Roads to Wilderness — That Was

Richard Weekwerth

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Persons who look down on Montana's western mountains for the first time have a number of surprises. One of the most startling is the multitude of roads that are visible from an aerial vantage point. Like the spreading branches of a malignancy roads probe into almost every cranny of the mountains and make access easy to what was wilderness but a few years ago.

Do you realize there is approximately one mile of road for every 1.5 square miles of land in the Hungry Horse and Coram Ranger Districts of the Flathead National Forest?

Presently there are logging roads situated in almost every major drainage on both sides of Hungry Horse Reservoir and the South Fork of Flat- head River from the Hungry Horse Dam to Bunker Creek with the exception of the Upper and Lower Twin Creeks. As of 1969, there were 617 miles of roads located in the Coram, Hungry Horse, and Spotted Bear Ranger Districts. The Coram District leads with 279 miles, the Hungry Horse District has 274 miles, and the Spotted Bear District has 64 miles. Present plans call for an increase of existing roads in the Spotted Bear District. The most important of which, in the interest of game management, will be the Dean Ridge and Bunker Creek roads.

These three ranger districts encompass a total of approximately 1,075,832 acres or 1,681 square miles. On the basis of 617 miles of roads for the 1,681 square miles of forest habitat, it means there is one mile of road for every 2.7 miles of land.

Presently, the Spotted Bear District, which is the largest of the three districts in the drainage with a total of 537,243 acres, has the least amount of roads. This is partly due to the fact that approximately fifty percent of this district is within the boundary of the Bob Marshall Wilderness. Logging activities near Spotted Bear did not develop on a large scale until the 1960's.

The area drained by the South Fork of the Flathead River has long been regarded as one of the finest wilderness elk hunting areas in Montana. Up to the late 1950's the Spotted Bear vicinity was the hub of outfitter activity with numerous base camps and campgrounds located in the area. Pack strings embarked from Spotted Bear for destinations in the roadless and wilderness areas.

The coming of the 1960's saw road construction starting in the Spotted Bear area. Now roads extend well beyond the Spotted Bear Ranger Station up Bunker Creek on the main South Fork. Another road extends up the Spotted Bear River to Beaver Creek, a distance of over nine miles. Both of these roads are accompanied by spur logging roads. These road systems allow vehicle travel to reach points much nearer the wilderness area as well as provide extensive access to prime game habitat. Future plans also call for extensions of these roads to reach logging sites on both forks of Bunker Creek and to Dean Ridge on the Spotted Bear River.

With the advent of these roads much of the recreational activity is now based at Meadow Creek on the South Fork of the Flathead and Beaver Creek on the Spotted Bear River.



Where can game escape? When areas become laced with logging roads, the hunter advantage is obviously improved.

What effect will these roads have on the big game populations? It is a known fact that grizzly bears are wilderness creatures and are not compatible with human beings, e.g. the demise of the grizzly in the plains and foothill areas of Montana. Elk are also subject to disturbances of the same type. We have observed that one snowmobile will cause elk to retreat farther up the mountain or to more secluded wooded areas on the winter range.

Several snowmobile trips were made to Spotted Bear and each time a larger number of elk were observed on the trip to Spotted Bear than on the return trip to Coram two or three days later. Traffic and human activities during the summer also disturb elk, especially during the calving season when they are most secretive in their habits.

Roads also improve hunter success and increase hunter pressure. When they are located in key areas where an elk migration may occur during the hunting season they may disrupt the migration pattern or put heavy hunting pressure on the migrating elk because of ease of access.

The results become quite evident in the case of Bunker Creek and Spotted Bear drainages. The 1969 hunting season was the first after the road was opened up Bunker Creek. During the period from 1957- 1968 never more than five percent (and usually one or two percent) of the total South Fork elk kill was checked from the Bunker Creek area, but in 1969 over eight percent of the elk checked from the South Fork drainage came from the Bunker Creek drainage. During the period before roads were built in the Spotted Bear drainage the average number of elk killed in the drainage comprised eighteen percent of the total number of elk killed in the South Fork. In the period after the presence of a road this percentage increased to an average of slightly over twenty-two percent.

With the future plans calling for new roads and road extension in the Spotted Bear area, the future for elk, grizzly bears and goats does not look bright. Study efforts will continue to be made to evaluate the effects of the road systems on elk, goats, and grizzly bears of the areas. Closing of the roads to the general public use would permit logging and minimize stress on game animals.



Closing of unused logging roads to general travel would minimize the stress on game animals.

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