



MONTANA  
WILD SHEEP  
FOUNDATION

# WildSheep

Fall 2021 | Volume 29, Issue 3

*Cover Story: page 8*

**The "Black Friday" Ram**



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**Cover photo credit** - Tom Grimes

## SUBMIT YOUR ARTICLES AND PHOTOS!

Have a photo from a great sheep hunt or an article you would like to have published in our newsletter? Submit your photos (in .jpeg format and with a short description) and your articles to [tulberg@meetingsnorthwest.com](mailto:tulberg@meetingsnorthwest.com).

## 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).

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# President's Message

*Fall is here and out of all the seasons, it is my favorite. Besides the obvious reason, the opening of the hunting seasons, I find the fall season to be a refreshing change in weather and color. The change of season has also ushered in change for the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation.*

We recently held our Board Elections to replace those rolling off the Board in 2021. Our now past-president, Shane Clouse has termed-out after serving nine consecutive years! Shane has contributed much to this organization, and his legacy includes bringing youth into conservation, resurrecting our website, and building relationships with our partners in the wild sheep community. Also rolling off the board this year is Corey Piersol, who has been the cornerstone to our successful fundraising efforts. Both of these gentlemen plan to stay engaged, and we are thankful for that!

The Board welcomes the returning and new Directors, Don Patterson (re-elected), Jeff Mortensen (returning), and Alex Russell. I should mention that we had quite a bit of interest for board positions this year, and due to eligibility requirements were only able to advance three candidates. As your new President, one of my goals is to improve volunteer opportunities. The Board is working to form committees to help with our primary business functions; conservation, outreach, and fundraising. If you are interested in helping, please contact me or Brian Solan.

There is quite a lot of movement with wild sheep conservation efforts in Montana. For a number of years, Montana was in a holding pattern. Thanks to MTWSF and our partners, many projects aimed to improve wild sheep habitat and distribution were completed last year. MTWSF directed over \$100,000 in grant-in-aid last year to support our mission. I am incredibly thankful to our membership and sponsors for their continued support and generosity.

I once heard "the only thing for certain is change." As the fall colors come into their own and you venture into the field to harvest wild game, I wish you all the best during the fall season. Here at MTWSF, we will continue to be a champion for change, always working to improve Montana's wild sheep populations.

*D.J. Berg*

Montana Wild Sheep Foundation President

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## *Conservation Director's Update:*

### Highlands Bighorn Sheep Population Restoration, Finally The Next Level in Restoring Struggling Populations

by Kurt Alt

The Montana Wild Sheep Foundation (MTWSF), the Wild Sheep Foundation (WSF), Montana Wool-growers Association (MTWGA) and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) have been working together supporting increased efforts to restore Bighorn sheep and supporting domestic sheep industry needs in Montana.

Through Kurt Alt's, Conservation Director, Montana and International Programs, efforts to both prompt and support Bighorn sheep work in Montana, FWP is gearing up to increase bighorn sheep restoration efforts again this winter. Last year's efforts were landmark in establishing a new sheep population in the Little Belt Mountains (first new Montana herd in nearly 20 years), restoring the Tendoy Mountains sheep population, and supporting two Missouri Breaks conservations easements containing important bighorn habitat and that provide hunting access in two FWP regions.

We (FWP, MTWSF and WSF) will begin an intensive 5-year restoration effort and management experiment this winter for the Highlands Bighorn Sheep Herd. Montana Sheep Auction tag revenue will provide a portion of the funding along with joint funding pledged from MTWSF & WSF (\$55,000) that will help FWP obtain a Pittman Robertson 3:1 Federal Aid match.

The Highland's was one of Montana's premier bighorn sheep herds prior to a 1994-95 die-off that reduced the herd by 90%. Since that time numer-



ous attempts have been made to restore this herd (the most recent in 2008) through augmentations of 131 individuals from 5 different Montana herds (personal communication, Vanna Boccadori, FWP Wildlife Biologist). Augmentation has not been successful in restoring the herd.

