



GOVERNOR'S YOUTH HUNTING STORY CONTEST

2023 STORYBOOK



To celebrate our hunting heritage in Montana, Governor Greg Gianforte hosted his second annual Youth Hunting Story Contest for Montana youth and apprentice hunters ages 10-17. To enter the contest, hunters wrote and submitted a story of no more than 500 words of a hunt from 2023. From almost 400 entries, Governor Gianforte selected ten winning hunters who he will honor at the State Capitol in the new year.

Congratulations to the winners of the 2023 contest. This storybook features their stories.

Aidan Walker, Miles City
Caroline Dudden, Great Falls
Inslee Moran, Arlee
Maizy Miller, Missoula
Mollie Ruth, Big Timber
Samuel Prescott, Florence
Sierra Dockter, Conrad
Weston Hoble, Capitol
William Sheehan, Big Sky
Wyatt Smith, Billings

A special thank you to J2 Taxidermy, Kenetrek, the Montana Outfitters and Guides Association, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Sitka, Stone Glacier, and Vista Outdoor for gifting prizes to the winning hunters.

**2023
WINNER**



AIDAN WALKER
AGE 10, MILES CITY

Hello, My name is Aidan and this was my very first year of deer hunting under the apprenticeship. I am 10 years old and I went hunting with my mom and grandpa. I was super excited to finally get to go hunting this year, because I have went with my mom every year since I was born. I have been in every picture with her for every Buck, she has shot each year. I have practiced shooting all summer long at many Prairie dogs and probably killed at least 400 or more to make sure I was ready. When I finally got a deer found. I was excited and ready to pull the trigger. My mom helped me get set up and in place and at the correct angle and spot and talked to me through it all. When I pulled the trigger and heard the hit and seen the deer drop, I was beyond excited. My mom and grandpa were super happy and was giving me hugs and high-fives. I had just taken my first deer. I made sure to tell the deer thanks for providing himself and putting food on the table for me and my family. It is a unique first deer they told me because of the brow sticking out the front and for it having velvet on still at this time of year. My mom said that she has never shot one that has had velvet on it before. So I thought that was kinda cool that I got to shoot one with velvet before she did. I cant wait to do it again next year. Than I can take hunters safety and I want to try and get an elk when Im old enough. I would love to come and visit you and the capital for the first time. Thank you for your time and Im glad to share my story with you. Aidan

**2023
WINNER**



CAROLINE DUDDEN
AGE 13, GREAT FALLS

My First Buck by Carly Dudden

Ever since I could remember my Dad has gone out hunting and I wanted to go. He always said one day I could, so I waited. Once my sister got her first deer the urge to go out and get my own only grew. The year before I could finally go out for youth in Montana I started watching my Dad as he practiced. I started looking at the cameras too, spotting what would be my first deer. Sadly before I could go out the military moved my family to North Dakota where I would have to wait around 2 more years to go out. As soon as I received my first gun I started practicing. Making sure I was ready for when I could go out. The first year I went out I almost harvested nothing but, on the last day a small doe came up from being bedded down. I was able to shoot her at 40 yards. The year after that I got nothing, I only had a doe tag so I couldn't get my first buck that I so badly wanted. My 8th grade year I would be able to get my first buck in North Dakota. I practiced with my 243 rifle as much as I could. I wanted to get a good shot and make sure my shot was humane and the deer would not suffer. I was so happy that next year I could shoot my first buck. I wanted a Montana buck because I had always loved Montana, I never wanted to move away. But the military had other plans for my family. The summer before I could get my first buck we got orders back to Montana. I was happy to go back to the state I have always loved. After October of 2022 I wasn't sure how much hunting I could do. I had gotten into a dirt bike crash. I was jumping my bike when the bike tire popped up when I was going full throttle. I flew around 20 feet and broke my arm and took out the PCL my knee. My arm healed but my knee needs surgery now. With how it swells up and how noisy my brace is I wasn't sure how much walking I could do. On opening weekend a close family friend invited my Dad and I out to hunt. I wasn't expecting to get much. We were looking around when we saw a herd of mule deer. My Dad and I made a stock on them, perched up in a fence. I saw a few buck, nothing too big. Then I saw him. The buck I wanted to shoot. They were over 300 yards away so we waited for them to come closer. Once the buck I wanted got within 200 yards I took my shot and dropped him. Getting my first buck.

