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MONTANA WILD SHEEP FOUNDATION



BOZEMAN, MT
MARCH 7TH, 2026



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Photo Credits: Cover celebrates our 2026 banquet!

All contributed material will be published at the discretion of the Editorial Board of the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation (MTWSF). The Editorial Board consists of the editor of the newsletter, the executive director of the chapter, and the president of the chapter.

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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@montanawssf.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

This will be my final message to you as President of the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation. As I reach the end of my term, I want to take a moment to reflect on the past few years and express my sincere gratitude for this incredible journey.

Serving on the MTWSF Board of Directors has been one of the most meaningful experiences of my life. I'm incredibly proud of what we've accomplished together – from expanding conservation efforts across the state to strengthening the foundation's organizational capacity, to growing both our membership and financial strength. These achievements are the result of collective dedication, shared values, and a deep love for Montana's bighorn sheep.

More than the accomplishments, though, I'm thankful for the friendships forged along the way. This community is built on relationships, and I've been fortunate to work alongside some of the most passionate and committed people I've ever met. The Montana Wild Sheep Foundation is in excellent hands with strong, thoughtful leadership by our Executive Director - Ty Stubblefield, our Board of Directors, and the Conservation Committee. I'm confident that MTWSF's future is bright and that the best is still ahead.

One example of that bright future is the momentum we're seeing on the Stafford Ferry Project. This long-anticipated effort to conserve bighorn sheep habitat in the Missouri River Breaks was officially approved at the August 21 MT FWP Commission Meeting. That's a major step forward. Thank you to everyone who has contributed time, energy, and support to get us here. This project is a landmark win for wild sheep conservation in Montana.

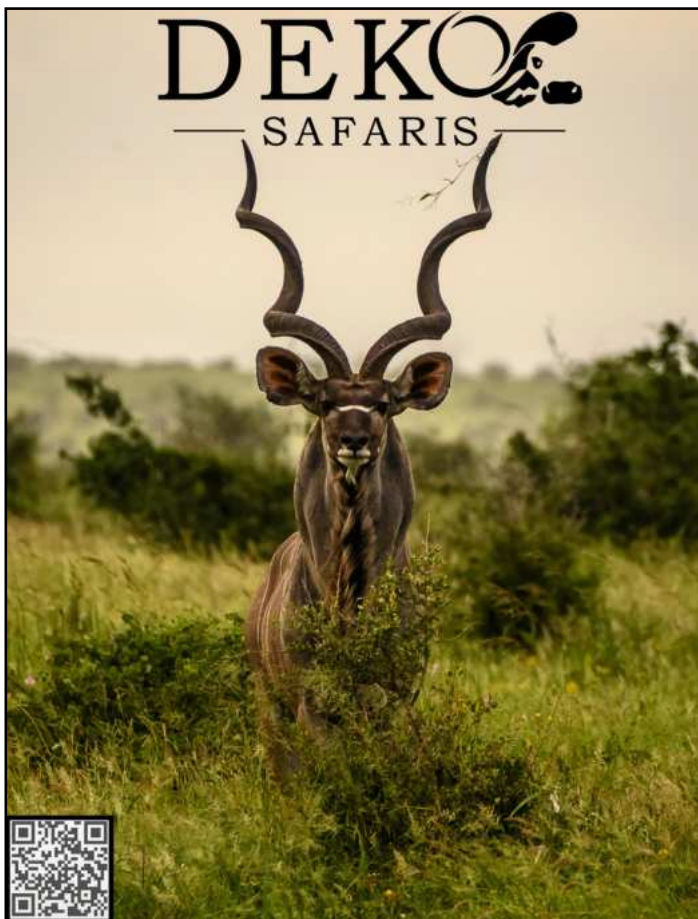
In addition, we completed our Board of Directors Strategic Planning Meeting in early August. This annual session is where we turn big ideas into focused goals and actionable steps. It's one of the ways we ensure the organization continues to evolve, adapt, and lead with purpose. With so much momentum and clarity of vision, I believe MTWSF is poised for even greater impact in the years ahead.

Thank you all for your support, your passion, and your belief in our mission. It has been an honor to serve as President, and I look forward to continuing to support MTWSF's work in new ways moving forward.

Be well and enjoy your fall!

D.J. Berg

Montana Wild Sheep Foundation President



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Executive Director's Message

Wild sheep continue to challenge us with their fragile state of being. Recent die-offs in the Bitterroot, Paradise Valley, and Missouri River Breaks are a sobering reminder of how vulnerable these iconic animals remain. The need for thoughtful, science-based human intervention is as critical as ever.

