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Regal
RETURN

DESERT BIGHORN SHEEP
ARE BEING RESTORED TO THE
MOUNTAINS OF WEST TEXAS.

By WENDEE HOLTCAMP

PHOTO © AMPY LONG



AGAINST A MAGENTA SUNRISE, THE WINTER SOLSTICE MOON — full and white — sinks into the western horizon. Several dozen folks stand bundled up at the base of Elephant Mountain, a flat-topped 6,225-foot monolith rising more than 2,000 feet above the Chihuahuan Desert. Witness to the glorious dawn on the solstice, a day historically celebrating rebirth and a return to light, I can feel the collective anticipation of the events soon to unfold.

On all accounts both practical and symbolic, it seemed the perfect day for returning desert bighorn sheep to the Bofecillos Mountains of Big Bend Ranch State Park on the Texas-Mexico border, where they had been absent for the past half-century.

“Every time we drove by, we would say, ‘There ought to be sheep in those mountains,’” says Mike Pittman, Trans-Pecos wildlife management area project leader overseeing the relocation. Bighorns disappeared from Texas around 1958, and restoration efforts began in earnest in the 1980s. Although bighorns are not yet in all of their former habitats, the return of the flagship species represents one of the state’s biggest wildlife victories. It involved an uncommon cooperation between hunters, private landowners, government agencies and conservationists.

When I visited the region just three months before, in September, TPWD biologist Froylan Hernandez showed me around the 23,147-acre Elephant Mountain Wildlife Management Area (WMA), which has become a natural breeding ground for the bighorns. Although the WMA has a self-guided driving tour, the 2,200-acre grassland plateau on top is often closed to the public except for guided hunts, research activities and field days. I witnessed something few ever will: bighorn herds up close atop the mountain.

We clambered through the willow grass as ethereal fog came and went, hiding the bighorns from view. “The mountain makes its own weather,” Hernandez explained. The desert’s wet season lasts from July through September, bringing occasional thunderstorms, low clouds and fog. We tried to get close to a half-dozen females and a lamb on a ridge, but when we arrived where they were literally moments before, the cloud lifted and they were halfway across the mountain, eliciting our raucous laughter. These sheep can dash like silent lightning through the pale yellow grasses.

As we continue our exploration, Hernandez shows me where the sheep nibbled “ice cream plants” — a colloquialism for their preferred vegetation: mountain mahogany, Wright’s silk tassel and the spring flowers of yuccas. Desert bighorns can survive with little fresh water, getting what they need from vegetation. These fleet-footed animals prefer habitat with mountain slopes greater than 60 percent, which helps them elude predators such as mountain lions and coyotes.

Watching the agile sheep leap across narrow ledges is like watching the Cirque de Soleil. How can they do that without falling to their deaths many feet below? The answer lies in their hooves, which have rubbery soles that grip rocky surfaces, giving them an uncanny ability to leap wildly but land safely.



Through the efforts of TPWD and others, desert bighorn sheep have been restored to several West Texas mountain ranges. The population has been on the rise since the reintroduction program was launched in the 1980s, and Texas bighorn numbers have now reached 1,500.



TOP PHOTO © GRADY ALLEN; OTHER © ANDY LONG

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As Hernandez tells about the bighorns, it's clear how much he loves his work. He interned at Elephant Mountain in 2000, and 10 years later, he leads the bighorn restoration for TPWD.

"If you find a job you love, you won't have to 'work' a day in your life," he says happily.

As we walk and observe, he shares the bighorn's history. One subspecies of desert bighorn once roamed the mountains of West Texas — *Ovis canadensis mexicana* — but was extirpated throughout the state by 1958 from unregulated hunting, domestic livestock diseases and habitat loss and fragmentation. Although humans have not destroyed the mountaintops, we have modified the valleys in between with roads, cities and fences that limit the ability of bighorns to move from range to range. As a result, when bighorns disappear from a mountain range, there's little chance for recolonization.

And that brings us to this winter solstice, a day for new beginnings. The cold air nips at my skin, but that will change as the day goes on. Excitement over the first sheep captured pulses

through the whole crew, which includes several Texas Bighorn Society volunteers, students and a professor from Sul Ross State University, TPWD biologists, veterinary scientists and a few photographers and reporters. By moving some individuals from one mountain range to another, humans go from being the bighorn's No. 1 threat to No. 1 hero — even if the individuals being relocated may experience what some of us jokingly call the sheep version of an alien abduction.

