

# Mountain Shoshone: The Sheep Eaters

A slide presentation by

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Several thousand years ago the Mountain Shoshone also known as the Sheep Eaters moved into the mountains of northwestern Wyoming, the surrounding areas of Idaho, and into the area now known as Yellowstone National Park. It is believed that they migrated from the Great Basin, an area located between California and Nevada.

## Slide One:

The Absaroka Mountains located in northwestern Wyoming

## Slide Two:

The Teton Mountain Range located in northwestern Wyoming

## Slide Three:

The Wind River Mountain Range located in northwestern Wyoming

## Slide Four:

Yellowstone National Park in northwestern Wyoming

## Slide Five:

Fresh water was of utmost importance to the Sheep Eaters, and there was an abundance of it in the mountains and valleys where they lived.

## Slide Six:

The Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep were the main food source of the Sheep Eaters and were abundant during the time that these intelligent people inhabited the northwestern area of Wyoming.

Mountain building was responsible for the minerals found in the mountain home of the Sheep Eaters. The rocks of the mountains provided the Sheep Eaters with the minerals they needed for the making of tools, cooking utensils, paint, and other materials.

Slide Seven:

Steatite also known as Talc is a mineral formed through the process called metamorphism. Evidence of Steatite quarries has been found in the Wind River Mountains, and bowls and other utensils were made by the Sheep Eaters from this Steatite.

Slide Eight:

Obsidian or “volcanic glass” was another mineral used extensively by the Sheep Eaters in the making of tools such as arrow points, spear points, and knives. This obsidian is found today in Yellowstone National Park from a site known as Obsidian Cliff.

Slide Nine:

Knives made from Obsidian with horn and bone handles.

Slide Ten:

Minerals also determined the type of plants that would grow in a certain area, and the Sheep Eaters relied on these plants for a major part of their diet.

Uplifting of the mountain country of the Sheep Eaters occurred many times in the geologic history of the area. A long cold period of glaciations during the last ice age was the type of erosion responsible for much of the landscape as we see it today.

Slide Eleven:

This glacier in the Teton Mountains called Schoolroom Glacier is typical of an alpine glacier.

Slide Twelve:

Glacial moraine is formed by the movement of glaciers and as rich in minerals as seen by the vegetation growing in this area.

All groups of the Shoshone were extremely sensitive to the delicate balance between the land, the animals, and the people that shared their environment. The hunting techniques used by the sheep Eaters utilized many of the natural resources available to them. They used nets to capture animals including fish, birds, and even the Bighorn Sheep. Jumps and squeezes using natural

land formations were also widely used. In their earlier history, the Sheep Eaters utilized a hunting tool called the atlatl.

Slide Thirteen:

Dr. Larry Loendorf, Archaeologist, demonstrates the modern version of the atlatl.

Perhaps the most innovative and unique of the Sheep Eater hunting techniques was the use of sheep traps. These traps were constructed of large pieces of logs, tree trunks, rocks, brush and any other material native to the area in which the Sheep Eaters lived. The Sheep Eaters knew routes the Bighorn Sheep traveled, and they strategically placed their traps along what they observed to be migration and escape routes. Many of the sheep traps used by the Sheep Eaters may still be found in the mountain ranges near Dubois, Wyoming.

Slide Fourteen:

The sheep trap usually consisted of a long driveline used to “funnel” the Bighorn Sheep into a catch pen.

Slide Fifteen:

The Bighorn Sheep were “herded” up a ramp and into the catch pen.

Slide Sixteen:

Hunting pits were also utilized in rocky areas such as those found in the Absaroka Mountains near Dubois, Wyoming. Dr. Larry Loendorf, Archaeologist demonstrates the use of a hunting pit.

Slide Seventeen:

The Sheep Eaters high quality hunting bows were long lasting, powerful tools made from the horns of the Bighorn Sheep through a time-consuming and difficult process.