But not all the news is grim. As you'll read in this edition's Conservation Corner, there are reasons for optimism. Herds in the Tendoy Mountains and other regions of the state are showing signs of growth. Potential translocation projects in the Madison Range point to continued opportunities for expansion and recovery. These efforts, supported by our partners at Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP), are a testament to the positive impact collaborative conservation can have.

We are also seeing tangible outcomes from our legislative advocacy. From increased support for wildlife crossings to securing funding for habitat projects on both public and private lands, our work is making a lasting difference—not only for wild sheep, but for a wide array of Montana's wildlife.

Our conservation committee remains deeply engaged across the state. In Region 1, where roadways pose a growing threat to bighorns, we're working to find solutions to reduce collisions. And across the state in Region 7, recent wildfires may have improved habitat conditions enough to open the door for new translocation efforts on national forest lands there.

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention the fact that our annual banquet fundraiser will be held in Bozeman, MT, on March 6th and 7th at the Grantree Inn and the MSU SUB. Tickets are available now on our website. Don't delay—we sold out early last year, and we'd love to see you there.

Lastly, I want to extend my deepest gratitude to our outgoing president, DJ Berg and board member Grant Winn II. Both men have dedicated the past nine years to the conservation of Montana's

bighorn sheep and MTWSF is a better organization for it. Of special note, DJ has strengthened the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation in countless ways. We simply wouldn't be where we are today without his dedication and tireless advocacy for Montana's bighorn sheep. Please join me in a heartfelt thank-you to DJ and Grant as they take a well-earned break from this incredible journey of volunteerism.

Thank you for your continued support and dedication to Montana's wild sheep. Together, we are making a difference. 🍂

Ty Stubblefield

Executive Director
Montana Wild Sheep Foundation

ty@montanawsf.org



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MONTANA WILD SHEEP FOUNDATION

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WE MATTER(S)

Commingling Project Opportunity: Get Involved with Public & Community Education

by Erika Putnam

Every morning at 8:05 AM my phone chimes with a reminder that says, "Stay on your own side of the fence." It's meant to encourage me to stay focused on what I'm doing and not get distracted by people or things that are out of bounds. I use the reminders app on my phone to give me personal messages throughout the day (bleep, bleep, bleep, 19 times) to remind me of goals, values and other things to keep me out of the proverbial weeds. I thought this reminder was worth sharing as a relevant perspective considering I wanted to write about the commingling work being done on behalf of wild sheep in Montana and an idea I have about creating and developing a project for the ladies of MTWSF.

At the heart of many discussions about wild sheep is the risk and threat of disease transmission and M.ov outbreaks. Keeping wild and domestic sheep separated isn't easily solved by a fence any more than my personal problems would be solved by a sentence or bleep about a fence. Complicated issues need to be addressed from many sides. However, there is plenty we can do about disease prevention and separation between wild and domestic sheep, otherwise known as commingling.

The physician in me wants to get on the side of the fence dealing with animal health, host health, and dive deep into nutrition and prevention. The biologist agree those things and many others could help our sheep populations. However, they are often expensive and slow approaches.

As I toured the Eureka and Libby herds this spring with Bennie Rosetto, our region one conservation representative, the biologist shared how basic community and public education could help. What they described as potential solutions seemed to me they could be relatively low cost and less bogged down in red tape. The physician in me is also attracted to prevention. The needs they expressed got my attention.

It seems wild sheep wander and that's a problem. Whether it's because of rut, not enough winter range, or civilization moving through and into nature's wild

spaces when the two types of sheep come into proximity there is an increased risk of infection.

Currently there is a collaborative effort between Montana State University Extension specialist and the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks set to study the risk of contact between bighorn sheep and domestic sheep and goats. The overall goal of this project is to improve the ability of wild and domestic sheep and goats to coexist on Montana's rangelands. They are actively recruiting domestic sheep and goat producers/owners within study areas to participate in the project. There have been meetings in several communities sharing information about the study.

I am looking for ways we, MTWSF women, can help provide more education and public awareness opportunities. Maybe billboards, flyers, brochures, new residence packages and posters for public distribution. Maybe we reach out to local veterinarians or realtors to share information with clients. Perhaps we filter money towards domestic sheep for fences or guard dogs. I would like to see outreach with handouts for kids in 4-H, or materials for distribution to small farms and feed stores.

Wild Sheep Foundation created a brochure on this topic called Keeping Wild Sheep Healthy, What you Need to Know and What you Can Do. This brochure is another useful resource.

For sheep a fence isn't built as a solution of a problem with two sides. Rather, a barrier created to keep healthy separation that prevents risk and spread of disease. Public education could provide understanding on both sides of the fence and help the sheep in both pastures, domestic and wild.

