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MONTANA
WILD SHEEP
FOUNDATION

Wild Sheep

Summer 2022 | Volume 30, Issue 2



Cover Story: page 10

**Little Belt Mountains Bighorn
Sheep Restoration Project**

THIS ISSUE

President's Message.....	3
Conservation Director's Update.....	4
Hunt of a Lifetime	6
2022 Teller Wildlife Youth Conservation Expo.....	8
Call for Board of Directors.....	9
Science Corner.....	10
Photo Gallery.....	14
2022 Online Raffle Packages.....	15

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.

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President's Message Photo - Jasper Poore

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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.

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While there, visit the **Photo Gallery** page. If you would like to have a picture posted, email (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

Happy Spring to all of you! The snow is melting in the high country and green grass has taken hold over Montana again. The mild spring weather brings a smile to my face each morning when the sunrise peeks over the mountains. I felt this same sense of warmth this February when we all gathered in Butte for the 30th Annual Montana Wild Sheep Foundation (MTWSF) Banquet and Fundraiser.

I am happy to report that this year's fundraiser was a smashing success! We had record attendance and broke fundraising records yet again. I hope you all had a great time and congratulations to those who won raffles and auction items. The generosity of our members, donors, and sponsors has put MTWSF in a strong financial position to do more for wild sheep in Montana.

Now more than ever, MTWSF is poised to answer the call to help wild sheep in Montana. As you have likely heard, the Little Belts Transplant has experienced a setback. A disease event has resulted in high mortalities of wild sheep transplanted in December of 2021. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MTFWP) Biologist Jay Kolbe has written a full report, which can be found later in this newsletter. MTWSF plans to offer its support to Montana FWP at both a project level and through the research initiatives that Kurt Alt explains in his article. MTWSF is committed to improving the resilience of our wild sheep populations and we are excited about the potential these research projects have.

The Montana bighorn sheep draw results were recently posted for the 2022 season. Congratulations to all those that drew! I look forward to hearing your success stories this fall. If you didn't draw, you still have a chance to go sheep hunting this fall. You can purchase a raffle ticket for a Desert Sheep Hunt at our website. If you have already purchased one, buy another! The drawing will be held in July.

We have sent this newsletter to all successful bighorn sheep applicants as an introduction to MTWSF. If you are not yet a member of our organization, please join us. MTWSF's mission is to improve wild sheep density in Montana. As you will read in this newsletter, we strive to make a positive impact on wild sheep and our hunting heritage. Please join as a regular or life member to pay your good fortune forward.

Visit www.montanawsf.org to join and to purchase a chance at a Desert Sheep Hunt!

D.J. Berg

Montana Wild Sheep Foundation President

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Conservation Director's Update: Restoring Montana's Bighorn Sheep: A work-in-progress and latest updates

by Kurt Alt

Conservation Director, Montana and International Programs

Big Problems

To summarize status of pneumonia in the Little Belts (*please see related article for latest update for Little Belts Bighorn sheep by FWP biologist Jay Kolby*):

- This pneumonia event appears to be a *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae* (*M.ovi*) transmission from wild sheep to wild sheep, instigated by last year's (December 2021) augmentation of 33 sheep.
 - When capturing and transplanting wild sheep, blood and nasal swabs are collected and analyzed for disease and exposure to disease. However, these lab results are only available well after the time captured animals are released.
 - In the 2020 capture, all 50 bighorn tested negative for *M.ovi*. In the 2021 capture, 2 of the 33 transplanted bighorn sheep, tested positive for *M.ovi*.
 - All sheep transplanted in 2020 & 2021 were equipped with GPS satellite collars; there have been NO close contact detected with domestic sheep.
 - *M.ovi* in bighorn sheep often results in pneumonia related population declines with lingering poor lamb recruitment depressing population recovery.
 - *M.ovi* also negatively impacts domestic sheep resulting in poor weaning weights, poor heard health and can contribute to death individuals.
-

Big Opportunities

The following 3 projects represents an unparalleled collaborative effort between Montana's two land grant universities; Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MTFWP); and Montana's Wild and Domestic Sheep interests.

1. Working Dogs 4 Conservation

We are supporting work to train dogs to identify and differentiate between sheep (both domestic and wild) with and without *M.ovi*. Training efforts involve both domestic sheep (MSU) and Little Belts Bighorn sheep. This project is being conducted by Working Dogs 4 Conservation and is a collaboration between MSU College of Agriculture, MTFWP, MTWSF, WSF and partially funded from a grant through WSF/ Cross Charitable Foundation. The effort could provide a new tool to determine *M.ovi*. status of bighorn sheep immediately after capture, to release.

