

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks  
**Region 2 Wildlife Quarterly**  
December 2021



*Bighorn sheep in Lower Rock Creek on November 20, 2021.*

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# Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Region 2 Wildlife Quarterly

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*Bighorn rams headed toward Petty Creek on November 11, 2021.*

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## RUT

Pardon us, but we're unable to ignore the bighorn rut.

An obsession, perhaps? Well, it might cross the line between fascination and obsession when we start grading roads and trails for rams to find ewes.

In this issue of the Quarterly, we intend little more than to celebrate the season with you.

And to freshen up our collection of sheep photos and stories.

If a little bit of useful information finds its way into the text, so be it.

*Bighorn sheep along the Blackfoot River on  
November 13, 2021.*



**Survivors** - The bighorns on and near Woody Mountain, north and east of Bonner, are resilient, to say the least.

In 2009-2010, the herd numbering 160-180 sheep was reduced by at least 104 individuals, due to a deadly pneumonia outbreak and FWP's lethal removal of symptomatic individuals. Included among the diseased animals were 94 sheep that spent much of the year within the town of Milltown and occasionally on Interstate 90.

If there is a bright side to this story, it's that more than 29 (more than 38 in 2019) healthy sheep remain, eleven years after the pneumonia outbreak, in suitable habitat on the cliffs along the river. In the years since the pneumonia outbreak, no sheep have been reported in town and no disease has been detected. This ewe and lamb hail from stern stuff.