I would love to hear your ideas or comments about launching this type of project. Also, if you have kids in 4H, are a teacher, work in a feed store, have a marketing connection, other mad skills, or just have a heart for the cause and would like to volunteer please contact me to get involved in launching a ladies conservation project (erika@montanawsf.org). 🍷

AREA 214

Big horn Sheep Hunt

by Casey Austin

After applying for 29 years, I finally drew an area 214 bighorn sheep tag. My son Shane drew the same tag for area 214 six years ago, so we knew the area well and the sheep's patterns. Every hunter that has drawn a special tag knows at first there is excitement, anticipation, some nervousness for the moment you see the drawing results until the season starts. I started spotting sheep the opening weekend of archery season while I was archery elk hunting. In unit 214 the mature rams don't come out of the Pintler back-country until either weather, or the rut pushes them out. By the first week of November, I had 30 plus days of spotting, countless hours looking through a lens, and many miles in my side by side with lots of hikes. To this point the hunt was very rewarding seeing the number of sheep and the consistency of the sheep.

The Friday before opening weekend of rifle season we had a major storm, and the hunt became very frustrating with the 18 inches of snow that came down at 8000 feet elevation. Along with the snow, wind and snow drifting that occurred it restricted a huge amount of the hunting area for the entire season. All the ewes moved low but when it warmed up and the snow melted and the sheep moved back up to higher elevations, and it was impossible to get higher than 6500 feet with the drifted snow.

It became a waiting game for the mature rams to migrate lower. November 5th and 6th more rams started showing up, but not the ones I wanted. On the morning of November 8th, I took a walk up into the upper parks of Blue-eyed Nellie to get a better look at some rams that showed up overnight, but again no mature rams. I got back to the side by side and was visiting with Scott Larango (a friend who had been helping me spot) and I looked over my shoulder and standing by the fish and game check station by highway #1 were four mature rams. I told Scott they were the rams we were waiting for. Two of the four rams were what I judged as 180" plus rams.

I quickly grabbed my bow/ram-sheep shoot-through decoy. The rams crossed the highway and were content playing with each other bumping heads and bellies in the management area. I had zero approach cover with minimal back-drop cover but decided to try to walk straight at them. I had about 125 yards to get within range, the longest 125 yards I ever walked. As I started the approach the rams had their heads down and buried under each other's bellies or they were bumping heads. Occasionally a ram would look up at me, I would stop walking and move my bow/decoy side to side, trying to simulate their movements. They didn't care about me and went back to their playing activities. I got as close as I felt comfortable and quickly shot the range, which was 41 yards.

I had to wait for the rams to rearrange and separate for a shot. It seemed like forever but was realistically only a minute or so. The rams separated and gave me my shot on the ram I wanted. I finally drew my bow (Scott said it felt like I held my draw forever), took my time and released. The arrow looked great and disappeared into the shoulder of my ram. My ram turned and ran away, and I could see the arrow had a partial pass through and I could see about 8 inches of fletch and 8 inches or so of broadhead sticking out and the placement looked perfect. He ran about 50 to 60 yards and went down. He got back up and ran about another 50 to 60 yards and disappeared behind some trees. We lost sight of him, but the other 3 rams stopped running and wouldn't leave. Scott and I were certain my ram was down. As we gave the ram some time, I quickly called my wife and my son Shane who were en route from Missoula.

It was interesting to watch the other rams. We couldn't see my ram, but we were convinced they were trying to get the down ram up. The other rams had their heads down and it appeared to us they were rubbing him and slightly bagging/butting into him. After about 5 minutes of failed attempts the other 3 rams walked away. About the time they left another 180" + ram appeared and walked straight to my ram's location. This ram did the same thing, rubbing



AREA 214 Big horn Sheep Hunt continued



and lightly ramming on my down ram but then he backed up, started running, front legs off the ground and gave my ram a big jolt. After the fourth ram finally walked off, we made the approach and indeed my ram was dead. The other 4 rams had moved my ram about 4 feet in their attempt to raise the dead or perhaps display dominance.

It was celebration time with lots of high fives and photos. I called Fred Boyer who had also helped me spot for many days, who quickly left Anaconda to join us. What a relief that my tag was filled, a great ram we estimated at 182-185 with the bow. I had not seen a shoot through bighorn sheep decoy until this year. I found it when I was shopping for a shoot through elk decoy. I researched it and read reviews of previous hunters who purchased them and decided to buy one. It worked out great for me.

I want to thank the many people who helped me spot and called with the sheep location reports. I especially want to thank Scott Larango, Steve Johnson, Dustin Hintz, and my son Shane Austin. My ram green scored 182 7/8". 🏹



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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.



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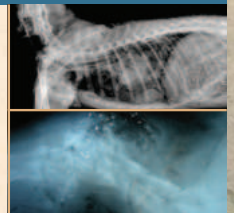
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Across North America, about 50% of Bald and Golden Eagles show chronic levels of lead poisoning.

