

★ ★ ★ *Montana* ★ ★ ★

# WILD SHEEP

F O U N D A T I O N



KEEPING SHEEP ON THE MOUNTAIN

Fall 2024 | Volume 32, Issue 3





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## SUBMIT YOUR ARTICLES AND PHOTOS!

Have a photo from a great sheep hunt or hunt story 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](mailto:ty@montanawsf.org).

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*Reward*

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).

# President's Message

Hello friends, fall is here in all of its glory; football, falling leaves, and best of all, hunting season. I plan to share most of my days in the field hunting with my kids. Their excitement for the hunt is contagious, and it inspires me to work harder and to give more to wildlife conservation.

We made significant progress over the summer at our annual strategic meeting. The MTWSF Board dedicated a weekend in July to review the progress we made last year, plan for the next five years, and establish an operational budget for the current fiscal year. We made some serious progress on our near term goals and chipped away at our larger vision over the last year. One of the significant milestones was increasing revenue through membership growth, license plate sales, and investments. Equally important was making operation improvements to our accounting systems to facilitate better financial planning. While these efforts were not specifically aligned to on-the-ground work, we are clearing a path for the bigger goals we have on the horizon.

The vision is to expand the population and distribution of bighorn sheep in Montana for viewing enjoyment and hunting opportunity. The path to accomplishing this vision includes outreach efforts to mitigate disease transmission, advocacy to expand opportunity of huntable populations, participation in transportation planning to reduce wild sheep collisions, and financial support for habitat improvement projects.

We are aware of the setbacks that several of our herds are experiencing. While it is frustrating that our state herds are not at their full potential, we are confident that with your support, we will achieve growth of our herds in the coming years. Later in this newsletter, you will read about our successful fundraising efforts for a land acquisition to protect a key lambing area. It is projects like this that will move the needle closer to our goal.

MTWSF held Board of Director elections in August. Before I share the results, Don Patterson retired from his directorship and I would like to thank him for his service to this organization. We had three openings this year. Alex Russell will return for his second term, Mark Westfall was elected to his first term (after mid-term appointment), and Riley Pearson was elected to his first term. We have an outstanding group of volunteers on the board and I am thrilled with the energy and enthusiasm they all bring.

We are starting to shift our focus to planning for the 33rd Annual Banquet and Fundraiser, which will be held in Bozeman, MT on March 7th and 8th, 2025. We need volunteers and donors to help out with planning and execution of the event. If you can help, please contact myself or Ty Stubblefield.

I look forward to seeing you all at our 33rd annual banquet. Until then, I wish you all the very best this fall. I hope you enjoy time spent with family and friends this season as you make memories in the field and gather for the holidays.

Take care and be well.

*D.J. Berg*

Montana Wild Sheep Foundation President





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# Executive Director's Message

As the crisp air of fall settles in, hunting season is upon us, the time of year that many of us cherish. However, as I've grown older, my perspective on this beloved tradition has evolved. It's no longer just about the thrill of the kill; it's about the journey and the memories we create along the way. In my earlier years, I was driven by results. But now, I find immense joy in every moment spent outdoors, whether it's sharing stories around a campfire or passing down what I have learned to my kids and grandkids. The excitement I feel watching them begin their own journeys is unparalleled. Our future generations are precisely why Montana Wild Sheep Foundation was established: to cultivate a passion for hunting bighorns and make sure there are still bighorn sheep on the mountain. All of that to explain my excitement about the hard work our board and conservation committee has been doing over the summer.

## East Cliffs addition of the Blue Eyed Nellie Wildlife Management Area (WMA):

Thanks to their tireless efforts, we have successfully gathered 90% of the \$100,000 needed for our contribution to the East Cliffs addition of the Blue Eyed Nellie Wildlife Management Area (WMA). This achievement is a testament to what our community can accomplish when we come together for a common cause.

A special thanks to our gracious partners who stepped up to help us fund this project:



Wild Sheep Foundation - \$45,000

Montana Wild Sheep Foundation - \$25,000

Midwest Chapter Wild Sheep Foundation - \$10,000

Eastern Chapter Wild Sheep Foundation - \$10,000

## Executive Director's Message continued

And a GREAT BIG THANK YOU to our membership for answering the call to help get this project across the finish line. We shot out an email request just prior to this newsletter hitting the press and it was met with a fast response. The Amicus Foundation, a Montana based conservation oriented charitable organization stepped up to offer \$5,000 dollar match funding which really helped us through the final push.

These following Montana Wild Sheep Foundation members helped us raise the final \$10,000.

