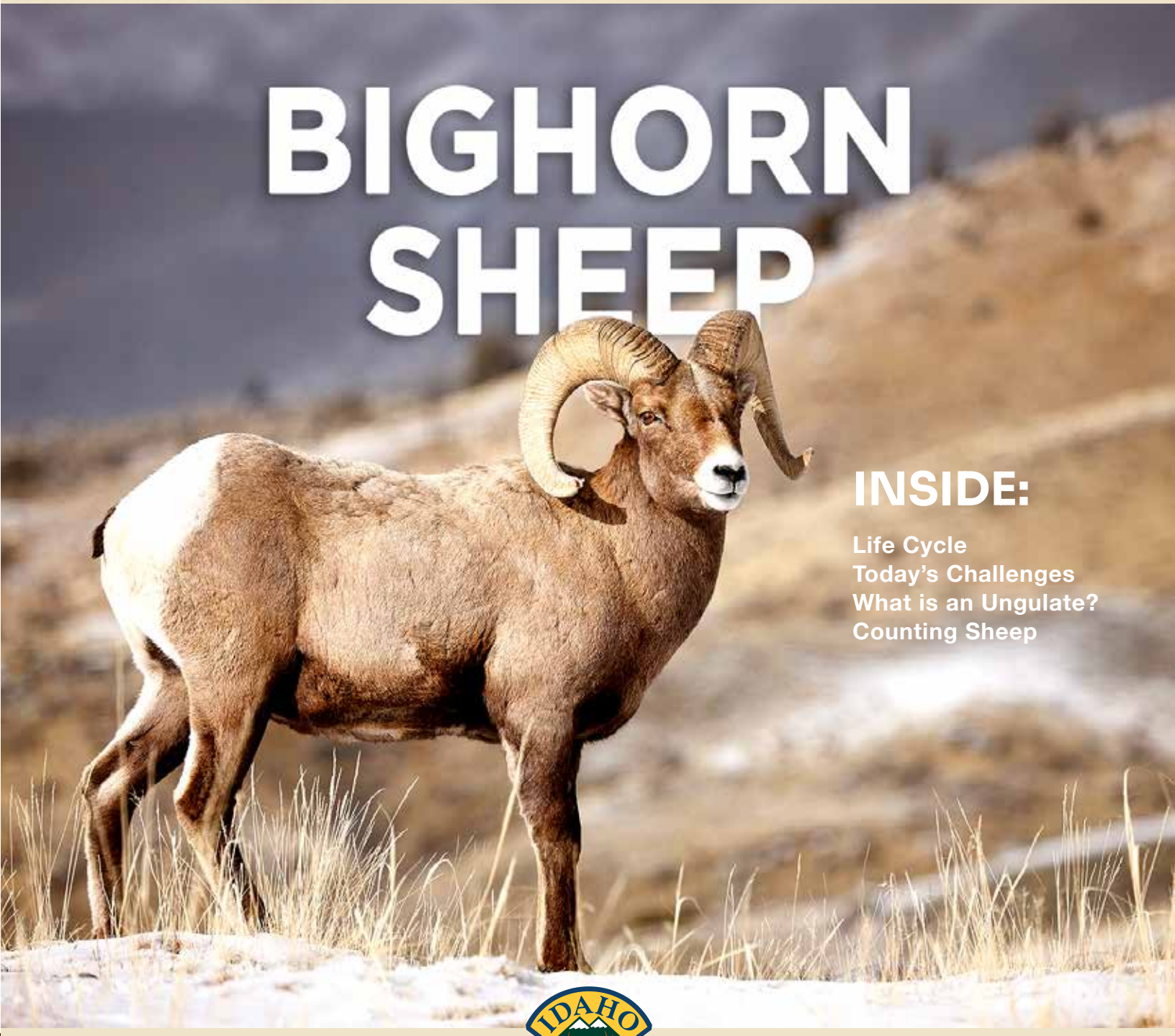
Wildlife Express

VOLUME 40 ISSUE 2 NOVEMBER 2026

BIGHORN SHEEP



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BIGHORN SHEEP

Idaho is home to two subspecies of bighorn sheep. California bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis californiana*) live in southern Idaho. Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis canadensis*) can be found in the central Idaho mountains. Besides occupying different habitats, these two subspecies are different in size and color. Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep are larger and feature a lighter, grayer coat and a noticeable dark stripe running through their white rump patch to the tail.



