

Deer



Top 5 Bighorn Locations Since 1996





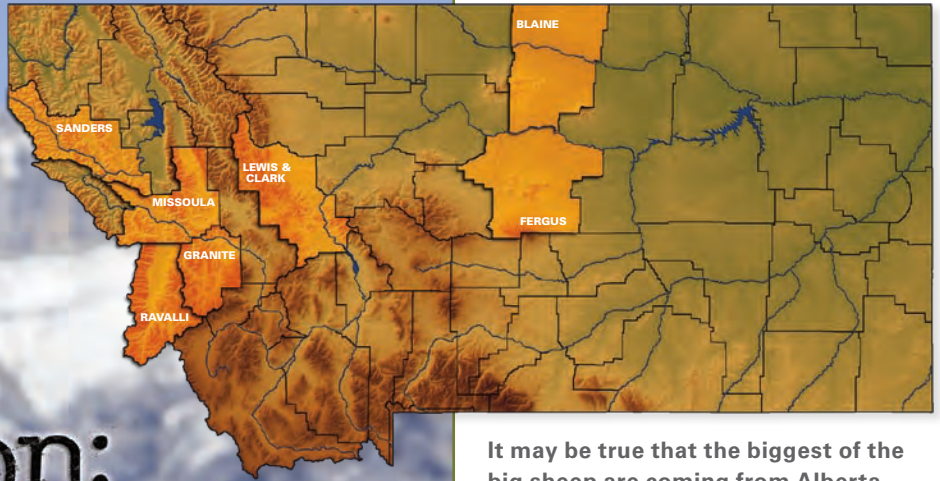
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The Biggest Bighorns

By Wayne van Zwoll
B&C Professional Member

Finding a records-book animal is difficult, no matter the species. Still, that book is being rewritten every season by hunters who go where game is managed to keep older animals in the population. Indeed, your odds of finding Brutus may be better now than in days when game densities were higher and hunting regulations less restrictive.

You might argue that the archetypal North American big-game animal is the whitetail deer. But though it's not nearly so plentiful or accessible to most hunters, the bighorn sheep probably holds the title of most coveted. Hunted hard for its delicious meat during the last half of the 19th century, bighorn numbers sank to dangerous levels. Protection has since bolstered herds. Fortunately, much of the country favored by bighorns in summer is so high and rugged that it has been spared from development. Winter ranges haven't fared as well; however, the heart of bighorn country lies well north of Colorado's ski areas.



Destination: Trophy Bighorn

It may be true that the biggest of the big sheep are coming from Alberta these days. However, Montana has the most entries in the Club's Records Program with 261 in the last 10 years compared to Alberta's 54. Over the past 10 years, 7 counties in Montana can be considered the top trophy producers. They include 1) Granite – 56 entries; 2) Sanders – 44 entries; 3) Blaine – 33 entries; 4) Fergus – 28 entries; 5) Missoula – 23 entries; 6) Ravalli – 23 entries; and 7) Lewis & Clark – 20 entries.

But even in ideal habitat, wild sheep need tending. They're vulnerable to wolves and to maladies like lungworm and *Pasteurella* bacteria, borne by domestic sheep. More are killed on highways threading through winter ranges. After drawing a coveted bighorn tag for Oregon's Steens Mountains 30 years ago, I followed the fortunes of those California animals and of the larger Rocky Mountain bighorns transplanted near my home in the Wallowa Mountains. Both populations have grown, as have numbers of the Rocky Mountain subspecies in the Snake and Grande Ronde drainages. Since 1985, ODF&W has transplanted more than 1,000 California bighorns to over 20 locations—a heartening sequel to the extirpation of these animals in the Pacific Northwest a century ago. Wild sheep herds have prospered in Washington's mountains too. But as in bighorn country elsewhere, old rams often vanish before sportsmen get a crack at them. Many bighorn trophies in the Boone and Crockett Club's records book are pick-ups. In fact, 11 of the top 40 rams were found, not shot.

A Time for Big Rams

More encouraging: 28 of the 50 highest-scoring rams in the book have made that list since 1987! In other words, more than half of the best bighorns have shown up during the last 20 years! Where did they come

from? Alberta gives you by far the best odds of killing a truly fine ram.

Fred Weiller found one there in 1911. Those stunning horns topped the charts for nearly a century. Then, in 2000, Guinn Crousen took another outstanding Alberta bighorn. At 208 3/8, it topped Weiller's by 2/8 of an inch. The first four bighorns in the book have come from this province, 10 of the top 15. Wildlife officials now estimate Alberta's bighorn population at 5,800 animals.

