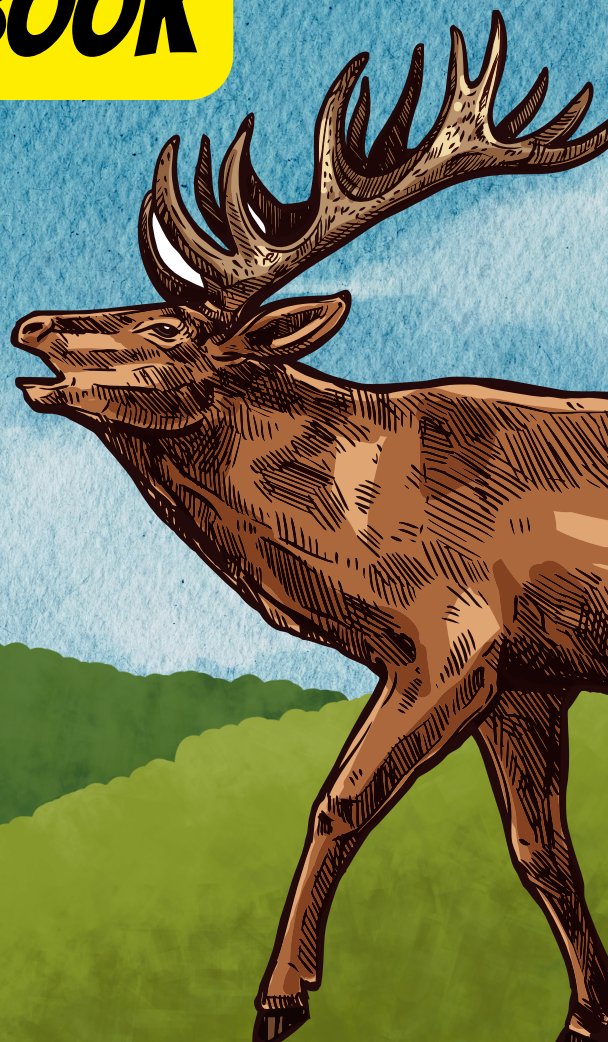




GOVERNOR'S YOUTH HUNTING STORY CONTEST

2022 STORYBOOK



To celebrate our hunting heritage in Montana, Governor Greg Gianforte in 2022 hosted the inaugural 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 2022. Governor Gianforte selected ten winning hunters from over 200 entries statewide.

Congratulations to the ten winners of the 2022 contest. This storybook features their stories.

Brynlee Epperson, Lewistown

Emaline Musson, Belgrade

Grayson Fulton, Colstrip

Greyson Garza, Belt

Jack Heicher, Townsend

Jaeger Tombre, Savage

Jason Michalsky, Billings

Lilly Ebert, Whitehall

Mika Smith, Charlo

Ruthy Vinson, Manhattan

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

**2022
WINNER**



BRYNLEE EPPERSON
AGE 15, LEWISTOWN

Last week on November 21, I shot my third deer. Since I hadn't been hunting in a long time and had not killed anything in three years, I was slightly nervous. My last deer that I shot in 2019 only had one antler (I had told my dad that I wanted to shoot a one-antlered buck the night before we got him...no kidding), so this hunt I was determined to get a big buck—preferably with both antlers. The buck I ended up with did not disappoint at all!

It was a Monday and I had woken up early to do my school (homeschool) so that I could go hunting later that day. We drove into the Judith Mountains onto some public land, parked on the side of the road when the snow got too deep to drive, and decided to hike further up the road to the spot we had in mind.

About seventy yards from the truck I spotted something to the left of the road—a buck. We quickly stepped into the woods, took off my gloves, and loaded a bullet into my .257 Weatherby. My dad got the shooting stick into position for me, but the deer had seen us and bolted further into the trees. We waited for a while hoping another deer was with it, but as we waited, my dad spotted the buck staring directly at us through some brush. I slowly raised my gun onto the shooting stick and started to scope in on the buck that was perfectly camouflaged about forty yards away. Before I could focus the scope, my dad noticed a doe walking straight towards us. I was going to have to shoot fast before the doe blocked my clear shot. I finally got the buck in my sights and had a perfect shot. My dad said, “whenever you're ready...” and I slowly squeezed the trigger.

