

A Sportsman's Guide to Landowner Relations

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Sportsmen have long enjoyed Montana as one of the premiere hunting and fishing sites in North America. From the plains of eastern Montana to the rugged mountains in the west, Montana offers excellent sporting opportunities.

While many sportsmen utilize Montana's public lands for their sporting needs, a large number flock to private lands owned by farmers and ranchers. Even though there seems to be an endless amount of public land in Montana available to sportsmen, many find themselves depending on private land to enjoy their hunting experiences.

Unlike public land that is managed for a number of uses by a government agency and is open to the public in general, private land is controlled by a landowner who makes the ultimate decision as to how, when, and by whom the land is to be used. Consequently, gaining access to hunt on private land is much different than public land and can be more difficult.

Fortunately, the extra effort needed to hunt private land is worth it, as 70% of Montana is in private ownership. Many game animals in Montana spend considerable amounts of time on private land. Private land may also offer more positive opportunities in terms of hunter numbers and quality of animals.

The Landowner Perspective

In order for sportsmen to develop and maintain a positive relationship with landowners, it is important that they understand the landowner's perspective. The landowner, in most cases a rancher or farmer, depends heavily

upon his land to make a living for himself and his family. In many cases, the sole source of income for a family may come from the ranch or farm. Since farmers and ranchers are so dependent on the land, they have serious concerns when they allow others to use their land for activities such as hunting or fishing. Gates left open, livestock killed accidentally, weeds, fires, and damage to roads are just a few of their concerns.

Hunting season also falls at what can be a busy time of year for landowners. Many are rushing to get fall work completed before cold weather and snow set in. A steady stream of hunters calling on the phone and appearing at the front door does little to help a landowner get his work finished and even less to improve his outlook on hunters and the hunting season.

On the other hand, many are proud of their land and the way they manage their natural resources and are eager to showcase those skills to the public at large. Wildlife generally benefit from this management and can become overpopulated. Landowners recognize the role hunters play in managing wildlife populations. Landowners also recognize the role of good sportsman/landowner relationships that keep wildlife in balance with their agricultural operations.

It is easy, then, to recognize that sportsmen present potential for both risk and rewards to the landowner. With a little effort, sportsmen can tip this balance in their favor and present more rewards than risks to landowners.

For the first-time private land hunter, developing a relationship with a landowner can seem like a daunting task. It may take a number of years, but by being a good sportsman and respecting the land and the landowner's wishes, you can ensure a positive hunting experience.

Obtaining Permission

Permission is the most basic necessity for hunting on private land. Since permission is required to hunt on private land, hunters must contact the landowner to gain access. Before contacting a landowner, sportsmen should consider the situation of the landowner. Fall can be an exceptionally busy time of year for a farmer or rancher—shorter days coupled with the need to complete work before winter can make for a very hectic schedule. During hunting season, farmers and ranchers are often bombarded at all hours of the day and night by requests to hunt. Many times the landowner is taken away from important activities to deal with requests from sportsmen.

Keep these factors in mind as you approach a landowner for permission to hunt:

- If you know where you will be hunting, contact landowners early, possibly even before the season starts. This will give advance notice that you would like to hunt in the area and increase your opportunity to receive permission.

- Contact the landowner during reasonable hours. Driving into a

rancher's yard at 4 a.m. to ask permission to hunt may be the best way of getting turned down for hunting access. If you haven't already obtained permission, calling or stopping at the landowner's house the evening before you plan to hunt is appropriate. Otherwise, wait until a reasonable hour during the day you wish to hunt to ask permission.

- Inform the landowner how many are in your party, what species you would like to hunt, and how long you would like to stay. This will make it possible for the landowner to manage his hunter numbers and ensure that his land is not overhunted.

- It is important for a landowner to manage his hunting. Too many hunters may chase off the game animals and detract from what could be a positive hunting experience. If a landowner turns you down because his place is already full, do not take it personally. It is in the interest of better hunter and game management.

Behavior on Private Land

Probably the most critical step in maintaining the landowner relationship is how a hunter behaves while he is on private land. If a hunter has not been a good sportsman and has not respected the landowner's wishes, he should not expect to return in future seasons. Following are some basic rules to follow as you hunt on private land.

- Close all gates that you find closed and leave open those that are open. Occasionally ranchers will leave gates open to allow livestock to move from pasture to pasture or to go to water. Closing the gate may prevent livestock from getting to water. Also be observant as you pass through gates. A gate that has been propped open or up against the fence usually indicates that it is supposed to be open, but a gate left swinging or laying on the ground may mean it is not supposed to be open. If possible, contact the landowner about such situations, so the

landowner has the opportunity to remedy any problems.

- Do not drive off roads and trails unless allowed by the landowner. Vehicle traffic across fields and rangeland tends to knock down grass, spread noxious weeds, and has the potential for starting fires. If the ground is wet, vehicles may cause ruts that will lead to erosion. It's much better to walk further than to damage roads or rangeland. A good rule of thumb is, if in doubt, walk!

- Be careful not to spread noxious weeds. If coming from an area that has noxious weeds problems, be careful to clean the undercarriage of your vehicle or any other equipment before you enter a weed free area. Research has shown that vehicles will transport noxious weed seeds. Noxious weeds not only cost a landowner to control them and reduce grazing for his livestock, but also reduce wildlife habitat.

- Know and respect boundaries. A landowner may give you permission on only part of his land. It is also important to know where one farm or ranch ends and the next begins. If you are unsure of boundaries, obtain a map of the area, and ask the landowner to outline all necessary boundaries for you. In some cases, landowners will supply maps. If you are not certain that you will remain on the landowner's property when coming to a fence, don't cross it!

Maintaining the Welcome

In many cases, a sportsman will find an area where he wants to hunt in future years. Landowners in general welcome those hunters who have been good sportsmen and respected their property. There are some things, however, that will cultivate that relationship.

- Correspondence following the season is appropriate. A thank-you note to let the landowner know that you enjoyed the opportunity to hunt will foster good will. Never assume

permission is for multiple years, so let the landowner know in advance of your plans to return. If he knows the date when you will be there, he can make sure you have a place to hunt. Even if you don't plan to return, notify the landowner, so he can give someone else a hunting opportunity.

- Do not assume that since a landowner allowed you to hunt that he wants all your friends and family as well. If you do plan on bringing more people with you in succeeding seasons, make sure you ask permission to bring the additional hunters.

- While it is not necessary to pay landowners for hunting, gestures of good will are appreciated. In many cases hunters may offer a service or help with the ranch chores if needed. In one situation, a hunter who owns a carpet cleaning business cleans the carpets in the rancher's house each year when he comes to hunt. A newspaper from town or a dozen bakery donuts may be a friendly gesture. Consider offering to share your game.

Summary

Hunters should appreciate the contributions of private landowners. In addition to a place to hunt, landowners provide habitat necessary for wildlife to survive. Disparaging comments about ranchers and farmers by groups that claim to represent hunters do nothing but harm hunter/landowner relationships. On the other hand, thank you's and acknowledgment of the contribution of private land and agriculture will help ensure future opportunities for sportsmen.

Good landowner/sportsman relations have the potential for great rewards to both parties. Landowners have the opportunity to get some help managing game populations that reside on their land, and sportsmen can enjoy first rate hunting opportunities. Hopefully, by understanding the situation of the landowner and by respecting him and his land, sportsmen can assure themselves of years of hunting.

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