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WILD SHEEP

F O U N D A T I O N

KEEPING SHEEP ON THE MOUNTAIN

Winter 2026 | Volume 34, Issue 1

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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.



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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, as winter settles in, I'm grateful for the chance to reflect on our achievements this year and share exciting updates for the months ahead. I hope everyone found time to relax and connect with loved ones during the recent holiday season.

For your board members, conservation committee members, and volunteers, this time of year is also one of near constant activity.

This year, our conservation committee continued to forge strong partnerships with Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, and local landowners, resulting in new funded and volunteer projects. Their upcoming comprehensive report will showcase the breadth of our efforts and the positive outcomes for wildlife conservation.

Ty has been busy providing testimony on behalf of the organization on all things Wild Sheep and our organization continues to be seen as a leading and trusted advocate.

Our board and dedicated volunteers are also diligently planning and finalizing our 2026 banquet. Even with the banquet a few months out, the effort required to pull off such a great event truly amazes. I am incredibly proud of the work the team is doing and know it will be a huge success. And speaking to that success, our annual banquet is officially sold out! Thank you to everyone who purchased tickets and contributed donations. Your support ensures the continued success of our mission. If you'd still like to get involved, please reach out to me or Ty; we're exploring new ways for everyone to participate, even if you can't attend in person.

A few more quick highlights to share. Don't miss our Desert Sheep raffle with San Jose Trophy Hunts in Sonora, Mexico—raffle tickets make perfect gifts! Plus, our newly improved website offers faster loading and richer content. Visit us online and share your feedback so we can keep enhancing your experience.

Thank you for making 2025 a remarkable year for our organization, and wishing you a bright start to 2026! Together, we'll continue to make a lasting impact for Wild Sheep and conservation.

With appreciation,

Alex Russell

Montana Wild Sheep Foundation President

Executive Director's Message

2026 is here! I wanted to take a moment to do the obligatory reflection on what Montana Wild Sheep Foundation accomplished over the past year and outline where we are headed next.

The 2025 legislative session was a major focus for us and it delivered several important outcomes for wildlife conservation — particularly for bighorn sheep and their habitat.

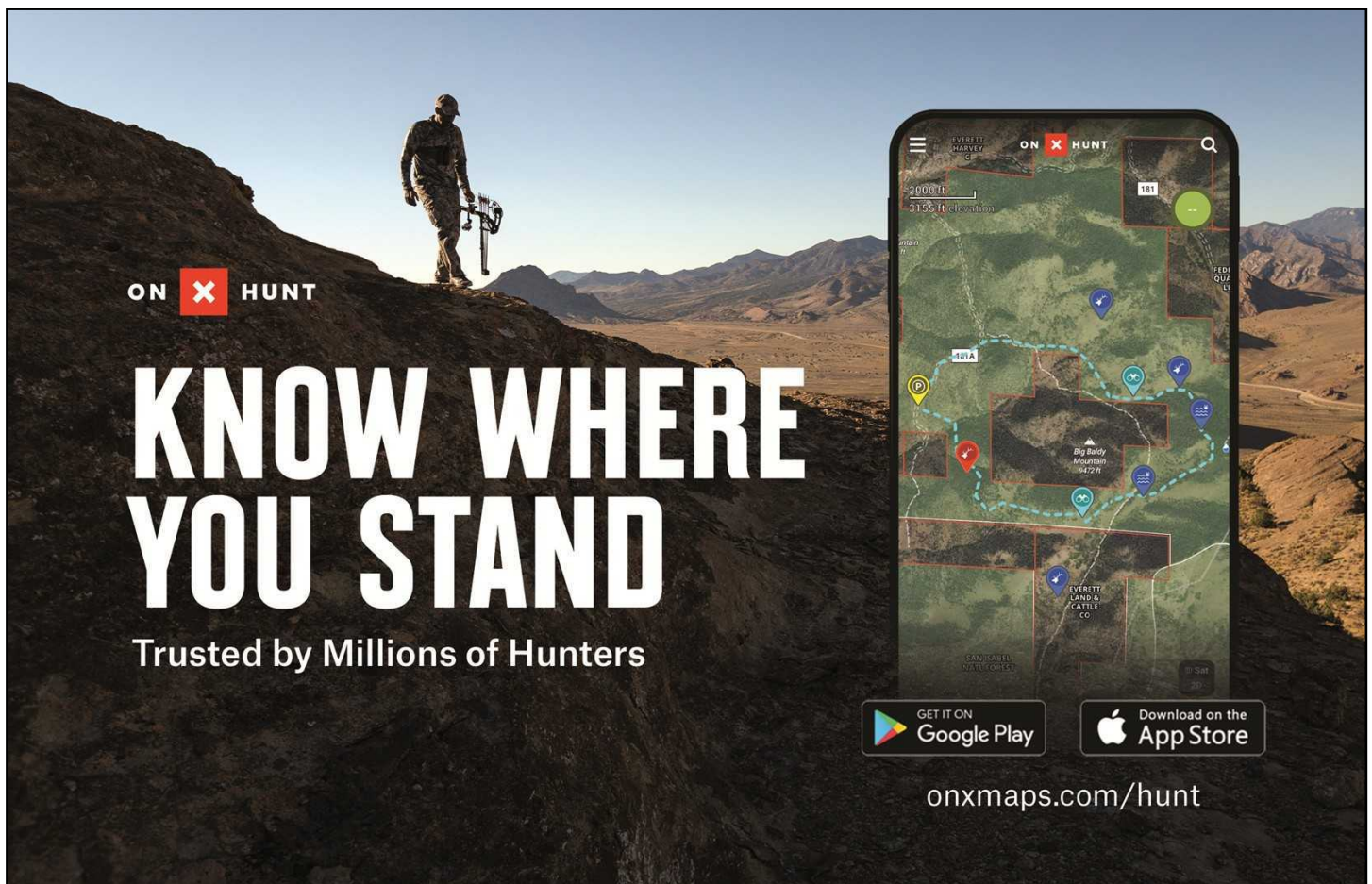
We supported and testified in favor of **House Bill 932**, which was signed into law by Governor Gianforte. This legislation directs significant new resources toward wildlife habitat conservation on both public and private lands and provides dedicated funding for critical wildlife crossings. These crossings are essential for reducing vehicle-wildlife collisions and restoring landscape connectivity — both of which directly benefit bighorn sheep.

We were also actively involved in **House Bill 855**, which was likewise signed by the Governor. This bill

creates a dedicated account for wildlife crossings and establishes a conservation license plate to generate ongoing funding for that account. This represents a durable, long-term investment in Montana's wildlife infrastructure.

House Bill 141, which legalizes the use of credit cards for nonprofit raffle ticket sales, was another success for the conservation community and will meaningfully improve fundraising capacity for organizations like ours. We of course want to promote sensible debt management so make sure your credit cards are paid off before the banquet so you can load up on raffle tickets.

House Bill 283, which would have allowed the raffling of the bighorn sheep tag, was thankfully vetoed. That tag remains available only through an auction which takes place at the Sheep Show in Reno. This past year the Wild Sheep Foundation laid to rest any doubts that the raffle tag can raise as much money as the auction tag when they raffled the Arizona bighorn tag.



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Netting over \$100,000 less than the auction did for the previous year.

House Bill 202, a bill we instigated addressed aircraft use and hunting, was also vetoed; however, many of our concerns were incorporated into **Senate Bill 106**, including the important 24-hour waiting period between flying and hunting.

Beyond the legislature we continued to be deeply engaged with Fish, Wildlife & Parks and the Commission on issues affecting bighorn sheep management. I testified and worked with agency staff on cougar quotas, seasons, and predation concerns. We were successful in keeping **HD 250** open for one ram tag and expanding its boundary to include the full deer and elk district, allowing sheep that move across the Idaho–Montana border to be legally hunted.

On the conservation side, our **Conservation Committee** has done extraordinary work this year building relationships with biologists and area managers and completing a herd-by-herd assessment of every bighorn sheep population in the state — identifying historical conditions, current status, and the challenges each herd faces. You can find that work summarized in the herd-to-herd breakdown in the Conservation Committee update.

