

VIEW FROM THE

The three-by-three mule deer was bedded at the crest of a prairie knoll, napping in the sun-soaked October afternoon, and I worried its tranquility might unsettle my hunting companion.

“My perspective as both a landowner and a hunter complicates my view of access and hunter behavior.”

It was Gwen’s first hunt. As an adult-onset hunter, she had been an eager, if tentative, student, more interested, she told me, in learning to “do things right” than killing an animal. This moment was preceded by months of doing things right: first Montana’s Hunter Education course (which the 40-something woman shared with a classroom of 11-year-olds), then gun-safety sessions followed by trigger time at the rifle range, and finally conversations about animal behavior and hunter ethics.

We both determined that she was ready, which is why we found ourselves on the second week of Montana’s rifle season, lying prone on the prairie and watching this comically drowsy buck from a distance of about 100 yards.

I own a small ranch in eastern Montana that holds enough mule deer to make hunting productive, even if it doesn’t churn out many older trophy-class bucks. I offered to guide Gwen on my place, where I thought I could manage the variables of hunting—uncomplicated access, relatively settled deer compared to adjacent public land, and none of the competition among fellow hunters that can color some public-land outings. I hoped to make her first experience both successful and enjoyable.

Gwen had told me that she wanted a shot inside 100 yards, if possible, and this buck served up that expectation. We had spotted him from a couple of draws away, then used the rolling terrain to hide our approach. We picked our way up the ridge until we reached a little rise. With just her orange cap and binocular breaking the horizon, Gwen scanned the prairie until she spotted the buck, his eyes closed and head lolling in some ungu- late dream.

It was a perfect situation, no matter a hunter’s experience. The breeze was in our faces. Our hidden position allowed us to chamber a round in the rifle, deploy the bipod, and wait for the buck to stand. We even had time to press foam plugs into our ears. I had Gwen aim through the scope and visualize how she would squeeze the trigger and where she would place the bullet for a quick, clean kill.

But that buck’s nap was a doozy, and I worried he would never wake. I also fretted that Gwen’s hard focus would shatter if the buck suddenly stood. So I tapped her on the shoulder and whispered that she should soak up this remarkable moment, assessing our place on the open prairie within earshot of a wild deer, this balmy afternoon with golden cottonwood leaves glittering in the creek below us, and this endless moment before everything would change with a single shot.

Gwen scanned the countryside before her smile



THE FENCELINE

hardened. “What’s that?” she hissed, looking below us. There, just on the other side of the coulee, were two hunters. One was dressed like us in a bright orange vest. The other wore camouflage that made him hard to see, but there was no mistaking their destination or intention. They had seen the buck and were slow-stalking their way into range.

I didn’t have much time to act. I told Gwen to stay on the scope in case the deer stood, and I wormed my way down the hillside to signal the hunters out of sight of the buck. I stood, waved my arms, and they stopped just as a single rifle shot shattered the afternoon. Gwen had made meat.

SHARED LANDSCAPES

My attention was divided. I needed to be with Gwen as she processed both the emotions and logistics of her first kill, but I also wanted to inquire why these hunters were trespassing on my land and willfully intruding on Gwen’s first hunt.

I slid down the slope to meet the hunters. They were a father and daughter from Michigan, and like me, he was guiding her to her first deer. They had spotted the bedded buck from my neighbor’s land, which is enrolled in the state’s Block Management access program. They had also seen us, they offered after a spell, but supposing we were also on Block Management land,

thought they could beat us to the buck. In their hasty approach, they hadn’t consulted a map or appreciated the implications of the unsigned barbed-wire fence they crossed.

In truth, none of us were far from the property line. The buck was probably only 200 yards on my side of the fence, but when it comes to hunting—and taxation and a certain universal pride of ownership—that makes all the difference. I tamped down my irritation and explained the details of both land ownership and Gwen’s big day.

The tension was defused with the shared appreciation for Gwen’s success. But that was hardly the first time I’ve encountered uninvited hunters on my land, and each instance leaves me with a complicated set of reactions and reflections.

That’s because my own identity is complicated. I hunt more—on my own land and elsewhere—than any other landowner I know. And my ownership of huntable land

makes me a minority among my fellow hunters. But riding that divide, a hiking boot on one side of the fence and a cowboy boot on the other, also gives me a perspective I don’t readily find in my respective communities.

FUZZY BOUNDARIES

Nearly every instance of what might be legally defined as trespassing descends from spatial disorientation. Even in a landscape bisected by fences, and even with the GPS-powered mapping software many of us carry on our smartphones, it’s easy to get turned around and inadvertently tread on someone’s land.

As a landowner who routinely encounters these accidental interlopers, I aim to be gentle but firm, often stating the obvious: that they need to do a better job of reading maps and paying attention to landmarks. Or maybe they should consider investing in a digital mapping service such as onX. But as a fellow wide-roamer, I recognize myself in these red-faced hunters. I can

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recall those times I've found myself deep inside someone else's pasture or woodlot without realizing it, and how excruciatingly self-conscious my hasty departure is, hopping like hell I wouldn't encounter the landowner.

