

# WESTERN HUNTING & FISHING NEWS

SEPTEMBER 2026



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# Elusive Catch: Angler Snags Large Paddlefish That Was At Large For 22 Years

MFWP <https://fwp.mt.gov>

Trevor Swisse of Sidney not only harvested the biggest paddlefish in Montana in 2026, but the nearly 117-pound female had avoided recapture by fisheries crews and anglers in Montana and North Dakota for 22 years.

"That's the biggest one I've ever caught," Swisse said.

Montana's state-record paddlefish, caught in 1973 in the Missouri River, was 142.5 pounds, but 117 pounds is definitely on the larger end of fish harvested.

Swisse was paddlefishing at Seven Sisters Wildlife Management Area near Sidney on June 12 with his boys, Mason, 15, and Charles, 6, when he snagged the fish.

"At first I thought it was a small one," he said. "Me and the two boys went to Seven Sisters that morning, and I cast into some slack water behind a sandbar.

I cast and hooked instantly, and I started pulling and it came really easy over to shore. I couldn't see it out of the water until I come back over the bank, and then I saw how big it was."

Mason, who was also paddlefishing that day but has yet to harvest one, and Charles got to share in the excitement.

"They loved every second," Swisse said.

The joy is evident in photos that show the three of them smiling with the paddlefish, which is a good half foot taller than Swisse from its tail to its rostrum. View the photo on MFWP Facebook page here: <https://www.facebook.com/MontanaFWP/photos/angler-snags-large-paddlefish-that-was-at-large-for-22-yearstrevor-swisse-of-sid/1367668752175539/>.

Regional fisheries manager Mike Backes also was excited with Swisse's catch, but more for scientific reasons.

"The fish is noteworthy considering its large size and the jaw tag being at large for 22 years," Backes said.

## Backes shared the story behind that jaw tag.

The fish was originally caught on April 27, 2004 by North Dakota Fish & Game. Staff were drifting gill nets on the Missouri River about 3 miles upstream of the Highway 85 bridge at Williston. The purpose of the netting was installing jaw tags on paddlefish before the harvest season, which assists with estimating harvest rates and growth rates, and producing a population estimate.

When captured, the fish was 49 inches long from the fork in the tail to the eye and weighed 90 pounds. A jaw tag with number ND7570 was installed on the fish prior to its release.

Fast-forward to June 12, 2026, when ND7570 was caught again by Swisse. The fish was taken to the Intake Dam Fishing Access Site cleaning station, where FWP and partners also collect data.

This time around, ND7570 was 52 inches long and weighed 117 pounds, gaining three inches and 27 pounds over 22 years.

Backes explained that growth is slow and becomes secondary to energy the females must divert to ovary and egg development and spawning migrations.

But trying to estimate ND7570's age is where it really gets interesting.

Unfortunately, FWP won't know the answer until next spring. Since the fish was cleaned at Intake, a jaw section was also collected for aging. The age estimate will be completed by Dennis Scarnecchia with the University of Idaho by early next spring.

(continued on page 15)



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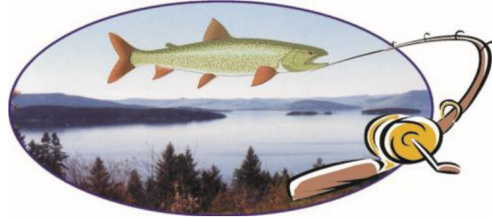
# 2026 Fall Mack Days on Flathead Lake

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Cash and Prizes-bonus amounts, lottery prizes, tagged fish

More Entries per angler=Higher Payout for that angler

(1)-\$10,000 & (3) \$5,000 & (5) \$1000 + over (9,000) \$500-\$100 Tagged Lake Trout



**Thursday-September 10<sup>th</sup> to Sunday-November 8<sup>th</sup>**

(Contest may end earlier if total harvest exceeds the payout limit-prior notice will be given)

Fish one day or several days-every fish gives you a chance to catch a tagged lake trout, receive bonus \$, and/or win in the lottery drawings!

**Bonus \$ amounts** (Mon-Sun) **increase as your total goes up**-bonus amounts and tagged fish amounts are estimated-anglers who enter 11 or more lake trout receive bonuses-examples: 11-30 lake trout entries- \$45, 31-50-\$88, 51-75-\$150, 76-100-\$205, .....205-225-\$518, 301-325-\$813 on up. No pooling of fish is allowed. Lake trout are to be entered the same day as caught. See bonus chart at [www.mackdays.com](http://www.mackdays.com)

**Friday- Sunday**-competitive Mack Days-lottery prizes, tagged fish, and bonuses-ends Sat 11/7

Top twenty angler prizes: Pick your best 18 days/26 possible-Friday-Sunday. Check out pick up sites on the website or turn in at Blue Bay from 11 till ½ hr. before sunset

**Monday-Thursday**- 11:00 am to ½ hr before Sunset turn in fish only at Blue Bay – 3-\$100, 3-\$200 4-\$250 lottery drawings plus bonus dollars -33 days-entries totaled with Fri-Sun totals at the end of the event for bonus amounts

**SUNDAY NOVEMBER 8<sup>th</sup>** -SEPARATE DAY ALL ENTRIES IN BY 3:00-only AT BLUE BAY

All prizes & lottery drawings will be done on Sunday morning 11/7 and posted for awards ceremony at 3:00. Cash Drawings for Sunday will be-\$400, \$350, \$300. Largest lake trout under 30" \$100-1<sup>st</sup>

\$75-2nd Smallest \$200 Top Angler by 11/8 total \$300 Totals count for bonus awards

All it takes is one ticket (one for every lake trout under 30") to win a lottery drawing

Friday-Sunday Prizes excluding the last day

Lottery drawings **\$2,000- \$600** all lottery drawings & prizes end Saturday 11/1

Top twenty angler prizes **\$950-\$200 totals**

Top lady anglers **\$300, \$200, \$100**-by total fish entered

Smallest lake trout **\$250**-(2 prizes) Largest lake trout **\$500**

Youth anglers- (17-13) 1<sup>st</sup>- \$200, 2<sup>nd</sup>-\$150, 3<sup>rd</sup>-\$75 (12 & under)-1<sup>st</sup>-\$100, 2<sup>nd</sup>-\$75, 3<sup>rd</sup>-\$50

Weekend Prizes-4-\$100 & \$200 per weekend-9 weekends

Golden Angler (70 & older)-\$300 & \$200, \$100-determined by total fish entered

**Fish the entire lake-** Check in stations and times listed on [mackdays.com](http://mackdays.com) (subject to change).

Check the rules, prizes, bonuses, check in sites in emails or send an email requesting information

Email entries to [joe.santos@cskt.org](mailto:joe.santos@cskt.org) with name, mailing address, telephone #, m/f, and age.

Applications are free and available at:

Zimmers Tackle-Pablo

Walmart-Polson

Sportsman's Warehouse-Missoula

FWP-Missoula and Kalispell

Westland Seed-Ronan

Sportsman & Ski Haus-Kalispell

Bob Ward & Sons-Missoula

Snappys Sports Senter-Kalispell

CSKT NRD Offices-Polson

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Sanctioned by Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks





Photo credit Ted Ramirez Jr. [www.caribougear.com](http://www.caribougear.com)

## How To Choose A Meat Staging Spot When The Terrain Gives You Bad Options

By Ted Ramirez Jr

Caribou Gear Outdoor Equipment Co. [www.caribougear.com](http://www.caribougear.com)

**N**ot every elk dies in a good spot.

Sometimes the animal goes down on a steep sidehill, inside thick deadfall, near a wet drainage, or in a place where sunlight will reach the meat before you make it back.

That creates a decision hunters often have to make quickly:

Do you leave the meat where the breakdown happened, or move it to a better staging location before the first load goes out?

The right answer depends on terrain, temperature, time, distance, and how much work the move will require.

The goal is not finding a perfect spot.

The goal is choosing the best available option without creating a second problem.

### Do Not Assume the Kill Site Is the Best Staging Spot

The place where an elk goes down is rarely chosen for convenience.

It may be steep, exposed, muddy, tangled with deadfall, or difficult to relocate after dark.

Before leaving meat behind, take a few minutes to evaluate whether the kill site will still work several hours later.

#### Ask:

- Will the area stay shaded?
- Can air move around the bags?
- Is the ground wet or dirty?
- Can quarters be hung or elevated?

- Will the location be easy to find again?
- Does the route back become harder after dark?

Moving meat a short distance early can make the rest of the packout much easier.

### Choose the Least-Bad Option First

In difficult country, hunters often waste time looking for a staging location that does not exist.

You may not find a clean bench, steady shade, open timber, and easy access all in the same place.

Prioritize the problems that matter most.

#### Start with:

- getting meat out of direct sun
- keeping bags off dirt, mud, and debris
- creating separation between loads
- finding a location you can reach again safely
- avoiding unnecessary uphill moves

A workable location with good access is often better than a slightly cooler spot that adds a difficult climb to every trip.

### Watch How the Sun Will Move

A shaded location at noon may be fully exposed by late afternoon.

That matters during multi-trip packouts where meat may sit for several hours while loads move toward the truck.

Before committing to a staging spot, look at the surrounding terrain.

#### Pay attention to:

- tree cover
- slope direction
- open gaps in the canopy
- the position of the sun
- how conditions may change before you return

Do not build a staging plan around shade that will disappear during the next trip.

### Keep the Return Route in the Decision

A staging spot is only useful if you can reach it efficiently more than once.

That becomes more important when darkness, fatigue, and heavy loads start stacking together.

A good location should be:

- easy to mark on a GPS
- simple to identify with photo notes
- reachable from the safest exit route
- clear of unnecessary creek crossings
- away from the worst deadfall
- practical for repeated trips



Do not move meat into a better cooling spot if the route turns every return trip into a harder retrieval.

### **Wet Ground Changes the Setup**

Low areas, creek bottoms, and shaded drainages can look useful at first.

But wet ground creates its own problems.

Mud, standing water, debris, and poor circulation underneath the bags can make a staging location harder to manage than expected.

In wet country:

- use logs, rocks, or natural elevation points
- keep bags away from mud and vegetation
- avoid pressing quarters against wet surfaces
- leave space underneath and between bags
- check whether the area holds stagnant air

The goal is not just getting meat off the ground.

The goal is keeping the setup clean, reachable, and easier to manage when you return.

### **Do Not Let Deadfall Create a Trap**

Deadfall-heavy timber can provide shade.

It can also slow every trip, limit hanging options, and make the staging location difficult to find after dark.

A small open pocket near the edge of heavy timber is often more useful than a cooler location buried deep inside it.

Think about the full retrieval, not just the first hour.

If every return trip requires crawling through deadfall with a heavy pack, the location may not be worth it.

### **Mark the Staging Location Clearly**

Fatigue changes how familiar terrain looks.

A location that feels obvious during daylight can become difficult to relocate during the third trip back in.

Before leaving staged meat, mark:

- the exact GPS location
- the safest route in
- the safest route out
- nearby hazards
- the location of each load
- photo notes when useful

For a broader system for multi-trip retrievals, read “How to Stage Elk Meat Between Packout Trips” here: <https://www.caribougear.com/blogs/hunting-tips/how-to-stage-elk-meat-between-packout-trips>.

(continued on page 38)



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Photo credit Ted Ramirez Jr. Caribou Gear [www.caribougear.com](http://www.caribougear.com)

## How To Pack Elk Antlers And Meat On The Same Pack

By Ted Ramirez Jr  
Caribou Gear Outdoor Equipment Co. [www.caribougear.com](http://www.caribougear.com)

**T**o pack elk antlers and meat on the same frame, build the meat load first and keep it tight against the frame. Position the skull high, with the nose up and the tines angled down and back. Secure the antlers independently from the meat, keep bone and tines from pressing into the game bag, and test the load for side-to-side movement before leaving the kill site.

If the rack cannot clear your head, shoulders, brush, and sidehill terrain without shifting, separate the antlers from the meat load. Saving one trip is not worth an unstable pack or a torn game bag.

**Before loading:** Validate and attach the tag as required, and confirm the current rules for transporting the head, antlers, evidence of sex, and edible meat in the state and unit you are hunting.

### Decide Whether the Rack Belongs on the Meat Load

Antlers and meat can share a pack, but they should not automatically share every packout. The decision depends on the rack, the route, the pack, and the hunter carrying it.

A combined load is more reasonable when:

- the meat load remains within the hunter's safe carrying capacity
- the pack has a load shelf and compression system designed for irregular loads
- the skull can sit high and close to the frame
- the tines clear the hunter's head, arms, and legs
- the route does not force the rack repeatedly into overhead branches or tight deadfall
- the antlers can be secured without using the game bag as a restraint point

Separate the loads when the combined weight is excessive, the rack is wide enough to snag constantly, the route includes thick timber or technical sidehills, or the pack lacks enough compression points to stop the skull from rolling.

Carrying antlers with a front quarter may be efficient on one route and reckless on another. Build the load for the hardest part of the exit, not the easiest hundred yards near the kill site.

### Build the Meat Load First

The meat is the dense part of the load. It should sit close to the frame and stay narrow enough that it does not pull the hunter backward.

Keep the densest part of the load close to the body and tight against the frame. A load carried high and close generally creates less backward leverage than one that sags low and away from the back. The exact position still depends on the pack design, torso fit, and the shape of the meat load.

