THE WILD SIDE by Dave Gibson

Mountain Goats

To expand hunting opportunities, in1947 fourteen mountain goats from Montana were released near Salida, Colorado, in the Collegiate Peaks Wilderness Area. More introductions followed with goats being imported from Idaho, British Columbia, and the Black Hills of South Dakota. Although an 800,000 year old mountain goat fossil of an extinct species was found in Porcupine Cave, South Park, CO, consensus among professional biologists is that mountain goats never resided in our state. Today there are about 2,000 mountain goats in Colorado - firmly establishing themselves to the point where they may be negatively affecting native bighorn sheep numbers. Rocky Mountain National Park presently relocates goats that have wandered within its boundaries.

The mountain goat's shaggy yellow-tinged white fur is tiered with a wooly undercoat and hollow-haired outer-layer. With stout bodies and short tails, both sexes sport a 5 inch long "beard." Their eyes, nose, and slightly backward-curving horns are black. After 22 months of age, a "ring" is added every year to their dagger-sharp ebon horns. When battling during rut, billies will try to stab opponents in their backsides - and have developed thicker skin on that part of their bodies. Mountain goats' cloven hooves have rubber-like pads that act as suction cups, and are well suited for climbing. Mostly dwelling above tree line, their diet consists largely of alpine grasses, sedges, mosses, lichens, shrubs, and flowers.

In late May or early June, nannies give birth to between 1 and 3 kids. Docile in nature, even as adults, they may live to be 14 years old before their teeth wear out and survival becomes more difficult. Most mountain goats succumb to avalanches or rockslides. Nearby Mount Evans is a great place to see mountain goats, with the resident herd numbering about 175 animals.

Dave Gibson is a photographer & writer focusing on the natural world around us. His imagery can be found on his web site at www.davegibsonimages.com