Slide Eighteen:

Tom Lucas of Lander, Wyoming has been able to develop a process by which he can make replicas of the Bighorn Sheep Bow. Tom begins the process by first soaking the two horns. The Sheep Eaters may have used hot springs or geysers to soak the horns.

Slide Nineteen:

Once the horns have been soaked, they are ready to be straightened.

Slide Twenty:

Next, Tom uses modern-day clamps to hold the horns straight until they are dry enough to hold the straightened shape. The Sheep Eaters may have used tree limbs tied with rawhide to hold the horn sections straight until they dried in 7 to 10 days.

Slide Twenty-one:

Once straightened the horns were then shaved. The shavings were saved to be used later as natural glue.

Slide Twenty-two:

The two horns were then fitted together in a tongue and groove fashion. Smaller pieces of horn were placed above and below the joint then glued with the natural glue from the shavings and bound with sinew.

Slide Twenty three:

Sinew was soaked in the natural glue made from the shaving process and used to “back the bow”.

Slide Twenty-four:

Bighorn Sheep bow and arrows crafted by Tom Lucas.

Slide Twenty-five:

The Sheep Eaters were also known for their craftsmanship in the making of tailored clothing from the tanned hides of the Bighorn Sheep and other large animals such as the deer. Trappers and other North American Indians considered this clothing to be some of the best made at that time.

Although the Bighorn Sheep were a major source of food, clothing and tools for the Sheep Eaters, vegetation also played a large role in their diet and migration patterns.

Slide Twenty-six:

The Oregon Grape might have been used for the yellow dye made from its bark as well as a food source.

Slide Twenty-seven:

Most of the edible plants were root vegetables such as camas, biscuit root, sego lily, and this spring beauty. The starchy, potato-like bulbs of the spring beauty are toxic unless cooked.

Slide Twenty-eight:

This yarrow was one of many plants used for medicinal purposes.

Slide Twenty-nine:

The Sheep Eaters practiced “seasonal transhumance” in order to stay close to their food sources and to take advantage of the various climates. In the winter they stayed in the lower mountain valleys such as the Wind River Valley.

Slide Thirty:

As the seasons changed the Sheep Eaters would migrate with the animals to the highest mountain elevations in the summer.

Because they followed their food sources, the need for permanent housing was not a priority of the Sheep Eaters. Often they utilized the natural shelters in their locale such as cliff overhangs or caves which could be sealed or closed with either brush or hides.

Slide Thirty-one:

The Sheep Eaters constructed structures known as wickiups for more secure winter homes while in the lower elevations. These wickiups were made of wooden poles usually covered with tree bark slabs, animal hides, or sheaves of grass tied together.

Slide Thirty-two:

This skull and horns of a Bighorn Sheep placed in the branch of a pine tree may have part of a ritual given in thanksgiving for a “successful hunt”. As the tree grew, the skull and horns were gradually enclosed.

Slide Thirty-three:

Further evidence of the practice of ritual in the life of the Sheep Eater’s might be the petroglyphs left on the rocks in the area they inhabited. This

type of rock art was typically produced by engraving or pecking on soft rock like sandstone with a tool such as antlers or a harder rock.

The Sheep Eaters never adopted the use of the gun or horse and eventually were placed on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming along with the other groups of Shoshones.

In 1882 the renowned medicine man, Togwotee, led the President Chester A. Arthur party from Fort Washakie through Yellowstone National Park. Many other Sheep Eaters became guides because of their extensive knowledge of the Wind river Mountains.

### **Credits**

- ❖ Ron Mamot, Editor and Photographer for the Wind River Rendezvous magazine, gave permission to use the following pictures: leather shirt, wickiup, and pictures of Tom Lucas in the process of making the Bighorn Sheep bow.
- ❖ The Smithsonian Institute gave permission to use the picture of the Sheep Eater family encamped near the head of Medicine Lodge Creek, Idaho in 1871.