**2023
WINNER**



INSLEE MORAN
AGE 10, ARLEE

Hi, my name is Inslee and this is a story about me shooting an elk.

I am a Native American, my family is Salish and Kootenai so I can shoot an elk on our tribal land. I am 10 years old. I started hunting because my dad hunts. One day he took me with him and I really liked it. I'm going to be hunting with him for many years. It was fun to be in the woods and see and hear the elk. It was early in the morning and it was me, my dad, and my cousin. We were driving and decided to get out of the truck and call for the elk. We heard them calling so then we started walking towards them and then my cousin saw them so my dad got me situated on a tree. I was sitting on the ground getting ready to shoot and my cousin was calling the elk so I could get a shot at him. I was a little nervous and scared that I was going to miss it. I took the shot. Then I got him! He stood there for a minute and I thought to myself I didn't get him. Then he fell and tumbled down the hill! I got him and I was so excited!

We walked to the elk and he was dead. We gutted him, my dad taught me what to do and after we did that we had to leave and go down the mountain to go get the buggy so we could load the elk up. We went back up the mountain with the buggy. We had to cut some wood out of the way of the buggy. Now we could load him up and get out of the woods and go home. As we were getting ready to leave the elk were still bugling and that to me is cool!

So that is my story. I hope you like it.

THE END

This story is by Inslee Moran

**2023
WINNER**



MAIZY MILLER
AGE 16, MISSOULA

A Girl & Her Bird Dog

I was born on a crisp October night at the beginning of pheasant season. My dad said there were only two reasons he would ever miss the birth of his child, the Green Bay Packers in the Super Bowl and pheasant opener. I must have unconsciously known this in the womb and arrived two days early. To say that bird hunting is in my bones is an understatement.

Having a birthday near pheasant opener is probably the best gift I could ever give my dad. What better way to celebrate the birth of his youngest child, than to spend a day at Freeze Out roaming the cattails and barley fields. Not old enough to hunt, I would camp and walk along with him and my older sister, waiting for the day that I could join them. Each year, a favorite rancher trades us fresh honey from his hives for a six pack of Cold Smoke Ale. It's become an unspoken tradition, like the pioneers of history trading goods, we trade fancy beer for honey.

Don't tell my dad, but while I might be his favorite hunting partner, our old labrador is mine. Her name is Osa, Spanish for Girl Bear, and she is almost 13. The gray whiskers on her chin and belly tell her age. At first it was her back leg that was stiff on cold mornings, but now she also favors her front.

I thought last fall would be Osa's last bird season, then something magical happened. During the early morning of this year's apprentice opener, as my dad gathered the shotguns and camping gear..her limp was gone. I wondered, was she faking it, or did the spirit of pheasant opener heal my dog's sore joints? It seems to heal my dads. Osa looks like your typical black lab except for one thing, she has a super-power. She can fly. One year for fun we entered her in the county fair dock jumping contest and she won. The fair organizer offered to buy her on the spot. Next, we drove to Great Falls and entered her in another contest. She qualified for youth nationals.

This year, Apprentice Opener on Flathead's North Shore was the best birthday gift I ever had. As we walked the fields, Osa flushed up birthday presents for me. The first flew low, but as we walked a ditch she flushed one up high. I got it on my second shot. Osa retrieved it and while she always retrieved birds to my dad, this time she brought it back to me.

As we drove home that evening, I held Osa close. I know that this is Osa's last year hunting and it breaks my heart a little. They say you only ever get one great bird-dog in your life and Osa is mine. I am lucky that I did not have to wait too long. I got my great bird-dog early, during an Apprenticeship Hunter weekend in 2023.

