



The Bighorn

WINTER 2021

>>> PUBLICATION OF THE TEXAS BIGHORN SOCIETY

Restoring Bighorn Sheep to their Native Ranges in Texas, and Ensuring the Viability of their Habitat

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THE DESERT BIGHORN SHEEP IN WEST TEXAS**

Bighorn

The official magazine of the Texas Bighorn Society
Advertising Rates Effective 1-1-2009
Bighorn is published 3 times annually

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Bighorn is a four-color glossy publication, and the following is required:

Ads should be supplied via email and in one of the following formats:

- PDF (Preferred)
- TIFF
- JPEG

Each ad should be: 300dpi (minimum) in CMYK color space

All other formats must be approved by our production staff

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Spring - April 1st
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Fall / Winter - January 30th

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Back Cover (Supply as full color bleed)	\$315.00
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Third Page (4-3/4" Tall x 5-1/4" Wide)	\$120.00
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Bighorn's production staff is available to help you build your advertising copy. Production costs, hourly rates, and estimates are available upon request.

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CONTENTS

- 05** New Members
- 06** A Letter from the President
- 07** Editor's Letter
- 08** This & That
- 09** Congratulations to Clay Brewer
- 10** Memorial Fund
- 12** Desert Bighorn Sheep Program Update
Froylán Hernández
- 14** Aoudad-Desert Bighorn Sheep Study
Froylán Hernández
- 15** TBS - Work Project 2021
- 16** Horizon Custom TBS Rifle Raffle
- 17** TBS Desert Bighorn Hunt Raffle
- 20** The Third Time is the Charm
David Price
- 22** My West Texas Bighorn
Lee Ferguson



Photo by Chris Stahl

Winter 2021

BIGHORN



YES!
I want to help bring
bighorn sheep back
to Texas.

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- Annual TBS Individual Membership \$ 40.00
- Three-year TBS Individual Membership \$ 115.00
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Howdy, New Members!

On behalf of the current members, the TBS Officers & Directors, and all the Texas Bighorn Sheep your patronage will go to support, we'd like to welcome you to our organization! We appreciate your support and look forward to seeing you at the next TBS event!

individual

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Immanuel Salas	Robert Renfro
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three year membership

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family

Rob Cinclair
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student

Campbell West
Thomas Freeman
John Albrecht

life

Ross Brewer

***please,**

Help us stay current with your address and email information! Contact Kathy Boone if you have moved, changed email addresses, or have questions about your membership. She can be reached at: membership@texasbighornsociety.org or 806.745.7783

A LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

“ TBS Members,

Happy 2021, and Good Riddance to 2020!

First, a HUGE Thank You to everyone for their generosity shown to our fallen conservation partners in the August helicopter tragedy. We were able to raise a nice memorial fund for the surviving family members.

Our 2021 WORK PROJECT will be March 12-13 on the Red Rock Ranch just outside Van Horn. We have a block of rooms at The Red Roof Inn in Van Horn. Please make your reservations using the information below.

Red Roof Inn
200 Golf Course Drive
Van Horn, Texas 79855
Phone: 800-733-7669 or 432-283-2800

*** Use Code B334Texas1 when making your reservation***

Please be sure to register on the website as well to ensure an accurate count for meals, etc. This year's work project is funded by grants from Wild Sheep Foundation and Cabela's/Bass Pro Shops, The Lubbock Sportsman Chapter of DSC, and from the BOLD Charitable Giving Foundation. We will be constructing two mountain top guzzlers and one drive to guzzler.

TBS is still planning to have our Round Up in June at Tapatio Springs. Watch for further details, auction items, etc. in the coming months. ”

See you in Van Horn,



Sam Cunningham, President
Texas Bighorn Society



EDITOR'S *letter*

Thank goodness 2020 is behind us, and here's hoping for a great 2021. Looking forward we have a great work project coming up in March at the Red Rock Ranch owned by Ernie and Louise Davis at Van Horn, 3 guzzlers will be built to support desert bighorns. Please sign up so that head counts can be taken for meals. Information about the work project is in this issue.

Annual Roundup is set for June and TBS will return to Tapatio Springs, check out the details in this issue. Hope to see everyone there.

Many thanks to Chris Stahl for the awesome bighorn ram photo on the cover of this issue of "The Bighorn."

Drought conditions this past year hit west Texas hard, wildlife and birds were scrambling for food sources and water. Guzzlers were so important at this time and many thanks to TBS for building so many guzzlers over the years to support desert bighorns as well as providing water sources for all wildlife and birds. Guzzlers make a huge difference in the desert country that bighorns inhabit.

Congratulations to Clay Brewer for winning the Dallas Safari Club, Trail Blazer Award. TBS nominated Clay for this award for his long-time commitment to the desert bighorns in Texas. His dedication has been a great example of putting the resource first and foremost.

Here is hoping for a great 2021, everyone stay safe and see you on the mountain at Van Horn at the Red Rock Ranch in March.



Bonnie McKinney
Editor, *The Bighorn*

Bonnie McKinney

Bonnie McKinney, Editor
El Carmen Land & Conservation Co, Wildlife Coordinator
Cemex USA-Texas



*Photo by
Bonnie McKinney*

**WORK PROJECT 2021
RED ROCK RANCH-VAN HORN, TEXAS
Ernie & Louise Davis, Owners
(Details to follow)**

This & That

“RIMROCK MAN - The Early Life of W.B. Carson (1907-1946)”

by Robert M. Anderson

Published by Ernie and Louise Davis, Cotulla, Texas

“In west Texas, Burch Carson and Desert Bighorns are synonymous. “Rimrock Man” is a tremendous compilation of the life and times of Burch Carson. A must read for everyone interested in the history of the desert bighorn and the tales and trails of the man that gathered the information we all still refer to today.”