Amicus Foundation - Jim & Susan W - Bert L. - Gerald N. - Adam A. - Steve Q. - Michael M. - Randy B. - William C. - William G. - Curt R. - Sandy S. - Marcus H. - Casey J. - Michael T. - John W. - Thomas R. - Edward G. - Jack B.

### Conservation Committee Goals:

In sharing more details on the work our Conservation Committee is doing you will find regional updates directly from committee members here in this newsletter. But I'd like to highlight the main issues they are actively addressing that are affecting bighorn sheep.

**\*\*Habitat Degradation\*\***: From conifer encroachment to the spread of noxious weeds, it becomes increasingly difficult for bighorn sheep to thrive. They are ultimately limited to the conditions of their wintering grounds. We are targeting projects to help improve bighorn wintering habitat.

**\*\*Predation\*\***: Big cats are the number one predator for bighorns and it is an issue all across the state. We are working with houndsmen and our members to target these frisky felines who are making a living on wintering bighorns.

**\*\*Roadway Hazards\*\***: Hundreds of bighorns have been killed on Montana roadways. We are working with MDT, FWP and other NGO's to find common sense solutions to each and every herd impacted by vehicle collisions.



**\*\*Human Recreation\*\***: Wintering habitats are being disrupted by recreational activities, further threatening these vulnerable populations. We are working with other outdoor recreationists to find solutions to minimize impacts from outdoor recreation.

There is plenty to be done but we are in a great position and are making a difference. And with the help of each of you, bighorn sheep in Montana stand a fighting chance!

Thank you for your continued support and commitment to conservation.

Your partner in bighorn conservation,

*Ty Stubblefield*

Executive Director

Montana Wild Sheep Foundation

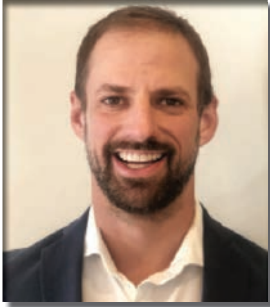
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# Welcoming a new Board Member!



I am very excited to be elected to the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation Board of Directors. Thank you to the membership for the support!

To give you a bit of background about myself and

where I see myself being most beneficial to wild sheep in our state:

I grew up in the Missoula area, in a hunting family. I spent a lot of time hunting deer and elk in bighorn units 210 and 216, near my mother's house. At this time, these units were in their prime, producing record book rams. This was my first and only exposure to wild sheep. I now realize how special that was. In 2003, I drew a ewe tag behind what was the Stimson Lumber mill and took my first wild sheep.

I graduated from Frenchtown High School in 2009 and from Montana Tech in 2012 with a Civil Engineering Technology degree. In 2014 I moved to the Billings area and also married my wife, Kaylee. This move found me on the doorstep of the Beartooth Mountains. I immediately fell in love with the mountain range and spent the next 5 years hunting it for bighorn sheep, finally finding success in 2019. During that time, I became a member and then a life member of Montana Wild Sheep Foundation and of the national Wild Sheep Foundation. In 2017, I was a lucky winner of the WSF's <1 club drawing, which

led me to taking a dall's sheep in the NWT that summer. In the years since taking my Montana bighorn, I have spent as much free time as possible in sheep country, hunting, guiding and tagging along with friends on hunts from Arizona to Alaska and many places in between.

Sheep hunting and sheep country has added so much to my life, and I look forward to contributing something in return.

In my professional career, I am a self-employed land surveyor and consultant. My experience and knowledge in this field compliments my objectives on the board quite well. I am experienced with and knowledgeable in several topics relevant to conservation, including easement acquisition, federal, state, and local regulatory matters and permitting. Acquiring conservation easements for critical winter range, permitting prescribed burning or a translocation would be right in my wheelhouse. I have participated in multiple capture/collar/transplants in the past.

The MTWSF is a fantastic organization and I cannot wait to get to work doing my part to build on the great work that they've been doing on behalf of wild sheep and their enthusiasts and hunters.

Thank you!

*Riley Pearson*  
Absarokee, MT

## RENO SHEEP SHOW

The MTWSF Board will make the trek to Reno, January 15th through the 18th to attend the world famous WSF Sheep Show. This event is a gathering of wildly passionate wild sheep enthusiasts from around the world where we network, fundraise and have more fun than should be legal, even in the great state of Nevada!

We will have a booth in the conservation corner where we'll be surrounded by our brothers and sisters in wild sheep conservation. Look us up if you make it to the show, we'll have raffles and gear for sale as well as time to talk about the work we're doing in Montana to conserve bighorns and bighorn sheep habitat.









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# 2025 Banquet

The 2025 Montana Wild Sheep Foundation Banquet Weekend will be in Bozeman, Montana, Friday and Saturday, March 7th and 8th. The Friday evening festivities will take place at the Best Western Plus - Grantree Inn where we'll have our annual membership meeting, raffles, games, Bubbles & Bighorns (ladies only event) as well as cold brews and great times.