Immediately the buck dropped. One more shot and he was dead. We waited about five minutes before approaching it just to be sure. I checked the time—it was 4:17. We hadn't even been hunting for thirty minutes and already killed a good size buck—a 5 by 3. While my dad did the dirty work of gutting the deer, I held the rib cage open for him. That's about the only gross gut stuff that I'm willing to do!

We loaded the buck into a game sled, wrapped him up like a taco, and slid him back to the truck. The buck ended up pulling us most of the way since it was all downhill. As we loaded him into the back of the truck his leg came up and knocked me upside the head. I guess that was his way of getting back at me for shooting him! It was definitely the fastest and easiest hunt I've ever been on. I plan on getting a European mount of it and hanging it up in my room next to my one-antlered deer.

**2022
WINNER**



EMALINE MUSSON
AGE 12, BELGRADE

I hunted with my parents my whole life and I was excited that this year I could hunt. My dad had a special gun made for me since I can only use one of my hands because I had a stroke. He wanted me to be able to shoot all by myself.

During the youth hunt, my little sister tried to get a deer, but she hesitated and didn't pull the trigger. So, when it was my turn to try, she gave me a pep talk and told me not to wait. She said, "As soon as you have the deer in your crosshairs, shoot!"

On October 25th, my dad got off work early and my whole family drove a little way out of town. We found some deer as soon as we got to state land and snuck up on them, but the deer knew we were there, so they never stopped moving.

So, we made a new plan and guessed where the deer would go. Then, we got in front of them and hid while waiting for them to walk to us. My dad helped me set up a tripod so I could shoot with one hand. Then, as soon as the buck I picked out stopped moving, I pulled the trigger.

The buck dropped in its tracks and my sister screamed and almost knocked me over with a huge hug. We spun in circles and laughed and I even cried a little bit because I was so excited.

After we gutted the deer and dragged it to our truck, we all got to have a celly-celly soda. One of my favorite parts of hunting is drinking a soda after success. For years, when my parents would get an animal, they would have a "celebratory soda." A long time ago, my little sister couldn't say, "celebratory" so she called it a "celly-celly soda." So now we all call it that.

I think my deer meat tastes so good and want to share it with my grandparents so they can see how good it is, too.

**2022
WINNER**



GRAYSON FULTON
AGE 10, COLSTRIP

I have wanted to hunt my whole life. I went with my parents all the time, but couldn't shoot anything. I packed a toy rifle with me wherever we went when I was littler. This year I got to apprentice hunt with my dad for the first time ever. I decided last year that I wanted to donate my first deer ever to the shelter in Bernie. They need food and we hunt a lot. I got my pack ready. Dad helped me make sure I had all my stuff. I helped get the camper ready and my sister made us cookies for snacks. I grabbed my 6.5 Creedmoor I got for my birthday and we were ready to go. Dad and I left for our friend's ranch to hunt. We got camp ready and set out to sit for the evening. I spotted a deer and it was a nice one. I decided to try and get it. I think I had buck fever cause I missed. Dad said it was OK we would try again in the morning. Mom showed up to camp that night. She didn't go with us in the morning but hunted with us that day. Dad and I hiked and mom met us at the end of the trail. We didn't see anything. We headed back to camp. Mom made dinner and dad and I headed to another spot by the river. We were sitting and a doe walked out. I wanted to shoot but dad said just wait. I saw my buck walk out and I knew I can't miss. I took my time. I took a breath and bang. I shot him. He didn't go down so dad told me to shoot again to make sure. I shot one more time. He hunched up and down he went. I was so pumped. I just put my head down and hit the ground saying yes yes. Dad was excited too. I wanted to gut him out but my dad did that for me. We took pictures and loaded him up. We headed back to camp to show everyone my deer. Mom and everyone was very happy for me. We hung him and all talked about how awesome he is. Dad says I am ruined now its a big first deer. That night the dogs chewed his nose off but dad said we can still mount him. We took him home. Dad and I cut him up and ground him into burger for the shelter. It was the best day ever. I can't wait to hunt again.

**2022
WINNER**



GREYSON GARZA
AGE 14, BELT

My alarm goes off. I roll over to my bed stand and it says 5:30. I hear my dad's footsteps above me getting ready for a long morning of hunting. I bundled up because it was the first snow of the fall and it was below freezing. I put on my hunting boots and we grabbed our gear. It was dark outside and there were large snowflakes fluttering everywhere like little white crystals.