Bonnie McKinney, Editor

To order “Rimrock Man,” contact:

Bob Anderson

Email: tx199@postnet.com

(please put attention BOB in your subject line on your email)

Mailing address:

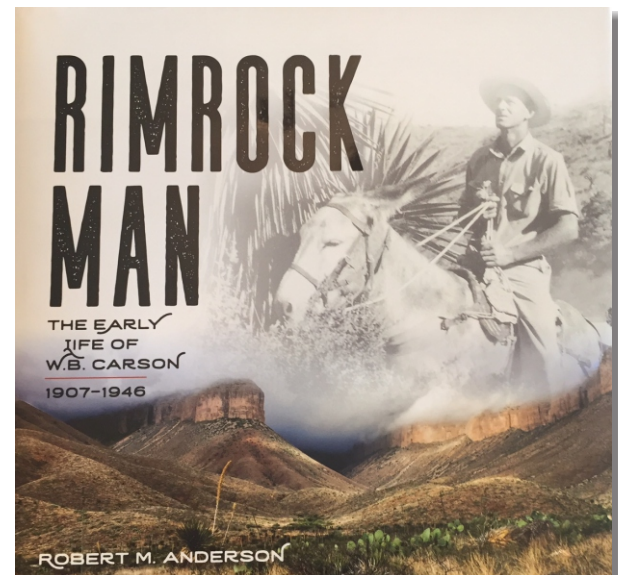
Bob Anderson

6882 FM South 549

Rockwall, Tx 75032

Price: Regular \$95.00 plus tax & shipping

Special Price TBS Members: \$76.00 plus tax & shipping



REMINDER TO ALL TBS MEMBERS:

TBS uses “mail chimp” service to email our members upcoming news and events. If you are one of our long-time members please make sure we have your most recent and up-to-date email address.

Please send to:

info@texasbighornsociety.org

or call 806-745-7783

CONGRATULATIONS TO CLAY BREWER

WINNER OF THE FIRST DALLAS SAFARI CLUB CONSERVATION TRAILBLAZER AWARD

Dallas Safari Club announced a new conservation award for wildlife professionals several months ago, and TBS nominated Clay Brewer immediately. The award celebrates the enormous contributions made by wildlife professionals for non-game, game, and game conservation, habitat management, research and wildlife policies.

TBS congratulates Clay for winning the award as well as a \$10,000.00 contribution toward his work in the field of wildlife conservation. The award will be presented during the annual Dallas Safari Club Convention (virtual).

Clay's career spans a number of years in Texas Parks and Wildlife and he served as Program Leader for the Desert Bighorn Sheep for a number of years. Clay's dedication to the desert bighorn in west Texas continues to this day. He worked tirelessly with landowners, and formed great working relationships as well as longtime friendships. He always put the bighorns first and foremost.

Clay retired from Texas Parks and Wildlife and currently is the Conservation Director, Bighorn Sheep Program for the Wild Sheep Foundation. Clay is also on the Board of Director's for the Texas Bighorn Society, and continues to work with landowners in west Texas.



**Congratulations
Clay,
a job well done!**

TEXAS BIGHORN SOCIETY MEMORIAL FUND

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Thank you very much for your donation to the Texas Bighorn Society in memory of Dewey. We know he would be humbled and appreciative knowing all three families were blessed because of your kind and thoughtful gift.
May God Bless you,

The Family of Dewey Stockbridge



Desert Bighorn Sheep Program Update: Surveys and Disease

*By Froylán Hernández, Program Leader Desert Bighorns
Texas Parks & Wildlife Department*

Undoubtedly, 2020 has been a very challenging year. Some of the challenges go far beyond face masks, hand sanitizer and shortages of toilet tissue. The COVID restrictions limited our ability to conduct annual helicopter surveys the way they are typically conducted. But those setbacks pale in comparison to the loss of our friends and colleagues during the tragic accident.

All aerial projects, including bighorn surveys were suspended after the accident. We initiated a thorough

evaluation on our current survey protocols to make sure we were performing all of our aerial work under the best safety practices possible. The aerial protocol evaluation is in the last stages of our internal review process. Upon completion of the internal review, it will go out to external sources (e.g. USFWS, other state agencies, pilots, etc.) for further input. Once complete, we should have a comprehensive document designed to enhance safety during aerial operations.

In the meantime, we have conducted foot surveys/ground counts in a few mountain ranges including, Elephant Mountain WMA, 9 Point Mesa Ranch and the Sierra Diablo Mountains. Following is a survey summary of the Black Gap WMA, Brewster County aerial survey (incomplete survey), as well as areas where we have conducted ground counts:

LOCATION	RAM CLASSES				TOTALS			TOTAL SHEEP	RATIOS		
	I	II	III	IV	RAMS	EWES	LAMBS		M	:100 F:	L
BLACK GAP/S. BREWSTER CO.*	8	14	13	7	42	84	13	139	50.0	100	15.5
ELEPHANT MTN WMA**	13	8	10	16	47	64	44	155	73.4	100	68.8
9 POINT**	0	5	8	9	22	23	12	57	95.7	100	52.2
SIERRA DIABLO MTNS**	5	8	11	15	39	64	30	133	60.9	100	46.9

NOTE: * = INCOMPLETE AERIAL SURVEY

** = GROUND COUNT

Although ground counts in other mountain ranges and areas have been scheduled, COVID restrictions, personnel infections and conflicting schedules have hindered our ability to conduct ground counts. We will continue our attempts to conduct ground counts in those areas to access population status.

