



## Colorado Bighorn Sheep Monitoring 2023 Report



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## Executive Summary

This document presents updates on the Colorado Bighorn Sheep Monitoring Program (CBSMP). Specifically, this report highlights program efforts and observations of bighorn sheep in the San Juan Mountains. The observations analyzed in this report are recorded by citizen scientists and uploaded to iNaturalist (a widely used online platform for public data collection). Data show that bighorn sheep sometimes occupy domestic sheep grazing allotments and adjacent land. Mountain Studies Institute (MSI) recommends that the data in this report and all available data is considered by managing agencies when evaluating the suitability of domestic sheep grazing allotments.

The CBSMP has received funding from Backcountry Hunters and Anglers (BHA), Rocky Mountain Bighorn Society (RMBS), Great Old Broads for Wilderness, Patagonia, and MSI, as well as in-kind contribution from the United States Forest Service. MSI is an independent not-for-profit mountain research and education center established in 2002 in Silverton, Colorado. MSI develops science that people can use to address environmental issues facing the San Juan Mountains. Additional project information and observations can be viewed at [www.mountainstudies.org/bighorn](http://www.mountainstudies.org/bighorn). For more information, please contact Jewell Coleman at [jewell@mountainstudies.org](mailto:jewell@mountainstudies.org).

## Background

In the late 1800's bighorn sheep were abundant (estimated population of 1.5 to 2 million in North America) and widespread throughout the western United States (Seton, 1909, as cited in The Wildlife Society (TWS, 2015). Bighorns evolved in a variety of landscapes over tens of thousands of years and were the predominant ungulate in many mountain and canyon landscapes, meaning they were more common than deer and elk (TWS, 2014). This iconic species was nearly extirpated in the late 1800's by overgrazing, habitat fragmentation, unregulated hunting and diseases carried by domestic sheep and goats as a result of westward expansion (TWS, 2014 & 2015).

In the mid-1950s only about 25,000 bighorns remained in the continental United States (as cited in TWS, 2014). Translocations, which are often costly and sometimes dangerous, were successful in reestablishing herds in some historic ranges (LaRoe, 1995). Dedicated conservation efforts resulted in increasing the overall population of bighorns to approximately 70,000 in the 1990s (as cited in TWS, 2014). Since then, however, despite a variety of intensive conservation efforts throughout the West, the overall population has stagnated or declined to 80,000 in North America in 2014 (TWS, 2014). Many herds are small (less than 100 animals), isolated, and are at risk of developing problems related to lack of genetic diversity (Singer et. al, 2000, as cited in Pils & Wilder, 2018).

The bighorn population in Colorado follows the national trend. In the 1970's Colorado's bighorn sheep population was estimated to be 2,200. Following extensive translocation efforts in the 1970s and 1980s the statewide population grew to about 7,230 in the early 1990s and

approximately 8,000 in 2001. In 2023 the statewide population declined to an estimate of 6,982 (CPW, 2023). From 2022 to 2023 Colorado Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep population in Colorado decreased by an estimated 503 sheep (CPW, 2023).

Although past efforts of government agencies and conservation groups certainly brought bighorns back from the brink of extinction, bighorn populations have never significantly recovered, unlike other wild ungulates including deer and elk. In the western United States bighorns currently number less than 5% of their estimated historic population. The long-term sustainability of the species is uncertain, making them a sensitive species in the Rocky Mountain Region and a Species of Conservation Concern (SCC) in many national forests where they occur (USFS; Abeyta et al., 2017).

Current scientific consensus (based on more than 70 peer reviewed journal articles) is that the major threat and limiting factor to expanding bighorn populations is a respiratory disease complex caused by a combination of pathogens carried by domestic sheep and goats (TWS, 2015). While multiple bacterial species have been detected in the lungs of affected individuals, amassed evidence points to *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae* as the primary causative agent of pneumonia epizootics in bighorn sheep (TWS, 2015).

Respiratory disease from pathogens transmitted from domestic sheep and goats has caused all-age die-offs and markedly reduced lamb recruitment in herds in Colorado and throughout the West (TWS, 2015; George et al., 2009). Reduced lamb recruitment can also occur in herds with low grade infection without suffering major die-offs (George et al., 2009). Thus, negative effects of a single disease event can last for decades in a herd, resulting in chronic decline or stagnation (Pils & Wilder, 2018). In 2023 the RBS 20 metapopulation which includes the Vallecito Creek herd, Cimaronna herd, and Sheep Mountain herd all had declines in their estimated populations (CPW, 2023). In addition, there is currently no effective vaccine or medical treatment available for domestic or wild sheep (Wehausen et al., 2011)— making removal of chronic carriers by capture and testing the only effective management strategy for infected herds. Capturing bighorns can cause mortality or compromised health, and the practice still leaves the healthy members of the herd at risk for another exposure (Kock et al., 1987).

Separation of bighorns from domestic sheep is the current foundation of science-based management efforts and necessary for full recovery of the species (Kamath et al., 2019). In Colorado, bighorn sheep are listed as a species of greatest conservation need in CPW's State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) (CPW, 2015). In addition, nearly all threats facing bighorns relate to pathogen transmission by livestock (CPW, 2015, Chapter 5 - Table 7). The current Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies recommendations explain that the best protection for maintaining bighorn sheep herds is to maintain total spatial or temporal separation of domestic and bighorn sheep (WAFWA, 2012). Furthermore, the WAFWA guidelines recommend that, "Land management agencies that regulate or are responsible for domestic sheep or goat grazing allotments, trailing routes, vegetation management, use as pack stock, or any other uses involving domestic sheep or goats should only authorize such use(s) outside of occupied wild sheep range" (WAFWA 2012, p. 12). To get an idea of the scale of separation that is

necessary, the guidelines recommend a minimum of 9 air miles of separation when considering buffer zones as a method of separation but recognizes that even this distance is not always adequate for allowances for bighorn foray activities (WAFWA 2012, p. 14). In the past four years there has been an increase in domestic sheep allotment retirement which can be a useful tool for domestic and bighorn sheep separation (WAFWA 2012, p.15). In 2020 the Endlich Mesa allotment, consisting of 11,150 acres, was retired. In 2023 ten more high elevation allotments from the Etchart family were retired, closing 101,676 more acres in the Silverton Colorado area (Fallon, 2023). In addition to bighorns entering domestic sheep allotments stray domestic sheep create a considerable risk of interaction with bighorns (WAFWA 2012, p.13), particularly in the late fall before the strays die in deep snow and while bighorn rams are spread out foraging.

## **Purpose**

Monitoring potential interactions between bighorn and domestic sheep is critical to managing public lands in Southwest Colorado to help protect bighorn populations. Although, the Colorado Bighorn Sheep Management Plan 2009-2019 acknowledged that, “Interaction between bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis*) and domestic sheep is a significant management issue for bighorn populations in Colorado” (George, 2009, p. 63), land management agencies lack the funding to effectively monitor these interactions. Furthermore, the USFS cited a lack of data in delaying their decision on the future of domestic livestock grazing in the Weminuche Wilderness (Simino, 2021).

The purpose of the Colorado Bighorn Sheep Monitoring Program (CBSMP) is to train and equip ‘citizen scientists’ to collect data that can help the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) record observations of bighorn and domestic sheep in Colorado with an initial emphasis on the southwest corner of the state, especially the San Juan Mountains. This report highlights the program efforts and volunteer observations on the SJNF, RGNF, and GMUGNF.

## Method



Approximately 1,100 domestic sheep in a Bighorn Sheep Summer Range located in the USFS Bear Creek Domestic Sheep Allotment (Appendix A, 13). Photo taken by citizen scientists as part of the Colorado Bighorn Sheep Monitoring project.

