

Bighorn sheep and bacteria

By JAYSON JACOBY
jjacoby@bakercityherald.com

BAKER CITY — As the helicopter flew over the ridges and canyons of eastern Baker County last month, Brian Ratliff was seeing more bighorn sheep than he expected.

But the news wasn't exclusively of the good variety.

It was the sheep Ratliff didn't see during the flight over the Lookout Mountain unit — lambs — that define the continuing threat to the future of Oregon's biggest herd of Rocky Mountain bighorns.

Ratliff, the district wildlife biologist at the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's Baker City office, counted just four lambs during the aerial census.

All of those lambs were in small groups of sheep in the northern part of the unit, which is bordered on the north by Highway 86 and on the south by Interstate 84.

The scarcity of lambs shows that a bacterial infection remains widespread in the Lookout Mountain unit and puts the long-term health of the herd in peril.

ODFW biologists believe all of the 65 to 70 lambs born in the unit in the spring of 2020 died due to the same strain of *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae* bacteria.

It 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.

Lab tests of 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.

A survey in late 2020 showed about 250 sheep.

Ratliff said he expected about 225 in this year's count, so he was somewhat pleased by the total of 274 animals.

About 62% of the bighorns, however, were distributed among several large groups in one canyon in the south part of the unit.

Ratliff didn't see any lambs in that area.

He said that's strong evidence that the bacteria, which sheep can easily spread among themselves, is still present in those larger groups and likely killed all of this year's lambs.



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.

"In the smaller subgroups there's less chance of lambs being infected," Ratliff said.

Biologists were initially optimistic in 2020, with no dead lambs found as of mid June.

They knew, from earlier testing, that lambs aren't infected by their mothers prior to birth.

But later in the summer of 2020, as ewes and lambs started to congregate in larger "nursery" groups, lambs started to sicken and die.

Finding the 'shedders'

The key to saving the Lookout Mountain herd — and the smaller herd of California bighorns, a smaller subspecies, in the Burnt River Canyon south of I-84 — is finding the sheep that are chronic "shedders" of the bacteria that causes potentially fatal pneumonia, Ratliff said.

That's the focus of a multiagency effort that started in 2020 and likely will continue for several more years.

This campaign relies heavily on temporarily capturing bighorns, testing them for the bacteria, and fitting them with GPS tracking collars.

Chronic shedders often don't get sick, but they can quickly spread the bacteria to other sheep that lack high levels of immunity, Ratliff said.

Ewes that are chronic shedders

are especially problematic because they mingle with other ewes, and lambs, more often than rams, which are either solitary or with other rams much of the year.

Lambs are especially vulnerable, as the nearly wholesale loss of the youngest animals the past two years attests.

Last fall, ODFW, with financial aid from the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, as well as the Oregon and national chapters of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, captured 25 bighorns from the Lookout Mountain herd. Although all 25 of those sheep had antibodies in their blood showing they had been infected with the bacteria, just four of the 25 were shedding bacteria at that time, Ratliff said.

Biologists fitted all those sheep with tracking collars so they can be captured again and retested.

So far this fall, ODFW has captured, tested and collared 14 more sheep from Lookout Mountain.

None was a chronic shedder, Ratliff said, although test results from two of the bighorns were inconclusive, so it's not clear whether they are shedders or not. One of the 14, a ewe, was a chronic shedder identified in 2020,

but was not shedding this fall.

Sheep that are trapped twice and are chronically shedding both times will be euthanized, Ratliff said.

So far, ODFW hasn't euthanized any bighorns from Lookout Mountain since none has twice been identified as a chronic shedder.

Ratliff said it's possible that the herd could naturally recover from the outbreak by virtue of the chronic shedders dying naturally. Over time, more sheep are likely to gain immunity from a previous exposure to the bacteria, as well.

On the other hand, just a few chronic shedders could potentially keep the bacteria circulating within the herd, and decimating each year's crop of lambs.

"We've just got to figure out who it is," Ratliff said.

To maintain the herd population requires a minimum of 20 lambs per 100 ewes, Ratliff said. The average ratio for the Lookout Mountain herd is 38 lambs per 100 ewes, and the number has ranged from a high of 67 per 100 to a low of 24.

Looking ahead to 2022

Ratliff said he expects to see a typical crop of lambs born in the Lookout Mountain herd late in the coming spring.

During the aerial survey this month, he said he didn't see any evidence of sick sheep — bighorns that develop pneumonia from the bacteria typically cough and stumble. And based on 2020 and 2021, it doesn't appear that the bacteria is affecting the reproductive capacity of the herd.

But again, because chronic shedders usually aren't themselves ill, the absence of any obviously sick sheep doesn't mean the bacteria isn't still present, Ratliff said.

The key period will be the summer, when the ewes and lambs begin to gather into their nursery groups, greatly increasing the chance of spreading the bacteria.

Source 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 have been tested for the bacteria.

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

Ratliff said the strain of bacteria in both Lookout Mountain and Burnt River Canyon herds has not been detected in bighorns in Idaho, which can potentially mingle with Oregon bighorns.

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.

So far this fall, ODFW has trapped and collared eight bighorns from the Burnt River Canyon herd, one of which was shedding the bacteria.

