

Photos by John Hyde



## Viewing Dall Sheep

by Nancy Tankersley

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**W**hen I was in graduate school studying natural mineral licks used by wildlife, I had my first close encounter with Dall sheep (*Ovis dalli dalli*).

I had hiked up a high mountain valley on a sunny day to take soil samples from a lick used by moose, caribou, and sheep. There were no animals using the lick when I got there, although some Dall sheep were feeding on an adjacent hillside. After we had taken samples from the muddy, trampled site for laboratory analysis, my field assistant decided to hike further up the valley. Being an unreformed California girl myself, I decided to lie down and sunbathe.

Before long, I heard some rustling in the bushes. I sat up in anticipation of photographing sheep eating the mineral-rich soil. As quickly as I had sat up, however, I lay back down when I realized it was a grizzly entering the lick site! I watched him as he frolicked around the lick, excited by the pungent smells left from years of animal use, and then ran off.

Later that day, I was finally treated to a close-range view of a group of cautious ewes and playful lambs which came down to use the lick. This was my first close encounter with Dall sheep (and not my last with grizzlies!), and I have since enjoyed watching these attractive northern sheep at many remote and accessible locations.

The white Dall sheep are named for W.H. Dall (correctly rhymed with “pal”), a nineteenth-century Alaskan explorer and writer. Although the technically correct name is Dall’s sheep, popular convention dictates Dall sheep. The darker Stone’s sheep of northern British Columbia and southern Yukon areas is a subspecies (*Ovis dalli stonei*). Dall and Stone’s sheep are also known as “thinhorn sheep” as opposed to the bighorns (*Ovis canadensis*) of more southern latitudes.

Dall sheep are found in the mountains of southcentral and interior Alaska, as well as northwestern Canada. They usually occur in alpine regions near steep cliffs for escape from predators, mainly wolves and humans. Sheep are normally found in groups, with ewes, lambs, and yearlings separate from rams, except during the mating season or “rut” during late November and early December. Rams form a dominance hierarchy for mating privileges primarily based on the size of their horns. Their head-butting clashes can be seen at any time of the year, but most often during the rut.

Dall sheep mainly feed on grasses, sedges, low shrubs, forbs, mosses, and lichens. In the spring, sheep are often found at lower elevations, feeding on the new green vegetation at snowline. As the summer progresses, they follow the receding

snowline to feed. Natural mineral licks, where sheep come to ingest mineral-rich soil or water, are used frequently in early summer. In the winter, sheep seek out areas with little or no snow (such as wind-blown slopes) to feed.

Powerful binoculars and spotting scopes with tripods are recommended to view sheep from a distance without disturbing them. When scanning a hillside for sheep, look for a group of off-white objects. A bright white object is usually a rock or snow patch. Looking for trails through snow fields and talus slopes is another way to find sheep from a distance.

When approaching sheep for closer viewing or photography, it is best to stay in the open, walk a slow zigzag pattern, stop often, and look away from the sheep. A rapid, direct approach will usually send even tame sheep over the hill. Some biologists recommend wearing white for close approaches. Whatever you wear or do, however, sheep have a minimum distance for tolerating people. If they keep moving back as you approach, it’s time to stop. Other viewers will appreciate your courtesy. Sometimes, if you just sit still near the sheep, they will come up closer than you could ever stalk them.

There are many accessible mountainous areas of Alaska where Dall sheep can be seen, sometimes at very close range. Here is a partial listing, starting in the southern part of the state and going north:

**COOPER LANDING CLOSED AREA:** Look for the pull-out at Mile 41.1 of the Sterling Highway on the Kenai Peninsula. There are spotting scopes and interpretative displays on Dall sheep. Sheep are on the mountain year-round, but viewing may be best in spring when they are at lower elevations. These sheep are protected from hunting. Just to the south on Cecil Rhodes’ Mountain, look for mountain goats that were transplanted during July 1983 by ADF&G and the U.S. Forest Service. They differ from sheep in having smaller black horns and long shaggy coats.

**TURNAGAIN ARM:** Sheep sometimes cause a traffic jam between Miles 106-107 of the Seward Highway because of their close proximity—sometimes 100 feet or less! Early summer is the best time to see them close to the highway. The area is closed to hunting and the sheep are quite tame.

**EKLUTNA/TWIN PEAKS:** Sheep occur on the slopes in Chugach State Park just north of Eklutna Lake (use Glenn Highway Mile 26.3 exit). Access is via a trail on U.S.G.S. maps



from the Eklutna Campground. All sex and age groups can be seen except large rams. The hillsides near the lake are closed to hunting, but the back side of Twin Peaks is open for hunting by August 10.

