

# Then & Now

B I G H O R N S H E E P > M O N T A N A

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It certainly was a sad day for the history of bighorn sheep populations in Montana. In April of 1916, in the Billy Coulee valley of the Missouri Breaks north and west of Jordan, Montana, the last Audubon bighorn sheep was killed. This brought the end to a robust population of bighorn sheep associated with the Missouri Breaks in north-central and eastern Montana.

William Clark first observed and recorded seeing bighorn sheep in Montana on April 29, 1805, in the Missouri River Breaks near Culbertson. Members of the Lewis and Clark Expedition would continue to document the sizeable presence of bighorn sheep populations. As they worked their way up the Missouri River near the mouth of the Judith River, Lewis recorded an observation on May 29, 1805, about the “great abundance of the Argalia or bighorned animal in the high country.”



**ABOVE LEFT:** This ram was entered in the Club’s Big Game Awards Program as a “pick up” trophy dating prior to 1918. It scores 189-5/8 points and was 1 of only 5 entries for Montana between 1830-1922. **LEFT:** Toni Sannon harvested this impressive Montana ram in 2008. It scores 204-2/8 points, just 5/8 shy of the state record held by James R. Weatherly.



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that is now Yellowstone National Park furnished a major food source for the "Sheepeater" Shoshone Indian Tribe.

Additionally, the impact of homesteading on 10.3 million acres from 1909 to 1922 placed a great burden on wildlife habitat and remaining wildlife populations.

Bighorn sheep flourished in the Missouri Breaks, but all throughout Montana early explorers, pioneers, and settlers observed and recorded existing bighorn populations. Historical use of bighorn sheep by Native Americans have been documented at many sites throughout Montana that had been used for thousands of years. In addition, bighorn sheep populations in and around the area

**This ram was originally listed in the Club's 1939 records book. It was rescored in 1952 using the Club's new scoring system and officially entered in the sixth competition. Taken by hunter Gold White, the bighorn has a score of 195 points and still ranks within the top 100 bighorn sheep of all-time. In 2000, the sheep was given to the Boone and Crockett Club's National Collection of Heads and Horns and is on display at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming.**

Exploitation of unprotected wildlife populations in all the western states including Montana began almost immediately after the Lewis and Clark Expedition came to a completion and they reported their findings to President Thomas Jefferson. Unprotected wildlife populations, especially the herds of big game, came under an attack of year-round market harvesting for hides and meat. By the end of the 1880s, all sizeable big-game populations were reduced to just remnant numbers scattered in isolated pockets of habitat that were overlooked. Sheep populations, even though not considered a large market item for the hide trade, were not spared. Subsistence hunting for meat took its toll on bighorns but some of the greatest damage to wild sheep populations was still yet to come. Domestic livestock, cattle and sheep, were trailed to Montana starting in the early 1870s. By the mid to late 1800s an estimated 500,000 domestic sheep and 600,000 cattle were grazing on open range throughout Montana. In addition to the competition that these domestic animals placed on native rangelands necessary for wildlife's survival, they also brought diseases, especially to the remaining bighorn populations, such as scabies, anthrax, lungworm, pneumonia and pink eye, which created large scale die-offs of wild sheep.

The situation for wildlife at the turn of the century could not have been worse. However, concerned sportsmen throughout the nation were already organizing and planning positive programs to protect and manage wildlife and wildlife habitat into the future. The first major effort to coordinate the activities of sportsmen was in 1887 when Theodore Roosevelt organized the Boone and Crockett Club. From 1887 until present day, Boone and Crockett Club members have had major political and financial influence to help design the North American Model of Wildlife Management and see to its implementation on the ground.

In 1937 the Pittman-Robertson Act was passed by the U.S. Congress. This act generates a funding source from a federal excise tax on sporting arms and ammunition. This funding source, called the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Program would now allow state wildlife agencies to fund research projects, advance management techniques, trap and transplant wildlife species to unoccupied habitats, purchase wildlife habitat, and hire and train professional wildlife biologists for the single purpose of increasing wildlife populations.

Transplanting wild sheep back into Montana took place well before the passage of the Pittman-Robertson Act. In 1922 a group of 12 bighorns were trapped in Banff, Alberta, Canada, and released inside the

## 1830-1950

### TOTAL BIGHORN SHEEP ENTRIES IN MONTANA - 7

| SCORE   | LOCATION         | HUNTER             | OWNER(S)                | DATE | RANK |
|---------|------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|------|------|
| 195 7/8 | Montana          | Unknown            | Dole & Bailey, Inc.     | 1890 | 71   |
| 195     | Sun River        | Gold White         | B&C National Collection | 1911 | 85   |
| 189 5/8 | Valley           | Picked Up          | Carl Iacona             | 1918 | 255  |
| 188 2/8 | Sun River        | Bruce Neal         | Bruce Neal              | 1912 | 318  |
| 186 1/8 | Yellowstone Park | William H. Dirrett | James K. Weatherford    | 1913 | 476  |
| 184 4/8 | Sun River        | Picked Up          | W.H. Stecker            | 1948 | 610  |
| 182 3/8 | Montana          | Unknown            | Joseph P. Scurti        | 1949 | 853  |



