

Neighborly relations BY TOM DICKSON

I'd hunted on private land (with permission) for years but never thought much about the people who owned the property. Then my cousin Bobby invited me to see what South Dakota's deer opener was like for him and my cousin Steve, his brother, who together owned about 15 sections of wheat fields and cattle range west of Pierre.

We didn't need an alarm clock that morning. Two rifle reports from the highway that bisects the ranch woke us before dawn. For the next several hours, Bobby and I drove from one field to the next, chasing off deer hunters, mostly locals who hadn't bothered to ask permission. "I'm a hunter myself and I like most hunters, but I hate this day," Bobby told me as we sat in his kitchen eating lunch.

I've since learned of the trespassing and other headaches that many Montana landowners endure each hunting season. Hunters not leaving gates as they found them—either open or closed. Litter in parking areas. Pickups and four-wheelers driving across clearly marked "walk-in-only" areas. Shot-up signs. Groups

of hunters knocking on the door before dawn on opening day.

In hunters' defense, some transgressions are unintentional, and those who intentionally break rules make up just a small proportion of participants. Most of us understand that access to private land is a privilege and act accordingly.

Still, poor behavior by even a few is a big issue for many landowners.

For FWP, too. Private land provides habitat for 70 percent of Montana's deer and pronghorn and one-third of its elk. Private property is also essential for providing people places to hunt. In addition to supplying recreational opportunities, public hunting on ranches and farms is the most effective way to control deer and elk numbers. Without public access to ranches and farms, big game numbers could explode, leading to extreme crop depredation and massive herd die-offs during severe winters.

To foster good relations among landowners, hunters, and FWP, agency wildlife biologists and game wardens help stockgrowers fence deer and elk out of pastures and haystacks. Biologists provide advice on applying for state and federal cost-share grants to improve wildlife habitat on private land.

Wardens respond to complaints of trespassing, shooting near buildings, or other illegal actions. The department controls weeds on state wildlife areas and allows adjacent ranchers to graze cattle on some WMAs where grassland habitat needs rejuvenation. FWP also helps landowners manage hunting on their land

through the Block Management Program.

To promote good hunter behavior, FWP reminds hunters in its regulation booklets, press releases, and public service announcements to always ask permission to enter private land and to act ethically once there. The agency also urges hunters to knock on doors and meet with landowners to develop healthy relationships—and to do it well before opening morning.

But there's only so much a government agency can do to counter societal changes and convince people to behave. Few hunters these days grew up on a ranch or farm, where they would gain a landowner's perspective. Many lack the time to find landowners—who often live out of state—and develop relationships. Then there's the growth of trophy hunting videos, TV shows, and social media, all fueling a big-antler obsession that makes even ordinarily ethical hunters sometimes act like knuckleheads.

FWP points out to hunters how they benefit from healthy landowner relations. For instance, 6 million acres of private land enrolled in Block Management are open to public hunting thanks to countless discussions at kitchen tables and cafes between landowners and FWP biologists and wardens.

The department also reminds hunters that unethical actions lead to locked gates. And that slob hunters create a public relations black eye that reduces public support for hunting.

Game wardens enforce hunting laws, but it's not their job to police hunting ethics. For the good of hunting, we hunters need to monitor our own ranks and call out bad behavior when we see it.

It's been years since I've talked with Bobby about deer hunting. I hope he no longer has reason to dread South Dakota's deer opener. I also hope that, here in Montana, work by FWP, hunters, and landowners to strengthen relationships is helping ranchers and farmers see the value of keeping their land open to public hunting, while also helping them make it through the hunting season with as few headaches as possible. 🐾

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