

## Mountain Goat

### *Oreamnos americanus*

The Mountain Goat lives out its life on tiny windswept ledges, far above tree line. It is an environment that would terrify most of us, but for the Mountain Goat it is a safe, predator-free home. Mountain Goats are found only in western North America, including Alberta, British Columbia, Alaska, the Northwest Territories, and Yukon.

### DISTRIBUTION

The distribution of the mountain goat begins to thin out as it reaches the northern limit of its range in Yukon. Yukon's 1,700 goats are found only in the lower third of the territory, mainly in isolated pockets in the southwest and in the Logan Mountains north of Watson Lake. More than half of Yukon's Mountain Goats live in Kluane National Park and the adjoining Kluane Game Sanctuary.

The Mountain Goat is rare here because so few habitats are suitable. In addition to mountainous terrain, ideal goat habitat features a high precipitation level that encourages forage growth. Cliffs are steep and exposed so the snow blows off, revealing winter food sources. The mountains themselves tend to be composed of rugged metamorphic or igneous rocks which provide better footing than softer sedimentary rocks.

### CHARACTERISTICS

The hooves of a Mountain Goat have hard outer shells and rubbery, concave foot pads which act like suction cups when weight is applied. This feature helps the goat to negotiate its vertical environment with ease and agility. It is not uncommon for a goat to leap 10 feet from one ledge to another, turn around on a narrow platform only inches wide, or pull itself up from ledge to ledge with its front feet. Keen eyesight complements this animal's daring mountain skills. It can spot moving objects up to a mile away.

The Mountain Goat's legs are relatively short and its body heavy set. Thick white wool covers all of the body except for short sections above its hooves, where the hair is shorter. The goat's black lips, nostrils, horns and hooves, as well as its brown pupils, stand out in stark contrast to the rest of its body.

Both males and females have slender, pointed horns which extend up and away from the long, narrow face. The horns, which grow continuously and are never shed, can be up to 25 centimeters long. Females have a noticeable curve at the tip of their horns while males have a gradual curve along the entire length.

The Mountain Goat's long wool is shed in spring and summer, leaving it patchy and dirty-looking until the shorter summer coat is fully exposed. The thick winter coat is part of an important survival mechanism. Good insulation is needed because the goat's strategy in winter is to move as little as possible, saving valuable energy.

## LIFE HISTORY

Mountain Goats usually give birth in sheltered areas, such as caves or rock overhangs. Newborns sport a white woolly overcoat to aid in survival, as the weather can still be harsh in May and June. Horns can be noticed by three days of age. At 10 days old, youngsters begin to romp and play with other kids and nannies. This helps them become familiar with their mountain environment. By three weeks, kids average about 18 kilograms in weight.

Although Mountain Goats have an average lifespan of 12 years, fewer than half of each season's kids survive their first year of life. Death is usually caused by an accident on the mountain or severe weather. Eagles have been known to carry off kids on occasion.

At maturity, males weigh about 85 kilograms and females about one-third less. Unlike sheep, Mountain Goats lead a solitary life, although they will occasionally form small groups. Adult males, or billies, keep to themselves during the spring. Yearlings that have remained with their dams throughout the winter are forced out on their own with the arrival of younger siblings. Females are sexually mature in their second or third year while males mature after three years. However, females typically do not successfully reproduce until age 4 or 5.

Grasses, sedges and rushes dominate the goat's summer diet. Foraging occurs mainly at dawn and dusk. Like other ruminants, the goat spends much of the time chewing its cud. Occasionally it will venture down into the valleys in order to visit natural mineral licks, while keeping escape terrain nearby. Winter brings a change in diet to conifers and flowering plants.

The Mountain Goat's mating season occurs between November and December. Males compete as they try to establish dominance, but fights are generally rare. Unlike other horned and antlered animals, male Mountain Goats do not butt heads. Instead they aim for each other's hindquarters and bellies. Most fights are shams but occasionally internal organs are pierced, with fatal results. Females use their horns to keep the males in line, a feature of the Mountain Goat's matriarchal social order. Except during the mating season, females dominate males.

## GOATS AND PEOPLE

Traditionally, the Mountain Goat's fleece has been used by aboriginal peoples to make clothing, particularly trousers. The Chilkat Tlingit people on the coast used the wool to make their famous Chilkat blankets.

Because of the peril involved, strict rituals were observed by hunters' wives. For example, women of the Inland Tlingit did not touch their hair while men were out hunting goats or sheep, for fear of "combing" the hunters off the cliffs.

Today's efficient hunting methods, as well as the high trophy value of the Mountain Goat, have put pressures on the North American population. The Mountain Goat is the rarest large mammal hunted in

Yukon. Males and females are so similar that protecting females is difficult. This has led to hunting restrictions to protect the species.

A transplant project in 1983-84 re-established the Mount White goat population near Whitehorse. It is an experiment that may be copied in other areas where goats have been eradicated.

#### VIEWING OPPORTUNITIES

Highway travellers on the lookout for goats should train their binoculars on Mount White at Jakes Corner and the peaks of the Coast Mountains along the South Klondike Highway. Hikers can glass the mountainsides along the St. Elias Trail in Kluane National Park. Ambitious wilderness hikers and Alsek River rafters/kayakers can watch goats on Goatherd Mountain, which looms over the Lowell glacier in Kluane National Park.

At a distance, goats can easily be confused with female sheep, so keep the following points in mind. Sheep horns are amber-coloured, while goat horns are black. Sheep have short woolly coats while Mountain Goats have long hairy coats that reach halfway down their legs. Mountain Goats have a pronounced hump over their shoulders that is absent in sheep.