Finding Fair Chase: University of Montana students get to experience big game hunting on public lands

By Heather Fraley

It was dark and quiet at 4:30 AM when the hunters got up to make breakfast. Then they trudged through snow to idling vehicles, watching their breath fog in front of them.

They pulled out of the drive while it was still dark, piling on warm clothes and clutching headlamps. They opened hand warmers, and pulled blaze orange vests over their coats.

For some of these hunters, it’s the first time they’ve ever been hunting for big game. They are participating in the hunter mentorship program, a program designed to give University of Montana students the chance to see what it’s like to experience fair chase hunting on public lands in Montana.

The program is a joint venture between the University of Montana Wildlife Society, and Backcountry Hunters and Anglers. It started up three years ago through the efforts of...
James Goerz, a PhD student at the University of Montana. Goerz acts as a mentor in the program.

Goerz started the program out of a passion to make hunting more accessible to people who had an interest in it.

He began by taking one or two of his less-experienced hunting buddies out to his dad’s property in Philipsburg, Montana.

He says getting into hunting on your own can be tough.

“It’s kind of a hard thing to break into, he says. Hunting by yourself in Montana is kind of overwhelming.”

He asked the student chapter of the wildlife society on campus if they would be interested in participating. Since then, Hunter Mentorship has taken off.

This year, the event took place over the last two weekends in November.

The two dozen students got to experience what it was like to be in a hunting camp. Sleeping bags littered the basement of Ken Goerz’s cabin.

Beginning hunters were paired with experienced mentors. The interested students could actively hunt, or just tag along and shadow an experienced hunter. They learned hunting safety, and the tools of the trade.

They spent most of their time hunting on the nearby public land of the Beaverhead Deerlodge National Forest.

They also learned to hunt on block management land, which is private land entered in a special hunting-access program.

Finally, they learned how to ask permission and hunt on private ranch land.

Freshman Graydon Hidalgo, went out the first weekend and shadowed both Randy Hojem, a retired natural resource professional, and Goerz. Hidalgo was a first-time big game hunter.

“I wanted to learn more about hunting, he said. When I was a kid, I used to view hunting as unethical. Like, if you’re doing it for sport, then you’re a bad person.”

He was surprised by how different it was than he had expected.

“These hunters that I went out with, they really respect what they’re hunting, and they’re not just doing it for the heck of it,” he said.

Hidalgo says experiencing hunting helped him realize all that went into it. He says that a lot of people view hunting as just taking a gun, going out and shooting a deer. He found it completely different than that.

Goerz says that’s one of the biggest take-aways he hoped the beginners would learn. Fair chase hunting on public lands is a real challenge.

Fair chase is pursuing a wild animal on its own turf in an ethical way. This contest between predator and prey goes in favor of the prey more often than not.

“My dad always says it’s called hunting, it’s not called getting, says Goerz. Hunting implies failure.”

It’s difficult to harvest an animal, and harvest isn’t the main point.

“It’s not about shooting an animal, he said. Hunting’s just an excuse for us to be outside, and the real reason we want to be outside, is because we just like seeing animals. The bonus is, sometimes we get to bring home food that we can eat.”

The hunters were able to tie into this bonus. They harvested a total of four animals. The first weekend, they brought in three of the four animals, including a good-sized mule deer buck taken by beginning hunter Craig Martynn.

Junior Megan Robbins shadowed Colter Chitwood, a University of Montana biologist. Under Colter’s tutelage they rose before morning light, ate the famous Goerz pancakes fried in bacon grease, and then drove to a logging road on the national forest.
Robbins walked behind Colter in the chill morning air, and learned his process for hunting. She listened to him explain his deliberations as he cut across the snowy landscape.

“He showed us how to move quietly, how to stay in the shadows, and how to walk in other people’s footsteps to keep from being really loud, she said. This was all stuff I hadn’t experienced before.”

Robbins doesn’t plan on hunting in the future, but she recommends the experience to anyone who wants to understand more about it.

“Coming to Montana, I’ve been around a lot of people that do hunt, and I’ve grown to appreciate that, she said.”

With short days and longer evenings, it was also important to fill some of the downtime at the cabin. Every night, there was a speaker that talked about a relevant wildlife topic, or professional development. Robbins says that this was one of her favorite things about the experience.

If any students found the hunting not for them, it was still fun to be gathering in front of a crackling fire and listening to someone talk about wildlife careers, or Boone and Crocket Club scoring for trophy animals. These talks became a time for discussion, questions, and team building.

Goerz says that each of the three years, students that show up get to see incredible things that they might not otherwise get to. This year, he woke up from a brief nap to find himself surrounded by a herd of elk.

Goerz’s mentee got to watch the whole herd of elk run by him at 50-75 yards.

Or even better, they might see something that even an experienced hunter rarely gets to see.

