



## Build, but not rest

CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM

Montana produces some of the nation's healthiest wildlife populations and greatest public hunting opportunities. But it might not for much longer. Social and economic changes threaten the state's strong traditions of wildlife conservation and public hunting.

Montana has done a remarkable job of restoring populations of elk, deer, pronghorn, and many other species that a century ago had nearly disappeared. A unique partnership of hunters, landowners, and state wildlife managers made that possible. Using hunters' license dollars, managers conduct extensive wildlife population surveys and develop science-based harvest regulations. Landowners across the state, who provide essential habitat and allow public hunting access, receive help from FWP and hunters on reducing wildlife depredation. Along with other Montanans, they also enjoy the sight of deer, elk, and other wild animals. Under this system of conserving wildlife, all partners contribute, and all partners benefit.

This arrangement has worked in large part because thousands of Montana landowners continue to allow public hunting. Their generosity is due to a combination of civic goodwill, support for America's democratic hunting traditions, and the assistance they receive in reducing wildlife depredation. But what happens when pri-

vate gates begin to close? Many longtime landowners are finding that it makes more economic sense to sell or lease their land for exclusive hunting access than to allow public hunting, as their family has done for generations. And many new landowners, for a variety of reasons, simply do not want to deal with public hunting on their land.

Of course, that is their private property right. Yet by asserting that right, a growing number of landowners are cutting off public access to what the courts have ruled is the public's wildlife. Unlike in most countries, wild animals in the United States are owned by the public, not by landowners. Here, each state holds wildlife in trust for its residents. Public wildlife ownership is the founding principle of what's known as the North American Wildlife Conservation Model, which has resulted in the restoration of elk, deer, pronghorn, and other wildlife populations in Montana and across the United States. When the public owns and has access to wildlife, the public commits to conserving wildlife. When Montana's elk, deer, pheasants, and other wild animals are locked behind private gates, the collective willingness of Montana hunters to conserve those populations diminishes.

Is there a new way to manage wildlife that recognizes both private property rights and public wildlife ownership rights in light of the new realities of a changing social and economic landscape? That is one of the most difficult big game management challenges facing Montana today.

Public access remains one of this department's highest priorities. We also continue to be concerned about the growing commercialization of the public's wildlife. But experience shows that successful wildlife conservation works only if all parties are involved in working out solutions and all parties benefit from those solutions. Yes, we need to build on Montana's best conservation traditions, but we should not rest entirely on those traditions. New ideas that acknowledge today's social and economic realities will go a long way toward ensuring that the great wildlife conservation gains made in the last century will continue into this new one.

—M. Jeff Hagener, *Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks*

## NATURAL WONDERS

Illustration by Peter Grosshauser

### ■ I like to hunt ruffed grouse. Where can I find them in Montana?

■ This handsome, black-and-brown, midsized game bird with the explosive flush is found in many mountainous areas of central and western Montana. Look along stream corridors and bottoms that have a mix of conifers and deciduous trees such as aspen, willow, and dogwood. Ruffed grouse numbers are usually highest within thick stands of young aspen that have trunks the diameter of silver dollars.

### ■ While hunting antelope last fall, I saw what appeared to be small bite marks in some prickly pear cactus. Do any animals actually eat cactus?

■ Many do, says Ryan Rauscher, FWP native species biologist in Glasgow. "Cactus are delicious and nutritious, which is the reason they have spines. They are also a source of moisture, making them attractive to small mammals such as deer mice that can nibble around the spines. I have even heard that if the spines are burned off, cattle will eat them."

