

OUT OF BOUNDS

In at least one hunter's view, ATVs and hunting don't mix

By Chris Madson
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For the last forty years or so, I've been a hunter. Through nearly all that time, I've wrestled with the ethics of hunting, trying to define the elusive notion of "fair chase" and the even cloudier issues that surround the killing of another living thing. Like many ethical questions, the issues that surround hunting aren't easily or completely answered. Because of that difficulty and because I've made a few bad ethical decisions myself in my years as a hunter, I've tried to avoid bashing other hunters. Given the choice, I prefer to consider what ethical hunting is rather than what it is not. But, when it comes to "all-terrain vehicles," I've just about had it.

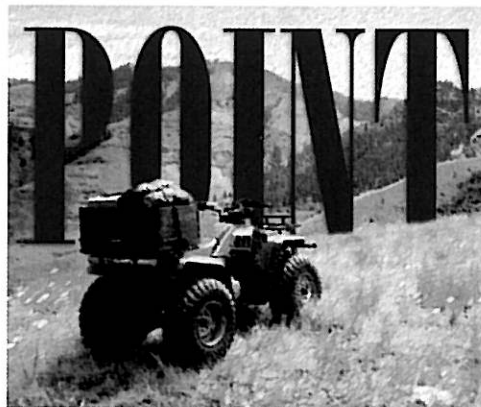
frame, my .270, and a pair of chest waders. I caught the trail north down the canyon of Walbright Creek, a short, spring-fed trickle that falls off the west side of Platte Ridge. I slipped on my waders and crossed to the east side of the Platte, a hairy undertaking at first light, then stashed the waders, laced my boots tight, and began hunting up the flank of the mountain.

It's steep country. By the time I scrambled up through the rim rock to the top, I had stripped down to my tee shirt, and the steam rolled off my arms and chest into the twenty-degree air. From the top, I could almost see back to where I had parked, three miles and a thousand vertical feet behind. I was a solid mile into the wilderness, and there was fresh tracking snow on the high ground. It promised to be a good day.

I worked my way into the edge of the timber, watching the heavy cover where the elk were most likely to be, going carefully to make sure I saw them before they saw me. After about an hour of still-hunting, I saw a dent in the snow ahead. My first thought was that a herd of elk had passed through on their way over the divide, but when I got a little closer, I could see the even, parallel ruts and the knobby imprint of the all-terrain tires.

I hunted another two or three hours without finding any elk sign, but it was hard to stay focused when I knew a motorized somebody was sweeping the timber ahead of me. About noon, I doubled back into the head of the Walbright drainage and followed the creek back to my waders. I never saw the guy on the ATV, and that was probably a good thing for both of us.

He was illegal, of course, and for several years after the incident, I was willing to accept the notion that the problem was with the operator, not the equipment. But the ATV craze has deepened with the passing years, and with the increase



My heartburn with ATVs started about a decade ago. I was hunting elk on the southern edge of the Platte River Wilderness. I arrived at Six-Mile Gap about two hours before sunrise with a pack

in interest has come an explosion in abuse. Probably half the hunting parties in Wyoming have at least one ATV now, and some groups show up with trailers of eight or ten of them. I've watched how they're used; I've gotten many reports from these hunters I respect; and I'm ready to make a flat statement — there is no place in hunting for an ATV. Period.

The temptation to use an ATV illegally while hunting seems almost overpowering. I'd like to know how many ATV riders sneaked into Wyoming wilderness areas or left Forest Service white-arrow routes last season. There are no figures, of course. Proponents of ATVs will argue that it was only a handful of ATVers. Those of us who hunt on foot, see the tire tracks and hear the engines, have a different view.

I talked to a hunter earlier this year who saw a group of nimrods, all mounted on ATVs and wearing two-way radios with headsets. Were these folks just talking about the weather as they drove around in the clear October air or were they organizing motorized game drives with radio coordination? In Wyoming and most other states, it's illegal to use any motorized vehicle to pursue a game animal. In some states, it's also illegal to use two-way radios to pursue game.

