

From the Archives: Bighorn Sheep in the Vicinity of Claremont, California

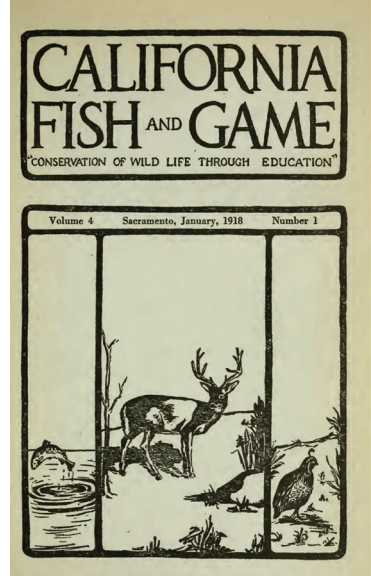
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That mountain or bighorn sheep still exist in small bands in various parts of the California mountains is a fact well known. It, however, comes as a welcome surprise to find them living, breeding and at least holding their own in numbers, in the mountains not farther than 30 miles from Los Angeles. Vague reports from old hunters that in certain parts of the ranges near Mount San Antonio, commonly known as "Old Baldy," there were "wild goats and sheep," and that they were "mighty hard to get near to," furnished the incentive for investigations which have demonstrated that one species of bighorn sheep occurs in the ranges north of Claremont, Los Angeles County. Whether or not this is the Nelson bighorn "*ovis nelsoni*" is an open question which can be decided only by the collection and study of specimens.

The rumor relating to the occurrence of wild goats is undoubtedly based upon the observation by hunters of the females and young sheep with their smaller horns. A case in point is the sheep's head found in Ice House Canyon in the spring of 1916. The severe rains of the year had washed it down from the mountainside and it was found at the canyon bottom and brought into Camp Baldy. Word went out that the head of a mountain goat had been found, and the writer immediately hastened up to the camp to see it. It proved to be the head of a young bighorn, but on account of the short horns and hair, now bleached nearly white through weathering, the mistake had been very natural.

The mountains of the region are much like all the southern California mountains, with brush-covered, south-facing slopes. While the shaded north-facing areas are fairly well wooded. The outstanding feature of this particular region is Mount San Antonio, or better known as "Old Baldy," which stands 10,080 feet above sea level. From it radiate great mountain ridges to the north, east, west and southwest, much as spokes from the hub of a wheel. The whole system is thus connected up by continuous ridges. In this great extent of territory the sheep occupy a very definite area. This includes Ontario, Cucamonga and Telegraph peaks, with their intervening ridges, also Iron Mountain and its connection with "Old Baldy," and the ridge between this latter peak and Telegraph. In the writer's opinion, this is the area of their widest distribution, their favorite haunts being the region around Ontario, Cucamonga and Telegraph peaks.

To seek out and study the sheep in this array of jagged spurs and protecting hollows is a task difficult in itself, and is made none the easier by their timidity. Their wari-



ness was impressed upon the writer by an encounter on June 12, 1915. The approach to Telegraph Peak was made by the ridge from "Old Baldy." While this peak was yet a considerable distance away, the writer's attention was attracted to a spot near the summit by a clear, thin rattling caused by a rock slide down the steep slope. It was apparent that some large animal was the cause of it, and close scrutiny disclosed three heavy-bodied animals bounding up the mountainside with great speed, and with no regard to the great quantities of stones dislodged. As each sheep in turn reached the summit, curiosity gained the upper hand, and it turned, gazed down in a bland, questioning way, and the with a quick turn, head erect, trotted stiffly over the top and disappeared to view. On account of the hard soil, the tracks could not be followed and pursuit was impossible.

Just what the sheep were doing on that barren rock slide is hard to say. They could hardly have been in the act of quitting the peak, for that particular spot was some distance from any ridge, being on a slope that ended only in the canyon a considerable distance below. If it was food they were seeking, they were certainly going to a great deal extra effort, for there was plenty at the summit. This was quite evidently a stray trio of more adventuresome or restless females or young males, for no bighorned ram was with them. They might very possibly have been members of a larger band on the other side of the mountain. This seems the more likely in view of the fact that about an hour later, in a location not so very distance from where the sheep were seen, the writer came across fresh tracks of a whole band of sheep.

Just how the sheep detected the presence of a human being is an interesting question. The air was quite still, so they could have received no warning through a telltale scent. It seems more likely they were given notice through the sense of sight. If so, their vision is very acute, for the writer was alone, dressed very inconspicuously and still at a considerable distance.