Start by placing the bagged meat on the load shelf or in the pack's manufacturer-approved load position. Compress it into a tall, stable shape. Boned-out meat should not hang as a wide ball below the frame, and a bone-in quarter should not be allowed to rotate against the pack.

Use a game bag sized for the load. The current Caribou Gear elk game bag systems separate meat-on-bone and boned-out applications so the load can be contained without forcing every cut into one oversized bag.

Finish the meat load before adding the rack. If the meat is unstable by itself, the antlers will only make the problem harder to control.

### Position the Skull High: Nose Up, Tines Down

For a mature bull, the skull should ride high on the pack with the nose pointed up and the tines angled down and back. This keeps the dense skull closer to the hunter and lowers the antlers instead of turning the rack into a tall lever above the frame.

Carrying the antlers upright can increase side-to-side sway, pull weight farther from the hunter, and create more contact with overhead branches. Angling the tines down and back reduces the height of the load and makes clearance easier to judge while moving through timber.

Seat the skull against the pack structure or the manufacturer's intended antler-carry area. Do not balance it on top of the meat bag and expect one strap to hold it in place.

### Keep Bone and Tines Off the Game Bag

A filled game bag is a meat barrier, not an antler attachment point. Sharp bone edges, burrs, and tines can abrade the fabric when the load moves through miles of brush and uneven terrain.

Use these rules:

- Do not route a tine through a game-bag handle, closure, or fabric panel.
- Do not cinch the skull directly into a soft bag of boned-out meat.



- Keep the skull and antler bases against the pack structure, not against the meat load.
- Use the pack maker's antler-carry method and dedicated compression straps.
- If a clean spacer or brace is needed, place it outside the game bag and confirm it cannot migrate into the meat load.
- Remove or pad sharp bone edges that could saw against straps or fabric.

Do not wrap warm meat in plastic or another nonbreathable layer to protect it from the antlers. Solve contact at the pack structure. Keep the meat in its breathable bag.

### Use Independent Compression Points

The meat and the antlers should not depend on the same single strap. Secure the meat to the frame first. Then secure the skull and rack with separate compression points.

A stable antler load normally needs control in three directions:

**Downward:** the skull cannot climb or bounce above the pack.

**Lateral:** the rack cannot roll from side to side.

**Rearward:** the skull cannot peel away from the frame and pull the hunter backward.

Large racks may need a brace between the pack and antlers to stop rocking. Follow the pack manufacturer's instructions and keep the brace above the hunter's lower body. A poorly placed brace or beam can strike the hunter's hips or legs with every downhill step.

### Run a Movement Test Before Leaving

A load that feels solid while sitting on the ground may shift as soon as the hunter bends, steps over a log, or traverses a sidehill.

Before walking away:

1. Push each antler beam laterally and watch the skull for rotation.
2. Lift and settle the pack to check whether the meat sags.
3. Put the pack on and look left, right, up, and down.
4. Squat, step up, and lean into a simulated sidehill.
5. Confirm the tines clear the back of the head, shoulders, arms, and legs.
6. Walk 50 to 100 yards, then stop and retighten every compression point.

Pay attention to sound. A repeated click, rub, or creak can reveal movement that is not obvious while standing still. Find the contact point before it wears through a strap or bag.

### Adjust the Route for the Width of the Rack

A wide elk rack changes how the hunter fits through terrain. The normal line between two trees may no longer work. Turning sideways can also rotate the load and pull the hunter off balance.

Choose a route with more clearance, even if it adds distance. In deadfall, step over one obstacle at a time and avoid ducking under branches that can trap a tine. On sidehills, keep the uphill side of the rack from catching brush and pulling the pack away from the slope. (continued on page 38)



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# How To Download State Layers And Offline Satellite/Topo Maps Before Your Next Hunt

By Brady Miller

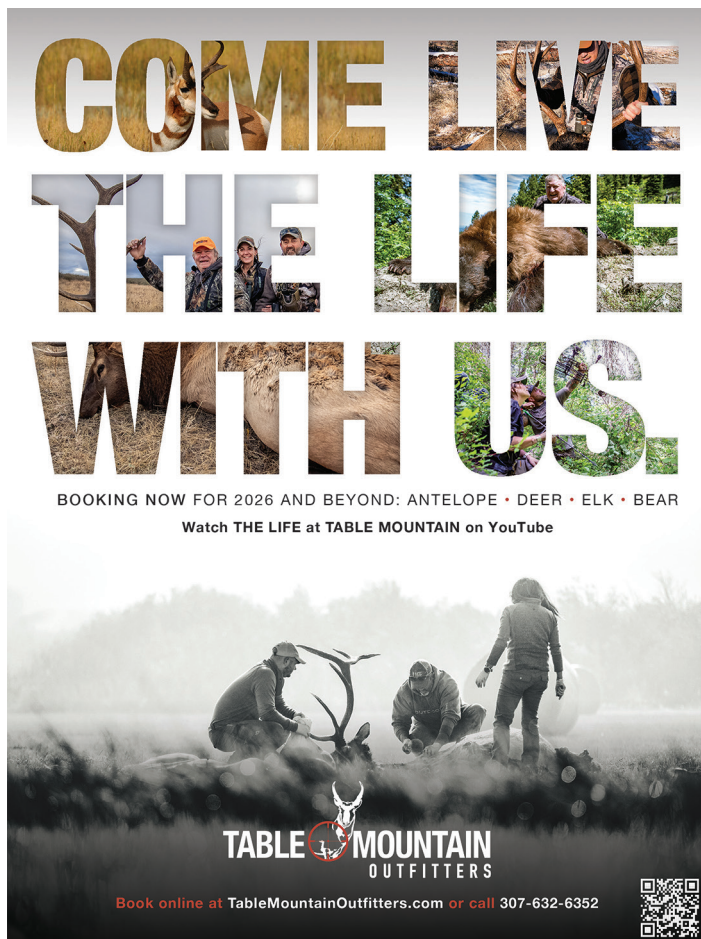
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**S**implified method for downloading layers and maps to ensure you are never “in the dark” on a hunt. When you’re preparing for your upcoming scouting trips or hunts, we’ve got you covered with a simplified way to download your state layers and satellite/topographical imagery on our GOHUNT Maps mobile app for offline use!

This download flow is so simple and a complete game-changer! Never again will you have to worry if you have state layers (public/private, unit boundaries, roads/trails, water, wildfires, etc.) and satellite/topographical imagery downloaded on your mobile application.

Remember that this entire maps process is a two-step download flow, but our system is absolutely foolproof. If you forgot to download your state layers and just downloaded satellite imagery to start, you’ll be prompted right there to download the state layers. This means you’ll always have the layers you need!

What I personally prefer to do is to download the entire state layer package first, and then download your satellite/topographic maps.



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The order in which you perform this doesn’t matter, but you need to download both if you want satellite/topo and state hunting layers while offline.

If you’re not a current Insider member, now is the perfect time to join and get access to the best maps for hunters, plus all of our Insider hunting research tools in the palm of your hand.

**Learn more about GOHUNT maps here**

## State Layer Offline Download Process

With GOHUNT Maps, you download all the layers for an entire state at once! Additionally, you no longer need to enable layers before downloading an offline satellite/topographical map. Both are huge wins, and having to turn on layers before you downloaded them was a huge pain point on other mapping applications!

When you download a state, you’ll instantly get offline access to all the public/private land, unit boundaries, wildfires, species distribution, roads/trails, water, terrain, etc. Every single layer is downloaded for the entire state.

This solves a HUGE pain point everyone dealt with in the past. No longer do you have to worry about these thoughts, “Did I forget to download the public/private layer?” or “Did I forget to download the roads/trails?”

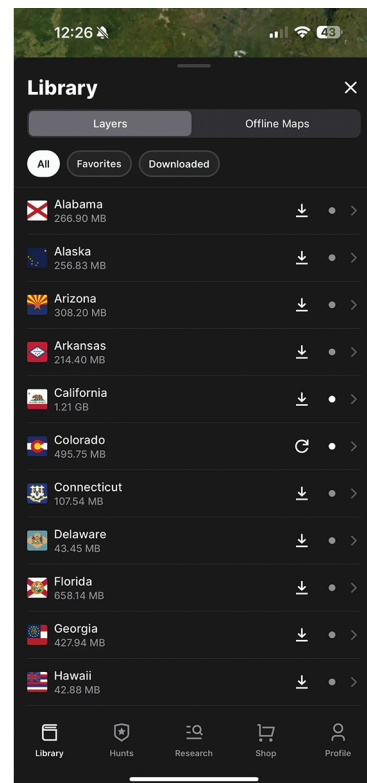
Now, you can download the entire state all at once! Additionally, every time we make an update to a state layer, you’ll be notified and able to update your state layer accordingly.

This is a very important piece of mind when you’re going on a hunt.

**This is a step-by-step method for how to download your state hunting layers on GOHUNT Maps**

**Step 1.** Open the Library tab located at the bottom of the screen in GOHUNT Maps.

**Step 2.** Once you have the Library tab open, you’ll see a list of all 50 states. Either click the downward-facing arrow icon next to the state you plan to hunt in to start downloading the state layers, or if you tap the state name, you can also download the state from the layers section by clicking the “Download All” button at the top of the drawer, just under the image.



The Library tab is separated by “Layers” showing all 50 states and “Offline Maps.” It’s this area where you can download state hunting layers.



**Step 3.** Before the download starts, you'll need to confirm that you want to download the entire state layer. Your download will then start, and you'll be able to track the download process.

It's just that simple! Now, you have all of the state layers downloaded for that ENTIRE state all at once. So, no matter where you travel in that state, you'll always have public/private land boundaries, roads/trails, unit boundaries, wildfire layers, water, wildfires, road density, etc.

### Updates to state hunting layers

Occasionally, we update our state layers. In the mobile app, if you have previously downloaded a state layer that has updates available, you'll see an arrow in a clockwise circle. To update that layer, tap on that arrow, then click on "Update," and your download will start.

### Extra information worth noting

Another part of this process that I feel speeds up access to your state layers is to "Favorite" a state. This means you won't have to scroll endlessly to find a state when you want to turn layers on or off, or adjust transparency.

To add a state to your Favorite tab, go to the Library, click on a state, and tap the Favorite button in the upper left corner. When the star is filled in, that means you have saved that state as a favorite. Now, the states you selected as a favorite will be located in the "Favorite" tab, which I use all the time as a super quick way to access layers in the state I'm hunting.

### Satellite/Topographical Map Offline Download Process

Another pain point we solved is saving satellite and topographic imagery for offline use for those times when you don't have cell service. When downloading a map for offline use, you can zoom in or zoom out to designate an area of interest to download.

The best part is that we only offer offline maps with high-resolution imagery. So you don't have to worry or get confused if you accidentally download a low-resolution map like on other mapping apps. Additionally, we enable you to download large areas at a time, simplifying the process.

Again, it's worth mentioning that all of our satellite maps are high-resolution. We don't believe people should view low-resolution maps when e-scouting or hunting, as that doesn't set them up for success when hunting.

As you zoom in or out during this download process, you'll also notice that the top of the screen will show you the estimated map file size. We allow offline maps to be downloaded that are 1GB or less. For larger maps, it is best to download them ahead of time using a Wi-Fi connection.

This process is very fast. For example, I downloaded a 869.38 MB map in 4 minutes and 37 seconds on WiFi.

(continued on page 34)

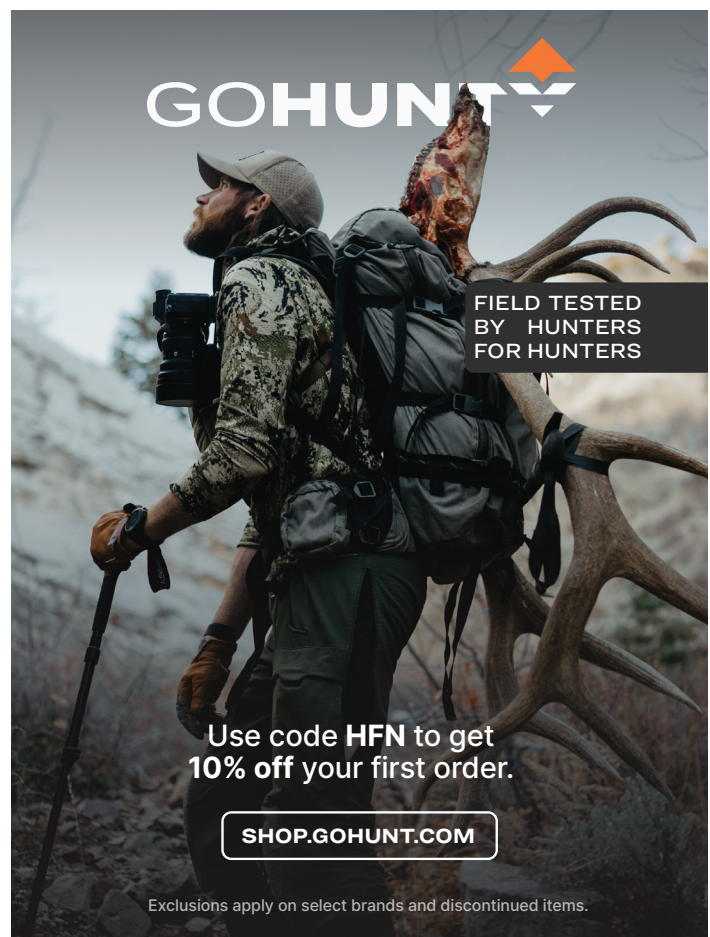


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Photo credit Idaho Department Of Fish And Game <https://idfg.idaho.gov>

## New Certified-Weight Record For Westslope Cutthroat Trout Shocks Fish Biologists

Idaho Department Of Fish And Game <https://idfg.idaho.gov>

When Luke Anderson headed to the St. Maries River in search of Westslope cutthroat trout, setting a new state record was probably the last thing on his mind. Or was it?