In several of the outdoor catalogs, I see racks for fastening firearms or bows to the handlebars of an ATV. An ethical hunter doesn't need to have a weapon that close at hand; why then, are some ATV hunters demanding equipment of this sort? Are they shooting at game from their ATVs? If so, they are violating the law. If they're jumping off the ATV before they shoot, they are merely violating the ethical canons of their sport.

The outdoor catalogs sell spotlights for ATVs as well. An ATV on a legal trail or road shouldn't need a spotlight very often; after all, ATVs have headlights. Are these spotlights intended to help ATVers out of areas

in which motor vehicles are prohibited? or are they for spotlighting game? In either case, they're leading ATV operators beyond the bounds of regulations and far beyond the ethical limits of hunting.

I imagine there are ATV owners who carefully avoid violating state or federal regulations when they ride, although I suspect there are fewer of them than either the ATV fraternity or manufacturers care to admit. And here, well inside the law, is where the real discussion of ethics should begin. To my mind, the most important issue to explore is motivation — why do law-abiding people use ATVs as part of a hunt? The only answer I can see is more than a little embarrassing — hunters use ATVs to save effort, which is to say they're lazy.

In this day of four-wheel-drives and proliferating back roads, the accusation could be leveled against most hunters. Certainly I don't walk from my home in Cheyenne to hunt elk in Jackson. But it's important to separate transportation from hunting. Each hunter has to draw that line for himself and decide whether he'll try to shoot that buck or bull he sees at the meadow edge while he's driving to another spot.

Consciously using a vehicle as part of day-in, day-out hunting tactics is different than taking advantage of chance encounter, and it's inefficient as well. To me, persistent road-hunting wanders well into the darker grays of hunting ethics. If anything, using an ATV to road-hunt is even less ethical than using a pick-up or sport utility because the ATV is generally more efficient. The ATVer can see better, reach his rifle more easily, park more efficiently, and get off and away from his vehicle more easily. I suspect that's one reason ATVs have gained such popularity.

Being willing to make the effort is a vitally important part of hunting. It is a measure of the hunter's year-round commitment, his self-discipline, and his regard for the concept of fair chase. As hunters abandon these elements of

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their discipline, they leave themselves open to the attacks of antihunters, but far more important, they lose irreplaceable components of the hunting tradition itself.

Two alibis for using an ATV while hunting seems to have gained some currency in the last few years. One is: "I don't use it to hunt; I just use it to get the meat out." I've carried meat out of the timber, and I've packed it on horses. I've got to say if I have the choice, I'd rather have it on the horse. However, if I have a choice between packing the meat on my back or running an ATV into the timber after it, I'll put the meat on my back.

Before there were ATVs, a hunter without a horse always thought about how he would get his quarry out of the timber after he shot. Many older (and probably wiser) hunters stayed within reasonable distance of a road to avoid the temptation of shooting a big game animal in a tough spot. Some younger (and probably crazier) hunters ventured back into the high country, pulled the trigger, and spent several days thereafter



paying for their folly.

If you checked the relative success of these two groups and the size of the trophies they took, you'd probably be surprised at how little difference there was. Still, I'd like to think there is a difference. I'd like to think that the best hunting waits for the hunter who is willing to make the greatest effort to get it. There's something innately right about that.

For generations, the prospect of packing out meat tended to separate hunters by their willingness to commit. ATVs are changing that. Now we're separating hunters by the size of their bank accounts.

A healthy adult can pack a big game animal out of nearly any situation. Put the meat in a shady place where the air can circulate under it. When you're ready to start packing it, bone the meat out and take a load you can handle. It may take two trips; it may take ten; it IS possible.

That brings me to the second big excuse: "I can't handle that country on foot." There may be several reasons a hunter offers this excuse. He may have a health condition; he may be seventy years-old, or he may just be out of shape.

A few Americans are disabled at birth or very early in life. Their disabilities may prevent them from hunting. If there is a group that can claim the need for an ATV while hunting, this is it.

As for those aging hunters with heart condition or other health problems—I sympathize. If you truly cannot hunt except with an ATV, I wouldn't criticize the decision. However, I remember something my old man told me a few years before he died. We were standing at the base of the Ferris Mountains planning the next day's strategy. He asked where I was going and I pointed to the top of Ferris Mountain itself.

"Want to come along?" I asked.

