

CALIFORNIA BIGHORN SHEEP REINTRODUCTION TO THE CHARLES SHELDON ANTELOPE RANGE

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Abstract. Eight California bighorns (*Ovis canadensis californiana*) were reintroduced to the Charles Sheldon Antelope Range in 1968. By the end of 1972 the herd had increased to 22 head. One known mortality has occurred.

INTRODUCTION

The California bighorn (*Ovis canadensis californiana*) once ranged from the Chilco and Williams Lakes area of British Columbia southward through most of eastern Washington and Oregon, southwestern Idaho, northwestern Nevada and along the Sierra Nevada of California as far south as Inyo County. By the early part of the 20th century, these sheep had disappeared from most of their native range. A few remained in isolated areas of California's Sierra Nevada. Much of the British Columbia range remained occupied but in reduced numbers. A few sheep may have continued to spend summers in the extreme north Washington Cascades, crossing back into British Columbia to winter (Sugden 1961, Seton 1969).

Attempts to reintroduce the California bighorn to its native ranges began in the early 1950's. To date, transplants have been made in all states where the sheep were native and in North Dakota (Yoakum 1963). The North Dakota introduction is on range once occupied by the extinct Badlands bighorn (*O.c. auduboni*).

Probably the most successful reintroduction thus far was made on the Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge in Oregon during 1954 (Deming 1961). The 20 California bighorns brought from British Columbia by the Oregon State Game Commission have done well and the Hart Mountain herd has provided 21 rams to hunters and furnished animals for three additional transplants in Oregon and one in Nevada. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the reintroduction made to the Charles Sheldon Antelope Range in Nevada during 1968.

HISTORY

Plans to reestablish bighorn sheep on the Charles Sheldon Antelope Range in northern Washoe and Humboldt Counties, Nevada, date back at least to 1950. At that time, consideration was given to the introduction of desert bighorns (*O.c. nelsoni*) to the area. The reason for wanting to introduce a non-native subspecies is not clear but was probably related to animal availability for transplanting.



Figure 1. Release of adult California bighorn on Sheldon Game Range. (Photo by George Tsucamoto, Nevada Department of Fish and Game).

A formal plan for the reintroduction of the California bighorn to Sheldon was prepared by the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife in 1963. Concurrence in the plan was received from the Bureau of Land Management, joint administrators of the Range, in 1964 and a cooperative agreement with the Oregon State Game Commission and the Nevada Fish and Game Commission was entered into in 1966.

The site selected for the reintroduction is near the center of the Range on the breaks of Hell Creek. A woven wire fence, six feet high, was constructed in 1966 and 1967 enclosing approximately 1,700 acres.

Vegetation in the enclosure is primarily of the big sage (Artemisia tridentata) and low sage (A. arbuscula) types. Two small meadows are found along the upper part of Hell Creek and a variety of trees and shrubs dominates the scene in Hell Creek Canyon.

Running water is available in Hell Creek year 'round and extensive rimrocks and talus slopes form the walls of Hell Creek Canyon.

THE REINTRODUCTION

The first attempts to trap sheep for the reintroduction began in mid-1967. Personnel could not be mustered for the trapping operation, however, and the actual transplant was delayed until 1968.

On July 20, 1968, about 60 men from the Oregon State Game Commission, Order of the Antelope, and Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, staged a drive of the bighorn enclosure at Juniper Canyon on the Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge. Four California bighorns were captured. These animals were held in a small pasture at Hart Mountain for two days. They were then trapped and loaded for their trip to Sheldon.

At about 10:30 p.m. on July 22, 1968 the tailgate was removed from the truck in the Hell Creek enclosure. The first California bighorn, a mature ewe, leaped to the ground and headed for the "high country". She was quickly followed by her ram lamb, a mature ram, six years old, and a two year old ram. After an absence of some 40 years, the California bighorn had reentered the Nevada wildlife scene.

On August 14, 1968, a crew of about 25 Oregon State Game Commission, Malheur Job Corps Center, and Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife personnel made another sheep drive on Hart Mountain. Four additional bighorns were captured, two mature ewes, and two ewe lambs. These were loaded and transported to Sheldon on August 19 to bring the total of reintroduced California bighorns to eight.

CURRENT STATUS

Table I shows the composition of the reintroduced herd of California bighorns on the Charles Sheldon Antelope Range from 1968 through 1972.

Table I. HERD COMPOSITION, 1968-1972.

Year	Rams*	Ewes*	Yearlings	Lambs	Total
1968	2	3		3	8
1969	2	3	3	3	11
1970	3	5	3	3	14
1971	4	6	3	4	17
1972	6	7	4	5	22

* Two years or older

Production in the Hell Creek enclosure has been good, ranging from 71 to 100% annually for ewes of three years or older.

Only one mortality has been known to have occurred. The skeleton of a mature ewe was found in Hell Creek Canyon in November, 1971. All that remained were a few well chewed bones. The condition of the skull suggests it may have been a ewe seen earlier with an abnormality on the right side of her head.

LITERATURE CITED

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