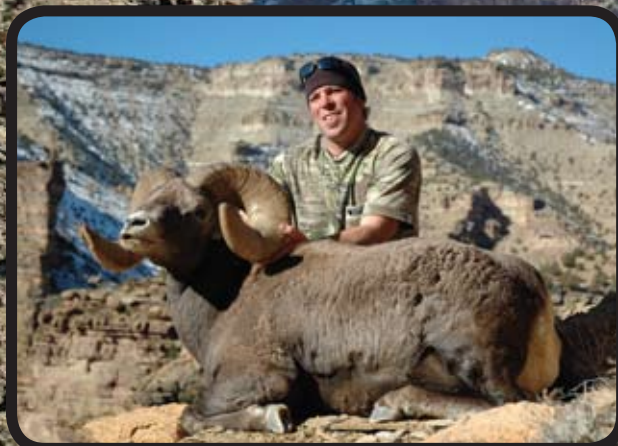


One Thousand New Bighorns And The Future of Sheep Hunting



Wayne Brown is shown above after a successful sheep hunt in Desolation Canyon. Wayne works with MossBack Outfitters.



by Don Peay

This is a story about how 1,000 bighorn sheep now thrive in Utah's spectacular Desolation Canyon, immortalized by John Wesley Powell. Twenty years ago, there were just a handful of sheep here and they were nose to nose with domestic sheep - a fatal time bomb ticking.

The above photo is an awesome picture of Desolation Canyon and a great 170" class ram taken by young, 30 something, Utah hunter, Wayne Brown. Congratulations on a great ram and for now achieving the Half Curl status. We can't wait until you finish your Full Curl™.

Speaking of Full Curl™ - membership from around the country is really picking up steam. Lots of sheep hunters are excited and many, many dads who have killed one to four sheep are signing up their kids for the "No CURL" sheep drawing we will have at the FCS meeting.

Twenty years ago, I sat in this canyon with a gentleman named, Fred Morris, and he said, "There ought to be a thousand bighorns in this 40-mile stretch of river". But back then, the handful of wild sheep on the Rattlesnake (east side of the river) portion had migrated down from the Ute Tribal lands. The original sheep herd was transplanted from an Indian tribe in Alberta, Canada. There were no sheep hunting permits in this area.

Today, there are probably close to 1,000 bighorns in this canyon! Utah FNAWS has invested over \$650,000 in this canyon. Five domestic sheep allotments have been converted to cattle, and as this herd expands, the possibility of contact with domestic sheep grows. Just last week, I negotiated my 25th buyout/conversions of domestic sheep grazing areas, further securing the future of this now great herd. The herd expands the full stretch of the river and is pushing east to the Colorado border through the lower



An 11-year-old, 175" Range Creek ram that Brett Miller harvested. Shown left to right are Randy Johnson (High Desert Wild Sheep Guides) and Brett Miller.

Book Cliffs country in eastern Utah. There are two more possible domestic sheep conflicts and thanks to the strong support of Utah FNAWS members and SFW members, I have the time, political support, and financial resources to remove these lethal and deadly threats. Before we are done, we will have to invest another \$200,000 to protect this sheep herd in a win/win fashion. Twenty years ago, the Utah legislature was considering a law to ban transplants of bighorn sheep. At that time there were groups who made them very difficult to accomplish.

The Utah DWR does a great job on this herd. Local biologist, Brad Compton, is very appreciative of our efforts to help him protect these sheep. There are continuous predator control efforts – thanks to the Minnesota and Wisconsin and Iowa FNAWS chapters for their support over the years. Eighteen or so years ago, I invited young, Mark Shaft of the MW Chapter out to hunt deer. I actually think he bought a donated hunt just east of this area in the renowned Book Cliffs. A key to all of the success for wildlife is relationships with people.

Additional transplants to Desolation Canyon have come from Colorado – 60 sheep, Bear Top Mountain Utah 20 sheep, and Montana another 20 sheep. The Montana transplant happened after we worked with Utah Governor, Mike Leavitt, to work with Montana Governor, Mark Racicot, to overcome some hurdles.

