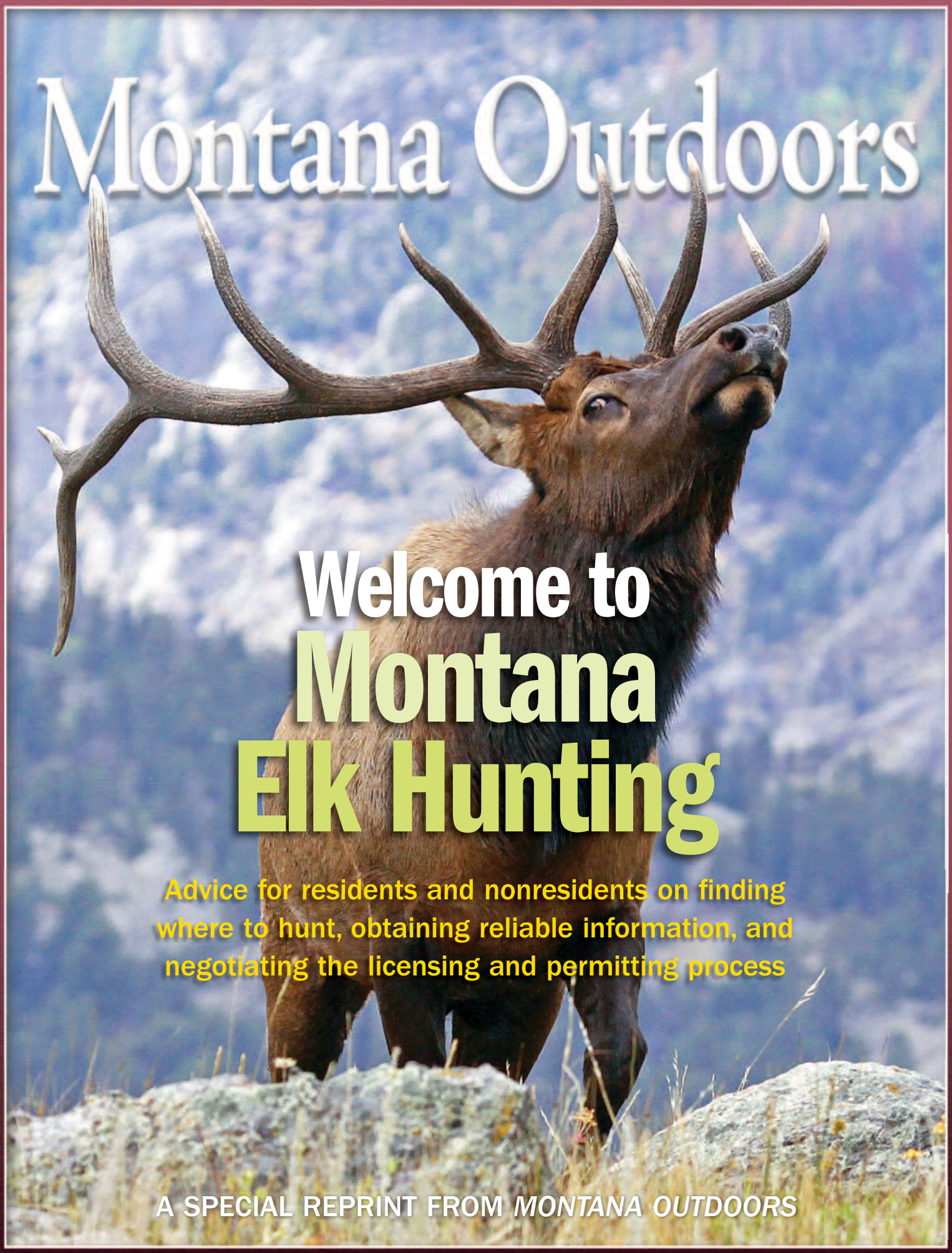

Montana Outdoors

Welcome to Montana Elk Hunting

Advice for residents and nonresidents on finding where to hunt, obtaining reliable information, and negotiating the licensing and permitting process

