



Millions of bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis*) once lived in the western United States. By 1900, though, bighorn numbers were reduced to a few hundred due to market hunting. In 1912, naturalist Ernest T. Seton reported bighorns in the park had increased to more than 200, and travelers could find them around Mt. Everts or Mt. Washburn.

Bighorn sheep inhabit high, rocky country. The bottoms of their feet are concave, enabling them to walk and run over rocks very easily. Their tan-colored fur camouflages them against cliff rocks.

Both males and females have horns. For the first two years of its life, the horns of a male are similar to the small, slightly curved horns of a female. By the time a male is six or seven years old, the horns form the better part of a circle. The bone interior of the horn does not extend out very far; the outer parts of the horns are hollow and may be damaged during the rut (mating season). Broken or splintered tips are never replaced, and the horn continues to grow from the base throughout the animal's life.

The rut begins in November. Males challenge one another in dramatic battles, snorting and grunting and rising onto their hind legs, then racing toward each other and crashing their heads and horns together. Their extra thick skull protects their brain during these jarring encounters. At the end of the two-month rut, males are often battered and bruised.

Although they are sure-footed in a steep and rocky environment, bighorns do have accidents. They fall off cliffs, slip on ice, and can become caught in avalanches. In Yellowstone, they also have been struck by lightning and hit by automobiles.

As of January 2011 . . .

Number in Yellowstone 250–275

Where to See

- Summer: slopes of Mount Washburn, along Dunraven Pass.
 - Year-round: Gardner Canyon between Mammoth and the North Entrance.
- Also: On cliffs along the Yellowstone River opposite Calcite Springs; above Soda Butte; in backcountry of eastern Absarokas.

Behavior and Size

- Adult male (ram) up to 300 pounds, including horns that can weigh 40 pounds.
- Average life span: males, 9–12 years; females 10–14 years.
- Adult female (ewe) up to 200 pounds.

- Both sexes have horns.
- Feed primarily on grasses; forage on shrubby plants in fall and winter.
- Mating season begins in November.
- One to two lambs born in May or June.

Management

- Bighorns exhibit some habituation to humans; be alert to them along the road; never feed them.
- Early reports of large numbers of bighorn sheep in Yellowstone have led to speculation they were more numerous before the park was established.
- A chlamydia (pinkeye) epidemic in 1982 reduced the northern herd by 60%.
- Other unknown factors may be limiting the population now.

Population and Management

Before a chlamydia (pinkeye) epidemic in 1982, almost 500 bighorn sheep lived on the northern range. Their population dropped 60% due to the epidemic, and it has been slow to recover. Researchers recently concluded that wolf reintroduction has not affected the bighorn sheep population. Their reasoning includes the fact that the population has been increasing by seven percent annually since 1998. They conclude that other, so far unknown, factors may be limiting population growth.

Researchers have also studied bighorn sheep habitat use and the effect of human activity along the Gardiner–Mammoth road. About 65 percent of all sheep observations occur atop McMinn Bench of Mt. Everts.