

# MULEYS IN PLAIN SIGHT

Finding mule deer in eastern Montana sage and grasslands often means seeing what's right there in front of you. **BY JOHN BARSNESS**



There was nothing over there except an open slope, yet something seemed wrong. Perhaps hunters develop a sense that tells them when game is near—but it was more likely we had noticed a shadow. Ben saw the deer first, as one of its big ears flicked, and then it was running, antlers widespread past those big ears, around the point of the ridge. We each took

a quick shot that did nothing but throw rocks and dirt toward the buck's rear end.

That big muley had been sitting almost in plain sight, behind a thin fringe of scraggly sagebrush. But even from the opposite hillside, a short ways away, we hadn't been able to see him until he moved. What we had seen, what had kept us looking at that apparently empty Montana slope, was the shadow

of his head. It just hadn't seemed right that a shadow could fall across the grama grass without something to make it.

Muleys are often open-country deer. They'll sit contentedly out in sparse cover, brush that barely breaks up their outlines, brush that would make the average white-tail feel downright naked. Mule deer aren't as shy as whitetails, either, which is why

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many hunters consider them “dumb.” It's not uncommon for some mule deer to stop on the ridge, allowing a hunter one last shot, or simply stand still and look at you from short range. When learning to hunt deer as a teenager, I was often advised to shout or whistle after jumping mule deer. Supposedly they'd stop and look back. Sometimes it worked, too.

Several years ago a companion and I stood on a badlands promontory in eastern Montana and watched two “hunters” fire a total of 14 shots at a forkhorn muley they'd jumped from a sage-lined coulee below. They had semiautomatic rifles and extra clips. The deer was only 60 or 70 yards off when they jumped it. The buck bounded across the sage in that peculiar stiff-legged mule deer

bounce, known as “stotting.” Each fellow emptied a clip trying to intercept that bounce. They were in the middle of their second clip when the little buck stopped at the head of a draw a couple of hundred yards away and looked back, standing broadside, to see what the commotion was about. One of them finally calmed down, sat, and killed the deer with a single, final shot.

Young bucks and does still behave this way, but it’s rare to see a decent-sized adult buck stop within range. My theory is that over the years the “ridge standers” were killed off, and natural selection has produced deer that rarely stop and look back.

#### POPULATION DOWNS AND UPS

Montana has seen great changes in its mule deer population since statehood. By the beginning of the 20th century, overharvesting had eliminated the deer from many areas of Montana, write Harold D. Picton and Terry N. Lonner in *Montana’s Wildlife Legacy*. Numbers

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increased rapidly from the 1930s to 1950s as a result of regulated hunting seasons and improvements to range conditions by conservation-minded ranchers. Mule deer soon recolonized the entire state. Numbers declined in the 1970s, likely the result of a natural population fluctuation, quickly rebuilt in the 1980s after reductions in antlerless harvest, then declined again. Today the statewide populations of mule deer and white-tailed deer are roughly equal.

Where their ranges overlap, mule deer seem to prefer country that’s more up and down than the flatter whitetail habitat. Not only does it suit their temperament better—remember, they’re fond of sitting on almost-open hillsides, where they have a view—but such areas are usually less trampled by people.

There’s one coulee in a jumble of rugged breaks in eastern Montana that I’ve hunted over the years. I’ve only seen three deer there, but all were muleys, and that coulee lies in an area almost totally dominated by whitetails. It’s known to some local hunters as “Blacktail Coulee”—“blacktail” is a common nickname for mule deer over much of the West—because it’s one of the few spots in that flat region where mule deer can be

found. In badlands that hold both species, whitetails are almost always down in the river bottoms, leaving the rugged breaks and gumbo buttes to the muleys. One time, in some of the biggest, most rugged badlands I’ve ever been in, I was sneaking up on several bighorn sheep I wanted to photograph. The red sides of those buttes were about as vertical as any non-rock can be, and right in the middle of my stalk I jumped a 3x3 mule deer buck out of a patch of chokecherry near the top of a hill.

Since mule deer are usually found in sparser cover than whitetails, a common method for hunting them on the plains is to use binoculars or a spotting scope. Spot them from a distance, then make a stalk. This is more difficult than it sounds. Unlike pronghorns, which have abundant white areas that make them highly visible from a distance, muleys blend remarkably well into the tan-gray of autumn hills. At that time of year their coats are almost gray, and even deer standing up can be downright invisible. I once hunted with a friend who had never hunted deer before. We came over a ridge, and on the opposite slope 200 yards away were about 20 muleys, standing and feeding slowly in the morning sun. For the next 15 minutes I tried to explain where the deer were.