FWP is proposing two large scale 5-year management-oriented research projects to develop better understanding and new tools for restoring bighorn sheep in Montana. These are groundbreaking efforts, that if approved by the FWP Director, will move Montana to the forefront in on-the-ground efforts to restore wild sheep.

2. Coproducing science to evaluate contact risk factors between wild and domestic sheep in Montana (*quote from proposal*):

"The goal of this proposed research is to identify individual, herd/band-level, and environmental factors that influence the probability of wild and domestic sheep contact, and to use that information to expand the development and implementation of tools that maintain effective separation to prevent disease transmission. The products of this study, including proposed management tools and updates to wild sheep habitat models to incorporate ecological risk factors for contact, will be presented to and vetted by producers, sportspeople, and woolgrowers, and will ultimately be used to develop future experimen-

tal management interventions aimed at reducing contact between wild and domestic sheep. Information from this study may also be used to evaluate new opportunities to expand wild sheep distribution in Montana while reducing the risk of contact with domestic sheep.”

3. **Statewide adaptive management of bighorn sheep and mountain goats** (quotes from proposal).
“In 2021, MFWP biologists formed an internal bighorn sheep and mountain goat working group (BSMGWG) to increase statewide coordination of management activities for these species, and to review and prioritize management and research activities. The BSMGWG has recently decided to move forward with an **adaptive management** approach that prioritizes monitoring and “experimental (my emphasis)” research in the context of planned management actions for each species.”

Management activities that will be evaluated include: Habitat Management; Predator Management; Pathogen Management; Population Augmentation or Range Expansion; and Population Reintroduction.

Objectives include: 1) Increase local population trends with management actions: predicted and monitored with models of annual population growth rates and component vital rates and 2) Reduce local risk of disease epizootics with management actions: predicted and monitored with probabilistic models of epizootics and components of disease risk.

Combined, these two FWP projects will involve at least 15 bighorn sheep populations across Montana and 4 mountain goat populations in western Montana and represent the largest collaborative effort yet undertaken to restore Montana’s wild sheep.

We will continue to update you on developments in the Little Belts and other sheep populations in Montana and look forward to reporting on implementation of the above three projects. 🍷

Thank you to our 2022 Beartooth Sponsors!



The Hunt of a Lifetime

Story by Jim Marsik

As a lucky Montana hunter, I received a big horn sheep tag in August 2021 for the Rocky Mountain Front, Augusta, MT. One of only two tags for Gibson Dam North Area# 423. To start with, I am 69 years old, and have applied for tags for 41 consecutive years for the sheep, moose, and goat. There are no roads to drive to hunt, you must go in on foot. It is from the parking lot into the mountains of the back country trails of the Bob Marshall. We tried to scout the areas, talk to the residents, game wardens, biologist, guides, everyone who knows anything of that area. We went up five times in this area. Everyone said that the sheep were all the way in the back due to the mild winter. That's 6.5 miles one way. For younger people that's more doable.

It starts off Mortimer Gulch 1 mile up and 2 miles back. Then Big George 2.5 miles past, then finally leading into Reclamation Flats making it a total of 6.5 miles. Reclamation Flats starts 2.5 wide and 8 miles deep. All this I did with my two 30 yr old sons. We did the Mortimer Gulch and Big George each 2 times. That a lot for an old horse like me. They all said wait till middle of November since they males go into rut at that time. We all did our homework, bought new Kuiu clothing which is wind and water resistant. This with good boots, walking sticks, lightweight tents, food, & lights. Next, we asked everybody we knew with horses which wasn't looking good. Finally, we found friends to come along with 6 horses. We now had 6 people, 6 horses, which meant more stuff. I was lucky I surrounded myself with 5 young, strong 30 old hunters. Two sons, a nephew visiting from Colorado with out of state tags, friends, Zack Gregoire and Darren Bonson, who had the stock.



