



YELLOWSTONE

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DISCOVERY

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CLIFF DWELLERS



A group of bighorn sheep grazes on the slopes of Mount Everts. Photo: Nick Derene

By Michael Leach
Yellowstone Association

It is the middle of May, and life is finally returning to Yellowstone's northern range. Burnt orange bison calves can be seen frolicking in the meadows and, with the exception of a few lingering snow drifts along the muddied rivers' north-facing banks, succulent green grass now dominates the landscape. After another brutally cold and harsh winter, Yellowstone's annual resuscitation has begun, and with the long-awaited return of the mountain bluebird, spring has announced its arrival.

Along with the countless natural indicators suggesting that a new season has arrived, the sudden influx of visitors passing through Yellowstone's North Entrance gate in Gardiner, Montana, only confirms

what the wild critters already know—that the doldrums of winter are now behind us. Many dedicated wildlife enthusiasts recognize this time of year as the most productive for wildlife watching, especially when it comes to elusive species such as the gray wolf and the grizzly bear. But for some

on this balmy, windy day in Yellowstone, all attention is focused upon a dazzling display of mountain prowess taking place in the sandstone cliffs high above the hurried waters of the Gardner River.

SUVs, sedans, a hybrid quietly idling, and a law-enforcement truck are parked in one of the large pullouts in the Gardner Canyon. To someone arriving at the scene it would appear that something tragic had occurred, especially in light of the 30-foot drop to the river below on the west side of the road and the sheer cliff lining on the east side. But large telephoto lenses, spotting scopes, and field glasses are not pointing down toward the raging rapids; instead, they are aimed skyward, toward the crumbling sandstone desert on the northwestern slopes of Mount Everts. Newcomers to the park might expect to see an osprey or a golden eagle perched upon a pillar in the cliffs, but to the

What's Inside...

- LATEST ON YELLOWSTONE'S EARTHQUAKE SWARM
- IN-PARK LODGING DISCOUNTS ANNOUNCED
- YELLOWSTONE OVERLOOK FIELD CAMPUS OPENS MAY 1

surprise and delight of the two dozen spectators, one of the wildlife kingdom's great marvels is unfolding right before their eyes. The white rump and tan body of a female bighorn sheep tactfully leaps from one side of a crevasse to another, and to the astonishment of the onlookers, the tiny shape of a newly born lamb follows in pursuit.

Though this ancient lesson from ewe—a female bighorn—to lamb is always a highlight for any visitor lucky enough to witness it, the easily recognizable bighorn sheep can sometimes be overshadowed by other species associated with the world's first national park, such as the wolf, bison, or grizzly. Still, throughout the years, this magnificent creature has had little trouble maintaining its status as a symbol of ruggedness and survival—one that captures the imagination of wildlife enthusiasts from all over the globe.

Historically, bighorn sheep were never as plentiful as the massive bison and elk herds throughout the West, yet their numbers were such that they remained a fixture on the western landscape. It is



The Sheep Eater culture centered on the migratory patterns of the bighorn sheep. Throughout the park, they left behind their temporary shelters, called wickiups. Photo: Larry Loendorf

estimated that millions of bighorn sheep occupied the mountainous regions of the Rocky Mountain West in the 19th century. But an all-too-common story of wanton waste during this era, combined with heavy pressure—due largely to

market hunters—rapidly reduced these icons of the Rockies. Unlike bison and elk, whose precipitous population drops were attributed almost entirely to hunters armed with rifles, the bighorn sheep faced the additional challenge of unfettered grazing by domestic sheep. Across the West, domestic sheep—carrying diseases and parasites to which wild sheep were highly susceptible—wreaked havoc on the bighorn population.

The hunter and gatherer, who cherished bighorn sheep meat as a delicacy, also took its toll. Numerous historical accounts establish that Native American tribes of the West favored the tender meat of the bighorn—even over that of the revered bison.

One such group was the Sheep Eaters, or Tukudika, a band of the Shoshone tribe. Considered one of the most mysterious and elusive Indians of the Plains, this mountain-dwelling Shoshonean band, in fact, earned its name because much of its culture and movements were centered around the migratory patterns of the bighorn sheep.

There are 26 tribes associated with Yellowstone National Park, but the Sheep Eater people were the only year-round residents. Occupying habitat considered inhospitable by other tribes, they utilized their highly developed ability to stalk prey among the precarious slopes and crags that served as home to the bighorn sheep. The most difficult part of hunting wild sheep in the rugged terrain found throughout the Yellowstone ecosystem is the laborious

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

Resource Notes.....	6
Association News	7
Institute News.....	8-9
Park Store.....	10-11
Just for Kids!	12
Membership.....	13-15



**YELLOWSTONE
ASSOCIATION**

THE MISSION OF THE YELLOWSTONE ASSOCIATION

The Yellowstone Association, in partnership with the National Park Service, fosters the public's understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of Yellowstone National Park and its surrounding ecosystem by funding and providing educational products and services.

