



MONTANA MULE DEER

**PLANNING AN
ON-YOUR-OWN
MULE DEER HUNT
REQUIRES EQUAL
DOSES OF LOGISTICS,
GRIT, AND REALITY.**

**THE PAYOFF IS A
PUBLIC LAND HUNT
FOR THE AGES**

Longtime Montana wildlife manager Charlie Eustace used to tell me that the worst time to plan a mule deer hunt was in a year that ended in the number five.

Eustace, who managed wildlife across south-central Montana for over 40 years, based that advisory on decades of data that indicated mule deer numbers across much of their northern range boomed and busted in roughly 10-year intervals. The booms coincided with the beginning and end of decades, years like 1969, 1981, and 1992. The busts? Those were those mid-decade years like 1965, 1975, 1995...

Years later, after applying my own wholly unscientific methodology—basically, how much effort I put into hunting mule deer around my homeland in eastern Montana—I can't say that I can correlate abundance with the calendar. But I can certainly confirm Eustace's main point: mule deer populations are highly variable.

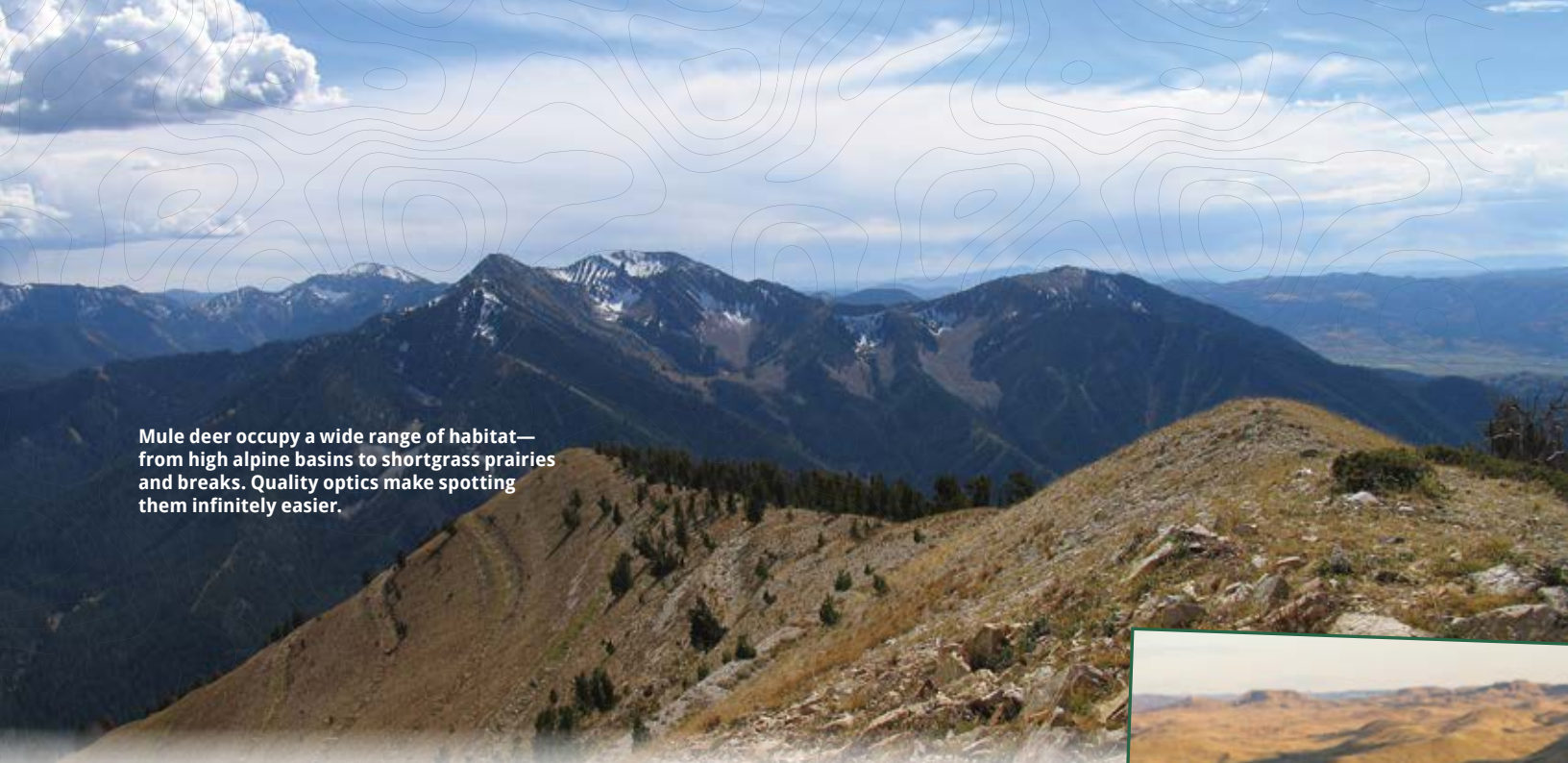
You would be smiling too if your tag went on this buck. The author with his 4x4 prize.

