



MONTANA MASTER HUNTER

**FIELDING MORE
ETHICAL, EDUCATED,
AND EFFECTIVE
HUNTERS:
THE MONTANA MASTER
HUNTER PROGRAM**

It can be hard to remember when you learned something. Each experience builds upon another, and you find that what was once a foreign idea is now a subconscious movement.

My first deer season was more than two decades ago, but one memory remains clear. While stalking a group of whitetail does in western Montana, I followed behind my dad as we waded through brush. As most novice hunters, I managed to find a stick in every step and the noise did nothing to help our stealth. We finally cut a deer trail, and I was told, "This will be the quietest route in the forest. Stay in it." Still today, that memory is a quick thought each time I step on a trail in the woods.

For most hunters, the more we hunt, the more we look for increasing challenges, different species, new locations, and deeper knowledge. The Montana Master Hunter Program (MHP) was developed explicitly for that last reason: knowledge. After one takes a Hunter Education class from a state agency, there is very little opportunity for broadening one's skills outside of time in the field. Now, hunters looking for more opportunities have options with this new education program.

In 2010, OneMontana, a Bozeman-based nonprofit, established the Common Ground Partnership. This working group brought

together Montana landowners, sportsmen, and agencies to address wildlife management and land stewardship access. Scott Hibbard (a Helena, Montana, rancher and member of the Devil's Kitchen Working Group) met with landowners and hunters and found that both were concerned with an increase in unethical behavior from hunters, a lack in understanding of landowner stewardship, and declining access to productive game areas in Montana. Sixteen core subjects were identified that engaged sportsmen on current issues facing wildlife management. George Bettas, former Boone and Crockett

executive director, was invited to help develop and lead the pilot program. To date, 90 master hunters have successfully completed the course with another 100 expected to graduate from the program in 2020.

Participants of the MHP are afforded the rare opportunity to learn directly from experts on topics that directly impact their success as hunters. Craig Jourdonnais was a biologist for Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks for 30 years before retiring. He currently serves as the big game researcher for the MPG Ranch outside of Missoula, Montana. His MHP presentation covers many aspects of

how states manage wildlife and the methods used to study populations. Understanding how a biologist—who spends over 100 days in the field each year looking for wildlife—provides valuable insight into participants' own pursuits. More than that, Craig's class helps sportsmen see what state agencies take into consideration as they set season specifics such as duration, harvest numbers, and dates. Sportsmen that are more informed are better influencers when public comment periods open.

Students prepare for class with required readings intended to spark more in-depth classroom discussion. This is where the value of the Montana Master Hunter Program is really seen; instructors field questions from students giving them access to a lifetime of knowledge and experiences.

A consistent student-favorite is the all-day landowner panel. This moderated discussion brings landowners from across the state with different perspectives to share their experiences with hunters. It is a pivotal moment for many participants as they learn about such issues as what the real cost of leaving a gate open is for a rancher, economic realities, or the difficulties faced each season. Landowners take



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great pride in being responsible stewards of their ranches. They see hunting as a partnership between themselves, the wildlife and hunters. Students leave with skills to build better relationships and positive approaches to find access to private lands. Through this, the Master Hunter Program is creating thoughtful ambassadors for hunting.

Following more than 50 hours of online programming and in-class discussion, students attend a weekend rendezvous. This intimate weekend set in Paradise Valley is where students really connect with one another. Students find many potential hunting partners who share the same values, schedules, and goals. Final shooting qualifications and land navigation are completed in the field. Students are required to show proficiency with a land navigation

course designed to be rigorous and to imitate a mountain hunt. Students are also required to qualify using their own hunting rifles in a variety of shooting situations out to 400 yards. They must also pass a final exam covering the course material.

Even though MHP is primarily an education program, graduates of the program find other benefits. Currently, 19 landowner partners offer a variety of hunting opportunities for both rifle and archery hunters on over 180,000 acres. Many of these are unique properties and some previously had not been open to public hunting.

The Montana Master Hunter Program works hard to find thoughtful landowners who want help managing the wildlife on their properties. Some of our corporate sponsors offer specials and

discounts for graduates of the program, but what might be the most valuable, and unseen, benefit is the growing network of master hunters who are ambassadors and mentors for new hunters. Collectively, these master hunters have a wealth of knowledge and form a camaraderie that often results in invitations to join on new hunts, float a river, or just meet up.

Support for the Master Hunter Program continues to increase. The program, which teaches the values of Fair Chase, is grateful for the partnership with the Boone and Crockett Club and other nonprofits, foundations, and industry partners. Mystery Ranch, also a founding partner, created a scholarship which is supporting eight students this

year. The Ruby Habitat Foundation also awarded a full scholarship. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks endorses this program and cites it as helping advance their goals by teaching hunters how to achieve positive relations between private landowners and the recreating public. This helps to contribute to Montana's wildlife management needs and hunter opportunities and creates potential mentors that can help more people engage in Montana's hunting traditions. As the Montana Master Hunter Program continues to grow and refine its efforts, we hope to see more ethical, educated, and effective hunters on Montana's landscape. ■

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TOPICS COVERED INCLUDE:

- HISTORY OF WILDLIFE CONSERVATION
- WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT
- MONTANA GAME LAW
- HUNTING CULTURE AND ETHICS
- LAND NAVIGATION
- PUBLIC LAND ACCESS
- LANDOWNER RELATIONSHIPS
- HUNTING RESEARCH AND RESOURCES
- NON-LEAD AMMUNITION

