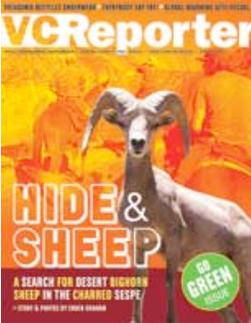


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## COVER STORY

### Ghost herd

Searching for elusive desert bighorn sheep in the charred, post-fire Sespe Wilderness

~ By CHUCK GRAHAM ~

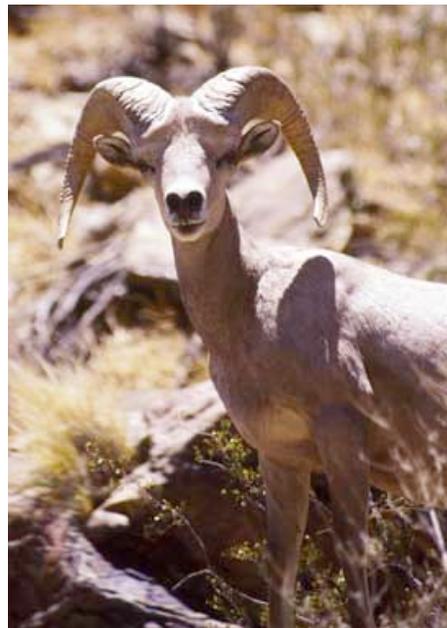


Photo by Chuck Graham

One of the less than 100 desert bighorn sheep that roam the Sespe Wilderness.

**I**t felt as if something was watching me. (Something other than the “glassers,” as the hunters with high-powered optics are called.) Tucked away on Johnson’s Ridge, Jaret Owens, Scott Lowry, Graham Goodfield, Chris and Dan Malloy, Mick Cunningham and Peter Ganibi were my long-distance eyes. A half mile away as the crow flies, they scoped for desert bighorn sheep while I churned up steep loose scree slopes, in the heart of the Sespe Wilderness of the Los Padres National Forest, to photograph one of the most elusive animals in California, the desert bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis nelsoni*).

Without their high-powered optics, it was nearly impossible to decipher whether it was merely a rock or an active herbivore sunning high above us in the warm rays of a new dawn. Due to the minimal radio contact, I positioned myself near Goodfield, a wilderness guide. I worked my way up to just

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beneath a craggy sandstone pinnacle, when over the radio I heard a throaty tone. "Move a few feet up to your left and there's a ram right above you," said a whispering Goodfield. Scrambling upward toward a narrow notch in the rock, I proceeded to ascend into the gap, but the bighorn ram beat me there. Swinging my right leg up onto a ledge, I looked up and found the gregarious ram staring at me.

It was a thrill to see such a powerful and majestic animal thriving in the Sespe. Motionless only for a moment, the ram ran off. Fleet of hoof, the ram easily scaled the loose scree as if it were running up a flight of stairs. I tried to follow but it was three steps forward and two steps back, as my trail shoes sank in the scree.

However, the blackened chaparral (the results of last autumn's Day Fire) enabled me to keep a close eye on the solitary ram. When it reached the knife ridge above me, the ram met up with seven other bighorn. Another ram, several ewes and a couple of younger sheep just sprouting horns huddled together. Relying on safety in numbers, the herd inched its way to the summit of the barren peak, an escape route only a bighorn could utilize.

**A stormy return**

The California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) replenished the Sespe with 37 bighorn throughout 1985 and 1987. At the time, bighorn had been absent from the region for a century. Unfortunately, as soon as those radio-collared animals were released, intense windstorms scattered the bewildered herd. The ferocious weather and a high predation count due to mountain lions, apparently left only a few stragglers of the newly relocated bighorn. By 1995, the radio collars grew nearly silent, and land and aerial surveys were locating fewer and fewer sheep.

"Initially, we expected a high mortality rate from predation," said Steven Torres, a DFG biologist. "There's no surefire way to move animals successfully, and there are lots of risks involved. To get a viable herd established is quite a masterful process."

The relocated herd was helicoptered 60 miles from the San Gabriel Mountains, east of Los Angeles, to the Sespe. Like most wildlife, the population of desert bighorn was in the tens of thousands (before Europeans arrived in the 1500s). Today, that number is around 4,300 animals. They're considered good indicators of land health, but over-hunting, loss of habitat and diseases from cattle have contributed to their decline. The DFG's original goal was to establish scattered herds within the Sespe totaling 100 bighorn. The habitat there is ideal for the surefooted sheep, and the Sespe is the furthest western edge of their historic range.

