The Fall and Rise of TEXAS BIGHORNS

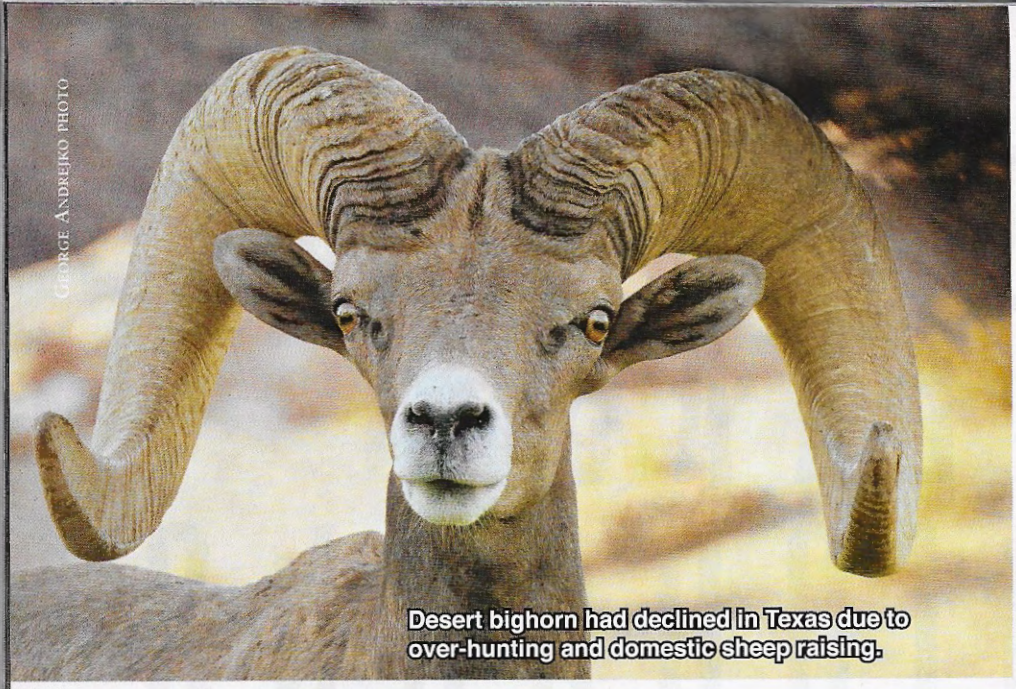
By Jim Heffelfinger

The desert bighorn sheep in West Texas are simply a smaller and lighter-colored version of the same species that roams throughout the Rocky Mountains and western Canada. Desert bighorn are well-adapted to the arid rocky southwestern landscape where they often exist in clusters of populations occupying several mountain ranges. Through time, populations of bighorn may die out in one mountain range, only to be repopulated via immigrants from nearby habitat. Sometimes they never come back on their own and sometimes conditions change, and they pioneer to ranges they haven't occupied before. Unlike their flatlander cousins, bighorn thrive in rugged and cliffy habitat called "escape terrain" because it offers them the opportunity to escape from predators that are not so adept at bouncing along the cliffs. Desert bighorns generally do well in remote areas as long as they have enough forage, water, and protection from disease and predation.

THOSE WHO CAME BEFORE

We know desert bighorn have been in West Texas for a long time because we have evidence in the form of petroglyphs in remote rocky areas. These depictions of bighorn were made long before our recent advances in wildlife management, but they attest to the fact that Texas Parks and Wildlife Department were not the first ones to count bighorn in the Trans-Pecos. Petroglyphs identified in El Paso and Hudspeth counties and in the Sierra Diablo Mountains illustrate just how important these animals have been to local residents for hundreds and possibly thousands of years. These animals were important through the eons for meat, tool material, leather, and ceremonial uses.

A healthy band of bighorns on the edge of Elephant Mountain with Santiago Peak in the background.



Desert bighorn had declined in Texas due to over-hunting and domestic sheep raising.

