

The Light In High Places



A Naturalist Looks at Wyoming Wilderness,
Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep, Cowboys,
and Other Rare Species

Joe Hutto

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PREFACE

A vast area of Wyoming exists as an environmental enigma. Rarely in the history of our voracious human diasporas across the face of the planet has wilderness survived long after “modern man” made his appearance upon the land. It is a strange irony that although humankind has been gnawing at the heels of Wyoming’s wilderness for untold millennia, a great expanse of this country still displays all of the characteristics of a truly wild place. The coexistence of wilderness and human culture in healthy balance has become a paradox on earth. That this area of the Rocky Mountains persists in a wild condition may be attributed to the sheer overwhelming physical obstacle of this country: remote, inaccessible, a granite fortification guarding and preserving an authentic natural landscape. At last, however, even these most remote extremes are beginning to feel the inevitable effects of human saturation of the earth. Wyoming’s rugged culture, both wild and human, is now being worn to a fragile state. The inevitable consequences of our global culture and technologies are now even leaking into these secluded and pristine lands with dire consequences.

From the most inaccessible alpine peaks to the high sage brush deserts, rare breeds of wild things are disappearing. Ancient ways of living are imperiled—romantic ideals and statuesque silhouettes are fading from view. I have come to these mountains to learn why the elusive Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep are disappearing. What I learn has as much to do with their decline as to that of other vanishing species, including the working back-country cowboy. Silently, without fanfare of apparent lament, without a sigh or whisper from the crowd—it appears that the final sun may be setting on some of our most revered creatures and some of America’s most sacred icons.

In wilderness there exists an old and familiar voice that, given an opportunity, still echoes down the canyons and off the granite walls and

has always called to those who might be inclined to listen. It still has the power to resonate in the hardest human heart, challenging us with the inescapable question: Is the world composed of just so many “natural resources,” or is the world, in fact, a sacred entity? And as humans, do we have the integrity and intelligence to know the difference?

I have come to this high place to observe rare creatures, to learn from the ancient wisdom that resides here, and to simply pay attention. Humanity and wilderness appear to be in opposition—in contradiction—but in the most vital and elemental sense, we may discover that we are in fact, in the end, inseparable.



Two adult rams on Middle Mountain.



Two ewes and lamb, the great southwest-facing slope of Whiskey Mountain in background.



Three mature rams on Whiskey Mountain.



Ram and ewe during rut on Whiskey Mountain.



Sheep Eater petroglyphs on Whiskey Mountain.
Note possible mammoth on right.



Popo Agie River in autumn.



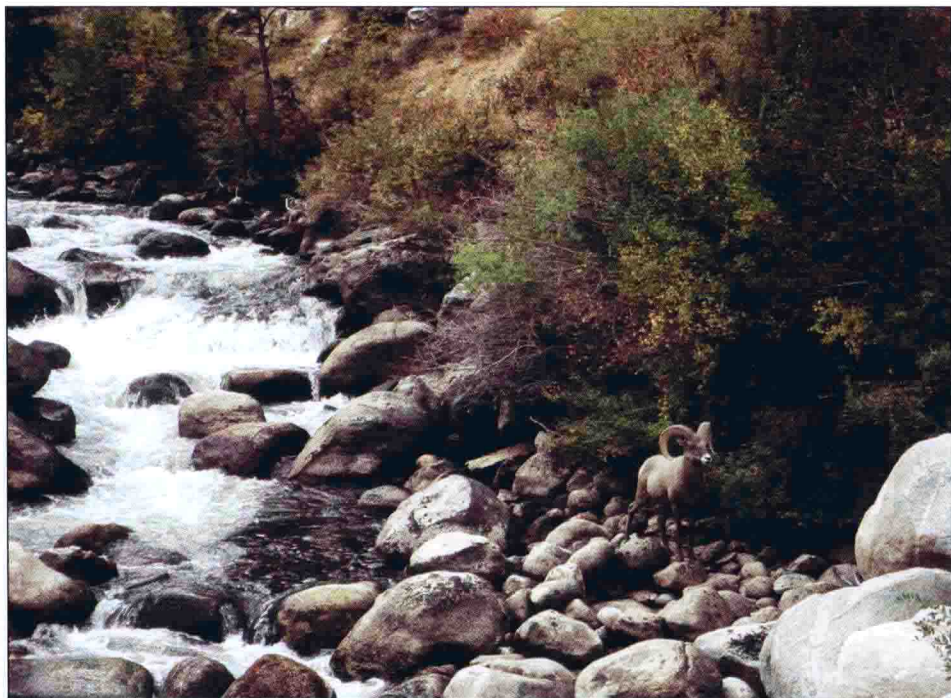
Lone Ram on Middle Mountain with distinguishing horn configuration.



