our surprise, up in a small valley we found 18 sheep moving around feeding. There were ewes, lambs and even a couple of younger rams running around.

We got out the spotting scope, but the wind was blowing so hard that we couldn’t see. The truck was rocking and the snow was blowing back in my window with every gust. We watched this group for an hour and kept searching to see if there was anything else moving on the mountain. From a small knoll, out stepped a ram. It looked like a good one, but we needed the spotting scope to check it out. Kevin and I headed across the draw to get behind a stand of aspens hoping they would block the wind enough to get a good look at this sheep. “It’s Pretty Boy,” I said.

We got back to the truck and I looked at Clark and said, “We’re sheep hunting!”

We got our stuff put together and started heading up the hill. We got within 400 yards of the ram and we stopped to take another look. It wasn’t Pretty Boy. This ram was wider, heavier and really light colored. This was a new sheep, he wasn’t there the week before. He was gorgeous standing up there. King of the Mountain!

The wind was still blowing hard and we needed to get closer. We worked our way through a stand of aspens and got within 335 yards. It wasn’t close enough with the wind. I needed to find a way to get closer. Clark and Kevin stayed in the edge of the trees as I crawled up a ditch. The ditch was just deep enough to keep me out of sight. I carefully worked my way to the end of the ditch, slid my pack over the edge, and rested my rifle on it. There he was, looking down the hill right at me. I waited



for the gusts of wind to stop, took a deep breath, and squeezed the trigger. The gun jumped. On the hill the sheep just turned around and started walking away. All I could think was, “I missed him.”

The King of the Mountain stopped again and I squeezed off another quick shot. I knew that in my excitement that I missed him with the second shot. This magnificent ram walked a little farther and paused, he was looking down the hill at me.

“Okay, take your time,” I said to myself. I settled my rifle into my pack and waited for the wind to subside. I squeezed off my last shot. In a quick burst he was gone! “How did this happen?” I wondered. I was devastated.

Clark and Kevin came up to where I was still laying in this ditch. I didn’t know what to say. “Did you see if I hit it?” I asked.

“Couldn’t tell,” they said. “Couldn’t see where the bullets were hitting. It sounded like you did, but your shot could have just hit a rock.”

I grabbed my pack and rifle and we headed up the hill. Kevin was running on pure adrenaline. He was 100 yards ahead of us and still pulling away. Clark and I were working our way up the hill behind him. Clark looked at me and said, “This is where we hear a “Wooohoo”, or Kevin will just be standing up there waiting for us.”

Kevin reached the top of the rise. “WOOHOO!” we hear him holler. That was it, I immediately sat down right there, I couldn’t go any farther. The emotions were too intense. We did it. I got to share this hunt with two of my best friends. I wouldn’t have wanted it any other way. And maybe someday, somewhere along the way, I will meet a hunter with their sheep tag and I will share my story with them wishing them the best of luck. 🍀



## Science Corner

Ray Vinkey, Science Corner Editor

*We are pleased to introduce you to our new addition to the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation (MTWSF) Newsletter—the Science Corner. This and future editions of the newsletter will have a section dedicated to informing you of pertinent and timely scientific research with implications for the management of bighorn and their habitat. As hunters and bighorn sheep enthusiasts we are all eager to keep abreast of current research and how science can inform management.*

In 2020, Dr. Bob Garrott of Montana State University, his research team and partners have agreed to share with us findings from the Montana statewide bighorn sheep project as well as the Greater Yellowstone Mountain Ungulate project. Dr. Garrott has completed pioneering work on Weddell seals in the Antarctic, the ecology of large mammals in Yellowstone National Park, overlapping populations of mountain goats and bighorn sheep in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, and numerous other ecological systems and species. He has collaborated with MTWSF, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MTFWP), and many other partners to increase our understanding of bighorn sheep and advance their management and conservation.

In this issue Julie Cunningham of FWP describes the outcomes of translocations of bighorn within the Madison Range which MTWSF assisted with. Ethan Lula—one of Dr. Garrotts' graduate students and a new biologist for MTFWP in Eureka—summarizes the results of his research which shows that there is significant predicted, but unoccupied bighorn habitat in the Madison Range. Their work with Dr. Garrott suggests that the range of bighorn in the Madison Range could be greatly expanded and support a population of 2 to 4 times more (780—1,730) bighorn sheep than currently exist. Within range translocations is a novel approach which shows promise for reestablishing bighorn sheep in areas that they once occurred.

