

Along with more participants, bowhunting is attracting increased regulatory scrutiny.

BY ANDREW MCKEAN

# A BOOM IN A SILENT SPORT

**J**oe Wiles moved to eastern Montana last fall with a bad back and a brand-new bow. The former police chief from Kansas had injured his spine falling through a burning building during a rescue attempt. He settled on Glasgow because of its small-town intimacy and abundant hunting opportunities in the Milk River Valley and Missouri River Breaks, and bought the bow to rehabilitate his back. "I didn't have any intention of bowhunting," says Wiles. "I used the bow as an exercise tool to strengthen my arms and back. But then I realized that if you don't bowhunt in Montana, you miss most of the hunting season."

Wiles's epiphany is familiar to a growing segment of Montana hunters. Bowhunting, which begins with the archery pronghorn season opener on August 15, provides an additional eight to ten weeks of hunting before the general firearms seasons. Unlike many other neighboring states, Montana does not require big game hunters to restrict themselves to either archery or rifle seasons. Hunters here can chase elk with broadheads in September, and then return with bullets in November when the firearms season is in full swing.

That's great if you're a hunter who likes to spend as many days afield as possible. But state officials think Montana has become too generous with its archery regu-



lations. The Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission recently imposed archery hunting restrictions in parts of the state, citing overcrowding and the loss of public access on private land as its main concerns. Bowhunting's increasing popularity may attract additional regulatory scrutiny down the road, as officials consider the sport's growing effects on trophy elk populations, public hunting access, and the equitable opportunity to pursue bull elk and other highly prized quarry.



JIM THERREY

**3 million**

Bowhunters in the United States

**40,950**

Hunters in Montana who purchased archery stamps in 2007

**1,845**

Hunters in Montana who purchased statewide bowhunting permits in 1998

**5,523**

Hunters who purchased statewide bowhunting permits in 2007

### GROWING NUMBERS

In recent years, Montana has turned into Big Bow Country. While the number of archery hunters nationally has remained flat at roughly 3 million for the past several years, participation in Montana has been growing. Last year, nearly 41,000 hunters purchased an archery "stamp," a \$10 permit allowing them to participate in archery-only seasons. That's more than twice the number who bought the stamp in 1988. FWP officials estimate that more than one-third of Montana's roughly 100,000 elk hunters took advantage of the option to hunt with both a firearm and a bow last year. Participation in Montana's archery-only antelope season has grown especially fast. In 1998, a total of 1,845 hunters bought permits that allow bowhunting anywhere in the state. By 2007, the number had nearly tripled to 5,523.

Why is archery hunting so popular in Montana—especially when rifle hunting participation has plateaued in recent years? "Montana has some very liberal bowhunting regulations," says Steve Sukut, a long-

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time officer in the Montana Bowhunters Association, the state's leading advocacy group for the sport. "Up until this year, you've been able to hunt trophy elk in areas highly restricted for rifle hunters. Not many places in the West have that kind of opportunity." One of the most popular spots is the Missouri River Breaks, where archers from across the country flock each September for the chance of seeing and stalking large bulls.

Sukut says bowhunting also provides a

more intense hunting experience. "When you look at an animal 200 yards away through a rifle scope, you see a target," he says. "But at 20 yards, the distance most bowhunters feel is the lethal range, you have a connection to the animal. You can see it up close and sometimes even hear it breathe. I think it's a lot more challenging than rifle hunting. For hunters who have achieved their goals with a gun, it's almost like they get to rediscover the thrill and challenge of hunting all over again."

Others also point out the camaraderie of bowhunting, the tradition of warm-season hunting camps in handsome landscapes, the chance to see more big bulls, and the peaceful nature of hunting with gear designed to be quiet.

### NOT WHAT ROBIN HOOD USED

Quiet, yes, but not always primitive. Sukut and a small number of other archers hunt with what's called traditional equipment. These recurve bows or longbows rely only on the muscle in the archer's arm to pull the bowstring, which bends the limbs that propel the arrow. But most Montana bowhunters shoot compound bows. The pulley-and-cam devices increase arrow speed while decreasing the strength required to pull the bowstring and hold it at full draw.

