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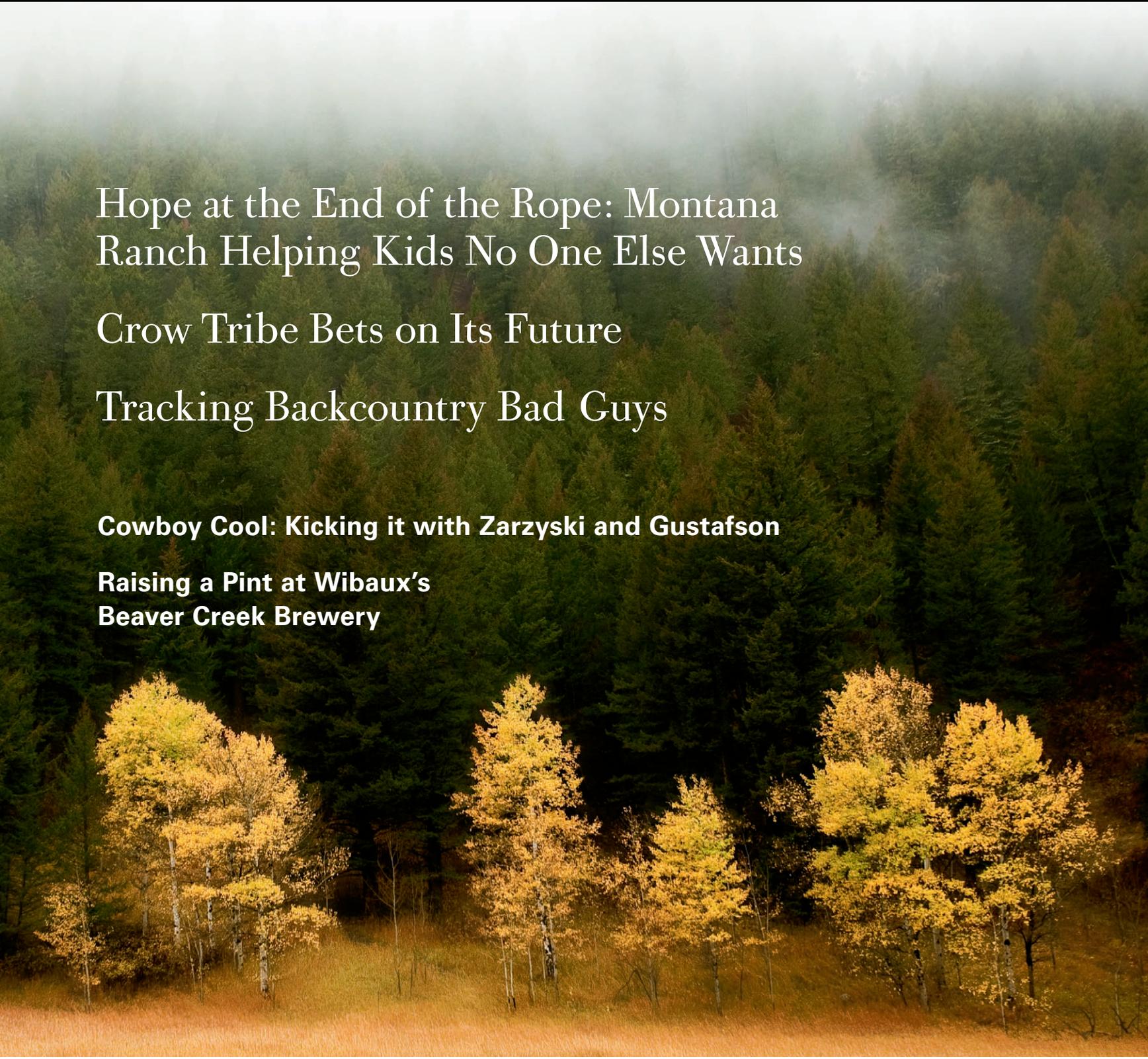
Hope at the End of the Rope: Montana
Ranch Helping Kids No One Else Wants