Enjoy and feel free to reach out to myself or any board member with suggestions for future stories.

### *Madison Range Summary of Translocation Effort* (2015, 2016, 2018)

Report by: Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks biologist Julie Cunningham in collaboration with Ethan Lula (MTFWP), and Dr. Robert Garrott, Professor, Montana State University

#### **BACKGROUND**

Understanding that bighorn sheep are slow to develop pioneering and migratory behaviors, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and Montana State University partners tested a novel idea: using within-range transplants to increase bighorn sheep distribution and abundance within the Madison Range. Using local knowledge from area residents, Ethan Lula's habitat models, and a combination of other biological and social factors, we identified Wolf Creek as an historic, but unoccupied, winter range to receive the first transplants of bighorn sheep. We identified the Hilgard herd as the source population because it had seen several years of ro-

bust growth, which resulted in record-high population numbers. We were concerned about potential severe starvation loss or disease outbreaks given such high density. We had some concern that the Wolf Creek transplant site was only 14 miles from the Hilgard herd winter range, but more biologically suitable locations were not available at the time. Success would mean a new winter range, expanding both the spatial footprint of bighorn sheep in the Madison Range and the overall number of bighorn sheep the mountain range could support. Failure — if the bighorn sheep returned to the Hilgard range — at least it would not change the status quo. The capture method was cost effective, so the





Photo Courtesy of Richard Horst Photography

operation would not squander precious conservation dollars even if unsuccessful.

### **APPROACH**

We captured bighorn sheep using a drop net baited with alfalfa hay, assuming this method would better enable us to capture family and social groups, as opposed to the single-animal captures of helicopter net gunning, which would have been logistically difficult in this location. In order to provide the new population with the best chance of getting established, we transplanted a total of 97 bighorn sheep to Wolf Creek over three winters: 2015, 2016 and 2018. Volunteers from across southwest Montana gathered to help restrain bighorn sheep while biologists took samples, measured body condition, and applied ear tags and radio collars. Volunteers included MSU students, landowners, Wild Sheep Foundation members, and other sportsmen and women. A total of 27 bighorn sheep

were fitted with GPS collars to monitor their movements. We placed the sheep in the trailer donated to MTFWP by the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation and drove them to the release site. Most bighorn sheep moved were ewes, lambs and rams less than 3 years old.

### **RESULTS**

Success varied each year we moved animals based on the weather conditions and individuals moved. Snowpack was light during the first transplant winter and as few as 20 percent of transplanted animals remained one year out. In 2016, deep snow conditions in the southern Madison Valley and presence of some resident sheep in the Wolf Creek area from the previous transplant may have encouraged the newly transplanted animals to remain in the vicinity; approximately 80 percent of transplanted bighorn sheep remained at least one year in Wolf Creek. Success in 2018 was

## Madison Range Summary of Translocation Effort *continued from page 15*

intermediate, with predation taking a heavier toll than the prior years.

