

A-HUNTING WE WILL GO!

2026 Big Game Hunting Forecast

Region 2

We anticipate better than average hunting opportunities for the upcoming fall hunting season. FWP Region 2 had a very mild winter in 2025-2026, on the heels of two previous mild winters. The winter was abnormally dry, but early summer conditions provided some needed moisture which should benefit animals heading into the fall. During spring surveys, biologists observed good recruitment for both deer and elk, and overall counts are trending upward in several areas, especially in the Upper Clark Fork.

Big game check stations will be open in Region 2 on weekends during the general season in Darby, Bonner, Anaconda and at the mouth of Fish Creek west of Missoula. Hunters are reminded to stop at all stations they pass, even if they haven't harvested anything.



Bighorn Sheep. Photo by John Dowd.

Region 2 had its first chronic wasting disease (CWD) detection in 2023 in Hunting District (HD) 213 near Deer Lodge. There were no additional CWD detections until 2026 when two more positive mule deer were found in HDs 213 and 215. CWD sampling will be offered at the Anaconda

check station and in Drummond to try to increase sampling efforts in the Upper Clark Fork. CWD sampling will also be offered at the Darby check station. Testing for CWD is voluntary and hunters wishing to have harvested elk,

deer, and moose tested can submit samples themselves (more info at fwp.mt.gov/cwd), visit the CWD sampling stations, or stop by the FWP office in Missoula (3201

continued on page 3

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continued from page 1

Spurgin Road) during business hours, Monday – Friday, 8 a.m.-5 p.m., during the general hunting season.

Fire activity has been moderate as of late August, with fire restrictions in place in some Region 2 counties. Hunters may encounter BMA closures or restrictions due to high fire danger in some areas. Hunters should check fire restrictions and closures before heading into the field: mtfireinfo.org.

For more detailed information on antelope, deer and elk numbers and hunting opportunities in western Montana, check out past editions of the FWP Region 2 Wildlife Bulletin, available online at fwp.mt.gov/r2-wildlife-quarterlies.

Elk

Some hunting season changes for 2026 include a new bull permit (250-26) in HD 250 only valid during rifle season (quota = 45), an extension of the 262-01 B license to Jan. 8 in HD 262, increased quotas for elk B 210-03 (500) and 211-00 (150), and an added restriction to elk B 201-01: “not valid in Mineral County.”

There are some early-season antlerless hunting opportunities on private lands in several HDs in

the Blackfoot, Upper Clark Fork and Bitterroot. Late season antlerless opportunities are also available in some districts. Hunters that hold these licenses are encouraged to reach out to private landowners early to secure access.

In 2026, biologists surveyed all HDs in the Upper Clark Fork during the winter. Aerial survey conditions were good despite the mild conditions and little snow. All HDs were within or above objective. The elk counts (3,015 elk) in the Philipsburg Valley (HDs 210S, 211, 212 and 216) and HD 291 have all shown increasing population trends in recent years. Survey data for HD 293 also suggests an increasing population trend within the area while HD 215 remained relatively stable. HDs 213 and 217 showed modest declines



Mule deer bucks. Photo by John Dowd.

from the previous survey, but both remain substantially above their long-term averages and continue to support robust elk populations. Calf production remained generally good across the Upper Clark Fork and will likely fuel continued population growth. Bull counts were lower than normal this year, but the mild conditions allowed bulls to be distributed more widely, and therefore they were more difficult to find and count. Still, every HD continues to meet management objectives.

In the Bitterroot Valley, biologists surveyed all HDs in the spring, and all were within or above objective. HD 270 (West Fork) recorded the second highest elk count ever, with bull:cow ratios at 17:100 and calf:cow ratios at 32:100. The Eightmile-Turah herd in HD 204 continues to be over objective and river bottom herds in HD 260 continue to grow. The Stevensville (Bell Crossing) herd jumped from 120 to 205 elk, creating increased game damage conflicts and risks to motorists where elk frequently cross the highway.

In HD 201 west of Missoula, spring elk counts also indicate

an upward trending population with this year’s count (2,355 elk) in comparison to the previous year’s count in 2024 and still within population objective. In the Blackfoot Valley, elk counts in HD 282 (Blackfoot-Clearwater Wildlife Management Area [WMA]) have also been trending upward over the last two years.

Elk distribution on private land in the valleys remains consistent, hunters interested in hunting these areas must obtain landowner permission prior to hunting. Additionally, many private lands within the region are enrolled in the Block Management Program (BMA). Access maps and the full guide to private lands enrolled in Block Management including rules and contact information are available online at Block Management Guides and Maps.

