

# THE HUNT FOR A DEAD RAM

ONE OFFICIAL MEASURER'S AFTERNOON WITH PROFESSIONAL MEMBER AND OFFICIAL MEASURER ERIC ROMINGER PH.D. CHASING DOWN NEW MEXICO'S NEWEST BIGHORN HERD

"Kai-T, that big ram is dead," Eric Rominger, a bighorn sheep biologist for the state of New Mexico, said.

"No way, where?" Kai-T Blue-Sky wildlife biologist for Cochiti Pueblo responded.

"It's the only one I'm hearing," Rominger said as he scanned the countryside with his telemetry device and listened to the steady beep-beep-beep-beep. "I think he's in the canyon on the left."

Rominger turned and looked at me and said with his cigar-stained voice, "a mystery," and smiled.

It was a dark April day. Hail, rain, and snow squalls whipped across the high desert all morning, and I figured Rominger would rain check our plans. When I called to ask, he laughed and said, "We're going."

Bighorns had been missing from the Cochiti Canyon area since the 1880s, and a lot of people and agencies have been working to get them back since around 2001. The first of three translocations started in 2014. The last one was in March 2017 when the state added 34 more bighorns. Rominger and I hatched a plan to go and check in to see how things were going with the budding herd. I met up with him at the New Mexico Game and Fish complex in Santa Fe, and then he pointed the truck west towards the canyon and New Mexico's Jemez herd.

Cochiti Canyon is north of Albuquerque and west of Santa Fe but not far from either. The deep canyon walls are made up of different colored layers, and the sun has baked all of them. The canyon was burned through during the Las Conchas fire of 2011,

the largest wildfire in New Mexico's history at the time. The fire made the canyon look like the charred surface of the moon, but when it burned out the old growth, it created good bighorn sheep habitat.

We drove through Cochiti Pueblo and started up the dirt forest service road to the first release area. We drove across creeks, and Rominger crept the truck up the mud-slicked route to the first good overlook. When we got there, I threw on my rainjacket and Rominger pulled out his telemetry gear to scan the area.

We met up with Kai-T Blue-Sky. He and Rominger talked about the most recent bighorn sightings. Blue-Sky pointed out a mesa across the mouth of the canyon where he said the bighorns had been seen.

"They tend to hang out near the Henat Katrut Mesa," a prominent mesa also called "Horn Mesa" above the village, where he tells me the Cochiti people faced off with Diego de Vargas in the 1690s.

Leaders of the Cochiti Tribe came out for the two big releases of the bighorns, and Blue-Sky would like the tribe to be an active part of the re-introduction. "It's much more significant than just letting sheep off a truck," he said. "The sheep are a segue to working with our neighbors." The mountain sheep are seen as a revitalization of the tribe's heart and will.

The weather started to lift a bit while we talked. As Rominger tried different channels on the telemetry

receiver, we looked out at the cold blue of the distant Sandia Mountains while the wind whipped the pickup truck. "The mountains and canyons are a part of us, and we are a part of them," Blue-Sky said.

In August 2014, New Mexico Game and Fish worked with the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) to capture the first 45 Rocky Mountain bighorns from the Wheeler Peak Wilderness and bring them to the canyon. They were alpine sheep transferred into torched canyon country, and they set to ranging far and wide across all the land that would be their new home. The first set of bighorns traveled up through White Rock Canyon, up to Bandelier National Monument, wandered through the nearby pueblo lands, came near the edge of the city of Los Alamos, and worked their way through the nearby national forests just to come back to the canyon during the rut.

The majority of the land considered suitable for the reintroduction, about 51 percent, is USFS ground, including the Dome Wilderness. About 30 percent is National Park Service land, eight percent belongs to the state of New Mexico, about five percent is Department of Energy and five percent is private, and two percent are Jemez and Cochiti pueblo lands. The effort to bring the bighorn sheep back has been a collaborative effort between all of the agencies, and Rominger has been there the whole way through. Rominger tells me



Eric Rominger scans the area with his telemetry gear.

he doesn't expect there will be a huntable population of sheep in the canyon for another six to eight years, but that the area may be able to hold 400 bighorns.

We got back into the trucks and drove further up the canyon. We hadn't gotten a signal at the first lookout point, so we kept at it. When we pulled over again, the rainclouds had blown past; still no signal, just a few hoof tracks in the middle of the road. Rominger walked alone to a point off the side of the road and listened. When he came back, he told us that the collar of the biggest ram of the entire herd was sending out a mortality signal. With that news, I knew the hunt was on.

