



Mountain Goat

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I can remember seeing these large white goats on the high cliffs in American Fork Canyon which is located a few miles from my hometown of Pleasant Grove, Utah. At the time, I was not sure what they were called but I have finally got around to doing some research on this magnificent animal.

The following picture was taken on Mount Timpanogos overlooking Utah Lake.



Species Information

The Mountain Goat, also called the Rocky Mountain Goat, is not a true goat—but despite their unusual appearance and behavior, they are close relatives of the antelope, sheep, and true goats. These mammals are more properly known as goat-antelopes (species tribe Rupicaprini of the Bovidae Family).



Physical Characteristics

Males and females look about the same. The males, known as a billies, are slightly larger than the females, called nannies. Baby mountain goats are called kids. The billies tend to spend a lot of time alone, while nannies live in small groups with the kids. A group of mountain goats is called a band.

Here are some characteristics shared by both males and females:

- **Both have slender black horns (6 to 11 inches in length)**
- **Both have short tails (4 to 8 inches in length)**
- **Both grow "beards" on their chins as they grow older**
- **Both have large, powerful shoulders that help them climb**

Overall Size

Mountain goats are about three and a half feet (about 42 inches) tall at the shoulder, and weigh between 125 and 250 pounds. The billy (male) usually weighs considerably

more (averaging about 225 pounds) than the nanny (female) that average about 155 pounds. The head-and-body length ranges from 46 to 70 inches.

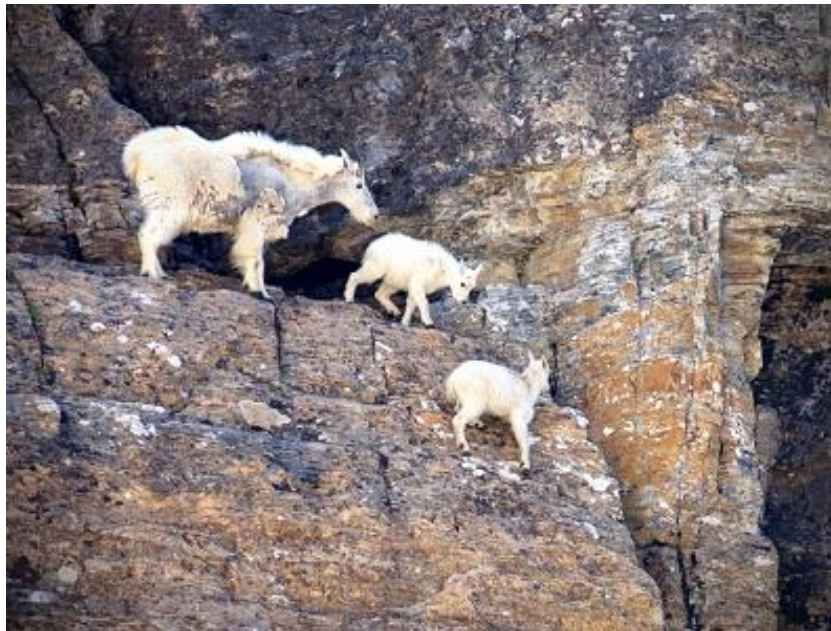
Horns

Mountain goats have slender, pointed horns that extend up and away from their long, narrow faces. Goat horns grow continuously and are never shed, unlike the antlers of elk, deer and moose. The Mountain goat's yearly growth rings on its horns tell us the age of a goat like the rings of a tree do.

Unlike true goats, mountain goats do not butt heads but instead stab each other with their horns. Since the horns can cause severe injury, mountain goats are highly reluctant to fight. Nevertheless, males grow a very thick skin as a body armour against attacks by rival males or females.

Coat

Mountain goats don't have to worry about the cold. During the winter, two layers of fur keep them warm. The fur close to their bodies is like the soft wool of a sheep; it provides a base layer of insulation. Long thick hairs, called guard hairs, cover over the woolly fur. Guard hairs protect the goat's body from wind, rain, and snow. These features help the goat to handle the bitter cold weather of the mountainous places they call home. Their coats help them to withstand winter temperatures as low as -50°F (-46°C) and winds of up to 100 mph.



Nanny (shedding winter coat) with her two kids

By late spring, mountain goats start to shed their winter coats. Their heavy fur comes off in chunks, making them look shaggy. They will rub against bushes and trees leaving behind chunks of fluffy balls of fur.

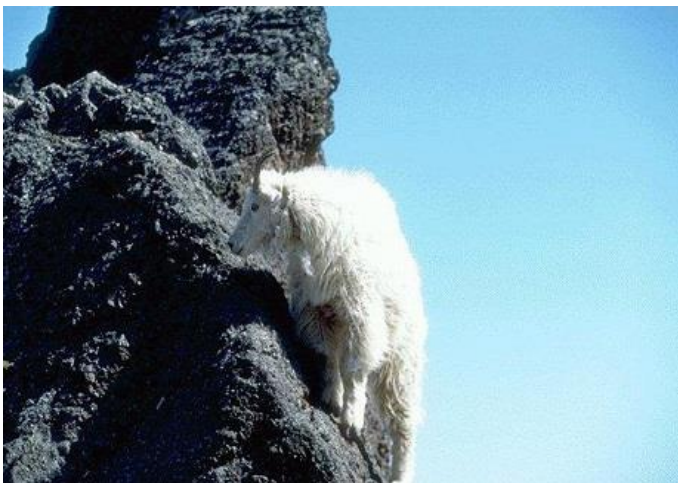
Although mountain goats have never been domesticated and commercialized for their wool, Indians living along the Pacific Northwest Coast did incorporate their wool into their weaving by collecting spring mottled wool left by wild goats and sheep.