Mule Deer

Opportunities to hunt mule deer are somewhat limited in western Montana. Several districts require a permit to harvest a buck, awarded through the statewide application process that happened earlier this year. For the third season, several hunting districts



Bull elk near Moise. Photo by John Dowd.

continued on page 7

CWD: growing problem in western Montana

Have a plan for CWD before you head out in the field this hunting season.

Research your planned hunting location

- Check FWP’s CWD Priority Sampling Areas or the Hunt Planner Map to see if your hunt location is in a CWD priority sampling area or a CWD positive hunting district. CWD testing is strongly encouraged in these areas
- Have a plan for taking a sample
- If you plan to take a sample yourself:
- Watch the CWD sampling video and download the CWD Sampling and Submission Guide
- Pack sampling tools including disposable gloves, field knife or scalpel, tweezers or pliers, and a small sealable bag for storing the samples
- Plan to drop off your sample at a CWD Sampling Station or follow instructions for mailing in your sample following the CWD Sampling and Submission Guide
- If you would like to have FWP take a sample:
- Find the location of the closest CWD Sampling Station
- Plan to bring in the entire animal or head -- we cannot sample frozen heads, and there must be 2-3

inches of the neck on the head for sampling

Have a plan for carcass management

- Planning to field dress your animal? Leave carcass parts at the kill site when possible
- Planning to transport the animal for butchering and processing? Bag remaining carcass parts and dispose of in a Class II landfill – find a location

If your animal tests positive

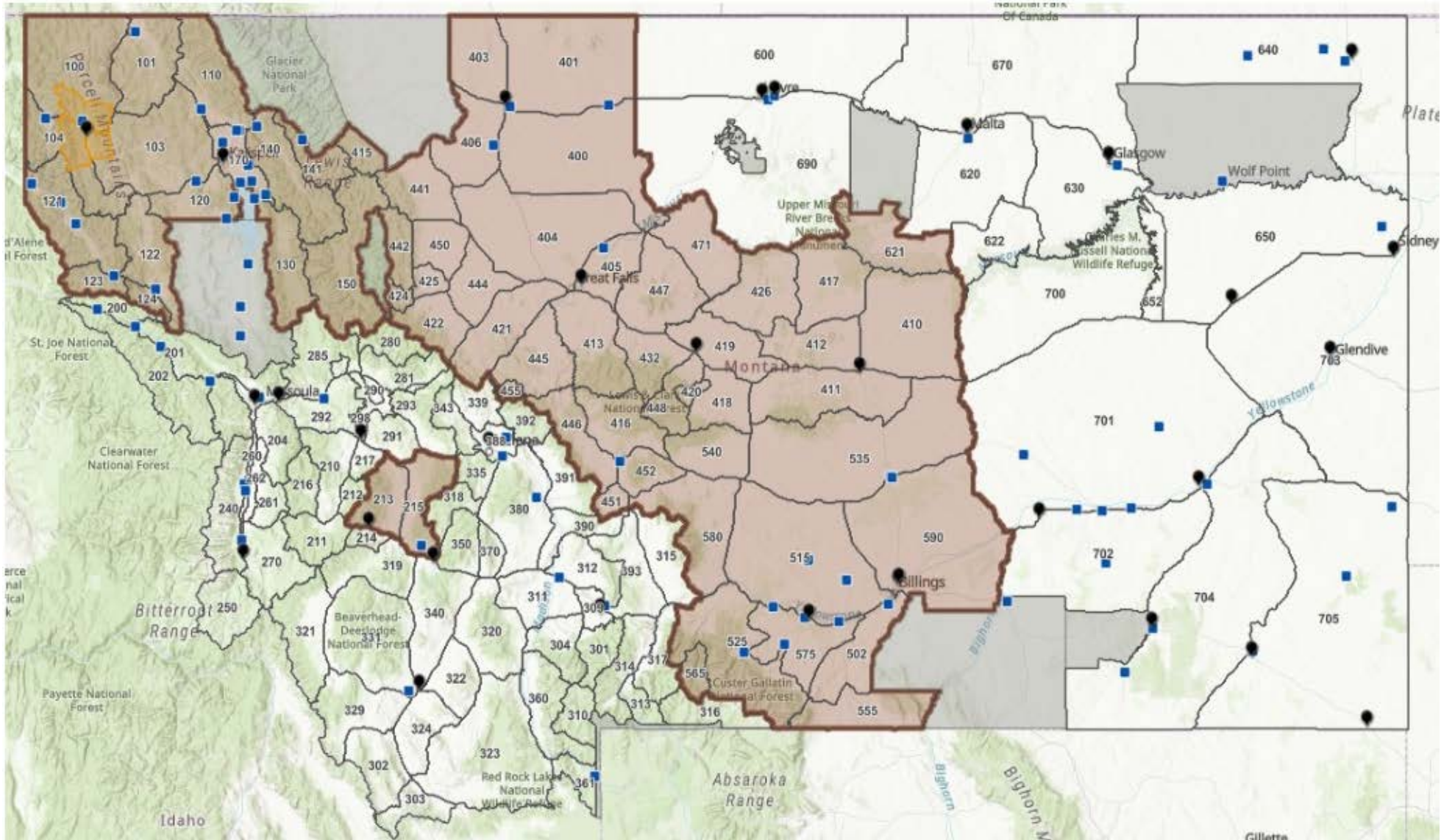
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that you do not eat the meat
- With a CWD suspect or positive test result, FWP authorizes the disposal of the meat. Dispose of all carcass waste (meat, bones, trimmings, hide, etc.) in a landfill
- If you have already sent your animal to a commercial processor or donated it to a foodbank, contact the FWP Wildlife Health Lab at: 406-577-7883, 406-577-7895, or 406-577-7881
- If you choose not to consume the meat and wish to request a new license for this year or next year, call your local FWP Regional Office or the Licensing Call Center (406-444-2950) to coordinate the next steps. You will have to properly dispose