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

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Bullet construction and location of impact influence rates of fragmentation.



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



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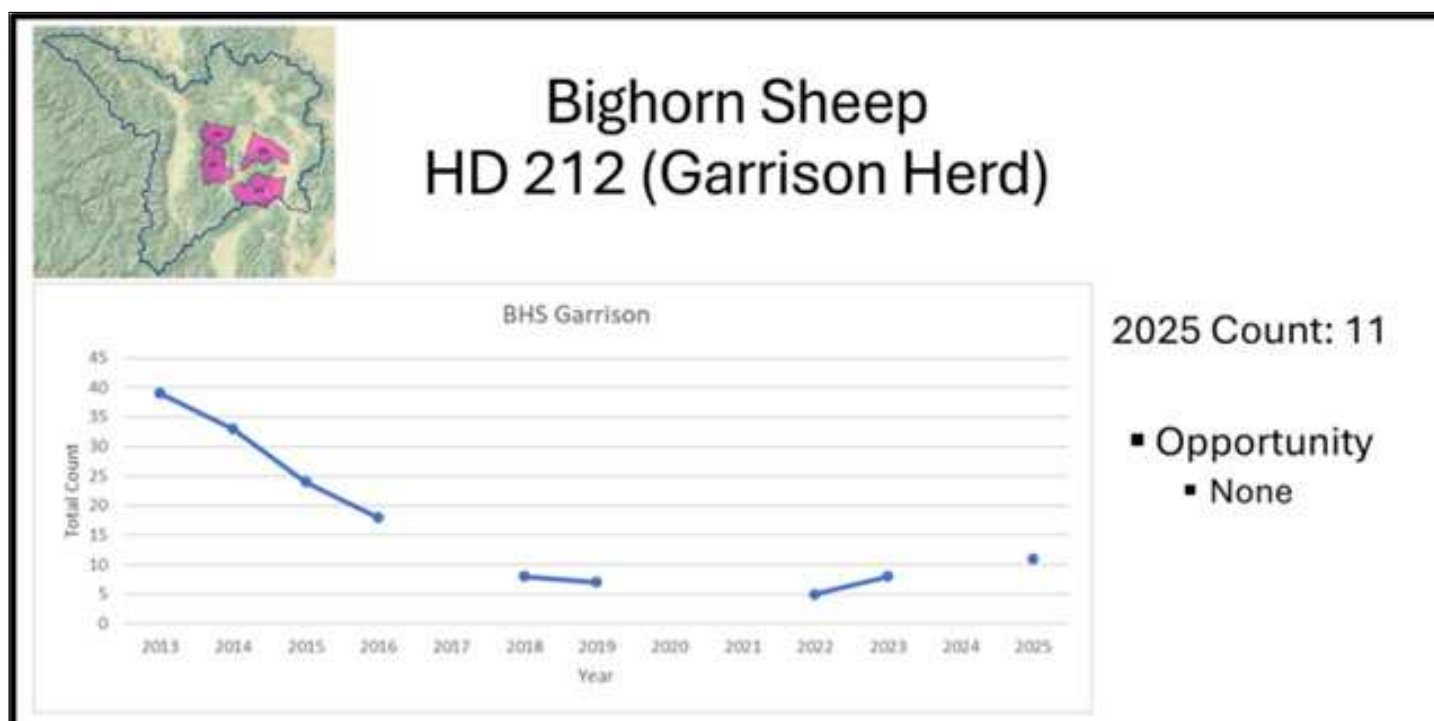


Conservation Corner

by Ray Vinkey, *Conservation Corner Editor, Volunteer*

Region 2 Update

For this Conservation Corner, Kirstie Yaeger an Upper Rock Clark Fork Wildlife Biologist presents us with a summary of bighorn sheep aerial flight data from 2013 to 2025. Data, discussion and proposed 2026 licenses are provided for the Garrison herd (HD 212), Lower Rock Creek (210), Upper Rock Creek (HD 216), and Anaconda (HD 214). These herds have not recovered from the Region 2 wide die-off which occurred in 2010 and 2011. On a positive note, they have stabilized, and the Anaconda herd shows signs of population recovery.



