

Dave Watts can hardly contain his enthusiasm.

"I've been looking for a 1,000-yard shooting range for a long time," says Watts, a retired wildlife biologist from Ohio who moved to Montana several years ago.

As he talks, Watts becomes increasingly animated, thumbing through a stack of gun magazines stacked neatly on his kitchen counter.

"My goal is to take into account all of the ballistics information, like caliber and powder and bullet weight," he says, "then know what the humidity is, the wind, the elevation. That's the challenge of factoring in everything. Challenge and satisfaction are almost the same word."

So passionate is Watts about testing his long-distance shooting skills that in 2004 he plunked down \$1,000 to become a life member of the yet-to-be-built Great Falls Shooting Sports Complex, based only on the promise it would eventually contain a 1,000-yard range.

Such is the zeal of shooters.

While the days of sighting in a hunting rifle behind the barn or plinking at tin cans off the back porch have not disappeared, they are receding like the rural life those activities embody. In 1999, to help fill the need for shooting sites, the Montana legislature put into law an existing program administered by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. The program provides grants to shooting clubs, sports groups, and other organizations to develop and improve public shooting ranges.

Montana has 140 shooting ranges in 47 of the state's 56 counties. Those ranges include public and private facilities, covering the spectrum of the shooting sports: rifle, shotgun, pistol, and archery.

According to Kurt Cunningham, who administers the program for FWP, shooting ranges do more than provide people with places to discharge firearms.

"Target shooting is a huge sport in the United States and worldwide," he says. "Ranges are also used by hunters practicing their marksmanship, law enforcement per-

sonnel, and even by Boy Scouts earning merit badges. They are also important recreational sites for small communities."

Local shot spot

Take, for example, White Sulphur Springs, population 994. Until the local 14-member sportsmen's club built a shooting range in 2003, the Meagher County seat lacked an official shooting area.

"There was no place for the people of White Sulphur Springs to shoot, unless they were trespassing or shooting on national forest land," says Jerry Churchill, manager of the new shooting range.

The Meagher County Sportsmen's Association found a rancher willing to lease 66 acres, convinced the county commission to build an access road, and sought grants from a local foundation and the state Shooting Range Development Program.

"They did a really good job," says Cunningham. "Using in-kind contributions and grant money from the Shooting Range Development Program, they pretty much

got the range built in just one year."

The new facility has outdoors targets at 100, 200, and 300 yards and a heated 100-by-27-foot building that houses an indoor .22 range. In the process, the sportsmen's club grew to almost 60 members.

Churchill says that local hunter education, bowhunter education, and 4-H shooting sports classes use the facility free of charge. Young shooters graduating from the programs are given a free one-year pass to the range, with the hope they will become members later.

Providing safe outlets for shooters makes sense because if people want to shoot, many will eventually find someplace to do so. That often leads to trespassing, shooting in public areas off limits to firearms, and other problems.

Terry Hill, an FWP game warden in Great Falls, says unauthorized shooting is commonplace around the city. Enforcement officials in other Montana communities lacking public shooting facilities say the same thing. In Billings, the two private gun

clubs have long waiting lists for membership. Shooters unwilling to wait for a vacancy eventually found a piece of federal Bureau of Land Management acreage 17 miles north of town. The site quickly turned into a glass-littered dump.

"People go there and shoot bottles, televisions, pumpkins, you name it," says Chuck Ward, BLM law enforcement ranger.

Because the Billings area lacks a public shooting range, Ward favors keeping the BLM site open. The spot has a tall earthen backstop, so it can be used without bullets dangerously straying. Another reason, says Ward, is that if the site were closed, "people would just take all these problems elsewhere. We might as well cut our losses and contain the abuse there."

The Great Falls range

Ward estimates that roughly 5,000 people a year visit the unofficial BLM shooting site. Those are numbers the Great Falls shooting complex promoters hope to attract once their new facility is completed. The group

RIGHT ON TARGET

Hunters, peace officers, and recreational marksmen are zeroing in on Montana's growing number of shooting ranges

By Bruce Auchly



FIRING FOR FUN Montana's 140 shooting ranges are primarily used by recreational shooters, who shoot for reasons ranging from personal satisfaction to hopes of winning an Olympic medal. Left and below left: At a range near Troy, a father shows his would-be Olympian where her shots hit a target, while a hunter adjusts his scope to ensure accurate shot placement on big game. Below: Shooters at the Deep Creek rifle range near Missoula fire old-fashioned black powder rifles at targets, a time-honored sport that's definitely no flash in the pan.



