

## "Bighorn Hunts Support Wild Sheep"

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Bighorn sheep had all but disappeared about 50 years ago from the West Texas mountains where they once flourished. Now there are so many that they're being hunted.

Years of restoration efforts have proven successful and now there are at least 822 of the agile animals, said Mike Pittman, who directs wildlife management areas in the Trans-Pecos region. A helicopter survey in late August tallied the desert bighorn sheep numbers, he said.

"And we know we're not seeing them all, naturally," said Pittman, who estimated there may be as many as 1,000 bighorn sheep. "They occupy the very roughest habitat that's out here."

Their growing numbers are reflected by the 12 hunting permits for bighorns issued statewide this year, the most since efforts to rebuild the population began in 1954. The previous high came two seasons ago when eight permits were allowed. Hunting permits are based on the count of older rams, which are not crucial to the herd. Nine of this season's permits will be for sheep hunts on privately owned land where surplus rams were spotted. Most landowners who receive the permits sell them and use the proceeds to improve bighorn and other wildlife habitat on their acreage, Pittman said.

Christopher Gill, who lives in San Antonio and owns a 32,000-acre ranch just south of the Sierra Diablo Wildlife Management Area in far West Texas, is one such landowner. This year he was issued his fourth bighorn permit since 2000 and sold it for \$60,000.

The sale of one of those permits helped pay for 80 miles of pipe that provides water for bighorn and other wildlife. Gill's seen the bighorn numbers increase since he bought the land six years ago.

"I think there are 60 or 70 bighorns all the time now," he said. "You'll see sheep all over that ranch at the oddest places and times, sometimes right behind the house."

One permit went to the Texas Bighorn Society, which in April auctioned it for \$105,000. The final two permits are offered by lottery to thousands of hunters paying \$10 a ticket for a chance to hunt bighorn.

"To anyone unfamiliar with the Texas bighorn sheep restoration program and big game hunting, the price tag for the right to hunt these magnificent animals may seem inflated," Texas Parks and Wildlife Department wildlife director Mike Berger said. "But it's the cause that fuels the bidding. These folks are investing in conservation."

The Texas Bighorn Society uses the money to provide basic needs of the bighorn in remote mountain ranges in the Trans-Pecos, where members construct water containers, called guzzlers. They capture the area's limited rainfall, even dew, so the sheep have a reliable water source.

"This is very much a success story and something Texas should be proud of," Texas Bighorn Society president David Wetzel said.

Rams older than 10 years struggle to survive and are often badly injured while competing for females during mating season. A pair of males can spend several hours butting their curly horns to try to win a mate.

Aging bighorn may also be ostracized and "sort of shoved off to the side," Pittman said. Their teeth wear out or fall out and survival becomes increasingly difficult as they get older, he said.

That's why older rams are the preferred quarry, Pittman said. "The alternative there is to let them die of old age or starvation," he said.

Desert bighorns were once prominent in remote mountains of West Texas. In the late 1800s, there were more than 1,500, but unregulated hunting, fencing and disease spread by domestic sheep caused their numbers to dwindle. By 1903, only about 500 remained.

That's when steps began to protect them, starting with a hunting prohibition. But the population continued to decline due to land use changes, and by 1945 only about 35 bighorn were left in Texas.

In 1954, Texas, other states and federal wildlife agencies, and private conservation groups developed a cooperative agreement to begin restoring the bighorn. They got desert bighorns from states including Arizona, Nevada, Utah and Mexico, and set up brooding sites in far West Texas. Other wildlife management areas have worked to rebuild bighorn numbers.

"We'd like for these populations to increase," Pittman said. "There are lots of areas in West Texas that are suitable for sheep that still don't have sheep."