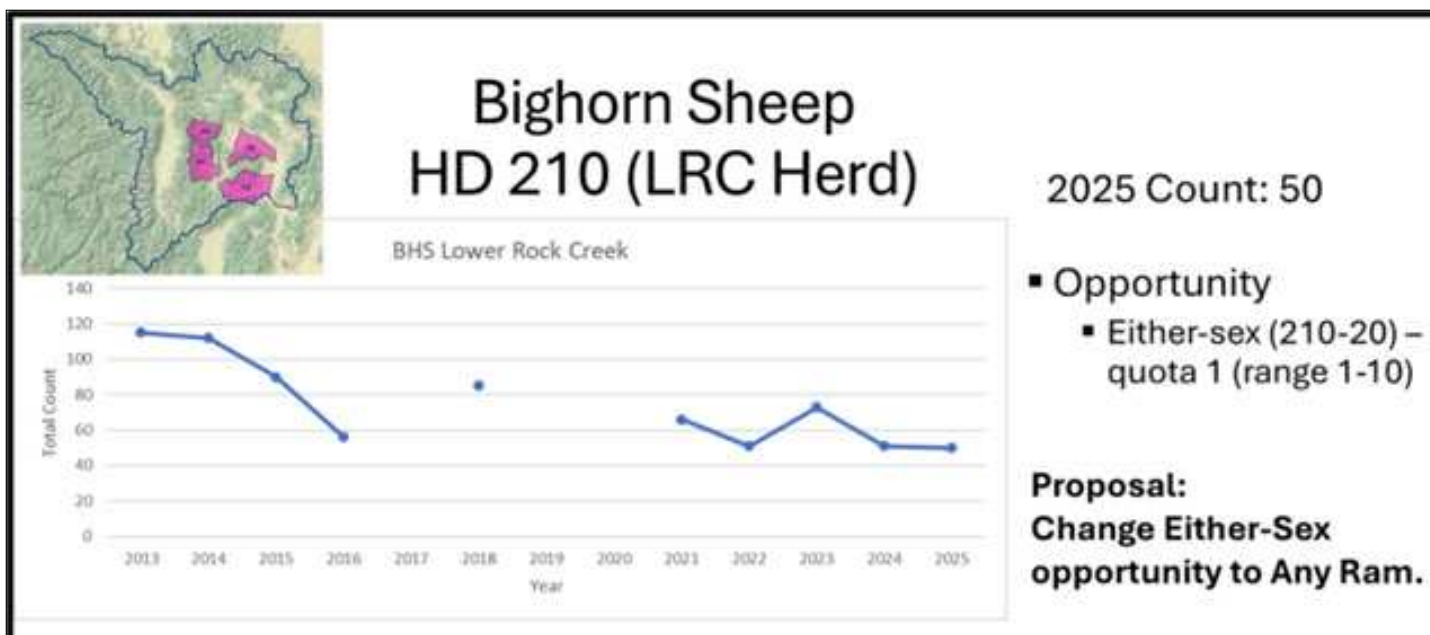
HD 212 - Garrison

The Garrison population has been small in recent years and difficult to find. Anecdotal observations suggest a population of around a half dozen or so. This spring, I observed the Garrison sheep for the first time since I started working for FWP in 2022. I was excited to see 11 in the group including two lambs. It's great that this small herd is still hanging in there. Thomas Sutton, the new Deer Lodge wildlife biologist, will be taking over management of this herd (see chart above).