While Luke is officially Idaho's newest certified-weight state record holder, Westslope cutthroat trout in Idaho grow much larger than his 13.6-inch, sub-one-pound fish.

Idaho's current catch-and-release state record, caught in Lake Pend Oreille, measured 27 inches, while the certified-weight record just across the border in Washington stands at 4.71 pounds.

So why is Idaho's certified-weight record for one of its most iconic native trout species so small? The answer involves decades of fisheries management history, but also includes changes to the State Record Fish Program.

### Changes to the State Record Fish Program

Until recently, Idaho's State Record Fish Program only recognized a single category for cutthroat trout. For the longest time, the certified-weight record "cutthroat trout" was the 18.94-pound lunker caught at Bear Lake by Roger Grunig in 1970.

Starting in 2016, Fish and Game revamped the State Record Fish Program. Changes included the new category of catch-and-release state records, and also included new separate record categories for all four sub-species of cutthroat trout found in Idaho: Westslope, Bonneville, Yellowstone and Lahontan cutthroat trout.

The standing record from Bear Lake continues to hold the top spot for Bonneville cutthroat trout, but this opened opportunities for three new cutthroats — which have only been available since the 2016 changes...

### The Fish Management Legacy

Throughout much of their range, populations of cutthroat trout have seen significant declines since Western settlement began. This was mainly from a combination of factors that included overfishing, habitat loss, and stocking non-native trout.

Times were different then. Unlike the catch-and-release culture that dominates wild trout fishing today, harvest was widely accepted and often encouraged. Increased angling pressure along with expanding road networks provided easier access to trout streams. Many of those roads were built to support industries such as logging and mining, which had few regulations then. At the same time, non-native trout species such as brook, brown and rainbow trout were being widely stocked, establishing new sport fisheries, but also contributing to the declines of cutthroat trout.

By the 1960s, cutthroat trout populations were in trouble as fisheries biologists documented significant declines across the state. Activities like logging, mining, building roads, and pollution had significantly impacted trout habitat. Many of the laws that regulated these industries would not become established until the 1970s. The result was widespread habitat degradation that further contributed to Westslope cutthroat declines.

Fishing regulations have limited or prohibited keeping Westslope cutthroat trout in many places, making it difficult for anglers to legally harvest and weigh record-sized fish.

In the early 1970s, Idaho fisheries managers implemented some of the first restrictive fishing regulations designed to reduce trout harvest, including lower bag limits and catch-and-release across much of Idaho. Over the next 50 years, anglers embraced those conservation measures and wild cutthroat trout populations would begin to bounce back.

At the same time, new landmark environmental regulations like the Clean Water Act, National Environmental Policy Act, the Wilderness Act, and many others began to address some of the habitat impacts. More recently, fisheries managers and conservation partners invested heavily in habitat restoration projects.

### A New Certified-Weight Record

The results have been encouraging. Today, Westslope cutthroat trout occupy roughly 80% of their historic range within Idaho, and many populations have rebounded substantially. Harvesting cutthroat trout has been allowed in stocked lakes for years, but some additional waters are beginning to see limited harvest opportunities return. For example, regulations on the Selway River recently changed from catch-and-release only to allowing some limited harvest.

The story behind Idaho's smallest certified-weight trout record is really a story of conservation success. Understanding that history helps explain why many waters still see restrictive fishing rules on cutthroat trout but also leaves us with a greater appreciation for Idaho's state fish and the opportunities we have to enjoy it...



# Fall Fishing: Don't Let Great Fishing Months Slip Away

Idaho Department Of Fish And Game <https://idfg.idaho.gov>

**T**here are a lot of good reasons to fish when the leaves turn red and gold.

Yeah, we get it. You've been fishing for months, and hopefully, you're having a great time and catching some fish. Then fall comes along, the guns come out, and the rods get stashed. Considering hunting seasons tend to be relatively short compared to fishing season, it makes sense.

But if you're not a hunter, or you can squeeze a fishing trip into your fall, it's not only worth your time, it could be some of the best fishing of the year.

## Don't let the cooler air temps fool you

Martin Koenig, Idaho Fish and Game's Sportfishing Program Coordinator, points out that while we're grabbing our sweatshirts and jackets, there's a lag time before fish feel that cooler weather due to "thermal momentum," which essentially means it takes longer to cool water than air.

Also, cooler water will do many fish some good after the summer heat made them lethargic and slower to feed. Many bodies of water, whether still water or rivers and streams, are coming back into prime temperatures for fish to get active again.

Koenig also noted that fish behavior is heavily influenced by both water temperatures and the amount of daylight. As the water cools and days become shorter, fish know winter is coming and food will soon be in short supply, so they start feeding aggressively in preparation for the long winter.

## The stocking trucks return

Fish and Game stocks catchable trout year round, but hatchery managers shift their stocking efforts away from lower elevation ponds and reservoirs during summer months when temperatures are too hot for trout.

When that water cools, the trucks return, so a fall fishing trip might be as close as a neighborhood pond or local lake or reservoir. Many local ponds are back on the stocking rotation and offer a great fall opportunity close to home. Check Fish and Game's fish stocking webpage to get current information.

## Different seasons, different addresses

Before you grab your rod and run off to where you were smacking fish in the spring or summer, remember fish are migratory, particularly those in larger lakes and reservoirs. Cooling weather will push many bass and panfish offshore, and you'll need to adjust your tactics to where they are, not where they used to be.

"They're found in different places, and that's the biggest thing for anglers to remember," Koenig said.

(continued on the next page)



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# Fall Fishing: Don't Let Great Fishing Months Slip Away

(continued from page 11)

For bass and panfish, a quick rule of thumb is deeper and in more open water, not along those convenient shorelines, bays, coves, etc. This is where good electronics can pay big dividends.

But cooling water also means trout will come up more shallow, so bank anglers and trollers alike will see more success fishing closer to the surface than during the heat of summer.

Different locations also include fish in rivers. Many trout streams are low and clear, which means trout may be spooky and lurking in deeper, or more protected waters. Even though you're fishing, be a hunter. Be on the lookout for prime water and be stealthy so you don't spook fish before your first cast. If the fish aren't there, or not biting, move on to the next spot.

## Fishing during the rut? What?

Fall fishing is a great time to intercept aggressive fish as they approach spawning seasons. Species like brown trout, lake trout, and brook trout all spawn in the fall, which means some of the largest trout are likely to be the most aggressive and available than in other seasons.

"It's like hunting big bucks during the rut," Koenig said. "Fall may be your best chance to see a trophy brown trout, brook trout or aggressive steelhead."

A well-placed streamer or lure can provoke a savage strike followed by a battle with a trophy fish.

Another fall spawner is whitefish, which school up and seem to love colder temperatures. They can be found feeding in deep runs and pools of larger trout streams and provide some fun fishing action for fly anglers and on light spinning rods.

## And don't forget the king of fall fishing

Like stampeding horses, ocean-fresh steelhead are returning to Idaho, and the run peaks in the fall.

Steelhead runs have been below-average in recent years, but forecasts and dam counts are showing higher numbers of steelhead coming to Idaho, especially in the Clearwater River.

If enough fish return to Hells Canyon Dam, you can also expect some steelhead to be trucked to the Boise River, which typically starts in early November. Stay tuned to Fish and Game's website <https://idfg.idaho.gov> for details.



Photo courtesy IDFG <https://idfg.idaho.gov>

## Don't overlook panfish and bass

We know, the best part of fishing for those fish is fast action on a warm, sunny day when sunscreen is as important as having the right bait. But crappie, bluegill, perch and bass feed much later in the season than most people realize. In fact, most never stop feeding, and even largemouth bass are occasionally caught by ice anglers.

Don't plan your outing around that, but the point is, if you can locate fish in the fall and get a bait, lure or fly in front of them, you stand a reasonable chance of hooking a fish. And as any ice angler will confirm, cold water doesn't bother perch.

## And now for the fine print

Like all fishing, fall fishing can be unpredictable. While all the above is true, a serious cold snap, a big storm, or a blustery day are all possibilities and can put a damper on fishing. To be fair, that applies to spring as well, but in the fall it can feel much more abrupt when sunny and 70 turns to 30s and 40s and spitting snow and rain. But don't get discouraged by some gray weather. Some of the best fall fishing can happen on those rainy days, when fish feel safer in low, clear water.

Beware of low water, both in rivers and lakes, ponds and reservoirs. That lovely open water you fished in the spring may be much lower, which can make boat ramps problematic and present navigation hazards. Check conditions before you go.

Finally, despite our best efforts to stock fish and supply the best information about fishing for them, fish will be fish. Some days, everything seems to be working in your favor, but the fish just won't cooperate. And that's just fishing, which makes it fun and frustrating, but don't let fall fishing slip away before winter hits and you have to.... go ice fishing?

Sure, why not? But more on that later.



# FWP, Outdoor Partners Launch Protect The Hunt Raffle To Reward Responsible Hunters

MFWP <https://fwp.mt.gov>

**P**rotect the hunt. Respect access. Those are simple words to remember and put into practice. They are also the key concepts of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks' free Hunter-Landowner Stewardship Program. The program offers tips and reminders for hunting safely, respecting working lands and understanding landowner perspectives.

"Protecting the hunt and respecting access go hand in hand," said FWP Director Christy Clark. "This program and raffle reward hunters who take the time to learn about working lands and do their part to keep private land access open."

To participate in the program, go to FWP's Protect the Hunt webpage: <https://fwp.mt.gov/protectthehunt>. Participants watch short, videos that cover access etiquette, safe hunting and working-lands awareness, and then take a test.

Anyone can take the test, and participants aged 18 and over who pass can enter the Protect the Hunt Raffle for donated hunts and gear. The raffle is now open, and 11 winners will be selected at random in spring 2027.

Here is a list of all FWP's Protect the Hunt Partners for this year and their generous contributions to help maintain private land access:

- Maven | C.1 10x42 binoculars and a CRF.1 rangefinder
- onX | Five individual one-year Elite memberships
- MPG Ranch | elk hunt - The prize winner and a friend will get a chaperoned hunt on the MPG Ranch south of Missoula. The prize winner may harvest a management bull elk, and an antlerless elk or either-sex white-tailed deer on the ranch, located in hunting district 204. The friend can harvest an antlerless elk or an either-sex white-tailed deer.
- MOGA & Montana Outfitting Company | guided hunt. An exclusive guided hunt – winner's choice: elk, deer, antelope, upland bird or varmint.
- Montana Knife Company | MKC culinary set - orange and black
- Weatherby | Vanguard Obsidian rifle
- Capital Sports | hunting package
- Christensen | Ridgeline FFT carbon barrel rifle in 300 Winchester Magnum
- GPO | Centuri 3-18x44 riflescope
- Eylar | Rifle hard case
- Vortex | 10x50 Viper binoculars and Diamondback 2000 laser rangefinder
- Stone Glacier | Avail 2200 pack
- Lone Mountain | 75-quart bear certified cooler
- Kenetrek | Mountain Extreme Boots (men's or women's)
- Sitka | \$500 gift card
- Capital Sports | \$500 gift card...



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## FALL WALLEYE TRANSITIONS

Northland Fishing Tackle <https://www.northlandtackle.com>

The word “transitions” may be one of the more overused terms in fishing today. We hear about mud-to-sand or sand-to-rock transitions, seasonal transitions, and bait transitions; to the point where the word tends to lose its meaning. Yet, it’s highly appropriate when discussing fall walleyes, as there are few times of year where everything can change as quickly as it can in the fall. Which is why you’ll need to be flexible in your approach if you’re going to catch fish during this stage of the game.

“Transitions” to fall walleyes means fish that are behaving differently in terms of their location. Warm spells and resultant increased water temps push fish back to more summer areas, often deeper than 20 feet of water. Cold bouts, and especially prolonged cooler temperatures have the opposite effect they do in the summer. Walleyes push shallower, feed more aggressively, and should be welcomed by anglers, even if they need some bulkier clothes and more cold-weather stamina to handle it. Nothing kills a great fall bite like an “Indian Summer” that hits as water temps are slowly but surely otherwise dropping nicely.

If walleye locations change, it should be no surprise that the techniques to catch them should transition as well. After water temps are in the 50’s to stay, you can put away the leadcore gear you used all summer to target scattered deep fish, and look for fish to congregate. For the most part, cool weather concentrates fish, and often does it shallow where walleyes like to feed heavily. This is especially true with prolonged wind events that stack fish in shallow, predictable locations. Cool, windy days in the fall can see the biggest fish in any water body actively feeding during daylight conditions.

That’s all well and good, but rarely in the fall is any one water body locked into a specific depth and individual pattern that works well for walleyes most of the time. In reality, fish move at back and forth, with these depth migrations being gradual over time, with all kinds of smaller movements throughout the days

and weeks of fall. They relate to water temperatures, light conditions, and major weather events. All of which sums up the truest sense of the term “fall transition,” meaning that walleyes in the fall are ALWAYS in flux.

