

# DESERT BIGHORNS IN CALIFORNIA

A SUCCESS STORY FOR WILDLIFE BIOLOGISTS AND SHEEP HUNTERS

## INTRODUCTION BY VERN BLEICH

When Andy Anderson harvested his California desert bighorn in the Marble Mountains in 1997, it was a success story not only for the sheep hunter, but also for California's state wildlife biologists who have been diligently working to reestablish desert bighorn sheep populations in their historic ranges. As I described in *Return to Royalty*, the Boone and Crockett Club's latest publication that deals exclusively with North American wild sheep, unregulated meat hunting, alteration of habitat and natural water sources, and disease epidemics associated with the introduction of livestock during California's gold rush completely eliminated many populations of wild sheep. Only 63 percent of the desert bighorn herds that historically existed in southeastern California remain today, and many of these herds are but a fraction of earlier numbers.

In 1983, the Department of Fish and Game began a carefully designed program of capturing and moving desert bighorns from healthy, existing herds to other historic ranges in southeastern California. By the 1990s, close to 400 sheep, mostly females, had been reintroduced into new areas. Reintroduction, coupled with the Department's development of year-round water sources for the animals, has been very

successful. There are now approximately 3,500 desert bighorns in California scattered among 61 mountain ranges. These sheep are of two subspecies: approximately 3,200 sheep are Nelson's bighorn, and the remainder are the California subspecies. All bighorn sheep in California are "fully protected," but certain populations are subject to hunting, and an average of about 12 permits are issued per year. To date, the California Fish and Game Commission has opened a total of six zones for desert bighorn sheep hunting, and a seventh will be added to the list during the upcoming season, a result of the incredible success of restoration efforts in the Sheep Hole Mountains.

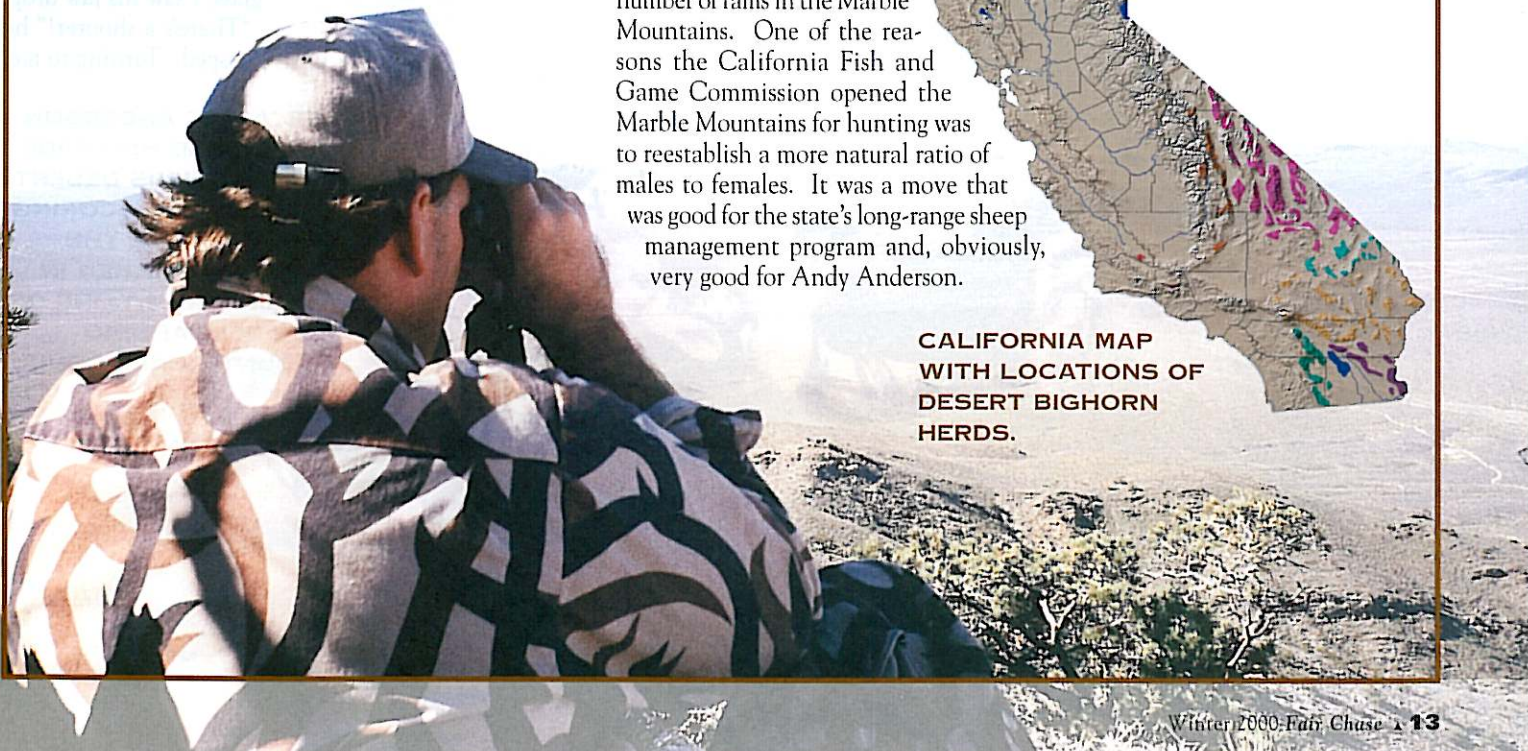
When Andy was hunting in the Marble Mountains, he had no idea that efforts to restore bighorn sheep to vacant ranges, including the Sheep Hole Mountains located 40 miles south of the Marbles, was a key to his success. The Marble Mountains have been one of three sources (the others are Old Dad Peak and the San Gabriel Mountains) of desert bighorn sheep for translocations to historical habitat. Removals of animals for translocation have emphasized females, and that left a disproportionately large number of rams in the Marble Mountains. One of the reasons the California Fish and Game Commission opened the Marble Mountains for hunting was to reestablish a more natural ratio of males to females. It was a move that was good for the state's long-range sheep management program and, obviously, very good for Andy Anderson.

