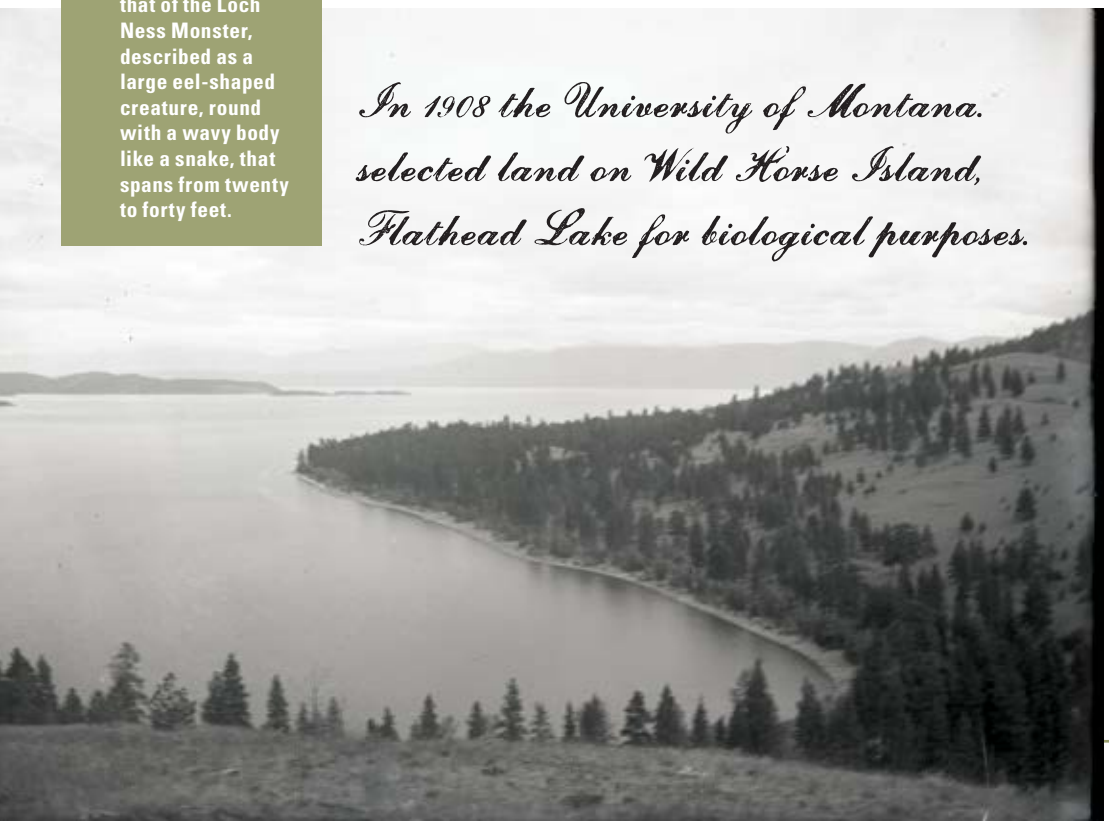
The Flathead

Flathead Lake lies nestled between the Mission and Salish mountains in western Montana. Carved by glacial activity, this body of water is the largest natural lake in the Western U.S. with more than 190 square miles in surface area and stretching nearly 30 miles long and 16 miles wide. Its beauty is admired by all who lay eyes on it. Folks travel from all over the world to experience everything the lake has to offer—from the deep, crystal clear waters teeming with fish to the history of the residents of the past painted on the cliff walls hugging its shore. Rising from the waters, whose depth can reach nearly 400 feet, are numerous islands, some of which are privately held. Others are publicly managed, including the crown jewel of them all, Wild Horse Island State Park.

In Montana folklore, the Flathead Lake Monster is a creature located in Flathead Lake. Its appearance is very similar to that of the Loch Ness Monster, described as a large eel-shaped creature, round with a wavy body like a snake, that spans from twenty to forty feet.



In 1908 the University of Montana selected land on Wild Horse Island, Flathead Lake for biological purposes.

1855: Hell Gate Treaty creates Flathead Reservation.

1887: Allotment Act (Dawes Act) begins the dismemberment of the reservation.

