

## Keeping tabs on bighorn sheep

By Larry Hyslop



Caleb McAdoo conducting research on bighorns

The Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep herd in the East Humboldt Range has changed considerably. In 2009, the population was 200 animals. During the winter of 2009-2010, a pneumonia-causing infection created a die-off reducing the population to as few as 15 animals. After all surviving bighorns were removed; no bighorns remained in the East Humboldts. Ten surviving ewes and one lamb were released in Lamoille Canyon and four rams were transported to Washington State University to be used in research studying this disease. During this last February, 17 replacement ewes and three rams were brought in from Alberta, Canada, to create a new herd.

These bighorn die-offs occur across the West and wildlife management agencies are scrambling to learn more about the disease and how to prevent it. Research was conducted this summer in the East Humboldts to see how these new sheep were faring and their chances of contracting the disease.

Caleb McAdoo is the Nevada Department of Wildlife's (NDOW) game biologist for Area 10, which includes the East Humboldt Range. He detailed the research conducted this summer on the bighorns. Every day from June through mid-August, four researchers were high in the mountains. Two kept tabs on bighorns and two on mountain goats.

The replacement bighorns were disease-free when released in the East Humboldts. It was assumed the mountain goats in these mountains carry the disease so the question was: do bighorns and mountain goats get close enough to transfer the disease? It is estimated that 140 mountain goats live in the East Humboldts and 13 carry radio collars. Another question was; do bighorns get close enough to any domestic sheep to transfer the disease? The answer to both turned out to be no.

The replacement ewes were all pregnant when released. The other big question was whether lambs would contract the disease. If the disease is present, lambs begin suffering from it when about 6-8 weeks old. Sixteen lambs were born this spring. Researchers reported all are healthy with no sign of the disease, although two lambs died of other causes. However, the disease affects mountain goat kids the same way, and some died of this disease. The mountain goats were not being monitored as closely so the number lost is not known, but it shows the disease is present in the mountain goats.

All adult bighorns carry ear tags and radio collars. The collars are checked monthly by air. The next big question will be how many of these lambs survive into their first winter. The herd will be checked by people on the ground next February to find that answer.

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