

# LEARNING THE LANGUAGE OF LAND OWNERSHIP

Deciphering descriptions like “Sec. 5&6, T3NR4W” can increase your odds of gaining hunting access.

By DAVID VICKERY



**I CAN'T TELL YOU HOW MANY TIMES** I've heard fellow hunters complain “there's nowhere left to hunt in Montana.” Yes, it seems like more and more private property has been locked up in recent years. But 23 million acres of state and federal land is open to public hunting, along with 8 million acres of private and isolated public land in the Fish, Wildlife & Parks' Block Management Program. What's more, Montana still contains millions of additional acres of private property across the state where hunters can gain access if they obtain landowner permission.

Step one in getting permission is finding out who owns the land you want to hunt. That's not always easy, considering Montana's many out-of-state landowners, tenant ranchers, and the confusing boundaries surrounding some holdings. But it's definitely possible—I've been doing it for years. The key is knowing how to read land ownership maps, which to the unschooled can be imposing documents filled with seemingly indecipherable numbers and codes. Fortunately, learning to read these maps is not that difficult. Here's how it works:

The system of land description for the continental United States (with the exception of the original 13 states and a few others) was adopted as part of the Land Ordinance of 1785. The system divides land by latitude and longitude into 6-mile-square townships. It further divides those townships into 36 sections, each 1 mile by 1 mile square.

Let's say you're driving through central Montana and see some brushy draws between rows of harvested wheat: ideal pheasant habitat. The crops indicate the land is likely privately owned, which means you'll need to ask permission. But from whom?

Find out by visiting the appraiser and assessor's office at the county office building in the county seat. What the clerk will need is a clear legal description. To determine that, you'll need a map with township lines (which run east and west) and range lines (running north and south). Each of the square-mile sections in the township will be numbered from 1 to 36. Let's say the pheasant cover you saw is mostly on sections 5 and 6 of the township. Start with the section number, then add detail to fully identify the land. If the township is 3 North and the range is 3 West, then the legal description would be “Sec. 5&6, T3NR3W.” The clerk will pull the section maps and look up a property identification number and the corresponding landowner's name and mailing address. Phone numbers and e-mail addresses are not provided. If the address is nearby, drive there and ask permission. If it's a post office box, you'll have to write for permission. To find a phone number, try an Internet search.

Sometimes I look for landowners during the hunting season. But usually my search begins in midsummer, after I learn whether I've drawn the antelope or deer permits I'd applied for earlier in the year. Once I know the general areas where I can legally hunt, I

◀ **BUCK THE ODDS** It's not always easy to gain access to private land. Learning who owns the property and how to ask appropriately can improve your chances.

visit or phone the local FWP office and talk to biologists about game animal populations to narrow down my search. Next I consult my Bureau of Land Management maps, which show boundaries of public and private land, and drive to the area to scout around. I look for the type of habitat that holds the game species I'm after. When I find it, I check to see if the land is private.

Of course, just because I have the legal description doesn't mean the landowner will grant me access. But it helps. I've found that many landowners appreciate the effort it takes to research land records and find the proper person to ask. Another value of learning to decipher land ownership maps: You gain confidence when hunting on public land that you

*David Vickery, who lives near Custer, has been obtaining permission to hunt private land for 45 years.*

won't inadvertently trespass on adjacent private property.

A few years ago, I planned a hunt with my two boys, ages eight and nine. I wanted their first big game hunting experience to go smoothly. Once I decided which hunting district to hunt, I scouted and found a location that seemed perfect. Part of it was public land, but there was no legal access, except across a private ranch. After looking at my map and writing out a legal description of the private property, I stopped at the county courthouse. In just a few minutes, I obtained the owner's name and address. I found his name in the local phone book and called. I explained that I was looking for a place to take my two youngsters on their first big game hunt and hoped to gain permission to cross his land to reach the public sections. Like so many Montana ranchers, he was friendly and hospitable. He said we could use his ranch for

