



The Importance Of The Roadless Backcountry For Big-Game Hunting Opportunity And Success On Montana Public Lands: What The Science Tells Us

Current Road and Roadless Conditions

- National Forest System (NFS) lands in Montana have more than 32,531 miles of road, nearly 10% of all NFS roads in the country, and enough miles of road to reach around the circumference of the earth with almost 8,000 miles left over. Over 380,000 miles of mapped roads and 60,000 miles unmapped logging roads currently exist in the NFS, enough to reach the moon with more than 40,000 miles left over. **1**
- There is currently a \$558 million cumulative road maintenance backlog on 32,000 miles of NFS roads within Montana. The annual maintenance backlog is \$36 million, with roads receiving only 29.2% of the maintenance budget needed to keep them safe and usable. The current national NFS road maintenance backlog is \$8.4 billion.
- Montana has 229 Inventoried Roadless Areas totaling 6.397 million acres in 10 national forests. **2**

Roads and Elk Habitat

- Thirty six Montana elk hunting districts include roadless national forest habitat. Roadless areas in the Elkhorn, Pioneer, Sapphire, Madison, Gallatin, Big Hole, Bitterroot, Belt and Continental Divide mountains are elk strongholds that produce healthy herds with large branch-antlered bulls.
- Roads reduce big game use of adjacent habitat from the road edge to over 0.5 miles away. **3**
- Logging and road-building activity along major migration routes change the winter distribution of elk. **4**
- Elk in Montana avoid habitat adjacent to open forest roads, and road construction creates cumulative habitat loss that increases impacts to elk as road densities increase. **5**
- Roads are a major contributor to habitat fragmentation by dividing large landscapes into smaller patches and converting interior habitat into edge habitat. With increased habitat fragmentation across large areas, the populations of some species become isolated, increasing the risk of local extirpations or extinctions. **6**
- Roadless areas act as a barrier against noxious invasive plant and provide vital habitat and migration routes for many wildlife species, and are particularly important for those [like elk] requiring large home ranges. **7**
- When many elk herds were located in inaccessible areas and elk harvests were below their potential in most states, construction of new roads was viewed as a positive contribution to more intensive elk management. Now, however, timber harvest is greater on previously unroaded national forests, and the network of roads is a major wildlife management problem. **8**

Roads and Elk Vulnerability/Security

- A west central Idaho study show elk occur in greater densities in roadless area compared to roaded areas, and hunter success is higher in roadless areas compared to roaded areas. **9**
- In another study, an expanding network of logging roads made elk more vulnerable to hunters and harassment, and higher road densities caused a reduction in the length and quality of the hunting season, loss of habitat, over harvest, and population decline. **10**
- Logging roads make nearby elk herds more vulnerable to human interference year-round, not just during hunting season. **11**

- Poor elk security can result in re-distribution of elk from public lands to private lands during the hunting season, where the average hunter has no access or permission to hunt.
- One result of road construction is the decreased capacity of the habitat to support elk from decreased habitat effectiveness. In highly roaded areas in Montana, only 5% live to maturity. Road closures extend the number of mature bulls to 16% and extend their longevity to 7.5 years. **12**
- Deer and elk in Colorado avoid roads, particularly areas within 200 meters of a road. **13**
- Travel restrictions on roads appear to increase the capability of the area to hold elk in Montana. **14**
- Road closures allow elk to remain longer in preferred areas. **15**
- Road closures in the Tres Piedras area in New Mexico during big game season are generally accepted by the public and result in increased elk harvest. **16**
- Increased hunter success was found in unroaded areas (25%) and reduced open-road density areas (24%) than roaded areas (15%). **17**
- Elk run away when ATVs passed within 2,000 yards but tolerate hikers within 500 feet, and then only walk away when hikers get closer. **18**
- Road-related variables have been implicated as increasing elk vulnerability in virtually every study in which the influence of roads has been examined. Bull elk vulnerability is highest in areas with open roads, reduced in areas with closed roads, and lowest in roadless areas. **19**

Hunter Attitudes

A survey of hunters' attitudes toward roads in the National forests found: **20**

- The majority of hunters (65%) who hunt on national forests in 33 states report that gaining access to private hunting lands has become more difficult over the past 5 years.
- Most hunters (85%) support repairing and maintaining existing roads before building new roads on National Forest System lands.
- Most hunters (83%) support keeping existing roadless areas in our national forests in their current roadless state.
- Deer and elk hunting in Montana have an economic value of \$360 million to the state reported by the Montana Wildlife Federation, based on 1.2 million hunter/days for deer and 900,000 hunter/days for elk.

Recommendations To Support Wildlife Habitat and Hunting

- The prevailing message from the hunters and anglers public is "Leave things as they are now. Don't build new roads into roadless areas, but make sure hunters and anglers have access to national forest lands and roadless areas."
- Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks supports maintaining existing roadless areas or designating them as wilderness to conserve them in perpetuity to provide fish and wildlife habitat security and quality, and to maintain the standard 5-week deer and elk hunting seasons.
- Governor Schweitzer should petition to not allow any new roads in Inventoried Roadless Areas.

**For more information on the backcountry and how to get involved, go to
www.bigskylegacy.org**

The Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership is a coalition of leading conservation organizations and individual grassroots partners, working together to expand access to places to hunt and fish, conserve fish and wildlife and their habitat, and increase funding for conservation and management.

Sources of Information

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