"Don't believe so," he answered. "I think I'll go up on this near ridge and see if I can sit one out."

"It's awful nice up there," I

argued. "And I think that's where the big one will be."

"You're probably right, but I'm not sure I could make it. And that's alright. I've had my time up in places like that. Your turn now." He paused for a long moment, looking up at the bare summit. Then he turned back to me and smiled. "Enjoy it."

Really, disability, age, or ill health are relatively rare circumstances among hunters. What's not so rare is flab. Most of us make our livelihoods behind desks these days, and that means we're faced with the constant challenge of staying in shape. Some hunters meet that challenge; many don't. It's an individual choice that I have no right to criticize—until the panting forty-year old decides to use an ATV to catch up with more motivated hunters.

ATVs have many legitimate uses. As working vehicles, they have most of the advantages of a horse and avoid many of the disadvantages. I can see the use of an ATV for inspecting fences and irrigation ditches, hazing cattle, and just getting around the agricultural landscape. I suppose I can even see the recreational appeal of riding an ATV, and I don't have a huge quarrel with that as long as the rider stays on legal roads and trails. Hunting, though, is a different matter.

I believe hunters are still accorded a measure of respect by the nonhunting public. If they are, it is because the public sees hunters as having discipline, knowledge, skill, and strength. When they lose that view of us, the future of hunting will be in danger. The first threat to that future will be when we hunters lose that vision of ourselves.

The views I have stated here aren't only my own. Many of the men and women I know share them. We may be suffering from a bad case of tunnel vision, but I don't think so. In any case, I invite avid supporters of ATV use in hunting to offer a defense.

But I don't think there are any. ▲▲▲

I was "chained up" on all

four wheels of my Ford F-250 when I left my tent camp in December 1972. A light snow was falling, but one could still see the stars at 3:00 a.m. as I started up the forest service road eager to begin the day's hunt. I had drawn an "extra deer" tag for the late mule deer hunt in Southeastern Idaho near Palisades Reservoir and it was the opening day of the season. I knew exactly where I was going as the year before I had hunted elk in this area late in the season and had marveled at the size and number of the mule deer bucks that seemed to be everywhere there was an aspen patch. As the elevation increased, the snow depth also increased to the point where the light, fluffy, snow was coming over the top of the hood of the truck after about three miles. At that point I pulled the truck off the road, put on my snowshoes and made my way in the dark up the road destined for a particular high basin in which I expected to find a special trophy buck.

As I walked I was excited as there was nothing but unbroken snow ahead of me. I had this spot to myself and by daybreak I would be on the ridge where I could course



along the ridge and look for the buck of my dreams. My army surplus trail snowshoes worked perfectly in the new powder snow and I was making excellent time.

As I broke out of the timber into the first basin it was just beginning to get light, although it was still a half hour before shooting hours. Plenty of time to get to the ridge as I had planned.

It was then that I heard the unmistakable sound of 2-cycle engines in the timber below me...my heart sank as I knew that I was about to have company. Within minutes the first rider came past me hardly giving me a glance, as he was intent upon getting into the basin above us before the deer were spooked by the sound of the engines. I do not recall how many hunters there were in all, five or six maybe. All of them had rifles slung

over their shoulders. I do recall the numb feeling that I felt in my stomach and the resentment I felt at the time. The quality of my morning's hunt had been ruined and their hunt was just beginning. Within minutes rifle shots echoed throughout the basin. I doubled back through the timber, side-hilled to the ridge, and went off into a more



