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Photos Courtesy of Author



MONTANA MULE DEER

Montana's diverse landscapes provide sportsmen opportunities unrivaled in the Lower 48. Old-growth rainforests in the northwest corner give way to arid ponderosa pine parks, and eventually the mountains draw into the northern plains. This is what draws me away each fall from my mountain home to eastern Montana with its breaks and coulees that hide mule deer. A casual drive down any dusty road will reveal how strong the herd is, but finding a mature buck will require leaving the truck and putting tracks in the soft dirt.

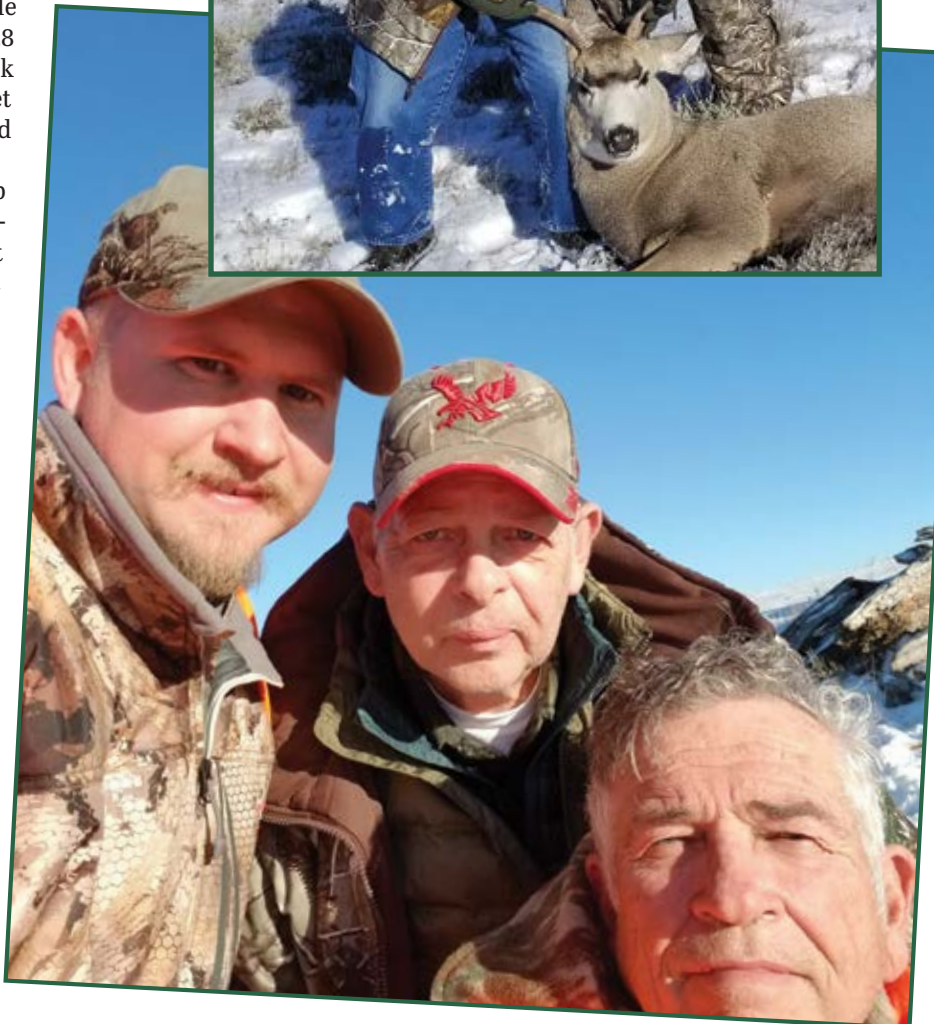
I HAVE FOUND EASTERN MONTANA MULE DEER HUNTING IS A GAME OF STRATEGY. IT BEGINS WITH IMMERSING YOURSELF IN A PLACE WHERE ANCIENT HUNTERS PURSUED THE SAME QUARRY.

THE OPENNESS OF THE LAND IS DECEPTIVE. DEEP DRAWS ABOUND AND SPLIT THE HILLS.

I've made many such treks to the other side of my home state. The most memorable of these trips was bringing my father and uncle together. I had planned this trip for some time, wanting to repay each of them for the love of all things outdoors they had instilled in me. My uncle had taken care of my aunt for many years and had not left her to take a hunting trip. It had been 13 years since he had carried a gun and 20 since he harvested his last buck. He and my father had not hunted together for 38 years. They grew up in the era when you took your rifle to school and hunted after school let out, sometimes a bit earlier than that. It had been too long, and a reunion was due.

I attempted to prepare them for the trip by explaining that we would not have a problem finding deer and that they shouldn't shoot the first one. We had only crested the first hill when my uncle spotted a 3x3 buck, excitedly exclaiming, "That's the one." Helping him move into position, we peeked over to see that the smaller buck had mingled with a small group led by a dark-antlered 4x4. He smoothly shouldered his rifle and made an excellent shot.

