

Small signs help hunters, other recreationists, and landowners by showing exactly where state and federal parcels begin and end.

# HERE IT IS

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TOM DICKSON

“There’s one,” says Dwayne Andrews, pointing from his Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks pickup out across a sage-grass flat. It’s a blue rectangle on a post, a few yards in from the county road. Though tiny, the sign is hugely significant.

It and thousands of others installed over the past decade show the boundaries of school trust lands. On these public parcels, anyone can recreate freely without needing to ask permission. Andrews and a handful of fellow FWP employees, working with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC), have been posting signs indicating hundreds of thousands of acres of previously unmarked state and federal parcels across eastern and southern Montana. The signs are an open invitation for hunting, fishing, hiking, and other recreation. “It’s public land,” says Andrews, “but most people don’t know where it is.”

## OPEN TO RECREATION

In 1992, the Montana legislature passed a law that said the state’s roughly 5 million acres of school trust lands—indicated on BLM and other public land ownership maps primarily as 1-square-mile blue squares—are open to public recreational use. (The law applies only to state lands “legally accessible”—either from public roads, waters, or other public parcels or by permission of the adjacent landowner. Users must purchase a

State Land Recreational License, which has been automatically tacked on to FWP conservation licenses.) Previously, those who leased grazing, timber, or mineral rights on state lands could deny public access, and “No Hunting” signs were commonly posted on state sections. The law was an important step for public access to these public lands, says Andrews, “but many of the sections weren’t marked, so people would drive right past.”

The same has been true for much of the roughly 8 million acres of BLM land in Montana. The agency produces detailed maps indicating the location and configuration of its tracts—as well as all other public lands. But the lack of signs makes it difficult for people to find many BLM lands and be certain they are not straying onto adjacent private property.

Andrews began signing public lands in 2000 as an area manager for DNRC, which, among other responsibilities, manages school trust lands. The agency leases grazing, mineral, and timber rights to the tracts to generate revenue for public education. “I figured that if there was now a recreational use law for state lands, it was important for the lessees and recreational users to have assis-

tance in recognizing those lands,” says Andrews. DNRC lacked additional funds and staff to sign the school trust lands, he adds. “It was up to individuals in the department to adjust their jobs to make the effort. Some did and some didn’t.”

When he began working for FWP in 2003, Andrews continued signing DNRC lands and then BLM parcels. Each summer he reviews a new BLM map from his region and identifies state and federal land next to roads built and

maintained by the state or the county. He sends a list of the tracts to the Miles City BLM office and DNRC office for review. “They verify legal access to the parcels and make adjustments if there’s been a land swap or some other change,” Andrews says. The agencies write to the landowner who leases each property—known as a lessee for DNRC tracts and a permittee for BLM acres. “The letter notifies them that some time in the future the land will be signed,” Andrew says. “We want to give everyone a head’s up. No surprises.”

For the rest of the year, squeezed in among his other responsibilities, Andrews posts the inconspicuous blue DNRC signs and tan BLM signs where county roads cut through public property. “It’s usually not necessary to sign the entire parcel, because once people

with a map see one sign they can figure out the boundaries,” he says. “But on some big parcels, I’ve put up dozens and dozens of signs to mark the entire boundary.”

After Andrews records GPS waypoints of the signs, he downloads the information at his FWP office for future reference and transfers the data to the other agencies so they have a record of sign locations.

Over the past ten years, Andrews estimates he has posted roughly 2,400 signs, identifying about 320,000 acres.

Chris Pileski, DNRC area manager in Miles City, says he appreciates the close cooperation between his office and FWP on the signing work. “We’re short of staff, so the extra assistance we’re getting from Dwayne is a big help,” he says.

## EVERYONE WINS

Others too are making public lands easier to find. Pileski says his agency signs “trouble spots” statewide where landowners adjacent to school trust lands have complained about trespass. In FWP’s Glasgow region, regional Hunting Access Enhancement Program coordinator Mikey Nye and local BLM wildlife biologist John Carlson have put up signs indicating the boundaries of federally owned lands as part of programs developed between the two agencies. The Three Buttes Cooperative Access Project is 6,000-plus acres of mule deer and wild turkey habitat along the Missouri River near Culbertson. Another cooperative project, called the Larb Hills, is composed of nearly 5,000 acres in southern Phillips County that contains



**WELCOMING COMMITTEE OF ONE** On a parcel of state school trust land 40 miles southeast of Miles City, FWP regional Information and Education Program manager Dwayne Andrews installs a recreational use boundary sign. “Now people know this land is here,” he says.