Crow Tribe Bets on Its Future

Tracking Backcountry Bad Guys

Cowboy Cool: Kicking it with Zarzyski and Gustafson

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Beaver Creek Brewery**





BACKCOUNTRY CRIME

In a state known for large tracts of wild country teeming with animals, just three special agents investigate crimes against wildlife — a job that keeps them overworked and quite often, undercover

BY JEFF HULL

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
THOMAS LEE

IN THE SPRING OF 2009, A MONTANA DEPARTMENT of Fish, Wildlife and Parks game warden in southeastern Montana received a call on the state's TIPMont hotline. The warden, Matt Hagedorn, went to the caller's house and listened to the story, which, in a nutshell, was that two years earlier the informant had been with a man who had shot an immature bald eagle north of Forsyth, a violation of federal law. The informant produced photos of the man, Dale Leroy Satran, holding the eagle with its wings spread, its feet chopped off.

Hagedorn scoured the photos, trying to ascertain location clues from the background. "There was a rolling hill and a sagebrush flat, which is tough because everything north of the interstate is a sagebrush flat. There's like, 4,000 square miles of sagebrush flat out there,"

Hagedorn, left, and Armstrong pose with feathers from the eagle at the crime scene.

Hagedorn says, two years later sitting in a restaurant in Forsyth with the man he then turned the information over to, Ron Armstrong.



Armstrong is a special agent with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service — one of only three covering the entire state of Montana — charged with investigating crimes involving wildlife. Armstrong has been stationed in Billings for the past nine years and has seen a lot of crimes against wildlife — serial poaching, illegal taking of endangered species, Migratory Bird Act violations, Lacey Act violations. He’s worked undercover for weeks at a time, in Montana and other states, to break up poaching rings.

In the Satran case, as he does in most cases, Armstrong relied on a suite of skills and a web of connections to suss things out. He worked closely with Hagedorn and Sgt. Allen Fulton of the Rosebud County Sheriff’s Department, who recognized some of the landscape features in the photo. At the site, a nearly featureless creek bottom in the plains where perhaps 20 cottonwood trees spread

over a mile-long stretch of short gumbo cutbanks, Fulton and Hagedorn were able to match a beaver-chewed tree stump and a log with bullet holes in it to those depicted in the photo. They found the log the informant said the eagle had been tucked under. There they found feathers, leg and breast bones. Once definitive evidence of a crime had been collected, Armstrong and Hagedorn raced to Colstrip to interview the suspect, Satran, as he ended his work day.



It’s not in every case that an informant hands agents a photograph of the suspect holding an illegally killed animal, but Armstrong still had to rely on his interviewing skills to tease out details that would stand up in court. Questioning a subject somewhere other than his home is but one subtle technique Armstrong deploys during the crucial interro-

Armstrong holds a bone from the skeleton of the poached eagle. Above, he holds the pictures of the poaching that led law enforcement to the crime scene.

gation part of an investigation.

“[A suspect’s home] is a terrible place to talk because a person in their household is protected by that household. It’s difficult for people to make admissions in front of family members who may not know what’s going on. It’s hard for him to say, ‘I’m a bad guy who shoots things illegally,’” Armstrong says.

“A lot of these things come down to trying to figure out what’s going to let [the suspect] minimize what they did so they can admit to something. You know the big lies. You know the little lies. You can tell from subtle things, like how they say something. A lot of times it’s what they don’t say. If someone says “my gun” they’re taking responsibility. If they say “the gun” they’re putting that gun as far away from them as they can. That’s something. There are a thousand kinds of communication that are outside of words. It all adds up. It’s hard to articulate those fine points, but when you see it, you know it. Anyone who has kids understands.”

The agent just missed catching Satran at work and so had to conduct the interview at his home.

Satran began his interview chipper and happy to help, but when confronted with the suspicion that he may have illegally shot a bald eagle, he made what Armstrong calls a “remarkable” denial.

“He claimed he had never even seen an eagle,” Armstrong says. “That just set off a bell. You know you’re headed down the right road when a guy claims not to recognize the national symbol.”

Armstrong slid the photo of Satran holding the dead eagle onto the table in front of him and flipped it over. “He was stunned. You could see the gears turning in his head, asking himself, ‘How did they get this? How am I going to explain it?’ It was a Maalox moment. Then he finally says, ‘Oh now I remember this. Is that an eagle? Is that what that is?’”

