

*** *Montana* ***

WILD SHEEP

FOUNDATION



KEEPING SHEEP ON THE MOUNTAIN

Spring 2025 | Volume 33, Issue 1



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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 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.



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dj@montanawsf.org

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alex@montanawsf.org

Erika Putnam, Secretary
erika@montanawsf.org

Mark Westfall, Treasurer
mark@montanawsf.org

Levi Bowler
levi@montanawsf.org

Riley Pearson
riley@montanawsf.org

Kirk Russell
kirk@montanawsf.org

Ray Vinkey
ray@montanawsf.org

Grant Winn II
g.winn@nm.com

Ty Stubblefield, Executive Director
ty@montanawsf.org

Kurt Alt, Conservation Director
kurt@montanawsf.org

Brian Solan, Legislative Director
brian@montanawsf.org

Contact us at:
Montana Wild Sheep Foundation
PO Box 17731
Missoula, MT 59808
Visit us at montanawsf.org.



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! As I write this we are right on the heels of our 33rd Annual Banquet and Fundraiser. Wow, what a weekend! It was fantastic to see our community of wild sheep conservationists come together to learn, share stories, and celebrate. Thank you to all who were there to participate. I truly hope you had a wonderful time.

It takes an incredible amount of effort to plan and execute the events over the weekend. I have to give a big shout out to the Board of Directors for their individual contributions. Whether it is securing donations or planning the events, this passionate team put in the work to make the event an experience our members would undoubtedly enjoy. I also want to recognize Ty Stubblefield for leading the planning effort and execution of the show.

The banquet would not have been possible without our generous donors. We had 17 Beartooth, 2 Bridger, and 8 Bitterroot Sponsors this year. In total, these sponsors contributed nearly \$100,000 in underwriting, hunts, and product donations. This incredible generosity was the foundation to our most successful fundraiser yet.

We also had an army of volunteers at this year's banquet and we could not be more thankful for them! Whether it was moving items back and forth to the S.U.B Ballroom, working the registration desk, or speaking at the seminars, the passion of these folks brought the event to a new level. I know I speak for all of us, thank you volunteers for your dedication.

Now that the coffers are full again, it is time to shift our focus back to the resource. Our number 1 goal is to expand the density and distribution of bighorn sheep in the state of Montana. We need to stay hyper focused on finding ways to achieve this goal through coordination with MT FWP and our partners. MTWSF is working to reimagine our conservation efforts and take action to implement new initiatives to achieve our goals.

The keystone to achieving these goals is the continued work of our Conservation Committee. They are making progress with relationships, advocacy, and project development. I am most excited about the progress to be made on reducing wild sheep highway collisions and expanding hunter opportunity. This committee continues to strengthen each year and is making a greater impact.

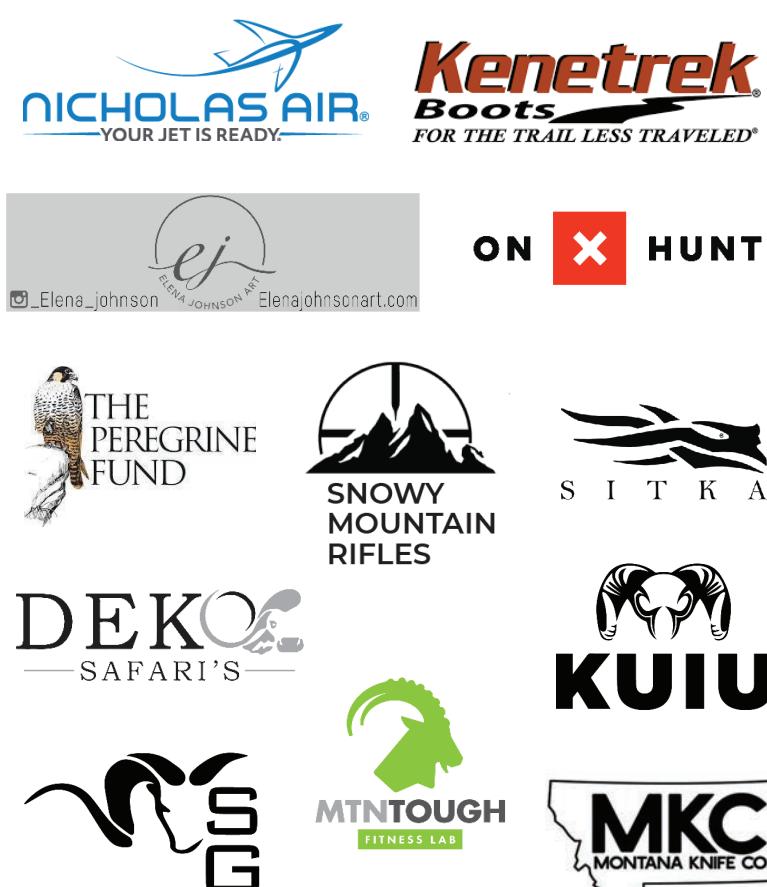
One last time, thank you all so much for supporting MTWSF. You are making a difference for bighorn sheep in Montana and I can't thank you enough for your support. I wish you all a wonderful spring and earlier summer.

Take care and be well!

D.J. Berg

Montana Wild Sheep Foundation President

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Executive Director's Message

We've been extremely busy over the past several months with various initiatives and events, particularly our recent banquet, the legislative session, and our ongoing conservation efforts. And we will be scheduling another "State of the Sheep" tour this spring so be on the lookout for an event near you in May and June.

