Big Creek – Unit 26 Bighorn Sheep Survey 2008

By Holly & Jim Akenson, December 16, 2008

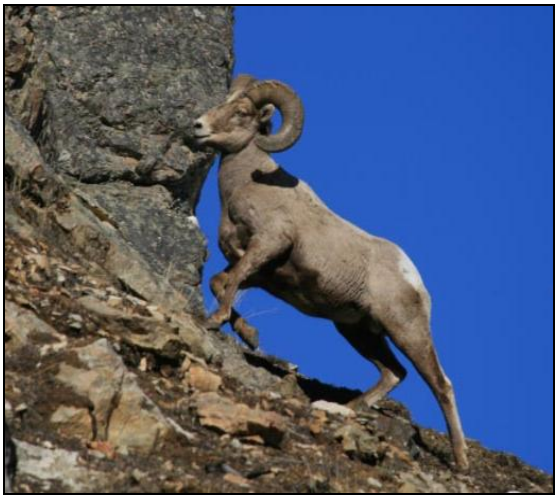

Photo © by Holly Akenson

Annual bighorn sheep surveys are conducted from the ground in December from Taylor Ranch to assess age and sex composition of bighorns in Big Creek – Game Management Unit 26. Surveys are a cooperative effort by University of Idaho, Idaho Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, and Idaho Department of Fish & Game. Surveys are coordinated by Holly & Jim Akenson, biologists at University of Idaho's Taylor Wilderness Research Station. Idaho FNAWS members Pete Stewart and John Cayman provided their expertise on the surveys. We appreciate assistance from Angela Rossmann from Wild Idaho News and Tyler Morrison and Amie-June Brumble from Taylor Wilderness Research Station.

Observations from December 2008

We observed similar numbers of bighorn sheep during the 2008 survey as past surveys, 97 sheep this year compared to 110 in 2007 and 100 in 2006. There has been a slight upward trend in the number and proportion of ewes observed over the 8 years of surveys. The Lamb:Ewe ratio this year improved to a moderate level (25 lambs:100 ewes) compared to the last 2 years. Lambs looked healthy and good sized. All age and sex classes of bighorns appeared to be in good health, with dense winter coats. Only one cough was heard during surveys. The Ram:Ewe ratio this year (34 rams:100 ewes) was lower than previous years, primarily due to much lower numbers of young rams observed. Poor lamb survival in the past 2 years led to the low proportion of young rams documented in the current survey. As in recent years, the majority of rams were mature, over 4.5 years old and greater than ¾ curl.

Fires continue to affect Big Creek bighorn habitat. The 2006 Dunce Fire burned 8,000 acres of winter range grasslands and mountain mahogany outcrops from Dunce Creek to Cliff Creek. Although in 2007 the Lamb:Ewe ratio did not increase as we expected from greater nutritional value of forage plants post-fire, in 2008 fire effects on the winter range may have contributed to the observed increase in the Lamb:Ewe ratio. In summer 2007 the 20,000 acre Goat Fire burned in Big Creek tributaries: Monumental Creek and Rush Creek. This fire burned part of the West Fork Monumental/Snowslide bighorn lambing and summer ranges and migration routes for most ewes (from West Fork Monumental, Big Cottonwood, and Dynamite summer ranges). The effect of the Goat Fire could be an improvement in summer forage nutrition and increased visibility and antipredator benefit during migration. All Big Creek bighorn summer and winter ranges are within wolf home ranges. The winter breeding season should be the most vulnerable period for bighorn predation by wolves because during the rut large numbers of bighorns congregate on less steep grassy terrain and rams are less vigilant. To date, during winter carnivore research and field observations we have seen little direct effect of wolves on bighorn survival. Information from these surveys gives bighorn managers at IDF&G and sportsmen an insight into annual population trends to augment IDF&G bighorn helicopter surveys.