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# WILD SHEEP

F O U N D A T I O N



KEEPING SHEEP ON THE MOUNTAIN

Summer 2023 | Volume 31, Issue 3



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[alex@montanawsf.org](mailto:alex@montanawsf.org)

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[justin@boone-crockett.org](mailto:justin@boone-crockett.org)

**Ray Vinkey**  
[ray@montanawsf.org](mailto:ray@montanawsf.org)

**Ty Stubblefield, Executive Director**  
[ty@montanawsf.org](mailto:ty@montanawsf.org)

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[kurt@montanawsf.org](mailto:kurt@montanawsf.org)

**Brian Solan, Legislative Director**  
[brian@montanawsf.org](mailto:brian@montanawsf.org)

## Newsletter Editor & Publisher

**Traci Ulberg**  
Meetings Northwest, Inc.  
(406) 273-7224  
[tulberg@meetingsnorthwest.com](mailto:tulberg@meetingsnorthwest.com)

*Contact us at:*  
Montana Wild Sheep Foundation  
PO Box 17731  
Missoula, MT 59808  
Visit us at [montanawsf.org](http://montanawsf.org).

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# President's Message

Hello friends! I hope this message finds you in the midst of an enjoyable summer. The spring brought us fantastic moisture and as I travel the state I see signs of excellent wildlife habitat everywhere. Certainly a good thing for Montana wildlife, including bighorn sheep!

If I haven't mentioned it before, my day job is as an engineer and I spend much of my time in an office setting. A friend and I were laughing about how the 1999 movie "Office Space" satirized the American office worklife. If you haven't seen it, it is a riot. In the show the company hires two "efficiency consultants" to make staff cuts. One of "Bobs", as they were called, asked an employee, "What would you say...ya' do here?" I won't ruin the movie any more than that, but that line got me thinking about our organization...What is it that we do here?

Our mission has been and continues to focus on promoting state bighorn sheep herd populations through projects, research, and professional management initiatives. Since the inception of this organization, the MTWSF board of directors has done a fantastic job directing funding and supporting many sheep habitat, conservation, and education projects. In doing so, they set the stage for something bigger and have awarded us the opportunity to make a bigger impact.

Our funding efforts are somewhat cyclical. There are years where we have spent over \$200,000 funding projects, and other years like this year, the board of directors have only awarded approximately \$15,000 in grant-in-aid. Considering we have had a record breaking fundraising year and last year we directed over \$100,000 in GIA, you might be thinking like one of the Bob's...what is it that you're doing here? Good question.

MTWSF is in a season of change. The board of directors have been heavily focused on creating a sustainable future for our organization by implementing two key initiatives. First, was hiring our Executive Director, Ty Stubblefield. Since his hire, Ty has been incrementally improving MTWSF's organizational effectiveness and will help lead MTWSF into the future through his efforts.

Second, was the creation of the MTWSF Conservation Committee. I am happy to report that committee seats have all been filled and the first meeting is scheduled for August. The Conservation Committee will have a volunteer representative from each FWP region of the state. Each committee member will be responsible for fostering a working relationship with their regional wild sheep biologist. They will work with FWP to identify and prioritize the issues that each herd faces and help develop solutions to those issues. Each regional representative will report back to the committee and work together to find solutions and provide support where needed. This will be a critical effort to maximize the \$8,000,000 in funding MTFWP has allocated to bighorn sheep and rocky mountain goat research in the coming years.

These two initiatives took an immense amount of effort by the Board, Brian Solan, and Kurt Alt. Many thanks to everyone for their contributions!

I am here to tell you that while we may not have directed as many dollars to the ground as in years past, we have been extremely focused on establishing a firm foundation for MTWSF to serve its members and mission at a level of excellence we've never seen.

*D.J. Berg*

Montana Wild Sheep Foundation President

P.S. Congratulations to all of you who drew a sheep tag this year! I am rooting for you! Be sure to tell us about your preparation and upcoming adventure. You can contact me at [dj@montanawsf.org](mailto:dj@montanawsf.org) with any questions and to share your experience.

