

## Dedicated to the Hunt

*Alongside 22 other Montana hunters, I signed up to commit myself to become a better hunter—but only if I could pass the final exam.*

Rick Sacca's personal record for deer killed in one day is nine. He and a team of roughly two-dozen hunters were tasked with killing 800 deer in 90 days. They had about half a million acres on the side of Mt. Fuji on which to hunt, and got paid 10,000 Japanese yen (about \$93) for every deer they killed. Sacca grew up in Massachusetts and hunted in upstate New York, but this was nothing like home.

Because very, very few people hunt in Japan, the native Sika deer were so over-populated that they were devouring the understory of the cypress and cedar forest on the mountain. They were changing the ecological balance and creating a barren forest. In the winter, the deer would peel and eat the bark off cedar trees and devastate crops in the lowlands.

In 1993, Sacca was fresh out of the Marine Corps after serving nine years on active duty, enlisting straight out of high school. He made his living "jumping out of planes and helicopters." He then lived in Japan working as a U.S. federal employee from 1994-2014. Sacca wasn't one to waste his free-time. He found a local hunting association and asked to tag along on some of their hunts.

While private hunting is frowned upon in Japan, Sacca says hunting associations are called upon to keep the deer, wild boar and problem bear populations in check. Once members of the

association realized Sacca could read and write Japanese, they offered to guide him through the process of becoming a hunter in Japan. He would (eventually) become one of only three foreign residents to hold both a firearm and hunting license in the country. The road wasn't easy, though.

Early on, when hunters killed a deer, they would call him, direct him to the kill site and tell him to bring a knife and a rope. While he dressed the deer, they would sit around, drink coffee and watch. "It's like if you wanted to make swords, you start by fetching water," Sacca says. "You have to work through their system by enduring. There's a little bit of hazing involved, but I had been a Marine for almost 10 years, so I was used to it."

Fourteen months later, Sacca passed his first hunting test. Six months after that, he received a firearms permit, which enabled him to buy a shotgun. He spent 12 years hunting with the association, but he could never get used to one cultural hang-up: wasting the meat. No one had interest in taking a deer home to eat. Hunting was simply population control. Most carcasses were thrown away.

"That waste bothered me a lot," he says. "We had a lot of barbeques at my house. And I was fortunate that I could call up my Marine buddies on base and drop off as many deer as they could eat. Some days I would drive by the

base with eight hindquarters. The volume of meat I was able to give those guys was just staggering."

Fast forward to 2015. Rick, his wife and then 9-year-old daughter moved to Glacier National Park where Rick started work. The year prior, he had taken a wilderness guide course and became a hunting guide in the Bob Marshall Wilderness. He was impressed that the school taught hunter ethics. He was equally impressed that Montana had laws against wasting meat. Then he went to work for a local outfitter.

"I saw the business side of hunting, and I didn't like what I saw," he says. "We might preach ethics, but the reality is outfitters are in it for the business. The vast amount of clients I saw didn't bring their ethics with them. They thought that once they showed up, we'd point at an animal and they'd shoot it."

An ad for something called the Montana Master Hunter program kept popping up in his Facebook feed. "As I read about it, I thought that these might be the people I've been looking for—people who think and hunt like me."

Then, for two months in the spring of 2019, Sacca would make the three-hour drive (one-way) to attend Master Hunter classes at RMEF headquarters in Missoula from 6 to 10 p.m. on Wednesday. "I didn't miss a class," he says. "It was either stay the night and drive

back early the next day or drive back home until 1 a.m.”

Sometimes that drive came with heavy snow. But Sacca had found his people.

## The Master Hunter

I took the class, too. As *Bugle's* Hunting Editor, I looked forward to generating new story ideas, learning a few things, and, admittedly, meeting some private landowners who might have a few more elk than they wanted.

Montana's Master Hunter Program is only two years old, and it's not the only Master Hunter Program in the country. What does make it unique is that it isn't a state-funded program. Instead, it's privately funded by One Montana, a non-profit. Oregon and Washington both have had Master Hunter programs for decades but for various reasons such as fish and game budget cuts and steadily declining program participation, both states' programs are on hold for now.

For now, only Delaware and Montana have programs up and running. While the two states are 2,000 miles apart, there are striking similarities.

