

* * * *Montana* * * *

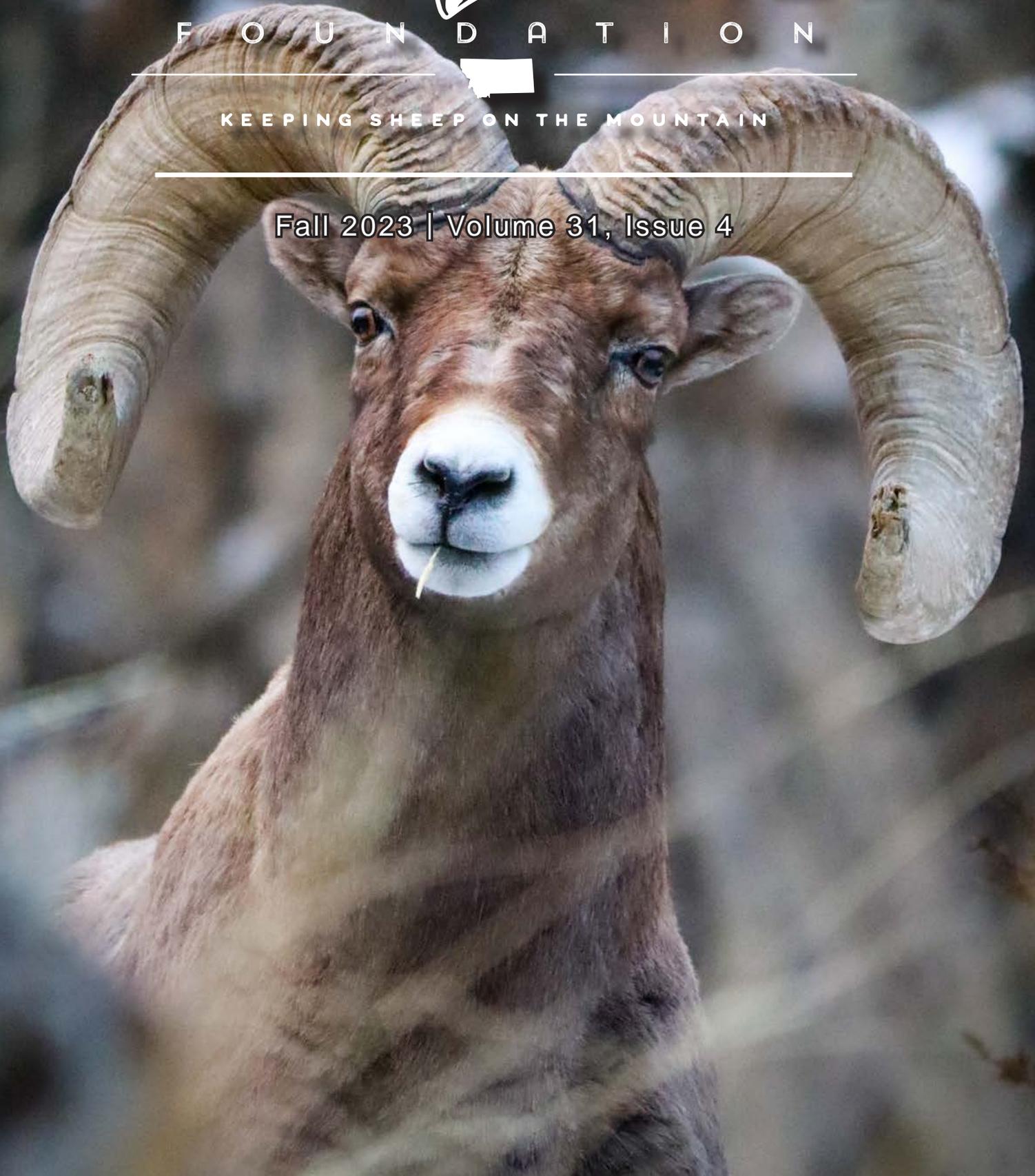
WILD SHEEP

F O U N D A T I O N



KEEPING SHEEP ON THE MOUNTAIN

Fall 2023 | Volume 31, Issue 4



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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.

