



PLAYING THE SHORT GAME A bowhunter waits for whitetails at dawn at a weapons restriction area in the Gallatin Valley. WRAs provide great hunting opportunities in areas near buildings or highways where rifles would be too dangerous.

SHORT-RANGE OPTIONS *for* BIG GAME HUNTS

Weapons restriction areas provide opportunities for hunters who don't need to take the long shot.

BY JACK BALLARD

The housing boom in eastern Gallatin Valley around Belgrade and Bozeman has gobbled up thousands of acres of undeveloped land in the past decade. Even so, abundant deer, elk, and black bear habitat remains, including a massive area open to big game hunting.

But you can't use a regular rifle there. The 109,341-acre (170-square-mile) Gallatin Valley Weapons Restriction Area (WRA) limits big game hunting to weapons that have reduced shooting range and less possibility a stray shot might damage property or injure livestock or people.

Across Montana, 16 other WRAs also are open to big game hunting under special weapons restrictions. WRAs are public lands, often but not always managed by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, where houses, roads, farms, and other developments are too close for regular-rifle use. Some are open to archery hunting only, but most also allow other limited-range weapons, including shotguns, muzzleloaders, and traditional handguns. These firearms have a shorter lethal range (generally less than 100 yards) than centerfire rifles and thus are considered safer (though not necessarily safe) in areas where people live and travel.

Taking advantage of these little-known hunting hot spots requires a basic understanding of how the various allowable firearms function, proficiency with your firearm of choice, and the skill to sneak close enough to an animal to make a lethal shot. ►►

BOWS

Any bow legal for archery hunting in Montana may be used on a WRA. Crossbows are legal only in certain WRAs and only during the general rifle season (not during the general archery-only season).

SHOTGUNS

Hunters who already own a shotgun used for waterfowl or upland birds can use that same firearm to hunt big game on WRAs. For some popular shotgun models, such as the Remington 870 or Mossberg 500, there's also the option of buying a special rifled barrel for big game hunting. Or you can purchase a special shotgun already fitted with a rifled barrel. All versions fire a slug, a thumb-size lead or copper bullet that sits in the plastic casing of a shotgun shell.

If using a smooth-bore shotgun barrel, you'll need what's known as a rifled or Foster slug. Angled grooves in this slug cause it to spin as it exits the barrel. When using rifled slugs, your choke must be no tighter than "modified." If you have screw-in chokes, keep a choke screwed tight so the slug doesn't damage the exposed threading. And always follow the shotgun manufacturer's recommendations for slug use from a smooth-bore barrel.

A rifled shotgun barrel has spiraling grooves ("rifling") cut into it like those in a



SAFER OPTIONS Technological improvements make compound bows (above left) and muzzle-loader rifles (above right) increasingly more accurate out to ever-greater distances (up to 50 and 100-plus yards, respectively). But both are still far less dangerous around buildings and roads than a regular deer or elk rifle, which can send a bullet a mile or more.

When the casing exits the muzzle, it releases the slug, which also is spinning and thus travels with increased speed and velocity (like a spiral-thrown football).

Which is better? For close range (less than 50 yards), both are sufficiently accurate and have roughly the same velocity and knock-down power. At 50 to 100 yards, a sabot slug in a rifled barrel is more accurate. Because of their heavy weight and low velocity, shotgun slugs of any type generally don't provide

BBs encased in a shotgun shell. FWP recommends using no smaller than #00 Buck in 12-gauge or 10-gauge and only at 40 yards or less.

MUZZLELOADERS

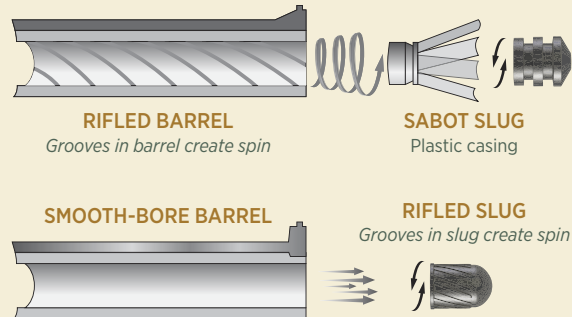
The difference between a modern deer or elk rifle and a muzzleloader rifle is that the modern gun shoots a cartridge in which the projectile (bullet) and gunpowder are combined in a metal "case" that gets loaded in the "breech," the opening above and slightly in front of the trigger. With muzzleloaders, the powder and projectile are separate. Gunpowder is poured into the barrel muzzle (end) followed by the projectile, which is then tapped down with a long rod. When the shooter fires a muzzleloader, a metal "striker" hits an ignition "cap" in the breech that ignites the powder.