This new effort will involve intensive pathogen surveillance for the first two years to identify individual chronic shedders of *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae* (M.ovi). M.ovi has been identified as the primary respiratory pathogen involved in all-age die-offs throughout the west. In many populations a few survivors become chronic sources of reinfection that lead to poor survival of new born lambs, this can persist for years preventing population recovery. In years 3 & 4 those individuals will be

*continued on page 9*

## *2021 Board Election Results*

by Brian Solan

Our 2021 MTWSF Board Elections are complete and **Don Patterson** was re-elected to the board for another three year term to serve as Vice President. Jeff Mortensen, another familiar name, was elected to serve as Co-Treasurer, and Alex Russell was elected as a new board member. All of these guys are valuable additions to our board and will provide valuable leadership to the organization.

We also had several members reach out that wanted to run for the board, but did not meet the 1-year requirement for being a member of the chapter. While this was disappointing to tell several people they didn't meet the requirements, they are all interested in running next year and we will have a very solid slate of candidates for next year's election.

All the recently elected or re-elected Board Members provided bios on themselves, continue reading to learn more about who is serving on the MTWSF board!



### **Don Patterson**

I serve on the board for the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation because of my desire to preserve and enhance the habitat of wild sheep in Montana. This is my second term on the board. I am a life member of the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation, the National Wild Sheep Foundation, the Idaho Wild Sheep Foundation, and am a Life Endowment member of the National Rifle Association. I also currently serve on the Board of Directors for the Ravalli County Fish and Wildlife Association. I am a graduate of the University of Oregon and Oregon Institute of Technology. During my career, I worked in Alaska, Oregon, and Wyoming before moving to Montana. I am a lifelong hunter and

fisherman and want to give back now that I have retired from my career in a land management agency. I have lived in Montana for 30 years. I welcome the opportunity to serve a second term on the board of Montana Wild Sheep and will work and collaborate with the members of the board to preserve and enhance habitat to ensure a strong future of wild sheep in Montana for future generations.

### **Jeff Mortensen**

I am Jeff Mortensen and I am re-joining the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation Board. I have served two terms on the Board and have also worked as Board Secretary during that time. Prior to and subsequent to my time on the Board, I was an active member of the Annual Montana Wild Sheep Foundation Fundraiser Committee. I have been a member of MTWSF since 2005, and also maintain memberships with Ducks Unlimited and Pheasants Forever. As a third generation Montanan and life-long hunter, I am keenly aware of the critical importance of conserving habitat and wildlife, including Montana Bighorn Sheep. Now retired, I have ample time to participate as an active Board Member. I appreciate your votes.



### **Alex Russell**

As a third generation Montanan, I grew up recreating on my family's homestead land, in the Beartooth Mountains, where my grandfather was raised. It was in these mountains that I saw my first wild sheep. From my earliest memories of cold mornings in wall tents tucked away in the Gravelly Mountains, to the still fresh images of the bull elk I harvested last fall within eyesight of that ancestral home, hunting and the outdoors have shaped my entire existence. After graduating high school in Laurel, I moved to Bozeman where I graduated with a degree in Mechanical Engineering. My next stop landed me in Helena where I was fortunate

to become great friends with individuals that drove my passion for hunting and my love of conservation even deeper. Through these friendships I was introduced to Montana Wild Sheep Foundation and became a lifetime member. I'm now back in Bozeman with my family, trying my best to raise a headstrong toddler. It's largely because of my daughter, Esme, that my interest in conservation and preserving this lifestyle I care so much about has grown and pushed me to do more to help. I was fortunate enough to help with the virtual banquet in Butte this year and am honored to have the opportunity to do more to contribute to the mission of putting and keeping sheep on the mountain. Thank you for your consideration and taking the time to vote.

**Don't miss out on the chance for a lifetime member hunt....**



## **BECOME A LIFETIME MEMBER TODAY!**

### **About the Hunt:**

Winner will venture into the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge with Ovis Outfitters on a 10 day, one-on-one, backpack style hunt.