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 ty@montanawsf.org.

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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

Hello friends! I cannot believe how fast summer blew by. How lucky were we to be in Montana this summer? For the most part we had a mild summer and managed to squeak by without the devastating fires our neighbors to the north had to contend with. Now we get to enjoy the best season, fall. I am sure many of you are putting the final touches on your hunting plans and last minute adjustments to your field gear. I wish you the best of luck in your pursuits.

MTWSF didn't let the summer go by without making significant progress. The Board of Directors, the Conservation Committee, and our Executive Director Ty Stubblefield were busy making plans, holding meetings, and bringing events to our membership.

In July, we held our inaugural strategic planning meeting. The MTWSF Board spent one and a half days planning for the future of our organization, including goals for the next five years. I share these goals with you, because we cannot accomplish these goals without your help. We need your advice, volunteerism, and generosity to make these goals a reality.



August was a busy month, including the first meeting of the Conservation Committee. We also held an event in Billings and one in Bozeman. Both were incredible events for our membership to engage and network with each other. More information on these events can be found later in the newsletter.

With the summer behind us, we are starting to focus our attention on planning for our annual fundraiser, which will again be held in Missoula, Montana on February 24, 2024. If you are interested in volunteering your time or donating your treasures, please reach out!

I hope you all enjoy the fall, spend time with family and friends, and find success in your outdoor pursuits for game. Take care and be well!

D.J. Berg

Montana Wild Sheep Foundation President

Montana Wild Sheep Foundation Announces Board of Directors Election Results

Montana, September 4, 2023 - The Montana Wild Sheep Foundation is pleased to announce the results of its recent Board of Directors election, which saw the re-election of Ray Vinkey and Levi Bowler, as well as the election of Kirk Russell for his first term. The foundation would also like to extend heartfelt thanks to outgoing director Justin Spring for nine years of dedicated service.

Ray Vinkey and Levi Bowler, who have already served admirably on the Board, were reelected, demonstrating their continued commitment to the conservation and preservation of Montana's wild sheep populations. Their passion and expertise have been invaluable to the foundation's mission, and we look forward to their continued contributions.

Kirk Russell joins the Board for the first time, bringing fresh perspectives and enthusiasm to the team. The Montana Wild Sheep Foundation is excited to have Kirk on board and is confident that his dedication to

the cause will be a significant asset in advancing the organization's goals.

"We congratulate Ray Vinkey, Levi Bowler, and Kirk Russell on their election to the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation Board of Directors," said DJ Berg, President of the Foundation. "We are confident that their diverse experience will be invaluable to achieving our goals to improve bighorn distribution in Montana."

The foundation also wishes to express its deepest gratitude to outgoing director Justin Spring, who has served on the Board for nine years and has been a pillar of support for the organization's initiatives. Justin's thoughtful approach to conservation decision making has significantly contributed to the success of the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation.

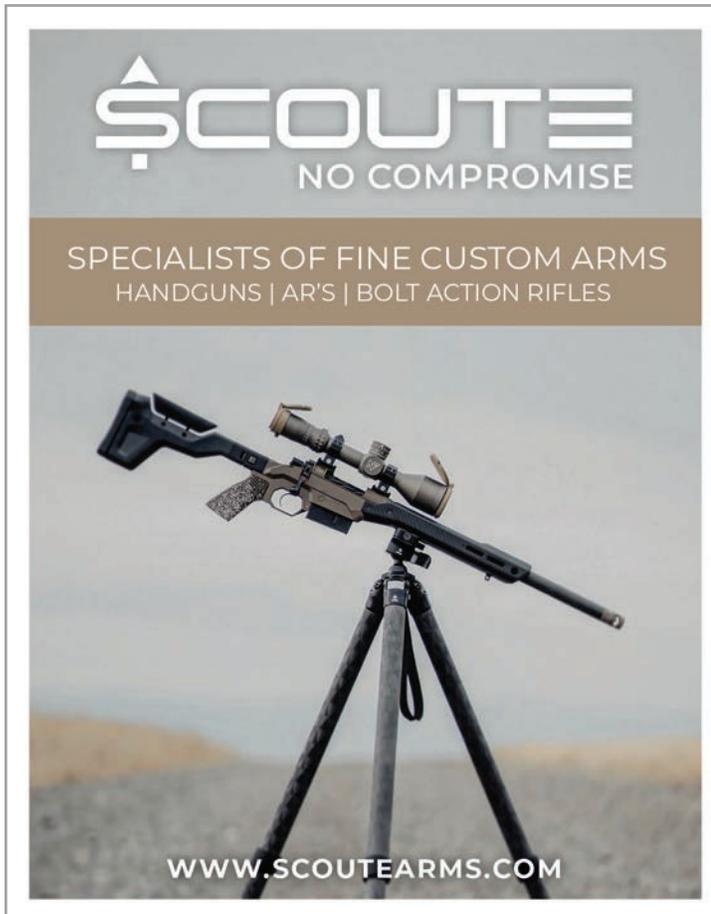
"As Justin Spring completes his term, we want to extend our sincere thanks for his exceptional service and commitment to the foundation," added DJ Berg. "His contributions have been instrumental in our ongoing conservation efforts."

