



GOVERNOR'S YOUTH HUNTING STORY CONTEST

2024 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 in the fall of 2024. To enter the contest, hunters wrote and submitted a story of no more than 500 words about a hunt from 2024. Governor Gianforte selected ten winning hunters to honor in the State Capitol.

Congratulations to the winners of the 2024 contest. This storybook features their stories.

Ambreigh Morris, Baker
Amelia Saylor, Wilsall
Hannah Smith, Bozeman
Hays Darr, Bozeman
Jacob Reddish, Lakeside
Leyton Arnold, Belgrade
Malena Altschwager, Corvallis
Noah Wheatley, Deer Lodge
Remuda Seymour, Dillon
Wyatt Mosher, Jefferson City

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

**2024
WINNER**



AMBREIGH MORRIS

AGE 12, BAKER

I will never forget the day I decided I wanted to go hunting. I was a young girl with a single mum who worked a lot and had nothing to do with hunting. I was thankful enough to have an uncle who was married to my family and who was a very passionate hunter. He guided me through Hunter's education. I passed and went on to get my license and gear. My Uncle Jon and I went to Dickinson to grab everything I needed. A couple of days later, we went to Runnings to get my license. This whole experience was fun, but I was so ready to go on the actual hunt. My uncle and I got everything ready so we could go hunting over the kids' hunting weekend. I was very excited! The anticipation was almost unbearable. I woke up early, geared up, and headed out with my uncle. We spent hours glassing and hoping for the perfect shot. Disappointment settled in as the day ended without a kill, but I was determined. The next morning, I woke up at the same time and my Uncle Jon and I went out to a different spot, not far from the one we were at the day before. We were lucky enough to find a lot of deer. So we set up our equipment and waited for them to come closer. We had a doe and its babies came 20 yards away from us, which was awesome! Finally, we started moving closer to this group of big bucks. We had to jump over a fence as we moved, but they saw us. The bucks were staring straight at us! I got my gun loaded and ready. Even though I spent a lot of time practicing at the range, I missed by the slightest bit. The bucks ran. At this point, I thought I wouldn't get my deer. My uncle decided that I was going to try once more at least. We ran to the truck and drove over to the other side of the hill. Turns out, there were a lot of deer. We looked at one of the bucks on top of a large hill. It was almost 500 yards away! I knew it was the one. While loading my gun, I had to calm myself down and ensure I was confident in my shot. The only thing going through my head was that if I missed, I did all this for nothing. So, I had to take my best aim. Then, I squeezed and I heard a big resonant sound. As soon as I looked through my scope again, the buck was going down this hill. I had shot him! Excitement and relief washed over me. I had done it! With my uncle's guidance, I successfully hunted my first deer. This was a gratifying experience, and I'll never forget the proud look on my uncle's face as I shot my first deer.

**2024
WINNER**



AMELIA SAYLOR
AGE 14, WILLSALL

Hi, my name is Amelia Saylor. My family just moved to Wilsall this Fall, and I wanted to share the story of my first mule deer. It all started at the trailhead at 5 A.M. It was opening day.

It was just my dad and I in the mountains. It had snowed the other day but most of it had melted so it wasn't too cold. As we began, my dad said that we wouldn't hike too far (heard that one before), but as the sun came up we kept hiking farther and farther. We kept going over hill after hill, just wanting to see around the corner. Until, before we knew it, we were 5 miles back in! We went up off the trail to gain some elevation and see if we could see anything. My dad kept telling me that it looked like really good mule deer country. So we glassed and glassed and had some breakfast. We saw some mountain goats, the kids were really fluffy and bounced along down the shale shoot. They were fun to watch. After a while the wind started to pick up and it started to get cold, so we decided to keep hiking. We went down a really steep hill with no trail, and I kept thinking how hard it would be to hike back up from there. When we got to the bottom we had to cross a raging creek with a little waterfall. When we got past the creek there was this big field that looked too good not to have something bedded in it. We didn't make it far into the field when my dad turned around and whisper yelled "Shooter buck!" At the same time I looked up and saw this buck running away from us! I didn't really care about how big he was because I didn't want to shoot a big mule deer for my first time anyway. My dad got the .338 Lapua ready while I got my earmuffs out of my backpack. (I was totally unprepared!) I told my dad that he should just shoot it because I thought that it was going to run away and I just wanted to put meat in our freezer. But my dad urged me to the gun anyway and the buck soon stopped and looked back at us. I laid down and got set up on the gun while my dad ranged him. 250 yards! We dialed the scope. I took the shot. He kicked a little bit and just stood there for a second. I asked if I should shoot him again, but then he rolled down the hill! My dad gave me a big hug and we went to find him. He was an old, backcountry 3 by 4 with a lot of character. I helped my dad cut him up and then we loaded the meat on our packs and began the 5.3 mile hike back to the truck!