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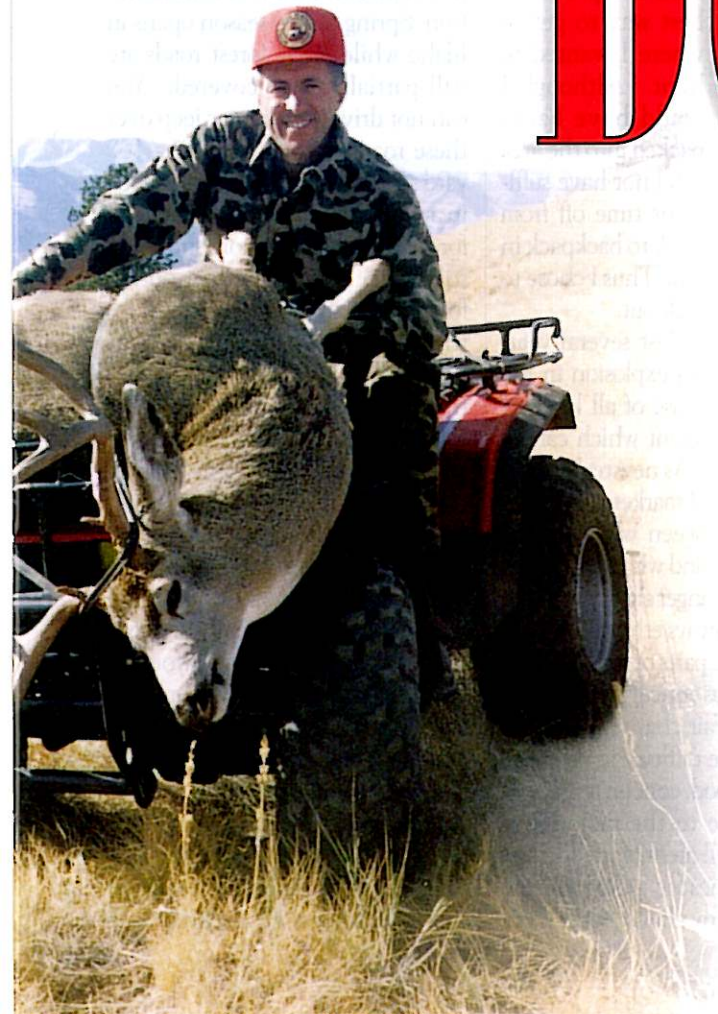
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remote basin where there were no roads and also no snowmobiles. It was there that the quality of my hunt returned.

As I hunted that day I thought about my morning's encounter with hunters on snowmobiles. I did not own a snowmobile and had not thought about using one to get into the high country for hunting. These guys were locals, had obviously

their sleds and towed them down the road and out of the area.

Since that day in 1972 I have hunted in many places throughout the Western U.S., Alaska, and Canada. Although the vast majority of my hunting has been done by backpacking or horse packing into remote areas, I have spent a considerable amount of time using 4x4 pickups, jeeps, land cruisers, airplanes, jet boats, rafts, snowmobiles, mountain bikes, and ATVs as integral parts of legal, ethical hunts. These modes of mechanized transportation enabled me to access hunting areas in a variety of geographical land types. In nearly all cases I chose to use a "machine" instead of backpacking or horse packing because the particular machine I chose provided the best and sometimes the only means of accessing the area I chose to hunt. These machines also provided for the effective, timely and efficient removal

of big game from the field. For example, flying in to a remote area of Alaska to hunt sheep was the best way to get to where I wanted to hunt. Although I could have backpacked into the area I did not have sufficient time off from work to backpack in

and out of the area. Thus I chose to fly in and backpack out.

Within the last several years there has been an explosion in the design, sale, and use of all kinds of high tech equipment which can be used in hunting. As new technology is introduced and marketed to hunters the line between what is legal, what is ethical, and what constitutes fair chase is no longer clear cut. What is legal is not always ethical. What is ethical in some parts of the U.S. may not be viewed as ethical in other parts of the U.S. Fair chase has become more and more difficult to define in easily understood, concise terms that are acceptable to the majority of hunters from all areas of the U.S.

