

Autumn Gold: Montana

Article and Photos by Tom Carney

Near the northwest corner of Montana, Glacier National Park blends into Alberta's Waterton National Park. So seamless is the transition that in 1932 Waterton-Glacier was designated as the world's first "International Peace Park." Somewhere along the road that runs through it is a traffic pullout with a sign that reads, "Where the Mountains Meet the Prairie," in both English and French. Indeed, look to the west, and the land rises and rumbles amid the clouds into infinity. To the east, thanks to a good scraping by glaciers during the last ice age, the earth flows effortlessly but not without some bumps and humps, toward the Dakotas.

The mountains meet the prairie just below the Continental Divide, which fences off about 20 percent of Montana from its eastern portion. Or, to put it another way, despite the state's name, which comes from the Spanish for "mountain," the bulk of the state — in size about as big as the combined areas of Pennsylvania, Delaware, West Virginia and Ohio — is part of the Great Plains.

One area of interest to bird hunters is known as the "Golden Triangle" of Montana. It's "golden" because that's the color of much of the land: this area produces over half of Montana's wheat. Its basic shape can be determined by considering Great Falls as the apex on an upside-down triangle. A line traced from there to the northeast along state Route 87 to Canada would be one side of the figure. Its base would be a line running to the west across the U.S./Canada border, through the Blackfeet Indian Reservation to U.S. Highway 89. That road forms the final side of the triangle as it heads back to Great Falls.

Many folks suggest the best thing for a bird hunter to do is to leave Great Falls along Route 87 and head for Havre ("HAVE-er") and points west.

The drive up from Great Falls to Havre features a number of interesting quirks. For example, though the land is primarily flat, in just about any direction, there are pockets where it erupts into hills and mesas. "Finger ridges"

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someone called them. And there's no way on God's green earth anyone could ever confuse them with real mountains. Every now and then a massive tumbleweed — looking mean like it wants to take out a headlight — bounces fiercely across the road. And how about this just north of Big Sandy: Spaced out over about a mile and pounded into the ground beside the road stand four signs, each with a white cross atop it. Here's what they read: "For every white cross ... Off to Heaven ... A wreck sent one ... But Smoking sent Seven." And the weird thing is that no, there is not a fifth sign proclaiming "Burma Shave."

From Havre, it's just a matter of finding a spot to hunt and putting in the required legwork to find birds. And the term "legwork" is important to understand because, as guide Brady Martin of Bellingham, Wash., says, "It's not tough walking, but you're going to walk. There are a lot of pheasants by Havre, but it's not like in South Dakota where you walk a cornfield for a quarter mile and hundreds of birds go up. You're hunting on the prairie here."

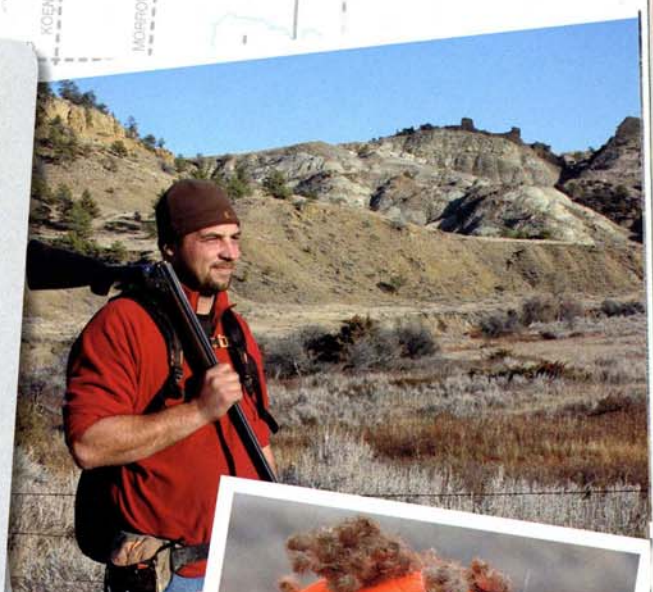
The pheasants here like to lurk in the coulees and escape by dashing out one end when hunters approach from the other. While it's not always as simple as "park your car and head into the bird fields as you see them," it's relatively easy to find places to hunt throughout the state. The reason for this is the superb Block Management Area (BMA) program run by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP).

A simple way to explain the program is to say the FWP negotiates contracts with landowners so the owner maintains control over the land but the public gains access to it. "There are 93 million acres in Montana and 64 percent of that is private," says Alan Charles, a Block Management coordinator for FWP. "Our main goal is to build relationships between the agency and landowners so that the land will be available for generations of hunters to come."

There are about 160 BMAs in the Golden Triangle alone. Plus dozens of Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program Projects where hunters might find birds. And that's just land that's open to the public. There are any number of outfitters in the area whose accommodations offer unique opportunities.

About 30 miles west of Havre, and close enough to the border that the only lights you see at night come from Canada, is Sage Safaris. The land, a portion of a family-owned farm, consists of sagebrush plains transected by a coulee, so anything might pop up in front of a dog on point: pheasants, sharptails or Hungarian partridge. Hunters may hunt with guide Jacob Dusek and his springer, Jasper, or roam place on their own.