Starting in 2018, MSI and partners have trained volunteer citizen scientists to submit observations of bighorn and domestic sheep to iNaturalist.org. Photos are linked with a time stamp and coordinates of where the photo was taken with the exception of some historic, pre-smart-phone observations that exist on iNaturalist. In addition to reporting sightings online, observers are asked to immediately report critical sightings (such as bighorns near domestic sheep) to the appropriate CPW wildlife biologists. A trailhead sign with a contact number and information on how to submit observations is attached in Appendix C. This sign is from the SJNF but the same sign was used in the RGNF and GMUNF with the designated

contact number for those regions. Though the program started in the San Juan Mountains, it is now state-wide. Study design, scope, and language (such as on trailhead signs) were developed with input and approval from CPW and USFS specialists to collect objective data.

### *Agency Participation:*

SJNF, RGNF, the GMUGNF, and CPW have collaborated with the CBSMP and domestic sheep grazing advocates in developing agreeable, objective language for trailhead signs. FS partners have also contributed by printing and placing some of the trailhead signs. In 2024, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) agreed to place signs on their land in the Southwest with 15 locations. Please see Appendix B for additional information on where signs are installed, updated, or pending installment.

CPW is responsible for responding to critical sightings reported by volunteers. The trailhead signs list the phone numbers of the four regional CPW terrestrial biologists so that volunteers can immediately report critical sightings, such as bighorn sheep in proximity to domestic sheep.

**Non-Agency Participation:**

Volunteer groups including The Great Old Broads for Wilderness, particularly the Northern and Southern San Juan broadbands; BHA; and RMBS have partnered with MSI on the CBSMP. Since starting this program in 2018, MSI and our partners continue to recruit and train volunteers from the community. Volunteer training was held online in 2020 and 2021 due to Covid-19. An online training video was created and is publicly available at MSI’s project landing page at [www.mountainstudies.org/bighorn](http://www.mountainstudies.org/bighorn). Additionally, general recreationalists are informed of the project and invited to participate by rack card flyers distributed at stores, events, and trailhead signs throughout the SJNF, RGNF, and part of the GMUGNF.

**Results**

Observations, core bighorn ranges, grazing allotments, trail information, and public land types are available on an interactive map found at [www.mountainstudies.org/bighorn](http://www.mountainstudies.org/bighorn). While this map is updated periodically, all observations, updated in real time, are publicly available at iNaturalist.org under the “Colorado Bighorn Sheep Monitoring” project page. Results are also summarized and delivered to the public, regional districts, CPW, and project partners via this report.