BY LEE "ANDY" ANDERSON JR.,  
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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
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CALIFORNIA MAP  
WITH LOCATIONS OF  
DESERT BIGHORN  
HERDS.



## DESERT BIGHORNS IN CALIFORNIA BY LEE ANDERSON

**THOUGH MY HUNT** for desert bighorn sheep took place in 1997, the story really began four years earlier. In 1993, my father, Lee Anderson Sr., bought the fundraising permit for a California desert sheep at the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep auction. He harvested a magnificent ram on the second day of his hunt in the Clark Mountain Range of southeastern California. I can still remember him calling me at home and giving me all the details. He was thrilled, and so was I. His desert sheep, with a green score of 177-3/8, was acknowledged by the California Fish and Game Department as the new state record. But my father's record stood for only a few years, until a larger ram was harvested.

I have been hunting with my father since the age of 14. Although we have enjoyed bear hunts and several trips to Africa, both Dad and I feel that sheep hunting is the most rewarding because the physical demands are much greater than in any other type of hunting. So it wasn't long after Dad had harvested his ram that I began to think about taking my own desert bighorn in California. Naturally, I had the fun of telling my friends that I had to go on this hunt to regain the "family honor" of having the number one desert bighorn in California. The real reason, of course, was that one has to go through a lot to get a sheep, and I simply love this kind of challenge. In 1997, I was fortunate enough to be able to purchase the California fundraising permit for a desert bighorn at the FNAWS auction.

My hunt began in mid-November of 1997. Although the normal hunting season for desert sheep started on the first Saturday of December, my permit allowed me to hunt the month prior to the opening of the regular sheep sea-

son. I flew to Las Vegas, Nevada, where I was met by staff from Aravaipa Outfitters and my guide, Rick Jones. These are the people my father had hunted with, and he had been quite pleased with their operation. We drove to a fairly luxurious base camp, in the form of a permanent trailer. It was located in the Kingston Mountains of California near State Line, a town aptly named for its location on the California-Nevada border, on Highway 15. This was not like the usual sheep camps, where you are a day's horse ride from civilization, and creature comforts are few. The trailer was well-equipped and well-stocked with steaks, fresh vegetables, and cold beer for our dinners.

