

The Bighorn

SPRING 2020



>>> 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

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- PDF (Preferred)
- TIFF
- JPEG

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All other formats must be approved by our production staff

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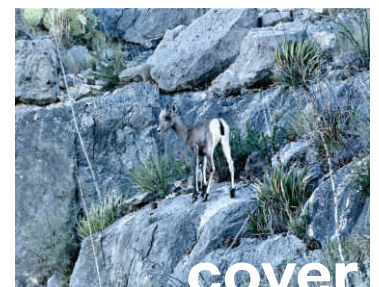


Photo by Bonnie McKinney

Spring 2020

BIGHORN



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bighorn sheep back
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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

Ross Bandy
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*** 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,

We just completed another successful work project! Two guzzlers were constructed on Black Gap WMA and a third was constructed on the Reagan Canyon Ranch. Thanks to everyone who participated on the guzzler projects - your hard work is greatly appreciated. Special thanks to everyone who provided food for the meals and helped with their preparation.

An exceptional recognition was given to Bonnie and Billy Pat McKinney! They were presented with a Desert Bighorn bronze statue for their never-ending support to the Texas Bighorn Society and Desert Bighorn Sheep Conservation.

Clay Brewer, Charlie Butler, Sam Cunningham and Dirk Parks were submitted by the nominating committee for three-year Board of Director positions and approved at the General Membership meeting on Friday night. Officers elected are Sam Cunningham, President; Ace High, Vice President; Curt Brockman, Secretary; Kathy Boone, Treasurer.

Following the general meeting we had a fun-filled auction, raising over \$10,000 for the Desert Bighorn Sheep of Texas! Check out photos from the weekend on our website, Facebook and Instagram.

Don't forget the upcoming Round Up at Tapitio Springs on June 12-14. You can register online from the website. Registration forms have also been mailed to all members. Hope to see you there and bring friends! ”



Sam Cunningham, President
Texas Bighorn Society



This & That

January 2020 Board Meeting Summary

by Curt Brockmann

The January 2020 Texas Bighorn Society Board meeting was held during the Dallas Safari Club convention in Dallas, Texas. Twenty-five people attended the meeting. The minutes of the August 2019 Board meeting were reviewed and approved. Robert Joseph gave a membership report and stated that TBS has 672 members.

The Board discussed the 2020 Roundup, which will be held on June 12-13 at the Tapatio Springs Resort in Boerne. Please mark it on your calendar, register and make your reservations. This year we have the sheep permit and rifle raffles and other great items, so we are hoping for a great turnout.

We also discussed the 2020 Work Project, which is scheduled for March 13-14. We will be staying at the Cemex, El Carmen Conservation Area. We plan to construct three new guzzlers on and around the Black Gap Wildlife Management Area. We will also repair some of the existing guzzlers.

Froylan Hernandez, Rachael Wiedmeier and Emily Wright gave their updates. Froylan provided an overview of TPWD's sheep management efforts and an update on the sheep herds at the various wildlife management areas. Froylan also reported that in December they captured, sampled and relocated 74 bighorns from Elephant Mountain

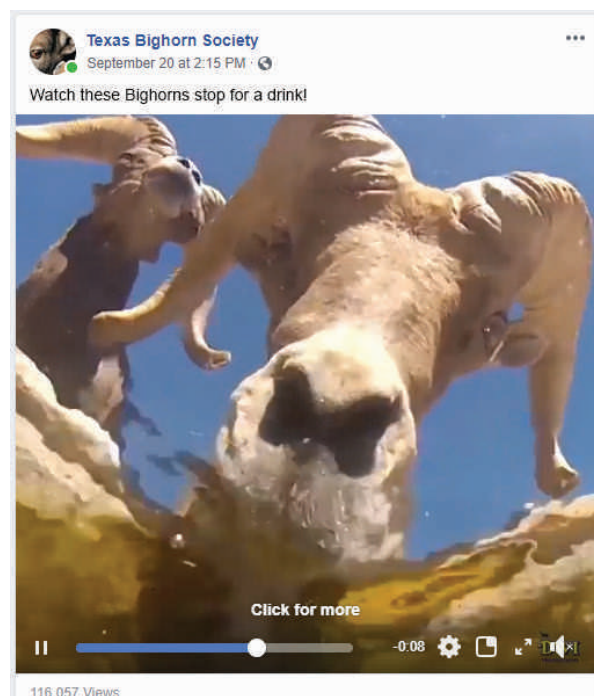
to Black Gap.

