



Giving Thanks in February

At Block Management cooperators' dinners each winter, hunters and FWP staff show their gratitude to landowners for providing access and habitat.

By Andrew McKean. Photos by Sean R. Heavey

As plates clatter and the collective warmth of a hundred people tucking into slabs of prime rib steam the winter windows of the Glendive Moose Lodge, Nancy Cullinan describes her "trophy album." It's a collection of photographs of deer, antelope, and prairie turkeys taken on her family's ranch northeast of this Yellowstone River town.

Holding each animal's antlers, horns, and wings are hunters—most wearing grins the size of Dawson County—whom Cullinan doesn't necessarily know by name. They're visitors to the ranch, invited and given free hunting access through Montana's Block Management Program. But they send photos to Cullinan every year as partial thanks for the opportunity to hunt. By all appearances, the hunting seems pretty good on the 12,000-plus-acre ranch. Hailing from Washington and Texas, Illinois and Minnesota, as well as from across Montana—many of the hunters return to the Cullinan Ranch year after year, most of them ready to make their

annual reservations the minute phone lines open in August.

"There's pictures of first deer, biggest deer, and sometimes it's a great big man with a tiny little forkhorn," laughs Nancy's husband, Jim. "We think of them all as trophies."

Nancy Cullinan's favorite trophy photo, adorning the cover of her album, is of a non-resident who's been hunting the ranch for years. Last year he returned with his father, who was in the final stages of terminal cancer. It's a photo of the two of them, posing at sunset on a rim above a web of eroded coulees and scoured washes.

"I guess that's why we do it, why we enroll our land in Block Management," says Cullinan, whose father-in-law has been opening his gates to hunters for 26 years, nearly since Montana's signature hunter-access program began. "We like to see successful hunters, especially those who appreciate and respect our land. It's also been a good way for us to manage wildlife on the ranch and to make a little extra income."

Andrew McKean is the hunting editor of Outdoor Life and a frequent contributor to Montana Outdoors. He lives with his family on a small ranch outside Glasgow. Sean R. Heavey is a photographer also based in Glasgow.



WE'VE GOT A WINNER! Above: At a landowner appreciation dinner in Glendive, FWP wildlife biologist Melissa Foster hands a door prize to a local Block Management cooperator. The prizes, donated by conservation clubs and local businesses, and the dinner are a way of thanking ranchers and farmers for enrolling their property in the popular hunting access program.

MULEY UPDATE FWP southeastern regional wildlife manager Brett Dorak updates guests on the status of eastern Montana's mule deer herds and other wildlife at a landowner appreciation dinner in Glendive.

Along the way, the Cullinans and their neighbors across eastern Montana have also forged durable relationships with biologists, game wardens, and other workers with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. The FWP staff administer Block Management, make sure that cooperators like the Cullinans remain satisfied with the program, and work to prevent hassles like littering and off-road driving as hundreds of hunters enter their property each season.

One way the state agency shows appreciation for the farmers and ranchers who

sign Block Management agreements is by hosting landowner dinners every winter in several towns around the state. The Cullinans and Jim's parents, John and Dana, all came to the Glendive Moose Lodge last February to feast on prime rib, hear Block Management Program and wildlife population updates, and visit with friends and neighboring ranchers.

"The least we can do"

Layers of conversation fill the hall, including talk of calf prices, a recent drought-busting

snowfall, and whether the Glendive Red Devils had the talent and drive to make a deep run at the upcoming state basketball tournament. Looking around the packed banquet hall at faces ruddy from winter windburn, Brad Schmitz makes an accounting of the multiple thousands of acres of private land represented by the Block Management cooperators in attendance.

"You have to remember that 80 percent of our land in this part of the state is private," Schmitz, FWP's regional supervisor for southeastern Montana, says. "We can't do

our jobs without these folks. Providing a \$20 steak and an evening out with the family is the least we can do to show how grateful we are that they open their gates.”

The evening before, at the Glasgow Block Management dinner, the mood was restrained. More than half the ranchers who had planned to attend couldn't make it, as a calving-season blizzard forced them to trade a free dinner with friends for a long night pushing newborn calves out of the weather.

The Block Management cooperators who made it to the Glasgow dinner talked about how the program has grown. “I used to have to make and hang my own [hunting access] signs and keep track of hunter days,” said Leonard Swenson, whose Milk River bottomland has been enrolled in the access program since the late 1990s. “But now the department does all that, and I can be as involved as much or as little as I want.”

The region's best habitat

Northeastern Montana FWP regional supervisor Drew Henry, who had worked directly with many of the farmers and ranchers in his previous role as the Glasgow-area wildlife biologist, thanked them for participating.

“We literally owe what we do to you who are out there on the ground, living and working among wildlife every day and taking care of what we consider to be the best habitat in our part of the state,” he told them.

For the most part, the transactional details of the Block Management Program—enrollment deadlines, payments determined by hunter usage, and hunting restrictions—were absent from conversations as biologists, wardens, and access technicians shared baked potatoes and beers with the landowners.

At one table, a rancher wondered if the decline of pronghorn on their place was part of a larger regional trend. At another, an upland-bird biologist asked and gained permission to conduct a breeding-season sharp-tailed grouse survey on a prairie ranch. In the back of the room, wheat farmers discussed the potential risks and rewards of planting dryland corn in the spring.

As the night wound down, Block Management cooperators shouldered into coats



and tightened neckerchiefs against the driving snow, while FWP personnel handed out flashlights and cattle-sorting flags. The lights would help in the dark night ahead, while the flags were for the spring when calves that survived this blizzard would be ready for branding and pasturing.

In Glendive, FWP personnel distribute Leatherman multi-tools to cooperators. Later, volunteers with a group called Hunters for Access pass around appreciation gifts, many provided by Main Street businesses

from Sidney to Miles City that recognize the economic contributions of hunters attracted by Montana's welcoming green Block Management signs.

“End of the day, every landowner involved in Block Management participates for a different reason,” says Travis Muscha, FWP's access coordinator for Region 7. “Sometimes it's for a bit of extra income. Sometimes it's to better manage the hunting crowds that would come anyway. Some just like to see hunters on their place but appreciate a little help from the department. But the idea for these dinners is pretty straightforward. They're simply a chance for FWP to say thank you to landowners for allowing public access.”

Before they part, the Glendive crowd—lively and boisterous in their first landowner appreciation dinner following pandemic shutdowns—join in singing happy birthday to John Cullinan. Ranchers in cowboy hats and farmers in Muck boots, a high-schooler still sweaty from basketball practice, FWP personnel in uniform shirts and jeans, even the volunteers who cooked and served the feast, all serenade the beaming 93-year-old, who basks in the attention of his neighbors and extended community of access providers. 🐾

FESTIVITIES AND FOOD Above: Glasgow-area rancher Leonard Swenson heads back to his table with a cattle-sorting flag. Below: Guests line up for the prime rib dinner.



GREAT GATHERING Clockwise from top: Travis Muscha, FWP regional access coordinator in Miles City, with a plaque commemorating a landowner's 25 years with Block Management; a volunteer serves up food; Wibaux-area Block Management cooperators Kip and Adele Stenson; Block Management cooperator Andrew Thiessen and his son; Region 7 Block Management staff members Annika Bollesen (left) and Bea Sturtz registering guests and handing out tickets for door prizes.