*For more information on the 2022 lifetime member hunt, visit <https://montanawsf.org/events-wsf/>.*



# 2021 Wild Sheep Foundation Chapter and Affiliates Summit

by DJ Berg

In June of each year the National Wild Sheep Foundation organizes an event to get chapters and affiliates together for a few days of wild sheep comradery. Like many events, the 2020 summit was canceled due to the pandemic, so it was exciting to get the gang back together in Lewiston, Idaho in June of 2021.

The event was generously hosted by the Idaho Wild Sheep Foundation, Oregon Wild Sheep Foundation, and the Washington Wild Sheep Foundation. Lead organizer Glen Landrus, Vice Chair of the WSF Board of Directors opened the event with a challenge to chapter leaders to follow the 3C's: Collaborate, Connect, and Congratulate. MTWSF attendees included DJ Berg and Don Patterson, who took advantage of the two-day event to do just that.

The format for both days was to attend morning seminars followed by field trips that highlighted wild sheep conservation efforts in Idaho and Washington. Day one highlights included presentations on sheep conservation efforts and disease, followed by a field trip to Washington State University.

Frances Cassirer, Senior Research Biologist with Idaho Fish and Game, gave a detailed presentation on wild sheep conservation efforts in Hells Canyon. That sheep herd had experienced a die-off in the mid-1990's, decimating the wild sheep population in a 14 square mile area. Efforts to restore the herd began in 1995, with a focus on a test and removal protocol to clear



*The Summit hosted tours of the Washington Animal Disease Diagnostic Laboratory (above) as well as jet boat tours of Hell's Canyon (below).*



the disease from the remaining population. This protocol entails capturing and testing sheep and if found to be carriers of the mycoplasma ovipneumoniae, removing them from the herd. Twenty-five years later, the Hells Canyon herd is doing well, with 14 subpopulations and a total wild sheep herd size of about 700.

Dr. Peregrine Wolff, Chair of the WSF Board of Directors, gave a disease update focused on investigating ways to predict risk of contact with domestic sheep based on home range. Her presentation also explored many unanswered questions. Why do some herds completely die off and others don't? Are all strains the same (more or less virulent)? How do stressors affect the sheep's ability to fight diseases? While researchers are trying to answer these and many other questions across the west, WSF and its Chapters remain focused on providing the funding for these efforts.

Sam Cunningham, President Texas Bighorn Society, shed some light on problems they are dealing with in the Lone Star State. In the 1900's aoudads were introduced in Texas from the Atlas Mountains, Africa as a hunting opportunity and meat. In the 1950's the population was

estimated to be about 300. Today the population has exploded, estimated to be approximately 25,000. The aoudad are adept at resisting predators and disease, easily out competing desert bighorn sheep. This has led to reduced habitat for bighorns and other native species. Because aoudad hunts are a lucrative

business, there is little advocacy for reducing the aoudad population. Sam challenged that using aoudad hunts for fundraising could conflict with our mission to restore wild sheep populations.

On the afternoon of day one, we visited the campus of Washington State University in Pullman. The university had just completed construction of the Washington Animal Disease Diagnostic Laboratory. The facility contains state of the art laboratories that offer diagnostic services for animal and public health. Our second stop at the university was the WSU Bear Center, where we got up close and personal with the twelve grizzly bears at the facility. The center's mission is to strengthen the understanding of bear ecology and biology to improve conservation and management.

The day ended with a visit to the Jack O'Connor Center in Lewiston, ID. There was no better way to end the day, than to connect with the bighorn hunting legend himself. The center boasts exhibits detailing the life and times of Mr. O'Connor. Highlights of the facility were Jack's famous Winchester Model 70 .270 and collection of 65 wildlife mounts. The Oregon FNAWS hosted a BBQ at the O'Connor Center, treating all the guests with good food and drink. It was an excellent opportunity to mingle and talk shop with fellow wild sheep conservationists.