The disease events that occurred, first in the Van Horn Mountains desert bighorn herd, and then in the Black Gap WMA population seem to have subsided. The most recent mortality in the Van Horn Mountains occurred in November 2020. However, that was the first mortality in a couple of months. Lab results for the November mortality indicated pneumonia was at least part of the problem. There has not been a known mortality in the Black Gap WMA herd since mid-September. Following is a brief summary of the disease events:

Van Horn Mountains

There have been at least 25 mortalities (11 M, 11 F) in the Van Horn Mountains since the disease event was detected in mid-November 2019. Most of those mortalities were attributed to bacterial pneumonia. Some of the respiratory pathogens detected (culture or PCR) on most of the samples submitted primarily include *Mannheimia* and *Trueperella*.

Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae (*M. ovi*) was not detected on the first several samples submitted. However, there were 2 intermediate positives on nasal swabs, but not detected on the lung PCR. Further sampling for other *Mycoplasma* species, 1 *M. (M. dispar)* was detected. One of the last mortalities, *M. ovi* was detected by lung PCR.

Black Gap Wildlife Management Area

To date, there have been a total of at least 30 mortalities (16 M, 14 F) at Black Gap WMA. At least 3 mortalities occurred outside of Black Gap proper. However, most mortalities were concentrated around Bourland and Maravillas Canyons. There have been a few towards Stillwell Mountain north of Black Gap headquarters. Most mortalities were attributed to bacterial pneumonia, *M. ovi* was detected (PCR lung or nasal swab) in the majority of the mortalities. The *M. ovi* strain appears to be a domestic sheep strain. Other bacterias cultured from the lungs include *Bilbersteinia*, *Mannheimia* and *Trueperella*. Blue tongue was also detected in the last 6 mortalities, but only 1 of those 6 was *M. ovi* positive in the lung. It appears blue tongue contributed in part to the death of these 6 bighorns.

We will continue to monitor both populations and suspect we will continue to get a few infected animals in both populations in the future, as the pathogens are likely still “mingling” in the herds.



Dr. Walt Cook drawing blood. Photo Krysta Demere (TPWD)

Aoudad-Desert Bighorn Sheep Disease Transmission Study

Update January 2021

By Froylán Hernández,
Program Director Desert Bighorn Sheep
Texas Parks & Wildlife Department

A two (2) phase aoudad-bighorn disease transmission study was initiated in January 2020. This study is in collaboration with the Texas A&M University School of Veterinary Medicine. However it has now grown, and Texas Tech University is also investigating other bacterial aspects.

Phase I of the study involved capturing 21 free-ranging aoudad from the Carrizo Mountains and transporting them to the TAMU School of Veterinary Medicine holding facility in College Station, Texas. The primary objective of Phase I was to artificially infect (inoculate) aoudad with *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae* (*M.ovi*) to: (1) determine whether aoudad sheep are susceptible to *M.ovi* infection and if they were capable of shedding the bacterium, and (2) if infected, characterize patterns and time periods of *M.ovi* shedding.

Secondary Objectives of the Phase I study included:

1. Determining whether aoudad shedding *M.ovi* was dependent upon exposure to other bacteria typically associated with pneumonia die-offs, such as those in the *Pasteurella* family.
2. Characterize aoudad immunological response to *M.ovi* or *M.ovi-pasteurella* mix and estimate after exposure if aoudad would be infectious.
3. Characterize aoudad pathological response to exposure to *M.ovi* (*M.ovi* only group) or a *M.ovi-Pasteurella* mixture (nasal wash group) to explain potential transmission pathways.

Once at the TAMU holding facility, the aoudad were separated into groups and after a 1-month acclimation period were inoculated with either:

1. “*M.ovi* only group” – *M.ovi* isolated and obtained from captive infected bighorn in Wyoming,
2. “*M.ovi-Pasteurella* mix group” – nasal washings obtained from Texas domestic sheep that tested positive for *M.ovi*, or
3. “Control” – no animals were inoculated.

Even though there were limitations to the Phase I, such as capture and capture induced stress on free-ranging animals, the results of the study strongly support the notion that aoudad can spread *M.ovi* and *Pasteurella* bacteria for an extended period of time following exposure.

Phase II of the study was initiated in January 2021, which involved capturing 20 bighorns (10 M, 10 F; mostly younger-aged animals) from Elephant Mountain WMA, and transporting them to a holding facility at Mason Mountain WMA. After a 21 to 30 day acclimation period, “pen-raised” aoudad will be brought in and placed in separate pens from the bighorn in the MMWMA holding facility. The aoudad will be inoculated with *M.ovi* or other significant *Mycoplasma* species, such as *Mycoplasma dispar*.

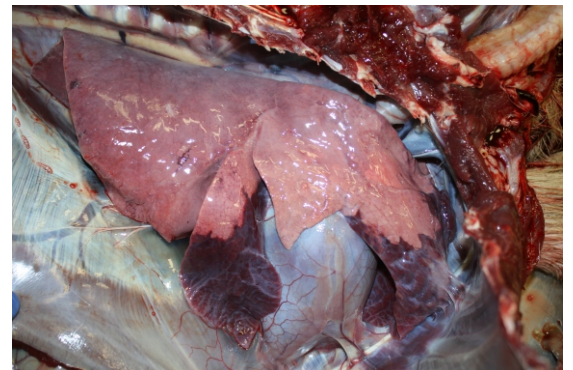
Initially, the aoudad and bighorns will have independent water sources. Once the independent water sources are removed, the aoudad and bighorns will remain in separate pens, but will share a water source.