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—GARY MARBUT, *President, Montana Shooting Sports Association*

was formed in the mid-1990s out of concern that Great Falls was losing opportunities for recreational shooting. The city has several private rifle, pistol, and shotgun clubs with ranges, but nonmembers find it difficult to use the facilities. Either they can’t afford a membership or the clubs are full.

To make matters worse, the city told the local skeet shooting club it wanted to terminate the group’s lease and turn the range into a city park. Meanwhile, rifle and pistol shooters wondered how long they could renew their tenuous lease to shoot on a parcel of private land. As opportunities to shoot seemed to be drying up, rifle, pistol, and shotgun shooters agreed that Great Falls needed a public shooting range.

Finding a site was difficult. If too close to the city’s growing subdivisions, it would create nuisance noise; too far and it would be inconvenient for shooters. Then shooting range promoters heard about 950 acres of agricultural land 3 miles north of Great Falls, owned by the estate of LeRoy Beckman, a farmer and oil speculator who died in 1997 at age 89. The location was ideal, and the attorney managing the estate said the land could be sold for a public shooting range because such a use would be compatible with Beckman’s life-long interest in hunting.

FWP provided \$200,000 of the land’s \$365,000 purchase price, while donations and the Shooting Range Development Program covered the balance. FWP considered its contribution a wise investment. “We sell hunting licenses to thousands of Montanans each hunting season,” says Cunningham. “It makes sense for them to have a place to become accurate, ethical shooters.”

Bruce Auchly is the FWP regional information and education officer in Great Falls.

Gary Marbut certainly thinks so. President of the Montana Shooting Sports Association, Marbut has long urged FWP to spend more on shooting ranges, and he was the driving force behind the campaign to create the state’s Shooting Range Development Program.

“We should have shooting ranges like golf courses—two in every community,” Marbut says. “And like golf courses, they would become community assets.”

FWP officials agree that public shooting ranges have value. It’s the cost, they say, that keeps the agency from doing more. Marbut maintains that more hunting license dollars should go toward shooting ranges, which would produce more hunters.

“I think shooting ranges are a good investment for hunting, because if people aren’t shooting, they aren’t hunting, either,” he says. “No one wants to see interest in



SHOOT AND RELEASE The sport of shooting metal animal silhouettes originated in Mexico and spread to the United States in the late 1960s. Upon impact, the metal targets tip back, making it clear from a distance whether they were hit or missed.

hunting tapering off because there aren’t enough places to shoot.”

Montana lawmakers have strongly supported the shooting range program, providing it with an average of roughly \$100,000 each year in state funds, and increasing funding each legislative session.

Cunningham hopes word of the grant program spreads. “We know there are many shooting ranges across Montana that are aging and need to be modernized,” he says. “A lot of shooting clubs out there could make good use of grants from the Shooting Range Development Program.”

Maybe other communities will be inspired by what’s being accomplished in Great Falls. Currently, the new shooting complex has rifle shooting stations at 25, 50, 100, 200, and 300 yards for members, and its pistol range is nearly finished. Later this year, work will begin on the skeet range, several public shooting ranges, and a 50-yard plinking range for families.

“Our ultimate goal is to have national events at ranges for skeet, 1,000-yard rifle, and 600-yard silhouette, along with a place for kids in hunter education to shoot,” says Hill, the FWP game warden and a long-time advocate for the Great Falls Shooting Sports Complex.