My father was not to be outdone by his older brother so quickly followed up a short time later with his own buck, an older 3x4 which is a trait very common in this area I hunted. Once he was steadied with a tripod, we saw the buck bed down while a few smaller bucks sparred and fed. The wind had



TOP: Everett's uncle with his 4x4 mule deer.
BOTTOM: After 38 years Everett (left) was able to get his uncle (center) and father (right) together for a Montana mule deer hunt.

picked up and bitterly cut at his bare hands. I tried to coach him to wait for the older buck to stand back up and not be “distracted” by these young guys. The minutes grew until finally he stood allowing my dad to place a bullet behind his shoulder. I helped both dress and load the bucks into the truck. The memory of their double was still being formed between us all

Everett's dad exercised patience waiting for this buck to stand up to get a clear shot.



when it began to be replayed. They commented on each other's hunt as though it was one from decades ago. The satisfaction I felt came from knowing that this was a day not easily forgotten.

Those looking to pursue mule deer bucks in Montana will find the journey filled with challenges that can be overcome with diligent planning and research. Residents enjoy over-the-counter licenses with no need to draw a permit. Nonresidents will need to draw either the deer combination or big game combination license. Recent years have seen more applicants than available licenses and having preference points has been necessary to draw.

Narrowing down the vastness of Montana's plains will require some effort. There are abundant Bureau of Land Management and Forest

Service sections. Some of them are rather large with easy to find access points, but the gems will lie in smaller pieces that are tucked away and require a hike to open up. Region 7 boasts the largest number of acres enrolled in the Block Management Program. Private landowners allow public hunting, and there are some very productive Block Management Areas to find bucks. Those that accept reservations will fill up quickly, often on the day they begin taking them. Putting time into meeting ranchers and offering to help with fencing can still find you invitations to hunt.

Venturing into eastern Montana during the early winter will likely come with rain, and that means gumbo. The region is famous for creating slick conditions that take first-timers by surprise and get them stuck. A heavy frost melting off is enough to cause a truck with four-wheel drive some frustration. It should be taken seriously and road conditions monitored.

The openness of the land is deceptive. Deep draws abound and split the hills.

NARROWING DOWN THE VASTNESS OF MONTANA'S PLAINS WILL REQUIRE SOME EFFORT.

Large creek beds, most often dry, act as highways that mule deer travel between feeding and bedding areas. Sagebrush and prairie grass is broken up by hardwoods lining these creeks. Utilizing these depressions in the otherwise flat terrain can help you cut the distance unseen. Once close enough, a hunter can ease himself or rifle over the edge with minimal profile. Longer distances are very common, and hunters of varying degrees of proficiency will find a shot within their effective range.

I have found eastern Montana mule deer hunting is a game of strategy. It begins with immersing yourself in a place where ancient hunters pursued the same quarry. High bluffs can be steep to summit but offer you the best chance at glassing up deer. Spotting them is easy, but planning your advance is the real challenge in hunting mule deer. Often the many eyes from surrounding does or the one deer that surprises you on your stalk in will leave you looking at the south end of a northbound buck.

However, sometimes everything that needs to go right does, and you are rewarded for your persistence. This past year more people were recreating outside, including hunters. With the increased pressure, bucks were particularly difficult to locate. But as is true in everyday life and hunting, everything can change in a moment. The last hill I inspected held around a dozen deer with what would be my personal best mule deer buck. And with most hunts we all take, they are over too soon.

Mule deer in Montana have had some rough winters in recent memory, but they seem to be rebounding very nicely. I am encouraged to see the age-class of bucks increasing and hunters taking higher quality bucks. Montana is managed as an opportunity state and mule deer can be hunted in the rut. This certainly impacts the density of bucks, but I continue to have increasing success on the caliber of deer every fall. I look forward to the long drive and the hope of finding one more. ■



Everett with his own mule deer taken on one of his many adventures in Eastern Montana.

DIY CHECKLIST:

MONTANA RESIDENT DEER LICENSE: \$16
NON-RESIDENT: \$614

LODGING: 10X10 KODIAK CANVAS TENT

GEAR:

MYSTERY RANCH METCALF BACKPACK

BROWNING X-BOLT .300 WINMAG WITH VORTEX
VIPER HST SCOPE

NOSLER E-TIP 180GR BULLET

VORTEX VIPER 10X42 BINOCULARS

VORTEX VIPER SPOTTING SCOPE

SITKA TECHNICAL CLOTHING

ALASKA GUIDE CREATIONS BEAR CUB BINOCULAR
HARNES

CABELA'S MEINDL PERFECT BOOTS



ADVENTURE
AWAITS

If you have any DIY hunts you would like to see featured in the column, please email Justin Spring or Karlie Slayer for details.

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Karlie Slayer - Karlie@Boone-Crockett.org