

## **The history of Bighorn Sheep in Nevada**

Research thus far completed by Great Basin Consulting indicates there were far fewer bighorn sheep found in the Great Basin during the early 1800's than many originally thought. Of all the many accounts which were written during the period, 1924 through 1900, thus for only three references' have been found wherein bighorn may have been seen in the Great Basin.

First; hunters accompanying the John Work party while trapping throughout today's northern Nevada in 1831 saw tracks but no bighorn until they reached today's southeast Oregon where they saw four sheep near the Owyhee River.

And second: Cartographer Charles Preuss while traveling south on a rout taking the Fremont party from Fort Vancouver (Washington) to Pyramid Lake in 1843, saw mountain sheep somewhere in today's Humboldt County or Washoe County, "bound across some high cliffs, too quickly to get a shot".

In 1849, Elisha D Perkins, bought three "mountain goats", while traveling along the California trail near Rock Springs in today's Northeastern Elko County from Shoshone Indians, which were "about the color of a deer, tho not standing quite so high but something of the same form, with horns much like a fish hook with a long shank projecting forward from directly over their eyes" which may have been bighorn sheep – but from the description of the animal's horns, it may be assumed that the animals were probably antelope rather than bighorn sheep.

Only two instances where sheep were seen during a 78 year period, from 1824 through 1900, is practically no sheep at all when considering all the thousands of miles that were traveled by the mountain men, explorers and emigrants during that period.

Certainly, pictographs depicting mountain sheep are found at different locations throughout the Great Basin, but to say that sheep were abundant historically because there were images of sheep found does not make it so.

Perhaps the best work done which can shed light on the question of sheep abundance during the period immediately proceeding western settlement was that which was completed by ethnologist Julian Steward. Between 1931 and 1936, Julian Steward made numerous trips throughout much of the State of Nevada, southern Idaho, western Utah, and the Owens Valley area of California, interviewing native people and recording, among other things, the food items used by the various groups in each of the valleys he visited. Most of the people he interviewed were in their 70's or 80's and had gained much of their knowledge from their parents and grandparents.

The significance of Julian Steward's work was in discovering testimony showing just how scarce game was in the 1800's. As an example, in all of Mr. Steward's interviews, elk are mentioned only once, and that was in regards to hunting elk in the area of Yellowstone. Sage grouse was only mentioned once as well, and that was of Temoke, hunting sage grouse in Ruby Valley. The

same can be said of mountain sheep. Just because the natives mentioned that their forefathers hunted mountain sheep from time to time does not mean they were not scarce and difficult to obtain.

That there were very few large game of any kind to be found anywhere within much of western America during that period, is indicated by the fact that the native people lived in brush shelters rather than skin lodges during winter; that moccasins were rare, and that no cradle boards were mentioned. What skins were acquired were mostly used for food storage apparently. Even successful rabbit hunts had to have been the exception rather than the norm, for testimony indicates that there were never enough rabbit skin robes for more than a few persons.

Small game was of relatively great importance. Reptiles, rodents, and insects all supplied food. Rodents and other small mammals held several advantages over large game. They remained in restricted localities and did not require a long chase as is the case when large animals are hard to find. Insects were of great importance. During some years, grasshoppers and Mormon crickets were abundant and could be taken in quantities that would last for months. Plant foods were also important. Unfortunately, even they were inadequate.

On good years pine nuts could be had over much of the Great Basin, but even then, good crops of pine nuts only occurred on occasion. Even on good years it was difficult for family groups to gather enough pine nuts during the naturally short harvesting period to last all winter. Consequently, starvation was not uncommon among the native people during that period.

Perhaps one of the best accounts ever written depicting just how harsh conditions may have been for many of the native people in the 1800's was written by Meriwether Lewis, of the famed Lewis and Clark expedition. In 1805, it was the plan of Meriwether Lewis to make contact with the Shoshone people on the west side of the continental divide, where he thought, they could trade for food and horses and lay over a few days before crossing the Lolo Pass. However, "the Chief informed us that they had nothing but berries to eat and gave us some cakes of serviceberries and chokecherries which had been dried in the sun; of these I made a hearty meal..."

The following day, Meriwether Lewis; "sent Drewyer and Shields before this morning in order to kill some meat as neither the Indians nor ourselves had anything to eat... "after the hunters had been gone about an hour we set out. We had just passed through the narrows when we saw one of the spies [one of the Indians who was following and watching the white hunters] coming up... he had come to inform us that one of the whitemen had killed a deer... "in an instant they all gave their horses the whip... as I was without [s]tirrups and an Indian behind me the jostling was disagreeable I therefore reigned up my horse and forbid the Indian to whip him who had given him the lash every jum[p] for a mile fearing he should loose a part of the feast. The fellow was so uneasy that he left me and the horse dismounted and ran on foot at full speed I am confident a mile."

"...when they arrived where the deer was which was in view of me they dismounted and ran in tumbling over each other like a parcel of famished dogs each seizing and tearing away a part of the intestines which had been previously thrown out by Drewyer who killed it; the scene was such when

I arrived that had I not have had a pretty keen appetite myself I am confident I should not have tasted any part of the venison shortly. Each one had a piece of some description and all eating most ravenously. Some were eating the kidneys the smelt (spleen) and liver and the blood running from the corners of their mouths, others were in a similar situation with the paunch and guts but the exuding substance in this case from their lips was of a different description. One of the last who attracted my attention on particularly had been fortunate in his allotment or rather active in the division, he had provided himself with about nine feet of the small guts one end of which he was chewing on while with his hands he was squeezing the contents out at the other. I really did not until now think that human nature ever presented itself in a shape so nearly allied to the brute creation." (Spelling left unchanged)

Keep in mind, Lewis and Clark at this time, were right in the midst of some of the best bighorn sheep country found anywhere within the North American continent. If there was an abundance of bighorn sheep and other game in those presettlement times, why was it that the Shoshone people were starving as they were? Why was it that they had only one skin lodge within their camp while all the other inhabitations were brush wickiups? And why was it that the tribe had not gathered and dried large quantities of meat during the season?