

10 TIMELESS RULES FOR THE MODERN HUNTER

Hunting and participation in the great outdoors have evolved over the years. For many, an outdoor legacy passed from older generations to younger ones has built a strong foundation of conservation and mutual respect. However, today's landscape is much different. Hunters and anglers make up less than 30 percent of all outdoor enthusiasts. New sports and endeavors, as do new sportsmen and women, fill our waters and fields. The inheritance of knowledge once assumed has slowly been lost over time. The result is a gradual loss of tradition and deference.

As a native Montanan, I was blessed at a young age to have a grandfather and uncles who showed me the ropes even before I was of legal age to hunt. They taught me simple things like how to place my feet with each step, how to hold a knife, and how to safely load, carry, and unload a firearm. My family's guidance created the foundation for my 28-year career as a professional big-game hunting guide.

As a professional guide and outfitter, I found that one's education in the Rocky Mountains never truly ends. In fact, with each day, each week, and each passing season, there is always more to learn and more to be shared. In the spirit of sharing and teaching the next generation of hunters the unwritten rules of hunting camp—or any camp—here are my top 10 rules for the modern hunter.

10. ALWAYS OFFER ASSISTANCE

If you happen upon a sportsman or woman afoot in the field, do not step on the gas and leave them in a cloud of dust. Stop your rig. Ask if they need assistance. Maybe they are lost or stuck. Perhaps they need a ride to town. Always treat others as you would like to be treated because it could very well be you who popped a sidewall and neglected to bring a jack. It could be you walking 15 miles to reach cell service.

9. PACK IT IN—PACK IT OUT

There's no excuse for leaving anything behind in the backcountry or in the frontcountry—be it a tin can in a fire ring or a spent shell casing. Leave No Trace principles apply to hunters just as much as they apply to backpackers, climbers, and other outdoor enthusiasts. This means minimizing the impacts of campfires by using established fire rings, camping on durable surfaces (not riparian areas), and the list goes on.

8. NO RACING

There are prime hunting spots, better mushroom crops, preferred camping areas, and superior fishing holes. However, nothing defeats the purpose of your trip—hopefully to relax—more than creating a lose/lose scenario from the start. If someone beats you to your favorite trailhead, don't try to race them up the trail. Simply execute a backup plan. Serendipity often rules in these scenarios and it is possible that plan B may produce a better result. Needless competition over public access has ruined many family outings and even resulted in fisticuffs.

7. DON'T STEAL

Don't invite yourself to investigate if you are out and about on your ATV and happen upon an empty camp or an unlocked Jeep on an old two-track. It's not a rummage sale. In the backcountry, even the smallest items are essential to survival. A lantern is not a high-ticket item, but its light when one returns to a dark camp is critical. A first aid kit, pistol, and chainsaw can all mean the difference between life and death. Plus, it's not yours.

6. NO CLAIM JUMPING

All outdoorsmen and women take great pride in their knowledge of particular areas, especially when studying the local herds and memories of past success takes years. When an individual personally invites you to join in their sacred activity and openly shares that knowledge with you, it is not an open invitation for you to return to the same spot with your friends and their friends. Appreciate and respect the opportunity because it was a gift.

5. RESPECT

Whether in pursuit of a game animal, fish, flora, fauna, or the perfect photograph, always respect your quarry. Do not take low percentage shots at game, nor wipe the slime off every fish you catch and release. Do not stomp the flora and fauna in pursuit of mushrooms for your steak. Reverence for the land and its inhabitants is key to conservation. Waste not want not. This reverence should continue through the processing, preparation, and consumption of the harvest.

4. RULES OF THE ROAD

UTVs, electric bikes, vehicles, and horses all share the primitive roads in the West. Know the laws, but more importantly, understand the damage that can be done. Keep to designated routes, be aware of your surroundings, and utilize caution. Road restrictions are in place to prevent motorized vehicle access and protect the land. Just because an e-bike has an electric motor does not exclude it from these same regulations. UTVs can get to offroad areas easily, but that does not mean they should. Knowing who has the right of way on a crowded two-track is also essential. The vehicle or UTV traveling downhill on an icy mountain road should always pull aside and allow the uphill vehicle to pass because a vehicle can always gain momentum going down.

3. NO TRESPASSING

Obviously, it is against the law to trespass or hunt on private property without permission, but we should not stop there as sportsmen and women. We should respect the rights of others on public land, too. If an outfitter or family camp sits over the next ridge and you know a dozen people will be hunting that area, you probably want to find a new hunting spot. If you see an angler on the river hauling in trout, do not crowd them. Ask what they are hitting on and find your own hole up or downstream. If we all do our best to accommodate one another, we can collectively improve each other's outdoor experience.

2. DIAL BACK THE TECH

The technology available today is astounding when compared to just ten years ago. Phones, GPS devices, trail cameras, map apps and tracking systems have opened a new world of adventure. Hunters, hikers, fishermen, and bird watchers have adopted these new technologies and gained a new confidence when it comes to exploring deeper into the wilderness. This is not necessarily a problem. However, when one ventures into the mountains with their head down they're typically not paying attention to their surroundings. They are not finding landmarks to guide them home. Both extreme cold and heat negatively affect batteries, clouds and a thick timber canopy can block satellite reception, and when one falls head over teakettle into a creek, water can put an end to electronics. Being too reliant on technology can and does endanger lives.

1. LET GO OF THE EGO

Emotions can get the best of us under certain circumstances, but being upset at another hunter who filled their tag should not put us in a bad mood. Instead, celebrate the accomplishments of others when they achieve their goals. If you come across a hunter hauling out an animal, offer a helping hand or a kind word of congratulations. One day it will be your turn. Outdoor pursuits are meant to be entertaining and enjoyed. It's not a place for competition and envy. Leave the egos at home.

This is certainly not an exhaustive list, but it's a good start to ensuring that we all enjoy our time afield. Lucky for me I had mentors who took the time to share their knowledge of and respect for the outdoors. Hopefully this list can help others on the trail to becoming a lifelong hunter. With a little luck, the next generation can turn down the noise, and open their ears and hearts to fully appreciate and conserve our unique gift of hunting. ■