

Summary of Research



**Montana Fish,
Wildlife & Parks**

Statewide Acreage Estimates of How Hunting Access is Managed on Privately Owned Lands in Montana

HD Unit Research Summary No. 40

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Abstract: In 2014, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) conducted a study of rural private landowners in Montana to better understand how hunting access is managed on privately owned lands in the state. The study was designed to provide acreage estimates for each of eight different management systems commonly used by private landowners to manage hunting access on their lands. The statewide results of the study revealed that anywhere from 27-34 percent of private land in Montana offers hunting access that is open to common or general use for deer, elk, antelope, or upland game bird (pheasant, sharp-tailed grouse, and Hungarian partridge) hunting. Anywhere from 66-73 percent of private land in the state is either not open to hunting or offers primarily hunting access that is intended for or restricted to the use of a particular person or group of people for each of these game species. The baseline data provided by this study is the first of its kind in Montana, and FWP intends to periodically replicate this effort in the future to monitor trends in private land hunting access. Ultimately, information from this study will be used by FWP and Montana's Private Land/Public Wildlife (PL/PW) Council (a council appointed by the Governor consisting of diverse statewide public interests) to comprehensively evaluate hunting access issues across Montana.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In 2013, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) began work to develop a Comprehensive Hunting Access Plan as part of an effort to address hunting access issues in Montana. During the development of this plan, an internal FWP working group identified “*maximizing access to privately owned lands in the state to provide for public hunting opportunity*” as one of the fundamental objectives for FWP’s access programs. The internal working group explicitly identified the need to measure the number of private land acres in the state that are currently open to public hunting access, and to repeat such monitoring periodically so as to measure the impact of FWP access programs on meeting this objective.

In support of this planning effort, in 2014, FWP conducted a statewide survey of private landowners in rural Montana. Private landowners were asked county

level questions about how they manage hunting access on their lands for deer, elk, antelope, and upland game bird (pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse, and Hungarian partridge) hunting. For each of these species, the goal of this study was to provide statewide and regional acreage estimates for each of the following access management systems commonly used by private landowners to manage hunting on their lands:

1. **Block Management Hunting Access Program.**
2. **Non-Block Management hunting without a fee involving mostly hunters who are NOT family/friends.**
3. **Non-Block Management hunting without a fee involving mostly hunters who are family/friends.**
4. **Outfitting by the landowner.**
5. **Outfitting by a licensed outfitter other than the landowner.**
6. **Lease agreement with a non-outfitting business that markets hunting opportunities.**
7. **Lease agreement with a hunter or group of hunters.**
8. **Access fees (non-lease) charged per hunter or group of hunters.**

The first two of these eight systems are considered to be hunting access open to common or general use. The remaining six systems are considered to be hunting access intended for or restricted to the use of a particular person or group of people. This kind of



hunting access requires a willingness on the part of hunters to pay fees or necessitates that hunters have a direct connection with a landowner (e.g., be a family member or friend of a landowner) to obtain access.

This study builds upon an earlier study of hunting access management on private lands in Montana; a collaborative study conducted by FWP and Colorado State University in 2008 (McCoy, Teel & Lewis; 2009). The 2008 study was designed to estimate the percent of landowners across Montana that use each of the eight aforementioned management systems. The 2014 study was designed to help FWP take the next step in providing acreage estimates for each of these systems.

In 2014, surveys were mailed to a total of N=7,000 randomly selected private landowners who own land in rural parts of Montana. The sample was pulled from the Montana State Cadastral Database and was stratified by county to ensure representation of landowners from each of the state's 56 counties and from each of seven FWP administrative regions. A probability-proportional-to size sampling scheme was used to ensure that larger landowners had a higher likelihood of being included in the study, while at the same time sampling some landowners who own smaller acreages of land. Because the survey sample was stratified by county and county level questions were asked of private landowners in this study, individual landowners may have received more than one survey if they owned property in two or more Montana counties.

To ensure an adequate response rate for this survey, two separate replacement mailings of the survey were mailed to non-respondents during the implementation phase of the study. Via the survey, private landowners were asked if deer, elk, antelope, and upland game birds (pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse, Hungarian partridge) were present on their lands. If any of these



species were present, landowners were asked to report if hunting occurs on their property, and if hunting occurs, to report the ONE SYSTEM that best represents how they manage hunting access on their lands for each of the species they reported being present on their property. This information was used in combination with property size information (e.g., acreage data from Montana's State Cadastral Database) to come up with acreage estimates for each of the eight systems private landowners use to manage hunting access on their lands.

