

Harvesting Information from the Hunt

Crews at mandatory hunter check stations gather data that biologists use to manage deer, elk, and other wildlife.

BY TOM DICKSON. PHOTOS BY LINDA THOMPSON AND TOM DICKSON

If there is an epicenter to North American hunting, it might be the Fish, Wildlife & Parks hunter check station in Augusta, about an hour's drive west of Great Falls. Hunters from across Montana and the United States drive through here on their way to the Rocky Mountain Front or the Bob Marshall Wilderness in search of elk, mule and white-tailed deer, and bighorn sheep.

Upland birds and pronghorn live in the prairies just to the north, and nearby Freezout Lake is a waterfowl mecca. I've stopped at the station many times over the years to report what game I have—and more often, haven't—bagged. I'm here today to learn why FWP established this and other hunter check stations (also known as game or biological check stations), and what biologists, wardens, and wildlife technicians do. >>



WEIGHING IN At the Augusta hunter check station along the Rocky Mountain Front, FWP area game warden Dave Holland weighs a mule deer doe. Wildlife technician Audra Labert records information such as where and when the hunter shot the deer and how many days he had been hunting. The information, along with similar data gathered at another dozen check stations statewide, helps wildlife managers determine hunting harvest and, subsequently, adjust quotas and seasons.

Open seven days a week throughout the hunting season from 5:30 a.m. to 10 p.m., the Augusta station is bustling this cloudless, cold mid-November afternoon. Stopping to report their success are hunters ranging from urban weekenders in shiny SUVs to local farmers in battered pickups out for a few hours before evening chores. A couple of weatherworn backcountry outfitters stop in, their bandannas, leather chaps, boot spurs, and faded Stormy Kromers proving their authenticity.

Area wildlife biologist Brent Lonner tells me there has been a hunter check station operating in this general area since 1910.

A crowd gathers around a pickup holding a 6x6 bull elk, its antlers and dark hind legs sticking up from the bed. Three local girls who have walked up the road a few blocks from town watch Audra Labert. The FWP

been killed, likely due to mild weather keeping herds at high elevations. Others crowd around a bulletin board that holds snapshots, taken by Lonner and his crew, of hunters with their elk, deer, and—drawing the most oohs and aahs—bighorn sheep. Then someone enters with the real McCoy. The 17-year-old hunter shot the ram earlier that day on Castle Reef. His dad, who helped out on the hunt, is beaming. “I’ve put in for that tag for 37 years, and he puts in for just two and was drawn,” he tells me as Lonner looks for a tape to measure the horns.

Dave Holland, the local FWP game warden, stays outside visiting with hunters while keeping an eye on trucks as they pass, looking for hunter orange in the cabs or animal legs sticking up from beds. Stopping at the station is mandatory—both when going to and coming from a hunting location, whether you

“It’s the one time of year we can get out and talk with a lot of hunters. I register everything I hear, all that information. It helps with the decisions I make.”

have game or not. But Holland is not looking to ticket anyone. Unlike the Sunday evening surprise enforcement stations, where wardens watch incoming vehicles with binoculars and chase down game-laden trucks that don’t stop, this is a biological check station. “The goal here is not to catch poachers but to gather information used to set hunting seasons and conduct other aspects of wildlife management,” Holland explains.

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FIRST MULIES Two young hunters fresh from the backcountry have their photo taken for the brag board at the Augusta check station.

All afternoon a steady stream of vehicles pull in for inspection. A battered Subaru driven by a college student carries a small whitetail buck in the back. A hunter in a pickup with Washington plates proudly reports he’s just taken his first buck, a big muley with thick, dark antlers. Madison Sechena and Emily Brennan, both age 15 and still wearing pajamas, show off the mule deer bucks each shot the day before at Madison’s dad’s backcountry camp.

It’s not all big game. Clay Scott and Steve Wilson from Helena stop in to report their morning’s bag of two Huns and a sharp-tail. And I give notice of the sole rooster I’d shot earlier in the day. Lonner says during the height of the waterfowl migration, hunters also stop in with ducks, snow geese, and tundra swans.

The biologist says he welcomes the opportunity the game check station gives him to talk to hunters, landowners, and outfitters. “It’s a great way to get important biological data and also input about what people like and don’t like about FWP rules and regulations, and what they are seeing in the backcountry, like lots of elk calves in a certain area,” he says. “A lot of it is just listening to folks, being there so they can talk to you, ask questions. I try to register everything I hear, all that information. It helps with the decisions I make.”

DECADES OF DATA

Montana wildlife officials have been asking to look in hunter’s game bags since the early 1900s. Originally the counts were limited to what backcountry wardens on horseback saw hanging on game poles. Today biologists gather information at stations in Augusta, Bonner, Gardiner, Darby, Anaconda, Big Timber, Cameron, Dillon, Lavina, Broadview, Billings, Big Timber, and several other sites statewide. Some stations are simply pickup trucks on the roadside; others are portable trailers set up for the season where FWP staff can enter data into computers and stay warm and dry.

FWP gathers detailed harvest information from winter hunter phone surveys and monitors wildlife populations using aerial counts and other methods. “But there’s no question



DEER BED Above: University of Montana student Brett Brauer checks tags at the Bonner check station. Below: FWP Missoula-area wildlife biologist Vickie Edwards prepares to cut the cheek of a whitetail doe to determine its age by checking wear on the third premolar. “We can easily see if the deer is a fawn or a yearling,” says Edwards. “Then at age two-and-a-half, the adult teeth begin erupting. As adults, the third premolar shows the wear. After age nine, there’s so much wear that it’s just a guess.” Below left: Brauer with sample premolars showing various degrees of wear. Left: Rick Specht, Robert Ridling, and Mike Ridling talk to Edwards about hunting in HD244 that day.