**2024
WINNER**



HANNAH SMITH
AGE 14, BOZEMAN

There are four different mountain ranges around my home, and I've had the chance to harvest three deer in Montana now, but all have been from the same mountain range. I guess you could say that I have a hotspot!

My Daddy and I had spotted a nice 4x3 buck on the opposite side of the canyon we were hunting, but then we saw this little forkie with a doe on "our" side and decided to try for him. I had the chance to harvest a larger buck last year, and thought it would be fun to have both a big one and a little one. After carefully and quietly working over a low ridge, we spotted my little buck again. With his natural mule deer curiosity, he was listening and looking in our direction. I slowly advanced to a large stump, being careful to avoid dry leaves and not step on anything that would be loud as I did so. I got down on one knee, took my gun off my shoulder, and got a steady rest. The buck stood not far ahead of us, among some trees and quartering towards us. He was standing perfectly still, with his large ears forward and alert.

With the stump serving as both cover and a rest, I aimed carefully, took the safety off, and fired. The little buck hunched his back, took a few steps forward, and immediately laid down. We waited, and before long he got up and slowly walked forward. I was confident in my first shot, but a second would ensure that we would not need to track him far, if at all. I loaded another shell, and as he stepped broadside to us, I aimed and fired again. This time he went down right away.

My Daddy hiked back to get our meat packs, while I stayed with my little buck. His antlers had a beautiful dark color to them, from rubbing on the burnt trees in that area. I like to come up with names for the deer I harvest, and decided to call this one Jerry Forkshire. When Daddy came back, I helped him skin and quarter my forkie, and we divided the meat up between our two packs. It was cool, but sunny; a great day to be out hunting in Montana! Our hike out was all downhill. There was some patchy snow, but it was not deep. The trickiest part was figuring out where to cross a little ravine without getting too tangled up in the brush.

With a busy schedule this year, we did not have a lot of time to be out hunting, and I am very grateful for the time I had with my Daddy, the chance to be out in creation, and for Jerry Forkshire, my first little forkie buck!

**2024
WINNER**



HAYS DARR
AGE 10, BOZEMAN

My first bird

It was August when I killed my first sharptail. I had been practicing for two months at Gallatin Sporting Clays. We visited Denton, MT, to run our dog in a field trial and hunt sharptial. As we drove to Denton, I wondered if I would get a bird this weekend. We drove up into the parking lot where we were going to stay. Dogs were barking and wagging their tail, getting ready for the field trial tomorrow. My dog's name is Una. She is in the field trial, but on Sunday, we will hunt the next day. I was ready to see the dogs run. First, I watched Braces (two dogs working together) and then Gun (a single dog), and then we went out to eat before we had to go to bed. Tomorrow was a big day for me. I woke up as excited as a dog with a big pile of beef jerky. As we were about to get out of the truck to go to our hunting place, we saw a bunch of sharptails fly into where we were hunting. I was the first to get ready, so I went to look around where I saw them land. Then the dog went on point, went over the bird's flush (I had never shot at a bird, so I missed), and then we went on. There were so many birds and I kept missing until I finally saw a bird fly over me. I shot I felt a lot of excitement as I saw the bird go down; we kept hunting till it was time to go and then the next day, I had to leave. This was the most exciting hunting trip I had ever gone on, and I will never forget it.

