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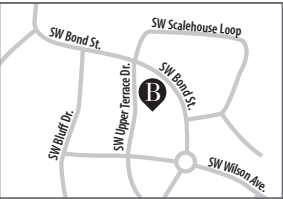
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LOCAL, STATE & REGION

Baker County



BIGHORNS BETTING TO BEAT BACTERIAL INFECTION

Some herds are recovering while others continue to struggle

BY JAYSON JACOBY • Baker City Herald

Baker County's biggest herd of bighorn sheep, plagued for more than two years by a bacterial infection that leads to fatal pneumonia, seems to be thriving in some places, but the situation is much less promising in others.

The difference is dramatic, said Brian Ratliff.

He's the district wildlife biologist at the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's (ODFW) Baker City office. Ratliff has been tracking the bacterial outbreak in the Lookout Mountain bighorn herd, in far eastern Baker County, since February 2020. The herd is not only Baker County's, but it has also been Oregon's largest herd of Rocky Mountain bighorns.

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



A group of bighorn rams photographed on June 20, 2020, in the Lookout Mountain unit in eastern Baker County.

Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald, File

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



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald, File

A group of bighorn sheep, including a lamb, in the Lookout Mountain unit in eastern Baker County on June 20, 2020.

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.

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.