Rachel and Emily presented to the board the Texas Tech University research update. They participated in the mule deer and aoudad capture at the Lado Ranch in early January. They helped with the capture, radio collaring and took samples from 10 mule deer and 20 aoudad. They also assisted in capturing, sampling, and transporting 21 aoudad from the Carrizo Mountains to TAMU for additional testing.

That is all for now. I hope you all have a great spring and I hope to see you at the Roundup in Boerne!



BE SURE TO CHECK www.facebook.com/texasbighornsociety for more photos, videos and all things Texas Bighorn!



*A special thank you to Cemex USA, El Carmen Land & Conservation Co.
for their generosity to provide lodging for the TBS 2020 Annual Work Project,
and for their continued support of the Texas Bighorn Society.*

Photo by Forres Meadows



This year the bronze sculpture of a desert bighorn was awarded to long time TBS members Bonnie and Billy Pat McKinney for their many years of support to the Texas Bighorn Society and bighorn conservation work in west Texas.

Photo by Dirk Parks

DSC



EDITOR'S *letter*

This has been a really busy winter for The Texas Bighorn Society members, from the Dallas Safari Club to Reno, Nevada for the Wild Sheep Foundation show. Many thanks to every member that helped at the booths to spread the word about all the good conservation work that TBS does for desert bighorns in west Texas.

The annual work project was held at Black Gap WMA again this spring and attendance was great, three more guzzlers on the desert mountains for bighorn water sources as well as providing water for a host of birds and mammals. El Carmen Land & Conservation Co. (Cemex, Texas) was delighted to host the site for lodging and, TBS is always welcome. Billy Pat and I would like to say a huge thank you to TBS for awarding us the beautiful bronze of a desert bighorn, we have been around TBS since its beginning and can truthfully say this group is like one big family, friends forever and the amount of conservation work TBS has conducted cannot be measured. Thank you all again, we will cherish the bronze forever.

Make your plans to attend the Annual Roundup at Tapatio Springs in June, please see the insert and register early. For sure we will all have a great time. The bighorn raffle winner will be announced as well as the rifle raffle, get your raffle tickets soon there are only a few remaining for the chance of a lifetime to hunt a desert bighorn or own a great rifle.

This issue has some great articles contributed by TBS members, updates on TTU research on genetics, the desert bighorn transplant from Elephant Mountain WMA to the Black Gap WMA this past December, as well as several special interest articles by Vernon Bleich and Chester Moore, and of course lots of photos from the annual work project.

Hope to see you all at Tapatio Springs in June, bring a friend and introduce them to TBS.

Bonnie McKinney

Bonnie McKinney, Editor
El Carmen Land & Conservation Co.
Wildlife Coordinator



Bonnie McKinney
Editor, *The Bighorn*

Wildlife Water Developments:

A Brief Review of Perceptions Pertaining to **PREDATORS AND PREY**

by Vernon C. Bleich, Ph.D.

Several years ago Nova Simpson—at the time a graduate student at the University of Nevada Reno (UNR), Kelley Stewart—a professor at UNR—and I prepared a review of the literature related to wildlife water developments and the relationship of those developments to a number of ecological issues. In that review, we addressed several points, all of which are topics of interest to biologists, managers, and conservationists. A question that is often raised, and is especially prevalent among critics of wildlife water developments, revolves around whether or not predators take advantage of prey species that use those developments. This notion has its origins in the heretofore unsubstantiated arguments that wildlife water developments serve as ecological traps because (1) potential prey are especially vulnerable while drinking, or (2) predators learn that prey concentrate around such developments. In this short piece, I have drawn extensively on material in the aforementioned review of wildlife water developments and their influence on predator behavior and ecology, and have augmented information contained in that report with additional findings gleaned from a number of more recent papers.

Water developments in arid ecosystems are used by a diverse array of species, including predators, but do not appear to present a high risk of predation for animals that visit them. Since most animals are attracted to surface water, water developments have been suggested by some to be “predation traps” or “predation sinks” where visiting animals are likely to be ambushed due to an increase in localization in predators. It has been argued that interspecific relationships, such as predator-prey interactions, have gone largely unassessed at water catchments. The literature does contain references to predation at water developments in the form of observations of individual predation events, inferences based upon predator use, or discoveries of prey remains. Predator observations and sign have been reported by some to be greater around water developments when compared to non-watered control sites, but other authors have reported no difference in predator use between water developments and non-watered control plots. Regardless of predator visitations around water developments, little evidence exists to support the hypothesis that the presence of water developments lead to increased rates

of predation, and such arguments appear to be largely unfounded.

