

STATUS AND MANAGEMENT OF THE
MOUNTAIN GOAT IN IDAHO¹

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HISTORY

Historically, the distribution of Idaho's only subspecies (*Oreamnos americanus missoulae*) of mountain goats was restricted to suitable habitat from the Snake River Plains north to the Canadian border. This represents the most southern extension of the natural range for this species and Idaho is only one of three states of the lower 48 with a native mountain goat population. Consequently, being ranked behind Washington and Montana in total numbers, Idaho has always held their mountain goats with some esteem, resulting in a conservative management approach.

In 1903, Idaho's legislature established the first mountain goat hunting regulations to restrict the exploitation of this species. These restrictions created a 78 day hunting season for goats and allowed each holder of a one dollar hunting license to take a goat annually. By 1931, Idaho's goat season had been further reduced to 10 days and in 1943 a specific 10 dollar goat tag was required for each hunter. Cognizant of the impacts of hunting on our mountain goat populations, statewide hunting closures were ordered by the Idaho Fish and Game Commission in 1948, 1949, and again in 1951. Also, recognizing the tendency for hunters to congregate on accessible goat herds, Idaho created its first permit hunts in 1954 with an 11 day hunting season in popular goat areas in Central Idaho. Idaho held its last general mountain goat season in 1966. Since that year, Idaho has restricted the harvest of mountain goats with a permit system to disperse hunting pressure to available goats. During these early years when small accessible populations were identified as receiving excessive pressure, the practice by the Department was to segregate these herds by regulations from huntable populations.

In the conservative management years prior to the 1960's, Idaho hunters displayed little interest in mountain goats when other big game was plentiful. Consequently, Idaho's legal goat harvest exceeded 100 only twice (1933 and 1946) prior to 1960. However, in the 1960's, when hunting pressure increased throughout the state on all species, and armed with additional new information on mountain goat status acquired from helicopter survey, Idaho liberalized its approach to mountain goat management. Permit allocations were increased and the number of units was also increased to disperse hunting pressure. Also, to accommodate the growing interest in archery hunting, Idaho established its first general archery seasons for goats in 1967 for specific areas of the state. As a result, Idaho goat harvest increased significantly, reaching a peak in 1966, the last year portions of Idaho were still open to general goat hunting, and again in 1968. A total of 161 goats was taken each of these years. Permit allocations continued to increase until 1974 with an authorization of 303 permits. However, faced with apparent population declines and a growing awareness of this species' sensitivity to hunting, Idaho reduced the number of permits to 259 in 1976. In addition, several areas were closed to hunting.

INTRODUCTIONS

Despite these population declines, the present distribution of mountain goats in Idaho remains essentially the same as when the state was first settled by white men, with the exception of relatively recent introductions that have expanded the range of goats within Idaho. All of Idaho's mountain goat transplant attempts have been successful. Idaho first tried its hand at transplanting goats in 1960 when 20 goats were trapped on Snow Peak and Black Mountain in northern Idaho and released on the cliffs overlooking the eastern and southern shores of Lake Pend Oreille (Fig. 1). Since introduction, this population has increased slightly and stabilized at 30 animals. Restricted in size, readily accessible and within view of the popular lake, this population has not been hunted.

Idaho's most successful and only hunted introduced goat herd was initiated in 1962 when four goats of each sex were released into the Seven Devils mountain range in west central Idaho. This range provides ideal goat habitat, but isolated from other inhabited goat ranges, the initial

¹Editor's note. Paper not part of Symposium.