▶ **“He’d stop and shoot the breeze, and we kind of developed a relationship. By the third day he was helping me out.”**

top-notch sharptail, pronghorn, mule deer, and elk hunting opportunities. In addition to the new boundary signs, the BLM lands in the project have boxes at parking areas containing detailed maps and GPS waypoints. “Everyone wins,” Nye says. “The programs increase recreation on public land and reduce trespass on adjacent private land.” Nye has recently begun an access project along the Milk River from Nashua to Havre and eventually hopes to sign more than 7,000 acres of public land there.

Reducing trespass is especially important for Dennis Hagenston of Billings. An FWP warden captain when he retired in 2003, Hagenston now works part-time for the department as a hunting access technician for the Block Management Program in fall and signs public lands in spring. “My years as a warden have helped me spot places where signs can solve potential problems,” he says. “I can see where hunters might get confused, so I put signs in those spots to make that less likely.”

Each of the three FWP signers takes a slightly different approach. After consulting DNRC staff, Hagenston focused first on signing accessible school trust lands in south-central Montana, then moved to signing BLM lands. Nye only signs lands that are part of projects that have additional objectives such as increasing deer and elk harvest to reduce depredation on neighboring croplands. Andrews, who calls himself an “equal opportunity signer,” says he has tried to methodically cover almost every BLM and school trust property in southeastern Montana. “I don’t pick the sites on physical characteristics. I just get out there on all the tracts we have approval to sign. Some of them

*Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.*



**MAN ON A MISSION** Above: A BLM map with Dwayne Andrews’s detailed notes. Below: Andrews with a decade’s worth of data showing where he has signed 320,000 acres of public land.



might not appear to have much value for recreational use, like stubble fields or heavily grazed areas. But you never know. They could be used by antelope or geese,” he says.

Boundary indicators alone aren’t enough, Andrews adds. Hunters and others must carry a compass or GPS along with accurate maps they know how to read. “The signs are only saying, ‘Okay, the public land begins here,’” he says. “Then it’s up to hunters to figure out where they are and how the land

lays.” Andrews avoids signing small quarter-section parcels because he thinks it’s too easy for people to end up trespassing. “I don’t sign anywhere where I think it would cause problems,” he says. “We have to be respectful of landowners.”

Landowners reciprocate. Hagenston says almost all lessees and permittees notified about signs have cooperated. “They know recreationists have legal access to this land if a county road bisects it.” Andrews says landowners are coming around to the fact that they no longer control access to most school trust lands. “I can’t say most of them are thrilled about the lands being signed. But the program has been in place for nearly two decades, so I think they are getting used to it,” he says. “I had one landowner come out and watch me do the entire border of a big tract that abutted his property. He’d stop and shoot the breeze, and we kind of developed a relationship. By the third day he was helping me out.”

Their biggest challenge now, say Andrews and Hagenston, is replacing old markers. Some people shoot the signs for fun, and cattle tip over signs while using them as scratching posts. The worst vandal is the harsh prairie sun. After a few years, signs fade and need to be replaced. “The moment you put one of these up, you create a potential maintenance problem,” Andrews says as he tightens a nut to secure a new DNRC sign to its post. “I think about that every time I do this, because at some point I won’t be around here to replace it.”

Walking back to his truck, Andrews reflects on a decade of helping hunters and others discover land that was already theirs: “It’s a good feeling to get outside and do something tangible, to know I’m doing something important that might not get done otherwise.” 🐾

## HUNTERS: Take another look

Though many state and BLM sections appear devoid of game, it can be worth scouting even the grimmest-looking parcels. Two hunting buddies of mine regularly scour state and BLM sections and continually discover pockets of prime pheasant and mule deer cover. A few years ago, one of them shot three limits of roosters on a parched little state half-section that from the road looked like a moonscape. He’d taken the time to walk the perimeter and found, over a slight rise hidden from passersby, a lush spring-fed swale that attracted cock birds all fall. I’ll bet hundreds of pheasant hunters drove by that parcel over the years and never gave it a moment’s thought. —Tom Dickson



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