

Montana's hunting season never really ends

A hunter recently reminded me of the remarkable number of hunting opportunities in Montana. As people debate wolves, discuss declining public access, and mourn the wildlife losses caused by last year's severe winter, it's easy to forget how good we still have it here—and that we need to work together to keep it that way.

It's amazing how much there is to do in Montana with a bow, rifle, or shotgun in hand. A person could conceivably hunt during every month except July. The action began a few weeks ago on August 15, when the 900 series antelope archery season opened. While the rest of us were wearing shorts, T-shirts, and sandals, bowhunters who drew this either-sex license were in full camo crawling across sagebrush steppes searching for pronghorn.

Just around the corner is the start of upland bird season on September 1. That's when some shotgunners head to the mountains for dusky and ruffed grouse, while others take their pointing dogs east to search for coveys of Huns, sharptails, and sage-grouse.

A few days later, archery deer, elk, black bear, mountain lion, and bighorn sheep seasons open. Not long after that come the general firearms moose, bighorn sheep, black bear, mountain lion, mountain goat, and backcountry deer and elk seasons.

It's hard to believe, but thousands of hunters fill their big game tags before summer is even officially over.

October is even busier. At dawn on Saturday, October 1, waterfowl hunters from Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge to the potholes of northern Phillips County sit hunched in their blinds trying to identify duck species winging over their decoy spread. That first hour is often the finest gunning of the season.

On October 8 the antelope and pheasant seasons open. Though pronghorn numbers are down and quotas much reduced, many hunters will still see and harvest antelope this year. The tough winter and cold, wet spring were also hard on pheasants. But that won't dampen the enthusiasm of the many friends and family members who make this weekend an upland tradition. Hotels and restaurants in Culbertson, Plentywood, and

Froid will no doubt be packed as usual.

Things will reach a frenzied peak when the general deer and elk seasons open October 22. Many hunters set their shotgun or bow aside, grab a rifle, and head for forests or coulees in search of big game. For the next five weeks, pretty much every firearms season is open, forcing hunters to carefully ration their vacation days and weekends. By mid-November some hunters have filled their tag and switched back to birds, while others are holding out for a big buck or bull. The Sunday after Thanksgiving is a day of mourning for many, as the deer, elk, mountain goat, fall mountain lion, moose, black bear, and bighorn sheep seasons close. (Others give a secret sigh of relief that they don't have to rise at 3:30 a.m. for another year.)

Though most hunters have packed away their blaze orange and camo by December, many waterfowlers are just getting started. The cold weather freezes ponds and streams in Canada, pushing mallards and honkers south. Freezeout, Benton, Bowdoin, and Medicine Lakes will have iced up, but the Yellowstone, Bighorn, Bitterroot, and Missouri Rivers will still be open, attracting birds by the thousands. When the upland bird seasons close January 1, a few diehards are still bundling up at dawn to hunt waterfowl on moving water until the middle of that month.

Some of those hunters, ice forming on their beards and fingers numb from cold, were crawling across a sun-baked prairie five months earlier searching for antelope.

When the waterfowl season closes, it's pretty much all over—except for lion hunters, who go for another few months, as well as the lucky hunters who drew a bison license and have until February 15 to fill their tag. Before you know it, April has arrived, and with it the wild turkey season. Spring black bear season starts not long after that, continuing until May 31 for most hunting districts and June 15 for a few others. Then the cycle starts anew with the 900 series antelope archery season in mid-August.

For some hunters, there is no off-season. Instead, they take an occasional breather between openers—to butcher game, do laundry, and buy ammo. And, most important, beg forgiveness from their spouse.

—Joe Maurier, Montana FWP Director