P.O. Box 117 • Yellowstone National Park, WY 82190
www.YellowstoneAssociation.org
ya@yellowstoneassociation.org
 406-848-2400

Monday - Friday • 8 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. Mountain Time



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and often dangerous effort of getting into the high country the animal inhabits. But once the dreaded journey has been completed, wild sheep are considered by many a much easier quarry than the ungulates wintering in the lowlands. The highly treasured bow-shaped and developed from the horns of the bighorn—also enhanced the Sheep Eaters' ability to sustain themselves through the harsh winters of the region.

While the Sheep Eaters may have been the only humans to call the area home, they were not the only ones to venture into the depths of wild country in search of the elusive bighorn. Trappers, mountain men, and sportsmen like Theodore Roosevelt celebrated the opportunity to journey into the bighorn's mountainous terrain. As told in the recent Ken Burns film *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*, on his legendary journey to Yellowstone in 1903, a hatless and coatless President Roosevelt—covered in shaving lather, with a towel still wrapped around his neck—hurried out of the comfort of his tent to observe a band of bighorns leaping acrobatically from foothold to foothold. The following day, while the rest of his crew went fishing, the President ventured off on his own to pursue the same band of bighorns, armed only with field glasses in hand and lunch in pocket.

Five years earlier, naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton spent several months traversing the park's northern range without seeing a single bighorn sheep, even though the population at the time was estimated to be 100–150 animals. By 1927, population estimates in Yellowstone National Park grew to more than 300 and within two years swelled to 346 wild sheep. After the 1920s, Yellowstone's bighorn population fluctuated in the face of disease, but remained relatively stable—never exceeding 500 sheep.

The word “stable,” however, did not apply to the winter of 1981–82—a dark period in the history of Yellowstone's bighorn sheep population. After hitting a high mark of 487 sheep, an epidemic of *Chlamydia* (pink eye) decimated 60 percent of the park's sheep population. It has never fully rebounded.

Over the last decade Yellowstone's sheep population has ranged between 150 and 225 animals on average, but the overall trend in recent years has been up. The 2008 Superintendent's Report on Natural



It takes six to seven years for rams to develop the full curl that almost forms a circle and affords him the status as a king on the mountain. Photo: NPS

Resource Vital Signs projects that the park is now home to approximately 353 bighorns.

In 1912, Seton reported that visitors to Yellowstone could anticipate observing bighorns with a fair level of certainty if they dedicated a few days searching the slopes of Mount Everts, Mount Washburn, and other locations, such as the Tower Fall area, where the sheep are known to inhabit. The same advice applies today. Though the bighorn's tan coloring offers camouflage, every onlooker who succeeds in catching sight of the male (ram), which weighs up to 300 pounds, can't help but feel awe. Smaller in size, but still reaching up to 200 pounds, the females are just as impressive and graceful as the males when navigating the treacherous and sketchy terrain where they dwell.

One wonders how it is possible for such a stout critter to find its way through such tricky topography without missteps. Hooves that have evolved to suit the habitat provide one answer. The bottoms of the bighorn's feet are concave, enabling it to run and walk over the smallest of rocks and other textured surfaces. Still—whether slipping on ice, losing balance due to loose footing, getting caught up in an avalanche, or simply falling off a steep cliff—accidents do happen.

Dressed for Battle

As sophisticated as their feet are, it is the size of a ram's horns that draws the most attention. The horns of both males and females grow from the base for the duration of the animal's life. If damaged,

they will remain splintered. While for the first two years it is difficult to tell the horns of the males and females apart, by the time a male is three years old, his horns are thicker and longer, making him easily distinguishable from a ewe. It is typically during a ram's sixth or seventh year that he will begin to develop the full curl that almost forms a circle and affords him the status as a king on the mountain—at a time when it matters most.

Just as the most abundant ungulate in the park—the elk—winds down the highly celebrated rut that draws thousands of visitors to Yellowstone each year, the bighorn begins one of the most impressive mating rituals in the animal kingdom. With 40 pounds of curled horn attached to its massive skull, when a ram finds a challenger vying for his harem there follows a staggering collision of heads and horns that sends shock waves crashing throughout the canyons. Witnessing this ancient ritual, one cannot help but be amazed—perhaps even horrified—by the brutality and force of each collision.

The bighorn rut takes place in October and November each autumn. Seemingly innocent snorting and grunting quickly lead to something much more magnificent. Typically there will be three or four adult males in a group challenging one another for the opportunity to mate with one of the ewes now in estrus. Once the posturing has served its point, the battle begins. Suddenly the taunting reaches a climax, and the chiseled,

continued on page 4