****1. Banquet Highlights****

Our annual fundraising banquet was a remarkable success, bringing together supporters and stakeholders dedicated to bighorn sheep conservation. The event featured guest speakers, silent & live auctions, raffles and our famous life member hunt giveaway. We raised substantial funds to support our conservation projects, which will directly benefit bighorn sheep populations.

****2. Legislative Updates****

During the recent legislative session, we advocated for key policies aimed at improving wildlife management and fair chase ethics. We worked diligently to engage lawmakers on the importance of bighorn sheep conservation and the need for sustainable hunting practices. Our efforts included testimony at committee hearings and collaborative discussions with other conservation organizations.

****3. Conservation Challenges****

We continue to address critical issues affecting bighorn sheep, including road kill, predation, and habitat loss.

For a deeper dive on these topics and our ongoing efforts, please read further in this newsletter. Your support and engagement are crucial as we work together to ensure a sustainable future for bighorn sheep here in Montana. Thank you for your commitment to wildlife conservation!

Ty Stubblefield

Executive Director

Montana Wild Sheep Foundation

ty@montanawsf.org

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Celebrating Success at the 33rd Annual Banquet Fundraiser

by Ty Stubblefield

This year's 33rd Annual Banquet Fundraiser was a night to remember, as it not only broke previous attendance records but also achieved remarkable fundraising success. With an impressive turnout of 600 attendees, supporters gathered to enjoy an evening filled with camaraderie, generous donations, and exhilarating prize giveaways.

The primary aim of the banquet is to raise funds crucial for our ongoing Bighorn sheep projects and initiatives, and this year, we set a new benchmark by raising over \$320,000. The atmosphere was electric, filled with laughter, conversations, and the unmistakable buzz of philanthropy in action. Each dollar raised at the event will go directly towards programs that benefit Bighorn sheep, making every contribution a vital part of our mission.

An exciting highlight of the evening was the life member giveaway, an exclusive Alaskan Dahl sheep hunt. This breathtaking adventure drew a mass of interest, with several names drawn, but in a bittersweet twist of fate, one lucky life member found his opportunity thwarted due to a vehicle breakdown on the way to the banquet. A great BIG thank you to Kevin Gilbert and Jim Winjum at Kenetrek for sponsoring the life member sheep hunt.

The prize giveaways didn't stop with the hunt; attendees were also thrilled by an array of firearms donated by top manufacturers, including Bergara, Springfield Armory, Weatherby, Snowy Mountain, and SCOUTE Arms. With a diverse selection of top-quality firearms, the generosity of our sponsors not only contributes to our fundraising goals but also enhances the experience for all participants.

We extend our heartfelt

gratitude to all our sponsors and members who participated with donations to our raffles and live and silent auctions. A strong showing of support from our Montana based companies like KUIU, MKC, MTN Tough, OnX, Sitka, Stone Glacier as well as our friends at Deko Safaris, Elena Johnson Art, Idaho Wild Sheep Foundation, Peregrine Fund and Wild Sheep Foundation round out the list of great conservation partners.

As we reflect on the success of the 33rd Annual Banquet Fundraiser, we also look forward to continuing this momentum through the rest of the year. Our team is committed to building even more engaging events across the state. With your ongoing support, we can not only meet but exceed our goals, ensuring the sustainability and expansion of bighorn sheep.

To all who attended, donated, or contributed time and resources to make this event a success, thank you. Your commitment has made an indelible impact on our mission and has inspired countless others to join us. As we look ahead, we are excited about what we can achieve together in the coming years. Stay tuned for next year's banquet, which will again be hosted in Bozeman, March 6-7, 2026. We hope to create even more unforgettable memories and, of course, raise even more for wild sheep! 🦌



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BINGO!

Ladies Bubbles, Boots & Bighorns Friday Night Event Was a Boot Stompin' Good Time

by Erika Putnam

This year's ladies Bubbles, Boots and Bighorns event was sponsored by Kenetrek and one lucky woman won a pair of boots as a grand door prize. The event was intended as a social event for fun and to spur women into participating in "boots on the ground" for conservation as part of the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation.

This year, along with silent raffles, bucket raffles, and a win the gun game, we played a social BINGO mixer to meet new people. The ladies jumped right into drinking bubbles, eating meatballs and chocolate covered strawberries and asking BINGO questions to get to know each other and win a BINGO prize. I was standing with a few ladies and asking questions and suddenly an ah ha moment happened. "What's your name again? No! Really? You're my taxidermist!" Which started a new friendship and a fun conversation about adventures, work and families.

At the Saturday night fundraising event one women stopped to tell me, "I'm so glad we played BINGO yesterday. I met so many women and it's so fun meeting up and talking with them again tonight."

