

BIGHORN SHEEP TRANSPLANTING IN MONTANA

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Bighorn sheep were at a low ebb in Montana in 1941 when wildlife restoration funds became available for research and management.

One of the first projects of the Wildlife Restoration Division was trapping game animals in areas of abundance, and transplanting them to suitable habitat in areas where the species was scarce or absent. In the case of bighorn sheep, many of the transplants were reintroductions into areas where bighorns formerly occurred.

The first bighorn transplant under this program was made in 1942 when 11 were trapped in the Sun River Canyon and released at the Gates of the Mountains north of Helena. Including this transplant, 643 bighorns in 39 different groups have been transplanted in Montana (Table 1). The distribution of these releases is shown in Figure 1.

Sources for the transplanted sheep were the Sun River Canyon, the Tarryall Mountains in Colorado, Wildhorse Island in Flathead Lake, and the National Bison Range. By far the greatest number was taken from the Sun River Canyon.

A transplant of 16 Colorado sheep was released in 1947 at Billy Creek in the Missouri River breaks. This is the former range of the extinct Audubon sheep. The sheep were released in a large fenced enclosure and held until 1952, when they were released and the fence removed. The sheep scattered and eventually disappeared. A similar procedure was followed with the Two Calf Creek transplant (also in the Missouri River breaks). These sheep came from the Sun River area. This herd built up to more than 100, both inside and outside the enclosure, and some limited hunting was permitted. About three-quarters of the herd died off during the severe 1971-72 winter. The remaining animals are still in the vicinity and are reported to be increasing.

There are several bighorn herds, established or augmented by transplants, that are currently supporting limited hunting and thus are considered successful. These are the Kootenai Falls, Thompson Falls, Highland Mountains, Anaconda (Olson-Foster), and Blue Hills populations. Approximately half of Montana's huntable populations have been established or augmented by transplants.

In addition, the Two Calf herd in the Missouri Breaks is recovering from a die-off, and the East Fork Bitterroot transplant appears to be increasing. These may provide hunting in the near future. The Wildhorse Island (Flathead Lake) herd is also a successful transplant. No hunting has been permitted by the landowner, but sheep have been trapped and transplanted from the island.

Approximately eight transplants apparently failed to become established. Several failures were in the Wolf Creek-Cascade area, where transplants totaling 121 bighorns have been made. The latest of these was made on the department's Beartooth Game Range in 1971 and 1973. Sheep from these plants are surviving

in the area, so their success is still undetermined. Several dead or dying sheep, apparently from verminous pneumonia, were found or reported from the earlier transplants in this area.

The success of some other releases is still undetermined. These are in the Petty Creek area near Missoula, the Pryor Mountains and the Little Rockies.

The procedure for making bighorn transplants is similar to that for other big game species. The area is inspected by Department of Fish and Game and land managing agency personnel (chiefly the U. S. Forest Service and BLM). Then an inspection report describing the area and its suitability for the transplanted species is written. This, together with proof of concurrence of private landowners in the area, and a cooperative agreement with the land agency, is signed by the Forest Supervisor or BLM District Manager, Forest Service Regional Office and the Fish and Game Commission, before the transplant can be made.

Table 1. History and status of transplanted bighorn sheep herds in Montana

<u>Location of Release</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Present Status</u>
Gates of the Mountains (Lewis & Clark Co.)	14	1942	Not successful
C.M. Russell Game Range (Garfield Co.)	42	1947	Failed after 1952
C.M. Russell Game Range (Fergus Co.)	31	1965	Sheep surviving in area
Sixteen Mile Creek (Gallatin Co.)	16	1954	Not successful
Wildhorse Island (Lake Co.)	2	1939	Increased to 137 in 1957,
Wildhorse Island (Lake Co.)	6	1947	range base
Kootenai Falls (Lincoln Co.)	13	1955	Hunttable population
Bull Mountain (Jefferson Co.)	23	1955-57	Not successful
Blue Hills (Custer Co.)	13	1958	Limited hunting
Thompson Falls (Sanders Co.)	19	1959	Limited hunting
Doris Mountain, Lake Blaine (Flathead Co.)	14	1963	Not successful
Sheep Creek (Meagher Co.)	18	1962	Not successful
Sheep Creek (Cascade Co.)	21	1956-60	Not successful
Tobacco Root Mountains (Madison Co.)	25	1965	Not successful
Highland Mountains (Madison Co.)	21	1967	Limited hunting
Olson-Foster Gulch (Deer Lodge Co.)	25	1967	Limited hunting
Sieben (Lewis and Clark Co.)	34	1968	Not determined
Petty Creek (Missoula Co.)	16	1968	Surviving - 11 in 1974
Teakettle Mtn. (Flathead Co.)	15	1968	Not successful
Bull River (Lincoln Co.)	33	1969	Surviving
Highland Mountains (Madison Co.)	30	1969	Limited hunting
Pryor Mountains (Carbon Co.)	78	1971-74	Not determined
Beartooth Game Range (Lewis & Clark Co.)	55	1971-73	Surviving
East Fork-Bitterroot (Ravalli Co.)	35	1972	Increasing
Little Rockies (Phillips Co.)	42	1972-74	Surviving & reproducing
Stillwater Canyon (Stillwater Co.)	6	1968-74	To augment native pop.
Total	643		