Instances of predators concentrating hunting activities around water sources in the United States either have not been reported or are scarce in the literature. In Arizona, investigators recorded more than 5,000 visits by mammalian predators to water sources, but reported little evidence (4 predation events by bobcats) to corroborate an increase in predation rates. Further, they reported no avoidance of water sites by prey species because of predator visitations. Other investigators documented predator sign at water sites with seven times the occurrence at non-watered sites, but did not find evidence to support the claim that water developments increased predation rates. Thus, predators drink at surface sources when water is available, but they do not appear to use them as focal areas for hunting, and water developments were not found to represent a pivotal resource for coyotes. Moreover, visits by coyotes to water sources peak near midnight, a period when visits by bighorn sheep or mule deer are not expected. Additionally recently available information indicates that water sources are not ecological traps, and that bighorn

sheep are not more vulnerable to mountain lions when visiting water sources. Although predation may occasionally occur at water sources, there is no evidence that predation at water developments influences the dynamics of either predator or prey populations.

Although access to water may provide predictable locations for encountering prey, a successful predation event depends on a variety of factors including predator behavior, prey behavior, and the composition and cover of the vegetation community. In some situations, water developments can alter the surrounding landscape by increasing vegetation and hiding cover for predators if water seeps from catchments or developments that modify natural springs but, as vegetation increases near a water source, large prey species modify their activity, group size, or drinking frequency, and such behavioral shifts may be the result of a perceived risk of predation associated with dense

vegetative cover around water sources. Small prey, however, are sensitive to distance to vegetative cover, perhaps an indication of vulnerability to predation when in open areas. Moreover, many species generally remain at water sources for only a few minutes. For example, bighorn sheep and mule deer generally remain at water sources less than 5 minutes.

Other investigators have observed altered behaviors or time spent in the vicinity of wildlife water developments when those sources were dry. Bobcats were observed entering the tank connected to an empty trough and remained in the vicinity up to fifteen times longer than when water was present. Mule deer were observed licking the empty trough, foraging nearby, and bedding next to the trough for up to four hours at a time, and remained in the vicinity up to seven times longer than when water was present. An absence of dense vegetation near wildlife water developments and short visitation

times when water is present suggest hunting efficiency of predators is not enhanced in the vicinity of those water sources, and that there may be few, if any, benefits accrued by predators hunting near functional wildlife water developments. Although more research is needed to determine how vegetation density around water sources affects the use of water sources by predator and potential prey, available evidence from a variety of ecosystems studied under different conditions indicates that wildlife water developments do not have a discernable effect on predator-prey dynamics.

-Vernon C. Bleich, Ph.D.

PREDATORS AND PREY

—Dr. Vern Bleich is an independent wildlife biologist who worked for the California Department of Fish and Game for 34 years. He currently resides in Bismarck, ND but remains active in the conservation and management of bighorn sheep and other large mammals inhabiting arid landscapes throughout the western United States. He serves as an advisor to several nongovernmental organizations including TBS, and in 2019 was appointed by Secretary of the Interior David Bernhardt to the National Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board to represent wildlife management issues. Interested parties can obtain a copy of the literature review upon which part of this article is based by contacting Vern (vcbleich@gmail.com) directly.



TTU RESEARCH UPDATE

By Emily Wright

Dear TBS members,

It's been a busy year so far! We are currently isolating, extracting, amplifying, and sequencing mitochondrial DNA from all sorts of desert bighorn samples such as skin clips, dried muscles, bone fragments, and horn shavings. Tissues such as these are needed from any pre- and post-1960 trophy mounts or skulls for several reasons: 1) examine the genetic profile of Texas desert bighorn pre-1960 for subspecies confirmation of *O. c. texianus* and 2) compare current Texas desert bighorn genetic profiles to source-stock origins (*O. c. nelsoni* and *O. c. mexicana*) such as

those transplanted to Texas during the 1970s and 1980s. If any of you or if you know anyone who may have mounts or skulls of Texas bighorn from pre-2000 I could really use a skin clip or bone fragment samples for my genetic analyses (please contact me if you do, cell: 214-991-2397; email: emily.a.wright@ttu.edu). Thank you to several TBS members (Kathy and Dan Boone, Clay Brewer, Lynton Holloway) who have already contributed samples for this research!