The goal of Phase II is to determine if *M.ovi* inoculated aoudad are able to transmit the bacteria to naïve bighorn through:

1. Water source sharing – without direct (nose-to-nose) contact;
2. Water source sharing and complete co-mingling contact – aoudad and bighorns in same pen.

Findings from this collaborative study will certainly allow TPWD, wildlife managers and landowners make informed management decisions as we move forward with management and restoration efforts.

Without the help, support and funding assistance from the Wild Sheep Foundation, as well as other NGOs such as Texas Bighorn Society (TBS), these projects would not come to fruition. We are also thankful for the cooperation we have received from many landowners. They are, and will unquestionably continue to be, a vital partner in wildlife management.



Aoudad lungs of *M.ovi* only group. Photo Logan Thomas (TAMU)

Texas Bighorn Society Work Project 2021

The Texas Bighorn Society invites all members to the Red Rock Ranch to participate in the building of water guzzlers to provide water for desert bighorn sheep in Texas.

***** You must be a TBS member to take part in our work project*****

March 12th and 13th, 2021

Where

RED ROCK RANCH - 1.5 miles N. of Van Horn on Hwy. 54 Gate on left.

The Plan

We will be building three guzzlers – one will be a drive-to.

What Do I Bring

Bring some plumbing tools, digging tools, drill batteries and whatever else you think we might be able to use.

Accommodations

Red Roof Inn, 200 Golf Course Dr.,
Van Horn, TX 79855
800-733-7669 or 432-283-2800

Discount rate is \$60.99/single or \$75.99/double – use code TEXAS 1 by phone reservation – discount rate is only available for March 10th - 13th
Deadline for the discount is March 1, 2021.

Clothing

It is impossible to know what the weather will do. In years past we have had snow and we have had 90-degree heat. Come prepared bring your hat, gloves, and sunscreen.

This is a remote desert area, and the possibilities of life-threatening injuries exist. Volunteers should be in good physical condition and comfortable hiking in rugged terrain.

Food

Meals will be provided beginning Friday morning through Saturday evening. A gracious thank you to Kai & Janet Buckert and the Lado Ranch for providing us Saturday dinner at the Lado Ranch. We always need assistance with meal preparations, so if you would like to volunteer, please contact us at 806-745-7783 or e-mail crisy@texasbighornsociety.org.

Register Please

Please, Please, Please---In order to have an accurate head count for meals, we need to know if you are coming. To register call 806-745-7783 or register on the TBS website: www.texasbighornsociety.org.

*****Deadline to register is March 1, 2021*****

General Membership Meeting

The membership meeting will be Friday, March 12th at approximately 7:00 pm. Following this will be an auction, lots of good food, fun and fellowship.

Horizon Custom TBS Rifle

RAFFLE



**Saturday,
June 12, 2021**



**Horizon Firearms has designed our
Series 002 Custom
Texas Bighorn Society Rifle**

**Tickets are \$50.00 each
There will only be 300 tickets sold!
The winner does not need to be present to win**

DETAILS

**28Nosler with a 24" Proof barrel with
a muzzle brake and is carbon fiber
and fluted; sheep knob; comes with
rings (30mm) and bases; TBS logo**

TO PURCHASE

**Call the TBS Office at 806-745-7783
and mail a check or go to the
TBS Website and click the link
"Buy Raffle Ticket Now"**

THE TEXAS BIGHORN SOCIETY DESERT BIGHORN HUNT RAFFLE

June 12, 2021

Tickets may be purchased
on the website:

Texasbighornsociety.org

**Tickets / \$200.00 each
only 500 tickets sold!**

*The winner does not
need to be present to win.*

The hunt will take place on the Red Rock Ranch near Van Horn, Texas. The hunt will be conducted with the next available tag issued by Texas Parks & Wildlife to the Red Rock Ranch. The lucky winner will hunt a desert bighorn ram on the Red Rock Ranch for 10 days, the hunt will be fully guided by Jim Breck Bean, High West Outfitters. The hunt is for rifle only. Travel to Van Horn to the Red Rock Ranch, and accommodations in Van Horn are not included. Meals (lunch only, while on the ranch is included). Field preparation of your trophy is included but shipping and taxidermy are the responsibility of the hunter. This is a non-transferable hunt and the lucky winner must also purchase a valid Texas Hunting License.



Red Rock Ram - Jim Breck Bean Photos



THE 32ND ANNUAL TBS ROUNDUP

June 11th & 12th, 2021

Boerne, TX

Please join your fellow TBS members and guests at the Tapatio Springs Resort

Name	Guest Name	
Address	City/State	Zip Code
Phone Number	Email Address	

NEW REDUCED REGISTRATION – SAVE WHEN YOU PURCHASE BOTH NIGHTS

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THE THIRD TIME IS THE CHARM

By David Price



“Do you see the sheep about halfway up the hill by the big green tree?” asked Jim Breck Bean, founder of High West Outfitters based in Alpine, Texas. “The big ewe is bedded facing downhill. She’s got an ear tag in her right ear – you can’t miss her!” “I’ve got her!” I replied. Jim Breck then said, “the ram is five feet above her and bedded down.” It took me a few minutes to sort the ram out from the rocks, brush and cactus, but once I picked him out, I never took my eyes off of the ram. Jim Breck sat next to me watching the sheep through his Swarovski spotting scope while I maintained a vigil through the scope on his rifle, a Swarovski X5i 5-25 x 56 model, which made keeping an eye on the nine-year old ram really easy.