Other Choices

Over the past 10 years, six states/provinces stand out as the top trophy locations. Montana finishes at the top with 261 rams. Entries drop off considerably after that with Alberta (54), Oregon (30), Colorado (29), New Mexico (25), and British Columbia (20). That's not surprising, as most bighorn herds stateside have now been cultivated from stock obtained in transplants from robust Canadian herds and their offspring.

Still, prospects vary by unit and year. In Montana, herds along the Rocky Mountain Front and the Missouri River breaks are now near all-time highs; but sheep have not fared as well recently in the Highlands and Greenhorn Mountains.

The biggest hurdle in finding a records-book ram is getting permission to hunt. My Oregon tag is the only one I'm allowed in that state during my lifetime. And I was darned lucky to draw in the first place! Idaho and Wyoming traditionally offer better odds. So does Montana. Still, according to the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, 20,482 applicants applied for its 487 Montana bighorn tags this past season. Over-the-counter licenses remain available in units 300, 303, 500, and 501. Bighorn densities there are low; on the other hand, there's no place else in the Lower 48 that you can hunt sheep with a rifle absent a lottery tag or an auctioned permit. Trophy-class rams are predictably scarce.

Narrowing the Search

I hunted elk with guide Shane Reynolds last October in Idaho's Frank Church Wilderness. His previous client had been after bighorns.

"Last week I guided a hunter in those rims," Shane pointed. "He shot a ram we think will be the new state record!"

Such records fall in quick succession these days, as wildlife agencies work to ratchet up the average ages of rams in their herds. A bighorn just taken on the Ute Reservation apparently scores into the 190s and may well replace Utah's top head.

Getting your crosswire on such a ram mandates that you first get a license. Apply every year, in all the places holding mature rams. Talk to enough outfitters so

ROCKY MOUNTAIN BIGHORN SHEEP

By Dale E. Towell | Excerpt from *Leupold Big Game Profiles* presented by B&C
B&C Professional Member

There are many reasons why our fascination with wild mountain sheep dates back to the earliest records of mankind. This hierarchical mammal is the master of land that will not support prolonged human habitation, the nearly unobtainable, oftentimes brutal, high-mountain world at the Earth's apex. There the bighorn roams freely, a tough-as-nails species flourishing in a mainly sparse, exquisitely frightening country. Perhaps this royal beast captivates us even more today, in this enlightened age, than he did in man's earliest hours.

Our fascination with the bighorn sheep and its massive, curling horns began at the flashpoint of human existence in North America and on through to the rise of the aboriginal tribes and then to the explorers of the New World. We know that troops led by Hernando Cortez encountered wild sheep in Arizona in 1540 because the sheep's massive horns were written of. Over 250 years later, in 1800, the first set of ram horns was scientifically described based on the English explorer David Thompson's return shipment of field samples collected near Banff, Alberta. In 1806, the Lewis and Clark Corps of Discovery returned to Washington, DC, with the skulls and hides of bighorns taken from the Missouri River breaks of Montana. Lewis reported to President Thomas Jefferson that ram horns were widely used by Native Americans to make bowls and spoons, suggesting some commercial value in this durable and malleable natural material.

When the human tide of fur traders, explorers, ranchers, and settlers headed West fantastic stories of the bighorn sheep trickled east. Bighorn sheep, it was reported, lived with smaller brown ibex among the rocky pinnacles of the mountains, where they eagerly watched the procession of sodbusters on the plains far below. We now know that the smaller ibex were, in fact, female bighorns, or ewes, which grow much smaller horns than rams.

The Rocky Mountain bighorn, one of four species of North American mountain sheep, occurs only in the continental West, from British Columbia's Peace River south along the Rocky Mountains of British Columbia and Alberta through Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, and west into eastern Washington and Oregon. Bighorns once ranged as far east as the rugged breaks of the Little Missouri River of South Dakota; to the west, all the way across Washington and Oregon to the crest of the Cascade Mountains. At one time bighorn sheep were more numerous than deer or elk in much of this rugged, mountainous country. In central Idaho, an entire native tribal culture, the sheep eaters, relied almost entirely on bighorns, a relationship similar to the one many plains tribes enjoyed with the bison.

Bighorn sheep live in a harsh environment; at one time a secluded and pristine venue of ice, rock, and wind that has long since felt the presence of man. Sheep are good indicators of a healthy ecosystem because they are extremely sensitive to natural and unnatural environmental fluctuations.