The Kingston Mountains are steep, open, and rocky, and the elevations range from about 4,000 to 7,500 feet above sea level. It was between the dry and the wet seasons, and at the end of the rut for desert sheep. The weather was clear and dry, with warm days and cool nights. We hunted hard for several days, using our two vehicles to drive up gravel access roads, and then we would hike for seven to ten miles a day over steep terrain. It was quite warm by midday, and all I needed for clothing was a cotton tee shirt and pants. The walking wasn't too tough, provided you avoided the cactus and paid very close attention to loose volcanic rocks that rolled down the sandy slopes, making way too much noise in the process. Based on my past hunting experiences, I was well aware how the slightest noise can carry in the dry mountain air, and how fast the sheep can disappear from an area because of a single, out-of-the-ordinary sound.

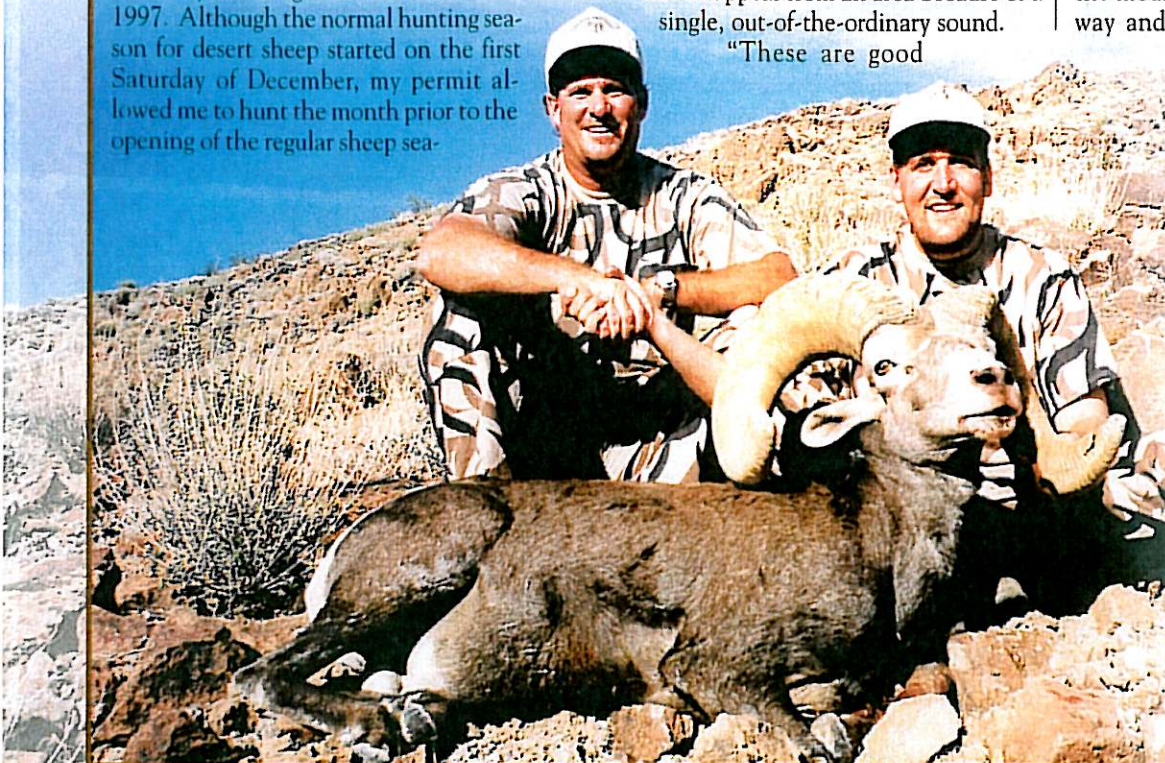
"These are good

sheep mountains," Rick told me. He was sure the big ram I sought was in the Kingston Range, not far from where my father had taken his sheep. Rick had spent a great deal of time guiding in this area, and although there was mountain lion predation, the herd had been able to withstand this negative pressure and remain relatively stable for many years. The area always held a large number of sheep, and Rick had seen some very good rams in the area shortly before I arrived. But in four days of hard hunting, glassing every nook and cranny until our eyes were tired, we did not see anything shootable. Where were all the good rams that these mountains should be offering us? Rick was mystified. To me, it was a typical sheep hunt. Sheep are never where you expect them to be—you locate them, climb a mountain to get a shot, and the sheep are nowhere to be found.

We discussed our options. The fundraising auction permit allowed me to hunt in any of the six desert bighorn hunting zones in the state. Rick decided to go to another mountain range that he had not recently hunted. We quickly packed our gear, loaded the Chevy Tahoe, and drove two hours to the Marble Mountains. Our new hunting area was on Highway 40, fifty miles south of the city of Baker.

By the time we reached the Marble Mountains, it was about an hour before sunset. Rick and I pulled over onto the shoulder of the interstate to do some glassing before we completely lost the daylight. Rick picked up his binoculars to scan the mountain slopes visible from the highway and immediately spotted a group of sheep. As he continued to glass, I saw his jaw drop. "There's a shooter!" he gasped. Turning to me,

LEE "ANDY" ANDERSON (RIGHT) AND HIS GUIDE RICK, WITH HIS DESERT BIGHORN RAM SCORING 171-6/8 POINTS. THE SHEEP WAS TAKEN IN MARBLE MOUNTAINS OF SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY, CALIFORNIA.