That groundwork allowed us to put meaningful conservation dollars on the ground in 2025 — from the Stafford Ferry conservation easement, to habitat improvements on key winter ranges, to fencing projects that reduce the risk of disease transmission from domestic sheep, to youth education materials, and to funding drop nets for FWP capture and research efforts.

Our **Unlimited Working Group** made substantial progress as well. Reporting requirements were reduced from 48 hours to 24 hours, successful hunters can now report by proxy, and FWP has committed to developing a “legal ram” identification test — voluntary in 2026 and mandatory in 2027 — similar to the bear identification test. In addition, unlimited bighorn tags will now be available only through the draw process and no longer over the counter. We also supported the Commission’s amendment to change bighorn draw tags from “either-sex” to “any-ram” tags.

At the same time, our team has been working hard organizing and planning the 2026 banquet fundraiser,

which is coming up in just a few short weeks and remains a critical part of how we fund this work. Looking ahead to 2026, our priorities are clear: continue strengthening our working relationships with FWP, state and federal land managers, and our conservation partners — including the Wild Sheep Foundation, Montana Outfitters and Guides Association, Montana Houndsmen’s Association, and many others — all of whom share a commitment to stronger, healthier, and more abundant wildlife populations.

The past few years have been about strategy, foundation-building, and growing a strong MTWSF community. That work is paying off. The train is rolling, it is picking up steam, and I am excited about what we will accomplish together in 2026.

Thank you for your continued support of Montana’s wild sheep and wild places.

Ty Stubblefield

Executive Director

Montana Wild Sheep Foundation

ty@montanawsf.org



MONTANA WILD SHEEP FOUNDATION



BOZEMAN, MT
MARCH 7TH, 2026



MONTANA WILD SHEEP FOUNDATION

Friday, March 6th

CONSERVATION NIGHT

at the GranTree Inn, Bozeman

Saturday, March 7th

MORNING SEMINARS

at the GranTree

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Help Us Make Our Banquet a Success for Bighorn Sheep

Each year, our banquet is the single largest source of funding for the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation's on-the-ground conservation work. The dollars raised through our live and silent auctions and raffles go directly toward habitat improvement, research and conservation efforts that benefit bighorn sheep across Montana. We are currently seeking donations of items, services, or experiences for our upcoming banquet — and we are asking our members to help.

If you, a friend, or a family member owns or operates a business, we would be grateful if you would consider donating an item or service for our auctions or raffles. Donations might include outdoor gear, artwork, travel, services, merchandise, gift certificates, or unique experiences.

Don't have a physical donation but can afford some time? We can use help soliciting donations as well as help during the event on Friday and Saturday. If you would like to volunteer, shoot Ty a message at the email below. Your generosity directly translates into conservation impact on the ground.

If you are able to help, or can connect us with someone who can, please contact Ty Stubblefield at ty@montanawsf.org.

All donations are tax-deductible as allowed by law.

Thank you for your continued support and commitment to Montana's Bighorn Sheep. 🍷

Thank you to our 2025 Beartooth Sponsors!





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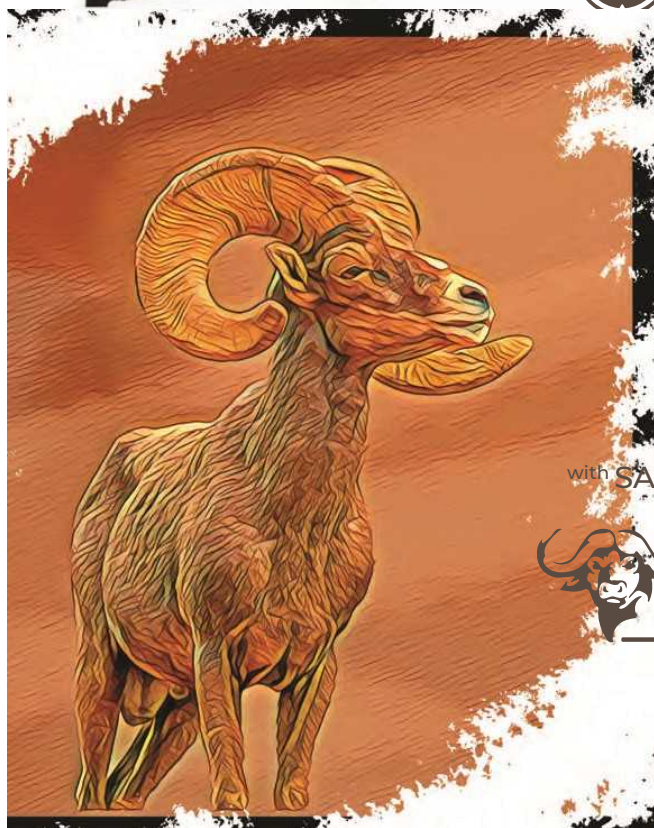
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Bubbles & Bighorns

Conservation Event for the Ladies

Friday Night March 6, 2026

Imagine the soft glow of a flickering flame and the fun of telling and listening to stories around a campfire. This year's Ladies Event theme is camping and we plan to have a blazing good time. The event will highlight conservation night with bubbles, cocktails, light snacks, silent raffles, bucket raffles, games and a great door prize all in our very own "She Camp," (short for sheep camp.) Outfit yourself in your favorite camping or glamping wear and come enjoy new and old friends by the campfire. In "camp" this year you might hear about a bear encounter, the biggest fish tail or a solo stock on a first hunt. This year's event will be the perfect place for tall tales and connecting with women of MTWSF.

For the 3rd year we will gather to support MTWSF conservation efforts, catch up with friends and make money for conservation. Some of our ladies are members who hunt and some are non-hunters, others contribute with their talents in land management, animal science, habitat health, politics and policy and related outdoor partnerships. It's our hope that lady hunters and non-hunters alike will support our mission of "Keeping sheep on the mountain," and together we can make a difference in their lives and ours.

Tickets to the Bubbles & Bighorn event can be found on our website. The cost is \$50 and includes drink tickets, light hors d'oeuvres, an entry for our door prize and an evening of fun and fellowship. Get your tickets before they sell out and to follow us on Instagram.

Would you like to support one of this year's campfires? We're looking for donations related to camping, glamping, conservation education, hunting, gear, clothing, outdoor experiences, jewelry and more. Donations welcome if you have a product, or service or would like to make a cash donation to any of our events please contact erika@montanaWSF.org. We also have volunteer opportunities if you have talents to share or want to lend a helping hand. 🍷