Another definite encounter occurred in September of 1914. This one was purely fortuitous. A fruitless hunt for deer had at last led to the outermost point on Ontario Peak, and here a rest was taken on the top of a big rock. About midafternoon the silence was broken by faint yet unmistakable sounds, which could have only been made by a whole troop of animals. There was the sound of twigs snapping, the bleating of lambs and the peculiar shuffling sound caused by the tramp of many feet. It was very evident that a band of sheep was approaching. A cautious observation over the edge of the rock disclosed a very interesting sight. Coming along the top of the ridge was a party of sheep, an individual stopping here and there to nibble at the vegetation. The rams, with their great curling horns, were a majestic sight, while the young of the year were exceedingly playful and altogether charming. Unfortunately at this stage a scent warned the sheep. In a second the whole band halted, heads up, noses questioning, then at an invisible signal they all wheeled and made off in jerky stiff-legged, bouncing leaps, and quickly disappeared from view.

At various other times sheep were seen, but under very unsatisfactory conditions. Either the distance was so great that nothing could be learned, or but a very fleeting glimpse was caught of the band in flight. One is often given the aggravating impression that he comes too late or that the sheep were too sharp-eyed and had taken to safety.

However, although themselves difficult to locate, unmistakable traces of the sheep are to be found if carefully sought. Here one sees the grass cropped, the bushes nibbled, there the scattered droppings, and in spots where the soil is powdery enough, or by a moist stream bank, the clear large footprints in great abundance. One might almost study the distribution of the sheep through this means alone. Thus the writer one day came across a well-beaten sheep trail on the ridge between Ontario and Telegraph peaks. In most places the soil is

too hard and rocky to take a print, hence tracks are not as abundant as one might suppose.

Regarding the general habits of the sheep, several points seem clear. As before noted, they are very shy and alert, despite years of freedom from pursuit by man. From the fact that tracks when found are usually in great abundance, and from direct observation, it is evident that they travel most often in bands. However, the occasional sight of one, two or three odd sheep perhaps points to the conclusion that certain individuals at times stray from or are cast out of the band. This might occur in the case of several males striving for the leadership of the band. It seems very possible that adventuresome young especially males, not yet arrived at the breeding age, might stray from the herd. From the appearance of the lambs in late September, at which time they are quite active, the writer would put the lambing season in late February and early March.

The question of water is not a serious one for the sheep. Not only is water accessible in the headwaters of the canyon streams, but springs issuing from the sides of Ontario Peak, at some places within 200 feet of the top, give a ready supply. This whole region in winter is covered with a heavy blanket of snow, and this, when melting in the summer, often forms large pools of clear water. That the sheep move about and drink at night is evidenced by one observation, when several of them were seen one moonlight night to slip down to one of the springs on Ontario and drink.

What constitutes their food can not readily be told without long-continued observation during feeding (a very difficult and well-nigh impossible task) and by a study of the stomach contents. There is no doubt, however, that the following plants form an important part of the diet: the leaves of the chinquapin (*Castanopsis sempervirens*), a wild parsnip (*Palpinaea sativa*) growing around water holes, berries of the manzanita (*Arctostaphylos*), twigs and leaves of *Rhus trilobata* and *Rhamnus crocens californicus*, and finally grass growing near springs and streamlets.

All that has been said applies to the sheep only during the warm season of the year. What becomes of them in winter is not known. They are certainly not at the mountain tops. The heavy snow blanket covering the mountains thaws during warmer spells only to freeze again into a solid sheet of ice. At such times they become exceedingly slippery and dangerous, and it seem inconceivable that the sheep or any living creature of large size could avoid sliding off into the canyons below.

There are two places that give great promise as wintering areas. These are the spurs to the northeast of Cucamonga and Telegraph peaks, respectively. They drop low enough to receive only an occasional transient snow covering. This region is exceedingly wild, trailless, and not visited by man, and would seem to present all the requirements of winter quarters for the sheep.

Regarding the number of sheep living in this territory, it is not possible to say definitely. If all the sheep are in one band, then their number is between 50 and 60 head. There is, however, no evidence to show that there are not dozens of sheep scattered all over the range, or that there are not two or more bands of varying sizes. The writer is inclined to feel that there is but one band, with only a few outlying stragglers. Much can be done toward answering these points if the sheep could be found in the winters, when their range is greatly restricted.

A study of this kind presents many other questions of great interest. It would, for instance, be very interesting to obtain, if possible, a history of these sheep. How long have they been known in this section, and are they remnants of a one-time larger band that was more widely distributed? It also seems very possible that there are other bands of sheep in favorable localities, such, for instance, as North Baldy and the series of unfrequented peaks in connection with it. Even the species is unknown, and from this as a starting point the problems extend endlessly.

With a wise and rigorously protective state law and a range that will not for years to come be encroached upon by man, there is everything in favor of a bright future for the mountain sheep of eastern Los Angeles County.