

MOUNTAIN SHEEP OR BIGHORN

The Forest Service takes a census of big game animals living in national forests each year from Mexico to Alaska. This is done in all areas by rangers who are on the ground and can make a fair estimate by comparing numbers of former years and conditions. It is impossible to get a complete count of noses, but the Forest Service records are the best indication of whether big game is increasing or decreasing.

The deer is by far the most abundant big game mammal. There is an estimated total of 1,040,000. Other estimates are as follows: elk, 120,000; bear, 60,100; antelope, 15,000; mountain sheep, 13,000; mountain goat, 17,900; and moose, about 8,000.

In many areas outside of national forests, game has been nearly exterminated. By adopting a practical game management plan providing both summer and winter range and by establishing game refuges, forest officials have been able not only to maintain but to increase numbers.

One of the unique big game species that has almost faded out in the Pacific Northwest is the bighorn or mountain sheep. The reasons behind this decrease have been the original limited range of the animal and a certain amount of hunting, but the most destructive factor has been the occupation of its home by flocks of domestic sheep and the spread of a disease commonly known as "sheep scab."

As far as we know, there are no early records of mountain sheep in the Cascades in Oregon. Some naturalists claim that they lived in the Hart Mountain area of Lake County. Flocks formerly ranged in the Steins Mountains. The last specimens killed in this region were taken by the Harney County authorities and mounted to exhibit at the Lewis and Clark Fair in 1805. At that time, there

was a small herd of about a dozen. The balance soon disappeared. It was considered impossible for these animals ever to survive in that area. This was open public range, and alien sheep herders with their bands of domestic sheep overgrazed every section of the mountains.

The last stand of the bighorns in Oregon is in the Wallowas. The Forest Service can protect these few survivors from hunters, but the question is whether they will guard against the inroads of the flocks of domestic sheep. It is a well recognized fact that the only chance of bighorns surviving is a refuge set aside covering summer and winter range and the complete elimination of domestic flocks.