



LUCKY SONS OF A GUN

Winning a SuperTag—
and with it a Montana big
game hunt of a lifetime.

BY DAVE CARTY

HUNT IN ANY DISTRICT Getting the chance to hunt a trophy bull elk is the dream of hunters across Montana and the rest of the United States. Since 2006, FWP has made more trophy hunts possible with the SuperTag lottery license. SuperTags are also available for bighorn sheep, moose, mountain goat, and other big game species.

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hen John Laughery of Moses Lake, Washington, learned he'd won a Montana elk hunting SuperTag, he let out a whoop so loud his secretary ran into his office.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I just won the lottery!"

Laughery laughs at the recollection. "She thought I was talking about Mega Millions. 'But no,' I told her, 'It's better than that. I just got a SuperTag!'"

The SuperTag, a special hunting license awarded by lottery, allows winners to hunt in any Montana hunting district, including the famous limited-entry trophy areas. Laughery says that winning the coveted hunting license gave him a new lease on life. "I got hold of a trainer and started working out three days a week," he says. "I ended up losing about 20 pounds, and I took 36 days off work, which I hadn't done in ten years." Then the really hard work started.

"I did a lot of on-line research and talked to friends," Laughery says. His brother, a Montana fishing and hunting guide in the Fort Smith area, also helped, asking around for where his lucky brother should hunt. The first place the Washington hunter hit was the Elkhorn Mountains, south of Helena, during the tail end of archery season.

"I saw a lot of elk in there but didn't get one," he says. "But basically that was just the first part of my trip. Then it snowed, so I hung out for a few more days, then drove to Billings, hopped on a plane, and flew back to Moses Lake for an audit."

An audit?

"Yes, I had an audit with the lovely people from the IRS," Laughery explains. "The guy said, 'You seem kind of antsy.' And I said, 'I'm not antsy about my tax return, I just want to get the hell out of here.' When I told him why, he kind of grinned and said, 'Well, let's just cut this short.' Seems like when you get a tag like this, all of a sudden other hunters want to help you out."

A few days later, Laughery was back in Montana, this time in the southeastern corner. "I was on a ranch down there for about ten days and saw some really nice bulls. But we didn't see the one I really

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"I nicknamed him 'Angry Moose' because of the whole showdown that led to me shooting him," says Glen Majors (left). "He's not the big bruiser I was after, but the whole experience makes him a trophy in my book." John Laughery (right) was excused early from an IRS audit to hunt this bull elk near Big Sandy.



Left: Larry Martin, coming off 35 days of radiation treatment for throat cancer, with the moose he killed 98 feet from the road. Right: Ian Weaver with his mountain goat. "We hiked up over Fairy Lake and damn, there they were, just as planned." He was back in Bozeman with the trophy before dark.



wanted until late one night and I could never find it again.

"In the meantime, I'd been talking to a rancher who lives up by Big Sandy. I find out his cousin lived in Moses Lake, where I'm from. And it turns out the cousin was my seventh-grade English teacher."

Score one for connections. Laughery received an invitation. "So I spent 11 or 12 days up there," Laughery says, "and on November 19, I ended up shooting a nice six-point bull."

A CHANCE FOR ORDINARY FOLKS

Montana began offering SuperTags in 2006 as an answer to public criticism that Fish, Wildlife & Parks' big game auctions, conducted to raise management funds for bighorn sheep, mountain goats, and other coveted species, were available only to the wealthy. Some bighorn sheep licenses have gone for more than a quarter-million dollars. "Montana decided to give folks who didn't have that kind of money an opportunity to win the same type of license," says Ron Aasheim, head of the department's Communications and Education Bureau.

Every year, Montana awards one SuperTag each for moose, bighorn sheep, elk, deer, mountain goat, mountain lion, pronghorn antelope, and bison. Both residents and nonresidents may buy unlimited numbers of the lottery chances at \$5 each. FWP considers the drawings a huge success. The more than \$300,000 generated from SuperTag lottery sales each year pays to enhance public hunting access and boost game law enforcement.

Most applicants buy just one or two

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chances, says Aasheim, but some improve their odds with multiple purchases. One year a single hunter bought 400 sheep SuperTag chances. Another bought a combined total of 800 chances for moose, sheep, and mountain goat. Of course, the fact that a person can buy more than one chance favors those with higher incomes, but Aasheim notes that most SuperTags have been won by hunters who purchased just one or a few chances. "Luck is still the biggest element," he says.

What are the odds of winning? Aasheim says roughly 21,000 chances are purchased for bighorn sheep and 15,000 for elk. The odds are far better for pronghorn, averaging 2,000 chances sold each year, and mountain lion, with 1,500 chances sold.



OH WHAT A FEELING

Each year several lucky hunters win a SuperTag license for any hunting district in Montana, including the famous trophy areas. Find out more at FWP offices, license providers, and on-line at fwp.mt.gov.

LOTS OF LEG WORK

Winning a SuperTag is certainly a thrill, but it's no guarantee of success. It's not even a guarantee the winner will find a place to hunt. Like any hunter, a SuperTag license holder needs permission to access private land and will find trophies on public land only with plenty of scouting and leg work. Locating a district with heavy-racked moose, bighorn sheep, or elk isn't the same thing as actually finding a trophy within

that district. Which is why Glen Majors of Manhattan ended up putting 3,000 miles on his truck a few years ago.