It's not difficult to see how bighorn sheep got their name. Rams, or male bighorn sheep, have huge curving horns. Together, the two horns on a Rocky Mountain ram may weigh up to 30 pounds. Horns become their weapon when battling other males. During the mating season, the rams charge at each other at speeds over 20 miles per hour. The sound caused by the horns crashing may be heard more than a mile away. Bighorn rams may battle like this for over a day until one ram finally gives up. It's a good thing their skulls are cushioned to absorb the shock!

Photos: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game

LIFE CYCLE

Being born on a steep cliff might not seem very safe, but that is exactly where bighorn lambs start their lives. Female sheep (ewes) give birth to one lamb in late spring. Lambs can stand and climb shortly after being born. A lamb will stay hidden near where it was born for about a week and then start to follow its mother. They drink mother's milk until they are about five months old. Then they start to eat plants like adults.



Bighorn sheep live in groups. Two kinds of herds are formed. One is a herd that contains adult females (ewes) and their lambs. Female lambs usually stay with their mother's group for their entire lives. Males create the second type of herd and stay together except during mating season. Young rams leave their mother's herd and join a male group when they are between two to four years old. As they get stronger, their horns may be the ones you hear crashing and echoing through the mountains.

Living in groups is a behavioral adaptation that offers bighorn sheep protection from predators. It's helpful to have more eyes to look out for danger. They have exceptional eyesight and can spot other animals moving from up to a mile away.

Ewes keep a close eye out for golden eagles, especially when the lambs are young. Golden eagles will sometimes swoop down on the lambs to make them lose their grip on the rocks. This makes them easy prey for the flying eagle. Wolves and mountain lions will also prey upon bighorn sheep.



Photos: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game



BIGHORN SHEEP THEN AND NOW

It is a special treat to see bighorn sheep in Idaho, but not so long ago it was next to impossible to find one. In the early 1900s no bighorn sheep remained in southern Idaho. The bighorns living in the central part of Idaho were almost wiped out as well. What happened?

Native Americans carved images of bighorn sheep hunts on rocks along the Snake and Salmon Rivers. Bighorn sheep were a major source of food for them. Horns were used to build bows. Bighorn sheep hides were used to make clothing and containers. Bighorn sheep were important for Native Americans' survival. At that time, they were one of the most abundant big game species in Idaho.

When European settlers moved into Idaho, they also hunted bighorns. At that time, there were no regulations or laws about when to hunt or how many bighorns a person could harvest. These early hunters put a lot of pressure on bighorns; they killed more bighorns than were being born. Bighorns couldn't replenish their numbers quickly enough to make up for the losses from unregulated hunting. Populations decreased.

So why are there bighorn sheep in these places now? Idaho Fish and Game put them there! Fish and Game worked with other states and Canada, where bighorns were still plentiful. Bighorn sheep were trapped in those areas and released back into the wild in Idaho. Many of the bighorns did well; thankfully their numbers started to increase.

Today, bighorn sheep hunting is highly regulated. In Idaho, you need to apply for one of approximately 100 controlled hunt tags. Successful applicants can harvest one California and one Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep in their lifetime.

A hunter has two other options to pursue bighorn sheep, whether or not they have previously harvested a wild sheep in Idaho. One bighorn tag is offered through a lottery, typically administered through the Idaho Wild Sheep Foundation, and another can be purchased at an annual auction typically held at the national Wild Sheep Foundation convention. Hunters who hold these tags can hunt in any open unit under the seasons established for the hunt area, with the highly desirable Unit 11 alternating between being included in the auction and lottery tag each year. Proceeds of these special tags are dedicated to bighorn sheep management, research and disease investigations.

