

# CREATING THE WILDLIFE-FRIENDLY FENCE

FWP provides instruction on how to modify fencing to prevent elk, deer, and pronghorn from injuring themselves and damaging private property. **BY CHRISTINE PAIGE**



**BYE-BYE BARBS** Volunteers from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and Montana Conservation Corps remove old, unused fence near Missoula. Some fencing poses hazards to wildlife, especially along migration routes. A new FWP booklet offers tips for sensible solutions at trouble spots.

While Steve Primm was driving through the Madison Valley south of Ennis one recent fall, a flash of white caught his eye. Primm, who lives nearby, had seen a pronghorn buck zigzagging next to a fence in a way that made him pause. He pulled onto a side road and found the antelope wrapped in barbed wire. Using his fence cutters, he



STEVE PRIMM

snipped a wire near the buck's hind leg. "That's all it took," Primm says. "He thrashed a bit, freed himself, and ran away."

Other wild animals often are not so lucky. Elk, deer, pronghorn, and other large mammals are injured or killed in Montana each year running into fences or entangling themselves in wire. And landowners face costly and time-consuming repairs fixing barbed wire and woven-wire (4- to 6-inch-square mesh) fences damaged by wildlife. A new booklet by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks offers livestock growers and others practical solutions for modifying fences at problem sites to help wildlife while saving money in fence repairs.

#### Entangled and blocked

Large ungulates such as deer, elk, moose, mountain sheep, and pronghorn are capable of jumping fences, but they occasionally get

**STUCK BUCK** A Madison Valley resident was able to cut this antelope free. The buck survived, but in many cases entangled wildlife don't fare so well.

caught in barbed wire. "Often the top strand is too high," says Craig Jourdonnais, FWP wildlife biologist for the Bitterroot Valley. "The problem is compounded in late winter, when elk and deer are at their weakest and become more vulnerable to being caught in the wires."

Fences also obstruct daily and seasonal movements of wildlife. Woven-wire fences often block fawns and calves from following adult deer and elk able to jump over the barriers. Woven wire also obstructs animals such as bears and bobcats unable to leap fences and too large to slip through the mesh. Fences pose particular problems for pronghorn. Although capable of leaping over a fence, pronghorn usually crawl under. Woven-wire fences can completely block pronghorn movement.

#### Sensible solutions

Most fences don't cause problems for wildlife. But some sections, especially where wildlife regularly move daily or seasonally, can benefit from minor modifications.

**"When nobody is putting pressure on them, even the big bulls go under with no problem."**

Recently FWP produced a 41-page booklet, "A Landowner's Guide to Wildlife Friendly Fences: How to Build Fence with Wildlife in Mind," that offers sensible solutions. With photographs and detailed illustrations, the booklet explains how to modify fences in trouble spots to contain livestock while still allowing wildlife to move freely through important habitats, such as gullies, ridges, wetlands, and streams. Examples:

- Lower the top strand of barbed wire and raise the bottom wire.
- Replace the top barbed wire with a smooth wire or rail.
- Modify sections of fence so a top rail or wire can be temporarily lowered at deer, elk,

and moose trails during seasonal migrations, and a bottom wire can be raised so calves, fawns, or pronghorn can slip underneath.

- Temporarily lay down sections of fence during seasonal elk, deer, and pronghorn migration when livestock aren't present.
- Replace the top strand with highly visible white poly-wire or attach short pieces of white vinyl "undersill" siding strips (available at most home improvement centers) to fence wires in areas where wildlife collisions or entanglements are common.

Electric fencing is another way to keep livestock in place while allowing wildlife to move freely. Juanita Vero, the fifth-generation owner and manager of the E Bar L guest ranch in the Blackfoot Valley, has fixed her share of damaged fence. On the ranch, 80 head of horses share 4,000 acres of range with large numbers of deer and elk. One half-mile section of the ranch's traditional barbed wire fence required frequent maintenance where it crossed a route that elk used daily. The large animals often stretched and collapsed wires as they lum-



bered over the fence. The Vero family sought help from the local FWP wildlife biologist, Jay Kolbe.

Under an agreement in which Kolbe evaluated the fence design at the trouble spot and FWP split costs and labor with the ranch, department crews and the Veros built a two-wire electrified fence, spaced between timber and fiberglass posts. The top wire is a high-visibility electric wire. The lower wire, hung several inches below the top one, is standard 12.5-gauge high-tensile steel that conducts no current. While the fence contains horses, elk easily pass over or

underneath. “When nobody is putting pressure on them, even the big bulls go under with no problem” says Vero.

