



# OHVs

## IMPACTS, CONFLICTS & SOLUTIONS

**Editors Note:** *The increasing use of ATVs by hunters, and conflicts from inappropriate use, have led MWF to take an in-depth look at regulations and ways to reduce impacts. This is Part I of a two-part series; Part II will be published in June.*

In the last decade, the number of registered Off Highway Vehicles (OHVs) has increased two, three, and in some states four fold. An estimated 11 million visitors to our national forests today, in some capacity, use OHVs. The term OHV, which is often interchanged with off-road-vehicle (ORV), includes any machine that has the power to travel off a road or highway including ATVs or three and four wheeled machines, quads, snowmobiles, dirt bikes, mini-bikes, swamp buggies, and dune buggies. In Montana, since the year 2000 the number of registered OHVs, not including snowmobiles, has increased from around 20,000 to more than 50,000.

As motorized recreation increases, so too do the negative impacts to our traditional recreation opportunities, public and private lands, and important wildlife habitats. Conflicts between motorized and non-motorized recreationists are also on the rise. In part, these are due to the increase in the number of vehicles and in part, due to the increase in the number of people exploring the outdoors, but a significant factor is technology. The ATVs of this century have changed dramatically from early models – sold as the Grizzly, Big Bear, Rhino, Renegade, Outlaw, Sportsman or a long list of other names implying their ability to “tame the wilds” or “get a rider any place they dream of,” they are more powerful machines than ever before. Today these new machines offer everything except the kitchen sink, are capable of climbing the highest, most rugged mountain, they can grind their way across the vastest desert, and churn through the muddiest of swamps, bogs, and wetlands. Critical wildlife habitats that have historically been secure areas, incubators for game, and crucial summer and winter ranges are experiencing a new type of traveler.

The impacts, the explosive growth, the increasing complaints, and budgetary challenges limiting enforcement for land and wildlife management agencies have triggered federal and state managers to rethink the many related problems. On US National Forest Service and BLM lands across America, land managers are working on new Travel Management Plans. At the state level, many wildlife agencies and commissions have been considering new regulations for ATVs used while hunting.

This article is not about the ecological damage or challenges to minimize the consequences of ATV general recreation use or whether they should be outlawed on some public lands or not -- it's about ATVs as they relate to hunters and anglers and the need for greater regulation.

### **Where do hunters fit into all this?**

For some hunters who use ATVs for legitimate road travel or while setting up camp at a designated campground, hauling equipment, or retrieving game in approved areas, they can be useful tools. For others – they are a menace that have ruined the quality and experience of hunting in Montana. “They run amuck on our public lands and ruin the places that were once high quality hunting,” “The back country where I used to hunt has been ruined by ATVs cutting deeper and deeper,” “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve had a stalk or a hunt ruined by an ATV,” -- the list of complaints is long and the stories many.

*“My family have hunted Hells Canyon in the Highland Mountains for more than 60 years. We’ve learned the terrain, inch by inch, year by year and know just about every outcrop, coulee, trail and hiding place for elk. Until about 10 years ago, before the real ATV technology boom began, family members consistently experienced high quality hunting and we were able to harvest elk by using skills learned and passed along from generation to generation. We tracked and stalked animals following their natural feeding and resting patterns throughout the season. We taught our children shooting skills, animal behavior, respect for the game we pursued and the values of fair chase. I guess those were the good ole’ days.”*

*“As ATV use increased – things changed - our opportunities and success diminished, competition between foot hunters and machines grew and many game trails that we had used for years became two track routes for ATVs. In many areas that once provided secure habitat for elk and high quality hunting opportunities, where we never heard the drone of an ATV, we increasingly instead found new, user created, motorized trails that cut deeper and deeper into the landscape as more and more machines discovered the new routes.”*

*“Starting around 2004, ATVs caught up with one of our favorite places to hunt - the Sheep Mountain Area.”*

*“Normally when we hunt elk on opening day we travel to an area a day or two before to scout and make a comfortable camp. This year, sitting on a ridge at sunset the day before the season was to open, we spotted a herd of more than 50 elk lazily grazing on and around the mountain side below us. That night in camp we made plans for our opening day, early morning walk-in that would start at the end of the nearest road, a little more than a mile from the elk.”*

*“As planned, we slowly walked in near darkness – the moon was bright - and then before we were too close to where we last spotted the elk we nestled into some juniper and waited. It didn’t take long, soon we could see and hear the elk moving around the mountain toward an open park right in front of us. There appeared to be at least 10 legal bulls in the herd, all within shooting range. Then, just about five minutes before legal light, we heard the drone of an ATV above and behind us. The elk heard them too and stopped. It didn’t take long before the glow of headlights illuminated the park and the elk. In a split second the animals were on the move toward the adjacent private land, a ranch that does not allow public hunting. The ATV then rattled its way down from the ridge into the center of the park. With no cover, the machine stopped and the rider got off, walked about 10 yards and sat down near some trees to begin his hunt. The elk were long gone.”*

