

Creature of Controversy:

The Persian Ibex

Spring Canyon, Watchable Wildlife Site 76

Strangers in a strange land. Foreigners from the other side of the world.

Both statements aptly describe the Persian ibex, a wild goat brought to New Mexico from Iran three decades ago.

In 1970, the Department of Game and Fish released 15 Persian ibex in the Florida Range near Deming as a welcomed wildlife guest and big game species. Today, the guest is firmly ensconced in its new home. But is it still welcomed? Ask 10 different people, and you'll get 10 different answers. Some affirm the Persian ibex as an attractive species, innocently and successfully occupying an unfilled niche. Others protest that it's an ugly, noxious interloper, competing against native species, no longer welcome here. Under certain circumstances, both statements may be true. Meanwhile, this tenacious, adaptable creature is here to stay -- for now -- in the Florida Range.

Spring Canyon

Human access to the rugged Floridas is difficult. The mountains rise abruptly 2,800 vertical feet -- forbidding islands above a sea of sand and mesquite. Primarily Precambrian rock, the Floridas are ten miles long by five miles wide. From a distance, the peaks seem barren; up close, they're anything but. As you approach, you'll begin to see splashes of green against the brown: Upper Sonoran vegetation including sotol (desert spoon), yucca, prickly pear and barrel cactus, ocotillo, creosote bush, juniper, scrub oak, and hackberry.

Visitors can best glimpse the beauty of this area from 80-acre Spring Canyon Picnic Area, a part of Rock Hound State Park, 12 miles southeast of Deming. Scattered about on the slopes are semiprecious gem stones, for which Rock Hound State Park was named and established. To access a mountain hiking trail, head for the last picnic table on your right as you face the entrance.

Watching for Ibex

As a wildlife watcher, will you be able to spot one of the 350 Persian ibex living in this area? Hard to say. A Persian ibex can jump several times its own height, walk across sheer cliffs, and spot movement from a half mile away. Still, ibex are occasionally glimpsed by visitors. Stealth, camouflage, and patience are the watch-words for spotting a Persian ibex.

Also known as the bezoar goat, Persian wild goat, Iranian ibex, or Pasang, the Persian ibex (*Capra aegagrus*) is a distant, exotic relative of the domestic goat. It's one of five ibex species found from Spain east to India and north to Siberia. This small, short-legged goat stands about 30 inches at the shoulder, with hind quarters noticeably higher than its front. Adult females tip the scales around 90 pounds, males up to 150 pounds. With their amazing high-jumps where predators can't follow, excellent eyesight, and herding instinct, they're a hard critter to hunt, whether by camera, binoculars, or a gun. Truly, they can go anywhere, anytime they so desire. This is because their hooves have a soft inner pocket surrounded by hard outer ring; this helps them cling to nearly any rock surface, much like suction cups on a rubber bath-mat.

Like most goats, Persian ibex will feed on almost anything. In winter, they prefer mountain mahogany, oak, and Wright's silk tassel. Spring and summer, they feed on grasses and forbs, even attempting to pluck leaves from deciduous trees. Some ibex have been seen munching away on prickly pear and cholla cactus.

Mating Season

Both male and female Persian ibex have horns. While female horns are modest nine-inch prongs, the males truly wear a crowning glory. Thirty inches of knife-blade horn, one on each side, sweep back from the adult male's forehead, curving in perfect arcs.

In summer, ibex coats are a soft, dusty brown to blend with rocks. Like all goats, the male Persian ibex has a 'billy-goat beard' extending from its lower jaw. However, as winter and the rut approaches, males undergo a handsome transformation into their breeding coloration. Their nondescript coats turn a rich, chocolate brown. Their belly fur assumes the color of light cream. Markings on their legs darken and deepen. A blackish-brown 'cross' appears, shoulder to shoulder, down the back and over the face. Billy beards and tails turn jet black. Adult males begin to exude the intoxicating odor of musk (intoxicating to female ibex, anyway). Such allure does not go unrewarded, and strong, aggressive males quickly gather harems of 10-15 receptive females.

Fierce fights often break out among males. Canny males will attempt to gain an advantage by circling uphill of their adversary. Rearing on hind legs, the uphill male plunges down onto his front feet as, at the same time, he strikes forward with his horns. The resounding crack of horn on horn can be heard for miles. The downhill male braces himself and stalwartly meets blows head on. After several such bouts, the defeated male (generally whichever animal is smaller or weaker) leaves the area.