We were in a bad place to start down-climbing, so we went up the road to find a good place to work down toward the bottom of the canyon through a dry creek bed. We said adios

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to a few of Blue-Sky's compatriots after fishing a weather balloon out of a burned snag, and the four of us—Rominger, Blue-Sky, a quiet young tribal officer named DJ, and I—started the descent.

Once we started walking through small bunch grasses and forbes, I noticed the low-growing mountain mahogany that had been browsed by either deer or bighorn sheep. Buckbrush, Gambel oak, and New Mexican locust (*Robinia neomexicana*) had taken hold since the fire, all good food for critters. Rominger continually checked his receiver and the beeps grew louder. About halfway towards the bottom we had to sidehill the creek bottom because of the treacherous drop-offs, and I glassed white bone next to a little rainwater pool.

I tried to beat Rominger and the others to it, and when I got there, I found the rotten skull of a bighorn ewe, one that had probably met its demise up the creek and had been washed down along with its femur. Prior to the 2017

release, New Mexico Game and Fish estimated that there were around 60-75 bighorn sheep in the area. The state has confirmed that three radio-collared bighorns have been killed by lions so far, but believe a few more have been picked off over the years.

With the original 45 bighorns, another three rams released in 2016, and the additional 34 released this last spring, there are probably more with lambing the last three springs, but the state doesn't account for lamb recruitment just yet. Rominger believes 25-30 lambs have been recruited to date, making the total population somewhere around 105-120 bighorns. The two bigger, breeder rams were culled by hunters on a special license this past fall to stymie any inbreeding.

The ram we were after was as dead as the ewe lying in front of me, but we didn't know how he died or where he was, so we continued down the rocky creek. A canyon wren called, while the sound

of the telemetry signal grew. "It's just around this corner, 100 yards or less," Rominger said. According to him, radio tracking is an art, one that takes years to perfect, and lucky for me, he'd been in the business a long time.

The four of us combed the bottomland in the spring sunshine for a good 40 minutes till we were all sweating and breathing heavily, but still no sign of the ram.

We were directly below the second point where Rominger had first heard the signal. We could look up the wall and see where he had been. There were sheer rock faces surrounding the canyon bottom, and the telemetry signal may have bounced off of any one of them. The dull part of the hunt was on—the time when I started thinking about what else I should be doing somewhere else—and a little doubt crept in. The receiver would catch signals bouncing off of rock walls, and since we were at the bottom of a canyon, and there was no dead ram, it could be anywhere.

I wasn't the only one with doubts. There was no smell, no scavenger birds or bones strewn across the ground. All that was around was rock, desert plants and soft sand. Rominger told me that we might just be looking for a collar someone had hucked off of a high point near the road. Blue-Sky and DJ started drifting away to look at a flowering cactus.

We decided to leave the creek bottom and head up the hill at an angle back towards the trucks, and after we climbed about a hundred yards up the hill we smelled the musky scent of sheep. The doldrums fell away in a hurry. We looked for trees, rocks, and bushes along the hillside where a body could be stashed and worked our way from place to place, but then we lost the scent.

DJ and I worked ahead to about 100 vertical feet up the hill when all of sudden he



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THE  
TAKE ANYWHERE,  
TAKE ON ANYTHING  
TAKE COOLER.



**YETI HOPPER**

THE 100% LEAKPROOF, TOUGH-AS-NAILS,  
CARRY-THE-DAY COOLER

stopped, like a setter sniffing out a pheasant, and he said, "It smells like death." We called to the others, and they came over by us; the receiver's beeps didn't sound louder to me, but to Rominger's ear they had grown sharper. If we were going to find anything, we had to climb the route out of the canyon that we didn't want to descend earlier. We stuck together the best we could, but the loose ground made it dangerous for us to stay too close together, so we worked our way up slowly.

Near the top, Blue-Sky and I took a breather, and he told me a little more about the history of his people and the land. I knew little about his tribe though I grew up less than 30 miles away. While we were talking, Rominger worked his way through the piñon-juniper stand nearby.

"Found him!"

When we got to him, Rominger was in good spirits and walked us through his hypothesis as to what had happened to the only big ram left in the area. He stood on a rock above the remains, grabbed a stick, and pointed out the drag marks above the body. The dead body had been drug from above down the dry wash, and we could see broken branches and places where the dirt had been scuffed up. The only thing left of the body besides the skull, bone, and fur was the rumen and its smell. The ram's neck was broken just below the skull.