Both muzzleloaders and modern rifles have "rifled" barrels that cause the bullet to spin and thus fly farther and more accurately.

Because they have a shorter lethal range than that of centerfire rifles, muzzleloaders are considered less dangerous in areas near where people live and travel.

Muzzleloaders used on WRAs have various restrictions. They must be a minimum of .45 caliber; use plain lead projectiles (sabots not allowed); be loaded with black powder, pyrodex, or an equivalent; and be incapable of being loaded from the breech

Shotguns fire a slug, a thumb-size lead or copper bullet that sits in the plastic casing of a shotgun shell.



Use a rifled slug in a non-rifled (smooth) shotgun barrel and a sabot slug in a rifled shotgun barrel.

rifle barrel. For a rifled shotgun barrel, you shoot what's known as a sabot (*SAY-bow*) slug, in which the projectile sits in a plastic casing that spins in the grooved barrel.

Jack Ballard is a writer in Red Lodge.

reliable accuracy beyond 100 yards. Note that some brands of rifled slugs work better than others. Test a few varieties to find which one works best for your gun.

Most WRAs also allow use of heavy shotgun "buckshot"—six to eight large pea-size

(see FWP hunting regulations for a full list of restrictions).

Muzzleloaders are very capable firearms for taking big game. One season, I harvested a bull elk, a buck deer, and a buck antelope in Montana, all with a budget .50 caliber muzzleloader. You can buy a basic muzzleloader setup including a budget rifle and necessary accessories for less than \$400, making it an affordable option for most hunters.

A modern muzzleloader is more accurate and provides more range than a shotgun that shoots slugs, even those with rifled barrels. Though the process for loading a muzzleloader is more complex than simply sticking a shell into a shotgun, it's easy to learn with a little practice. Also, with a muzzleloader you only get a single shot at an animal, requiring both competence and self-discipline.

Montana has never held a special muzzleloader season, but as this issue went to press, the state had proposed, subject to Fish and Wildlife Commission approval in September, a traditional-muzzleloader-only season that would run December 11-19, 2021. Hunters could use any license or permit that

SHORT SHOT The author with a whitetail buck taken at about 80 yards with his scope-mounted .460 Smith & Wesson. "It's not a tool for the recoil shy," he says.

HOW TO FIND WRAS IN MONTANA

To locate WRAs, visit the online FWP Hunt Planner at fwp.mt.gov/gis/maps/huntPlanner (or scan the QR code below). Click the "Big Game Restricted Areas" box, then click on the hunting districts (in red) on the map. Then open your FWP hunting regulations booklet to those hunting districts to see specific restrictions. Some privately owned lands, state school trust lands, and fishing access sites may have further restrictions, such as archery-only, no-weapon, or no-shooting designations. WRA restrictions and areas are also listed on pages 25-28 of the 2021 regulations booklet. To find out which FWP fishing access sites allow hunting (most do) and their weapons restrictions, visit myfwp.mt.gov/fishMT/explore or scan the QR code below right.

FWP Hunt Planner



Fishing Access Sites



was valid for deer or elk during the general big game season. Visit the FWP website at fwp.mt.gov in September for updates and details.

HANDGUNS

Traditional handguns also are legal where firearms are allowed on WRAs. Don't get confused about the "traditional" part. Modern semi-automatic handguns are just as legal as Old West-type revolvers. What aren't allowed are long-barreled "nontradi-

tional" handguns. On WRAs, a handgun's barrel length can't exceed 10.5 inches, nor can the handgun be shoulder mounted. It also must fire only a "straight-walled" cartridge not originally developed for rifles.

For hunting, experts recommend handguns with barrels 6 inches or longer to improve muzzle velocity and accuracy. The various .357 Magnum cartridges are generally considered the minimum for deer and black bears and the .44 Remington Magnum for elk. For big game hunting, use the heavier handgun bullets designed for penetration rather than the rapidly expanding ones used for personal defense.

Whether firing a shotgun, muzzleloader, or handgun, don't shoot at big game at distances beyond what gives you a high-percentage shot. Practice beforehand. Then limit your shots to distances at which you can consistently put five rounds into an 8-inch target from standing, sitting, kneeling, and prone shooting positions. For hunters accustomed to killing big game from 200 yards or farther with a regular rifle, passing up shots at those distances on WRAs requires self-restraint.

Learning to sneak close to a big game animal is difficult. But it's worth the effort for the extra hunting opportunities that Montana's many WRAs provide. 🐾



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: LON LAUBER; LISA BALLARD