Elsewhere on the ranch, the family has successfully placed temporary single-strand electric fencing to divide pastures into smaller units. That allows them to control where horses graze, allows wildlife of all types to pass freely, and eliminates fence repair.

Ultimately, any fence must be functional and meet a landowner’s needs. Many property damage problems and wildlife injuries can be prevented with modifications on only a short section of fence. By installing wildlife-friendly fencing, a landowner helps Montana’s elk, deer, pronghorn, and other wild animals move freely across the landscape without doing damage to fences—or themselves. 🐾

*Christine Paige is an independent wildlife biologist and science writer who lives in the Bitterroot Valley. Additional research contributed by Bryce Andrews.*



**CURRENT SUCCESS** A two-wire electric fence on the E Bar L ranch keeps horses in but allows elk to jump over or duck under.

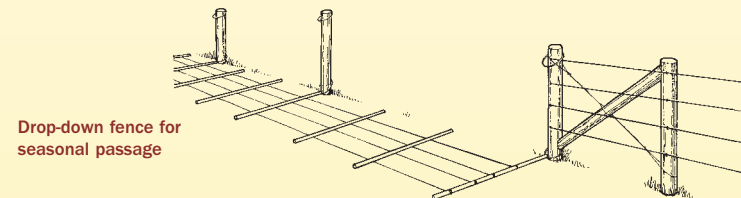
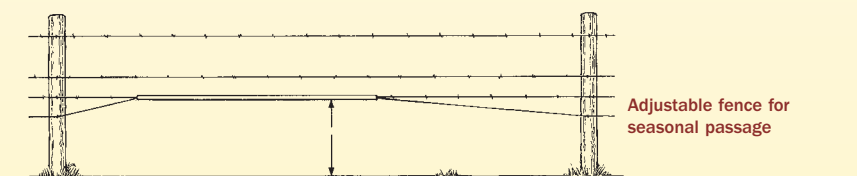
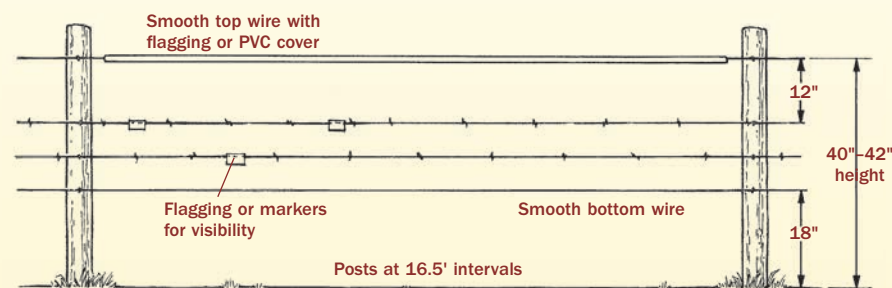
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## Friendly Fences

Thinking of putting up new fencing on your property or adjusting existing fences?

**Wildlife-friendly fences:**

- are low enough to jump over—top is no more than 40 inches above the ground;
- are high enough to crawl under—bottom is at least 18 inches above the ground;
- won't tangle legs—have at least 12 inches between top wires;
- are well-maintained, with no loose wires;
- include a smooth wire or rail on the top and a smooth wire on the bottom;
- are adorned to be visible to running animals;
- include gates and drop-downs where wildlife concentrate and cross.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY ED JENNE

## YOURS FOR THE ASKING

For a free copy of “A Landowner’s Guide to Wildlife Friendly Fences: How to Build Fence with Wildlife in Mind,” contact any FWP office or Joe Weigand, who coordinates the FWP Landowner/Wildlife Resource Program, at (406) 444-3065 or [joweigand@mt.gov](mailto:joweigand@mt.gov). Download an electronic copy at [fwp.mt.gov/wildthings/livingwildlife/tips.html](http://fwp.mt.gov/wildthings/livingwildlife/tips.html) (look in the “Tips” box). The 41-page guide contains information and illustrations on specific fencing situations. Weigand says the guide has generated interest across the United States as well as in Canada, Mexico, Argentina, Chile, and Australia.