Knowing that, then we have the challenge of determining details in targeting them. First and foremost, start shallow, and start aggressive. Crankbaits, both lipless and short-bodied shad diving baits, along with swimbaits, jig and plastic combinations, and even stickbaits are great choices for this type of fishing. Fish wind-driven points, rock piles, and ledges in as shallow as a few feet of water, and give it a good hour or more of your time. Make the fish prove to you that they’re not shallow before abandoning that bite, as when it’s on, it’s on in a big way.

Next, move to the first break, and let your electronics be your guide. Often, especially in clear bodies of water, fall transition fish will move below the edge of the first pronounced drop-off from shore during the day, still feeding occasionally, while waiting to push to nearby shallows for a night-time feeding session. These fish may require a bit more attention and subtlety, and large, live minnows are a great presentation for them. Free-swim a big chub behind ample weight on a larger than average rigging hook, and wait for the thump-thump of the minnow to be interrupted by a “smash.” Pay the fish ample line and give it some time to get the bait in his mouth before setting the hook, and you’ll be surprised how well fall walleyes are into big minnows. With some patience, many minnows lost, and some practice, you’ll also be wondering how even eater-sized walleyes can eat these extremely large minnows.

If live-bait isn’t your game, it’s a great time to try Puppet Minnows on these intermediate-depth fish. You’ve got the combination of concentrated, aggressive fish, along with a bit of distance between you and the fish, such that Puppet Minnows really have the space to dive, dart, swing, and work their magic. I know more than a few anglers that fish this bite from 60 degree water temps all the way until lake ice-up.

Finally, if fall walleye locations are confounding you, and you haven’t found anything at shallow or intermediary depths, consider going back to what worked in the summer. This could be live bait rigging deep structure, or even pulling leadcore. A few years ago, I did really well pulling leadcore, at night, in 25 feet of water in October. The fish shouldn’t have been there, especially then, but they were and they ate. It could be due to warmer than average weather preceding your visit to the lake, exceptionally clear water, or a number of other factors including turnover, but know that you’ve always got the patterns from the previous weeks to fall back on.

Stay mobile, be flexible with your baits, and fish the fall walleye transition in order from shallow to the depths. Let the fish decide what they want and where they want it, then realize that each fall day can act like a new season altogether as you repeat the process with success.



# Elusive Catch: Angler Snags Large Paddlefish That Was At Large For 22 Years

(continued from page 2)

At minimum, Backes estimates ND7570 at 40-42 years old. He explained that female paddlefish do not make their first spawning migration out of North Dakota's Sakakawea Reservoir until reaching age 18-20, and the fish was at large for 22 years. Females making their first spawning run vary in size but are rarely less than 45-50 pounds.

"This fish was 90 pounds when tagged, so I'm speculating another 10-20 years beyond the first year of being sexually mature," Backes said. "This puts her at a reasonable lower-end age estimate of 52-62 years."

Swisse had no idea the fish was potentially that old, but it didn't take long to confirm that she was big.

"When we got to Intake, I backed up to the scale and popped open the tailgate, and the biologist said 'wow' right away, so then I knew," he said.

Swisse is a diehard paddlefish angler, jokingly labeling himself a "regional expert."

"I've been paddlefishing since I was, like, 17," he said. "Before Covid I caught one every single year."

He missed one season due to Covid, and the following year he didn't harvest a fish.

"When I was a kid, I fell in love with paddlefishing, more for meeting people, and the camaraderie and camping and stuff," he said.

Swisse recalls one summer in particular when Intake's campground drew thousands of people, including Russian visitors, and live music filled the air.

"That was one of the best memories of my life," he said.

Paddlefish used to congregate just below Intake Diversion Dam, which made it difficult for them to get upriver and drew lots of anglers, but completion of a bypass channel in 2022 helped to greatly disperse fish.

"You used be able to track the schools [of paddlefish], but when they put in the bypass channel at Intake, that changed everything," he said. That didn't change Swisse's love of paddlefishing, but he has seen the number of anglers in Montana drop.

"It's heart-breaking to see the loss of interest in the sport, and you don't see the quota met anymore like in North Dakota," he said...

Swisse is very appreciative of the opportunity to paddle-fish, and of the people who make it possible.



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Nexus Outdoors <https://nexus-outdoors.com> and Traditions Media <https://traditionsmedia.com>

## First Ducks In, First Ducks Down

Hardcore Waterfowl <https://www.hardcorewaterfowl.com>  
Nexus Outdoors <https://nexus-outdoors.com>  
Traditions Media <https://traditionsmedia.com>

Every summer, blue-winged and green-winged teal head north to breed across the prairie potholes and boreal wetlands of the U.S. and Canada. Come fall, they turn around and beat everybody else south.

Blue-wings go first, and they don't mess around about it. Most years they're clearing out before other ducks have even started packing. Green-wings aren't far behind, either, working the same flyways as the season rolls on.

Which means, pretty much everywhere in the country, teal are the first ducks you're going to see when the season opens.

That kind of head start doesn't mean they're easy. Teal fly small and fast in tight, erratic flocks that can hit 60 miles an hour, and their eyesight keeps pace with their wings — sharp enough to pick apart a spread from way up and flare off anything that doesn't look right.

A decoy that looks "good enough" from a distance usually gets exposed the second a flock commits. And once they're close enough to work, you don't get a second shot at making a first impression.

"Nobody's going to fool a green-wing that's been hunted 40 times better than our decoys," said Steve Allie, Marketing Director for Hardcore. "But that's not the duck that keeps you up at night. It's the ones seeing decoys for the first time all year, moving fast, with eyes that don't miss much. That's where realism actually wins or loses hunts, and it's where our decoys separate from everything else on the market."

### Blue-Wings First: Built for the Early Push

Since blue-wings are almost always first through, Hardcore's Rugged Series Blue-Winged Teal Decoys are working before most other species are even in the conversation.

The six-pack breaks down into three Active Drakes, two Surface Feeder Hens, and one Resting Hen. That's not a random assortment, either, it's how small groups of teal actually sit on the water, some feeding, some resting, one bird up and alert. Six identical decoys in the same pose just doesn't read the same way from altitude.

Size matters here too. Each decoy comes in around 11 inches long, true to scale for the smallest dabbling duck in North America. Get that wrong and a passing teal notices just as fast as it would a bad paint job.

### Then the Green-Wings Take Over

Green-wings pick up where the blue-wing push tapers off, and Hardcore's Rugged Series Green-Winged Teal Floater Decoys hang around longer with hunters, carrying them well into the regular season across the southern half of the country.

Same six-pack variety here: two Resting Drakes, one Active Drake, two Resting Hens, one Surface Feeder Hen. The paint and featherwork are built specifically around green-wing markings — that signature green eye patch, the finer vermiculation on the flanks — not a blue-wing decoy repainted and called something new.

### One Piece, Built to Take a Beating

Both packs share the same backbone running through the whole Rugged Series line: FowlFlex™ Technology.

It's one-piece construction, so there's no head-and-body seam to snap after getting tossed in a bag, stepped on in the blind, or baked in a truck bed between hunts. Cheap decoys fail at that neck joint first. FowlFlex just doesn't have one to fail.

The material flexes instead of cracking under impact — drop it, it bounces. And the finish shrugs off UV and season after season of handling.



RUGGED SERIES BLUE-WINGED TEAL



### **Movement That Sells the Illusion**

A perfect paint job sitting dead-still on the water still reads as fake. Movement is what makes it look alive, and that's the WhaleTail™ Keel's whole job.

It's shaped to catch even the faintest current or breath of wind and turn that into natural rocking and swimming motion — the kind a live teal makes while feeding, not the exaggerated bob of a decoy that's just unstable. Same keel also helps the decoy self-right after a hard cast or a gust flips the spread, so you're spending less time wading out to fix things and more time watching the sky.

### **Detail That Holds Up From Above**

Realism at teal range comes down to the details most competitors skip. Hardcore paints these knowing the birds are just as likely to be looking straight down as looking in from the side, which is a perspective a lot of decoy paint jobs never account for.

The featherwork goes beyond color into texture too, with molded definition that still reads right in the low light most teal hunting happens in.

"We didn't want hunters choosing between durability and realism," Allie said. "FowlFlex and WhaleTail let us deliver both, whether it's the first teal of September or the last ones still working through in November."

### **One Last Look**

Teal don't give second chances. The Rugged Series Blue-Winged and Green-Winged Teal Decoys are built to earn that first look — and the second, third, and fortieth after it. Whether you're a guide putting a

spread in front of clients or a hunter setting decoys out for the first hunt of the year, Hardcore's betting the birds will do the convincing.

### **Rugged Series Blue-Winged Teal Decoys FEATURES:**

- Detailed paint and featherwork built for overhead visibility
- WhaleTail™ Keel for natural rocking/swimming motion and spread self-righting
- One-piece FowlFlex™ construction — no head-and-body seam to snap or crack
- True-to-scale sizing at roughly 11 inches, matching the smallest dabbling duck in North America
- Six-pack: three Active Drakes, two Surface Feeder Hens, one Resting Hen

**MSRP: \$69.99**

### **Rugged Series Green-Winged Teal Floater Decoys FEATURES:**

- Detailed paint and featherwork built for overhead visibility
- WhaleTail™ Keel for natural rocking/swimming motion and spread self-righting
- One-piece FowlFlex™ construction — no head-and-body seam to snap or crack
- Paint and feather detail tuned specifically to green-wing markings, including the signature green eye patch
- Six-pack: two Resting Drakes, one Active Drake, two Resting Hens, one Surface Feeder Hen

**MSRP: \$69.99**

Shop online at <https://www.hardcorewaterfowl.com>.

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Photo credit Jake Horton courtesy GOHUNT.com

## Why You Should Arrive Early For Rifle Season

By Jake Horton

Originally published at **GOHUNT**  GOHUNT.com

Rifle hunting out West is one of those annual treks and adventures that so many people, including yourself, may take on year after year. You do your research, purchase your tag and get your days off from work. In order to maximize your hunting days, you get out into the mountains the night before your five- to ten-day rifle hunting season. You wake up on time, go to your preselected shooting nob... Yet year after year, you struggle to find consistent success. For some of you, you may even consistently be unsuccessful at finding and harvesting a buck, bull, cow, doe or another big game animal. You are in a good unit and even look at the camp down the road that has multiple animals on the ground and wonder what they are doing differently and how can you be consistently successful, too? The difference between a successful hunter and an unsuccessful hunter comes down to a lot of small things, including luck, but there is one thing that can curb success in your favor this year and in years to come. It does not matter if you are chasing bucks or bulls with a rifle this fall, you need to plan to get to camp at least two to three days before the season opens and here is why.

### Setup

The first reason you need to arrive multiple days before the season opens is to get your camp and gear set up in a non-stressful way. It doesn't matter if you are in a camper, wall tent, small tent or sleeping in your truck, arriving the night before a hunt is a stressful way to start. No matter how organized you are, it always seems as though you are scrambling to find your headlamp, your knife, your water and multiple other things while you are trying to set up your tent and get your stuff organized. The light of the day is fading or it is already dark because it always takes longer to get there than you expected. Though it is only 5 p.m., the night is cold and the wind is blowing. You have a plan for the morning, but you need to get camp set up and dinner made before you can lay down and try to catch some sleep. I understand exactly what you are going through because for many years that was me. I wanted to maximize my days

off by hunting all of them instead of thinking about the experience. Now, I have changed my tactics and arrive a few days before the opener, set up my camp during the morning hours and have time to spare where I can shoot my gun, organize my pack, crack open a cold one and heat up that last home-cooked meal my wife made me take along on the journey. Having time to set up in a non-stressful way starts off the trip in a good way that transcends throughout the entire hunt. The best part is that if I forgot something like batteries or game bags, I can run into town and get it without wasting any of my hunting days.

### Camaraderie

The second reason you need to arrive multiple days before the season is for some camaraderie. Hopefully, you have a few hunting buddies in camp with you to make the experiences more memorable and the pack outs a little lighter. Hopefully, you also like these people and enjoy hanging out with them. Arriving a few days before the season opens allows you to have some moments that are not all business. Sharing some hunting intel, spots, stories and laughs is a great way to start your hunt. In a few days, the season will be open and you will be driven to harvest an animal so much that you will wear yourself out. Enjoy the days before the hunt when spirits are highest and everyone is excited about finding and harvesting the animals you are chasing.

### Find the Animals

The final and most important reason to arrive early is to find the animals before the season opens. It does not matter how good of an e-scouter you are, what happened last year or where you remember seeing animals, you need to understand that this year will be different. This is why you need to arrive multiple days before season to scout, glass and find a shooter buck or bull and have a plan in place to get after him on opening day. You can bet that other hunters are going to be out on an opening day and if you are the one that has an animal patterned you can also bet that you will be the one who gets the first shot. By arriving before the season starts and hiking out to possible spots at first and last light, you can find out if the area is good or bad and make an alternate plan. Nothing hurts your high hopes and spirits more than an opening day of the season with no animal sightings. Spend a few days before season to scout and find animals and you will be in a great position opening day.

Though arriving a few days before season may lead to fewer actual hunting days it will be well worth it in the end. Setting up camp, getting your gear around and getting some time to hang out with some buddies is just part of the appeal to being there early. The biggest reason I will be heading to rifle season a few days early this year — and you should too — is to find the deer or elk before the season opens. This gives me the best chance to be successful on the season opener, before hunting pressure messes with the animals and drives them down onto private land or out of the basin I am hunting. This hunting season, try to plan on getting out to camp early and find consistent success on the season opener.