Day two began with an interesting presentation from Utah WSF Executive Director Travis Jenson. Utah is working to build a new facility for establishing a nursery herd. The purpose of the facility is to serve as a source for wild sheep transplants and for monitoring sheep suspected of disease. The facility is being repurposed from a high fence property previously used as an elk farm. New Mexico has a similar nursery that has proven successful, while Texas reported closure of their nursery due to issues with disease.

The hot topic on day two was fundraising and particularly raffles. Many states, including Montana, have rules and regulations regarding the sale and purchase of raffle tickets. Charlie Kelly of Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep Society gave an excellent presentation on the federal and state specific rules relating to online gaming. MTWSF and other chapters have been using online raffles as a fundraising tool and are working together to ensure these raffles are conducted lawfully.

A roundtable discussion about paid staff was held later in the morning. Many WSF Chapters and Affiliates have paid staff to execute their missions. It was interesting to hear that while many of these organizations have significant volunteerism amongst their ranks,



*Above: MTWSF President DJ Berg and Vice President Don Patterson in Hell's Canyon. These tours were just one of many activities that conference attendees participated in.*

they still needed to have paid staff for daily operations like member management, outreach, and fundraising. While MTWSF is currently operating as an all-volunteer organization, the MTWSF Board has been discussing ways to get more done and bring more value to our membership through paid staff.

The summit culminated with a jet boat tour of Hells Canyon. Franses Cassirer gave a tour of the canyon, stopping at several spots along the way to observe the fruits of her labor. In the mid-afternoon sun, bighorn sheep were making their way to the water for a drink. We were able to see several herds of wild sheep, some with healthy lambs! On the way back down river, we stopped at the Hells Canyon Resort at Heller Bar for a dinner and auction. Along with another fantastic BBQ from Oregon FNAWS, silent and live auctions were held to support local wild sheep conservation efforts. A highlight of the evening was a call for donations for the water shortage for guzzlers in Nevada. It was impressive to see wild sheep advocates from across the country come together to support a drought-stricken state in need. In minutes over \$80,000 was raised for the emergency water haul project. Within the next couple weeks, that number grew to \$182,000. MTWSF was proud to sponsor this effort with a \$5,000 contribution.

There was no better way to complete the event, showcasing what we do best. We show up for our brothers and sisters, we learn from each other, and most importantly we protect and grow wild sheep herds across North America. 🍷



# The “Black Friday” Ram

Story by Tom Grimes

The cold November wind was making it difficult to steady my rifle. Brian Solan, DJ Berg & I had a herd of bighorns at 275 yards across a steep draw. The three of us were in the Greenhorn Mountains looking for a mature ram. DJ and Brian had come down from Helena to help me harvest a bighorn ram. We were there because incredibly, after 30+ years of applying, I finally drew a Montana Sheep tag for 2020.

Bighorn sheep were reintroduced back into the area in February 2003 & 2004. The sheep were relocated from the Missouri Breaks & the Rocky Mountain Front. Today, thanks to an agreement between the Helle family, Montana FWP, Montana WSF, there are bighorns scattered across the Greenhorn, Snowcrest, & Ruby Mountains. In 2018 a bighorn ram tag was issued for the first time in Unit 330. Area biologist Dean Waltee had been gathering population data that supported issuing the permit for Bighorn unit 330. I was fortunate to receive the third tag for the new area in 2020.

I spent the early part of the season working in Idaho. By mid-October, I began getting more familiar with the sheep country in the Greenhorns & Snowcrests. Bad weather, as well as opening week of the General Big Game Season, pushed my serious hunting until early

November. On November 10th, Brian Solan and I met up to look around for some sheep up in the Snowcrests. We worked our way up Ledford Creek glassing the promising looking country. In the light snow, we saw our first sheep at the bottom of Snowslide Creek. There were 7 or 8 sheep in the group, no older rams though. Another band of young rams and ewes was located up near the trailhead. Still no mature rams to be seen.

