

## SHOULDERING ITS RESPONSIBILITY

FWP proposes additional hunting seasons to reduce the size of burgeoning elk herds in parts of Montana.

BY TOM DICKSON



Chase Hibbard is nearing the end of his rope. “We don’t mind being hosts to elk,” says Hibbard, whose family owns a large ranch in Cascade County. “But we now have a herd of 300 to 500 coming down in late summer feeding on our irrigated alfalfa fields. We’ve run out of control options, and it’s come to a point where elk are taking money out of our pocket.” The Hibbards aren’t the only

landowners frustrated by fast-growing elk herds. In areas across Montana, the overabundant ungulates are knocking down fences and consuming haystacks and pasture meant for livestock. Elk populations have grown too high in 80 of Montana’s 138 elk management areas that have population objectives, say state wildlife officials. In some areas, elk numbers are now five to even ten times greater than what the land can support and landowners will tolerate.

Concentrated elk also increase the risk of brucellosis spreading to cattle in areas where the disease is present, like the Paradise Valley. More than half the elk in a portion of the valley last year tested positive for exposure to the disease. “It’s a huge concern in these areas whenever elk come into contact with cattle,” says Quentin Kujala, a senior wildlife official with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

Why don’t landowners with elk problems simply allow more public hunting? Many, like the Hibbards, do. But sometimes relatively few elk stay on ranches open to hunting during the general five-week firearms season. The mobile animals find refuge on nearby properties with little or no public hunting to disturb them. Then, come December, they move elsewhere and compete with livestock for food. “Successful elk management requires neighbors working with neighbors to ensure numbers can be managed, versus elk finding refuge during the hunting season, then spreading out afterwards and growing in number,” says Ken McDonald, head of the FWP Wildlife Division.

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.

Feeling pressure from landowners and lawmakers to increase elk harvest in some hunting districts, FWP has proposed a new option that adds additional seasons to firearms elk seasons. The department would use these “shoulder seasons” to pare down overabundant elk herds by giving hunters additional days afield. “We heard loud and clear from the legislature that getting these populations down to objectives is a top priority, and this proposal is meant to do that,” says McDonald.

### NOT WORKING

For years Montana has struggled to lower elk numbers in many areas to reach popula-

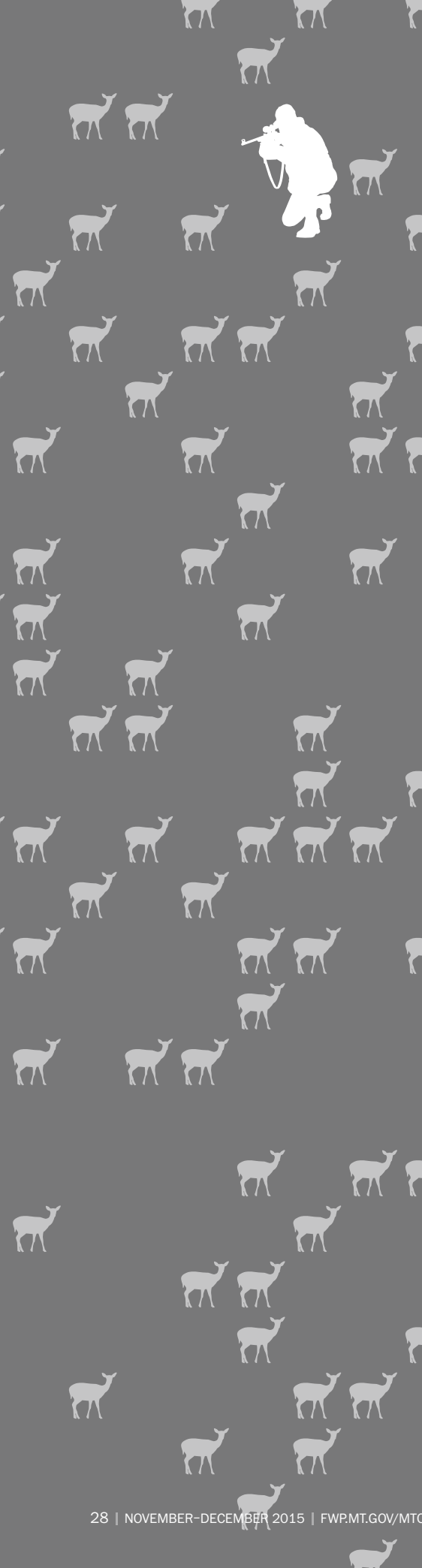
tion “objectives,” levels determined through a public process and based on the biological carrying capacity of the land, landowner tolerance, and hunter interests. During the 1990s and 2000s, Montana held a five-week regular firearms elk season plus, in areas where that wasn’t sufficient to reduce elk numbers, “late-season” cow elk hunts in December or January. FWP also offered special “game damage” hunts to disperse herds on individual properties that allowed general season public hunting but were still having severe depredation problems.