What makes Sage special is the accommodations. Lodging comes in the form of 12-by-18 foot canvas cabin tents with two beds and a wood burning stove in each structure. Water comes from a pump. The pump and the generator are powered by a couple of 12-volt car batteries



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that must be sweet-talked into maintaining their charge until daylight. At night, when the temperature drops farther below freezing than it should and the air is still, the only sound comes from the nearby coyotes as they yip yip away in concert.

Closer to Great Falls is Chase Hill Outfitters where Brady Martin is a guide. Chase Hill is more “normal” a lodge in that the clients sleep indoors. In this case, they stay in the lower level of the ranch house where owners Bill and Renita Brown live. As Martin has said, the birds are available for people who want to work for them. What makes Chase Hill special is that its southern border gives way to the famous Missouri Breaks.

Mike England of Bozeman, Mont., explains, “The ‘Breaks’ are an inverted landscape. The land looks flat, but the closer you get the more you come upon jagged, rough, tough, narrow valleys.”

Bill Brown adds, “They’re like upside mountains. They’re called ‘breaks’ because the land breaks away. About a half mile away from the river, there’s a 1,000-foot drop. It was caused by erosion from the glaciers.”

This is awe-inspiring, beautiful country made even more beautiful by the fact that bird hunters don’t have to set foot on that real estate unless they really want to. For the hunts, the groups head in the direction opposite the Breaks, looking for shelterbelts near old homesteads or tree rows or edges of fields. Flat land, not inverted mountains, where the biggest drag — or “situation” as Bill Brown calls it — for a walking hunter is caused by the thick and heavy mud that clings to boots after a big rainstorm.

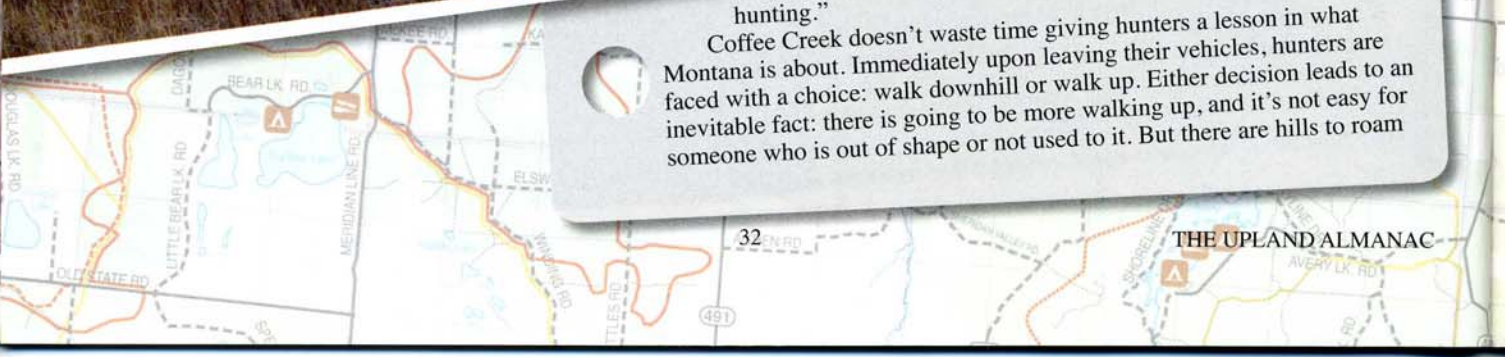
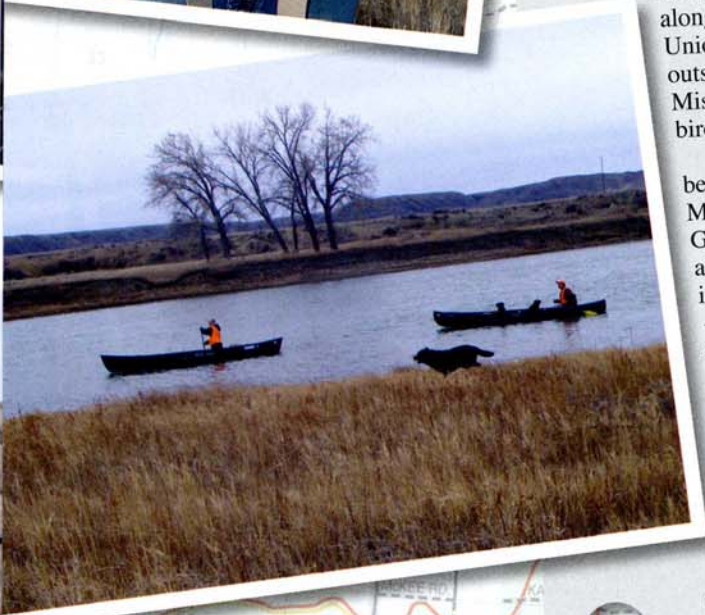
Back onto Highway 87, it’s only a short jaunt to Fort Benton.