of all remaining parts in a landfill, and turn in any antlers associated with your harvest, if you request a replacement license.

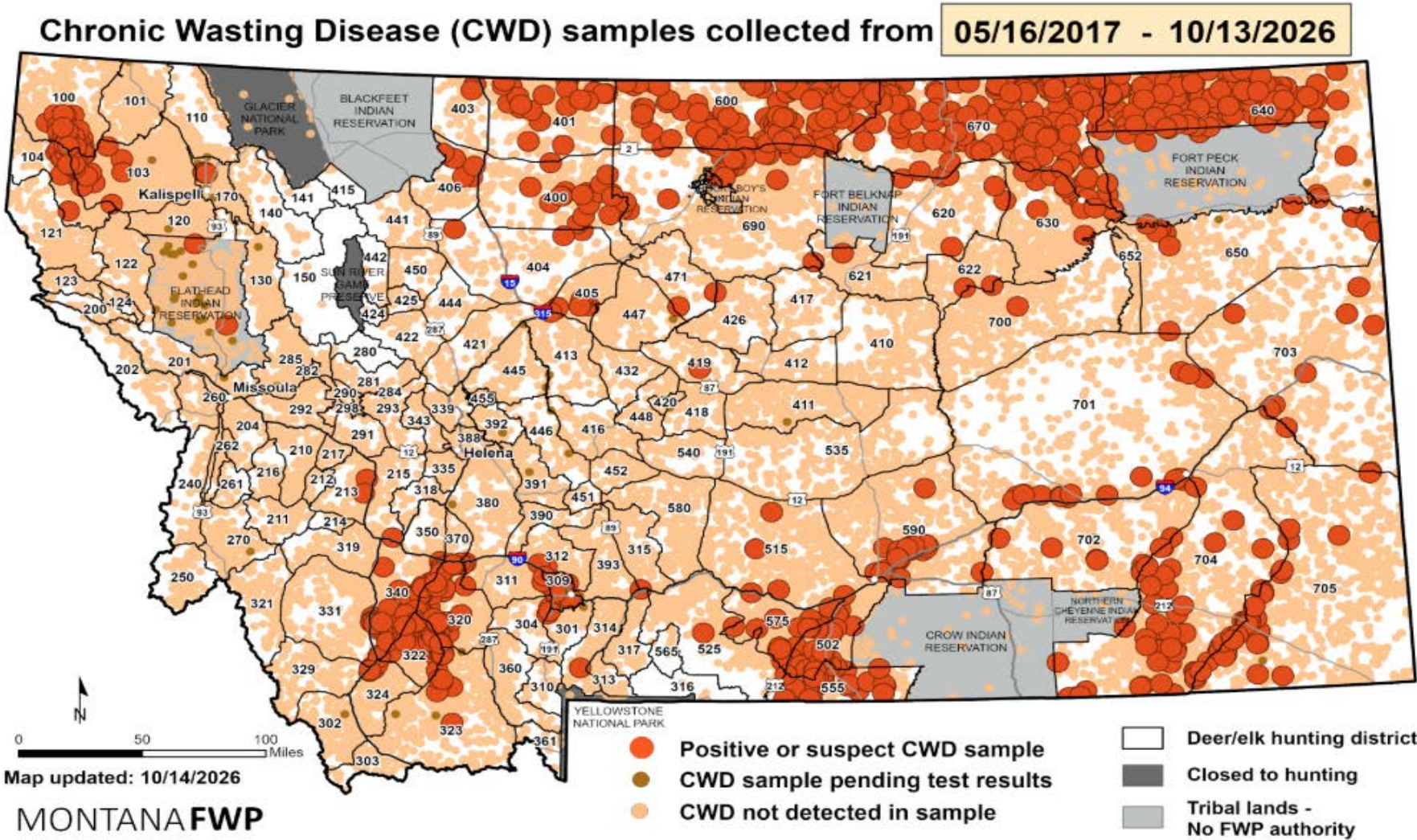
Submitting samples

Hunters in Montana can have their deer, elk, or moose tested for chronic wasting disease with the help of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. FWP is paying for the testing of samples. CWD sampling is voluntary. In Priority Surveillance Areas, sampling is strongly encouraged to help FWP gather additional data to inform management.

Hunters can either take the samples themselves, fill out the online hunter submission form and mail them to our Wildlife Health Lab in Bozeman, or they can bring the animal (or head) to an FWP regional office or CWD Sampling Station. Hunters who visit a regional office should be prepared to experience wait times during busy hours. Check with your regional office for optimal times, but in general regional offices will be able to take samples during normal business hours. Outside of the general deer and elk season, please call your regional office ahead of time to schedule a time to have your animal sampled.



Above, certain areas of the state are designated as Priority Sampling Areas where FWP is making a concerted effort to gather more samples. Priority Sampling Areas can fall into two groups 1) places where the FWP have not yet detected CWD where we conduct surveillance and 2) places where CWD has been detected where the FWP monitors to estimate the CWD prevalence. Especially in any Priority Sampling Areas, hunters are asked to voluntarily submit a sample from their animal. CWD photos/graphics courtesy of Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks.



Current Season Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) Sample Data (July 2026 - Present)

Positive Samples

5

Test Results Available in:

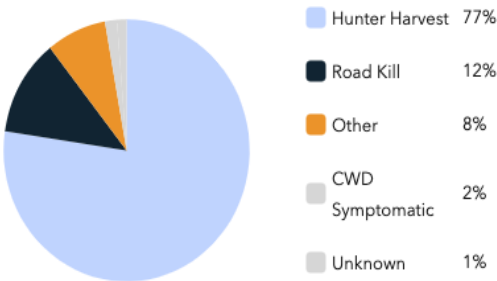
6 days

for Hunter Harvest Samples

Samples by Species

Species	Positive Samples	Total Samples
