

Endangered Sierra Nevada Bighorn Sheep Translocation
A First Time Volunteer's Account
Ginnie Chadwick

Sometimes, when you get into your 60's you think that all your adventures and dreams are behind you. Then along comes an endangered species, the Sierra Nevada Bighorn Sheep, their hardworking scientists and advocates, and a peak experience enlightens your life.

Being science enthusiasts, my husband, Jef, and I attended a lecture about the Sierra Nevada Bighorn Sheep in Bishop in March of 2012. Dr. Alexandra Few, the newest member of the Department of Fish and Wildlife team, wove an enthralling story about the efforts to reestablish the bighorn in their once native habitat. Every facet of the presentation was an epic thriller with emotional highs and lows.

I immediately went home and watched the on-line documentary, *Counting Sheep*, which depicted the efforts of Dr. John Wehausen to have the Sierra Nevada Bighorn Sheep listed as endangered. A story unfolded of attempts to sustain fragile sheep herds in the face of predation utilizing the skills of predator specialist, Dr. Becky Pierce, and predator trackers, Vicky and Jeff Davis. Other topics included finding a balance with domestic sheep raisers in an effort to prevent the illness-producing microorganisms that inhabit domestic sheep from infecting the endangered Sierra Nevada Bighorn Sheep. More drama than a Star Wars epic!

During a wonderful evening at the 500 and Rising fundraiser my friend, Julie Rolfe, and I cornered database analyst, David German, and asked him hundreds of questions. Jane Kim's Migrating Mural, maps made by Kathleen Knox, and photos by Andy Seltzer, Steve Yeager and others, beguiled us. Julie, Jef and I took advantage of the field trip offered the next day. We watched the animals with binoculars and scopes while peppering Dr. Wehausen and Dr. Tom Stephenson with more questions. I asked Tom if citizens ever got to witness the captures and gave him my contact information.

In March 2013, Julie, Melody Barksdale, our friend from Washington State, and I were invited to attend the translocation orientation and learned about the procedures necessary to capture, research and release the Sierra Nevada Bighorn Sheep. It was impressive to be in a roomful of scientists, veterinarians, and veteran volunteers. We learned about the GPS and VHS collars, blood and fecal samples, nasal swabs, and a myriad of other measurements that would take place during the capture. The data collected would be used to evaluate the health of the animals and select certain individuals for relocation to help improve the genetic diversity of the herds and increase the sub-species' chances of survival. The tracking collars help scientists keep watch over the locations of the sheep, their migration patterns, and an animal's possible demise.

The next day Julie, Melody and I reported to the translocation site for duty and were immediately put to work. When I initially approached Tom Stephenson about the

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opportunity for citizens to participate in the SNBS translocation, I fully expected to watch from afar. I never thought I would get to touch an endangered animal, let alone be part of a team that took the measurements, and kept the animals cool and calm during the physical check-ups.

If you are old enough to remember the opening scene of the TV series M*A*S*H then you have a feel for what it is like to witness between two and four blindfolded and bagged Sierra Nevada Bighorns dangling from a hovering helicopter. The capture crews from Leading Edge Aviation are specialists in pursuing, netting, blindfolding, hobbling and bagging the sheep. When the pilot lowered the sheep to the landing area, it was done so gently the large metal clips on the bags were silent. As the helicopter cleared the area, the teams rushed out with litters to get the sheep. Just like M*A*S*H!

One of the most thrilling aspects of the capture was the determination via ultrasound that nearly all the ewes were pregnant. Expectant ewes are a very good thing for a population that is striving to return to its historical numbers and native territories. Watching the animals released back into the wild made my heart leap. Most are relocated to different canyons from where they were captured in order to start new herds or increase genetic diversity. As the sheep bound out of capture boxes or are released via helicopter into the backcountry, the Vulcan blessing of "Live Long and Prosper!" ran through my mind. When Tom Stephenson asked me how I liked the experience my reply was, "Tom, it's the best day of my life"

While driving back to Mammoth Lakes, Julie, Melody and I reflected on the privilege of participating in the translocation experience. The joy of making a small contribution to the survival of a struggling endangered species is intoxicating. We fully appreciated the years of investigation, frustration, paperwork, roadblocks, politicking, fundraising and dedication of the scientists, advocates and volunteers that came before us. I revealed to Julie and Melody that prior to my 38 years as a physical educator and college professor, my career desire was to be a veterinarian. Due to the fact that my applications to veterinary school were before Title IX, my papers were rejected with the reply "we don't accept women in large animal practice". The Sierra Nevada Bighorn Sheep translocation experience was truly redemption for my career deviation.

None of us can drive, bicycle or hike by the entrance of an eastside canyon where Sierra Nevada Bighorn Sheep reside without wishing them long and productive lives.