“Look, you see that two-trunked ponderosa? Look about 30 feet below it and a little left....There’s a big gray rock. A buck is standing just to the right of it....”

When my friend finally shot, he shot the rock.

#### LOOK FOR PARTS

Experienced deer hunters, whether whitetail experts or mule deer sages, will tell you they look for part of a deer. That’s an easy concept to understand when you’re talking about stalking one in thick cover, where most of a deer usually will be covered by branches. But it also applies to spotting mule deer in open country. Part of my friend’s problem was that he was looking for a deer’s body. He should have looked for smaller pieces of the deer. For instance, a muley’s ears are often lighter than the rest of the animal and stick out like a big V against a hillside. They’re moving much of the time, too, flicking in little movements easy to spot once you know

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W. STEVE SHERMAN

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what to look for. The other end of a mule deer is also conspicuous: Any time you see a white circle bisected by a black-tipped line, you know you’re looking at a mule deer rear. Shadows help, like the one thrown by the big buck at the beginning of this article. I’ve occasionally spotted a shadow floating on a hillside when there wasn’t any apparent reason for it, then looked upward to find a mule deer on top of the shadow.

The best times for glassing are morning and evening, because deer are more apt to be moving then, and it’s always easier to spot moving deer than bedded ones. Clear days are best, too, because you may catch a slight glint of sunlight off an antler, and shadows

are more prominent. Overcast days flatten everything out.

Another popular method for mule deer hunting on the plains is to walk coulees. Usually two hunters walk along either side of a brushy draw. Mule deer are much more easily driven from cover than whitetails and will usually leave brush without much coaxing. If you’re after a young deer and don’t care about trophies, this is an excellent method, as the younger deer will often stop for that last—very last—muley look. Big bucks, however, keep moving, and a running mule deer, because of its jackrabbit bounce, is a difficult target. I don’t advise trying to put your crosshairs on a running

deer unless it’s close and you’re well practiced in offhand shooting. I’ve seen far too many deer wounded that way.

#### FINDING THE 30-INCHERS

Truly large mule deer bucks, with a 30-inch or more inside antler spread, are perhaps the most challenging big game animal an open-country hunter can find. Big bucks prefer the most rugged places, the gnarly stretches of badlands and breaks. These huge deer pose many obstacles for the hunter, not the least of which is getting the carcass out. Occasionally you can take a vehicle along the ridgetops in badlands; this is a common hunting method in some areas. Geologically,

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badlands are places that used to be flat but erosion has scoured away the topsoil. In more recently eroded badlands, long “fingers” of sod stretch out into rugged country, offering routes for wheeled hunters (if permissible by the private landowner or public land agency). Unfortunately, increased access pushes big bucks farther back into broken country. If you want a big buck, you’ll still end up walking for miles after you get to the end of four-wheel-drive trails.

Many times I’ve casually sat on an open hillside and glassed a slope for smaller mule deer. The hunter who tries such a tactic on big bucks will end up with no meat in the freezer and no antlers on the wall. Big mule deer bucks need three basic things: a vantage point where they can rest unbothered (usually with at least two escape routes), nearby water, and nearby food. Rough-country bucks will often choose a patch of juniper or other small trees on the ridge point between two big coulees as their resting spot. Those animals are extremely difficult to approach. They’re also nervous about

being seen—even from a distance. A younger deer may sit and look back at a hunter glassing it from the opposite slope, but big bucks are up and gone the moment they’re sure they’ve been spotted.

If you do spook a big buck from such a hiding place, consider returning there later. Big muleys are often reluctant to give up a choice resting spot, especially one near water. A buck that has found a backcountry stock dam or spring with a nice vantage point nearby isn’t about to give it up—at least as long as he has not been shot at. If you happen to roust a buck from his hideout, don’t shoot unless the chance of a kill is reasonably sure. Wait a day or two and return, approaching the spot more respectfully. This tactic is even more effective in a dry year, because deer are more reluctant to leave the few available watering spots.

The semi-open ponderosa pine forests that top some of the higher breaks also offer good mule deer hunting. This is almost timber hunting, because the country usually consists of pine-topped ridges over open

slopes. In morning and evening, walk carefully through the pines while glassing the opposite slopes. During midday, work the thicker timber around water sources.