ODFW hasn't found any surviving lambs in the Burnt River Canyon herd, although those sheep are more difficult to survey due to the terrain.

Pierce plans campaign stop at airport

Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — Dr. Bud Pierce, a candidate for the Republican nomination in the Oregon governor's race, will make a campaign appearance in John Day next week.

Pierce will be at the Grant County Regional Airport, 72000 Airport Road, on Wednesday, Jan. 12.



Dr. Bud Pierce

According to information from the Pierce campaign, the candidate will meet with area residents between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. in the main conference room at the airport

terminal. He will also be making campaign stops that day in Ontario and Baker City.

Pierce, a Salem physician, was the GOP nominee in the 2016 gubernatorial election, losing to incumbent Democrat Kate Brown.

Anyone wishing to attend the John Day event is asked to RSVP by email to info@budpierce.org.

Rep. Drazan to visit John Day Saturday

Blue Mountain Eagle

State Rep. Christine Drazan, one of more than a dozen candidates seeking the Republican nomination for governor in this year's election, will visit John Day this week.

Drazan, a Canby resident who serves as House



State Rep. Christine Drazan

minority leader, will be at the Squeeze-In Restaurant and Deck, 423 W. Main St., from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Saturday, Jan. 8, to meet with local residents and talk about her bid for the governor's office.



Grant County Undersheriff Zach Mobley, second from left, poses with his President's Special Recognition Award from the Oregon State Sheriffs' Association. With him, from left, are Sgt. Wade Waddell, Deputy Dave Dobler and Emergency Manager Eric Bush.

Grant Co. undersheriff honored for service

Blue Mountain Eagle

BEND — Grant County Undersheriff Zach Mobley received the Oregon State Sheriffs' Association's President's Special Recognition Award at a banquet during the organization's annual conference, held Dec. 5-9 in Bend.

Mobley served as chair of the Oregon State Sheriffs' Association Enforcement Council for 2021.

The award was announced in a press release by Grant County Sheriff Todd McKinley.

GOP candidate forum in Burns on Saturday

Blue Mountain Eagle

Nine GOP hopefuls for two of the state's highest offices in this year's elections will be on hand for a forum and dinner in Burns this weekend.

Billed as the "Republican Roundup," the event is sponsored by the Harney County Republicans and will be held on Saturday, Jan. 8, at the Burns Elks Lodge, 118 N. Broadway Ave.

Six of the 13 candidates seeking the GOP nomination for governor will be in attendance. They are Christine Drazan, Jessica Gomez, Nick Hess, Kerry McQuisten, Brandon Merritt and Bud Pierce.

Also appearing will be three of the contenders to challenge Democrat Ron Wyden for his U.S. Senate seat: Grant County Commissioner Sam Palmer, Darin Harbick of Rainbow and Jo Rae Perkins of Albany.

The festivities will begin with a reception and social hour at 4:30 p.m., followed by dinner at 5:30. The candidates will be on stage by 6.

Dinner tickets cost \$35 and are available in advance or at the door. To RSVP, purchase tickets or submit questions for the candidates, contact Gretchen Heldt Bates at harneycorepublicans@gmail.com or 541-589-0915.

OBITUARIES Shawn Dale Nebeker

Sept. 6, 1967 — Dec. 28, 2021

Shawn Dale Nebeker passed away in Phoenix, Arizona, Dec. 28 due to complications following COVID-19. He was 54.

Shawn was born on Sept. 6, 1967, in Burley, Idaho, to his parents, John Dale and Bertha Moore Kruse. He graduated from Thurston High School, Springfield, Oregon, in 1985. He worked for George's Shop 'N' Rock in Vale, Oregon, during the late '90s and Pinal County in Casa Grande, Arizona, at the time of his death. He was a volunteer EMT for Vale Fire and Ambulance for 11 years. If you were blessed to know Shawn, you knew he was hilarious, generous, stubborn and would do anything for anyone. His laugh was contagious, and his heart was huge.

Shawn is survived by his sons, Harry Colton Nebeker and Kyle Nebeker; his mother and stepfather, Bert and Doug Kruse; twin sister, Shauna Phillips; sisters Lynda Reynolds and Merna Bennett; and many friends who loved him fiercely. He was preceded in death by his father, John Dale Nebeker, on Nov. 17, 2021.

Shawn will be cremated and his ashes spread at Duck Lake, per his request. A memorial will take place on May 14 at 10 a.m. at the Geiser-Pollman Park, Baker City, Oregon. All are welcome to attend and celebrate Shawn's life.



Last Week's Temps

John Day	HI/LO
Wednesday	26/13
Thursday	35/19
Friday	40/7
Saturday	31/19
Sunday	33/26
Monday	38/31
Tuesday	38/28

24/7 FORECAST

AUTOMATED: 541-575-1122

ROAD CONDITIONS: 511; TRIPCHECK.COM

NOAA WEATHER RADIO FOR JOHN DAY

162.500 MHZ

WEATHER FORECAST FOR THE WEEK OF JAN. 5-11

Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday
Snow	Showers	Rain/snow	Partly cloudy	Mostly cloudy	Partly cloudy	Rain/snow showers
36	42	42	35	37	38	39
32	39	28	24	23	27	31