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A Homecoming for Bighorn Sheep in Colorado



Matthew Staver for The New York Times

Heather Halbritter, a biologist for the Colorado Division of Wildlife, released three bighorn sheep on Wednesday in an area of the Pike National Forest that was devastated by a fire in 2002.

By KIRK JOHNSON
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SEDALIA, Colo. — The mechanics were simple. A trailer latch popped, a gate swung open and three wild bighorn sheep — two females, presumably pregnant, and a year-old lamb, definitely frisky — trotted up the rocky slope of Thunder Butte under a pale afternoon sun.

It is the back story of the animals' release this week by wildlife biologists here in the mountains southwest of Denver that can stagger

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the mind with its complications of coincidence, historical accident, devastation and hope.



A truck breakdown on a highway in February 1946 played a role, believe it or not, as did [the biggest Colorado wildfire](#) in memory, the Hayman, in June 2002. The fire roared through the cliffs in the Pike National Forest with flames hundreds of feet high, scouring the land of trees across 138,000 acres.

Human intervention, from the mining boom in the late 1800s, when timber was cut by the trainload for fuel and construction, through [the bighorn reintroduction](#) program in the Hayman burn area by the Colorado Division of Wildlife, begun last year, completed the circle of natural and wild that brought the bighorns home. They were last seen in this area in the mid-1960s.

However the pieces fit, biologists and land managers say a bighorn homecoming to the Hayman is a powerful reaffirmation of hope in the West for a creature that has long symbolized the ideals of sure-footed survival in the high lonesome aeries where they evolved and still persist. [Sheep restoration](#) began here last year with the first 12 animals and continued with 12 more this month.

“We’re back,” Janet George, a senior biologist at the Colorado Division of Wildlife, said as the animals peered around at their new home (their eyesight is excellent, which is why they stake out rocky perches, the better to spot approaching predators). “This was historically bighorn range, and then it couldn’t sustain a sheep herd any more,” Ms. George said. “And now nine years after the fire, it can again.”

But back to that truck accident. In early 1946, state wildlife managers were hauling 14 bighorns near Colorado Springs, intending to start a herd of transplants near Pikes Peak. When the truck broke down, the animals were instead released right where they were. The 14 pioneers — 10 ewes, 2 rams and 2 lambs — drifted north and established vibrant herd from which the Hayman group was drawn for release.

The accidental but successful herd created the gene pool, and the Hayman fire restored a habitat of treeless rock that bighorns love, and where they seek shelter from predators who cannot match them in cliff-side clambering.

Their agility is partly due to unique hooves that have evolved specifically for climbing rocks, with a hard outer wall and a soft inner wall for traction. Combined with iron-lunged endurance, they can even sometimes evade mountain lions, which are fierce and fast but quickly winded.

It is a life and a niche in the high rocky places, where — crucially — humans usually do not build ranches or mansions, that has allowed the bighorns’ numbers to hold strong along

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the spine of the Rockies from Colorado through Wyoming, Montana and into Alberta, Canada, each of which has bighorn populations estimated at 7,000 animals or more.

But the Hayman burn site is as much a character in this saga as the animals, and the healing from its giant scar has been slow. On June 8, 2002, a [United States Forest Service](#) employee named Terry Barton said that she burned a letter from her estranged husband at a campground, and that the fire spread. Ms. Barton ultimately pleaded guilty to arson and spent six years in prison.

Hayman was also calamitous for Denver's water system, which has spent millions of dollars rebuilding and cleaning a reservoir in the burn area that became clogged with sediment from eroding soils that were no longer held in place by grasses and trees.

Ms. George, the state biologist, said it would take decades before Thunder Butte became reforested. That is very good news for the sheep, which have survived in part by avoiding forests, where predators like lions can drop from above.

But that is also assuming that the historical cycle of rebirth and growth repeat in the same way. With [climate change](#) and planetary warming in the decades to come, Ms. George said, the next-generation forest here might be very different from the one that was erased by Hayman.

Meanwhile, as the three new residents disappeared up into the rocks, another biologist with the Division of Wildlife, Heather Halbritter, was tracking the nine sheep released earlier this month from that same post-1946 group, using the radio-beacon collars they had been fitted with.

"They're in those rocks, up along the ridgeline," she said, waving the tracking device and pointing in the very direction the newcomers were going. A herd reunion might be in the offing.

Then the two ewes and their tag-along lamb stopped on a cliff. As if posing for a picture, or assessing the strangely beautiful moonscape of the Hayman, they stood in silhouette.

"That's what sheep do," Ms. George said. "They climb out on a rock and look."

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