

Master Hunter Program benefits hunters and private landowners

Kris Descheemaeker Special to the Lewistown News-Argus

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Participants in the One Montana master Hunter Program practice for their final shooting qualification exam to become a certified Master Hunter. Photo Courtesy of One Montana

Montana private landowners have observed a range of experiences when allowing public hunters to access their properties for hunting and other recreational activities. These experiences have produced life-long friendships for some and extremely negative experiences for others. One Montana Master Hunter program was created to build trust and improve working relationships between landowners and sportsman so all can benefit from hunting on private lands.

“Private landowners manage the majority of Montana’s landscape. Because their property is some of the state’s most productive, it’s critical to sustaining Montana’s

wildlife,” said Sarah Tilt, Executive Director of One Montana. “Without productive private lands, we wouldn’t have such a rich tradition of hunting and wildlife appreciation.”

The One Montana (1MT) Master Hunter program was created in 2018 to help create ambassadors and mentors within the hunting community and strive to help landowners and the State of Montana with wildlife management goals by restoring the cooperation between hunters, private landowners and game managers.

On the hunter side, the program includes training in conservation and stewardship, natural history, ethics, and specialized ballistics and marksmanship skills. The unique course includes classroom and online instruction as well as field work. Instruction comes from a variety of instructors including landowners, university faculty, professional shooting instructors, wildlife managers, wildlife biologists, first aid personnel and back country survival and equipment experts.

Upon completion of the course participants will become a Certified Master Hunter and receive a Montana Master Hunter Certificate which will allow them managed hunting access to 1MT partner landowners. Certification is maintained by participating in continuing education and volunteer service activities.

On the landowner side, the 1MT Master Hunter Program has roughly twenty-seven ranches formally enrolled in the program with approximately 350,000 acres available for certified hunters. The program works with additional landowners who host volunteer service days and offer support to the program in other ways, while also offering hunting opportunities outside the Master Hunter Program.

“Our focus is about relationship building and improving hunter-landowner relations so that more access is granted over time,” said Tilt. “The program increases hunter access to private lands across Montana by working with willing landowners who want to help reducing big game on their properties.”

In 2022, there were twenty-one ranch projects completed, with over eighty Master Hunters providing 600 plus volunteer hours on various projects including pulling weeds for noxious weed control, fence removal and installation of wildlife friendly fencing, trail building, and chicken harvest.

Volunteer time helps master hunters build a relationship with landowners and helps them understand the challenges landowners face in their day-to-day operation and how providing wildlife habitat impacts their business. It also gives hunters a better understanding of the work that goes into being a steward of the land and the challenges of landowners in dealing with wildlife.

The Master Hunter Program creates opportunities for hunters to interact with landowners and learn about the important role that landowners play in stewarding wildlife habitat as well as how to be a good guest on private property. Participating landowners have the opportunity to build a relationship with those who wish to hunt on their lands and are more comfortable saying yes to requests to hunt when they know the asking party has a greater understanding of hunting ethics, respect for ranch rules and a greater understanding of landowner stewardship efforts.

The IMT Master Hunter Program is looking for more landowner enrollment of willing landowners who would like to reduce the big game numbers on their property. Targeted areas of the state include, Lewistown, Billings, and the Kalispell/Whitefish areas.

“There are no specific qualifications, but an interest in managing wildlife on their property and wanting hunters they can trust,” said Tilt.

Over 70 hunters became Master Hunters in 2021. Each participant had fifty hours of classroom time plus volunteer work and a weekend in the field doing their final exam which included shooting qualifications. Classes were held in four different locations around the state including Bozeman, Great Falls, Kalispell and Miles City.

The classes for the 2023 Master Hunter program have been filled for this year. Landowners can enroll property at any time. For more information on the One Montana Master Hunter program go to www.mtmasterhunter.com or call 406-522-7654.