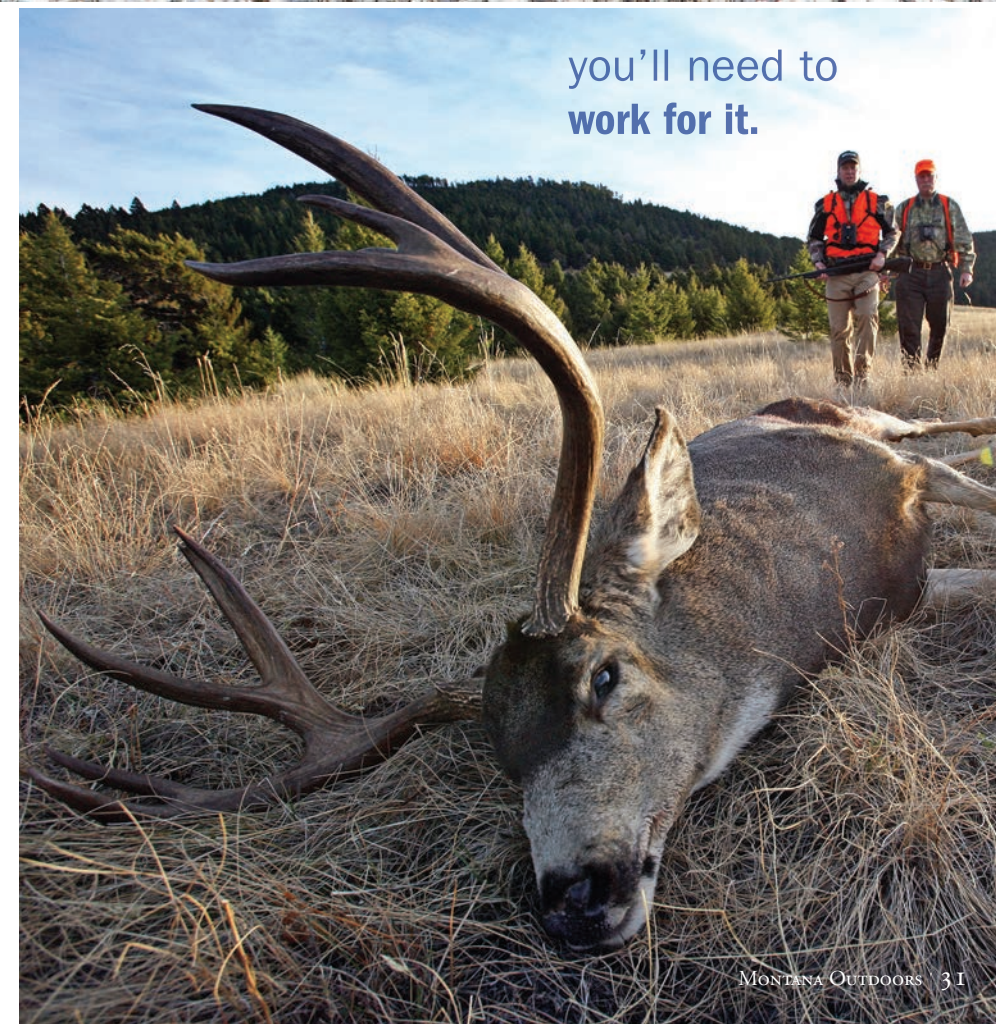
You can also find mule deer on sage flats. Rest your rear just below a ridge and carefully scan the country with binoculars, especially early and late in the day. Mule deer travel established routes in sage country, though on a vastly larger scale than the trails made by river breaks deer. That’s because they must travel farther to water. I was hunting in the Missouri Breaks on the C.M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge one November day and had just about given up. Legal shooting hours were almost over and I was thirsty, so I headed toward my pickup, parked a half mile away. I’d just walked around the edge of the only tract of gumbo butte within miles when a dozen mule deer does trotted around one of the buttes. It was getting late in the season, so I sat down and killed one with my .270. It wasn’t until I dressed the doe and started dragging it toward my pickup that I noticed the area was covered with deer trails that

twisted throughout the tall sagebrush. Evidently the deer traveled along the side of that butte to a small stock dam several hundred yards away for their evening drink. I had to wait another year to prove my theory. This time I was ensconced on the side of the butte. At about 15 minutes before sundown two bucks came by, a three-pointer and a four-pointer. When they were about 150 yards away and paused to sniff the air, I killed the larger deer.

Where is Montana’s best open-country mule deer habitat? You’ll find parcels practically anywhere in the state’s eastern half, but they are most abundant in the southeastern corner in and around Custer National Forest and in the Missouri Breaks region of the state’s central portion.

Remember, if you want to kill a big mule deer buck, you’ll need to work for it. That means walking as far as possible from the routes used by road hunters. In the breaks, look for the ruggedest country you can find. And where it’s wide open, just look. There may be a big deer right in front of you. 🐾

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