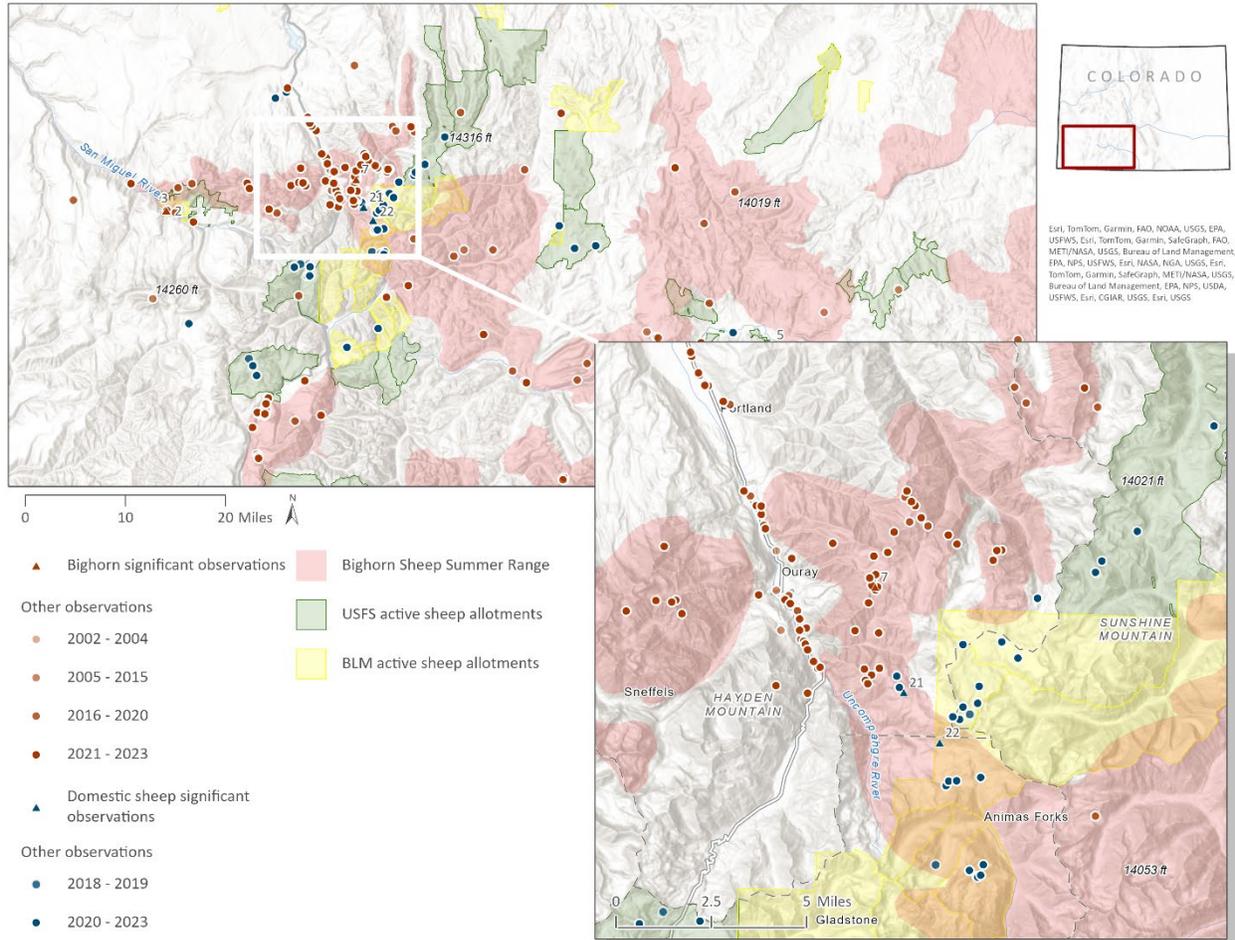
While the CBSMP didn’t start until 2018, iNaturalist data exists prior to 2018, allowing us to include historic data in our study. As an iNaturalist project, all observations of bighorn sheep, domestic sheep, and domestic goats observed in the state of Colorado uploaded to iNaturalist are added to the CBSMP project. All included, the CBSMP project has had over 1,838 observers who have contributed more than 2,767 observations across Colorado. The number of observations has grown in recent years, as shown below in Table 1.

**Table 1.** CBSMP observations available on iNaturalist. This data was exported from iNaturalist on January 16, 2024.

Year(s)	1971-2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
All observations	303	94	116	194	274	329	476	450	531	2767
Observations in SW CO	9	5	6	15	30	56	80	47	57	305

This report focuses on 22 of the 57 observations made in southwest Colorado (bounded by latitude 38.2 and longitude -106.25) in 2023. In Figure 1, observations are colored determined by number of bighorn observations on USFS and BLM domestic sheep allotments from 1971-2023. In Figure 2, significant observations include (1) bighorn sheep on a domestic sheep allotment, (2) domestic sheep on bighorn summer range, or (3) a noteworthy observer comment (e.g. noting domestic sheep near bighorn sheep, stray domestic sheep, or foraging bighorn sheep). Bighorn forays are defined as “any short-term movement of an animal away from, and back to, its herd’s core home range” (Pils & Wilder, 2018, p. 6). Using these criteria,

22 observations within 2023 were determined to be significant, numbered, and displayed in Appendix A.



**Figure 1.** Significant and noteworthy bighorn and domestic sheep observations in Southwest Colorado in 2023 (22 total). Significant observations include (1) bighorn sheep on or adjacent to (<1 mile) a domestic sheep allotment, (2) domestic sheep on bighorn summer range, or (3) a noteworthy observer comment. Significant observations are numbered from left to right and are detailed in Appendix A.

There are 20 observations of bighorn sheep in SW Colorado on an active domestic sheep allotment in 2023 (Figure 2). Additionally in 2023, there were 2 domestic sheep observed on bighorn summer range. Between 2010-2023, the highest number of bighorn sightings on domestic sheep allotments occurred on the Little Molas/West Needles Allotment, followed by Cascade Reservoir and Bighorn S&G. One noteworthy observation in 2023 includes a single desert bighorn foraging for more than 2 months, receiving observations that document a foray distance of over 90 miles before heading back to his home herd.

## Conclusions and Next Steps

Collected opportunistically by volunteers, these results represent a limited picture of bighorn and domestic sheep distribution and interactions. Even so, the significant observations highlight the importance of considering bighorn and domestic sheep interactions in determining science-based land use policy and management. Data shows that bighorn sheep sometimes occupy domestic sheep grazing allotments and adjacent land. MSI recommends the USFS and BLM consider the data in this report and all available data in the suitability of grazing allotments.

MSI intends to continue expanding citizen scientist monitoring as it has proven effective in gathering useful data. Future efforts will involve placing and updating trailhead signs at trailheads including but not limited to those shown in Appendix B, further public outreach, and volunteer recruitment. MSI is currently in conversation with the Gunnison Field Office and will be providing BLM with 15 signs for the 2024 season for relevant BLM trailheads in Southwest Colorado. Additionally, there have been nine new sign locations approved by the Ouray Ranger District which can be seen in Appendix B.

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## Appendix A

**Appendix A:** Significant observations in SW Colorado belong to one of three categories. (1) Bighorn sheep on or adjacent to (<1 mile) an active domestic sheep allotment (highlighted pink), (2) domestic sheep on bighorn summer range (highlighted blue), and (3) bighorn sheep on or adjacent to (<1 mile) to a vacant domestic sheep allotment.

ID	Date Observed	Species	Latitude	Longitude	Significant Observation
1	2/21/2023	Bighorn Sheep	37.74171886	-106.3588846	Bighorn on USFS allotment- Indianhead

2	3/17/2023	Bighorn Sheep	37.96785	-107.9713283	Bighorn on BLM allotment- Lee Lands
3	3/18/2023	Bighorn Sheep	37.96823	-107.9721133	Bighorn on BLM allotment- Lee Lands
4	4/28/2023	Bighorn Sheep	37.81220556	-106.3253861	Bighorn within 2 miles of USFS grazing allotment- Indianhead
5	8/4/2023	Bighorn Sheep	37.79620456	-106.8603837	Bighorn on USFS allotment- Wishbone
6	9/9/2023	Bighorn Sheep	37.37241667	-106.3107533	Bighorn within 2.5 miles of BLM grazing allotment- McMahan/Greenie
7	9/9/2023	Bighorn Sheep	38.218814	-108.55732	Significant foray activity
8	9/18/2023	Bighorn Sheep	38.31122	-108.887725	Significant foray activity
9	10/23/2023	Bighorn Sheep	38.243473	-108.525844	Significant foray activity- Platoro
10	11/21/2023	Bighorn Sheep	38.021485	-107.626501	Bighorn within 300 feet of USFS grazing allotment- Bear Creek