# Executive Director's Message

Summer's finally here and we'd like to congratulate everyone who drew a coveted Montana bighorn sheep tag! This is going to be a great year for all wildlife but especially for our bighorn sheep.

It's been a wet spring and I'm sure I speak for all hunters when I say we're thankful for the reprieve this moisture brings to our herds. This weather has ended a four year dry spell where Montana has experienced dryer than normal spring weather across much of the state. The refreshing uptick in spring wetness conjures up day dreams of ewes gorging themselves on lush native grasses and forbes. Visions of healthy and robust lambs frolic among the wildflowers, bucking and kicking without a care in the world. Rams, replenishing their fat reserves after a long hard winter, horns growing in mass unlike anything we have seen in the last decade. Beautiful sight, ain't it?!

Montana is an amazing place for Bighorn sheep hunters and conservationists. Home to one of the largest populations of bighorn sheep in the United States. Our great state is abundant with quality and opportunity for sheep hunters. However, this iconic species faces numerous challenges. From habitat loss to disease and predation our once robust wild sheep herds are in need of intervention. As DJ mentioned in his president's message, we are setting the stage to take on this monumental effort of studying, improving and expanding our wild sheep herds. Through the newly developed Conservation Committee there will be ample opportunity to volunteer for sheep projects all across the state. We will send out email blasts looking for help when the time comes so please subscribe if you're not already so you don't miss out on some awesome opportunities to give back.

Lastly, I'd like to ask you to join me in thanking the MTWSF board for their dedication to seeing this great organization succeed. In early July they all donated a precious summer weekend to meet in person to strategically plan out the organization's goals for the next five years. Meeting at Fairmont Hot Springs they worked together to accomplish the mission - "to enhance and promote the state's sheep herd populations and to safeguard against the decline and extinction of the species.." With a driven passion for wild sheep we came up with a plan that will ensure we accomplish that mission in the most productive way possible. We will share more on that plan in the future but for now, please reach out to the board and thank them for their tireless efforts in wild sheep conservation in Montana!

If you'd like to get involved please shoot us an email at [info@montanawsf.org](mailto:info@montanawsf.org).

There's a lot to get done!

*Ty Stubblefield*

Montana Wild Sheep Foundation Executive Director

[ty@montanawsf.org](mailto:ty@montanawsf.org)

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# Chapter & Affiliate Summit XV Update

By: Erika Putnam

A whopping \$270,000 was raised for Wild Sheep projects through the Chapter and Affiliate Summit attendees in Rapid City, South Dakota at an exciting dinner and auction held at Sylvan Lake on June 17th.

The summit was co-hosted by the Wild Sheep Foundation Midwest Chapter and the Wild Sheep Foundation. Montana WSF President DJ Berg, Executive Director Ty Stubblefield and Board Member Erika Putnam, all attended the two-day meeting.

A variety of speakers shared news about chapter projects, legislation, health and disease, Women Hunt and more. There are many exciting things happening on state and national levels as well as in Canada and Mexico. We also learned that there is new science and equipment being developed for faster testing to address Movi outbreaks.

The summit provided opportunities for connection and socializing with leaders of our sister organizations in order to share ideas and concerns. The Montana WSF board is undertaking a strategic planning meeting in July and the ideas from the Summit will be included for discussion in order to prioritize wild sheep conservation work here in Montana. 🍷



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# Yukon Hunt

Story by: Justin E. Spring



**N**ow in range, the Fannin we spotted from across the valley was obvious in the band of 7 rams further up the ridge. He lay on the side of the slope ahead of us turning his head left and right. After a long morning clawing our way up we finally had eyes on him. My wife questioned her ability to make it through willows and across scree slopes. We made it and together we stood admiring the ram. Within moments the angle was just right and revealed two un-broomed tips easily breaking the bridge of the nose.

