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Keeping up with drones

Unmanned craft flies in face of "fair chase"

By **Scott Willoughby**
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Mark Bauer, a contractor with the U.S. Geological Survey, launches a Raven drone at the Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge. Drone technology developed for warfare has found surprising civilian applications, including surveys of wildlife populations. (*The New York Times file*)

Mike Hutt, as the kids might say, is blowing up.

Hutt serves as the U.S. Geological Survey's unmanned aerial systems (UAS) project manager. Those are drones, to the rest of us, and Hutt's Denver-based program receives more than a dozen calls a week from other Department of the Interior branches interested in putting their skills to use.

"The technology is really starting to take off," Hutt said. "The systems are fairly affordable, and the people we are working with seem to be pretty pleased with the technology. People see the potential they offer and are excited about the cost savings."

Hutt and the USGS have worked with a variety of Interior agencies — including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Parks Service and Bureau of Land Management — on tasks including inventory and monitoring of wildlife, climate change studies, tracking bird migration, search and rescue operations and even "precision" agriculture projects. The increasingly cheaper, safer and more accurate studies of the natural world through the use of drones offer several advantages over old-school methods, including [the ability to fly close to animals without scaring them off](#).

And that advantage in particular has some Colorado sportsmen sounding the alarm.

"For scientific purposes, they could lead to huge cost savings and possibly better science," said Tim Brass, Southern Rockies coordinator for [the sportsmen's group Backcountry Hunters and Anglers](#). "But from a hunting perspective, they definitely threaten the concept of fair chase. I don't think there's any question among sportsmen that they cross the line."

That may be the case here in Colorado, but the reason Brass and BHA are even discussing the matter is that drones already have been used in other states to assist hunters.

In places such as Louisiana, where wild hogs have become a big problem, two electrical engineers have made a name for themselves by strapping a thermal imaging camera to a remote-controlled airplane to create [a feral pig-hunting drone they call the "Dehogaflie."](#) They fly the machine around fields until they spot a hog, then shoot it from the ground.

Colorado has no such wild pig problem. Nor does it have a drone problem, at least not yet. But because the technology is progressing so rapidly, the traditionalists at BHA are eager to get ahead of it.

Colorado hunting regulations prohibit the "use of aircraft to hunt, to direct hunters on the ground or to hunt the same day or day after a flight was made to find wildlife." The concern among sportsmen is whether that language covers the use of drones and whether the 24-hour time parameter is sufficient for such stealthy vessels, or for that matter, is enforceable.

"How would you know how long before a hunt they were used?" Brass asked rhetorically.

As a result, the sportsmen's group would like to see regulations prohibiting the use of all UASs by the public during hunting season in Colorado.

"Colorado BHA is concerned the current regulations are insufficient to prohibit the use of drones for scouting during the hunting season," local BHA co-chairman David Lien said in a statement. "While CO BHA supports the use of drones for science, we strongly oppose their use for scouting and/or hunting, thus we're requesting an outright ban on the use of drones during the hunting season."

Colorado Parks and Wildlife and the commission that sets state hunting regulations have yet to take a formal stance on the use of drones, although the head of the agency recognizes their use as a "legitimate concern" and emphasized that the ethic of "fair chase" remains the guiding principle for hunting in Colorado.

"It's a blessing and a curse in my mind. It's really great technology that clearly has tremendous capability from a scientific standpoint, but there are also these ethical questions along the way," CPW director Rick Cables said. "It has not been discussed within the agency or the commission in any depth whatsoever, but clearly the standard we have to adhere to is fair chase."

Thus far, CPW's limited experience with UAS technology has been through a brief sage grouse monitoring project done in conjunction with Hutt's USGS program. Cables and Hutt see the potential for future collaboration, perhaps even one with an ironic twist.

"We have been approached by U.S. Fish and Wildlife to see if we are interested in helping flyover refuges during hunting season to make sure no one is hunting illegally in the refuges," Hutt said. "We would be interested in working with them to try it."

While they're at it, maybe they could scout for other drones.

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