



Desert Tracks

“Helping conserve the natural resources of the Chihuahuan Desert Borderlands through research, education, & outreach.”

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Editor: Patricia Moody Harveson

RESEARCH IN ACTION:

Restoring Bighorn Sheep to Big Bend Ranch State Park

by Thomas S. Janke and Louis A. Harveson

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In the early 1800s, desert bighorn sheep exceeded 1,500 animals and ranged over 15 mountain ranges in Texas. By the 1960s those populations were extirpated because of unregulated harvest, net-wire fences, and competition and diseases from domestic livestock. Because of the conservation efforts of private landowners, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD), and the Texas Bighorn Society (TBS), desert bighorn sheep have been repopulated to 8 historic mountain ranges and currently exceed 1,200 individuals.



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In December 2010 and 2011, a total of 141 desert bighorns (31 rams and 110 ewes) were restored to their former habitats in Big Bend Ranch State Park. Researchers with the Borderlands Research Institute are partnering with TPWD and TBS to better understand the movements, survival, and success of the restoration efforts. To do so, we outfitted 78 of the sheep with GPS or satellite radiocollars.

Since their release, we have been tracking and monitoring the sheep weekly. From the GPS data generated, we have been able to document large scale movements and several mortalities.

The rams have traveled considerably further than the ewes. In fact, several rams have moved over 10 miles from the release site. Most of the ewes have stayed near the re-

After 50 years of absence, desert bighorn sheep were recently restored to Big Bend Ranch State Park and surrounding private lands.

lease site around the Santana Mesa and Mesa de la Cuchilla areas. We have also documented frequent movements of rams and ewes into Mexico (up to 10 miles).

From the original 2010 release, we have documented 7 mortalities to date. Three deaths were attributed to natural causes, 3 were killed by mountain lions, and 1 has died of unknown causes. From the 2011 release, 3 sheep have also died; 1 appeared to have broken its neck from a fall and the other 2 were also attributed to mountain lion predation.

This project will help refine future restoration efforts for desert bighorns in Texas.

BRI RESEARCHERS

Dr. Johanna Delgado-Acevedo

- Visiting Assistant Professor of Wildlife Management
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Dr. Louis A. Harveson

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Dedication of landowners, biologists, and volunteers has paid off for desert bighorn sheep. Their populations have increased from 0 in the 1960s to over 1,200 today.

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From the Director—“How the Tables Have Turned...”

There are two species that typify the beauty and diversity of the Chihuahuan Desert Borderlands: American pronghorn and desert bighorn sheep.

These large mammals serve as flagship species for their respective habitats. Pronghorn exemplify the vast, rolling desert grasslands, while desert bighorn sheep epitomize the dry, rugged mountains of the region.

Twenty-five years ago, who could have imagined where these populations would be today?

For desert bighorns, their story will go down as one of the most successful wildlife restoration programs in Texas. With their populations eliminated from the Texas landscape by 1960, a

handful of private landowners and volunteers with the Texas Bighorn Society has worked with Texas Parks and Wildlife Department to begin implementing a restoration plan.

The road to recovery was not easy and is still an ongoing effort as seen in our cover story. Many attempts failed, but perseverance paid off. Because of unwavering determination, estimates of desert bighorn sheep in Texas exceeds 1,200.

For Trans-Pecos pronghorn herds, their story is not as cheery. Pronghorn were at an all-time high in the 1980s when almost 20,000 roamed the desert grasslands of the region. Today, they are at historically and critically low numbers with less than

5,000 across the Trans-Pecos.

As with desert bighorn sheep, the road to recovery for pronghorn will be long and arduous. Fortunately, we have assembled a team of dedicated landowners, volunteers, and biologists to help with their recovery. The team will be hosting a seminar March 6, 2012 as an update of our current and planned recovery strategies for Trans-Pecos pronghorn (see page 4 for details).

We can only hope, that with your help and through persistence, we will be celebrating the recovery of pronghorn in the near future.

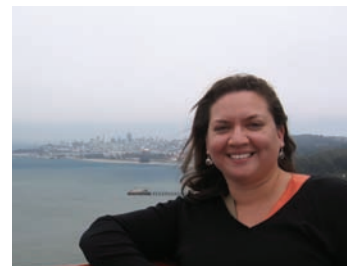
Thank you again for helping our conservation programs.