When I opened the gate onto our land we saw 3 does run off into the dark woods. We crossed the crick and we walked to our hunting stand that we built four years prior. We settled down and waited for the shooting light. We could hear the loud groan of the trees as the light wind swayed the branches and leaves back and forth. As it got brighter and brighter we could see around us a little and I started to get really excited. "There are some deer coming from the left side."

"Well it's good to see them moving around." I whispered so we didn't spook them. We sat looking out opposite windows for a good twenty minutes.

Three does cross and the others turn and start coming from the door. I waited to see what they were and I saw antlers and a small buck walked out. He might have been a six pointer. Right behind him was a nice buck that I actually was gonna pass. Then I saw some kickers on the back of the antlers and I decided I would shoot. This time I had a rest on the window and was confident with the shot I was about to take. He was quartering away a bit but at thirty yards I was confident with the shot.

BOOM! I took the shot. I was very confident that I hit him because he was thirty yards. We waited a few minutes and walked to where I shot him. "No blood you missed him," Dad said.

"No, there's no way it was from thirty yards," I said as the other buck sprinted away from us down from the creek bed.

"So do we just follow the tracks then and find him that way?" I asked.

"Well he didn't run off with the other buck," Dad said.

"Oh shoot dad he's literally right there." Not 10 yards away from us in the big bush not too far away from the stand there he lay. "How was there no blood?"

"I have no idea"

We drug him out of the bush and we started gutting him. When we were done we took pictures and then came my least favorite part dragging him.. We jumped six bucks on the drag and we saw plenty more deer. We lifted him up in the truck and drove home. I was excited to tell everybody that we got a good buck this early in the season.

**2022
WINNER**



JACK HEICHER
AGE 11, TOWNSEND

The Weirdest Waterfowl Hunt Ever

Nobody told me that duck hunting on Youth Waterfowl Weekend involved a bicycle. Or how hard it is to pedal a bicycle while wearing waders. I found out. My dad took me to a place that we call "Duck Bay." It is on a lake, in Montana. (Only somebody who lives out-of-state gives away hunting spots.) I will say that it is not easy to get there.

We put the dogs, decoys, hunting gear and bikes in the truck, and drove to the lake before sunrise. I wore my waders, an old camo t-shirt three sizes too big (my dad says he will buy me a real camo shirt when I stop growing), and my shooting earmuffs. We strapped on our headlamps, and jumped on the bikes, which is not easy while wearing stiff waders. My dad steered his bike with one hand and carried my shotgun and the decoys with the other. I pedaled in my waders, trying not to tip over. The dogs mostly got in the way.

We rode the bikes about a mile in the dark, parked, then hiked across a field and through a pond with six inches of water and enough mud to keep us walking fast. We got to Duck Bay, and there was nobody there (likely because nobody else thought of riding a bicycle in waders). We set up the blind. My dad put out the decoys. Our yellow lab, Percy, ran out, picked one decoy up, then brought it to us, like he always does. My dad scolded Percy and put the decoy back, like he always does.

We waited in the blind. Our older Chesapeake, Chug, sat out in front looking at the sky and whining a little while Percy sat close enough to constantly thump the blind wall with his wagging tail. We all looked for birds.

Black dots appeared in the sky. Birds came in but kept turning away. Finally, four geese flew toward us, but three of them turned away from the blind. One kept coming closer. It might not have been the smartest goose in the flock. I shot it, my first goose ever. The dogs retrieved it. Then the ducks came in and I shot a teal. That was my third duck ever.

When the hunting ended, we packed up and waded back through the pond, hiked over the field to our bicycles, and pedaled in our waders all the way back to the truck. It didn't get any easier. Plus, my dad was now carrying a goose and a duck.

Hunting is fun. I'm glad I got to go out with my dad and shoot my first goose. I like to eat the birds later. I'm glad I don't have to do any chores for the rest of the day after hunting, except for putting everything away. And I'm glad that I don't normally wear my waders when pedaling my bike.

