



Hoofin' It! Lesson 2: Dall Sheep Life Cycle

Survival Necessities

Like all animals, Dall sheep need water, food, shelter, and space to survive.

These four needs define the species' habitat. Disease, habitat destruction, predators, weather, food availability, pollution, and human interference can all be limiting factors that affect population size and health.

No single habitat provides everything Dall sheep need to survive throughout the year, so sheep move between habitats as the seasons change. Moving with the seasons is one type of migration.

Spring

In spring, after spending the winter at lower elevations, Dall sheep migrate to open slopes at higher elevations as the snow melts. They can often be seen around mineral licks.

Scientists believe that the mineral licks help re-supply the sheep with micronutrients that were lost during the winter. Pregnant ewes leave the small groups, or bands, to find isolated and protected spots for giving birth. The birthing sites are often high, rocky outcroppings or caves.

Lambs are born in May or June just as the new plants and grasses emerge. Ewes and lambs form an immediate bond, recognizing each other by both smell and sound.

The ewe and lamb will stay by themselves for a few days before joining small nursery bands consisting of ewes, lambs, and yearlings, last year's lambs. These bands stay together for protection against predators.

Summer

During the summer, Dall sheep are still in separated into nursery bands and ram bands. They spend their time grazing on the alpine ridges to build up fat stores that help them through the winter.

Alpine ridges with access to steep slopes and rocky outcroppings provide safety from predators, as well as refuge from storms and wind. While in the nursery band, they move with the young rams and ewes to various summer

ranges. By the time they are weaned in autumn, they will weigh 10 times as much as they did at birth.

The summer is also a time for the lambs to learn from the ewes the necessary behaviors for survival. The lambs quickly learn to eat grass and escape danger. Common lamb predators are golden eagles, bears, and wolves. The first year of a sheep's life is perilous and many will not survive.

Autumn

In autumn, as snow begins to fall at the higher elevations, the small bands of ewes and rams are forced down to lower subalpine habitats. As they migrate to these lower, more accessible areas, they come together in larger groups for the rut, or mating season.

The ram with the largest horns tops the dominance scale and treats all other sheep,

regardless of sex or age, as subordinates. During the rut, older rams will challenge the dominant ram for mating rights by clashing horns. Fighting can last several hours and ends when one ram is either exhausted, hurt, or behaves in a subordinate manner. The winning ram will breed with the ewes in the group.

Winter

With winter, Dall sheep continue their migration to the lower elevations, seeking areas with the least amount of snow covering the plants they forage. Rams that are over three years old move away from the nursery bands and spend the winter in small groups, referred to as bachelor or ram groups.

Winter is a difficult time for all the sheep. Dominant rams that were active during the rut may now be undernourished or injured and may die. Some lambs might still be too small

to survive the winter. Winter diets are limited to dry, frozen grasses and plant stems. Snow depth and air temperature are critical in sheep survival. Sheep can dig through snow, up to 12 inches deep, but prefer areas that the wind has swept clear. Winter can also have an effect on the unborn lambs. The gestation period (how long they are pregnant) for the ewes averages 180 days (6 months). Ewes need both quality food for the developing fetus and good weather in the spring in order to have a successful pregnancy.