I throw that out at the start of a story about planning your own do-it-yourself mule deer hunt to caution readers capable of navigating all the variables of a destination hunt—which include comprehending draw odds and byzantine regulations, understanding migration patterns, sleuthing overlooked public access, and waypointing base-camp coordinates. All those successes will compound your frustration if mule deer are in the trough of a population swing when you finally arrive at your chosen destination.

Rather than sow despair, I would argue that's the very reason mule deer are so worth hunting—because they are changeable and dynamic and occasionally frustrating. Just like the country they inhabit.

Mule deer are mainly creatures of Western public lands. Yes, they frequent large ranches and even are showing up—and staying—with alarming frequency in well-watered towns and small cities from Whitefish, Montana, to Pueblo, Colorado. But unlike elk, which head en masse to the nearest no-hunting property once shooting starts in the fall, or Western whitetails, which prefer to stay out of harm's way entirely, mule deer are available, accessible, and abundant. Their habitats are among the most diverse in North America. Because they live mainly on public land, from eastern





Mule deer occupy a wide range of habitat—from high alpine basins to shortgrass prairies and breaks. Quality optics make spotting them infinitely easier.

Montana's shortgrass prairies and breaks to Arizona's alpine cirques, sun-blasted benchlands above the Columbia River to dark canyons of the Green and Colorado rivers, they're the ultimate big-game animal for those of us who want to apply our own grit and gumption to finding them.

They're also endlessly surprising. They can occupy avalanche chutes just below mountain goats or make their living in the sweltering desert. They can be twitchy and evasive as any whitetail, then turn senseless and fatally visible as the rut approaches. They can migrate for hundreds of miles between summer and winter range, or they can live their whole lives in the same section of winter wheat.

The inaugural question to anyone thinking of pulling off a DIY mule deer hunt is: which mule deer do you want to hunt? The high-country king of September or the rutting winter-range monarch? Do you want to join the masses in a general season or hold out for a special permit for an older buck? We'll get to the

trade-offs of each choice, but the very fact that hunting them can be so variable is one of the arguments for mule deer.

ADJUST TO CONDITIONS

On my first DIY mule deer hunt, in the Wyoming Range south of Jackson, I imagined I'd see 190-class bucks on every open slope. The area, famous for its heavy-horned mountain bucks, is stitched with ATV-friendly trails, and no matter how far and high I hiked, I struggled to get away from fellow hunters.

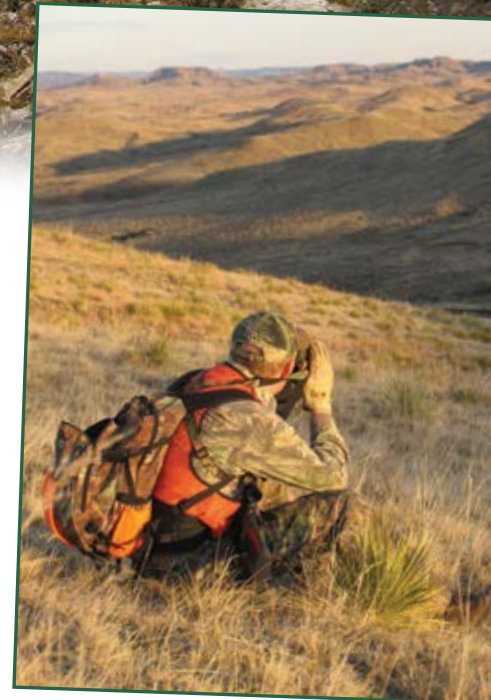
The bucks I did see were young, wild-eyed, and fast on their way to calmer pastures. But my companions and I soldiered on, hunting for nearly a week in the same drainage we had picked from our remote scouting. None of us notched our tags, largely because we resisted the urge to pull stakes and prospect other areas. A return trip to the range years later revealed portions of the unit that would have been productive had we camped on high ridges instead of along a river. In hindsight, we would have happily traded water for opportunity.