Many events transpired to put me on the side of the mountain in the Yukon and they will never be able to be repeated. Prior to COVID, I worked with an outfitter on booking his least popular hunt. It was prior to the moose rut and well into sheep season. Many clients were hesitant to book that time span. To us the potential to afford a Yukon moose and mountain caribou hunt was a dream come true. Couple that with my

dad purchasing another spot in camp through an auction item donated by the outfitter at a significant discount. This was truly a once in a lifetime opportunity.

The summer of 2022 was filled with travel for work as I oversaw a 3-day banquet in Missouri for around 300 attendees. Through it all, the light at the end of the tunnel was the Yukon. This hunt was booked prior

to Canada shutting it's borders due to the pandemic, so we had years to plan. The main goal of the trip was to try and get my wife a moose, a caribou for my dad, and I would be battling cleanup with hopes of a grizzly. While this was the goal, the outfitter stated nobody would leave camp without a tag for all legal species in their pocket. So, as we crossed into B.C. from Montana just north of Eureka, our minds were racing with what may lay ahead. The crossing was smooth with gun permits all in order. I'm sure the gear packed into the back of the truck with the cooler, freezer, generator and fuel coupled with the excitement which was obvious across our faces, put the borders agents at ease that there was nothing nefarious about our reason for visiting.

We left after on the 31-hour drive north. The first night we stopped at Radium Hot Springs. The town lies just outside the border of a group of amazing Provincial Parks in Alberta and British Columbia. As we pulled into town that night to find our hotel, I wondered if the bighorn ram skull statue in the roundabout in the center of town may not be a sign of things to come. I hoped.

The drive north up through British Columbia via the Cassiar Highway was stunning. Places I read about in stories or saw listed as the locations of harvest were no longer a world away but ahead on the horizon. We arrived three days later in plenty of time to collect my dad from the airport and enjoy a nice dinner. The following day we had nothing scheduled in case any of us had travel issues getting there. With things going smooth, we took the opportunity to explore Whitehorse and meet with the outfitter who was in town doing a gear run. I was standing in front of the MacBride Museum of Yukon History after spending a few hours admiring the exhibits as he pulled up.

We shook hands and exchanged pleasantries and I brought up the question of the season's success so far. He gave me a slight look of exasperation and said, "So you want to go sheep hunting?" Apparently, a couple clients had literally quit on them a couple days into the hunt, this meant they had a couple 12-year-old rams they were hoping to harvest that remained on the mountain. Rebecca looked at me and asked, "Do we forget moose and caribou and go for sheep?" I paused, *was this really happening?* Neither she nor my dad would fault me for jumping at the opportunity but was it fair to them? The hunt was accessible from the camp we were scheduled to be in. It was a tremendous ram and they had moved a client there to hunt it for his last few days, but he wasn't successful.

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## **Yukon Hunt** *continued from page 7*

I thought hard about the situation for the next 24 hours before we were scheduled to fly out. I had told myself before embarking on this hunt that I wasn't just looking to take any sheep or any grizzly. *Was this the opportunity for the ram I dreamed of?*

Dinner took longer than expected to arrive at the table that night. Perhaps the local beers on an empty stomach skewed my decision, but we were there for moose and caribou. Two other people were along on this hunt along with one in their 70's. I had taken one of each subspecies of moose in the last 7 years, while my wife, who'd always dreamed of the opportunity, hadn't had a tag. We would continue as planned, if we got a moose and caribou for those two, we would shift gears and pursue the ram.

The flight in was spectacular. We stopped at a couple other camps in route to drop and pick up other hunters. We would be at the end of the line. Pulling up to the beach and jumping from the float to the gravel was surreal. Three years in the making and here we stood. Some caribou and sheep from previous hunters hung in the meat shed and they made for a fine dinner that night.

The next day the wranglers took off to catch the horses from where they fed up to a high meadow dur-

ing the night. We were left in camp with time to glass. Caribou were quickly spotted and the search for a big bull began.

The scenery was breathtaking with areas to glass in all directions. The day passed and it became apparent that adversity reared its head on the horse catching mission. When the wranglers made it back to camp around 1 A.M. we had long been in our bunks. We did spy some sheep right before dark. They were on the ridge we would cross the next day.