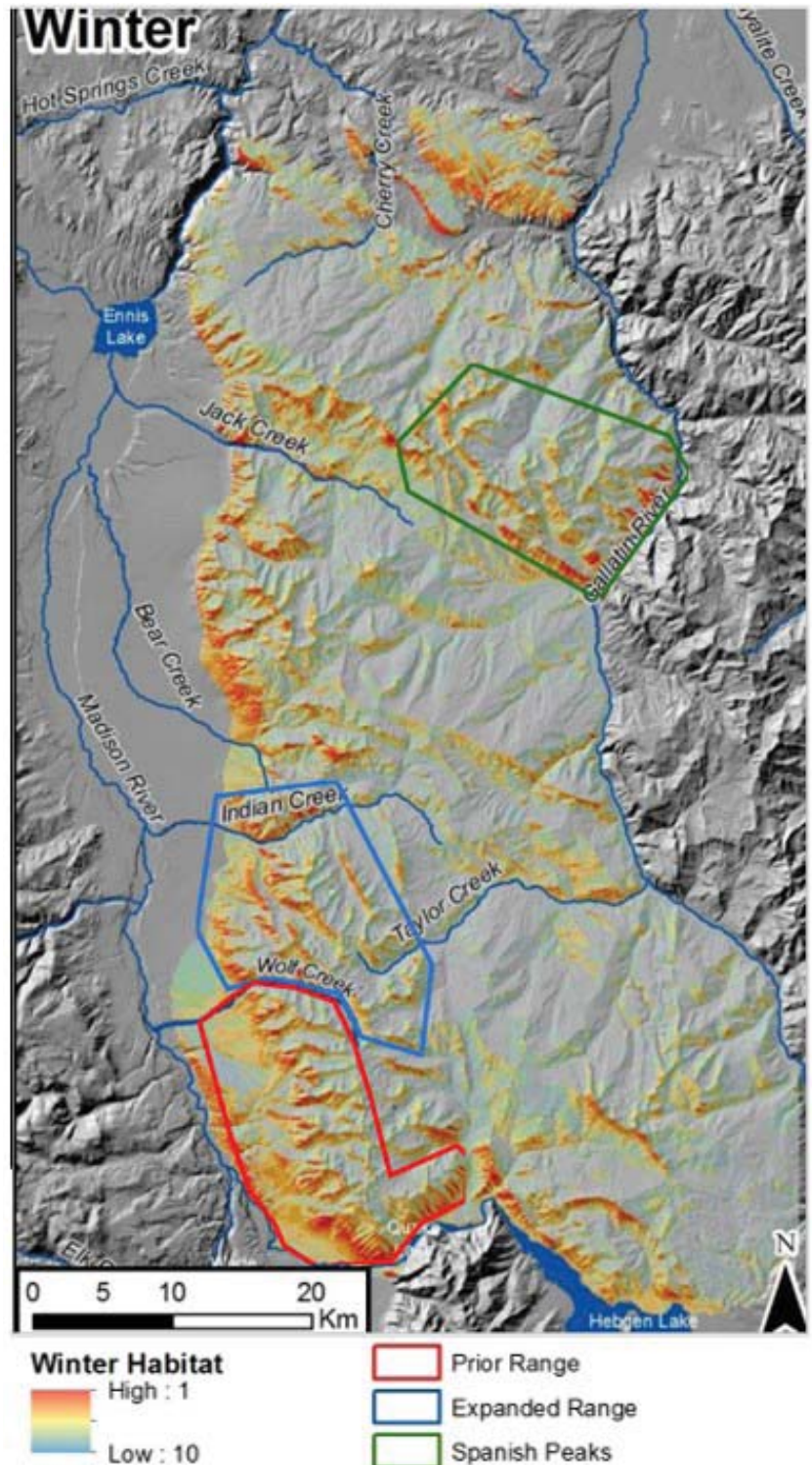
We had predicted cohesion between social and family groups and assumed instrumenting a modest number of animals during each transplant with GPS collars would be adequate to monitor results of the unmarked released animals as well. Instead, the transplanted bighorn sheep exhibited behaviors not seen in resident collared or marked bighorn, and their individual behaviors varied widely. Some chose to winter at high elevation (above 10,000 feet) and others at low elevation (6,000 feet). Some dispersed to adjoining bighorn populations up to 40 miles away, and one female lamb ultimately appeared within a group of Spanish Peaks animals — the first documented exchange between the winter ranges. The transplanted bighorn sheep explored about 80 square miles of novel habitat, more than doubling the amount of range used by bighorn sheep in the southern Madison Range (see Map Figure right).

### MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

The results of our work suggest intra-mountain range captures and transplants can expand occupied winter ranges and connect isolated populations. Intra-mountain transplants have advantages of using local animals familiar with the landscape and predators, and with common movement behaviors (i.e., migratory or non-migratory strategies). Importantly, intra-mountain transplants do not introduce new pathogens to the herd, presenting a sheep restoration strategy with minimal risk to the overall health of the herd.

In the future, it could be possible to use Madison Range bighorn sheep to repopulate several more of the winter ranges where bighorn sheep have been extirpated for 75 years or more. For example, Ethan Lula's habitat models indicate Bear Creek Wildlife Management Area could be a key future location to help restore bighorn sheep. It would be far enough from any source herd to hopefully prevent bighorn sheep from returning to their original capture sites. Ultimately, if we continue this transplant experiment, there could be a series of perhaps eight distinct wintering populations which would represent a metapopulation of bighorn sheep throughout the Madison Range, building genet-

ic and demographic resilience to stochastic environmental and population factors. As the Madison Range population builds, the future could hold the possibility of establishing a new unlimited-entry hunting district in the area. Largely in difficult-to-access wilderness areas, a more numerous and disperse population could result in more and healthier bighorn sheep, and new opportunities for hunters. 🏹