6th Competition

SEE OTHER SIDE FOR INSTRUCTIONS

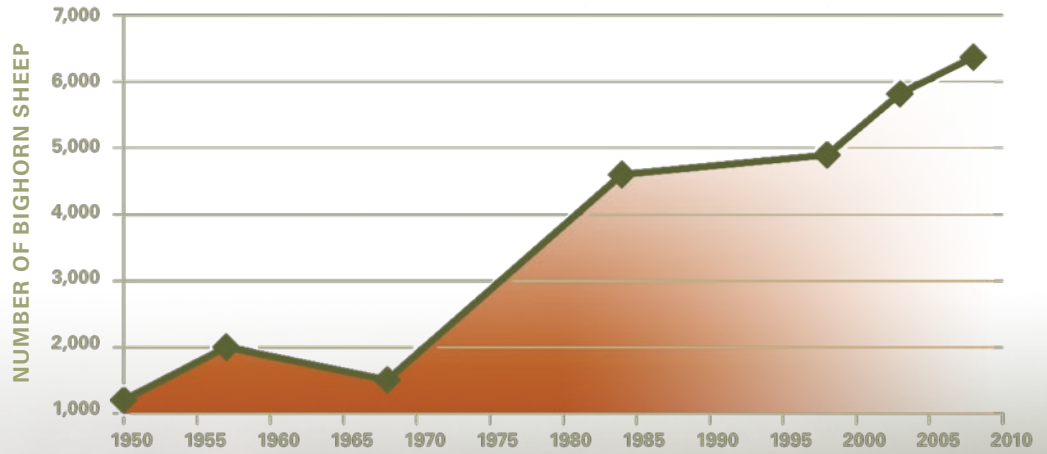
| Supplementary Data  | Column 1   | Column 2   | Column 3 |
|---|------------|------------|----------|
| Greatest Spread (Is often Tip to Tip Spread) (If Greatest Spread, to Tip Spread (Enter again here)) | 26 7/8 in. |            |          |
| Length of Horn  | 44 1/4     | 38 1/2     |          |
| Difference of Base  | 45 in.     | 37 1/2 in. |          |
| D-1. Circumference at First Quarter   | 15 3/8     | 16 in.     | 3/8      |
| D-2. Circumference at Second Quarter  | 15 1/8     | 15 3/4 in. | 3/4      |
| D-3. Circumference at Third Quarter   | 14 1/2 in. | 14 in.     | 1/2      |
| TOTALS  | 11 in.     | 11 3/4 in. | 3/4      |



**Transplanting wild sheep back into Montana began in 1922 when a group of 12 bighorns were trapped in Banff, Alberta, Canada, and released inside the National Bison Range at Moise, Montana.**

**Map indicates distribution of sheep in Montana in 2008. Since transplanting sheep began in Montana in 1922, a total of 2,692 sheep have been trapped and transplanted throughout Montana and other states. The photo of the ram shown below was taken at the National Bison Range in 2004.**

**BIGHORN SHEEP POPULATIONS IN MONTANA**



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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The author would like to encourage all readers of this article to pick up copies of two publications and one DVD:

**Montana's Wildlife Legacy—Decimation to Restoration**, Harold D. Picton and Terry N. Lonner. 2008.

**Montana Big Horn Sheep Conservation Strategy**, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks publication. 2010.

**Montana's Wildlife Legacy—Back from the Brink DVD**. Produced by Terry N. Lonner.



These publications and DVD offer great depth and insight into the history of the North American Model of Wildlife Management and its application to bighorn sheep management along with other species of wildlife in Montana.

National Bison Range at Moise, Montana. Trapping and transplanting continued from 1922 through 2008 and a total of 2,258 bighorns have been trapped and transplanted within Montana. While not all transplanting efforts were successful, the overall success of the program can be seen on the ground at this time.

A Montana Fish & Game Commission bulletin written by Montana wildlife biologist, Fay M. Couey, in 1950 estimated that 1,200 bighorns occupied 16 different areas within the state of Montana. As of 2008, there were an estimated 5,694 bighorn sheep that occupy 45 different areas in Montana.

The success of Montana's sheep management program can certainly be judged by the total number of animals and the variety of the areas that these sheep now inhabit. A part of Montana's bighorn sheep management success story is also measured with the increased hunting opportunities now available and the quality of rams that are harvested. Bighorn rams are a very desirable trophy among hunters in North America, and Montana has recently been producing some of the top bighorns taken anywhere. The quantity and quality of the bighorn trophies harvested in Montana are not only a direct reflection of the habitat, animal health and genetics but also a measurement of the success of the bighorn sheep management program in the state.



