

Alberta Conservation Association
2022/23 Project Summary Report

Project Name: Hunter Perspectives on Obtaining Access to Private Land in Alberta

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Partnerships

Alberta Environment and Protected Areas

Alberta Fish & Game Association – Minister’s Special Licence Program

Alberta Professional Outfitters Society

Brad Fenson Outdoors

University of Alberta

University of Waterloo

Key Findings

- Hunters from large cities were less likely to have received hunting permission on private land than rural residents.
- Hunters who were seeking permission on private land in the 300-series Wildlife Management Units were less likely to have had success than those who asked in the 100, 200, or 500 series. And those who sought hunting permission in the southern 300 series had lower success than those in the northern 300 series.
- Hunters who asked for permission on non-agricultural land were less likely to be successful than those who asked for permission to hunt on cropland.
- Hunters asking for permission in a pronghorn management zone had higher success than those outside of a pronghorn management zone.

Abstract

A voluntary online survey was used in 2021/22 to investigate the perspective of hunters on acquiring access to private land in Alberta. We received over 3,500 visits to our online survey with just under 3,000 people completing the entire survey. The vast majority of survey participants were Alberta Resident licensed hunters from across the province. There was a near even split between those who lived in cities versus small towns and rural areas. During 2022/23, we explored factors that might be associated with whether a hunter was granted permission the last time they contacted a landowner. We found that hunters who live in large cities were less likely to be granted access compared to those who live in rural areas. When compared to the largest age group in our survey (55 to 64 years old), those in the 35- to 44-year-old and 45- to 54-year-old categories were less likely to obtain permission, while those in the 65 and older age group had a higher probability of success. Hunters who were seeking permission on cropland were more likely to have been granted access than those who were seeking permission on non-agricultural land. Those asking for permission in a pronghorn management zone were more likely to have had success than those asking for permission in the rest of the province. Permission was least likely to be obtained in the Foothills Wildlife Management Unit zones (300 series), with the southern 300 series producing a lower likelihood of success than the northern 300 series. Factors that did not appear to be associated with getting hunting permission on private land included how avid a hunter was (i.e., how many days in the year they typically hunt on private land) and whether they identified as a visible minority. We will continue to investigate and report on these data in 2023/24.

Introduction

Over the past century, hunters have played a vital part in ensuring wildlife are managed sustainably in Alberta. Resident hunters, outfitters, and their clients have put millions of dollars a year into conservation activities through licence purchases and volunteer time. They are often the first to raise concerns regarding changes in wildlife populations and habitat, and their passion underlines the intrinsic and economic value that wildlife has for a segment of society. Maintaining hunter numbers in Alberta supports the long-term conservation and management of wildlife in the province.

Declining hunter numbers is a major concern for wildlife managers and conservation organizations across North America (Ryan and Shaw 2011, Larson et al. 2013). While Alberta has fared better than many other jurisdictions (Sillars 2020), new hunters will be needed to replace those who choose to no longer participate each year. One of the greatest barriers to developing and maintaining an interest in hunting is simply finding places to hunt, particularly places that are not overcrowded.

Alberta's rural landowners play an important role in providing quality hunting opportunities for those who do not have their own land, which indirectly influences hunter retention and recruitment. However, some have suggested that the hunter-landowner dynamic may be changing. Paying for access to hunt on private land is illegal within Alberta, so the motivation for landowners to provide access for hunters is more subtle. The purpose of this survey is to better understand the perspective of hunters and the dynamics at play for gaining access on private lands.

Methods

We developed a voluntary survey to obtain information from hunters on their experience with gaining access to hunt on private land in Alberta, where charging for access is not permitted but explicit landowner permission is normally required prior to entry. The questions were designed to mirror and complement those asked on a survey directed toward landowners in 2021 and was conducted using online survey software. Social science research collaborators at the University of Alberta (Dr. Howie Harshaw), University of Waterloo (Dr. Jeremy Pittman), and Alberta Environment and Protected Areas (EPA; Dr. Brian Joubert) helped design these hunter survey questions. Representatives from hunting and outfitting stakeholder groups provided early feedback on the design of the survey as well.

Survey participation was promoted from December 1, 2021, to January 5, 2022. Partner organizations promoted survey participation to hunters through newsletters and social media posts. Our social media accounts and electronic newsletter were also used to promote the survey to a significant portion of Alberta's licensed hunters. Online ads were used to target hunters that we may not have the ability to communicate with directly.