I kept looking in all the spots we had seen sheep, hoping an older mature ram would turn up. The week before Thanksgiving, DJ Berg and Brian Solan drove from Helena to help out with locating a good ram. We spent the morning glassing in the Snowcrest with a few





groups of bighorns spotted. After a quick lunch break, we turned our attention to the Greenhorns. I had seen a couple of different bands of bighorns near the Upper Canyon area. We split up to glass the large hillsides. After meeting back up, DJ said that he had located another group of sheep with a couple of bigger rams in it. The three of us hiked up to get a closer look at the rams. We all agreed one of the rams was a potential target ram. Not wanting my hunt to end quite yet, I decided to pass. Every morning after that day, I went to glass for any new rams that might show up with the ewes.

On Black Friday, Brian & DJ returned to assist with the hunt. With only a few days remaining in the season, we intended to close the deal. We split up to check out the usual spots. Once again DJ found our target ram near the same area from earlier in the week. Our crew made a plan, and shouldered our packs to begin the stalk. A couple of inches of snow had fallen and the hillsides were slick. As we worked our way closer to the band of sheep, Brian went ahead and relocated our ram. We found a decent location to set up for a shot. A cold wind was blowing directly at us. I was having some trouble getting comfortable in the gun. Eventually I settled in and found the ram in the scattered herd. Just as the scope centered on the ram, he laid down. With the crosshair steady, I squeezed the trigger on my 7mm Magnum for the shot, too high! The noise from the shot caused the herd to mill around. I found the old ram standing behind a young ram. This time the 7mm found its mark with a solid hit on the second shot. The old ram lunged forward and ran into a small clump of trees and rocks to his final resting place. We gathered all of the gear, then began the climb across the steep draw & slippery hill to our ram. It was surreal seeing the old warrior piled up in the trees. DJ and Brian took several field photos from different angles. We had to slide the ram down to a flatter location to finish processing him. Each of us loaded our packs for the trip down the hill. When we reached our vehicles there was a celebratory toast to our beautiful old ram.

I'm very grateful and fortunate to have had the opportunity to hunt this bighorn ram. Thanks to the work of Dean Waltee, Montana WSF, Montana FWP, and the Helle Family, I had the chance to fulfill my long-time goal. Their efforts are the reason an additional ram tag was issued, making this a True Success Story!!!

Dean continues his work with the Unit 330 bighorn herd. Last February Dean, with additional MTFWP personnel, captured and collared several sheep in the Greenhorns and Snowcrest in order to monitor herd movements in the unit. This data will be important for future management decisions in Unit 330. 🍷

## ***“Highlands” continued from page 4***

removed from the population. In addition, we know nutrition can play an important role in health and immune responses. Additional experimental methods in trace mineral supplements, specifically selenium, will be evaluated.

There are 5 well documented sub-herds. The project calls for deploying GPS satellite collars with geo-fencing capabilities on all yearlings and ewes in all sub-herds and up to 8 juvenile rams in each sub-herd. Ewes will receive a vaginal implant transmitter that will locate neonate lambs which will then receive a VHF necklace to monitor survival through the first year of life.

To refresh memories, the continued decline in the Tendoy bighorn sheep herd followed an all-aged die-off in 1993. That herd also suffered from lingering poor lamb recruitment and was augmented several times with no positive results. In the Tendoy's case, FWP's method was to remove the remainder of the herd in 2015-16, primarily using licensed hunters, with a commitment to restore the herd using M.ovi free sheep. Last year, sheep from Wild Horse Island, Montana's only known M.ovi free sheep herd, were transplanted to the Tendoy's.

Unlike the Tendoy depopulation and restore, the Highlands will use the most recent methods developed from work in Idaho's Hell's Canyon Bighorn Sheep population, where identifying and removing chronic shedders has shown promising results in both lamb recruitment and population growth.

The Little Belts will receive an additional transplant of 30 sheep this winter, our contribution will be an additional \$20,000 through WSF's grant-in-aid program. This will increase success of the transplant that began last year with 50 sheep when Montana WSF and WSF together contributed over \$100,000 to the effort.