It took most the next day to load horses and get into our spike camp. We weren't ten minutes out of camp when I felt my saddle starting to roll. When I went to bail off the toe of my size 13 boot hung up in the stirrup and right off the bat I found myself laying in the mud looking up at the horse. His look of exasperation said it all and while the only damage was to my pride, the incident reinforced the reason my wife and I don't own horses. We clearly are not of the equine persuasion.

We rode up a tight valley with a creek being fed from a glacier clearly in view. As we neared it the guides dismounted and said we would have to hike from there to the pass. Thankful to get off the horse I soon learned that I am even less adept at leading a horse than I am riding one. The pace set by the guides





wasn't insurmountable other than the horse pushing or pulling in the opposite direction of where I wanted to go. It required two or three times more effort than just climbing the hill. I slowed and told the rest of the group to go ahead. The climb wasn't bad but by the time we neared the top I was cramping every hundred yards. I know the guides and wranglers had some concern but I confidently assured them that by day three I would be back to 100 percent.

Once over the pass the valley below was as breathtaking, and that evening just before dark a bull moose emerged from the timber across from camp. He was an old bull though and only displayed 2 brows on one side and three on the other. The folded paddles and width down low caught my eye but the guides thought we should look some more before shooting.

The next day a beautiful 200-inch bull appeared below us in the valley and a long stalk checked the box of getting Becca her moose. We boned out the bull that night and went back the next day to pack the meat out. The same bull from the first night was still near camp and we glassed him some more. The more I looked at him the more I confirmed he was a shooter bull.

The next day when the guides were packing the meat back to base camp, I suggested they bring my dad up to try and kill this bull. We waited but the word was he didn't think he could make it. That night the

bull appeared below camp, but the weather was horrible, and light was quickly fading. I decided if the bull presented a shot the next day, I would take it. An hour after daylight the following morning I was standing over my bull.

It took a couple days to get the bull broken down and packed back to base camp. We continued to see caribou but no shooters. Once in base camp all efforts went to trying to find my dad a moose or a caribou. He passed a good grizzly earlier in the trip. Finally on the second to last full day we hiked up a couple miles above camp to glass. All of us were there together and there in the draw below us emerged yet another



## Yukon Hunt *continued from page 9*

shooter moose. He appeared to have a larger rack than the two we had in base camp. I told my dad he should shoot it, he looked at me and asked, "Why? We have two." I tried my best to get him excited to go after the bull but he just couldn't bring himself to killing a third bull on the trip.

Around lunch we headed south to a distant ridge to glass for caribou and left my dad on that ridge with his guide. We got to our desired location and below us stood some caribou but no shooters. It was from here we glassed across the valley and lake and spotted a band of 7 rams with one that appeared to be a full 1/3 larger than the rest. This was the group the 12-year-old ram was in. As we sat glassing, the rams scampered higher up in the rocks and a grizzly bear emerged from the willows below them. We had one day left on the hunt and I looked at my guide and wife and said, "Well, looks like we go sheep hunting tomorrow."

So there I was on the last day of my dream Yukon hunt. The ram was in range and feeding unalarmed. I am confident we could easily close the distance, if need be. I watched the sun glimmer off his horns. It was amazing. We glassed him and I confirmed with the guide he is legal but not any older than 8 or 9. He tells me the outfitter doesn't like to shoot them at that age, but there is no reason to try to talk me out of him. It is a ram, but not *the* ram.

I was confronted with something I thought would never be attainable. I didn't need a ram to eat, he wasn't at the end of his days or without a chance to make it through the winter. The only reason to shoot would be to attain a slam and passing this stone might mean never getting a slam. I wasn't hunting for others approval. I had no reason to take that ram's life. I smiled, leaned back against the ridge, and closed my eyes while I enjoyed the heat of the sun on my face in one of the most spectacular places in the world. 🏹

## Thank you to our 2023 Beartooth Sponsors!



# Montana Wild Sheep Foundation Conservation Committee

by Kurt Alt

*Conservation Director, Volunteer*



In conjunction with Montana FWP's announcement of an unprecedented \$8,000,000 research, management and restoration effort for bighorn sheep and rocky mountain goats, the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation board has approved and is launching a statewide Conservation Committee to work alongside FWP in each region to tackle the various needs of our beloved wild sheep.