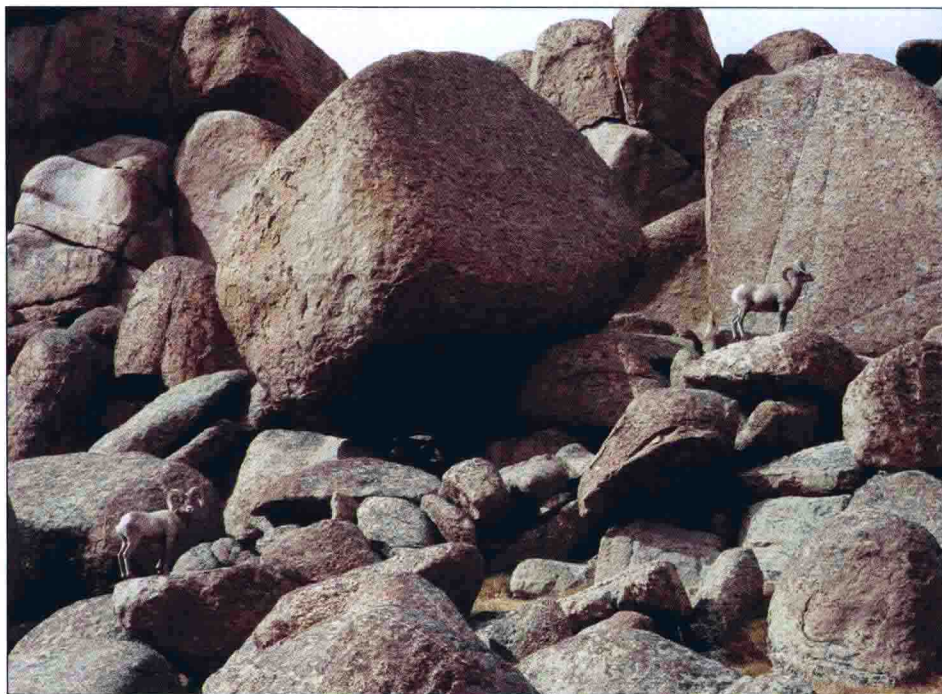
From the foot of the mountain, looking down on Red Canyon Ranch—1982.



Red Canyon Ranch from the rim, looking northward toward Table Mountain. Note ranch complex in center of photo.



Ram on Torrey Creek.



Adult rams on Middle Mountain, working their way up into a pinnacle.



A dedicated migratory event.
Note Middle Mountain in the background left.



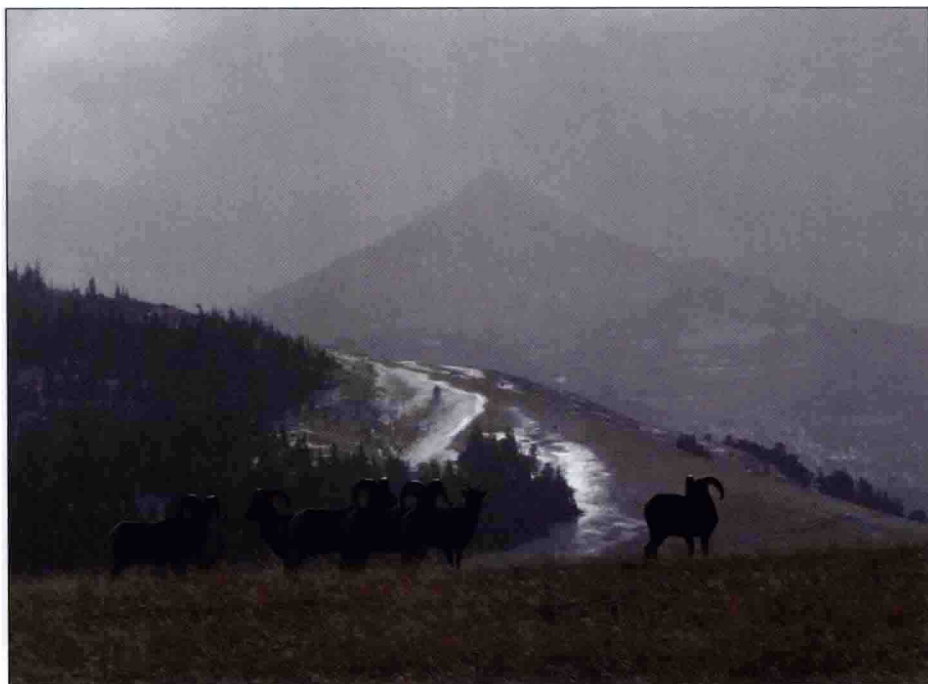
Many bighorn sheep concentrated on the great
southwest-facing slope overlooking Whiskey Basin.
Note Middle Mountain on left.



Spring 2009. Ram on Popo Agie River. Perhaps the last surviving ram from the Middle Fork herd.



The author observing sheep on Whiskey Mountain. *Photo by Helge Swanson*



A group of five adult rams with a lone ewe on Whiskey Mountain.
Note Arrow Mountain in the background.



The author at Slingerland Ranch—2007.