A SPECIAL REPRINT FROM *MONTANA OUTDOORS*

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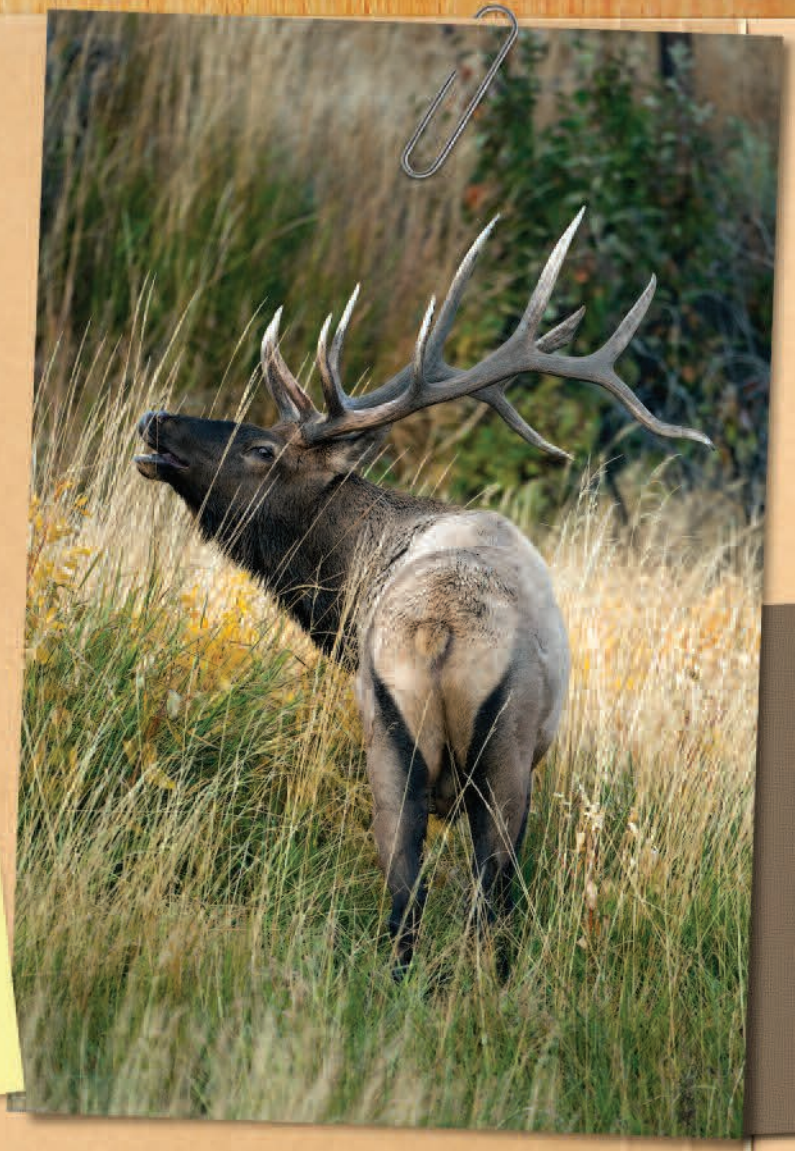
BY TOM DICKSON



Important Note: This guide does not contain all of Montana's elk hunting regulations. Before hunting elk, all hunters are responsible for reading and knowing the regulations, available on-line and at all FWP offices.

To a beginner—whether resident or nonresident—trying to learn about elk hunting in Montana can seem like entering a secret society. The elk hunting world is replete with inscrutable numbers and symbols (210-80, 390-00, HD, WMA, BMA, LPT), intimidating restrictions ("Elk HD 424 may be subject to 12-hour closure for the antlerless portion of the general brow-tined bull or antlerless elk season...."), and a thick regulations handbook. The only thing missing is the special handshake.

Then there's the challenge of finding somewhere to hunt. Many longtime hunters are understandably reluctant to share with newcomers the locations of their public land secret spots, earned through years of hard work and exploration. Other experienced hunters have gained access to private land through relatives, friends, and business associates—relationships that are tough to develop quickly.

Fortunately, deciphering the mysterious lingo, negotiating the complex procedures, and even locating a hunting spot are not as hard as they might appear. What follows is information from FWP wildlife biologists and front desk staff who regularly explain the rules, regulations, and language of Montana elk hunting to people learning about the sport for the first time.

Where to hunt

Elk range across several million acres of Montana in 148 hunting districts. Most live west of a line running from Glacier National Park to Yellowstone National Park. Roughly 50 percent of the annual elk harvest comes from southwestern Montana (FWP Region 3), in places like the Gallatin and Beaverhead-Deerlodge national forests. Elk also live along the Rocky Mountain Front and in the Big Belt, Little Belt, Pioneer, Bitterroot, Purcell, Mission, and Cabinet mountains, as well as in the Swan, Garnet, and Whitefish ranges.

Two essential resources to help you decide where to hunt are the FWP Montana Elk Management Plan, available on the FWP website, and *Elk Hunting Montana: Finding Success on the Best Public Lands*, published by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.

The 400-page elk plan, last updated in 2004, lists public access opportunities, elk harvest over the previous decade, and other helpful information for each of the state's 35 EMUs, or elk management units. (Each EMU contains from two to five hunting districts, or HDs.) The plan also includes a history of elk management in Montana,

statewide harvest and hunter numbers over the past decades, and the comparative densities, by EMU, of bull elk and antlerless elk harvest during selected years.