Timing makes all the difference. Most general-tag seasons around the West ride the divide between late fall, with its sparkling days and crisp nights, and early winter, with wind-driven snow and bitter temperatures. The former conditions can make hunting difficult, as muley bucks are spread out on summer range. The latter conditions improve hunting, as deer start to gather in pre-rut herds and move along defined migration corridors to lower elevations, but reduce hunter mobility and comfort.

Add a week-by-week weather outlook to your pre-season checklist, and decide for yourself if you'd rather hunt when the weather is good or when the rut makes bucks visible. It's a rare year indeed when you can have both.

ASSESS YOUR EXPECTATIONS

Most destination mule deer hunters have expectations of seeing mature bucks with 30-inch spreads, heavy antlers, and maybe a drop tine or sticker point. Those



“calendar bucks” are still out there, though they're mainly produced by permit districts managed for older age-class bucks rather than opportunity, meaning that tags are extremely hard to draw.

In general-tag units, you can expect a wide variation in age class and antler dimensions to the degree that it's fair to ask what you hope to get out of a destination hunt. Is it a pleasurable trip, long on creature comforts and experiences? Or is it a trophy buck earned through hard days of vigor and singular

focus? Will you be happy with a mid-sized buck, or will you feel you settled for filling your tag rather than holding out for a whopper?

I confront this dilemma nearly every season, but I've learned to manage my expectations with a couple of considerations. The first is that I want a quality hunt, which I generally measure by seeing enough animals to be selective and few enough fellow hunters that I don't feel the heat of competition. But the main measure of a hunt is one that culminates in a stirring stalk, the outcome of

which depends on my skills and knowledge. I generally have a mental picture of a buck that I'm chasing, a healthy animal with antlers that express that classic mule deer configuration: 4 points on a side, with deepish forks, and some distinctive character. Anything else—a drop tine or tall brow tines or some non-typical configuration—is a bonus.

As I've observed out-of-area hunters in my corner of Montana, I have come to appreciate that every hunter's baseline is different. For a whitetail hunter from Ohio,

even a middling 22-inch mule deer can seem like a giant, and for hunters accustomed to stand-hunting the dense hardwoods of the East, seeing several hundred deer on the open plains of eastern Colorado can be a gift in itself.

As a hopeful hunter with a couple dozen preference points that I hope to spend someday on a permit to hunt Utah's prized Paunsaugunt, I'd be negligent if I told you that you can walk into a general tag unit and kill a Boone and Crockett buck. Most wildlife agencies manage their general units for opportunity and their limited-entry areas for trophies. But it's wrong to assume that only trophy areas produce trophies or that general areas are only good for forkhorns and junior varsity bucks.

The same pre-hunt considerations apply to both types of seasons. Know as much as you can going into an area, but then be flexible enough to adjust to real-time conditions. Consider this less an instruction manual than a thematic guide to your DIY mule deer hunt, whether it's your first or your next.

2. DOWNPLAY OUTFITTER PHOTOS

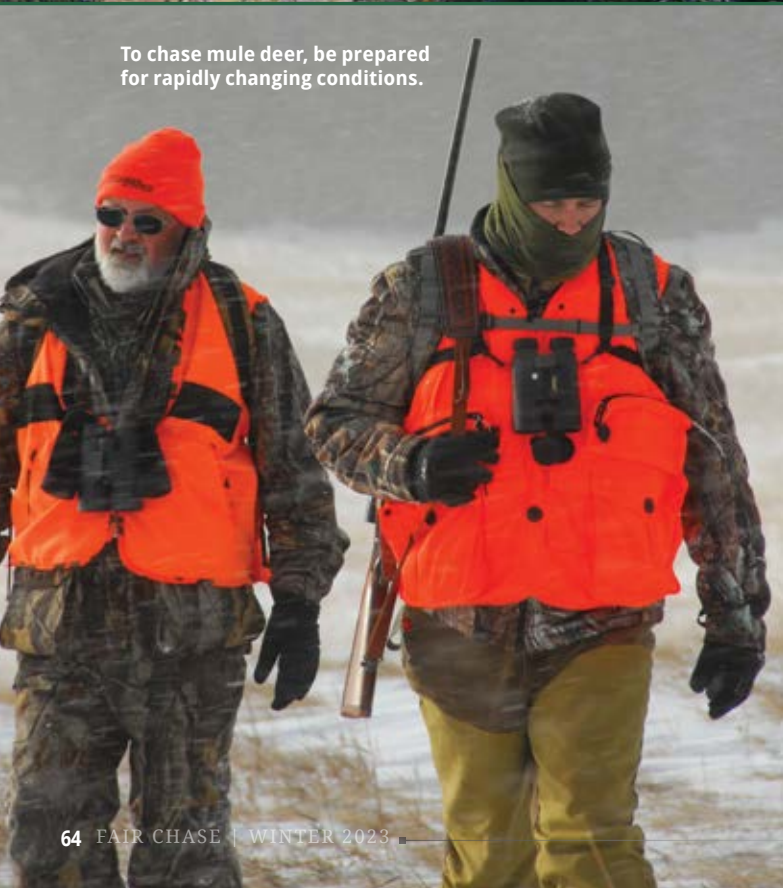
In my experience, the first thing that DIY hunters do when they find they've drawn a tag in an area is to Google "trophy buck hunting in your-name-here unit." They are then presented with outfitters' websites full of happy clients gripping out-sized antlers. Recognize that this is setting you up for unrealistic expectations. Even assuming those bucks were killed in the area, you can also assume outfitters have special access or extraordinary assets to boost their clients' success. Take these photos as the top end of what's possible in an area, not as the realistic average.