Satran then spun out a scenario in which he and two friends were hunting and found the bird dead. They didn’t know what it was, thought it was crazy to find such a big dead thing, so they took some pictures of it.

Armstrong asked Satran why the photo showed fresh blood on the bird and the body hanging limply, with no sign of rigor mortis, which you would expect in a bird that’s been dead for some time. He noted that the photo was taken in March, when a carcass on the landscape would surely have frozen. He asked

Satran why he had a knife in his hand in the photo, and why the eagle’s feet were missing.

Then, OK, Satran admitted, he’d cut the feet off because they were huge and unique. But he left the bird where he found it because he had a friend who killed eagles for money, selling feathers and claws and he, Satran, did not want to be like that friend.

“Now he’s admitted that he knows what an eagle is and that he knows it’s illegal to kill them and he doesn’t want to emulate anyone who does,” Armstrong says. Next he asked Satran what story the other people in the picture were going to tell, letting Satran know they were being interviewed simultaneously. “He sat there and scratched his head and said, ‘OK, I shot it, but I thought it was a porcupine.’”

“We had one of those reactions like, Holy shit, can you believe this? I would never have seen that one coming down the pike. We’d been to the site. With all the sagebrush, there’s no



From left, Hagedorn, Fulton and Armstrong, who asked not to be photographed in order to protect his undercover identity, pose on the spot of the poaching.

way he could have seen a porcupine at that distance unless it was walking down the road.”

That was the story Satran stuck with: It had been a simple case of mistaken identity.

With an assist from the USFWS forensics lab in Ashland, Ore., which positively identified the bones and rotten feathers as belonging to an immature bald eagle, Armstrong built a case strong enough that Satran pled guilty to shooting the eagle. But at his sentencing hearing in June 2010, Satran stood before a



federal judge in Billings and again swore he thought the eagle was a porcupine. When presented with photographic evidence and the results of Armstrong's interviews with Satran, the judge didn't believe him any more than Armstrong had and levied the maximum fine under the Bald Eagle Protection Act — \$5,000. Satran was sentenced to one year probation and was prohibited from hunting, fishing, trapping or accompanying anybody engaged in any of those activities for a year.

THE SATRAN CASE WAS TYPICAL of Armstrong's work. Armstrong depended on other officers and agencies — Montana FWP and the local sheriff's department — and together they were able to find a needle in a haystack: a decayed eagle body under a log in hundreds of square miles of sagebrush flats. Other personnel from his own agency — the lab in Ashland — contributed expertise. And shrewd interrogation technique tripped a suspect up in his storytelling, which resulted in a stiff penalty.

It's hard to say how many cases Armstrong and the other two federal wildlife special agents in Montana — Rick Branzell, based in Missoula, and Brian Lakes in Great Falls — work in a year. Some cases are over in a few weeks. Others linger for months or even years. Often the federal agents initiate an investigation only to determine that the violations require state jurisdiction; they turn those investigations to FWP. Counting convictions is not a reflection of their efforts either, because so many cases plead out. But the agents are never begging for work. Dead grizzly bears. Mountain lion poaching. Trophy bighorn sheep

Armstrong, Fulton and Hagedorn were given pictures of the poacher and searched the landscape north of Forsyth for the exact spot.

kills. Spree shooting of antelope or mule deer. Eagles trapped for the feather trade. Smuggled sturgeon roe. Between their own investigations and the undercover or interview assistance they give to agents from other states, the caseload is constant.

Armstrong, who grew up in Los Alamos, N.M., is typical of federal wildlife agents. He spent a great deal of time in the outdoors as a youngster hiking in the Vallee Grande, fishing and hunting. As a child he heard stories of people violating game laws. "It seemed kind of atrocious for someone like me, who loved wildlife," he says. After graduating from the University of New Mexico, Armstrong landed a job as a state game warden, which he held for 10 years before joining the feds.

Armstrong's colleague in Missoula, Rick Branzell, was a range manager for the Bureau of Land Management before he became a special agent — although he was also the son of a special agent. Incoming agents complete a 10-week academy, sharpening their skills in shooting, self-defense, driving, and criminal investigative techniques. Then they attend an additional 10 weeks of special agent training to focus their attention on wildlife crimes.

