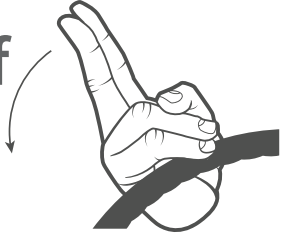


How To Wave, Montana-Style

The New Wave of the Avant-Garde

By Eric Heidle



The truck is nearly past you when its owner gives you the finger.

Say it's a fine spring morning and you're barreling down a dirt road, heading for a favored fishing or watering hole, minding your own business. You see the other rig coming, battered and broken, hay hooks and twine boiling up from its homemade stock rack. And just as he's going past you, cracked, greasy Stetson framed in his cracked, greasy windshield, the driver gives you the finger before vanishing in a cloud of tan dust.

Only it's an index finger, a lone stubby digit slowly prized off the wheel, and far from an insult, it's Montana's way of saying hello from the road.

We may not be the only place where people wave to other drivers; anywhere the asphalt turns to gravel, folks revert to common courtesy. But waving on the road is *supremely* Montanan, right up there with Cat-Griz and the whiskey ditch. And, like anything worth doing, it's worth doing with style. There's an art to the wave, an aesthetic as personal as it is expressive. It's a move that makes you part of a movement. And like any great movement in art, there will be rules:

Rule 1. Waving Is the Driver's Job. As with adjusting the radio and environmental controls, waving is the domain of the driver. It's her privilege and obligation. In a waving situation, you'll look like a damn parade float if everyone joins in. Let your driver do her duty.

Rule 2. Know When to Wave. Etiquette governing the wave rivals that of any at Versailles or the Edo courts of Japan. The type of road you're on, driving conditions, relative closing speeds, and other factors all dictate the terms of the wave. Don't bother on interstates; they're the death of neighborliness and no one can see you anyway. Two-lane highways are a judgment call requiring additional calculation: How rural is the road, how long has it been since you've seen another rig, what's the speed limit through this stretch? The rule of thumb here is: the more empty, slow and remote your road, the more likely it is you'll need to wave.

Dirt roads? Mandatory wave, in almost every case. You're moving slowly enough to look the other fellow in the eye; it's only being polite. Plus, there are practical considerations underpinning this cherished social construct—the stranger you wave to in the morning might pull you out of the barrow pitⁱ in the afternoon. Which brings us to...

Rule 3. Waving in Weather. If the roads are bad enough that you can't risk a wave, you shouldn't be out at all. But if you do find yourself in a white-knuckler, you don't have knuckles to spare. Save the wave for a balmy day.ⁱⁱ

Rule 4. The Town Wave. This is less tricky than it sounds, and the same basic concepts apply. If the town is small enough for dogs to nap in the street, wave. Bigger towns with traffic? Not unless you know the other guy or they're yielding the right of way, in which case your wave means, "Thanks."

Rule 5. A Wave Does Not Imply Friendship. We're an amiable bunch, Montanans, and we like to lend a hand as well as raise one. But if you're out here in waving country, you're either hard at work or playing hooky. A wave might end with a stop to shoot the breeze, but it doesn't mean we're not on a schedule. Nothing sours the mood quicker than the overly inquisitive on a logging road during elk season. Jaws clamp shut, eye contact drifts. You've overstepped. And, if the other driver's in a hurry because his cows are out, you're probably obligated to spin around and help get 'em in.

Rule 6. Style Matters. Now we get down to it. It's not enough *that* you wave; *how* you wave means everything. Like the way one might throw a rope or mend a fly line, your style says a lot about you as a person. And nothing separates greenhorns from old-timers like a feeble, half-hearted wave; you've got to go strong and commit. In that vein, we could all use a little brush-up. For your perusal, then, the basic styles:

The Classic: Two fingers raised casually off the wheel. This is the gold standard in Big Sky Country. It's friendly—but not *too* friendly. You've acknowledged the other party and then you're on your way. It's terse, polite and takes minimal effort. The one-finger variant described above is acceptable.



The Palm: All four digits raised off the wheel. An evolution of the Classic, this iteration signifies a slight uptick in friendliness. Good for folks you'd nod to at the store.



The Nod: Speaking of which, this controversial tactic—technically not a wave at all—is permissible, but only in response to another nod. Nodding to acknowledge a wave is insufficient and dismissive, and therefore bad form.



The Check-Off: This derivative turns the Classic on its side, performed with a brisk downward motion to confirm that you've cleared the other driver to proceed, asserting your authority in the bargain.



The Salute: An advanced move requiring that your hand leave the wheel entirely; executing this crisp tip of the cap can imply formality or sarcasm. Use with care.



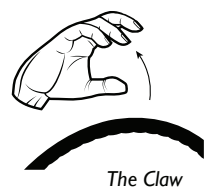
The Heisman: Reserved for use in town or with pedestrians, the Heisman comes into play when the driver must issue a greeting through the passenger window. Lean in that direction, extending your arm fully, palm upward. Touchdown.



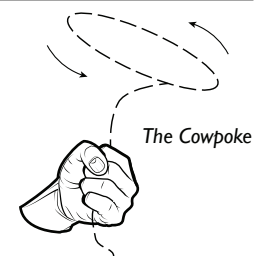
The Six-Guns: Make pistols with your fingers and give 'em a little *pew-pew* action. Not for greeting the Highway Patrol.



The Claw: A new variant, lately identified and seldom observed. The driver's wheel arm pivots upward at the elbow, retaining its grip-like posture for the duration of the wave. Exceedingly rare.



The Cowpoke: Gripping the wheel in his right hand, the driver extends his left arm out the window making lariat-spinning motions as he whoops and hollers. Bonus points awarded if the driver can pound one bootheel on the dash for an extra-hairy ride.ⁱⁱⁱ



Rule 7. Keep the Wave Going. There you have it: the rules of the road. But knowledge isn't enough; movements require action. The avant-garde cannot be advanced without robust participation and forward-thinking innovation. We need new drivers with new ideas. A new sense of urgency. A new wave of wavers.

When you're out there, then, get in your right mind. Ease your foot off the gas; kill the A/C and crank those windows down. Tune in your car radio (they still make them), and surf the AM band, preferably for an old country station. Let the fragrant tang of burnt irrigation ditches fill your nostrils, and cock an ear for the first meadowlark of spring. And, when that next battered, broken rig comes lumbering at you from a quarter-mile off, settle in. Calm your breathing, square up, stay within yourself, time it right. Then give 'em the finger.

Or two.

ⁱ Barrow pit: *n.* a large ditch running along the margins of rural roads, so named for the barrow or mound of earth resulting from digging one. See also: borrow pit.

ⁱⁱ A corollary to this rule: if the other rig is stopped and you sense trouble, you owe them more than a wave. "Everyone okay? Need any help?" is the proper salutation.

ⁱⁱⁱ This wave is entirely fictitious; no one does this. But someone should.