We searched the area for some sort of indication of a lion, and soon found some fine grain hair on a branch along the drag path that didn't come from the sheep. We looked for more, and then decided we'd better get moving towards the trucks. The temperature was dropping, and we'd found what we were looking for. As we waited for a minute at the top of the hill,

it turned out DJ had already split for the truck, so we climbed in his rig and drove to ours. Everyone was pretty excited about what had just happened, and we needed a minute to collect ourselves.

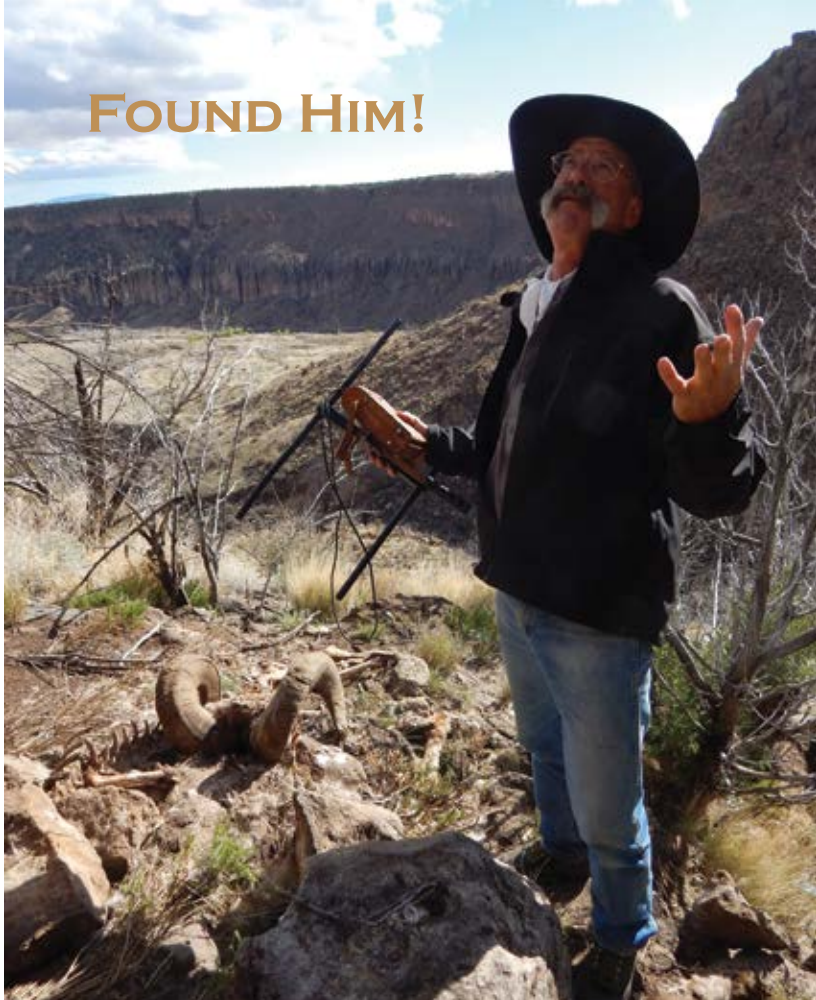
Rominger said that the ram had definitely been alive when they flew the survey in December, which means he had made it through the rut, and he would likely be the primary breeder of the new lamb crop of 2017. The ram's genes had probably made it into the herd, and there'd be no chance of inbreeding as he had been brought in during the spring of 2016. The herd was doing pretty well. There were no longer any rams over the age of four in the herd, and a new batch of lambs were on the way.

We drove our truck further along the canyon's rim with DJ and Blue-Sky following in their pickup. Rominger pointed out different landmarks along the way. We got into deep mud and barely made it through, so we all got out and stood above Cochiti Canyon. Blue-Sky told us that as a young boy, before the fire burned all the trees away, he would walk the canyon and fish and camp for a week, back when the canyon didn't hold any bighorns.

Rominger, DJ, and I listened and we watched the sun make its way low on the horizon. We knew the same thing, the bighorns were back and the hunt was over. ■

**Charles Ebbers loves Glacier National Park and North America's wildlife. He first started working in the park in 2010. He went to school to learn how to be a journalist, and has ended up working with local, regional, state and national publications. This past summer was his eighth season building trail in Glacier. Charlie lives in News Mexico when he is not in Glacier and met Eric Rominger at a B&C Official Measurers workshop in 2012.**

## FOUND HIM!



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