**2022
WINNER**



JAEGER TOMBRE
AGE 15, SAVAGE

There is more to a hunt than pulling a trigger. A hunt is a series of days or weeks that test your skill, patience, and determination. My hunt was no exception. The weeks passed without even firing a shot. Every opportunity seemed to slip from my fingers as property lines and the setting sun kept my finger away from the trigger. It was 2 days before the season ended, when I went on another ordinary hunt for a buck. I was up at 6:00 a.m. and drove to my first spot in the hills. My dad assisted me with finding deer that morning. Unfortunately, does were all we saw. Feeling defeated we began our hike back to the truck. Then the unexpected happened, a buck popped out 200 yards ahead of us. I quickly drew my rifle and aimed toward the buck. He was standing head on staring at me. It was an easy shot, but reckless. Having shot, would've likely wounded the animal, so I removed my finger from the trigger and watched it prance away. I followed it to see if I could get another chance but at this point it was too far gone. Had I just missed my last chance? Why didn't I just shoot? Regret flooded my head as I returned to the pickup. Deep down I knew why I didn't take the shot. In the past I had made an unethical shot and wounded a deer, resulting in having to put an additional shot into the distressed animal to end its misery. It hurt too much to watch an animal suffer like that and I never wanted to put that pain on an animal again, and as a result I have been hesitant to make another shot.

After losing that deer, I went to another hunting spot. I hiked up and down coulees for hours but never took a shot. The hunt was like a 5-hour leg workout. Unsuccessfully, my legs like jelly, I struggled to return to the pickup as blisters throbbed on my heels. Once again, I was coming home empty handed.

I knew if I wanted to bring home a deer, I would have to be more confident with my shot. The next morning, we returned to the same spot I had seen the buck before. It was the last chance I'd have for the season. I jumped out of the vehicle, sore from the day before, and started walking up the steep terrain when I heard something in the brush and saw the beautiful buck from the previous day proudly standing in the sunrise. This was the second chance that I needed. With my legs burning and blister throbbing I pursued him. Out of breath, I took the shot. I missed but miraculously he didn't move. I calmed myself, taking a deep breath I took one last shot. He dropped. This experience tested every part of me as a hunter and resulted in a successful, clean, rewarding, and memorable hunt.

**2022
WINNER**



JASON MICHALSKY
AGE 16, BILLINGS

Better to be Lucky than Good

The day started out at 5:00 AM when I forced myself out of the warm comfortable camper bed to go hunting with my dad, grandfather, and great uncle. The previous night, I had arrived after dark. I hadn't even seen the terrain yet so all I could do was follow my dad through the hills. We hiked up and down ridges until the sun came up, taking a few minutes to rest upon one as it rained a bit. There was nothing much to be seen, which isn't unusual. I've been hunting a few times with my family in the past few years, and we don't typically see much, especially in the wee hours of morning. As we moved through the hills, the temperatures seemed to drop since we were wet from the rain, and after two hours, my dad and I decided it was probably best we started going back to camp before we got hypothermia.

On the way back, I was able to finally see my surroundings, but I realized that if I didn't have my dad by my side, I would have been lost. While on the walk I found an old deer antler shed on the ground and made a joke saying, "this is the lucky antler." As we walked back down the trail we had come up, my dad spotted something. "Look!" He whispered. Perhaps it was the lucky antler or maybe it was fate but standing in front of us was the biggest bull elk I have ever seen. The bull was just off the trail that we walked up only a few hours earlier.

My dad and I snuck closer until I could get a 300 yd shot. I shot three times, and the elk was on the ground. This animal was so big I had to thank God for sending him my way. "Elk are where they find you," is what my great uncle said. I still find it amazing how lucky I was, to draw a tag and harvest the biggest elk I've ever seen on public land. Dad and I cleaned and tagged the animal and walked back to camp to get some help and to change into dry clothes. We had my grandpa, my cousin, and my great uncle join us to haul it out.

"This is where the work begins," my dad told me. I didn't think it would be too bad at the beginning but after hauling a hind quarter and helping with the head, I fell asleep as soon as I lied down. The next day my dad and I returned to the trail where I had set the deer antler down so I could shoot my bull. I decided to keep the shed as it surely proved to be lucky because not only did I harvest an elk, but in the following days my father and uncle were also blessed.