The Montana Wild Sheep Foundation looks forward to the continued success of its mission to protect and preserve Montana's wild sheep populations under the guidance of the newly elected and reelected directors. We are confident that their leadership will propel our organization to new heights in the years to come. For more information about the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation and its conservation efforts, please visit our website at <https://montanawssf.org/>.

2023 Board Election Winner Bios

Ray Vinkey

It has been a privilege to serve on the board and I am excited by the opportunity for continued collaboration with our dedicated members and board to advocate for wild sheep—and for the wild lands they bring us to! As a wildlife biologist—who has worked in for Montana for 30 years—I bring insights from the field, professional expertise, a passion for wildlife and wild places; and above all an abiding



love for Montana and commitment to bighorn sheep conservation. I have been fortunate to work on bighorn in multiple professional capacities: research, management, and lands acquisition. From my perspective, the knowledge I have of the species and its habitat, plus relationships with biologists and hunters are an asset to MWSF. The Science Corner of our newsletter—which provides updates on bighorn populations—is my creation. We have rebranded it the Conservation Corner, where as the board designee to the Conservation Committee, I hope to report on our activities. It is an honor to continue our work to conserve wild sheep and retain opportunities to hunt them on public lands.



Levi Bowler

Growing up in eastern Montana I didn't know what mountains were and what chasing mountain critters was like. Fortunately for me, my brother became addicted to mountain hunting and introduced me to the bliss of the high country. My mountain experiences and meeting like-minded friends has shaped my idea of wild places and the purpose of these wild animals on the landscape. The more I learn the more I want to help further the mission of this great organization. I have had the privilege for the last 6 years to work with the Montana Wild Sheep and look forward to continuing my role for another term. I believe Montana has some of the greatest conservation minded



people and through the work of the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation and the collaboration of other great organizations I have high hopes for the future of wild sheep in this great state!

Kirk Russell

Born in western Montana, the outdoors have always been part of my life. Until I was 9, my family lived in the Swan valley where hunting, fishing, and hiking were a few steps out the back door. We then moved to the Flathead valley, where I attended high school. After pretending that I wanted to leave the state for college, I spent 4 years in Missoula earning a Bachelor's of Science degree in Wildlife Biology. Growing up, I always returned to the Swan to recreate as the mountains there felt the most like home.

After college, I returned home to Bigfork where I currently live with my wife and three daughters. The mountains and water are still nearby and we try to spend as much time as possible in the wild.