Several mentees were walking along with Goerz when in the far distance they saw a full-curl bighorn ram walking towards them. They waited patiently. The ram ended up walking right down the ridge they were on. He seemed almost close enough to touch. They could see drool dripping from his muzzle.

“My jaw was on the ground, say Goerz. It was in the top five best experiences I’ve ever had.”

“I looked over at the two mentees with me, and I was like, yeah, right, that’s Montana.”

Check out the Awesome Missoulian Article on the program!


PRESIDENT’S CORNER: SOCIETY PRESIDENT CARLY MUECH GIVES AN UPDATE ON THE STATE OF THE SOCIETY THUS FAR...Hi wildlife society members,

It’s been about a month since I talked to you last, and things are still going well for us. This time of the year, there is a little quiet break in the action. We usually have a bunch going on at the beginning of the semester, then we settle in, and then pick up again in the winter.

However, we still have some fun activities ahead of us, including our wolverine watch program, and our end of the semester potluck.

It’s been really great to see the new group of freshmen that will definitely be sticking around. It’s exciting to see some new faces coming in on a pretty regular basis.

4-6 of our officers will be leaving next semester, so I am excited to see who will step up to fill their shoes!

Keep up the good work! -carly
Ten fidgeting third graders look on while a Wildlife Society volunteer points a red and white canister of inert bear spray at an imaginary bear.

The kids are all itching to try it themselves.

Every semester, the wildlife society makes it a goal to talk to local public school kids about bear safety.

This year, five wildlife society volunteers went into third grade classrooms at Cold Springs School on November 2nd, 3rd, and 8th. The volunteers were Violet Arnold, Madeline Damon, Nicole Ballard, Jonathan Karlen, and Carly Muench.

Bear education is very important in a place like Missoula, where black bears are abundant, and are often found frequenting semi-urban areas.

The objective was to let kids know how to store food, and be safe in bear country.

One of the things the kids learned was how to keep their yards bear friendly. They learned to put away bird seed or pet food so that bears don’t get food rewards.

“It went super great,” says Violet Arnold, education and outreach coordinator for the wildlife society. “The kids were super interested! They had tons of stories, and so many questions.”

Each class of 30 students was broken up into groups of ten, and sent through three different stations.

Each station focused on a different aspect of bear safety or awareness.

Arnold says the elementary school teachers were very supportive of the effort, which was made it feel worthwhile.

“It’s so rewarding,” says Arnold. You get there and the kids are just so excited.” “They love it.”
Charlie Henderson remembers well what brought him to Montana. He hiked the Gunsight Pass trail in Glacier National Park one summer.

He grew up on a Virginia cattle ranch, so the sweeping Montana scenery was very different to him, and spectacular.

“Looking at these mountains, I thought damn, I should probably go back here” he said.

He’s turned his love for Montana’s wild places into a career. He is currently a PhD student in the wildlife department at the University of Montana.

After the Gunsight Pass trip, he ended up moving to Whitefish, a touristy ski resort town at the base of the Whitefish Mountain Range in Montana. He did carpentry work and bummed it on the ski slopes.

He remembers the exact time he got interested in doing wildlife work. He was on a relative’s ranch when a wildlife biologist came to ask if he could track turkeys on the private land.

Charlie graduated from college with a cultural anthropology degree, and he wasn’t even aware that a profession in wildlife biology was possible.

When he found out it was, he started pursuing it.

His first wildlife job was helping radio-track porcupines with a graduate student working under former UM professor, Kerry Foresman.

He had a number of adventures trapping porcupines.

He would usually find them up in ponderosa pines, and build a fence around the base of the tree. When the porcupine came down, it would be trapped.

The graduate student he worked with played a trick on him once. She asked him to reach in and grab one of the trapped porcupines with thick gloves before he knew what he was doing.

He got slapped by the porcupine’s tail, leaving him unhurt, but certainly startled.

The graduate student took care of it from there. “She gave it the drugs, knocked it out, we collared it, and everything was peachy,” he says.

Charlie was hooked from there.

He went on to work with marten in California.

After that, he came back to Montana to help assess parasite loads on resident bighorn sheep on the National Bison Range.

He started working on the interagency grizzly bear genetic study in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem shortly afterward.

Making connections with people he worked for was essential to success. He got a number of his technician jobs through people he knew from previous jobs.

He started a master’s degree under Mike Mitchell at UM, because he had met Mike before and made a good impression.

He stressed the importance of doing every job well so that people would recommend you to others in the field.

“It’s a small world; it’s who you know,” he said.

In 2014 he graduated with his master’s degree. He’s now about six months away from finishing a PhD working on mule deer in Idaho.

Henderson’s parting remarks were his best tips for undergraduates.