Friday night will be followed by a series of seminars Saturday morning where FWP will be covering the first year of the five year commingling study as well as some great presentations on sheep hunting and bighorn conservation work we have been doing across the state.

The banquet Saturday evening will take place at Montana State University in the Strand Union Building. There will be buses running from the Grantree hotel to the college. We'll have many of the great raffles and games you're used to as well as some brand new and fun ways to win guns, gear and amazing hunting and vacation trips around the world. And remember, one lucky life member who's present in the room will win an Alaska Dall sheep hunt in 2025. But you have to be a life member and you must be present to win. Last year we drew eight names before crowning a winner.

If you plan on staying at the Best Western Plus, Grantree Inn be sure and mention group 4289 for MTWSF room block discount pricing (406-587-5261). This will be a sold out show so get your hotel room booked and banquet tickets bought early. Banquet tickets will go on sale on the MTWSF website in early October.

Hope to see you at the party!

## HELP WANTED

The banquet is our biggest gathering of wild sheep enthusiasts of the year and it is also where we raise the lion's share of our conservation dollars. All of the work we do every year revolves around this momentous weekend. Up to this point it has helped us fund over \$650,000 of "on the ground projects" that help put and keep bighorn sheep on the mountain. If you'd like to see where we put our money check out our "Projects" page on the website - <https://montanawsf.org/work/>

The banquet planning committee has already started working on donations and planning for the 2025 banquet which will take place in Bozeman, March 7th and 8th. We are looking for dedicated wild sheep fanatics to help us with the many tasks required to execute an event of this importance. If you are one of those people and you'd like to help please send an email to Ty Stubblefield - [ty@montanawsf.org](mailto:ty@montanawsf.org) and he'll brief you on where we need help and include you in on the banquet committee meetings which happen once a month.

We can use help acquiring donations for the live and silent auction, games and raffles. We'll also need help with setup and execution of the event the weekend of the banquet. Many hands make light work and with your help this event will be the best banquet yet.





# 2025 BANQUET BOZEMAN, MONTANA MARCH 7TH & 8TH



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# Passing *the Torch*

by Brian Solan





As I was starting to put this article together, I did some A.I. searching on the term “passing the torch”. It was quite surprising and quite frankly, a little scary how close to home the A.I. response was when I typed in “passing the torch”:

*The phrase “passing the torch” often carries a strong connotation of legacy. It implies not just transferring responsibility or leadership, but also passing on values, traditions, and wisdom from one generation to the next. This idiom has its roots in ancient Greece, where runners would pass a lit torch during relay races, symbolizing the transfer of knowledge and duty. Here are some ways “passing the torch” relates to legacy:*

- *Continuity of Values: Ensuring that the core values and principles of an organization or family are maintained.*
- *Mentorship: Guiding and preparing the next generation to take over responsibilities.*
- *Tradition: Keeping cultural or organizational traditions alive by passing them on.*
- *Wisdom Transfer: Sharing experiences and lessons learned to help successors avoid past mistakes and build on successes.*

I spent over a decade as a Board Member, President or Executive Director of the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation. I stepped back from a formal role with MTWSF over a year ago and “passed the torch” to new leadership. I have continued to be engaged in an advisory and support role for the leadership of the chapter but I’m not in any formal role. I truly appreciate the Board’s willingness to keep listening to my input, advice and I will continue to assist as long as they will have me. This organization has been a central part of my family’s life for a long time, and it means a great deal to me to see it move forward, grow and lead the charge on wild sheep conservation in Montana.

Similarly, I put a significant amount of thought and effort into “passing the torch” to my family with regards to the outdoor lifestyle, hunting, and conservation. I try to set a good example as a sportsman and conservationist. I have made an effort to get my kids hunting and I have taken a back seat as the hunter. For the most part, I have turned into a full-time guide, which I have truly loved. Don’t get me wrong, I still go hunting for myself but when I have the chance to hunt for myself or guide one of my kids – I will gladly “pass the torch” and take the role of guide and mentor.

Now to the hunt. I engaged with Blackstone Outfitters

in the Yukon over five years ago as an effort to try and find a Fannin that would qualify as my last sheep for a Grand Slam. They have some sheep in their territory with black hair that would qualify. I had been planning to go last year (2023) but swapped my hunt to 2024 so our MTWSF Life Member winner could go last year. In that time, I just happened to win a Stone Sheep hunt at the Sheep Show in Reno for 2025 that could potentially be my Grand Slam ram. With that incredible good fortune, I decided that I would “pass the torch” and either my daughter or son would go on the Blackstone hunt with me as the hunter. My daughter was just starting her clinicals for Nursing school, so the time frame wouldn’t work for her. Which means my son was the hunter and dad is on the search for a special hunt to do with my daughter in the near term...