Elk Hunting Montana, avaliable at booksellers, divides Montana's hunting range into 19 geographic areas. For each area, the book provides an overview of elk distribution, explains where to hunt, and offers hunting strategies. It also includes a matrix—based on FWP harvest data and experiences by Montana hunters—indicating whether each area has low to high elk numbers, hunter densities, trophy bull potential, and proportions of roadless areas.

Once you have a rough idea where you want to hunt, check the FWP elk regulations (available at FWP offices and fwp.mt.gov) to see what hunting districts you will be in and the boundaries, special seasons, regulations, and required permits that apply there.

HUNTING PRIVATE LAND

Though most elk in Montana during much of the year are on public land, many are on private property, especially at season's end. Snow and cold drive them from mountains down into valleys, which are composed primarily of ranches and farms. Gaining access to this private land is not always easy, even for locals. The exception is on Block Management Areas (see below). The best way to get access to private land is to ask politely well before the season begins. The odds are better if you ask to hunt for antlerless elk only.

BLOCK MANAGEMENT AREAS

Montana's Block Management Program provides free hunting access to private land, under various restrictions. Eastern Montana holds most of the 8 million acres in Block Management, but tens of thousands of acres are in western Montana's prime elk range. New Block Management maps and tabloids are available each year at all area and regional FWP offices starting in mid-August. Call or write the FWP regional office where you want to hunt and ask for their annual "Hunting Access Guide." This booklet summarizes the current year's Block Management opportunities and the rules and regulations for each area. You can also access maps to all Block Management Areas at fwp.mt.gov.

Other helpful hunt planning resources

FWP Hunt Planner—Found at fwp.mt.gov, this interactive website provides detailed elk drawing statistics for licenses and permits, useful for figuring out which districts have the best odds for lottery drawings.

FWP website (fwp.mt.gov)—In addition to the Hunt Planner, you can find information on the Block Management Program, hunting public land, obtaining permission on private land, and more.

The Complete Book of Elk Hunting—Informative elk hunting books abound, but this one published by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation covers hunting situations and strategies particular to Montana—especially the state's southwestern region.

"Too Many Places to Hunt"—Advice on figuring out where to hunt on Montana's overwhelming 30 million acres of public land, *Montana Outdoors* article, September–October 2007.

"Montana Access Guide to Federal and State Lands"—This brochure, available at FWP regional offices and fwp.mt.gov, details all state and federal land access opportunities.

Montana Hunting Companion (msl.mt.gov/hunting/)—Developed by the Montana State Library and FWP, this interactive website provides links to several state mapping sites and also provides essential hunting information.

Essential Maps

Montana public and private land ownership maps (http://fwp.mt.gov/hunting/hunterAccess/toolkit.html)—This website has two map series covering the entire state. One shows all public lands; the other all private lands and the names (though not addresses or phone numbers) of every landowner.

DeLorme Montana Atlas & Gazetteer and ***Benchmark Maps' Montana Road & Recreation Atlas***—Tabloid-sized map books sold at gas stations and sporting goods stores.

BLM maps—Officially called Surface Management Edition Maps, these show public and private land boundaries. Sold at BLM offices statewide, on-line at the agency's Montana–Dakotas website (blm.gov/mt/st/en.html), or at many sporting goods stores.

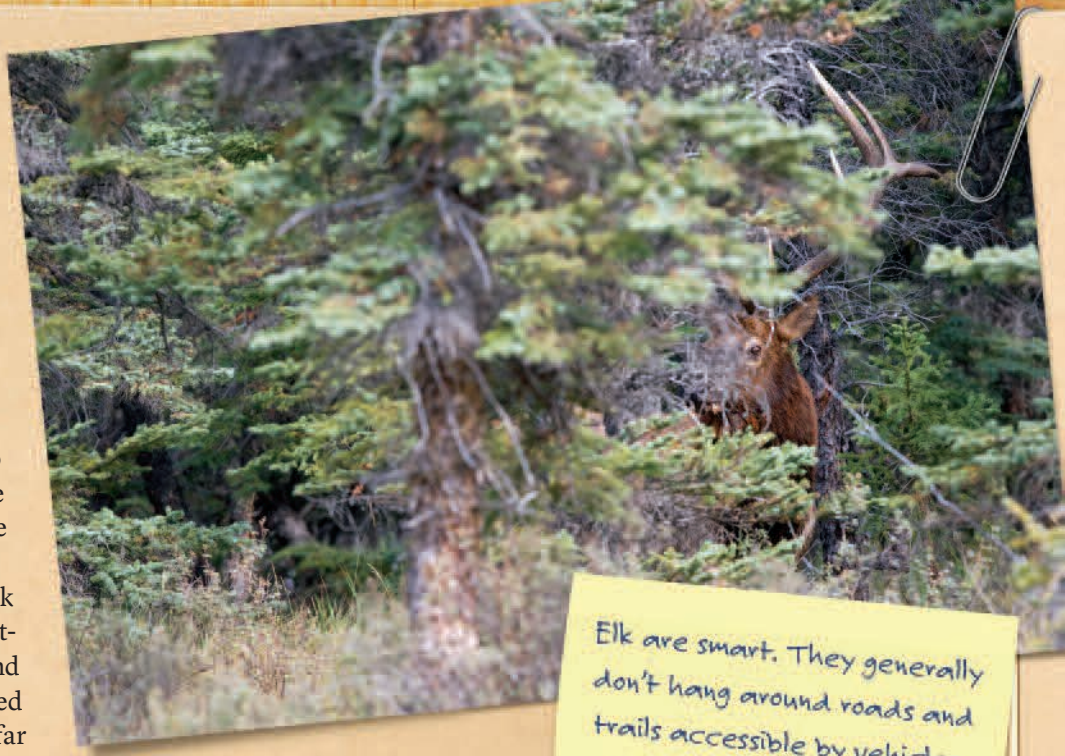
National forest maps—Sold at USFS offices and FWP offices.

