

Bighorn Sheep: Winter Visitors

San Juan Corridors Coalition (www.sanjuancorridors.org) is continuing its monthly series on Living with Wildlife featuring *Bighorn Sheep: Winter Visitors* presented by Brad Banulis, Terrestrial Biologist, CDOW, Thursday, November 13, 7 p.m., Ridgway Community Center.

Two hundred years ago bighorn sheep were widespread throughout North America with some estimates exceeding two million. Subsequent hunting and disease introduced by domestic sheep--pneumonia and scabies, reduced the populations dramatically until by the early 1900s only a few thousand remained. Conservation efforts have restored the populations to moderate levels.

Colorado is especially proud of its bighorn sheep conservation efforts and the size of its herds. The Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep is the state mammal of Colorado and the symbol of the Colorado Department of Wildlife. According to John Ellenberger in *Return of Royalty, Wild Sheep of North America* (1999), there were about 7,000 bighorn sheep in Colorado in 1915 which declined to 3,200 in 1958 and to 2,200 by 1970. The most dramatic single incident of decline was in the winter of 1958 when the Tarryall-Kenosha herd was hit by pneumonia and reduced from 1,000 to 30 animals.

Concern over the rapid decline of bighorn sheep led the Colorado legislature to outlaw hunting between 1887 and 1953. Hunting was resumed “when wildlife managers felt that limited hunting was needed to disperse concentrations...and prevent die-offs...Management in the form of limited hunting, trap and transplant, and habitat manipulation are being used to maintain and augment bighorn sheep populations in the state.” By 1998 there were an estimated 7,000 bighorn sheep in Colorado, showing a gradual and significant increase from 4,000 in 1981 and 6,000 in 1988 (Ellenberger, 79, 81). According to CDOW, the Colorado herds represent the largest number of bighorn sheep anywhere.

Ouray has a special herd, designated sheep unit S21 or the Ouray-Cow Creek herd, that is enjoyed by residents in the winter when the sheep come to lower elevations for winter range. They can often be seen grazing on the rocky cliffs along 550, sometimes causing traffic jams as people stop to take pictures. In an article in the *Plainealer* (December 14, 2007), Karen Griffiths discussed the problems this Ouray herd is facing as the result of development and recreation, which fragments their habitat and increases their stress level. In 1981 this herd numbered 200 animals; by 1998 it had been reduced to just 80 animals (Ellenberger, 81). A 41-acre private parcel called Jackass Flats north of Ouray near Lake Lenore and the Bachelor-Syracuse mine is an especially important wintering area for S21 and is currently the object of controversy as to its future.

Brad Banulis is a Terrestrial Biologist for the Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW) in Montrose. He has been with the CDOW about four years. Before being hired into his current position, Brad worked cooperatively between the CDOW, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and Colorado Watershed Network (CWN) as a Private

Lands Biologist working to improve wildlife habitat. Brad received his B.S. from Colorado State University in Wildlife Biology and Management, and is working on completing a M.S. from the University of Wyoming, with research focusing on the effects of gas and oil development on elk habitat selection.

Doors for this presentation will open at 6:30. Refreshments will include cookies, coffee provided by Mountain Market, and herbal tea provided by Cups.

There will be no December presentation due to the many holiday activities. However, sessions will resume in January and continue throughout the year on the second Thursday of each month featuring wildlife topics of interest to the community.

For further information and to offer suggestions for this series, please contact Sara Coulter (626-4496, scoulter@towson.edu) or Shirley Jentsch (240-1319, sjentsch@montrose.net).