I’ve gotten to know Luke and Heather Dueling over the past few years. Luke guided at Blackstone for a decade and he and Heather just purchased the outfitting business from Jim Fink a couple years ago. I can tell you that they run a first-class operation. I’ve been in several other sheep camps and they are hands down the best run operation I’ve seen. Incredibly organized, great people and quality guides. They utilize several methods of hunting. They hunt via horseback, float hunt and backpack. We are not horse people, but the area we were scheduled to hunt was best done by horses, so riding we went.

Logan Fink - our guide and Kathleen – our wrangler, had trailed a dozen horses into a remote area in the northwest corner of their concession. Logan’s parents owned Blackstone outfitters for 20+ years and Logan grew up guiding this area. His knowledge and understanding of this country is incredible. To describe this country in one word is difficult, but I would sum it up as “big”. Big Sky country has nothing on the Northern Yukon. A vast area with no other people for 100+ miles.

Deagan and I flew into this remote camp in super cubs and immediately started glassing the day before the opener. Nothing was spotted from camp so we headed out for a ride at 5am the next morning riding a long range and glassing as we went. Many moose and caribou sheds littered the countryside. About six miles from our camp, we spotted two rams on a ridgeline another six plus miles away. We kept riding at them getting a better look each time until we got within a couple miles to examine if the rams were mature enough to pursue. One of the rams was, so we tied up the horses and went up after them.

## Passing the Torch continued

The two rams continued to move along the ridgeline, and we made our approach behind them to stay out of sight and keep the wind conditions right. A grueling climb of over four hours got us onto the same ridge-line as the rams. When we got to the ridgeline, the two rams went out of sight in a small saddle on the back side of the ridge. Logan snuck along the ridge-line to investigate and went out of sight as well. As we waited for Logan to return from his recon mission, the smaller ram popped out right below us at about 40 yards. He didn't know what we were but did somewhat spook and head back out of sight.

Logan returned and as we were discussing the previous encounter, the larger ram appeared further down the backside of the ridge at about 200 yards. He was not bothered in the least and bedded in a perfect spot for us to get a good feel about his age and size. He was broomed on one side and still had his fancy ram lamb tip on the other. The best of both worlds, like a mullet for sheep - business in the front and party in the back!

Logan and I studied the ram intensely for over an hour. The sun glare made it tough to get his age rings, but I had counted at least 10 years of age rings as Logan continued to study. Deagan and I had already made up our minds that this ram was coming home with us, and I had got him set up in the gun, ranged and dialed in. As we were getting set up, the nerves and shakes started for Deagan as a fifteen-year-old kid was about to take a wild sheep. This was absolutely my favorite moment of the trip. Seeing that "ram fever" take hold of a young hunter who happened to be my son was an incredible experience as a father. I was able to talk him through that and he settled into the moment.

Finally, Logan pulled his head up and said, "I've got him at 11 years old. Deagan, is that a ram you want

to take?". I'm not sure I even heard Deagan respond, as his mind was already made up, had been fighting the ram fever and was thinking about execution of





the shot. I responded to Logan “Absolutely”. Deagan got into the gun and waited for the ram to stand up. As I was messing around with my spotting scope to get the phone scope video going, the ram stood up and turned broadside. I was surprised at the shot and heard Logan say “Schmucked him”. The ram took two steps and fell over.

Watching your son walk up to a wild sheep is incredibly surreal. Taking photos, breaking down of the animal and loading backpacks ensued. A tough pack back up to the ridgeline, then a several mile trek back to the horses made for the perfect amount of pain and suffering for a fifteen-year-old’s first sheep. A long horse ride back to camp capped a roughly 20-hour first day of the hunt.

We spent the next few days at the remote camp eating Logan’s peach pancakes, sheep heart and tenderloins. When the weather cooperated, we flew back to the Blackstone base camp, got a shower, repacked gear and headed back out with guides Erik and Kathleen to look for caribou. We flew to a spot close to the main camp and looked for caribou for a couple days. The weather turned hot and made for very tough hunting. We spotted a few caribou, but no shooters.

We also saw five different grizzly bears in the area. One of these bears was a little too close for comfort as we ran into him hiking along a creek bed at about 20 yards. He was as startled as we were and took a few hard charge steps at us, before turning and getting down wind. The rifle was strapped to my pack and if he had kept coming, I would have been in trouble. Luckily, he turned and I was able to get my rifle off, a round in the chamber and cross hairs on him when he stood up on his hind legs to smell us at about 50 yards. I had a bear tag, but I saw he was a young juvenile male (long gangly legs, smallish head), I didn’t pull the trigger. I looked behind me and Deagan was locked in on the bear with his fingers plugging

his ears waiting for the gunshot. Another very fun moment and experience as a father hunting with my son.