Unfortunately, those management tools didn’t always control populations, and elk numbers kept climbing. What’s more, some public hunters complained that landowners who leased their property for paid bull elk hunts were profiting from the public’s trophy elk during the regular season, then using nonpaying hunters for population “clean-up” during the late-season cow, or antlerless, hunts. (Harvesting female elk is a more effective way to lower populations because they produce new calves each year.)

In 2006, hoping to encourage more landowners to allow public hunting, FWP went to a five-week-only season statewide and ended late-season hunts (while maintaining game damage hunts and “manage-



**FROM ONE RANCH TO ANOTHER** Elk are smart. During the regular five-week firearms season they often congregate on land with no public hunting access. Once the season ends, they head next door to feed on haystacks and pasture. FWP’s new shoulder seasons proposal aims to move elk around more during the regular season and increase hunting pressure before and afterward.



ment seasons”—similar to game damage hunts but larger in scale). If the late-season option no longer existed, went the reasoning, landowners would be more likely to let public hunters on their land during the regular five-week season to reduce herd size.

That didn't work either. Landowners bristled at what they considered an attempt to strong-arm them into offering more hunting access. Some who had allowed public hunting during late seasons closed their gates in protest. And elk populations in many hunting districts continued to increase as hunters who had been happy to shoot a cow elk lost additional late-season hunting opportunities.

With landowner dissatisfaction and legislative pressure growing, FWP wildlife managers needed to find a better way to connect elk hunters with the state's growing number of elk.

#### A NEW PROPOSAL

One way to boost elk harvest would be for more landowners to open their property to public hunting. That continues to be a major challenge. “We respect the absolute rights of landowners to say who does or doesn't hunt on their land,” says Kujala. “At the same time, Montana has consistently resisted giving landowners elk permits they can then give or sell to others, as some other Western states have done.”

Another way to harvest more elk is to increase hunter success. That's what FWP believes could happen with its new proposed shoulder seasons. In certain hunting districts, the additional seasons of a few days to a few months would take place before or after the existing five-week firearms elk season. “By using more of the calendar, shoulder seasons would create more time for harvest to happen, basically giving hunters more times at bat,” Kujala says.

McDonald says that this past summer FWP biologists studied a range of options to reduce elk numbers and make harvest as fair

and equitable as possible. The shoulder seasons proposal came out on top. The seasons would also help the agency comply with state statutes requiring it to manage elk populations to objective, as well as meet a mandate by Governor Steve Bullock for FWP to improve relationships among the department, landowners, and hunters.

Even with shoulder seasons, hunting districts would also need to increase elk harvest during the regular firearms seasons. “We can't rely solely on the shoulder seasons to reduce elk populations to objective,” says McDonald. “We have to see more harvest during the five-week season, too.”

To nudge that outcome, FWP has made the shoulder seasons “performance based.”

**By using more of the calendar, shoulder seasons would basically give hunters more times at bat.**

The department will require that a certain number of cow and bull elk are harvested during the regular archery and firearms seasons over a period of three years before agreeing to continue shoulder seasons. “Landowners who restrict access during the general season and want to use the shoulder seasons to reduce elk numbers may need to allow more public access during the general season,” says McDonald.

Unlike game damage hunts and management seasons, for which hunters on rosters are notified when they can hunt, shoulder

seasons would be listed in the printed hunting regulations, allowing hunters to plan their outings far in advance. The seasons could be offered from mid-August to mid-February.