In 2005, farmers and other private landowners contacted Delaware's Division of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) about the overabundance of deer. At first, DFW called on hunter education instructors to cull the deer. The hunters received a course in conservation and had to show proficiency with their firearm of choice to participate in the managed hunt. The program was well-received and DFW began to enroll other hunters.

"DFW wanted hunt ambassadors," says Mark Ostroski, outreach administrator for hunting and aquatic education programs with DFW.

Delaware's Master Hunter Program and basic hunter education are both free thanks to Pittman-Robertson funds—the 11 percent tax we pay on firearms and ammo. Once hunters take extra course work on topics ranging from the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation to shooting to trapping (in addition to basic hunter education), they qualify as a Master Hunter only after they pass a 50-question test.

RICK'S COMMITMENT	
Classroom Instruction	56 Hours
Additional Research & Studying	15 Hours
Driving	1,385 Miles & 30+ Hours
Range Time	10 Hours
Ammo Cost	\$200

One of the perks of the program is that Master Hunters get to participate in managed hunts—one in a county park and another on a local golf course, which is archery-only.

"There is a need for hunters as a management tool to help reduce car accidents, tick-borne diseases and ag depredation," says Ostroski.

And it's not just about getting to hang a tree stand on the seventh hole. "You'd be surprised at how many people come through the course just for the extra knowledge," says Ostroski.

For One Montana's program, landowners were also the driving force. In 2010, Pat Flowers, then regional supervisor for Fish, Wildlife and Parks, sought help to improve hunter and landowner relations. He approached One Montana, a group that works to

solve problems in Montana by helping to bridge the urban/rural cultural divide. One Montana put together a working group named Common Ground, which included landowners, the Montana Wildlife Federation, Montana Stockgrowers, Western Landowners Alliance, RMEF and others.

As I spoke with course instructors and retired agency folks taking the class, it became clear that sometimes there does need to be a non-agency intermediary like One Montana to help build bridges. Maybe you're a landowner who, at some point, disagreed with a FWP management policy, which affected your bottom-line. As a result, you're a landowner who doesn't want anything to do with Block Management, FWP's private land access program.

"If we can help build bridges between landowners and FWP, then we're here to do that," says Zach Brown, Common Ground's program director. "We want to be partners with FWP. Sometimes they're caught between a rock and a hard place, so I think there is a role for a third party in the equation."

Over the course of nine years, Common Ground's board members reviewed hunter access programs around the country and interviewed various landowners around Montana. They then built a curriculum not to simply create better hunters, but to give landowners a pulpit in which to speak to sportsmen and women.

"Landowners have really been key to shaping this curriculum," says Brown. "We heard from them consistently that they want to have the chance to tell ag's story to hunters."

And they do.

For eight hours on a Saturday, a panel of landowners and ranchers from around

Montana convened at RMEF headquarters to talk ag economics, life on the ranch, wildlife interaction, conflict, conservation and hunter interactions. "One rancher talked about how they get overwhelmed with hunter requests to hunt their property—many times at the last minute," says student Leann Clarke. "One rancher explained how a hunter who had forgotten his rifle asked

to borrow the rancher's."

One of the landowners on the panel who lets hunters on his land, Joe Purcell, nearly lost his entire ranch in the 54,000-acre Lolo Peak fire in 2017. "I was almost in tears when he was talking about how he almost lost his ranch," says Leann. "He told us about how sportsmen came together to help him out on his property. And that made me want to help him out. My parents

live right down the road. They almost lost their place, too. I was able to connect with that."

After the panel discussion, Joe hosted a workday on his ranch. A handful of students, myself included, met up at his place with chainsaws in hand for a day of slashing and piling. Leann was there with her four-year-old daughter and three-year-old son, the latter snug on her hip much of the day as Leann hauled away dead trees to one of many burn piles. At the end of the day, we were covered head-to-toe in black soot, and a few ticks made the ride home with me. But in the late afternoon we all stood around laughing and having a beer—human stuff. Joe couldn't thank us enough, offering up his place for us to come back to hunt turkeys and bears.

"It's about reciprocating and appreciating being given access, even if it's just being friendly or helping out on a ranch with some chores," says Brown. That's exactly what we did that day.