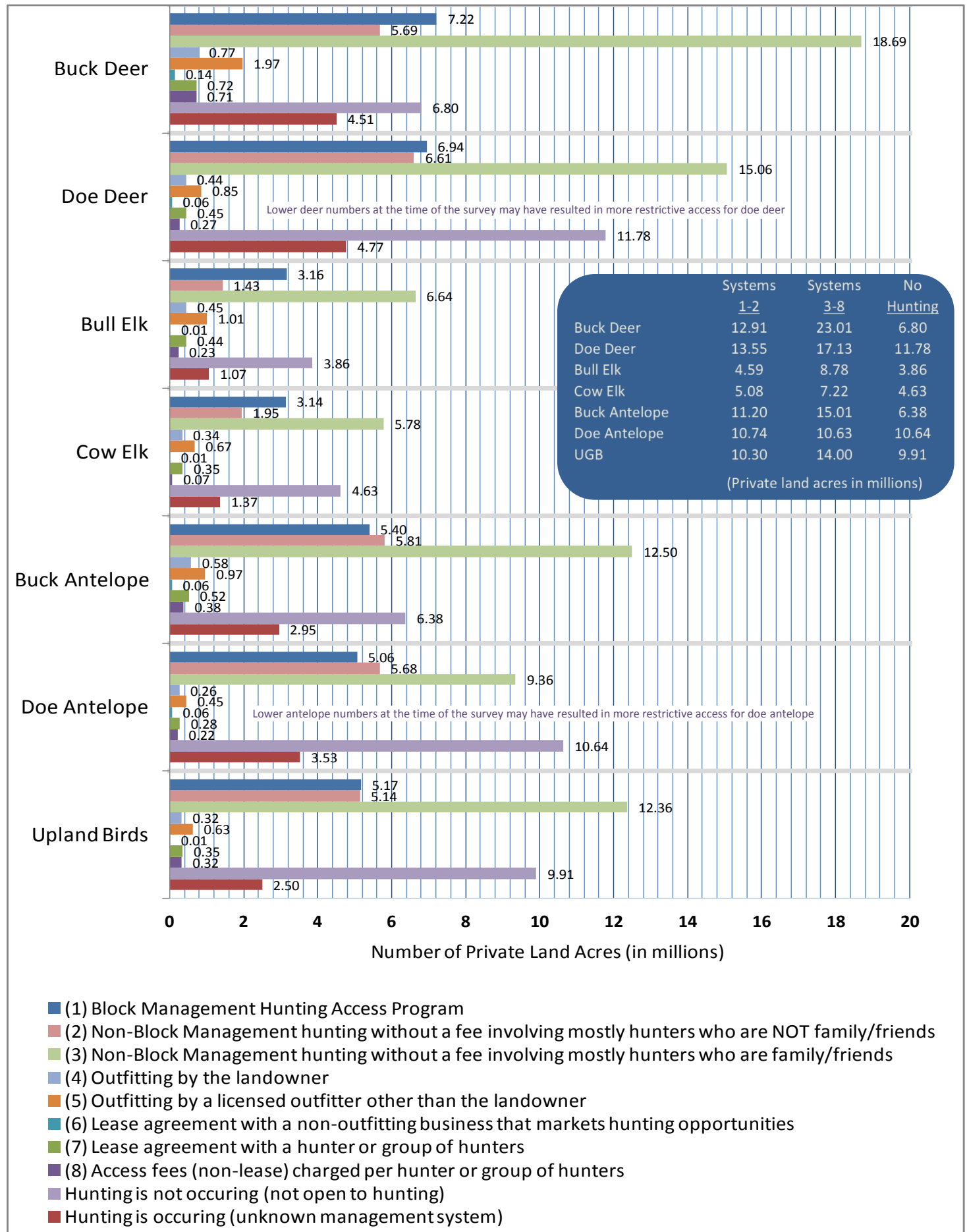
STUDY RESULTS

A total of 3,261 landowners responded to the survey questionnaire. One hundred forty-five landowners were removed from the sample for a number of legitimate reasons (e.g., the owner had passed away, absentee landowner, the property in question was unsafe for hunting, etc.). And, addresses for 259 of the landowners in the original sample proved to be undeliverable. Hence, the final response rate for the 2014 study was just under 50 percent. This response rate is considered to be excellent for a survey of this nature.

Figure 1 provides the statewide acreage estimates derived from the study. Additional results for each of FWP's seven administrative regions are available upon request. Of note, while FWP already has information regarding the number of private land acres enrolled in Montana's Block Management Program, this system was included in the survey to help ground truth the comprehensive results of the study. The known Block Management acreage tallies were found to be well within the acreage estimates provided by this study.