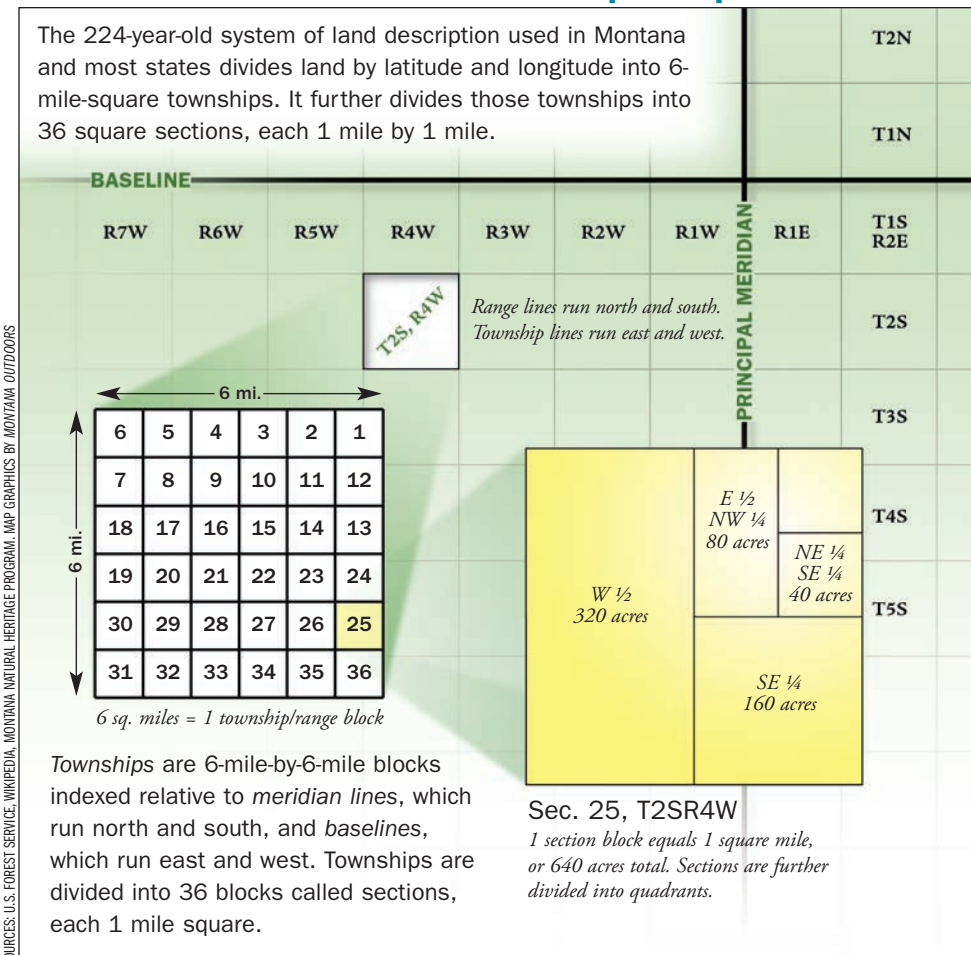
access and even hunt there if we made sure gates were left as we found them and we kept our vehicle on ranch roads. The boys and I had a great hunt.

Most landowners I talk to seem to appreciate being asked in person. And no wonder. Before I would consider opening my land to strangers, I'd want to look them in the eye and size them up in person. But sometimes that's not possible, so you'll need to make a phone call. If you have time and can't reach the landowner any other way, a politely written letter can work.

No matter how I communicate, I always treat landowners with respect and gratitude and present myself as the ethical and respectable hunter I am. Legal property descriptions can help identify who owns a property, but it's ultimately your responsibility to assure landowners you are worthy of their trust and generosity. 🐾

## How to read a land ownership map

The 224-year-old system of land description used in Montana and most states divides land by latitude and longitude into 6-mile-square townships. It further divides those townships into 36 square sections, each 1 mile by 1 mile.



## Montana Public Land Ownership Maps

Another way to locate landowners is through the on-line Montana Private Land Ownership Maps, produced by the Montana Natural Heritage Program. Visit [nris.state.mt.us/gis/ownmaps.asp](http://nris.state.mt.us/gis/ownmaps.asp) and click on the map for the area you want to view, then click on "Private Lands Map." Locate the parcel and look up its number on the "Private Lands List" for the name of the landowner (addresses are not shown).