Recently, we received bone fragments from eight bighorn (*O. c. mexicana*) from the Sierra Del Carmen, thanks to Bonnie and Billy

Pat McKinney. These samples will be useful to identify gene flow, if it exists, across the Texas-Mexico border and characterize similarity between these samples and historic Texas desert bighorn. I recently presented a portion of my research, titled "Use of DNA from museum specimens and trophy mounts to reconstruct the genetic profile of Texas bighorn sheep", at the Texas Chapter of The Wildlife Society annual conference in Corpus Christi (~650 attendees) and Texas Society of Mammalogists annual conference in Junction (~150 attendees) in mid-February. Several professional biologists, students, and

researchers were interested in the laboratory methods because extracting DNA from aged, non-conventional tissues is rather difficult. Additionally, the emphasis on the need for museum and personal trophy collections for tissue sample collection is appreciated by many TPWD biologists and professional mammalogists alike.

On the aoudad side of the mountain, we currently have contemporary tissue samples from California, New Mexico, and several regions across Texas. All aoudad appear to be from the same source-stock populations with the exception of one individual from Garza County (near

Post, Texas). We have been using phylogenetic analyses with mitochondrial markers to ascertain the aoudad genetic profiles. With this unique discovery, we are continuing our sampling efforts of current aoudad populations in Texas and elsewhere (Oregon, Oklahoma, Florida, etc.) to see if there are other distinct groups on the landscape.

Rachael Wiedmeier has been busy working on her side of the project analyzing the microbiomes of aoudad, bighorn sheep, and mule deer. So far, she has found two aoudad that can carry *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae*, one of the bacterial species found to be a part of the pneumonia complex, commonly found in bighorn sheep. Looking further into this species, she found that the strain the aoudad carried is also different from the strains carried in Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep in northern states. Currently she is working with the TPWD wildlife veterinarian, Dr. Bob Dittmar, to gather more samples from other ungulate species and analyze other medical data (blood chemistry, virology reports, etc.) to help better understand the overall health of the bighorn herds.

We are continuing to expand our collaborative research on bighorn sheep, aoudad, and mule deer with biologists and staff with Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and with students and faculty at both the Borderlands Research Institute at Sul Ross State University and Texas A&M University. Long time TBS member and supporter Kai Buckert has been crucially important in facilitating this current tri-species research effort, and we look forward to continuing these collaborations well into the future.

None of this research would be possible without the Texas Bighorn Society and its members, and we appreciate your continued support! I look forward to the 2020 TBS Round-up in June!

Wreck 'em,
Emily Wright



Photos by TTU

ELLEN MELOY

EATING STONE

*Imagination
and the Loss of
the Wild*



“Eating Stone” is a must read for anyone that has ever been involved with desert bighorn sheep whether hunting them or working to bring them back to areas of historic range. “Eating Stone,” is about a woman named Ellen Meloy and her ties to the land and wildlife and her almost daily monitoring of a herd of desert bighorns in some of the roughest desert country in Utah. This band of bighorns literally disappeared, as in vanished completely, then they returned. An amazing wildlife chronicle not to be matched.

Ellen Meloy spent much of her life in wild places, rivers, canyons, desert and mountains all in remote areas. She died very suddenly in November 2004, about 3 months after completing “Eating Stone”.

GREGORY CARL BOND (1955-2019)