3. DO YOUR (DIGITAL) HOMEWORK

Most states have very good get-started portals that detail hunting district boundaries, draw odds, and hunter-harvest success. Those are great places to get baseline data, followed by more granular information that's available for a fee from apps like goHUNT or Huntin' Fool. These services can tell you which state, season, and hunt area to focus on.

4. CONSIDER INFRASTRUCTURE

Because mule deer occupy both backcountry and front-country, a hunt can be just about whatever style you choose. Do you want to backpack into remote drainages and live on freeze-dried meals? Or do you want to hunt out of a motel and take your dinners back in town? If you want a comfortable base camp with a few amenities, look for Forest Service and BLM campgrounds. Or if you plan to spike out in the hills, figure out how close you can drive to the area you'll hunt and whether roads have seasonal closures or might become impassable in a mid-season snowfall.



To chase mule deer, be prepared for rapidly changing conditions.

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

MAKE THE BEST OF EVERY STALK, CAMP OUT OF THE WIND, AND MAKE THE TROPHY OF YOUR HUNT THE EXPERIENCE RATHER THAN THE SIZE OF THE DEER.

5. QUIZ PRIMARY SOURCES

All that digital data can populate a spreadsheet, but it won't tell you the real story of a place. For that, you need to chat up the locals. Here's an example. My home turf has been locked in a pernicious drought the last few years, but the last two summers have brought plague-scale grasshoppers that have eaten every stalk and leaf of vegetation by August. That has redistributed public-land pronghorn, sharptailed grouse, and mule deer to irrigated croplands where access isn't assured. You wouldn't pick up on that knowledge without calling folks on the ground. Talk with land-management agencies and area biologists about localized road closures or pockets of deer abundance or depletion.

6. RECOGNIZE MIGRATION CORRIDORS

One of the most exciting developments in wildlife management of the past decade has been the widespread use of GPS collars to understand big-game movement across the seasons and landscapes. Through waypoints uploaded

from these collars, researchers have identified hundreds of corridors that animals have used for thousands of years—and still do. While most of the granular migration data is protected to prevent resource exploitation, hunters can get a good sense of routes and seasonal movement by visiting agency websites that feature animated maps of these paths. Instead of posting up on a pinchpoint in November and expecting a monster mule deer buck to saunter past you, use the information to inform the sorts of terrain you might focus on in different seasons. In September, for instance, hunt the high plateaus and subalpine meadows. In late October, concentrate on primary drainages that lead from the high country to protected valleys. And if you're hunting in later November, look for transition areas that lead to south-facing, low-elevation winter range.

7. TEMPER YOUR EXPECTATIONS

The best hunts are those that produce an experience or an animal that you didn't expect. The corollary is equally



true; hunts can leave you hollow when they don't meet your expectations. I've encountered a lot of disgruntled hunters in my area who didn't see the number or the size of bucks they expected. I sometimes want to ask the rhetorical question: What did you expect in a general-tag unit with abundant access? Those very factors that draw people to my area are also responsible for reducing the joy of hunting for those seeking solitude and a gargantuan buck on every ridge. The solution is to make the best of every stalk, to find a bountiful place to camp that's out of the wind, and to make the trophy of your hunt the experience rather than the size of the deer.



If that's your approach, then even if you hunt one of Charlie Eustace's bust years, you'll come home with stories and memories that will sustain you until the next mule deer boom. ■