You've heard the proverb, "Good fences make good neighbors." That rustic truism applies to both hunters and landowners. The places on my ranch where I have the most consistent trespass issues are those where the fences between my property and adjacent public lands are derelict, either missing wires or gone altogether for a furlong or more. This is an artifact of the West's legacy of public-land leasing; many of the parcels of federal and state school-trust lands within the borders of my ranch that I lease for cattle grazing are superficially indistinct from my deeded land. That situation incubates confusion, and when I find hunters who have wandered onto my property from the unfenced adjacency, I give them large doses of consideration.

But sometimes an ordinary contact turns ugly. I've come upon trespassing hunters whose defensiveness

escalated what might have been a forgettable moment, both of us citing higher powers (the law, corner posts, onX, the game warden) to prove our point. As a hunter who is increasingly conscious of the image that any one of us projects for all of us, these high-temperature exchanges leave me discouraged. And the temperature is climbing across our shared landscapes.

Neighbors who lease their land to outfitters have zero tolerance for freelance hunters, and I've been shadowed by fence-riding guides who intimidated me into leaving accessible adjacent land. On the other side, I've found hunters so deep inside my ranch that their excuse that they didn't see the fenceline simply doesn't hold up to scrutiny. Both cases are equally uncomfortable for me because they confirm entrenched biases: to a certain type of hunter, all landowners are selfish cads. And to a certain type of landowner, all hunters are potential poachers.

My own land ethic is shaded with nuance, owing to my split identity. I feel obligated to share my land with fellow hunters, and I open my gate to friends, family,

occasional strangers who strike me as somehow deserving, and to beginning hunters like Gwen. But there's an ocean between granting permission to a stranger and finding them uninvited deep inside your land. These trespasses can feel personally violating, as though I've discovered a burglar rifling my closet.

DISTRIBUTING ACCESS


Why, you might ask, don't I give the job of managing hunting access to agents who administer Montana's Block Management Program? That's the state's program—similar to dozens of similar access programs managed by state wildlife agencies around the country—that effectively brokers hunting access to private lands in exchange for a payment derived from hunting licenses. Not only am I a frequent user of Block Management, I've advocated for its expansion and for increased funding for cooperators.

Importantly, I also live with its impacts almost daily during hunting season.

My land is surrounded by parcels enrolled in Block Management by neighbors who tired of access-seeking

hunters or who use the payment as part of their ranch's income stream. It's a tremendously successful and highly valued program—the one that Gwen's interlopers used to get in sight of her buck. To be honest, I'm not quite ready to give unfettered access to my land, which is how Block Management is administered in my township. Instead, I use the old-fashioned—and increasingly rare—tools of verbal permission and handshakes to bestow access. But I also use my land as a sort of gift. There are few things more satisfying to a landowner than to be able to offer a pasture to a hunter eager to fill a doe tag, or a few days to a friend looking for a late-season buck, or a week of access to a beginning hunter.

Because the gift of access is so precious and fragile, I want to be harder with those hunters—like those Michiganders—who cavalierly breach boundaries. I want them to know that, across rural America, there are still landowners like me who will allow strangers to hunt their land. But they need to first find us, then ask us, and then be willing to abide by any restrictions we may place on their activity.



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Those are apparently high bars for many hunters, who have become accustomed to frictionless access, relying on digital maps to find public land, or self-service Block Management properties, or other parcels where they needn't contact a landowner or make prior arrangements to hunt. I don't mean to sound sanctimonious; I'm describing myself here. I can't tell you the number of times I haven't knocked on a ranch house door, fearing the sting of rejection or wanting to avoid the unspoken judgment that so many of us feel when asking a stranger for a favor to hunt animals that, after all, are owned just as much by me as by the landowner. All those headwinds are amplified when it comes to hunting, which for most of us has outsized meaning and significance in our lives and identities.

The result is not only the loss of a potential relationship with a landowner but an uncommon concentration of hunters on our public lands.

That concentration, in turn, puts pressure on the edges, the fencelines that border private land that can be hard to identify and police. Which brings me back to Gwen, and to the Michiganders who nearly upended her first hunt. After the trespassers returned to the right side of the fence, and after we had finished all the tedious and important parts of reducing her buck to first a carcass and later to packages of freezer-ready venison, Gwen asked how I felt about my confrontation with the father and daughter.

I wished it hadn't happened, I told her. Instead of repelling visitors, I'd rather share the charms and abundance of my land that I adore, curse, manage, and fret about depending on the day and season.

As a landowner, I want only a few things in return for the gift of access. I want gates to be left as they were found. I want hunters to leave their vehicles and hunt

on foot. I want any restrictions or requests to be followed. And I want to know how a guest fared, whether they killed something, saw something noteworthy, or simply feel inclined to share their impressions of land they might experience for a day but which has given me and my family a generation of joy and memories.

"Think of a special gift you've received," I challenged Gwen, as we were trimming roasts of her buck. In my imagination, I pictured myself as a hunter receiving a gift of access, not a landowner giving it. "I'm guessing it was special exactly because it was a gift, not because of

the retail value of the thing. Now, imagine how unremarkable—or even unwanted—that thing would have been if you had stolen it."

Fruits of fair access, whether a trophy buck or a limit of birds or simply a memorable day afield, are remarkable mainly because they are either gifted or earned. And they are ingredients of righteous hunting that are every bit as vital as marksmanship, game identification, and application of fair-chase ethics. Our present and future ability to hunt private land depend on the fullest appreciation—as both recipients and donors—of the value of gifted access. ■



Gwen with her first buck on her first hunt.