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# GEAR UP FOR YOUR HUNT

## RIFLESCOPES - RED DOTS - BINOCULARS - RANGEFINDERS - SPOTTING



### DIAMONDBACK® RIFLESCOPE 3.5-10X50 DEAD-HOLD® BDC (MOA) RETICLE | 1INCH TUBE

With a long legacy of proven grit, Diamondback® is a true workhorse, delivering hard-working reliability in trusted lineup of models. Excellent low-light capability. Brilliant contrast and sharpness that serves up impressive images. Renowned for toughness and accuracy, it's built with durable construction and a lightweight design, giving hunters the confidence to push further and succeed in any terrain. Simple to use and rugged enough for any hunt

#### FEATURE TECH

##### XD™ OPTICAL SYSTEM

Premium optical system delivers impressive resolution, edge-to-edge sharpness, greatly reduces chromatic aberration, and guarantees bright, high-contrast images.

##### FULLY MULTI-COATED LENSES

Anti-reflective coatings on all air-to-glass surfaces provide increased light transmission for greater clarity and low-light performance.

##### ARGON GAS PURGED

Gas purged and O-ring sealed for superior fogproof and waterproof performance in the most extreme conditions.

##### FAST-FOCUS EYEPIECE

Allows for quick and easy reticle focusing.

##### AIRCRAFT GRADE ALUMINUM

Constructed from a solid block of aircraft-grade aluminum for strength and rigidity.

##### LOW-GLARE MATTE BLACK ANODIZE

Corrosion and wear resistant anodization provides low-glare matte surface and helps camouflage the shooter's position.

##### WATERPROOF

Designed to withstand harsh weather conditions.

##### FOGPROOF

Designed to withstand a wide range of temperatures.

##### SHOCKPROOF

Designed to withstand the highest levels of recoil and impact.

**MSRP:** \$429.99



### VIPER® HD RIFLESCOPE 5-25X50 VMR-3 (MOA) RETICLE | 30MM TUBE

When success rides on the perfect shot, rely on the exceptional versatility and optical performance of Viper® HD. From predators to big game, river bottoms to the Rockies, there's a field-proven configuration for every hunting application. Ultra-rugged. Remarkably adaptable. Each member of the Viper® HD family delivers outstanding image clarity, resolution, and sharpness to ensure your target comes into view with sharp detail. Viper® HD also boasts enhanced features for unmatched accuracy at extended ranges while also excelling in the low light of dawn and dusk when game is most active.

#### FEATURE TECH

##### HD OPTICAL SYSTEM

Optimized with select glass elements to deliver exceptional resolution, cut chromatic aberration, and provide outstanding color fidelity, edge-to-edge sharpness, and light transmission.

##### REVSTOP® ZERO SYSTEM

Patented streamlined design offers an easy to set, reliable return to zero after turret adjustments.

##### FULLY MULTI-COATED LENSES

Anti-reflective coatings on all air-to-glass surfaces provide increased light transmission for greater clarity and low-light performance.

##### EXPOSED LOCKING ELEVATION TURRET

Integrated locking mechanism prevents accidental adjustment. Elevation turret provides fast, accurate, easily read elevation adjustments.

##### ILLUMINATED RETICLE

Provides precise aiming under low-light conditions.

##### SINGLE-PIECE TUBE

Maximizes alignment for improved accuracy and optimum visual performance, as well as ensures strength and waterproofness.

##### ARGON GAS PURGED

Gas purged and O-ring sealed for superior fogproof and waterproof performance in the most extreme conditions.

##### FAST-FOCUS EYEPIECE

Allows for quick and easy reticle focusing.

##### AIRCRAFT GRADE ALUMINUM

Constructed from a solid block of aircraft-grade aluminum for strength and rigidity.

##### ARMORTEK®

Ultra-hard exterior lens coatings defend against scratches, oil, and dirt.

##### LOW-GLARE MATTE BLACK ANODIZE

Corrosion and wear resistant anodization provides low-glare matte surface and helps camouflage the shooter's position.

##### WATERPROOF

Designed to withstand harsh weather conditions.

##### FOGPROOF

Designed to withstand a wide range of temperatures.

##### SHOCKPROOF

Designed to withstand the highest levels of recoil and impact.

**MSRP:** \$1,299.99

Also available in VMR-3 MRAD



# WITH VORTEX OPTICS

## SCOPES - TRIPODS - MONOCULARS - THERMAL - WEATHER DEVICES - APPAREL

### VENOM® BUNDLE AR-BDC3 (MOA) RETICLE | 3 MOA DOT



Get on target faster with the Venom® Bundle. Pre-assembled and ready to zero, it's a complete tactical setup with workhorse reliability and accuracy that won't let you down.

#### FEATURE TECH VENOM® 1-6X24 XD™ OPTICAL SYSTEM

Premium optical system delivers impressive resolution, edge-to-edge sharpness, greatly reduces chromatic aberration, and guarantees bright, high-contrast images.

#### FULLY MULTI-COATED LENSES

Anti-reflective coatings on all air-to-glass surfaces provide increased light transmission for greater clarity and low-light performance.

#### ILLUMINATED RETICLE

Provides precise aiming under low-light conditions.

#### SINGLE-PIECE TUBE

Maximizes alignment for improved accuracy and optimum visual performance, as well as ensures strength and waterproofness.

#### FAST-FOCUS EYEPIECE

Allows for quick and easy reticle focusing.

#### THROW LEVER

The included throw lever can be installed for quick and easy magnification adjustments.

#### AIRCRAFT GRADE ALUMINUM

Constructed from a solid block of aircraft-grade aluminum for strength and rigidity.

#### ARMORTEK®

Ultra-hard, scratch-resistant coating protects exterior lenses from scratches, oil and dirt.

#### LOW GLARE MATTE BLACK ANODIZE

Corrosion and wear resistant anodization provides low-glare matte surface and helps camouflage the shooter's position.

#### WATERPROOF

Designed to withstand harsh weather conditions.

#### SHOCKPROOF

Designed to withstand the highest levels of recoil and impact.

#### FOGPROOF

Designed to withstand a wide range of temperatures.

#### VENOM® ENCLOSED MICRO RED DOT ENCLOSED ALUMINUM HOUSING

Durable 6061 aluminum enclosed housing protects against debris and moisture.

#### LARGE VIEWING WINDOW

For fast target acquisition and large field of view.

#### ASPHERICAL LENS

For distortion-free sight picture and truer colors.

#### MOTION ACTIVATION WITH 10 MINUTE

#### AUTO-SHUTOFF

Automatically activates with motion while 10 minute auto-shutoff saves battery life.

#### TOP BUTTONS

For quick adjustments.

#### 10 DAYLIGHT BRIGHT BRIGHTNESS SETTINGS

Daylight bright, illuminated center dot aids in faster center-point acquisition in bright daylight conditions.

#### NIGHT-VISION COMPATIBILITY

The lowest 2 settings are night-vision compatible.

#### PARALLAX FREE

All red dot and holographic sights will exhibit some small amount of parallax. Matching current industry practice, this small amount would be considered "parallax free" and will make a negligible difference in performance.

#### UNLIMITED EYE RELIEF

Non-critical eye relief for rapid target acquisition.

#### LOW-GLARE MATTE BLACK ANODIZED

Corrosion and wear resistant anodization provides low-glare matte surface and helps camouflage the shooter's position.

#### SIDE LOAD BATTERY

Easy battery changes without having to rezero your optic.

#### WATERPROOF

Designed to withstand harsh weather conditions.

#### SHOCKPROOF

Designed to withstand the highest levels of recoil and impact.

#### FOGPROOF

Designed to withstand a wide range of temperatures.

#### SPORT CANTILEVER MOUNT

#### 2" OFFSET

TYPE 2 LOW-GLARE MATTE BLACK ANODIZE  
LASER ENGRAVED TORQUE SPECIFICATIONS  
6061 ALUMINUM

#### SPORT 12 O'CLOCK RED DOT MOUNT

COMPATIBLE WITH DELTAPOINT® PRO FOOTPRINTS

TYPE 2 LOW-GLARE MATTE BLACK ANODIZE

MSRP: \$749.99

Turn the page to see more Vortex Optics recommended gear, including binoculars, rangefinders, spotting scopes and more.





# GEAR UP FOR YOUR HUNT WITH VORTEX OPTICS

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## RAZOR® HD 10X50 ROOF PRISM BINOCULAR



### FEATURE TECH HD OPTICAL SYSTEM

Optimized with select glass elements to deliver exceptional resolution, cut chromatic aberration and provide outstanding color fidelity, edge-to-edge sharpness, and light transmission.

### XR™ PLUS LENS COATINGS

Ultimate anti-reflective coatings on all air-to-glass surfaces provide maximum light transmission for peak clarity and the pinnacle of low-light performance.

### MAGNESIUM CHASSIS

Decreases weight and increases strength.

### TRUE OPEN HINGE

Superior ergonomics decreasing total weight and bulk.

### ADJUSTABLE EYECUPS

Twist up and down for comfortable viewing with or without eyeglasses.

### CENTER FOCUS WHEEL

Adjusts the focus of both binocular barrels at the same time.

### LOCKING DIOPTER

Adjusts for differences in a user's eyes. Located on right eyepiece.

### PLASMA TECH

Cutting edge coating application process provides unparalleled coating durability and performance.

### PHASE CORRECTION

Coating on roof prism models enhances resolution and contrast.

### APO (APOCHROMATIC)

Index-matched lenses correct color across the entire visual spectrum.

### ARMORTEK®

Ultra-hard, scratch-resistant coating protects exterior lenses from scratches, oil and dirt.

### RUBBER ARMOR

Provides a secure, non-slip grip, and durable external protection.

### ARGON-GAS PURGED

Gas purged and O-ring sealed for fogproof and waterproof performance in all conditions.

### WATERPROOF

Designed to withstand harsh weather conditions.

### FOGPROOF

Designed to withstand a wide range of temperatures.

### SHOCKPROOF

Designed to withstand the highest levels of impact.

### TRIPOD ADAPTABLE

Compatible with a tripod adapter, allowing use on a tripod or car window mount.

**MSRP:** \$1,579.99

## VIPER® HD 10X50 BINOCULAR



### FEATURE TECH HD OPTICAL SYSTEM

Optimized with select glass elements to deliver exceptional resolution, cut chromatic aberration and provide outstanding color fidelity, edge-to-edge sharpness, and light transmission.

### XR™ PLUS LENS COATINGS

Ultimate anti-reflective coatings on all air-to-glass surfaces provide maximum light transmission for peak clarity and the pinnacle of low-light performance.

### DIELECTRIC PRISM COATINGS

Multi-layer prism coatings provide bright, clear, color-accurate images.

### TRUE OPEN HINGE

Offers superior ergonomics while decreasing total weight and bulk.

### ADJUSTABLE EYECUPS

Twist up and down for comfortable viewing with or without eyeglasses.

### CENTER FOCUS WHEEL

Adjusts the focus of both binocular barrels at the same time.

### LOCKING DIOPTER

Adjusts for differences in a user's eyes.

### PHASE CORRECTION

Coating on roof prism models enhances resolution and contrast.

### ARMORTEK®

Ultra-hard, scratch-resistant coating protects exterior lenses from scratches, oil and dirt.

### RUBBER ARMOR

Provides a secure, non-slip grip, and durable external protection.

### ARGON-GAS PURGED

Gas purged and O-ring sealed for fogproof and waterproof performance in all conditions.

### WATERPROOF

Designed to withstand harsh weather conditions.

### FOGPROOF

Designed to withstand a wide range of temperatures.

### SHOCKPROOF

Designed to withstand the highest levels of impact.

### TRIPOD ADAPTABLE

Compatible with a tripod adapter, allowing use on a tripod or car window mount.

**MSRP:** \$809.99



# GEAR UP FOR YOUR HUNT WITH VORTEX OPTICS

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MONOCULARS · THERMAL · WEATHER DEVICES · APPAREL



## RAZOR® HD 4000 LASER RANGEFINDER



### FEATURE TECH RANGING MODES

**Horizontal Component Distance (HCD):** Displays the slope angle compensated distance to the target.

**Line of Sight (LOS):** Displays the actual line of sight range.

**Scan Feature:** Displays continuous distance readings while panning across a landscape.

### TARGET MODES

**Normal Mode:** The standard mode providing the target's range with the strongest range result. Recommended for most situations.

**First Mode:** Displays the closest distance when ranging. Ideal for ranging a smaller target in front of other larger or more reflective objects.

**Last Mode:** Displays the farthest distance when ranging. Ideal for ranging a specific target behind a group of objects like brush, trees, rocks, etc.

**Extended Laser Range (ELR) Mode:** Ideal for ranging targets at extreme distances. A slightly longer response time allows greatly for extended range distances. Best used on a tripod.

### HD OPTICAL SYSTEM

Optimized with select glass elements to deliver exceptional resolution, cut chromatic aberration, and provide outstanding color fidelity, edge-to-edge sharpness, and light transmission.

### XR™ PLUS LENS COATINGS

Ultimate anti-reflective coatings on all air-to-glass surfaces provide maximum light transmission for peak clarity and the pinnacle of low-light performance.

### DIELECTRIC PRISM COATINGS

Multi-layer prism coatings provide bright, clear, color-accurate images.

### ARMORTEK®

Ultra-hard, scratch-resistant coating protects exterior lenses from scratches, oil and dirt.

