Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 2 Wildlife Quarterly

March 2018

White-breasted Nuthatch along Clark Fork River, Missoula, March 2018

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Seasons Changing

Boy, it seemed like a lot of hawks were on the power poles, in the trees and overhead on St. Paddy's Day. So, we took the camera for a ride on the back road out toward Frenchtown, in what they call Grass Valley.

Not to be disappointed, raptors swirled and swooped as the clouds gathered and a spit of rain spattered the windshield. I let my camera loose and squeezed the shutter whenever two or more birds entered the viewfinder. They were a long ways off. High, too. I didn't worry about identifying birds in the field. I knew I'd have them "in hand" soon enough, on my computer screen.

Far off and shaded, their secret ritual might have been safe if not for modern technology. Privacy, even in the wilds, is nowadays threatened, if not endangered.

The bird on the left is a Red-tailed Hawk, up from its southern wintering grounds to reclaim the Spring.

The one on the right is a Rough-legged Hawk, our winter hawk, with a hankering to head north for the nesting season.

As the clouds gathered and the rain turned to snow, it seemed as if the hawks of our spring and winter would dance for a while longer, the one crowding in, the other not quite ready to relinquish its hold.

It'll be fun to watch and see when the last Rough-legged Hawk of winter can be seen.

Don't Feed The Wildlife—*by Rebecca Mowry, FWP Wildlife Biologist, Hamilton*

Odds are one of the reasons you live in Montana is our state's abundance of wildlife. We see elk herds from the freeway, deer in our front yards, and the occasional bear or mountain lion waltzing through the neighborhood like he owns it (which probably happens more often than we're aware). And because we love our wildlife so, it can be tempting to show our appreciation or give them a helping hand during hard winters by feeding them.

1. **Feeding can kill them**. Hoofed animals have very complex digestive systems that adapt to lower-quality feed as winter progresses. A sudden bounty of carbohydrate-rich food (such as grain or corn or even apples) can hit their guts like a kid raiding a candy store, causing a condition called acidosis in which the animal's gut bacteria die, food stops moving through the digestive system, the rumen fills with water and the animal dies of dehydration with a full stomach.

A person is exempted from the Montana statute prohibiting the supplemental feeding of wildlife when conducting the normal feeding of livestock. Elk attracted to livestock feeding grounds create a hardship for ranchers.

Feeding game animals is illegal in Montana (including deer, elk, and now in some circumstances, wild turkeys). In addition, artificial feeding *tends to do the animals more harm than good*, in spite of a person's good intentions.

Not only that, but if you're providing food to deer or elk, odds are you're bringing them into close proximity to your house, with its delightful array of exotic ornamental plants. Native wildlife have spent millennia figuring out which plants in their

environment are safe to eat, and our tendency to festoon our gardens with foreign flora gives them all kinds of tough decisions to make. Recently, an entire herd of pronghorn in Idaho keeled over after they ate Japanese yew planted in someone's yard, and we suspect this same plant killed a few elk in the Bitterroot last year.

Right: A browsed Japanese yew shrub believed to have caused the deaths of some elk outside Hamilton, MT in January 2017.

Oh, and I can't forget another danger of attracting a large number of animals to a single source of food—disease transmission. With Chronic Wasting Disease on everybody's radar these days, anything that causes an unnatural congregation of deer or elk is something to be avoided.

Feeding of big game animals facilitates the transmission of disease by concentrating and aggregating animals. Baiting and feeding of big game animals is illegal in Montana under MCA § 87-6-216(1)(c), which states, "a person may not provide supplemental food attractants to game animals by purposely or knowingly providing supplemental feed attractants in a manner that results in an artificial concentration of game animals that may potentially contribute to the transmission of a disease or that constitutes a threat to public safety."

—FWP CWD Action Team, February 8, 2018

2. **Predators follow.** Another reason not to encourage prey animals to hang out around us is the danger that their natural enemies will be close behind. When I worked on mountain lions in Colorado, I was once called to a neighborhood outside of Boulder where a lion had killed a deer in a front yard, dragged it through the carport into the backyard, and ate it there in full view of several homes. Some people find this cool. Others—usually neighbors with pets or small children---disagree.

A mountain lion comes face-to-face with a housecat through a glass door, outside Boulder, CO. From Tom Mabe, Huffington Post.

