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HISTORY AND PRESENT STATUS OF BIGHORN IN SOUTH-CENTRAL NEW MEXICO

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The Mexican bighorn (Ovis canadensis mexicana) (Cowan, 1940, p. 545) is the endemic form of mountain sheep in southern New Mexico. At the present time but three herds are known in the state. These are found in the Guadalupe, San Andres, and Big Hatchet mountains. The only other bighorns in New Mexico are several from Canada planted by the state game department in the Sandia Mountains near Albuquerque. This paper pertains chiefly to the herd in the San Andres Mountains but includes records of sheep from the Organ Mountains immediately to the south.

LOCATION

Darton (1928, p. 183) describes the San Andres Range as follows: "The San Andres Mountains are one of the most prominent ranges in New Mexico. They begin at San Augustin Pass, northeast of Las Cruces, and extend north to Mockingbird Gap, a distance of 75 miles. The altitude of the adjoining plains is 4,000 feet, and most of the higher peaks of the range rise somewhat more than 7,000 feet; Salinis Peak, the highest summit, is 9,040 feet above sea level according to the Wheeler Survey. The range presents to the west a long slope of limestone and to the east a precipitous slope consisting of granite and schist surmounted by cliffs of limestone. The range is structurally a westward-dipping monocline...." The range is flanked on its western side by the Jornada del Muerto, a dry plain separating

the mountains from the Rio Grande. The eastern declivity of this long, narrow range faces the Tularosa Basin, which contains the White Sands area of New Mexico. To the south of San Augustine Pass the continuing mountains are known as the Organ Mountains. Bailey (1913, frontispiece) in his map of the life zones of New Mexico shows that these mountains are largely in the Upper Sonoran Zone with small areas of Transition Zone in the Organ Mountains and the northern San Andres. At present, the sheep are found in the rough rims and adjacent areas of the Upper Sonoran Zone dominated according to site by various plants of the semi-desert type, including Cercocarpus, Agave, Dasyllirion, Nolina, Opuntia, Garrya, Fendlera, Fallugia, and Condalia, as well as various weeds and grasses, of which the grammas (Bouteloua) are prominent.

EARLY RECORDS

Cave deposits (Ayer, 1936) and ethnobiological evidence (Castetter and Opler, 1936) indicate that bighorn sheep have been in this region from before the time of written history. The San Andres Mountains were a favorite haunt of the raiding Mescalero Apache Indians who were known to use artifacts of the horns and to eat the flesh of mountain sheep (Ibid. pp. 5, 19, 25). Mescal pits can still be seen in the southern San Andres and arrowheads, pottery, and other artifacts are found around old Indian campsites. Unfortunately, little is known of bighorn numbers in the days of Indian occupation, but the presence of the sheep today in rough areas largely ungrazed by domestic stock suggests that when more such areas were available more sheep were present.

Lt. W. H. C. Whiting (1850, p. 201) writing of his explorations mentioned the Organ Mountains and the bighorn as follows: "It appears there are three distinct ranges of mountains traversing the country east of El Paso in a north and south direction: the first the Organ range, twenty miles east of the Rio Grande;"

"These wild and rocky mountain ranges are the places where several animals resort that are to be met with nowhere else. . . . The bighorn, or cimarron, is also seen skipping playfully from rock to rock upon the narrow overhanging crags, and cropping the short herbage which grows upon them:"

Townsend (1893) mentions mountain sheep in the Organ Mountains and adds that Mr. G. R. Beasley of Soledad "is reported to have killed a full-grown mountain sheep two years ago in the Organs." Mr. A. D. Litton of Hatch, New Mexico lived in the southern San Andres Mountains in the middle nineties. While looking for a stock-killing bear in May 1895, he saw six or seven sheep on the crest of the range east of the saddle between Ropes Canyon and Ash Spring. He also spoke of a large ram killed by a miner, Mr. Green Crawford, who packed the sheep to his camp in San Andracito Canyon by burro where the skull with horns could be seen for many years. C. M. Barber, who collected in the San Andres region in the 1890's (F. M. Bailey, 1928, p. 28) (Poole & Schantz, 1942, p. 51) mentions sheep in the Guadalupe (1902, p. 191) but not in the San Andres or Organ mountains. This leads us to infer that although the sheep were doubtless present they were both scarce and little known at the time.

Bailey (1931, p. 18) cites Gaut who reported in 1903 "a small bunch living in the mountains between Bear Canyon and San Augustine Peak" in the southern part of the San Andres Range. Gaut also reported at this time that the sheep found formerly in the crest of the Organs had not been seen recently. Ligon (Ibid: p. 18) learned from an old trapper in 1915 that 30 or more were still to be found in the San Andres. Scattered reports indicate that bighorn were occasionally seen in the San Andres during the 1920's. By 1936, after the drought years of 1933 and 1934, these animals were estimated by the Forest Service (1936) to number but 20 to 30.

Hornaday (1901) notes that a reliable observer, Mr. C. J. Jones, saw a bighorn in the Organ Mountains southeast of Las Cruces in 1901. Ranchers living in the Organ Mountains report mountain sheep as being present in small numbers up to about 1937. Their numbers were doubtless very small, however, and little was known of them as Ligon (1927) does not mention the remnants of the Organ Range in his study of existing New Mexican bighorn herds. In 1941 we received reports of a single large ram having been seen at the north end of the Organ Mountains near San Augustine Pass. It is possible that sheep occasionally wander between the southern San Andres and northern Organ mountains.

PRESENT STATUS

After having been a state game refuge for several years, the most favorable bighorn range of the southern San Andres Mountains was set aside in 1941 as the San Andres National Wildlife Refuge of the Fish and

Wildlife Service, U. S. Department of the Interior. The majority of the remaining sheep are doubtless in this new refuge although persistent reports indicate that a few bighorns can still be found in the more northerly parts of the range, as well as to the south in the Organ Mountains.

Under protection on the refuge the bighorns are slowly increasing. Ten lambs were reported in 1942 and the 1943 crop of lambs also numbers at least 10. The total present (1943) bighorn population is more than 60. This estimate is based on a field survey of animals seen, and on sign and tracks. Some water supplies have been developed and present plans call for more of this important work. Preliminary food studies based on browse utilization and field observations indicate competition between the sheep and the numerous mule deer. A successful public hunt for bucks and does was held in 1942 with the cooperation of the New Mexico State Game and Fish Commission to reduce deer numbers and plans are being laid to continue this herd regulation. Thus a start has been made in the management of the small band of Mexican bighorns on one of their ancestral ranges.

SUMMARY

Early records of bighorn sheep are cited for the San Andres and Organ mountain ranges in south-central New Mexico. The present (1943) sheep population (60+) on the newly created federal refuge in the San Andres Mountains is given. Management has begun.

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San Andres National Wildlife
Refuge, Las Cruces, New Mexico