During the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation (MTWSF) annual fundraiser on February 25th, Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks (FWP) formally announced the unprecedented 5-year investment in research, management, and restoration efforts for wild bighorn sheep and Rocky Mountain goats.

FWP's Chiefs of Management and Research, Brian Wakeling and Justin Gude, respectively, gave an overview of the two projects: 1) Coproducing science to evaluate contact risk factors between wild and domestic sheep and 2) Statewide adaptive management of bighorn sheep and mountain goats. The scope of project work is broad, with many subprojects within

each. The Plan is now awaiting approval from the state's Fish and Wildlife Commission.

On June 7th, the MTWSF board unanimously approved seven nominees for the newly formed Conservation Committee (CC). The volunteers for each region are, R1 - Jim Weatherly, R2 - Shane Clouse, R3 - Jack Atcheson, R4 - Matt Wickens, R5 - Brian Duffy, R6 - Pat Gunderson, R7 - John Ensign. The goal of the committee is to identify the needs for our state's wild sheep herds. The committee will work hand in hand with FWP's regional wild sheep biologists where they will help with identifying issues affecting sheep, funding projects benefiting sheep and organizing on the ground volunteer projects.

The first in person meeting is scheduled for August 19th. We are looking forward to the great work to come from the newly organized Conservation Committee. We will better accomplish our mission with this well rounded and strategic approach to bighorn sheep conservation in Montana. 🍂



## Broken Leg Ram

Story by: Rebecca Mowry, FWP Biologist Region 2

On March 9, I received a very unwelcome text message: one of my Painted Rocks bighorn sheep GPS collars had switched onto “mortality” mode. This wasn’t just any sheep. This was my last remaining collared ram.

We caught him in February 2021 during a helicopter net-gunning operation, in which we collared a handful of other sheep (rams and ewes) to study movements across the landscape as well as causes of mortality. This herd is notoriously difficult to monitor due to the remoteness and heavy timber of their habitat here in the far southwestern corner of Montana, and the GPS collars would give us a more intimate look into their seasonal habits and movements than we had ever been able to obtain before. During that capture, we noticed that this ram—estimated to be 4 years old at the time—had a badly broken rear leg. It wasn’t caused by the capture; his broken tibia was scarred over and bulbous, his hoof bent backward and over-

grown; he’d essentially been walking on his knuckle, for a year at least.

I remember the team debating whether we should euthanize him then and there. But since the injury was old, we decided to give him the benefit of the doubt, collar him, and hope for the best. He ended up being my most interesting sheep.

The fancy GPS collars these sheep wore transmitted a fairly precise location twice a day, and all I had to do was log in to a website to see them. And even with a badly broken leg, each spring that ram traveled over 15 miles from Painted Rocks Reservoir

north to Trapper Peak, the highest mountain in the Bitterroot Range (10,157 ft). We had no idea these sheep would move that far, or go that high. He spent all summer up there, ranging across the high country toward (and sometimes across) the Idaho border and then back to Trapper. Then he'd return to Painted Rocks for the rut. Sometimes he'd go back and forth a few times; each time, it only took him a matter of days to make the trip. Every time I logged into that website, I looked at his data first, eager to see where he was today.

