



BRITISH COLUMBIA MOUNTAIN GOAT SOCIETY

SMITHERS BC CANADA

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Greetings

Goat photo



Did you find the mountain goat in the aerial photo last time? The goat is bedded down in the lower right corner of the photo.

It's difficult to find the goat. When you zoom in to the photo at 100%, there is a lot of mountain to search, thanks to the extreme resolution of the camera and the wide field of view.

More Philopatry

The tendency of mountain goats to stay close to their birthplace (philopatry) has repercussions. Any hunter who understands mountain goat behaviour knows that if a herd is frightened and flees, there is a high probability that the herd will return to the same spot within a day or two. Predators know the same. They sometimes return on a regular schedule knowing that eventually they will get close enough to catch a goat.

To compound the problem, mountain goats become complacent. If predators have not shown up for a while, goats tend to roam further and further from the safety of their escape terrain. We have often hiked along a ridge and discovered that we were between a mountain goat and nearby cliffs. Lucky for each goat, we were not wolves. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SUW-GMhrf6w> Hiking in Mountain Goat Country.

Some goats make this mistake more often than others. Mature males and juveniles who are busy foraging seem especially prone to wandering too far from escape terrain. Nannies seem to make that mistake less often. They tend to stay closer to the safety of cliffs.

Sub-populations

In large mountain ranges, there is not just one population of mountain goats. Instead there are multiple sub-populations, thanks in part to philopatry. Many of our local sub-populations (herds) originally numbered about 25 to 30 members while the total number of goats (meta-population) on a large mountain range may total as many as 300. Instead of one large herd, there may be 8 to 10 distinct sub-populations (herds).

Herds may wander across neighbouring terrain. Juveniles may switch from one herd to another. But there is a core group that defines each sub-population – a set of mature males and mature females along with many of their offspring.

Philopatry ensures that if one herd declines in numbers, another neighbouring herd will not rush to occupy any empty habitat. It may take years before mountain goats move away from their own range and into empty terrain. Emigration will happen, it always has, but it will take time. Mountain goats prefer to stay home.

The hunt

The management of the mountain goat hunt on an entire mountain range is based primarily on two counts: the total population and the number of goats harvested. The number of sub-populations (herds) and the population of each sub-population are not usually known to the managers.

The census of the entire meta-population in a mountain range is often out-of-date or absent for years. Hunt managers often have only the number of harvested goats to base their decisions. Managers tend to continue the hunt as long as the total number of harvested goats from the entire mountain range each year remains consistent. But hunters are very resourceful. If there are fewer animals to hunt, the hunters are able to compensate by stepping up their effort – right to the last hunt. Individual herds that are easily accessible for hunters may decline all the way to extirpation without the managers being aware.

The disappearance of half of the goat population in the Babine Mountains Provincial Park is a classic example. A lack of mountain goat population data along with easy hunter access, combined with management decisions based solely on the total number of goats harvested in the park results in a severe decline in population, without anyone noticing.

Change of culture

Hunting can alter mountain goat behaviour. The natural method for a mountain goat to escape predation is to move to local steep ground and wait for the predator to leave. The goat stays and hides at home. No need to run long distances. Philopatry prevails. But that may not work if the predator is a hunter with a rifle. A goat in hiding is then a stationary target. Mountain goats learn to adapt by running from their home terrain as soon as they spot a human. Philopatry is sacrificed. Goats learn a new behaviour, a new culture. Now they abandon their home range as fast as possible, at least temporarily.

A goat's nose

We have often mentioned that mountain goats have an excellent sense of smell. How do we know? It comes from watching thousands of 10-second video clips from our trail cameras over the last 11 years. We see goats constantly sniffing foliage along a trail to catch the scent of other goats.



Figure 2 Billy rubs scent on twigs

We see mature male goats jam a nearby twig into the scent gland at the base of their horns to leave their scent along a trail. A nanny sniffs her kid whenever the two are close. Mountain goats sniff everything.



Figure 1 Nanny sniffs branches

Scent is possibly more accurate than sight or sound. Sight and sound are brief bursts of sensory information for a mountain goat, but scent lasts for hours or days. A goat may not see a predator hiding behind a hill. The sound of a predator can be carried away by the wind,

but there is no mistaking the scent of a bear or wolf in the air or on the ground.

Dogs in the alpine

We are recommending that hikers leave their dog at home when hiking in mountain goat terrain. We have seen dogs chase wildlife both in the alpine and closer to town. But we cannot say that we have witnessed a dog chase a mountain goat. There is no way to test a goat's reaction to a dog without sacrificing the safety of goats. So our recommendation has to come from a couple of assumptions and a bit of logic.

- Wolves are the primary predator for mountain goats in our region.
- Domestic dogs are direct descendants of wolves.

- Domestic dogs exhibit many traits of wolves – pack behaviour, chase response, scent, etc. and are capable of cross-breeding with wolves.
- Therefore, dogs are seen (and smelled) by mountain goats as a threat.
- And we would not be responsible if we did not make this conclusion.

If anyone has direct evidence of a dog – mountain goat encounter, we would appreciate if you would share your experience. mtgoats@bcnorth.ca

Until the next time

Jim

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