



## Inside Canyonlands

### Bighorn Sheep Transcript

Hi folks, I'm Karen Henker at Canyonlands National Park.

The magnificent curled horns of the desert bighorn ram are an icon of toughness. These animals thrive in a habitat where few other large mammals dare to go: the steep cliffs and talus slopes of the high desert. . . where there is little to eat, and even less to drink.

Smaller and lighter colored than their cousins in the Rocky Mountains, desert bighorn sheep have broad hooves that actually grip the rock when weighted, like suction cups. Their long legs can scamper up and down incredibly steep terrain, which is how they avoid mountain lions, their chief predators.

So what's there to eat on these barren cliffs? Bighorn sheep aren't picky, eating a variety of shrubs and grasses like blackbrush, mormon tea and ricegrass. Though much of what they eat looks completely dry – if not dead – these plants contain just enough moisture that sheep only need to drink every few days.

Perhaps the most spectacular time to catch a glimpse of bighorn sheep is during the late fall rut, when the rams put their magnificent horns to use in fights over breeding rights. They charge each other at up to 20 miles per hour and CRASH their heads together. These violent collisions can sound like gun shots echoing through the canyons, and it's all a display to attract the ladies.

After they breed, the males leave the herd while the females form nursery bands to raise their young. Females can give birth to one lamb a year, and while all bighorn sheep have horns, only the male's horns form the classic curl.

Despite their toughness, the population of bighorn sheep in Utah was nearly wiped out. Disease, trophy hunting and competition from domestic sheep caused a steep decline in their numbers. By 1975, only 1,000 sheep were left in the state. . . and 100 of those were in Canyonlands.

In the early 1980s, biologists began relocating some bighorn sheep from the Canyonlands herds to other areas, including nearby Arches National Park. A few sheep relocated just west of the park have grown to two herds totaling more than 600 animals. Today, the bighorn population in Utah is estimated at 3,000 animals, and over 10% of that total is protected at Canyonlands.

Increased human activity and development continue to threaten the desert bighorn sheep. For the remaining herds to survive, intensive management may always be necessary. Protecting wilderness areas is key to the survival of these amazing animals, and Canyonlands will continue to play a large role in these ongoing efforts.

I'm Karen Henker. Thanks for joining me on Inside Canyonlands.