We came back to the base camp empty handed after hunting caribou and spent a couple days catching grayling fish in the Blackstone River. Once again, I can’t emphasize how professional the Blackstone outfit is. A great group of people that I will be returning to hunt with again at some point.

I’ve had some incredible experiences over the years hunting sheep. My own hunts were very memorable, but I’ve also been fortunate enough to assist on over twenty Montana bighorn hunts and being able to watch a good friend take a wild sheep is a more rewarding experience than hunting for myself. Watching your son take a wild sheep is something that tops any hunt I’ve ever done myself or been a part of.

“Passing the torch” to the next generation is something I’m incredibly proud of and watching him pick up that torch and run with it is beyond words. I am truly a lucky man.🔥





MONTANA  
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FOUNDATION

2025

# ANNUAL BANQUET LIFE MEMBER GIVEAWAY

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# Conservation Corner

by Ray Vinkey, *Conservation Corner Editor, Volunteer*

**H**i folks, we have exciting news on bighorn sheep research which will inform their conservation in Montana.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and cooperators have completed the first year of the *Statewide Adaptive Management Study of Bighorn Sheep & Mountain Goats*. This will be a five-year, multimillion dollar study which will guide the management of bighorn sheep and mountain goats. Six of the 13 bighorn herds in the study were marked and sampled in 2024 (East Fork of the Bitterroot, the Greenhorns, Kootenai Falls, Sleeping Giant, the Tendoy, and the Ural-Tweed). An additional 7 bighorn herds and 4 mountain goat herds will be marked in subsequent years.

The overarching objective is to learn how six different management actions—habitat management, hunting regulation changes, pathogen management, predation management, range expansion, and population reintroduction—influence the health, distribution, recruitment, demographics, population size, and persistence of our bighorn sheep (and mountain goat) populations.

Nick DeCesare, Wildlife Research Biologist with FWP provides a summary of the first year's results: "Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and the University of Montana completed the first year of a 5-year research project dedicated to Adaptive Management of bighorn sheep and mountain goats across Montana. The overall goals of this project are to integrate data from a variety of sources to better understand the effects of our management actions on bighorn sheep and mountain goat population trends. These data sources include aerial surveys conducted by FWP to count and classify mountain ungulate populations, GPS-collar data to monitor survival and space use of a sample of animals, and herd health sampling data to monitor various respiratory pathogens associated with pneumonia epizootics and depressed survival.

During year 1, project staff captured, sampled and GPS-collared 128 bighorn sheep across 6 populations spanning portions of administrative Regions 1, 2, 3, and 4. This included 89 females and 39 males.

Health profiles showed some populations with fairly clean results and complete absence of pneumonia-related pathogens, while others tested positive for current infection and past exposure to *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae* and other pathogens. Monitoring of these animals is ongoing, but thus far has included 12 mortalities of collared animals across populations, including roughly equal proportions of mortality due to pneumonia, mountain lion predation, and other health-related, natural causes. In the meantime, PhD graduate student Colton Padilla has begun building statistical models designed to maximize our inferences from these and historic bighorn sheep data. Preliminary results are promising for our ability to glean information across a variety of data sources with regards to population trends among bighorn sheep herds and over time. Mountain goat captures and sampling were delayed due to logistical constraints of conducting such research in designated wilderness areas, but we are adjusting plans to begin work in multiple non-wilderness areas during the second year of the project."

You can contact Nick: [NDeCesare@mt.gov](mailto:NDeCesare@mt.gov) or myself: [ray@montanawsf.org](mailto:ray@montanawsf.org) for a full copy of the first year's research report. 🍖



# Region Reports



## Region 1

Conservation Committee Member, *Bennie J. Rossetto, M.D.*

In Region One, we are concentrating efforts on the following:

1. Prevention of M.ovi exposure in the Galton Herd, in conjunction with B.C. biologist, B.C. tribal biologist, and our B.C. WSF counterparts.
2. Reduction/elimination of highway mortality on the Ural/Tweed Herd in conjunction with DOT biologist and hierarchy.
3. Reduction of rail and highway mortality on the lower Clark Fork herds.

Ethan Lula, biologist for region one is very much on top of this and is excited about the role we can play in helping these herds. We hope to have a cross-border meeting this winter with our Canadian counterparts on the Galton, and work with MDT on Ural-Tweed and Clark Fork highway/railroad options.

