

## Endangered Species and Spaces

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### 3.6 Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep: *Ovis canadensis canadensis* (Shaw)

**Order:** *Artiodactyla*  
**Family:** *Bovidae*

#### Status

Global Rank: G4G5T4T5  
Provincial Rank: S3  
COSEWIC: not addressed

Provincial Listing: [Blue list](#)



#### *Distinguishing Features*

The distinctive feature of Bighorn Sheep is the massive brown spiral horns which, in rams, curls back and down close to the head with tips projecting forward and outward just below the eyes. The ewe's horns are shorter and simply curl back laterally from the crown. The coat is smooth and close to the body contours. The dorsal colour is wood brown with darker chocolate brown on the chest, face and legs. The lower belly, backs of the legs, muzzle and large rump patch are ivory white. Males weigh 130 - 156 kg. Females are much smaller than males (Banfield. 1974)

#### *Distribution*

Columbia Basin: Most numerous in the Rocky Mountains from Golden south to the USA border. Discontinuous in the northern north portion of the Columbia Basin Rockies.

British Columbia: Rocky Mountain Bighorns inhabit the Rocky Mountains, from Golden south to the Canada-USA border, and discontinuously north to the Sukunka River. Two introduced populations also exist in central British Columbia: one north of Lytton between the Fraser and the Thompson rivers west of Spences Bridge; and a second on the south side of the South Thompson River from Chase to Squilax and southeast as far as Turtle Valley.

Global: *O. c. canadensis* ranges through the Rocky Mountains from British Columbia and Alberta south to Colorado.

#### *Habitat*

Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep are found mainly in alpine tundra and mountain slope grasslands associated with rugged escape terrain. They prefer areas with low precipitation levels in winter, seeking out south-facing grasslands below 600 m, but occasionally up to 1800 m. Summer ranges, on the other hand, are usually slopes at 2000-2500 m.

## Threats

There are an estimated 3100 animals in the province, and the population is stable. Some of the herds have declined in recent years because of disease and severe winter weather, but others have increased. The Rocky Mountain Bighorn population declined rapidly from the 1930s to the 1980s, because of habitat destruction, disease, harassment by the public, and intensive fire suppression which allowed traditional grassland ranges to be overtaken by forest succession. Overharvesting has historically been a threat, but provincial wildlife management and conservation efforts have controlled this. Livestock grazing, interruption of migration corridors, human encroachment on winter habitat, and the lack of wildfires to maintain grassland ranges all still potentially affect Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep. Small herds, particularly isolated ones, are vulnerable (Cannings et al. 1999).

## Biology

Bighorn Sheep usually eat grasses and sedges, but their diet also can include shrubs. Except for the mating season, adult males live in all-male groups, usually on a separate home range from ewes and juveniles. Mating takes place in November and December, followed by gestation period of around 175 days. A single lamb is born in late May or early June is usually weaned in 4-6 months. (Cannings et al. 1999).



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