**2024
WINNER**



JACOB REDDISH
AGE 16, LAKESIDE

I have always hunted with my Dad since the day I was old enough to join him and roam around the wilderness. Every trip has etched memories and unforgettable experiences for both of us. He has taught me everything about hunting that I know. We were able to hunt multiple times together this year, but he had to go back to work. We talked about me going out to my Grandparent's property on a solo hunt. I felt very comfortable with my surroundings on their property and confident in my abilities, and only felt hesitation because my Dad would not be there to experience the hunt with me like usual. Even when our hunts are not successful there are so many moments to each outing that make hunting together so much more than just harvesting an animal; the quiet, the laughter, and happiness doing something we both enjoy very much. These moments are the foundations of my love for the sport and mean so much to me as I share the stories later on. In the end, my Dad encouraged me to go out on my own. So I decided to drive down Saturday morning. After turning off the highway and driving along the dirt road of the property a huge 5x5 buck walked in front of my truck. It was well before shooting light, so I just sat and watched him chase some does into the trees. Seeing this buck made me even more excited, I parked soon after and walked to my spot to wait for the sun to rise.. I sat down near a pond and just listened in the darkness. The sounds were fascinating. It's always very quiet down there but now in the dead silence I heard the beavers splashing and two bucks fighting deep in the trees. All these little things added to my hunt and made it even better. Legal shooting light came along and about ten minutes in I decided to quietly get up to take a look around a couple trees that were blocking my view of a distant meadow. Almost instantly I saw a deer, and he saw me too. I laid down, put in my earplugs, and ranged the buck as fast as I could. He was 261 yards away. He continued to stare at me as I patiently waited for him to turn broadside. Then he turned and started to trot, so I yelled a loud "YO", he stopped perfectly broadside and I took the shot and he fell. My exhale breath was a huge white cloud in the cold air from my adrenaline as I continued to watch through the scope. I slowly gathered up my gear smiling ear to ear and walked towards the buck. I felt so accomplished and excited and couldn't wait to tell my Grandparents and call my dad, and share the story of my first solo hunt.

**2024
WINNER**



LEYTON ARNOLD
AGE 14, BELGRADE

My First Elk Story

I have always wanted to shoot a bull elk. I saved money from my 4-H pig projects for the last 7 years to buy hunting equipment for this moment. It was 5:00 AM on a snowy winter day in November 2024. My Dad and I got up and we were ready to go on our last hunt of the season. We were deciding where to hunt and my dad didn't feel like climbing the ridge again that day. We hunted the ridge all season with no luck. So, we decided to go somewhere else, but the roads on the highway were icy. It was foggy so we decided to go back home, and I thought all hope was lost. But then my dad said that we can go check out this new hunting spot. As we drove to the trail, there it was. A large herd of elk was traveling right up into the mountains, crossing the road in front of us and I could not believe it. It was the best site I've ever seen. We hiked up the mountains with steep ridges to find a big bull elk. When I get to the top of the ridge, I spot the herd. Then, I heard a gunshot, and I thought the elk would leave. Luckily, the hunter was shooting mule deer which I found out later. So, I made my way over to the other mountain while my dad is behind me. At the top, I saw a 5x5 bull elk standing broadside among the herd and it was the best sight I've ever seen. I aimed my 6.5 Creedmoor rifle on the elk's shoulder and I miss. But then I get another opportunity to shoot and drop him with my second bullet. It was the greatest feeling, and I was so thankful. My dad was proud, and we were very happy. As we approach the bull elk, I still see him breathing. I thought back to my hunter education class and knew that you cannot leave animals suffering. So, I shoot him one more time. Once he was dead, we gutted him and then called some of our friends to help us pack him out from the steep ridge. If it wasn't for our friends, we would probably still be up there now. I'm very thankful that they that they came and we will give them some meat for their help. As we were hiking out, I had to carry about 80 pounds of meat on my back and the others had about 140 pounds in their packs. It was very tough, but we will get good meat to eat for the rest of the year and I will always be proud of the first elk that I shot. It was an awesome hunt, and I will never forget that moment. I can't wait to do it again in the future.