FALL OF THE MOUNTAIN MONARCH

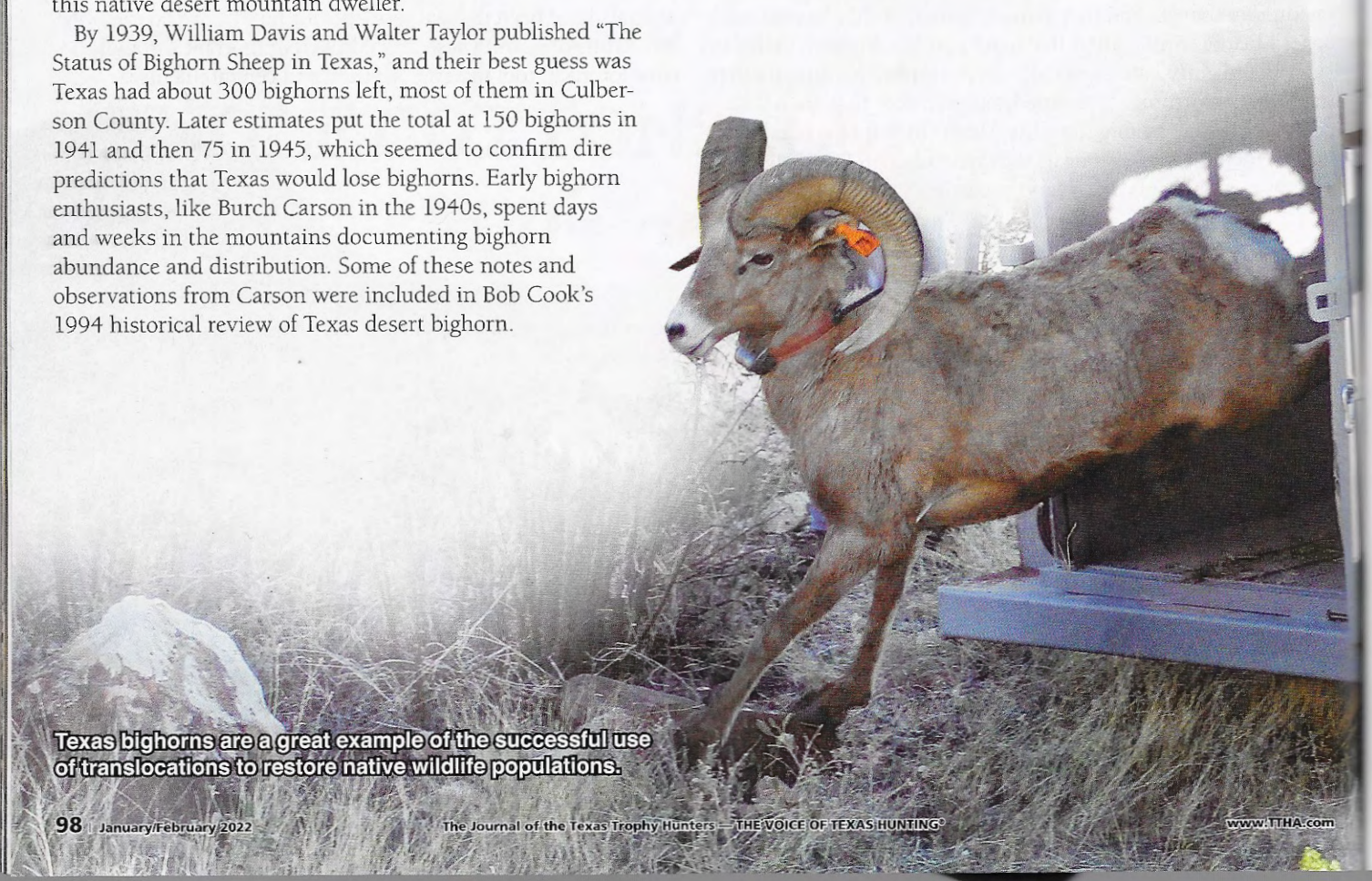
Early salt miners needed meat and in the arid mountain ranges of West Texas, bighorns contributed to their supply. Later, the Hazel Mine (1882-96), a profitable silver mine between the Beach, Baylor, and Sierra Diablos ranges, no doubt resulted in heavy local pressure on those bighorn populations.

