

# Police nab Hermiston man in connection to Island City burglary

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The Observer

LA GRANDE — The arrest of a third suspect involved in an attempted burglary and police chase brings an end to a dramatic manhunt that tied up police resources from several agencies.

Demus Montez, 36, Hermiston, evaded officers following the events Sunday, July 17, that started in Island City. Police finally caught up with Montez during the early morning hours of July 19. Montez was identified by a motorist who reported seeing an individual wearing a black hooded sweatshirt crawl out of a field near the Elgin Stampede grounds down Highway 82, according to Union County Sheriff Cody Bowen.

Deputies arrived on scene, arrested Montez and booked him into the Union County Jail. He was arrested on charges of attempted murder, first-degree attempted robbery, unlawful use of a weapon, felon in possession of a firearm, criminal mischief, reckless endangerment and misdemeanor fleeing.

Montez joins Jessica Spalinger, 31, of Walla Walla, Washington, and Ashtin Romine, 26, of Clarkston, Washington, who were arrested around 10 p.m. July 17 in connection with the episode that began with the attempted burglary of Bullseye Muzzleloader's and More, 10201 W. First St., Island City, on July 17.

Gun shop's owner Rick Gorte was pleased to hear about the final capture.

"I'm glad that they got him," he said. "He was a danger to our community."

## Store owner recounts fending off masked men

Gorte was cleaning up shattered glass on July 17 following a break-in at his gun store the night before.

Gorte said around 2:30 p.m. two masked



Andrew Cutler/The Observer

**A law enforcement officer stands near a bridge over Shaw Creek outside of Elgin on Sunday, July 17, 2022. Multiple law enforcement agencies were in the area searching for a suspect after an attempted robbery in Island City followed by a high-speed chase that involved gunfire.**

men attempted to enter the shattered glass door of his store. He and the four family members and two friends with him in his shop yelled at the two masked men who then fled the scene.

The two individuals ran to and entered a white sedan — later identified as a 2005 KIA Spectra — parked west of the gun shop. Gorte's daughter, Randi Jo Shafer, stood in front of the sedan in an effort to stop it from leaving. Its driver, identified later during an interview with Oregon State Police detectives as Spalinger, attempted to run over Shafer, Gorte said, but she leaped onto the hood of the sedan before being thrown off as the vehicle's driver sped away. Shafer's foot was injured as a result, according to arrest documents.

As the sedan's driver raced out of the parking lot, Gorte's son-in-law fired three shots at it with a pistol. Gorte believes the shots may have hit the sedan.

Gorte's son-in-law got into a vehicle and began following the sedan but pulled back when a Union County Sheriff's deputy, responding to a 911 call from the store, took over the chase toward Imbler.

Gorte said he thinks the two masked individuals and their driver were responsible for the earlier break-in and were attempting to rob the store a second time.

## The chase and gunfire

According to arrest documents, shortly after fleeing the gun store, Spalinger switched out from the driver's seat with Romine, who then drove the vehicle to Hunter Road where it was located by pursuing law enforcement near Booth Lane.

"When the vehicle passed me, I saw three occupants in the vehicle; a male in the driver's seat and a second male in the back seat and a third person in the front seat," Union County Sheriff's Sgt. Travis Schaad wrote in the arrest document. Schaad attempted a traffic stop, but Romine failed to yield and continued at speeds of approximately 105 mph.

The pursuit ended up on Summerville Road, where Union County Sheriff's Deputy Dane Jensen reported shots were fired from the sedan, which shattered its rear window. One or two bullets hit Jensen's patrol vehicle, which caused it to overheat.

The pursuit continued through Imbler onto Striker Lane then north on Grays Corner Road. They took Rinehart Lane to Indian Creek where the vehicle crashed at the bridge on Indian Creek Road near Dutton Road.

Romine, Spalinger and Montez fled from the vehicle into the dense brush and vegetation.

The Northeast Oregon Regional SWAT Team and the Oregon State Police SWAT Team responded to the area and ultimately located and

arrested Spalinger and Romine late on July 17.