Extended Harems

From about Thanksgiving through New Year's Day, ibex breeding season is in full sway. With the amount of energy expended during the rut, ibex males grow thin during winter. By spring, they're frequently emaciated as they wait for the new growth of spring grasses and forbs.

Adult males and their harems stay together until early spring. Certain "nonparticipants" are also allowed to join the group: females too young for breeding and yearling males. Older males, aged two and three, are not invited. Their incipient maturity is too threatening for comfort, and they're chased away by the adult harem male. These rejected ones remain apart but continue to follow the group at a respectful distance. When the rut ends, the separate harems merge, and groups come together peaceably.

Newborn Kids

In May, pregnant females go off among steep cliffs and rocky outcrops to bear their young alone. Most Persian ibex bear twins, sometimes triplets. Many newborn kids succumb to illness brought on by cold, wet weather. Others fall prey to mountain lions, bobcats, golden eagles, and other factors.

After initial infant mortalities, the number of females with kids is only 30-40% of adult females who gave birth that season. When the kids are able to travel a few days after birth, females with youngsters join together in nursery bands. The kids play together like . . . well, like kids. Playing tag, chasing one another cross rocks, exploring new terrain.

When summer temperatures soar above 100 degrees (common in the Floridas), females and kids tend to stay near watering holes. Although the Floridas are considered a true desert mountain range, it does have several springs along its base and several seeps higher up that are frequented by ibex and other wildlife.

Exotic Release

Persian ibex were released in Floridas during a time when the Department of Game and Fish was implementing an exotic big game program. (The Department is no longer bringing in exotics or espousing release of exotic species within the state.) The Florida Range was selected for a release site because of its isolation and lack of resident, native, big game species. The terrain of the Floridas is much like that of the Iranian mountains, only dryer, with higher summer temperatures.

The Department released 15 Persian ibex by helicopter on Dec. 8, 1970. A short time later, an additional 27 were released. On January 4, 1974, the first hunt of Persian ibex was opened to the public. Since then, the Persian ibex population has fluctuated between 300-800.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the agency responsible for managing the Florida Range, has determined 400 to be the optimum number of ibex the mountains should support. The Department has conducted aerial surveys of the Persian ibex every year since 1972 (with the exception of 1975, 1978, 1993, and 1994.) Thus far, ibex are staying put in the Floridas, not venturing out -- yet -- across the plains to other ranges. One to two designated hunts per year help keep ibex population numbers in check.

In the Works

What is the fate and future of the Persian ibex in New Mexico?

No one knows for sure. The process of formulating and implementing a management plan is still in the works. This month, the Department is scheduled to disseminate an Ibex Questionnaire to the BLM and other interested persons and agencies, requesting input for the development of a comprehensive ibex management plan. For more information about this questionnaire, contact Pat Synder at the Las Cruces Area Office, (505)522-9796.

Other Wildlife

If you don't spot any of the elusive ibex at Spring Canyon, don't give up yet. You're bound to see other wildlife species. Spring Canyon is a great spot for birding. There's especially good summer viewing of hummingbirds, including the rufous, broad-tailed, and black-chinned. There's year-round viewing of mule deer, coyote, scaled and Gambel's quail, mourning dove, javelina, rattlesnake, rock squirrel, occasional nocturnal viewing of ring-tail and bats; good viewing of golden eagles and other raptors, spring-fall. Best viewing for most wildlife occurs April-November. Spring and fall afford most comfortable temperatures for wildlife viewing. Warning: summer temperatures can be merciless. Bring plenty of water and a hat any season of the year.

Directions

Spring Canyon is a developed day-use site with restrooms, picnic tables, paved access, and parking. Park your vehicle and walk up the mountain toward cliffs. A hiking trail starts at the furthest picnic table on your right.

From Deming, go south on NM 11 four miles to the junction of NM 141. Turn left (east) and continue 8 miles to the junction of NM198. Follow signs to the junction to Spring Canyon State Park (a division of Rock Hound State Park) and go three-quarter-mile to the entrance. Day use only, 8am-5pm. Park is open Wednesday-through-Sunday only, spring, summer, and fall. Parking lot closed in winter; however, walk-in access is still easily available from the road. For more information, contact New Mexico Park and Recreation Division, Spring Canyon State Park, (505) 546-6182.