Feet and Toes

The mountain goat's feet are well-suited for climbing steep, rocky slopes with pitches exceeding 60°, with inner pads that provide traction and cloven hooves that can spread apart. The tips of their feet have sharp dewclaws that keep them from slipping.

The hoof on each foot of a mountain goat has a hard outer shell and a rubbery, concave footpad which acts like a suction cup when weight is applied. Goat toes spread when they step. This feature helps goats get around in the mountain environment with ease and agility. The goat's foot design gives the track a square shape with a V in front. They tend to drag their feet, creating a trough between prints. This is especially obvious when they leave tracks in the snow.

Short, sturdy legs and a heavy-set body also aid goats in agility and balance. Mountain goats have been known to leap 12 feet from one ledge to another, and turn around in spaces that are only inches wide. Mountain goats can also pull themselves up from ledge to ledge with just their front feet. One false step in this terrain can mean a broken leg, or even death, so sure footing is a must. They are agile, methodical climbers, adapted to the insecure footing of snow-covered and icy cliffs, where predators are afraid to follow.



Lifespan

Both males and females continue to gain body mass until about 6 years old when they are considered fully grown. The life span of mountain goats is typically 11-15 years old for males and 14-18 years old for females

Range

Mountain goats are native to North America where they live in the United States and Canada. Mountain goats can be found from Alaska, to the Yukon, to Utah, but most mountain goats are found in British Columbia, Canada. They can also be found in Idaho, Wyoming, Nevada, Oregon, Colorado, South Dakota, and Washington.



These surefooted beasts inhabit many of North America's most spectacular alpine environments. They often appear at precipitous heights, from Alaska to the U.S. Rocky Mountains, showcasing climbing abilities that leave other animals, including humans, far below.

Mountain goats are the largest mammals found in their high-altitude habitats, which can exceed elevations of 13,000 feet. A mountain goat's choice of habitat makes it especially unique. A goat lives in locations where many other big game animals cannot survive. Not only do goats live in what we would consider a hostile environment, but they stay there year around. Unlike other animals that migrate to lower land or hibernate to survive in the winter, mountain goats do not leave their "comfortable" homes.

Population

There are an estimated 100,000 Mountain Goats in North America. There are more than 2,000 mountain goats in Utah.

Diet

The eating habits of mountain goats vary throughout the year. Their diet is made up mainly of grasses, woody plants, mosses, lichen and other vegetation. The goats also seem to be drawn to salt licks, although there is no evidence that salt is a required mineral for them; they just seem to like the taste!

Predators

Mountain goats do not have a lot of predators. They live in areas that make it difficult for any predators to go chasing them up a steep cliff. The most common predator is the mountain lion (also called a cougar by some people). It is powerful enough to overwhelm the adult goat and is uniquely nimble enough to navigate some of the steep rocky terrain of the goats. Golden eagles will occasionally snatch up a kid.



Some people hunt mountain goats for their meat and for trophies but most mountain goats will survive because they are hard to get close to. They are more likely to suffer death due to falls, avalanches, old age, or sometimes lack of food.

Mating and Family Life

Mountain goats reach sexual maturity at about 30 months. They mate in late November and December. After the mating season, females may drive the males off their wintering ranges. A single kid (rarely two) is born in late spring after about 180 days. Kids can stand up and walk soon after birth and grow quickly. Although a kid's first taste of food comes from drinking their mother's milk, they begin eating plants in just a few days. These plants become their entire diet after about one month. Adult female mountain goats are very protective mothers. In winter, females with young may become territorial and lay claim to an area of favorable cliff habitat. They then chase all other goats from their territories and readily attack hesitating males. Females are more likely to fight than males.

The nannies teach their kids all they need to know to live in the mountain habitat. The kids learn from each other as well. They play by pushing and wrestling. Once they grow horns they make less contact with one another, probably to avoid injuries. Kids leave their mothers when they are about one year old.



Kids Playing

Female mountain goats spend much of the year in herds with their young kids. These groups may include as many as 20 animals. Males usually live alone or with one or two other male goats.



The Order of Goats

Each mountain goat has a rank. Rank determines who gets the best sleeping and feeding spots and who gets to use the salt licks first. Usually the larger nannies are at the top of the ranking order. The kids rank the same as their mothers. If a billy goat happens to be around, he ranks the lowest of all, except during mating season.

Last two pictures show these expert climbers scaling almost vertical cliffs.



Well, I learned a lot about those big white goats I used to see up on the cliffs in mountains of northern Utah. I hope you did to too.

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