U.S. Geological Survey topographic maps—Sold on-line and at sporting goods stores throughout Montana.

"Directory of Montana Maps"—Phone numbers and addresses for obtaining county plat books as well as maps from state and federal land-management agencies in Montana. Available at fwp.mt.gov and all FWP offices.

Expectations

Think beforehand about what you want most out of your hunt. Maybe your primary goal is simply to spend a week in Montana's scenic mountains with a rifle or bow and the chance of killing an elk. Maybe you're most interested in the elk camp experience. Maybe you'd be satisfied with killing an antlerless elk. Or maybe you are determined to kill a big bull. Some expectations are more likely and realistic—and more under your control—than others.



Elk are smart. They generally don't hang around roads and trails accessible by vehicles. Don't plan on seeing many elk from your truck.

▸ **Elk hunting versus deer hunting:** Elk hunting is typically harder than deer hunting. Elk move more often and farther, and they are often in steeper and more rugged terrain. Elk hunting usually requires far more effort, and success rates are far lower.

▸ **The odds of killing an elk in Montana:** Over the past two decades, the statewide average annual success rate for bulls and cows combined has been roughly 20 percent. That means that each year, one out of every five hunters kills an elk. On average, successful hunters in Montana spend 10 to 12 days hunting before killing an elk.

▸ **The odds of killing a big bull:** Each year only about 4 percent of elk hunters kill a 6x6 (six points, or tines, on each antler) or larger bull. Most of those elk are shot by local hunters who have figured out elk movement patterns or hunt the backcountry for many days, and also by hunters who hire outfitters and have access to prime private land.

▸ **Time:** The more time you spend in Montana's elk country—scouting before the season and hunting during—the better your odds of finding good spots to hunt and see elk. It's unrealistic to expect to kill an elk by hunting only a few days.

▸ **Physical fitness:** Hunters in good physical condition are more likely to reach areas where elk hang out. The ability to hike with a pack for 5 or 6 miles each day increases your odds substantially. Generally, the harder the hunting conditions, the more likely you are to see elk. To become fit enough, consider spending some time each day hiking hills for at least three months before your hunt. If the landscape where you live is flat, hike up and down riverbanks or the stairs of office buildings. Gradually add weight to a pack until you can go at least 5 miles uphill with 20 pounds on your back without keeling over. Check with your physician before undertaking any exercise program.

When to hunt

Montana offers some of the longest hunting seasons in the West. Archery begins in early September, backcountry firearms starts in mid-September, and the general season runs from late October to the Sunday after Thanksgiving. Bowhunters focus on the pre-rut and rut period of September, when they have the best opportunity of calling in a bull. In a few backcountry areas, firearms hunters also can lure bulls by calling during September and early October in backcountry areas. Hunting this time of year requires peak fitness to reach the high country where elk live. By the time the general firearms season begins in late October, rutting activity is winding down. Intense hunting pressure on opening weekend sends both bulls and cows deep into the timber, often at high elevations. Hunters find elk in early November mainly by hiking into heavy timber or finding where elk emerge at dusk and dawn to feed on fringes of open parks. Elk stay at high elevations, resting and building fat reserves for winter, until snow or cold pushes them down into the valleys. Though elk become easier to locate then, the low land is mostly privately owned. So even though elk are often more visible later in the season, they can be less accessible to hunters.

Licenses and permits

GENERAL ELK LICENSE

A general elk license is the basic license for hunting elk. It can be used only according to the specific regulations of the hunting district in which you hunt. Many districts also offer a separate antlerless (B) license (see page 6) to hunt cow elk. Some districts require a special permit to hunt bull elk, while cow elk may be available with a general elk license. Look for "General Elk License" in your hunting districts in the FWP elk regulations booklet to see what restrictions apply.