However, radio collars don't last forever, and much of the Sespe is overgrown with chaparral, reaching 20 feet high in some regions. With very little burn history there, the sheep stayed hidden during surveys. And with so much overgrowth, bighorn were susceptible to attacks by mountain lions. Bighorn rely heavily on their acute eyesight to watch other animals over a mile away, but in overgrown vegetation their vision is obstructed and that leaves them vulnerable to attack.

"They have the innate drive to go in a certain direction when spooked like that," said Maeton Freel, wildlife biologist for the Los Padres National Forest. "They didn't know where the escape terrain was and mountain lions were picking them off." Over the next three years, bighorn sightings were minimal, but by 1998 regular reports were filtering in from hikers, backpackers and hunters to the DFG and the Los Padres National Forest of small bighorn herds in various Sespe Wilderness regions, including of Cobblestone, San Raphael, MacDonald and Alamo Mountains.

"I get e-mails and photos from time to time of the same nine to 19 bighorn in that region," said Rebecca Barboza at the time, a wildlife biologist for the DFG. "There's great habitat out there, and I'm hoping they'll find it." Surveys resumed and as many as 28 sheep were counted. But from 2004 until the fall of 2006, poor weather and the lack of funding to conduct adequate surveys halted sheep counts again. This coincided with a decline in the San Gabriel Mountains herds (now down to 300 bighorn), thwarting any attempts to

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relocate more sheep into the Sespe region.

**Fire and the flock**

When I visited in December 2006 after the Day Fire, there wasn't much stirring about at Cottrell Camp along the Sespe River. It appeared as if a bomb had exploded and all possible signs of life had ceased to exist, the earth charred. After every step, powdery black soot airlifted plumes of ash around the mules and us and canyon breezes whipped up giant dust devils into leafless oak, cottonwood and sycamore trees. The only vegetation that survived the blaze hugged the Sespe River, the pulse of this wilderness.

After a long day searching for the Sespe's bighorn, we huddled around a blazing campfire, while Goodfield prepared a memorable feast. The moon was full and brightened the barren landscape. To the southwest, the Topa Topa Mountains towered above us like a mighty fortress. Then a bright light appeared on the backside of the broad, ominous mountains, nearly reaching the summit. A high mountain wind had breathed life into a lingering hot spot on the Topa Topas. Owens whipped out a pair of high-powered binoculars, revealing a flame that was at least 15 to 20 feet high, burning the last stand of life on the peak, remnants of the Day Fire clinging to any signs of life.

The Day Fire was one of Southern California's largest wildfires in history. It began on Labor Day of 2006, and wasn't contained until October 2, 2006. Over 4,000 firefighters fought the blaze, started accidentally by someone burning trash. The 254-square-mile fire cost over \$73 million to fight, and burned 162,702 acres.

But despite the devastation, the wildfire did accomplish two positive things in the Sespe. It burned overgrown chaparral that wasn't allowing new plants to grow beneath its dense canopy. It also opened up valuable escape terrain for the (still-undetermined) population of desert bighorn sheep in the region. The burn may enable survey crews to get a better read on the existing population in the future.

"There really isn't an accurate way to determine the population right now, only because this would entail radio-collaring animals," explained Barboza. "During a survey a few years ago, we saw some trailing where you might not expect deer, and I thought it might've been bighorn, but it was an area a helicopter couldn't go."

Barboza was referring to the California Condor Sanctuary in the Sespe, where helicopters are forbidden to fly because of the highly endangered raptors. She said a lot of outside funding is needed for radio-collaring, but it could lead to more subgroups of bighorn sheep that the DFG doesn't know about. "There's some really good habitat in the condor sanctuary," she said. "I hope they would go there. There's good lambing habitat."

**New beginnings**

Desert bighorn live for 10 to 15 years, so the bighorn currently living in the Sespe today are a new generation of sheep that have lived on their own for at least the last decade. Because the DFG didn't reach its management goals of 100 bighorn sheep in the region, the relocation project could be seen as a failure, but Barboza doesn't believe so.

"There's been a viable population in the Sespe for 20 years, so in that respect it is a very successful project," Barboza said. "If all the sheep had died out in the relocation, then it would've been a failure. But we have a small population out there that's sustained on their own."

"I thought it [the project] had busted, but they maintained themselves and tended to stick in that area," said Freel. "But it's going to take more releases to get to that original goal of 100 animals." The combination of sustainability and the effects of the Day Fire could prove to be a boon for the bighorn.

"Whenever there's a wildfire in sheep habitat, there's the possibility of some expansion of range," continued Barboza. "There's more visibility and new forage."

Watching with each pronounced leap, I saw the sinewy muscles across the bighorns' stout hindquarters contract as the small band bounced from ledge to ledge in the burned out terrain. There is no telling how far the desert bighorn can now run, no longer impeded by dense chaparral, as the Sespe regenerates itself. ★

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