1850 1855 1860 1865 1870 1875 1880 1885

Lake Monster

JUSTIN SPRING
DIRECTOR OF BIG GAME RECORDS

HISTORICAL PHOTOS COURTESY
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The history of the island, which has produced the largest Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep in recorded history, has a past that parallels much of the history of the American West and its wildlife—at least in relative modern times starting in the mid-1800s. The majority of Flathead Lake, including Wild Horse Island, lies within the boundaries of the Flathead Indian Reservation that was created under the Hellgate Treaty of 1855. The origins of the naming of the island are disputed; however, the first known reference appears in an 1854 journal. One of the stories is that a tribal member had some horses stolen by the Blackfeet; he then stole a band of them back and placed them on Wild Horse Island for his children in an attempt to prevent them from being stolen back.

The tale of the creation and ultimate attempts to dismantle the reservation were common in those days. Numerous regional tribes and bands of those tribes were being forced onto a section of land through a treaty whose ramifications and concept they didn't fully comprehend.

If being forced from traditional lands wasn't bad enough, the tribes endured another change when Congress passed the 1887 Dawes Act (also known as the Allotment Act), where each tribal member was allotted a set amount of land per person or family. This land assignment was an attempt to force the tribes into more of a farming lifestyle than their historical hunting and gathering culture and was greatly opposed by the tribal leaders. Any unoccupied land or land not included in the allotments or villas was opened to homesteading. There were two parcels on Wild Horse Island that tribal members had claimed, and the rest became available to non-native settlers in 1910.

Numerous folks tried farming the area, but none successfully. The only remnants of those days are a few weathered house and barn frames and rusting farm equipment that is slowly being reclaimed by the harshness of the land that is the island. While the farming failed to take root, it began the establishment of the noxious weeds and assault on the native Palouse Prairie. The prairie once stretched from northwestern Montana westward though the Idaho Panhandle into Washington and eastern Oregon.

Palouse grasslands or prairie are a semi-arid habitat type found within the rain shadow of the Cascade mountain range. Characterized by native wheatgrass and fescue, most of these rolling plains have been converted to agriculture or allowed to be infiltrated by cheatgrass and other exotic species. Reduced to only a couple isolated areas from its once expansive range, the native Palouse Prairie exists in three known locations

Tourists visiting the newly founded Glacier National Park would visit Wild Horse Island.

1908: State receives a portion of the Island for biologic study area.

1910: Homestead Act opened Reservation to Non-Native Americans.

1917: First attempt at sheep introduction takes place, all six sheep perish.

1890 1895 1890 1895 1900 1905 1910 1915

in Montana with Wild Horse Island being one of them.

The first major land acquisition to take place on the island happened in 1915 when Colonel Almond A. White purchased several parcels. While not much is known of his exact vision, it is believed that he had hoped to build scouting camps, a large observatory, and a luxury hotel. This also started the idea of bringing different species to the island in hopes of augmenting the prevalent mule deer and blue grouse populations already there.

The first sheep introductions took place in 1917, though all six transplants perished in rather short order. During this time, White had begun selling villas on the island in hopes that the influx of tourists visiting the newly founded Glacier National Park would purchase them. While some of the villas were sold, White died bankrupt in 1923 and the remaining unsold parcels were confiscated for unpaid taxes.

One of the parcels sold was to Robert Edgington and his wife Clara Isabelle who would later build the only commercial establishment in the island's history, the Hiawatha Lodge, which was completed in 1931. Historic photos show well-heeled folks enjoying cocktails at the establishment overlooking the lake. While the lodge was in operation, horses and powerboats were brought to the island for the guests' enjoyment.

It was in an effort to save these boats during a severe squall in 1934 that Edgington was thrown into the turbulent waters and was unable to recover. His wife had no desire to continue to run the business, and the lodge began to fall to disrepair.

In 1939, the first successful sheep relocation took place with a private individual bringing two lambs to the island. These came from the Mission Mountains south of the lake.

A year later, Lewis Pennel bought the Edgington property and the remainder of the island's parcels from individual owners. Shortly thereafter, Dr. J.C. Burnett purchased the island and used it to produce a line of Arabian horses. It was during his ownership that the second transplant of sheep to the island took place in 1947. The population was estimated at least 12 sheep at the time, with six additional sheep (three rams and three ewes) added from the Sun River herd.

Eight years later, in 1954, the island's sheep population was estimated at 90 animals. Additionally, an estimated 300–400 mule deer lived on the island plus some 100 of Burnett's Arabian line. It was this year that Montana Fish and Game Commission started exporting sheep from the island with the first transplant being 12 sheep taken to Kootenai Falls in Lincoln County, Montana.

