

TOO MANY PLACES TO HUNT

Advice on figuring out where to hunt on Montana's overwhelming 30 million acres of public land. **BY DAVE CARTY**

At around 275 pounds, my buddy John is no candidate for “Dancing with the Stars.” But for a few days every September he puts on his game face and the two of us chase blue grouse in the vast public forests of southwestern Montana. Last year I hunted with John while also working the kinks out of a new setter puppy, named Hanna. It turned out that I found the first birds before Hanna did. They flushed and vanished, but she relocated them a few minutes later, back on the ground. This time when one of the grouse went up, John snapped off a shot and it dropped like a stone. Hanna made her first wild-bird retrieve and proudly returned with the grouse in her mouth. >>





WHERE IS HE? A hunter hides from a buck on national forest land in northwestern Montana. Across the state, resident and nonresident hunters have access to vast tracts of public hunting land managed by state and federal agencies. The first step in finding your own hotspot is to get as many maps as possible. The best ones, such as those published by the Bureau of Land Management, clearly show public and private land boundaries and differentiate among the various public holdings by color.

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Finding hunting land on your computer

The Internet is a great way to find maps and other information to help locate hunting spots. One source is the Montana Public and Private Land Ownership Maps site (<http://nris.state.mt.us/gis/ownmaps.asp>), managed by the Montana Natural Resource Information System, which shows the boundaries of state and private land throughout Montana. Like BLM maps, these show state and federal land coded by color.

Another great source is Google Earth, a free "virtual globe" program that superimposes satellite imagery, aerial photographs, and other sources to allow you to see, in 3-D and from every possible angle, any place in Montana. Though it doesn't show property boundaries, Google Earth displays landforms such as mountains, valleys, and streams that you can cross-reference with two-dimensional maps to better understand the lay of the land you want to hunt.

That particular section of national forest is great for blue grouse, and it's a spot any hunter could find on his own. Whether for grouse and other upland birds, waterfowl, or big game, Montana is blessed with millions of acres of public hunting land. These include state and national forests, state wildlife management areas (WMAs) and fishing access sites, federal waterfowl production areas (WPAs) and national wildlife refuges (NWRs), and other land owned and managed by the state and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Reclamation (BOR). In total, Montana contains more than 30 million acres of public hunting land.

The only drawback to having so much public property available is figuring out just where to begin. Fortunately, land management agencies provide exceptional maps detailing the boundaries of their holdings. All a hunter needs is a pair of legs and the willingness to do some exploring.

STEP ONE: GET MAPS

The first step in learning the most effective way to hunt public land is to buy good maps. Over the years, I've bought county maps, U.S. Forest Service (USFS) maps, satellite images overlaid on road maps, you name it. For the average hunter who wants a detailed and reasonably accurate picture of the various public land in an area, nothing beats the BLM maps, officially called

Surface Management Edition Maps. Buy them at BLM offices statewide, on-line at the agency's Montana-Dakotas website, or at many sporting goods stores.

Other maps I couldn't live without are those in the Montana edition of the *DeLorme Atlas & Gazetteer*. This tabloid-sized map book, sold at gas stations and sporting goods stores, is essential for general navigation when researching areas at home or while driving around in the country. By cross-referencing my Montana *Gazetteer* with the corresponding BLM map, I can usually make sense of the often-confusing roads and trails that crisscross the state.

For those hunting primarily in the mountains, national forest maps show even more road and trail detail than BLM maps. And providing even finer detail are the U.S. Geological Survey topographic maps, which delineate springs, cliffs, meadows, parks, points, draws, and other land features. The USFS and the BLM also regularly publish supplemental maps showing reasonably up-to-date road and trail closures.

These public maps list phone numbers of state and regional offices to call for additional information or resources. The numbers are also available in the *Montana Access Guide*, a free pamphlet available at any Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) regional office or by calling the department at (406) 444-2535.



STEP TWO: GET MOVING

Once you've got maps in hand, it's time for the legwork. John Berger, a Bozeman taxidermist and serious bowhunter, spent years exploring BLM land on the Charles M. Russell NWR. That's where a sizable chunk of the agency's 8 million acres in Montana is located. "I'd go horn hunting there in the spring and really got to know the area over the years," Berger says. "I found areas where I could hike in a mile and a half and get away from people, little pockets of cover where, it seemed like every fall during the rut, those elk would move in. I did my homework."

Berger's knowledge of the area and his willingness to walk away from roads put him into game: His most recent CMR bull, a five-point, was a direct result of hard work and good timing. "We realized that on public ground, the hunting is better later in the bow season," Berger says. "The elk get hammered so hard in the beginning that it seems they respond better to calls during the first ten days of October."

Berger and his hunting partner found an elk herd that had a few satellite bulls moving with the group. "We were moving with them on the side of a hill in the cover, about 30 yards inside the trees. I cow-called a couple

of times, and one of those satellite bulls came in. He pulled his leg up to step over some timber, and I zipped an arrow right in."