FWP would still have the option of continuing game damage and management seasons to alleviate severe elk problems on individual properties, McDonald says. “But in theory we wouldn't need those as often because the shoulder seasons and increased general season harvest would bring elk numbers down to objective.” Shoulder seasons would not affect early backcountry hunts or primitive weapon hunts.

#### NOT EVERYWHERE

Shoulder seasons would not be applied in all or even most hunting districts, says Kujala, but only those 15 to 20 areas with significantly overabundant elk numbers. “As the most liberal tool we'd have for population management, they would be used only when other tools—like allowing more B licenses or cow elk harvest during the regular five-week season—haven't worked to lower overabundant populations,” he says.

In addition to giving hunters more days to find and harvest elk, the shoulder seasons could move elk herds around the landscape, making them more vulnerable to hunters. “For various reasons, some ranches that allow public hunting don't see many elk during November, but then in December and January the elk move in,” says Kujala. “Or elk are there in September but not during the regular season. Now those elk would be more available to firearms hunters.”

That's what Hibbard is counting on. “We're already at capacity with public hunters during the five-week season, and we also allow archery hunting and hold a late-season game damage hunt,” says the rancher, a member with other local landowners of the long-standing Devil's Kitchen elk management work group. “We're using all the tools available to us but still can't get a handle on

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elk numbers. If we could have more firearms hunters on our land before and after the general season, like in September, when cow elk are bunched up on our irrigated meadows, that would do a lot.”

The shoulder seasons might even result in more public hunters getting a shot at bull elk on currently closed properties. A landowner currently unwilling to allow public hunting for bulls during the regular season might feel added pressure from neighbors concerned about brucellosis and game damage. “It's no guarantee, but we hope the structure of the shoulder seasons results in more cooperation among landowners,” says McDonald. “The landowner community has told us they want elk objectives to be met, so this is also an experiment to see how committed they are to helping make that happen.”

#### PUBLIC WEIGHS IN

As this issue of *Montana Outdoors* went to press, public opinion was split on the shoulder seasons proposal. “I think the shoulder seasons are a positive step in helping manage elk herds,” wrote one Montanan to FWP's public comment website page. Commented another: “More needs to be done for those [of us] who rely solely on big game meat for our family.”

But many hunters are still unsure FWP's proposal would work. In a letter published in the *Billings Gazette*, Joe Perry of the Montana Sportsmen's Alliance and J.W. Westman of the Laurel Rod and Gun Club argued that elk overabundance is caused by landowners who harbor elk. The shoulder seasons won't change that, they wrote, and thus will “further erode the public ownership of public wildlife and significantly increase commercialization and privatization of public trust

resources.” Their solution? Impose cow-only elk seasons on hunting districts where populations greatly exceed objectives.

McDonald says that because FWP manages wildlife in entire hunting districts and not on individual properties, imposing cow-only seasons “would, by not allowing bull elk hunting, end up punishing landowners in those districts who are providing access—not to mention the hunters who hunt on their property and on public land.” McDonald won't rule out future antlerless-only seasons in some areas. “But right now,”



**MORE OF THIS** Two goals of the proposed shoulder seasons: harvest more elk and provide more opportunities for hunters to harvest cow elk.

he says, “we believe that the shoulder seasons option we're proposing is the best effort to get those elk numbers down, which is our main objective, while also giving more hunters a chance to shoot a cow elk.”

*On November 12, the Fish and Wildlife Commission will decide whether to test shoulder seasons in a few hunting districts this winter. Details would be announced in the news media and on the FWP website.*

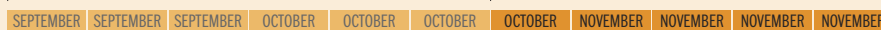
### More elk opportunities

Under FWP's new proposal, firearms elk hunting in some hunting districts could begin as early as mid-August and run as late as mid-February.

#### Range for early firearms shoulder seasons\* (private land only)



#### Montana's current 6-week elk archery season



#### Montana's current 5-week elk firearms season



#### Range for late firearms shoulder seasons\* (public and private land)

\* Both early and late shoulder seasons could be anywhere from a few days to a few months added before or after the regular firearms season. In no cases would the combined shoulder and regular seasons in a hunting district last an entire six months.