MONTANA

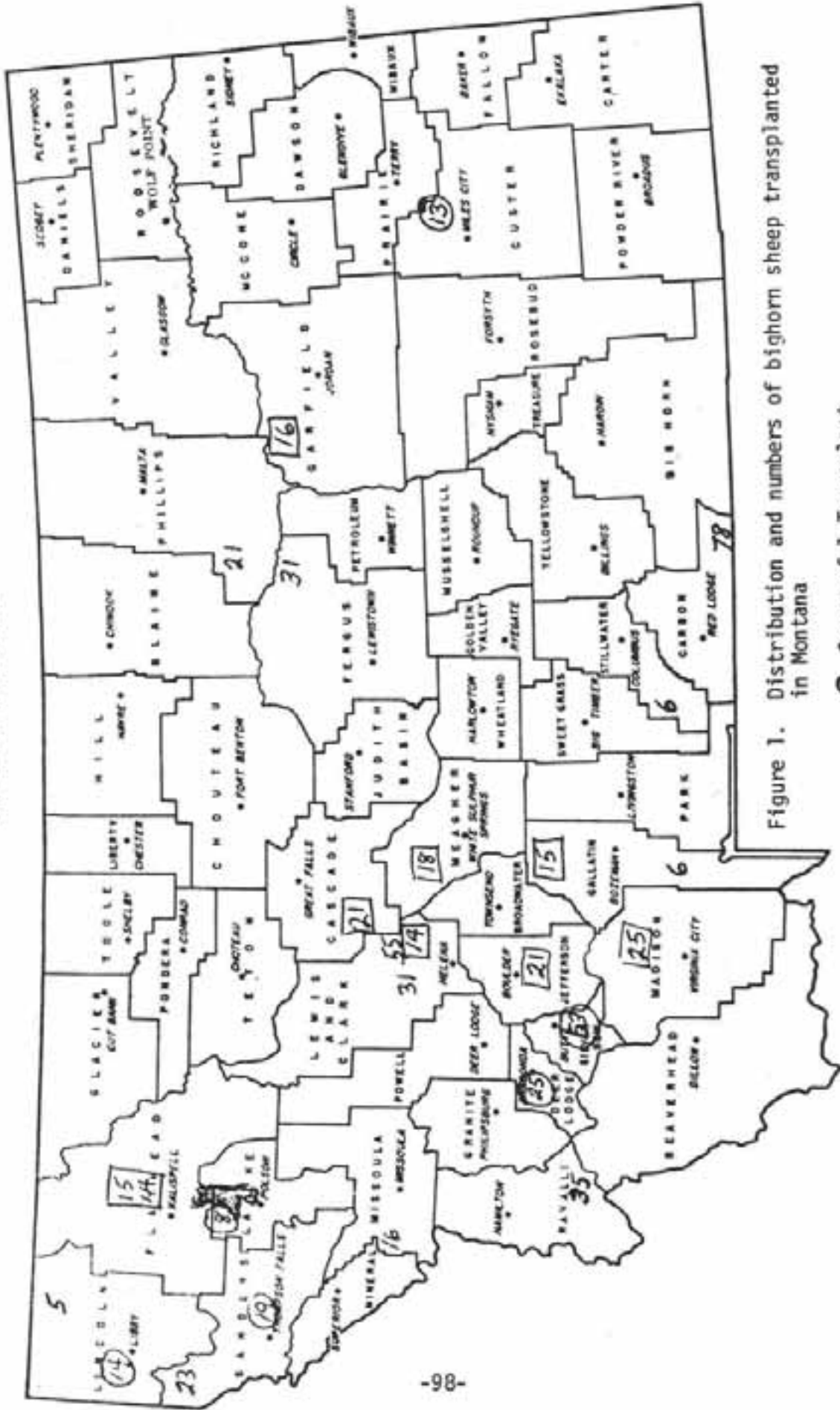


Figure 1. Distribution and numbers of bighorn sheep transplanted in Montana

- Successful Transplant
- Unsuccessful transplant
- Others - undetermined