During 2022/23, we explored a variety of factors that may influence hunters gaining permission to hunt private land, as well as their past success in gaining permission, satisfaction with that experience, and change in success with gaining permission. We analyzed these relationships with generalized linear models and present preliminary findings herein related to whether a hunter was successful the last time they contacted a landowner to request permission to hunt on their private land.

Results

We received over 3,500 visits to our online survey with just under 3,000 people completing the entire survey. The vast majority of survey participants (96%) were Alberta Resident licensed hunters from across the province. There was a near even split between those who lived in cities versus small towns and rural areas.

A hunter's demographics had a mixed association with their success the last time they asked for permission to hunt on private land. Hunters from large cities were less likely to get hunting permission than rural residents (Figure 1). When we compared other age groups to our largest category (55 to 64 years old), we found that 35- to 44-year-olds and 45- to 54-year-olds had a lower probability of success in getting permission, while hunters 65 years old and older were more likely to be successful with their request. Hunters who identified themselves as a visible minority were not significantly more or less likely to be granted hunting permission during the last time they contacted a landowner. Hunters with more years of experience had a greater probability of obtaining hunting permission. However, hunters who hunted more times in an average year were not more likely to obtain permission than those who hunted less.

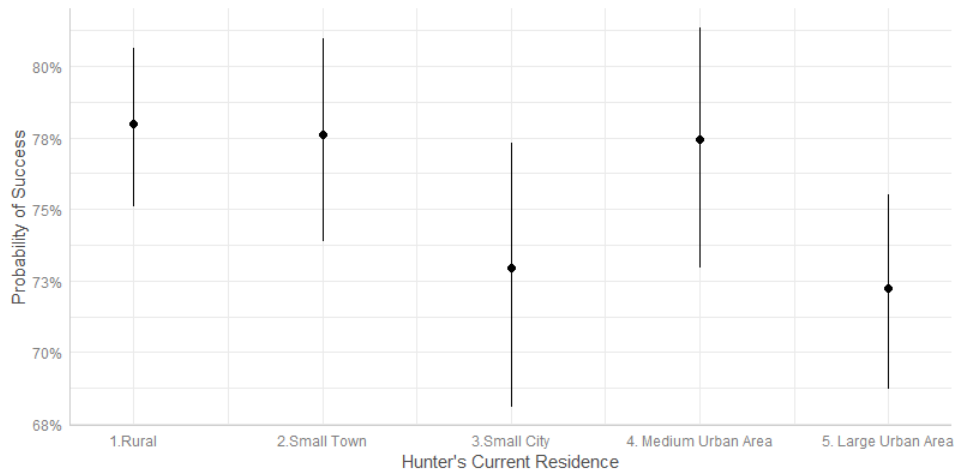


Figure 1. Hunters from large urban areas (Edmonton and Calgary) were less likely to have had success the last time they asked for hunting permission on private land than those who currently live in rural areas.

The type of landowner that a hunter contacted for permission was related to whether they would get access to private land. Hunters who asked for permission on non-agricultural land were less likely to have had success than those who asked for permission to hunt on cropland (Figure 2). And not surprisingly, those who asked strangers had a lower probability of success than those who asked someone they already had a relationship with (Figure 3).