## Appendix B

**Appendix B:** Trailhead sign status in CPW contact areas (Durango, Monte Vista, Montrose, and Gunnison).

Trailhead	Status	Updated
<b>Durango Area</b>		
<b><u>Columbine RD San Juan NF Sign Locations:</u></b>		
1. Molas Pass Colorado Trail TH	2023 permanent sign	10/30/2023
2. Andrews Lake Crater Lake Trail TH	2023 permanent sign	8/29/2023
3. Purgatory Flats Trail TH	2021 sign	9/3/2021
4. Elk Creek Trail TH at train tracks	2021 sign	9/12/2021
5. Needle Creek Trail TH at train tracks	2023 permanent sign	10/25/2023
6. Missionary Ridge Lime Mesa Trail TH	2018 sign - needs to be updated	
7. Lemon Reservoir Endlich Mesa Trail TH	2018 sign - needs to be updated	
8. Lemon Reservoir Transfer Park TH	2023 permanent sign	8/30/2023
9. Vallecito Reservoir Pine River Trail TH	2023 permanent sign	8/30/2023
10. Vallecito Reservoir Vallecito Creek Trail TH	2023 permanent sign	8/30/2023
11. Vallecito Reservoir East Creek TH?	2021 sign	9/2/2021
12. Middle Mountain Cave Basin Trail TH	2023 permanent sign	8/30/2023
13. Middle Mountain end of road at Tuckerville	2023 permanent sign	8/30/2023
14. Bayfield Office Front Desk	2023 permanent sign	8/30/2023
15. Durango PLC Front Desk	2023 permanent sign	8/30/2023
<b><u>Expanded Coverage:</u></b>		
Little Molas CG and Colorado Trail TH	2023 permanent sign	10/30/2023
Ice Lake Basin TH	No sign	
La Plata Canyon Kenebec Pass TH	2023 permanent sign	11/6/2023
Hermosa Creek Lower Hermosa TH	2023 permanent sign	8/29/2023
Poison Park Trailhead	2023 permanent sign	8/29/2023

Middle Fork of the Piedra	2023 permanent sign	8/29/2023
Williams Creek Lake #587	2023 permanent sign	8/29/2023
Fourmile Lake #569		
West Fork San Juan River TH	2023 permanent sign	8/29/2023
Lobo Overlook (Continental Divide Trail) #813	2023 permanent sign	8/29/2023
<b>Monte Vista Area</b>		
<b><u>Conejos Peak RD Trailheads:</u></b>		
Red Lake TH	Laminated Sign	7/20/23
Chama Basin	Sign	9/16/2021
Treasure Creek	Unknown	
Elk Creek TH	Laminated Sign	7/20/23
Three Forks	Unknown	
South Fork Conejos	Unknown	
Twin Lakes	Unknown	
Tobacco Lake	Unknown	
Conejos Peak	Unknown	
Adams Fork	Unknown	
Crater Lake	Unknown	
CDNST	Sign	9/16/2021
<b><u>Conejos Area:</u></b>		
Ruybalid Trail	No sign	
South Fork of the Conejos TH	No sign	
Duck Creek TH	Laminated Sign	7/20/23
Crater Lake TH	No sign	
Summit Peak TH (Treasure Creek)	No sign	
Los Pinos TH	Laminated Sign	8/12/23
<b><u>Additional Trails per Dale Gomez:</u></b>		
Hope Creek Trailhead	2021 Sign	7/10/2021
Ivy Creek Trailhead	2021 Sign	7/10/2021
Hanson's Mill Trailhead (leading to Wheller Monument)	2021 Sign	7/10/2021
<b><u>Creede Area:</u></b>		
Pole Creek TH, trail# 820	No sign	
Lost Trail TH, trail# 821	No sign	
Spring Creek TH, road #547	Laminated Sign	6/13/2023
Carson TH, road# 518	No sign	
Bristol Head TH, road# 532	No sign	
Miners Creek TH, road# 803	No sign	
Rat Creek TH, road# 505	No sign	
West Willow TH at Equity mine, road# 503	No sign	
<b><u>Kiosks:</u></b>		
Alamosa Canyon	Unknown	
Conejos Canyon	Laminated Sign	7/20/23
<b><u>Sangre De Cristo Trailheads:</u></b>		
Willow Lake TH	2023 Laminated paper Sign	6/20/2023
Mt Blanca TH	2023 Laminated paper Sign	6/20/2023
Trailhead	Status	Updated
<b>Montrose Area</b>		
<b><u>Ouray District Trailheads:</u></b>		
1. Dexter Creek TH (CO 14)	2021 sign-metal	8/2023

