



Santa Catalina Bighorn Sheep Reintroduction Project

December 3-16, 2015

BRIEFING

The following is a summary of bighorn sheep reintroduction activities on the Coronado National Forest from December 3-16, 2015.

RESEARCH UPDATE

During the week of December 7, a research biologist observed eight groups of sheep consisting of 16 collared ewes (including three from the 2015 release), one collared ram, six lambs, and two yearlings. Excluding the three recently released ewes that have not had the opportunity to contribute to the population in the Catalinas, the lamb:ewe ratio observed was 46 lambs per 100 ewes. This ratio was based on a small sample size because only half of the ewes from the 2013 and 2014 releases were seen. The number of lambs observed represents good news, as it appears there has been better than average lamb survival during this vulnerable stage of life.

It appears that sheep from all releases are starting to form mixed groups, whereas during previous observations the 2015 sheep were only found in proximity to sheep from the 2013 and 2014 releases, not necessarily closely associated with them.

LAMBING SEASON

We are approaching the lambing season for bighorn sheep, and many of the ewes may be in the later stages of pregnancy. Ewes with new lambs are particularly sensitive to disturbance, and recreationists are being asked to help minimize human-caused disturbance by adhering to the trail restrictions within the Pusch Ridge Wilderness Bighorn Sheep Management Area. From January 1 through April 30, travel more than 400 feet off designated Forest Service trails is prohibited. Dogs are prohibited year-round.

MORTALITIES

There were two mortalities of collared sheep during this reporting period. Both the VHF and GPS components of the collar on Ewe #37448 were intermittently sending mortality signals for two weeks, which was cause for concern. However, visual observations of the animal during this period confirmed she was alive and performing normal activities such as moving across the landscape and grazing. On December 9, a research biologist checked on her while in the field and found her dead. Predation has been ruled out as the cause of death. The carcass was necropsied, and it appears that she died on the evening of December 8. Cause of death was not apparent. Samples were collected from the carcass for disease testing, and preliminary laboratory results have confirmed pneumonia. Ewe #37448 was captured as an adult in 2014 in the Tonto National Forest.

Late on the night of December 12, the GPS component of the collar on Ewe #37441 sent out a mortality alert. On the morning of December 13, the VHF component of her collar was transmitting a mortality signal. Her carcass could not be located until December 14, when field personnel confirmed cause of death was lion predation. Ewe #37441 was captured as an adult in the Plomosa Mountains in 2014.

A subcontractor to the project used a drone to monitor his dogs during pursuit of the lion that preyed upon Ewe #37441. The Department routinely uses low-level fixed wing and helicopter flights in connection with wildlife management projects. The pursuit was terminated upon the Department learning of use of the drone as the Department has not completed ongoing evaluation of how to best use such technology consistent with all applicable rules and regulations.

CURRENT POPULATION STATUS

As of December 16, 2015, 58 collared sheep are known to be alive.

LINKS

For project background and previously-reported information on project events, including photos and videos, as well as meeting notes and minutes please visit www.azgfd.gov and click on “Wildlife”, then “Catalina Bighorn Sheep” under the heading “Additional Wildlife Information”.

Additional project information can be obtained by visiting the Arizona Game and Fish Department Facebook page at www.facebook.com/CatalinaBighorns, the Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep Society webpage at www.adbss.org, or by visiting the Catalina Bighorn Advisory Committee webpage at www.catalinabighornrestoration.org. This update is a public document and information in it can be used for any purpose.

TO SUBSCRIBE

If you would like to receive project updates as they are published please send your email address to ldesouza@azgfd.gov.

COMMUNICATION AND COORDINATION

The next written briefing will be provided on December 31, 2015.

CONTACT

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