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On Top of Old Whiskey

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NOT much snow falls on the reddish badlands and short-grass foothills surrounding Dubois, in western Wyoming, and what does fall usually gets blown away by the wind or evaporates into the dry air. But a few miles away, up on the Continental Divide, the snow is relentless, turning the high country into an icy, uninhabitable desert. The bighorn sheep that live among the craggy peaks must descend in order to survive, and by November more than 900 sheep concentrate near Dubois on the bare, windswept slopes of Whiskey Mountain.

The Whiskey Mountain herd is the largest winter gathering of bighorn sheep in North America, studied for decades by wildlife biologists, but until recently not well known to the public and winter tourists.

In the 1980's conservation groups and Federal and state wildlife agencies cooperated to protect the sheep's winter range, and in 1993 the North American Bighorn Sheep Center was established in Dubois to educate visitors about bighorn sheep and run wildlife tours out to Whiskey Mountain.

In early January I spent a weekend in Dubois photographing the bighorns, staying at a guest ranch in the mountains and cross-country skiing along the Continental Divide.

I flew into Casper and drove a rental car three hours west across sagebrush plains until, 50 miles from Dubois, I could see the ragged peaks of the Wind River and Absaroka Mountains. At 6,900 feet, Dubois perches between these two massive ranges, in the upper Wind River valley, a landscape of badlands, broken rock and baldish hills.

I took a motel room downtown and when I went to bed, the television was predicting that Dubois would be the coldest spot in the state that night, perhaps 20 below zero. At 4 A.M. I was awakened by the wind, flowing down from the mountains and breaking like an ocean wave on the buildings and rocky outcrops of downtown. Wind is so ubiquitous in Wyoming that it is background noise to most residents, but I found it hard to sleep. At 6 A.M., when I walked over to a restaurant for coffee, the time and temperature sign on the Dubois National Bank read 10 degrees.

Later that morning at the Bighorn Sheep Center, Jamie Walton, the biologist who leads the tours, told me that winds coming over the divide often bring warmer temperatures, but the resulting wind chill offers little solace to wildlife watchers out on the sheep range. Fortunately, I had followed the center's recommendations and taken along my warmest outdoor gear.

Only three people were scheduled for that day's tour. At Mr. Walton's suggestion, we spent an hour in the museum, studying the exhibits, watching wildlife films and getting an introduction to bighorn biology. The museum is small but professional, with touch-and-feel exhibits for children, a computer quiz on habitat management and several mounted sheep posed on a mass of fake rocks 15 feet high.

The center, however, still struggles for money. Our tour vehicle was a well used 1982 Chevy Suburban on loan from a benefactor. A missing seat limited the capacity to four people and we had to use a pocket knife to close a window, but the heater blew warm air.

Mr. Walton drove us four miles east to Trail Lake Road, which runs for 10 miles along the base of Whiskey Mountain. The road passes through an open, rocky valley interspersed with small frozen lakes before it climbs and dead-ends at a trail head for the Fitzpatrick Wilderness, part of the Shoshone National Forest.

The sun seared the landscape with light, but there was no warmth in it. The sagebrush shivered in the wind and the only snow on the ground lay on the lee side of rocks and bushes, and even these drifts were tinted with the fine, red dust of the nearby badlands.

It was open, unprotected country, but bighorn sheep are mostly indifferent to cold. The wind aids their survival by blowing away snow and exposing grass and vegetation. Whiskey Mountain is ideal winter habitat for bighorns, and the herd here has been so productive over the years that biologists have trapped and relocated hundreds of animals to other areas in the Rockies.

The herd is actually an aggregate of three bands that summer separately but share the winter habitat from November until March. When breeding occurs, in December, it's not uncommon to see the rams butting heads.

Mr. Walton, who has studied the herd for years, was not long in finding sheep. Using binoculars, he pointed out a few dozen animals grazing on a rock-strewn slope high above us. The hill was at least a mile away, and I could not differentiate the tawny-colored sheep from the rocks until the animals moved. We didn't linger; Mr. Walton felt sure we would get a closer view.

An hour later we came upon 11 bighorns grazing along the shore of Trail Lake. Mr. Walton cut the engine and immediately a second group bounded down from a nearby cliff, crossing the road within a few feet of the truck.

