

From: Montana FWP <montanafwp@announcements.mt.gov>
Sent: Monday, September 25, 2023 9:07 AM
To: Ravalli County Commissioners Office
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Montana Outdoors: Do the Right Thing



Montana Outdoors

The magazine of
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Do the Right Thing

Hunters, landowners, and FWP team up to reduce unethical behaviors that threaten public access to private property. by TOM DICKSON

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks says the incident made him sick to his stomach.

In late October 2020, roughly 100 hunters, all with permission to hunt the Black Management Area of a Galt family ranch and adjacent state land near White Sulphur Springs, surrounded a herd of elk and began firing into the herd. Roughly 30 elk died from the shooting spree. Others were injured, injured. "It's shocking to see animals get wounded like that," Galt says, recalling the incident.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks game wardens called in by concerned outdoorsmen handed out six citations, mainly for shooting from a county road. But otherwise, say FWP officials, the "stock shooting" episode, though distasteful and dangerous, was legal or

involved impossible-to-prosecute indications such as killing multiple animals.

The incident was not, however, what most hunters and landowners would consider ethical. Galt told reporters that he and his brother, Ben, were so disgusted by what they called the "demon 'open-up'" that they considered removing the 40,000-plus acres the family had owned in Black Management from the program.

The episode was one of several reported to FWP during the previous five years.

After the Galt property incident, widely covered by Montana newspapers and TV news stations, landowners and hunters asked FWP to "do something" about irresponsible behavior.

The department responded by convening a hunter ethics coalition to promote

ethical hunting. The Bozeman-based media group InlandEye, Montana Stockgrowers Association, Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, Montana Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife, and other hunting, agriculture, and conservation groups all got on board.

"Landowners need hunting as a wildlife management tool, and many are hunters themselves and appreciate the importance of hunting in Montana's heritage," says Kaylee Honeycutt, executive vice president of the Montana Stockgrowers Association and a member of the ethics coalition. "But at some point, certain behaviors become unacceptable."

The coalition developed messages urging ethical hunters to monitor their own risks and report blatant unethical behavior to landowners and law enforcement. Greg Lemons, head of FWP's communication program, says, "Most hunters are ethical and well behaved." Lemons says, "But one bad apple can ruin it for everyone, so the idea with the campaign is that hunters need to police their own risks, for their own good."

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DOGUS AND BUTES

When FWP, landowners, and hunters talk about "unethical" behavior, they mean conduct considered by most people to be dishonorable. Examples include taking shots that could threaten human safety or sound wildlife (like shooting over a horizon or at a bounding deer), actions that damage or defile private or public property (such as leaving or driving off designated ranch roads), or showing disrespect for killed animals (like hunters posing images of themselves sitting on a

dead elk with its tongue hanging out. "An example I see too often is someone leaving cigarette butts or even toilet paper at a Black Management Area parking lot," says Ryan Callaghan, conservation director for Montana and a member of the ethics coalition.

no "ethics wardens" out there enforcing honorably conduct.

Complicating matters is that not everyone agrees on what's ethical. For instance, some people, including some Montana landowners, think any type of hunting, no matter how it's conducted, is unethical.

Even among hunters, the concept is shaded in gray. For instance, shooting a duck on the water is generally considered far less ethical—or "sporting"—than downing a flying duck. But some hunters may consider it okay to shoot a "wing duck" because they know the bird dies immediately, compared to one slipping that may be wounded with a poor shot.

One of the biggest areas of ethical disagreement among hunters is distance shooting. For years, sporting game hunters considered 400 yards as the furthest distance to shoot a big game animal, deer, or elk without undue risk of wounding the target animal.

Technologically sophisticated rifles and scopes, however, now allow skilled shooters to shoot animals at 500, 750, even 1,000 yards. Yet at such vast distances, critics argue, the margin of error is so narrow that a slight wind gust or miscalculation could result in a wounded animal.

FOCUS ON LANDOWNERS

The Galt's 2020 warning sent shivers throughout Montana's hunting and wildlife management communities. If bad hunter behavior leads to landowners locking their gates to public hunting, millions of acres could become off-limits. That would add additional pressure on public lands and remaining accessible private properties, while making it next to impossible for FWP to manage many deer and elk herds.



The worst hunter behavior, such as trespassing or hunting out of season, is also illegal. Game wardens are charged with enforcing these and other laws to protect wildlife populations, public safety, and property. The unethical yet technically legal behavior—like shooting an arrow at an elk merely obscured by brush—is different. There are

that because ethics are so subjective, public agencies are in a bind when asked to discuss right and wrong. "Legal and illegal—yes, FWP can do that because we enforce laws covering licenses, trespassing, bag limits, that type of thing," Lemons says. "But once you enter the realm of legal-but-maybe-unethical behavior, a lot of people believe as government officials it's none of our business."

That's why the coalition focused on dishonorable actions known to upset most landowners, such as leaving closed gates open, driving across fields, shooting near livestock, and knocking on doors before dawn. "Because so many FWP wildlife habitat and hunting access programs concern private land, we decided to make that a priority for our campaign," Lemons says.

The campaign tagline is "It's Up To Us. Respect Access. Protect the Hunt." According to Lemons, the wording is meant to stress the responsibility of all hunters to ensure hunting remains a positive public image. The term Respect Access reminds hunters that hunting on private land is a privilege that requires respecting landowners and their property, he says.

The final phrase—Protect the Hunt—"is the motivator, the reason that hunters need to get involved," Lemons says. "If we don't

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By Tom Dickson

This story is featured in *Montana Outdoors* September-October 2023 issue.

Meagher County landowner Bill Galt says the incident made him “sick to my stomach.”

In late October 2020, roughly 100 hunters, all with permission to hunt the Block Management Area of a Galt family ranch and adjacent state land near White Sulphur Springs, surrounded a herd of elk and began firing into the herd. Roughly 50 elk died from the shooting spree. Dozens more limped away, injured. “It’s sickening to see animals get wounded like that,” Galt says, recalling the incident.

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