"It was almost total disbelief and shock," says Majors of hearing the news he'd been drawn for a moose SuperTag. "It threw off all my plans. I had wanted to do a bunch of elk hunting, but all I ended up doing that fall was hunt moose."

By the end of the season, Majors had driven the equivalent of a coast-to-coast trip to check out Montana moose hunting areas, walked dozens of miles on scouting trips, and talked to everyone he thought might know something about moose. In the end, he focused on the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge. That's where he learned that when you call in a moose, you might get more than you bargained for.

"I'd found a nice bull, and was trying to get in on him, but I just could never get an opportunity," Majors recalls. "I was walking through 6-foot-high willows, and I knew that other moose were in the area. All of a sudden I had a cow and calf up in front of me, and a small bull to my left, and then another bull."

It turns out the other four moose also had been attracted to Majors's calls. "That cow started closing the distance on me. There were no trees in sight, just willows. Then one of the other bulls starts staring at me, and the next thing I know he's rolling his head and walking toward me. I was kind of in disbelief this was happening to me.

"Of course, growing up in Montana, I know

that moose are sometimes more dangerous than bears. So I'm talking to the bull, but it did no good, and he kept taking steps toward me. He got closer and closer, and by this time I'm waving my rifle in the air and picking up my voice and trying to spook them away. I had no exit. I was surrounded by moose."

For a few tense moments, says Majors, it looked like the moose might have drawn a bead on him. That's when he decided his hunt had gone on long enough.

"When that closest bull turned his head to look at the cow, I shot him in the neck and dropped him right there," says Majors.

BEATING THE ODDS—AGAIN

Most SuperTag hunts aren't so dramatic. But some are even more so.

When Larry J. Martin of Clinton won a moose SuperTag last year, his life was unraveling. "I had mixed emotions," he says of getting the call from Aasheim that he'd won. "That same week I'd found out I had throat cancer. And one of my dearest friends had died of cancer 30 days before I found out I had mine. So I was preparing to die. I wasn't really preparing to think about moose hunting. As thrilled as I was, and as much of an upper it was to hear I'd won, it didn't offset the downer of finding out you have a disease that, when you go on the Internet, statistics say that only 16 percent of guys age 65 to 70 are going to live through." Martin, a novelist, was 68.

He'd had cancer once before, beat it, and decided to fight the disease with everything

he had. He went to Houston, Texas, for 35 days of radiation treatment. By this time, the moose rut was over, making it harder for Martin to find a bull when he returned. But, weak as he was from the cancer therapy, the hunter still wanted to fill his SuperTag. He says he knew his moose was still out there somewhere, waiting for him.

"I got on the phone and talked to every outfitter around," says Martin. "Then I called a friend of a friend who had found moose for a couple of other guys." Unfortunately, Martin was still weak and could not hunt far from his vehicle. "But we went out anyway and, sure as hell, we stumbled onto a 45-inch moose that I killed 98 feet from a logging road. I know



100 RAMS LATER

Steve Carson, who lived in Helena when he won his bighorn sheep SuperTag, says he spent months scouting seven hunting districts and glassed roughly 100 rams before killing this one north of Anaconda.

it was 98 feet because I then called my son, who had 100 feet of line on his winch. We had just enough to wrap the horns and get the bull to the road. My son—he's a young buck in his late 40s—then shimmied up a tree and chained a block up there. We ran the line through it, pulled my truck under it, and dropped the moose in the bed."

Martin says he would have liked a larger bull but was happy enough with the one he shot: "I was afraid not to take him. I was

afraid I was going to run out of time."

It turns out he had more time than he thought. Martin recently reported that his cancer is in remission.

BACK BEFORE DARK

Many SuperTag winners try to stretch out their hunt for as long as possible, relishing the chance to be outdoors while searching for a trophy. For instance, Ryan Stratman of Bozeman says the 20-plus days he spent scouting the high country around Bozeman for mountain goats with two friends was as fun as the hunt itself. Then there are the hunts that are over almost before they begin.

After the usual research on the phone and Internet, mountain goat SuperTag winner Ian Weaver of Fredericksburg, Ohio, decided to hunt around Fairy Lake in the Bridger Range. The hunt began inauspiciously when an early season storm rolled into the area. Weaver and his hunting partner first tried to wait out the bad weather, but after a few days they decided to bundle up and look for mountain goats anyway. "We hiked up over Fairy Lake and there they were, just as planned," Weaver says. Less than an hour after spotting a big billy, Weaver killed the trophy. He and his partner were back in Bozeman with the mountain goat before dark.

Even if the endeavor is relatively easy or the animal's rack is smaller than they'd hoped, most SuperTag winners emerge from their hunts with trophy-sized memories. "If I never shoot another moose again, that guy is still a trophy to me," Majors says of the undersized bull that almost ran him down. "That whole situation—I'll never forget the craziness of it."

And yes, he's hoping against all odds that he'll win another moose SuperTag. "I'm buying chances every year," he says. 🐾

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY GLEN MAJORS; COURTESY LARRY MARTIN; COURTESY IAN WEAVER; COURTESY STEVE CARSON