The sheep are accustomed to vehicles, but when I stepped out with my camera, the animals fixed me with their golden, odd-looking eyes and made ready to run toward the cliffs. The horizontal, slitlike pupil of the eyes compounds their strangeness, but endows the bighorn with an extraordinary fish-eye vision to see predators: coyotes, cougars and golden eagles, which kill lambs but not full-size sheep. Bighorns will forage in the open, but they rarely stray far from the protection of rocky cliffs.

When we watched a ewe and her lamb descend a near vertical face, it was easy to understand why they feel safe there. The sheep vaulted about with no hesitation, dropping several feet from ledge to boulder, landing as solidly as if their hoofs and the rocks were swathed in Velcro.

We sighted a few more animals over the next three hours, but when we reached the end of the road we came upon a stunning sight: more than 100 bighorns grazing in yellow, chest-high grass with the dark, forested slopes of the Wind River Range as background. For the first time, we saw several powerfully built rams -- 8 to 10 years old -- with the full-curl horns so coveted by trophy hunters.

The herd had just lain down, apparently to chew their cud, so we relaxed, too, got out sack lunches and alternated between eating and picture taking. The center suggests visitors bring a 300 mm. telephoto lens, but some animals wandered so near the truck, I was able to use my point-and-shoot camera.

It was late afternoon when I got back to Dubois to meet friends who had driven up from their home in southern Wyoming to join me for some backcountry skiing. On Ramshorn, the town's main street, we walked by a fancy Italian restaurant, a drive-up coffee stand serving cappuccino and a well stocked bookstore, but the bars and the pickup trucks along the street spoke of a more traditional clientele.

Although winter tourism has grown significantly in recent years, and telecommuters (nicknamed modem cowboys) are moving into the valley, Dubois remains a mountain town of 895 people where most residents earn a modest living and the typical winter tourist is a middle-aged male snowmobiler from Wisconsin or Minnesota. The discussions in the taverns that night revolved around elk hunting and the various torque ratios of Polaris snow machines.

We were staying that night at the MacKenzie Highland Ranch, about 16 miles west and 2,000 feet higher than Dubois. It has several log cabins alongside the Wind River and stands just inside the Shoshone National Forest. We had reserved two upstairs rooms in the main lodge.

The next morning, I came downstairs to find my friends at the communal breakfast table, peering out the window at nine moose feeding in a snowy meadow. The moose winter in the willow thickets along the Wind River but the MacKenzies coax them within 30 yards of the lodge each morning with a strategically placed bale of hay. When we drove out to the highway, the moose scattered at our approach, stepping through two feet of snow with a speed and dexterity that belied their clumsy looks.

Sixteen miles west of the ranch, I parked next to a nearly buried highway sign that read: "Continental Divide 9,544 feet." As we clipped on our skis, the snow pack absorbed and deadened the carry of our voices. Clouds scudded by at near ground level, obscuring the peaks and cliffs we knew were all around us.

We'd chosen to ski the Sublette Pass trail because it is off limits to snowmobiles and passes near the rocky summit of Sublette Peak. The trail isn't groomed as some are in the national forest, but we were fortunate that another skier had broken trail the day before.

Still, the first half mile from the road to level ground was an arduous climb, requiring us to herring-bone our way through deep powder. I could hear the whine of snowmobile engines along the road, but in the forest all was nature: lodgepole pine creaking in the cold; snow sloughing off the boughs and hitting the snow pack with a muffled sigh, and loudest of all, my breath coming hard and fast in the altitude.

The trail ran in a four-mile loop, but our goal was to ski in two or three miles, find a scenic spot near the face of Sublette Peak, and cook lunch. For an hour we traversed the side of the mountain, skiing from forest, across meadows, and back into forest.

With the clouds gone, we could finally see Sublette Peak, a 475-foot wall of volcanic rock and sandstone towering above the surrounding forest. We skied alongside, but heeded the avalanche warnings posted at the trail head and kept our distance from the rock face.

In a treeless open bowl, we stamped out a flat area of snow and set up a camping stove to cook a dehydrated meal. But at 10,000 feet and 10 degrees it takes time to boil water, and we'd failed to bring along a cover for the cooking pot. After 30 minutes, I threw in a few packets of hot chocolate, and we drank it lukewarm.

The trail had become slick once the sun had come out, and on the way back, we fell several times. Getting upright in that powdery fluff took a supreme effort. The ski poles sank in like hot skewers through butter, and if you lost a ski, you were suddenly plunged up to your waist in snow.

After a fall, it was pleasant to relax for a moment, close your eyes against the bright sun, and feel the cold seeping in from all around. It was during one of these reveries that I decided to change plans and stay in Dubois another night.

