Lewiston bowhunter Kevin Kepler is a map-reading whiz. Twenty-one years as a U.S. Army pilot will do that to a fellow. So it’s perhaps not surprising that, of all the hunters looking for ways to access portions of the nearby Big Snowy Mountains isolated by surrounding private land, it was Kepler who figured out a way to open up 18,000 acres of prime elk country to himself.

And, eventually, to everyone else.

For years the retired military aviator had been eyeing a vast tract of national forest—prime elk, mule deer, and black bear habitat cloaked in pines, aspens, and mountain meadows—tucked back in the Lewis and Clark National Forest. But after scouting the area on foot, Kepler knew that a cliff-faced canyon created a nearly impenetrable barrier.

Then, a few years ago, he spotted on a land ownership map what appeared to be a “back door” into that all-but-inaccessible U.S. Forest Service land. An oddity in the township grid caused a tiny 40-acre private tract along Red Hill Road, south of Lewistown, to overlap, for a mere 10 yards at one misaligned corner, with the national forest beyond. Parcels that meet at an exact corner can’t be legally crossed without permission from all adjoining landowners, so the overlap proved crucial.

It meant that Kepler would need permission from just one.

He called the parcel’s owners, Marshall and Leslie Long, Montana natives living out of state. He struck up a conversation and eventually popped the access question. “No problem,” the Longs told Kepler. They didn’t ask for a trespass fee, just an over-the-phone handshake.

Kepler spent the next two seasons hunting above the Longs’ property. He pretty much had the entire 18,000-acre tract of national forest to himself and his family members.

Then he learned that the Longs had put the land up for sale. With the asking price well out of his price
range, Kepler contacted the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF), of which he is a member. The Missoula-based organization, which has secured public access to more than 700,000 acres of elk country across the United States over the past 30 years, jumped at the opportunity, partnering with Fish, Wildlife & Parks and the Forest Service on the project. RMEF paid the $190,000 asking price, then sold the land to FWP for $50,000. Acquisition by the department ensured that the 40 acres, now called the Red Hill Wildlife Management Area, is open to hunting and year-round recreation access. Even more important, it provides a gateway to the national forest lands. “This gives the public access to some of the most incredible country in central Montana,” says David Allen, RMEF president and CEO. For their part, the Louns say they were pleased to know their land would be protected and, along with the adjacent national forest block, open to all.

**FINDING THE STRANDED LANDS**

The Red Hill project represents just one way that hunters, conservation groups, and public agencies help the public reach seemingly inaccessible public lands. Though Montana contains more than 30 million acres of state and federal land, much of it sees little use by hunters. Some isolated or apparently inaccessible parcels are stranded by cliffs, rivers, or other natural barriers. Many are unmarked and unknown to most hunters. Others appear too small or out of the way to make hunting worth the effort. And a growing amount of public land, like much of the Snowy Mountains, is surrounded or otherwise blocked by private property and requires landowner permission for access. Demand to reach isolated or oft-ignored public hunting land is growing. Reduced hunter access to private property has created a cascade effect, putting more pressure on public lands. That forces hunters to be more creative in finding over-looked parcels that might hold game. It has also spurred FWP and private groups to devise new ways for hunters to find their way onto the nearly 2 million acres of public lands surrounded by private holdings without guaranteed access (see sidebar, page 14).

Most of these isolated public parcels are state school trust lands, managed by the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. In 1889, Congress granted to Montana more than 5 million acres of federal land comprising 1-square-mile sections for the state to lease for grazing, mining, and logging. The revenue Montana generates from leasing school trust lands, often identifiable as blue squares marked 16 and 36 on township grids, goes to college and K-12 education.

It’s hard to hunt these and other public holdings if you don’t know they’re there. Fortunately, GPS devices and smartphone apps loaded with land ownership maps make locating public land and staying inside legal boundaries easy. At least two Montana companies sell electronic maps that display property boundaries, landowner names, game management and hunting units, as well as topography, roads, trails, waterways, and other geographic features. The digital maps work in PCs and Macs, many Garmin GPS handheld units, and Apple and Android phones and tablets using a designated app, which costs $30 to $100.

A less expensive option is to use the Montana State Library’s Cadastral, an online land ownership map available at svc.mt.gov/mld/mtcadastral. Hunters can print the site’s maps and use them with low-cost built-in GPS base maps or a smartphone app, such as the GPS Topo USA, to avoid inadvertently trespassing even in areas with no cell phone coverage.

Also helping hunters find public lands are people like Dwayne Andrews, a retired FWP employee in Miles City. For more than a decade, Andrews and several colleagues at state and federal land management agencies have installed thousands of small signs indicating legal entry and exit points to hundreds of thousands of acres of state and federal parcels across eastern and southern Montana. “It’s all public land, but until we got those markers up most people didn’t even know it was there,” says Andrews.

Hunters can reach these and other public parcels via public roads, rights-of-way, access easements, streams and rivers, or adjacent

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Paul Queneau is conservation editor of Bugle, the magazine of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. He lives in Missoula.
No Trespassing" signs," Charles says. "We Many may be traditional ranchers and farm -
he approaches the surrounding landowners 
has spent 18 years helping hunters gain and 
property. When he spots an interesting one, 
permission from an adjacent landowner. 
he is always on the lookout for unmarked or 
remote or isolated areas and pick them up 
2013 Montana Legislature created the Unlocking State 
It's also not limited to hunting, says Ken 
big game and bird hunter himself, 
big game and bird hunter without a 
They have yet to rule on the maternity of hundreds of public 
that corner crossing constitutes trespassing. 
the concept of public wildlife that belongs to 
the public's rights to access public land 
that corner crossing is legal, but it failed in committee. Stuker says such leg-
around and investigate. And 
the front porch and ringing the doorbell." 
Some of my best hunting experiences 
McDonald, head of the FWP Wildlife Divi -
State parcels made accessible may also 
roads in Montana that cross private land en 
mall-acreage owners holding multiple state 
 sectional users," McDonald says. 
will be surprised at what gates open up, 
drive around and investigate. And 
FWP and the DNRC maintain 
first on public land—you bet." 
THE STATE HELPS OUT 
Recognizing that some people might need 
landowners feel respected, he says, 
that corner crossing is legal, but it failed in committee. Stuker says such leg-
and other groups to keep public roads public 
 draconian opportunities. "One of the many 
and blocked, or illegally marked "Private." 

Montana the top western state in off-limits public land acreage 

Recent analysis by the Colorado-based Center for Western Priorities shows that more 

than 4 million acres of public land in the West is inaccessible to the public. Topping the list is Montana, with nearly 1.96 million acres, followed by Wyoming (750,000 acres) and Colorado (541,000 acres).

In many areas, a quiet of public and priv-

citizens—composed of legislators, 
ment and other FWP programs, to increase 

as with so much of public 

there are ways, like with Block Manage-

landowners who allow hunters and others to 

ings if asked. "If you can catch a landowner 

that corner crossing is legal, but it failed in committee. Stuker says such leg-

in a thorny issue, pitting 

Public land in Montana inaccessible 

because the public 
can't cross corners 724,000 acres 

Fully land-locked by private lands 1,231,000 acres 

Total amount inaccessible and off-limits 1,955,000 acres 

Annual $500 tax credit for allowing public 

acres per year.

so there is a public 

their hand. 

to them right now." 

"Hunters may not realize 

that corner crossing is legal, but it failed in committee. Stuker says such leg-

in a thorny issue, pitting 

"Some of these 'blockages' are only 

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