Imagine their point of view: While happily walking through their desert scrub home, bighorns suddenly find themselves ensnared in a net, legs tied, blindfolded. Then their bodies lift off the ground and fly through the air. What in their experience or evolution could have prepared them for this? The helicopter pilot flies down the mountain with up to three tethered beasts dangling below. They are gently placed on the ground, whereupon strange creatures (that would be us) take blood and fur and, yes, even perform an anal probe for the purpose of taking temperature and a fecal sample.



Bighorn reintroduction almost failed to get off the ground. Over the years, several *O.c. nelsoni* were brought from neighboring states and *O.c. mexicana* from Mexico to a facility at Black Gap WMA, but early efforts at reintroduction faltered until the early 1980s. Dr. James "Red" Duke formed the Texas Bighorn Society in 1981 and, together with the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, decided to settle for nothing less than seeing bighorns returned to all of their native mountain ranges. They lobbied the state Legislature and received its support. Restoration has proceeded in fits and starts since.

In 1983, TPWD brought captive bighorns from Black Gap to a breeding facility at Sierra Diablo WMA near Van Horn. The bighorns were released into the wild, and those mountains now boast the largest wild bighorn population in the state.

Elephant Mountain WMA came into existence in 1985 when rancher and Texas Bighorn Society member C.G. Johnson donated Elephant Mountain Ranch to Texas. Biologists brought 20 bighorns from Sierra

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At Elephant Mountain Wildlife Management Area south of Alpine, a helicopter crew netted, hobbled and blindfolded bighorn sheep before taking them to the headquarters complex. There, workers took blood and hair samples from the animals and fitted them with radio collars. Later in the day, the bighorns were released at Big Bend Ranch State Park.



TOP LEFT BY EARL NOTTINGHAM/TPWD; OTHERS BY CHASE A. POUNTAIN/TPWD



Those who came here for the release stand on either side of the trailer, anxiously waiting. The gate is opened, and a dozen ewes come charging out, running straight up the mountainside.

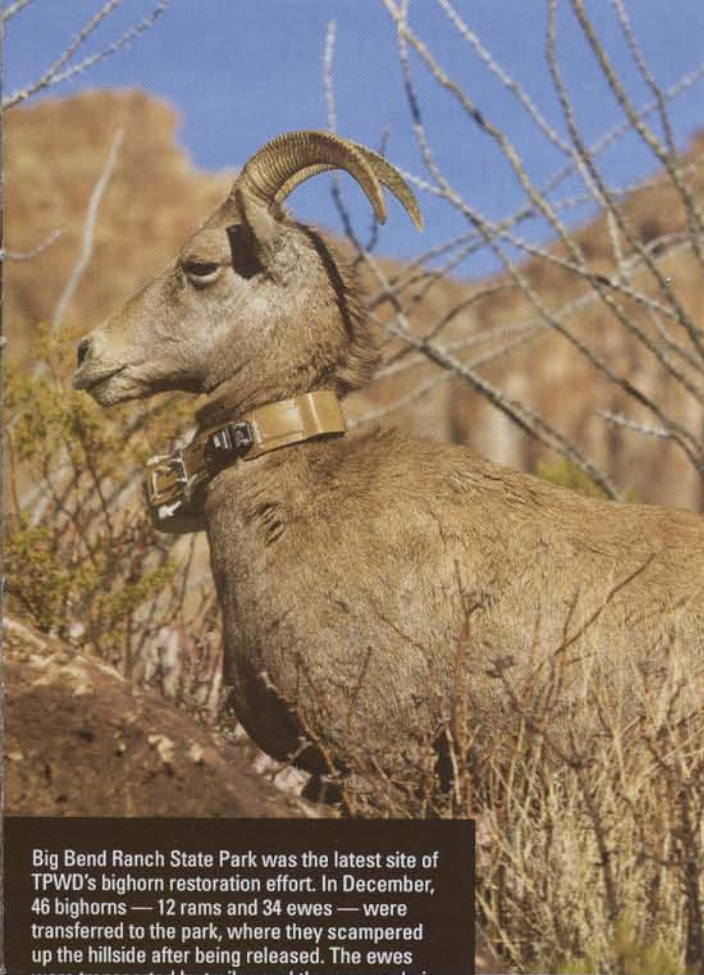
Diablo to Elephant Mountain in 1987, and they have blossomed into a population of 165 today. Elephant Mountain is now home to the bighorn portion of the annual Grand Slam — a five-day guided hunt, determined by lottery, for Texas' big four game animals: white-tailed deer, mule deer, pronghorn antelope and bighorn sheep.

