

A working-lands ignoramus

By Tom Dickson

One day last October I headed north from Helena toward Teton County to hunt pheasants and sharptails. I drove along the blue-ribbon stretch of the Missouri River, then continued past Tower Rock State Park, where Lewis and Clark left the prairie in 1805 and entered the Rocky Mountains. To the west I could see Sun River Wildlife Management Area, where, years ago, my wife and I saw our first sharp-tailed grouse on a lek one chilly March morning. To the east was Freezout Lake WMA, where I'd spent many windy December afternoons huddled on the eastern shore of Pond 4 with my old springer, hunting late-season mallards.

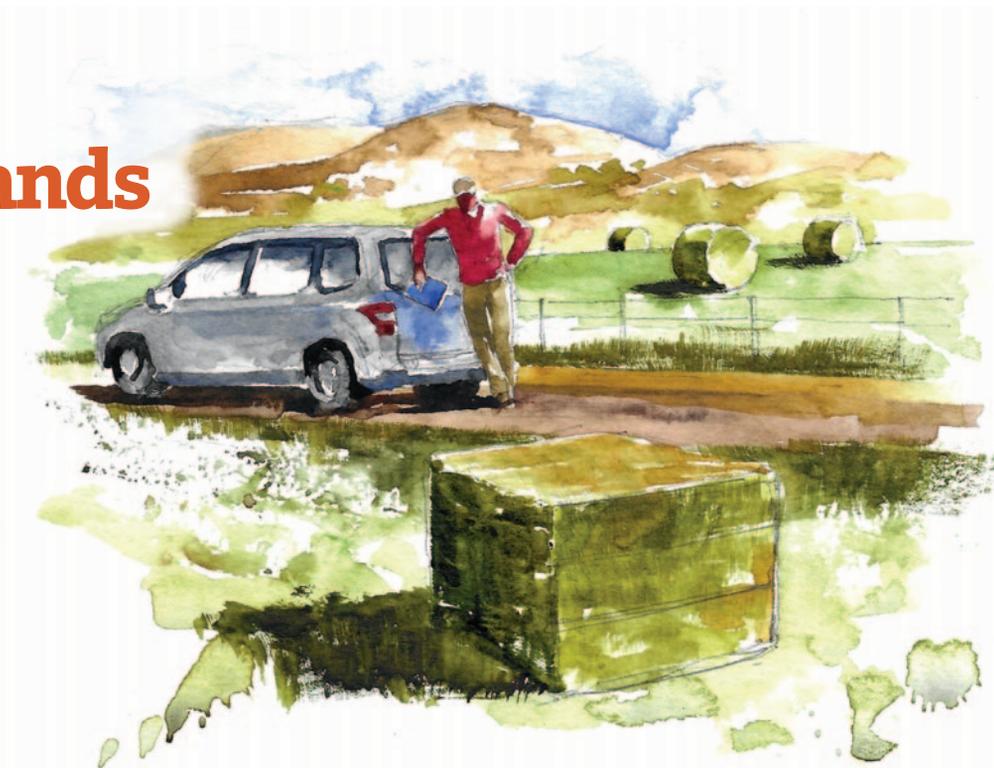
Then I drove past a Hutterite colony and looked out at the harvested fields of... of *what*? As I continued north, I began to realize that not only did I not know what those particular crops were, I had no clue as to what *anything* was on the farmland and ranchland I was driving past.

What were those old wooden sheds in the distance, or the rows of round aluminum bins? Why were some hay bales round and others rectangular? I drove past a sign at a ranch entrance that advertised "Registered Polled Angus Steers." What on earth?

Farther along, I passed a herd of horses. Were they stallions? Mares? Geldings? What even *is* a gelding? And the difference between a foal and a colt? No idea.

On it went. By the time I reached my hunting spot, I was ashamed to admit to myself that after two decades of writing about Montana's outdoors, I really only knew about the state's *recreational* outdoors. I could talk knowledgeably about state parks and national forests, federal wildlife refuges and state wildlife management areas, fishing access sites, and school trust lands. I knew where to fish and camp and hunt and moun-

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tain bike and cross-country ski. I could tell you where to find huckleberries and how to book a U.S. Forest Service cabin.

But the definition of "silage," or how a combine works, or where Montana farmers export their wheat and barley? Not a clue.

My expertise was (and continues to be) in what could be called Montana's *play* lands. But I know little about the state's *working* lands. This is the majority of Montana's land base where people make a living producing livestock, growing crops, and logging trees. Not to mention the transportation, energy, and communication infrastructure supporting their work: railways, highways, power lines, transformers, cell towers, wind turbines, and natural gas wells.

I drive by these things almost every day, and I comprehend them no more than I do the workings of the James Webb Space Telescope.

For the next few weeks, I kept a list of all the things I saw from my car window and would not have been able to explain to a fifth-grader. Why are some wire fences linear strands and others woven squares? Why are there different crop irrigation devices? How about Montana sheep: Are they raised for lamb chops or wool or both? Who maintains the multi-colored beehive boxes that show up in fields in the middle of nowhere? Why is the ditch along a road called a barrow pit?

And are these much-altered but often grain-rich lands harmful or helpful to wildlife?

After going online for answers, I soon found I needed more than the internet to satisfy my curiosity. Over the past year, I've asked various experts if I could drive around with them to learn about the surrounding landscape: county extension agents, ranchers, farmers, sawmill operators, railroad employees, Montana Department of Transportation staff, and more.

I'm filling a notebook with their answers. When I'm done, I'll share what I learn in *Montana Outdoors*.

Like me, you probably know a lot about where to hike, backpack, kayak, hunt, camp, and fish in Big Sky Country. You're familiar with the scenic highlights that grace tourism calendars—Glacier National Park, the Chinese Wall, Makoshika State Park's badlands, the Yellowstone River in its autumn splendor, and so on.

But I also suspect that, if you grew up in a city or suburb like I did, you may not know much about the places in between the calendar pages—the ordinary, unheralded working landscapes where people carve out a living each day. That, too, is Montana's outdoors, and I think some of us need to know a bit more about it. 🐾

Readers: If you spot an unidentifiable structure or device while driving Montana's backroads, send me a description at tdickson@mt.gov and I'll see if I can learn what it is.