Now it's time for a little tough love. I'll bet the ranch that none of your friends, no matter how saintly they otherwise might be, will tell you exactly where they hunt. Nor will anyone else give you more than general directions. So let me be the first to say it: The best way to find game animals on public land is to go out and look for them. And that means there will be days—sometimes several in a row—when you may not find the animals you're after.

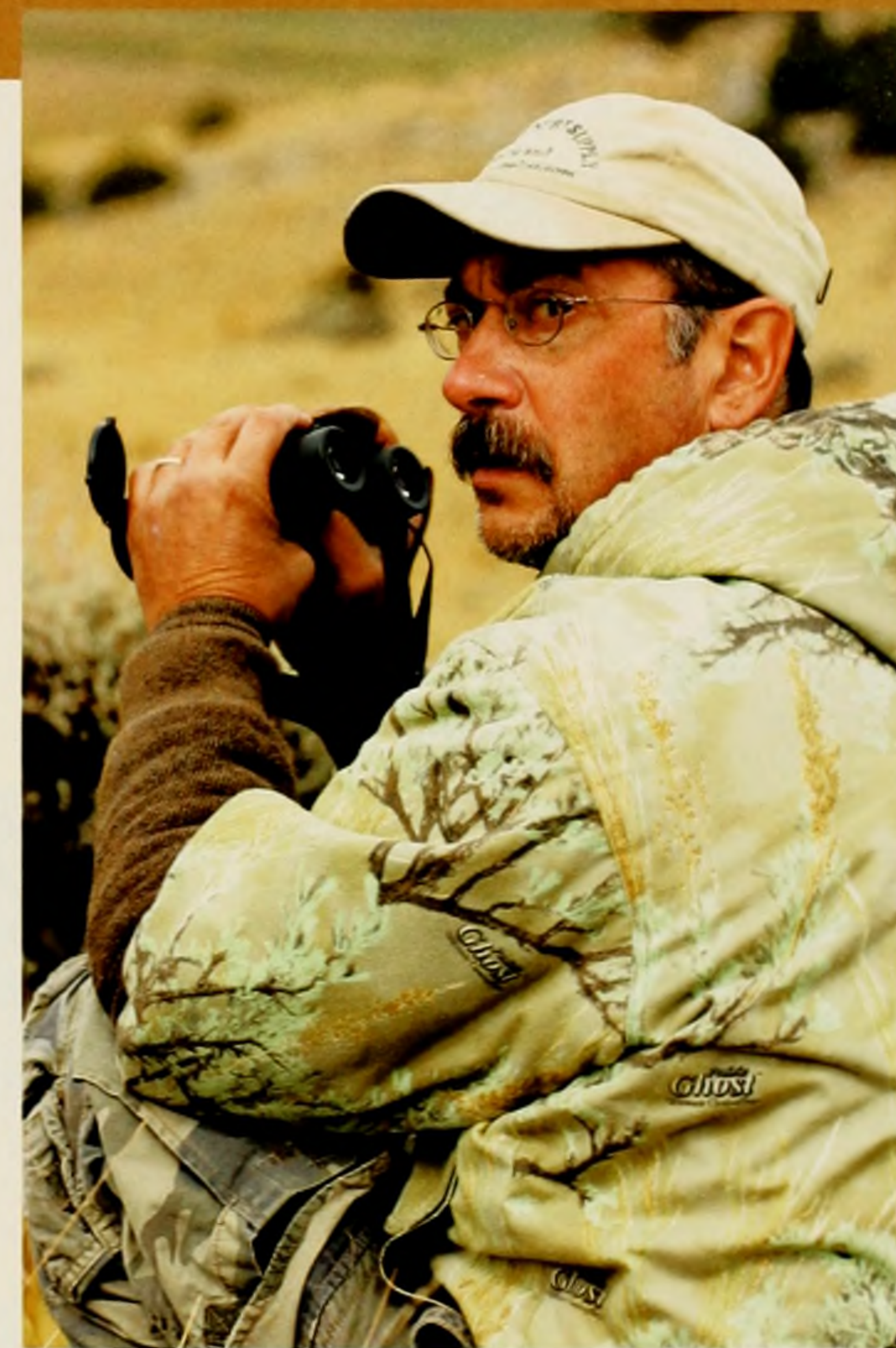
My experiences may be instructive. For the last several years I've traveled to southeastern Oregon to hunt chukars. The region contains literally thousands of square miles of public land, almost all of it administered by the BLM. The downside is figuring out just where in that sea of cheatgrass to find birds.

After a couple of nonproductive hunts, I decided to explore a region recommended by a friend. I started with several birdy-looking drainages, but they didn't pan out. (I long ago gave up trying to figure out why what appears to be perfect cover for game birds doesn't hold a single one.) Eventually, though, I started finding chukars. And whenever I found a place with birds, I marked it down on my BLM map. Four years later, my map is cross-hatched with notes and circles. I still explore new drainages, but I've now catalogued enough public land to last me for the rest of what I hope will be a long and happy life afield.