Bighorn sheep numbers fell to the same exploitation as was experienced by the elk, bison, pronghorn, and mule deer, and by the late 1800s bighorn

...it was none other than Boone and Crockett Club founder, Theodore Roosevelt, who seemed to capture the very essence of wild sheep hunting, both then and now, when he wrote, "the chase of no other kind of American big game ranks higher, or more thoroughly tests the manliest qualities of the hunter, than a fair-chase quest for the mighty bighorn ram."



you'll have a destination in mind should you draw. Obviously, putting a tag in your pocket is much, much harder than putting one on a bighorn. In some parts of sheep range, enthusiasts have inventoried and even named rams, tracking them through the seasons as if tending a roving pet. The animal you want may already be on someone's GPS unit!

The process can test your resolve, especially if you're committed to a records entry.

The Lost Ram

One of the most compelling stories of sheep hunting was told years ago by F.H. Riggall to Andy Russell, both veteran big-game hunters in Alberta's wild places. Riggall wrote:

I'd been in touch with Phimister Proctor, the famous sculptor, by letter during the summer of 1912 and discussed the possibility of a sheep hunt with him. But he didn't confirm his plans, and when autumn rolled around with no further word, I gave it no more thought. Toward the end of October, I was in Pincher Creek, Alberta, buying six months' supplies to keep my family over the winter at our ranch

on Cottonwood Creek, 30 miles south of the railroad. The trip took two days by wagon, so I stayed in town overnight.

About six o'clock in the morning someone knocked on my door. "I'm Phimister Proctor," said the stranger. "When do we start the sheep hunt?" Soon we were winding over the wagon road, the sculptor's gear stowed on my load. He had only a bedroll, art supplies and a cased rifle. I'll never forget that rifle. It was a brand-new, highly engraved 8mm Mannlicher-Schoenauer carbine with a 20-inch barrel stocked to the muzzle. It wore a folding peep sight on the cocking piece. While Proctor took great pride in owning the rifle, he admitted he didn't know a thing about it and hadn't even fired it. At the ranch, I assured him he'd have a chance to try it out before we started the hunt.

After breakfast next morning, I patted a 6-inch bullseye on the side of a coal-oil can, and set it up behind the cabin. The last three shots grouped inside that circle at 200 yards.

We swung into our saddles and headed for the mountains. I led the way up a winding trail into the mouth of Yarrow Creek Canyon—the best bighorn-sheep range in the country at the time. In mid-afternoon we pulled into a flat by a spring-fed pond. As I set up camp, Proctor

was busy with his glasses.

"Maybe I'm imagining things," he said, "but every once in a while I think I smell sheep."

I assured him he was, for I'd also noticed the heavy smell of bighorns. After staking the horses out to graze, we left the flat to climb. From a fringe of scrubby firs at the bottom of an open slide, we spotted a fine ram above us. He had a full curl and heavy horns. The setup was next to perfect. My hunter was seated behind the roots of a fallen tree with a solid rest made to order for accurate shooting.

Proctor was visibly excited, and I made him wait until he steadied. At the crack of the rifle, rock dust spurted well over the ram's back. The sheep leaped up and gazed at us.

"Six inches over," I called softly. "Aim lower."

After what seemed an age, the rifle cracked again. The bullet powdered the rocks 3 feet high. "Hold low!" I whispered frantically.

After another agonizing pause, the rifle crashed a third time. I'll never know where that bullet hit. The ram took a tremendous bound and tore straight up the slope.

I first blamed the misses on buck fever. But when I picked up Proctor's rifle, I imme-

Destination: Trophy Bighorn



diately saw the trouble. Each time I'd told him to hold low, my hunter had tried to adjust the sight—but the wrong way! He'd screwed the elevator to its upper limit! I adjusted the sight down as far as it would go and told Proctor to take a few shots. Prone, he put five bullets in the target.

Next morning we rode out of camp down-valley to hunt new country. After climbing past a couple of empty basins, I stopped just inside timber to glass the slopes. A good ram was bedded on a ledge above. Proctor slipped through the trees to set up. After what seemed an age, the mountains echoed my client's shot. Rock dust flew over the ram's back. As the animal bounced to its feet, I roared, "Hold low!"

Again came the crash; to my disgust this bullet went 4 feet high. The third shot was another miss. The ram left. When I reached Proctor, he was numbly staring at his rifle. The sight was again screwed up to its limit. We rode to camp in silence. There I again bottomed out the sight—then wired it firmly in place.