# *Opportunities for Future Bighorn Translocations Within the Madison Mountains*

Report by: Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks biologist Ethan Lula in collaboration with Julie Cunningham (MTFWP) and Dr. Robert Garrott, Professor, Montana State University

## **BACKGROUND**

Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis*) restoration continues to be a challenge throughout western North America despite nearly a century of effort dedicated to the species' recovery. Though bighorn sheep restoration may be constrained by a suite of environmental factors and behavioral tendencies, areas with unrealized restoration potential may exist if novel restoration strategies are considered. The Madison Range, located on the northwestern edge of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) in southwest Montana, USA, is an example of a mountain complex with suspected unrealized potential for restoring a bighorn sheep metapopulation. Although bighorn sheep were historically observed throughout the Madison Range, only two remnant populations, Taylor-Hilgard and Spanish Peaks, are currently recognized by management agencies. The two populations occupy relatively small portions of the available landscape on opposite ends of the mountain range and despite increases in population size and established migratory behavior, have demonstrated little expansion into adjacent areas during nearly eight decades of management and conservation.

## **APPROACH**

As part of a collaborative study between Montana State University and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, we built upon established techniques to describe bighorn sheep habitat use and explored the potential for broader restoration within the mountain range containing these two established, but non-expanding bighorn sheep populations. We used GPS data from female bighorn sheep in the Taylor-Hilgard population to address two objectives. First, we evaluated the relationship between the Taylor-Hilgard GPS data, and a suite of landscape attributes expected to influence habitat selection to develop predictive summer and winter models that identified potential habitat throughout the Madison Range. Second, since harsh winter conditions strongly limit population abundance, we linked our winter

habitat model to population count data from the existing Taylor-Hilgard herd to estimate the minimum potential population if future management actions could successfully reestablish bighorn sheep in all predicted winter habitat that is not currently being used.

## **RESULTS**

Our results indicate significant potential for bighorn sheep restoration within the Madison Range and describe a potential population structure that may maximize the possibility of higher abundances and broader distributions. Based on the habitat models, approximately 82% of predicted winter habitat and 42% of predicted summer habitat within the Madison Range is unoccupied and may be capable of supporting 780–1,730 animals, which is 2–4 times the number of bighorn sheep currently observed within the range.

The distribution of predicted habitat also has important implications for bighorn sheep restoration within the Madison Range. Although summer habitat generally occurs as essentially 3 large expanses within the high-elevation, mountainous regions of the Madison Range, winter habitat occurs on low-elevation foothills primarily within the Madison River watershed in a non-contiguous distribution of discrete habitat patches. Considering the migratory behavior and strong fidelity exhibited by instrumented animals in our study, as well as other bighorn sheep populations in the GYE, we hypothesize that a metapopulation of bighorn sheep



## Opportunities for Future Bighorn Translocations *continued from page 17*

historically existed within the Madison Range in which distinct wintering subpopulations migrated to shared summer ranges to exploit seasonally variable resources such as the emergence of nutritious forage.

### MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

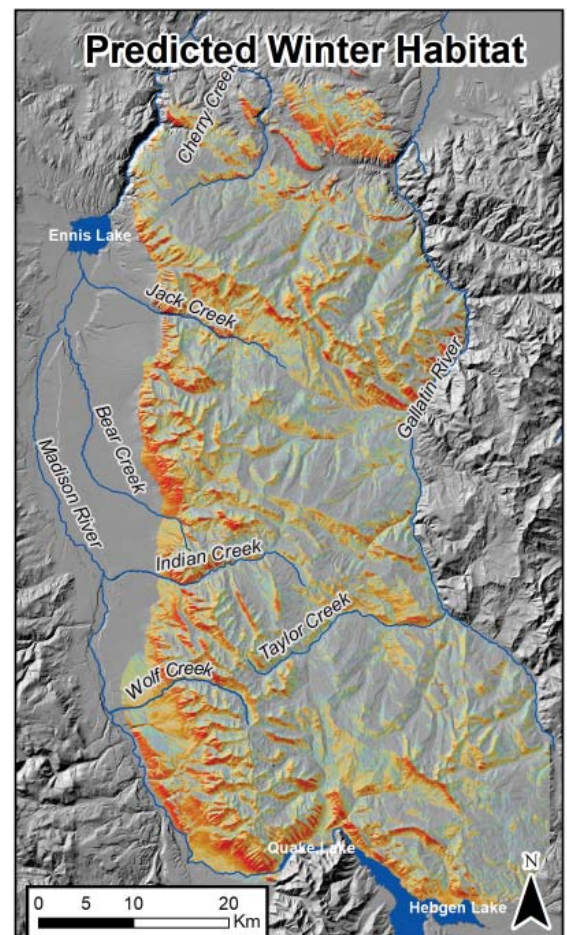
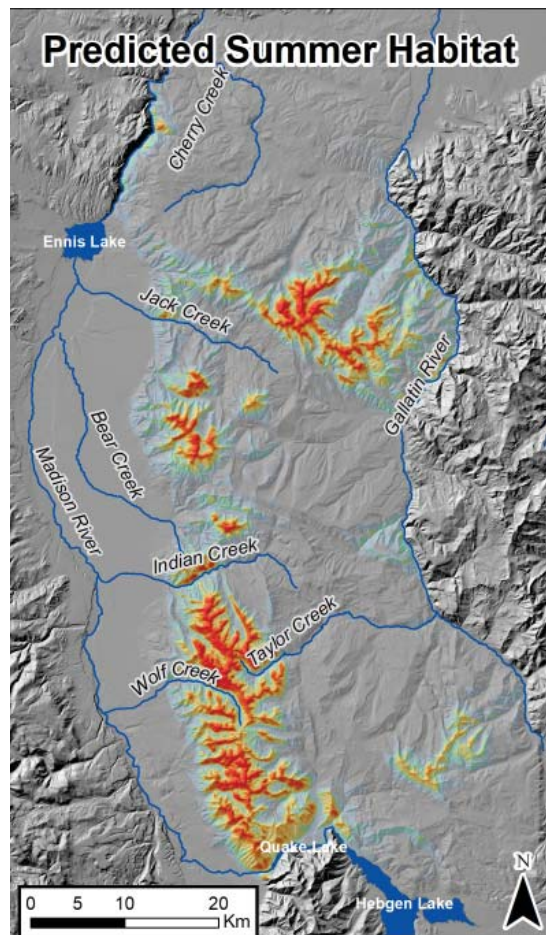
Recent work conducted by Brett Jesmer at the University of Wyoming suggests that bighorn sheep may establish and maintain knowledge of seasonal ranges via cultural transmission, the process by which knowledge of an area beyond the animal's perceptual range is passed down from generation to generation through social interaction. In the context of our hypothesized metapopulation, we speculate that cultural transmission may have been important in maintaining localized wintering subpopulations of bighorn sheep, and that their historical extirpation resulted in an overall reduction of the broader geographic landscape known to the remaining population.

Once extirpated, vacant winter ranges are unlikely to be naturally reoccupied by animals from neighboring subpopulations given the high fidelity that female bighorn sheep exhibit to their natal home range. We speculate that this behavioral tendency, in combination with subsequent disease related die-offs and factors such as increased predator densities, may be effectively suppressing the remnant populations of bighorn sheep within the Madison Range (i.e., Taylor-Hilgard and Spanish Peaks) from expanding into adjacent landscapes.

This implies that further restoration success could be achieved through the mitigation of constraining factors and the encouragement of exploratory behavior, perhaps via

short-range intra-mountain range translocations. By moving local animals with an established knowledge of the broader landscape, rather than introducing naïve animals from a distant herd to a novel landscape, short-range translocations may promote exploration and decrease the number of generations needed to naturally recolonize unoccupied habitat. Furthermore, by moving animals from within the same geographic region, short-range translocations would minimize the risk of unintentionally introducing novel pathogens compared to other introduction strategies. Recent intensive testing of Montana bighorn herds suggests all populations likely host various pathogens associated with respiratory disease, so moving bighorn sheep between herds could increase risk of pathogen exchange.

As managers face increasingly complex biological and social constraints to restoring and maintaining bighorn sheep populations, the implication that mountain ranges with established populations may contain greater restoration potential than previously realized may provide new opportunities for creating and enhancing extant populations of bighorn sheep, ultimately putting more sheep on the mountain. 🍷





# Photos for Swag!

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