## Region 2

Conservation Committee Member, *Shane Clouse*

In Region 2 we have some robust herds of wild sheep. Unfortunately there are some disease issues in the East Bitterroot on the border of district 261 and 270 where there has been some death loss to suspected pneumonia. Five sheep were found dead and pathogen tests are pending. Montana FWP and local biologists are working to monitor, test, and contain the incident.

During quota setting last fall there were some recommendations to reduce hunting opportunities in at least three Region 2 hunting districts. MTWSF was successful in convincing the commission to maintain bighorn sheep tags in areas 250, 216 and 212.

I'd like to invite our members to come to region two for mountain lion hunting this coming winter. Region two has excellent mountain lion hunting opportunities and generous quotas in place. If we can reach the quotas we'll do a lot to help Bighorn sheep and other ungulates to proliferate. If you are interested in helping please reach out to me at [contact@montanawsf.org](mailto:contact@montanawsf.org) put "Region 2 cats" in the subject box.

## Region 3

Conservation Committee member, *Jack Atcheson Jr.*

It is clear that hunting wild sheep and helping them is equally as difficult. MTWSF created a strategic plan to partner with MTFWP wild sheep managers and field biologists in all seven of Montana's wildlife management districts. Seven volunteers were selected for this committee to help bighorn sheep in each of the seven FEP regions. I work in region three, the home of many bighorn sheep sub herds. My report is a snapshot of MTWSF focused work and herd status observations by MTFWP and local wild sheep enthusiasts. In the past year I have put boots on the ground and have been in communication with the region three Wildlife Manager and have had numerous conversations with MTFWP wildlife field biologists.

Two of the five unlimited sheep permit areas are found in region three and there has been many discussions on regulations and policies to help **manage and expand** the popularity of hunting with an over the counter bighorn sheep permit.

300 - Gallatin unlimited area: Winter of 2022 had some impacts on the young and old bighorn sheep but last year's mild winter left lambs trending up. Sub herds appear to be moving into more of its historic bighorn range.

301 - Spanish Peaks: An amazing population of indigenous wild sheep, sub herds are expanding on their own to historic wild sheep habitat. The bad winter of 22 was not friendly to the young and old bighorn sheep in this range.

302 - Hilgards: Also an Indigenous bighorn sheep population has been generally stable enough to offer hunting opportunities from the mid 1950's to present including being an unlimited area for many years. It has the formidable backcountry characteristics that could qualify it to be managed as an unlimited permit area once again?

*Special note on 301-302 area the historic bighorn range in these areas is believed to be capable of sup-*



porting well over one thousand bighorn sheep. The combined herds are about halfway there and a new translocation to MT state own Bear Creek Game Range is coming up for public review.

303 - South AB wilderness: An unlimited permit area, this native migratory bighorn herd is scattered for many miles along the upper Yellowstone valley and have competed with elk for winter forage for decades.

304 - Hyalite: This was once an unlimited permit area and the winter of 22 appears to have impacted portions of the herd.

305 - South Yellowstone: This native migratory bighorn herd has been affected by respiratory disease related die-off but still has all age groups of wild sheep in its population allowing for very limited hunting. Just reopened this season.

*Common linked threats to these herds are:*

- Road strike issues- MTWSF is in discussion with MTDOT and MTFWP.
- Winter non-motorized human recreation on the winter ranges. Developing a partnership with specific user groups.
- Pine encroachment and noxious weeds- out reach with land managers on going.
- Elk encroachment - MTFWP
- Predation (lions) develop partnership with Houndsman
- 

315 - Tendoy: Are presently closed to hunting. The 2022 transplant is doing great and the herd should be

over 100 animals by spring of 2025.

330 - Greehorns: I joined a capture and collar project in January of 2024. Collars were attached to young rams and ewes in three different sub herds. There are now several dozen collars that are helping MTFWP to understand summer/winter ranges used by these herds.

340 - Highlands: This population is under the micro-scope and in the last two years over 190 collars have been placed on bighorns from five sub herds in the area. Lion predation and unknown predation have had notable impacts on the herd. Collar placement is focused on ewes and lambs.

380 - Radersburg: This herd is recovering from respiratory all age-class die-off.

381 - Sleeping Giant: This population is found to the east and west of Holter lake and is a mix of USFS and MTFWP Beartooth Game range. A great place to view wild sheep by boat in the Gates of the Mountains.

