



## Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep

Kingdom: Animalia  
 Phylum: Chordata  
 Subphylum: Vertebrata  
 Class: Mammalia  
 Order: Artiodactyla  
 Family: Bovidae  
 Genus: *Ovis*  
 Species: *canadensis*



Photo courtesy of Tony Wisneski

### Habitat

- **In the Wild:** This species of sheep is found in the Rocky Mountains of southwestern Canada, the western United States, and northern Mexico. They are found in alpine tundra and desert areas, particularly in areas near rocky cliffs and bluffs. Bighorn sheep prefer slopes between 6,000 to 8,500 feet in summer and in winter, at 2,500 and 5,000 feet with annual snowfall of less than 60 inches.
- **Exhibit Location:** Wildlife Trails

### Characteristics

- Height: 32-42 inches at the shoulder  
 Length: males (rams) = 5-6 feet; females (ewes) = 4-5.5 feet  
 Weight: males (rams) = 175-275 pounds; females (ewes) = 115-120 pounds
- Their bodies are compact and muscular with a covering of light brown fur with hollow hairs protecting them from temperature extremes. The summer coat is a rich golden brown fading to a lighter grayish brown by winter's end. There is often a white patch on the rump and muzzle. The tail is very short, only 5 inches long.
- The ears are short and pointed, and their eyesight is extremely good.
- They are sure-footed animals and have rough pads on the bottom of their two-toed, spread-out hooves. These pads allow them added traction as they move across the rocky cliffs. They move well on rough uneven terrain.
- Both sexes have horns made of keratin (like our fingernails) that continue to grow throughout their lifetime. The horns are thickly ridged with growth rings that tell how old the sheep are. Males' horns are bulky and curve backward to encircle the ear. The females' horns are much shorter, more slender, and only curve slightly, never making more than half a curl.
- **Lifespan: In the Wild** 6-7 years; **In Captivity** 10-15 years

### Behaviors

- Bighorn sheep are social animals and, except for mating season, live in segregated groups of males and females with their lambs. The males band together in small groups and migrate to higher terrain for the summer. The females with their lambs group together and move to separate high areas. In the fall the males separate from each other and join groups of females for the mating season. During the mating season of November and December the rams posture for dominance. During this period the rams will snort loudly. They do not defend territory, but rather access to the females.
- Bighorn sheep migrate seasonally, using the valleys during the winter and higher terrain during the summer.
- They are primarily diurnal (active during the day) and spend the better part of the day eating then lying down to chew their cud (partially digested food). They retire for the night to their bedding areas, which may be used for many years. When temperatures rise, they will graze at night and rest during the heat of the day. They stay cool by perspiring and panting.
- Bighorn sheep can reach speeds of 30 mph over level ground, and they scramble up mountain slopes at 15 mph.
- Besides being excellent climbers and jumpers, bighorn sheep are also good swimmers.
- **Enrichments at the Zoo:** browse such as sugar maple in the summer

## **Reproduction**

- Sexual maturity is reached at about 2-3 years of age. Only the dominant males get to breed.
- Breeding season is generally October – December, although this varies somewhat with latitude.
- Horn size determines status. As rams batter at one another for dominance, the crack of their massive heads can be heard more than a mile away. These contests can last all day until one of the battlers lowers his head in submission. With nose elevated, rutting males follow any female in heat.
- After a gestation period of 175-180 days, the females seek a secluded canyon or gully and give birth to a single lamb. In rare cases, there may be two lambs born. By the end of the first day, the baby is on its feet and can climb almost as well as its mother.
- Newborn lambs have a soft, woolly, light-colored coat and small horn buds. They stay hidden for about a week, then follow mom, quickly learning to feed on tender grasses. Within a few weeks, the lambs of the herd form bands of their own and seek out their mother for nursing only occasionally. They are weaned at 5-6 months of age.
- Ewes are protective of their young for many months. Last year's young may be seen with their mother and the current year's lamb.

## **Diet**

- **In the Wild:** leaves, herbs, twigs, shoots, grass, wild roses, choke cherries, horsetails, willow
- **At the Zoo:** hay, grain

## **Conservation Status**

- **IUCN status:** Lower Risk; **CITES:** not listed
- The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service list bighorn sheep on the California peninsula as endangered.
- Bighorn sheep follow their parents, migrating year after year along the same trails. Young sheep learn this route and do not vary from it. They do not disperse and colonize new areas. Efforts to introduce bighorn to other areas have not been successful.
- Due to unlimited hunting and overgrazing of livestock the bighorn sheep have not done well in North America and can be maintained only by judicious care. Hunting is regulated.
- Predators: wolves, bears, mountain lions, golden eagles, coyotes, bobcats, lynx, humans

## **Did You Know?/Fun Facts**

- Bighorn sheep are closely related to goats.
- Male horns can weigh as much as 30 pounds.
- They often watch other animals at distances of up to a mile away.

## **Sources:**

- Desert USA, (n.d.). Bighorn sheep. Retrieved Nov. 20, 2005, from Desert USA Web site: <http://www.desertusa.com/big.html>.
- Enchanted Learning, (2005). Bighorn sheep. Retrieved Nov. 20, 2005, from Enchanted Learning Web site: <http://www.enchantedlearning.com/subjects/mammals/sheep/Bighornsheep.shtml>.
- Lamb, A. and Larry Johnson. (2002). Bighorn sheep (ovis canadensis). Retrieved Nov. 20, 2005, from Eduscapes.com Web site: <http://www.eduscapes.com/nature/bighorn/index1.htm>.
- Snyder, K. (2005). Rocky mountain big horn sheep. Retrieved Nov. 20, 2005, from Mount Evans.Com Web site: <http://www.mountevans.com/ME-Critters-Sheep.HTML>.