

# Beating the Odds

Taking a records-book ram in northeastern Oregon goes beyond the slim chance of drawing a tag.

By John Groupe DVM  
B&C Associate

The author, John Groupe D.V.M. is a veterinarian in Pendleton, Oregon, and a Boone and Crockett Associate. He has spent considerable time hunting sheep. He is an outdoor writer for the East Oregonian newspaper, and can be reached at [dogdoc@uci.net](mailto:dogdoc@uci.net)

Drawing a sheep tag for the Hurricane Divide unit in northeastern Oregon means you have beaten odds of less than one percent, but the adventure has only just begun. Hurricane Divide is one of only two units in Wallowa County that offers eight Rocky Mountain bighorn tags. I knew the Hurricane Divide area from hunting it myself—I had drawn one of these rare tags in 1994, and later guided friends who had drawn in this unit. For those fortunate tag holders in 2000, there would be a chance to stalk a well-known and elusive ram sure to place high in Boone and Crockett Club's records books. He was called "44," the number on his ear tag.

That was the situation in the summer of 2000 when Pendleton, Oregon, hunter Monty Davidson asked me to guide him. Davidson was one of two Oregon hunters who had been successful in drawing a Hurricane Divide tag. His father, Larry Davidson, signed on to handle the food in camp. Monty's brother, Brian, offered to go with me into the high country three days prior to the hunt to scout and set up our wilderness camp. Help from my sheep-guiding partner, Rob Stahl, was in question as the birth of his second child was only two weeks prior to the opening day of September 9th. Thanks to a normal delivery, a healthy boy, and a supportive wife, he was able to go.

Though we knew scouting was an important prerequisite, our party was too busy with life to do much about it. I was able to spend three days over Labor Day just prior to the hunt scouting in the upper Wallowa River drainage. But due to two days of snow and one day of fog, my efforts were fruitless. No word was available on the whereabouts of "44," who was known for being inconspicuous. There wasn't a single report of anyone ever seeing him except in his

winter range. We were fortunate to spot a single ram the evening before the opening. He was near the top of Hurricane Divide about 2,500 feet above us and about three trail miles away. There were several nice basins nearby with good feed and water where rams are common.

We had already spent many hours dissecting the divide with our binoculars



"44" on winter range in early February of 2000. This monarch of the Lostine herd was harvested, but has never been entered in the records book.

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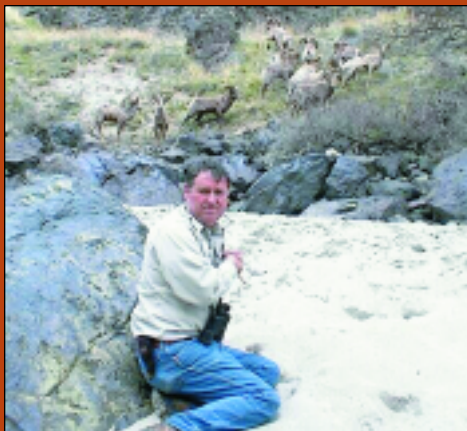
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**VIC COGGINS—**  
**A name synonymous with**  
**Oregon bighorns**

The pioneer in Oregon's sheep restoration efforts is Vic Coggins, a biologist for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife in Enterprise, Oregon. Vic has been involved in all transplant and management efforts from the beginning, taking the lead role in land purchases such as the Lostine Bighorn Sheep Wildlife Area and various tracts to the Wenaha Wildlife Area. Vic also engineered several buy-outs of domestic sheep allotments, and has been Oregon's chief participant in the Hells Canyon Initiative. He is a founding member of the Oregon Chapter of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, which is just another of his efforts to raise political, social, and financial support for reintroduction efforts. Although several years beyond the state retirement age, he continues his visionary work in reestablishing bighorns in their historic ranges in Oregon.

Vic Coggin's lifelong efforts on behalf of wild sheep have not gone unnoticed. He has received prestigious awards from various organizations, including the Isaak Walton League, the Oregon Hunter's Association, Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, the Oregon Wildlife Society, and Washington State University, which named its bighorn research facility after him.

North American sheep numbers have gone from a low of 9,000 in 1960 to 70,000 animals currently. Although your odds of drawing an Hurricane Divide tag are still less than one percent, your chances of seeing a world-class ram on the mountain are getting better all the time—thanks, in great part, to Vic Coggins.