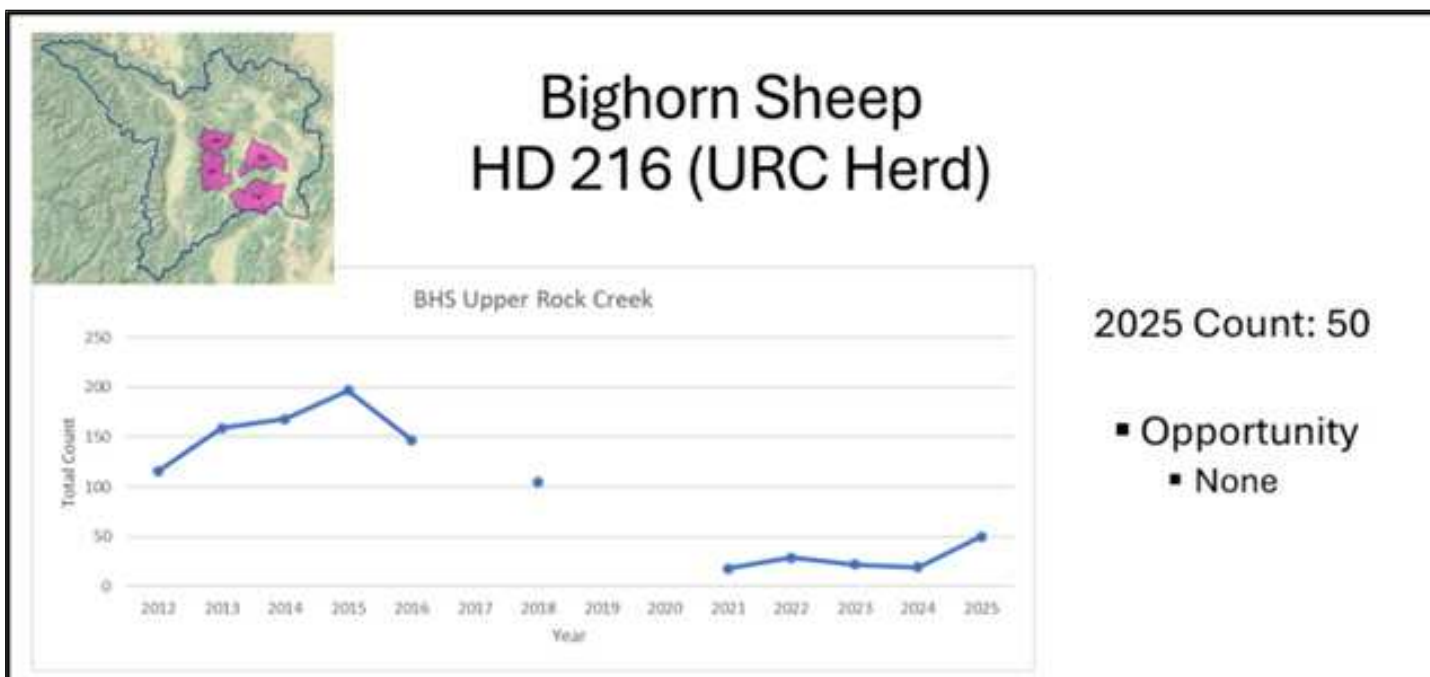
HD 210 - Lower Rock Creek

The Lower Rock Creek herd is stable but potentially declining based on the survey results from the last few years. Counts have been between 50 and 70 bighorn with very low recruitment. Symptomatic sheep with pneumonia variants or ecthyma have been observed in recent years, but evidence to suggest that a population level die-off has occurred is lacking. Recent surveys indicate several legal rams are still available in the population.

Therefore, we will continue to offer the single ram opportunity for the 2025 season but monitor the population closely for indications of a significant decline. However, since recruitment has been low, I'm proposing to change

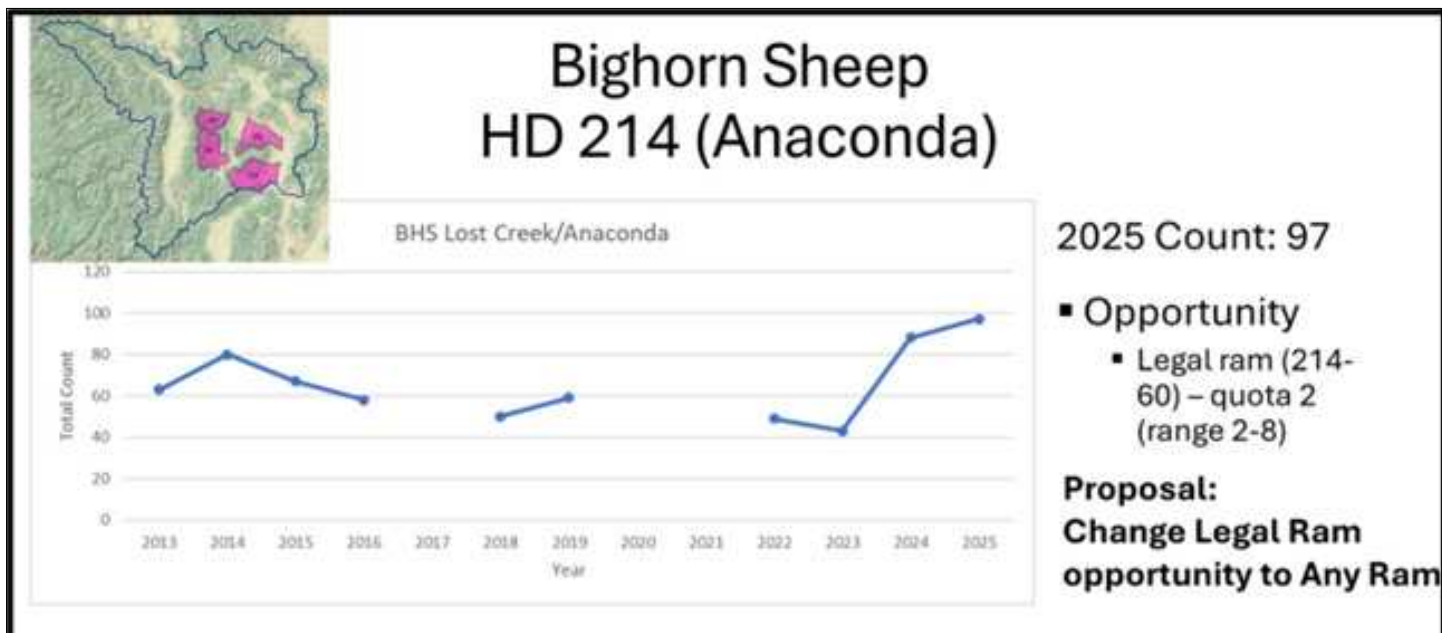


the opportunity from 'either-sex' to 'any ram' for the next biennial season setting process ('26-'27). On a positive note, early summer reports indicate 14 lambs on the ground this year suggesting that recruitment may improve (see chart above). Hopefully, the days of low recruitment are behind us (see chart above).