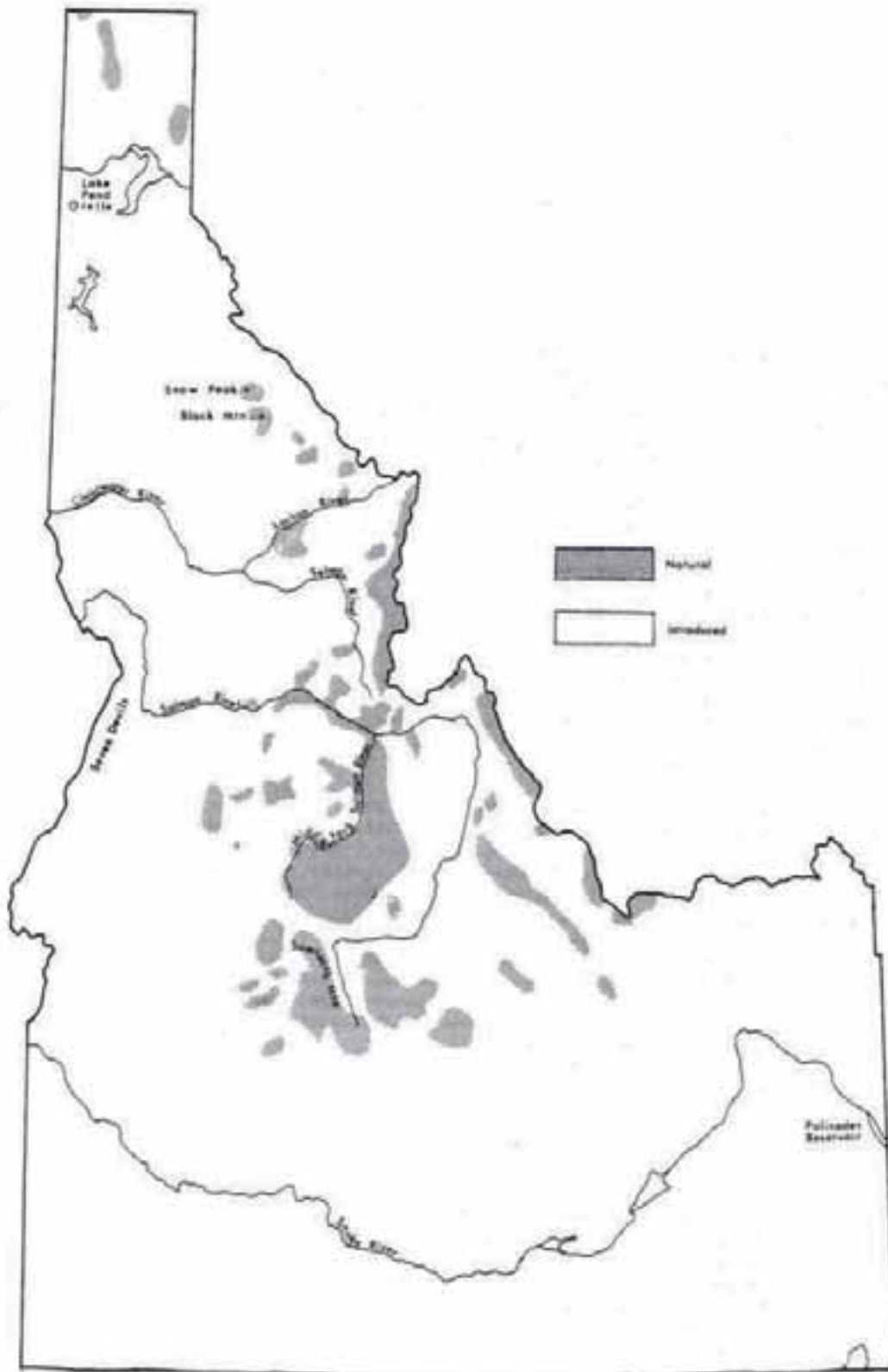


Figure 1. Mountain Goat Distribution in Idaho.

release was supplemented with an additional nine goats (seven females and two males) in 1974. This population has increased rapidly with a current population estimate of 70 animals. This herd has been hunted under a limited permit since 1974 with an annual allotment of five permits. Kid production has remained above average and this population is apparently still increasing.

Idaho's most recent introduction, in 1969, extended the southern extremity of goat range in Idaho when five goats (two females and three males) were released near Palisades Reservoir (Fig. 1) on the Idaho-Wyoming border. This initial release was followed with four additional goats (two females and two males) the next year. During the ensuing years, this population has increased to approximately 20 animals. Initiated from two release sites, the Palisades herd is extremely scattered, difficult to inventory and current trend is not known. There are no plans to exploit this population at this time. Additional transplants are proposed for Idaho, but the only suitable populations for trapping, on Snow Peak and Black Mountain, declined drastically during the trapping program. The Snow Peak population has recovered sufficiently to allow the resumption of a trapping program in the near future.

