

Historic Fourth of July bighorn sheep count postponed after desert hiker's death
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Donald White Jr. knew the drill. The 68-year-old veteran outdoorsman drove down on a Friday night with his wife from their Culver City home to tiny Borrego Springs, at the doorstep of the open desert. He was there to hike in to a remote spot and cache water supplies for volunteers during the venerable and beloved 50th annual Fourth of July volunteer bighorn sheep count.

He and a partner hit the Borrego Palm Canyon trail in Anza-Borrego Desert State Park by 4:30 a.m. on the Saturday before Father's Day, aiming to beat the heat. They hiked up the steep, boulder-strewn gorge about 4 miles and stashed several gallons of water in a shady spot.

Eight hours later White was dead, overcome by 116-degree heat half a mile from the parking lot, after running low on water on the return hike. Days later, the count — the longest running of its kind in the United States — was postponed for this year amid probes into his death, and stoking fears among some attendees that state parks officials will shut the count down permanently.

"Apparently they ran out of water and Don White collapsed," said Mark Jorgensen, longtime retired superintendent of the state park, who was conducting mandatory orientation for numerous first-time sheep counters that day, which included strong warnings on its perils.



A San Diego County medical examiner's report said a passing hiker discovered both men in distress and called 911. Veteran hiker Tony Wilson regained consciousness, but responding paramedics tried unsuccessfully to administer CPR to White.

Wilson and a Borrego Springs firefighter were overcome by the heat and were airlifted out to Palomar Hospital, where they were rehydrated and released. White's death is being investigated by state parks and California Division of Occupational Safety and Health officials.

White's best friend, Don Chamorro, told The Desert Sun that White told him he had been asked to hike the water in by a state park count coordinator with Wilson.

"Don was working, he wasn't just hiking," Chamorro said.

Jorgensen said volunteers like White "are there of their own volition" and sign waivers but are considered employees for state liability purposes.

Parks department spokesman Jorge Moreno told The Desert Sun in an emailed statement that "California State Parks cannot comment on a pending Cal OSHA investigation."

Chamorro said White's wife, Lisa, their daughter, and all who knew him were devastated and bewildered by his sudden death.

"He was truly the most wonderful man. He was like no other person you'll ever meet. I've been crying pretty much nonstop for two weeks," Chamorro said.

He said White was incredibly fit, and that they had done long backpacking trips together, including across parts of the Mojave Desert in 100-degree heat.



The tally is conducted during the hottest, driest time of the year because the reclusive — and endangered — Peninsular bighorn sheep are forced in such weather to come down from the hills to natural watering holes. Small crews of volunteers sit patiently for hours in suffocating heat waiting to spy a ram with its massive, curling horns or a ewe and a lamb. Every sighting is tallied on official logs.

"It is extremely dangerous, the desert demands respect, and if you make slightest mistake, you can die," said Jorgensen.

Fellow hikers remembered White in interviews and on a bighorn sheep count Facebook page as a cheerful trail leader who loved the outdoors, and was always willing to lend a hand when the trail grew tough.

"With a heavy heart I mourn Don White. In 2019 ... I had the extreme pleasure to hike up with and camp that first night with Don," wrote Collette Perry of Pinon Hills. "He was kind, patient and very good-natured. He was very able bodied, strong and competent. He helped the rest of us over the rough spots and ministered to me at one point in the hike when I wasn't feeling well. "

She added, "I am saddened by the loss of this wonderful man and send his family all the strength and love I have for them in this very trying time."

White's death one of three in June

White's death was part of a tough June toll for Anza-Borrego Desert State Park and its environs. Two weeks earlier, another pair of visitors had to be airlifted out of the same canyon due to extreme heat, and one died while in transit, said state parks spokesman Jorge Moreno. A woman died on the Pacific Crest Trail just outside the northwest corner of the park near Anza at the beginning of the month.

On June 26, as nearly 100 volunteers finalized plans for stays in hotels, Airbnbs and campsites, parks officials pulled the plug on this year's count.

In an email, officials wrote, "Dear Bighorn Sheep Counters, The Colorado Desert District of California State Parks regrets to inform you: In light of heat-related tragedies which occurred over the last few weeks and the forecast of extreme heat warnings for the coming week, California State Parks has made the decision to cancel the Colorado Desert District: Anza-Borrego Desert State Park Citizen Science Bighorn Sheep Count this year."

Parks officials also have initiated a review of the citizen science program and district training protocols "in an effort to enhance safety measures for both employees and

volunteers. The goal of the review is to provide an improved program with additional tools to maintain a safe environment for all in the coming years."



The cancellation stung Jorgensen and others, who said the count, which draws scores of people from across Southern California and other states, did not need to be postponed. They fretted online and in phone conversations that it could be the beginning of the end for the half-century old event.

"I have about a 50-50 percent concern that the bureaucracy will see fit to just cancel it permanently," Jorgensen said. He said it was the first fatality ever connected to the event, though over the decades, he recalled, one hiker had hurt their shoulder and another had hurt an ankle. "I don't see anybody in California state parks willing to take any kinds of risks anymore."

