

Get Wild: What gets your (mountain) goat?

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Frances Hartogh
Get Wild



Mountain goats are pictured Aug. 10 at Gore Lake.
Mike Browning/Courtesy photo

Sighting a mountain goat at an Alpine lake in the Gore Range can be the high point of a hike into the Eagles Nest Wilderness Area. Male goats (billies) can weigh over 300 pounds, and watching them gracefully clamber up and down seemingly vertical rock cliffs is a real treat.

Mountain goats (*Oreamnos americanus*) were introduced to Colorado starting in 1947 to expand hunting opportunities. Interestingly, Colorado Parks and Wildlife declared mountain goats to be a Colorado native species in 1993 at the request of the International Order of Mountain Goats.



To see mountain goats, get high — as in elevation. Goats hang out above tree line (over 11,000 feet), where they munch on lichens, moss, grass and the few shrubs.

Females (nannies) are pregnant for about six months and babies (kids) are born in May or June. Goats shed their wool in summer, and can look quite unkempt during this process. Goats live in small groups of nannies with their dependent kids and a few immature males and females, while mature billies are usually solitary – except in the fall mating rut when billies seek out breeding females.

Mountain goat populations are thriving while Colorado's native bighorn sheep are declining in number. Unfortunately, both compete for the same delicate high-Alpine territory. Mountain goats are hardier than bighorns, which suffer from respiratory problems that may be contracted from domestic sheep and goats. Parks and Wildlife has placed radio collars on bighorns in the Gore Range, and wildlife officers are collecting data to better understand bighorn populations.

Unfortunately, mountain goats at some of our most popular Alpine lakes have become habituated to humans and dogs, losing their normal fear of people. Habituation is unhealthy for wildlife, people and pets. Mountain goats that lose their natural fear of humans may allow us to come close or may approach us like the goats at popular Willow Lakes in Summit County. Goats are attracted to salt and minerals found in human food and sweat, and in human and dog urine. We've seen goats chew apart straps of backpacks left unguarded. Keep your distance, and don't leave gear unattended.

A rule of thumb: If you hold your thumb up and can't cover the goat with it, you're too close. If a goat approaches, move away slowly to a safe distance – at least 50 yards is recommended. Urinate away from trails and campsites, preferably on rocks, to avoid mineral accumulations that attract goats.

When approached by people or dogs, or provided with human food, mountain goats can become extremely aggressive and gore, bite, kick or trample, causing severe injury or even death and resulting in the goat being lethally put down. As the fall rut commences, give mountain goats extra distance; billies can be especially aggressive!

Both billies and nannies have sharp, black horns that can be up to 12 inches long. Mountain goat horns are extremely sharp. Interestingly, goats have evolved to communicate aggression and dominance through complex behavioral displays, minimizing lethal goring between goats.

But local vets have reported cases of dogs attacked by mountain goats, and wildlife officers report baby goats being killed by off-leash dogs. Goats can spear a dog with their horns and push dogs over cliffs. So keep your dog on leash, even when camping. It's also the law in the Eagles Nest Wilderness Area.

So enjoy viewing those amazing mountain goats through binoculars, and let's all help keep wilderness wildlife wild!





Frances Hartogh

“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Frances Hartogh is a board member and volunteer wilderness ranger for Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect and preserve the wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit counties. For more information, visit EagleSummitWilderness.org.

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