he said, "Hurry up and get ready, we're going after him."

I rushed back to the vehicle, grabbed my rifle, and loaded the magazine. Rick was still studying the ram when I returned. "This ram could be the new state record," Rick said. "I just wish I could see his other side." Moments later, the ram turned around and Rick's jaw dropped again. "He's got no horn on the other side," Rick said incredulously. "I can't believe it." As disappointing as it was, we were still excited about seeing such a large ram in this new area. I had a hard time falling asleep thinking what we might find the next day.

The next morning we returned to the same spot and parked on the side of the interstate again. The Marble Mountains were much smaller than the Kingstons—just a couple of humps rising up from the valley floor. It would take about two days to glass the entire area. We began hiking, and it wasn't too long before we spotted a very interesting ram that had just bedded down at the base of a low mountain about 800 yards away. Given the direction of the wind and the sight lines to the ram, we decided to go around to the other side of the mountain and approach the ram from behind. After an hour of repositioning ourselves, we began to cautiously move up over the backside of the low mountain, hoping we could spot him bedded down over the crest of the hill.

We kept walking towards the spot we were certain he would be, but there was no ram to be found. We didn't think he had moved. Rick's assistant, Chris, had remained in our original position where he could keep an eye on the animal, and he had not given us any warning signal. We continued to carefully search the area for about half-an-hour until we realized that we had been fooled by the topography. We were not on a rounded mountaintop, as it had first appeared, but rather on a flat table formation with very steep sides. The sides of the table were deeply undercut in several places, creating pockets protected by overhanging rocks. It was in one of these pockets that the ram must have bedded down.

There was simply no way to get within shooting range without revealing our presence. We couldn't even glass him as he was conveniently tucked away underneath us. All we could do now was wait for the ram to make the first move. We listened intently for sounds and watched for a signal from Chris. It was hard to wait, and we became a little restless after 30 minutes had passed. All of a sudden we heard the clatter and crack of

falling rock, and saw the ram running flat-out across the sandy valley floor. I controlled my impulse to shoot, as we had never been able to determine with any certainty his size and age. Also, I was convinced that we wouldn't lose sight of him in this wide-open country. This was not like sheep hunting in the Rockies, where a sheep runs 20 yards and is out of sight.