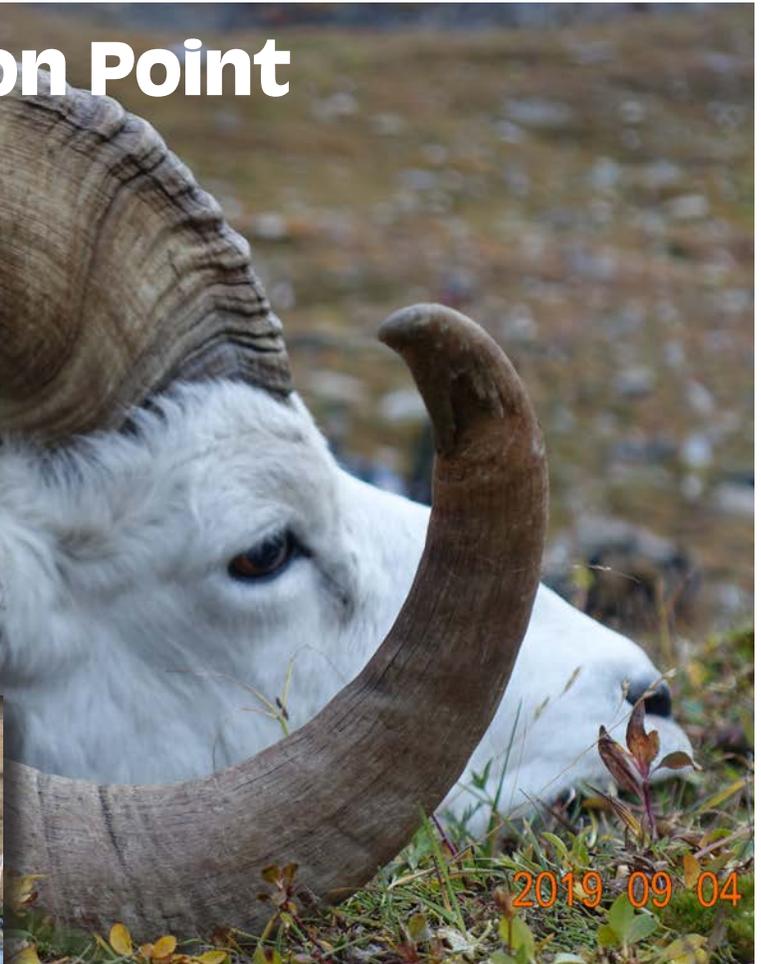
Somewhere along the trail, I transitioned from river bottoms to mountain tops. Two opportunities to join friends on Mountain goat hunts solidified my love for the high country. New friends made on those hunts led me to sheep hunting and the Montana Chapter of the Wild Sheep Foundation.



With so many recent changes to Montana as I know it, and more, sure to come, I believe anyone concerned about wild places and wildlife can make a difference. I am a life member of the Montana chapter and am proud to contribute my time to ensuring that the mountains have sheep and the sheep have mountains. 🍂

Chugach Inflection Point

Story by: Mark Westfall



Growing up in southwest Washington state, I distinctly remember the first time I saw wild sheep. The bighorns on the Columbia River Gorge captivated my imagination. I was enamored with these creatures that embodied raw power, delicate grace, and an effortless calm while living on dizzyingly steep cliffs. As I developed into a DIY backcountry hunter over the following decades, the dream of a Dall sheep hunt solidified in my mind. In 2019 that dream revealed itself over the course of a 7-day progressive backpack hunt through the Chugach Range of Alaska.

I've always been drawn to backpack hunting in the deep wilderness. When I began exploring the possibility of doing a sheep hunt, I wanted to find an outfitter that would embrace that same adventure style of hunting I had come to love. When I found out Ultimate Alaskan Adventures guides sheep hunters in the walk-in area of the Chugach, I knew I found my outfit-

ter. The walk-in area is off-limits to air support of any kind, so the only option is to backpack hunt, and once you're in it, you're on your own: for food, for gear, and for packing out any sheep you're lucky enough to kill. The reputation of the Chugach preceded it, and I came to learn first-hand it deserves every ounce of respect it receives. What the range lacks in elevation, it more than makes up for with sheer ruggedness and potential consequence.

While I don't come from a family with generations of hunters, my brother James and I hunted together as kids, and he is my most trusted hunting partner to this day. Since this was to be my once-in-a-lifetime sheep hunt, he offered to join me on the adventure. After being dropped off on the side of the road with my 50-pound pack, rifle, and sheep tag; my brother, our guide, our packer, and I set off into the Chugach. We were literally going to hunt our way from one side of the mountain range to the other.