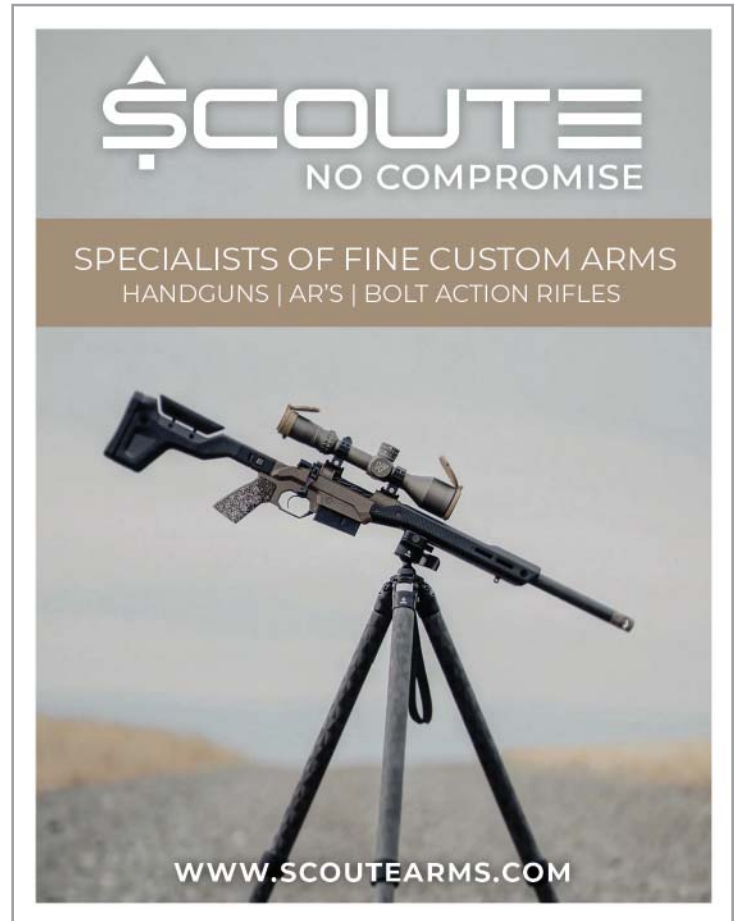
Immediately after I received the mortality alert (which the collar is programmed to send when its motion sensors detect four hours without movement), I loaded up my dog and we drove the hour from Hamilton to Painted Rocks. We secured permission from the landowner at the bottom of the drainage, then hiked up the steep hill toward the rusty cliffs that give the reservoir its name. These collars had a fabric spacer that would eventually degrade and allow the collar to fall off, so I was holding out hope that I would find a collar and nothing else. But as I got closer to the GPS coordinates that came with the mortality alert, I noticed fresh mountain lion tracks in the snow.

We followed them uphill toward the cliffs. There was nothing at the GPS spot, but I could smell sheep and saw fresh droppings. I took out my radio telemetry equipment but the signal was bouncing wildly around the rugged terrain, making it very difficult to pinpoint where it was coming from. After a few moments traipsing up and down and side to side with no evidence of a dead sheep, I realized my dog had disappeared. I called to her and caught movement—she was thirty yards uphill, at the very base of the cliffs, looking down at me. Her German shepherd nose had done what my technology couldn't.

The scene confirmed that a lion had been the culprit. Unlike wolves or bears, mountain lions often pluck or shear the hair off their prey before consuming them, and little piles of fur lay around the ram's carcass. They will also often bury remains in leaves and branches between meals, although we hadn't given this lion a chance to do that yet. The sheep had sustained another leg fracture in the death struggle and he had some small gouges out of the front of his horns. It had probably happened overnight; my best guess was he was resting in the cliffs and been ambushed by the lion, and they tumbled off the rocks into the brush below. They probably would have slid even further down the steep slope had the ram's horns not gotten caught up in a scrubby bush.

There's a good chance his broken leg made him an easier target. But I was surprised he lived as long as he did, given that several of his fellow collared sheep had already succumbed to one cause of death or another—including a few to lions. It made me think of all the other times I've encountered injured animals in my capacity as a wildlife biologist and had to make the choice between letting them go or putting them out of their misery. If there's one thing I've learned, it's that wild animals are a lot tougher than we soft humans give them credit for. I sometimes joke that the fourth leg on many carnivores and ungulates is a "spare"; often, they can live without it.