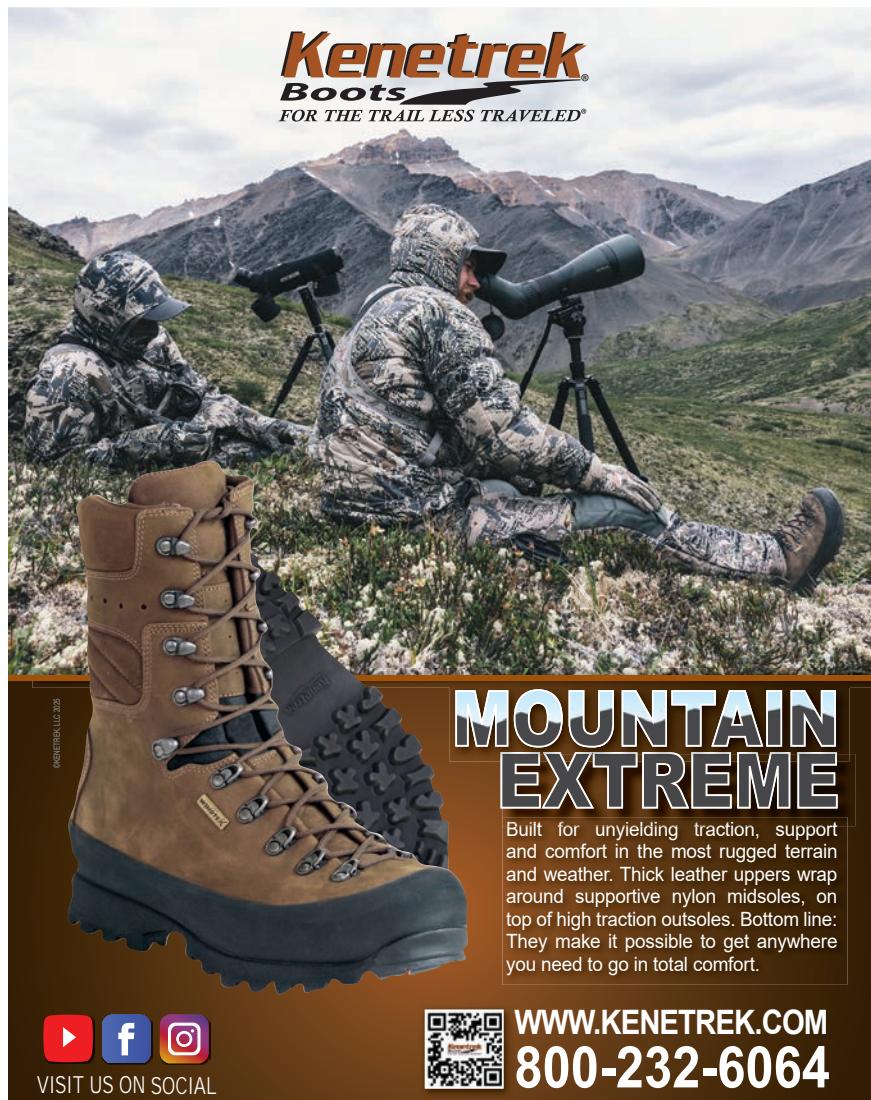
The room was filled with laughter and representatives from our state who have interests in hunting or sheep related influences. Thank you to Alex Stokman with Venery; Renée Thornton and Kara Browne (Class of 2023) with Women Hunt®; Sheep Biologist, Sidney Brenkus from Montana Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit; Hannah Cantu, Aquatic Biologist from Confluence Inc.; and Thomas Powers from Montana Youth Outdoors for participating and sharing about sheep and opportunities with hunting, biology, habitat and more.

We are creating a community and finding a purpose within the Montana Wild Sheep Foundations as women. We are both hunters and non-hunters. If you made it this

year. Thank you for your participation and contribution. If not, be sure to attend next year to connect with other ladies and enjoy this specialty event.

My hope is to launch a women's conservation project this year and report back next year. Please reach out with any conservation ideas (erika@montanawsf.org). And, watch your email for a survey about how to forge forward together!

A giant thanks to our many volunteers who prepared for and worked the event. And thank you to the donors, sponsors and vendors who contributed time and merchandise. ❤



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An "EYEBEX" hunt

by Riley Pearson



Hunting in Central Asia had been in my mind for several years when I decided to take the next step to find out what that would entail.

In 2022, I contacted Jack Atcheson Jr. to learn more. Before long, he had my deposit. The hunt would be for Mid-Asian Ibex with ANCOT, which is the Association of Nature Conservation Organizations of Tajikistan. ANCOT conducts its hunts in a “community based” hunting model.

This means that local people and their livestock are involved in supporting the hunt. By bringing economic opportunities to these rural areas inhabited by herders and farmers, wildlife species have a value to the locals, who are incentivized financially to conserve them. This has contributed greatly to the recovery of Central Asia’s iconic mountain species such as Argali, Markhor and Snow Leopards.

While talking with Jack about what to expect, the theme that kept coming up was just how wonderful the people that would take part in the trip would be.

By early 2024, my wife decided that she would come. While not an avid hunter, she has been on a few hunts and at that time was in the process of training for an ultra-marathon.

That training and preparation came to a halt in July when we found out that she was pregnant. After discussing with her Ob/Gyn, we learned that she should stay below 12,500 feet. Tajikistan is known as the “Rooftop of the World.” The region we’d be hunting in contains Ismoil Somoni, formerly Stalin Peak, which is the highest peak in the former soviet republics and tops out at over 24,500 feet.

After talking with Jack and the Tajiks, we were assured that we could have a quality hunt while staying below 12,500.

After a little test run of backpack hunting the Beartooth Mountains in September, we packed our bags, and in mid-October headed for Tajikistan. We took a short domestic flight to Seattle, then a 12 hour flight to Istanbul, where we planned a 3 day layover to check out as much of the history of the Roman and Ottoman empires as we could in that time.

The flight into Dushanbe was about 6 hours and landed in the middle of the night. We were greeted by our outfitter and his staff, and went through a quick and easy customs process before loading our gear

into a Honda CR-V and hitting the road for 12 hours.

As it got light, the vastness of the Tajik mountains became apparent as we passed through small village after village. We were headed north toward the border with Kyrgyzstan.

After turning off the highway and bumping up a valley for about an hour, the road deteriorated, however, the CR-V bounced over boulders and crossed rivers and streams all the way to the end of the road and the last village.