Monty Davidson, his dad Larry, and brother Brian, with Monty's Oregon bighorn sheep scoring 177-6/8 points. INSET: Rob Stahl on a sheep scouting trip.

and spotting scopes without seeing other rams, so a closer look was in order on opening morning. Monty, Brian, and Stahl headed up the hill at daybreak on horseback. They took a rugged old trail that would get them within a few hundred yards of the alpine basins. Two major horse wrecks occurred within the first 20 minutes of the grueling climb. Without great athletic mobility, Monty's brother, Brian, would have been badly hurt when his horse went over backward while trying to negotiate a downed log. Ten minutes later Monty's saddle slipped to the side, creating a dangerous situation when his bulky hunting boots were trapped in his stirrups.

An hour later the horses were left about a half-mile below the basins and the remaining gap was closed cautiously on foot. Conditions to approach the first basin were excellent as the wind was blowing in their faces and there were ample boulders and scrub pines to

break up their outlines. Four rams were spotted feeding peacefully at the 8,400-foot level near the crest of Hurricane Divide. The largest ram was about 300 yards away and with a 40x spotting scope, Stahl quickly judged his horns to be in the 180-class. Though it wasn't "44," it was an excellent ram.

Being an experienced and patient hunter, Monty waited and watched, hoping a larger ram might appear. About an hour later Stahl dropped back and worked his way over to the next basin to look for "44" or the other larger ram that he had seen and photographed on winter range. When the rams that Monty and Brian were watching moved out of the basin into the next, they two men followed the group hoping they would again stop to feed or bed down. If they kept moving it would be all over for this three-mile stalk. When the brothers' camouflaged heads popped over the rim, the rams were grazing. Now, Monty was looking at a 250-yard shot. After two hours of watching and waiting, the largest ram was looking pretty good, especially as the sheep started to leave the second basin. The hunting phase of the morning turned into the harvesting phase.

Monty carried a 7mm Mag and

can shoot it well. It took three well-placed shots to stop the big ram, more evidence of the toughness of the monarch of the crags. Preliminary measuring of the horns at the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife office in Enterprise was very close to the 180 points needed to make the Boone and Crockett Club's records book. The measurement was 179-6/8, just 2/8 inch shy. After the 60-day drying period, the official measurement of Monty's ram was 177-6/8.

The ram called "44" was taken by the other Hurricane Divide tag holder on opening day. It has not been entered in the Boone and Crockett Club's records book.

The remarkable bighorn called "44" is a testament to the success of Oregon's sheep restoration efforts. Oregon's bighorn populations had been eliminated by the end of Second World War from disease, competition with livestock, and over-hunting. Restoration efforts began in 1971 when 40 animals from Jasper National Park, Alberta, were transplanted to the Hurricane Divide and Hells Canyon areas, located about 30 miles apart in Wallowa



The author with his string, packing into sheep camp.

County. Since then, subsequent transplants of sheep in Wallowa County have focused on diversifying the herds' genetics—a lesson learned the hard way from an unsuccessful attempt in the 1960s to transplant goats taken from a single herd. The "supplemental" sheep transplants in Oregon came from six different locations in Idaho, Montana, Washington, Colorado and Canada.

Biologists are very pleased with the resulting Oregon sheep herds, particularly in terms of horn growth. The famous ram "Spot," who died in 1996

from pneumonia, scored 202-7/8. He was a member of the Lostine herd, as was "44." Another ram known as "Flare" also perished in 1996, and many feel he would have outscored any harvested Oregon ram. The 1996 pneumonia outbreak was an unfortunate setback for the Lostine herd, reducing its population from 120 to 31 animals.

Oregon sheep enthusiasts are quite optimistic about the future of sheep, particularly in the Hells Canyon area of Wallowa County. The Hells Canyon Initiative, which began in 1997, has done much to augment Oregon's earlier transplant efforts. The states of Oregon, Idaho, Washington, the USFS, the BLM, and the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep have all signed on to the Initiative, and support has come from the Nez Perce Tribe, many conservation groups, and numerous private individuals.

The purpose of the Initiative is to further restore sheep within the 1.3 million acres of prime sheep habitat in Hells Canyon, the deepest gorge in North America. In addition to transplanting supplemental animals from a variety of Canadian locations, the

Initiative also seeks solutions to disease problems that plague bighorn sheep throughout North America. The Hells Canyon Initiative is consolidating political and financial support necessary for herd development; for example, domestic sheep allotments have been nearly eliminated from the canyon, which greatly reduces the primary threat of pasture-

la transmission from domestic sheep and goats.

With ongoing organized efforts, the five million acre Hells Canyon Recreational Area could potentially hold the greatest population of bighorn sheep in the United States. Conservative expectations see 2,000 sheep by 2007 while others close to the program believe 4,000 sheep may successfully inhabit this remote area. While much remains to be accomplished, this high level of public support should ensure that Oregon's bighorn sheep herds will continue to expand and thrive. ■