There are two other efforts “in the making” yet this fall. One is the use of dogs to detect M.ovi in individual sheep and a 9-10 year effort to develop science-based separation practices for wild/domestic sheep. Both efforts have direct management application and will be presented in the next newsletter. Both involve strong collaborations between MTWSF, WSF, FWP, MTWGA, and Montana State University College of Agriculture and will require additional funding from MTWSF and WSF.

Your Conservation Director has been working over the past 6 years to help Montana arrive at this point of intensive on-the-ground efforts to restore bighorn sheep in Montana, and yet there is much more to come. Please Stay Tuned! 🍷



# Science Corner

by Ray Vinkey, Science Corner Editor

In 2021 Montanans can celebrate the successful reintroduction of bighorn sheep to the Tendoy and the Little Belt Mountains by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) in cooperation with Montana Wild Sheep Foundation and numerous other partners. Our sportsmen's dollars and commitment to the conservation and management of Montana bighorn sheep provided important political and financial support for the movement and subsequent monitoring of these populations.

Looking forward to future opportunities to conserve bighorn populations potentially with introductions; and critically the management of existing populations through supplementation and population management, an important consideration is the conservation of migratory behaviors and where feasible the establishment of this behavior in new populations.

Recent research on bighorn sheep populations (including populations for which we have provided grants-in-aid) in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming highlights the necessity of retaining existing herds with migratory behaviors, and where possible, establishing this behavior in new herds. In the abstract below Lowrey et al (2019) note that ideally, "source populations are identified based on a suite of criteria that includes matching migratory patterns of source populations with local landscape attributes." For your interest we offer the full abstract of the manuscript which describes the role of migration in the maintenance of healthy (and huntable) bighorn sheep populations. Something to contemplate as we spend time afield this fall.

## Characterizing population and individual migration patterns among native and restored bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis*)

### Abstract

1. Migration evolved as a behavior to enhance fitness through exploiting spatially and temporally variable resources and avoiding predation or other threats. Globally, landscape alterations have resulted in declines to migratory populations across taxa. Given the long time periods over which migrations evolved in native systems, it is unlikely that restored populations embody the same migratory complexity that existed before population reductions or regional extirpation.

2. We used GPS location data collected from 209 female bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis*) to characterize population and individual migration patterns along elevation and geographic continuums for 18 populations of bighorn sheep with different management histories (i.e., restored, augmented, and native) across the western United States.

3. Individuals with resident behaviors were present in all management histories. Elevational migrations were the most common population level migratory behavior. There were notable differences in the degree of individual variation within a population across the three management histories. Relative to native populations, restored and augmented populations had less variation among individuals with respect to elevation and geographic migration distances. Differences in

migratory behavior were most pronounced for geographic distances, where the majority of native populations had a range of variation that was 2–4 times greater than restored or augmented populations.

4. *Synthesis and applications.* Migrations within native populations include a variety of patterns that translocation efforts have not been able to fully recreate within restored and augmented populations. Theoretical and empirical research has highlighted the benefits of migratory diversity in promoting resilience and population stability. Limited migratory diversity may serve as an additional factor limiting demographic performance and range expansion. We suggest preserving native systems with intact migratory portfolios and a more nuanced approach to restoration and augmentation in which source populations are identified based on a suite of criteria that includes matching migratory patterns of source populations with local landscape attributes.

*Citation: Lowrey B, Proffitt KM, McWhirter DE, et al. Characterizing population and individual migration patterns among native and restored bighorn sheep (Ovis canadensis). Ecology & Evolution 2019;9:8829–8839. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ece3.5435>*





**Matt Clyde.** Matt was able to hunt in HD 502 in 2020, taking home this beautiful ram (left). In the above photo, you can see Matt's ram with the other two rams taken in HD 502 in 2020.

*Mark your calendars!*

## MONTANA WILD SHEEP FOUNDATION 30th ANNUAL FUNDRAISER

February 25-26, 2022 ♦ Copper King Hotel ♦ Butte, MT

*We look forward to gathering and celebrating our organizations and raising funds to 'keep sheep on the mountain'!*

### Thank you to our 2021 Beartooth Sponsors!

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  - 3 year - \$120.00
- Life - \$500.00