### EASY-TO-USE MENU

Intuitive, easy-to-use menus with illuminated display.

### DIOPTER

Adjusts for differences in a user's eyes.

### RUBBER ARMOR

Provides a secure, non-slip grip, and durable protection.

### MAGNESIUM ALLOY CHASSIS

Decreases weight and increases strength.

### UTILITY CLIP

Provides quick external access

**WATERPROOF, SHOCKPROOF, TRIPOD ADAPTABLE**

**MSRP: \$729.99**

## RANGER® HD 3000 10X42 LASER RANGEFINDING BINOCULAR



### FEATURE TECH RANGING MODES

**Horizontal Component Distance (HCD):** Displays the slope angle compensated distance to the target.

**Line of Sight (LOS):** Displays the actual line of sight range.

**SCAN Feature:** Displays continuous distance readings while panning across a landscape.

### TARGET MODES

**Normal Mode:** The standard mode providing the target's range with the strongest range result.

**First Mode:** Displays the closest distance when ranging. Ideal for ranging a smaller target in front of other larger or more reflective objects.

**Last Mode:** Displays the farthest distance when ranging. Ideal for ranging a specific target behind a group of objects like brush, trees, rocks, etc.

### HD OPTICAL SYSTEM

Optimized with select glass elements to deliver exceptional resolution, cut chromatic aberration and provide outstanding color fidelity, edge-to-edge sharpness and light transmission.

### RED OLED DISPLAY

Optimized for low light.

### FULLY MULTI-COATED LENSES

Anti-reflective coatings on all air-to-glass surfaces provide increased light transmission for greater clarity and low-light performance.

### NITROGEN GAS PURGED

Gas purged and O-ring sealed for fogproof and waterproof performance in all conditions.

### ARMORTEK®

Ultra-hard, scratch-resistant coating protects exterior lenses from scratches, oil and dirt.

### RUBBER ARMOR

Provides a secure, non-slip grip, and a durable external protection.

### WATERPROOF

Designed to withstand harsh weather conditions.

### FOGPROOF

Designed to withstand a wide range of temperatures.

### SHOCKPROOF

Designed to withstand the highest levels of impact.

### TRIPOD ADAPTABLE

Compatible with a tripod adapter, allowing use on a tripod or car window mount.

**MSRP: \$1,199.99**





# GEAR UP FOR YOUR HUNT WITH VORTEX OPTICS

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## RAZOR® HD 4000 GB BALLISTIC LASER RANGEFINDER



### FEATURE TECH RANGING MODES

**Horizontal Component Distance (HCD):** Displays the slope angle compensated distance to the target.

**Ballistics (BAL):** Displays the actual line of sight range and wind/drop solution.

**Scan Feature:** Displays continuous distance readings while panning across a landscape.

### TARGET MODES

**Normal Mode:** The standard mode providing the target's range with the strongest range result. Recommended for most situations.

**First Mode:** Displays the closest distance when ranging. Ideal for ranging a smaller target in front of other larger or more reflective objects.

**Last Mode:** Displays the farthest distance when ranging. Ideal for ranging a specific target behind a group of objects like brush, trees, rocks, etc.

**Extended Laser Range (ELR) Mode:** Ideal for ranging targets at extreme distances. A slightly longer response time allows greatly for extended range distances. Best used on a tripod.

### IN-DISPLAY WIND/DROP SOLUTIONS

Equipped with the accurate GeoBallistics® ballistics solver backed by a full up-to-date bullet database.

### CUSTOMIZE BALLISTICS PROFILES

Customize ballistics profiles via the GeoBallistics® App or use one of three preloaded profiles for popular cartridges.

### ON-BOARD ENVIRONMENTAL SENSORS

On-Board compass, humidity, barometric pressure, and exposed temperature sensors for fast acclimations.

### TWO WIND MODES

Features Full Cross Wind Mode and the Patented Wind Bearing Capture Mode.

### PAIRS WITH THIRD-PARTY DEVICES

Pairs with Kestrel® weather meter devices.

### EASY-TO-USE MENU

Intuitive, easy-to-use menus feature a simple, clean illuminated display.

### DIOPTER

Adjusts for differences in a user's eyes. Located on the eyepiece.

### WATERPROOF, SHOCKPROOF, TRIPOD ADAPTABLE

**MSRP: \$1,199.99**

## VIPER® HD 11-33X50 (STRAIGHT) SPOTTING SCOPE



### FEATURE TECH HD OPTICAL SYSTEM

Optimized with select glass elements to deliver exceptional resolution, cut chromatic aberration, and provide outstanding color fidelity, edge-to-edge sharpness, and light transmission.

### XR™ PLUS LENS COATINGS

Ultimate anti-reflective coatings on all air-to-glass surfaces provide maximum light transmission for peak clarity and the pinnacle of low-light performance.

### DIELECTRIC PRISM COATINGS

Multi-layer prism coatings provide bright, clear, color-accurate images.

### ARMORTEK®

Ultra-hard, scratch-resistant coating protects exterior lenses from scratches, oil and dirt.

### DUAL FOCUS

Fast focus dial allows for quick adjustments, while the fine focus dials in the fine details. This two step process allows users to see critical details while reducing eye fatigue.

### RUBBER ARMOR

Provides a secure, non-slip grip and durable external protection.

### ARGON-GAS PURGED

Gas purged and O-ring sealed for fogproof and waterproof performance in all conditions.

### WATERPROOF

Designed to withstand harsh weather conditions.

### FOGPROOF, SHOCKPROOF, TRIPOD ADAPTABLE

### ARCA-SWISS COMPATIBLE

Designed to fit the Arca-Swiss standard. Allows for a direct mount with other Arca-Swiss compatible products.

**MSRP: \$849.99**



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**Mark Boardman - Brand Experience Manager**  
Check him out on the Vortex Nation™ Podcast and Cartridge Talks.



NEVER MISS  
**THE TROPHY  
FOR THE TREES**



## RAZOR® HD SPOTTING SCOPES

Whether glassing for rams above the tree line or calling shots at the range, Razor® HD gives you the optical edge to spot the smallest details. Unmatched resolution, stunning HD clarity, and superior light transmission bring every growth ring, antler tine, and vapor trail into stunning focus. Meticulously constructed and built tough for extreme conditions, Razor® HD ensures you don't miss a single moment, whether on a once-in-a-lifetime hunt or in a high-pressure competition.

### Available in:

27-60X85 (ANGLED)  
27-60X85 (STRAIGHT)  
22-48X65 (STRAIGHT)  
22-48X65 (ANGLED)  
13-39X56 (ANGLED)  
13-39X56 (STRAIGHT)

### INCLUDED IN THE BOX

- Eyepiece Cap
- Objective Lens Cover
- Custom Fitted Neoprene Case



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# How To Protect A Hunting Rifle From Rain, Snow, Dust And Mud

By Ted Ramirez Jr  
Caribou Gear Outdoor Equipment Company  
[www.caribougear.com](http://www.caribougear.com)

**R**ain is only one of the things that can damage or contaminate a hunting rifle in the field.

Snow collects around the action and optic. Fine dust works into exposed controls. Mud splashes during ATV travel. Wet brush covers the rifle even when it is not raining. Condensation forms when cold equipment moves into a warm truck or tent.

Western hunters need a protection plan that covers the entire trip.

That includes major transport, daily field movement, weather exposure, inspection, drying, and storage.

The goal is not keeping a rifle sealed inside a heavy case all day.

The goal is reducing avoidable exposure without making the rifle difficult to access when it is needed.

**Protect the Entire Rifle, Not Just the Muzzle**  
Muzzle protection matters.

It is not the only part of the rifle exposed to field conditions.

Rain, snow, dust, mud, and brush can reach:

- the barrel
- the action
- the trigger guard
- the stock
- the optic
- the scope turrets
- the mounting hardware
- the sling and attachment points

A complete field-protection system should account for the scoped rifle as a whole.

Lens caps alone do not protect the action, stock, metal surfaces, or the outside of the optic.

**Rain Protection Starts Before the Storm**  
Waiting until the rifle is already soaked makes protection harder.

Cover the rifle during the parts of the hunt where exposure is predictable:

- travel between camp and glassing locations
- open truck-bed transport
- ATV movement
- horseback travel
- boat or raft travel
- wet hikes
- overnight camp storage

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Photo credit Ted Ramirez Jr. Caribou Gear [www.caribougear.com](http://www.caribougear.com)

A waterproof field cover creates a barrier before rain reaches the rifle and optic.

It should come off quickly once the hunter reaches an active position where immediate rifle access matters.

**Wet Brush Can Soak a Rifle Without Rain**  
Morning dew, rain-soaked timber, tall grass, and snow-covered branches can transfer a surprising amount of moisture.

A hunter may walk under clear skies and still arrive with a wet rifle.

**Wet-brush exposure is common during:**

- early-morning approaches
- timbered elk hunts
- alpine deer hunts
- coastal hunts
- late-season snow travel
- moves between glassing locations

A lightweight waterproof cover is often more practical in those conditions than carrying a padded or rigid rifle case through the field.

**Snow Creates More Than a Wet Barrel**  
Snow can collect around the scope, action, stock, sling, and exposed hardware.

It may melt as the rifle warms, creating moisture in areas that did not appear wet outside.

**During snowy hunts:**

- cover the rifle during travel when practical
- keep it out of loose snow at glassing stops
- avoid leaning it against snow-covered trees
- inspect the optic and action after exposure
- dry the rifle before extended storage
- dry the protective cover separately

Snow protection is not finished when visible snow is brushed away.

Melting and condensation still need to be managed.



## Dust Can Reach Places Rain Never Does

Fine Western dust is persistent.

It moves through open truck beds, ATV racks, side-by-side cabins, camp gear, and unpaved roads.

### Dust can settle around:

- the action
- scope controls
- mounting hardware
- sling connections
- stock adjustments
- exposed metal surfaces

A full rifle cover helps reduce exposure during dusty travel without requiring hunters to keep the rifle inside a full-size hard case at every stop.

After a long dusty drive, the rifle should still be inspected according to the firearm and optic manufacturers' instructions.

### Mud Protection Requires Secure Transport

A cover helps shield the rifle from mud splatter.

It does not replace secure transport.

During ATV, truck, boat, or horseback movement, hunters should confirm:

- the rifle is properly restrained
- the cover cannot shift off the rifle
- the optic does not strike the rack
- the muzzle and buttstock stay covered
- other cargo cannot move into the rifle
- straps remain secure during rough travel

Added cover straps may be useful during rough movement where additional hold is needed.

The firearm must always be transported safely and in accordance with applicable laws and equipment requirements.

### Condensation Is Easy to Miss

A cold rifle brought into a warm truck, cabin, or tent may begin collecting condensation.

That moisture can appear after the rifle is already inside.

Hunters should avoid assuming the rifle is dry simply because it was covered outside.

### After major temperature changes:

- inspect exposed metal surfaces
- check the optic
- look around the action and mounting hardware
- remove the cover when appropriate
- allow wet equipment to dry properly
- follow the manufacturers' maintenance instructions

A cover reduces direct exposure.

It cannot prevent every form of condensation created by rapid temperature changes.



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PRODUCT

### Hard Cases and Field Covers Solve Different Problems

A rigid hard case is the right tool when impact resistance and major transport are the priorities.

A waterproof field cover is the right tool when weather, dust, brush, mud, and daily portability are the main problems.

| Protection             | Best Use                                                | Primary Strength             |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Rigid hard case        | Major travel and high-impact transport                  | Rigid impact resistance      |
| Padded soft case       | Vehicle, range and general carrying                     | Padding with easier handling |
| Waterproof field cover | Rain, snow, mud, dust, brush and daily hunting movement | Compact weather protection   |

Many serious hunting systems use a rigid case for major transportation and a lightweight cover once daily field movement begins.

For a complete comparison, read Rifle Cover vs. Hard Case vs. Soft Case here: <https://www.caribougear.com/blogs/hunting-tips/rifle-cover-vs-hard-case-vs-soft-case>

### What to Look for in a Waterproof Rifle Cover

A field rifle cover should provide meaningful protection without becoming another bulky case.

#### Look for:

- waterproof construction
- coverage for the rifle and mounted optic
- reinforced muzzle and buttstock areas
- secure straps or closures
- adjustable fit
- fast removal
- compact storage
- compatibility with the rifle's length and setup

(continued on next page)



# How To Protect A Hunting Rifle From Rain, Snow, Dust And Mud

(continued from page 27)

The best cover is one that fits the rifle correctly and remains easy enough to use throughout the hunt.

Protection that stays in camp does not protect the rifle.

## How the Caribou Gear Waterproof Rifle Cover Is Built

The Caribou Gear Waterproof Rifle Cover is designed as a lightweight field-protection layer for scoped hunting rifles.

### Its field-focused features include:

- a waterproof TPU inner coating
- a durable water-repellent exterior finish
- reinforced Cordura ballistic fabric at the stock and barrel
- an adjustable internal pull cord
- a quick-removal barrel pull tab
- two hook-and-loop accessory straps
- a built-in storage pocket
- fit for scoped hunting rifles within the listed size range

Hunters preparing for wet, snowy, muddy, dusty, or brush-heavy conditions can review the Caribou Gear Waterproof Rifle Cover here: <https://www.caribougear.com/products/rifle-cover>

Additional options and accessories are available in the Waterproof Rifle Covers Collection here: <https://www.caribougear.com/collections/rifle-covers>.