**2023
WINNER**



MOLLIE RUTH
AGE 17, BIG TIMBER

I have always had a genuine and true passion for hunting and I have been able to have the opportunity to harvest a variety of amazing animals. Although my 2023 hunt will surely be one I will never forget. It was the day before Thanksgiving and the snow was coming down. At about three in the afternoon my dad, my mom, my dad's friend Andy and I set out on an afternoon hunt. We started on the edge of one of our biggest sections and made our way towards the west, in order to keep the wind in our favor. Through the cold, bitter wind and snow we walked about a mile in and saw no sign of any elk. So we kept on going and going, being hopeful we would come across some bulls. After about 2 or 3 more miles that felt like an eternity we eventually came to a quick stop. My dad had spotted a group of five bulls at about 850 yards in front of us. He glassed the ridge for a couple of seconds and then turned around and gave me a thumbs up. My heart began to race and we started our chase towards the bulls. We stayed close to the side of the barb wire fence and crept our way towards them. As I took each step closer, my heart raced faster each time. I was anxious to get to the bulls and could tell by the way my dad was acting that these bulls were gonna be big. We finally got into the shooting range at about 330 yards away. There were two big bulls close to the bottom of the ridge, so we had some discussion. Andy and I came to the conclusion that we would both shoot at the same time. So, I chose the bull to the right and he chose the bull to the left. I set down my bipods and got down on one knee ready to shoot. I took a big deep breath and counted out loud with Andy. 1...2...3... CRACK...both bulls took the hits. In fear my bull would run off, I reloaded and took another shot. It hit him once again, but now he was on the run. After about 50 yards the bull finally came to a stop broadside and I reloaded one more time. WOP...he finally fell to the ground. I turned around to my dad with ringing ears and a heart full of excitement. He gave me the biggest hug and we made our way down to the bulls. When we finally got to them I immediately gave a huge thanks to the Lord because I had just harvested a bull of a lifetime. He was much bigger than anyone thought as he looked to be a 350+. I was extremely thankful as I was filled with pure happiness and excitement, knowing that I was able to have such a wonderful opportunity to get a bull like this.

**2023
WINNER**



SAMUEL PRESCOTT
AGE 17, FLORENCE

In 2020 my dad drew a coveted mule deer permit with 13 bonus points. He would end up scouting all summer and not long into the season would arrow a mule deer that grosses over 180. This would inspire me to put in for the same unit the following year.

The buck I would eventually shoot this year lived around the same area as my Dad's mule deer. This spring when we first saw the buck we decided to name him "Turkey Foot " after his nontypical points on his right G2. One morning in the spring we saw him with his antlers still attached, the following morning he had shed. My dad would find the match set several yards apart from each other soon after.

Mid June I got the surprise of my life when I drew the permit my first year ever putting in for it. From then on every chance me and my dad would get throughout the summer, we would scout. My dad and his friend would be the first to spot my deer again since this spring. There was just one problem, he was living on private. My dad and I had watched him enough to have him nearly patterned every time we went out scouting we could find him. The buck primarily liked 2 properties one had great bedding habitat with big tall grass and little dirt hills. The other had great feed with apple trees and water. My dad and I through knocking on doors would end up with permission on both properties along with several others.

September 2nd opening morning of general archery we went out to find "Turkey Foot" arriving just after first light. We would spot him soon, bedded against a fence on a neighboring property he was rarely on. We had secured lots of permission in the area but of course, on opening day he had decided to go to one of the few we hadn't asked. It was still early so we drove around to other spots waiting for the buck to either move or till it was late enough to knock on the landowner's door. 9 am rolled around and the buck had stood up, feeding with some does and a smaller buck. The landowners seemed to be awake so my Dad and I decided to ask. The property the buck was on was the same as the one my dad killed his deer on just several years prior but the landowner had passed away. The new owner was very nice and allowed us to hunt as the deer had started to become a nuisance, a sentiment shared by many of the landowners who gave us permission. With the landowner's blessing, my Dad and I snuck our way up the fence line making a perfect shot at 36 yards. The buck went about 60 yards and fell over. Walking up to it couldn't believe I was able to harvest a deer of this caliber grossing 196 inches.