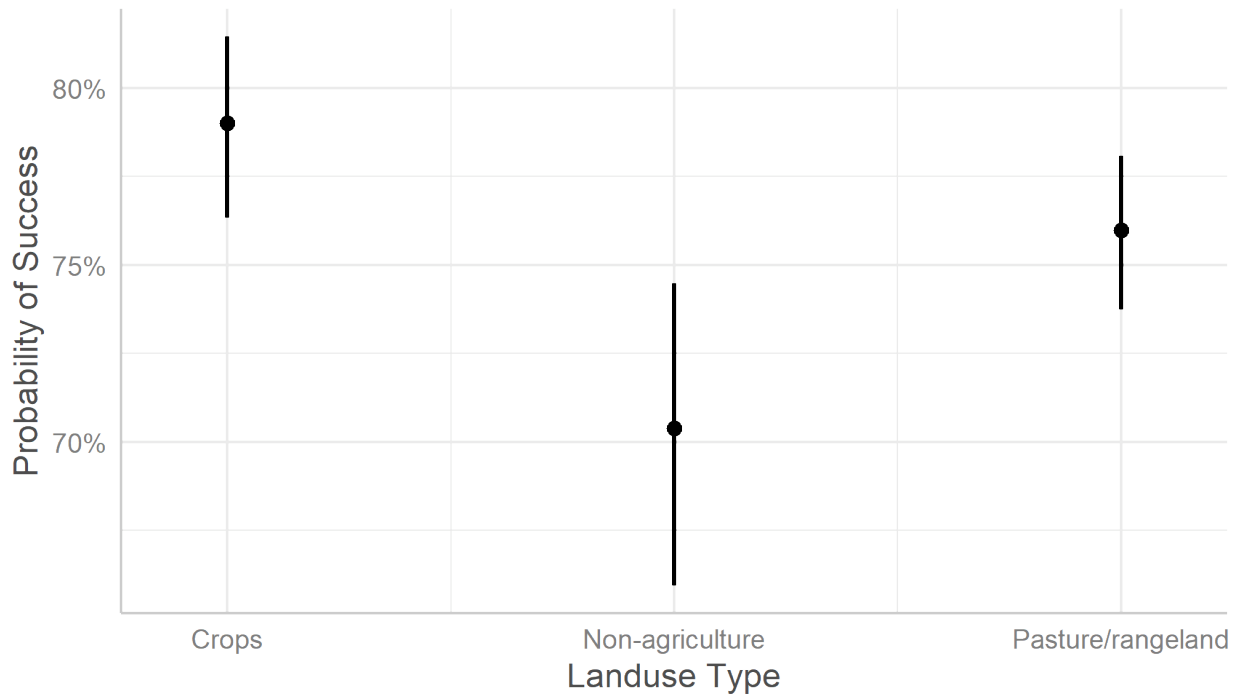


Figure 2. Hunters who asked for permission on non-agricultural private land were less likely to have received access than those who asked for permission on cropland.

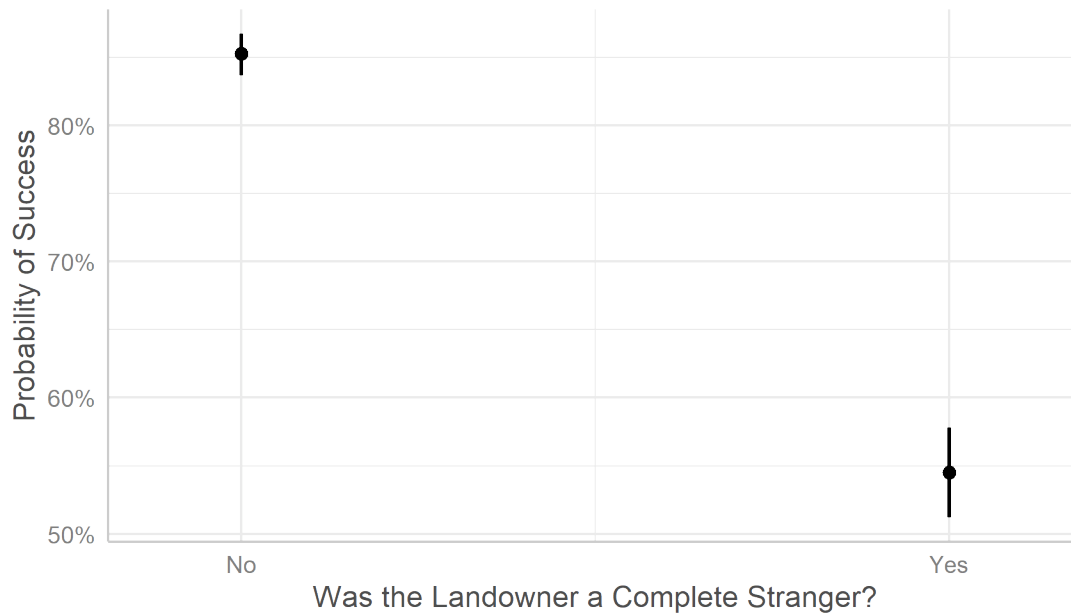


Figure 3. Hunters who asked for permission from a landowner that they did not know previously were less likely to receive access than those who asked someone they already had a relationship with.

Where a hunter asked for permission was also associated with the response they received. Those who most recently asked for permission on private land in the Foothills (300 series) Wildlife Management Units (WMUs) were less likely to have been successful than those who asked in the Prairies (100 series), Parkland (200 series), or Northern Boreal (500 series) WMUs (Figure 4). And those who hunted the southern 300 series (south of Rocky Mountain House to the Montana border) had a lower probability of success than those asking in the northern 300 series (north of Rocky Mountain House to northwest of Grande Prairie). The probability of getting permission on private land increased with distance from urban centres and decreased as the amount of publicly accessible land in the WMU became greater. Contrary to what we expected when we began this study, hunters asking for permission in a pronghorn management zone were more likely to have had success than those outside a pronghorn management zone.