Highly evolved compound bows bear little resemblance to traditional bows. One manufacturer describes its top-selling model as having an "ultra-smooth CenterTrac Binary Cam System coupled with Center Pivot limb technology and an extremely forgiving 8¼-inch brace height." High-tech compound bows are made of space-age polymers and contain complicated sighting gadgets. A mechanized release allows an archer to draw



DUSAN SNETANA

**BOW BUSINESS** Reasons for Montana's bowhunting boom include extended seasons, access to big bulls, and equipment that's easier to use. Growing interest translates into business opportunities. Says one archery technician, "These new hunters are buying the latest compound bows on the market."

the bow without even touching the string. And modern compounds are capable of delivering arrows with killing energy out to 50 yards and, increasingly, even farther. "The archery industry is gaining arrow speed each year," says David Strandberg, a bow technician at Buffalo Jump Archery in Helena. "Right now the average recurve bow shoots an arrow at under 200 feet per second. The average compound shoots a lighter arrow at more than 300 feet per second."

Such lethal velocity doesn't come cheap. Strandberg says a package containing a mid-priced compound bow and components—sights, releases, quivers, and arrows—can cost between \$1,000 and \$1,300. Higher-end packages run nearly twice that. "Our average customer is maybe 25 years old, someone who has hunted with a rifle but wants to diversify now that he has some disposable income and time," says Strandberg. "He hears about all the fun his buddies are

having in the archery season, and he wants to do it, too."

Strandberg says about half his customers are new to Montana. "They moved at least partly because they can do it all here," he says. "They can hunt with a rifle and a bow. They can get away from the crowds of the rifle season and enjoy the best weather of the fall. And if they don't get anything with their bow, they still have the rifle season."

Some longtime bowhunters claim these

## FWP Commission takes aim at archery regs

Citing more overcrowding, less access, and

reduced equity between archery and rifle hunters, the FWP Commission in March adopted new bowhunting rules.

Commission members imposed a quota of 5,600 archery-only antelope licenses (officially designated as "900-00" licenses). Previously unlimited, these licenses allow holders to hunt either-sex pronghorn with archery equipment in any open hunting dis-

trict in the state starting August 15. Up to 10 percent of the licenses, or no more than 560, will be available for nonresidents if application demand exceeds supply.

In the Missouri River Breaks, hunting districts previously open to unlimited either-sex archery permits now have quotas that limit hunter numbers. By default, this will also reduce the potential number of clients who

would pay for exclusive access to private land. The permits were allotted through a drawing with a June deadline.

In 23 hunting districts outside the Missouri Breaks where rifle elk hunting is limited but archery elk hunting was previously available with only a general hunting license, bowhunting for bull elk will now be restricted. Bowhunters must apply for the June

drawing for unlimited permits to hunt bulls in these units, generally in central and southeastern Montana. Archery hunting for antlerless elk in the districts will remain available with just a general license.

In much of western Montana, where rifle elk hunting is unrestricted, archery elk hunting will remain available with just a general elk license and an archery stamp. ■



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newcomers are crowding the field. But most archers say the sport has room for additional participants. In a 2000 FWP survey of Missouri River Breaks bowhunters, 65 percent thought the number of other hunters observed in the field was acceptable.

### SHAKEUP IN THE BREAKS

The bowhunting boom is sending waves across Montana. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in the Missouri River Breaks, a remote stretch of timbered badlands abutting the Missouri River and Fort Peck Reservoir in east-central Montana. Last year, nearly 5,200 licensed bowhunters were permitted to hunt the Breaks, which is famous for large elk, a high ratio of mature bulls, and open terrain that allows hunters to spot their quarry from a distance and sneak close.