Jim Breck and his head guide, Jasper Klein, spotted the group of sheep high up on the mountainside at 5:00 p.m. and the three of us maintained our vigil updating each other and fine tuning our sight picture until 5:45 when

Bean announced that the ewe was about to stand up. He said, “when the ewe stands up the ram will too. When he stands up and he’s clear of the other sheep squeeze the trigger, the distance is 501 yards.”

A minute or so later the big ewe rose to her feet, the ram followed suit and I squeezed the trigger on Bean’s Mesa Precision Arms 6.5 PRC Signature Series rifle. Jim Breck and Jasper already knew what I saw when I recovered from the slight recoil – the ram was fatally hit and tumbling downhill. We were excited and congratulated each other, and I took a deep breath thankful that the shot flew true. My two guides scrambled up the hill and dragged the big ram down to a hilly bench where I met them, we took plenty of photos, and field dressed the animal. Thus, ended my desert bighorn sheep hunt on the Lado Ranch near Van Horn, Texas, but there’s a lot more to the story than a single 501 yard shot!

Here’s how it all started! I became a life member of the Texas Bighorn Sheep Society (TBS) over 10 years ago and I have volunteered to work on guzzler building projects wherever they were held in west Texas. In January 2020, while attending the Dallas Safari Club Convention I purchased a raffle ticket for the TBS sponsored desert bighorn sheep hunt like I had done each year since I became a member. I never expected to win the prize when I bought the raffle ticket and considered the \$200 ticket price as a conservation contribution to TBS. But this year with all of the emphasis placed on the COVID 19 pandemic I forgot all about the raffle drawing. Imagine my surprise when Dr. Sam Cunningham, TBS President, called to inform me that I had won the sheep hunt raffle. I was going sheep hunting in Texas!

Jim Breck called a couple of days later asking me to drive to Van Horn, Texas during the first week of July to scout and hunt desert bighorn sheep. I drove to Van Horn wondering what kind of adventure lay ahead of me. I met Jim Breck and Jasper Klein in town, and we drove south to the Lado Ranch where we rendezvoused with two High West Outfitter guides, Steven Ryan and Cross Moody. We ventured out that afternoon driving the two-track roads on the ranch looking for sheep in the hills. We saw plenty of wildlife; abundant coveys of quail, scattered mule deer and numerous aoudad sheep, but no bighorn sheep. The next morning, we were out early before sunrise where the stark beauty of the Chihuahuan Desert stretched out before us. The elevation was approximately 4000’ and as the sun rose so did the temperature. Soon it was 100 degrees. After spotting more mule deer and aoudad sheep Steven and Cross spotted a good ram and Jim Breck decided we should stalk him. He asked me if I thought I could make the stalk he had planned and I jumped at the chance!

Let me say this...Jim Breck and Jasper are both in their mid-twenties. I thought I was capable of keeping up

with them, but I was sadly mistaken. By the time I got to the spot where I saw the ram I was so knackered that I was unable to mount my rifle to look through the scope at the ram. The effects of my age, the heat, the elevation and not staying hydrated properly kicked my butt. Humbled and a little bit embarrassed, I walked back to the vehicle for some rest, recovery and replenishing liquids. The next day we saw the same ram, made another similar stalk where I



shot over the ram's back, and then he was gone. I was crushed! I thought my sheep hunt was over, but redemption takes many forms.

I returned to Dallas, began an accelerated workout routine and fine tuned my shooting in case I got another chance to return. I got my second chance two weeks later. Steven and Cross guided me but, as hard as we tried, we couldn't make those three and four-year old rams grow up to be eight-years old. The last two days we saw 32 sheep by Steven's count: eight rams all of which were too young to harvest. We stopped hunting at last light on July 31, 2020.

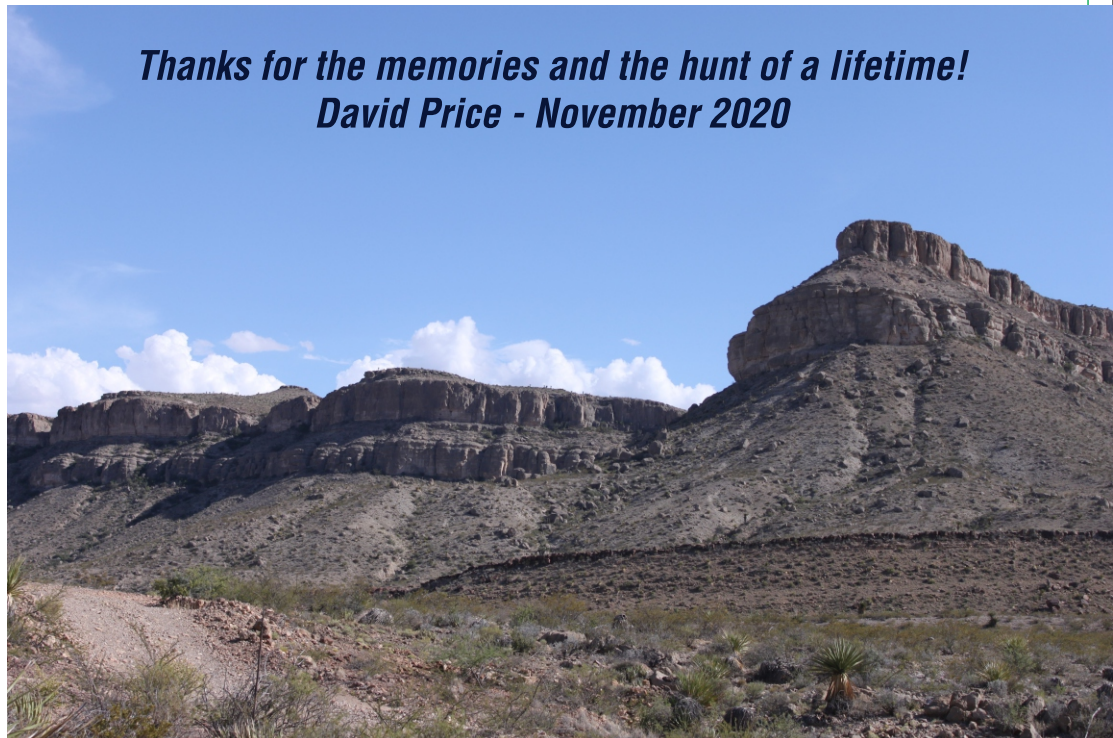
Sheep hunting season in Texas closes for the entire month of August to give the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's (TPWD) game biologists a chance to conduct aerial surveys, count sheep and collect biological samples from the sheep herd. The hunting season resumes for bighorn sheep on September 1st and is open until the next July 31st. To hunt