Romine was arrested for reckless endangerment and for misdemeanor and felony fleeing, while Spalinger is in jail for first-degree assault, hit-and-run with injury, recklessly endangering and misdemeanor fleeing from police.

"Spalinger admitted they knew the police were attempting to stop them when I turned on my overhead lights on Hunter Road," Schaad wrote in his report. "She stated Romine was driving at this time, which corresponds with what I saw when the vehicle passed me at Booth and Hunter Road."

## The fallout

The owner of Bullseye Muzzleloader's and More said he has been overwhelmed by the expressions of support his family is receiving on social media.

"It makes you feel like people care, for sure," Gorte said.

Gorte, who has owned his shop for almost 10 years, said he finds it hard to believe something like this occurred in a place like Island City.

Gorte said he is relieved nobody suffered any major injuries. His daughter received medical treatment at Grande Ronde Hospital, according to police documents.

"I'm glad that nobody has been hurt," he said. "My daughter's foot will heal."

"Our police force did an exceptional job," he said.

The court has appointed attorneys for Spalinger and Romine. La Grande's James Schaeffer is representing Spalinger, and Canyon City's Kathleen Dunn is the attorney for Romine. They have hearing pleas scheduled for Aug. 15 and Aug. 22, respectively.

According to arrest documents, Montez is being represented by Rick Dall of La Grande. His plea hearing is set for Aug. 17.

## Bighorns

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The disease also spread to the county's other herd of the agile sheep, which roams in the Burnt River Canyon between Durkee and Bridgeport.

The sheep in the Burnt River herd are California bighorns, a different subspecies than the larger Rocky Mountain sheep that inhabits the Lookout Mountain country between its namesake mountain and Brownlee Reservoir.

The strain of Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae bacteria was first detected in the Lookout Mountain herd, which included about 400 bighorns, in February 2020 when dead sheep were found near the Snake River Road above Brownlee Reservoir. Tissue samples from dead sheep confirmed the strain of bacteria, the first time it had been found in bighorn sheep in Oregon.

During an aerial count in late 2018, biologists counted 403 bighorns in the Lookout Mountain unit, 250 in 2020 and 274 in 2021.

In Lookout Mountain, different herds, different results in 2022

First the good news — and it's quite good, Ratliff said.

Two groups of sheep, one frequenting Connor Creek Canyon, the other in upper Soda Creek, midway between Huntington and Richland, produced a good crop of lambs this year. And so far these lambs seem to be doing well.

The ratio among those groups was about one lamb per ewe, Ratliff said.

"Clearly we had some lamb survival," he said on July 5.

In 2020, by contrast, biologists were initially optimistic because they didn't find any dead lambs in Lookout Mountain as of mid June. They knew, from earlier testing, that ewes don't infect their lambs prior to birth.

But later in the summer of 2020, as ewes and lambs congregated in what biologists call "nursery groups," those lambs started to sicken and die across the Lookout Mountain area.

Ratliff and other biologists concluded that all of the 65

to 70 lambs born in the unit during the spring of 2020 died from bacteria-induced pneumonia, along with an estimated 75 adult bighorns.

The situation wasn't much better in 2021.

After seeing quite a few lambs in late spring and early summer, by late August biologists knew of just five lambs that had survived from that year's group.

During an aerial census late in 2021, Ratliff counted just four lambs.

This summer, the ewes and lambs are in nursery groups in upper Connor and Soda creeks, but the lambs, unlike in 2020 and 2021, are surviving.

The situation is quite dire, however, for another group of bighorns, Ratliff said.

This bunch, which generally stays at lower elevations near the Snake River Road, running along Brownlee Reservoir between Richland and Huntington, had lambs this spring, just as in the previous two years.

But earlier this month, Ratliff said, biologists didn't see a single lamb in the area, where they counted 67 ewes.

Biologists did see lambs earlier this year, he said.

They also saw several ewes with swollen udders, indicating they had recently been nursing a lamb that, presumably, had died.