#### Beaverhead Country Cooperative

The group sought to reach a set of collaborative agreements intended to move us beyond deadlock over the future of public land management in Beaverhead County involving wilderness study areas and recommended wilderness areas that have been in limbo for 45 years. The areas in focus are the Tendoy mountains, Lima Peaks and southern Beaverhead Mountain range. MTWSF was asked by this remark-

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## Region Reports continued

ably diverse collaborative to act as the voting wildlife representative on this committee. I attended a monthly meeting with the group from April 2023 to present. We went on two field trips in the region and I guided the group through to give them feet on the ground perspective. This region is the southernmost native range of Rocky Mtn Goats and also the Tendoy/Beaverhead Bighorn herd. MTWSF were about to present embedded language in the BBC recommendation that could be wildlife related boilerplate language for wilderness. They include habitat for Bighorn Sheep and Mountain Goats and any legislation designating this area should highlight those features. Legislation must allow needed management activities for fish and wildlife populations under present or future listed ESA Endangered, threatened or designated species of special concern by federal and or state wildlife agencies.

*"Management activities to maintain or restore fish and wildlife populations and the habitats to support the populations may be conducted within the wilderness area, including the occasional and temporary use of motorized vehicles if the use would promote healthy, viable, and more naturally distributed wildlife populations."*

### Region 4

Conservation Committee Member, Gary Olson

Brent Lonner graciously prepared a Region Four bighorn sheep summary for fall 2024. Ryan Rauscher also provided information on recent sheep surveys.

Survey data for Region Four (spring-late summer 2024) indicate overall stable to increasing numbers across the majority of BHS hunting districts. Lamb production and ram age structure look promising, including Rocky Mountain Front, Beartooth-Sheep Creek and Missouri River Breaks (south side) areas. A generally mild 2023-24 winter allowed for good survivorship, especially during the lambing period, which no doubt helped bolster survival into the spring/summer period.

Region Four sheep hunting license levels are down from previous years, although given current population trends and improved ewe/lamb and ram/ewe ratios, area biologists are hopeful additional opportunities will be available within the next few years. The first several months of the "Statewide Adaptive Management of Bighorn Sheep and Mountain Goat

Project" have provided opportunities to improve understanding of sheep ecology in several areas across Montana, including the Sheep Creek/Beartooth WMA to Sleeping Giant area (Regions 3 and 4). Overall survivorship of these herds has been strong over the past several months. An annual report for this project is nearing completion.

The other project titled "Coproducting Science to Evaluate Contact Risk Factors Between Wild and Domestic Sheep in Montana" is also moving along well. The annual report is available and does a good job explaining the many facets of this effort across the state, including the Sheep Creek/Beartooth WMA to Sleeping Giant areas in Region Four.

### Region 5

Conservation Committee Member, Bryan Duffy

Region 5 sheep are doing well, no reports of disease, excessive predation kills or winter die off. Population is stable and growing in certain remote areas

Three units for bighorn sheep in Region 5 are unlimited units, 500, 501, 502.

With a nice winter there are plenty of sheep on the mountain. But with stable sheep numbers comes hunters, and all three units have seen an uptick in hunter participation. Although not a "biological issue" at this time, this has become a real social issue! Many meetings this last year were held with FWP officials, the public, and our membership. These meetings were designed to address these social issues. To what end? This remains to be seen. From these meetings some very practical simple solutions have been adopted by the MTWSF Unlimited Conservation Sub Committee and have been presented to upper FWP management.

Region 5 unit 503 is retaining a nice herd of sheep with a couple of beautiful rams. A few lucky permit holders will have the opportunity to hunt them. Some discussion has been had on the impact of wild horses on our sheep herd. Is there one? If so, can we find some solutions to help 503 sheep expand their range and grow herd numbers? Are there some ground leasing opportunities available to increase range and herd growth. Things to work on for sure this year.

On a personal level, I have enjoyed building solid relationships with the Region 5 FWP biologists and



other department officials. It is our conservation committee intention that these relationships will help us put and keep sheep on the mountain in Region 5.

## Region 6

Conservation Committee Member, *Pat Gunderson*

Access into the Bullwhacker portion of the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument, a quality bighorn sheep viewing and hunting area was restored through a decision by the BLM this Spring. Paired with a Public Land Access Agreement between a private landowner and MFWP on an adjacent private land tract, the Left Coulee Access project improves public land access opportunities for bighorn sheep enthusiasts over a vast area of rugged, remote public lands.

Population surveys in the Breaks sheep herds of Region 6 have shown a decline over the last few years. License quota recommendations have mirrored these numbers as quota levels have been reduced. Low lamb numbers have been noticeable during this downturn, as drought conditions have had an impact on area wildlife. Mountain lion harvest quotas have been liberalized and harvest has been more focused in the Breaks with HD's 622 and 680 now having individual harvest quotas.

Disease surveillance continues to be prioritized by MFWP in Region 6 through all available means, including hunter harvest tissue samples.