The first day was an initiation into the sub-alpine brush line as only Alaska can deliver. When we finally broke through the foliage, we moved up a drainage towards a headwall that guarded the interior mountains and the sheep we hoped to find. The climb

up the headwall consisted of hard slab rock topped with loose pebbles and plenty of exposure. With a heavy pack and fall-risk close at hand, I had several very real moments of contemplating whether this was something I could, or wanted to, do. As we approached the ridgeline and the view beyond began to expose itself, there was a landscape of cliffs, peaks, and talus like I have never seen. I was awestruck, and that was the moment I fell in love with sheep country.

As we broke camp each morning and pushed deeper into the mountains, the next two days were primarily punctuated by rain and a stunning performance by the aurora borealis. Towards the end of our third day, we crested yet another headwall that revealed a breathtaking display of the mountains. The vibrant yellow brush in the valley floor gave way to upsweeping slopes that turned into near-vertical gullies and cliffs which topped out on ridgelines that resembled the edges of serrated knife blades. We sat on the saddle and glassed. Far below us on the valley floor, we found a sow grizzly and her two cubs chasing marmots in the rocks. Her speed on the attack was incredible. We watched the trio for some time, and then it appeared. The first Dall ram I ever saw. He was skylined on the nose of a flat-topped mountain above a 2,000' cliff, and while he was 'just a sickle-horn,' to my eyes, he was magnificent. Then we started seeing more sheep; the effort to get to the interior had been worth it. After a couple hours of glassing, we descended to our next camp location, where I would spend the last night of my life in the Less Than One club.

The next morning, we began moving down the drainage, and we quickly spotted a band of nine rams bedded high on a bench. We dropped our packs, pulled out the glass and started to evaluate each sheep to determine if any had a full curl, which would make them legal in this unit. None of them did. We threw our packs back on and once again began walking. Thirty seconds later, in an urgent hushed voice, my brother said, "Hey, there's another one up there." He had turned around for one last look as our angle changed just enough to reveal the last bit of rock near the group of rams. In that space, another ram was bedded. We dropped to the ground once more, and after a few minutes of careful evaluation, our guide turned to me and said, "He's legal. Get ready to go." After waiting over an hour for the sheep to stand and filter one-by-one beyond the convexity of the slope, the full-curl ram slowly followed suit. The instant he stepped out of view, the guide and I took off.

We left our packs with my brother and the packer, and we ran across the valley floor to a very steep grassy slope. We climbed straight up the slope to the shooting position, where I belly-crawled to the edge. Most of the rams had moved upslope, but the ram had gone down. I heard the guide say, "255 yards. You good?" "Yep, I'm good," I replied as I settled the rifle on the sleeping pad we brought to use as a shooting rest. The ram was several hundred feet below, facing directly at us. It was a steep downhill shot. I settled the appropriate hashmark on the spine between the ram's front shoulders and squeezed the trigger. The shot broke cleanly. On day four of the hunt and three days of walking from the nearest exit of the Chugach, I killed my first wild sheep.

As I approached the ram, the weight of what had just occurred descended on me. The confluence of life's complexities, sharing this adventure with my brother, and having just fulfilled a lifelong dream by killing the most beautiful wild animal I had ever seen in the heart of the most beautiful and unforgiving place I had ever been, proved too much. I knelt, put a hand on the sheep, and let emotion wash over me.

While I didn't fully appreciate it when I saw my first bighorn, or even when I killed this Dall ram, wild sheep have come to symbolize what I value most about hunting, conservation, and wild landscapes. They are hardy, majestic, and resilient creatures, yet the ecosystems in which they exist are delicate, and they need our help to protect them.

This hunt was an inflection point in my life on a number of levels, and I'm extraordinarily grateful to have had the opportunity. I originally thought this would be a once-in-a-lifetime trip and be the end of my sheep journey. Yet, this experience engrained an indelible passion for sheep and sheep country, and four years later, I now realize it was just the beginning. 🍂



Conservation Corner

by Ray Vinkey

Conservation Corner Editor, Volunteer

In this issues' Conservation Corner, we present updates on two projects in southwestern Montana which will benefit bighorn sheep. These projects are an example of conservation in action and the role that Montana Wild Sheep Foundation plays in assisting Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks to get work done on the ground using our members funds and sweat equity. The Upper Canyon Creek fence replacement project and Tendoy's reintroduction are exactly the type of projects which the board and our member's support!