RESIDENT GENERAL ELK LICENSE

Resident hunters may purchase this license over the counter at FWP offices and other license vendors for $20 plus the required conservation license ($8) and hunter access enhancement fee ($2). Residents may also buy a sportsman's license (prices vary), which includes a general elk license. Some disabled, youth, and senior hunters may qualify for discounted licenses.

NONRESIDENT GENERAL ELK LICENSE

Nonresidents can't buy their general elk license over the counter. They must obtain what's known as a "combination" license, which includes a general elk license as well as several other licenses. Montana makes 17,000 of these licenses available each year. Demand is usually greater than supply, so to get a combination license most years* you need to apply in a random lottery drawing for either a:

- **Big game (deer and elk) combination license** ($976), which is also good for fishing and upland bird hunting, or an
- **Elk combination license** ($826), which is also good for fishing and upland bird hunting.

You can apply for only one of these licenses each year.

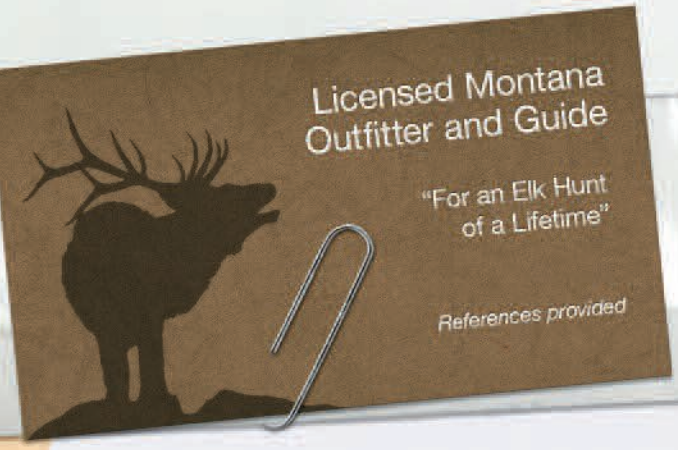
Both nonresident combination licenses include the conservation license and access fee required to hunt in Montana.

Bowhunters must also purchase a nonresident bow license for an extra $10.

Outfitters

Hiring an outfitter can be an attractive option for a hunter coming to Montana for the first time. It's also desirable for anyone who wants to pay someone to find a place to hunt, navigate the permitting process, locate elk, arrange for food and lodging, and—if things go right—pack your elk out of the backcountry. A guided five-day elk hunt in Montana runs roughly $3,000 to $5,000, not including the cost of the nonresident combination license.

For about half the price, consider a "drop camp," in which an outfitter packs you and your gear into an area and drops you off for a few days. You set up camp and hunt on your own. The outfitter returns several days later to pack everything back to the trailhead. Some drop camps allow you to hike in and use a wall tent and cooking equipment the outfitter has already set up.



To find an outfitter, visit the Montana Outfitters and Guides Association website (montanaoutfitters.org), which includes a list of questions to ask outfitters you interview.

Note on terminology: ***Guides*** are licensed individuals who lead the hunts. Guides work for ***outfitters***, who own the business of providing hunting services. Many outfitters are also themselves guides.

No more outfitter-sponsored nonresident licenses

In 2010, Montana voters passed Initiative 161, which eliminated the outfitter-sponsored combination variable-priced license. These licenses, which cost more than the two other nonresident combination licenses, were available to nonresident elk hunters without having to go through a lottery. In addition to eliminating this option, I-161 increased the cost of nonresident combination elk licenses.

Licenses and permits *(continued)*

ELK B LICENSE

An elk B license (resident, $25; nonresident, roughly $280), awarded by lottery, is a second license that allows a hunter to take an antlerless elk in certain hunting districts that have overabundant elk. This is in addition to an elk you may tag with your general or combination elk license, thus allowing you to harvest two elk. To buy or use an elk B license, residents don't need a general elk license and nonresidents don't need a combination license. But both still need to pay the access fee and buy the conservation license (page 5). Many hunting districts offering elk B licenses consist of mostly private land, so gaining access can be tough. Some over-the-counter elk B licenses are available, but only for a few hunting districts where public access is extremely limited. The application deadline is January 2, and results are announced in late July.

If you draw an elk B license for a specific hunting district, you can only fill that tag there. But you can still hunt elk in that or any other hunting district with your general elk license under the specific regulations there.

SURPLUS B LICENSES

Each year some hunting districts offer surplus elk B licenses, left over after the late July lottery drawing ($20 resident, $273 nonresident, plus access fee and conservation license). In early August, surplus licenses go on sale over the counter and on-line until the quotas are filled. Because many surplus licenses are in hunting districts where most of the elk are on private land, hunters need to find out about Block Management Areas there or seek permission from a landowner. Some elk B licenses may be used only on private or state land and not national forests. Check the elk hunting regulations to see which restrictions apply.

