U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Special Agent

Special agents with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Office of Law Enforcement are plainclothes criminal investigators who enforce Federal wildlife laws throughout the United States. They target crimes – such as wildlife trafficking and habitat destruction – that undermine U.S. efforts to conserve wildlife resources.

Service special agents protect threatened and endangered species, migratory birds, marine mammals, and imperiled animals and plants around the world. Their investigations document violations of Federal wildlife laws as well as such crimes as smuggling, conspiracy, money laundering, mail and wire fraud, and making false statements.

Agents at duty stations such as New York City often investigate wildlife smuggling.
Bill Butcher/USFWS

Agent retrieves eagle carcass at the site of a suspected poisoning incident.
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Below: Agents help States protect Chesapeake Bay striped bass and other valuable fishery resources.
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Where do special agents work?
Special agents investigate wildlife crimes wherever they occur in the United States. They work in settings that range from major cities to more rural duty stations near some of the few remaining wilderness areas in this country. Some are based in multi-agent offices in locations such as New York City, Los Angeles, and Miami while others are responsible for enforcing Federal wildlife laws in entire States. Most travel often, spending periods away from home.

What do agents do?
Service special agents investigate crimes that range from international wildlife smuggling to unlawful migratory game bird hunting. Like all criminal investigators, they collect evidence, interview witnesses, interrogate subjects, conduct surveillance, plan raids, make arrests, and help prepare cases for court.

Agents often work undercover to infiltrate wildlife trafficking rings, illegal guiding operations, and other criminal groups to document violations from the "inside." Covert investigations can range from simple "buy-bust" transactions where agents arrange to purchase illegal wildlife from subjects to multi-year probes in which agents establish false identities and even run wildlife businesses to gain the confidence of the criminals they hope to expose.

Agents investigate the killing of endangered species and other protected wildlife, such as eagles, migratory birds, and marine mammals. They support species reintroduction programs and pursue cases involving the destruction or contamination of wildlife habitat. They investigate oil or chemical

Agent examines the carcass of an endangered Florida panther and the related crime scene for evidence of "foul play."
USFWS

spills and poisoning incidents that kill wildlife. They also work with industry groups and companies to reduce hazards to protected species linked to oil production facilities, electric powerlines, wind farms, and mining operations.

Agents often work closely with other Federal, State, Tribal, or foreign law enforcement authorities. Common partnerships include work with U.S. Customs and Border Protection or Homeland Security Investigations on wildlife smuggling cases and cooperative investigations with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency involving oil spills, industrial contaminants or pesticides. Special agents team with State counterparts to enforce regulations that govern waterfowl and dove hunting and assist the States in detecting and deterring the interstate exploitation of State-protected species, including big game animals and fishery resources. They also assist Tribal enforcement officers when wildlife crimes involve violations of both Federal and Tribal laws and regulations. Work with enforcement authorities in other nations ranges from sharing intelligence to conducting joint investigations of international wildlife trafficking.

Below: Agent teaches wildlife crime investigative techniques to enforcement officers in Tanzania.
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Agents provide training on wildlife law enforcement for State and Tribal officers as well as for enforcement officers overseas. They also respond to citizen complaints and conduct public outreach to secure voluntary compliance with Federal wildlife laws.

Agent releases a juvenile leopard shark (which was illegally caught along with thousands of others by a California shark trafficking ring) back into the Monterey Bay.
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Left: Idaho-based agent patrols the backcountry to protect grizzly bears and other threatened species.
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Below: Mud-splattered agent conducts ATV patrol at Alaska's Izembek National Wildlife Refuge during waterfowl hunting season.
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Service special agents arrest a suspect wanted for wildlife crimes.
Ryan Haggerty/USFWS

How do I become a Service special agent?
Only some 250 special agents work for the Service, making these positions extremely competitive. Only the most qualified applicants are appointed. The Service usually hires special agents as a "class" of 24 or so. To begin the recruitment process, the Service issues national vacancy announcements via the Office of Personnel Management's USAJobs website (www.usajobs.gov).

Are there any special requirements?
To qualify for a special agent position, applicants must meet strict medical, physical, and psychological requirements. They must also participate in mandatory drug testing and psychological screening programs. The most highly qualified applicants will be interviewed. Academically, a four-year degree in wildlife management, criminal justice, or other related fields is preferred. Those chosen will undergo an extensive background investigation.

Agents often log hours in the field during spring and fall waterfowl seasons.
Ryan Haggerty/USFWS

All appointees must be citizens of the United States, at least 21 years of age, but less than 37 years of age at the time of entrance on duty. Male applicants born after December 31, 1959 must certify that they have registered with the Selective Service System or that they are exempt from doing so. Appointees must have a valid State driver's license, and they must sign a mobility agreement indicating willingness to accept reassignment to any location in the future.

Appointees must be in excellent physical condition and pass a comprehensive medical examination provided at no cost to the applicant. The appointee must also successfully pass a battery of tests to determine physical fitness suitability.

Once employed and provided training, special agents must meet firearms qualification standards and re-qualify each year. Periodic medical examinations are also required along with fitness testing. Some agents must complete yearly financial disclosure reports.

Agents work on firearms skills during basic training at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Georgia.
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Classroom training for new Service special agents covers Federal wildlife protection laws and regulations in detail.
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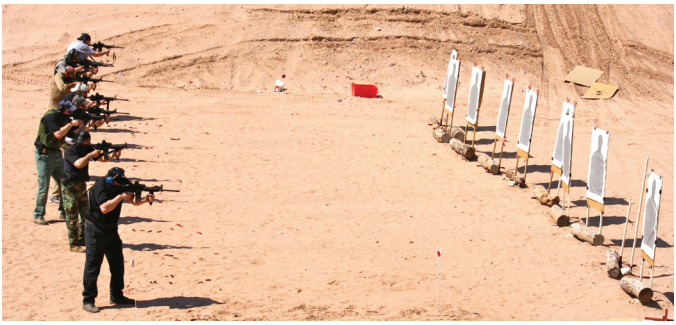
What type of training do new agents receive?

New Service special agents begin their careers with 20 weeks of formal training in criminal investigations and wildlife law enforcement at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Glynco, Georgia. Basic training covers subjects that range from rules of evidence, electronic surveillance, and use of firearms to waterfowl identification, crime scene investigation and case report writing. When agents report to their first duty stations, they complete a 44-week Field Training and Evaluation Program, working under the close supervision of experienced training officers to hone their investigative skills and enhance their mastery of wildlife laws.

What opportunities exist for career advancement?

Starting salaries for special agents begin at the GS-7/9/11 level depending upon education and experience. The full performance level of pay for a field investigator is GS-12; agents who have exceptional skills may be considered for GS-13 senior special agent positions in the field and at headquarters. In addition to base pay, agents earn "law enforcement availability pay" (which adds 25 percent of base pay to their biweekly earnings in compensation for at least 2 hours of unscheduled duty per regular workday). Agents stationed in high-cost geographical areas receive additional locality pay.

Agents from the Northeast demonstrate firearms proficiency at an outdoor firing range in Connecticut to meet "re-qualification" requirements.
Bill Butcher/USFWS



Special agents can expect to serve in several locations during a typical 20-year career. Diversified experience provides a sound basis for moving into the supervisory and management positions found in the Resident Agent in Charge offices, the Regional Offices, and at Service headquarters in Arlington, