

BACKCOUNTRY JOURNAL



The Magazine of Backcountry Hunters & Anglers

Fall 2016

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THE REVIEW

"MEET ME AT THE BRIDGE AT 6 A.M."

It was time for BHA Development Associate Grant Alban's annual review. In early January, I couldn't think of a better place to conduct said review than on the water. Not only could we talk about the past year during lulls; I also could take Grant on his first waterfowl hunt.

The energy that morning was palpable. Grant arrived on time, and we loaded two big bags of decoys – one of duck floaters and the other geese. Some chairs and our shotguns rounded out the load. In the pitch-black darkness we reached the river and headed to a spot I have hunted more than 50 times. With no permission to access the adjacent private land, we kept our feet wet stumbling over river rock and submerged logs. At one point it got deep enough where the decoy bags on our backs touched the water and almost began to float.

The ducks and geese were full of morning chatter. We stopped in silence and listened to the beautiful music. We were in their bedroom, and they didn't know it yet. The sounds and anticipation were too much for Turk, my black Lab, and he let out a whine. In a thunderous chorus the birds lifted off the water. I knew at least some would be back. It was going to be a good day.

At the end of a point, a gravel bar cuts almost all the way across the river. It creates a perfect spot for the birds to rest in slower water and mill around for food. Grant continued his review in fine fashion by helping set out the dekes, taking care to create an open landing zone in the middle within reach of our shot. The light was creeping into the void. It was almost time. We set up under some willows, making sure we stayed within the legally accessible high water mark.

And then it happened, just like it's supposed to. A pair of mallards circled, and I gently called to them. Late season birds are wary and I didn't want to blow them out. Yet they came in on a string and hovered above the designated opening. "Take 'em!"

Grant rose, pulled the trigger on his first ever duck, and a magnificent drake fell to the water. The review was complete!

In our last issue of the journal, we rolled out BHA's Stream Access Now campaign to protect and promote moments just like this. Grant and I were flanked by private lands during our waterfowl hunt. But thanks to Montana's stream access law, we were legal to hunt as long as we stayed within the high water mark and faced the river, taking care to shoot birds over the water.

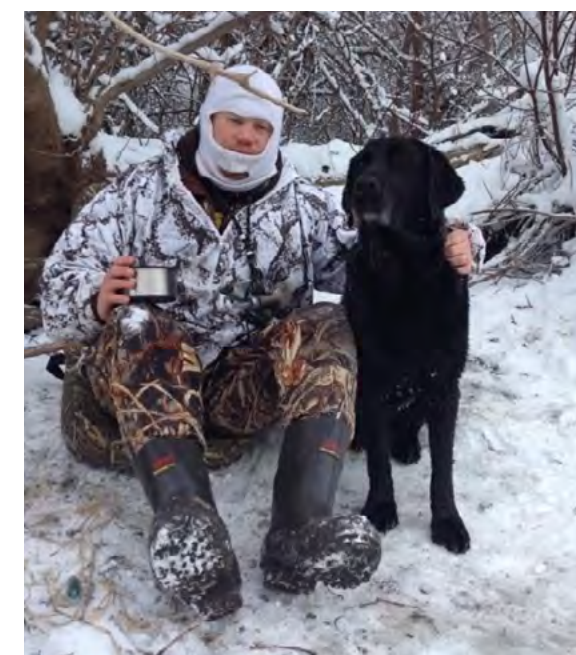
Not all states boast public stream access laws like Montana's. We launched Stream Access Now in part to build awareness of the vast differences between states. Not only do we want to educate folks on what is legal and what is not; we also want to motivate you to defend access like we have here in Montana – and improve access in places like New Mexico, where it is now illegal to wade where water borders private lands.

In New Mexico, the state legislature passed – by a single vote – a 2015 law to drastically reduce public stream access. It subsequently was signed into law by Gov. Susana Martinez despite strong opposition. While this is unfortunate, I remain convinced that we can unite New Mexican sportsmen and women to right this wrong. In September, a coalition was formed in New Mexico that includes BHA and the New Mexico Wildlife Federation, to tackle this very issue. Together we will restore traditional sportsmen's access in the Land of Enchantment.

We won't stop with New Mexico. To continue our work, however, we need your help. Visit StreamAccessNow.org and sign our petition as a first step. Once you've done that, check out our fundraising campaign, which includes great premiums such as a custom hat from Rep Your Water, chest packs from Fishpond, Yeti coolers, Costa sunglasses, lanyards from Flyvines, rod and reel combos from Redington and Sage and, finally, a guided fishing trip in Montana. BHA makes it easy to support critical issues like public access to our nation's streams and waters.

All annual reviews should be conducted with feet in water. Together, we can ensure that they are.