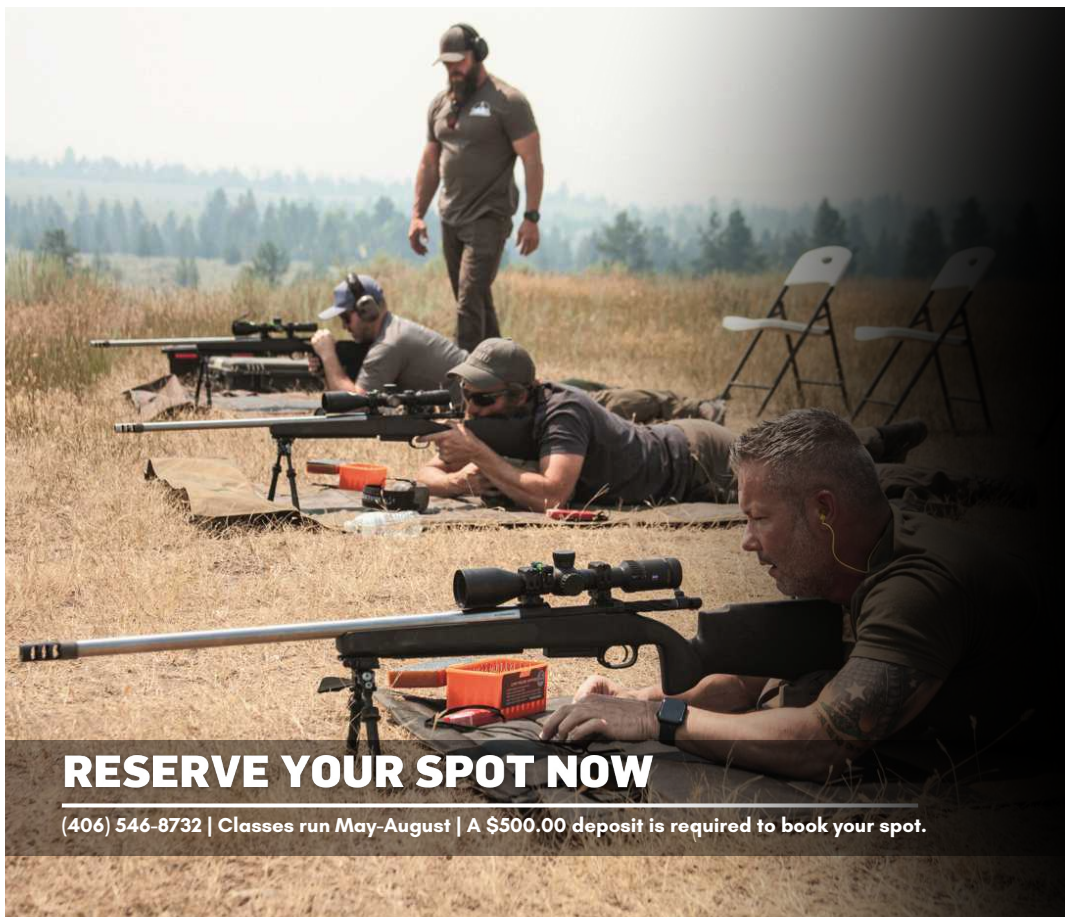


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Montana Wild Sheep Foundation at the Montana Woolgrowers Convention

Study Highlights Partnership and Research Progress

Kurt Alt, MTWSF Conservation Director, and Executive Director Ty Stubblefield were invited to attend the Montana Woolgrowers Convention on December 5, 2025, in Billings, Montana.

At the convention, Kurt Alt participated in a panel alongside wool producer John Helle and Quentin Kujala, FWP Chief of Conservation Policy in a discussion highlighting the **current commingling and adaptive management study** being conducted collaboratively by Montana State University (MSU), Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP), the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation (MTWSF), and the Montana Woolgrowers Association (MWG). The session emphasized the depth of cooperation among wildlife advocates, producers, and researchers and underscored the strong working relationship between Montana bighorn sheep advocates and domestic sheep producers.

The study represents one of the most comprehensive efforts to understand and manage interactions between **bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis*)** and **domestic sheep and goats** in Montana. Its goals and emerging insights include the following:

1. Understanding Contact Risk Factors Between Wild and Domestic Sheep

The commingling component of the study aims to **identify environmental, individual, and herd-level factors that influence the likelihood of contact** between wild and domestic sheep and goats across the landscape.



Researchers are collecting detailed data to understand where and when contact occurs and what conditions increase the risk of interactions that could facilitate disease transmission. This includes monitoring herds over multiple years across eight study areas in Montana where bighorn and domestic sheep ranges overlap.

2. Developing Practical Tools for Separation and Risk Reduction

A core objective is **evaluating existing management strategies**



and identifying new tools that could help maintain effective separation between wild and domestic animals. These practices may include husbandry adjustments, landscape-level management, and producer-led innovations designed to minimize close contact and reduce the potential for pathogen spillover.

3. Co-Production and Stakeholder Engagement

A significant emphasis of the research approach has been **active engagement with producers and community stakeholders**. Public meetings held across Montana in 2025 allowed researchers to explain objectives, gather feedback, recruit participants, and co-produce solutions that reflect both scientific and practical perspectives. This model of participatory science builds trust and ensures that the study reflects real-world conditions and management priorities.

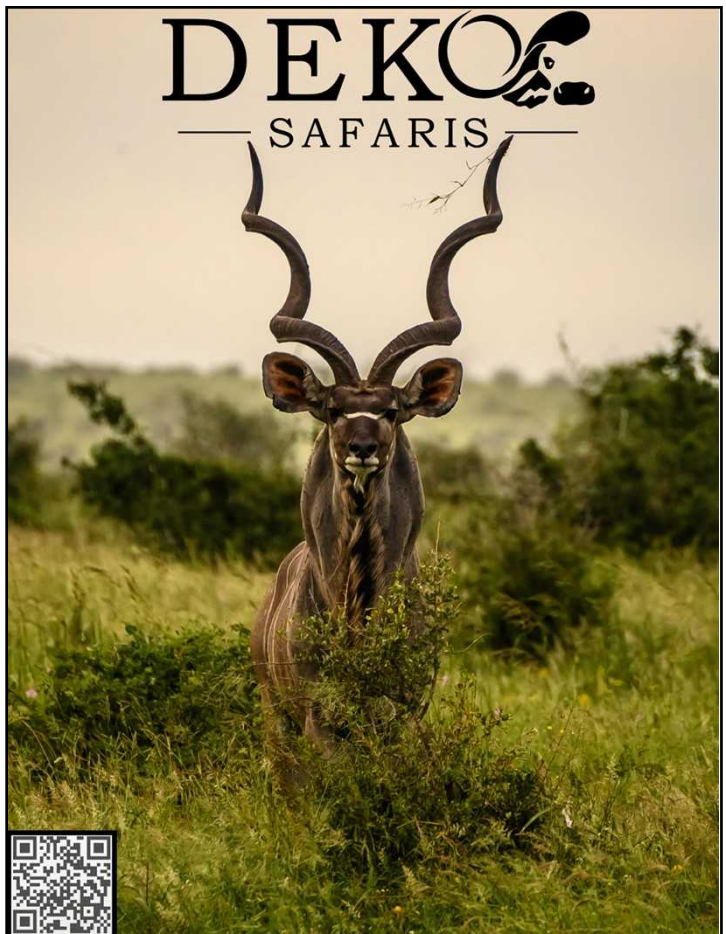
4. Adaptive Management Framework for Bighorn and Mountain Goat Populations

Beyond commingling, the partner agencies and institutions are implementing an **adaptive management framework** to evaluate how different management strategies affect bighorn sheep and mountain goat populations over time. This framework allows managers to test and refine actions — ranging from habitat enhancement to pathogen management and demographic interventions — based on ongoing monitoring and predictive modeling. Integrated population models and structured monitoring help quantify outcomes and reduce uncertainty in future decisions.

5. Funding and Collaborative Investment

The study builds on **significant funding and institutional support**, including a multi-million-dollar investment to advance research into interaction patterns and mitigation strategies. MSU researchers emphasize that the information generated will support wildlife managers and producers alike by focusing mitigation efforts where risks are highest and identifying opportunities for coexistence.

The panel discussion at the Woolgrowers Convention underscored that the **study's progress to date is only possible because of the collaborative partnership** between wildlife and domestic sheep interests. Both sectors contribute data, expertise, and local insights that enhance the relevance and application of research outcomes. 🍷



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Opposition to the Proposed Closure of *BIGHORN SHEEP HD 250*