**2024
WINNER**



MALENA ALTSCHWAGER
AGE 13, CORVALLIS

November 8, 2024 was a chilly day. The air seemed to crystallize as I breathed, coming up as smoke from a chimney. The morning sky was pale in color. Purple, with the misty blue of morning lingering. It was as though you could smell the majestic mountains, frosted flowers, and nearly naked trees. Nothing could contain my smile. A wonderful sense of warmth came through, slicing through the chill in my bones, the one that rattled my teeth till I thought they would crack. I hoped that the evening hunting would be as amazing as the morning.

When we got in the blind that evening, we hurried to get everything ready and settled. We adjusted the bipod to the proper height, then I rested my gun on my thigh. Just a short time later, a good sized four by four buck came by. At first it remained unseen but when I stole a glance out of the window, I saw it. It took a moment for my dad to notice it, but when he did, he said, "Okay, get ready." It was a frontal shot, standing straight and true. I clicked the safety off and took my shot. The deer dropped the apple it had been eating and took off, bounding on three legs. "Please God, don't let him be hurt," I prayed. Dad left the tent and walked on silent, slow feet, and I saw him jump. The deer had been just down the hill, but bolted. We searched for a short time, looking for the blood that was sure to be there, with nothing to be seen. After what felt like a long time, but was really only around half an hour, we found two tiny dots. Then nothing. We got our headlamps on searching in the dark and weaving through the high grass. After nearly an hour and fifteen minutes, we found another drop. And another. And another. I was still frightened that it had suffered, and angry with myself for not taking more time to shoot. Just a few moments later, we discovered it laying in the bushes. Dead. Hope filled me, but a sense of dread still wrapped around my heart. I was still fearful that it had not died as quickly as I hoped. It had only run a short distance, that had to be good. While gutting, dad showed me where the bullet impacted. Although not the best shot, it died quickly. With more joy in my heart, but still not complete triumph, I felt more relaxed.

After the adventure of the evening was over and the moment of joy had passed, I realized that there was one thing I should have done first. So as we sat in the living room, I gave thanks to God, not only for the deer, but also for the beauty of the day.

Daniel 2:20

"Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, for wisdom and might are his."

**2024
WINNER**



NOAH WHEATLEY
AGE 13, DEER LODGE

We woke up at around 4:30 in the morning after a couple hours of sleep in between the ride North and the couple hours at the motel we stay at yearly. Everybody was sleepy and slow moving, but we got our poop in a group and were walking in at least an hour before shooting light. On the way in we saw a group of deer that seemed pretty spooked. About 20 minutes later, we are sitting at our spot, the cold biting at our noses and the wind whipping us around like rag dolls. As the world awakes and the day begins, we understand why the deer were going the opposite direction. A truck was driving away from the river by the pivot below us. The deer had seen the truck and left the field in the dark. We leave our spot early knowing that it wasn't going to be successful and head for the deep coulees behind us.

Coulee hunting is hard because you need to be both fast on the gun and accurate with your shot placement. Deer only giving you a split second, so you need to be fast to get on the gun and make the ethical shot. My dad and I start around a corner when out of nowhere, 2 Muley bucks have their heads turned and are ready to run. As fast as I could, I get on the gun and aimed at the bigger buck of the two. Safety off, I bury the crosshairs in the crease between the front shoulder and his armpit and squeeze slowly. The gun goes off, and the buck runs over the crest of the hill. "Just below him. That's on me, I didn't tell you to dial," my dad apologizes. My gun is sighted in for three-hundred, but after that I need to dial the scope. We gather our things and continue down the coulee

We walked for a long time, peeking around corners and following the highway of trails that run through the coulee. We reach another corner, and four muley bucks stop dead in their tracks. I'm already on the gun. Ranged this time, I start my squeeze. One shot, and the buck falls.

