

Bighorn Sheep from the Canyon of Lodore to Whirlpool Canyon

by Lacy Smith

Soon after entering the Gates of Lodore we chanced upon a group of 6 female bighorn sheep. They were at the river's edge, munching on grass and surrounded by tamarisk. Our approaching caravan of rafts scared them off and they proceeded to climb the bank. We were probably more of a concern than an actual threat as they only slightly quickened their pace to distance themselves from us. A few minutes later we passed a group of 3 more females on the edge of the river, but they were much slower to wander up the bank as we came by.

Near our campsite, just past Winnie's Rapid, 2 females and a single young were resting on a ledge formed between the rock a third of the way up the canyon wall. Only their heads were visible as they peered out at the landscape. Upon approach their position and behavior remained relatively unchanged. However, when a fleet of rafts and inflatable kayaks came down the rapid making a commotion they became more alert and backed up a bit. Once the noise passed, they remained undisturbed when people were walking around down below their ledge.

A little later they had ventured down to the bank to browse and perhaps access the water. A group of nearby students working on their own surveys appeared to be non-threatening to the sheep who continued to make their way in the direction of our camp. During this time the young was off on his/her own, but close by to the adults. Eventually the adults headed towards the rocky river edge. The young, left behind, sped up to catch them. Still unconcerned of the people, they wandered around the rocks, and then walked off in the opposite direction of our camp.

A few days later while at a survey site at Sage Creek in Whirlpool Canyon (River Mile 217) a group of 4 male bighorn sheep were slowly making their way upstream, browsing as they went. With one farther downstream and two behind vegetation only one was visible along the bank as I approached. He was not scared off by my presence and as I got closer he began to slowly walk towards me. I kept my distance from them but was not able to observe the other 3 until we left the site and floated down the river passed them. The sight of our rafts did not bother them and they continued on as they had been.



Bighorn sheep: females with an offspring in the Canyon of Lodore (left) and males by the river in Whirlpool Canyon (right). Photos: Lacy Smith (left) and Jeff Mount (right)