

Wyoming: Desert Basins

SHEEP MOUNTAIN
 LAND EXCHANGE
*Trade Secures Public Access and
 Winter Range for Wildlife*



A major wildlife corridor runs between the Shoshone National Forest and Sheep Mountain. © Randy Craft/TNC



The Bales family has been ranching on Sheep Mountain for more than a generation and wants to see it protected. © Bales Ranch

“Sheep Mountain is the most interesting and beautiful place,” says Patricia Bales. “I’m thankful that this land that had been in my family for so long is still isolated and wild.” For more than a generation, Bales’ family owned much of the private land on Sheep Mountain. Now an innovative land exchange provides a chance to protect its wildness for more generations to come.

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–Patricia Bales,
 Sheep Mountain Rancher

Critical Winter Range

West of Cody, Sheep Mountain sits wedged between the north and the south forks of the Shoshone River. The mountain’s open, grassy meadows harbor crucial elk and mule deer winter range, particularly in deep snow years, and are

occupied grizzly range. Many of the elk that winter in this area are part of migratory herds that summer as far away as Yellowstone National Park.

“The area is one of the major ungulate winter ranges for the Cody elk herd,” says John Emmerich, Wyoming Game and Fish Department Deputy Director. “With potential land trades and conservation easements to protect this area from future development and to set aside more winter forage, this area will be

of utmost importance in maintaining big game herds in future years.”

In Sheep Mountain’s shadows stand limestone cliffs where you can find both nesting raptors and a collection of rare and endemic plants. The mountain’s

conservation profile

- major habitat type** Desert Basins
- ecoregion** Wyoming Basins
- project size** more than 4,000 acres
- threats** fragmentation from rural residential development
- partners** Bureau of Land Management (BLM); Wyoming Game and Fish Department; Two Dot Ranch; Breteche Creek Ranch; additional landowners

many caves offer stories of the past, including a woven juniper net found covered in a packrat midden. The net dates to the Paleoindians of almost 9,000 years ago and is thought to have been used to trap mountain sheep.

The top of Sheep Mountain is a large block of private land surrounded by Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land. For many years the Bales family owned the majority of private lands and generously made them available to the public for recreation, hunting, hiking and horseback riding. In 1999, two private individuals purchased the deeded acres on Sheep Mountain from the Bales family, with the intention of trading them to the BLM for other property.

But the new landowners soon realized the process was far more complicated and time consuming than they expected. In August 2000, the Conservancy purchased 1,828 deeded acres on Sheep Mountain with the intention of exchanging them to the BLM.

What the Conservancy is Doing

Today, the Conservancy is proposing to transfer the land on Sheep Mountain to the BLM in exchange for an equal value of BLM parcels mostly located in the Stonebridge Reservoir area west of Sheep Mountain. Other BLM lands in the Two Dot Ranch, Polecat Bench and Meeteetse areas have also been added to the exchange.

The Nature Conservancy will transfer these BLM parcels to private landowners, protecting certain parcels with total non-development conservation easements.

Without the exchange, the picture of conservation on Sheep Mountain doesn't look as bright: the Conservancy might



The Breteche Creek Ranch serves as an important migratory corridor for elk and mule deer. © Randy Craft/TNC

be forced to sell Sheep Mountain to a private buyer who could protect wildlife habitat, but deny public access to the mountain for hunting, horseback riding and hiking. In addition, the Bales family might lose Sheep Mountain as a major portion of their family-run grazing operation.

"It just makes sense for the BLM to manage the land on Sheep Mountain," says Patricia Bales. "I would much rather the BLM have it than some private party that would build a big road up there and destroy the views. A large percentage of wildlife live on private lands—they don't fare well on subdivisions. And [exchanging the lands to the BLM] will ultimately help our ranching operation stay alive."

"There are many winners here – wildlife, ranching, conservation and public access," says Laura Bell, Director of The Nature Conservancy's Northwest

Program. "The Conservancy has worked hard to come up with a proposal that both generously enhances the public holdings while supporting the needs and interests of the local community."

Benefits of the Proposed Exchange

- Provides the public with permanent access to Sheep Mountain for hunting, hiking and horseback riding.
- Allows better public access to Bald Ridge BLM and US Forest Service lands as well as fishing access to portions of Luce Reservoir in the Two Dot Ranch area.
- Helps to protect major wildlife corridor from Shoshone Forest out to Sheep Mountain's critical elk winter range.
- Maintains large blocks of North Fork land in agricultural status.
- Ensures Sheep Mountain remains available to the Bales Ranch family-run operation.
- Supports no net loss of county tax base.
- Ensures that the Stonebridge parcel's critical winter range will not be developed.



Sheep Mountain provides important winter habitat for elk, especially in winters with heavy snow depths. © John Morrow II

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