

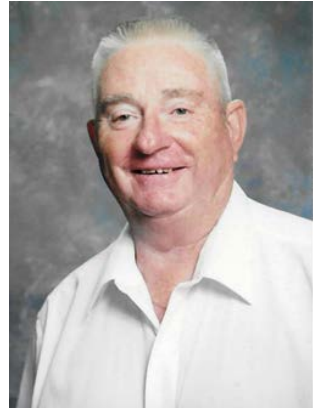
In Memoriam: Robert L. Vernoy (1926–2020)

Hunters and other conservationists familiar with the eastern Mojave Desert lost one of their strongest supporters on March 7, 2020 with the passing of Robert L. Vernoy, retired California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) Wildlife Biologist. A California native and a veteran, Bob grew up in Cherry Valley before serving in the Army Air Corps during World War II.

Bob was employed by CDFG for 41 years, and served in a variety of capacities in the deserts of southeastern California prior to his retirement in 1989. He began his career in 1949 as a Game Conservation Aid at CDFG's Imperial Waterfowl Management Area near the southeast corner of the Salton Sea, at a salary of \$180.00/month, and where he became a proficient heavy equipment operator. Bob also worked at the Brawley Game Farm for 7 years before becoming manager of the Valley Center Game Farm in San Diego County. He next transferred to the Chino Game Farm, and then spent several years at the Mojave River Hatchery, but returned to the Chino Game Farm in 1965 to oversee the closure of that facility. Following closure of the Chino Game Farm, Bob was assigned to a "pool" position, where he participated in a variety of wildlife management activities throughout southern California, and during which he became heavily involved in mitigating the impacts of the Santa Barbara oil spill in January and February of 1969.

In 1970, Bob promoted to Assistant Wildlife Manager-Biologist, and was assigned to the Desert Wildlife Management Unit (DWMU) in San Bernardino County, where he established an office at his home in Victorville. During the 20 years he held that position, he was an important contributor to the Department's efforts to ensure water was available for all species of wildlife inhabiting the eastern Mojave Desert and, thereby, ensuring that hunters would have access to high-quality opportunities to pursue Gambel's quail, chukar, mourning dove, and other upland game, as well as mule deer and, eventually, bighorn sheep. Few individuals realize Bob's dedication to maintaining the 350 wildlife water developments (often referred to as quail guzzlers) in the DWMU. In his own words, though, he acknowledged, "I was only able to inspect or make repairs to these units about once every other year."

Bob also performed inspections and maintained the many dozens of desert springs located in the DWMU to ensure surface water was available for all wildlife, and on which mule deer and bighorn sheep were especially dependent. Add to these activities the annual brood counts to assess quail and chukar production, dove surveys, raptor surveys, data collection and oversight of the mule deer hunting season in eastern San Bernardino County (now Zone D-17), participation in aerial surveys for bighorn sheep, and the ever-increasing number of environmental documents upon which to review and comment, and he was one busy biologist. Zone D-17 has become well-known for producing large mule deer and it



has continued to produce animals that are among the largest taken in California each deer season, a point that Bob was immensely proud of.

Bob's interest in data acquisition and his thoroughness in maintaining records, his presence in the field talking and interacting with hunters throughout the upland game and deer seasons, and his close working relationship with local wildlife protection personnel paved the way for increased hunter interest in, and appreciation for, the eastern Mojave Desert. His area of responsibility included the majority of San Bernardino County, and extended from the Riverside County line on the south to the Inyo County Line on the north, and from the Los Angeles County line eastward to the Colorado River, and actually included a large portion of southeastern Inyo County. Located within this vast region were the first two areas to be opened to the hunting of bighorn sheep in California since 1878: Old Dad Peak and the Marble Mountains. To date, 7 of the 11 zones that have been opened to bighorn sheep hunting are within what once was the DWMU.