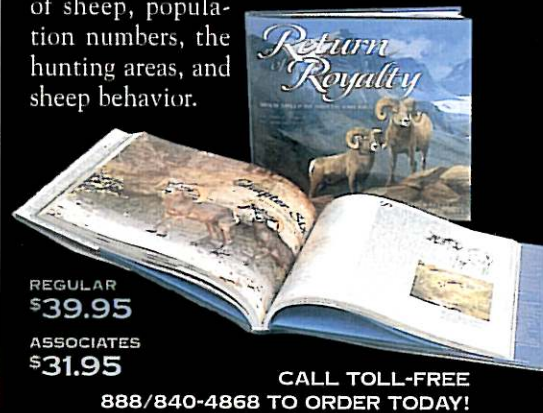
The ram continued to race across the valley about two miles until he finally slowed down and found a place to bed down and rest from his grueling sprint. We had been able to see enough of the ram while he was running to determine that he was a full curl and worth a stalk. But the openness of this country and the ram's incredibly acute vision made a stalk from our present position impossible. Our new plan took us back to the interstate, where we took the vehicle to an access point from which we could hike into shooting range of the ram's new position. We knew we had to be cautious. Rick figured he had run because of some noise or movement we had made back on the rock table, and he was probably going to be very spooky for the next few hours.

We walked for an hour before we saw him lying down about 1,500 yards away. There was no cover between us and the animal, and we could not continue towards him without being spotted. The desert environment requires a whole new set of stalking techniques, and I had never been so aware of sight lines as on this hunt. It seemed as though it took forever to be able to close the distance to the ram down to 200 yards. There were still some rocks that obstructed a shot, so I slipped off my backpack, chambered a cartridge in my .300 Winchester magnum, and crawled on my hands and knees until I was 50 yards closer. I had to really concentrate on crawling low enough to stay below his field of vision, not making any noise that would carry in the dry air, and hoping there was no breeze to pass along my scent. These sheep have it all when it comes to sensing predators.

I finally got into position, with my rifle securely stationed on my backpack, when the ram stood up and darted to a new spot several yards away. He was holding still, but acting very spooked and nervous. He obviously knew something was up, and I had to react fast or he would be long gone over the ridge behind him. In order to get a clear shot, I ran about five steps. There was no time to set up. I dropped where I stood, put the rifle on my knee, and squeezed the trigger. Nothing. Absolutely nothing happened. The safety was on.

## RETURN OF ROYALTY

If you love sheep hunting, you should read the Boone and Crockett Club's latest publication, **RETURN OF ROYALTY**. This wonderful new sheep book was edited by two Professional Members of the Club, Valerius Geist and Dale Toweill. There are chapters on each species of North American wild sheep broken down by state and area, and authored by many noted wildlife biologists and sheep experts. This is a fabulous resource for any serious sheep hunter who wants to learn about the different species and subspecies of sheep, population numbers, the hunting areas, and sheep behavior.



That was all it took. The sheep was gone over the ridge, running full-bore away from me and I knew that taking a shot at him was probably hopeless. But the fleeing animal was running diagonally, so I took a 200-yard shot, and missed. The realization that I might never see this ram again hit me, and at 250 yards, I squeezed the trigger again. It was an incredibly difficult shot—I didn't expect the ram to go down . . . but he did. I was absolutely stunned. I quickly discovered that my shot had been low. My next shot was through the heart. This is the kind of thing I hate to have happen, but sometimes that's just how it works out.

I was very happy with the ram, even though it was not large enough for a new state record. The ram's score of 171-6/8 met the Boone and Crockett Club's standards for inclusion in their 12th all-time records book. My father's ram is still the larger of the two California desert bighorns in our family, and that is just fine with me. Dad and I feel the family honor is intact, and the memories of our respective trips just keep getting sweeter with time. We both hope that, in a few years, my two young sons will inherit the family addiction for sheep hunting and want to create their own wonderful memories of hunting desert sheep in California. Thanks to the dedication and fine work of California wildlife biologists, like Vern Bleich, Andy Pauli, and Steve Torres, my sons will have lots of desert bighorns to chase. ▲▲▲