ELK EITHER-SEX PERMITS

Elk permits, most allotted by drawings, allow you to hunt in a restricted area or time period or to harvest a bull where bull harvest restrictions exist for hunters who have only a general elk license. (Because most bull permits are "either sex," you also have the option of taking a cow or a calf.)

Permits are not a second license for killing an additional elk. Rather, you must use them with your general elk license.

Up to 10 percent of all permits are available to nonresidents. You may need a permit, along with your general license, to hunt bull elk in certain hunting districts. Review the elk hunting district maps in the hunting regulations to see if a permit is required. If so, you must apply by March 15.

Permits and licenses are labeled with a three-digit number followed by a dash and then a two-digit number (such as "345-20"). The first three digits identify the hunting district, and the last two digits are FWP codes for additional restrictions related to that license or permit.

Learn about the hunting district you wish to hunt before applying for a permit. For instance, don't put in for a backcountry area if you aren't willing and prepared to backpack in. And don't apply in hunting districts that are mostly private land if you aren't certain you can get permission.

How to obtain a permit or license

- Visit fwp.mt.gov, go to "Licenses and Permits," and download a blank application to fill in and mail to FWP.
- Request a printed copy, either at the Licenses and Permits section of fwp.mt.gov or by calling (406) 444-2950.
- Apply online at FWP's Online Licensing System
- Apply in person at an FWP regional office.

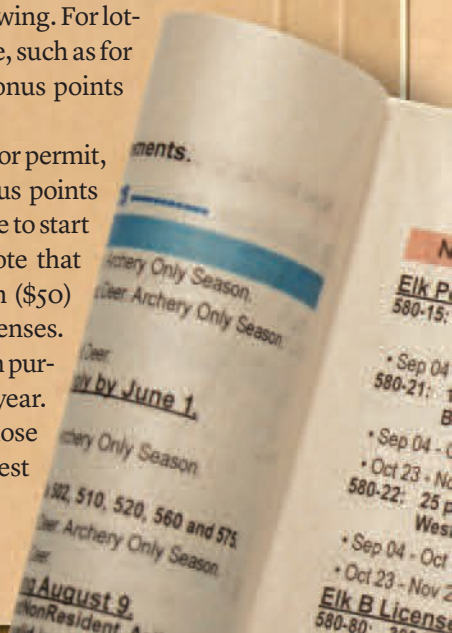
BOWHUNTING LICENSES

In Montana, you may hunt elk with a bow during the archery season and then hunt with a firearm during the regular season. Resident and nonresident bowhunters need to purchase or apply for the licenses and permits listed previously and also buy a bow license ($10 for both residents and nonresidents). To buy a bow license, you must provide either a National Bowhunter Education Foundation course certificate of completion or proof (archery stamp, tag, permit, or license) that you bowhunted in Montana, another state, or a Canadian province during a previous year.

BONUS POINT SYSTEM

This is a way to increase your odds of drawing a license or permit. For $2 (resident) or $20 (nonresident) per species, you may purchase one bonus point every year for each license or permit you apply for. These points accumulate each year you are unsuccessful. Bonus points don't "move you up the preference ladder," as many hunters believe. Instead, they are like extra tickets in a lottery. The more points you accumulate, the more chances are entered for you into the drawing. Keep in mind that many other hunters are accumulating points, so they too have "extra tickets" added to each drawing. For lotteries where competition is fierce, such as for either-sex (bull) permits, the bonus points don't make much difference.

Note that if you draw a license or permit, you lose your accumulated bonus points for that license or permit and have to start over the following year. Also note that there is a true preference system ($50) for nonresident combination licenses. In this case, each nonresident can purchase one preference point each year. Licenses are awarded first to those who have accumulated the greatest number of preference points.



Legal elk definitions

Some hunting districts have special regulations restricting elk harvest to certain sizes of bulls. These regulations produce bigger bulls and increase the ratio of male to female elk so more bulls are available to breed.

Antlerless elk: Male or female with no antlers, or both antlers are less than 4 inches long as measured from the top of the skull. Generally these are calves and cows.

Antlered bull: An elk with one or two antlers at least 4 inches long as measured from the top of the skull.

Spike bull: An elk, usually 1½ years old (also known as a yearling), with antlers that do not branch. Or, if branched, the point (tine) is less than 4 inches long from the tip to the main antler beam. Roughly 20 percent of yearling bulls have a point longer than 4 inches long.

Brow-tined bull: An elk with one or both antlers having a point on the lower half (see photo below) that is at least 4 inches long.

