



# Mastering Block Management

No one ever said having 8 million acres of private land to hunt would be easy. **By Dave Carty**



**THE PAYOFF** Getting the most out of Montana's Block Management Program requires more than obtaining a few maps and driving around. The most successful hunters study the annual booklet, scout new areas, and capitalize on the many high-quality opportunities that often require planning, phone calls, and even drawings.

LEFT TO RIGHT: JACK BULLARD; DONALD L. JONES

**W**hen Mike England's plans for a hunt in eastern Montana changed, he suddenly found himself with nowhere to go.

"A friend had lined me up with some private land, but when I got there, that had fallen through, and I couldn't get on," England recalls. "So I went to the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks regional office in Miles City, and several people at tables were helping hunters find landowners' phone numbers and providing tips about each Block Management Area."

England, a Bozeman magazine publisher, then sat down with FWP's regional Block Management Area (BMA) booklet, or guide, and started looking for descriptions of areas that might provide the best hunting for the deer and antelope he was after. He quickly realized, however, that the booklet and accompanying maps provided only so much information. "They tell you which species are available, but you don't know how abundant those species are, where the roads are, and what the landscape looks like."

His next step? Get back on the road. "What I ended up doing, and what I did for the next few years, was to devote one day to driving around to look at BMAs I'd planned to hunt for that year, trying to get a feel for the terrain and the landscape," he says. "Once I saw what looked good, I started calling the landowners. That first day I called 20 people. I got four or five places lined up for the next day."

England's phone work paid off. BMA booklets only note whether or not an area contains certain game species, but not the likelihood of seeing those species. For instance, a BMA that lists "antelope" and "mule deer" might contain only a few antelope but many muleys.

"But on the phone, the landowners let me know exactly what was going on at their place," says England.

That type of pre-hunt research can pay big dividends on BMAs. For his extra legwork, England took home two eastern Montana deer and two antelope that trip.

Effort like England's is not essential. Roughly 7 to 8 million acres of private property is enrolled in Montana's Block Management Program, making plenty of land available to any resident or nonresident hunter. All you have to do is pick up a BMA booklet at a regional FWP office or order one online from the FWP website. (Visit [fwp.mt.us](http://fwp.mt.us), click on the "Hunting" tab and then click on "Block Management" under the "Public Access" heading.)

But obtaining the booklet and getting the most out of the BMAs listed inside are two very different things. To consistently hunt

Block Management successfully requires an understanding of how access to different areas varies and what that means in terms of hunting quality. It also requires legwork—sometimes lots of it.



**EASY ON** You can hunt Type 1 BMAs on the spur of the moment. The downside: So can everyone else.

**Quantity versus quality**  
The first step to becoming a Block Management master is to recognize that BMAs come in two different types, each with its pros and cons.

At Type 1 areas, all hunters "administer their own permission." In other





words, you can drive to the designated parking area, check in at the sign-in box, and start hunting. No phone call or personal visit with the landowner is required.

Sound too good to be true? In a way, it is.

That's because most Type 1 BMAs, while providing good and occasionally even great hunting, generally don't limit hunter numbers. As a result, the best Type 1 areas see a lot of use.

Type 2 BMAs are "administered by someone other than the hunter," typically the landowner or an FWP staff member or contract worker. That means hunters have to call or visit the landowner or dial a special FWP number and make a reservation or even apply in an access drawing. Because access is controlled, crowding is rarely a problem. But the downside is that you may have to book a slot weeks or even months in advance, or, with access lotteries, risk not getting drawn at all.

But that's the beauty of Block Management: options. On the spur of the moment, you can hop in your vehicle and hit a bunch of Type 1 BMAs over the weekend, no planning required. Or, if you're after a higher-quality experience, you can jump through the extra hoops required on Type 2 areas and make the requisite phone calls, reservations, or lottery applications.

"Basically you get what you pay for in terms of effort to gain access on BMAs," says Alan Charles, FWP's coordinator of landowner/sportsman relations and coordinator of the Block Management Program. "In most cases—though certainly this isn't true all the time—the more steps to obtaining permission, the better the quality of the hunting experience in terms of crowding and opportunities to find game. Some of our BMAs offer the kinds of opportunities you might get on an outfitted hunt. But those aren't areas you can hunt anytime you want."

#### Eggs in many baskets

As for deciding which BMAs to hunt, hunters can take two approaches. One is to learn a few areas well and hunt them hard. "Whenever you spend more time hunting a BMA, you're going to be more successful

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### Block Management Ethics

#### Don't

- ▶ Shoot near outbuildings or homes.
- ▶ Walk through herds of livestock.
- ▶ Litter.
- ▶ Allow your dog to chase deer, livestock, or the landowner's pets.
- ▶ Drive off established roads unless you have received permission to do so.

#### Do

- ▶ Close all gates you open.
- ▶ Treat other hunters with courtesy and respect. They have as much right to be there as you do.
- ▶ Consider informing the landowner beforehand if you plan on party hunting with three or more people.
- ▶ Consider sending the landowner a thank you note or gift or thanking him or her in person.

than the person just showing up for the first time," says Dale Nixdorf, FWP regional BMA coordinator for south-central Montana. By hunting the same areas year after year, says Nixdorf, hunters learn where to find resting and bedding areas, movement funnels, feeding areas, and more.

