



BIGHORNS

A Half-century of Bighorn Sheep in North Dakota

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By Ron Wilson

HUNTING HORNS

The first modern-day bighorn sheep hunting season in North Dakota was held in 1975. That year, 12 once-in-a-lifetime licenses were made available to hunters.

Over the years, 185 bighorn licenses have been issued with annual numbers varying from 12 to two and back up to eight.

After a severe bighorn die-off south of Interstate 94, licenses were decreased from eight to four and hunting was allowed only north of the Interstate. Due to management efforts, the southern unit has since been reopened with one license available in recent years.

A half-century ago, 18 bighorn sheep from British Columbia were released in western North Dakota as part of an arduous undertaking to reintroduce an animal long absent from the state.

In mid-January of this year, 19 bighorns from Montana's Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge in the Missouri River Breaks were captured, hauled 250 miles and let loose in the northern badlands, signaling what is likely a new era in sheep management in North Dakota.

"You try to find the closest match in terms of habitat that you can, and this is the first time since 1956 that we've transplanted bighorn stock from habitat so similar to ours," said Brett Wiedmann, North Dakota Game and Fish Department bighorn sheep biologist. "Bighorn sheep are creatures of habit, so this is important. Our hope is that when the sheep jump out of the trailer they realize the badlands offer the same grasses they're used to eating, it's the same clay soils they've walked on ... it's just like home."

Bill Berg, deputy project leader at CMR National Wildlife Refuge, said the similarities in habitats will be a boon for the relocated bighorns. "I'm expecting these animals to thrive in North Dakota," he said.

North Dakota, it was long held, was once home to Audubon bighorn sheep, a supposed extinct subspecies of sheep last seen in the badlands about 100 years ago. Turns out, there never was a distinct Audubon subspecies. Nor is there a distinct subspecies of California bighorn sheep, the animal originally brought in from British Columbia, and later Idaho and Oregon, to replace the Audubon and initiate a population in western North Dakota. Recent morphometric and genetic re-evaluations by scientists have proven that these animals instead are Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep.

What this means for bighorn management in North Dakota – and elsewhere, for that matter – is that biologists are no longer limited by arbitrary subspecies classifications when it comes to trapping and transplanting

sheep. Now, they can go and find the best match possible for North Dakota – sheep living and thriving in similar terrain as the badlands. “It’s very unlikely we will ever go west of the Rocky Mountains again to get bighorn sheep,” Wiedmann said. “We’ve known for years that if we could do it all over again, we’d take animals from the Missouri River Breaks in Montana. Those sheep are more suited to our habitat.”

Moving bighorns from A to B – something Game and Fish has done 42 times instate and eight times from out-of-state in the last half-century – is stressful on the animals. Yet, now that wildlife managers have been given the scientific OK to slip just 250 miles into Montana, instead of making a 1,500-mile return trek from Oregon with such precious cargo, some of that stress will hopefully be reduced. “We can now capture bighorns that morning in Montana and be back in North Dakota the same day,” Wiedmann said. “It’s much quicker and less expensive this way.”

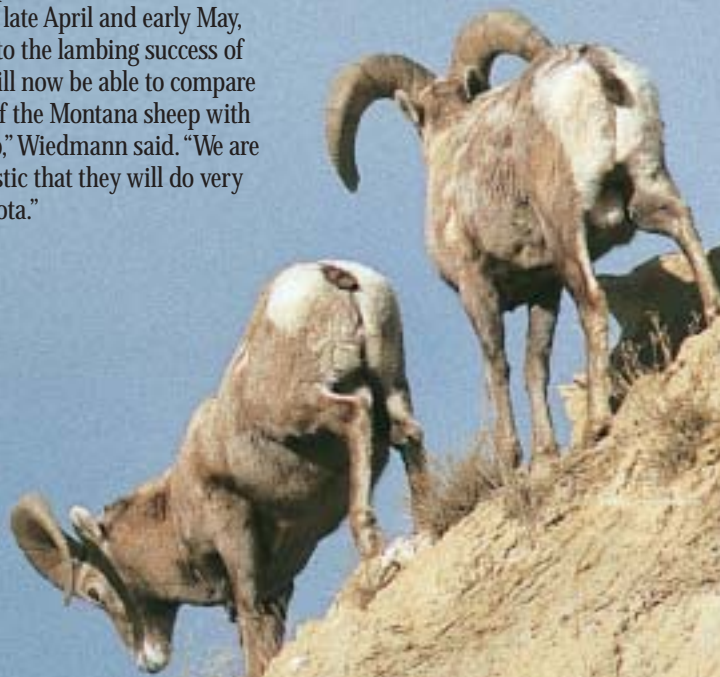
All the sheep from Montana were fitted with radio collars, which will enable Wiedmann to keep close tabs on their whereabouts. And come late April and early May, he’ll get insight into the lambing success of adult ewes. “We will now be able to compare lambing success of the Montana sheep with our resident sheep,” Wiedmann said. “We are cautiously optimistic that they will do very well in North Dakota.”

The bighorns in the Missouri River Breaks of Montana are thriving. They’re doing so well, Wiedmann said, there are now too many sheep. Much of their success across the border likely has to do with an abundance of undisturbed, quality habitat, something North Dakota lacks by comparison. Even so, there is hope that there is some carryover in success, and the new recruits will prosper in the badlands.