Parks spokesman Moreno said in an email, "No, State Parks will not be ending the Anza Borrego Citizen Bighorn Sheep Program.

"California State Parks understands the frustration of its volunteers and (former) superintendent Mark Jorgensen, and wants them to know that we carefully weighed options prior to canceling this year's event," Moreno wrote. "It is in the best interest of all to review and update this important program so that it may continue in the future. We look forward to their continued support."

Hours on some of the park's most popular trails have also been curtailed, with Hellhole Canyon, the Slot and Borrego Palm Canyon now closed until further notice "due to extreme heat conditions," according to the park's website.

Those trails had only been open from sunrise until 11 a.m. before White's death. Jim Dice of UC Irvine's Steel Burnand Desert Research Center said White and Wilson may have known they were supposed to be back by 11 that day and pushed hard in triple-digit temperatures to try to make it. White was also a dedicated member of the center's Swainson's hawk migration program, and he and his wife were staying at the research center. She went to the park trailhead after he didn't return as expected. The next day, Father's Day, his daughter and son-in-law helped his wife collect his belongings and head home.

Long-running record

Jorgensen, a longtime bighorn researcher, said if the count is just one year off, it would "just be a blip in the data."

"We have 48 years of consistent data and ... it certainly shows long-term trends," he said. In particular, it allows scientists to see how many lambs have been born in a given season, and a year later, how many have survived. There are other bighorn counts in the

Sierra Nevada, San Geronio National Forest and elsewhere. The Bighorn Institute, based in Palm Desert, has a volunteer count scheduled July 21 and 22 that is full, and volunteers will have "plenty of water and shade and communication ... throughout the count," said associate director Aimee Byard.

But the Anza Borrego Independence Day weekend event is the oldest of them all, said Jorgensen.

Bighorn habitat has shrunk and been fragmented due to development and roads, and domestic sheep and goats grazing on the same lands at times have transmitted deadly diseases to which the wild bighorn are not adapted. The decimated coastal desert population was declared endangered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1988, and it has recovered somewhat.

"With the Fish & Wildlife service doing fewer counts these days than in previous years, it's up to organizations like ours to collect these data," said Mike Rivkin of the Bighorn Institute. "Without them, management simply becomes a patchwork of guesses."

The count also educates volunteers about the animal and its environs, Jorgensen said, turning them into ambassadors and advocates for the reclusive ungulates. He fell in love with them at age 11, when on a Boy Scout trip to the desert, he saw a park ranger plunk down a massive skull with curled horns.

"That was it for me for life," he said.

Perennial bighorn counters Callie Mack and Phil Rouillard explained the peculiar thrill of camping in triple-digit heat and staking out sheep on the Anza Borrego Foundation website.

"The chance to observe desert bighorn sheep for hours at a time is well worth any discomfort — and the entire experience is a welcome escape from the outside world," they wrote.

We set up our spotting scope and then take out binoculars, notebook, trail mix and potato chips. ... It's 95°, then 102°, then 110° F. Distant boulders, ocotillos and agave stalks on the ridgelines are momentarily mistaken for our elusive sheep. We sweat copiously, drink lots of water, discuss world affairs and trade bad jokes ... We grow a little drowsy in the heat. One of us stretches out for a nap or opens a book while the others keep watch. The only sound now is the song of the cicadas.

Then someone hisses, "Sheep!"

That single word galvanizes the counters as if an electrical charge has raced through us. All the heat and drowsiness and the hard rocks numbing our rear ends are forgotten as we scramble to carefully observe the bighorn, identifying the animals by sex and age, checking for radio collars and numbered ear tags, and recording what we've seen in as much detail as possible.

We're all energized by the same thrill as we watch these magnificent creatures moving with skill and grace over the rocks, apparently mindless of the brutal heat, so beautifully adapted to this environment. It's why we return, year after year."

The count, begun in 1970, was partially curtailed in 2020 due to COVID-19, and plans for a big 50th anniversary celebration were put off until this year. A huge dinner was planned for Saturday at Carmelita's Mexican restaurant in Borrego Springs, which like other restaurants and area businesses, relies on the holiday count visitors for off-season revenues.

Instead of the joyous dinner, a grief counseling session was held for parks employees at UC Irvine's research center on Friday.



Chris Carlson, 57, of San Diego was part of the "Fourth Grove" crew with White during the 2019 count. White worked in Los Angeles real estate, he said, and loved to escape urban stresses in the desert. He said White personified generosity, shouldering one volunteer's backpack as well as his own when she couldn't carry it any longer.

"He'd drop his pack off, go back and schlep hers up a ways, and then go back and get his. He did that several times. I thought, 'man, that dude's in shape.' It's just so sad. He was in good shape and he knew what he was doing."

Carlson also recalled White happily gazing at the desert night sky after a long, hot day of counting sheep.

"He was fantastic. We'd sit out in the dark, and his knowledge of the stars was extraordinary," recalled Carlson. "He told us to get out our binoculars to look at the constellations ... I'd never thought to use my binoculars to look at the stars. That's something he taught me that I'll never forget."

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