**2022
WINNER**



LILLY EBERT
AGE 12, WHITEHALL

Hi, my name is Lilly Ebert. I am 12 years old from Whitehall, and this was my first-year hunting elk. For my 12th birthday in June my grandparents got me a 7mm08. I have been really excited to shoot it. I spent every weekend on my horse hunting until I finally got my bull in Southwest Montana this last weekend. It was so fun hunting this season with my grandpa and mom. I hunted all weekend starting Friday morning, my mom said most people would not be out on a horse it was so cold. It did not bother me I got to miss school and ride, so I was happy. On the morning I got my bull, I was raced up the hill on my horse after we spotted them, and I was able to get off and get a good shot at him before he went into the trees. He was with some cow elk that ran off down the hill after I shot. He died a little way from where I shot him, and my grandpa gutted him out for me. He showed me how to do it he's really fast at it.

My good horse Doc carried me all over the mountains, he is one of my favorite horses we have! He helped pack my elk out the next day too. Doc and I put in a ton of miles this season in the snow and cold. It was all worth the hard work to be able to get my first elk. Elk hunting is way more fun than deer hunting and I can't wait to go out again next year to try to get a bigger one!

Thank you for reading my story,
Lilly Ebert

**2022
WINNER**



MIKA SMITH
AGE 10, CHARLO

Dear Governor, My name is Mika and I am 10 years old. I have gone duck and goose hunting with my grandpa since I was 4 years old. I call my grandpa papa. Papa does not have a dog so I have picked up the ducks and geese for him all this time. This year I finally got to shoot my own ducks but I still am picking up my papa's ducks for him. Papa has showed me how to have fun hunting but also makes sure I am being safe. He said I couldn't hunt until I had passed hunter's safety. My mom went with me this spring. I got an A but my mom got an A+. My papa makes me clean my own game. He also helps me cook it. I was able to take duck to school for lunch a few times and show my friends. I plan to go turkey hunting in a few weeks. I also got my deer last week. I'm very lucky to have my papa as my mentor. Thank you for making the youth hunt available for me. Mika Smith

**2022
WINNER**



RUTHY VINSON
AGE 14, MANHATTAN

As I was unpacking my things from my last hunting trip, I thought back to the most memorable hunt this season...

We were out looking for deer for an exhausting ten hours. It was 4:00 pm as my dad, sister and I walked out to a group of trees where the grass was tall and the brush thick. We sat down to wait. Soon, a large herd of young cattle came out to investigate us. My dad glanced sideways at me and we both sighed.

"I suppose we'll have to just wait until they leave. Or we could go up the hill and look out from there." he said.

Both Anna and I voted for the latter. We packed up and headed out, with the cows following us curiously. We climbed the hill and looked down. The wind was at our backs, which was inconvenient.

"Shoot. Doesn't seem like there's much up here or down there in the valley. Let's head back to our spot before."

By then it was about 4:30. We dropped back into the valley and to our hideout. The cows, of course, followed us. We got to our place and settled in. The cows eventually lost interest and wandered away. As I was scanning back and forth on the treeline and the fence, I spotted movement. I scrambled for the binoculars, hoping for the best.

"Please, please. Be a buck!" I thought. I peered through them and spotted what I had seen move, but not what I was hoping for. It had a pair of pointed ears, bobbing up and down. "Is that a wolf? No, it couldn't be. Wolves don't live out here." I told myself. I tore my eyes away, and turned to dad. "Dad, what is that out there? It's not a wolf, is it?" He grabbed his own binoculars and looked for himself. "It's definitely not a wolf, Ruthy. It's a coyote, see the difference in color? Also, the coyote is much smaller than a wolf," he answered. "Can I shoot it?" I asked. He hesitated. "Well, we're not out here to shoot coyotes, but since we only have about ten minutes left of shooting light, go for it." "Thanks Dad!" I exclaimed. I carefully took the .243 off its resting place against the tree, and set up the tripod for a rest. The coyote was bobbing up and down through the tall grass. I waited until it had gotten to a place where it was clear, and it finally stopped moving. "Remember, if you shoot it, you'll be carrying it back to the truck," Dad said. I hesitated. Whatever. I looked up, and saw that the coyote was still. I slowly squeezed the trigger, and BOOM! The coyote dropped like a rock. After my ears had stopped ringing, we went to take a look....

"Ruthy! Hey!" my dad called from the living room. Shoot. Off reminiscing in my room again. "Sorry Dad! What did you need?"

The End