HD 216 - Upper Rock Creek

Since the all-age die-off in 2010 and 2011, the Upper Rock Creek population has remained a fraction of pre-die-off numbers. I was excited to find twice as many sheep in the Upper Rock Creek herd this year. The 2023 and 2024 counts were only around 20 and mainly consisted of rams and a few ewes located near the Skalkaho turnoff and Gillis Bridge area. This year, I found a few nice groups of lambs and ewes farther north into Rock Creek, including a total of 11 lambs. We'll see how it goes over the next few years and consider offering an opportunity in this hunting district (see chart above).



HD 214—Anaconda

The Anaconda population counts over the last few years suggest an increasing population. The 2025 survey yielded 97 sheep including 12 lambs. Animals were distributed across the alpine, in Lost Creek, on Garrity Mountain, and throughout the West Valley. I survey this herd informally several times a year and almost always see at least one symptomatic animal, reminding us that pneumonia is in this herd. However, it doesn't appear to be having a population level affect. That said, I still watch it closely. I'm proposing to change the opportunity from 'legal ram' to 'any ram' for the next biennial season setting process ('26-'27) to make this opportunity consistent with other opportunities in the state. As with all the sheep herds in the Upper Clark Fork, the potential for disease outbreaks by existing or new pathogens is being monitored closely (see chart above).

~ Kirstie Yaeger, Wildlife Biologist, July 9, 2025

Montana Wild Sheep Foundation Supports Region 3 Bighorn Sheep Translocation Project

The Montana Wild Sheep Foundation (MWSF) is proud to support Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks' (FWP) proposed bighorn sheep translocation project in Region 3. This forward-looking conservation effort is aimed at restoring native bighorn sheep to their hi

Project Overview:

The proposed project would translocate between 50 and 100 bighorn sheep over a 10-year period (2025–2035) from existing herds within the Madison Mountain Range to the Bear Creek Wildlife Management Area (WMA)—a historic but currently unoccupied winter range in the heart of the range. The long-term nature of this project allows for careful monitoring of the source herd's recovery after each removal, ensuring sustainable management throughout the process.

Project Objectives:

1. **Restore native bighorn sheep** to suitable, unoccupied habitat in the Madison Mountain Range.
2. **Increase the number of occupied winter ranges** to expand the species' distribution and resilience.

3. **Improve connectivity** between currently isolated herds to promote genetic diversity and long-term viability.
4. **Proactively manage the source herd** at Quake Lake to remain within the area's winter carrying capacity, reducing the risk of overpopulation and associated die-offs.

MWSF views this project as a critical step in the continued conservation of Montana's wild sheep. We commend FWP for its science-based and proactive approach to herd health and habitat stewardship, and we are enthusiastic about the long-term ecological benefits this project offers for bighorn sheep and the broader Madison Range ecosystem.

MTWSF Conservation Committee Regional Representative Updates

Region 1 – Bennie Rossetto

- Collaborating with FWP on roadkill mitigation (Hwy 37 – Ural Tweed/Galton herds).
- Addressing potential BHS/domestic sheep commingling with nearby recreational producers.
- Exploring funding options (MTWSF GIA) for fencing/signage projects.

Region 2 – Shane Clouse

- Rock Creek herd stable; suggests using “citizen science” to support surveys.
- Notable ram movement from HD 260/270 to Skalkaho—5 rams found dead, confirmed Movi.
- Petty Creek herd is in good shape.

Region 3 – Jack Atcheson

- Growing concern over backcountry skiing impacting Gallatin BHS winter range.
- Madison Range BHS translocation proposal comments forthcoming.

Region 4 – Gary Olson

- Advocating for Stafford Ferry Conservation Easement.
- Participated in Wolf Creek commingling meeting.

Region 5 – Brian Duffy

- FWP penalized a hunter for sublegal ram harvest—7-year application suspension.
- Sheep surveys funded after initial concern over funding.
- USFS canceled the West Rosebud prescribed burn due to staff cuts.

Thank you to our 2025 Beartooth Sponsors!