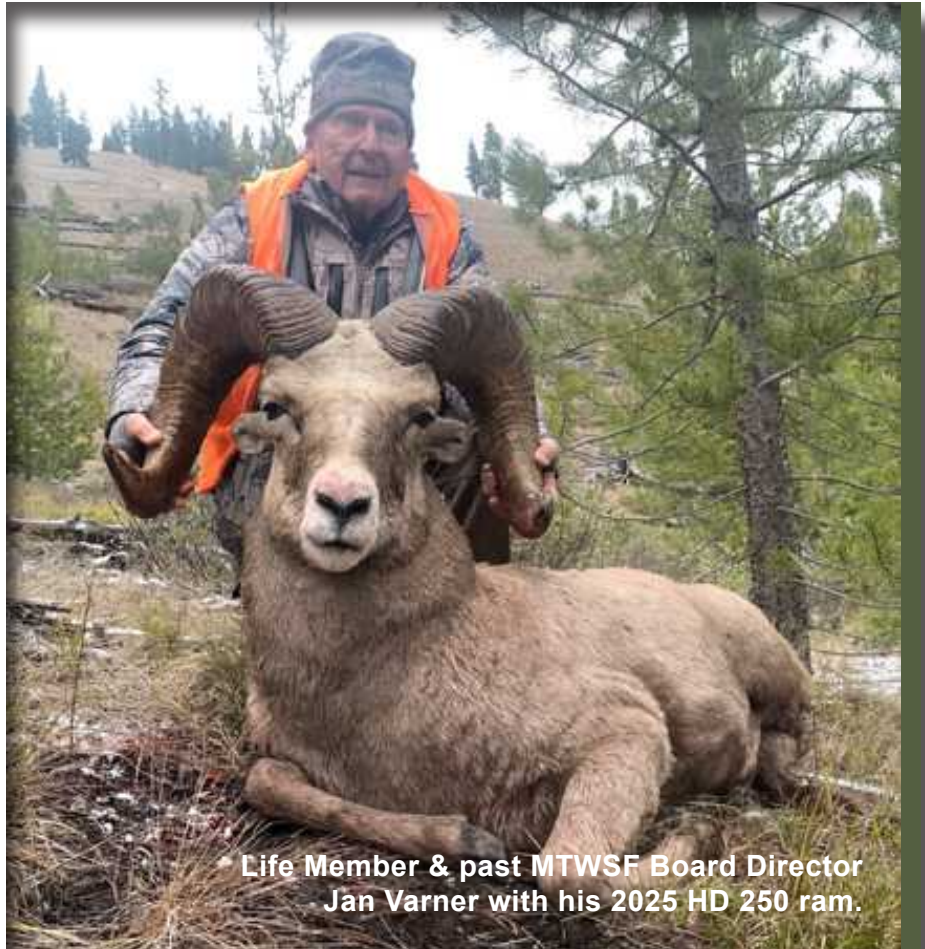
At the December 4, 2025 Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission meeting, FWP again proposed closing bighorn sheep Hunting District 250 for the second consecutive year. For the second year in a row, the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation opposed that closure.

Our opposition was based on several factors.

First, Region 2 Conservation Committee member, Shane Clouse, has first-hand field observations, supported by multiple member reports, indicating that there are more bighorn sheep on the landscape than are currently reflected in FWP's population estimates. Importantly, some of these sheep are occurring outside the historical HD 250 Bighorn boundary. This is why we supported expanding the bighorn boundary to match the deer and elk boundary for HD 250 — to better reflect current sheep distribution and improve the accuracy of monitoring and management.

Second, FWP biologists have identified predation by mountain lions as the primary driver of the recent population decline in this herd. In response, over the past several winters we have organized houndsmen and volunteer hunters to target mountain lions in the bighorn winter range. Those efforts have had measurable success, but they are increasingly complicated by the presence of a large wolf population, which interferes with hound work and limits effective lion hunting.

Finally, we believe the appropriate response to this situation is not a blanket closure, but a coordinated management strategy. We are actively working with FWP staff and the Commission to:



Life Member & past MTWSF Board Director
Jan Varner with his 2025 HD 250 ram.

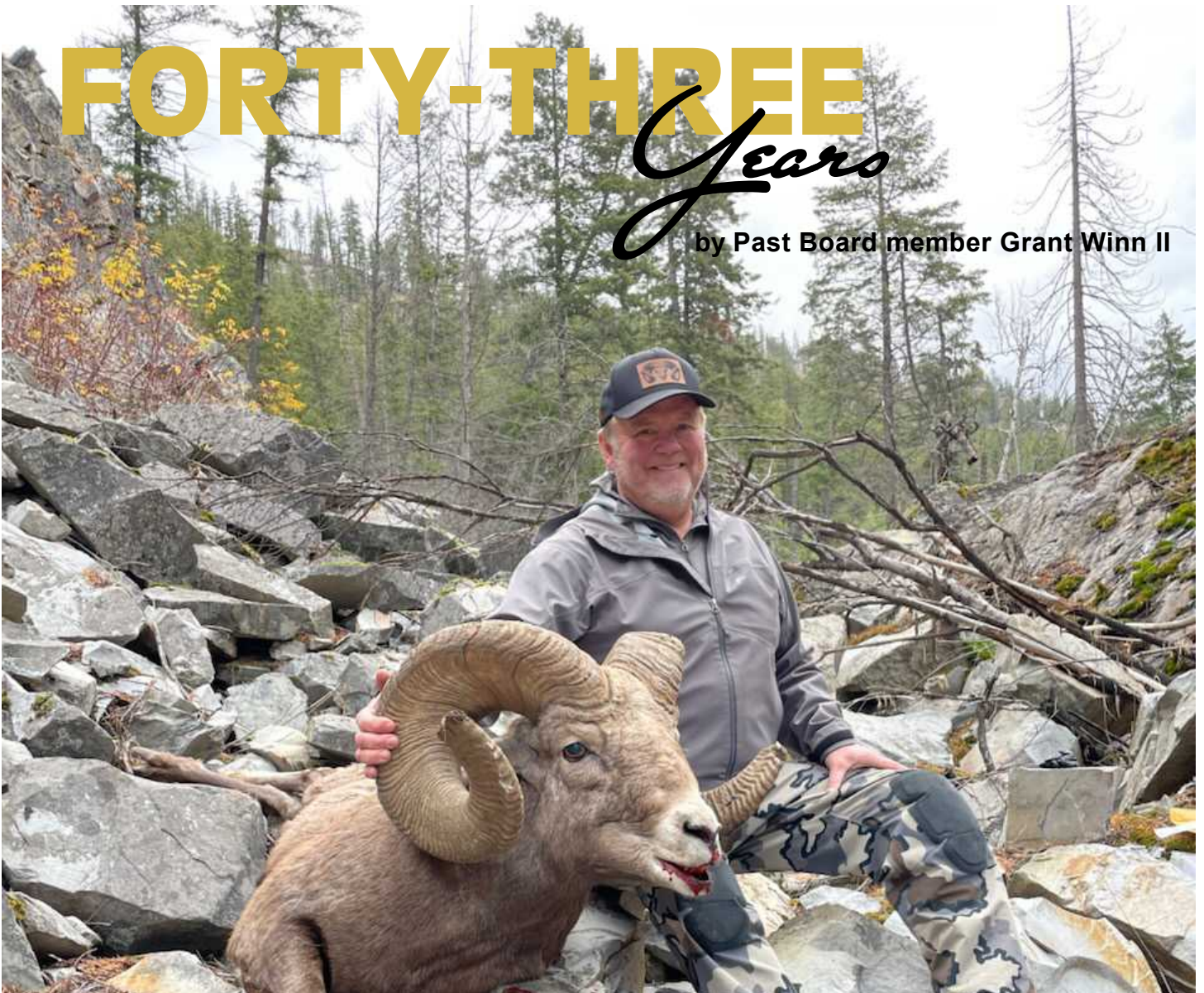
- Develop a viable path forward on predation management,
- Expand the use of volunteers in bighorn surveys through structured citizen science to improve data quality and coverage, and
- Address long-term habitat limitations, particularly conifer encroachment into critical winter and summer bighorn range — an issue affecting this and many other herds across the state.

We remain committed to working collaboratively with FWP and the Commission to ensure that bighorn sheep in HD 250 — and throughout Montana — are managed using the best available science, on-the-ground knowledge, and practical conservation tools that actually improve herd health and resilience. 🔥

FORTY-THREE

Years

by Past Board member Grant Winn II



That's how long I had been applying for a Montana bighorn sheep tag before my name finally came up in 2025 for unit 121—the rugged country in northwest Montana between Plains and Thompson Falls. I grew up in Plains, and every Sunday on the drive to church in Thompson Falls we'd slow down where the cliffs drop straight into the Clark Fork, hoping to spot those white dots high on the rock. Those childhood glimpses planted a seed that never left me. Over the decades I served more than ten years on the board of directors of the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation, giving back to the resource I loved. The year I termed off the board, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks rewarded that lifetime of patience with the tag I never thought would come. This sheep herd—the iconic Thompson Falls/Clark Fork population that inhabits Unit 121 and surrounding areas—was started in 1959 with 19 animals transplanted to the area. Populations boomed in the decades that followed, reaching as many as 400 animals at its peak and averaging around 200 from the 1990s to 2009. I spoke with Zach, the wildlife biologist for the district, and he said recent aerial surveys over 2023 and 2024 averaged about 100 animals. With persistent mortality from highway and railroad collisions along the Clark Fork corridor, FWP decided to cautiously increase ram tags in Unit 121 from one to two for 2025, providing a bit more opportunity while prioritizing conservation. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, the Montana Department of Transportation, and the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation are actively collaborating on solutions to reduce those vehicle strikes—they've already installed fencing in key spots, electrified road mats to deter crossings, and flashing signage to warn drivers of sheep on the road.