## Independent Field Use Adds Useful Context

Field protection should be judged under real weather rather than only by specifications.

Hunt Alaska Magazine included the Caribou Gear rifle cover in its 2026 hunting-accessory coverage after using it during an alpine Sitka blacktail hunt.

The field report describes using the cover to help protect a scoped rifle from dew and rain at camp.

Read the independent field-use coverage from Hunt Alaska Magazine here: <https://www.huntalaskamagazine.com/hunting-accessories/>.

## A Rifle Cover Does Not Replace Maintenance

No cover removes the need to inspect and maintain the rifle.

After exposure to rain, snow, dust, mud, brush, or condensation, hunters should follow the firearm and optic manufacturers' instructions.

## Check:

- metal surfaces
- the barrel and muzzle area
- the action
- the optic and turrets
- scope mounts
- sling connections
- the cover itself

Allow the rifle and cover to dry properly before long-term storage.

Do not leave a damp rifle sealed inside a wet cover.

## Build Protection Into Every Stage of the Hunt

Protect the rifle during major travel.

Cover it during wet, dusty, snowy, or muddy field movement.

Secure it during rough transport.

Inspect it after exposure.

Dry it before storage.

A good protection plan is not one product or one action.

It is a series of simple decisions that reduces avoidable exposure from the drive in through the final trip home.

## Hunting Rifle Protection FAQ

### How should hunters protect a rifle from rain?

Use a waterproof cover during exposed travel, keep the rifle securely transported, inspect it after exposure, and dry it according to the manufacturer's instructions.

### Does a rifle cover protect against dust?

A full rifle cover can help reduce dust exposure around the rifle, optic, action, and stock during unpaved-road and ATV travel.

### Can a rifle stay inside a wet waterproof cover?

The rifle and cover should be removed, inspected, and dried properly after wet use. A waterproof cover reduces exposure but should not be used for long-term damp storage.

### Should hunters use both a hard case and waterproof cover?

A hard case can provide rigid protection during major transport, while a lightweight waterproof cover can protect against weather, dust, mud, and brush during daily field movement.

### Does a rifle cover protect the scope?

A full-length cover designed for scoped rifles helps protect the optic as well as the rifle from rain, snow, dust, mud, brush, and transport contact.

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Brother Bill and Tom showing their hunting flexibility; here it's with Grandpa's old .45 caliber muzzleloader. Photos credit Tom Cooper.

## Big Buck, Good Luck

By Tom Cooper

Our early morning hike (brother Bill and me) toward Doherty Mountain was a bit on the chilly side, however, we knew climbing to the ridgetop usually warmed us considerably. As we rounded a small knob, brother Bill and I could see at least 400 yards further up the reasonably level ridgeline. We could also see a single deer standing in the sagebrush, probably 350 yards away. With binoculars we decided it was a nice buck, but during previous seasons, we had seen 2-3 “really nice” big bucks. However, there were a couple issues we were not prepared for when hunting big bucks in wide open, sagebrush-covered hills and valleys.

### Clarity and Distance

First, both of us carried 8-power binoculars and we couldn't see the deer clearly initially, because he was standing in shoulder high sagebrush with a background of more sage. Because of the sage landscape, we also struggled with determining distance, eventually settling on a compromise of “at least”, 300 yards.

The second issue was the lack of any kind of portable shooting apparatus (to stabilize a rifle for a shot).

Because of the distance and lack of rifle stability, neither of us really wanted to try a shot.

Our only options were to sit (but without a rest, the gun wasn't stable) or lie down in the sagebrush (but then you couldn't see 200 yards). Neither allowed for a stable, accurate shot.

When our buck moved a few steps to a lighter, grassy background, we could see he was a really large buck;

**Bill decided to try a shot. However, we still struggled to find a solid rest and our big buck simply walked away while we searched for that rest.**

We looked for our big buck the rest of the morning, but couldn't find him.

### We Can Fix This

On the way home, we discussed what we needed to hunt for deer like him in this sage-covered open country.

A spotting scope was a logical item, and stable, portable shooting sticks was another.

I had an inexpensive spotting scope I originally bought to look for eagles on the Missouri River.

**With practice and use of a lightweight, collapsible tripod to steady the scope, we figured we had solved part of our problem.**

**We also found a set of collapsible tripod shooting sticks, made for shooting from a sitting position.**

**We learned to use the scope and tripod to examine possible targets, and our shooting sticks to provide stability.**

### Only One Gun

For this area, we expected a long hike as part of our hunt, so we took turns regarding who carried a gun, leaving the scope and tripods to the other hunter.

**Because we hunted together a lot in those days, who carried what frequently depended on whether one of us had already filled an elk tag. If so, that hunter carried equipment; the other hunter carried our only gun.**

For the next two seasons, I carried my gun. I filled my deer tags both years on heavy antlered 4x3 bucks, neither in the “really nice” big buck category.

Bill had carried the spotting scope and tripod, but we didn't use them. We simply did not see a big buck at close range or long distance. Both bucks I shot were within 100 yards.

### Start the Day at Minus 23

The next season Bill carried the gun and tagged a nice five point but again we didn't use our scope, just binoculars.

After a short stalk, he shot his deer at 75 yards. (Refer to July 2023 story, titled “Sometimes It's a Long Walk Back.”)

We processed Bill's buck on the backside of the mountain and it was a long hike to our vehicle loaded with half a deer each.

Two years later, we hunted the mountain again and Bill was carrying his gun.

For the first hour, we hiked toward the highest ridge and only stirred up 20-25 antelope. Did I mention the truck's outside thermometer said minus 23 degrees when we left the nice toasty warm cab?

Normally we might have delayed our hunt, but the next day Bill was returning to his home in the Bitterroot Valley. So we pressed on. When the Sun finally hit our side of the mountain, we gave thanks to the Sun god and soaked up as much warm sunshine as possible. Apparently other animals were doing the same thing. We saw a coyote working around a distant ridge right at sunshine level. Then we spotted several deer near the head of our canyon, also just above sunshine level.

Initially all we could see were does and fawns. But as they disappeared around a bend, a small buck followed out of the brush, maybe a 2-year-old, 3 point. A stray cloud covered our Sun and it suddenly seemed a lot colder.

### **Meat Versus Trophy**

Over the years, Bill has shown a tendency to quickly switch between trophy hunter and meat hunter.

At this very cold point, he said: "if we climb up there and that buck is with those does, I'm going to shoot it".

Well we climbed to the curve in the draw, and saw 8-10 does and fawns, no buck.



Bill seated comfortably on a later hunt on Doherty Mountain.

But now the sunshine was back and it felt much warmer. With warmth, you probably guessed it, Bill switched back to trophy hunter.

We climbed to the ridge top on our right and glassed with binoculars and spotting scope. We spotted a very heavy antlered 4 or 5 point in the bottom of a deep canyon, at least 4 to 5 hundred yards away.

We moved 75 yards down a small ridge hoping to improve our visibility and look at options for a stalk. We searched and searched, but couldn't find him. It didn't make sense to drop further into the deep canyon. Reluctantly, we climbed back up the mountain and moved on, more or less following the route of previous hunts.

### **Deer in the Junipers**

We entered a small draw thick with 10 to 20 foot tall Juniper trees. Bill and I had separated a bit; I was 30 yards from him and lower in the draw itself. Bill had crossed the draw and was working his way through the Junipers up the small ridge on the far side.

I stopped when I saw two does walking 50 yards ahead of me.

About the same time, I heard Bill whisper "it's just a fawn", apparently thinking we were looking at the same deer.

Before I could respond or even glance to my right to see if I could spot his orange vest, he shot.

Then he said something a little like "gosh darn it" and shot again. I was pretty sure both shots were off-hand because the Junipers were so thick, and finding a clean branch for a rest was impossible.

Now he said: "That one got him." The does I saw were long gone and I couldn't see anything else; I had no idea what he shot.

### **I asked: Is he on the ground?**

**His response: "Dropped like a rock."**

Spotting his orange vest, I moved toward him and asked "Where's your buck?", at this point not sure whether I was asking a meat or trophy hunter. Bill responded he's right under that tree and hasn't moved. Looking where he pointed I saw a large Mule deer with considerable antler showing all around his head. Not really heavy, but plenty of points and wide. Now we had a really nice Mule deer buck, maybe not a giant, but while tagging his buck,

Bill said it was the biggest Mule deer buck he ever shot.

### **Both the Right Gear and Good Luck?**

So how did we find our big buck? We walked into a juniper thicket and, and stumbled onto a bunch of deer, who had apparently had done the same (only they didn't "stumble" on to us). So, maybe it was just plain old fashioned "good luck"? I suspect most hunters would agree every hunting experience adds to becoming a better hunter. While the gear we had assembled and carried with us was not used, identifying, acquiring, carrying and using it all, added to us becoming better hunters. Frequently it seems like using exactly the right gear is necessary to achieve your hunting goal; other times it seems more like old-fashioned good luck steps in, and gets job done. However, good hunters also recognize previous hunting experiences seem to influence one's good luck.

One other thing, I don't want to give anyone the wrong idea about a meat hunt versus a trophy hunt. For us, meat must be taken care of first, regardless of the trophy quality on the ground. Antlers can always be dealt with last.



# How To Overcome Mid-Season Hunting Struggles

By Dave Barnett

Originally published at **GOHUNT**  GOHUNT.com

I couldn't believe it, how did this happen again? My hunting partner and I had worked into a deep basin hidden away far from roads in search of late season elk. It had been a while since we'd experienced any good vocal activity, the end of season was drawing near and an empty freezer drawing even nearer. We had found some fresh elk sign and decided to stop for a quick snack. Just when we were about to resume our trek I noticed something off colored...an elk butt! We had somehow wandered into a small herd of four to five animals with a smaller righthorn at the helm. The animals began to figure something wasn't right and became fidgety. Suddenly, a bull appeared within range and clear for a shot. I came to full draw, settled my pin, and watched in disbelief as all hell broke loose just before I punched the trigger.

This was the fourth bull I had come to full draw on this season. We had worked our butts off and had some incredibly close calls, but it was wearing on me. This was a major low point for me for a few reasons. Obviously, the desire and need to fill the freezer was screaming at me, but, here I was, sitting in some epic elk country and pouting like a toddler. While these experiences and times only add to the excitement when a tag is finally punched they can be difficult to work through and simply keeping your head in the game, while important, can be the one thing that will be your biggest test.

While I didn't hang a tag off a bull that season I learned a lot about the animals I hunt as well as myself. Below are some of the best tactics I've found that help keep me alert and hunting as hard as I do on opening day throughout the entirety of the season.

## Take a Break

This one is always a tough pill for anyone to swallow. Here in Montana, our main archery season is six weeks long and, locally, I can hunt September through January with my bow. While a long season like this is certainly a blessing it can also be a curse. After several weeks of pounding out the miles and missed encounters, it can be incredibly difficult to continue getting out of bed every morning when the alarm goes off. Eventually, it can lead to your season turning into something more like work. At this point, you can become increasingly frustrated with the whole experience and end up putting far too much stress on yourself as well as your family.

While nobody wants to give up a day of hunting, it can be one of the best decisions of your season. Take a break, go fishing or out to dinner with the family—whatever makes you happy. When we start to lose sight of the main purpose of being in the woods we start to overlook simple details and, in general, enjoy the experience less and less.



Photo credit Dave Barnett courtesy GOHUNT.com

Sometimes a recharge is exactly what we need to come back with our head in the game and be ready to go.

## Break the Cycle

Like all things in life, if something is repeated enough it will eventually become a habitual force of action.

Imagine walking into the same area day after day. You never see elk in the first mile though you do see some tracks. Naturally, you're just going to motor into your normal hunting grounds before you begin really looking for elk, right?

What about that one time you happen to stumble into a herd with your hands in your pockets? Point being, getting comfortable with an area can sometimes be a curse in disguise. This familiarity is transformed into an issue even more as the season wears on and you become more and more frustrated with each passing day.

By searching out new areas to hunt, you will not only find new potential hot spots but you will also force yourself to stay on your toes and, consequently, reduce the amount of messed up encounters that could have been prevented.

Often, I find myself simply getting bored with my surroundings and in desperate need of change.

A change in locations can be beneficial for a number of reasons, including your mental well being.

It may also help you realize that the deer or elk you've been chasing for weeks now may have left the area or gone nocturnal.

The change of areas doesn't need to be drastic; it can even be in the same drainage. Yet, changing your surroundings can usually change your outlook in a big way.

Hunting the unfamiliar terrain will also take your mind off the task at hand and allow you to enjoy the hunt that much more.

I've also noticed in myself that when hunting new areas I feel more vulnerable and, thus, much more attentive to detail. This results in actually beginning to hunt much more efficiently.

## Back to the Drawing Board

Along with changing your normal routine of activities, sitting down and getting technical about your hunting can really make a difference, too. To expound on this, is it possible that the animals you were once seeing in masses have simply moved off in favor of more desirable landscape features? Once the weather starts to turn colder and the leaves begin to fall many of the available food sources will change on a nutritional level, too. Elk and deer will now need to begin dropping elevation to stay ahead of this feed change much like a bear will follow green-up as it increases in elevation with the spring sun.

Sometimes sitting down and really evaluating the game you are pursuing can put everything into perspective and make garnering a new plan of attack much easier. Now is the time to break out your maps and begin to really pick apart your area. Look for natural funnels that will allow the animals to transition into lower areas easily and focus your efforts on these. Generally, I like to start high and work my way into the lower elevations until I begin to find an increase in sign.