At the village we were met by the family that lives there. They farm potatoes and raise livestock. There is no grid electricity or indoor plumbing. Nearly everything they need comes from right there on their land. Our guides, called rangers, were from this village and the next one down. After enjoying some tea, bread, fresh jam, honey, cream, and stew, we loaded our Stone Glacier backpacks and then loaded them onto the sides of donkeys. We mounted our horses and headed up the valley.

The ride was beautiful, with the western Pamirs towering above us. We lead the horses across a makeshift bridge that no western horse I've ever been around would cross, then up a mountain in a rainstorm and to a clay hut, where to our surprise we stopped for tea. As we entered the hut, we were greeted by an elderly woman. She had a fire going in the stove with a tea pot atop it. This stop was like going back in time hundreds of years. This house is off grid and several miles beyond the end of any road. The translator told us that this woman's husband was likely out herding their livestock. I don't know if she had ever seen an American before, but I'm certain my wife was the first western woman she had ever seen.

After warming up, our translator showed us the wood fired tandoori oven outside that the bread was made in. Every stop we made on this entire trip we would be offered this kind of bread. It is a staple of the local diet and is offered with tea anywhere you go.

We then mounted our horses and continued up the valley.

As it got dark, we came to a point where the horses could not go any further along the cliffs of the riverbank. It was at this point we learned that some of the folks with us were going to return, all the way back to the village in the dark with the stock and we would walk a few more kilometers. After crossing the raging,

An “EYEBEX” hunt continued

glacial river in a cable car, pulled by hand on a pulley system, we hike the last bit of distance to the camp spot. The tents were already set up. Someone from the village had hiked in several days prior to get it ready for us. This was a welcome surprise. We were so glad to get a chance to rest.

We awoke in the morning to more tea, coffee, fresh eggs, sausage, pistachios in the dark and were told we'd hike up the drainage behind camp to look for Ibex.

The drainage is steep and tight at first but opens up after a few miles. Constant care was taken to watch for falling and rolling rock, which is a common occurrence.

As the drainage opened, we stopped to glass.

At one point when we were stopped to glass, I made the mistake of getting out of the bottom where I was concealed by a steep bank to go up the bank to get a better view. A group of nearby Ibex were peaking over a ridge and caught site of me. They did not hang around. They went up the hill at 850 yards, and out of sight. It was obvious as they crested the ridge that there was at least one shooter in the group. I was sure kicking myself for being so careless. The rangers didn't seem too bothered by this and assured us that there would be more “EYEBEX” and less “eeeebex” as we got higher. The rangers speak no English and we certainly don't speak Kyrgyz or Farsi, so this terminology, along with hand gestures, is how our guides communicated Ibex size to us, without having to use the interpreter.

With the time left in the day and the distance between us and the obvious end of huntable terrain getting shorter, due to glaciation at the end of the valley, it began to snow.

One of our rangers snuck up onto a knob and then quickly gestured that we join him. It was obvious from his excitement that he had eyes on something.

Across the valley above us was a herd of Ibex. “EYEBEX” he says, holding up 3 or 4 fingers, meaning that's how many big billies are in the group.

We estimated this group of Ibex to be 3 hours away. We only had 2 hours of daylight left. We observed them just long enough to get excited about them and

then headed for camp. The snow picked up. As we lost elevation, it turned to rain.

I ordered an InReach forecast when we got back to camp. It predicted a very wet night. If correct, dreams of killing one of the billies in the morning would have to be postponed.

The forecast was correct.

It rained all night and all the next morning. As it got light, it was apparent that visibility above the snow-line, which was about 500 vertical feet above the tent, was nearly zero.

A good day to stay in camp and catch up on rest and eat. They made so much food for us that day.

By midafternoon, the storm was breaking and we could glass from camp. We saw eeeeebex and 3 grizzly bears.

The rangers were excited about the next day.

We got up and ate breakfast in the dark and began hiking with headlamps.

We quickly hit snow. It wasn't long and a ranger had spotted a group of Ibex. They were low, feeding in the grass and brush along the creek. We got to sit and observe them for about an hour. We watched them feed, often standing on their hind legs to eat off these tall plants that had gone to seed along the creek. Having no Ibex experience, I was trying to judge them based upon the length of horn proportionate to their body size. One billy stood out. Long horns, dark cape. I put the spotter on him and showed Kaylee. I told her that when it was time to shoot, if she could, to shoot him.

The Ibex finally fed out of sight and gave us an opportunity to close the distance.

Following the rangers, we moved as quickly as we can to get into position. Before long, the entire group of Ibex were standing across from us at 300-400 yards. We got Kaylee set up to shoot and began looking them over.

She was able to pick out the dark billy with long horns. When he cleared away from the others, she shot. After a follow up shot, her billy was down and

there were ibex running everywhere.

I got on the gun and quickly located 4 billies going up the hill, about to top over a ridge. The rear one stopped for just long enough to get a shot off. I shot, and he stepped over the ridge. It sounded good and felt good. The interpreter told me that the guides said he was hit good. I wasn't so sure.

Kaylee went with a ranger and the interpreter to recover her clearly dead Ibex and I took the rifle and a ranger and went after mine. Thankfully, mine was dead too.

The rangers talked on the radio and it was decided that we would slide both to the bottom to process them together. This is when I realized how large a mid-Asian Ibex body is. Larger than a mule deer, smaller than a cow elk.

After some work, with the assistance of a few inches

of fresh snow and a very steep mountainside, both were together.

We took some photos and then got to work on the processing.

To my amazement, only the heads went on a real backpack, which was the one I brought. The rangers carried every ounce of meat, bone-in, back to camp on their backs in potato sacks. They did so while wearing tennis shoes or thin rubber boots. These guys redefine terms like 'mountain fit.'