He stressed networking, being involved in organizations, knowing how to work with statistics, and knowing how to be an effective public speaker.
The Power of Initiative

Professor Dave Naugle shares his research and career tips with the wildlife society

Dr. Dave Naugle knows a lot about initiative, both sage grouse and otherwise.

He got his first graduate position by taking the initiative to drive ten hours to an interview. He jumped in a car, and skipped his undergraduate classes to interview in person.

“They gave me a 30-minute interview, and before I left, I had that sucker,” he said.

Naugle grew up in Iowa, in an area he describes as a biological desert.

He developed a love of hunting at a pretty early age. He didn’t play football because it overlapped with bow hunting season.

He has followed that love through the years.

He’s glad to have ended up in Montana, a place he considers very biologically diverse.

Naugle works with the Sage Grouse Initiative, a collaborative conservation effort that he helped launch in 2010.

The initiative is working to help protect the imperiled sage grouse.

Naugle is a science advisor for the program, in addition to being a professor of wildlife ecology at the University of Montana.

The Sage Grouse Initiative works with private landowners to improve habitat in ways that are sustainable for ranching.

This can include cutting out encroaching conifer trees to open up spaces for grouse. Sage grouse need open spaces so that they can avoid predation by perching predators.

The grouse would move back into the improved habitat on their own.

“They moved into those cuts and readily nested there,” Naugle said.

Naugle has also edited two books. His most recent book is titled “Energy Development and Wildlife Conservation in Western North America.”

His advice to undergraduates is to take the initiative.

“If you see it and you want it, you gotta go get it,” he said. “Nobody’s going to do it for you.”

He also advised students to treat school like a job, and be actively working to make themselves look good to potential graduate advisors.

“Get involved; do everything,” he said. “You need to be someone who knows the job boards and goes to TWS.

Rad Raptor Research!

Society President Carly Muench gave a successful talk at an international raptor conference in Salt Lake City. The conference was held Nov. 8-11.

She presented on the work she did for her senior thesis on Northern Goshawk turnover rates.

The thesis involved looking at breeding birds, and seeing how many were being replaced on a yearly basis. Raptors are very loyal to their breeding territories, so when they don’t return it can have strong implications for population health and dynamics.

“It was super exciting, Muench said about the presentation, it went really well.”

She also described it as a great networking opportunity.

The wildlife society recently had the pleasure of listening to Carly present her research at a society meeting.
Why do Elephants Kill Rhinos?
Dr. Joshua Millspaugh talks career, research, and killer elephants in South Africa.

When Joshua Millspaugh was 15 years old, the faculty of Syracuse University came to his town to study the interaction of moose and livestock. They radio-collared a big bull, and it made the local news.

“From that moment on I said that’s what I want to do,” he said.

Dr. Millspaugh is now the Boone and Crocket professor of wildlife conservation at the University of Montana. He’s been at UM just over a year. The Boone and Crocket professorship is an endowment that has its roots with Teddy Roosevelt in 1897.

Roosevelt was an original member of the Boone and Crocket Club, a sportsman’s group with a strong interest in conservation.

Millspaugh grew up in upstate New York, but he always had a dream of moving west and working with large mammals.

Over the years he’s worked with salamanders, black bears, common loons, and moose. He spent time assessing the effects of habitat issues and ecotourism on elk populations in the Black Hills in South Dakota.

He got his PhD from the University of Washington in 1999.

He eventually got a job at the University of Missouri, where he became the director of the school of natural resources. He was responsible for 250 graduate students and 800 undergrads.

That’s when Mark Hebblewhite called. Millspaugh decided to try something new, and take the job Hebblewhite was offering.

“The opportunity to try something new is really significant and important in your career, he said. Even if you think you won’t like it-try it.”

One significant research project among his many, was working with elephants in South Africa.

For some reason, researchers were finding that transplanted elephants were being really aggressive.

They were tusking to death endangered white rhinos that went to water at the same watering holes.

Age structure of transplanted animals had turned out to be very important. Uniform age structure of males was causing some of the aggression in the elephants killing rhinos.

There were no older males in the population. When older males were introduced, the strange acting out stopped.

Since some of these behaviors could be caused by stress, Millspaugh and his team did a study to assess the extent of the effects. They found that it could take a transplanted elephant up to ten years to acclimatize to a new location.

Experience is something Millspaugh has reams of. His advice to undergrads is to start building it right away.

He stresses the importance of talking to faculty and graduate students, to gain opportunities for experience. He usually has some opportunities for students himself.

“Experience is the most important thing you can get in the field of wildlife,” he said.
Sixteen students from the wildlife society experienced an awesome tour of the National Bison Range on October 21st. The members got to see some incredible wildlife sightings.

“We saw everything from Bison, coyotes, deer, elk; lots of raptors. It was great,” said society president Carly Muench.

The members topped off the trip with the famous Windmill Bakery donuts.