

# Do the Right Thing

Hunters, landowners, and FWP team up to reduce unethical behaviors that threaten public access to private property. **BY TOM DICKSON**

Meagher County landowner Bill Galt says the incident made him “sick to my stomach.”

In late October 2020, roughly 100 hunters, all with permission to hunt the Block Management Area of a Galt family ranch and adjacent state land near White Sulphur Springs, surrounded a herd of elk and began firing into the herd. Roughly 50 elk died from the shooting spree. Dozens more limped away, injured. “It’s sickening to see animals get wounded like that,” Galt says, recalling the incident.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks game wardens called in by concerned onlookers handed out six citations, mainly for shooting from a county road. But otherwise, say FWP officials, the “flock shooting” episode, though distasteful and dangerous, was legal or

involved impossible-to-prosecute infractions such as killing multiple animals.

The incident was not, however, what most hunters and landowners would consider ethical. Galt told reporters that he and his brother, Ben, were so disgusted by what they called the “shoot-’em-up” that they considered removing the 40,000-plus acres the family had enrolled in Block Management from the program.

The episode was one of several reported to FWP during the previous few years.

After the Galt property incident, widely covered by Montana newspapers and TV news stations, landowners and hunters asked FWP to “do something” about unsportsmanlike behavior.

The department responded by convening a hunter ethics coalition to promote

ethical hunting. The Bozeman-based media group MeatEater, Montana Stockgrowers Association, Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, Montana Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife, and other hunting, agriculture, and conservation groups all got on board.

“Landowners need hunting as a wildlife management tool, and many are hunters themselves and appreciate the importance

of hunting to Montana’s heritage,” says Raylee Honeycutt, executive vice president of the Montana Stockgrowers Association and a member of the ethics committee. “But at some point, certain behaviors become unacceptable.”

The coalition developed messages urging ethical hunters to monitor their own ranks and report blatant unethical behavior to landowners and law enforcement, Greg Lemon, head of FWP’s communication program, says. “Most hunters are ethical and well behaved,” Lemon says. “But one bad apple can ruin it for everyone, so the idea with the campaign is that hunters need to police their own ranks, for their own good.”

**A FEARED FUTURE** The images on these two pages, though not actual depictions, show what hunting groups and FWP fear could happen if unethical behavior turns the public, especially landowners, against hunting.

## TONGUES AND BUTTS

When FWP, landowners, and hunters talk about “unethical” behavior, they mean conduct considered by most people to be dishonorable. Examples include taking shots that could threaten human safety or wound wildlife (like shooting over a horizon or at a bounding deer), actions that damage or defile private or public property (such as littering or driving off designated ranch roads), or showing disrespect for killed animals (like hunters posting images of themselves sitting on a

“[The phrase] **Protect the Hunt is the motivator, the reason that hunters need to get involved.**”

dead elk with its tongue hanging out). “An example I see too often is someone leaving cigarette butts or even toilet paper at a Block Management Area parking lot,” says Ryan Callaghan, conservation director for MeatEater and a member of the ethics coalition.

no “ethics wardens” out there enforcing honorable conduct.

Complicating matters is that not everyone agrees on what’s ethical. For instance, some people, including some Montana landowners, think *any* type of hunting, no matter how it’s conducted, is unethical.

Even among hunters, the concept is shaded in gray. For instance, shooting a duck on the water is generally considered far less ethical—or “sporting”—than shooting a flying duck. But some hunters may consider it okay to shoot a “sitting duck” because they know the bird dies immediately, compared to one zipping past that may be wounded with a poor shot.

One of the biggest areas of ethical disagreement among hunters is distance shooting. For years, most big game hunters considered 400 yards as the farthest distance to shoot a bighorn sheep, deer, or elk without undue risk of wounding the target animal. Technologically sophisticated rifles and scopes, however, now allow skilled shooters to hunt animals at 500, 750, even 1,000 yards. Yet at such vast distances, critics argue, the margin of error is so narrow that a slight wind gust or miscalculation could result in a wounded animal.

## FOCUS ON LANDOWNERS

The Galts’ 2020 warning sent shivers throughout Montana’s hunting and wildlife management communities. If bad hunter behavior leads to landowners locking their gates to public hunting, millions of acres could become off-limits. That would put additional pressure on public lands and remaining accessible private properties, while making it next to impossible for FWP to manage many deer and elk herds.



PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS BY LUKE DURAN/MONTANA OUTDOORS

The worst hunter behavior, such as trespassing or hunting out of season, is also illegal. Game wardens are charged with enforcing these and other laws to protect wildlife populations, public safety, and property.

But unethical yet technically legal behavior—like shooting an arrow at an elk mostly obscured by brush—is different. There are

But because ethics are so subjective, public agencies are in a bind when asked to dictate right and wrong. “Legal and illegal—yes, FWP can do that because we enforce laws covering licenses, trespassing, bag limits, that type of thing,” Lemon says. “But once you enter the realm of legal-but-maybe-unethical behavior, a lot of people bristle at government sticking its nose in.”

That’s why the coalition focused on dishonorable actions known to upset most landowners, such as leaving closed gates open, driving across fields, shooting near livestock, and knocking on doors before dawn. “Because so many FWP wildlife habitat and hunting access programs concern private land, we decided to make that a priority for our campaign,” Lemon says.

The campaign tagline is “It’s Up To Us. Respect Access. Protect the Hunt.” According to Lemon, the wording is meant to stress the responsibility of all hunters to ensure hunting retains a positive public image. The term Respect Access reminds hunters that hunting on private land is a privilege that requires respecting landowners and their property, he says.

“If we don’t weed out bad behaviors, the penalty could be that all of us lose private land access.”

The final phrase—Protect the Hunt—“is the motivator, the reason that hunters need to get involved,” Lemon says. “If we don’t



**SELF-INTEREST** The new hunter ethics campaign, which appears on billboards and in other media, aims to get hunters to police themselves and report “bad apples.”

start to reduce unethical actions by the relatively few bad apples out there, the penalty could be that all of us lose private land access.”

To deliver the message, FWP set up a special page on its website where visitors can watch the It's Up To Us video and others highlighting landowner concerns, and find links to hunter resources, campaign partners' web pages, and a survey to solicit ideas that can improve the campaign.

FWP and partner groups also posted the It's Up To Us video on Facebook and Instagram. They bought a mix of radio spots, online display ads, social media promotions, email marketing, ads in newspapers, and billboards. The Montana Stockgrowers Association and other coalition members promoted the campaign in their own media or news releases.

Bill Galt believes public pressure can work to weed out the minority of hunters who act unethically. “We’ve seen it here on our land,”

Tom Dickson is editor of *Montana Outdoors*.

**“Ethical behavior is doing the right thing when no one is watching—even when doing the wrong thing is legal.”**

he says. “Other hunters take down license plate numbers and call us or the local game warden. We’ve seen a big reduction these past few years in behavior like driving off roads that really used to bother us.”

Game wardens agree, noting that when unethical hunters get called out for misbehavior, they clean up their act.

Pat Doyle, head of the FWP Marketing Program, says the campaign is attracting additional partners—including the University of Montana and Montana State University football programs—to promote ethical hunting messages even more broadly during the 2023 hunting season. “We’re working on promotions with both universities to reach as many people as possible,” he says.

Aldo Leopold, regarded as the father of wildlife management, wrote that “ethical behavior is doing the right thing when no one else is watching—even when doing the wrong thing is legal.”

The challenge facing hunters is that people are watching, especially landowners, many of whom may be weighing whether to allow hunters onto their property or to shut the gates entirely and be done with it. “I’d say 95 percent of the hunters we see are good people,” Galt says. “It’s the other 5 percent that create all the problems.”