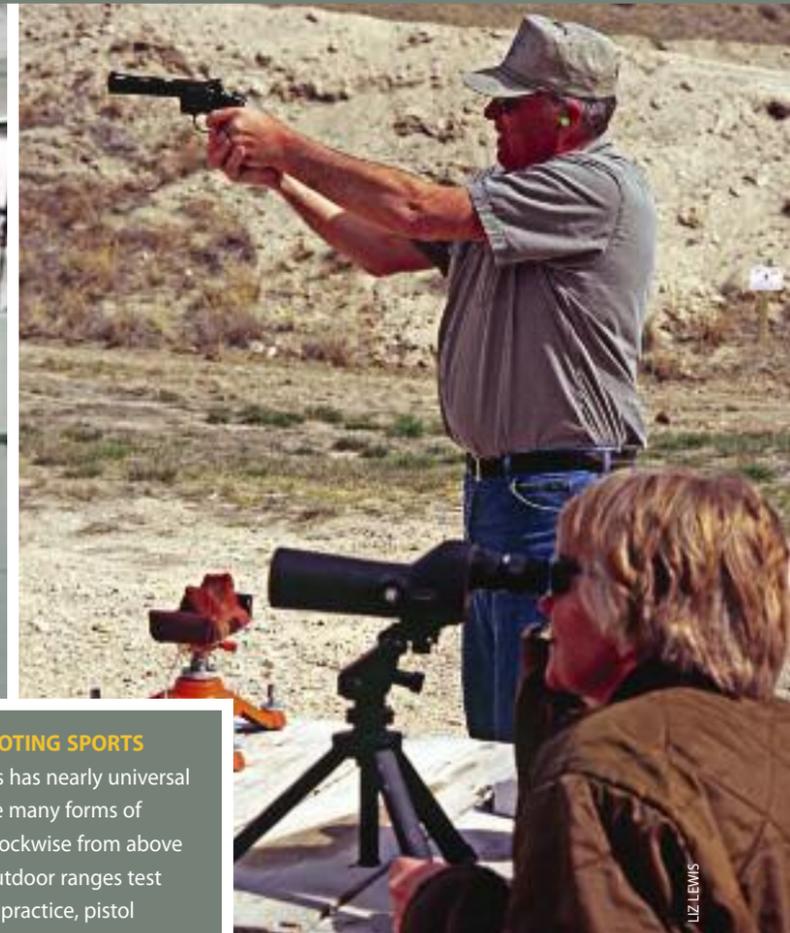
Eagerly watching all these developments is Watts, the retired biologist. At 67, he figures he doesn’t have a whole lot of time left to try his skills on a 1,000-yard range.

“I don’t want to be too old to shoot,” Watts says.

If progress on the Great Falls range continues at its current pace, he won’t have to wait much longer. And if civic leaders and shooting advocates in other communities take advantage of state funding for range construction and improvements, other shooters across Montana won’t either. 🐾



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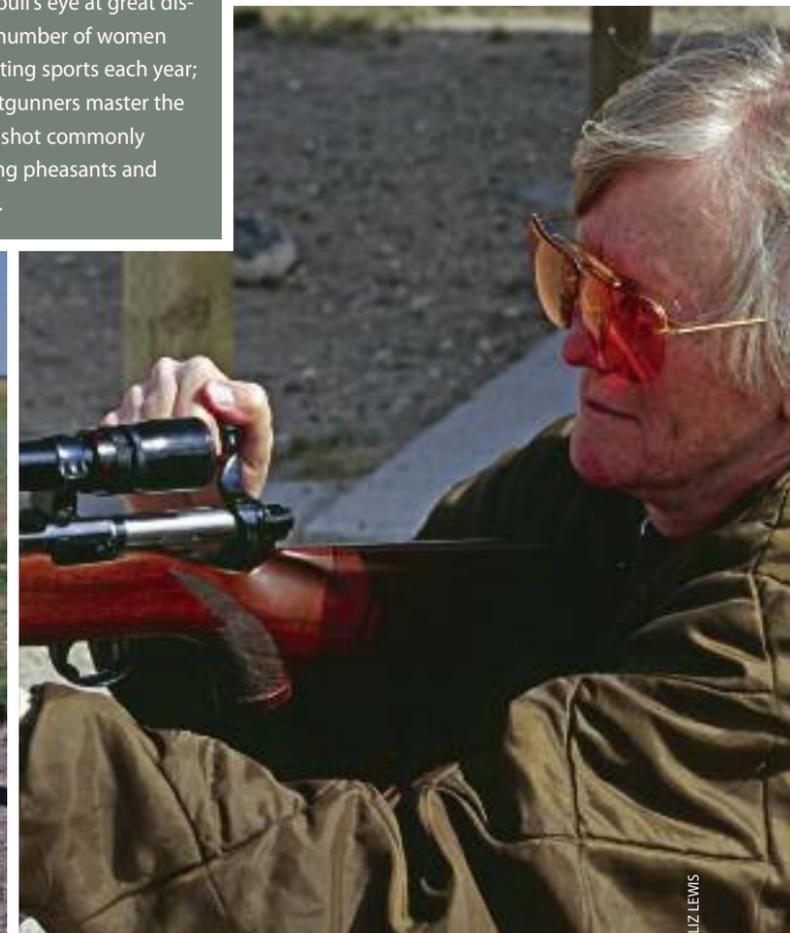


LIZ LEWIS

A RANGE OF SHOOTING SPORTS Shooting at targets has nearly universal appeal. Among the many forms of shooting sports (clockwise from above left): Indoor and outdoor ranges test archery skills; with practice, pistol shooters can hit a bull’s eye at great distances; a growing number of women participate in shooting sports each year; at trap ranges, shotgunners master the rising, going-away shot commonly found when hunting pheasants and other upland birds.



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