Upper Canyon Creek Fence Replacement Project

Here is Dean Waltee's, Wildlife Biologist, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Sheridan, Montana summary of work well done...

On August 26, 2023, 22 individuals representing The Nature Conservancy, Montana Wild Sheep Foundation, Upper Canyon Ranch, Butte Skyline Sportsmen's Association, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, and personal wildlife conservation interests committed a day of labor to removing approximately 0.8 miles of fence comprised of woven and barbed wire as part of the Upper Canyon Fence Replacement Project. The project objective is to replace the existing fence—which impedes movement of wintering elk, mule deer, big horn sheep, and moose—with a four-strand high-tensile wire fence designed to improve wildlife movement when in use and be taken down when not in use. The volunteers removed the existing fence, which was estimated to cost \$7,200, in five hours.

The project is a partnership between The Nature Conservancy, the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation, the Upper Canyon Ranch, and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. The Montana Wild Sheep Foundation contributed approximately \$4,000 towards new fence construction and volunteer labor towards existing fence removal. The Nature Conservancy contributed approximately \$27,000 towards new fence construction and volunteer labor towards existing fence removal. The Upper Canyon Ranch contributed a conservation willingness to replace the existing fence to improve wildlife movement, approximately \$1,200 towards new fence construction, volunteer labor towards existing fence removal, lunch for volunteers removing fence, and perpetual fence management and maintenance. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks contributed project organization, new fence design recommendations, and labor towards existing fence removal.



This project will improve movement of wintering elk, mule deer, big horn sheep, and moose, reduce direct mortalities of all species resulting from entanglements, and reduce fence damage on the ranch. The greatest benefits are expected to be for bighorn sheep and mule deer during the late winter and early spring, when those species traverse the fence daily to access initial vegetation green-up in the valley. 🍂



Far Left: Volunteer crew removing woven wire fence which impedes wildlife passage from the Upper Canyon Ranch.

Left: A good day—almost a mile woven wire fence going to the dump!

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Tendoy Bighorn Sheep Reintroduction

The Tendoy herd has become established, is reproducing and increasing in number! Jesse Newby, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks' Wildlife Biologist in Dillon emailed:

In February of 2021 Montana FWP and partners reintroduced bighorn sheep into the Tendoy Mountains from Wildhorse Island. These sheep have now been on the landscape for 2 full biological years. The released sheep were all telemetered with GPS collars which allowed us to track their movements, survival, and evaluate cause specific mortality. The last of these collars were set to blow-off in August. The restoration effort will now enter a new phase; relying more heavily on longer-term monitoring efforts, such as ground surveys, to evaluate population performance.

Jesse prepared a thorough and excellent report which I can't do justice summarizing. If you would like to read it, please request a full copy of the report — *Bighorn Restoration into the Tendoy Mountain (August 2023 Update)* — from Jesse at: JNewby@mt.gov or myself at: ray@montanawfs.org 🍷

Bighorn rams in the Tendoy mountains headed home...

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Montana Wild Sheep Foundation

Conservation Committee Comes to Fruition

by Kurt Alt, *Conservation Director, Volunteer*

After years of planning and organizing by Conservation Director, Kurt Alt and the board of directors of the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation (MTWSF), the first meeting of the newly formed Conservation Committee was held. The meeting took place this past August at the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) Beartooth Wildlife Management Area near Helena, Montana.

The committee consists of seven MTWSF representatives from each of the seven FWP regions in the state. The representatives by region: Region one, past MTWSF volunteer Executive Director and President, Jim Weatherly. Region two, past MTWSF President, actor, musician and long time conservationist, Shane Clouse. Region three, life long outfitter, hunter, sheep advocate and chair of WSF International Conservation Committee, Jack Atcheson. Region four, retired after 30 years as FWP wildlife biologist on the Rocky Mountain front, Gary Olson. Region five, self employed mason, avid sheep hunter and wild sheep advocate, Brian Duffy. Region six, Pat Gunderson, retired both as a FWP wildlife biologist and regional supervisor as well as BLM district manager. Region seven, John Ensign, with over 30 years as a FWP biologist and regional manager out of South Eastern Montana. Also on the committee is Brent Roeder who works for the Montana State University College of AG as the domestic sheep research biologist and is a representative for the Montana Wool Growers Association (MWGA).