TOP TO BOTTOM: NEAL & MJ MISHLER; FRANCIS & JANICE BERGQUIST; DONALDMJONES.COM; JEREMIE HOLLMAN

YOUR ALS NUMBER

Like many states, Montana assigns each hunter a unique identification number (ALS stands for Automated Licensing System). Your ALS number is your birth date (month, day, year) followed by another one-, two-, or three-digit number. Once you receive your ALS number, you can use it to check your status in license and permit drawings. If you forget your ALS number, look it up at fwp.mt.gov (search for "MyFWP").

REFUNDS

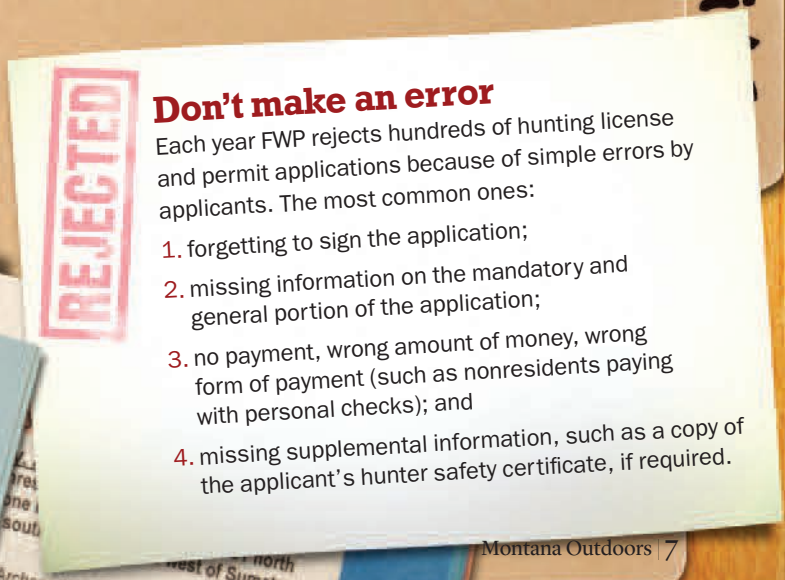
When you apply for a lottery license or permit, you pay at that time. If you are drawn, FWP mails you the license or permit. If you aren't drawn, FWP sends you a refund check minus a $5 application fee for each license or permit you applied for (to cover printing and processing costs). FWP cannot refund a license or permit unless the licensee dies or has—and can document—a medical emergency or a death in the immediate family. The exception is with nonresident combination licenses. For those, FWP grants refunds for any reason for unused licenses turned in by August 1 (80 percent refund) or before the start of the general elk hunting season (50 percent refund). For more information, call (406) 444-2950.

NONRESIDENT COMBINATION LICENSE ALTERNATE'S LIST

When FWP grants refunds on nonresident combination licenses, it then reissues them to nonresident hunters who have asked to be put on the "alternate's list." The odds of obtaining a combination license this way varies greatly from year to year. From mid-April to early May, you may request to be listed as an alternate (see fwp.mt.gov for details). FWP holds a random drawing in mid-May to determine the order in which hunters' names appear on the list. Preference goes to nonresident hunters who correctly applied for that year's combination license but were unsuccessful. The website allows you to check your relative position on the list throughout summer and fall.

NONRESIDENT LANDOWNERS

Nonresidents who own land in Montana still have to put in for a nonresident combination license if they want to hunt elk on their land or elsewhere. State law stipulates that only Montana residents can buy a general elk license over the counter. However, both resident and nonresident landowners receive special opportunities in drawing certain special permits or licenses. In each hunting district, 15 percent of special permits are set aside for landowners who own 640 or more acres of land used by elk in that hunting district.



Don't make an error

Each year FWP rejects hundreds of hunting license and permit applications because of simple errors by applicants. The most common ones:

1. forgetting to sign the application;
2. missing information on the mandatory and general portion of the application;
3. no payment, wrong amount of money, wrong form of payment (such as nonresidents paying with personal checks); and
4. missing supplemental information, such as a copy of the applicant's hunter safety certificate, if required.

The hunt

KILLING AN ELK

Many people accustomed to hunting deer approach elk hunting underprepared. Elk generally move farther and more frequently than deer. It usually takes more hiking, especially more uphill hiking, to reach elk areas. The caliber of rifle or type of bullet used for deer may not be enough for elk, which are much larger. Read up on calibers and loads suggested for bringing down an elk. Learn where the elk's kill zone is. Elk often don't die as easily or quickly as deer, even with a killing shot. Sometimes several shots are required. Mortally wounded elk will often walk or run several hundred yards or more before dropping.

PACKING AN ELK OUT

A field-dressed adult bull elk weighs anywhere from 300 to 500 pounds, a cow 200 to 300 pounds, and even a calf weighs 100 to 150 pounds. That's a lot of meat to haul.