A coveted experience, this hunt is literally a "once in a lifetime" opportunity.

Photo: CC-BY Canyon County Parks, Cultural & Natural Resources

TODAY'S CHALLENGES FOR BIGHORNS



Though hunting is now controlled and populations have been re-established in historical ranges, bighorn sheep still face many hardships. Habitat loss, predation and human disturbance can create challenging conditions for the species. The largest threat to most bighorn sheep herds is respiratory disease caused by a bacterium called *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae* (Movi). Movi causes pneumonia and can lead to death in wild sheep who have no built-up resistance to it. Movi can be transmitted between wild animals and between domestic sheep/goats and wild sheep/goats. Since there is currently no vaccine for Movi, the most effective management solution to date has been to keep domestic and wild sheep physically separated. This may sound easy, but since wild and domestic sheep prefer many of the same habitats, intermixing and physical contact is difficult to prevent.

If a bighorn does get too close to domestic sheep, it may need to be euthanized. This may seem extreme, but if a wandering bighorn gets Movi and goes back to an uninfected herd, up to half of the sheep who get infected could die from the outbreak. Removing one bighorn may help save the rest of the herd. Bighorns are an important part of Idaho's history and natural ecosystem.

The Department of Fish and Game is trying to make sure that bighorn sheep will always be a part of Idaho by regulating hunting, managing habitat, and managing disease.

Photo: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game

WHAT IS AN UNGULATE?

Bighorn sheep are ungulates. Ungulate is the Latin word for hoof. All ungulates have hooves.

World-wide, ungulates are divided into two groups. One group includes animals that have an odd number of toes (perissodactyls). Horses, zebras, donkeys and rhinoceros are members of this hooved group. Animals in the other group have an even number of toes (artiodactyls). Cattle, sheep, goats, giraffes, and all members of the deer family have 2 toes.

All ungulates are herbivores. Grasses, shrubs, leaves and twigs are tough to eat. To help them digest plants, ungulates have stomachs divided into different chambers or rooms. When bighorn sheep eat, they nip off grass, leaves and twigs. They don't chew their food much before swallowing it. The plants go into the first chamber of their stomachs. The first chamber is full of bacteria and other organisms that help break down the plants. Later, bighorn sheep spit up the food and chew it more thoroughly. This "chewing the cud" helps them gain more nutrition out of poor quality, tough food.

Many animals are at risk when they eat. Predators are more likely to see a deer eating in a clearing than hiding under a tree, so sheep eat quickly. They nip off plants, chew them just a little and then swallow them. Once their first stomach is full, the sheep finds a place to rest and hide. Now the sheep can fully chew and digest their food, without having to constantly look out for danger.



Photo: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game

HORNS



Photo: © Chris for AdobeStock #471602189

Bighorn sheep, pronghorn, mountain goats and bison all have horns. Horns are a bit different than antlers. How do you tell horns and antlers apart from each other?

Antlers are bones and often look like tree branches with a main beam and points coming off the beam. Horns are sheaths over bone stubs and are usually not branched like antlers; they are shaped similar to the letters “C,” “J,” and “L.”

Horns have two parts, a bony middle and an outer sheath. The inside part is bone that is attached to the skull. The outside of the horn, the sheath, is a covering made of a tough fiber-like material called keratin. Your fingernails and hair also contain keratin. What purpose does the sheath serve? It protects what’s underneath! Both males and females



Mule Deer - Antlers
Tree Branches with main beam.



Pronghorn - Horns
Bony middle with outer sheath.

Mule Deer Photo: © AdobeStock #533553900; Proghorn Photo: CC-BY Shutterstock #86413435

of a species may grow horns. Horns are permanent. In most cases, they continue to grow throughout an animal's life. Pronghorns are an exception to this rule. A pronghorn will shed and re-grow its sheath each year.