The disadvantage of mastering just a few BMAs, however, is that if you arrive and see them awash in other hunters—like on opening weekend or the week around Thanksgiving—you're stuck. That's why Block Management officials recommend that hunters regularly scout new areas so they have several backups.

"Don't put all your eggs in one basket," Charles says. "Pick out a key BMA or two that you really want to focus on, but have some fallback areas too. Maybe you're really banking on a Type 2 area where you have a reservation, but when you get there it's been grazed more heavily than in years past. Have a few nearby Type 1 areas you can fall back on, areas you've previously scouted so you know what they're like. And always consider



checking out other options, such as legally accessible public land, or maybe just knocking on a landowner's door."

#### Narrowing it down

One of the biggest challenges to mastering the Block Management system is the sheer number of BMAs available to hunters, especially across eastern Montana. In FWP's Region 7 (southeastern Montana), 320 landowners have enrolled 2.5 million private acres into Block Management this year, while in Region 6 (northeastern Montana), 310 landowners have enrolled 1.2 million private acres.

Where does a hunter even begin?

Tim Potter, FWP regional BMA coordinator in Glasgow, says maps can be a big help. "Some guys come out here and have no idea where they want to go or what they want to do," he says. "We have pretty detailed maps that can help them zero in on where to go."

The BMA booklets contain large fold-out maps of each region showing the general location of each BMA. But to really see what an area looks like, you need a BMA site map, available online on the FWP website, at regional offices, or, in some cases, at the BMA sign-in boxes. The maps show exact boundaries, often overlaid on U.S. Geological Survey topos. By examining maps, hunters can locate water sources, ridges, ravines, and other landscape features used by wildlife, as well as adjacent public lands that may be accessible via the BMA.

#### Actually read the booklet

Probably the most valuable resource for getting the most out of your BMA hunt is the booklet itself, officially known as the *Block Management Program Hunting Access Guide*. "At first glance, it appears to be just a listing of all the BMAs by region," says Charles. "But most hunters don't realize that there's a lot of other valuable hunting information in that guide." The booklet explains what's unique to each region and how each one administers the Block Management Program. For instance, some regions take reservations via a telephone answering service. And some provide county-by-county listings of wildlife species or the current status of big game populations.

Charles, who regularly hunts BMAs



himself, recommends that all hunters read through the guide carefully for a better sense of what each region offers. "I think it would help them develop more realistic expectations," he says. "Before you look at the more detailed BMA site maps, the booklet and larger regional maps give you a general idea of where you might want to hunt."

"Maybe you want to focus on a remote, lone BMA that likely doesn't see much use," Charles says. "Or maybe you want to find a group of areas that are close to each other. Or focus on areas near towns so you can stay in motels. You can find all that and more in the guide."

After you finish reading, it's time for some scouting. Ken Farthing, FWP regional BMA coordinator in Great Falls, says, "Once you have your maps, look at the areas to see if they're what you're looking for before committing time to actually hunting."

With so many millions of acres of BMAs statewide, FWP staff can't inspect all prop-

erties. Some may be good for a few years but then lose their prime wildlife habitat. If you find an area to be sub-par, let FWP know. "Any hunters who consider BMAs to be below their expected standards should bring them to our attention," Farthing says. "For example, one BMA was in CRP [Conservation Reserve Program] up until last year. But we didn't find out until halfway through the hunting season that the landowner had taken it out of CRP and plowed up the grass. This year, that place will not be re-enrolled in Block Management."

#### Journals and boot leather

Another tip for getting the most out of Block Management: Keep a simple hunting journal that includes information on the areas you hunt. Include things like each area's habitat, game species you see, watering holes for hunting dogs, and other vital information. Journals can be invaluable in seasons to come, when details of an area you visited a

#### MORE HOOPS BUT MORE OPPORTUNITIES

Type 2 BMAs require hunters to contact landowners in person or by phone, call an FWP hotline, or apply for a drawing. By limiting hunters, the additional hurdles often create higher-quality hunting opportunities.

year or two before become fuzzy. If you plan on hunting opening day—and most of us do—knowing the lay of the land and where you've found game in years past can be a huge advantage when it comes to beating the crowds.

Another tip: Outwalk everyone else. Some BMAs are many miles across. If you're willing to hike just a little farther than everyone else, you'll probably have a better hunt.

How far is enough? FWP officials say most hunters rarely venture more than a mile from their trucks. If you spend a half hour walking at least that far from the parking area, you'll leave most other hunters behind—and the few you might run into deserve to be there as much as you do.

One last tip, this one more of a long-term strategy as well as simple common courtesy: If you've had a great hunt on a BMA, consider letting the landowner know. None of them are getting rich by enrolling in the Block Management Program. Payments are capped at \$12,000, and the average payment per landowner is around \$3,500, says Charles. "Even though the state has negotiated a contract, taking the time to thank the landowner makes a difference," he says.

In addition to this gesture of civility, your thanks may inspire the landowner to re-enroll next year. That's good for the state, good for the landowner, and, not least, good for you and the tens of thousands of other resident and nonresident hunters who hunt on and enjoy these highly accessible private lands. 🐾

**FLUSH WITH SUCCESS** To master Block Management, walk farther from parking areas than everyone else; apply for Type 2 areas that limit hunters; or hopscotch among several Type 1 areas until you luck upon game that others have passed by.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LEFT, MONTANA FWP; CRAIG & LIZ LARSON; ALLEN HAY; GARY KRAMER