In March of 2025 I was working the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation banquet in Bozeman like I had so many years before. While I was selling raffle tickets my friend Ryan Speikermeier walked up grinning ear to ear. Ryan lives smack in the middle of unit 121. He pulled out his phone and started flipping through photos and spotting-scope shots of some absolute giants he'd been watching through the previous hunting season—deep curls, heavy bases, the kind of rams that make a grown man weak in the knees. Only one ram tag had been issued in 121 the year before. Something about those pictures hit me square in the chest. I looked at Ryan and said, "I'm putting in for 121 this year." He just laughed and said, "You better" Somebody's got to get the tag. I learned I'd drawn the tag a couple months later while fishing the Snake River on a walleye trip with my wife Mara and a handful of friends. I snuck away from camp to check the FWP website on my phone, saw my name, and let out a whoop that rattled tents all the way to the boat ramp. Everyone thought I'd hooked a 30-inch walleye. Nope—just a sheep tag.


Unit 121 is no gentle place. It's a maze of steep timbered draws, avalanche chutes, and granite spines that guard high alpine basins. That summer my dog

and I logged more than 120 miles of scouting, missing only two weekends. We climbed to several lakes, topped out on peaks that don't bother with trails, and learned the country the hard way—one boot print at a time. The rams were playing hide-and-seek, bunched up in dark timber, slipping out only when no one was looking. We heard rumors—good rams here yesterday, big one there last week—but every time we arrived, only fresh tracks in the dirt.

One July day in particular stands out. We left the truck an hour before daylight and headed for Priscilla Peak—five miles and 4,300 vertical feet to the top. It was already pushing sixty when the sun cleared the ridge. I sucked my three-liter bladder dry while eating a sandwich on the summit, then started down. By midday the temperature hit ninety. Heat exhaustion crept in fast: dizziness, chills, the whole ugly package. I found a scrap of shade, lay down for thirty minutes, and tried to keep my core from cooking. On the descent I was so thirsty I dug a fist-sized rock out of a wet spot on the trail, waited for the hole to seep full of rusty water, and drank it like it was Dom Pérignon. My dog just looked at me like I'd lost my mind.

Come September I moved my camper onto a private





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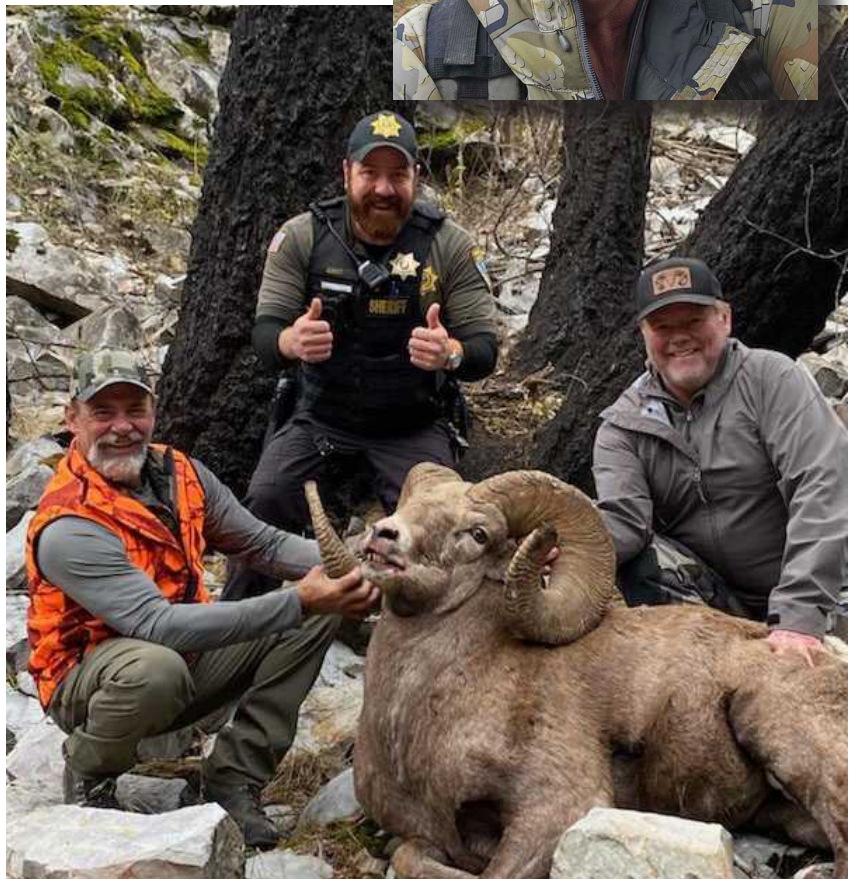
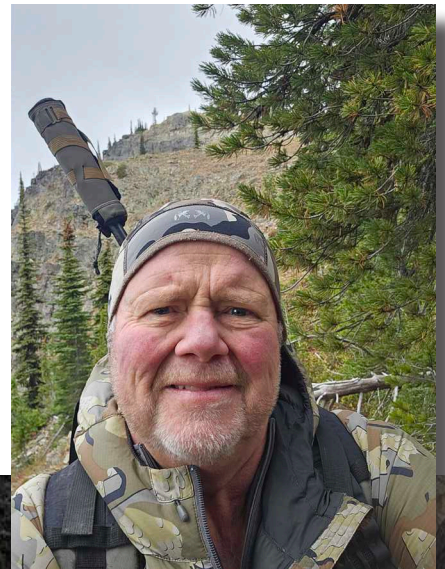
43 Years continued

lot right on the Clark Fork River, thanks to my buddy John McNulty putting me in touch with the owner. Three months of hookups and a short drive to the mountains—pure luxury in sheep country. After hunting every weekend starting with archery season and a few more days here and there, I left for the opening week of the general elk season. I had drawn a tag in area 700. I was fortunate to get a bull opening morning that was my personal best. A beautiful six point scoring over 370 points. With the help of my buddy Dave Hotchkiss we had him loaded up and heading to the butcher the next morning. I dropped my elk off at Lolo Locker and headed back to sheep camp.

Then one afternoon my phone rang. My friend Richard McDonald was telling me that the other tag holder had killed a ram and there was another ram with him that I should look at. We glassed until dark, found the second ram, but Richard shook his head. “I think there is a bigger one.” The next dawn Richard, his wife Crystal, and I were back on the mountain, binoculars up at first light. Three hours in, Richard and Crystal slipped up a side road to answer nature’s call. Ten minutes later they came skidding back. “We got him. Big one, come have a look.” I followed them to the spot and settled the spotting scope. There he was, tending to a ewe on top of a cliff, the sun lighting up horns that never quit. Massive bases, deep curls that carried their weight all the way to the tips—one side broomed off square, the other curling high above his nose. Forty-three years collapsed into that single moment. I knew. He was on the opposite side of the river so I had to drive down to the bridge and back up the other side. After hiking up the ridge I spotted him again. I settled in, found the crosshair behind his shoulder, and squeezed. At the shot he staggered, took two stumbling steps toward the edge he’d been following the ewe on and pitched forward off a hundred-foot granite wall. I heard the sickening crack of those heavy horns smashing into rock after he fell out of sight, a sound that still echoes in my head. For a long second the mountain was dead silent except for the beat of my own heart and the blood pulsating in my veins. When I finally reached him, he was wedged between two boulders at the base of the cliff, neck broken from the fall, but he still had his horns intact, although they were a little beat up. I knelt there on the scree, hand on those battered but still magnificent

curls, and let forty-three years wash over me. This was the ram I’d been chasing since I was a kid riding to church in the back of my parents’ motorhome. I brought him to the FWP office in Missoula the next day and had him plugged and they green scored him at 191.