Research of the island's sheep populations began in the 1950s under the guidance of past Boone and Crockett Club Records Chairman Dr. Philip L. Wright from the University of Montana. At the outset of the research, it was noted the native grasses were being heavily grazed. Much of this early research took place looking into the high prevalence of lungworm of the sheep. The scientific literature at the time revealed most populations around the West were declining, but the island's sheep population was rapidly increasing. Reading these thesis papers reveals these budding sheep biologists were really at the forefront of wildlife capture techniques. It was noted in a research paper done in 1954 that the researchers started using sheep dogs to round up the lambs for transport. This worked well until the ewes caught on to what was happening and would intervene. Research notes state that, "the dogs would not perform as desired." The researcher surmised a better trained dog may have a higher success of capture using this method. Eventually they landed on a method where they would approach the sheep in the dark with two researchers; one researcher would shine a light in the lamb's eyes, while the second would spring forward capturing the lamb by hand.

The Hiawatha Lodge was built by Reverend Robert Edington and served as a dude ranch for wealthy tourists beginning in 1931.

1923: Colonel Almond A. White dies bankrupt and all remaining unsold property confiscated for delinquent taxes.

1939: Two sheep are brought to Wild Horse Island. One male and one female yearling are introduced. Most likely these two came from the Mission Range south of the lake by a private individual.

1940s: Lewis Pennel of Helena buys the Edgington Property and acquires the remainder of the island from other individual owners. He petitions Montana Game Commission to stock deer, mountain sheep, elk, antelope, and game birds on the island.

1947: Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (MTFWP) conducts second transplant to Wild Horse Island. There is an estimated 12 sheep on the island at this time from the original transplant. Six additional sheep are brought in from the Sun River Canyon (three ewes and three rams) by MTFWP.

1954: Approximately 100 horses are on Wild Horse Island in addition to 90 sheep and 300-400 mule deer. Twelve sheep are moved to Lincoln County, Montana from the island.

1955: Twenty-four sheep are transferred from the island to three different locations throughout Montana.

1920 1925 1930 1935 1940 1945 1950 1955

The following winter was a severe one and even though many of the horses were pulled off the island, the majority perished. Conflicting reports exist on the extent of the die-off, but one report states that after Burnett's death in 1959, the entire island was listed for sale which included three horses and one mule.

In this period from 1954–1959, 54 sheep were transplanted off the island to numerous locations around the state in an effort to rebuild historic Montana populations. These transplants still continue today, amounting to hundreds of sheep added to the current Montana bighorn populations.

After Burnett's death, the future of the island was in limbo. There were three major players all hoping to stake their claim on the island. The Nature Conservancy, Rockefeller Foundation, and the state of Montana were all vying for the purchase of the island. These three entities all lost out on their chance to manage the island after a vote from the Lake County Commissioners stating they wanted to sell the island with the intention of increasing the tax base.

In 1962, Bourke MacDonald purchased the island and hired a landscape architect who helped him establish 500 parcels. They were all shaped round to prevent any parcels bordering on a neighbor's parcel and also in an attempt to prevent future development. He also set the parcels 10 feet above the high-water mark to prevent shoreline development. After his purchase he worked with Montana Fish and Game Commission encouraging folks to visit the island to photograph the wildlife. Only 49 had been sold when MacDonald passed away in 1973.

His family wanted the island protected, so this time the state of Montana and The Nature Conservancy stepped up to formulate a plan to acquire the island. A negotiated purchase price of 50 percent of the assessed value was agreed upon, with the MacDonald family donating the remaining 50 percent or $1.75 million to the state. This left $1.75 million the state had to come up with to purchase the island. Each year, the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) allocates money to either state or federal land acquisitions in an effort to safeguard our natural resources. This fund was created by a bipartisan bill passed by Congress in 1964, which allocated oil and gas earnings from offshore leases so no taxpayer money was spent. Montana's allocation had to cover both local and state government requests and the purchase price. This would have prevented any other project under the LWCF from getting funded if the request to purchase the island happened in a single year. While this seemed daunting, the Department of Interior had produced a document on the islands of the U.S. in the early

Key measurements from the new World's Record ram's horns (above) that contribute to its final score are horn lengths of 48-3/8 and 49-6/8, circumferences at the bases of 16-3/8 and 16-4/8, and fourth quarter circumferences of 11-2/8 and 11-4/8 inches.

The first sheep introductions took place in 1917, though all six transplants perished in rather short order.

1957: Six sheep are moved to Jefferson County, Montana from the Island.

1958: Two transplants totaling 12 sheep are moved to two locations in Montana.

1964: There are 130 sheep and 200 mule deer on the island at this time.

1969: Twenty-three sheep are moved to Sanders County, Montana.

