

# WEMINUCHE WILDERNESS, COLORADO

BY DAN PARKINSON

**I STILL DON'T KNOW WHAT HAPPENED.** They just vanished. Doyle and I were glassing two full-curl rams laying in the shade beneath a purple-grey rimrock bench high in an alpine cirque. Three days into our search, we'd decided to take a mid-morning break. As luck and persistence would have it, I finally spotted those beautiful, dark-bodied sheep. Alan, who'd drawn a highly coveted ram tag for the Vallecito Creek herd in 2004, was soon moving toward the bighorns. But in a distracted moment, we took our eyes off the sheep and they were gone.

We were hunting in Colorado's largest wilderness, the Weminuche, named for a band of Ute Indians – meaning “people who keep to the old ways.” The wilderness, located northeast of Durango, covers almost 500,000 acres. Most of the terrain is extremely rugged with remote, colorful, volcanic mountains, spruce-fir forests and picturesque cirques. Numerous small streams make up the headwaters of the Florida and Pine rivers. Mountain grasslands dotted with fens and small lakes add to the diversity of this landscape – historic home to one of the state's most valuable, true native, Tier 1 bighorn herds. The population consists of three distinct but interconnected herds that include around 425 animals.

U.S. bighorn population estimates range from 1.5 to 2 million in 1900. Populations declined with settlement, market hunting, introduction of domestic sheep and overgrazing. Conservation efforts have allowed them to recover from an estimated 25,000 in 1955 to nearly 70,000 now. Yet recently bighorn population recovery has stagnated in much of the West despite continued restoration efforts. Herds in Colorado reflect this trend, increasing from 2,000 in 1955, to a peak of 7,500 in 2002, to 6,800 today.

Current scientific consensus is that bighorn populations fail to thrive due to recurrent herd-level respiratory disease outbreaks associated with exposure to domestic sheep. Tragically, a single outbreak can kill most bighorns in a herd. In addition, according to Colorado Parks & Wildlife research published in the *Journal of Wildlife Diseases*, significant lamb mortality can occur for many years in a herd following a single exposure. According to a statement from The Wildlife Society and American Association of Wildlife Veterinarians in 2015: “It is now apparent that disease transmission from domestic sheep to wild sheep is a significant risk factor for the conservation and restoration of wild sheep populations... Effective separation of domestic sheep from wild sheep is the only currently available management solution for preventing or minimizing disease transmission.”

Young bighorns often will foray in search of new breeding and foraging opportunities. Bighorns are attracted to their domestic cousins and vice versa, so contact between domestic and wild sheep in close proximity in areas with active grazing eventually will happen – with consistently deadly results. Bighorns exposed to domestic sheep – even on national forest historic and core

home range – are culled by CPW in a desperate effort to prevent further disease spread. Whether due to disease or other factors, the Vallecito herd has declined from 125 animals in 2004 to 70 now. Lamb recruitment is half of levels reported in 2000. Hunting has been reduced from three ram tags to one. In addition, because Vallecito is interconnected with the Cimaronna and Sheep Mountain herds, a virulent form of respiratory disease in the Vallecito herd could easily spread to this greater meta-population, resulting in the potential loss of *all* the bighorns in the Weminuche.

Active domestic sheep grazing allotments in the Weminuche, operated by a single permittee, are located in the heart of bighorn habitat and are considered by the Forest Service's Risk of Contact Model to be “high risk” for disease transmission. Yet, the permittee says he has never seen a bighorn in or near his allotments in 30 years – although there are other credible reports to the contrary.

If separation of the species is key, documentation is essential. In the Weminuche Wilderness and throughout the West there is a lack of data documenting foray activity near active allotments and possible expansion of bighorn home ranges. Separation also is influenced by grazing practices that may result in domestic sheep straying out of allotments and coming in contact with nearby bighorns. Collaring bighorns for the collection of GPS data can be expensive and dangerous for the biologists and the bighorns. But sportsmen and conservationists can help.

In 2017, in an effort to assist the Forest Service and CPW with public education and the collection of more observation data points, BHA spearheaded a volunteer bighorn observation program to post information signage at trailheads and look for bighorns near active allotments. In 2018, we will recruit and train volunteers to act as citizen scientists to better document the range and foray activity of bighorn sheep. We are working on ways to use smartphones to easily and verifiably record observations, including gathering and storing embedded date, time and GPS coordinates from digital photos. Hopefully our efforts will help land managers and biologists make decisions based on the best available science and will be duplicated in other regions in the West.

Our goal for this program is to raise awareness of the presence of bighorns in the Weminuche and the challenges they face. Management decisions regarding bighorn-domestic interactions on public land, especially wilderness areas, always will be difficult. It is easy to get frustrated by politically charged decision-making processes. Bighorns have been around since the time of the woolly mammoth and were once at the brink of extinction. Now, after recovering somewhat, they again may be at a critical point for their survival. We must be persistent and keep our eyes on what's happening to this iconic species or they, like the two dark-bodied rams we saw that September day in 2004, may vanish. 🐾

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