3. **Speaking of neighbors….**I've lost count of the complaints I've gotten from homeowners who are overrun with huge flocks of wild turkeys. The first question I ask these folks is, "Which of your neighbors is feeding them?" and usually they tell me, between curses, exactly who.

Feeding wild turkeys recently became illegal (with exceptions) due to the growing number of nuisance complaints, particularly during the winter. Turkeys can tear through protective coverings for hay, rip into feed bags, even push livestock around to get at feed. I recently heard about turkeys actually breaking through glass windows in barns. They also defecate. A lot; in large quantities and in various locales, including but not limited to porches, roofs, vehicles, and haystacks. FWP's best solution to reducing numbers of overabundant wildlife is normally to encourage legal hunting, but many times, landowners all too willing to allow this tool are stuck next to neighbors who harbor and feed. Turkeys (and elk and deer, for that matter) aren't dumb and are quick to figure out where they're safe. And the person feeding them may not have the best land for roosting (and defecating)—they're just the restaurant, while the neighbors are the hotel. Don't do that to your neighbors, but that's just my advice.

It's only mildly out of the ordinary to see a turkey perching on a rooftop. This was in Winter 2018, near Missoula.

Not always cause for Thanksgiving. Taken on March 17, 2018, in a yard near Missoula.

4. **They don't need it.** Native wildlife lived here long before we ever arrived. (Turkeys are not native to Montana, by the way.) They conquered ice ages, wildfires, droughts, diseases, and who knows what else, a multitude of evolutionary forces that have shaped them into what they are today. How illogical to suppose that they need us to survive! Deer and elk are perfectly capable of living off meager rations when snow and cold and dark descends. A healthy winter range is rich in a diversity of evergreen shrubs, especially sagebrush, which provide highly-digestible protein throughout the winter.

An exceptionally severe winter may result in a spike in overwinter mortality of some more sensitive species—especially pronghorn and mule deer—but as they have done for eons, they eventually recover.

Holding to the tenets of natural selection, the fittest will have survived. And not only could the pressure of winter severity yield evolutionary consequences, but these periodic dips in population give the *habitat* time to recover from browsing pressure.

Setting aside the prospect of allowing weak animals to continue spreading their genes in a population, another unfortunate side effect of artificial winter feeding is the maintenance of unsustainably large wildlife populations that the habitat may not be able to support. Wild plants damaged by overbrowsing can take *years* to recover, and if wildlife populations are not checked, winter feeding won't be able to stop the inevitable catastrophic crash caused by habitat degradation (or disease transmission).

5. **…but they'll take it.** They may not need it to survive, but let me ask you something: if given the choice to eat ice cream every day rather than spinach, which would you choose? The stuff people usually feed game is often a lot tastier, if less nutritious (though not always), than the wild browse available to them in their natural habitat. As mentioned before, and much like ice cream, too much can make them sick. But it also draws them away from their natural habitat, encouraging them to spend more and more of their time around our homes and roads (and crops), waiting for the next tasty handout.

There is genuine concern amongst the public that game animals may be abandoning their summer-winter migration routes in order to live year-round near humans. Some blame this on predators, others on increased hunting pressure. But what about habitat? What about the changes in wildfire regimes, climate, and noxious weeds in the wildland? What about all the rich croplands, the irrigated pastures, and the deer feeders--the ice cream shops that have sprung up where the people are? If humans have the best food, and if hunting around homes is unsafe and difficult, what reason is there for them to leave?

This is 6. **Habituation.** Wildlife should fear us, and feeding them gives them a reason not to. Last winter I was outside of Hamilton trying to capture mule deer does to radio-collar for a research project, and my team ended up parked outside a house where a herd was nonchalantly lounging about on the front lawn. I walked up the driveway and knocked on the door to ask permission to capture a doe. No one was home, and as I turned to go, I was blocked by an enormous antlered buck not five feet from me, and coming closer.

It was clear what he wanted, and it was clear why this herd was here in the first place. That buck, with his sharp headgear, could have killed me as easily as if he were a bear or mountain lion. Don't believe me? Look up "deer attacks hunter" on YouTube. We don't want bears or mountain lions in our neighborhoods, so why should deer be any different?

Clockwise from top: An extra bail is placed for the white-tailed deer where horses are fed in Winter 2018.