One option is to pack the entire animal out yourself. Such a chore is easiest if you bone out the meat and make several trips to and from your vehicle. Dragging an entire elk out of the woods is nearly impossible for one person, except in the rare cases where the trip is all downhill with snow on the ground and no downed timber blocking the route. Another option is to rent a game cart from the nearest sporting goods store. Or hire beforehand a horsepacker—get names from the local game warden, meat processor, or taxidermist—to haul out your elk.

▸**Spoilage:** Early season hunters should know ahead of time how to prevent an elk from spoiling in warm weather. Three tips for cooling the carcass in the field: From the inside of the carcass, split the backbone lengthwise with a hatchet; cut open the hip at the socket joint; roll the carcass up onto logs to get it off the ground.

GRIZZLY BEARS

Roughly half of Montana's elk range overlaps grizzly range. To reduce the chances of running into a bear, watch for sign such as scat and tracks, avoid thick cover, and don't become so focused on following prey that you stumble upon a grizzly. Always carry approved bear spray, keep it handy, and know how to use it. When camping, follow U.S. Forest Service food storage guidelines. If you kill an elk, be especially wary of bears as you field dress the animal and when you return to the carcass to pick up another load of meat. Learn more about safety in bear country at fwp.mt.gov. If you are uncomfortable with the idea of hunting in grizzly country, visit the website and compare the range maps of grizzly bears and elk.

Other information

TROPHY BULL AREAS

Montana has many areas renowned for trophy elk—including parts of the Snowy, Judith, Big Belt, Highwood, and Bull mountains. The Missouri River Breaks and the Elkhorns have become especially well known. Hunters hoping to hunt these and other trophy areas should know it's difficult to draw a permit because so many hunters put in for one.

DENVERBRYAN.COM

In the Elkhorns (HD 380), southwest of Helena, any hunter with a general elk license may hunt a spike bull. But to hunt a cow you need an elk B license, and to hunt a branch-antlered bull you need a special permit, available only by lottery drawing. Much of the private land surrounding the Elkhorns is in Block Management, which provides public access.

In the Missouri River Breaks (HDs 410, 417, 621, 622, 631, 632, 652, and 700), hunting for bulls—both for firearms and, since 2009, archery—is by permit only. Access to private land in the Breaks can be difficult, though not impossible. There are also some opportunities there to hunt cow elk.

TIM CHRISTIE

WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN CALLING FWP

It's fine to call FWP offices for advice on elk hunting. But don't expect staff there to tell you exactly where to find elk. Elk move around. Where they are one year—or even one day—they may not be the next. As one front desk worker at a busy regional office says, "If we knew where to get an elk easily, all of us here would shoot one every year, and that's definitely not the case." FWP staff can provide general information about public land and Block Management Areas in specific regions.

CAMP OR HOTEL?

Figure out where you will spend nights well in advance of your hunting trip. If you plan to stay at a motel, book a room early. In some popular elk hunting spots, hotels fill up quickly and hunters book rooms up to a year in advance. If you camp, prepare for winter conditions, with freezing temperatures and snow.

ADDITIONAL ADVICE

▸**Bring warm and waterproof clothes.** Even in September, elk areas can have snow, cold rain, and low temperatures. By November, deep snow and freezing temperatures are common. Dress in layers. Make sure your boots are sturdy, waterproof, and well broken in.

▸**Always carry an emergency kit** containing first-aid supplies, fire-starting materials, a whistle, a space blanket, and a compass in case you become injured or lost.

▸**Carry lots of water.** Dehydration is one of the most common causes of hunter fatigue and weakness, especially in the high, dry mountain air.

▸**Have fun.** And don't get discouraged. Keep in mind that most elk hunters, even highly experienced ones, don't shoot an elk every year. If you don't see elk, keep hunting. They are out there. The key to a successful hunt is having a good time, not necessarily killing an elk.

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.

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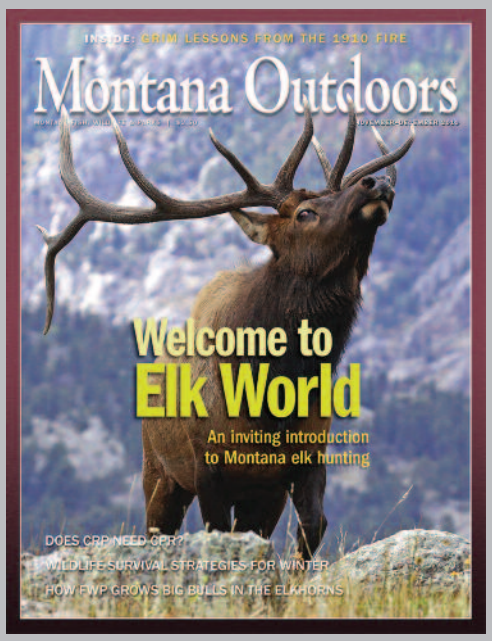

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