Mule Deer	1	35
White-tailed Deer	4	98
Elk	0	85
Moose	0	5
Total	5	223

Samples by Mortality Type



Samples Collected by Day



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continued from page 3

allow mule deer buck harvest on the general license for the first three weeks of the general season only, so hunters are encouraged to read the regulations closely. The three-week season applies to HDs 204, 212, 213, 214, 215, 217, 240 and 292.

Overall, mule deer numbers in the region are down from historic levels but have shown evidence of trending upward in the last few years. This year, biologists reported high fawn recruitment in several survey areas in the Upper and Lower Clark Fork and Bitterroot Valley. Fawn recruitment in HD 270 in the Bitterroot Valley was 52 fawns per 100 adults, a 31 percent increase from the previous year. Across the region, several districts are showing an increasing trend in buck harvest, a positive indicator for more widespread mule deer population growth across the region. Hunters should expect conditions and success to be similar or better than 2025. Mule deer hunters should plan to go high in the mountains for the best opportunity for bigger bucks.

White-tailed Deer

White-tailed deer numbers are generally stable to increasing across the region. Region 2 continues to be a popular place to hunt white-tailed deer in Montana, contributing an average of 15 percent of the statewide harvest since 2004. Antlered harvest was above the long-term (20-year) average in 2025. Most harvest in Region 2 usually occurs in HDs 201, 202, 240, 260 and 285. Mild conditions during the 2025-26 winter led to early green-up conditions. Biologists conducted



White-tailed deer buck. Photo by John Dowd.

ground-based green-up surveys in April in HDs 201, 202, 285 and 292. Although fawn:adult ratios were lower than the previous year, overall recruitment and harvest trends point to a stable or increasing population in most of the region.