Back at camp, the cook prepared their traditional meal, 'osh', consisting of a bismati style rice, veggies, spices and Ibex meat. Like nearly everything else that we were fed the entire trip, it was delicious.

The following day, we headed back to the village. The rangers amazed us at how strong they were and how much endurance they had.



An “EYBex” hunt continued

The hike and ride back were beautiful. The sun was shining, and it was quite warm. We were riding by remnants of dwellings in a place that has been inhabited by humans since at least 3 centuries before Christ. Yet, aside from the occasional visitation of Americans like us with too much fancy gear, not much has changed in this valley in that time.

Back in the village, potato harvest was in full swing. Without missing a beat, our rangers began picking up 50Kg bags of potatoes and carrying them into the storage building. We were shown around the farm and offered endless amounts of tea and food.

We would stay in the village that night in one of our ranger's houses, before the long drive to Dushanbe the next day.

On the way back, they stopped in a village to gift us a handmade, wooden bowl that traditional Tajik meals are served in, then stopped again to eat lunch and to shop at an open air market to buy some nuts and other snacks for the road.

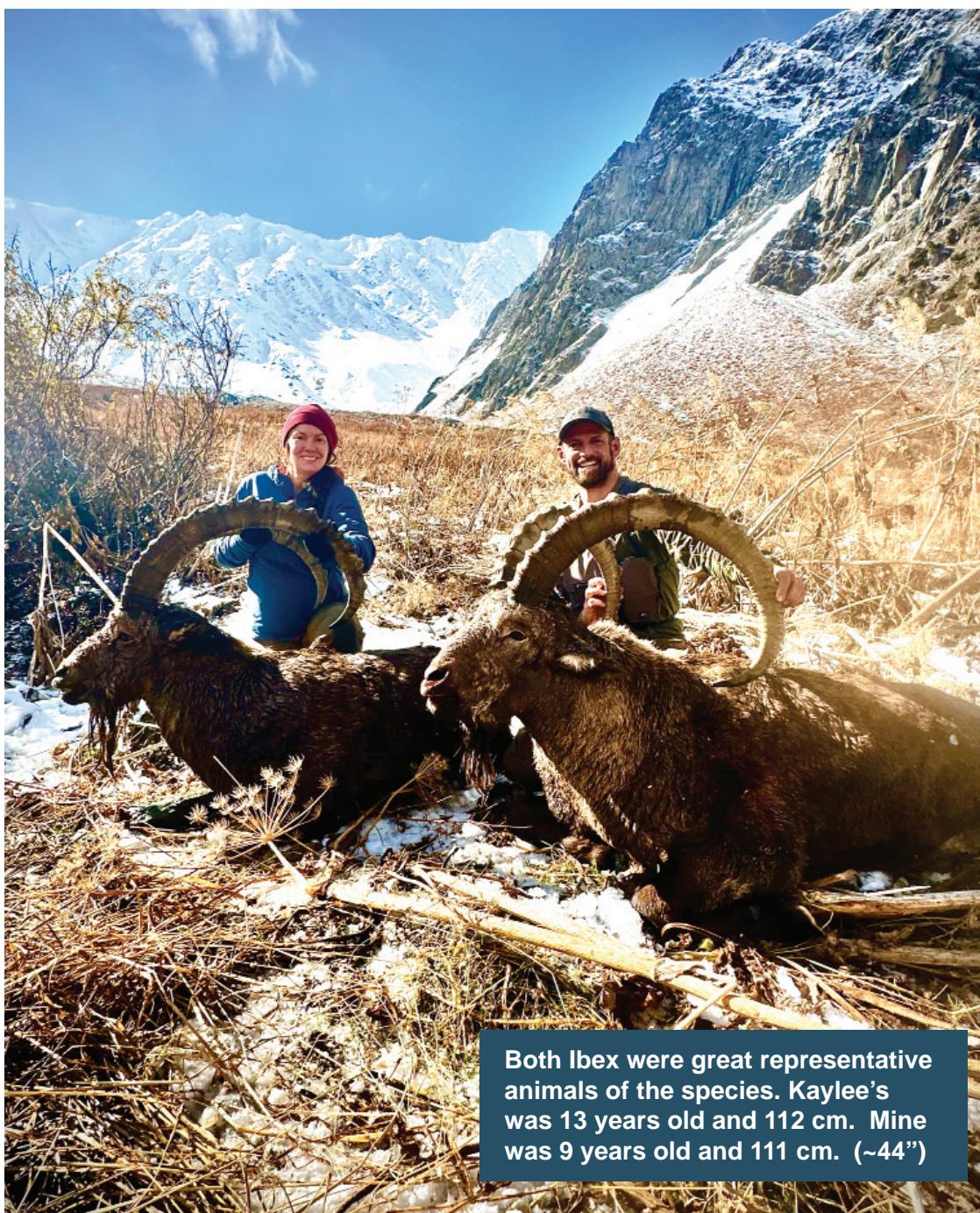
Back in Dushanbe, where we would stay two more nights, the outfitter took us to dinner and showed us around their beautiful capital.

The people of Tajikistan were the most welcoming, honest and hospitable people I've ever been around. The village people live a simple, subsistence lifestyle where they provide for themselves the freshest,

healthiest foods I've ever had. They may not have the luxuries of the modern, western world, but they do not have many of the problems either.

They are mountain people in every way.