## Tracking 'chronic shedders'

The key to combatting bacterial infection, Ratliff said, is in sheep that can infect others through nose-to-nose contact.

These "chronic shedders" often don't get sick themselves.

But even a lone shedder can rapidly infect a large group of bighorns, many of which are quite susceptible to the illness, Ratliff said.

Chronically shedding ewes are especially troublesome because they mingle with other ewes, and lambs, much more than rams, which are either solitary or with other rams most of the year.

ODFW's strategy for finding chronic shedders is labor- and time-intensive, requiring that biologists trap as many bighorns as possible, test them for

the bacteria, and fit them with tracking collars so they can be tested later.

Sheep that are twice determined to be shedders will be euthanized.

So far, ODFW has euthanized two ewes in early spring of this year, each from Lookout Mountain unit and Burnt River Canyon, after they were shown to be chronic shedders of the bacteria both times.

(Several sheep that were shedding during a first test were no longer shedding the bacteria during a subsequent test. Other chronic shedders died naturally before they were tested twice.)

However, Ratliff said he's concerned about one ewe that has been seen recently by multiple people near the Snake River Road, in the vicinity of Big Deacon Creek, which is between Connor and Soda creeks. That ewe is clearly sick, he said, with obvious symptoms such as coughing and a snotty nose.

Although it's not certain that the ewe is infected with the Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae bacteria, that's plausible, and of great concern.

One infected sheep "could wipe out that entire nursing group," Ratliff said.

He said two other ODFW biologists recently found a ewe that was suspected of being the ill sheep, as it was in the same area where the sick sheep had been seen the previous day, but it's not clear whether the ewe they found was the same.

The ewe the biologists saw was decidedly spry, Ratliff said.

The sheep actually jumped into Brownlee Reservoir and swam faster than the biologists could run along shore to track it, he said.

Another concern is that the lower-elevation herd, which lost its entire crop of 2022 lambs and might well include a chronic shedder, will mingle with the apparently healthy groups that roam higher in the canyons that drain into Brownlee.

So far, Ratliff said, there's no evidence of such mingling.

And data from tracking collars fitted to sheep from each of the groups shows that they stay isolated more than biologists expected, he said.

"That's a good thing," Ratliff said.

Until winter, anyway.

During that season the sheep tend to descend toward the river where temperatures are warmer and snow often absent for much of the winter.

Overall, Ratliff said, "things are not dismal but not great."

"We'll see what happens in early winter, when they start mingling," he said.

Ratliff said ODFW will soon start trying to capture ewes from the lower-elevation herd to test them for the presence of the bacteria and, potentially, identify chronic shedders.

The goal, he said, is to do that testing before the still isolated nursing groups start to congregate later in the year.

## Origin remains a mystery

Ratliff said biologists don't

know how the Lookout Mountain herd was initially infected with the bacteria.

Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae bacteria are not known to be carried by cattle, but domestic sheep can be infected.

Domestic sheep graze on a public land allotment, overseen by the Bureau of Land Management, in the Lookout Mountain unit, Ratliff said. None of the domestic sheep that graze on that allotment has been tested for the bacteria.

Two other domestic flocks near Richland, at the north end of the Lookout Mountain unit, were tested in 2020 and none carried the Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae bacteria, Ratliff said. A llama owned by a resident along the Snake River Road was tested, and was also negative for the bacteria.

Sheep in the Burnt River

Canyon began dying around October 2020, and Ratliff believes sheep from that herd crossed I-84 earlier in the year, mingled with infected Lookout Mountain bighorns and became ill, then returned and began spreading the bacteria among Burnt River Canyon sheep.

## Burnt River Canyon

This herd is much smaller than the Lookout Mountain herd, with about 75 to 85 bighorns. Although monitoring the Burnt River Canyon herd is more difficult because the bighorns tend to congregate in the steepest, most inaccessible terrain, Ratliff said biologists counted 14 lambs in the area this spring.

That's not far below the pre-infection average of 25 to 30 lambs per year, he said.



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