I cut my tag and worked on the deer until everything we wanted and needed was in our backpacks. I followed my shot and found that I shot through the lungs, an ethical, clean kill. The last thing we add on my pack is the head, counting three points by four points, not counting brow tines. We were soon walking out of steep hills, five miles away from the truck. After a long day of packing out the deer, we had a celebratory freeze-dried dinner.

Montana is so special because of my dad, who has taken me out with him since I was an infant. I love getting to explore this amazing state with him, doing something that he and I absolutely love, and learn just like he did.

**2024
WINNER**



REMUDA SEYMOUR
AGE 12, DILLON

I was getting ready for school on a Monday but my dad got a call that he didn't have to go to work. He asked if I wanted to go hunting. I chose to go hunting because I didn't know what the future would hold.

We went to my dad's hunting spot because he saw two nice bucks there before. The first spot we saw a little spike but no big deer. We then went to a hay stack to glass but still didn't see anything. We tried to use old sheds to rattle to see if the deer would come in. We saw some nice bucks but they were on the wrong side of the fence.

We decided to take a break and get some lunch. I ate my lunch but still had some room for Cherry Pie. Then we headed back out to hunt.

The little spike deer that we saw earlier was now in a pasture but there was also a bigger buck where my dad and I saw the spike earlier. My dad had to call him in with a deer grunt. He jumped the fence onto our side so I could shoot. My heart was racing! He was broad side between two trees. I took my time to line up. Once I was lined up, I pulled the trigger.

I shot him right where the neck meets the shoulder. I got him with one shot! I was so happy! As we were walking up to him, I couldn't hide my excitement! I couldn't believe how pretty and big he was.

We didn't have time to take our pickup in the morning so we had my dad's car. We had to put my buck on top of my dad's car to get him home! We were ready to head home with stomachs full of Cherry Pie and a nice buck. Eating Cherry Pie is our new tradition for going hunting!

**2024
WINNER**



WYATT MOSHER
AGE 15, JEFFERSON CITY

A Hunt To Remember:

This hunting trip was very special to me. My family moved to Montana two years ago from Oregon and even though I've always loved hunting and spending time with my dad and my hunting friends, the amount of wildlife and animals I get to see here is amazing. This hunting trip in particular was very amazing. This is the first time I have ever been antelope hunting in my life. I was very fortunate to draw a tag 30 minutes from my house and I got to go with my dad and his buddy Kyle. We got to the hunting spot, we sat in the truck and scouted for a little bit, and then my dad spotted some antelope on the top of the hill. We took our time and worked our way towards the animals. It was already getting towards dark, which meant shooting hour was coming to an end but we ended up going after them and didn't get any type of opportunity to harvest one that night. I was a little bummed but my dad said let's go out and try to get this antelope tomorrow so we woke up the next morning bright and early, picked up my dad's friend Kyle again, and headed back to the hunting spot. After we got there, it didn't take us long to spot that big antelope we were looking for. As we drove up to the top of the hill to try to get a better angle to try and get the antelope, we stopped and got out of the truck, got our stuff on and got ready. I was a little bit nervous at this point because again I have never been antelope hunting and there's always that little nerve inside of you when you know you're about to accomplish something big. So as we were hopping over the fence to get from BMA to State land we tried to set up and get a nice shot but the animals kept moving away from us behind this hill. We decided we needed to crawl to not spook them and to get a clean shot on them. As we are crawling I started to get a little bit more nervous (and had a few run ins with some prickly pear cactus), but was ready as we came over this hill and I saw the big antelope broadside and took the shot! Antelope down! The amount of joy I had was unreal. I was so happy after a long 2 days of hunting had paid off. When we had it measured, it was 79 1/8, just shy of the Boone and Crocket 80 minimum. But to me it's a trophy and I am so glad I got to spend such great time with my dad and our new friends here in Montana.

THANK YOU TO OUR PRIZE PARTNERS