The hunting was incredible, but it really was the least remarkable part of the trip. Anybody that has the opportunity to travel to Central Asia should take it, whether it's for hunting or something else. ♡



Both Ibex were great representative animals of the species. Kaylee's was 13 years old and 112 cm. Mine was 9 years old and 111 cm. (~44")



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IBEX HUNT RAFFLE

Ewe Matter(s)

by Erika Putnam

With the banquet at our heels, it's time to focus on the year ahead. I am interested in finding more conservation opportunities for our members and their families. That means meeting more women in the world of hunting, biology, and conservation with a broad perspective about ways we can collectively learn and incorporate outreach for a variety of projects.

An example of this is an upcoming hike scheduled for May 17th with sheep biologist Vanna Boccadori. A small group of hikers will meet south of Butte to observe bighorn sheep groups. Vanna will lead us in learning about habitat, food habits, counting and classifying sheep by age and sex, and much more. This is an opportunity to ask questions and further our knowledge with a professional. We may even take a break and do some sheep yoga. The goal of the hike is to learn and be in community.

On another note, I recently took a field trip to Eureka and visited with Ethan Lula, the Region 1 biologist and Bennie Rossetto MD, our MTWSF Region 1 Conservation Representative. We discussed the trouble with sheep fatalities along the highway near the border and also on a stretch of highway south of Rexford. We discussed and are learning more about types of signage, lights, electric signals and fencing used to reduce collisions. We also discussed habitat concerns related to old growth forest and lack of nutrient dense feed for sheep. Another challenge is proximity of wild sheep to domestic sheep and spread of disease. I understood that funding and prioritizing with regards to time are limiting factors for many projects. I could see some possibility for community projects that I will discuss further with our Conservation Committee. There are opportunities for education about how the sheep migrate and disease that is unfamiliar to new people moving into the community. Perhaps, we can help take some smaller steps like education, pulling weeds, planting seeds, involving youth and increasing public awareness in ways to benefit the foundation of our mission.

For more information about the upcoming hike or conservation projects please reach me at erika@montanawsf.org. 



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69th Montana Legislature

The 69th Montana legislature is just past its halfway point and our elected officials have been actively engaged in wildlife issues. Your Montana Wild Sheep Foundation has spent much of our time engaging on two bills relevant to putting and keeping sheep on the mountain and advancing fair chase hunting.

Rep. Courtenay Sprunger's (R-HD7, Kalispell) HB202 aims to close a loophole in the current state statute that has allowed some hunters to abuse small planes and drones while afield. As currently written, this bill will require hunters to wait 24 hours after flying in a small plane or utilizing a drone before they may begin hunting. It will also prohibit hunters from being in possession of a drone while hunting, and will raise the penalties for breaking these laws.

Rep. Tyson Running Wolf (D-HD16, Browning) has brought forward HB283, which poses a substantial risk to the future of FWP's bighorn sheep conservation efforts by undermining the longstanding success of the annual bighorn sheep auction tag. On face value, this bill merely introduces an option for the Montana Fish & Wildlife Commission to elect to raffle this tag, rather than auction it, however, MT WSF remains skeptical that raffling a sheep tag could raise revenue comparable to an auction tag. As hunters, we must continue to put the resource first and, in this case, that means electing to maximize revenue for sheep conservation, research, and management. For these reasons, we oppose HB283.

Conservation Corner

by Ray Vinkey, *Conservation Corner Editor, Volunteer*

Hi folks, in this column we are able to share the executive summary of the first annual report of the statewide wild-domestic commingling study. This research is the second element of the multi-year, multi-million dollar research effort on bighorn sheep and goats in Montana. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Montana State University, Montana State University County Extension staff, and numerous livestock producers are cooperating to study commingling events (and the efficacy of various separation techniques) in eight bighorn sheep herds (Darby, Sleeping Giant, Highlands, Greenhorns, Tendays, Madison & Mill Creek; (Figure 1) which in combination have over 12,000 domestic sheep and goats within 14.5 kilometers of bighorn sheep herds. In the first year of the study contact rates were documented based on GPS data from 162 collared bighorn as well as field observations (Figure 2).

This study will provide valuable information on individ-

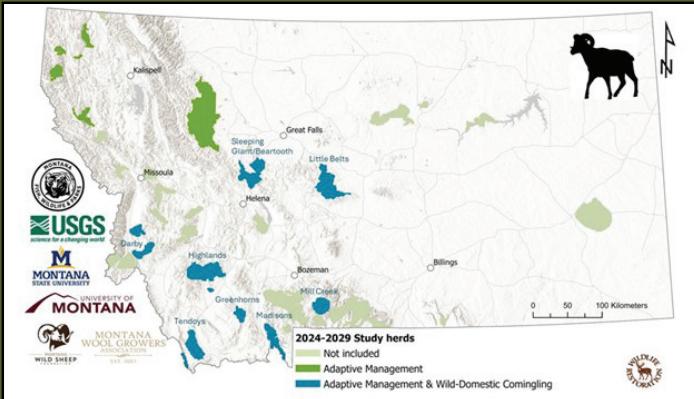


Figure 1. Bighorn sheep herds where wild-domestic sheep contact will be studied in coordination with FWP bighorn sheep research. Information on domestic sheep and goat operations will be collected within 14.5 km of the study herd distributions.

ual, herd/band-level, and environmental factors that influence the probability of wild and domestic sheep contact and will identify situations where pathogen spillover is most likely, allowing wildlife and domestic sheep managers to focus on reducing the risk of epizootics in situations with a high risk of contact.

Montana Wild Sheep Foundations' advocacy to work with livestock producers was an important factor in the development of this work. We believe that working collaboratively is essential to the conservation of mountain ungulates.

