

# Mountain Sheep Coming Back

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**B**IGHORNS, possibly the finest big game animal in all North America, are again roaming the high mountain canyons and rimrocks of Southeastern Oregon. Originally inhabiting every canyon, cliff and lava butte as well as many of the rough lava beds of the state, east of the Cascade mountains, they disappeared suddenly and completely about 40 years ago. Now they are being given an opportunity to re-establish themselves.

Early in October a band of 23 Rocky mountain bighorn sheep was released on the Hart mountain antelope refuge, and now are under the watchful eye of Merle Jacobs, their personally appointed guardian, and Gene Branson, refuge superintendent. Transported more than 800 miles in two large trucks fitted up with nine compartments, the animals made the journey in good shape and apparently were in prime condition upon arrival. At last reports they were sticking close together and working their way up toward the summit of the mountain.

The newcomers including seven rams, 13 ewes and three lambs were transferred by the biological survey from its national bison range in Montana because the habitat there does not appear to be entirely suitable for the mountain bighorn, and because many Oregonians have been asking for a reintroduction of the species into this state, where only from 20 to 30 animals, a mere remnant of the once great herds formerly found in the state, are reported to be clinging to a perilous existence in the high Willows of Northeastern Oregon. However, no one has seen a living specimen for some years and that band may have been entirely wiped out by this time. Originally they occupied the high mountains only in the summer time, coming down into the Snake and Imnaha River canyons to winter, but in recent years domestic flocks have forced them to remain in the high mountains throughout the year, so if the bighorns have not already been wiped out, their ultimate extinction is only a matter of time since they cannot exist under such conditions. The establishment of a national park in the Snake River canyon might change the picture.

The bighorns just released on the antelope refuge will not be forced to live under such difficult conditions. The Hart mountain rims are not so high nor so rugged. There always are wind-swept ridges where abundant food can be found, and if in an unusual winter these should be covered with snow the sheep could easily get down to food. The greatest hazard they face is that of disease. They are susceptible to that scourge of domestic flocks, scabies, but as there have been no domestic sheep on Hart mountain for some time it is hoped these animals will escape this danger.

Much care was used to protect the animals on their long overland journey. Tarpaulins covered the tops and sides of the trucks to ward off wind and rain. Water troughs were installed and the floors were bedded with hay. The sheep were released as far up Potter's canyon as it was possible to take the trucks. Boys from a nearby CCC camp were lined up on both sides of the canyon wall to assist in getting the animals started safely up toward the rims. Potter canyon is on the steep west-

ern side of Hart mountain which rises above Warner valley.

Led by a 150-pound ram, six years of age, the herd eagerly clambered up the mountain side and apparently has made itself at home on a range that formerly abounded with bighorns, probably until about 1900 when they were exterminated by over-shooting and disease.

While the original Hart mountain sheep belonged to a slightly different subspecies designated by Vernon Bailey as Rimrock sheep, the biological survey officials believe these Rocky mountain animals will find the region to their liking and that they will do better than would the desert species from Nevada or Arizona.

Under favorable conditions the animals multiply rapidly, as the ewes commonly bear twins. Given any kind of a chance they seem to be animals capable of taking care of themselves. It's amazing to see the easy way they climb mountains and along cliffs, and many hunters have had a hard time making themselves believe what their eyes see when the bighorns start going down the face of a mountain. They leap from high cliffs, touch crags and narrow shelves of rocks here and there to slow them up momentarily, and then often end up with a sheer drop of many feet.

Both males and females have horns, but the majestic curly ones

formerly found, but the big game survey made last winter by the biological survey shows there are not more than 11,000 remaining. A drop from 28,000 to 11,000 in 30 years shows there is plenty of cause for alarm. If such a rate of decrease in numbers should continue there would soon be another addition to our long sorry list of extinct creatures. The government through the agency of the biological survey is doing everything it can to keep this from coming to pass.

Guy Stryker of Portland who was a member of a surveying party in the Hart mountain country in 1895, says the animals were abundant and that they were killed for food by members of the party. One member had 15 heads drying on the corral fence. But the end seems to have come suddenly. There is no authentic record of a single animal having been seen in that region after 1900.

In speaking of the possibility of reestablishing the bighorn in Oregon, Vernon Bailey of the biological survey says "they will live and thrive all the year around in deserts where no other game or stock can, and with proper management they would make profitable many areas now only picturesque. Moreover they would add greatly to the picturesqueness of any rocky ridge, peak, cliff or canyon wall, or to rough black lava beds and sagebrush basis between where they would



Rarely seen and more rarely pictured are the mountain sheep in Yellowstone National park, large bands of which roam the sides of 10,300-foot Mount Washburn. Here the photographer has caught one of the agile and timid animals poised on a rock probably speculating on the nature of the strange black box in the hands of the human. The big sheep are roaming the rimrocks in Southeastern Oregon.

—Photo by Haynes Inc.

grow only on the rams. The horns of the ewes do not grow long enough to form curves. The horns of the rams sometimes measure a foot in circumference and three feet from base to tip, while a good sized horn on a ewe would be about four or five inches around and 10 inches long.

Some 30 years ago, Ernest Thompson Seton estimated there were 28,000 of the animals in the United States. That was a rather small number compared to the vast herds

find just the food and shelter to their liking. Who would not enjoy living for a part of each year where a magnificent old bighorn could be seen on a cliff above or a band of ewes and young following a curved-horned leader up a terraced wall, bounding upward from ledge to ledge to look back from the skyline above? To him who has the means, the time and the vision to add such a resource to our natural wealth and progress and pleasure the world will owe a debt of undying appreciation."