**2023
WINNER**



SIERRA DOCKTER
AGE 16, CONRAD

It was August 17, and I was sitting in school when the office lady called the class I was in and said, "Can I have Sierra excused, please?" I walked down the stairs and signed out of school. My dad was waiting outside for me. I hopped in the pickup and went to the house. My dad said to get dressed in my hunting clothes while he put everything in the pickup. I got all my stuff and hopped in, and we drove northeast of town looking for this antelope that my dad had seen the past week. I was nervous, but excited at the same time, to trying something new. I was mostly nervous that it wouldn't be there, but my dad told me not to worry because he been there for the past week.

We got to the spot and started looking for him. It didn't take long for to find him. He was the only antelope bedded on the back side of a watering hole. We made a plan and went to a place where he couldn't see us. We got out of the truck and shut the door really slowly, so we didn't make lots of noise. We started to walk out to the watering hole and we saw when we got there that he was maybe 24 yards from us. We waited for him to get up to see if he would get a drink. It take long time for him to get up. At 20 yards away from us, I took a shot and missed him, and he ran out to 80 yards. He started to feed, and I looked at my dad and he said, "Don't be bummed. He will be back; trust me."

I took my dad words to heart and know that I didn't want to give up because there are always other chances. We made a decision to stay and wait for him in the tall grass. Somehow I knew that he would come back. As it grew closer to dark, I was getting more worried that he wasn't coming back, but then he started to make his way to us. I could feel the butterflies in my stomach, but I was getting worried that it'd be dark by the time he got there. We wanted for him to get 48 yards. I would've liked it to be closer, but there was like 5 minutes left. I shot from 48 yards and hit him little bit low, but it was enough to kill him.

The biggest smile on my face showed how happy I was, but not as happy as my dad. He was so excited that he might have said some curse words. My dad thought it was 75 but it was 84 $\frac{1}{8}$. We had to wait 60 days to put it in Pope and Young, where it got 34th place.

**2023
WINNER**



WESTON HOBLEY
AGE 15, CAPITOL

A Wild Adventure in Wild Country:

Hello, I'm Weston Hopley I'm a young Montanan who loves ranching and the outdoors. I began my hunting career in 2019 when I completed Hunter Education, from there I cut my teeth chasing Whitetail Deer on the edges of farmland, but this year I took on a new challenge, pursuing Mule Deer in the badlands of eastern Montana.

I started the season in the Long Pines, a stretch of public land near the South Dakota border, after 1 week of consistent hunting I finally got a shot a nice 5x5 buck I put a round in the chamber and took my shot...AIRBALL, after another shot and another cloud of dust he was gone, lost to the Long Pines. I felt terrible, I hadn't missed a shot on deer in two years and to have missed twice on the same buck; it was a real gut punch, but at least they were clean misses.

After, two weeks more of hunting and over 50 miles of hiking I finally got permission to hunt a piece of private, but more country doesn't guarantee success. My neighbor, who had experience hunting this property, offered to help me trail my quarry. We went to an area he knew would likely hold deer who were interested in browsing the young sage growth, we made our way to the location and sure enough we found a group of game. There was five bucks, but as I could only take an animal who I could be sure was an aged buck I had two options, an old two-point with a lot of antler mass or a younger buck who was still in velvet. Just as I elected to pursue the two-point the pipeline serviceman drove through the middle of the herd, twice! The group of deer dispersed however, when the dust had settled the herd re-formed, but the two point was missing. We figured he had bedded down in a swale and as we attempted an approach four does walked out of the swale, we believed held the buck; just when we thought he may have quit the country the does looked back and exposed him.

We crept toward his general area and saw him bedded, immediately he knew something was wrong, he hopped up and walked in the direction of the does, he stopped, I shot, I missed, this felt way too familiar. He stopped again and I loaded my rifle again and this time my aim was true; I drilled a cartridge through both lungs he was down, but not for long, the fact that he got back up with two deflated lungs is a true testament to how tough these Mule Deer really are. A final projectile in the back of his head at 303 yards ended this hunt. This was quite the experience filled with long unsuccessful days, cold nights, and plain old mistakes, but I do believe this qualifies as a wild adventure in wild country.

