

# SECRET SPOTS

## “Swear to me you won’t tell anyone about this place...”



Secret spots may very well be the most treasured thing a Montana hunter or angler owns. These hidden parks, bowls, ridge tops, pools, and points are not just places where we can avoid impertinent creditors, but are part of our very selves, more of an extension of what we are than eye color. Some have even been passed down from generation to generation: “To my shiftless son Rick, who is the finest wingshot I know but also likely to hock anything not bolted down, I leave a section of CRP in Chouteau County where I have killed at least a score of roosters every fall. No, you don’t get the Land Cruiser.”

Of course, some of us seem better at finding secret spots than others. When someone we know comes back with yet another six-point elk, we shrug and say, “He’s got a secret spot somewhere.” As if a secret spot were the equivalent of a tame elk herd. The guy with the elk is likely to pull into town in the opposite direction from where he actually hunted, intimating he shot the bull just out past the Town Pump, and we could too if we only knew how.

Even the most inept among us are likely to have a few secret spots, yielding scads of 10-inch trout and doe mulies, but I once knew a guy who didn’t possess a single one. That was especially strange because he worked as a fisheries biologist for the Bureau of Land Management, which required him to hike around all summer, “testing” little creeks with a spinning rod to see if trout lived there. Actually, it wasn’t strange that he didn’t find any fishing spots, because trout and BLM land are pretty much mutually exclusive. But he didn’t find any hunting areas, either.

Well, no, let me amend that. Chester found secret spots every summer, like X Creek in the Garnet Range, which he said had mule deer sticking out of it “like the ribs on an ol’ pointin’ dog” (Chester originally came from New Mexico and liked to emphasize his southwestern drawl in certain situations). He went back

on opening day and found X Creek to also be the secret mule deer spot of Butte, Montana.

Sometimes Chester shared his “great” secrets—all of which seemed to attract hordes of other hunters—with his friends. This happened often enough in our social circle that one Saturday when my buddy Kirby and I were headed out of town on a float trip, Kirb pointed toward the rows of vehicles in the Southgate Mall parking lot and said, “Look, one of Chester’s secret spots.” Chester finally gave up on Montana and moved back to New Mexico, where he shoots doves, which don’t really have any secret spots.

Actually Chester’s biggest problem was a lack of time, because it took so much of it to find trout on the BLM land that he wasn’t left with much to look for anything else. Which is why X Creek remains X Creek in this narrative: I went back there a couple of years after Chester left and found a little side ridge where the mule deer loaf after all of Butte has passed through. I’d be happy to show it to him if he ever makes it back this way (but not to you).

Because that’s the biggest problem with secret spots: keeping them secret. They come in two basic varieties: those discovered by thought and those that require sweat. The sweat spots are easiest to keep hold of, because if enough sweat is involved, it doesn’t matter if anybody else finds out. I recently met a hunter who has taken four bighorn rams out of the Beartooth Plateau, and he doesn’t give a damn if anybody knows where he goes. This is one of the last areas on the continent where you can just buy a bighorn permit and go out hunting, instead of putting your name in a hat with 20,000 other aspirants. There are, of course, a couple of catches. One is that there’s a quota on the number of rams to be taken in any year, so as soon as the quota’s filled you’re done hunting, even if you haven’t filled your permit. The other is that the country is as steep as the Chrysler Building and has more snow. This guy waits until the snow is crotch



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deep and backpacks in there and camps until he finds the ram he wants. No, don't thank me; you're welcome to it.

The secret spots you figure out need a bit more protection. I still call Chester's area X Creek because I thought for part of it myself, by noting that when most of Butte went up the creek they all went "farther back" into the hills and canyons, driving right by a quarter-section of public timber at the bottom of the drainage, next to a ranch's fence line. In two years I've seen three mule deer and a bull elk in there, enough game for one or two people, which is why my wife and I are the only ones to know about it. In more settled country, people have been known to tail successful hunters out of town, trying to find their spots. One Minnesota bowhunter I know hunts several farms in the southern part of the state and has a hiding place for his vehicle on each one.

That's the saddest aspect of the secret spot these days. Over the past decade or so, it seems that some of the unwritten rules concerning the care and usage of secret hunting and fishing areas are increasingly abused. Perhaps it's the lack of continuity between generations (though this may be a bit of nostalgia on my part), but I think that all those unwritten rules used to be passed along from older hunters and anglers to us younger folks, back in the days when more of us learned about the outdoors from parents and older friends than from the Discovery channel.

Rule One might seem the simplest and

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most cynical of the lot, but it's the basis of the whole structure: If you don't want somebody to know about your secret spot, don't tell them. A secret is something not everybody knows. This rule affects just you and yours, so I don't care if you break it as long as you break it with me. Rule One is usually violated by the younger and less experienced (who quickly learn), but sometimes even older people get reminded. An older writer once told me about how he'd found a good mule deer spot in southwestern Montana and had written an article about the hunt, briefly mentioning the mountain range. The next year he couldn't get a motel room in the one small town close to his mule deer mountains; even then he didn't catch on until he overheard someone talking about the great article so-and-so wrote.

Look, if you have to brag to somebody about some great spot you found, just lie. That's what I do. So if you ever hear me telling someone how I got the big buck up Yellowtail Creek, you can just about bet it was Redhead Gulch. Or someplace else, which is even more likely.

Rule Two: Never prod anybody about their spots. I've been guilty of this, and after getting the sort of answers I give now, finally realized how rude I was.

Example: "Where'd you get your elk?"

Correct Answer: "The Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest." (The Beaverhead-Deerlodge is the size of Connecticut and doesn't have any street signs.)

Rule Three: Never discuss secret spots among friends when in unknown company. A young guy we'll call Durwood recently steered an older friend to a good elk canyon. The older guy got a nice bull, and the next

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time Durwood saw him was at a large company party. Durwood walked up, clapped his friend on the back, and shouted, "Hey, I hear you got a hell of a bull up Eagletop!" No.

Rule Four: Never, ever go back to a secret spot someone's shown you unless they invite you or give permission. If you show someone your secret spot, especially someone you don't know as well as your father, it isn't considered terribly rude to spell this out, just because so many people don't know the rules. My friend Milo has a secret elk and mule deer spot up Rock Creek where he's taken a big four-point mule deer and a six-point elk over the past few years. One fall he took along one of the guys from work, and the next year the guy showed up just down the road with his own camp and four friends. Luckily, Milo's secret spots are almost as notorious as Chester's, except instead of being known as the parking lots they're known as the long hauls. In this case the "friend" from work and his buddies had to cross the creek in the dark (the only thing more slippery than Rock Creek's bottom is a Gulf Coast oil spill) and then climb 2,500 feet over 2 miles. Evidently they didn't find anything that year because they haven't been back.

Rule Five: If you're given permission to return to someone's secret spot, you don't abuse the privilege by inviting other people, littering, or taking more than one or two pheasants, walleyes, or whatever. And you offer to share the bounty with your benefactor.

Rule Six is that if you violate any of the rules except Rule One, you'll never ride beside Teddy Roosevelt across that bully hunting ground in the sky—and in this life you may be missing a few teeth.

If you feel an urge to break Rule One, call me...collect. 🐻