CURRENT STATUS

Brandborg (1955) estimated a stable population of 2,785 mountain goats in Idaho in the early 1950's. This estimate was obtained primarily from an accumulation of admittedly liberal United States Forest Service estimates, but it does compare with a current estimated population of 2,200 to 2,500 mountain goats.

Although present Idaho Department of Fish and Game figures are not totally comparable with Brandborg's, general consensus of Regional Game Managers indicates that current population trends are down. The most significant declines have occurred in Idaho's panhandle goat populations found in the Selkirk and Cabinet ranges. Population estimates in 1950 exceeded 200 for this area but have declined to less than 40 animals today. These populations, some of the last goat populations to be hunted under a general hunting program, have now been closed to all hunting and have not shown any recovery at this time.

The Clearwater and Selway goat populations in north Idaho (Fig. 1), hunted under a general hunting system until 1966, also reflect population declines but not as severe as the Panhandle goat populations. Conversely, the major goat populations on the main Salmon River and the Middle Fork of the Salmon River (Fig. 1), the first goat populations to be managed under a conservative permit system in Idaho, have also declined significantly since the 1950's.

Idaho's southern goat populations found in the Sawtooths and associated mountain ranges (Fig. 1) apparently have held their own or have increased. Even in these areas, several of the accessible populations along the fringes of these major mountain ranges have declined under present hunting schemes.

CENSUS TECHNIQUES

In recent years, the helicopter has been Idaho's principle inventory tool and most aerial censuses have taken place in winter during periods of peak concentrations. In a state managerially dominated by deer and elk, most information obtained on the status of mountain goats has been obtained secondarily while flying for deer and/or elk. Restricted by time and funding, most mountain goat inventories have been irregular and incomplete. Idaho's only exception to this indirect approach has been the monitoring of the Pahsimeroi mountain goat herd located in east central Idaho. Since 1960, this herd has been inventoried annually by helicopter to ascertain population trends and to study the impacts of hunting on an individual mountain goat population. A maximum of 217 animals was counted in the early 1960's, but numbers have declined to less than 100 under various levels of harvest management. As a result of the Department's mountain goat research program, hunting mortality appeared to be additive and not a compensatory form of mortality for this goat population. As a result this population was closed to hunting in 1975 and is being monitored annually to measure the population response to a total hunting closure.

Except for introduced populations, most of Idaho's mountain goat populations have been hunted in the past; however, in recent years, recognizing the sensitivity to hunting, many of Idaho's declining and/or vulnerable mountain goat populations have been closed to hunting. Today approximately 2,000 mountain goats are being hunted in Idaho. In 1975 Idaho authorized 276 permits, of which 268 were issued for 63 different controlled hunts. Permits per unit varied from 2 to 15 depending on the size of the unit and the number of goats available within each unit. The trend in recent years has been to reduce the size of goat units and increase the number of units to disperse hunter pressure in proportion to available animals.

Of the 267 permits issued in 1975, 32 of these goat hunters did not hunt. The remaining 235 goat hunters killed a total of 93 goats for a 40 percent hunter success. The sex ratio of the

kill was 1.4 billies to each nanny in 1976, but the average sex ratio in recent years has been nearly equal. Although nannies are legal game, each hunter is mailed instructions prior to the season wherein he/she is encouraged to avoid killing nannies with kids. Goat kids can be legally killed in Idaho, but because of reporting bias they usually don't appear in harvest analysis.

Idaho utilizes a voluntary hunter report card system to determine kill information on mountain goats. This report card, attached to each goat tag, requests county or state determining on residency, the number of days spent hunting and hunter success. In addition, each report includes the sex of the kill, date of kill, location, and management unit.

Idaho has two major mountain goat problems today: increased access and disturbance related to mining and logging activities, and the associated increase and improvement in off-road type vehicles. Probably more important has been the insufficient funds and manpower to properly monitor the trends and impacts of hunting on mountain goat populations. Consequently, game managers have not had the information available to make appropriate management adjustment rapidly enough to accommodate changes in population trends.

LITERATURE CITED

Brandborg, S. M. 1955. Life history and management of the mountain goat in Idaho. Idaho Dept. of Fish and Game, Wildl. Bull. No. 2, 142p.