

WE LUCKY FEW

Let's pause the gloom-a-thon for just a moment to remember that we get to hunt in *Montana*. By Tom Dickson

What a drag. Once again, the good people at Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks—and they are in fact good people—didn't send me a mountain goat permit. That's what—seven, eight years in a row now? And you probably didn't draw your bull tag for the Elkhorns or the Breaks or whatever other popular permit you put in for. Again.

Then there's the deer and pronghorn hunting in much of central Montana, which, let's face it, stunk last year and the year before. And don't get me

started on elk. They seem harder to find pretty much everywhere. Pheasant hunting sure isn't what it used to be, when you could go out *without a dog* and have your limit before lunchtime. Huns have all but disappeared, at least where I look. The doors on more and more private land have shut for public hunters, so that stinks too. And on public land, the mountains are steeper, the trails longer, the competition more fierce. Even if you kill an elk, it's harder to get the carcass back to the truck, what with our bad backs and creaky knees.

Woe is us. Woe, woe, woe. >>



BULL ELK AT SUNRISE. PHOTO BY CHRIS AUCH

MILLION ACRES OF PRIVATE LAND ACCESS THROUGH BLOCK MANAGEMENT * BLACK BEARS * SIX WEEKS OF DEER AND ELK BOWHUNTING * TROPHY BIGHORN SHEEP * PHEASANT
* 150,000 ELK * MULE AND WHITE-TAILED DEER * DUCKS * MOUNTAIN LIONS * FIVE WEEKS OF DEER AND ELK FIREARM HUNTING * MOUNTAIN GROUSE * TROPHY BULL ELK * MOUNTAIN
GOATS * SPRING AND FALL WILD TURKEY * HUNGARIAN PARTRIDGE * 30 MILLION ACRES OF PUBLIC HUNTING LAND * MOOSE * GEESE * PRONGHORN * SHARP-TAILED GROUSE

But let's maybe take a time out from all our complaining (I'm as bad as anyone). Let's pause here for a few moments at the start of Montana's 2015 hunting season and take a clear-eyed look at how hunting has supposedly gotten so hard, how game populations have apparently declined from one end of the state to the other. How hunting access to local ranches and farms has become "impossible."

Because if we do that, if we take off the gloom glasses and look objectively at what Montana offers, it becomes pretty clear pretty fast that we have it good. Real good. In many cases, even better than those so-called golden years—of, what, the 1960s?

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.

the '80s? when—how does it go?—7 x 7 bulls wandered right into elk camp, FWP handed out bighorn tags right and left, and 30-inch muley bucks would just stand there munching bunchgrass 150 yards away.

Just consider how remarkably long we get to hunt. Most other states offer big game seasons that last a week to ten days, tops. In Montana, it's six weeks of deer and elk archery, then another five weeks of deer and elk firearms—and that's just for starters. If you really wanted to—and could afford it (and were willing to risk losing your spouse to a better-looking replacement who spent more time at home)—you could start hunting in mid-August (archery pronghorn) and continue uninterrupted (with upland birds, big game, waterfowl, mountain lion, and wild

turkey) through the end of spring bear season on June 15. That's practically year-round.

Then there's the big game itself: mountain goats, bighorn sheep, pronghorn, moose, elk, both white-tailed and mule deer, black bears, wolves, and mountain lions. And lots of them. Consider that in 1990, Montana was home to 40,000 elk. Today the number is 150,000 to 160,000. We've also got 450,000 deer, 13,000 black bears, and 120,000 pronghorn.