**2023
WINNER**



WILLIAM SHEEHAN
AGE 13, BIG SKY

My mom and I have had some pretty epic waterfowl adventures on the Big Horn over the last few years. As competitive sporting clays shooters, we love to practice on the range some of the shots that we may see in the blind. It helps, believe me. My mom thinks it's important for us to over prepare for our hunts, probably because people watch us closely and she likes to prove that a mom and young son are capable hunters. The duck hunt I will write about here was special because we learned a lot from our guide, shot our limit and made awesome memories.

The story begins with our drive from Big Sky to Ft. Smith, about 5 hours. We listened to The Call of The Wild audiobook on the way to get in the mood for adventure. We checked into our Air bnb and unpacked our food and hunting gear. We laid out our camo, checked our shotguns, ate some chili and went to bed early. I woke up at 4am, not even a bit tired, I was full of excitement. I threw on all my clothes, lots of layers, and made some hot cocoa. We met our guide, he was very excited. We were the first mother son hunting duo that he ever guided. We set up our boat, drifted down the Bighorn in pitch black conditions (no shooting until sunup). As we arrived at our shooting destination, Mallard Lane we named it, sunrise finally comes, I load up my 20g and am ready. The guide's black lab, Finn, was the most excited of all.

We helped the guide put out some decoys and began to see so many ducks come in from all directions, but still had to wait because it technically wasn't sunup. When we got the go ahead to shoot, I missed my shots, a lot of shots. The second half of the day was much better, I spent time watching the ducks come in and was more patient. I remembered the sporting clays training and picking out a small piece of the bird to focus on. The guide was impressed that I could hit a 40yard shot with my 20g. The Bighorn is amazing because we saw mallards, widgeon, goldeneye, bufflehead, Canada geese, divers, gadwald and even a pintail (missed him!).

The guide taught us a lot about weather and wind and calling birds in (and when to not call). After the hunt we took the ducks to the "quack shack" and he taught me how to clean the birds. He gave us some good recipes. I have learned that one of the best things about hunters is they like to share knowledge that it took them years to get. Every year we learn something new from our guide and fellow hunters, mom says it's great to have mentors. I hope to be hunting the Bighorn for the rest of my life. Pretty soon without a guide.

**2023
WINNER**



WYATT SMITH
AGE 10, BILLINGS

I just turned 10 on September 25th and I had been waiting a long time to be able to hunt with my dad. He let me come out with him a lot, but I wasn't allowed to shoot until I got my apprenticeship license. I saved up \$100 and my dad and my grandpa both matched my money so I could buy my first hunting rifle- a .243 Mossberg. On November 10th, my mom went to the grocery store in the morning, and when she came home, she saw a buck in our driveway. We live out off of Highway 3, and our property borders state land. She let me skip school (homeschool) and my dad and I started running around to get all of our gear on and grab our guns. We went down our long driveway to find the buck, but it had taken off. So, we headed out onto the state land to see if we could find it. My dad knew there was a gully where does liked to hang out and we figured the buck could be heading there.

We went all the way to the gully and beyond it and couldn't find the buck. We decided to turn around and head back towards the gully. And that's when we saw it- a buck was laying down on the side of the gully, opposite of us. We quietly got into position by a rock, about 100 yards across the gully from the buck. We waited just a few minutes so I could get into position. My dad pulled out his phone and showed me a picture of a buck, and pointed to the exact spot that I needed to aim my scope. I looked into my scope (I had been practicing that a lot). It was a hard shot because there was a tree limb in my way. But I finally got my mark in the middle of his shoulder, let out my breath, and took the shot. I got him! He stood up and ran about 15 yards and then fell.

I was really happy and proud of myself. My mom was really proud of me and reminded me that my name means "war strength". She said I'm growing up and growing strong. My dad was really proud too. I got a deer this season before him! The buck was a 2 by 3. My dad gutted him and then hauled him (with the help of some friends) back to our property. My dad also took the hide off and I helped him with cutting out the meat. (We already made tasty jerky!) He made me a Euro mount and I can't wait to hang it up in my room. I really love hunting because I love spending time with my dad.