Various people estimated between 500 and 1,500 bighorns were present in about 17 mountain ranges in West Texas in the 1880s. By that time, most people knowledgeable about the bighorn predicted their demise forever from all the scattered mountain ranges in the Trans-Pecos. Hunting bighorn was specifically outlawed in 1903 to curb the over-exploitation of local populations, but that law did not assure the persistence of this native desert mountain dweller.

By 1939, William Davis and Walter Taylor published "The Status of Bighorn Sheep in Texas," and their best guess was Texas had about 300 bighorns left, most of them in Culberson County. Later estimates put the total at 150 bighorns in 1941 and then 75 in 1945, which seemed to confirm dire predictions that Texas would lose bighorns. Early bighorn enthusiasts, like Burch Carson in the 1940s, spent days and weeks in the mountains documenting bighorn abundance and distribution. Some of these notes and observations from Carson were included in Bob Cook's 1994 historical review of Texas desert bighorn.

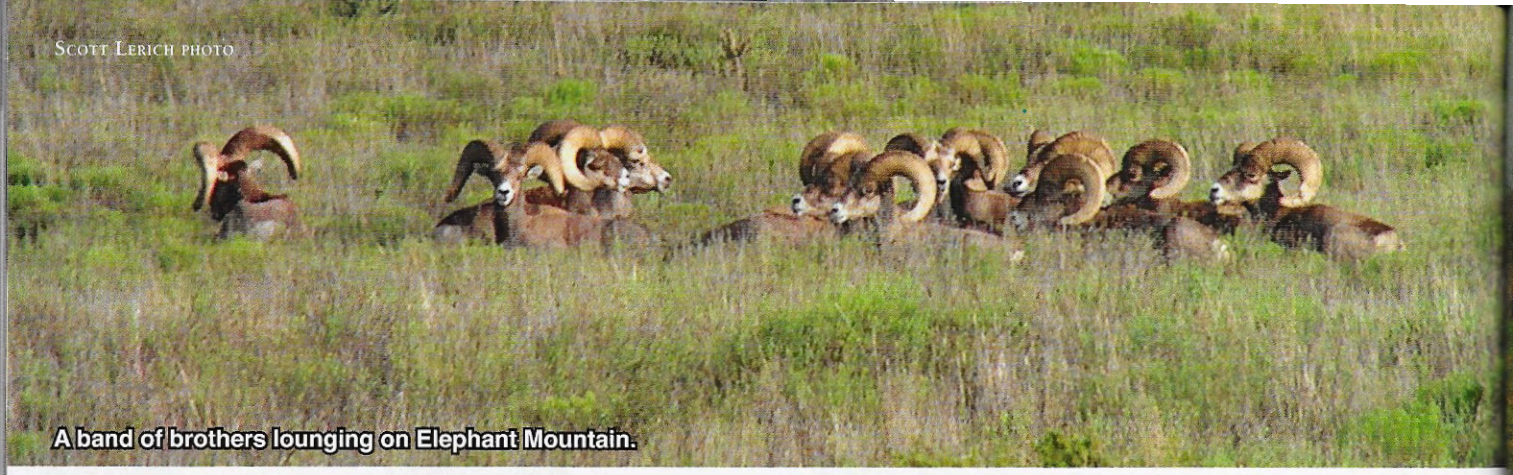
Although enforcing the closed season for bighorns was difficult in this remote region, it was the high numbers of domestic sheep that came in and trampled any hopes of the native bighorn populations recovering. According to an overview of bighorn in the Chihuahuan Desert by Scott Lerich, the price of domestic wool doubled between 1939 and 1943 and that drove a dramatic increase in domestic sheep raising. The number of domestic sheep in Culberson County alone increased from 19 sheep to 20,000 during that time. High numbers of domestic sheep brought not only more grazing on the same forage, but diseases from the Old World that wild bighorns had not ever been exposed to and did not carry any immunity for. Domestic sheep were controlled and contained by stringing miles and miles of net-wire fences across the landscape. This new barrier kept bighorns from moving freely to water, green patches that received the first rainfall, finding mates, and generally just travel from mountain range to mountain range.

