

FIELDNOTES

Desert Bighorn Sheep

DESCRIPTION: Desert bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis nelsoni*) look nothing like their domesticated cousins. Their coat consists of guard hairs about 2 inches long covering a woolly undercoat. The coat color is usually a shade of brown, but it can sometimes look gray. They have a short brown tail surrounded by a white rump patch, with the white color extending down to their hind legs.

There is considerable differentiation between the sexes. Adult males, called “rams,” usually weigh between 160 and 200 pounds, with a maximum weight of 225 pounds. They sport large, curled horns. Adult females, or “ewes,” range from 75 to 130 pounds and have short horns that curve slightly.

DISTRIBUTION: Historical numbers of this desert-adapted mammal were much higher than they are now. Many factors contributed to their decline, including disease and overhunting. Conservation and repopulation efforts spanning decades have increased their numbers, although their range (potential habitat) has stayed relatively the same. They live in the desert mountain ranges of Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Mexico and Utah. They like steep terrain and are good climbers.

HABITAT: Desert bighorn sheep prefer steep, sparsely vegetated mountain habitat. They avoid tree cover when possible and prefer habitats with a variety of plant species. A large portion of their diet consists of grasses, but they also consume shrubs and other flowering plants.

BIOLOGY: Desert bighorn sheep are well-adapted to the arid and steep environment they inhabit. They can go for weeks without visiting water and are efficient at gathering moisture from the plants they eat. They are also good climbers, with specialized hoof pads that help them negotiate steep, rocky terrain.

Desert bighorn sheep are social animals. Adult males generally segregate themselves from the rest of the herd. Ewes, lambs and young rams (less than 3 years old) are often seen together. The groups join during the breeding season, or “rut.” This protracted season can last from



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ZACKERY ZDINAK

September through December and sometimes resumes for a short period in the spring. Rams establish a social hierarchy based on body and horn size. During the rut, they engage in dramatic head-butting to determine breeding dominance. Once the hierarchy is established, rams live in the same group with little conflict.

Gestation is about 180 days long, and ewes nearly always give birth to a single lamb. Newborn bighorn lambs weigh from 8 to 10 pounds. Lambs can walk, run and climb minutes after their birth, but depend on their mother for milk in the first weeks of life. They gradually incorporate more vegetation into their diet and are usually weaned by 6 months of age. Bighorn sheep have a life expectancy of 10 to 12 years, but may attain age 17 or older.

STATUS: Desert bighorn sheep are considered a game animal in Arizona. They are susceptible to disease outbreaks, and populations are monitored closely. Hunters who draw a tag are only allowed to harvest one desert bighorn sheep in their lifetime. There are currently about 5,000 desert bighorn sheep in Arizona.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: Transplants of sheep into vacant habitat and to augment struggling populations are ongoing. To minimize transmission of diseases carried by domestic sheep and goats that can kill wild sheep, wild sheep must be adequately separated from these domestic animals. Monitoring herd health in existing populations helps to prevent disease outbreaks among desert bighorns. —Anis Aoude