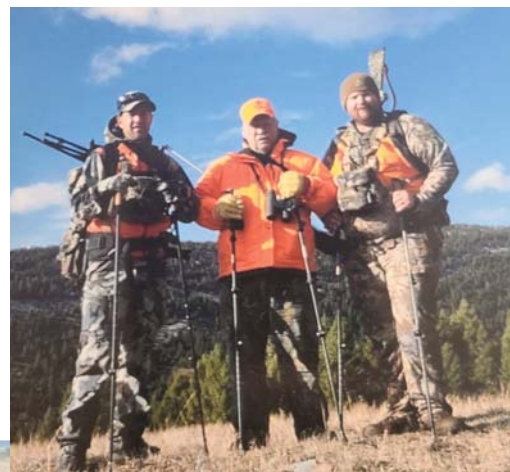
The hunt started Sunday, Nov 21, 2021, from the parking lot with 3 riders and 3 pack horses. The other 3 men went by jet boat to Big George on Gibson Reservoir. I used to horse hunt with friends, so I had my own saddle and tack, which meant this wasn't something new for me. As we rode in past Big George, there was another big coulee at 4 miles and we kept going. Came into another big opening and decided this was as far as we were going to go. None of us had any idea where we were. Rode over to the trees and set up camp. To our surprise, this was Reclamation Flats. Complete with a locked forest service cabin, horse corrals, and running water for the stock. It was great! The Rocky Mountain Front is known for high winds. All day long the wind blew 40 mph and higher. As we put up the tents, and took care of the stock, our other 3 hunting partners came walking in. There was just enough time to go and scout before dark. One hunter in our party saw 20 elk about a mile away but no one saw any sheep. The next morning, before dawn, we left and the hunt was on. Of the 6 hunters in our party, 4 of us walked for sheep and the other 2 rode out on horse looking for elk. The sheep party got up the ridge and all split up to scout. After 2 hours it wasn't looking good. We were where everybody said the sheep were supposed to be which was at Reclamation Flats, Sheep Reef, Arsinick Creek.

Then it happened! One of my sons came running saying "I found them!" Grazing, we saw just 2 ewes and 1 ram. Off we ran to the ridge, of course it was all up hill. We looked out across the valley 450 yards away. One of the ewes wasn't interested in the ram and took off running in the other direction. The good news was it was coming our way with the ram hot behind her. They were coming down the hill, across the valley and up our side. So we took off running to head them off. Got to a spot on a ridge where we could see them clearly. Here they come only 70 yards away! I got ready, laid the bypod down, touched off with my 270 Winchester 150 grain bullet with Luepold Scope. The first shot hit and the ram jumped. Didn't wait and took my 2nd shot and the ram went down on a large rock cliff. We knew he was down so off we went to get the other 2 guys. After finding them we all went back together. To our surprise the ram was not on the rock cliff - it was gone! It had rolled off and down the hill and into the trees. We found it quickly and it ended up being less of a drag from the trees. All the work was left to the 30 years olds. It did take four grown men to pick up the ram and place on the rock for a photo op.

This was a hunt of a lifetime on the Rocky Mountain Front, Augusta, MT. That day the weather was nice

with a little wind but not bad. I have been lucky this gives me, what I call the Montana Slam. I have drawn a tag and license and gotten a moose, goat, sheep, bison, Mountain Lion, bear, elk, deer, and antelope. I am missing only the notorious wolf which would complete all 10 Montana licensed huntable animals.

The ram is going to be a full body mount,



so we skinned it on the spot. We saw 2 other smaller rams during skinning, only 25 yards away. One came from downhill and the other from the top of the hill. They could smell this guy and they stayed for half hour watching us. During the skinning, the 2 shots were only 2 inches apart. Pretty precise!

We rendezvoused with the elk hunters in our party which were on horses and gave this ram a ride down the hill. The next day, we packed up. It was good weather again, and 6 guys walked out too much stuff. In my opinion walking sticks are a must! It had started heavily snowing, with about 2.5 inches in an hour, while heading back to the parking lot. The hunt of a lifetime by an old Montana hunter.

Special thanks go out for those 5 young men who made this happen for me. Zach Gregoire, Darren Bonson, Grant Marsik of Colorado, Ryan Marsik, & Charlie Marsik. 🍷

2022 Teller Wildlife Youth Conservation Expo

by Don Patterson and Tom Powers

Montana Wild Sheep Foundation and over 40 outdoor, wildlife and conservation based organizations participated in a day packed with learning, prizes and fun! The free event gave youth the opportunity to learn about conservation and experience fun activities like a climbing wall, fly casting, bb/pellet gun shooting, archery, a horse packing demo, and more! Over 500 youth and adults attended the event in Corvallis, Montana.

This year's Youth Expo was well attended despite the cold breezy weather - at least it was not snowing! The Youth Expo was an excellent opportunity to teach youth about wild sheep in Montana and other conservation messages. Tom Powers did an excellent job in pulling all of the various conservation organizations together. There was a handout for youth that described bighorn sheep facts in a question answer format that the youth could take home or to school. The handout covered wild sheep disease issues and biological facts of wild sheep.

