

DOUBLE-HEADER: MONTANA MULE DEER AND PRONGHORN



SOME STATES IN THE WEST HAVE A CHECKERBOARD OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE LAND. HERE'S HOW TO LEGALLY NAVIGATE THOSE WIDE OPEN SPACES AND STILL FILL YOUR TAGS.

I had no idea where my dad was. I hadn't heard from him in two days, and his last known location was Reno, Nevada. The plan was for me to drive 500 miles across Montana from my home in Missoula and meet him in Broadus to hunt pronghorn and mule deer. Meanwhile, more than 1,100 miles of barren highway separate Reno from Broadus, and Dad was somewhere in between. My best guess was that he lost his phone, again.

THE SAGEBRUSH MOVED LIKE WAVES AS THE WIND WASHED OVER IT. THE LANDSCAPE IS VERY DECEPTIVE. WHAT APPEARS FLAT IS ACTUALLY A WEB OF HUMPS AND DITCHES, PROVIDING COVER FOR BOTH GAME AND HUNTERS.

Based on population alone, Montana is the second-best state in which to draw a pronghorn tag with nearly 125,000 animals. The Treasure State can't come close to Wyoming's 400,000, though. There are no over-the-counter tags for pronghorn in Montana. Archery tags are close to a 100 percent draw, but you still need to apply. Dad and I had tags and rifles.

Last year I drew a tag for Region 7 in Montana's southeastern corner. And I convinced my dad to apply there as well. Nearly 35 percent of the annual pronghorn harvest comes from this area, and the tag has a 64 percent success draw rate. The draw odds are good for a non-resident, but the price is even better. The tag cost him around \$200, which is a steal compared to \$600 for a deer tag and \$800 for elk.

Region 7 was described to me by friends as the land of plenty. Not only do most pronghorn harvests come out of this region, but 30 percent of mule deer harvests come out of here, too. That's why I planned to arrive three days

before the general rifle season opened. This would give us two days of pronghorn hunting and, hopefully, two days to find a mule deer buck.

I was gassing up in Billings when I got a call from a Montana number I didn't recognize. I would usually ignore a strange number, but I knew who it was going to be. An unfamiliar voice answered. He was a manager at a motel in Broadus. Dad had lost his phone somewhere between Reno and Montana. Dad checked into the motel, but he was too nervous to use the phone during a pandemic. He had the manager call me and let me know. Three hours later, I drove out of the thick woods of the Custer Gallatin National Forest toward the Powder River valley. The land stretched as far as I could see.

Cavan with his mule deer. This buck was special since it took 22 years for him to shoot a buck with his dad present on the hunt.



Broadus is everything you want in a hunting town. Diners, bars, and gas stations lined the streets, while cattle trucks constantly drove through the intersections. Side streets were barely paved and many were dirt.

I found Dad's truck in front of the worst motel I'd ever seen. The outside hadn't seen a coat of paint since Nixon, and the lights that lined the sidewalk showed off a collection of dead bugs. The bug collection was equally impressive inside the room. The door barely closed and judging from the splintered wood on the frame, it looked like it was recently kicked in.

SCOUTING AND ACCESS

One beauty of pronghorn hunting is sleeping in. You don't have to wake at the

crack of dawn to catch them in the open. They will spend most of the day in the open. Even when they do bed down they are easily visible in the short sagebrush. Even so, the alarm went off several hours before sunrise. We were hunting brand new country and didn't want to waste any time.

We crossed the Powder River and took the first turn down a dirt road. The sun was starting to illuminate the darkness, and we could catch glimpses of whitetails in the agricultural fields. The road climbed out of the valley and into rolling sagebrush. We immediately saw pronghorn. Then a herd of mule deer posed for us on the side of the road. Even though deer season wouldn't open for two days, we both pulled out our binoculars to marvel at a stout buck leading the herd.

While there may be plenty of game and public land in Region 7, the problem is access to both. Public land in eastern Montana resembles a checkerboard. Small squares of public land are often isolated by surrounding private land, making them inaccessible. Public and private borders are often unmarked without as much as a fence signifying the transition. The only viable way to navigate the area is by using modern hunting maps, apps and devices that display these boundaries.

Having never hunted here before, I relied on them heavily. I also consulted

friends who have hunted in the region, and they sent me waypoints. The information was invaluable, and it led to our first area—a chunk of Montana’s Block Management.

There are over two million acres of private land in Region 7 that are open to public hunters through the state’s Block Management program, and it is your best option when public land is scarce. While scouting, I specifically looked for these lands that bordered Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land to provide an even wider range of access and more opportunities to hike farther from roads.

Dad and I hiked into the wind, making sure to glass every drainage and coulee. The sagebrush moved like waves as the wind washed over it. The landscape in Region 7 is very deceptive. What appears flat is actually a web of humps and ditches, providing cover for both game and hunters alike.