If you take a close look at most horns, you may see rings or segments. Counting the rings will give you an idea of a bighorn sheep's age. Bighorn sheep have many ridges and lines on their horns. As the horns grow, they leave behind a ridge or line. The rings used for aging a bighorn are usually darker, a bit wider and go all the way around the horn. These rings are made during the winter. Horn growth slows down in the winter, and the stress of winter will often leave a mark on the horn. The area between these darker rings is called a segment.

Lambs grow their first set of horns by six months and their second horn segment by 18 months. Older rams often wear off the tips of their horns, which is called "brooming" of the horns. It can be difficult to determine the age of ewes by their horns. You may only be able to tell a ewe's minimum age.



Photo: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game

MANAGING WILD SHEEP IN IDAHO



Though Idaho Fish and Game is charged with managing bighorn sheep in Idaho, they do not do it alone. Like much effort toward wildlife management, partnerships among government agencies and private organizations are common and essential. Nearly 62% of Idaho is managed by federal agencies and nearly all the bighorn sheep habitat in Idaho is on federal land. These agencies work hard to manage habitat for bighorn sheep. The U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation and the Army Corps of Engineers all partner with Idaho Fish and Game to manage bighorn sheep. In addition, the Idaho Wild Sheep Foundation's mission is "to enhance wild sheep populations in Idaho, and with partners in adjacent states, for public enjoyment, education, and fair chase hunting; to promote professional wildlife management and protect sportsmen's rights." Through funding and volunteer work, the passionate members of this organization also play a significant role in helping Idaho Fish and Game manage bighorn sheep.



Photos: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game



TRANSLOCATIONS

Translocations are a wildlife management technique to establish, reestablish or add to certain wildlife species in specific areas. Translocations can be used to increase the population of a species in an area or increase genetic diversity or both!



In February of 2026, 30 California bighorns were translocated from Oregon to southwest Idaho though a partnership among Idaho Fish and Game, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Bureau of Land Management, the Idaho Wild Sheep Foundation and the Wild Sheep Foundation.

As mentioned earlier, bighorn sheep were historically common in Owyhee County, but native sheep were lost from the local landscape in the 1920s. Fish and Game first translocated California bighorn sheep back into the Jacks Creek area in the late 1960s, with more bighorns added in the late 1980s to bolster the growing population.

The herd grew to about 360 animals at its peak in the early 1990s, but has declined steadily since then. A July 2024 survey counted 111 sheep. The goal of the 2026 translocation was to increase the number of sheep in the population and improve long-term bighorn herd health. Studies indicate the Jacks Creek area has suitable habitat to support more sheep, and health testing of Jacks Creek sheep found no evidence of Movi disease.

Most of the sheep released in 2026 were females, which play a critical role in increasing populations. All released sheep were fitted with GPS collars, allowing biologists to closely monitor their survival, movements, reproduction, and lamb survival. The goals of the project are to increase the number of bighorn sheep through increased adult female survival, improved pregnancy and lambing rates, and a greater number of lambs surviving to adulthood.

Photos: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game

COUNTING SHEEP



An important part of managing many of Idaho's wildlife species is counting presence, absence, abundance and monitoring health. Counting sheep may be something you think of doing as you fall asleep, but counting bighorn sheep is a lively and exciting undertaking. Bighorn sheep are typically counted in the winter with aerial flights using low-flying helicopters, supplemented by boots-on-the-ground visual counting. Since many bighorn sheep are collared, telemetry tracking and GPS monitoring also aid counting and monitoring sheep. Health monitoring (to obtain blood and nasal samples) uses nets for live capture.

One of the times that require additional boots-on-the-ground is during surveys when lambs are 4-months old. Most lamb mortality occurs during the first 4 months, so surveys at this time give a good idea of the number that will survive to adulthood. Biologists, contractors and volunteers use marked ewes to get close enough to observe if they have a lamb-in-tow that got through the roughest 4-month period of a sheep's life.

Photo: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game



Photo: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game

Wildlife Express

Volume 40 • Issue 2
Bighorn Sheep
November 2026

Wildlife Express
is published by Idaho Fish and Game

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Layout: Nancy Jasper