

Your Lands, Your Wildlife

Your Lands, Your Wildlife, Your Story Contest

BACKCOUNTRY ADVENTURE

Submitted by Josh Ewing – Salt Lake City, Utah

The exhilaration of first time accomplishment was coursing through my veins. I had just successfully completed my first lead of a difficult crack climb at a rarely visited cliff. I had never ascended such a beautiful and challenging crack before, and I could hardly wait to share my celebration with my climbing partner. This was my first time climbing in the redrock country of the San Rafael Swell in central Utah. This gorgeous area is managed by the Bureau of Land Management, but many believe it should be protected as a national monument.

As I rappelled down the cliff, I glanced down to see my partner staring intently at something around the corner. When I touched down on terra firma, I could see the herd of desert bighorn sheep that had entranced my friend. I'd seen a few bighorn before, but never in a herd and never at so close a range. The herd was literally a stone's throw away, but above us on a cliff band. The group of perhaps 20 sheep must have descended from above down steep, cliff-like terraces, perhaps to find out what these humans were doing in their territory.



The massive horns on several of the sheep curved in beautiful arcs and almost appeared to be as large as the sheep's bodies. The herd stood quietly and confidently on a ledge perhaps four-foot wide and at least 30 feet up the cliff. After only about a minute of watching the magnificent herd, we noticed the animals become nervous, as if having spotted a danger. I felt embarrassed that perhaps it was us that had spooked the herd. But it wasn't the two "innocent" climbers. We soon heard the roar of ATV engines. A cloud of dust emerged about a half-mile away coming from the entrance of Red Canyon, a designated wilderness study area. The "herd" of about 20 ATVs turned onto the main road and roared in our direction. Not many seconds later, the herd fled down the cliff.

While I was annoyed by the cause of their flight, I couldn't help but marvel in the beauty of the herd's movement. The sheep bounded down the cliff with complete control, yet unbelievable abandon. They would leap off of 30 foot cliffs, flying through the air, to land softly on the slope below and continue their descent, only to reach another cliff band, which they would again hurdle off.

The flight of the bighorn remains the singular most magnificent display of athletic prowess I have ever seen. In the five years since, we have never seen more than a few solitary bighorn in the Swell. Perhaps it is because of the increased presence of motorized recreation. Or perhaps it was just that rare of a spotting. Regardless, I'm inspired by the opportunity to perhaps see such a sight again. And, I'm even more motivated to help protect the lands I love in the future.