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Bighorns transplanted to Wyoming's Big Horn Mountains

By the Associated Press

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LOVELL - A helicopter skimming above rocky outcroppings in the Big Horn Mountains is a rare and unusual sight, but a pair of blindfolded bighorn sheep dangling from that helicopter is perhaps best described as surreal. Yet that was just one in a string of bizarre images seen Friday during a Wyoming Game and Fish Department operation that captured nine ewes and three rams from an area south of Devil's Canyon, about five miles north of where U.S. Highway 14A crosses Big Horn Lake.

Adding to the strange atmosphere was the near silence maintained by more than 15 Game and Fish specialists as they worked with the captured sheep at a staging area in a campground near Cottonwood Canyon.

"I don't want any idle chatter," said Kevin Hurley, bighorn sheep coordinator for Wyoming Game and Fish, speaking during a morning safety meeting.

"We want this whole thing overall to be very quiet, or as quiet as it can be," Hurley said, explaining that shouting could stress the sheep. He acknowledged that helicopters aren't very quiet.

Hurley accomplished his goal - to capture a dozen sheep from the southern area around Devil's Canyon and release them more than 350 miles away in the Seminoe Mountains, near Rawlins.

About 20 sheep from Oregon were released in the same area two months ago, and plans had called for an additional 40 sheep from Utah to be transplanted in the Seminoes to help re-establish a herd there.

But when Utah wildlife managers had no extra sheep to send, Hurley decided to capture from a small group established between Cottonwood Canyon and Highway 14A, along with a few sheep from just north of there.

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Those bighorns were at the southern end of a large group of about 160 spread across the Devil's Canyon area, where managers have a long-term herd objective of about 200 sheep.

"We're not comfortable with the potential for contact" between wild sheep at the southern end of that range and domestic sheep trailed along Highway 14A, Hurley said.

Contagious pneumonia outbreaks can devastate bighorn sheep herds.

"We don't want the problem, or even the possibility. It's not good for us or for the bighorn sheep," said Wendy Smith, whose family moves up to 1,600 ewes each year along Highway 14A between Powell and their summer pasture in the Big Horn Mountains.

Smith, who is also a teacher at Powell High School, observed Friday's capture operation with 13 seniors from her natural resource management class.

"It's a great opportunity for them to see what Game and Fish does with the sheep, and how they manage them," she said.

Part of that work included drawing blood and swabbing nose and throat cultures from each sheep. Lab tests will check for pneumonia and other diseases, and help wildlife managers learn more about the overall health of the herd.

But before they can be swabbed, measured and assessed, the sheep must be captured, which is not an easy trick when chasing an animal that can bound up craggy rock walls with astonishing ease.

Working with Game and Fish specialists, private contractors from Leading Edge Aviation in Lewiston, Idaho, used a helicopter to herd each sheep into a spot where a shooter could fire a net over the animal.

As the sheep keeps running, it becomes tangled in the net, and "muggers" jump out of the copter to subdue and secure it for transport back to the staging area. Sky Aviation, of Worland, used a second helicopter to help with sheep transport.

The goal is to place leather or nylon straps on the sheep's legs as quickly as possible, preventing them from getting away or hurting themselves or the muggers, Hurley told the Powell students. **Bighorns transplanted to Wyoming's Big Horn Mountains** SHARE THIS

"They can kick, and there are certain places on the body you don't want to get kicked," he said.

The sheep are blindfolded, hobbled and cinched into a custom bag attached to a line below the copter. Then they are flown back to the staging area.

Three-man teams move each sheep to a tarp where the animal is held securely, preventing it from struggling during the medical check, which includes monitoring their body temperature.

Even in frigid weather, at least one sheep became overheated from running to the top of a canyon, and was briefly plunged into a snowbank to cool it down.

After their exam, the sheep were carried to a modified horse trailer - known as the "ewe haul" - for their trip south. They were held overnight before being released on the southeastern side of the Seminoe Mountains.

Saturday's release was "picture-perfect," said Dennie Hammer, Game and Fish spokesman.