Guidelines for appropriate use must accompany almost every piece

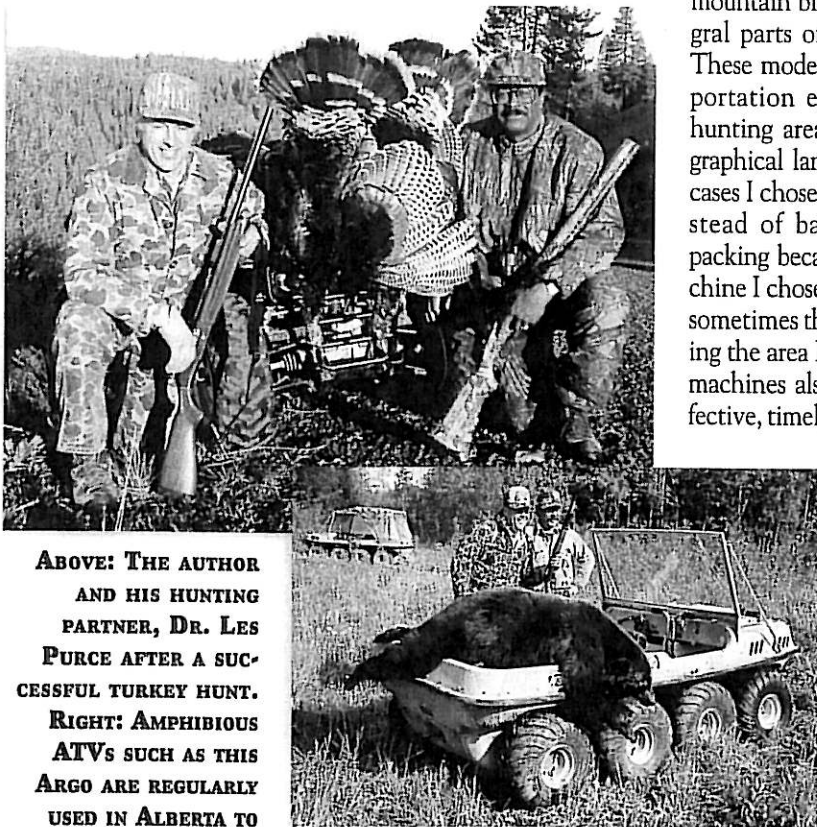
of gear used in hunting situations. Some of these guidelines are promulgated for the safety of hunters. Other guidelines are developed to protect roads and the land from erosion and abuse. Guidelines are developed to protect our wildlife. Finally, guidelines are developed to maintain ethical standards and standards of fair chase. Once these rules are developed, education and enforcement are required to maintain the rules. Even with education and enforcement there are people who will choose to not follow the rules.

ATVs have just as much of a place in the hunt as do airplanes, rafts, jet boats, jeeps, pickups, etc. In many cases an ATV is the best piece of equipment to accomplish the task at hand. Let's think about the positive side of ATV use.

Packing in a camp.

I have used ATVs often to pack a hunting camp into a remote area which was not accessible by any other vehicle. Although I own my own pack string of horses there are occasions when ATVs are the most efficient means of transportation. Spring turkey season opens in Idaho while many forest roads are still partially snow-covered. You can not drive a pickup or jeep over these roads as there may be a 100 yard stretch of snow three feet deep in a shaded area and then bare road for a half mile, then more snow and so on. An ATV is the best option for packing in a hunting camp for the weekend under these conditions. Spring bear hunting poses the same problem. The snow melts slowly on shaded north slopes and an ATV is about the only vehicle one can use to access many excellent spring bear areas. Once you cross a snow patch you may be able to ride for several miles until you encounter another patch of snow. Once you set up your camp you can use the ATV to ride from your camp to where you want to hunt on foot. You can even ride on the road up to snow line where you put on your snowshoes or your mountaineering skis and go off looking for a bear.

An ATV does not have to be the only means of packing in a



ABOVE: THE AUTHOR AND HIS HUNTING PARTNER, DR. LES PURCE AFTER A SUCCESSFUL TURKEY HUNT. RIGHT: AMPHIBIOUS ATVs SUCH AS THIS ARGO ARE REGULARLY USED IN ALBERTA TO ACCESS BEAR HUNTING AREAS AND PACK OUT BEARS.

done this before, and were not breaking the law. They were simply using technology which was available at the time and applying it to a hunting situation. It was a personal choice they had made. I too had made a personal choice in electing to use snowshoes to get into the area. Who was to say who was right or wrong in this situation. After that encounter the day was simply stunning! I enjoyed one of the most memorable hunting days of my life as I coursed silently along the ridges on my snowshoes knowing that at any moment I might find a very special buck. I suspect the other guys had a good day too by their standards as they were able to drag their deer down the hill to where they hooked them on to

camp to justify its use. ATVs are less expensive to buy and maintain than a string of horses and mules and will do much of the same packing work that stock will do. Some individuals simply are not comfortable around horses and choose to use an ATV instead.

