

# Interactions between humans, bighorn sheep rarely end well. Here's why

Mike Rivkin

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Our local species of Peninsular desert bighorn sheep have been in the news lately — and for an unusual reason. It seems they've taken to occasionally strolling around downtown Palm Springs, taking in the sights and tsk-tsking at anything made of wool.

The fact that there are any sheep at all in our local foothills is something of a miracle, so we can forgive them if they occasionally get a little too close and personal. If you see them someplace where they shouldn't be, leave them alone and give the Bighorn Institute of Palm Desert a call.

Recent sheep counts in all three herds along the southern rim of the Coachella Valley have looked pretty good of late, but there's a reason these animals have long been classified as federally endangered. And human/sheep interactions rarely end well for the sheep.

With that said, here's the latest survey information on how many sheep are actually out there: In the San Jacinto Mountain herd behind Palm Springs, there are about 75 adult bighorn roaming these hills. The population is pretty evenly split between rams (males) and ewes (females), and 10 of these are currently wearing California Fish & Wildlife tracking collars that allow for their monitoring.

As of this writing, at least nine lambs from last year's crop are still alive — a good, if not great, number of new additions to the herd.

As for the sheep living in the northern Santa Rosa Mountains behind Rancho Mirage, extrapolations from the institute's fieldwork that included a waterhole count conducted in late June indicated about 100 adult animals are in this range with 14 wearing collars and another dozen or so new-to-lifers. While there have been at least two lamb deaths here during the summer, lamb mortalities are not uncommon and this is not excessive.

Behind La Quinta in the central Santa Rosas is where the largest of our local herds can be found, but it's also the site of the most problems. A fence has finally been constructed along PGA West, but gates have been left open often enough to allow a number of sheep to take up residence once again on all that lovely grass. The result has been an increase in illness and mortality as the sheep dine on fertilized landscape, nibble on poisonous plants, and occasionally fall into water hazards. Two other adjacent courses have yet to be fenced. Nonetheless, a recent survey indicates some 168 sheep are alive and reasonably well in this herd, and that is an encouraging number.

All the same, if you see a nearby sheep shaking its head sadly as you hit another ball into the water, just remember to keep your head down and appreciate for a minute the fact that these animals, unique to our region, still inhabit our world.

*Mike Rivkin and his wife, Linda, are long-time residents of Rancho Mirage. For many years, he was an award-winning catalogue publisher and has authored seven books, along with countless articles. Now, he's the owner of Antique Galleries of Palm Springs. His antiques column appears Sundays in The Desert Sun.*