The expo was dedicated to Dale Burk in memory of his passing and many contributions to conservation efforts in Montana. Dale was a life member of the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation.

Many thanks to Tom Powers, Don Patterson, Traci Ulberg, Wayne Chamberlin, George Wasser and Loren Carney for taking charge of the wild sheep booth. Also, to Layne and Lynn Larson and Jason and Lisa Athenosatos for taking care of the registration booth. 🍷





The Montana Wild Sheep Foundation is accepting nominations to the Board of Directors now through July 30, 2022. **We have three open directorships and are seeking individuals who are passionate about wild sheep to join our board.** To qualify you must be a member in good standing for at least a year.

Please submit your biography (up to 250 words) and photo by email to info@montanawsf.org. The nomination committee will review nominations and advance qualified candidates to the general election, which will be held electronically in August.

We look forward to hearing from **YOU!**

Brian Solan

Volunteer Executive Director
Montana Wild Sheep Foundation

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Science Corner: Little Belt Mountains Bighorn Sheep Restoration Project

Article by Jay Kolbe, Wildlife Biologist, FWP, jkolbe@mt.gov

Photos by Jasper Poore

Introduction

Bighorn sheep restoration in the Little Belt Mountains began with an initial release of 50 sheep into the South Fork Judith River (5M, 45 F) in December, 2020. All of these sheep were captured in HD482, south of the River in the Upper Missouri River Breaks. In December 2021 an additional 33 sheep were captured in HDs 482 and 680 (north of the Missouri River) and released in the same area. All translocated sheep were fitted with GPS collars that allow remote monitoring of sheep movements and that alert biologists of any mortalities.

Habitat Use

Bighorn have generally used high quality sheep habitat on public lands (mainly USFS). The new sheep herd's range extends roughly from Sage Creek in the north, then south and east to Buffalo Canyon (west of Judith Gap) along the eastern front of the Little Belts. Sheep translocated in 2021 were released in the same area and have used the same habitat features as those from the original 2020 release. Interestingly, we haven't yet seen a significant difference in winter and summer habitat selection or evidence of an annual seasonal migration.

There have been several notable movements of individual sheep this winter. One ewe released in 2021 almost immediately traveled to the western Big Snowy mountains, where she remains. Several other ewes traveled south over the Judith/Musselshell divide to high quality habitat patches in Daisy Dean, Haymaker, and Robert's Creek.

We have not detected collared bighorn coming into close proximity to or having contact with domestic sheep or goats.



Lamb Production

Spring 2021 lambing began in early May and was concentrated over a 2-week period. We observed twenty-two of 30 ewes producing lambs. Of the 8 that did not, 5 were yearlings and one was very old. By August 2021, 9 of those lambs had died leaving 13 surviving lambs going into fall. Tracking lamb survival during late fall and winter becomes difficult as ewe/lamb groups mix and lambs are less specifically dependent on their mothers. Anecdotally, field staff have observed a number of coming-yearling lambs on sheep range this spring.

Biologists began to document lambing even earlier this spring, with the first birth occurring April 18. Intensive monitoring of 2022 lamb production and survival is ongoing.

Mortality

Adult mortality was high for both the 2020 and 2021 release cohorts. Of the 50 sheep released in 2021, 31 are known dead. Seventeen of the 33 sheep released in December of 2021 have also died. It appears that mortality risk may be higher during the months immediately following relocation.

Although at least 2 of the mortalities were capture related, and several others were either due to coyote predation or of indeterminate cause, the vast majority of deaths that occurred prior to April 2022 were from mountain lion predation. FWP and landowners worked with mountain lion hunters during the 2021/2022 lion hunting season and legal lion harvest was significantly higher in and around the sheep range this winter, compared to previous years. The lion predation rate was lower during the late winter and spring of 2022 compared to 2021.

Pneumonia

On April 2, 2022, biologists recovered a dead 3.5 y.o. ram that was emaciated but showed no signs of trauma. Subsequent necropsy and laboratory testing confirmed that the ram died from acute pneumonia. Since then, ten more sheep (5 male, 5 female) also died from pneumonia. Several other adult sheep and last-year's lambs were also observed with symptoms of the disease during April.

Pneumonia in both domestic and wild sheep can result



Science Corner continued from page 11

from a bacterial infection of the lungs and appears highly transmissible. The precise disease process is the subject of ongoing research and is still not completely understood. However, recent work suggests that, in some cases, infection by the *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae* (*M. ovi*) bacterium, sometimes found in wild and domestic sheep, may allow other bacteria present in the upper respiratory tract to descend into the lungs and cause disease.