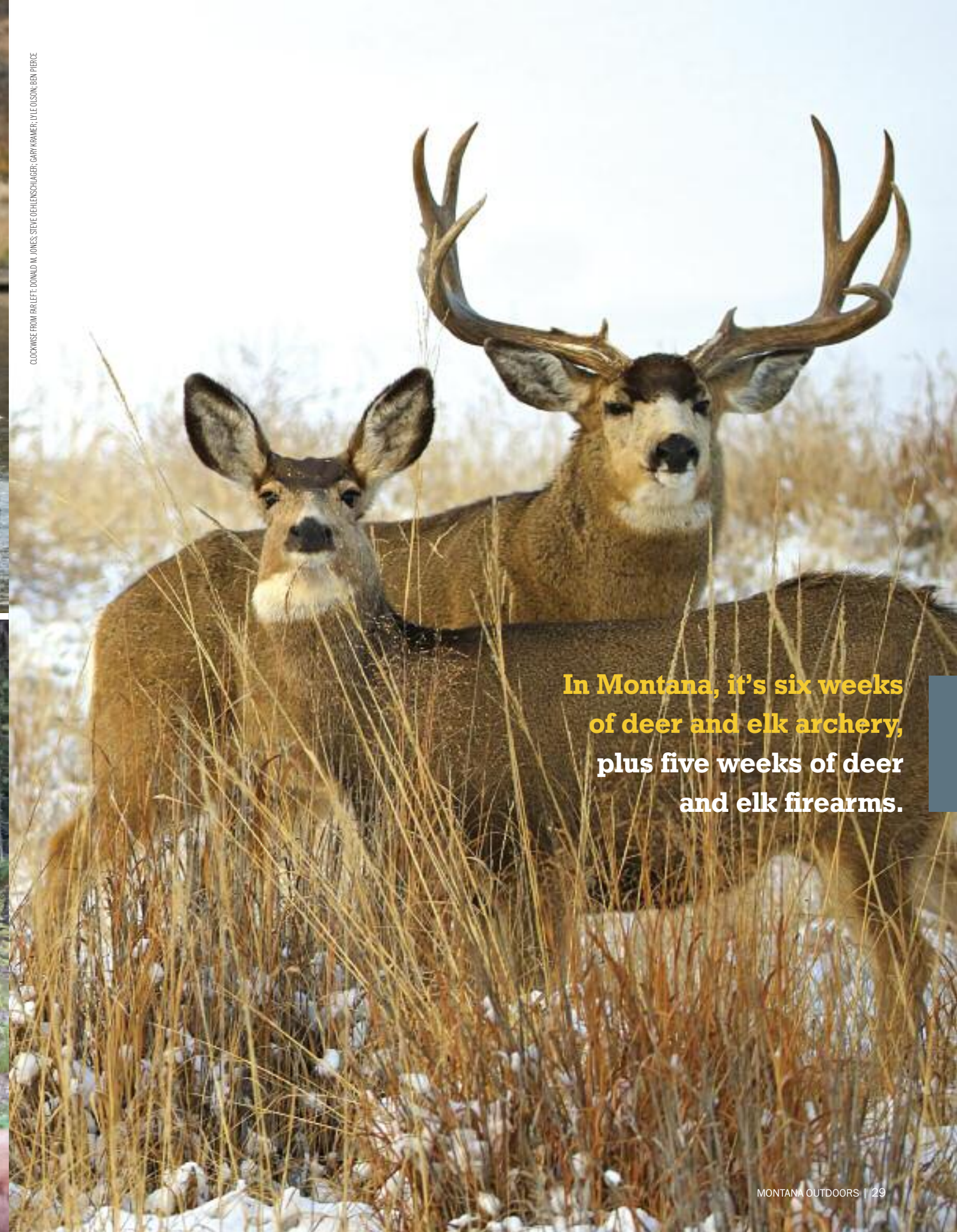
Montana also lays claim to the whole suite of major upland species, including ruffed, spruce, and blue grouse in the mountains; pheasants, Hungarian partridge, sharp-tailed grouse, and sage-grouse in the prairies; and sandhill cranes, tundra swans, both snow and

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LEFT TO RIGHT: STEVE OEHLENSCHLAGER, DONALD M. JONES



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CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: DONALD M. JONES, STEVE DEHELENSCHLAGER, GARY KRAMER, IVIE OLSON, BEN PIERCE

In Montana, it's six weeks of deer and elk archery, plus five weeks of deer and elk firearms.



As for me, no doubt my time will come to draw one of those coveted moose, sheep, goat, or bull elk permits. Yours will, too.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ANNE & USA JOHNSON; DONALD M. JONES; CHRIS SAUCH; DAMIAN Y. WILSON; JESSE LEE WARREN

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Canada geese, and 20-some duck species over water and fields. Plus wild turkeys and mourning doves. Even some chukars.

Those 40-plus game species nearly sum up all the hunting opportunities in the entire United States. And they're all right here. All for us lucky few.

And by few, I mean not many hunters, despite what you might think when pulling into the parking lot of a popular wildlife management area on opening morning. Of the 13 million hunters in the United States, less than 2 percent hunt each fall in Montana (235,000 residents and nonresidents combined). To top it off, that relative handful of hunters is spread out across the fourth-largest state in the union. That makes for a lot of land for each hunter to explore.

Of course, not everything is so rosy. Mule deer numbers east of the Continental Divide are still down from a few decades ago.

Whitetail numbers dropped in much of central Montana for a few years due to hemorrhagic diseases (but are rebounding). The pronghorn population took a beating in much of the state's prairie region after the brutal winter of 2010-11 (it too is bouncing back). And elk are indeed harder to hunt in many areas for many reasons, like more irrigated farmland that attracts elk but is increasingly off-limits to public hunting.

There's no denying that access to private land has declined in many areas over the past few decades. But that loss has been offset by the 7 to 8 million acres of private land available through the Block Management Program each year over the past three decades. Then there's the 30 million acres of public hunting land available in Montana, not to mention several million acres of private property that hunters get on through friends, family, or plain old-fashioned (and still remarkably effective) door knocking.

All that access results in a lot of days afield

and a lot of filled tags. Last year 107,663 elk hunters killed 25,735 elk, of which 5,637 were bulls carrying racks of six points or more. By the way, that's a 36 percent increase in big bulls from ten years earlier.

As for those permits no one ever seems to draw? Last year 357 hunters drew moose tags and killed 252 bulls; 388 bighorn sheep hunters shot 120 rams—many of them Boone & Crockett caliber—and 270 mountain goat hunters harvested 136 billies.

As for me, no doubt my time will come to draw one of those coveted moose, sheep, goat, or bull elk permits in the annual FWP lotteries. Yours will, too.

In the meantime, just being able to spend another fall in Montana with rifle, bow, or shotgun in hand, hunting millions of acres of private and public land for deer, elk, upland birds, and waterfowl, makes us the envy of hunters across the United States.

If you ask me, we've already won the most important lottery of all. 🐾