—*Louis A. Harveson*

Borderlands Research Institute Welcomes Delgado-Acevedo

Dr. Johanna Delgado-Acevedo recently made the move from Hawaii to Alpine as she joins the research team of the Borderlands Research Institute as a Visiting Assistant Professor with Sul Ross State University.

Dr. Delgado received her doctorate in Wildlife Science from Texas A&M University-Kingsville, where she studied distribution patterns of feral hogs. Dr. Delgado has specialties in landscape ecology, conservation genetics, and invasive species.



Dr. Delgado-Acevedo recently joined the research staff of the Borderlands Research Institute.

Donor Spotlight: Texas Bighorn Society

The wildlife program at Sul Ross State University has collaborated with the Texas Bighorn Society (TBS) for almost 15 years where they have supported various research projects, educational programs, or undergraduate scholarships. TBS has stepped up again to

sponsor a Texas Bighorn Sheep Research Fellowship which will support a graduate student, equipment, and travel for monitoring translocated bighorn sheep in Big Bend Ranch State Park.

Formed in 1981, TBS is considered “One of the best

little conservation organization in Texas.” In fact, TBS was one of the inaugural inductees in 2007 to the Texas Conservation Hall of Fame and received the Outstanding Achievement Award from the Texas Chapter of The Wildlife Society in 2001.



Photo Courtesy of TPWD

Volunteers of the Texas Bighorn Society have played an integral role in the recovery of desert bighorn sheep in Texas. TBS recently donated funds to the BRI to support a graduate research fellowship.

Mark Your Calendar: Trans-Pecos Wildlife Conference

Start making plans today to join us August 1-3, 2012 on the campus of Sul Ross State University for the 2012 Trans-Pecos Wildlife Conference.

The Borderlands Research Institute will partner with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, the Texas Wildlife Association, and private landowners to host

the conference.

The plenary sessions will explore the impacts of drought and wildfires on ranching and wildlife populations in the region. Additional seminars will address mule deer, pronghorn, and bighorn management; proven habitat management strategies; carnivore ecology; wildlife diseases; and various

other topics. Sessions will also include a field tour at a local ranch.

The conference offers an opportunity to hear research and management updates from a host of wildlife professionals and agencies.

Space is limited, so register early. For more information call us at 432.837.8488.

Please consider making a tax deductible donation to the Borderlands Research Institute to support our research, outreach, and educational programs.

Texas Bighorn Society Research Fellow: Thomas Janke

For over 30 years the Texas Bighorn Society (TBS) has taken a leadership role in the conservation of desert bighorn sheep in Texas. Whether it's water improvements, habitat management, scholarships, or assisting with sheep translo-

cations, TBS is up for the task. Most recently, TBS has sponsored a graduate fellowship with the Borderlands Research Institute.

The recipient of the Texas Bighorn Society Research Fellowship is Thomas Janke of Bartlett, Texas. Thomas

recently graduated from Texas A&M University-Kingsville with a 4.0 GPA in Wildlife Management.

Thomas will be monitoring the recently restored desert bighorn sheep in Big Bend Ranch State Park.



Thomas Janke is studying the movements and population dynamics of translocated desert bighorn sheep in Big Bend Ranch State Park.

*Borderlands Research Institute
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Join Us for a Pronghorn Restoration & Research Seminar

One of the most critical projects we are conducting at the Borderlands Research Institute (BRI) is the Pronghorn Restoration and Research Project. The Project is a collaborative effort by the BRI, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Trans-Pecos Pronghorn Working Group, and concerned citizens.

The purpose of the Pronghorn Restoration and Research Project is to identify the causative factors associated with declining herds and to restore pronghorn to

their historic habitats in the Trans-Pecos.

On March 6, 2012 we will be providing an overview of the ongoing restoration efforts and an update of our research findings.

Please plan to join us at 7:00 pm in the Espino Conference Room of the Morgan University Center on the campus of Sul Ross State University. This seminar is open to the public and light refreshments will be provided.

For more information, please call 432.837.8488.



Pronghorn populations in the Trans-Pecos are hanging on by a thread. An update on the restoration and research efforts is scheduled for Tuesday, March 6, 2012.