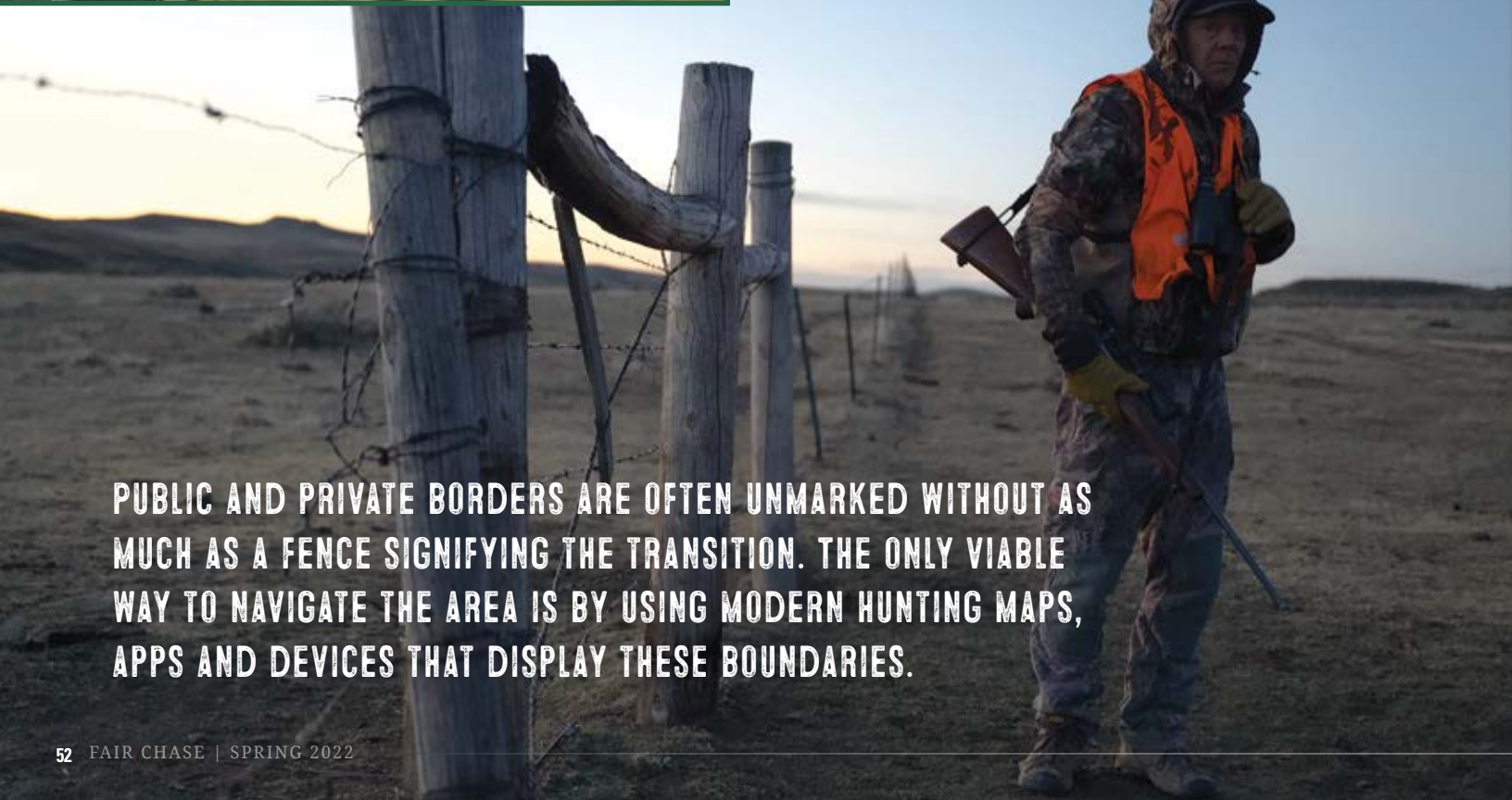
A life of construction and hard hunting means Dad hunts slow and steady now. He is a master at spotting game, though, and it didn’t take long for him to glass movement. Two ridges over, another herd of mule deer bucks moved along a fence. We put pronghorn on a quick hiatus and set up the spotting scope to admire a wide, mature prairie buck bringing up the rear.

We shifted back to pronghorn. Across the road, a herd filled my lenses. We double timed it back to the truck, where I brought up the hunting map on my phone. The area across the road was

a patchwork of BLM and Block Management. We drove up a road paralleling the public land and topped out on a hill, looking down onto where we saw the herd. Clear as a day on a hillside, there they were, bedded on the hillside about 1,000 yards away. A quick look at the map showed they were on BLM land, about 200 yards from an invisible private property border.

We left the truck and decided to use a series of drainages to weave our way closer. We made it within 400 yards, and the drainage opened up into full view of the herd. Dad wanted to close the distance for his shot, but he had to crawl. I hid behind some sage as he slowly crawled diagonally, using the bushes and the hillside as cover. If he got close enough, the lip of the drainage would create enough cover so he could stand, walk up toward the edge and pick a buck out of the herd.

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He edged toward the lip and...busted. Dad popped his head up in time to see the second fastest land animal in the world do what they do best.