**1951-1999**

**TOTAL BIGHORN SHEEP ENTRIES IN MONTANA – 388  
Top Five Listed Below**

| SCORE   | LOCATION       | HUNTER             | OWNER(S)                   | DATE | RANK |
|---------|----------------|--------------------|----------------------------|------|------|
| 204 7/8 | Granite Co.    | James R. Weatherly | James R. Weatherly         | 1993 | 5    |
| 203 5/8 | Beaverhead Co. | Picked Up          | MT Dept. of FWP            | 1992 | 8    |
| 202 3/8 | Granite Co.    | Richard B. Wiant   | D.J. Hollinger & B. Howard | 1992 | 11   |
| 200 7/8 | Deer Lodge Co. | Lester A. Kish     | Lester A. Kish             | 1990 | 18   |
| 200 2/8 | Blaine Co.     | Eugene R. Knight   | Eugene R. Knight           | 1991 | 21   |

One specific way of evaluating the success story of bighorn sheep management in Montana is to take a look at the Boone and Crockett Club's *Records of North American Big Game*. Go back in time to the 9th edition published in 1988, which recorded trophies through the end of 1985. The 9th edition listed 10 bighorn sheep that scored 200 points and above. None of these rams came from Montana and only one of the rams, that scored exactly 200 points, came from Wyoming. It was taken in 1883. Now, fast forward to the 12th edition of the Boone and Crockett Club's *Records of North American Big Game*, published in 2005. There are currently 25 bighorn rams listed that score 200 points and above. Montana now has eight of these 25 rams included that score above 200 points. The only other entry from the United States is that same Wyoming bighorn that scores exactly 200 points and was taken in 1883. Since the publication of the 12th edition in 2005, there are three more Montana rams that have scored greater than 200 points, making a total of 11 rams that will be included in the 13th edition (due out in 2011).

One more comparison needs to be made for rams that score from 190 to 199-7/8 points. The 9th edition, published in 1988, lists a total of 64 entries that score from 190 to 199-7/8. Thirteen of the rams listed are from Montana. Comparing entries from the 12th edition published in 2005, there are now 173 rams listed that score from 190 to 199-7/8, with 84 of these being Montana rams. In addition to these 84 rams, there will be 27 more Montana rams that have been measured during the 26th and 27th Big Game Awards that will be included in the 13th edition of the Boone and Crockett's *Records of North American Big Game*.

Thanks to the quality rams Montana has recently produced, there is another funding source that has grown out of an increased interest from the hunting community for a Montana ram permit. The 49th Montana Legislature gave the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission authority to auction one bighorn sheep license each year. Beginning in 1986 and continuing through 2010, one ram permit has been auctioned each year.

From a low bid of \$61,000 in 1990 to a high winning bid in 1994 of \$310,000, the auction of a bighorn license has generated \$3,975,500. Primary uses of these funds have included transplanting bighorns within Montana, aerial survey and monitoring efforts, habitat acquisition and easements, research projects, and habitat enhancements projects on private and public lands.

Boone and Crockett Club's scoring system for native North American big game has become a permanent measuring stick that all hunters, wildlife biologists, scientists, and wildlife managers look to for comparing the past to the present and which offers guidelines to the future. The 13th edition of the Boone and Crockett Club's *Records of North American Big Game* will permanently record another chapter of a continuing success story of not only the management of bighorn sheep in Montana but a success story of the management of all North American big game in the United States and Canada. ■

**RIGHT MIDDLE:** Taken in 1957 by F.P. Murray, this bighorn scores 190-3/8 points and was harvested near Sun River. **RIGHT BOTTOM:** Patrick L. White harvested this ram (202-2/8 points) in Fergus County in 2009. The quality of Montana's bighorn sheep continues to improve.



**2000-2010**

**TOTAL BIGHORN SHEEP ENTRIES IN MONTANA – 244  
Top Five Listed Below**

| SCORE   | LOCATION    | HUNTER            | OWNER             | DATE | RANK |
|---------|-------------|-------------------|-------------------|------|------|
| 204 2/8 | Fergus Co.  | Toni L. Sannon    | Toni L. Sannon    | 2008 | 6    |
| 202 7/8 | Blaine Co.  | Debby L. Perry    | Debby L. Perry    | 2008 | 10   |
| 202 2/8 | Fergus Co.  | Patrick L. White  | Patrick L. White  | 2009 | —    |
| 200 7/8 | Sanders Co. | Jack M. Greenwood | Jack M. Greenwood | 2001 | 18   |
| 200 1/8 | Fergus Co.  | David J. Nygard   | David J. Nygard   | 2003 | 22   |

**BELOW:** The original score chart notes that this ram suffered a broken leg and that Glacier National Park Service and Fish and Game personnel put the animal down in 1956. It was entered in the 10th Awards by Faye Couey of Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks at a score of 187-5/8 points.