



Bighorn Sheep

The most obvious feature of the bighorn sheep is, of course, its horns. Among a herd, the horns are a symbol of rank. On a mature male, or ram, the horns will curve gracefully around the ears and come up near the cheek. Normally, a ram won't grow a full curl until they reach 7 to 8 years of age. When fully grown, their curl may have a spread of up to 33 inches and the horns may weigh in at 30 pounds. Ewes (females) will have shorter, smaller horns that never exceed half a curl.

The bighorn's weight range is from 115 for the smaller ewes to 280 lbs. for a mature male. Their length ranges from 50 to 62 inches, with a shoulder height between 32 and 40 inches.

All bighorn sheep species have compact and muscular bodies. The muzzle is narrow and pointed; the ears are short and pointed. Their fur is a shade of glossy brown that will fade in the winter, with white patches on the rump. Bighorns have acute eyesight that they use to watch predators and humans from as much as a mile away. They'll also use their incredible eyesight in jumping to and from narrow mountain footholds; some as narrow as two inches. Bighorn sheep can leap up to twenty feet and move over level ground at thirty miles an hour.

Their diet is mainly grass, sedges, and forbs although they'll eat young twigs, leaves, and shoots when food is scarce. Bighorn sheep have a complex 9-stage digestive process that maximizes removal of nutrients from food of marginal quality. Desert Bighorns have been known to eat prickly pear cactus and cholla cactus after first removing the cactus spines with their hooves or horns. They'll also feed on the flowers of succulents such as the agave and squawgrass. When green vegetation is available in the winter, bighorns do not require a steady supply of drinking water. In the summer they'll move closer to a water supply, which they'll visit every two or three days. The bighorns will also reduce their own activity to conserve water consumption.

Bighorn sheep inhabit alpine meadows, foothill slopes, rugged mountain cliffs and bluffs. In the winter they prefer elevations from 2,500 feet to 5,000 feet, depending on snowfall. Their summer range is 6,000 to 8,500 feet. Though they once ranged the entire western U.S., the bighorn's range is now sparse and fragmented.

Different species of bighorns can now be found in small parts of most western states, including Baja California, British Columbia and into the Yukon Territory.

Bighorn sheep reach sexual maturity in 2-3 years, at which time a ewe may breed. However, because of competition, rams won't usually mate until they're 7 years old. Rutting (breeding) season is in November and December.

After a gestation period of 180 days, a ewe will give birth to one or two lambs. Within a few weeks of birth, the lambs in a herd form groups of their own, seeking out their mother for occasional suckling. Sadly, only one lamb in three will survive in the harsh desert environment. The lambs are completely weaned by four to six months of age.

As of a 1998 survey, most of Arizona's 5,900 bighorns are located in the western part of the state. The largest concentration, 1,815 head, resides in the Black Mountains, north of Kingman. Herds of eighty sheep each were surveyed in both the Stewart and Superstition Mountains outside of Phoenix. Life expectancy for the bighorns in the wild is 10 to 15 years, although they may occasionally live for 20 years.