Signs of bighorn sheep

Big Thompson Canyon placards to provide information about Colorado’s state animal

By Pamela Dickman
For The Times-Call

Driving up the Big Thompson Canyon in late summer and fall, one can almost always spot motorists pulled to the side of the road, necks craned, eyes trained on the rock, sharing the view of Colorado’s official animal.

The canyon west of Loveland is home to Colorado’s most visible herd of bighorn sheep with their distinctive beards and tell-tale curled horns.

With six new signs posted in the canyon, viewers can take away more than a glimpse or a photograph of one of the state’s most majestic and unique wildlife species.

They also can learn how rams (males) butt each other head-to-head in a contest for dominance to win the ewe.

The ram’s skulls are unique with an almost “honeycomb” outer layer of bone and cartilage designed to absorb shock.

They may walk away knowing that, while all bighorn sheep have horns, only the males sport the large, circular adornment, which grows their entire life. Or that it takes at least seven years for a full circle to grow, and the larger the horn, the older the ram.

They can read how mountain lions hunt bighorn and their ability to run straight up steep rock faces and blend in with their natural environment.

In fact, baby sheep can climb as well as their mothers at one day old.

“They have spongy little feet to hop and climb on the rock,” said Aimee Kryl, Loveland’s Colorado Division of Wildlife area ranger.

All these facts and more, along with photos, are on six new educational signs Wednesday. One is at mile marker 83 at the mouth of the canyon just west of the Dam Store. Two more are located at a pullout three miles up, and the final three in the dirt parking lot at Idylwilde Dam.

The Rocky Mountain Bighorn Society, a nonprofit, donated $7,233 to pay for the signs, and the Colorado Division of Wildlife contributed nearly as much for permits and fees. By the end of the year, the division at the dam site to help wildlife lovers spot the sheep on the rocks. (Hint: Look for their white tail ends as their bodies and horns blend in with the landscape.)

“Being a somewhat delicate wild animal, but also being our state animal, we’d like to enhance herd populations and make them more visible,” said Jed Prendergast, board member with the bighorn society.

“This is an opportunity to promote our state animal.