Simple transportation to and from the field.

Many forest service roads, two-track jeep roads and trails permit ATV use. These trails and roads can be used very effectively, ethically, and legally to access remote hunting areas. Riding an ATV up a two-track road can be enjoyable as well as easy on the environment. They are also an economical and efficient means of getting to and from the field. They are also legal and ethical to use in these applications as long as the hunter is using the ATV in a legal, ethical manner. Older hunters may choose to access an area with an ATV as they may not be as physically able as they may once have been. When driven responsibly, a 4-wheel drive ATV can leave a track which is barely detectable on such a road. It is also appropriate to carry rifles, shotguns, archery gear and the like on an ATV to and from the hunting area. Loaded rifles are unlawful to carry on ATVs in some states and are also unsafe to carry on ATVs in any situation.

Removal of big game from the field.

I have backpacked loads of big game out of the mountains over the past thirty years for myself and my hunting partners. I have packed a similar number of big game quarters out of the mountains on my horses and mules. Until I bought my first used ATV I never knew how useful an ATV could be for this purpose. I bought my first Honda Foreman more than ten years ago because I needed something to plow the snow out of my driveway. The one I bought had been used for just that and had a nifty plow already attached. When hunting season rolled around my friend suggested that we take the

blade off and put the Honda in the back of my pickup just in case we needed it for something. That fall I packed six deer and three elk out of the field with my Honda and was amazed at how well it performed. Now I take the ATV with me whenever I am hunting in an area where its use is legal and the terrain is conducive to its use for retrieving game from the field.

Responsible use of ATVs

It is not appropriate to hunt from an ATV. It is also inappropriate to hunt from a jet boat, a pickup truck, an airplane, a snowmobile, or any other motorized vehicle or craft, but hunters do it. Human nature being what it is, just about any mechanized vehicle can be used in unethical, inappropriate, and in violation of fair chase hunting practices.

In most states off-highway vehicles are legal to drive on state, Forest Service, and BLM lands. ATVs fall under the same regulations as other motor vehicles and for the most part, are allowed on established roads and trails that are signed with route markers. ATVs are not permitted in wilderness areas. They may be driven off roads or trails only when the land management agency specifically indicates such use is allowed. These agencies all have travel plans which are available to the public. Responsible hunters obtain travel plans for areas they intend to hunt educate themselves about what areas and routes are open to ATV use and abide by the plans at all times.

The choice of whether to use an ATV in a hunting application is a very personal decision made for many different reasons. Just because someone has an ATV in the back of their pickup or chooses to use an ATV in a hunting related situation does not make him or her an outlaw. Most states have rules which are intended to curb inappropriate use of vehicles in hunting situations. In some instances rules need to be tightened to curb abuse and in all instances rules need to be enforced.

Responsible ATV users show respect for the resource by staying on designated roads and trails. They resist the urge to take shortcuts and create new trails. Responsible ATV users also avoid areas sensitive to potential erosion and cross streams only at fords where the road or trail intersects the streams. Responsible ATV users are considerate of fellow hunters and when encountering horses and hikers they pull off to the side of the road or trail and shut off the engine to allow these individuals to pass.

The issue with ATVs, in my experience, is that off road rules are either nonexistent or are rarely enforced in many states. The proliferation of ATV use has simply overwhelmed the BLM and the U.S. Forest Service to the point where neither agency has the personnel to enforce existing off road rules. The budgets for these agencies have been cut to the point that they don't have the funds to do basic land and timber management practices let alone patrol the back country for ATV outlaws. Another issue is that some states do not have laws prohibiting the carrying of loaded firearms on ATVs. Finally, there are hunters in our midst who believe they have a God given right to drive on any road they find in the woods, gated or not, public land or private land makes no difference. In Idaho they pull the locked gates out of the ground with their pickup trucks or they go around the gates by cutting the fence. These individuals will break the law whether they are driving an ATV or a 4x4 pick-up. The longer there are insufficient rules and the longer that existing rules go unenforced the greater the problem will be. The problem is the lack of laws governing ATV use in some situations and lack of enforcement in others. The problem is not the ATV. The problem is people. The devil does not ride a Honda. ▲▲▲



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