In the end, forage competition, diseases, net-wire fencing, and unregulated killing was too much for them. The last known sighting of native bighorn in Texas occurred in the summer of 1960 when two ewes were sighted in Victoria Canyon in the Sierra Diablo Mountains north of Van Horn by TPWD personnel. Desert bighorn persisted in the Mexican states of Chihuahua and Coahuila until at least the 1970s.


Texas bighorns are a great example of the successful use of translocations to restore native wildlife populations.

BIGHORN TRANSLOCATION CHART • 1957-2019

Year	Total	Capture Site	Release Site
1957	15	Arizona	Black Gap WMA enclosure
1958	1	Arizona	Black Gap WMA enclosure
1958	3	Arizona	Black Gap WMA enclosure
1959	1	Arizona	Black Gap WMA enclosure
1959	10	Arizona	Black Gap WMA enclosure
1971	20	Black Gap enclosure	Black Gap WMA
1971	8	Black Gap enclosure	Sierra Diablo WMA enclosure
1973	7	Sierra Diablo WMA enclosures	Sierra Diablo Mountains
1977	6	Punta Prieta, Baja, Mexico	Black Gap WMA enclosure
1978	7	Black Gap enclosure	Chilicote Ranch enclosure
1979	5	Arizona	Black Gap WMA
1979	5	Arizona	Black Gap WMA
1979	7	Sierra Diablo WMA enclosures	Sierra Diablo Mountains
1980	8	Arizona	Kerrville, Texas
1983	15	Nevada	Sierra Diablo WMA enclosure
1983	10	Arizona	Sierra Diablo WMA enclosure
1983	2	Sierra Diablo Mountains	Sierra Diablo WMA enclosure
1984	2	Canyonlands NP	Sierra Diablo WMA enclosure
1984	2	Nevada	Sierra Diablo WMA enclosure
1985	3	Canyonlands NP	Kerrville, Texas
1987	25	Nevada	Van Horn Mountains
1987	5	Chilicote Ranch enclosure	Sierra Vieja Mountains
1987	20	Sierra Diablo WMA enclosures	Elephant Mountain WMA
1988	10	Nevada	Baylor Mountains
1988	15	Nevada	Van Horn Mountains
1988	11	Chilicote Ranch enclosure	Baylor Mountains
1988	3	Sierra Diablo WMA enclosures	Elephant Mountain WMA
1988	3	Sierra Diablo WMA enclosures	Sierra Diablo Mountains
1990	25	Sierra Diablo WMA enclosures	Beach Mts Holding Facility
1991	28	Beach Mts. Holding Facility	Beach Mountains
1992	1	Elephant Mountain WMA	Sierra Diablo WMA enclosure
1992	10	Sierra Diablo WMA enclosures	Sierra Diablo WMA enclosure
1992	11	Sierra Diablo WMA enclosures	Sierra Diablo Mountains
1992	12	Sierra Diablo WMA enclosures	Beach Mts Holding Facility
1993	21	Beach Mts Holding Facility	Beach Mountains
1994	20	Nevada	Black Gap WMA
1995	3	Elephant Mountain WMA	Black Gap WMA
1996	10	Elephant Mountain WMA	Black Gap WMA
1997	43	Sierra Diablo WMA enclosures	Sierra Diablo Mountains
1998	20	Nevada	Black Gap WMA
2000	45	Elephant Mountain WMA	Black Gap WMA
2010	46	Elephant Mountain WMA	Big Bend Ranch State Park
2011	9	Beach Mountains	Big Bend Ranch State Park
2011	22	Baylor Mountains	Big Bend Ranch State Park
2011	64	Sierra Diablo Mountains	Big Bend Ranch State Park
2012	44	Elephant Mountain WMA	9 Point Mesa
2014	61	Elephant Mountain WMA	Capote Peak
2015	20	Beach Mountains	Big Bend Ranch State Park
2015	40	Sierra Diablo Mountains	Big Bend Ranch State Park
2015	15	Sierra Diablo Mountains	Capote Peak
2017	82	Elephant Mountain WMA	Black Gap WMA
2019	74	Elephant Mountain WMA	Black Gap WMA
TOTAL	**955**		



Scott Lerich photo

A band of brothers lounging on Elephant Mountain.