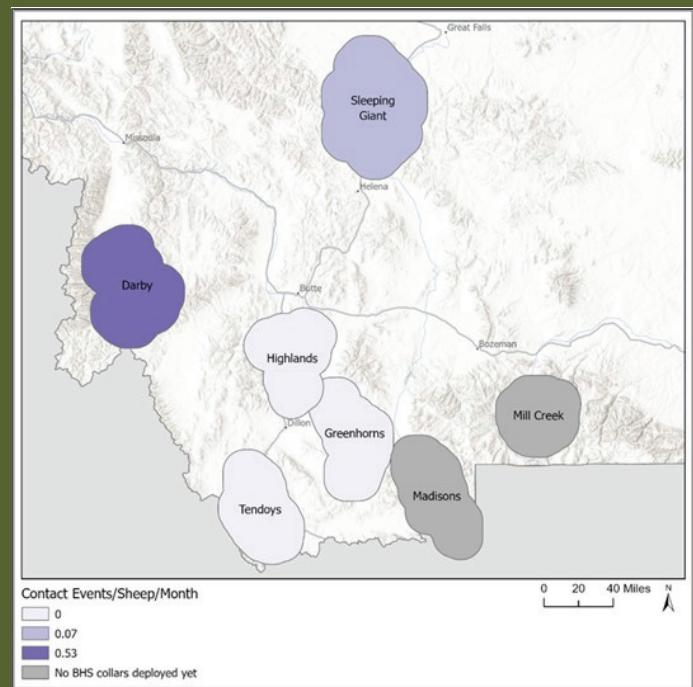


Figure 2. Bighorn sheep (BHS) close contact rate by study area during July 1, 2023 – June 30, 2024. The contact rate is calculated as the total number of individual BHS contacts with domestic sheep and goats, per the total number of BHS collared, per the length of time collars are active

Executive Summary from *Co Producing Science to Evaluate Contact Risk Factors Between Wild and Domestic Sheep in Montana* (Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, September 1, 2024,):

“Respiratory disease, specifically pneumonia caused by *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae* (*M. ovi*), remains a limitation to bighorn sheep recovery in Montana. *M. ovi* can be transmitted among all members of the Caprinae family, including domestic sheep and goats, via direct contact (i.e., nose-to-nose) or via aerosols at distances up to 12-15 meters. The purpose of this study is to better understand how often, and under what circumstances, wild and domestic sheep contacts occur. This project aims to identify factors that contribute to a higher risk of contact, allowing managers to better predict when and where wild and domestic sheep and goats are likely to interact and how best to maintain physical separation between them. Optimizing our tools to reduce contact between bighorn sheep and domestic sheep and goats should reduce the risk of disease spillover, yielding benefits for both produc-

tion agriculture and wildlife conservation.

This study is evaluating the probability of wild-domestic sheep contact as a function of individual, herd-level, and environmental covariates across eight study herds where existing Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks' bighorn sheep research is planned or underway. Through producer surveys, local knowledge, and field investigations, a total of 48 domestic sheep and goat producers have been identified within 14.5 km of the bighorn sheep study herds. These operations have an estimated 11,826 domestic sheep, 271 domestic goats, and 35 livestock guard dogs. In the spring of 2024, GPS collars were deployed on participating domestic sheep operations that are herded, in large, fenced pastures, or that move frequently in temporary fencing. A total of 294 domestic sheep and 25 livestock guardian dog (LGD) collars were deployed across 5 operations and 10 bands/flocks within the vicinity of 3 bighorn sheep study herds. So far, GPS collars have been deployed on 38 bighorn rams and 124 bighorn ewes across 5 of the study herds.

All collars are planned to last 2-3 years to capture seasonal and yearly variation in movements. Most bighorn sheep collars were programmed with a virtual fence to capture more frequent locations when they are within proximity to known domestic sheep or goat operations. A total of 51 close contact events, defined as collared bighorn sheep within 200 meters of domestic sheep or goats within a 24-hour period, were identified through GPS data (744 locations). These events involved 8 individual collared bighorn sheep across 2 study herds and each event involved an average of 2.08 individuals.

The contact rate across all study herds was 0.15 contact events per collared bighorn sheep per month. Close contact events occurred in March, April, May, and June, 2024. In addition, 6 close contacts across 2 study herds were identified through ground observations by producers, landowners, commingling project staff, or FWP staff.

One full-time and one seasonal field technician joined the project in the spring of 2024. Efforts are underway to complete identification and ground-truthing of domestic sheep and goat operations within the study areas and to continue producer outreach to gather husbandry data on these

operations. Ground-based survey protocol and observation tools are being explored and will be implemented in the fall of 2024. Collars on domestic sheep and LGDs will continue to be monitored and managed in coordination with sheep producers. Lastly, in the coming year, we plan to include the Thompson Falls bighorn sheep herd in northwestern Montana as another study area in this project; this report does not yet reflect that decision, but future reports will include this herd."

You can contact Emily Almberg, Disease Ecologist with FWP ealmberg@mt.gov for a full copy of the first year's research report.

A recent die off occurred in the Paradise Valley. The tragic news of 12 bighorn sheep deaths—consisting of one ewe, two lambs, and nine rams in the Mill Creek Drainage.

The carcasses of the ewe and lambs were scavenged to the point they could not be necropsied, however nasal swabs were taken to test for common pneumonia-causing bacteria. Preliminary necropsy findings from the rams revealed significant lung damage—particularly in the right cranial lobe—which is indicative of respiratory distress typically associated with pneumonia. Some of the rams showed severe adhesion of the lungs to the rib cage, further supporting the hypothesis that the pneumonia outbreak is linked to a known bacterial pathogen: *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae* (*M. ovi*). The body condition of the rams suggests that these infections may be due to an acute rather than chronic onset. The investigation by Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) is ongoing. Samples have been sent in to test



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Conservation Corner continued

for PCR. The results will play an important role in identifying not only the specific strains involved but also in developing future management strategies.