Gregory Carl Bond was born at the United States Naval Hospital Maryland on May 28, 1955 and passed away peacefully on November 6, 2019 after a brief battle with cancer. He is survived by his loving wife, Terri Bond and predeceased by his parents, Carl Ray Bond and Hazel Katherine Shiek and one brother Rodney. Greg graduated from Princeton High School in Princeton, Texas where he was an all-state athlete. He went on to earn a Bachelor of Science in Forestry in 1977 from Stephen F. Austin State University and a Master of Science in Forestry in 1980. Throughout his time at SFA, Greg competed in lumberjack competitions and to this day still holds the record in log chopping. In 1977, he competed in the Lumberjack World Championship placing 6th in the world. After graduation, Greg joined his father in the concrete cutting business and went on to create an extremely successful business. Concrete Cutting by Bond which he ran for the next 27 years. He then brought his talents to Pavecon where he remained as Sales Manager until his death. Greg loved the outdoors and was an accomplished big game hunter and fisherman. He traveled the world conquering mountains, desert and the sea after his quarry. He obtained elite status through his many hunting awards including but not limited to the Dallas Safari Club's highest honor, the Outstanding Hunter Achievement Award in 2008. He served as president of the Dallas Safari Club in 1998 and was a board member of the Texas Bighorn Society for several years. He was an active member of numerous hunting and conservation organizations and was extremely dedicated and passionate about conservation and teaching this to future generations. Greg was an intelligent and yet uncomplimented man who will be dearly missed for his quick wit, happy disposition, strength and great big bear hugs. A celebration of his life was scheduled for Monday, November 18, 2019 at 2:00 p.m. at the Chapel at Prestonwood Baptist Church, 6801 W. park Blvd., Plano, Texas. In lieu of flowers please send donations to the Outdoors Tomorrow Foundation at P.O. Box 543305, Dallas, Texas 75354 or T. Boone Pickens Hospice at 12477 Merit Dr., Dallas, Texas 75251.

Published in the Dallas Morning News on November 10, 2019.

TBS WORK PROJECT 2020

Return to Black Gap

By Bonnie McKinney, ECLCC

Another great work project in the books! They heard about it, read about, and many came to work on spring break. Great to see many old friends and many new faces. It was a big group and good to see many younger generation people going up on the mountain to help and learn how TBS builds guzzlers to provide permanent water sources for desert bighorns, which in turn also helps all wildlife and birds in the area.

The weather cooperated and equipment was taken by helicopter to the three guzzler sites on Thursday morning. Earl Watters did his usual great flying getting some heavy loads up on the mountain. Friday morning after a hearty breakfast everyone headed out from the Cemex USA- El Carmen Land and Conservation Co. (ECLCC) where lodging was provided for the weekend. Three guzzler sites were selected by Texas Parks & Wildlife, one on the Regan Canyon Ranch owned by the Smith family. This guzzler was special since it was constructed in memory of the late Harvey Smith who contributed so much to desert bighorn conservation. Family members were there working on the mountain and his brother Ford hiked a way's up the mountain to the guzzler site. The other two guzzlers were built up river from this site. Two were constructed on Friday and one on Saturday.

Many thanks to the TBS members that contributed food and prepared meals as well as lunches to go each day. We also thank the people and companies that made donations to the guzzler project and Friday night auction,

which was a huge success. Also, a special thank you to Tracey Watters for helping people and steering them in the right direction both loading and unloading from the helicopter.

Billy Pat and I were so surprised to receive the TBS bronze on Friday night just prior to the auction. We both appreciate it very much and will cherish it the rest of our lives. TBS has done so much conservation work over the many years we have been a part of this group, since way back in 1984. Thank you all!

Thanks to both Dirk Parks and John Meyer's they did a great job taking photos, I hope you enjoy the selection in the following pages.

LIST OF ATTENDEES WORK PROJECT 2020

Lynton Holloway Ace High James A. Payne Jr.
Richard Gutierrez Wes Howard Maya Ressler
Dirk Parks Robert Oliver Dris Abraham
Calvin Richardson-TPWD Bill Scott Don Schmidt
Sloane Schmidt Allen Smith Elizabeth Smith
Ford Smith Walker Netherton Randy Stolte
Dewey Stockbridge-TPWD Travis Smith-TPWD Jimmy Bartos
Austin Stolte-TPWD Scott Thomas Carlton Turner
Matthew Waldrip Austin White Cameron Wilson
Brandon White-TPWD John Gutz Charlie Butler
Mark Cavanaugh Patricia Cavanaugh Caleb Cox
Chuck Cox Mike Janis-TPWD Kathy Bolner
Steve Bolner Kathy Boone Dan Boone
Mike Allison Ross Bandy Parker Bankston
Charlie Barnes Winona Barnes Carl Brockmann
Curt Brockmann Julie Brockmann Melissa Brown
Benjamin Benavidez-TPWD Christina Bergmann Jason Crosby
Ron Bell Susi Bell Travis Bryan-TPWD
Trammell Crow Greg Huffman Kathryn Hunter
Jacob Hurley Ronnie James Jessica Jasek
Robert Joseph Mark Kielwasser Ken Garcia
Pat Kirk Hill Krause Kevin LeGrow
Andrew LeVere Tom Link Alex Maresh
Mitch Lockwood-TPWD Elva Martin William Martin
Hydie McAlister Bob McCoy Cody McEntire-TPWD
Billy Pat McKinney Jr. Bonnie McKinney Earl Watters
Tracey Watters Forres Meadows John Meyer
Leonard Moy Jr. Sam Cunningham Tracy Cunningham
Matthew Duru Bob Drinjak Matthew Drinjak
Casey Edwards Terry Frakes Wes Mundy
Joanna Fuess Mark Garrett-TPWD Rob Gowan
Mark Hall Parker Hall Blackie Hamilton
Shorey Harmon-TPWD Bobby Harrison David Hertenberger

