

Finlay-Russel Stone's Sheep Project

July 2024 Update

Following captures in March, pregnancy testing revealed 16 of the 19 ewes captured were pregnant (86%), on average with other thinhorn sheep populations in BC and the Yukon.



Four new mortalities were recorded during the fieldwork this past year:

* one grizzly * two wolves * one wolverine

Bringing the total to eight mortalities to date, including:

* one grizzly * four wolves * two wolverines * one accidental fall



The remains of ewe 22-1760, killed by a grizzly bear. This collar was perfectly intact and will be scrubbed clean before being redeployed this winter.

How do we conduct mortality investigations?

Each collar enters mortality after not moving for an 8-hour period, after which project team members are sent an email and text message notifying us of the suspected mortality. Once we confirm the collar is not moving, a crew is dispatched to investigate within 48 hours. Crews first fly over the site to document tracks and animal sightings before landing. On the ground, crews document all tracks and animal sign to piece together what happened—just like a crime scene. Biological samples are taken from the carcass to check for underlying health concerns, and predator hair or fecal samples are taken to confirm what killed the animal.



Stone's sheep ewe 21-1985 with orf or "contagious ecthema" lesions.

One ewe capture in March was observed with orf or "contagious ecthema", the first documented case of orf in Stone's sheep.

Orf mainly affects the mouth, oral cavity, lips, muzzle, tongue, and is characterized by skin lesions, particularly around the mouth and lips. Outbreaks usually affect domestic sheep and goats, but can also occur in wildlife species like Dall's sheep, muskoxen, caribou, mountain goats, and Sitka black tailed deer. Though uncomfortable, orf usually resolves on its own within 30 days. Orf is a zoonotic disease, meaning it can be transmitted to humans.

If anyone sees similar symptoms on wild sheep or mountain goats, we ask that you please contact the wildlife health team at Caeley.Thacker@gov.bc.ca or call: 250 751-7246



In June, we were invited to visit Kwadacha Nation to present our project. There we had discussions about reasons for the population decline in the area. One possible reason discussed was the decrease in active trappers due to falling fur prices leading to reduced trapping effort. This may have led to an increase in the number of fur bearing predators that prey on sheep on the landscape (wolves, wolverines and lynx). Habitat enhancement was also discussed, with concerns over tree and shrub encroachment limiting sheep habitat and sightlines. Thank you Kwadacha Nation for inviting us up to speak with you all in-person!

What's next? Now that we're entering summer, we'll start the next phase of our project - vegetation sampling. Working with our project partners, we will collect vegetation samples on summer ranges from each collared sheep in July to help us determine why fat levels may vary between individuals.



Ministry of Water, Land and Resource Stewardship



WILD SHEEP SOCIETY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



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