In addition to being a good town to use as a base, Fort Benton is historic and a tourist’s delight. Hunters who want to invite spouses along for a nice trip will want to book rooms at the historic Grand Union Hotel. Dogs aren’t allowed inside, but the parking area is just outside the building and is well lit. Some of the rooms overlook the Missouri River, and that is the attraction for lovers of both history and bird hunting.

Fort Benton became known as the “World’s Innermost Port” because it was the upstream limit where boats could land on the Missouri before they’d hit increasingly more violent rapids and then Great Falls. As a result of its location, the Fort became important in all phases of Montana’s development. Arguably, though, its most important connection is with the Lewis and Clark Corps of Discovery — their expedition to explore land the U.S. had acquired through the Louisiana Purchase, and much of Montana was part of that land deal.

It’s certainly possible to find places to hunt not far from Fort Benton. Coffee Creek near North Denton about an hour’s drive away is a BMA of about 2,000 acres. The Lewiston, Mont., Chapter of Pheasants Forever purchased 1,000 acres near the center of the area, says chapter president Craig Roberts, “with the help of lots of other partners — other chapters, the Safari Club.” He adds, “This will eventually lead to a 15,000-acre bloc of land for public hunting.”

Coffee Creek doesn’t waste time giving hunters a lesson in what Montana is about. Immediately upon leaving their vehicles, hunters are faced with a choice: walk downhill or walk up. Either decision leads to an inevitable fact: there is going to be more walking up, and it’s not easy for someone who is out of shape or not used to it. But there are hills to roam



and coulees crowded with overgrowth to explore — and more than a few wily birds tucked in the nooks and crannies there.

The Fort Benton area also offers a chance for a unique hunt: floating and island hopping. At perhaps 50 miles below the Great Falls, the river here is easily navigable, the current's top speed in fall an easy to handle 3 1/2 mph. Here the actual hunting can become only part of a bigger adventure. Think paddling a canoe. Think camping at designated campsites along the way. For a change of pace, think pulling up at the landing in Fort Benton and overnighting at the Grand Union or, farther downstream, spending the night in a pleasant bed and breakfast room or a homestead cabin at the Virgelle Mercantile, a restored homestead-era ghost town. Most of all, though, think jumping out at likely looking islands and trying to put the stalk on some pheasants. If the mainland is public land, it's OK to hunt there, too. And the hunter who comes prepared with the proper licenses and appropriate shot shells might also be able to bag some ducks and geese on the same trip.

At one spot during our visit, the two of us in my canoe got out at the head of an island. Two others floated to the foot and stepped out. Both teams — with appropriate safety measures already discussed and agreed upon — started moving toward the middle of the island. At one point, about a half dozen mule deer jumped up in front of us and headed toward the other team. During their mad dash, they flushed about six ringnecks for us. So, forget about those traditional Montana jackalope you see mounted on bar walls; we encountered a few honest to goodness Montana springer mulies!

As we neared Fort Benton, my partner and I saw the long island on our left and figured the other team was working the entire thing. What we didn't notice was the cut about six feet across that made the lower end of this parcel a separate island. The other guys took the leap of faith to the second isle and flushed about a dozen pheasants in 10 minutes' time, harvesting four.

OK, so it's possible to go on float/camp/hunt trips in other parts of the country, too. What makes this trip so special? *It takes place in Lewis and Clark country!* A float through here literally takes a person through the exact spots Lewis and Clark navigated on their upriver journey. For example, according to the maps available at the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument Headquarters in Fort Benton, a person can visit the actual island where the Corps of Discovery camped on June 12, 1805.

Hunters who are driven by something more than the pursuit of birds — like a sense of history, an appreciation of good country and a thirst for "achievable" adventure — might find that Montana's Golden Triangle is a place they'll just have to sketch onto their maps.



For More Info ...

General travel information: Russell County Montana
800-527-5348, russell.visitmt.com
River maps, brochures, campsite information
on the Missouri River:
Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument,
Bureau of Land Management: Fort Benton Office,
406-622-4000 or 877-256-3252
Lewiston Field Office, 406-538-1900,
www.blm.gov/mt
Montana's Block Management program:
fwp.mt.gov, at the "For Hunters" page,
click on the "Hunter Access" link.
Hunting guides and accommodations:
Sage Safaris, Jacob and Sarah Dusek;
406-219-0441, sagesafaris.com;
bookings@sagesafaris.com
Chase Hill Outfitters, Bill and Renita Brown;
406-386-2447, 406-386-2435;
chasehill.com; brbrown@mtintouch.net
Accommodations:
Grand Union Hotel, Fort Benton;
888-838-1882, 406-622-1882;
grandunionhotel.com;
info@grandunionhotel.com
Virgelle Mercantile, Don Sorensen;
800-426-2926, 406-378-3110
virgellemontana.com
Canoe Rental:
Adventure Bound Canoe,
Michael and Meredith Gregson;
877-538-4890;
adventureboundcanoe.com;
abo@adventureboundcanoe.com
Virgelle Mercantile,
paddlemontana.com