

LOVE TRIANGLES CAUGHT ON CAMERA - EXPOSING THE INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN HUNTERS, GUT PILES, AND SCAVENGERS

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As big game hunting season draws to a close, hunters celebrate filling their freezers and the satisfaction of time spent outside. While they enjoy venison backstraps fresh off the grill, scavengers are feasting on a gut pile left in the woods. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that hunters leave 1.5 billion pounds of carrion annually in the field. However, little is known about how scavengers consume this carrion and what role this food source may play in scavenger populations. We asked hunters in the Bitterroot and Missoula Valleys to set up game cameras on gut piles after successful harvests of deer, elk, and moose. Scavengers ranging from Golden Eagles to gray wolves visited the gut piles. Scavengers continued to visit gut pile locations long after obvious food sources were consumed, suggesting the “life” of a harvest goes beyond a matter of weeks. We’ll discuss how this project adds to other citizen-science efforts to understand scavenging species in western Montana, and to our ability as scientists to engage with hunters on tough topics like ammunition choices, carnivore management, and public land issues. The high level of interest in this project suggests that hunters are able and willing to contribute to scientific research. We expect to continue and expand this project during the 2019 hunting season.