Some new opportunities for the 2026 season include a new B-license in HD 211 (quota – 25), and an either-sex opportunity the first week of the season on the general license in HDs 281, 285, 292, 293, and 298.

Following the December 2025 commission meeting, the cap on the number of deer licenses individual residents may hold in a license year have been reduced from seven to three for

continued on page 9

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The Buck knife

by Mike Hudgins, Hamilton

*My father got the Buck knife
for Christmas in 1985,
back when its whole world
was Georgia whitetail woods.*

*It never dressed a giant buck.
Mostly average deer,
a fork horn if he was lucky,
nothing worth putting on the wall.
Still, he kept the edge sharp.*

When he died, the knife came to me.



*I carried it west,
away from pine and red clay,
past the country it knew,
until Georgia whitetails became
Montana mule deer,
antelope on open prairie,
elk heavy enough
to make that old blade work.*

*My hand fits the same handle
his hand did.
But now his grandchildren
have watched that blade open
animals they harvested themselves,
their hands bloody beside mine,
the knife doing work
my father never imagined
when he pulled it from the box
on Christmas morning.*

*The blade is smaller now.
Every swipe of the stone has taken something,
every sharpening carried away
a little more of the steel
that belonged to him.
Still, I sharpen it.*

*A knife does not know
when the hand holding it changes.
It only knows the work.*

continued from page 7

the 2026-2027 license years. The total of three may be represented



Pronghorn buck surveying his surroundings. Photo by John Dowd.

by a general A license and two B licenses or three B licenses. This cap does not apply to deer licenses made available outside the fall hunting season during game damage hunts.

Overall, hunters should expect good hunting conditions and success to be average or above average this fall. As with other big game, the best opportunity will be away from roads and motorized access.

For more information on Region 2's white-tailed deer harvest trends, see the Region 2 white-tailed deer harvest report online.

Pronghorn

There are only a few pronghorn hunting opportunities in western Montana. Pronghorn numbers in HD 215 were up from last year but still down from the long-term average. FWP did not observe any pronghorn in HD 291 during the summer survey. Though recent

years show a decreasing trend in the HD 291 antelope population, observing no pronghorn is likely due to the variable nature of conducting a single survey on a relatively small population. Hunting is limited to a few hunters who received a license through a special drawing.



Bull moose after chasing the Bitterroot Star editor off his fishing spot. Photo by John Dowd.

The Crying Log

by Stephen Lassiter, Stevensville

It was the worst bugle I'd ever heard. I couldn't believe someone was less than two hundred yards in the semi-clearcut behind my camp, in the heat of the day, blowing such awful notes. I sat up in my cot, half asleep and disgusted. It was the fourth day of my hunt and I was tired. After that morning's hunt I had gone back to camp to eat and rest a little before trying a different place that afternoon. Truthfully, I was there as much to reflect on the past few weeks, alone with my thoughts, as much as I was to hunt. My dad had passed away just a few weeks prior, my good job was in a tailspin with new management and I needed some woods-time.

The mental and physical fatigue caught up with me that day and my mind was whirling as I lay down for a quick nap. But now all I could think about was that awful bugle that woke me up and wondered why in the hell someone would be walking that open ridge at that time of day so close to camp. It sounded like a kid squealing through an empty paper towel tube in his kitchen; short and too high pitched.

"Newbie," I thought as I stepped out behind my tent and looked for him. And still the bugles came. "Why is he doing it so much?" I shook my head at that pitiful screech that stayed just out of sight on the flat above. "Oh well, might as well go hunting." I checked my pack and hopped on my four-wheeler for the mile long ride to a jumping off spot I had found a couple days earlier. Another bugle just before I cranked up. "Man, he got there kinda fast."

Paralleling the ridge on a forest service road, I kept checking the hill to see if I could see the guy, hoping he would see me and be quiet before he scared every elk into the next county. Around three hundred yards from camp I rounded a slight bend behind a slash pile and spotted the source.

It was a real elk. He emerged from the thin timber and was coming down

the slope just in front of me. We saw each other at the same time, both

slamming on brakes. I watched in utter disbelief as he whirled and went back the way he had come from, disappearing over the top. I just sat there, stunned. How can a six-point bull sound like that? I never felt so stupid in my life. "I could have called you in from camp," I muttered to his ghost. "Unbelievable."