bighorn sheep in Texas a hunter must possess a valid Texas hunting license and a permit obtained from Froylan Hernandez, TPWD.

On October 18, 2020, Jim Breck texted to offer me a third chance to hunt bighorn sheep on the Lado Ranch. I packed up and left the next morning arriving at the ranch at 2:30 p.m. By 3:30 p.m., we were out trying to spot sheep, and by 5:00 my guides spotted the nine-year old ram bedded with his ewes high up on a hillside seemingly out of harm's way. The three of us patiently waited for a shot opportunity to present itself, while keeping track of the ram and his ewes as they bedded down in the shade of the mountainside. When the big ewe stood up the ram quickly followed suit standing up above her. I quickly learned why the Mesa Precision Arms rifle is considered one of the finest mountain hunting rifles in the world.

I want to thank Jim Breck Bean and his staff at High West Outfitters (highwestoutfitter.com), the Texas Bighorn Society and Dr. Sam Cunningham. Tremendous thanks to Kai Buckert and The Lado Ranch for giving me the extra opportunity to return to hunt additional times in pursuit of my bighorn ram, and I also want to thank the Lado Ranch staff. Additional thanks go to the Dallas Safari Club, The Wild Sheep Foundation, Froylan Hernandez (TPWD) and Bonnie and Billy Pat McKinney (Cemex USA-El Carmen). I'll close with one admonition. If you want to hunt sheep – any sheep – get into “sheep shape”! I don't mean neighborhood gym shape, but truly mountain hunting sheep shape. Stay hydrated! The mountains are unforgiving, and they are “no place for old men”. Hunt sheep when you're young and not 71!

***Thanks for the memories and the hunt of a lifetime!
David Price - November 2020***



It is with a heart of deep appreciation and sadness that I dedicate this article to Dewey Stockbridge, Brandon White and Dr. Bob Dittmar of the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department. These three valiant men lost their lives on August 8, 2020, while performing a bighorn sheep survey at Black Gap Wildlife Management Area in west Texas. Dewey was the main guide on my bighorn sheep hunt in June, and is mentioned throughout my story, as he was an integral part of the success of my hunt, and became a good friend. My prayers go out to the families of these brave men who gave their lives in service to the State and animals they loved.



MY WEST TEXAS BIGHORN

By Lee Ferguson ©

“This is my favorite call of the year!” Justin said on the other end of the line; and that's how it all began on what was otherwise just a normal October morning in east Texas.

Justin Dreibelbis is the Program Director of the “Big Time Texas Hunt Program” for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD), was calling to tell me that I had won the *Texas Grand Slam*-the “granddaddy” of them all in TPWD's *Big Time Texas Hunt* drawing for 2019! *The Grand Slam*-the winner and one non-hunting guest to hunt four (4) trophy big game animals all over the Great State of Texas throughout the following year; white-tailed deer, mule deer, pronghorn antelope, and the coveted west Texas desert bighorn ram! During (and after) the call I was in shock, surprised that I had won (I never win anything), and not fully understanding the magnitude of it! This was the first time I had purchased any chances to win one of the TPWD hunts, so it was amazing that I had been chosen as the *Grand Slam* winner, and not for just one hunt, but four! Toward the end of the call, Justin told me that TPWD only issues three permits for desert bighorns each year, and I would get one of them! He spent a few more minutes sharing additional details of the package, which also included shoulder mounts for all four animals from Woodbury Taxidermy, and then he asked: “Is this something you would like to accept?” and of course I didn't have to think twice-I said “Absolutely!”

You see, I've been a hunter since I was just a kid growing up in the Texas panhandle, but only for quail and pheasant. My dad and I would go out to the farm and chase pheasant down rows of maize and corn with my 16 gauge, but I had never harvested anything bigger than a ringneck pheasant. Now I was getting to go on four hunts of a lifetime, and I had some work to do to get ready.

I had purchased an inexpensive Savage .30-06 with a factory scope after we moved to east Texas a few years ago with hopes of doing some deer and hog hunting, but my friends and the guides for these hunts told me I needed to make the most of this rare opportunity and upgrade. They emphasized optics, especially for the bighorn since they are smart, can see a mile, and their terrain is unforgiving and won't let you get very close. So, I decided on a Mossberg Patriot Revere .270 Remington with a Leupold scope, and I hit the range.

I went on the whitetail and mule deer hunts first, in mid-December and early January. The guides were fantastic and put me on some beautiful trophy bucks. The whitetail was literally my first deer hunt, and my guide Bryon was fantastic, and taught me some things you can only learn from an experienced hunter. That was my first deer, and it was an exhilarating experience, as ever whitetail hunter knows.