## Region 7

Conservation Committee Member, *John Ensign*

There have been some changes within R7 FWP. The wildlife biologist responsible for the Blue Hills, who was very interested in doing some work on that population, has left FWP. We are waiting for the position to be filled and will be working to establish the engagement with R7 over the Blue Hills.

## Woolgrowers

Conservation Committee Member, *Brent Roeder*

There was a hybridization incident between wild sheep and domestic sheep this past year. Several domestic sheep produced non-viable offspring from a commingling event(s). The producer is collaborating with MTWSF CC members, MSU and FWP on the commingling project. Brent Roeder and MTWSF will be meeting with the producer this fall to discuss ways to incorporate project designs and modifications in the commingling project specific to this producer. 🍷

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# Ewe Matter(s)

## A Perspective on Montana Bighorn Ewe Tags

by Erika Putnam

Each year when I apply for bighorn tags I notice the option for choosing a ewe tag. It had not occurred to me to apply for a ewe tag. I haven't seen any pictures of hunters showing off their trophy ewes or heard them sharing ewe hunting stories. It has been out of my awareness and thought process to consider applying for a ewe tag as a first choice. I reached out to several Montana biologists to learn more about ewe tags.

At first glance, filling a ewe tag could seem similar to hunting does or cows. The meat is equally good. The hunt itself offers life experiences and memories in beautiful places. The preparation and planning would be just as satisfying. You could even enjoy a

nice mount if you wanted one. But, let's be honest, a trophy ram still has value to the ego and is somehow more easily justified than harvesting a lamb producing ewe, especially when it appears sheep populations are on the decline.

There is a bigger picture to consider when choosing to hunt either sex of bighorn sheep.

Herd management dictates the number of ram and ewe tags available in each district. Tags are available based on many factors, primarily habitat and disease prevalence. Tags become more available when sheep populations become higher than the habitat carrying capacity. Poor quality and limited food re-

sources sacrifice animal health which often makes sheep more susceptible to disease. Drought, fire and invasive vegetation can negatively affect habitat and animal health of both sexes.





Lamb production often declines with poorer ewe health. At signs of herd decline herd management is considered from a broader perspective.

Hunting is one management tool used to decrease herd populations. That means hunting could be considered for all animals in the herd, not just the rams. Each sex and each age have behaviors and roles to consider. One option would be to transplant members to other locations, however, that option tends to be long and complicated. Even though it might appear that a transplant supports the mission of keeping sheep on the mountain it does pose risk of disease transmission. Changing hunting quotas is used as a pro-active, timely and flexible management tool.

Commonly, it has been considered a management perspective to harvest the oldest, biggest rams. But, we could also consider herd management from the perspective of harvesting ewes. Hunting lamb producing ewes seems inconceivable when sheep populations are low compared to deer and elk herds. From the perspective of overall herd management, it is the same. From a conservation perspective it offers a hunting option, if the hunting experience outweighs the idea of the typical trophy.

There is also discussion about the value of harvesting younger rams. Younger rams tend to travel further and are more likely to spread disease or carry disease between herds. This is a topic of discussion among biologists, researchers and hunters. It has been proposed in other states and countries and has not yet been accepted in Montana.

A reminder, many of the bighorn sheep tags provide opportunities to harvest either sex. If one is hunting and not finding a ram, they could choose to harvest a ewe. This is something to consider when applying for tags each year.

Ram tags are highly sought after and the chances of drawing one is relatively low. The odds of drawing a ewe tag are higher. These tags offer hunters more opportunities to hunt in sheep country and support conservation management. Further, hunters are not limited to the 7-year waiting period when they draw a ewe tag.

For those that have “sheep fever” and have already harvested big rams, maybe a ewe tag is a new op-

tion. For those playing the odds, maybe a ewe tag is worth a chance. Ewe tags might be an option when applying in other states and countries. Maybe consider one in an area where you and your partners want to hunt together and take turns putting in for ewes. Maybe mom, dad and kids put in for a different tag each year and the odds go up for everyone to get out together. Less than half the ewe tags in Montana are filled each year.

In my new understanding of this hunting option I will plan my draws more strategically and thoughtfully. I can consider the experience I want to have, who I want to share it with and the odds of success. I also trust that these hunting quotas are determined with informed consideration for the herd and the state. Harvesting a big, old ram might still be on my bucket list but I've become more aware of other hunting opportunities that can take me to other places, for other reasons and with more understanding of conservation management I feel better about my overall hunting decisions. I am even open to shifting my perspective on what a trophy means to me.

The bigger picture of hunting does include conservation. I appreciate the conversations with the biologists that contributed to my questions. For more information, FWP has a bighorn management strategy which is a 300 plus page document that includes discussion of ewe harvest. 🍷





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