We will provide more information as it becomes available.

Thanks to the hard work of the Unlimited working group, the FWP Commission, back in December voted to make changes to the timeline for reporting a ram harvested in one of the five unlimited units.

Unlimited bighorn sheep units are managed by harvest quota. This regulation structure is implemented by a reporting system that requires hunters to report and check in their harvest within 48 hours. Once reported, harvest reaches the quota, FWP announces the closure and hunters have another 48 hours to hunt before the season closes. This leaves potential for the season to remain open for 96 hours or four days after the quota is met. This unnecessarily increases the potential for each unit to go over quota. This original timeline was established when technology was extremely limited. With technological advances it has become easier for hunters to check in and report their harvest. This new technology enables hunters to communicate from anywhere in the world including the deepest parts of the Beartooth mountain range. The additional time for inspection is to allow more time to exit the backcountry.

The Fish and Wildlife Commission voted to adjust time requirements for reporting harvest, closing the season, and head and cape inspection times for unlimited bighorn sheep harvest from 48 to 24 hours for harvest reporting, 48 to 24 hours for season closure, and 48 to 72 hours for head and cape inspection.

If you plan to hunt an Unlimited unit this year be sure you are prepared to report your harvest within 24 hours of harvest.

Commission closes bighorn sheep hunting in HD 622

The Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission closed bighorn sheep hunting in Hunting District 622 during an emergency meeting on Monday.

The closure was proposed by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks after biologists conducting a spring survey

last week only counted five sheep. One ram died while the biologists were conducting the survey. The ram is undergoing a necropsy at the wildlife health lab in Bozeman.

HD 622 is located on the north side of the Missouri River Breaks in northeast Montana. Concerns over bighorn sheep populations in the hunting district have mounted over the past two years as biologists have noted a decline in spring counts, and in 2024 hunters noticed a decline in sheep within the hunting district.

“Hunters and landowners alike expect us to respond immediately when we see situations like this within our wildlife herds,” said FWP Director Christy Clark. “Our staff is working hard to investigate the situation so we can determine how to best move forward.” The deadline to apply for bighorn sheep permits is May 1. About 2,000 hunters have applied for a bighorn sheep license in HD 622. FWP will contact those hunters and offer them the opportunity to adjust their application or receive a refund.

Upcoming deadlines, reminders about wait period for bighorn sheep

The deadline to apply for a bighorn sheep, moose, mountain goat and bison license is May 1. Remember, don’t wait until the last minute to apply. Applicants can easily apply online. For helpful information on the application process, FWP produced two videos, one for nonresidents and one for residents.

Also, we want to remind bighorn sheep hunters that there is a seven-year wait period after you draw a limited either-sex or ram bighorn sheep license or after you harvest a ram with a bighorn sheep license in an unlimited area. This seven-year wait period means that you cannot possess a bighorn sheep license, with the exception of an adult ewe license, during the seven years after you’ve drawn an either-sex or ram limited license or harvested a ram in an unlimited area.

FWP regulations for moose, bighorn sheep, mountain goat and bison are available online or at one of our FWP offices. For questions on buying and applying for licenses, you can call our licensing hotline at 406-444-2950.

Remember to download your MyFWP mobile app to conveniently store your licenses and E-tags. 



HUNTERS LEADING THE WAY IN CONSERVATION

Hunting, fishing, and trapping provide direct support for wildlife management in North America. The Peregrine Fund, founded by falconers, co-founded the North American Non-lead Partnership.

After discovering lead fragments in the stomachs of dead raptors, our research revealed that these small lead fragments were primarily coming from the remains of shot animals. Scavenging wildlife can accidentally consume these tiny lead particles while eating remains left afield, getting sick and sometimes dying.

The North American Non-lead Partnership aims to preserve our wildlife conservation and hunting heritage by promoting **voluntary efforts** to reduce unintended impacts.

Across North America, © Estelle Shuttleworth, DVM
about 50% of Bald and Golden Eagles show chronic levels of lead poisoning.

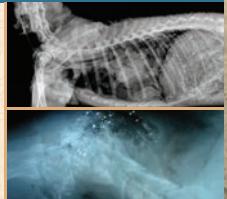
Lead exposure is the leading cause of death for an obligate scavenger, the California Condor, North America's most endangered raptor.

HOW HUNTERS ARE HELPING

We can reduce the amount of lead eaten by scavenging wildlife by using non-lead ammunition or removing the remains of animals shot with lead from the field. However, remains of animals shot with non-lead provide a wonderful food source for scavenging wildlife, especially in the winter months when food can be scarce.



Scan to learn more about the North American Non-lead Partnership.



Bullet construction and location of impact influence rates of fragmentation.





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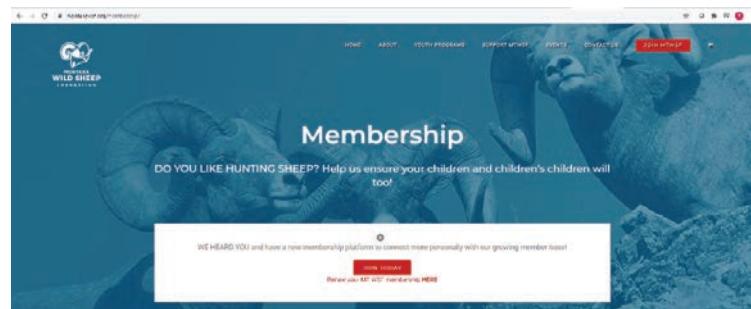
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