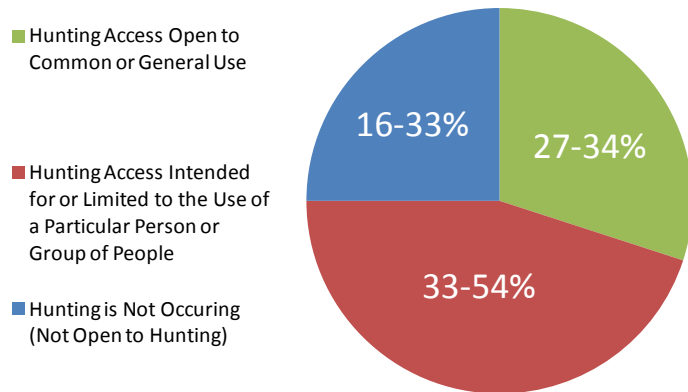
Figure 1. Statewide estimates of private land acres in Montana by eight different access management systems commonly used by private landowners to manage deer, elk, antelope, and upland game bird (pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse, and Hungarian partridge) hunting on their lands.



- (1) Block Management Hunting Access Program
- (2) Non-Block Management hunting without a fee involving mostly hunters who are NOT family/friends
- (3) Non-Block Management hunting without a fee involving mostly hunters who are family/friends
- (4) Outfitting by the landowner
- (5) Outfitting by a licensed outfitter other than the landowner
- (6) Lease agreement with a non-outfitting business that markets hunting opportunities
- (7) Lease agreement with a hunter or group of hunters
- (8) Access fees (non-lease) charged per hunter or group of hunters
- Hunting is not occurring (not open to hunting)
- Hunting is occurring (unknown management system)

Grouping of the acreage estimates provided in Figure 1 reveals that most private land (if a species is present) is either not open to hunting or offers primarily access intended for or restricted to the use of a particular person or group of people (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2. Breakdown of hunting acreage open to common or general use, hunting acreage intended for or restricted to the use of a particular person or group of people, and no hunting acreage on privately owned lands in Montana for deer, elk, antelope, and upland game bird (pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse, and Hungarian partridge) hunting.



DISCUSSION

Hunting on privately-owned land in Montana and elsewhere in the country is increasingly becoming a contentious issue. From this study we learned that most private land acreage in Montana is either not open to hunting, or requires hunters to have a direct connection with a landowner or be willing to pay fees. These findings parallel findings from a 2014 resident hunter survey, where FWP learned that securing access to hunt on non-Block Management privately-owned land in the state is becoming a challenge for those hunters who are not willing to pay fees or do not have a direct connection with a landowner (Lewis, Gude & Charles; 2014).

Despite the above, Montana continues to offer tremendous hunting opportunity across the state. In addition to the private land opportunities outlined in this research summary, the state of Montana has approximately 31.8 million acres of public land owned by state and federal agencies that also offers hunting opportunities.

But is all hunting opportunity equal? From FWP's 2014 resident hunter survey, we learned that reported harvest success on publicly and privately-owned properties that offer primarily access open to common

or general use was significantly lower than harvest success reported on properties that offer primarily access intended for or restricted to the use of a particular person or group of people.

There is also the question of availability of game for hunter harvest during the hunting season. Increasingly, hunters are expressing concerns that game populations are spending most of their time on privately owned lands that offer little or no hunting pressure during the hunting season. This is not just a concern for hunters. Many landowners worry about these congregations of unpressured animals moving onto their properties after the hunting season. And, in situations where game numbers are exceeding population objectives, biologists often see a need for increased hunter harvest to reduce herd numbers in some parts of the state where hunters simply cannot get access due to restrictions imposed by private landowners.

Clearly, private land hunting has a significant role in Montana. And, FWP recognizes the inherent rights of private landowners to manage hunting access on their lands in ways that best meet their needs. At the same time, wildlife in Montana is a publicly owned resource. Along those lines, an important goal of FWP's access programs is to foster collaborative relationships with private landowners in an effort to enhance public hunting opportunities across the state on both publicly and privately owned lands. The baseline information provided by this study, used in combination with data from future studies, will help the agency monitor its effectiveness in accomplishing this goal over time.

LITERATURE CITED

- Lewis, Michael S., Justin Gude & Alan Charles. 2014. *Selected Results from Surveys of Resident Deer, Elk, Antelope & Upland Game Bird Hunters Regarding Hunting Access in Montana*. HD Unit Research Summary No. 38. Helena, MT: Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks.
- McCoy, Caitlin., Tara L. Teel & Michael S. Lewis. 2009. *Hunting Access Management on Private Lands in Montana: Selected Results from a 2008 Landowner Study*. HD Unit Research Summary No. 27. Helena, MT: Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

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