A common problem when deer live amongst us is becoming entangled in our fences. This mule deer had been stuck for a couple of days in Fall 2017 before FWP was notified. The deer was sedated and the fencing removed, but it is unknown if he survived long after being released.

White-tailed deer have habituated to feed with the horses in February 2018.

Pileated Woodpecker tapping on cottonwoods at the Tower Street area on 16 March 2018.

Pileated Woodpecker

The Tower Street Conservation Area is managed by the City of Missoula, providing the public with a readily accessible opportunity to experience wildlife habitat and wildlife viewing along the Clark Fork River. Over the years, we've come to appreciate this expansive riparian area and floodplain for its pileated woodpeckers.

The Pileated Woodpecker is a Species of Concern in Montana, due in part to “its reliance on large tracts of mature and old growth forest” (Marks et al. 2016). Known for its excavation of large tree cavities that are used for nesting by many other species, Pileated Woodpeckers also feed on seasonal fruits.

Pileated Woodpecker harvesting dogwood berries at the Tower Street area in 2016

Pileated Woodpecker close up. Tower Street Conservation Area, 17 November 2017.

Wood chips fly as a Pileated Woodpecker works at Tower Street on 17 November 2017.

A mouthful of cobwebs for its trouble.

Pileated Woodpecker contorts its head, presumably while seeking and extracting insects from a cottonwood at the Tower Street Conservation Area, 17 November 2017.

Bighorn Sheep and the Goat Creek Burn

by the FWP Region 2 Wildlife Staff

It didn't take bighorn sheep long to find the first sheen of greenup emerging on the south-facing slopes of the Goat Creek Burn, in the Lower Rock Creek watershed. We observed these 16 ewes and last year's lambs on the mid-slope of Babcock Mountain on 10 March 2018, following a brief thaw, feeding on the fresh green growth that was barely visible across the mile-or-so between us. These individuals may represent 20-30 percent of the ewes and lambs in the Lower Rock Creek population, and are the largest group of sheep we've seen together in the area during our occasional observations since late last fall.

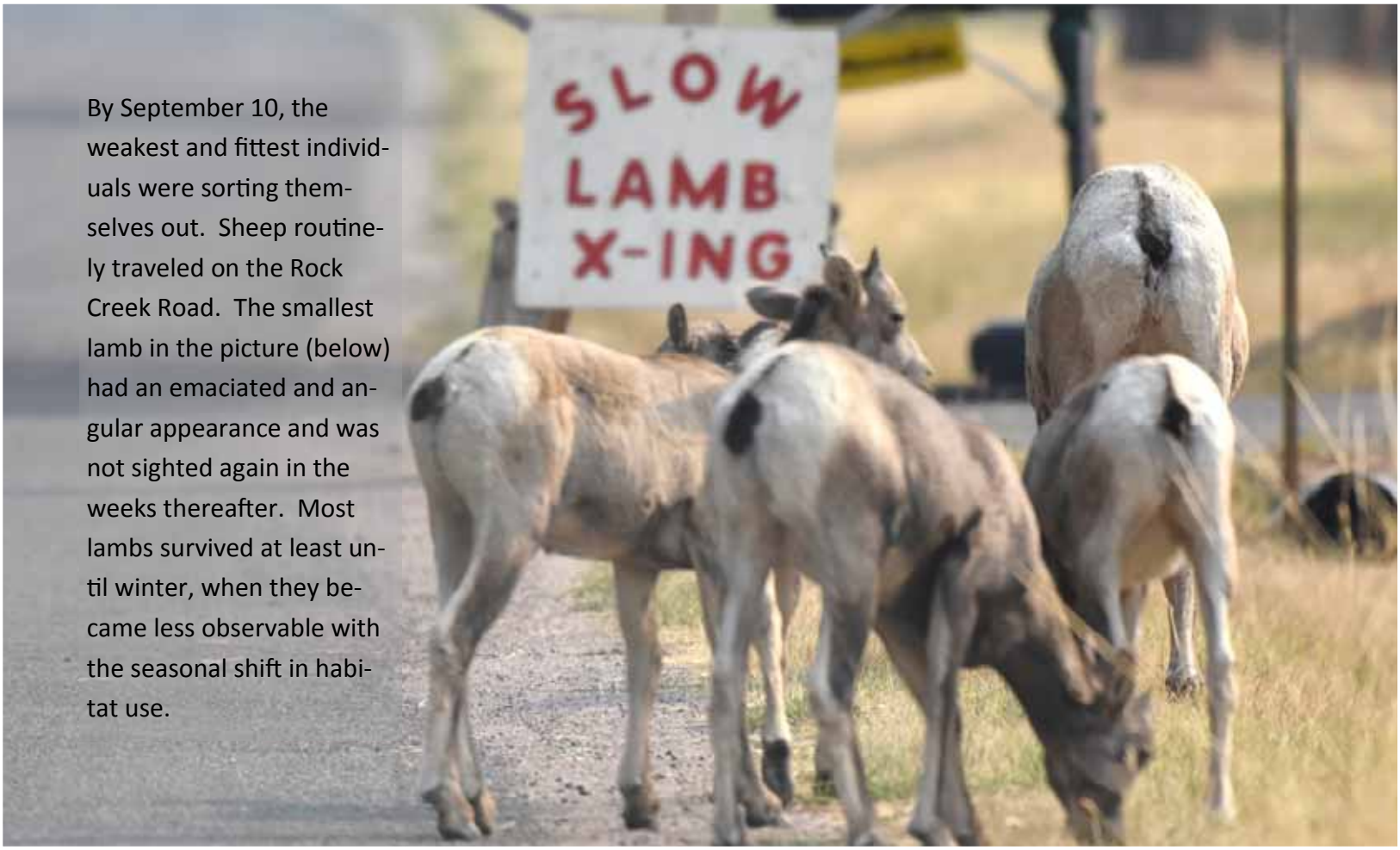
It also didn't take long for the snow to return to this slope, only a few days later, but this nevertheless marks the transformation of the burn's detrimental effect to a beneficial one on the local bighorn sheep population—a benefit in forage quality that should extend through this calendar year. The Goat Creek Fire originated on 19 July 2017 from a lightning strike, and grew to over 8,000 acres of the year-round bighorn range. The greatest potential impact on sheep involved the winter range, where the growing season ended before any significant re-growth could occur. How well would sheep weather this lean winter until the next growing season?