AS THE SATRAN AFFAIR wound down to sentencing, Armstrong was already investigating several other cases. For weeks he had been heavily involved in the organization and, days after Satran was sentenced, the execution of a multi-state takedown of a poaching ring in which 60 suspects in six

states were interviewed and five search warrants were executed. He returned to Billings after the takedown on a Saturday. On that Sunday, a grizzly bear was shot in the Gallatin Canyon, and off he went to see what happened. The next day he was back to chasing down loose ends on the poaching ring. He missed his 6-year-old boy's last T-ball game and his graduation from the first grade. By mid-June, Armstrong had not had a single day off in a month.

Positions for 252 special agents have been created nationwide, but since 2001, when Armstrong's came on board, he can't remember when more than 200 of those positions have been filled. By comparison, the state of Montana employs about 100 game wardens.

Federal agents do not spend much time patrolling like game wardens do. They spend a great deal of time on the phone. "My job is to draw from all these different sources and to put together the bigger picture," Armstrong says. "We prioritize people who are impacting the resource on a larger scale."

Perhaps the most dangerous duty Armstrong and other agents pull is undercover work. (In order not to jeopardize informants and individuals involved peripherally in past investigations, none of the agents interviewed for this story would discuss details of any undercover operations. In order not to jeopardize future operations, the agents would not allow their faces to be photographed.) To bust poaching rings and illegal outfitters who kill beyond bag limits, hunt without proper licenses, hunt in the national parks, or allow "upgrading" — a practice wherein clients are allowed to kill more animals if they don't like the size of the trophy they've bagged — the agents routinely pose as clients and go on hunts. During an undercover operation, everybody the agents deal with is armed most of the time. Armstrong once spent six months on an undercover assignment (though he got to go home most of those nights and be himself).

"Undercover is tough because you're trying to maintain a separate identity and still maintain your cover," Armstrong says. "You're there paying 110 percent attention to what's being done, noting who's there, what vehicles are being used, remembering all of that evidence to show motive, intent and knowledge. We're not there to kill an animal. We're there to pay attention to everything that's going on. When you come out of an undercover assignment like a three-day hunt, you're exhausted."

"You have to listen to what the people you're with are saying, what their motivation is. You get to understand why people do what they do. I don't empathize with their violations, but you get to see how it affects their lives, how it affects their families."

SO MANY CASES TURN ON AN INFORMANT. Around the first of January in 2002, Rick Branzell, the USFS special agent stationed in Missoula, received a call from a wolf biologist who had picked up a mortality signal from a radio collar on a wolf in the Big Hole — wolves were an endangered species at the time. Using radio telemetry, Branzell and the biologist located the dead wolf buried in a snowy pasture. Branzell retrieved a bullet from the carcass and sent it to the state crime lab in Bozeman, where it was later determined to be in the .223-.224 caliber range.

In the meantime, Branzell received another call, this from a FWP game warden in that area who asked if he was investigating a wolf shooting. When Branzell said he was, the agent told him about an informant who had heard a suspect, a man who had run a tannery in Alaska, bragging about shooting two wolves on the North Fork Road.

Needing evidence, Branzell returned to the scene of the crime with a private citizen who trains dogs to locate carnivores by scent. "Her dog proceeded to lick me in the ear all the way from

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“I thought, Oh my god what a wild goose chase this is going to be. It wasn’t. The dog got out of the truck, peed on all four tires, took off along a jackleg fence and within minutes had located the wolf in two feet of snow.” — RICK BRANZELL

Florence to the location near Wisdom,” Branzell remembers. “In the jaundiced view that agents have of citizens, I thought, Oh my god what a wild goose chase this is going to be. It wasn’t. The dog got out of the truck, peed on all four tires, took off along a jackleg fence and within minutes had located the wolf in two feet of snow.”

The confidential informant had told Branzell that a .22-250 caliber rifle had been used to kill the wolves. Branzell drafted a search warrant and executed it on the suspect’s house. Then came the all-important interview.