1971: Sheep herd is estimated at 240 individuals, 75 mule deer, one horse and one mule.

1972: Sheep herd experiences severe winter and is reduced to 205 by that spring.

1975: Two sheep are taken from the Island to Sanders County, Montana.

1978: Wild Horse Island becomes a Montana State Park managed as a "primitive area". One hundred sheep are removed from the island in an attempt to improve habitat conditions and a population goal of roughly 100 sheep is established for the island.

1979: Eighteen sheep are shipped from the Island to Washington State University (WSU) for research, 61 are sent to Sanders County, Montana, in three different locations, and 25 are relocated to Rock Creek in Granite County, Montana. Fifteen years later Jim Weatherly takes the Montana state record from this herd, which stands for nearly 25 years.

1981: Five sheep are taken off the Island to Sanders County, Montana.

1987: Two sheep from Lincoln County, Montana are transplanted to the Island.

1993: Eight sheep are shipped from the island to WSU for research, nine to Lower Hells Canyon in Oregon, 12 to Fox Creek in Oregon, 15 sheep to Teton County, Montana, 26 sheep to Gallatin County, Montana, three sheep to Lake County, Montana, and 32 sheep to Lewis and Clark County, Montana.

1994: Twelve sheep are shipped to Fox Creek in Oregon and 14 to Downey Gulch in Oregon.

1960 1965 1970 1975 1980 1985 1990 1995

NEW WORLD'S RECORD BIGHORN SHEEP

A special Boone and Crockett Club judges panel declared a ram from Montana as the new World's Record bighorn sheep. The four-member panel of senior Boone and Crockett Official Measures re-scored the ram's horns and determined the final score to be 216-3/8 points B&C, surpassing the current World's Record - a ram that scores 209-4/8.

Special judges panels are convened to declare new World's Records by confirming an official entry score. This ram's entry score accepted on February 8 was 216-3/8.

"This ram is significant for many reasons," said Justin Spring, the Club's director of Big Game Records. "One of many things worth noting is that since the Club's current scoring system was adopted in 1950, this is only the fifth World's Record bighorn, and three of these have been declared since just 2001. If anything, we're now seeing what nature and sound wildlife management are capable of producing in the wild."

The panel scoring took place at the world headquarters of the Wild Sheep Foundation, located in Bozeman, Montana. On hand were B&C officials, Montana State Governor Steve Bullock, and Wild Sheep Foundation President and CEO Gray Thornton.

"Here in Montana, we have a rich history of bringing diverse groups together to preserve and protect wildlife habitat and public lands," said Governor Steve Bullock. "This is truly a Montana conservation success story."

"Wild Sheep Foundation (WSF) is honored to host the panel certification of this World's Record bighorn and this momentous announcement from our Governor that Montana, the "Land of the Giants" is home to the largesbighorn sheep known," stated Gray N. Thornton, WSF's President & CEO. "Wild Horse Island is not only an incredible watchable wildlife asset but is an exceptional source with obviously incredible genetics to repatriate bighorn sheep throughout Montana" Thornton added.

The nine-year-old ram lived his entire life on Wild Horse Island. The ram was found by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks officials who determined it had died of natures causes. Because a hunter did not take the ram, the department entered the ram into B&C records on behalf on the citizens of Montana.

Spring said, "This ram doesn't have the longest horns on record, or the largest bases, but the mass of his horns carried over the entire length of nearly 50-inch horns is what makes this ram the largest we've seen by a significant margin. The last three World's Record rams have been 208-1/8, 208-3/8, 209-4/8 and now 216-3/8. That's a jump we just never expected to see."

1970s which directly named Wild Horse Island as an island to be procured and preserved.

The governor authorized the purchase of up to $2 million for the island in 1977. Because the state was unable to purchase the island outright, it was divided into seven equal parcels which the state agreed to purchase in a predetermined order with matching funds from the LWCF. The MacDonald family agreed to donate any increase in the appraised value to the state as well.

Since this time, the island has been managed as a primitive recreation area with no camping allowed on the island. Local charters bring visitors to the island to explore on their own as regulations prevent any outfitter or guide from accompanying guests onto the island.

Management is currently jointly managed by Montana FWP, Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), and the Confederate Salish Kootenai Tribe (CSKT). Natural resource management actions include prescribed burning and noxious weed spraying as well as maintaining the pine stands to prevent encroachment of other trees such as Douglas fir. In addition to the sheep and mule deer, a population of 5 wild horses are maintained on the island to preserve the namesake.

