Bully Goats?

Researchers try to figure out if relative newcomers to the Greater Yellowstone Area are displacing native bighorn sheep.

By Jack Ballard

The summit of Grizzly Peak rises some 200 yards above where I stand. At its 9,416-foot apex is a tiny grove of wind-battered pines and the upper terminal of a Red Lodge Mountain chairlift. A sudden gust stings my face with icy shards of snow as I sit down on the chair. Though I’m bundled in a down jacket and insulated ski pants, the lift-ride in the mountain chair is a bit ofcdc8d1d7a66a3b57166f56e7b945375d

Mountain goats also live in that harsh environment. But, while the sheep have been here for eons, the goats are transplants, gaining their foothold not from the evolutionary forces of time, but through human intervention.

Wildlife biologists, hunters, and others who helped move mountain goats there from similarly mountainous parts of western Montana suspected that the alpine animals would fare well. And they have. Yet while goats have been thriving in their new homes during the past several decades, bighorn sheep numbers in many of these same areas have been declining. Those who once thought the two species could coexist in the region are now having second thoughts. Several new studies could help scientists learn whether mountain goats are causing wild sheep to disappear from the region, and, if so, why.

Never migrated

Bighorn sheep have roamed the Yellowstone Region for thousands of years. The earliest written account comes from Osborne Russell, a trapper who entered the Lamar Valley in today’s Yellowstone National Park in 1835. In his Journal of a Trapper, he wrote of encountering Mountain Shoshone Indians, later dubbed Sheepshears, who subsisted largely on bighorn.

Russell never set eyes on a mountain goat in the Yellowstone Region. The white-coated, dark-horned animals are native in Montana primarily west of the Continental Divide, 150 or more miles away. Almost no mountain goats lived in ranges east of the divide, even those containing abundant rocky alpine habitat that goats prefer. Biologists suspect that because the animals rarely cross valleys or other low areas—where they become vulnerable to predators—mountain goats never migrated to isolated mountain “islands” such as the Beartooths.

Most wild goat herds found today in mountain ranges east of the divide grew from animals transplanted more than half a century ago. From 1941 to 1958, Montana Fish and Game crews trapped and transplanted 310 mountain goats (mainly from the Bitterroot Mountains and the Sun River area) to a dozen release sites, including, in the Beartooth Range, the Rock Creek drainage west of Red Lodge and the Stillwater drainage south of Nye. In most cases, the transplants thrived. In the Greater Yellowstone Area (GYA) alone, mountain goats now number over 1,100.

Bob Garrott, professor of ecology at Montana State University (MSU) and the Bosque de animales por carne, no hay camino. Y ésta es la razón por la que los científicos no creen que los muertos sean una amenaza para los bisontes.

La vida en la montaña es dura, pero los bisontes son valientes y resistentes. Los científicos están trabajando en nuevas investigaciones para entender mejor cuánto y cómo los muertos afectan a los bisontes. Es un tema importante y complicado, pero estoy seguro de que algún día conseguiremos fórmulas que ayuden a conservar tanto los muertos como los bisontes, y a todos los demás animales de la montaña.

Por favor, recuerda que necesitamos trabajar juntos para proteger la vida en la montaña. La vida en la montaña es preciosa y valiosa, y debemos cuidarla para que siga existiendo en el futuro.

Gracias por leer esto. ¡Espero que te hayas enterado de lo importante que son los muertos para los bisontes y que te hayas convencido de que necesitamos protegerlos tanto como podríamos!

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sheep range. “The Park Service had no knowledge of what effect goats might have on Yellowstone’s plant communities and bighorn sheep populations,” says Garrott. “All three states then became involved, because they have a vested interest in understanding interactions between mountain goats and bighorn sheep.”

The project’s initial phase examined historical wild sheep population counts by Montana biologists in the region since 1971 and counts of mountain goats since 1966. Most of the goat populations have seen increased growth and wider distribution in recent decades. Wild sheep counts have been much more variable, with some going up and others declining. However, researchers found no difference in sheep declines between areas that contained mountain goats and those that didn’t. “There was no smoking gun on this first step suggesting a direct relationship,” says Garrott. “But it makes sense that when you have two big plant eaters occupying the same mountain tops that there’s some interaction. So now we’re studying further, drilling down deeper to uncover more details.”

Though evidence from historical herd counts was inconclusive, scientists suspect that goats are in fact displacing sheep. Shawn Jack Ballard of Red Lodge is the author of several books on big game hunting and natural history. He says the animals often share the salt, says Garrott. Even so, mingling peacefully among a carpet of gentian in midsummer can cause problems. “That close contact could allow for transmission of disease from one species to another,” says Garrott. Bighorn sheep are highly susceptible to pneumonia, and die-offs of 10, 20, or more animals in herds are commonplace across the West. It’s well known that wild sheep can contract pneumonia from domestic sheep. Could they catch it from mountain goats, which in some areas carry the same suite of pathogens—picked up from domestic sheep—suspected in bighorn die-offs? Garrott says that such transmissions are possible, but no studies to date have shown that they occur. “So far we don’t understand pneumonia in bighorn sheep very well,” he says. “There’s no consensus on what particular strain of bacteria causes it, and no evidence showing that pathogens are transmitted from goats to sheep.”

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Perhaps goats have nothing to do with the continued suppression of the Rock Creek sheep herd that winters in the alpine zone, says Stewart. But he and other biologists have witnessed similar population fluctuations between goats and sheep in other areas of the GYA and conjecture a connection.

Nose-to-nose transmission?

It appears that wild sheep and goats get along fine in summer range. Biologists have watched both species graze amicably on alpine plateaus. Stewart once observed bighorn ewes and mountain goat nannies sharing a single avalanche chute, all with recently born young. Researchers with the Mountain Ungulate Project have used bat stations with salt on alpine summer range to attract both bighorns and mountain goats.

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