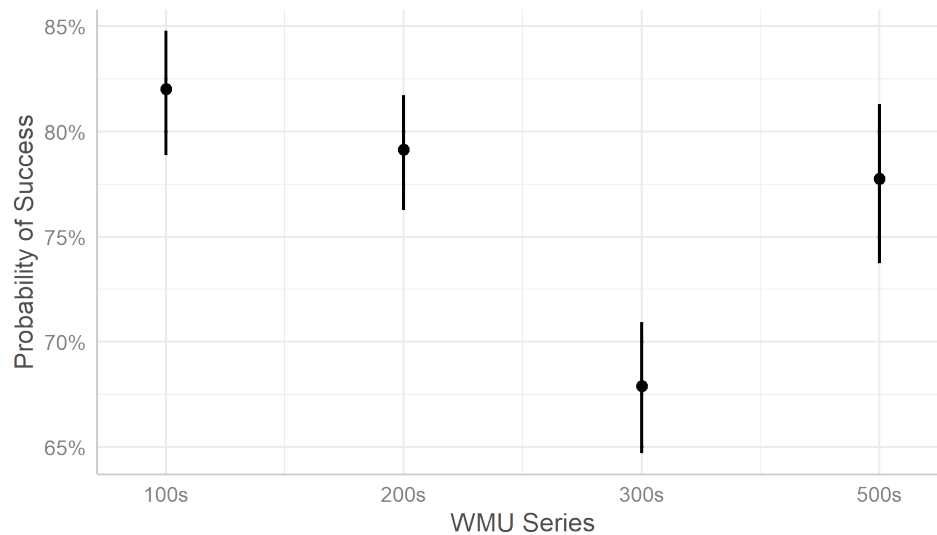


Figure 4. Hunters who asked for permission to hunt in the 300 series WMUs, particularly the southern 300 series, had a lower probability of having been granted access to private land.

Conclusion

Many of the patterns that we have been finding with the hunter survey data are reminiscent of what we learned from the landowner survey. Agricultural producers appear to be more open to allowing hunting on their private land than are landowners who have land for non-agricultural purposes. Permission to access private land in the Foothills appears to be more difficult than in the Prairie or Parkland WMUs, and the probability of finding a willing landowner increases as you get further away from the big cities. But regardless of where a hunter is looking for permission, if they want to have consistent success, it is important that they work to build relationships with landowners over time and not always rely on first-time contacts. We were pleased to see that hunters who asked for permission to hunt private land in the pronghorn management zone were not less likely to be granted access than those in other parts of the province. However, the relationship between hunters and private landowners in southwestern Alberta may warrant further investigation.

The results presented in this summary report are preliminary and subject to review and revision. Further analysis on the hunter survey is expected to take place in 2023/24, with publication of a final report planned for early 2024/25.

Communications

- A series of infographics were produced by our Communications team and a freelance consultant. The finished product was posted to the Alberta Conservation Association (ACA) web page and can be accessed via www.albertahunteraccess.com (March 6, 2023).
- A subset of the infographics was used to produce two roll-up banners, which can be utilized as part of tradeshow and other ACA promotional displays.
- Amanda MacDonald provided a presentation on the landowner and hunter survey results to the Alberta Fish & Game Association conference in Edmonton (February 24, 2023).

Literature Cited

- Larson, L.R., D.J. Decker, R.C. Stedman, W.F. Siemer, M.S. Baumer, and J.W. Enck. 2013. *Hunter Recruitment and Retention in New York: A Framework for Research and Action*. Human Dimensions Research Unit Series Publication 13-04. Department of Natural Resources. Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, United States of America. 72pp.
- Ryan, E.L. and B.R. Shaw. 2011. Improving Hunter Recruitment and Retention. *Human Dimensions of Wildlife* 16(5): 311-317.
- Sillars, J. 2020. *Hunting is Declining across North America—except in Alberta. Here’s How*. MeatEater, Inc. Available online at www.themeateater.com/hunt/whitetail-deer/hunting-is-declining-across-north-america-except-in-alberta-heres-how (accessed February 11, 2022).

Photos



Photo 1. Hunters were less likely to have been granted permission to hunt on private land if they were inquiring about a property in southwestern Alberta.

Photo: Robert Anderson