



“SOLD!”

Big dollars for Montana’s special auction tags produce major gains for big game management and habitat. BY PJ DELHOMME

When bidding at the moose license auction stopped in March 2015, a hunter had agreed to fork over \$60,000 for a chance to hunt a bull moose in Montana that fall—the most ever paid to hunt the large-antlered ungulate in the Treasure State. Because there is no national group solely dedicated to moose conservation, the tag was auctioned by the next best thing: Ducks Unlimited.

Huh?

“We’re a wetlands and waterfowl conservation organization,” explains Barry Allen, senior regional director for Ducks Unlimited in Montana. “Moose need water and wetlands, just like ducks. Healthy wetlands provide habitat for moose and waterfowl.”

Still, why was *any* conservation group able to auction off one of Montana’s most coveted big game licenses?

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The answer dates to 1986, when the Montana Legislature authorized Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks to create special trophy big game licenses to be auctioned to raise money for conserving those species. The first auction license was for a bighorn sheep, and over the next two decades lawmakers also authorized annual auction tags for moose, mule deer, elk, and mountain goats. Winning bidders may hunt in any open hunting district they choose, but they must abide by weapon and season restrictions.

The license auction idea grew from a paradox of wildlife management. Montana is home to relatively few bighorn sheep, moose, and mountain goats, meaning FWP can offer only a limited number of licenses each year and generate relatively little revenue from those sales.

Because wildlife research, population monitoring, and habitat acquisition are done largely with license dollars, management of those high-profile species was getting short-changed. Enter the auction licenses.

Since moose, wild sheep, mountain goat, and trophy elk and mule deer licenses are so coveted, annually auctioning one of each generates conservation funding far beyond that earned from sales of the handful of regular licenses. “We’ve been able to do things ranging from studying moose mortality to relocating bighorn sheep thanks to auction license revenue,” says Ken McDonald, head of the FWP Wildlife Division.

McDonald adds that state statutes authorizing the auction licenses require the funding be used for the “substantial benefit” of each species. “It also must be used as *additional* funding for the species, not to replace existing funding,” he says.

FWP isn’t authorized to conduct auctions, so that work is done by conservation and sporting groups. In addition to DU’s role managing the moose license auction, the Bozeman-based Wild Sheep Foundation holds the bighorn sheep auction, the Great Falls Chapter of Safari Club International auctions the mountain goat tag, Missoula-based Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation runs the trophy elk license bidding process, and the Mule Deer Foundation is responsible for the trophy mule deer tag.

Each year the Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission selects organizations to hold the auctions based on proposals that include how a group will promote their license auction.

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LOW ODDS

To obtain an ordinary moose, sheep, goat, or trophy elk or mule deer license, hunters need to enter and then be drawn in yearly lotteries. Most hunters are never drawn, even after entering for decades. “It gets down to the fact that there are far more hunters who want these licenses than we have licenses available,” says Neal Whitney, business analyst

for the FWP License Bureau.

For instance, roughly 10,000 elk hunters put in for roughly 135 Elkhorn Mountains bull

licenses (HD 380) each year. For many mountain goat, wild sheep, and moose districts, the odds are less than 200:1.

With trophy big game licenses such a rare commodity, the idea that some people can buy their way to the head of the line by bidding tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars for an auction license doesn’t sit well with many hunters. “We hear people say that it turns hunting into a rich man’s sport,” Whitney says.

To ease some of that tension and allow hunters of modest means another chance, Montana created SuperTag licenses in 2006. SuperTag lottery tickets cost \$5 each, and an individual may purchase an unlimited number of tickets. As with the auction licenses, lucky SuperTag winners in each species category receive a license to hunt in any hunting district in Montana—including Montana’s legendary trophy districts. Since 2006, SuperTags have generated nearly \$5 million in revenue, averaging roughly \$330,000 each year. Unlike the auction license proceeds, which must go to the species for which each license is sold, revenue from SuperTag sales is earmarked for hunting access and FWP law enforcement.