Unit 121 gave me a challenging and memorable sheep hunt. I earned every blister, every swallowed mouthful of trail-seep water, every sunrise spent freezing on a windswept ridge. Forty-three years of applications, a lifetime of loving wild sheep, and one perfect November morning on a northwest Montana mountain. Some dreams are worth waiting for. Mine wore full curl horns, answered on the first try, and left this world with one hell of a bang when he hit the rocks. 🍷





HUNTERS LEADING THE WAY IN CONSERVATION

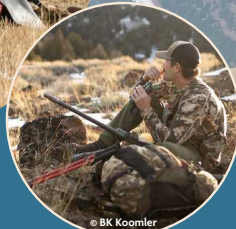
Hunting, fishing, and trapping provide direct support for wildlife management in North America. The Peregrine Fund, founded by falconers, co-founded the North American Non-lead Partnership.

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.



© Estelle Shuttleworth, DVM



© BK Koomler

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

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.



Bullet construction and location of impact influence rates of fragmentation.



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



_Elena_johnson

Elenajohnsonart.com



CONSERVATION Corner

by Ray Vinkey, *Conservation Corner Editor, Volunteer*

Research is ongoing on the 13 bighorn sheep and 3 mountain goat herds which are part of the statewide bighorn sheep adaptive management study. In September Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, the University of Montana and the Montana Cooperative Research Unit released the *Statewide Adaptive Management of Bighorn Sheep and Mountain Goats—2025 Annual Report*.

While I highly recommend that members read the full report (<https://fwp.mt.gov/binaries/content/assets/fwpcconservation/bighorn-sheep/2025/4---um-fwpc-adaptivemanagementbhsandmg-annualreport-2025.pdf>) in detail, I will provide highlights of statewide findings. The report has sections dedicated to each of the specific study herds as well as a summary of statewide findings for each of the goals identified in the report.

“The overarching goals of the project are to:

- 1. Conduct captures of bighorn sheep and mountain goats in study herds to monitor vital rates and assess cause-specific mortality.*
- 2. Develop integrated population models for monitoring each species that make use of the best available data for monitoring population dynamics of each herd.*
- 3. Assess pathogen status and risk of epizootics in bighorn sheep and mountain goat populations.*
- 4. Evaluate habitat parameters and limiting factors of mountain goat populations in native and non-native ranges to assess potential for augmentation and range expansion.”*

Since January 2024, 176 bighorn sheep have been captured and 186 monitored (10 sheep captured in prior health monitoring work are included). Of those 186 bighorns, 81% are still alive and being monitored, 13% have died and 6% have had collar failures or an unknown fate. Field and lab analyses determined that 9 deaths were due to cougar predation, 5 were due to pneumonia, 4 were from harvest or vehicle collision, 5 were due to natural causes and 1 was due to an unknown cause. Predation, pneumonia, and road mortality are all factors that MT WSF has identified as barriers to bighorn population growth and are working with our partners to address.

In the first two years of the study active *M. ovi* infections were detected in the Sleeping Giant/

Beartooth WMA population, Skalkaho herd, and the South Flint Range (the Anaconda herd). Evidence of prior exposure to *M. ovi* was detected in the East Fork of the Bitterroot/Skalkaho, Greenhorns, Sleeping Giant/Beartooth WMA, and in the Rocky Mountain Front herd. These findings are largely consistent with what is known about prior outbreaks and the prevalence of *M. ovi* and show that it is an ongoing challenge to the management of bighorn populations.

Twenty-six mountain goats have been captured to date in the Crazy Mountains, the Gallatin Crest and the Anaconda/Flint Creek Ranges—three of the four study herds. Capturing mountain goats has proven challenging due to difficult terrain, weather and helicopter mechanical issues. In 2026 the effort will be enhanced by the addition of ground-based capture efforts. A graduate student has been hired to focus on gathering population and vegetation-based data to evaluate options for future translocations of native mountain goat populations.

Looking forward to 2026 Nick DeCesare (NDeCesare@mt.gov), Research Wildlife Biologist for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and the state lead on the Statewide Adaptive Management Study provided the following update on work planned for this winter:

“For the winter of 2025-2026 we are continuing capture and monitoring work in most of the bighorn sheep study herds. Specifically, we are targeting the Ural-Tweed and Berray Mountain herds with a ground-darting crew based in Troy, Montana. We are targeting ram collar deployments in many of the other study herds to replace collars that have failed or will drop-off this winter, with rams being particularly of interest to our sister study of commingling between wild and domestic sheep. We plan to conduct new captures of sheep along the Rocky Mountain Front via helicopter, and also to continue targeting mountain goats in each of our four study areas.”

This will be year three of the five-year study and we look forward to future findings.

Please join us for the *2026 State of the Sheep Seminars* at 8:30 am during our annual fundraiser on March 7, 2026, in Bozeman for additional updates on the adaptive management, comingling and other research studies.



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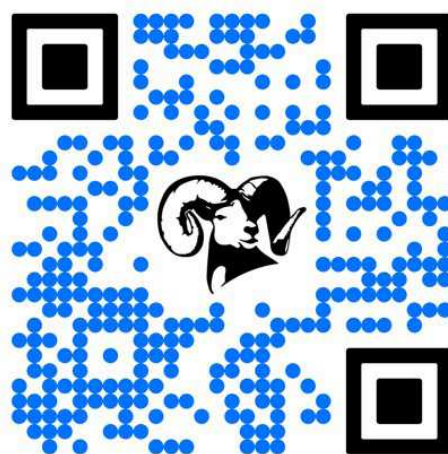
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REGION 1 UPDATES

by Bennie Rossetto



HD 100, Kootenai Falls: This unit north of the Kootenai River between Libby and Troy, once produced Boone and Crockett rams. I have a memorable photo of Paul Schaffer paddling his recurve bow kill ram across the river in a canoe. The unit sheep population is estimated to be 85, down from 100 sheep, 2 tags, down from 3 mainly because of lower age class harvest. The population goal is 150.

Priorities: Threats include wolf/lion predation and potential road mortality. I am not aware of M.ovi threats.

HD 101, Ural-Tweed: I list this first because we no longer have a permit for this herd, and most Region One hunters don't know it exists. It is a native herd of Rocky Mountain Trench genetics, and once thrived on both sides of the Kootenai River. Libby Dam created Lake Koocanusa, dividing the herd, and over time the west side sheep became extinct. Herd size was 150-200 in '60's, fell to 25 in 70's, and rebounded to 150-200 in '90's prior to wolf reintroduction. The herd is now a remnant of 30-35 or so animals, the main threat to its existence now being highway mortality, mountain lions, and habitat transition. Population objective is 100-125 with habitat enhancement and highway mortality mitigation.

Priorities: #1 Limit highway mortality. #2 Improve habitat (forest succession). #3 Reduce predation (mainly lions).

HD 102, Galton Range: This is predominantly a British Columbia herd with its southern extension being the Galton Range, east of the Tobacco Valley, to Theriault

Pass. It, too, is of native Rocky Mountain Trench genetics. Probably its biggest ram in recorded history was taken by a nonresident, down in the foothills in 2023. The major threat for this herd is a landowner with a domestic sheep herd. One permit is offered. Population estimates are difficult because of the forest environment, but the goal is >150 (both sides of the border, I assume). We are working on ways to prevent M.ovi such as helping provide a double fence along the private land boundary, and providing a unique species of guard dogs that the sheep owner actually has. We are also in contact with our WSF counterparts in B.C, as well as the local Tribal and B.C. biologist to coordinate efforts.

Priorities: #1 Prevent commingling with domestic sheep and goats near the Canadian border. #2 Eliminate highway mortality within a mile of border crossing. #3 Habitat enhancement (knapweed on Woods Ranch WMA, forest succession).

HD 121, North Clark Fork: 19 sheep were transplanted here from Gibson Lake (423) and Wildhorse Island in 1959. This was one of the best units in the state for record class bighorns when Duncan Gilchrist penned "Montana, Land of Giant Rams" in the '80's. The population was over 400, and we had ewe and half curl ram tags (very controversial at the time). He wrote off the Missouri Breaks as not worthy of a search for a giant. How time can change things. Highway and railroad mortality has wiped this unit from its glory days. Population was 200 in the '90's to 2009, then 50-70 since. The goal is 250 There is one permit. The genetics for great rams (and ewes) are there.