Since then, Tom Powers and Jim Weatherly of Montana FNAWS have been great partners and helped bring a bunch of Montana sheep to Utah. It was really cool just this past year when Tom Power's son, Shawn drew a San Rafael Desert bighorn tag just 30 miles west of Desolation Canyon. The Powers family just signed up for the Full Curl Society. Really cool story there - Tom and his son Shawn both hunted Dalls and Stones together. Now Tom needs a desert to complete his Full Curl and Shawn needs a bighorn to complete his. I hope they both get to fulfill their sheep hunting dreams, they deserve it!

Three domestic sheep herds used to run in the San Rafael, now there are none. It took driving and meeting with ranchers nine different times to get these deals done. These deals are often complex and dealing with older ranchers requires an art form.

The DWR counted just shy of 200 desert bighorns in the South San Rafael last month. The north San Rafael is struggling a bit, most likely due to lion predation and we are working on that today and every day.

Last winter, another herd of 40 were released in the Avintaquin country, (they came from Montana, thanks Tom and friends) just a day or two walk for a bighorn to the north. The most recent domestic sheep conversion will protect this entire bighorn complex. It only takes one ram to contact domestic sheep, and this entire complex of over 1,000 bighorns could be destroyed within weeks. Scary!

Across the river on the north side, is the Ute Indian tribal lands, and we have built (especially Troy Justensen who works for SFW) a great relationship with the Ute tribe. We have worked together on many wildlife management issues with the Ute Tribe. Thanks Roland and Troy!

There was a lot of criticism for some of the actions taken and the money we invested into the Desolation Canyon Herd (known as Rattlesnake on the east side and Range Creek on the west side of the river). There was tremendous political opposition in the beginning over growing and expanding bighorns, but now, mostly from SFW support the political opposition has been put to bed.

Here is how I calculate or roughly estimated the return. First, there is over a 1,000 bighorns and this herd should be sustained for generations. That won't happen without constant, vigilant effort by sportsmen. Over \$1.4 million in Governor's tags and Conservation tag money has been generated. Over 150 public draw tags have been drawn and many, many great rams and several record book rams have been taken. Close to 20 hunters a year will get to hunt this AWESOME canyon in 2010 and in the future. This canyon has provided transplant stock to start the Timpanogas herd.

Many SFW members and SFW Chapter leaders have hunted bighorn in Desolation Canyon. They know it is an AWESOME, WORLD CLASS EXPERIENCE.

SFW was also a main driver in the Acquisition of the Wilcox Ranch in Desolation Canyon, which opened access to this HUGE piece of remote country. Our efforts have also helped increase populations of elk, mule deer, wild turkey, and other game species in this remarkable wild place. ■



Pat Warr Sr. and Pat Warr Jr. are part of the Tooele SFW leadership team. Pat Sr. is shown with his 2009 Desolation Canyon ram. Pat hunted with Xtreme Outfitters.

Tim Pilling owner of Book Cliff Outfitters and his hunter Chuck Lamar took this great late season Utah 8x8 bull with 52" main beams. He was rough scored at over 360 points. Chuck said, "This Desolation Canyon Country is truly amazing"



Billy Dunbar had an awesome hunt for the Utah Governor's Rocky Mountain Bighorn. After 21 days of hunting with Wild Mountain Outfitters they harvested this 183" ram. This is the 4th Governors tag Billy has purchased. He cares about the younger generation of Utah sheep hunters and wants them to someday draw a tag. His money has contributed to increasing sheep numbers on Utah mountain's. (Shown left to right) Outfitter Shawn Labrum, Brent Todd, Billy Dunbar, Cody Webster and Guy Webster.



Rattlesnake is a magical place especially for hunters hiking back from Coal Creek in the dark as the moon illuminates the side canyons and cliffs. The only noise is the river and the memories of the day's hunt and of hunts past and of what tomorrow will bring. Don thanks for helping to make my hunt memorable and for all the others who have and will get to know the experience. - Byron Bateman, President of SFW. Editor's Note: Byron just needs a desert bighorn to finish his Full Curl™.



Mark Dickson with a 180" plus ram taken with Wade Lemon Hunting and Ute Tribe Outfitting. The ram hunt took place on the Ute Indian Tribal Lands.



Travis and father, Duane Jensen with another near record book Desolation Canyon ram. The Jensen family is a do-it-yourself hunting family. Duane has completed his Full Curl™, and so has Travis' brother Jeff. Travis just needs a desert bighorn to finish his Full Curl™.