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Arizona Game and Fish Department

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Desert bighorn sheep predator taken at site of latest kills

Yuma -- On Sunday, officials with the Arizona Game and Fish Department killed a mountain lion in the Plomosa-New Water Mountains north of the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge in a continuing effort to help restore a declining desert bighorn sheep population that has reached an historic low.

Arizona Game and Fish Department officials have determined that lions that take more than two sheep in a six-month period are a significant threat to the already seriously declining bighorn sheep herd.

When taken, the young male lion was found with two freshly killed bighorn sheep and one freshly killed mule deer. The lion had been preying on desert bighorn sheep in the Kofa Mountains and other surrounding mountain ranges for several months.

“When added to two other known bighorn sheep kills during the past three months, these dead sheep would equal the entire annual recruitment of yearling sheep that we would expect to be produced by 25 ewes,” said Larry Voyles, the regional supervisor for Arizona Game and Fish Department’s southwest Arizona region.

Officials from Arizona Game and Fish and the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) announced in November that the triennial survey of the Kofa bighorn sheep herd indicated the herd had fallen to an historic low estimate of 390 animals, representing a severe decline from the estimated 812 animals found during the 2000 survey.

“Given the declining status of this bighorn population, it cannot withstand the level of predation that this particular lion was exerting on the herd,” Voyles said.

Officials had been tracking the lion through the use of satellite telemetry since last February as part of efforts to restore the Kofa herd. This herd was once one of the most robust herds in the

nation and has been a critically important source of sheep for repatriating desert bighorn sheep to Arizona and other southwestern United States mountain ranges for 50 years.

Sheep transplants from the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge were suspended this year due to the severe population decline. As announced last November, wildlife experts attribute the decline to a variety of factors including drought, predation, disease factors and human disturbance.

At that time it was estimated that at least five lions were spending enough time in the area to be considered “resident” lions and five different lions have, in fact, been recorded by remote cameras at water catchments in the area. This represents a significant change from the transient lion population that has been the historic norm for this part of Arizona.

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