August 13 was one of the first days after Rock Creek Road was reopened to the public for travel from Interstate 90. Bighorn sheep grazed in fields and lawns on the bottom of the Rock Creek valley, the freshly burned and burning slopes to their backs. While irrigated fields provide supplemental forage for the sheep in summer, they are under snow in winter and are comprised of plant species that do not hold their quality as a standing crop over winter. During winter, sheep rely on the native bunchgrasses that burned on the steep, rocky, snow-shedding slopes in the Goat Creek Fire.

Dense smoke blanketed the burned cliffs where sheep would normally find forage in their escape terrain.

Kicking up their heels in a light rain, long awaited.

By September 10, the weakest and fittest individuals were sorting themselves out. Sheep routinely traveled on the Rock Creek Road. The smallest lamb in the picture (below) had an emaciated and angular appearance and was not sighted again in the weeks thereafter. Most lambs survived at least until winter, when they became less observable with the seasonal shift in habitat use.



While hay grasses continued providing green forage, the fire removed much of the mixture of native forage production and diversity that would normally round out the summer diet. The ewe in this picture was unsteady on its feet, with a bony conformation, and was not observed on subsequent occasions.

By November 25, the rut was in full swing. Sheep were observed in groups of 5-10 individuals, with 2-4 rams of all ages per group. The bighorns that we observed were using unburned habitat. In some cases, sheep were seen grazing unburned bunchgrass plants that the fire skipped-over within the blackened perimeter.

Rams facing off above Rock Creek Road.

A rutting group on the unburned side of a ridge on Babcock Mountain.