The Smith Family-Regan Canyon Ranch



TBS WORK PROJECT 2020





GREAT AUCTION









OLD FRIENDS & NEW



MORE WATER on the MOUNTAIN





Photos by Dirk Parks & John Meyer





Elephant Mountain WMA/Black Gap WMA Translocation

By Dewey Stockbridge & Travis Smith, TPWD

16 Dec 2019

On December 16, 2019, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department staff along with numerous volunteers could be found gazing at the western slopes of Elephant Mountain Wildlife Management Area in anticipation of the desert bighorn sheep translocation to come. The thumping of helicopter blades in the distance announced the first group of sheep were en-route to the processing station. As these mountain icons were lowered from the sky, blindfolded and bound, their arrival marked the start of another restoration milestone.

Once on the ground each sheep was carried to a processing table. Each processing table had an assigned team comprised of TPWD staff and volunteers. Each person on the team was given an assigned task which they repeated each time an animal was brought to their table. This helped to ensure that all samples were taken, all required data was collected, and that the process was carried out quickly in order to reduce the amount of stress placed on the animal. While being processed, the animal's physical health and condition was evaluated by a veterinarian. Finally, they were loaded into a custom

livestock trailer where they awaited transport to their new home.

Since the translocation occurred, the latest additions to the Black Gap sheep population seem to have acclimated quickly and joined up with groups of resident sheep. Their movement is monitored by staff using information transmitted from GPS equipped collars. The new sheep have been documented around Stillwell Mountain, Bourland and Maravillas Canyons, along the Rio Grande, and north to Dove Mountain.

Over the last 9 years Elephant Mountain WMA, considered the "brood stock" of Texas for desert bighorn sheep, has produced 342 sheep for reintroduction back into their historically occupied mountain ranges. If that's not impressive enough, 194 of these animals have been translocated to Black Gap WMA since 2000. Of those, 154 were translocated in the past three years. These captures have not only bolstered the resident sheep population of Black Gap, but also help to relieve browsing pressure and maintain a healthy sex ratio at Elephant Mountain.

2019 Capture Break Down By Date Caught on Elephant Mountain WMA

	16 Dec.	17 Dec.	18 Dec.	Totals
Ewes	16	14 <small>13 released to Black Gap WMA</small>		30 <small>29 released to Black Gap WMA</small>
Class I	8			8
Class II	3	9	3	15
Class III	5	3	3	11
Class IV	4	5	1	10
Total	36 <small>hard released to Black Gap WMA</small>	30 <small>soft released to Black Gap WMA</small>	7 <small>soft released to Black Gap WMA</small>	74 <small>73 released</small>



Since bighorn restoration efforts began, 70 sheep permits have become available to public hunters. Further exhibiting the success of the program, 34 of the 70 permits have resulted in Boone and Crockett Club eligible rams. Our success to date would not have been possible without help from volunteers and private landowners. The Texas Bighorn Society has continually worked to improve desert bighorn sheep habitat throughout the Trans-Pecos including Black Gap, Elephant Mountain, and Sierra Diablo WMAs. Thank you for your continued support!

If looks could kill, I would have been a dead man! The bighorn ewe fixated on me with a focused intensity. It was apparent, she knew I was a stranger in her rocky domain, and I expected her to bolt at any time. But, a clacking sound from the rocks below broke her stare and she looked down. Up the rocks came her baby, a gorgeous Rocky Mountain bighorn lamb already masterfully moving up through this beautiful and treacherous gorge. Shortly after the lamb climbed up eight more bighorns moved up into the plains above. It was truly a beautiful and inspiring scene.