I picked up whatever dignity I had left from the mud beneath me and slowly drove on, chastising myself the whole time. That afternoon was filled with thunderstorms and bugles from two different bulls, and one of the bulls was unmistakably him. I named him "Wimpy," not for his antlers, but for his voice.

I saved Wimpy's spot for the afternoon hunt and was eagerly looking forward to getting back there. Maybe lightning would strike twice.

I took a slightly different approach and after a half mile hike through manageable deadfall sprinkled with open park-like clearings, I found a nice spot to rest and call a bit. There was a perfect log on the ground with a couple of deadfall logs across the front of it making a good blind. I surveyed in front of me and there were small openings here and there with wind-downed trees between them, affording several good shooting lanes. The wind was right, so I sat down on the log and set my bow down.

"Pretty place," I thought, pulling a couple calls from my front pocket. Since I was reasonably sure Wimpy, or the other bull I had heard last night, was still around, I didn't bugle. Instead, I offered a few short cow and calf calls to the elk gods and sat quiet. And that is when it hit me. From nowhere, with no warning, my eyes teared up, my chest heaved and I was crying. Not a frenzied sob but a gentle weep all the way from my gut. A fifty-seven year old little boy crying for his Daddy. It was the first real time since the funeral, and it all came out right there on that rain-soaked log in the elk woods.

It's what I needed, I suppose. The long quiet hours around the fire, the



Photo by Stephen Lassiter.

myriad stars above, the minutes before sleep in the tent, the hikes and the hunt had opened the way to grieve the way I needed to. The solitude needed me, and I needed it. Eventually, I remembered where I was, sitting on a wet log with a bow in my hands, elk hunting.

"This is a good spot," I thought. I reached for my GPS to mark it but couldn't get it out of my pocket sitting down. I stood up slowly to pull it out, scanning around at a place I hadn't seen for at least ten minutes. And then I saw movement. About sixty yards out, the right color, quartering away right to left. I shoved the GPS back in my pocket just as it came on and blew a quiet cow call.

Right on cue it turned and as it moved towards me it materialized into an elk. "It's him," I thought. And sure enough it was Wimpy, coming in on a string. Totally unprepared, I stooped to pick up my bow, pulled an arrow from the quiver, knocked it and raised the bow, all the while watching for when his head was behind a tree or looking the other way.

Each movement was in slow stages. Ten seconds was an eternity, but he didn't catch me. Usually by this point in the past, I had already fallen to pieces, shaking like a leaf with my heart pounding out through my ears. But this time was eerily different. Every time I felt that rise, that adrenaline dump, I was able to overcome it, think and breathe my way into calmness. Looking back, I attribute that to being so emotionally spent that I had already worked past all that.

When his head was down and be-

hind the brush, I drew that bow back with such fluid precision that he never knew I was there. I had never been so rock solid at full draw on a bull elk, and at forty yards, I knew he was mine.

He got past the deadfall, turned toward me just a step, and then turned broadside and stopped, looking for that cow. In that crowning moment my vindication was nigh. I touched the release with the most confidence I have ever had in a shot. Then, the string hit my sleeve, sending the arrow wide left. He never moved until the arrow broke brush behind him, and when he ran, he took all that confidence with him. For the second time in three days, I watched that bull run away from me.

I never wear that coat bowhunting, but my regular one was wet and cold, so I changed to a thicker one. It was just thick enough to bunch up at the wrist and deflect my shot. I'll never forget that whispering sound it made, or that gentle tap as it went by. I sat back down on the log in disbelief. Again. The same bull had beaten me twice. I wasn't even mad, just numb. I sat there for a good half hour going over every detail and I will for the rest of my life. They call that a lesson, I guess. On the way back to camp in utter defeat, I made up my mind to burn that coat in the fire that night. Reason prevailed so I didn't, but I'll never wear it bowhunting again; that's for sure. My friends say it must have been my dad who sent that bull to me, that he was telling me everything would be all right. I don't know about all that, but the timing sure is suspect.

I marked that place on my GPS.



Ravalli County Fish & Wildlife Association

ATTENTION HUNTERS

Hunting season is here at last! To protect our resources & avoid FWP violations:

CHECK REGULATIONS

Ravalli Co. has 6 main deer & elk hunting districts plus portions of others. Each has different restrictions, tags & age requirements. Know what they are before you go.

RESPECT LANDOWNERS

Ask for permission before hunting, check for public hunting access, & research block management options.

PREVENT THE SPREAD OF CWD

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