Bob was the wildlife biologist for the DWMU when Dick Weaver conducted the only in-depth and statewide assessment of bighorn sheep in California, and Bob lent his expertise and knowledge to assist in that effort from 1970 to 1972. Following completion of that assessment and prior to Bob's retirement, a total of 21 wildlife water developments were constructed specifically to help conserve bighorn sheep within the DWMU. During his time as the Unit Manager, Bob worked closely with personnel assigned to CDFG Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Project W-26-D and members of the Society for the Conservation of Bighorn Sheep on each of those projects. Construction of each bighorn sheep water development depended largely on volunteer labor and provided hundreds of interested individuals with opportunities to be involved directly with bighorn sheep, and likely resulted in many life-long commitments to conservation that, in all probability, would otherwise not have occurred.

During the early 1980s and following development of several of those wildlife water sources, bighorn sheep in the eastern Mojave Desert were the beneficiaries of increased interest within CDFG. Bob participated in numerous helicopter surveys, and helped collect data that resulted in the reintroduction of bighorn sheep to the Eagle Crags, Whipple Mountains, Argus Range, Sheephole Mountains, Bullion Mountains, and the northern Bristol Mountains, as well augmentations of bighorn sheep populations in the Avawatz Range and Chuckwalla Mountains. Bob was an integral part of, and an active participant in, those translocations, and ensured that critically important tasks were carried out effectively and efficiently.

Bob also played a pivotal role during the conservation of bighorn sheep by serving as an observer in dozens of aerial telemetry flights that otherwise would not have occurred, and participating in numerous helicopter surveys upon which the program to reintroduce desert bighorn sheep to vacant ranges was based. Data gathered during those flights also led to the opening of bighorn sheep hunting in California, and Bob was a primary author of management plans for bighorn sheep populations at Old Dad Peak and the Marble Mountains that were required by the state legislature; those plans remain current and are relied on each year. In addition, he prepared management plans for several other areas within the DWMU that eventually became bighorn sheep hunt zones.

Bob also was an important contributor to the annual Bighorn Sheep Hunter Clinic that bighorn sheep hunters are required to attend, and he proposed the initial (1987) Hunter Clinic be held at CDFG's Camp Cady Wildlife Area. That venture evolved into an annual event sponsored by the Society for the Conservation of Bighorn Sheep, and was a tradition that

lasted 25 years. Bob had management responsibility for the Camp Cady Wildlife Area, and ensured the bunkhouse and associated facilities always were in top condition for the annual hunter clinic, which was an in-depth and extensive affair that, following supper, extended well into the evening and generally continued the following day. During those Hunter Clinics Bob and many other individuals—most of whom volunteered their time—generously shared information on bighorn sheep occupying the hunt zones, geography, hunting techniques, equipment, desert safety, taxidermy, photography, and regulations, and by far exceeding the minimum requirements that had been specified by the state legislature.

Bob Vernoy understood the importance of habitat and the value of habitat management or enhancement to assuring the availability of resources needed by all wildlife. He was a friend of hunters and other outdoorsmen, and he fulfilled his role in conservation very capably. He was a quiet man, and did not have a penchant for accolades. Following retirement, Bob was recognized by the Society for the Conservation of Bighorn Sheep with the Bicket-Landells Award, named in honor of BLM Wildlife Biologist Jim Bicket and Helicopter Pilot Don Landells who died while conducting a bighorn sheep survey at Clark Mountain on 6 October 1986; Bob had been scheduled to join the survey crew on the morning of the accident.

The authors of this tribute both were assigned to Federal Aid Project W-26-D, and we had the privilege of knowing and working with Bob Vernoy for many years. One of us eventually became Bob's supervisor, and the other filled the position created by Bob's retirement. Bob was a kind and generous person, a dedicated employee, a fine naturalist from whom we learned a great deal about the Mojave Desert, and an individual for whom we, and many others that knew or worked with him, had the utmost respect. Collectively, desert wildlife in general—and bighorn sheep in particular, along with California's sportsmen and the public in general, have been the beneficiaries of Bob Vernoy's many contributions to wildlife conservation. Hopefully, his dedication and efforts on behalf of wildlife will not be forgotten.

—VERNON C. BLEICH, CDFG (Retired), Bismarck, North Dakota, *and* ANDREW M. PAULI, CDFG (Retired), Apple Valley, California.