2. Horsethief TH (CO 14)	2021 sign-metal (To Be Replaced 2024)	7/2023
3. Cutler Creek TH (CO 14A)	2021 sign-metal (TBR 2024)	8/2023
4) Courthouse Trail (Cow Creek Rd)	2021 sign-metal (TBR 2024)	8/2022
5) Stealey Mtn TH (Cow Creek Rd)	2021 sign-metal (TBR 2024)	8/2022
6) Cow Creek TH (Cow Creek Rd)	2021 sign-metal (TBR 2024)	8/2022
7) Bear Creek trailhead (Hwy 550)	2021 sign-metal	8/2022
8) Base of Engineer Pass Road (Hwy 550)	2021 sign-metal	7/2023
9) Wetterhorn Basin TH (End of W Fork Rd)	2021 sign-metal	8/2022
10) Middle Fork of the Cimarron	2021 sign-metal (TBR 2024)	8/2023
11) West Fork of the Cimarron	2021 sign-metal	8/2022
12) Hayden Trail	2024 Sign To Be Intalled - metal	
13) Richmond Trail	2024 Sign TBI - Metal	
14) Corbett/ Dallas Trail	2024 Sign TBI - Metal	
15) Silvershield Trail	2024 Sign TBI - Metal	
16) Baldy Tail	2024 Sign TBI - Metal	
17) Little Cimarron Trail	2024 Sign TBI - Metal	
18) Sneffels Trailhead	2024 Sign TBI - Metal	
19) Sutton/Neosha Mine Trailhead	2024 Sign TBI - Metal	
20) Amphitheater Campground	2024 Sign TBI - Metal	
<b><u>Norwood District Trailheads:</u></b>		
1) Whipple Mtn TH off of Last Dollar Road (near the high point)	2021 sign-metal	9/3/2021
2) Deep Creek/Whipple Mtn TH off of Last Dollar Road (parking area, just north of the airport)	2021 sign-metal	9/3/2021
3) Eider Creek TH off of CR617 (Mill Creek Rd)	2021 sign-metal	9/3/2021
4) Deep Creek TH off of CR617 (Mill Creek Rd)	2021 sign-metal	9/3/2021
5) Jud Wiebe TH off of Aspen St in Telluride	2021 sign-metal	9/3/2021
<b>Gunnison Area</b>		
<b><u>BLM Sign Locations:</u></b>		
Slumgullion restroom (Sawmill Park Area)	2024 aluminum sign TBI	6/18/2024
Cinnamon Pass ATV Staging Area	2024 aluminum sign TBI	6/18/2024
Wager Gulch Road	2024 aluminum sign TBI	6/18/2024
Cataract Gulch Trailhead	2024 aluminum sign TBI	6/18/2024
Engineer ATV Staging Area	2024 aluminum sign TBI	6/18/2024
Burrows Park Restroom	2024 aluminum sign TBI	6/18/2024
Cinnamon Pass	2024 aluminum sign TBI	6/18/2024
Engineer Pass	2024 aluminum sign TBI	6/18/2024
Molas Pass	2024 aluminum sign TBI	6/18/2024
Deer Park Road	2024 aluminum sign TBI	6/18/2024
Maggie Gulch Road	2024 aluminum sign TBI	6/18/2024
Minnie Gulch Road	2024 aluminum sign TBI	6/18/2024
Eureka Gulch Road	2024 aluminum sign TBI	6/18/2024
Cunningham Gulch Restroom	2024 aluminum sign TBI	6/18/2024
Waterdog Lake Trailhead	2024 aluminum sign TBI	6/18/2023

Appendix C

Appendix C: A trailhead sign in the San Juan National Forest.

 **Citizen Science—You Can Help** 



**Share Your Observations!**

Please report any sightings of bighorn sheep, especially if near domestic sheep, to CO Parks & Wildlife at 970.375.6714. Provide exact location and photos if possible. Upload photos to the free iNaturalist app or to iNaturalist.org.

 Detailed observation instructions

 For more info   

Tip: Take a photo of this sign to keep the information