Priorities: #1 Control highway and railroad mortality with fencing, crosswalks, thermal sensing of wildlife on roadway triggering flashing signs, someday overpasses. #2 Predator control (lions and wolves).

HD 122, Clark Fork Cutoff: Wildhorse Island sheep were transplanted here in 1979 and 1982. After closure in 2015 because of a dramatic population decline from M.ovi, 20 sheep from unit 622 were transplanted. The population estimate is now around 110 to 120, and we have 2 permits.

Priorities: #1 Continue to prevent commingling with domestic sheep and goats. #2 Highway/railroad mortality is recently becoming a threat. Highway mitigation is planned. Railroad mitigation is needed.

HD 123, Cabinets: This is a rugged unit north of the Clark Fork and east of the Idaho border, extending northward to the Kootenai River. Primary habitat is the Cabinet Mountains, one of our finest mountain ranges in Western Montana, but it also includes the Scotchman Peak range (West Cabinets) along the Idaho line. Both ranges have mountain goats. 2 permits are offered. The population is thought to be 20 on Berray Mountain, and 20 in subalpine habitat.

Priorities: Minimize highway mortality on short stretches of HWY 56.

HD 124, Paradise: This small unit, tucked between Hwy 28, 200, and the Flathead Reservation, punches above its size. 6 ram permits and 2 ewe permits are offered. Genetics for record class rams exist here. I suspect the Reservation provides a reservoir for this unit, allowing the current harvest. Railroad borders much of the unit, and proximity to 2 highways, makes highway and train mortality likely. Proximity to Plains adds risk of M.ovi exposure.

Priorities: #1 Minimize highway and railroad mortality. #2 Find ways of keeping bighorns from getting close to Plains where some domestics are kept.


HD 199, Wildhorse Island: Yes, it has a unit number. The original transplant came from the Missions (yes), in 1939, 6 from Sun River in 1947, 2 from Ural Tweed in 1987(remember, Rocky Mountain Trench genetics). I will have a report on

Wildhorse in a future publication, since it is our nursery, and the major source of top 10 record book rams. Currently habitat degradation has become a problem, with increased mule deer mortality. Reduced lamb survival is a concern.

Priorities: #1 Improve habitat (knapweed, cheatgrass control). #2 Keep mountain lions (and bears) off the island.



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REGION 2 UPDATES

by Shane Clouse



HD 203, Grave Creek Range: The population continues to be strong in Petty Creek. There are continued needs for thinning and weed control. Efforts in this regard are ongoing and being conducted by USFS. I have not received a response from biologist Kierstie Yaeger to report on the current status of wild sheep in her districts.

HD 210, John Long Range: There have been no dramatic changes in population and no indication of any disease issues. I recommend MTWSF ask membership to help organize a citizen science count in the area. Conifer encroachment and noxious weeds are a major issue in traditional wild sheep habitat. The quality of forage for wildlife is depleted and treatments are necessary.

HD 214, Anaconda: There have been no major changes in population or hunting opportunities in 2025. Weed mitigation is important to accomplish, especially on the recently acquired lambing ground adjoining the Blue Eyed Nelly area.

HD 261, Skalkaho East Side Bitterroot: This herd continues to be strong, although there were isolated die offs this past spring. This area also needs thinning and noxious weed control. Continued education for the public on wild and domestic separation is greatly needed as new people move into the area. 5 rams were recently collared for a study. The 2025 count showed 31 lambs per 100 ewes.

HD 250, West Fork Bitterroot: The FWP commission maintained one ram tag in the area. The area directly around Painted Rocks lake, Little Blue Joint, and Blue

Joint creeks are historically where the wild sheep live and where hunters find them. There are only a few legal rams in this area, however there are many more wild sheep adjacent and connected to the painted rocks area which spend most of their time in the Nez Perce drainage. The FWP Commission decided to expand the 250 Wild Sheep unit to encompass more areas including the Nez Perce area. Hunters report seeing many adult legal rams in the Nez Perce area of 250. It is recommended that weed control and Nutrafix application be undertaken in the Blue Joint area to mitigate noxious weeds and improve the quality of forage in the area. Mountain lion predation continues to be an issue for herd health and lamb recruitment in the Blue joint and Painted rocks area. It is recommended that MTWSF work to purchase or encourage legal lion hunts in the area to reach the lion quota of 18 lions in area 250. It is recommended that the 250 Wild Sheep regulations be changed to state language that only allows for one legal ram to be take as the current regulations would allow for take of young rams. Biologist Rebecca Mowry likes the idea of using citizen science to get an accurate count of ewes, lambs and rams.

HD 270, East Fork Sula: Herd health and numbers are very good. It is reported that most ewes had lambs at the side during the 2025 hunting season. Hunter reported counting 120 sheep in one day and suspects there are many more. Hunter also reported seeing 25 rams that were in the six year old range. The age and size of adult rams looks to be in the 35 to 36 inch horn length range. No 40 inch rams reported. This hunting opportunity was increased to 6 rams. This herd could be used to augment area 250 as the two herds do commingle from time to time and they meet at Highway 93 near Sula. This was confirmed through GPS collar studies. The official FWP count was the highest wild sheep count ever recorded at 203 which is good news knowing they aren't able to find and count all of the wild sheep.

Bonner: There is currently no hunting season in this area, but the wild sheep herd is growing and is robust. Local reports, photos, and video show a minimum of two eight year old rams in the 40 inch horn and 180 plus estimates. The ewes are seen to have healthy lambs at the side during the hunting season. This herd is estimated at over 100 now. It is recommended that MTWSF work with biologist Ryan Klimstra to take steps to create a ram opportunity in the Bonner area for one legal ram.

REGION 3 UPDATES

by Jack Atcheson, Jr



Bighorn sheep surveys have been conducted as a collaborative survey of the Northern Yellowstone Cooperative Wildlife Working Group (NYCWWG) in the upper Yellowstone area since 1991. They saw a total of 376 sheep (243 in Montana and 133 in YNP. They classified sheep by age and sex, resulting in 67 lambs, 198 ewes, and 111 rams. Across all wintering areas, the lamb per 100 ewe ratio was 33.8 (range 21.1 - 50, Table 2) and the ram per 100 ewe ratio was 56.1. Of the 111 rams observed, 30 were classified as 3/4 curl or greater. Welcome new! The bighorn herds north of Yellowstone Park are now one of Montana's largest bighorn populations and largely native bighorns.

HD 300, Gallatin/Yellowstone: Unlimited permit. Winter range conditions are likely the single greatest threat to this area. Once again, the number of rams taken exceeded the harvest quota, also a sign of a robust bighorn sheep population. The new proxy option for using satellite communications to report hunter harvest of unlimited area bighorn sheep should push over harvest downward a key to extending unlimited bighorn permits. Reporting your sheep just after tagging can help us all enjoy over-the-counter bighorn hunting into the future. Wish List, better winter range conditions.

HD 301, Spanish Peaks: Late winter surveys 2025 were challenging and a poor count occurred, but the overall trend reports can give us confidence these bighorns are stable or on the increase like their neighbors. Winter ranges at high elevation and low are threatened by backcountry skiing increases and displacement to less productive winter habitats. Low altitude winter ranges have pine encroachment, weed/ cheat grass and one of Montana's busiest two-lane

hwy. Wish List, Pines thinned and habitat improvement, user-based backcountry skier awareness program.

HD 302, Hilgard's: This herd was hit hard by our last hard winter but appears to be following the trend with the neighboring herds, more sheep. Julie Cunningham reported on Dec 23 "I just got back from a bighorn sheep survey in HD 302, which went well – many good rams out there today" There is a translocation of sheep from the Hebgen Lake area to the Bear Creek Game range in the works, when surplus 302 bighorns are available, a new nursery herd will be underway. MTWSF is also working on a proposal to return area 302 to an unlimited permit area once again. Perhaps an early unlimited season hunt and a late season draw, area 302 has the terrain that limits success even in the present draw only season. I can tell you it hurts to get to these rams in the early season! Wish List, 100 bighorns on the mountain and to buy a 302 unlimited permit area. I hunted bighorn here in 1965!