Then it was time for the mule deer hunt in Hudspeth County in far west Texas. My guide for that hunt was Dave Horak, an experienced mule deer guide, seasoned hunter, and co-owner of the Double H Ranch. Throughout the hunt he coached me not only on how to find and approach a big muley, but he also prepped me for what I would experience on the sheep hunt. Getting those pointers from David in that environment was invaluable preparation for the sheep hunt as the terrain for both hunts were nearly identical-rocky mountainous country filled with cactus. David also let me spend time on his rifle range, helping me focus and gain confidence at further distances. That training helped me prepare for the hunt of a lifetime-the west Texas Desert Bighorn.

The sheep hunt was originally scheduled for March at Elephant Mountain Wildlife Management Area (EMWMA) in Brewster County, but then COVID-19 shut everything down. I had been talking regularly to the hunt organizer, Mark Garrett, and guide, Dewey Stockbridge, both with TPWD, about how to prepare for the hunt, everything from gear to recommended ammunition, and I was getting more excited each day as the time approached. So, it was a huge disappointment when Mark called to tell me things had been postponed, but I understood. However, Mark was my persistent advocate with the higher-ups, and in late May he called to tell me things were back on. We would have to practice social distancing, but I said that's fine with me, and that shouldn't be too hard in the Big Bend Country! I started pulling things together for a mid-June hunt.

As you would expect, it is HOT in west Texas in mid-June, so I knew I was going to have to do things differently. Dewey called and started prepping me again on what I would need to bring and what to expect. He and his team of assistants went to work canvassing the mountain to find a trophy ram that would make this hunt truly memorable. And, I went back to the range to get in some practice.

As part of the *Texas Grand Slam* package the winner is able to invite a non-hunting guest on each of the hunts. So, without thinking twice, I knew I wanted my son, Steele to come along and share this once in a lifetime experience with me. He is an avid outdoorsman and had gone with me on the mule deer hunt. He had been such a huge help, encourager, and support for me on that trip, and this would give us more prized time together on the drive to west Texas.

The day finally arrived, I packed my truck and headed from my home in Marshall to pick up Steele in Lewisville, and then head out on Sunday for Elephant Mountain, a 700-mile one-way trip. Everything went as planned, and we arrived late Sunday afternoon. We met Mark and Dewey, signed the coveted bighorn permit, and began discussing plans for the next morning. Dewey and his team had been canvassing the mountain for several weeks and identified several trophy rams that would be excellent choices for me. But Dewey had decided on one ram in particular they had been tracking. They had seen him on Sunday afternoon on top of the mountain, so our plan for the next morning would be to take the Kawasaki mule up the mountain road and move in on the ram from there.

That evening Steele and I moved into the bunkhouse, and then sat outside gazing in amazement at all the stars in the clear night sky. We were in awe at the beauty and freedom we felt, and thrilled for what we hoped Monday would bring. We finally went to bed, but sleep was evasive as I tossed and turned, thinking about the moment I would have a bighorn sheep in my crosshairs. It was a day I had been waiting for since that call from Justin nine months ago, and it was just a few hours away!

Dewey picked us up early and we headed to the range to sight in my rifle. I took a few shots and they looked good, so we headed out with our plan to go up top. But, as we headed down the road on the south side of the mountain, several of the TPWD assistants had stopped on the road and were glassing four rams that had come down into a steep drainage gully cut out of the side of the mountain. And, one of them was mine! Our plans changed as we watched the rams wander from spot to spot across the gully. They were well over 1,000 yards away, and there was no way to move closer without spooking them. We watched them for about an hour, trying to determine their next move. Then my ram took off alone across the mountain and to the east, and bedded down in another gully about two-thirds of the way up the mountain. Dewey decided our best bet would be to take the Kawasaki mule up on top and come down at the ram from above where we were less likely to spook him.

No only did we have Dewey, the resident Wildlife Biologist at Elephant Mountain as our guide, but we were also fortunate to have Froylan Hernandez the Texas Desert Bighorn Program Leader as the other guide on our hunt. Dewey, Froy, Steele and I took off in the Kawasaki mule to drive up top, about a 20 to 30 minute trek. Dewey knew the mountain like the back of his hand, so we were able to stop on the road and hike to the edge of the mountain where we were in the perfect spot to see the ram still bedded down below next to a big cactus. We sneaked behind a huge boulder hoping to not spook the ram and set up our gear. We got lucky the ram didn't move. We were able to get within 200 yards of him, and we were still about 100 yards above him on the ridge, giving me about a 30 to 40 degree angle shot downhill. I got settled and scoped in, bracing my rifle on the boulder, which I could partially hide behind to get ready for the shot. It was about 10:00 a.m., and we waited.



The ram was looking in our direction, and I am sure he had spotted us by now with his keen eyesight, and his huge horns were reflecting the morning sun. Dewey kept the spotting scope on him constantly, and every few minutes I would check with my binoculars, check my scope, check my aim, and then relax. Binoculars, scope, aim relax. Binoculars, scope, aim, relax, this became an exercise because I wasn't going to miss this opportunity by being unprepared! But my mind would wander what if he never gets up? Or, what if he gets up and darts away without stopping for me to get a shot? Or, what if I miss? I couldn't go there, so I practiced the drill again; binoculars, scope, aim, relax.