Good luck out there! 🐾



While a picture of Grant and his first duck would be appropriate, our CEO's cell phone took a swim that day. This shot from the same place on a different day must suffice.

Onward and Upward,

Land Tawney
President & CEO

REFLECTIONS ON A ROAD CLOSURE

BY JACK BALLARD

THE ROAD BEGINS AT 6,600 FEET ABOVE SEA LEVEL along a modest river. From there it runs 9 miles across sagebrush benches, through dense stands of emerald evergreens and pale aspens, to terminate at a trailhead at 8,600 feet. It is not a “road,” really, just a coarse, two-track trail fit only for four wheel-drive vehicles steered by confident drivers. It is the route used by my family to access our elk hunting camp, high in the mountains of southwestern Montana.

Or it was. In 2010 the road was closed at its halfway point. With the stroke of a pen in a faraway office, the authorization of a new travel management plan for the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest abruptly ended a family tradition spanning six decades.

“They’ve locked us out,” concluded a cousin, employing the rhetoric of those who spin any restriction on motor vehicle travel on public land as equivalent to a “No Trespassing” sign. I certainly wasn’t willing to join that chorus, but when elk season arrived I hunted elsewhere. So did the rest of the family. For the first time since the early 1950s, there was no Ballard camp in our cherished drainage of the upper Ruby River.

The following autumn we pitched a trio of wall tents at the edge of an aspen grove near the barricade marking the terminus of the road. A long, cold ride or wearying hike of four miles separated

us from what was soon named “Old Camp.” Our familiar hunting grounds were even further away. Opening morning found me herding three kids and my sweetheart, Lisa, on an over-ambitious, untrailed hike to a favorite meadow. It was too far from the new camp. Dawn greeted us a mile from the meadow in poor habitat. The remainder of the day found my youngest son and me hunting dark timber on the backside of Old Camp, on a slope where we’d killed many elk in previous years. But the road closure had shifted the travel patterns of *Cervus elaphus* as well as humans. We spied not a single elk and returned to the new camp exhausted.

The second morning proved a déjà vu of the first. Late that afternoon I pointed Lisa and the kids back toward the tents and veered away into a broad basin, one we’d occasionally hunted from Old Camp, also within reasonable hiking distance of our new digs. Tracks and dark, shiny droppings betrayed the recent presence of elk on a 100-acre burn on the basin’s flank. I knew where we’d hunt the next morning.

While Lisa waited with a riding horse in a long clearing at the bottom of the basin, Micah, my oldest son, and I climbed toward the burn. Just at legal shooting light I spotted two cows cropping grass on a narrow bench above us. A single shot from Micah’s lever-action dropped one of the pair, the first elk harvested from the new camp.

The intervening five years have been a poignant study in the behavior of elk and humans. One of our greatest concerns of the

camp relocation was hunting pressure. With the upper portion of the road closed, we suspected the lower reaches would receive twice the hunters. It has proven otherwise. In fact, we probably share the territory with fewer hunters than when we hunted from Old Camp. The reasons are unclear, but I suspect the upper portion of the road lured a measure of wistful road warriors hoping to ambush elk along the two-track, an incident I never once witnessed in a 30 years hunting from the upper camp. The road now ends on the border of desirable elk habitat. There’s good hunting not far beyond the barricade, but most vehicles chug up to the end of the road, then rumble right back down.

A student of biology, I’m more intrigued by the changes in elk behavior and their relationship to our hunting success. It has taken a few years for the herds to adapt to the closed road and my family to adjust to hunting much of what is essentially a new area. Elk travel freely across the upper road now, its tracks ever so slowly filling with vegetation. Prior to the closure, the road demarcated a habitat rift infrequently crossed by wapiti during the hunting season.

They have also “filled in” the buffer created by motorized disturbance on the road, giving them more places to forage and a larger space to roam. We have seen elk feeding at daylight on the old gash from rubber tires worn into a sagebrush flat. A couple years ago I killed a cow within shooting distance of the two-track. I’ve witnessed what numerous studies have concluded: Road closures don’t increase the distance from hunters to elk. The wily brown denizens of the forest still maintain their preferred mile-wide buffer zone from vehicles. The border now is simply found in a different place.



In truth, I miss the old camp, mostly for memories of deceased family members, inextricably bound to an acre of woodland we called home for many long years. Some autumn hence, when I’m hunting more and writing less, I hope to bivouac there again, transporting the camp contents via horseback. But in reality we like New Camp as well as the old and the hunting is good. Our success has increased each year. The loss of the road hasn’t hurt our hunting.

Elk, I’m sure, are better off without it. 🐾

Author and BHA member Jack Ballard has written three books on elk and elk hunting. His favorite week of each year is spent in elk camp. See more of his work at www.jackballard.com.