Next morning I suggested that Proctor spend the day sketching, while I made a quick trip home. My wife was at the ranch with a new baby, and I was anxious about her. I also

populations were drastically reduced in some ranges and entirely wiped out from others. Far worse than over harvesting were devastating diseases such as scabies and pneumonia that were transmitted from domestic sheep to wild sheep. The opening of the West became a one-two punch for the bighorn, but thankfully it wasn't a knockout.

The bighorn's senses of hearing and smell are keen, and its vision is superb. It is a good swimmer that excels as a jumper and climber. Bighorns have hooves that are hard at the outer edges with spongy centers, providing good traction even over sheer rock... a compact, blocky animal built for power rock climbing and the numbing cold of Rocky Mountain winters. He is equipped to dig through crusted snow for food and his coat is a near perfect camouflage match to the predominately brown and the dun colors of his mountainous environment.

Adult rams may weigh 250 to 320 pounds, while the smaller ewes weigh 160 to 200 pounds. Both sexes have true horns that grow throughout life. Horns are comprised of keratin, which grows over central bone cores from the skull above each eye socket. While the horns of ewes may only reach 9 inches in length, curving just slightly rearward, the horns of rams may form massive spirals of nearly 50 inches in length, with base circumferences of 16 inches or more and weighing more than 40 pounds.

Age and nutritional quality, not genetics, determine horn growth and the bighorn society is structured around horn size. Young rams are expelled from ewe-and-lamb groups at around two years of age, when their rapidly growing horns first become obviously larger than those of ewes. Young rams wander alone until joining a band of rams, which is usually dominated by the oldest ram with the largest horns.

When bighorn rams meet they ceremoniously huddle and display their horns to one another. Visual horn comparison is usually enough to establish most relationships, but when a smaller ram fails to give way to a larger ram he may quickly be battered into submission. If a visual comparison fails to satisfy, evenly matched rams may square off and battle—sometimes for hours. In these instances, the crack of horn on horn echoes like gunshots as the rams rear and charge headlong into one another. The impacts are frighteningly spectacular, but rams have specially developed vertebra and massive neck muscles to absorb the blows. The intent of such battles is not to harm, but to imbalance an opponent and to bring him to submission.

While rams may clash at any time of the year, the truly epic encounters normally occur during the November breeding season, or rut. Ewes signal their reproductive status with chemicals secreted in their urine, which rams detect through a special organ in their palate accentuated with a "flehman" or "lip curl" motion that exposes this organ to reproductive chemical signals. As ewes approach estrus or peak breeding condition, rams constantly moving among them, testing for a ewe's responsiveness to mating advances.

Once a ram has detected a near estrus ewe he follows her constantly, restlessly chasing her among the cliffs. Other rams often join the race and attempt to take the lead position. Rams may clash to reinforce their dominance and ewes may or may not wait for the winner. These breeding melees may last for hours.

Within a week or so the electricity of the rut gives way to the slow harsh realities of a period of great grinding hardship: the impending winter is a time of slow starvation for the bighorn. As grazers, wintering bighorns will barely find enough forage to maintain their needs. Active rams may have lost more than 25 percent of their fat reserves during the rut and many will have injuries to heal. But despite the brutality of winter most survive the cold long enough for the warming spring weather to rejuvenate the mountain grasses and, in turn, the bighorn.

Born in May or June, bighorn lambs represent 8 to 10 pounds of wobbly legs – an easy mark for marauding eagles and bobcats. Ewes sequester in the cliffs just prior to birthing and for a few weeks thereafter, so that they may personally



thought my hunter needed a day off. When I returned that afternoon, he greeted me excitedly. He'd spotted three fine rams on a ridge.

"I'm sure they're bigger than anything we've seen," he exclaimed.

The next day was the last of sheep season. Prospects at dawn were cheerless, for the wind blew out of the northeast, carrying the smell of winter. But by ten o'clock the sun had burned through the overcast. At noon we reached a spot overlooking a big basin. High on the peak in a jumbled boulder field something caught my eye. Then the outline of a huge ram's head came into focus. I almost choked on a mouthful of bannock at the size of it! In the rocks close by, I spotted two more bighorns. My excitement mounted, for though either was a fine trophy, they both looked small compared to the first.

When I showed them to Proctor he was jubilant; but when he looked at the mountain below them, his face grew long. The boulder field, dropped off into a series of ledges rimming a cliff 1,000 feet high.

Finally he said, "I came out here to get a ram, and that's probably the biggest one I'll ever see. But I have a wife and seven children at home depending on me for a living. I won't risk that climb."