“There are techniques you use,” Branzell says. Instead of trying to trip him up in lies, Branzell first appealed to the suspect’s decency. “This guy was a great guy, a very nice man. I played to the point that, ‘Well, you hired people in your tannery for years, I’ve checked your history, you don’t have a speeding ticket, let alone anything else, and mistakes get made. You treat your employees well, you pay your taxes.’

“He realized I didn’t have a third eye sprouting from the middle of my forehead. Within about 20 minutes of the start of the interview he admitted, ‘This is what happened.’”

Still, they had no weapon. Eventually the suspect also admitted he had dumped his rifle in his septic tank. As team leader, Branzell delegated to another agent the duty of chopsticking the rifle from the septic muck using a rake and a hoe. “I think they used two rakes, because the head of the first rake fell off. Everyone scattered when that rake head left,” Branzell remembers.

Like Satran in Armstrong’s eagle poaching case, the wolf shooting suspect would only go so far in his admission. He had thought the wolves were coyotes, he claimed. But Branzell’s subtle questioning led the suspect to admit that he had shot one coyote already on the day he shot the wolves — proof that he knew how big and what color a coyote was — and that he had handled wolf carcasses at his tannery in Alaska — proof that he knew how big and what color a wolf was. At sentencing, the magistrate didn’t buy the mistaken identity story, fined the man \$4,025, with all of the amount suspended except \$525, and ordered him to pay \$2,000 in restitution to the crime lab.

For every conviction netting heavy penalties, the agents work cases that result in slaps on the wrist. Weeks of investigative toil might result in no conviction. On several occasions, Armstrong has worked illegal outfitting cases that result in family patriarchs appearing in court weak and frail and trailing toddler grandchildren, begging for mercy because a serious penalty would cost the entire family its livelihood — and judges have reacted sympathetically, frowning severely but slapping wrists.

Branzell, who has been a federal agent for 29 years, says violators run the gamut from people who make stupid mistakes to serial poachers. He specifically remembers a case where he caught a man who was routinely shooting bighorn sheep in Glacier National Park and selling the heads.



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service special agent Ron Armstrong carries a rifle and a shotgun in his truck.

“I did my job and caught him and let the coat-and-tie gang booger up the sentencing,” Branzell says.

Wildlife crimes do not command the same outrage crimes against people do. Further complicating matters, in the West the combination of admiration for living off the land, an anti-government spirit, and a widely held belief in an individual’s right to defend his way of life means that many people see nothing wrong with downing a deer in February, blasting re-introduced wolves, or killing a truckload of pronghorns chewing their way through a wheat field. No jury in Montana has ever convicted someone for shooting a grizzly bear (although earlier this year, for the first time a Wyoming judge denied a man’s self-defense argument and convicted him of killing a grizzly bear).

“I learned very early on in my career,” says Branzell, “that if you want to be jury, judge and executioner in this line of work, there’s a very good possibility you’re going to have an unhappy career. Because you’re sitting in that little red wagon holding onto your stuffed tiger going down the hill and you have no control. You have no control over a case once it goes to the lawyers. You present the best product you can to the lawyers, and then let them do what they’re paid to do.”

And then — if you’re Branzell, Armstrong or any of their colleagues — you go back out and bust another bad guy, because they make you a little bit angry. Because you respect and treasure the resource they’re destroying willy-nilly.

“You see the wanton destruction of the resource by some of these people that really have never grown up,” says Branzell. “And if you have a love for the resource and what you’re doing, you don’t ever get over that. Whether it be a boatload of ducks or someone flock-shooting a herd of elk, that keeps a lot of us going.”

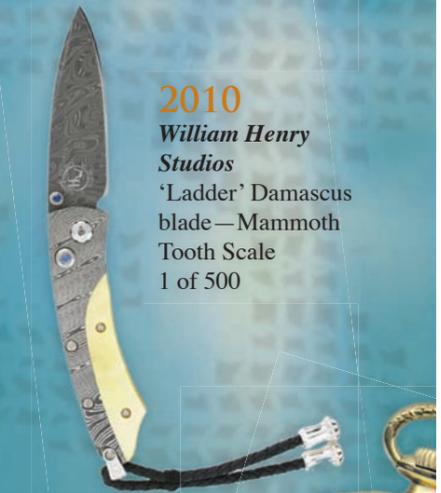
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