Conservation Corner continued

Region 6 – Pat Gunderson

- HD 622 suffered major losses; Movi detected. Season closed.
- HD 680: No abnormalities observed; summer aerial surveys scheduled.

Commingling Project – Brent Roeder (Woolgrowers & MSU)

- 7 current study areas; adding Mill Creek and Madison.
- New MSU grad student (Max Evans) joins team.

- Most interactions involve small recreational sheep producers

Adaptive Management – Justin Gude & Brent Lonner (FWP)


- BHS & Mountain Goat project entering Year 3 of 5+ years.
- Native goat transplants (Pintlers, Flints, Swan) planned for August.
- Online reports coming this summer.




Anaconda area members gather at the Blue Eyed Nellie WMA to discuss habitat projects and the proposed East Cliffs Addition to the Blue Eyed Nellie.




Board Member Riley Pearson visiting a potential habitat project on private land where bighorn sheep winter.





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Stafford Ferry Conservation Easement Approved

The Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission voted unanimously on August 21 to approve the Stafford Ferry Conservation Easement, securing 1,080 acres of prime habitat and working lands in the southern Missouri River Breaks.

This easement, located north of Winifred in Hunting District 482 (bighorn sheep) and also overlapping deer/elk HDs 417 & 426, protects critical rangeland and wildlife values while enhancing access to more than 20,000 acres of surrounding lands.

The Stafford Ferry CE safeguards habitat for the southern Missouri River Breaks bighorn sheep herd, part of the state's largest metapopulation of wild sheep. Recent all-age die-offs in the eastern herds have underscored the importance of conserving the western portion of this population.

The easement also connects 15,400 acres of adjacent State School Trust and Bureau of Land Management lands and lies directly next to the 4,619-acre Whiskey Ridge CE (2020), amplifying the landscape-scale value for wildlife, hunters, and recreationists alike.

Project Details

- **Size:** 1,080 acres
- **Location:** Southern Missouri River Breaks (HD 482) bighorn sheep herd; also deer/elk HDs 417 & 426; north of Winifred
- **Landowner:** Cliff Henderson
- **Enhanced Access:** 15,400 acres (State School Trust & BLM lands) + 4,619-acre Whiskey Ridge CE
- **Appraised Value:** \$1,080,000
 - Cliff Henderson donation: \$85,000
 - NorthWestern Energy (NWE): \$50,000
 - Wild Sheep Foundation (WSF): \$5,000
 - Montana Wild Sheep Foundation (MTWSF): \$5,000
 - MTFWP Bighorn Sheep Auction Account & Habitat Montana: \$980,000 (including appraisal costs)

Funding Partners: MTWSF, WSF, NorthWestern Energy, Cliff Henderson, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Bighorn Sheep Auction Account (funded by WSF Auction), Habitat Montana.

With unanimous Commission approval, the Stafford Ferry CE stands as a testament to what partnerships between landowners, nonprofits, energy companies, and state agencies can achieve. 🍂



Proposed Lion Quotas Voted Down

Recently, we prepared to testify on a Region 3 proposal that aimed to reduce quotas in some Lion Management Units (LMUs) by up to 50%, but the proposal was voted down before public comment was heard. We acknowledge that this issue remains contentious, with stakeholders on both sides driven by differing agendas. The question is, is the reliability of current mountain lion population modeling, which relies heavily on harvest data, accurate.

We are asking for collaborative development of more scientifically sound methods. MTWSF remains committed to member-driven, targeted lion hunting focused on cats preying on wintering bighorns and urges open collaboration to create integrated, region-specific strategies for long-term success of both species. MTWSF supports science-based wildlife management and opposes broad reductions in mountain lion quotas, especially in areas with vulnerable or reintroduced bighorn sheep populations. Citing research and field examples, MTWSF emphasizes that unchecked mountain lion predation remains a primary cause of bighorn mortality and can severely hinder recovery, particularly following disease-related die-offs. 🐾



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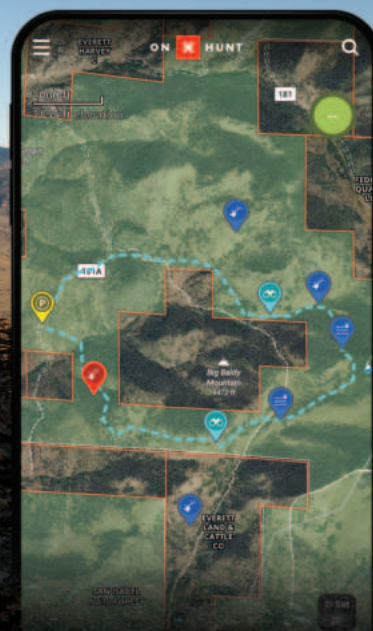


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