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PRECISE MEASUREMENTS Clockwise from top: Edwards explains to University of Montana student volunteer Jeremy Brown how to enter data collected at the Bonner station. Hunter Nick Ruiz talks with other FWP employees as Edwards ages his whitetail buck, taken earlier that day from the Ovando area. Hunter Steve Mace shows off his whitetail buck at the Bonner check station. Brent Lonner, area wildlife biologist at the Augusta check station, measures the base horn circumference of a bighorn ram shot earlier that day along the Rocky Mountain Front. Justin Gude, who supervises the FWP Wildlife Research and Technical Services Unit, says biologists would have a hard time managing wildlife without the check station data: "Seeing what hunters do or don't have in the back of their pickups, year after year, is essential real-time information."



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that seeing what hunters do or don't have in the back of their pickups, year after year, is essential real-time information," says Justin Gude, who supervises FWP's wildlife research. He notes that a low harvest recorded at the check stations, factored in with weather and other conditions, may indicate a declining population that might require restricting the doe or cow harvest the following year to allow recovery. Conversely a high harvest may indicate the population could withstand a higher doe or cow harvest next season.

"Check stations also monitor the ratio of successful to unsuccessful hunters," Gude adds. "When we see harvest is up, that may be largely due to more hunters, not more deer or elk."

The check stations provide wildlife managers with information several months before winter phone surveys are completed and tabulated. Jay Kolbe, area wildlife manager at Seeley Lake, says the FWP Commission reviewed check station results this past spring as it decided whether to okay biologists' proposals for adjusting the 2009 hunting season regulations in northwestern Montana. "We showed the commission our check station data indicating last season's whitetail population decline to justify withdrawing our region's over-the-counter whitetail B licenses for 2009," says Kolbe. Without the check station information, he adds, the commission might have been reluctant to restrict B licenses, which could have led to a doe overharvest in 2009.

BUMMED IN BONNER

It's the last day of the big game season at the Bonner check station, along the Blackfoot River on busy Montana Highway 200 east of Bonner. Most vehicles are pulling into the "no game to report" lane, where they get asked only a few questions before being waved on. The empty pickup beds are no surprise. Though it's nearly December, the thermometer reads 45 degrees, and the surrounding mountains here and throughout western Montana have almost no snow.

Across the highway stands what's known locally as the Weimer "meat pole," where a ranching family hangs its harvest. Today the crossbeam sags under the weight of two bull



STORYTELLING At the Bonner station, Ronny Melo describes his morning deer hunt to Jay Kolbe, area wildlife biologist at Seeley Lake.

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elk, one cow elk, and a big whitetail buck. That doesn't make unsuccessful hunters stopping at the station any happier. Neither do the pickups pulling trailers with mounds of pronghorn and muleys from eastern Montana, which are waved through because the station gathers information only on harvest from the Blackfoot watershed.

Checking the harvest today is Kolbe along with Vickie Edwards, FWP wildlife biologist at Missoula, and Jessica Stirling, a wildlife biology undergrad at the University of Montana. (Like other students at the station, Stirling gets class credit and hands-on experience while FWP receives free labor.) As a pickup pulls into the "no game" lane, Edwards asks a few quick questions—"Hey guys, how's it going today? Where were you hunting? See any wolves, lions, or griz?"—before thanking the occupants and waving them on. In recent years, as predator populations have grown in the region, FWP began asking hunters about sightings. "It really helps us keep in touch with hunters' attitudes toward predators and find out where the sightings occur," Edwards says. While Kolbe checks two whitetail does in the trunk of an old sedan, he explains how he uses information gathered at the station, which has been operating here since 1958. "As recently as last week, when the regional managers were deciding on whether to extend the deer season, we were looking at check station data from over the years, and

we found that even though harvest is low, it wasn't low enough from a historical perspective to justify an extension."

Kolbe adds that while the station captures about one-quarter of the overall Blackfoot hunting district's harvest each fall, he's amazed at how well it correlates with comprehensive hunter surveys conducted in winter. "For instance, if the number of bucks checked into this station increases 20 percent from the previous year, the phone surveys done later in the year almost always indicate about a 20 percent increase," he says.

As afternoon turns to evening, more game animals begin showing up. Tony Liane from Bonner drives in with a 3x3 whitetail he shot east of Ovando. "Saw a lot of lion tracks," he tells Edwards. Chris Hathaway of Missoula pulls in with a big elk calf he shot after hunting nearly every day of the season. "Today was the first time I could get a good shot," he says, adding that while carting the calf 6 miles through the woods back to the truck, he saw at least 100 other elk. "More than I've seen all season combined," he says, then shrugs.

“We used the data as recently as last week, when the regional managers were deciding on whether to extend the season.”

"What can you do?" The trophy of the day is a magnificent 6x6 bull elk shot in the Scapegoat Wilderness by Nickolai Yarmolich, who moved to Missoula in 1994 from the country of Belarus. "Nice bull, eh?" he says, lifting the animal's massive head to display the thick-beamed rack.

Then Paul Teagle of Missoula pulls in with his daughter Cortney. He shows off his 4x4 whitetail buck and the girl's big doe, both taken just east of Ovando Mountain. Cortney proudly reports to Edwards that she stalked the doe to within about 80 yards and killed it with a single shot. "That's not on my list of biological and harvest questions," says Edwards. "But it's the kind of nice thing you get to hear and one of the reasons I like working the check station." 🐾