PRONGHORN SUCCESS

On the second day, we went back to the same area as the day before. This time we glassed a different side of a far ridge. Every step we took landed on pronghorn tracks, but we still couldn't find an animal on the hoof. At the top of the hill we could see into a vast, gently-sloped valley. And there they were. About a mile away I could make out the orange bodies of a herd of pronghorn.

The distance was too far for Dad. We share the same spirit for hunting but not the same energy level anymore. This can make things challenging, but we made a plan. I gave him the keys to the truck and told him of some good spots he could drive by and check out. I told him to meet me at the

entrance of the Block Management area when he was done.

On my stalk, I used a series of deep draws to work toward the herd. I climbed out of one draw when it ended but just as I started to drop into the next one, the prairie exploded into a thunderstorm of hooves and orange bodies. A large herd of pronghorn was in the draw I was going to use for cover. I threw my backpack on the ground and placed my rifle across it. I couldn't get my scope on anything running to my right, so I picked my head up to see a group of bucks running to my left. I tried getting my scope on them, but they were running too fast.

Looking up, I saw the herd on my right slow to a stop about 100 yards away. They spooked but didn't know what was going on. I shifted my position again and found them in my scope. I scanned several does, before seeing the telltale horns of a buck walking toward me.

Pronghorn aren't big, and at that range I knew my 6.5 Creedmoor could make a lethal frontal shot. My thumb switched the safety up, I settled in and eased the trigger. The herd took off in a stampede, but I could see the buck struggle and come to a halt in less than 30 yards. I stood and gave a fist pump to the air. With a long hike out, I quartered the buck and had the meat secured to my backpack within an hour.

The hike out was long but mellow. Back at the entrance, I put the pack in the scarce shade of a tall sagebrush plant and laid down. Eventually I heard the familiar engine of my truck.

"You got one!" said Dad. He pulled over and took his time admiring the hooked horns of my buck, having

never seen one up close before. That night we ate pronghorn liver with garlic and onions under a sea of stars only the prairie can provide.

THE OPENER

Strong winds picked up that night and continued through the morning. The winds were too savage for Dad's taste. He stayed in bed, and I headed for some state land down by the Powder River. There I watched some of the biggest whitetail bucks I've ever seen taunt me from the wrong side of a fence. Later Dad and I decided to explore a large section of BLM.

The area seemed even more vast than where we had hunted the day before. We took an old Jeep road, careful to avoid puddles. The dirt in this part of the world turns

Pronghorn aren't big, Cavan quartered the buck and had the meat clipped to his backpack within an hour.



Never seeing one in person, Cavan's dad took time to study the buck's horns.



to gumbo when it gets wet. It attaches itself to tires, boots, whatever it touches, and it makes travel nearly impossible. We pulled over and went for a quick hike over a hillside. My heart skipped a beat when I spotted the white rumps of mule deer in the sage. They were over 700 yards out. Through the spotting scope, I could see they were all does except for one tall forked buck. I was tempted to sneak in closer for a shot, but one-by-one they got up and left over the ridge.

We drove farther down the road, where we saw three mule deer does standing on an exposed rock. They were focused on a deep draw. I followed their eyes to see

that they were looking at the tall forked buck and the other deer from earlier.

A friend of mine once gave me a piece of advice. He told me that if you get excited when you see a game animal, then you should try and harvest it without worrying about the size. He hunts because of that excitement. Well, I was excited.

I turned off the truck and grabbed my backpack and rifle. The deer took off over the hill, and I pursued. I followed them until they crossed a deep draw about 200 yards away. I threw down my pack just like the day before and focused my crosshairs. I thumbed the safety again and gently touched the

trigger. The shot rang out, but the buck didn't go down. I hit too far back, but racked another round and delivered a finishing shot.

Dad came out of the truck to join me. I've been hunting deer since I was 13. I've taken some nice bucks, but it took 22 years for me to shoot a buck with my dad—this buck. There was a lot more to this harvest than the size of those antlers.

We dressed the deer, and I hauled it uphill toward the road. Back at camp we strung the buck up in a grove of cottonwood trees. While skinning, a father and his two young sons drove up to our camp. The father asked if they could use the tree next to ours

to skin his son's buck, too. We happily said yes and gave the young hunter congratulations on his buck.

We looked for pronghorn again the next day but with no luck. It didn't seem to matter, though. Notching a tag wasn't the point for Dad anymore. He was happy to see me fill two tags and walk around some new country.

We packed up camp. I headed west, toward my wife and my one-year-old son. Dad headed south. I took one last mental picture of Region 7 and the never-ending prairie. Like the father helping his son skin his buck next to us, I can't wait to take my own son to this place as well. One day, three generations of hunters will pull over to look at every mule deer they see and, with any luck, those same three will be skinning out a buck under a cottonwood tree together, too. ■

Three generations of Williams carrying on the hunting tradition.



If you have any DIY hunts you would like to see featured in the column, please email Karlie Slayer, Karlie@Boone-Crockett.org for details.

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