Down in the town, the temperature had shot up to 40 degrees. I'd spend the afternoon watching bighorns out on Trail Lake Road, browse the local history section at the bookstore, sample pizza at the Italian restaurant, and maybe wander over to the bars and talk snowmobiles.

Finding the bighorns in the badlands

Dubois has always had some tourists, but it wasn't until the 1980's, when the timber industry collapsed, that the town built up its tourism.

There is a wide range of winter activities: dog sledding, bighorn sheep watching, cross-country skiing and snowmobiling. In 1994 snowmobiling boomed after Wyoming created the Continental Divide Trail, 250 miles of groomed paths running through the national forests to Yellowstone National Park.

Fifty-five miles from Yellowstone and the Grand Tetons, Dubois appeals to many tourists as a lower-priced alternative to Jackson Hole.

Getting There

The closest major airports are Riverton, 79 miles; Jackson Hole, 90 miles; Casper, 198 miles. Rental cars available.

Information is available from the Dubois Area Chamber of Commerce, Post Office Box 632, Dubois, Wyo. 82513 or Wind River Country Traveler Services, Post Office Box 1449,

Riverton, Wyo. 82501; (800) 645-6233.

Food

The Rustic Pine Tavern and Steakhouse, 119 East Ramshorn Street: (307) 455-2430. Prime rib $16.95, London broil $10.95, New York strip steak $14.95. Also serves a chicken entree for $9.95 and a seafood special for $16.95. Open every evening from 5 to 9. Reservations not required.

Old Yellowstone Garage, 106 East Ramshorn Street; (307) 455-3666. Western Italian cuisine. Serves dinner Thursday, Friday, and Saturday only. Wood-oven pizza on Sundays. Entrees: elk osso buco (slow-cooked elk shanks) $18; grilled quail with lemon and garlic, $18; buckwheat polenta with wild mushrooms $16, Dessert specialty: tiramisu. A selection of northern Italian wines. Reservations recommended.

Ramshorn Inn, 202 East Ramshorn Street; (307) 455-2400. Sack lunch for bighorn tour includes

ham, turkey, or beef sandwich, potato chips, cookies and fruit: $4.35.

Lodging

In Dubois, you'll find reasonably priced family motels. Most bed-and-breakfasts and guest ranches are in the mountains west of town.

Branding Iron Motel, 401 West Ramshorn Street in downtown Dubois, (307) 455-2893, has 23 log cabins, some with kitchenettes, starting at $40 a night. Free horse corral for hunters.

MacKenzie Highland Ranch, 3945 U.S. Highway 26, 16 miles west of Dubois, (307) 455-3415, is one of the oldest guest ranches in Wind River Valley. Cabins for four people, $40 a night. Rooms in the main lodge are $70 a room. Meals extra.

Cowboy Village Resort at Togwotee, Highway 26/287, Dubois; (307) 543-2847. Packages, including transportation to and from Jackson airport, breakfast and dinner, 1997 snomobile and guide, $199 a person per night. Ski rentals for under $5.

Sheep Tours

National Bighorn Sheep Interpretive Center, 907 West Ramshorn Street, Dubois, Wyo. 82513; (307) 455-3429. Six-hour tours run Saturday and Sunday from early November to late March. Cost $30 a person. Capacity six people. Deposit and reservations required. Provides binoculars,

spotting scopes and guide. Bring sack lunch, drinks. Winter hours: Thursday through Monday, 9 A.M. to 4 P.M.

Cross-Country Skiing

For maps, trail descriptions, and advice about snow and back country conditions, contact the Wind River Ranger District, 1403 West Ramshorn Street, Post Office Box 186, Dubois, Wyo. 82513.

Out Sportin', 310 East Main Street, Riverton; (307) 856-1373. Daily rental: $7.

Gart Sports, 455 Broadway, Jackson Hole; (307) 733-4449. Daily rental: $6. Steel-edge, back country skis available. J. M.

Photos: Whiskey Mountain in Wyoming, where 900 bighorn sheep congregate. (Ted Wood) (pg. 8); A slice of Ramshorn, the main street in Dubois. (Ted Wood) (pg. 13) Map of Wyoming.

JAMES McCOMMONS writes about the environment and outdoor recreation.

Correction: January 19, 1997, Sunday A picture caption on Dec. 22 with an article about bighorn sheep in Wyoming misidentified the mountain shown. It was Ramshorn Peak, not Whiskey Mountain.

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