“The sheep within the Missouri River Breaks are doing very well,” said Berg. “Providing sheep to the North Dakota Game and Fish Department is a great opportunity to work with another conservation organization to get sheep going elsewhere.”

Because North Dakota is on the very eastern edge of the bighorn’s range, lamb recruitment into the population is a limiting factor. It’s critical, then, that ewes and newborns are afforded the best possible habitat to escape predators. A ewe with a newborn lamb is a different animal from, say, a white-tailed deer or mule deer. “She doesn’t try to hide her young, but flees when danger approaches,” Wiedmann said.

Bighorn sheep look at home in the rugged up and down habitat in the badlands of western North Dakota.



BIGHORNS IN THE BADLANDS

Bighorn sheep don't occupy all of western North Dakota, but rather pockets of quality habitat, as shown in the encircled area, that is harder and harder to come by nowadays.



With lambing habitat, you need three things: rough and rugged contiguous escape terrain; high visibility so ewes can see danger coming from some distance; and minimal disturbance. Research has shown that if ewes and lambs are continuously disturbed, they will abandon those areas no matter if the habitat requirements are met. "Lambing habitat is so critical because that first month of life for a lamb is the most critical," Wiedmann said. "Once a sheep is one year old, they've made it. They are well on their way."

There are other obstacles in a bighorn's life in the badlands, disease being one of them. In the late 1990s, four separate populations were decimated by disease – two were wiped clean from the map – south of Interstate 94, which runs east and west across the lower half of the state. "We discovered that domestic goats were grazed for leafy spurge about two miles away," Wiedmann said. "The goats were likely the disease vector for the bighorn sheep."

The biggest concern wherever bighorns run wild is the threat of contact with domestic sheep or goats. "We have a policy that if we know a bighorn has interacted with domestic sheep or goats, we kill that animal because it can wipe out 100 healthy bighorns when it returns to the herd," Wiedmann said.

One of the limiting factors in bighorn management in North Dakota for decades was funding. There are many expenses, most notably funds needed to artificially place animals into habitat identified as bighorn sheep range. After the die-off south of Interstate 94, the Game and Fish Department entered a management partnership with the Minnesota-Wisconsin Chapter of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep in 1999. In addition to funding Wiedmann's

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position, the chapter has paid for several management projects, including out-of-state transplants and fitting many sheep with radio collars. Information gathered from radio-telemetry work has been instrumental in more effectively managing the state's bighorn population.

"I believe we wouldn't have a sheep program today without the Minnesota-Wisconsin Chapter of FNAWS," Wiedmann said. "We certainly wouldn't be anywhere near where we are today without them. We've learned more about our sheep since 1999 than we did in the previous 40 years."

A half-century after the reintroduction of bighorn sheep, there are now about 250 animals in the badlands, a figure that has nearly doubled since 1999. The goal is to one day have a sustainable population of 300 sheep.

The hope is the bighorns recently transplanted from Montana, from country that mirrors the badlands in so many ways in the eyes of sheep, will help to meet that number.

RON WILSON is editor of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.



CRAIG BHIRLE



RON WILSON

RECORD RAM

A ram harvested on public land in October 2005 by a Michigan hunter is the new North Dakota state record bighorn sheep.

The ram netted 168 6/8 points, eclipsing the old record of 166 5/8 points shot in 1987. The sheep was 7 1/2 years old and weighed 275 pounds and was harvested from the Sheep Creek herd in the badlands in western North Dakota.

Jerry Brenner paid \$43,000 for the auction license sold at the Minnesota-Wisconsin Chapter of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep annual gathering in March 2005. North Dakota's lone auction license in 2004 sold for \$40,000.

License proceeds, along with an additional grant for \$25,000, are used to enhance management of bighorn sheep in North Dakota. The grant and license auction are part of a 10-year agreement signed in 1999 between the Game and Fish Department and the Minnesota-Wisconsin Chapter of FNAWS.



Drop nets have been used to capture bighorn sheep in North Dakota as seen in this photo taken in 1990. Today, however, helicopters are primarily used when it's necessary to capture sheep.

IN THE BEGINNING

The following account details part of the trapping operation in British Columbia a half-century ago when bighorn sheep were captured and later trucked 1,500 miles for release in the badlands of western North Dakota. The excerpt, written by A. R. Brazda, a State Game and Fish Department big game biologist at the time, comes from the December 1956 issue of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*.

"Finally on November 2nd, after several cold nights in a sleeping bag and countless hours of observation, the situation began to develop favorably. Threatening weather developed into intermittent snow, and with no bait remaining outside the trap, the animals were showing considerable activity around the upper gate. Eight sheep, which were in the trap shortly after daybreak, moved out. Then about two hours later, a band of 18 moved to the upper gate and began to filter in one and two at a time. Shortly after 12 p.m., all but two wise ewes showed every desire to enter the trap, but their female intuition told them things were not exactly right. However, about 10 minutes after 12, they too abandoned their cautious ways and entered the trap. Within seconds, the detonator was exploded and the first phase of the operation was completed."



Bighorn sheep released in the badlands in mid-January were certainly no worse for the wear. The bighorns, captured in the Missouri River Breaks of Montana, had to travel just 250 miles in stocking trailers to their new digs.



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