**SHEEP MOUNTAIN CLOSED AREA:** Look for the ADF&G signs near Mile 106 and 116 of the Glenn Highway warning that the area is closed to sheep hunting. Sheep are often seen near the road on the cliffs above Caribou Creek. This area is especially good in spring when newborn lambs can be seen. Do not obstruct the road near the creek as it is on a steep hill. Turnouts are available along the highway.

**TOK CUTOFF:** There is good sheep viewing along Miles 79-104, from the Tok River Bridge to Mentasta Pass. Sheep may be observed every month of the year on both the east and west sides of the road; however, there are generally more sheep present in late April and May. All sex and age groups are present at various times in this stretch, but ewe and lamb groups are more common on the east side and rams on the west side. This area is open to hunting.

**NABESNA ROAD:** The entire south side of the Mentasta Mountains is good for viewing sheep, especially the Boyden Hills and Devil's Mountain area near the end of the road. This area is open to hunting.

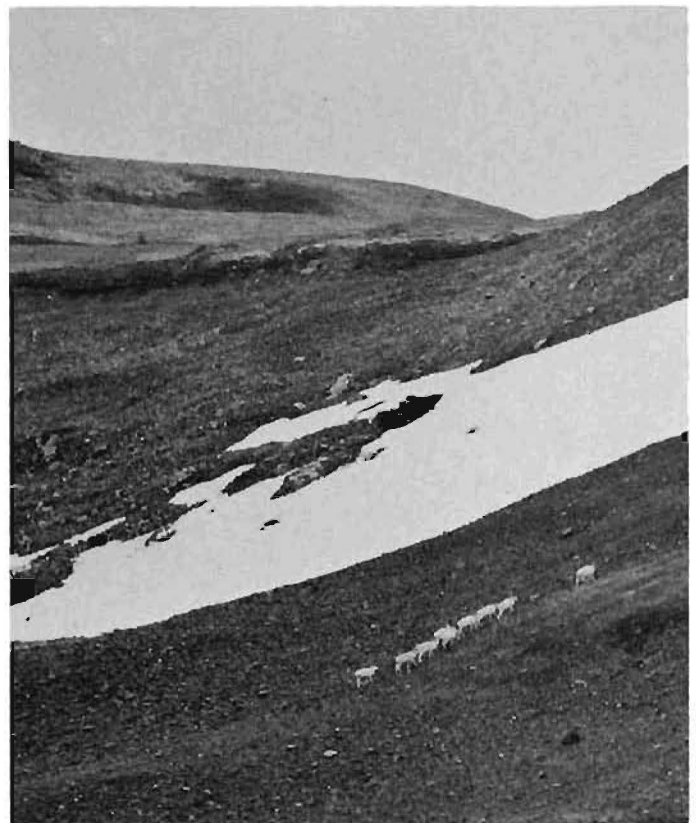
**DENALI NATIONAL PARK:** Sheep are found in nearly all the mountainous country along the park road. Some of the better areas for viewing are from Savage River to the Sanctuary River north of the road, Igloo and Cathedral Mountains, Polychrome Pass, and near the Toklat River bridge. Early and late summer (May and September) are generally best for spotting sheep close to the road, but Igloo and Cathedral Mountains are a good bet during mid-summer, too. Sheep in the park are generally easy to approach using the methods suggested earlier.

**HEALY AREA:** Look for sheep along the cliffs of the Nenana River just south of Healy along the Parks Highway. May and early June are the best times to spot ewe groups. Rutting sheep can sometimes be seen near the Usibelli Coal mine in Healy during November and December. Ask permission prior to entering the private lands in the mining area.

**DALTON HIGHWAY:** Look for sheep in the mountainous country 180 to 211 miles from the junction of the Elliott Highway. The highway is closed at Disaster Creek to all vehicles except permit holders on official business. See *The Milepost* for more details.

For more information on viewing sheep in these areas or at licks and other remote destinations, inquire at a local ADF&G office. Alaska is fortunate to have healthy populations of Dall sheep for viewing and hunting because of habitat protection and careful management. Enjoy these beautiful creatures of the mountains by using thoughtful viewing and courtesy—and, of course—watch out for the grizzlies!

*Nancy Tankersley is a Game Biologist serving with the Nongame Program, Division of Game, ADF&G, Anchorage. She has done research on moose, Dall sheep, and most recently, loons, on which she reported in our last issue.*



ADF&G Staff