According to Nicole Tatman, Big Game Program Manager for the New Mexico Department of Game & Fish, the state has both Rocky Mountain and desert bighorns. She said, “we actively manage both herds and are always evaluating populations and areas where we can translocate sheep from abundant herds into areas that need more, or currently do not have bighorns.” In 2018, New Mexico Game & Fish released 40 desert bighorns in the



THE BIGHORN & TURKEY CONNECTION

By Chester Moore

Alamogordo area and over the last decade stocking of Rocky Mountain bighorns in the Rio Grande Gorge and near Bandelier National Monument have proven successful. This trip across the border to New Mexico had proved very fruitful for this Texas wildlife journalist, I found bighorns on the first day, but of course was looking for more.

Since childhood, wild sheep and wild turkeys have enamored me and recently that childhood passion has risen. I found an old set of scrapbooks full of clippings from outdoor magazines put together with my Dad while sitting in his lap as a boy around 1980. This included a statistic chart from a Texas Parks & Wildlife magazine. The chart showed wild turkey and their abundant numbers, but listed that in 1976 there were only 40 desert bighorns in Texas. For a six-year old who already knew about the Grand Slam for sheep, this was

frightening. Little did I know about the formation of the Texas Bighorn Society, and what was to happen with desert bighorns in the Trans Pecos in coming years.

I have worked as a wildlife journalist for 27 years and have written many articles on sheep and turkeys, but this find inspired me to take a journey in search of both and to use my media platforms to raise awareness of their conservation. What brought me to this part of New Mexico was learning of an increase in bighorn numbers, as well as a large population of Merriam's turkeys. The tragic Las Conchas fire that consumed more than 150,000 acres of northeastern New Mexico habitat in 2011 created a treeless habitat in the mountains that is perfect for bighorns. This allowed New Mexico Game & Fish to translocate bighorns there, and they have thrived in areas like the Bannister National Monument.

Fire is considered the key to turkey conservation. For example, in east Texas where an ongoing eastern turkey restocking program has experienced a hit and miss type of success, all stockings are now targeted in areas that have a controlled burning program. In fact, according to officials with the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF), they are excited that several of their recent turkey habitat enhancement projects actively benefit bighorns. This includes prescribed fire and mechanical habitat treatment to remove encroaching conifer trees from shrub and sagebrush habitat on portions of the Missouri Breaks' public lands in Montana. Another NWTF project at Spanish Peaks State Wildlife Area and Chancellor Ranch near Trinidad, Colorado involves opening forest canopy, reducing tree density and promoting increased tender, understory forage for sheep

and turkeys, and the lack of trees offers fewer opportunities for predators. Although I found sheep and tons of turkeys during the two trips, I never did photograph birds in New Mexico. On a trip to Colorado a few months earlier I photographed a flock of Merriam's turkeys as well as three bighorn rams just three miles apart on the same day. Research showed a perfect spot for sheep and turkeys in an also populated with moose and elk.

As pressure of human advancement into sheep habitat grows, bighorns need all of the allies they can get. Turkey hunters are a passionate bunch who, like sheep enthusiasts, spend millions on conservation projects annually.

Perhaps teaming together on initiatives could go a long way in ensuring both the sheep and turkey of the mountains prosper in the future. Looking back at the charts in my scrapbook, it is great to see bighorn numbers are now at 1,500 in Texas, and turkey populations have increased as well. In 2020, I plan on photographing the elusive Gould's turkey in New Mexico and Arizona, and documenting the desert bighorn populations in the same area. In the mountain regions of the western United States where turkeys flourish, so do bighorns. Perhaps if we can find ways to link the conservation of these magnificent game animals, both can benefit.



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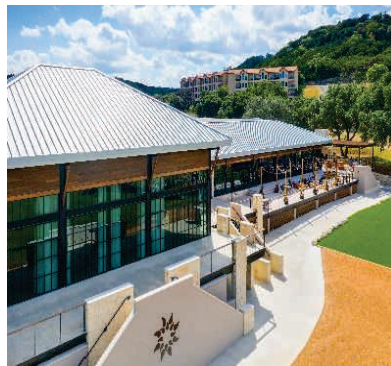
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