

"NO, I'M NOT KIDDING!"

WHEN HUNTERS GET THIS PHONE CALL, IT MIGHT BE NEWS THEY'VE BEEN WAITING FOR THEIR ENTIRE LIVES.

BY RON AASHEIM



When it comes to Montana's highly coveted SuperTags—licenses that allow lucky winners to hunt a trophy big game animal nearly anywhere in the state—I've been lucky.

Not in drawing a SuperTag. That's never happened and probably never will. But as part of my job I get to call the lottery winners and tell them the good news. "Hello," I say, "this is Ron Aasheim with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. I'm about to make your day."

It's one of the most enjoyable things I do at work all year.

Montana has eight SuperTags, one each for moose, bighorn sheep, mountain goat, antelope, elk, deer, bison, and mountain lion. For \$5, hunters buy a chance at winning one of these special licenses. Each summer we hold a lottery and draw one SuperTag for each species. The license is good in any Montana hunting district—including the state's legendary trophy areas. We use the revenue to enhance hunting access and boost FWP game law enforcement.

Both residents and nonresidents may buy unlimited numbers of the lottery chances at \$5 each. Most buy just one or two chances, but some hunters improve their odds with multiple purchases. Though that gives people with more money an advantage, many past winners have bought only one \$5 ticket.

The odds of winning range from about 1,000:1 for the mountain lion SuperTag to up to 20,000:1 for the bighorn sheep SuperTag. As you can imagine, it's a big deal to get drawn for any of them.

Most hunters I call respond the way you'd expect: "You gotta be kidding me!" A few admit they forgot they'd even put in for the license and are surprised to be reminded they entered, much less actually won. A fair number truly believe I'm pulling their leg.

One guy insisted I give him my phone number so he could make sure I was in fact an FWP official. When he called me back after confirming my identity, he said, "You S.O.B.! I thought for sure you were one of my buddies playing a joke." Another hunter I called was completely floored by the news. "Wait a second," he said. "I've got a bottle

of whisky here and I need to pour myself a drink."

You'd think that after a while I'd get jealous of these lucky hunters. But that's not the case at all. It's fun hearing them whoop and laugh and even gasp at the news. I feel like the guy who delivers those big Publishers Clearing House sweepstakes checks to some unsuspecting family.

It's not just SuperTags that get hunters flustered. Winning any of the regular big game lottery permits can change someone's life, or at least their hunting season. Hunters who draw a mountain goat or bighorn sheep permit, for instance, might have to throw their deer and elk hunting plans for that fall out the window. Some

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hunters spend months training for these hunts and then weeks or even more scouting and hunting. After our son Erik drew a mountain goat tag for the Spanish Peaks, he hiked in five to ten miles eight different times before the season even started. We spent hours talking about his upcoming hunt, and I remember asking him why he put in so much effort. "Because it's an opportunity of a lifetime, Dad," he said.

As highly desired as these big game permits are, winning one can turn out to be a matter of "Be careful what you wish for." Some hunters who've drawn a prized either-sex elk tag for the Elkhorn Mountains have told me they ended up calling it the "Permit from Hell." They say their buddies pressure them (or they pressure themselves) to pass on smaller bulls and keep hunting—week after week—hoping to shoot something for the record books. After the season ends, parents of younger Elkhorn permit holders have told me, "Thank God that's over."

On the other hand, some permit winners hope the hunt never ends. One hunter from Manhattan (Montana) who drew a moose SuperTag happily put 3,000 miles on his truck during scouting trips across western Montana. Another spent four months scouting seven hunting districts for bighorn sheep, eventually looking at 100 different rams before deciding to pull the trigger on one in the Flint Creek Range. One nonresident SuperTag winner spent four weeks hunting across the state trying to get the perfect bull but never succeeded. He told me he finally realized that what was most important about his adventure wasn't the size of the bull he shot but the friendly people he met and the great places in Montana he visited.

Some stories are especially moving. Larry Martin, of Rock Creek, drew a moose SuperTag while battling cancer. Though weakened by treatment, Larry hunted hard that fall and eventually shot a trophy moose. He later told me, "When I was in treatment, that moose license was the light at the end of the tunnel that kept me going."

Several years ago I learned that the mayor of East Helena, a beloved man named Ed Murgel, had terminal brain cancer. His brother, Randy, told me that for most of Ed's life he'd put in for an Elkhorn bull tag and had never drawn one. Randy asked if we could dummy up a permit to give to his brother. So we printed one out with his name on it and sent it to him. Later we learned that Ed had asked to have it pinned up on the wall in his hospital room where he could see it during his last few days. His family buried him with the permit pinned to his shirt.

Stories like that reaffirm for me the importance of what we do at FWP. Public controversies over how the department manages fish and wildlife occasionally cause me to lose perspective on what's most important about FWP's mission. Then I talk to a Larry Martin, or learn about the last wishes of a devoted elk hunter, and I'm reminded that those of us who work here have a special privilege, opportunity, and responsibility to manage the wildlife that mean so much to so many people. That's a real honor, and it serves as a reminder of what an amazingly wildlife-rich state we live in. And how lucky we are to hunt in such a place—whether we draw a special permit or not. 🐾

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY LUKE DURAN/MONTANA OUTDOORS

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