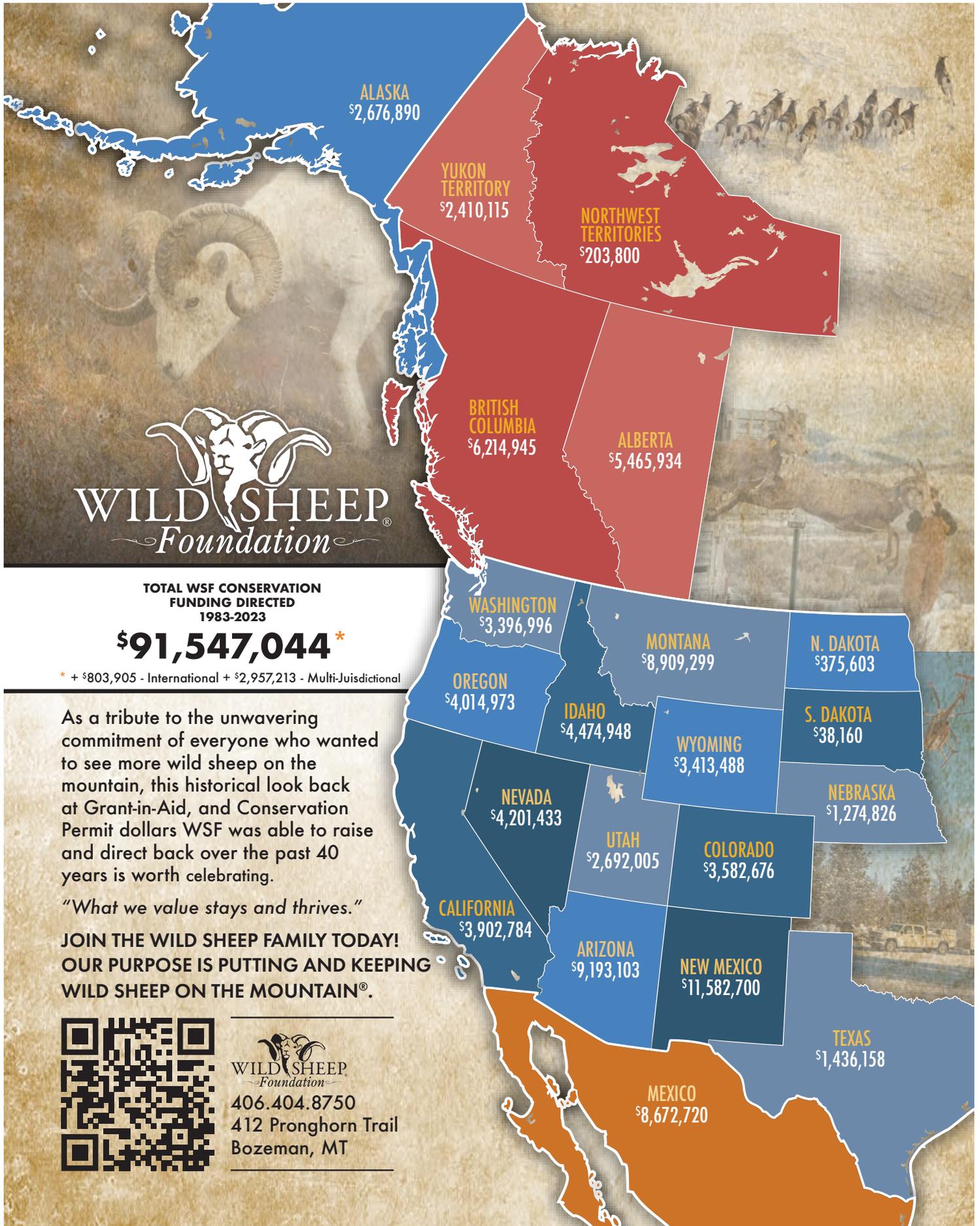
The committee will be working directly with FWP regional biologists and regional wildlife managers to offer support for funding projects as well as boots on the ground aid. Montana bighorn sheep herds have been in decline across many regions of state for the past 20 years. Meanwhile other herds have remained healthy and strong. Reasons vary from herd to herd based on many factors and will require different approaches to address the varying issues. FWP's Game Management Bureau Chief, Brian Wakeling, Research Administrator, Justin Gude and Quentin Kujala, Chief of Conservation Policy out of the Director's Office highlighted the commitment of \$8 million for bighorn

