

Secret spots

By Tom Dickson

I knew I'd finally become a real Montana hunter the day I started lying about my hunting spots. It was not my proudest moment.

When I moved here 20 years ago, I wondered why people were so coy about where they fished and hunted. Montana is a sprawling 150,000 square miles in size, home to just 1 million people. Why all the secrecy?

When my then-boss pulled snapshots from his briefcase each November to show me the massive bull elk he or his son had shot, all he'd divulge was that they'd had been hunting "in the Gallatin Range." One friend said she and her husband regularly killed limits of pheasants "up on the Hi-Line." Another said his party did well on pronghorn "in Region 7"—an FWP geographic jurisdiction larger than Indiana.

But it didn't take me long to learn that, despite Montana's size, such directional indistinction was necessary. While afield, I kept running into people I knew, even hundreds of miles from Helena. The night before my first turkey hunt, in 2002, I camped in the Custer National Forest east of Ashland, a six-hour drive from home, and woke to find an FWP colleague in a trailer parked next to my tent. The next year, while camped along the Big Hole River, I looked up to see a neighbor from across the street floating past in a raft. Since then, I've bumped into friends or colleagues while camping at Nelson Reservoir, hunting deer north of Lewistown, and fixing a flat along Montana Highway 87 in remote Petroleum County. Once I ran into a co-worker and his son in the middle of the Bob Marshall Wilderness.

That's when I finally understood what people mean when they describe Montana

as "a small town with long streets." And why, despite all the space here, a person needs to keep secret spots close to the vest.

If possible, I try not to outright lie. When someone asks where I hunt ducks each January, my answer of "on the Missouri" is factually correct. It's just not helpful to someone who'd like to shoot a few mallards for themselves. Which is the point.

Secrets spots are precious real estate. Over the past two decades I've driven thousands of miles, examined hundreds of public land parcels, and knocked on dozens of doors searching for places to hunt deer, waterfowl, and upland birds. Some hunters study topographic and land ownership maps all year long looking for out-of-the-way pieces of public property. Others cultivate lasting relationships with ranchers and farmers. You don't just give something like that away.

Let's say you generously take a buddy to a sweet little state section that holds a few roosters, and the following weekend he lets slip the location to his sister-in-law, who then innocently tells a colleague at work. Next

thing you know, a half-dozen hunters and their dogs have vacuumed up every ringneck left in your no-longer-secret spot.

Because it doesn't take much additional pressure to ruin a top-notch hunting or fishing location, secrecy is paramount. Two friends and I once hired a fishing guide in British Columbia who took us down a steep mountain-side to a prime bull trout pool on the Wigwam River. He parked a half-mile away from the trail and made us sneak in because, he told us, local anglers often tailed his truck. A hunting buddy leaves his vehicle at a parking lot in Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge then jogs for 20 minutes, glancing over his shoulder the entire time, to an adjacent Bureau of Reclamation cattail slough that's sometimes loaded with roosters.

All this sneaking around takes its toll. I'm a forthright fellow who doesn't like to mislead anyone, especially friends. But when heading out with a buddy, do we only visit spots we both know about? Or does one of us share a secret location—and, if so, what's the protocol afterward?

In my circle, we never return to an area someone has offered up unless they invite us back or grant permission. And if given the green light, we don't milk the spot by returning too often, and we *never* go back with someone else.

Sadly, secret spots are becoming harder to find and keep. That remote elk park you discovered after hiking all day last fall is visible via Google Earth or the onX app to anyone with a computer. And as more and more private property gets leased or posted, the rest of us are squeezed onto the limited land that's left.

Which means we anglers and hunters need to keep searching for secret spots. And, I'm sorry to say, do whatever it takes to keep them that way. 🐾



Tom Dickson is the Montana Outdoors editor.