But after a few minutes of persuading, he relented. We roped our way up the rocks, our progress agonizingly slow. Finally we reached the crest. Pushing ahead, I cautiously lifted my head and looked over.

What I saw almost stopped my breath. Picking their way across the boulder field walked three great rams. The smallest wore full-curl horns big enough to make any hunter proud. The second was even bigger, while the leader carried a head beyond the wildest dream. His great horns hooked past the bridge of his nose and were tremendously heavy, with the tips broomed to broad points. It was by far the biggest head I had seen on any sheep. And it was just 50 yards away.

Proctor eased up beside me and took his rifle. "Take the leader," I whispered unnecessarily.

The rifle roared. I saw a wad of hair lift, and the animal slumped. The other rams leaped onto the rocks and stared back in astonishment. In those days licenses allowed for the taking of two sheep. "The one on the right," I hissed.

Again the rifle cracked, and the second ram rolled down to join the first. For a moment neither of us moved. Then I raced across the rocks to the big ram and put the steel tape on these horns. It stretched 18 3/4 inches around

the base of one and 18 7/8 around the other. Both horns taped more than 41 inches long.

We field-dressed the animals, then packed up. Balancing the huge head on my shoulders, I started down the mountain. Proctor followed. On a steep place, I felt my ankle turn. With the weight of that great ram head on my shoulders, I tumbled and slid, grabbing desperately for a handhold. I came to a stop on my belly with my legs dangling over the cliff, my right arm locked around a rock. Out of the corner of one eye I saw the sheep head tumbling in a free fall to disappear into the clouds below. For a second I hung there unable to move. Then my left hand found purchase and I managed to heave myself to safety.

"You're badly hurt," Proctor gasped.

"No, I'm all right," I assured him.

I looked at the lucky stone that had saved my life. When I kicked it lightly with my boot heel, it cracked loose from the thin film of ice that held it and skidded over the edge. My client was white and shaking. Tying the rope around him again, I payed out the rope as he gingerly picked his descent. All the while I fretted about that magnificent sheep head, now probably smashed to a pulp.

Finally reaching the creek at the base of the cliff, I found the head half submerged

Dare to see



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between stones in a foot of water. I picked it up and, save for one small scrape, discovered it was as good as ever!

Next morning I packed out the other head and the meat. A couple of days later I said good-bye to Proctor at the railroad station. I never saw him again.

In 1950, Phimister Proctor died in Palo Alto, California, age 89. A son, Gifford Proctor, succeeded him as a celebrity in the world of sculpture. He remembered the sheep's head well and told me it had been loaned for a time, either to the Camp Fire Club or the American Museum of Natural History, but that it was returned to the sculptor between 1925 and 1929. Then the head was sent to storage—nobody knows where—and has not been seen since.

I've done a lot of guiding for bighorns. My clients have taken 66 bighorn sheep, all over 35 inches on the curl and quite a few better than 40. In 1924, up on Oyster Creek, Martin Bovey was with me when he killed his great bighorn ram, which once held first place in the Boone and Crockett records. All trace of the Proctor ram has been lost, but I can't help but believe it must still exist. If it is ever found, it may take its place at the top of the list as the largest bighorn ram of all time. ■

bond with their lambs through smell and by sound. Following two weeks of mother's super-nutritious milk, the lambs come together in nursery herds where ewes rotate the duty of predator surveillance.

Summer is the time of peace and security for the bighorn. The ewe recovers from the stresses of motherhood, the frolicking lamb grows quickly and the ram builds his fat reserve for the coming rut and winter. It's the time of tranquility, growth and regeneration: the bighorn in their physical prime.

While the bighorn sheep is an example of the terrific successes at the hands of hunting conservationists, bighorn numbers are exceedingly low when compared to most all of the deer species. Together with a tightly controlled hunting system, science-based management and sportsmen-supported relocation programs, the bighorn population continues its overall increase throughout the West.

Hunting is a vital part of the bighorn's recovery in several western states and Canadian provinces. But even in the glow of such a remarkable, well-supported comeback there remains more to be done on behalf of the bighorn.

As it has for decades, much of the bighorn's progress will come from the works of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep and its members, a renowned hunter-conservation group that blossomed shortly after a 1970s wild sheep summit hosted by the Boone and Crockett Club.

And it was none other than Boone and Crockett Club founder, Theodore Roosevelt, who seemed to capture the very essence of wild sheep hunting, both then and now, when he wrote, "the chase of no other kind of American big game ranks higher, or more thoroughly tests the manliest qualities of the hunter, than a fair-chase quest for the mighty bighorn ram." ■



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