

# Seeing the open doors

By Tom Dickson

I'd like to think of myself as a strong, fit Montana man, a guy able to hike mountains and ford rivers and pack a bull elk out from the backcountry. But I'm not that guy and never have been.

I grew up relatively weak compared to kids my age, unable to do even one pullup until I was 15. When I finally started building muscle in my late teens and twenties, I injured my lower back and then struggled with chronic pain for decades. I had a hip replaced at age 54, but the new joint never really took. I also have sore knees, a partially clogged heart artery, shoulder arthritis, a condition causing my little finger on both hands to permanently curl, and, most

recently, a torn ankle tendon that kept me housebound most of this past summer.

Jeez, I'm only 64. What awaits me at 80? I wouldn't call myself disabled, since stretches of health and wellness during the past two decades have allowed me to backpack, take multiday canoe trips, harvest a deer or two most falls, and even get in several full seasons of upland hunting.

But some years I struggle just to walk the dogs or wade-fish the Missouri.

These setbacks have given me a glimpse of what truly disabled people go through just to live their lives each day. They also provide me a different perspective on outdoor activity.

After dinner one evening this past summer, my wife and I drove up to MacDonald Pass to escape the heat. While she took our two dogs for a hike along the Continental Divide Trail, I waited in

the parking lot with my sore ankle. I spent the next hour watching nighthawks swooping over the field below me, making their distinctive *peent* calls. One curious male dove at me then veered off at the last second, making that strange mechanical boom noise as air rushed through his wing feathers.

I'd rather have been with Lisa on the trail, watching the dogs sniff for dusky grouse and chase ground squirrels. But I definitely enjoyed watching those graceful nighthawks, birds I wouldn't have noticed had I been more mobile.


"When one door closes another door opens," wrote Alexander Graham Bell.

We all eventually break down, even the sturdiest among us. We tear one thing or strain another or have this or that joint replaced.

Sometimes the repairs work, sometimes not. When they don't, we're left with no option but to adjust—in my case, fishing from a boat rather than wading, getting a buddy to help haul out my deer, hunting ducks from easy-to-access blinds. Or some seasons giving up hunting and fishing entirely and instead taking nature photos, kayaking, e-biking, reading, or just enjoying our state's world-class scenery from the road.

Not long ago, a colleague said he thought many hunters had grown "too lazy" to hike into the backcountry and haul out an elk. Maybe. Or maybe many, like me, just can't physically do that anymore, if they ever could.

Not all of us can be rugged backcountry types, especially as we grow older. But almost all of us, no matter how much our bodies deteriorate, still want to engage with the outdoors. My response is to try to stop moping over what I can't do and embrace all that I still can. But for many of us, shifting perspective like that is not easy.

Bell could have been describing me when he also wrote, "We so often look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door, that we do not see the ones which open for us." 

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