After I removed the ram's collar and prepared for the trek back down, I had to stop, sit down in the snow, and take a moment. I like to think that wildlife appreciate the grandeur of their habitat, and sheep country, in its gravity-defying ruggedness, is truly glorious. As I looked out over the West Fork of the Bitterroot River from these lofty cliffs, I couldn't help but admire Broken Leg Ram and all he had accomplished in his short life. He beat the odds (at least for a time). And his life added greatly to our understanding of his herd, and of the incredible tenacity of life in the hardest of places. 🐾



# Conservation Corner

by Ray Vinkey

*Conservation Corner Editor, Volunteer*

Hello members! We have renamed the Science Corner the Conservation Corner to better reflect our focus on all aspects of bighorn sheep conservation and management. While that includes the science which informs management we also anticipate providing updates on the work of our recently established Conservation Committee and other conservation initiatives.

For this newsletters Conservation Corner, we offer an update on the Little Belts reintroduction. This was a cooperative endeavor including MWSF and numerous parties who assisted financially as well as

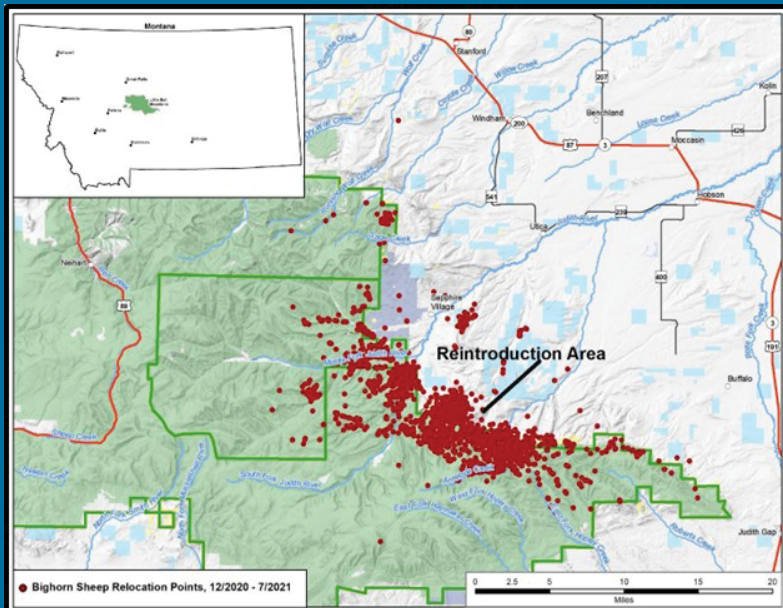
with capture and monitoring. The Little Belt reintroduction has resulted in a herd, which despite some challenges, remains on the landscape and is reproducing.

Reintroductions occur one step at a time and reestablishing this herd has demonstrated the opportunity to establish new herds where there is available habitat, willing landowners, supportive sportsmen & women and dedicated professionals. We thank Jay Kolbe area Wildlife Biologist with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and FWP for taking the initiative to advance bighorn conservation in the Little Belts. 🍷