and rocky mountain goat research and management at the meeting. MTWSF is excited to be working with FWP on this research/management effort. The MTFWP work will involve both adaptive management and research on commingling between domestic and wild sheep. These projects are designed, in the long run, to give deliverables including a scientific understanding of commingling in order to develop science based separation management strategies and to evaluate and move forward augmentations, new herd establishment, habitat management, test and remove, evaluating population demographics and understanding additional limiting factors including respiratory disease and predation.

Brent Roeder and his team at Montana State University College of AG will play a critical role in connecting willing producers and FWP wildlife biologists for the commingling portion of this research. Dr. Mark Jutila, Montana State University College of Ag's, Immunology Department, will also be a big part of these efforts with his work on research in respiratory pathogens in domestic sheep. In addition, Working Dogs for Conservation who's dogs are trained to sniff out M.ovi and could also be trained and used as a separation tool. These partnerships are unique and will help us understand the disease issues in both wild and domestic herds.

"MTWSF has been steadfast in that to be successful with wild sheep conservation in Montana, partnerships are required between wildlife and agricultural interests" says DJ Berg, President of MTWSF. MWGA representation and involvement on the Committee is essential to moving both domestic and wild sheep interests forward, together.

The newly formed MTWSF Conservation Committee will bring together the shared passion of a diverse and well experienced group of wild sheep conservationists. The group will play a critical role in helping MTWSF achieve its mission to increase the number of sheep on Montana's landscape. It is an excellent example of Montanans working together in what is truly the Last Best Place. 🍂



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As a tribute to the unwavering commitment of everyone who wanted to see more wild sheep on the mountain, this historical look back at Grant-in-Aid, and Conservation Permit dollars WSF was able to raise and direct back over the past 40 years is worth celebrating.

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2024 Banquet Weekend

You are officially invited to the 2024 MTWSF Banquet weekend, February 23rd and 24th in Missoula, Montana. We'll be hosting another Friday night get together as well as seminars Saturday. And of course we'll be blowing the roof off with the grande Banquet fundraiser Saturday night.

If you would like to volunteer to help the weekend of the event or if you are interested in helping with soliciting donations, giving donations or would like to provide your thoughts on how we can make this event better than it already is please send us an email to Ty at ty@montanawsf.org

Tickets will be available soon! Remember, it was a sold out event last year so get your tickets as soon as they are available to reserve your seat to the funnest fundraiser in Montana!



Photo Contest!

Do you take a pretty good wild sheep picture? If you're a beginner, novice or professional you can take part in our first ever wild Bighorn Sheep photo contest. Winning images will grace the 2024 Montana Wild Sheep Foundation Bighorn Sheep calendar. This calendar will also be part of our 2024 calendar fundraiser where we'll be giving away A GUN A MONTH for 2024. Your work will also be used in other publications like the Montana Wild Sheep Newsletter and on our social media. Of course you'll get photo credit and you'll be helping the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation spread awareness about our state's bighorn sheep while raising funds for Bighorn Sheep conservation.



We are looking for high resolution photos, 300 dpi or high quality resolution on your phone. Pictures should be of live bighorn sheep, horizontal orientation. We are not looking for trophy photos for the calendar but if you want to send those to us we'll be sure to share them on our other platforms. Include your name, phone number and email address when you submit. By entering this photo contest you consent to Montana Wild Sheep Foundation using your photos in any and all of their social media platforms and publications.

If your picture is chosen for the calendar you will receive a calendar and \$30 credit towards MTWSF swag.

Submit photos to ty@montanawsf.org by November 30th! 🏹

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