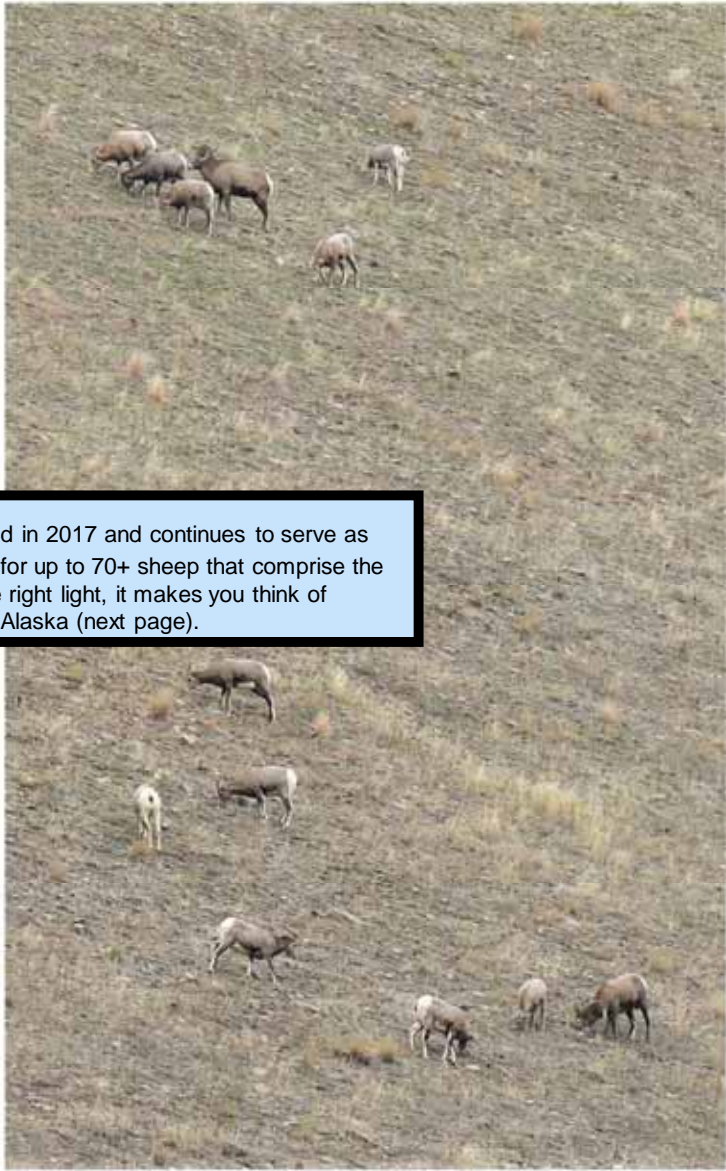


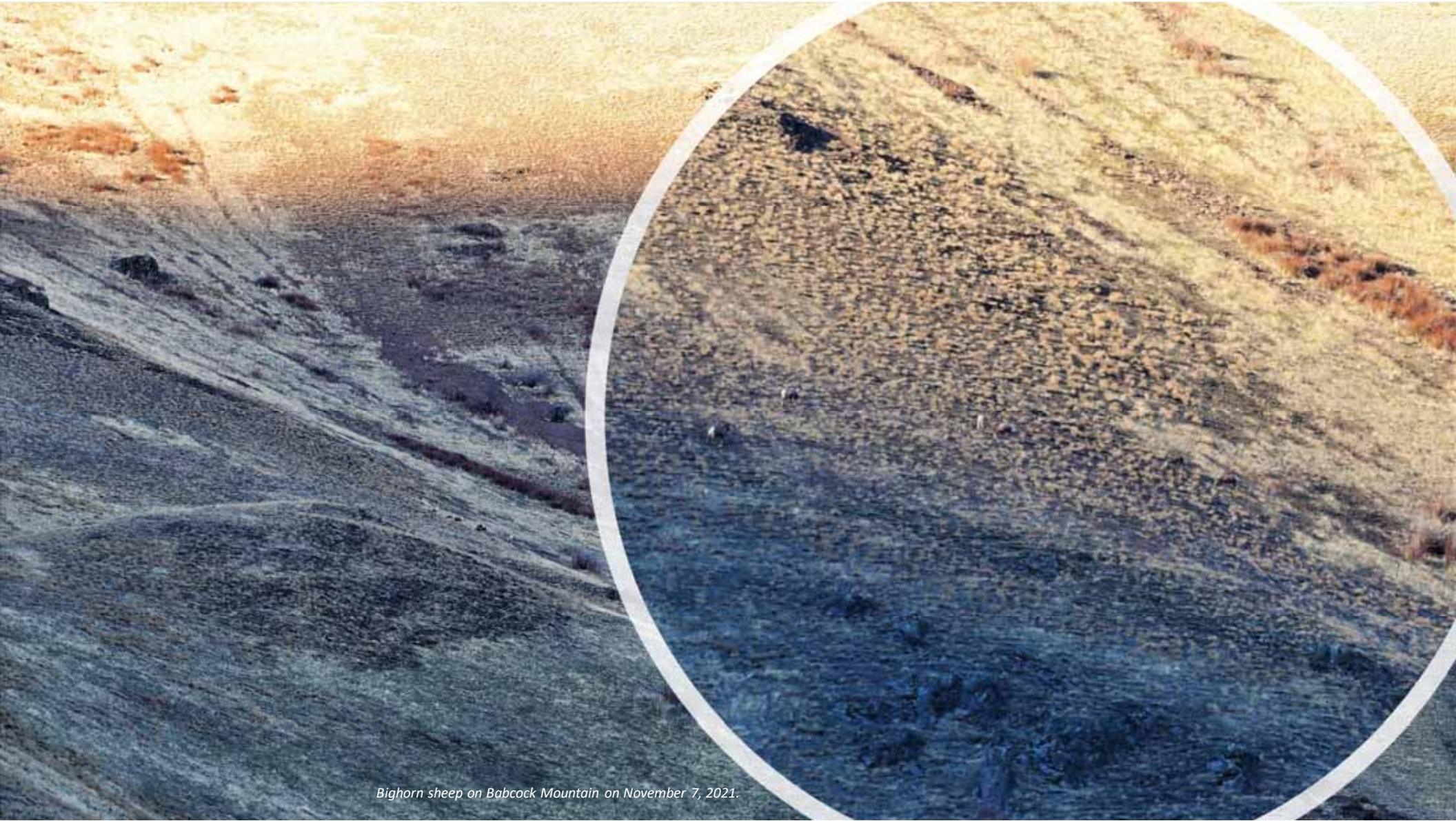
*Bighorn sheep along the Blackfoot River on November 13, 2021.*