HD 303, South Absaroka Unlimited: This season went well and sheep appear to be doing well. Winter ranges have pine encroachment and weed issues plus higher elk populations are spending more time in the upper Yellowstone valley year-round so competition with elk is real. Wish List- critical winter range assessment and remedies outlined.

HD 304, Hyalite: This area was once an unlimited permit area, and the sheep population has been stable for many years; winter ranges have pine encroachment and weed issues along with the Big Sky Hwy gantlet. Wish List, critical winter range assessment and remedies outlined.

HD 305, South Yellowstone: This area was once an unlimited permit area, and this herd of bighorns is one of Montana's most viewable bighorn populations. They had some respiratory issues over the years. Now a drawing area their summer range is largely in the park but their winter range is split by a heavy traveled road, "Touran" a blend of "tourist" and moron, cheat grass and weeds along with large numbers of elk and bison make it had to be a healthy bighorn in winter. Wish List, critical winter range assessment and remedies outlined.

HD 315, Tendoy/Beaverhead Mtns: Will potentially reopen in 2027 if the population increase of bighorns continues. Jesse Newby wrote-Nov 21, "I went down Thursday to survey with an eye to check on rutting behavior and rams present. I counted 61 bighorn along the route along Big Sheep Creek. I couldn't get into

Conservation Corner continued

Hidden Pasture as far as I wanted without stepping on some hunters. Among those I counted were 24 lambs for 28 ewes and 3 uncollared rams that looked to be full curl. This looks very promising to me. I think we will likely be starting the conversation about opening it up to hunting at the next opportunity." MTWSF has been discussing enlarging the borders of this hunting unit to expand bighorn management options for bighorn throughout this region of SW Montana. We are working on road signage now.

HD 330, Greenhorns: The work to collar as many bighorns as possible has told a tale in this district. There appears to be 3 sub-groups which likely are all visited by rams from each group. These sheep use a lot of country from summer to winter ranges. Two of the three winter ranges have busy roads, pine encroachment, cheat grass and weed issues. They share winter range with lots of elk, one of the herds is in the middle of a MTFWP Game Range. From Dec 1 to May 15, there are no vehicles, no people, few elk on their winter range. It will be interesting to watch how their habitats help the bighorns stay healthy. Interestingly mt lions have not targeted the many collared bighorns in this area, hmmm. Take away? One size management does not fit all. We are working on road signage now. Wish List, two rams on quota, one early season permit Sept 15 to Oct 30 and one permit-Nov 1 and Nov 30

HD 340, Highlands: The collaring in this area is epic, Mtn lions are also being collared along with domestic sheep and guardian dogs. Most ewes and lambs have collars; more rams are going to be collared. One ram traveled 500 air miles in 30 days during the rut of 2024, covering the east side of the Pioneers, Highlands and McCartney Mountains, he crossed I-15 and the Bighole River twice. Five subgroups of ewes share a number of rams. Likely the most studied wild sheep populations ever. Wish List, Would be nice to see the ram quota raised in this area to 2-3. A split season from Sept 15 to Oct 30 and Nov1 to 30.

HD 380, Radersburg: This herd seems stable but... Wish List more collars on a mix of ewes and ram and how do we get more sheep on the mtn in this area?

HD 381, Sleeping Giant: This area has some of Montana's most beautiful bighorn habitat. The Gates of the Mountains have bighorn and mtn goats the full length of Holter lake. You can view sheep and goats while trolling for rainbows and walleyes. The east shore has Beartooth Game Range with its seasonal access

closures. This area has the habitat for more bighorns and goats. Wish List, what do we need to do to put more sheep on the mountain?

R3 wish list, Bighorn Road strikes - All areas could receive help from the new MTWSF sign campaign signage asking drivers to slow down and keep bighorns on the mountain and off of your bumper! Critical winter range for bighorn sets the standard in any area, threats to bighorn vary for winter food access and quality is a constant. More collared sheep means more information. This generates confident and targeted management options for MTFWP.

Mtn Goats are not native to the 300, 301, 302, 303, 304, 305 330 but are native in 315, 340 and I believe 381, what is their impact on bighorn sheep high altitude winter ranges. Should mtn goat numbers be minimized for bighorns or maximized for all outdoor recreational opportunities?

REGION 4 UPDATES

by Gary Olson



HD 421, 422, 423, 424, 441: Total counts look good in all areas. Lamb ratios above average at 48:100 ewes, overall ram numbers look good as well. 100% hunter success in 2025 with 9 tags available, average age at 7.8 years. 37 more collars will be deployed on rams and ewes this winter. Winter surveys are on-going in December and January.

HD 455, Big Belts: Just under 100 sheep were observed during the last aerial survey. Lamb recruitment is down from past years surveys but overall numbers appear to be stable. Hunters were 100% successful with 2 permits issued. Rams averaged 7-8 years old.

HD 482, South side Missouri Breaks: A July 2025 survey revealed 317 sheep, 82 rams, 151 ewes, and 75 lambs. Lamb numbers were very good at 50:100 ewes, rams were 54:100 ewes. Hunter harvest was 8 rams with 5 permits offered. The governor's tag and super tag hunters always hunt HD482, which accounts for additional harvest beyond the regular permit offering. No sign of sick sheep so far.

Little Belts: Fall surveys accounted for 21 bighorns, but some collared ewes were not located so this is considered a minimum count. No evidence of continuing disease in this group from 2023-2025. Lamb recruitment appears to be trending upward in 2025, as several lambs have survived into the late fall period. FWP will put additional effort towards tracking yearling survival in 2026.

REGION 5 UPDATES

by Bryan Duffy



HD 500, HD 501, HD 502, Unlimited Hunting Districts: The Bighorn Sheep within these HD's inhabit the vast Beartooth Wilderness and contain many sub herds. Bighorn Sheep in these HD's are at normal to above average population levels. Lamb recruitment was good in 2025 and ram harvests that included older age class rams during the 2025 hunting season.

For the past 2 years, Montana Wild Sheep Foundation has been working on regulation adjustments along with members of MOGA for these HD units. One adjustment put in place in 2025 was a shorter reporting time and season closure for a ram harvest from 48 hours to 24 hours. This was put in place to prevent high, "over quota" ram harvest during hunting season. This new regulation had a strong impact on HD 502 during the 2025 hunting season, with a 2 ram harvest. The outlook for Bighorns in these HD units is good; hopes

are high for a continued healthy and strong sheep population.

HD 503, Pryor Mountains: Bighorn sheep in this HD are at normal to above normal population levels. Sheep in the region are primarily found in the Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area. Recent reports from the National Park Service show that this Bighorn sheep herd is at risk of close contact with a small herd of domestic sheep along the Montana Wyoming border. Efforts are being made to find a solution to this problem. Montana Wild Sheep Foundation is working with Wyoming Wild Sheep Foundation and the National Parks Service to rebuild a 3/4 mile stretch of fencing that borders the National Park boundary. Other potential projects are to install a cattle guard in place of a gate. When finished, this will help keep the domestic sheep from entering the National Park. We will be asking help from our membership with these projects. It is tentatively slated for early 2026. We are also working on habitat improvement projects in the park. More to come soon.

REGION 6 UPDATES

by Kurt Alt

MTFWP Region 6 new biologist in Malta - Jake Burnes

HD 622: About 24 sheep remain (no lambs found), following the all age dieoff in 2024-25. Disease status of remaining sheep is unknown. Winter helicopter survey planned, late January to February, 2026. Looking to capture sample and collar some of the remaining sheep (may need some financial support from MTWSF) Potential ground survey from late spring 2026 (w/ MTWSF volunteers)

HD 680: They say a drop in numbers on the east side a few years ago, but they have rebounded. Sheep in this hunting district has been living with respiratory diseases (including M.ovi), and have generally been doing well. However, they have a different M.ovi strain type from other herds.

HD 620, Little Rockies: This population is now over 100, an all time high. There was a large burn a few years ago, improving habitat conditions. The population objective is 75-100. One dead ram and a couple caught ground darting, pathology showed NO exposure to M.ovi.



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