*“The issue wasn’t just a matter of another hunter ruining our hunt, that happens all the time with so many people out on opening morning – even with foot hunters - the issue was where in the heck did he come from and how did he get in here on an ATV. Our family had packed several elk out of the area over the years so we knew there were no approved or designated ATV trails. What we found later was that sometime during the late summer or early fall ATVs had cut a new trail to the top of the mountain where none had ever existed. Now where the hunter drove from the hillside to the center of the park - there was another new track. We don’t hunt this area any longer. Today, it is continually overrun with ATVs and the good traditional, fair chase hunting is nonexistent; to make matters worse, the Forest Service now recognizes these user created trails as open to ATVs.”*  
--Darryl Olson, Sheperd, Montana--

## **Hunter Conflicts**

Conflicts between non-motorized, traditional hunters and ATV hunters are increasing. Most frequently the debates are over motorized access into areas that were lightly used in the past and closures that are put in place to protect critical habitats for big game. Some motorized users wave the “multiple use” banner saying “don’t lock us out”. For others it is a matter of their outdoor experience being shattered by the sound of an ATV and for many more it is seeing animals being moved or chased by an ATV or moved away from a hunter who has used stealth and stalking skills in pursuit of his quarry. Such activities are a slap in the face to traditional hunters, the majority of hunters and the tradition of ‘the hunt’.

Some of the most offensive activities that anger non-ATV hunters is the operation of ATVs in areas where they are prohibited and the use of a machine to chase down and kill an animal. These are not honorable or legitimate activities that can be condoned. The issue of soil erosion and damage to fish and wildlife habitats caused by cross country travel and the habitat fragmentation from the networks of user created travelways is another.

Studies over the past twenty years have discovered that elk habitat security and use declines in areas adjacent to roads open to motorized vehicles. A study in Montana confirmed that as motorized vehicle access increases, the quality and amount of elk habitat are degraded. In an ATV public education flyer, Idaho tells users that “...an open road density of three linear miles of road per square mile of land seriously reduces the value of that area for elk. An open road density of six linear miles per square mile can reduce elk use to near zero.” They also state that hunter check station information has documented that hunters using ATVs are often less successful than other hunters.

## **Fair Chase and Enforcement**

The increasing number of hunters that are actually hunting with ATVs rather than on foot and their behavior is a major concern for “fair chase” hunters and MWF.

Irresponsible and illegal use creates increasing pressure on land and wildlife management agencies to restrict ATV use during hunting seasons.

*“Four of my hunting companions and I walked into an area before light. We knew elk were around, we had spotted a small herd the day before. Shortly after legal shooting light three ATV’s drove up the bottom of a long draw next to the park edge where we were sitting so that they could get to a large block of connecting BLM land.”*

*“One of our hunting partners was also waiting on the edge of the BLM land watching for elk. When the ATV’s drove by him they did not see him because he was in the trees, shortly thereafter a small four point bull jumped up out of the tall sage brush. One of the hunters while standing on his ATV shot and wounded the elk. The animal took off running up an interconnected draw with the ATVs in hot pursuit, over hill, over dale without any consideration for the animal or the lack of a legal route. Finally the bull disappeared from view along with the ATVs.”*

*“Now this is an extreme case - highly illegal – and I’ve never experienced it before. But we all gathered together deciding that if we worked together we might identify the hunters, or vehicles and report them. After about an hour they came rumbling up out of the BLM land with the quartered elk. At about the same time they spotted us heading toward them like a small army. Two of the riders took off cross-country to avoid us. Of course being on foot we couldn’t keep up, so we were not able to get any clear identification or a visual on any license or county vehicle sticker. The third rider, bringing up the rear, had part of the animal hanging off the back of the ATV covering a street legal license plate which we could not see and after spotting us he split off in another direction – again cross-country.”*

*“After contacting the local game warden we were told that he couldn’t get into the area until the following day – which, of course would have been too late. We then tried, unsuccessfully, to contact the local Forest Service enforcement officer but never heard back from him until two weeks later. Without any easily identifiable license plate, the agencies couldn’t follow up or investigate the many violations.”*

*–David Jennen, Billings, Montana–*

Nobody likes regulations; but as irresponsible ATV use increases to cause unacceptable impacts, greater regulations are necessary to ensure the protection of public lands, wildlife and our hunting heritage. Four problems, in this regard, continue to be major issues in Montana: ATV user behavior; ATV user education; the inability of agencies to enforce regulations due to the lack of manpower and funding; and the lack of regulations or laws governing ATVs.

Join us in the June/July issue of Montana Wildlife as we explore these four issues and consider how Montana can manage ATVs used in the act hunting.