Truly, this is a story where the passion and conservation ethic of hunters led to the restoration of a species. Only about 16 of the oldest rams out of an estimated population of 1,500 are hunted each year. In addition, bighorn hunters put their money where their mouth is. The Texas Bighorn Society auctions sheep hunts and other items, using the money for its annual work project — usually installing automated wildlife guzzlers. In addition, proceeds from TPWD bighorn hunting licenses, Grand Slam tickets and an excise tax go toward research, management, monitoring and relocation efforts. It's one of few completely self-sustaining wildlife restoration programs.

When the first sheep arrive at the helipad, we receive an unwelcome mouthful of dust, but then get to work. The plan is to capture 40 animals — mostly females, since they will give birth in spring, but also some rams.

A team of volunteers unhitches each sheep from the helicopter, then carries them one by one to the four stations standing ready. I work with TPWD biologists Mike Sullins, Mike Janis and Jonah Evans. After removing the hobbles binding a sheep's feet, we lift the animal onto a special stretcher, guiding each leg through a hole to immobilize it. I gently hold the sheep's head to





Big Bend Ranch State Park was the latest site of TPWD's bighorn restoration effort. In December, 46 bighorns — 12 rams and 34 ewes — were transferred to the park, where they scampered up the hillside after being released. The ewes were transported by trailer, and the rams rode in boxes, at left. It was TPWD's first time to transfer bighorns to a state park.



TOP RIGHT BY EARL NOTTINGHAM/TPWD; OTHERS BY CHASE A. FOUNTAIN/TPWD

one side so vets can take blood and look for parasites.

We take a hair sample and attach a radio collar before moving the sheep into a transport trailer. Everyone learns the routine quickly; once a sheep is off the helicopter, it gets handled for less than five minutes.

Their bodies seem small and fragile under our “alien” care. Horns on the female, or ewe, stay small and pointed, but a mature ram's horns weigh up to 30 pounds and seem gargantuan for an animal whose body is only 200 pounds, similar to a white-tailed deer. During breeding season, rams use their bony skulls and tough horns in impressive battles that can last up to 24 hours. Only similarly sized males fight, charging at each other from distances of up to 20 feet, then head-butting. These battles can mean life or death, but the winning male mates with all the females, so their heavy horns pay off — at least for a lucky few.

Around midday, Pittman makes the call to stop and move the 29 sheep we have, and continue the effort the next day. All ewes are together in one trailer, while the rambunctious rams have their own wooden boxes. The trailers head south for almost two hours before turning off toward some of the most magnificent mountains I have seen — colorful, rugged and picturesque. The release site at Panther Canyon lies just feet from the Mexico border, and in December, TPWD, the National Park Service, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and the international cement company Cemex — which owns the land across the border — signed a memorandum of agreement for joint wildlife restoration and management. Cemex is already engaged in bighorn restoration in the Mexican states of Coahuila and Chihuahua, with former TPWD employees Billy Pat and Bonnie McKinney heading the program.

Those who came here for the release stand on either side of the trailer, anxiously waiting. The gate is opened, and a dozen ewes come charging out, running straight up the mountainside. Others hesitate, but with a little encouragement, they all head up the slopes. The rams come next, and with a little help, the regal bighorns have all gone to their new home. Cheers erupt from those standing by. It's a fitting end to a perfect winter solstice, the day for looking forward to a brighter tomorrow.

“I don't think the capture could have gone better,” says Louis Harveson, director of the Borderlands Research Institute at Sul Ross State University, who will monitor bighorn movements in the park. “Will they all just go to Mexico?” he wonders, glancing at the nearby Rio Grande. Some may head back to Elephant Mountain, 55 miles north as the crow flies. Everyone involved hopes the bighorns will stay, breed and establish a new population.

Despite clear success, the effort remains far from complete. “We are only halfway to the goal,” Hernandez says. “Bighorns historically lived in 15 or 16 mountain ranges. Right now we have 1,500 animals in seven mountain ranges — the Beach, Baylor, Sierra Diablo, Van Horn, Eagle, Black Gap-Del Carmen ranges and Elephant Mountain.”

We can now add the Bofecillos to that list, and with it the opportunity to witness wild bighorns prancing around the rock ledges of Big Bend Ranch State Park, one of the state park system's crown jewels — not unlike the bighorn itself. ★