Then, about an hour later he moved! Dewey elbowed me and whispered, “get ready, he might be getting up!” I grabbed my rifle, got settled on the boulder in front of me, and placed him in the crosshairs. But it was a false alarm. So, we settled back into our rhythm-Dewey and Froy on their scopes, and me; binoculars, scope, aim, relax. We waited longer and broke a sweat as the sun began to rise above the canyon rim on this beautiful morning. I got another elbow from Dewey about 30 minutes later, but it was another false alarm, so we settled back again into our routine. Then, right about noon Dewey elbowed me again a little harder and said, “He's Up! Get Ready!”

It's amazing to me how Dewey, Froy, and this team of experts on desert bighorns know these animals so well after watching them day in and day out. They can nearly predict an animal's next move. Mark Garrett told me that Elephant Mountain is the perfect environment where these animals now thrive, after almost becoming extinct in the early 1900s. They are now being brought back through the extensive TPWD Desert Bighorn Sheep Program, and Elephant Mountain is such a prolific setting that TPWD relocates sheep from here to several other areas in the state each year.

Now, the ram was up, my heart was racing! I reached for my rifle, careful to be quiet and still as possible, to prevent the ram from moving down the mountain. Slowly laying the forestock on the sandbag I was using as a brace, I put the butt of my .270 securely into my shoulder. Then zeroing in with my scope I increased the magnification and put the crosshairs just behind his left shoulder. Dewey had the range at 178, so I checked my elevation again and took aim, waiting for the go ahead from Dewey.

“Take the shot when you are ready,” he said. The next few moments only lasted a few seconds, but they are etched in my memory forever! The ram was up and facing us, but he had turned slightly downhill as if he might be about to start that way. I had a shot, but it wasn't the optimal one that I had envisioned, as he was not fully broadside and the sweet spot was tighter than I wanted. Not the best angle, but the best I might get, as we were all anxious that he might move downhill at any moment. Dewey gave me the go ahead again. I took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, and checked my aim one last time. I braced my rifle, said a quick prayer, and slowly squeezed the trigger. “Boom!” The shot echoed in the canyon. Dewey said, “he's still up! “Reload!” I cocked the bolt and loaded another round from the magazine. “Wait, I think you hit him, but stay

ready.” I waited, and quickly got back on my scope. Froy said, “I think you hit him,” and Dewey agreed. “Wait, he's trembling.” By that time, I had the ram back in the crosshairs, and he was standing in the same position as when I had taken the shot. “Dang, I missed him, I thought to myself.” But Dewey said, “he's wobbling.” And then, as I watched through my scope the big ram began to lean slowly, and then he fell, toppling over like a big tree in a thunderstorm. As he fell, he rolled a couple of times and ended up about ten yards downhill. We could only see his back legs, which trembled for a few seconds, then were still. “You got him, congratulations!” Dewey, Froy, and Steele all congratulated me on the shot. I was thrilled and amazed, but still a little worried he might get back up. But he didn't move again, and the prize I had been working for and dreaming about since October was now a reality- I had my desert bighorn!

After a few minutes of celebration, we packed up our gear to hike around the rim and down the gully to where the ram had fallen. It would be a challenging trek, but I wasn't about to make anyone else do my work or let this moment pass me by. Dewey, Froy, and Steele were great, patiently hiking down the mountain with me to appreciate and size up my trophy below. Dewey blazed the trail, Steele carried my rifle, and Froy walked behind me to offer his support should I need it. Having Steele there to experience this with me was the blessing of a lifetime. Just his presence gave me the strength and tenacity to push myself beyond my physical limits, hike down to the ram, and enjoy this day to the fullest!

Cactus, sliding rocks, and a steep descent challenged all of us but, especially me, as we hiked down the gully. The rest of the TPWD team who had been watching through binoculars and scopes from the road below began their hike up the mountain to meet us and help field dress and carry the ram down the mountain. They reached him first, and just as we got there they were bracing him carefully so he wouldn't roll further down the mountain.

My first reaction when we reached the ram was awe-how majestic, strong, and resilient was this incredible animal. He was a mature ram, evidenced by scars on his face and body, and nicks on his horns. I think I said out loud, “he would have made that trip in five minutes,” meaning that the hike which we had just taken me thirty to forty-five minutes would have been just a few strides for him. He was magnificent, and his horns were huge! Dewey pointed out how they were flat and worn on top, representative of many battles during the 12+ years! They were dark near his brow, but gradually lightened up toward the ends-another sign of his maturity and grandeur. To see those horns up close told a story all their own, of battles for territory, breeding rights, and a harsh existence on this mountain!

The TPWD team all pitched in to get the ram positioned for a few photos and graciously congratulated me on my success. But they were the true heroes; scouting, scoping and planning for weeks to allow me to experience the hunt of a lifetime! I could not have done this without each stepping in to offer their unique skills in support!

After some time for celebration, hydration, a few photos and getting to admire this incredible animal one last time, Mark grabbed my backpack, Steele grabbed my rifle, and we headed the rest of the way down. As we hiked, every once in a while, I would stop and look back up the mountain, again appreciating this incredible experience and the beautiful country, and wishing I could turn back time a few hours and do it all again! But I have to admit, I was pretty happy when we reached the Kawasaki mule and got to ride the rest of the way down.



What an adventure! Not just getting to hunt such a magnificent animal, but getting to share it with my son, meet some of Texas best Parks and Wildlife experts, and enjoy another beautiful part of the great State of Texas! It is an experience I will never forget!

And, when I am finally able to hang the mount of this incredible bighorn ram in my home or office, he will live on for generations in the stories we tell and the memories we share, and I will get to relive this once in a lifetime opportunity over and over through the years! Admiring his strength and resilience, I will be reminded how he helped foster in me a glimpse of those traits on a hot June day in west Texas! © Lee Ferguson – June 2020.

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