#### COALITION PARTNERS

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks  
Backcountry Hunters and Anglers  
Master Hunter Program  
MeatEater  
Montana Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife  
Montana Stockgrowers Association  
Montana Wildlife Federation  
OnX Hunt  
Pheasants Forever



*Editor's note: To view the hunters ethics coalition's It's Up To Us videos and other materials, visit <https://fwp.mt.gov/itsuptous>.*



## A Bigger Threat?

Montana's It's Up To Us campaign focuses mainly on hunter behavior that disturbs landowners and thus threatens public access to private land. But according to national conservation leaders, poor hunter ethics could threaten the very existence of hunting in North America.

“Fewer and fewer Americans hunt or understand our hunting heritage,” says Augusta-based Hal Herring, a contributing editor at *Field & Stream* and host of the *Podcast and Blast* podcast. “It’s up to us hunters to act with the best ethics and to present hunting in its best possible light. That’s the only way we can make sure it continues in an uncertain future.”

Hunters are an ever-shrinking minority, even in states like Montana. And while most Americans and Montanans support hunting, acceptance could wane if public opinion sours. For instance, surveys show that most nonhunters are okay with hunting done to put meat on the table—but not antlers on the wall.

“While the right to keep and bear arms is

constitutionally assured, hunting is a privilege to be repeatedly earned, year after year, by those who hunt,” wrote Jack Ward Thomas, chief emeritus of the U.S. Forest Service and professor emeritus at the University of Montana's College of Forestry and Natural Resources, in the Spring 2014 issue of the Boone & Crockett Club's *Fair Chase* magazine. “It is well for hunters to remember that in a democracy, privileges, which include hunting, are maintained through the approval of the public at large. Hunting must be conducted under both laws and ethical guidelines in order to ensure this approval.”

Surveys show that what nonhunters care about most is animals suffering from shots that wound rather than immediately kill. They also strongly dislike hunting considered unfair or unsporting, like running over coyotes with snowmobiles or shooting pronghorn trapped in fence corners. When the general public believes that hunting practices lack fair chase standards, support quickly dries up.

That’s not just an idle worry. In 2017, British Columbia ended all grizzly bear hunting. California and Oregon have made it illegal to hunt bears or mountain lions under any conditions. Though it seems impossible that deer, elk, or upland bird hunting could ever be outlawed, countries including Kenya, India, and Singapore—with a combined population of 1.7 billion—have banned all types of hunting.

#### FAIR CHASE ETHICS

No group has promoted hunting ethics—and examined the potential dangers of unethical hunting—more than the Missoula-based Boone & Crockett Club. The first action of the club, founded in 1887 by Theodore Roosevelt, was to develop a code of conduct, known as “fair chase,” to differentiate sport hunting from the commercial market hunting that was decimating wildlife populations.

According to the Boone & Crockett Club, fair chase hunting must comply with state and federal laws and regulations, be conducted according to personal standards and

those set by credible hunting organizations, and cannot engender public criticism.

Among the most important tenets of fair chase are ensuring game animals die a quick death. This requires hunters to hone marksmanship and woodsmanship skills, enabling them to get close enough to prey to make a single killing shot.

#### NORTHERN EUROPEAN MODEL

Northern European countries such as Sweden and Norway, where hunters widely embrace the fair chase ethic, have been able to maintain hunting traditions and opportunities. In Germany, a country the size of Montana with 80 million residents whose politics tilt largely left of center, hunters are not only tolerated but feted in summer parades as wildlife stewards and conservationists.

German hunters earn that honor. Strict training protocols require shooting proficiency tests, wildlife biology classes, and even the ability to develop wildlife management plans. Above all, German hunters show respect for the land on which they hunt and reverence for the animals they kill.

“As more and more people move into the Treasure State, many of them with anti-hunting sentiments, maybe we Montana hunters could learn a thing or two from the Germans,” wrote journalist James Hagengruber in a 2003 *Montana Outdoors* article on Bavarian hunting traditions. “They might be able to show us how hunting could continue to thrive as our state becomes more urbanized.”



Honoring fellow German hunters.