To hunt elk with a bow or rifle, nonresidents must obtain a general license either through an annual drawing or by buying a “variable-priced” license, available only by hiring an outfitter. Many hunting districts also require a special permit provided through another drawing. But in the Breaks, there was no lottery for archery permits. That attracted bowhunters from across Montana and the United States, resulting in the archery bull harvest in many Breaks hunting districts routinely topping the rifle bull harvest. In recent years, nearly 30 percent of bowhunters in the Breaks have been nonresidents.

“Hunters are smart, and they always gravitate toward the best hunting opportunities,” says Lewistown FWP wildlife biologist Tom Stivers. “They’ve learned that in areas with limited entry for rifle hunting, they can find more bull elk. And with Montana’s liberal archery regulations, they’ve learned that they could pick up a bow and hunt the best bull populations in the state with few obstacles.”

Just as hunters respond to opportunity, landowners respond to growing interest in their property. “Big elk can have a strong attraction to hunters that often results in leasing and other forms of exclusive access on private land,” says Quentin Kujala, chief of the FWP Wildlife Division’s Management Bureau. “Leasing can decrease the amount of land open for free, public hunting and put additional hunting pressure on public land.” Kujala adds that by restricting public



BILL BUCKLEY

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access, leasing can also limit FWP’s ability to effectively manage elk that cause severe depredation problems.

The easy availability of high-quality elk hunting in the Breaks has created conflicts among hunters. Some want to maintain the abundant bowhunting opportunities. Others, complaining of overcrowding, private land leased for exclusive access, and a disproportionate share of trophy bull elk going to archers, argue that Montana needs additional bowhunting restrictions.

In March of this year, the FWP Commission agreed that changes were necessary. After reading summaries of several thousand written comments and dozens of rancorous public meetings, commissioners imposed sweeping restrictions on archery hunting for elk and antelope. They pointed to hunter overcrowding, a widening equity gap between archery and rifle elk hunters, and the loss of public hunter access on private land as factors in their decision. The new restrictions focus on most hunting districts in the Missouri Breaks as well as a few other areas—mainly in central and eastern Montana—where rifle hunting had been restricted through lottery

drawings but bowhunting permits were open to all comers (see details in sidebar, page 18).

FWP wildlife managers point out that bowhunters have been adding significantly to the bull harvest. “In most of the last several years in Hunting District 410 and the 600 districts, archers have harvested more bull elk than rifle hunters,” says Stivers. “And in most years they take more mature six-point bulls than rifle hunters.”

Kujala adds that bowhunters in the Breaks don’t harvest many cow elk and thus don’t contribute much to population management. “The FWP Commission decided it was appropriate to restore some equity to hunting opportunities by restricting bowhunter numbers,” he says.

Though many bowhunters support additional restrictions on archery hunts, talk of “equity” concerns Sukut and Strandberg. Each year, they hear rumors that Montana might be headed toward the same constraints that dominate archery hunting elsewhere in the West. These restrictions require hunters to choose between hunting with a bow or with a rifle. Kujala says FWP does not advocate the so-called “pick-your-weapon” restriction. “It came up during commission meetings on the Breaks, but the commissioners decided it was not an option they wanted to pursue,” he says.

Strandberg and others in the archery business worry nonetheless. “If Montana ever goes to a pick-your-weapon season, I think you’ll see more than half the bowhunters return to hunting just with a rifle,” he says. “You’ll lose those guys who are bowhunting now because they can, not necessarily because they’re committed to it.”

Ultimately, it may be the fundamental appeal of bowhunting, not extra hunting opportunities, that keeps the sport healthy. According to Sukut, states with either/or restrictions have lost bowhunters at first but soon gained many back. He says the hunters decided to forego rifle seasons in exchange for the longer and more comfortable seasons, less competition, and more challenging opportunities that bowhunting affords. “I hope Montana never gets to the point where you have to choose your weapon,” he says. “I would choose a bow, but I wouldn’t want to have to.” 🐾

**END OF AN ERA?** Bowhunting will likely continue attracting those looking for longer hunting seasons and the challenge of stalking close to big game. But the heydays of unlimited access to Montana’s trophy bulls may be over.

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