

Howdy, new neighbors!

By Tom Dickson

If you thought the droves of people moving to Montana in the 1990s and early 2000s were overwhelming, brace yourself.

Over the past year, it appears that out-of-staters have been pouring in. There's no hard data yet, but judging by the high number of nonresident license plates I saw this past winter, some kind of migration is taking place.

Another indicator is the current housing boom. A friend who co-owns a real estate company in Helena told me that in 40 years of selling homes, she's never seen anything like the current Treasure State home rush. "There's essentially no inventory in Helena right now; everything's sold out," she said. "And it's happening across Montana."

This time, blame Covid-19. The virus has made crowded urban areas seem less safe than spacious rural settings. Millions of one-time office employees also realize they can now work in their pajamas at the kitchen table with mountains out the window and trout streams down the road.

Who can blame them? Montana is blessed with abundant public land, great fishing and wildlife watching, endless trails, family-friendly state parks, and some of the prettiest rivers anywhere. Plus we have more breweries per capita than all but two states (Vermont and Maine). Talk about quality of life.

But Montana residents grumble when they see those California, Washington, and Texas vehicles driving around town. Who can blame *them*?

Yes, there's lots of open space, but start adding housing developments here, subdivisions there, and pretty soon we're looking like New Jersey with sagebrush. Also, many new residents don't seem to know the basic Montana rules, like that all our streams and rivers are open to public use.

Gripping won't get us anywhere (I keep telling myself). People are moving here, like it or not. Maybe we could make this change

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work out for all of us.

So, to the newcomers, I say: Welcome! I know that many of you want to understand the Montana culture and not be seen as outsiders. You want to fit in, just as I did when I moved here 20 years ago. A few tips:

- ▶ Don't honk. It's a dead giveaway you're not from around here.

- ▶ In fact, impatience in general is frowned upon. That probably comes from realizing we can't hurry winter into spring or force a trout to take a fly it doesn't want.

- ▶ Montanans value undeveloped vistas. If you build a house, don't plop it atop a hill or bluff where it mars the landscape. Put it below the natural horizon. Better yet, keep it completely out of sight and enjoy your privacy.

- ▶ Also, don't build right next to a river or stream. No one wants leaky septic systems polluting Montana's treasured trout fisheries (which may be what attracted you here in the first place). You also don't want your living room under 2 feet of water during spring runoff.

- ▶ Consider learning how to hunt. It gets you outdoors and provides your family with organic, free-range meat. Not for you? Then at least learn a bit *about* hunting. It's a big part of the culture here.

And to my fellow Montanans, I say: Chill. Wanting to live here is not a crime. Most of us, or our parents or grandparents, were newcomers once. We learned Montana's unique, often-unspoken protocols, and all the recent arrivals can too.

That's why I propose providing each new resident with an "instructional" gift basket. Inside, with a jar of huckleberry jam, would



be a can of bear pepper spray, a guide to driving in wet gumbo, a copy of the Montana Stream Access Law, a "Leave No Trace" pamphlet, a "Living with Grizzlies" brochure, and FWP's "Montana's Public Trust Responsibility" booklet.

For new ranch owners, the basket could also include a thumb drive containing the *Owning Eden* video that FWP and the Montana Stockgrowers Association produced several years ago. It explains how the privilege of owning ranchland comes with community responsibilities, like spraying weeds and allowing public hunting to control local elk numbers so the animals don't ravage the neighbors' hay fields and fencing.

Maybe add the names and contact information of the area FWP fisheries biologist, wildlife biologist, and game warden. That way, when questions arise, new landowners can learn how to leave some water in tributary streams for trout spawning, adjust fencing to accommodate wildlife migrations, and enroll in FWP's Block Management Program.

People are moving here for all the same reasons the rest of us stay here: abundant wildlife, clean water, great public access, and unobstructed views stretching for miles. Newcomers already know Montana is awesome. Let's help them understand what Montanans do to keep it that way. 🐾

ILLUSTRATION BY STAN FELLOWS