While there was some great outside time, there was plenty of class-time, too—more than 50 hours' worth. The course work featured lectures, then quizzes, on Montana's fish and game laws, wildlife management and diseases, biology, GPS, ethics and, of course, shooting and ballistics.

To become a bonafide Master Hunter, all 22 of us had to attend and pass a weekend test involving orienteering, shooting and a written exam. I hadn't taken any sort of test aside from an annual physical in years. And unlike Rick, I missed more than one class even though I live in town. For many, including me, the time commitment is a barrier to taking the course. One student had to negotiate with his wife, forfeiting his entire summer fishing rights to participate in the course. So why not just make it an online course?

"There's a movement to do that, but you miss out on interaction with the instructors,"



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says Everett Headley, a graduate from 2018 and now the program's lead instructor. "You need others to help you develop your thoughts and your decisions. There are no shortcuts in hunting, and there are no shortcuts to this course."

Montana Master Hunter Program's first director and past lead instructor, George Bettas, watched Washington's Master Hunter Program come and go, and

he didn't want Montana's program to be online only.

"Online classes were not on the drawing board," he says.

Bettas, a lifelong hunter and wildlife advocate, served as RMEF's chairman of the board of directors from 1995-2001, then as executive director of the Boone and Crockett Club from 2001-2007. As the former executive director of the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks

Foundation, he was involved in One Montana's Common Ground program since the beginning and was eventually recruited to be the program's lead instructor, recruiting 21 volunteer instructors, fundraising, developing the curriculum and helping ensure the program succeeds as he passes the torch off to Headley.

"With quality leadership in place, I am confident the program will be sustainable and successful into the future," says Bettas.

### *The Final Exam*

After 50 hours of course work, a dozen speakers, one full day of slashing and burning dead trees on a landowner's ranch and more boxes of ammo than I will ever reveal to my wife, the exam weekend had finally come.

I carpooled with some co-workers to the exam site in the Bitterroot Valley. We were almost to the ranch when one of the more experienced (older) members in the car cursed something about his rifle still in his truck. We turned around, retrieved his rifle and walked late into the meeting room with our tails between our legs.

For the next three hours, instructors Jordan Harmon and Jason George from 406 Precision—a shooting school based in Twin Bridges, Montana—taught a crash-course on ballistics, the difference between accuracy and precision, various field shooting positions, much more information than I could ingest. Regardless, I volunteered to be the first group to qualify with a rifle, postponing the written exam for another day.

For a couple hours, 11 of us shot at steel plates placed anywhere from 243 yards to more than 400—all from prone field positions. Shooting within feet of various calibers and muzzle brakes was loud and unnerving. Being red-green colorblind, I could barely make out the orange plates in the distance.

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# MAKE THE CUT

Hitting them proved even more challenging.

And then it was time to qualify. We had to make three out of three shots on a 12-inch gray steel plate at 259 yards from a field position of our choice. We were perched on a rocky bluff, surrounded by blooming bitterroot and arrowleaf balsamroot, the flowers of which bent sideways in the 22-mph left to right wind. I hit my first shot but missed my second. I was out and disappointed, but I'd get another chance the next day.

The next morning bloomed sunny and calm. After working through an orienteering course and taking a 70-question exam before lunch, I found myself back at the range. It felt like a good day. I watched plenty of students qualify on the 259-yard target, some even ringing the 18" steel out past 400 yards.

I stepped to the line and the timer started. I had six minutes to get into position and make three shots. My first two shots were on the money. The third sailed a foot high and to the right. I borrowed a different rifle and shot a three-inch group on the steel. I had qualified, but with an asterisk. I wouldn't have that rifle with me on my next hunt. I had passed the written exam and the orienteering course. As for the shooting, I knew I needed work. I'm lucky. It's June as I write this. I have a good four months until rifle season, a range membership and a rough idea of what my deficiencies are (for shooting anyway). I have homework, and I'm okay with that.

As we were leaving the ranch Sunday afternoon, Everett and I were talking. I asked him what he wanted students to take with them from the course. "I hope that we all realize we are lifelong students of this tradition and that we need to continue to learn."

I, for one, still have plenty to learn.