RISE OF THE TEXAS BIGHORN

Following the initial research on bighorn distribution and abundance by Walter Taylor, William Davis, and Burch Carson, the Sierra Diablo Mountains were designated as a refuge for bighorn in 1945, but that was too little, too late at that point because they needed active management. In 1954, an agreement between the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Wildlife Management Institute, Boone and Crockett Club, and Arizona and Texas paved the way for the trapping of desert bighorn from the Kofa Game Range in southwestern Arizona to put them in a 427-acre enclosure at the Black Gap Wildlife Management Area (WMA). By 1959, 16 Arizona bighorns were captured and placed in the enclosure.

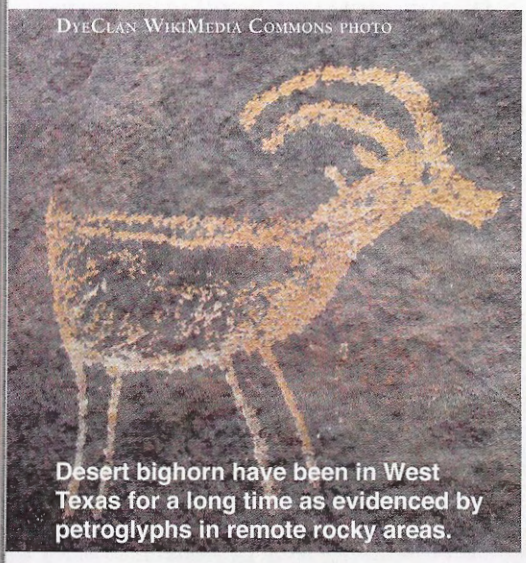
This began a long history of restoration based on translocating bighorns back to their historical range. (See page 99.) The restoration made slow progress initially and was mostly unsuccessful until 1983 when a renewed effort kick-started the program. Bighorn were translocated first from captive populations, but then from wild free-ranging bighorn populations once those herds started increasing. More than half of the bighorn released had radio collars to learn more about their survival and movements.

To date, more than 900 bighorns have been translocated as part of a conservation success story funded primarily by hunters. Thanks to the contributions of sportsmen and women, bighorn have been restored to an abundance similar to their levels in the early 1900s. The Texas Bighorn Society has been the cornerstone of the restoration of desert bighorn in Texas. Their advocacy, money, and influence helped drive initial successful restoration efforts in the 1980s and evolved into on-going support for proper management. The successful efforts cascaded into additional support from landowners including the donation of the 23,147-acre Elephant Mountain Ranch to TPWD in 1985.

CURRENT STATUS

Currently there are about 1,500 wild free-ranging desert bighorns in 11 populations, including: Elephant Mountain WMA, Black Gap WMA, Sierra Diablo Mountains, Beach Mountains, Baylor Mountains, Bofecillos Mountains in Big Bend Ranch State Park, Nine Point Mesa, Sierra Vieja Mountains, Van Horn Mountains, and Capote Peak. The ability to hunt a recovered species is always a sure sign of conservation success and that is certainly true with the Texas bighorn. Contrary to the dire predictions made by many, Texas offered the first bighorn tag in 1988. Annual fall helicopter surveys were initiated by TPWD in 1990 and continue to guide proper management. Currently the permit system allows about 15-17 permits for private landowners and three for the general public. Since most bighorn habitat in Texas is privately owned, this successful restoration has been a collaboration between TPWD, Texas Bighorn Society, Wild Sheep Foundation, Dallas Safari Club, private landowners and neighboring states using money mostly from sportsmen and women and their organizations. Their interest, money, and advocacy for healthy native bighorn populations has returned this mountain monarch to the Trans-Pecos for everyone to enjoy.

This article is dedicated to Dr. Bob Dittmar, Dewey Stockbridge, and Brandon White who made the ultimate sacrifice during their efforts to continue to monitor, manage, and build the Texas bighorn population.



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