*Bighorn sheep on Babcock Mountain  
on November 14, 2021.*

**Babcock Mountain** burned in 2017 and continues to serve as important fall, winter and spring range for up to 70+ sheep that comprise the Lower Rock Creek herd in 2021. In the right light, it makes you think of hunting sheep in the Brooks Range of Alaska (next page).





*Bighorn sheep on Babcock Mountain on November 7, 2021.*



Weather permitting, the rut in Lower Rock Creek takes place in the bottoms, alongside Rock Creek Road, beginning in early November.

With the arrival of snow cover, the sheep trail up onto Babcock and the neighboring cliffs, but the rut goes on.

As the weeks go by in November, older rams arrive on the scene.



*Bighorn sheep along Rock Creek Road on November 14, 2021.*



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*Bighorn sheep along Rock Creek Road on November 14, 2021.*

How is it that a wild force such as this shares our backyards, literally?

How is it that we were ever without them, for we were without them in Lower Rock Creek for a good part of the last century.

And what would we lose if we let that happen ever again?

We come back, every year, not only for the sheep, but to check for the spark of life within ourselves.

*Bighorn sheep along Rock Creek Road on November 14, 2021.*





*Bighorn sheep along Rock Creek Road on November 14, 2021.*



*Bighorn sheep along Rock Creek Road on November 14, 2021.*



## Out of Order — Have you ever found yourself in a bad spot?

Like a yearling ram on a narrow ledge between an estrous ewe and two mature rams?

And have you had to make tough choices that turned out remarkably well in the end? (counterclockwise from top left)

The ewe and yearling in the bottom with the big rams left behind on the cliff: now that's an outcome out of order!



*Bighorn sheep along Rock Creek Road on November 20, 2021.*

*Bighorn sheep along Rock Creek Road on November 20, 2021.*



And how times change.

Sheep weren't here when the tractor was new. Not until FWP reintroduced sheep in 1979.