M. ovi has been historically documented in the Upper Missouri River Breaks herd in both HDs 482 and 680. Sampling as recent as 2016 suggested that a small proportion of sheep had been exposed to *M. ovi* in HD 482. In HD 680, across the river, a capture in 2016 indicated active infection, and a hunter harvest sample from 2019 suggested recent exposure to *M. ovi*. All the bighorn sheep captured in the Breaks for the Little Belt Mountains project were tested for a suite of pathogens involved in respiratory disease, but the results of those tests were not immediately available.

This is what we now know from that initial testing:

Year	Source Heard	N	Movi Serology	Movi PCR	Bibersteinia trehalosi	Mannheimia hemolytica	Mannheimia ruminalis	Mannheimia sp.	Trueperella pyogenes	Pasteurella multocida	Mannheimia glucosida
2020	482	50	0/49 (1 indeterminate)	0/50	22/50	1/50	0/50	1/50	12/50	3/50	7/50
2021	482	13	0/13	1/13 (2 indeterminates)	12/13	1/13	2/13	3/13	1/13	1/13	2/13
2021	680	20	4/20	1/20 (1 indeterminate)	20/20	3/20	13/20	7/20	8/20	3/20	0/20

M. ovi detected in blood samples (serology) indicates evidence of past exposure, while *M. ovi* genetically confirmed in nasal samples (PCR) may indicate a recent exposure or active infection.

FWP conducted rigorous physical exams of sheep from HD 482 and 680 upon capture and prior to translocation to ensure only apparently healthy animals were moved. Later laboratory results from samples collected during capture indicated that none of the animals moved from HD 482 were recently exposed or actively infected with *M. ovi* in 2020. In 2021, 1/13 animals from HD 482, and 1/20 animals from HD 680 tested (PCR) positive for *M. ovi*. Genetic strain typing is now being conducted, but results are not yet available. Strain typing may help us better understand the source of the infection.



Animals translocated in both years and from both herds were infected with a similar suite of *Pasteurella* species, common co-infecting agents during pneumonia outbreaks. We are continuing to collect a wide range of samples and data to investigate the outbreak.

The proportion of a herd that gets sick or dies during an all-age pneumonia event varies greatly but can be as high as 90% of a population in some cases. Lamb production and survival can also be depressed for a number

of years after a pneumonia event. So far, FWP has only documented dead or symptomatic sheep in a portion of the Little Belt Mountains sheep herd's range. Biologists will continue to intensively monitor the situation there to assess the extent of the outbreak and its effects on lamb survival in future years.

FWP has received no recent reports of symptomatic sheep in the Upper Missouri Breaks. FWP staff is planning to increase monitoring efforts there this spring and summer.

To date, there are 34 surviving collared bighorn (3 males, 31 females) in addition to an unknown number of lambs born in the Little Belts in 2021 and 2022.

Future work

FWP biologist, other staff, and volunteers are actively monitoring collared sheep this spring to document lamb production and any individuals with disease symptoms. FWP has also hired a dedicated field technician to closely monitor sheep in the Little Belts and upper Missouri River Breaks this summer.

Acknowledgements

We sincerely thank all the individuals, agencies, organizations, and companies that generously donated their funding, time, and support to this project. 🍷



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Members *Photo Gallery*



Brad Tribby and Dale Tribby (hunter) - October 2021



Jack Jones, HD 214 (2014)



John Kennis & John Reeves



Deb & Dorran Larner, HD 214, Anaconda

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Don't miss out on the chance for a once in a lifetime hunt....

LIFE MEMBER RAFFLE



About the Hunt:

Location and Outfitter pending.

To qualify for the 2023 Life Member Hunt Raffle:

1. Must be a Life Member of the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation.
2. Must be PRESENT at the Annual Banquet & Fundraiser on February 24-25, 2023 in Missoula, MT.
3. Transferable only to another Life Member who is PRESENT at the event.

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

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Second Drawing Prize: Texas Aoudad Hunt - One guided hunter for Barbary Sheep in Texas

Third Drawing Prize: Stone Glacier Package with a Stone Glacier Pack and apparel

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Raffle Rules:

The taxable value of the prize will be treated as ordinary income to the raffle winner for federal and state income tax purposes. MT law prohibits sale of raffle tickets with credit cards. Online orders can only be placed with debit cards. Ticket stubs will not be mailed out for online sales. Raffle tickets will be available at the banquet for cash and check. Please do not purchase if online raffle sales are prohibited in your state (AL, CA, HI, IN, KS, SD, UT, WA).



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