MONEY FOR CONSERVATION

There’s no denying the auction license system works as envisioned. Yes, tags go to some very rich people. For instance, this past January at the National Wild Sheep Show in

Reno, Nevada, the Wild Sheep Foundation sold the Montana auction tag for \$440,000 to a Malaysian sultan. And, for each species, that’s one fewer trophy license available to people of lesser means.

But all that money ends up creating more habitat for big game animals and improving FWP research and monitoring work. Since inception, the bighorn auction license has generated more than \$7.6 million, the moose license more than \$600,000, the mountain goat tag \$345,000, the trophy elk tag \$550,000, and the trophy mule deer license over \$335,000. “That’s money we wouldn’t have had if not for the auction tags,” says McDonald.

By law, 90 percent or more of the proceeds from each auction tag must go to conserve that particular species. The auctioning conservation group gets to keep 10 percent, but even that must be used for auction expenses and advertising, says Whitney.

Take wild sheep, for instance. Over the past several decades, populations have been on a roller coaster ride, and everyone wants answers. But when it comes to wildlife management, coming up with answers is costly.

“You bet that money is important for the sake of the sheep,” says Kurt Alt, conservation director for the Wild Sheep Foundation.

He says the money is used by FWP to conduct research, augment or restore bighorn sheep populations, help fund conservation easements, and enhance habitat. “Those projects aren’t cheap,” adds Alt. “Capturing and disease surveillance, especially, are really expensive.”

Buying habitat is also pricey, especially with Montana’s ever-booming real estate market. Allen, the DU Montana senior regional director, says his group is grateful for the moose auction license because it helps FWP acquire wetlands. “Wetlands have many benefits, from water purification to flood control to wildlife habitat,” he says. “Whether it’s conserved as ‘moose habitat’ or as ‘waterfowl habitat’ doesn’t matter to us. We just want to see more wetlands conserved.”

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Editor’s Note: Montana state statutes also allow for auctioning a grizzly bear license, if hunting is someday allowed. Funds would

be dedicated to grizzly bear management. “It costs a lot to conduct grizzly bear research, monitor movement, and reduce conflicts between bears and people,” says McDonald. “An auction license could be an important source of funding for that work, which has helped maintain the largest grizzly population in the Lower 48 while minimizing conflicts.”

Auction funds in action

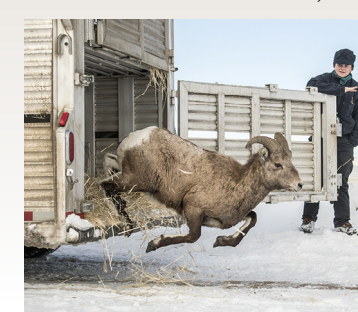
License auctions have generated essential additional funding for wildlife management across Montana, Ken McDonald, head of the FWP Wildlife Division, says. “For instance, when chronic wasting disease was first detected, we were able to leverage deer auction dollars with federal Pittman-Robertson dollars to carry out an immediate response,” he says.

FWP has used mountain goat and bighorn sheep auction dollars to intensively study diseases in those species, and conduct ground surveys to help verify the accuracy of standard aerial surveys.

“We’ve also used elk auction dollars to purchase a portable ultrasound machine so our biologists could, with less stress on the animals, assess the body condition of elk they capture as part of various field studies,” McDonald says.

To benefit bighorn sheep habitat, auction license proceeds helped purchase the 11,200-acre Lone Tree Conservation Ease-

ment near Chinook and the 4,424-acre Whiskey Ridge Conservation Easement near Winifred, acquire a 296-acre addition to the



Translocating bighorn sheep using auction license funding.

Blue-eyed Nellie Wildlife Management Area (WMA) near Anaconda, purchase the 440-acre Full Curl WMA along the Flathead River, and buy a 52-acre parcel near Thompson Falls that includes a bighorn sheep viewing site on Montana Highway 200.

Deer and elk auction funds were recently used to help acquire the 3,980-acre Rumney Foothills Conservation Easement near Cascade, and deer auction funds helped buy an 80-acre inholding of the Beckman WMA near Lewistown. ■

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