## *Little Belts Update from June 20, 2023*

by Jay Kolbe

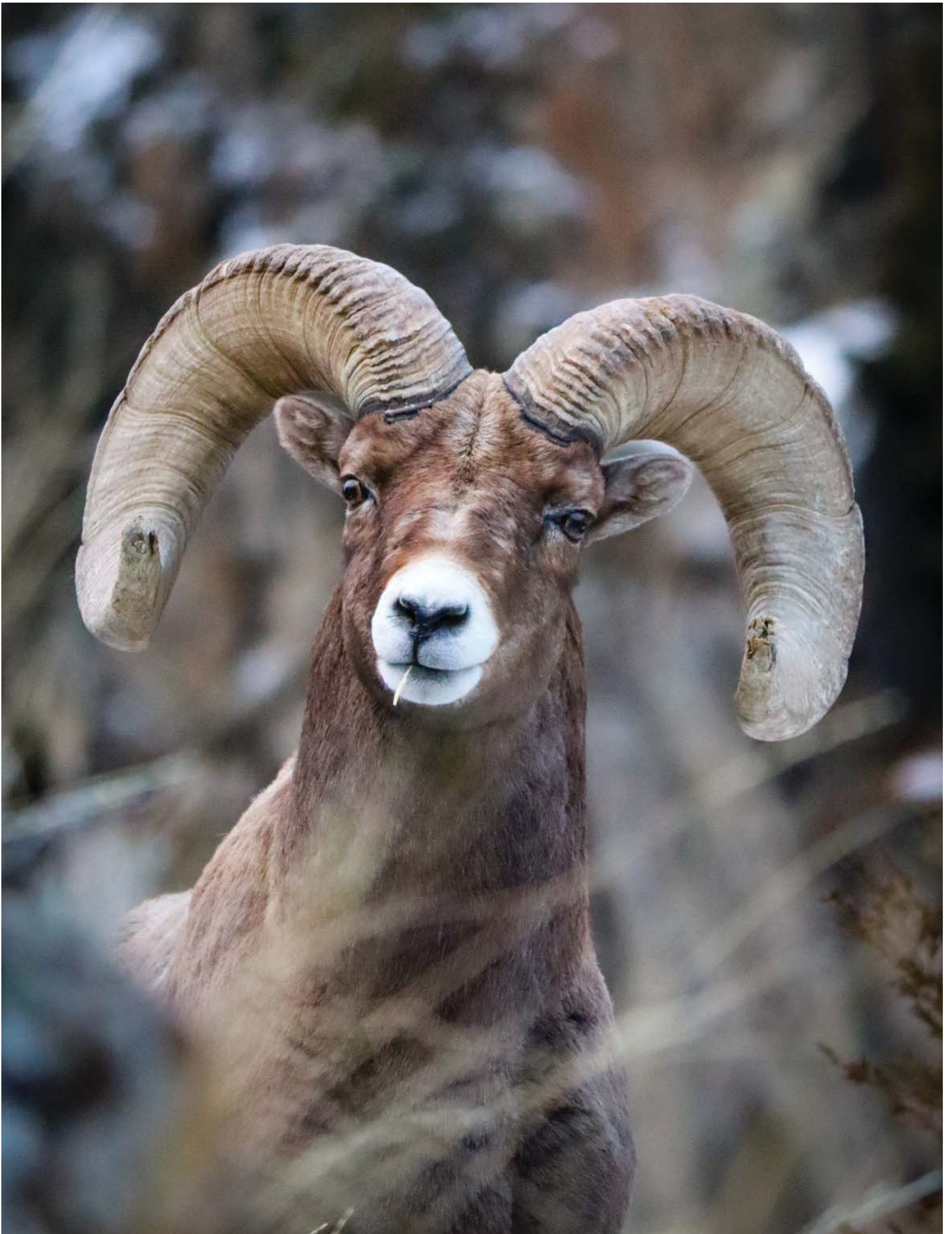
Beginning in 2020, FWP and many partners moved 82 bighorn sheep from the upper Missouri River to the eastern Little Belt Mountains. Although the sheep quickly settled into high quality habitat, more than 60% of the collared sheep have died by predation (mostly mountain lion). Fourteen collared sheep also died after contracting pneumonia. To date, 15 of the original sheep that were moved into the Little Belts are alive. FWP staff also confirmed that at least 7 one-and two-year-old sheep (that were born after the reintroduction) were present during spring of 2023. FWP staff continues to monitor herd health and distribution in the Little Belts.”



*Bighorn sheep reintroduction area and relocation points December 2020 to July 2021.*



*Bighorn lamb & ewes sighted during a June 2023 FWP survey of the Little Belts. At least 7 young sheep born since the reintroduction as well as 15 of the originally translocated animals were observed.*





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 Check payments can also be mailed to the address above using the form below.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Select category (one only please per form) and membership length:

- Youth
  - 1 year - \$20.00
  - 3 year - \$35.00
- Regular
  - 1 year - \$35.00
  - 3 year - \$90.00
- Family
  - 1 year - \$50.00
  - 3 year - \$120.00
- Life - \$500.00