When the scores of these giant rams of Wild Horse Island were first brought to the public's attention, the Club received numerous comments of how they should not be accepted as they weren't able to be hunted. While the island does provide a quality habitat where the sheep are not exposed to hunter harvest pressure, the island as a whole is a conservation success story which has resulted in opportunities for thousands of folks to pursue rams in their native habitat.

As stated earlier, the history of Wild Horse Island is, in fact, the history of much of our wildlife today: westward expansion, development, private individuals stepping up, research, federal programs contributing to the mission through oil and gas revenues, and ultimately, joint management shared by numerous agencies. Regarding the trophies being ineligible due to the lack of hunting pressure, the records were never intended to serve as a competition amongst hunters or to list only hunter-taken game. The idea that somehow these sheep are any less valuable or deserving than a hunter-taken ram is simply not true.

Research shows that Wild Horse has been home to coyotes, mountain lions—and in a couple cases, grizzly

2008: Thirty-eight sheep are relocated to Lincoln County, Montana.

2010: Twenty-four sheep are relocated to Sanders County, Montana and 16 to Lincoln County, Montana.

2012: Forty-nine sheep are moved from the island to Beaverhead County, Montana.

2014: Twenty-seven sheep are moved to Sanders County, Montana, and 33 sheep to Lincoln County, Montana.

2000 2005 2010 2015

bears. Early research indicated that during bad winters, the lake would freeze, and potential emigration of mule deer took place—which means that under natural conditions, the sheep can come and go as they please as long as winter severity is maintained. The one thing the island does provide is a model research station showcasing how resource management can affect the sheep. With the island being just over 2,000 acres, this provides opportunity to control factors of research that can be extrapolated to numerous populations across the sheep's historic range.

The major issue the island faces today lies in the lack of funding necessary to maintain this gem. Managed as part of a complex of state parks around Flathead Lake, the funds to do anything are very limited. The challenges it faces today are common throughout the West—noxious weeds, long-term fire suppression, development, etc. This park is managed with state parks funds, and the sheep raised are used to supplement numerous sheep populations both in and out of the state. Montana has a small fee added to vehicle registrations to help offset parks costs but comes far short of supplying what is necessary to cover this. The new World's Record ram lived on Wild Horse Island. The buzz this sheep has generated is a prime opportunity to investigate how to fund conservation by thinking outside the box of hunter-generated revenue, which is constantly proving to fall short.

Boone and Crockett Club has always allowed the entry of found or picked-up trophies into our records as they are part of the story of conservation. The sheep living on this island are a testament to what modern conservation and wildlife management can accomplish. Stand with us in recognizing what sheep and this island have done in recent times and make your voice heard in finding ways to fund conservation to ensure all species of North American big game continue to thrive going forward. ■

The island provides a model research station showcasing how resource management can affect the sheep.

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BEYOND THE SCORE

BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB POLICY ON FOUND/PICKED-UP TROPHIES

The Boone and Crockett Club sets the rules for entering a trophy into its records books, which are based primarily on principles of wildlife conservation and fair chase. The fact that the Club accepts entries that have not been harvested by a hunter, but instead are "found" by people (whether on a hunt or not) may be surprising to some, but there are sound reasons for doing so.

Found trophies include animals that die of natural causes, such as advanced age, environmental factors, and predation. Found trophies also include animals that die of unnatural causes, such as vehicle collisions. Found entries, along with the locations where found, are listed as "picked up" in the Club's records books to distinguish them from hunter-taken entries, which are subject to different eligibility requirements, including the principles of fair chase.

The big game records of the Boone and Crockett Club are a set of wildlife and hunting data that the Club began to collect over a century ago to initially track the recovery of big game populations from decades of unregulated overharvesting. The focus today is on monitoring the quality and distribution of specimens that natural conditions and sound wildlife management are capable of producing.

Having sportsmen participate in this data collection system by voluntarily submitting their trophies is vital. Having people submit trophies they find is equally important. Mature males that have lived long enough in the wild under favorable conditions to grow large antlers, horns, or skulls to qualify for the Club's records book are indicators of healthy ecosystems, balanced age structures within a given population, acceptable mortality (natural and human-caused) and sustainable recruitment. The Boone and Crockett Club maintains that all trophies, both harvested by hunters and those that are found, add to the data set that helps game managers adopt successful policies to benefit big game populations of North America. The Club's records program was never intended to be a numeric ranking of a hunter's skills.

The special judges panel included (left to right) Official Measurers Roger Atwood, L. Victor Clark, Fred King, and Pat McKenzie.