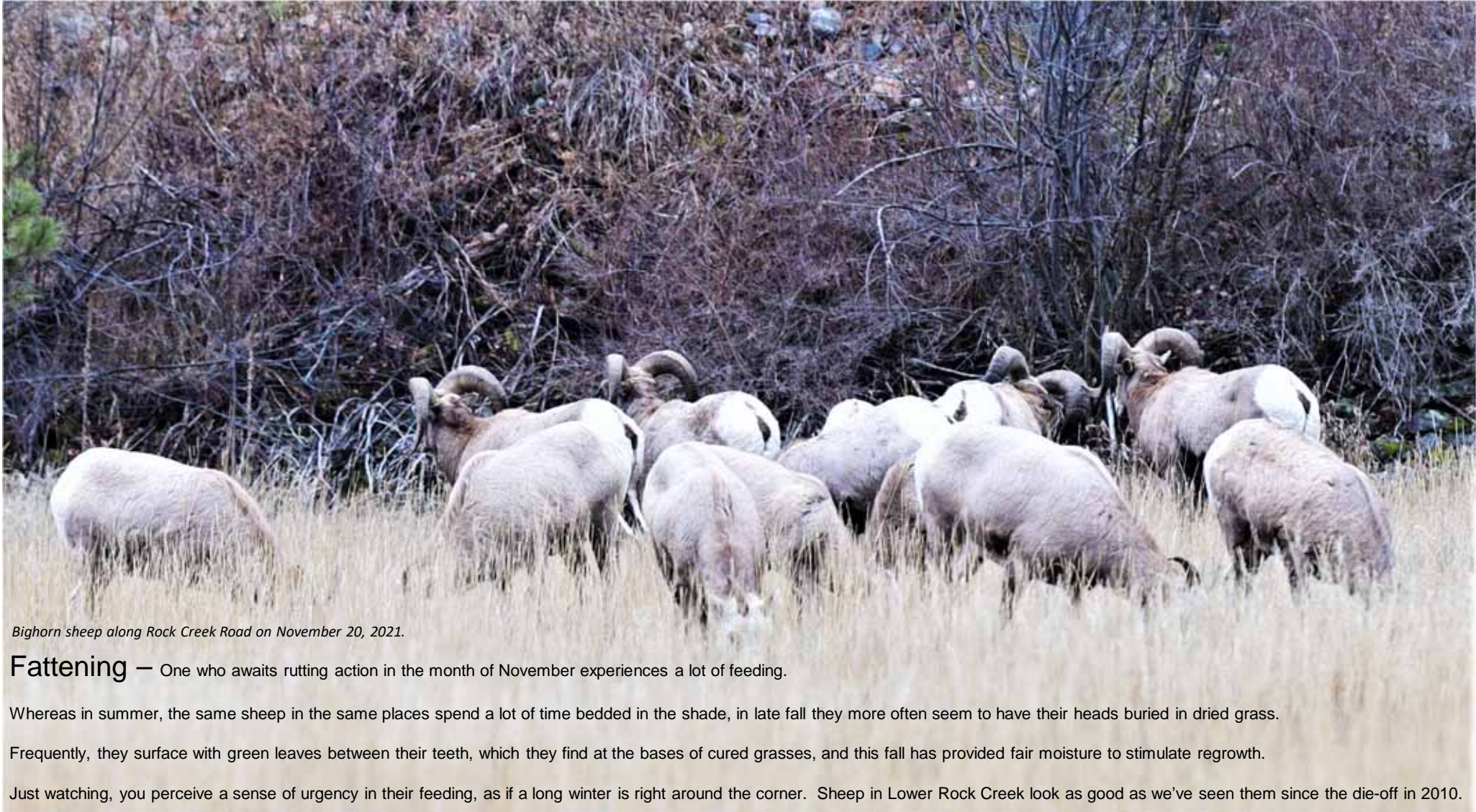


Nice neighbors.

*Bighorn sheep along Rock Creek Road on November 20, 2021.*



*Bighorn sheep along Rock Creek Road on November 20, 2021.*



*Bighorn sheep along Rock Creek Road on November 20, 2021.*

**Fattening** — One who awaits rutting action in the month of November experiences a lot of feeding.

Whereas in summer, the same sheep in the same places spend a lot of time bedded in the shade, in late fall they more often seem to have their heads buried in dried grass.

Frequently, they surface with green leaves between their teeth, which they find at the bases of cured grasses, and this fall has provided fair moisture to stimulate regrowth.

Just watching, you perceive a sense of urgency in their feeding, as if a long winter is right around the corner. Sheep in Lower Rock Creek look as good as we've seen them since the die-off in 2010.



*Bighorn sheep along Rock Creek Road on November 14, 2021*

*Bighorn sheep along Rock Creek Road on November 20, 2021.*



**Scrum** — We've seen less of this behavior this year, the rams standing around, sizing each other up. With fewer rams than in years gone by, there may be less provocation.



**Checking for estrous ewes** — In early November, ram behavior toward ewes might be characterized as random harassment. On November 20, rams followed their noses, paying little mind to ewes not in heat.

*Bighorn sheep along Rock Creek Road on November 20, 2021.*



*Bighorn sheep along Rock Creek Road on November 14, 2021*

We wondered if their tongues are so black from living and feeding in the ash on the burn.



So we Googled, "What color is the tongue of bighorn sheep?"

The pictures that came up online were of other bighorn sheep with black or gray tongues, too.

*Bighorn sheep along Rock Creek Road on November 14, 2021.*



*Bighorn rams headed toward Petty Creek on November 11, 2021.*

*Spooked by an angler on Rock Creek on November 5, 2021.*