## Don't Lose Sight of Your End Goal

While I'm not here to preach to anyone about the outcome they should expect to see when the sun sets on the last day of season I think we can all agree that simply carrying a bow around the woods during the season is something to be happy about. After a long and trying season, it's very easy to get caught up in the need to fill a tag, especially when you log

onto your favorite social media site and are constantly bombarded by everybody's bulls and bucks and how "this has been the best season of their life." However, the simple fact of the matter is that it can literally take 30 seconds for your entire season to take a left turn and become your best one. It's an easy enough concept to grasp but it is also very tough to convince yourself to keep that mentality and keep pushing everyday, but it really is that simple.

The biggest reality check for me every fall is the fact that I can basically step out of my back door and hunt deer, elk, bear, lion and wolf on a yearly basis. Beyond that, if I'm lucky enough, I can also chase moose, sheep, and mountain goat.

We are truly blessed to live in the west and it's something that I feel gets taken for granted far too often.

Remember why you are out there in the first place. While this answer will obviously vary from hunter to hunter, keying in on these important factors can help keep things light and in perspective.

Hunt hard every day, enjoy the little things and remember to enjoy the time you have because it's a long wait for next season.

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# How To Download State Layers And Offline Satellite/Topo Maps Before Your Next Hunt

(continued from page 9)

Also, below is a step-by-step method for downloading satellite/topographic offline maps.

**Step 1.** I find it's easier to use the expandable toolbar when downloading the satellite/topographical maps. Tap the "plus" button, and the toolbar will expand. Then select the "New map" button.

**Step 2.** Now, use finger gestures to zoom in or zoom out to create the custom offline map size that you want.

You have full control of how big or how small a map you want to download (keep in mind that you can't download a map larger than 1 GB). So, zoom in or out to highlight what part of a state or unit you want to download.

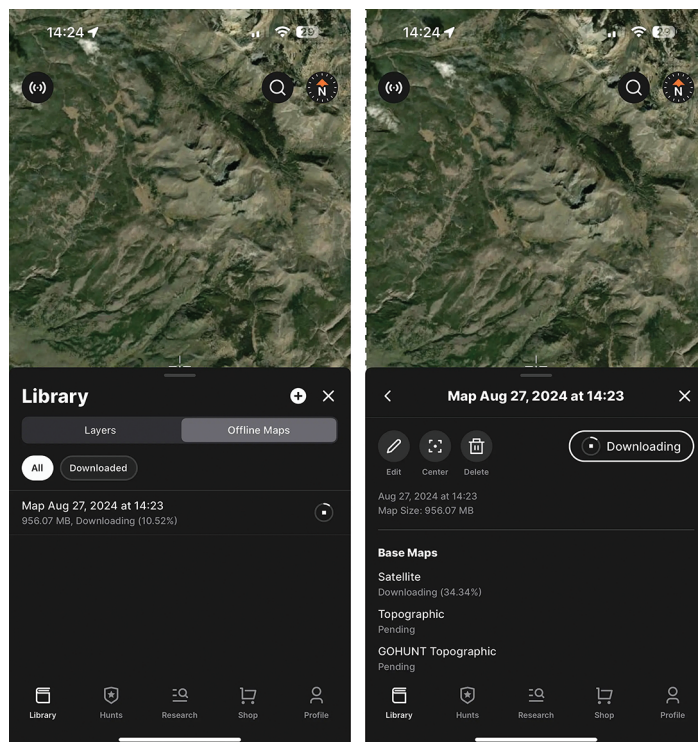
The extent of the map you will download is the entire length and width of your screen.

Again, you'll also notice that at the top of the screen, the file size of the offline map will show as you adjust the download area.

If the label at the top says "Zoom In," you must zoom in until you can download a map. You'll know you have zoomed in far enough when a file size shows at the top of the screen that is under 1 GB. Once you have selected your area, click the orange downward-pointing arrow in the lower-right corner of the screen to initiate the download.

**Step 3.** A prompt will appear to confirm that you want to download this offline map. You can also rename the map at this time. Or skip it and use the default map name. Note: You can edit the map name at a later date.

**Step 4.** After you click "Download," you'll be able to see the map's progress in the Offline Maps area of the library. You can also click on the offline map to view the Base Map download status and rename it.



Once that is complete, you'll have your satellite/topo map downloaded to your device. You can see your completed map in the "Offline Maps" area of the Library.

## How to download state layers and offline maps for Android users

To download the state layers on an Android device, once you're in the app and on the map side, tap the lower-left maps layer icon. Then select Layers. Select a state and then click "Download All" or tap on the downward-pointing arrow next to the state in the Layers tab to download all the layers for offline use for that state. Then, for the offline satellite maps/topo side of the download, there are two ways to go about this. Option 1: Tap on the maps folder layer icon on the left again, select Offline Maps, then tap the "+" button in the top right of that tray to create a new offline map. Then adjust the map to the desired size and click the orange download button. Option 2: Tap on the "+" icon on the right-hand side toolbar. Select "New Map," adjust the map to the desired size, and then click the orange download button.

Easy process that ensures you'll never be without maps when you don't have cell service. Overall, as I stated earlier, this process is a complete game-changer when it comes to saving your state layers and satellite/topo maps for offline use when you don't have cell service on a hunt.

We made the process as easy as possible, and our download process is absolutely foolproof, ensuring you never head into the field without maps in your hand.

No matter what hunt you're going on, I always suggest downloading both state and satellite/topographical maps before you leave for your hunt.

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# September Tactic: Grunt a Buck

Mike Hanback Big Deer Blog <https://bigdeerblog.com>

A few years ago in September Taylor Fitzpatrick traveled to the Milk River in Montana to bowhunt with our friend Luke Strommen. The then 19-year-old Taylor climbed into his tree stand super early one morning, about 3:30. The air felt great, 42 degrees cool, and the full moon hung in the sky like a big pie.

Taylor began seeing deer in the moon glow, moving back to their beds for the day. A 10-pointer that would score 155" walked beneath his stand and got him fired up. The sun came up hours later and he kept seeing deer. A buck with hard, fresh antlers cut across a corner of a distant alfalfa field. Taylor raised his call and floated some loud grunts.

"The buck looked up and walked to me on a string," Taylor said.

Taylor did what any good bowhunter would do—drilled the animal through the boiler room at 20 yards. The 130" buck ran back out into the alfalfa and tipped over dead. Here, the story gets interesting.

Taylor watched as another P&Y buck approached the dead 10-point, fuzzed up, pawed and roughed up the fallen animal, poked him in the belly and tried to flip him over!

Luke has a theory. Right after velvet-stripping time bucks feel a jolt of testosterone, and they get aggressive for a few days as they try to sort things out in the buck hierarchy (they've been buddies all summer but now begin to get antsy and less tolerant of each other). Taylor was hunting smack in the middle of this "sorting out" time. Luke figures the buck responded to those grunts and attacked the dead buck to show his dominance.



<https://youtu.be/nKHd7HA8PeI?si=xLT7aOgCAuSyDbdT>

The episode proves another thing: Carry a grunt call from September through January, and don't be afraid to use it any time, any day.

A few grunts will never spook a buck, and you never know when a buck will like what he hears and come closer to your stand.

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## Elk Fried Steak With Mashed Potatoes Recipe

By Joseph Romano

Originally published at **GOHUNT**  GOHUNT.com

Fried steak is a classic American meal and is a great dish for any time of the year.

### Ingredients

Makes 6 servings

Total time: 1 hour

#### For the steak

3 lbs. cube steak

1 1/2 cups whole milk

2 large eggs

2 cups all-purpose flour

2 tsp seasoned salt

Freshly ground black pepper

3/4 tsp paprika

1/4 tsp cayenne pepper

To taste kosher salt

1/2 cup canola or vegetable oil

1 tbsp butter

#### For the gravy

1/4 cup all-purpose flour

3-4 cups whole milk

1/2 tsp seasoned salt

To taste freshly ground black pepper

#### For the potatoes

1 lb. potatoes

1/2 cup milk

2 tbsp. butter

### Quick Tips:

Get the pan extremely hot for the roux\*Roux should be a paste consistency\* Amount of milk for the gravy may vary to get the desired consistency\*Be sure to thoroughly dry cast iron pots to prevent rust.

### Directions:

#### For the steak:

1. Take the elk meat and flatten it with a meat tenderizing hammer.

2. After breaking down the meat with the hammer, next take a meat tenderizing blade and thoroughly tenderize every part of the elk meat once more.

3. Begin with setting up an assembly line of dishes. Mix the milk and eggs in one dish, flour mixed with the seasoned salt, 1 1/2 tsp. of black pepper, paprika and cayenne in another, and the meat in a third. Have one clean plate at the end for the breaded meat.

4. Work with one piece of meat at a time. Sprinkle both sides with kosher salt and black pepper, then place it in the flour mixture. Turn to coat. Place the meat into the milk and egg mixture, turning to coat.

5. Finally, place it back in the flour and turn to coat. Place the breaded meat on the clean plate, then repeat with the remaining meat.

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Photo credit Joseph Romano GOHUNT.com

6. Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium heat and add butter. Drop in a few sprinkles of flour to make sure it's sufficiently hot. When the butter sizzles immediately, you know it's ready. It should not brown right away, if it does, the fire is too hot.

7. Cook three pieces of meat (at the same time) for about two minutes until the edges start to brown. Remove meat and place on a paper towel-lined plate. To keep warm, cover lightly with another plate or a sheet of foil. Repeat until all meat is cooked.

After all meat is fried, pour grease into a heatproof bowl. Without cleaning the skillet, return it to the stove over medium-low heat. Add 1/4 cup of the grease back to the skillet and allow it to heat up.

#### Mashed Potatoes:

Cut the potatoes and place into a large pot and cover with cold water. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat and cook for 20 minutes, or until the potatoes are tender. Drain potatoes and mash with a potato masher. Meanwhile, heat the milk and butter in a small saucepan. Add the mixture and season with salt and pepper. Mix together with a spoon.

#### For the Gravy:

8. When the grease is hot, sprinkle the flour evenly over the grease. Using a whisk, mix the flour with the grease to create a golden-brown paste.

Add more flour if overly greasy, but add a little more grease if it becomes too pasty or clumpy. Keep cooking until the roux reaches a deep golden-brown color.

9. Pour in milk, whisking constantly. Add seasoned salt and black pepper to taste and cook while whisking, until the gravy is smooth and thick, (5-10 minutes). Be prepared to add more milk if it becomes overly thick. Be sure to taste to make sure gravy is sufficiently seasoned.

10. Once the gravy is finished, carefully add a few spoon fulls of gravy to the fried elk steaks and mashed potatoes.

11. Serve and enjoy.

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# How To Choose A Meat Staging Spot When The Terrain Gives You Bad Options

(continued from page 5)

## Good Staging Decisions Reduce Work Later

A good staging location does not need to be perfect.

It needs to keep meat protected, organized, and easier to retrieve without adding unnecessary work to the packout.

Choose a location that solves the biggest problems first.

Keep the bags separated.

Keep the route simple.

Then make sure the setup still works when the next trip happens after dark.

Hunters building a more organized retrieval system can review “Elk Game Bag Systems” here: <https://www.caribougear.com/collections/game-bags-for-elk>.

## Elk Meat Staging Spot FAQ

### Should hunters leave elk meat at the kill site?

Not always. If the kill site is exposed, wet, difficult to relocate, or unsafe for repeated trips, moving meat a short distance to a better staging location may make sense.

### What matters most when choosing a meat staging spot?

Prioritize shade, clean ground, separation between bags, a practical return route, and a location that can be found again easily.

### Should meat be staged in creek bottoms?

Creek bottoms may offer shade, but hunters should watch for wet ground, debris, stagnant air, and difficult access before using them.

### How far should hunters move meat from the kill site?

Only move meat as far as needed to solve the biggest problems. A short move to better shade, cleaner ground, or easier access is often enough.

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# How To Pack Elk Antlers And Meat On The Same Pack

(continued from page 7)

Trekking poles can add control, but they do not fix a loose load. If the rack continues to shift after retightening, stop and rebuild the attachment before descending.

## Know When to Make Another Trip

Take the antlers separately when:

- the rack prevents normal head movement
- the tines contact the hunter or game bag
- the skull cannot be held high and close
- the pack lacks enough secure attachment points
- the route is too tight for the added width
- the combined weight changes safe foot placement
- fatigue makes the load harder to control than it was at the kill site

The broader elk packout strategy guide explains how to divide quarters, loose meat, and antlers across multiple trips. One extra trip is often faster than fighting an unstable load for several miles.

## Elk Antler Packout FAQ

### Should elk antlers point up or down on a pack?

For a large rack, position the skull high with the nose up and the tines angled down and back. This keeps the skull closer to the hunter and reduces the leverage, sway, and overhead interference created by carrying the antlers upright.

### Can elk antlers ride directly against a filled game bag?

They should not. Bone edges and tines can abrade or puncture a game bag as the load moves.

Secure the antlers against the pack structure with independent straps and keep hard contact points away from the meat bag.

### Should meat or antlers be loaded first?

Build and secure the meat load first because it is the dense foundation of the pack.

Add the skull and antlers only after the meat is stable against the frame.

### When should antlers be carried on a separate trip?

Carry them separately when the combined load is too heavy, the rack cannot clear the hunter or terrain, the skull will not stay high and close, or the antlers cannot be secured without contacting the game bag.

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