

South Dakota Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep and Mountain Goat 2008 Status Report

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Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep

Audubon's bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis auduboni*) were native to the Black Hills and Badlands of South Dakota. Uncontrolled hunting caused the extinction of this subspecies by the early 1900's. Therefore, the four herds of Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis canadensis*) in South Dakota are a result of transplants from other state and provinces of Canada. Three herds are located in the Black Hills; Spring Creek/Rapid Creek herd, Elk Mountain herd, and Custer State Park herd. Another herd outside of the Black Hills is located in the Badlands National Park.

Spring Creek/Rapid Creek herd

This herd was established in 1991 with 26 bighorns from Georgetown Colorado. An additional 5 bighorns from the Badlands National Park were placed in the herd in 1992. The herd grew to 175-200 animals by 2000, the first year a hunting season was established for the herd with 2 "any bighorn" licenses available. Presently, the herd is at a stable population with approximately 200 animals. Licenses for this herd are at four "any bighorn".

Elk Mountain herd

This herd was established in 2001 when 20 bighorns from the Spring Creek/Rapid Creek were transplanted to Elk Mountain. An additional 7 bighorns ewes, were placed in the herd in 2004 from New Mexico. The herd has grown to approximately 100+ animals and in 2008 one "any bighorn" license will be offered.

Custer State Park herd

The present Custer State Park herd was started in 1965 with 22 animals from Wyoming. The herd grew to approximately 150 and stabilized. In 1999, twenty bighorns from Alberta, Canada were transplanted into the herd. During the 1990's and early 2000's license numbers ranged from 2 to 4 "any ram". By 2003 the herd had grown to approximately 180 animals. However, during the winter of 2003-2004 an all age die-off reduced the herd to around 50 animals. There has been no hunting season since that time. An additional transplant into that herd will be considered in the future to rebuild numbers.

Badlands National Park herd

The Badlands herd was originally started in 1964 when 22 bighorns from Colorado were transplanted into the park. The herd grew to approximately 160+ animals by the early 1990's when an all age die-off occurred during the winter of 1994-1995 and reduced the herd to approximately 52 animals. During 2004, 23 bighorns were transplanted into the park and the present herd has grown to around 100 animals. There is no hunting season within the park. Herd numbers will be controlled by removal of animals for transplanting in other areas of the state.

Rocky Mountain Goats

Rocky Mountain goats (*Oreamnos americanus*) were not native to South Dakota. In 1924, 6 animals were obtained from Alberta, Canada which were placed in an enclosure within Custer State Park in the Black Hills. Two escaped that day, and the remaining four escaped in 1929. This established the present herd in the Harney Peak range. In 1954, 6 goats were transplanted from this herd to Spearfish Canyon in the Northern Black Hills. That transplant failed, leaving the Harney Peak herd as the only herd of mountain goats in South Dakota.

By the late 1940's the herd size was estimated to be 300-400 animals. During the early 1980's an apparent decline in population numbers dictated a need for a basic population research study. During 1982 through 1984 the hunting season was closed. At the conclusion of the study, the population was determined to be 150+/- 22 animals. The hunting season was reopened with 4 "any goat" licenses. Population and license numbers remained stable until 2001, at which time mountain goat numbers began declining and license numbers followed suit. 2006 was the last hunting season with two licenses. At that time, aerial surveys results estimated the population to be at approximately 60 animals. During the winter of 2006-2007 eighteen mountain goats from Colorado were transplanted into the Harney Range to supplement the herd.