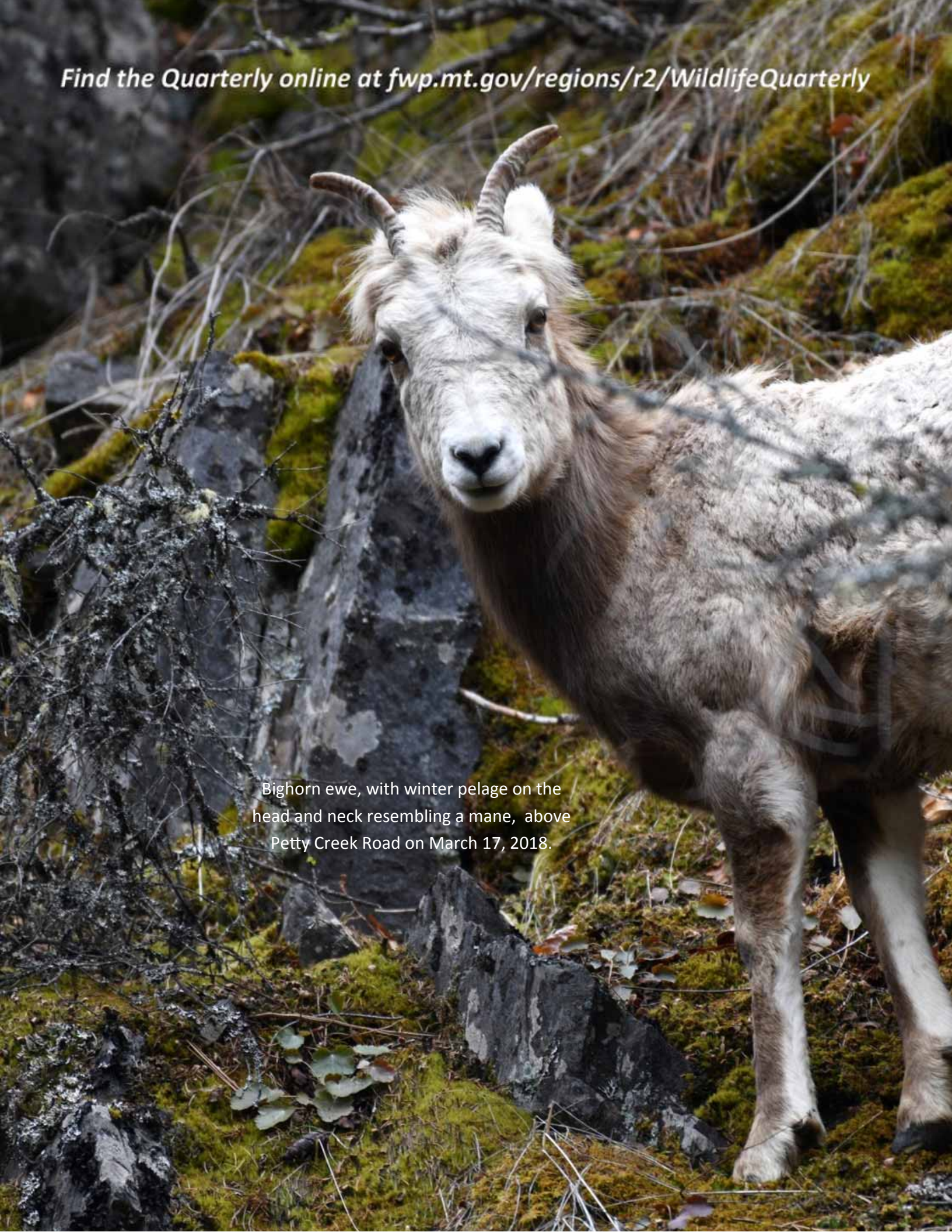
The victor.

We observed small groups of sheep on February 19, wintering on the unburned fringes of the winter range. That the sheep population numbers less than half its size prior to the pneumonia outbreak of 2009-10 was likely an important advantage for the survivors on this shrunken winter range in 2018.

At this writing, it's unknown how well the bighorns fared through this difficult winter. However, the body condition of those we observed appeared good.

To the best of our knowledge, most sheep typically winter on the steep south-facing slopes up the canyons of Babcock and Spring Creeks, which burned in the summer of 2017. This winter it seemed that more sheep than usual wintered on unburned west-facing slopes closer to Rock Creek Road.

In the coming spring and summer, the burn should produce enhanced forage quality and benefit sheep. A good crop of native forage will likely be available on the burn for sheep to graze next winter. For the survivors of this winter, the hardship owing to the fire may be over, and the population may benefit in the long run from new openings in the tree canopy and the stimulation of grass and shrub production for years to come. Time will tell if this was the spark that this beleaguered sheep population needed.



Bighorn ewe, with winter pelage on the head and neck resembling a mane, above Petty Creek Road on March 17, 2018.