It works the same way in Montana. I've spent the last few years hunting Huns and the occasional sharptail on a small tract of BLM land on the Madison River. This isn't typical Hun habitat, but at least two coveys of my favorite bird live there, and I have figured out roughly where to find them.

Not all public land is created equal, of course. Some of it is overgrazed, overhunted,

Bozeman writer Dave Carty hunts upland game birds and waterfowl on public land throughout the West.



CHUCK & GALE ROBBINS



LOOK CLOSELY Once you've scoured maps to locate areas that might hold game, visit the sites and start looking. Many successful public land hunters keep detailed notes of what they see and don't see on their scouting and hunting trips, which allows them to cross out nonproductive spots and zero in on areas that hold game.

CHUCK & GALE ROBBINS

and undermanaged. On the other hand, land managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and FWP have from good to superb habitat, because they're managed exclusively for wildlife. WPAs, WMAs, and national wildlife refuges always hold game, at least for a month or so. These places are no secret; they get hit hard early in the season. I don't like to hunt with other people around, no matter how much game there is, so I usually avoid these holdings until later in the season.

Perhaps the biggest sleepers are state fishing access sites. These areas, purchased for river fishing access, almost always contain anywhere from a few to several hundred acres of prime wildlife habitat. I have shot a couple of whitetails at fishing access sites and seen hundreds of others, all on holdings sometimes no more than a few dozen acres in size. Most fishing access sites are open to hunting, and in some parts of the state they're virtually ignored.

My other public land secret is BOR land. Though most BOR uplands are hit hard throughout the season, many hunters don't know that the agency also owns land around several large reservoirs, including Nelson, Fresno, and Canyon Ferry. I have hunted these areas for ducks and pheasants, sometimes successfully and sometimes not. As on most public reservoirs, waterfowl hunters



hammer BOR waters early in the season. But later on, just before freeze-up, incoming flights produce decent hunting. The trick, as is always the case with ducks, is to be there when the birds are.

BIGGER IS BETTER

You'll usually have better success hunting one contiguous chunk of public land rather than a bunch of small parcels. And the bigger, the better. In large parcels, you can walk a few miles from access roads to places most hunters won't bother to visit. For example, if you're trying to decide which BLM land in eastern Montana will be best for hunting mule deer or pronghorn, look for large swaths of pink on your BLM map or *Gazetteer*. Then figure out how to get away from the crowds.

I don't mean driving in on an ATV or a truck. Vehicles are a tool to get you to a starting point, which is where you begin *walking*. Gunsmith Dennis Gentry of Belgrade has hunted antelope successfully for years on BLM land in eastern Montana, almost always on foot. "Being in a truck is not how you see animals, not on public land anyway," he says. "A lot of people just drive. They actually help me out, by keeping the game stirred up. They're driving around and getting out and

shooting from next to their truck. I'm not afraid to get out and walk a little bit."

Two other hunting areas worth knowing about are those along large rivers and on state trust land. Montana's stream access law permits waterfowl hunting within the high-water marks of all navigable rivers in the state. A few important things to know: This does not include deer or other big game hunting, and hunters can only gain access to rivers from public land, from private property with permission of the landowner, or from public bridges. Also, if you shoot a duck or goose that falls on land above the high-water mark, you'll need permission from the landowner to retrieve it. (That makes hunting on most of the state's small streams nearly impossible.)

Trust land is state property sold or leased to generate revenue for school districts and other public needs. In much of the state, trust land is generally Sections 16 and 36, and it shows up as blue boxes on BLM maps. Many stipulations apply to hunting trust land, the most important of which is that you can only access it from public roads or land. Also, trust land is rarely signed, so hunters need to be extra careful to ensure they don't trespass when trying to reach these public holdings. (For details, go to



GETTING AWAY FROM THEM ALL Experienced Montana hunters say they look for large chunks of public land where they can walk several miles to put adequate space between themselves and other hunters.

STATE TRUST LAND: <http://dnrc.mt.gov/trust>



GARYRAMER.NET

TOSS THIS "PROBLEM" TO MY STATE In much of the nation, finding *any* public hunting land is a major chore, much less having too much land to choose from, as is the case in Montana.

<http://dnrc.mt.gov/trust/> and look under "Frequently Asked Questions.")

If you choose to hunt along large rivers or on trust land—and I often do—pay close attention to the access laws explained in pamphlets available at FWP offices or online. Better yet, call the local game warden (phone numbers are available from FWP offices), who will be happy to clarify laws regarding public hunting access.

Still not sure which public areas to hunt this season? I understand. After two decades of hunting in Montana, I still find the abundance of public land here a bit overwhelming. But consider the alternative. Berger tells the story of a guy he met in a Bozeman cafe one morning. The fellow was from Texas, where public hunting land is almost nonexistent.

"What's the elk hunting around here

like?" the Texan hunter asked.

"You know all that land from here to Yellowstone Park?" Berger replied. "It's pretty much all public ground."

"You mean I can just drive up into the mountains and get out and hunt?"

"All the way to Yellowstone Park," Berger said, adding, "We've got it so good."

Thousands of Montana hunters would have to agree. 🐾