



TRAVERSING FENCING

Fencing goes back to the ancient days of prehistoric mankind, where among other uses, they offered defensive barriers against people and animals. Uses evolved into military barriers, defined boundaries, deterred trespassers, protected crops and property. Fences were built for containment and to block the movement of wild and domestic animals as well as people; some researchers believe “they actually have a cultural function” and “that the history of civilization is closely tied with the history of the fence.”

Early hunter gatherers erected stone and wooden fencing to direct, impede or capture game, and to capture or contain and domesticate animals for food and for modes of transportation.

Historically, for the most part, western range fences were built to manage livestock. Beginning in the mid to late 1870s, the “range war” years, the use of fences changed the west for people and wildlife.

In modern times, fences remain a useful tool for farm and ranch operations and property management. Installed to control the movement and grazing of livestock and to safeguard crops, ranchers frequently erect not only border fences but also “cross” or “division” fences to section off pastureland.

Outdoor recreationists today cannot avoid fencing; someplace, sometime, even on public land, we will encounter a fence where there is no gate, pass-through or crossover. Understanding how to cross or pass through a fence will minimize the impacts and the possibility of livestock escape, reduce maintenance to both private landowners and public land managers, and will improve relationships between sportspeople and private landowners. The expense of standard barbed wire livestock management fence per mile is not cheap ranging from \$3500 to \$7,000 depending on terrain, types of posts, and associated labor costs. For a landowner to take the time to fix a fence is not only costly but an inconvenience.

This brief article is not about the merits, problems or drawbacks of some fencing but how hunters and anglers can minimize impacts to fencing and landowners as we traverse them while enjoying Montana landscapes.

Some Basic - Helpful Tips

- ◆ Care should always be taken to avoid damaging a fence.
- ◆ Always know where you are and if you have permission or if it is legal to enter the adjoining properties; if it is in question, don't! Ask the landowner about where you can and can't cross and other rules.
- ◆ Never/ever cut a fence; the only circumstance where it may be a necessity is in an emergency, a severe injury or accident. If this occurs, notify the landowner as soon as feasible.
- ◆ Always unload firearms and quiver broadheads before negotiating fencing. After you cross over, through or under a fence confirm that the barrel has not become obstructed by any objects before reloading.
- ◆ The most useful tools to carry with you are a pair of leather gloves, a small piece of leather or other medium heavy material to cover a wire strand or even a short piece -12"-20" – of garden hose or PVC that has been split lengthwise. The lightweight tubing can be easily carried and placed over either a barbed wire or electrical fence allowing for harmless cross over or to hold up or down a strand for a crawl through.
- ◆ If two hunters are negotiating a fence, have one person hold the firearm's while the other crosses and then hand the unloaded guns to the other hunter.
- ◆ If hunting alone, place your unloaded firearm under the fence on the ground or on some brush with the muzzle pointing away from you. Never lean a gun up against the fence or fence post before or while crossing.
- ◆ If removing big game from the field, never try to load it over a fence but instead drag it under. If alone, you may need to prop the fence up with a stick or other tool for support. There are products on the market for metal t-post fencing that some hunters carry to allow the wire to be lifted up at the post and held in place for hands- free crossing over, crawling or dragging under or through a fence. The wire can then be released to return to its original position with no damage to the fence after traversing.
- ◆ Examine all fencing you encounter carefully before making any attempt to cross, look for gaps, unlocked open gates or bent/sagging or knocked down sections safe for passage. If you can step over a sagging section without stretching the fence,

and there is secure footing, it is a good route. Avoid stretching the fence which may inadvertently pull out fence attachments, holders, nails, etc.

- ◆ If the bottom wire is loose enough to crawl under – this is the preferred method of crossing a fence line in comparison to climbing over the top wire - slide under on your back so that you can see the strand as you move.
- ◆ If there is no field entrance, sagging section and the lower strand is too tight to crawl under, find a sturdy post in the fence.
- ◆ Leaning on the post, determine whether the post is well set in the ground so that it can support your weight. If loose or wobbly do not cross at this post, find another.
- ◆ Test the bottom strand of wire with your foot. Carefully put your weight on it, one foot at a time. After you're certain it will take your weight, put one foot on the second strand from the bottom. Climb the post using the rows of wire like rungs on a ladder. Press down on the top wire and swing your bottom leg over the top of the fence stepping to the next wire down. Shift your weight onto the inside foot and step to the ground. Jumping to the ground from the top strand exerts extra pressure on the wire and may cause it to become disconnected from the post.

Electrical Fencing

Watch for electrified fences mixed with barbed wire strands; they are single unbarbed strands. When approaching an electric fence, the public should assume it is electrified unless informed otherwise but you can test by lightly and quickly tapping them with your finger. All electric fence manufacturers must comply with national standards (UL69) to ensure they are safe for people. For many grazers using rotational grazing, the electric fence is a critical component of the total system.

In most cases, the wires that have the insulators are the “hot” wires, and the wire stapled directly to the wood post is the ground or “cold” wire. Some fences have insulators on all the wires to provide flexibility as to which wire(s) are electrified. Any non-conducting material can be used to touch or hold electric fencing, such as wood or rubber while crossing or crawling underneath.

- ◆ The best way to cross over or crawl under a “hot” electrical fence is to wear protection or have a leather glove or other non-conductor to hold the wire. Some hunters will use the butt of an unloaded gun to hold down the top wire while a companion steps over the strand. A common, helpful tool can be a jacket to be thrown over the “hot” strand when climbing over.

“Good fences make good neighbors!”

Hunters and anglers need to always adhere to honorable, ethical and responsible behavior that will ensure our hunting and angling heritage. Respecting private property, acting responsibly when on private land as a guest of the landowner, treating the land, private property including fencing as if it were yours, and conducting yourself in a manner that proudly represents our traditions will help preserve the heritage. Remember too; pass along to young and new hunters and anglers the attitudes, skills and principles essential to ethical pursuit of fish and game.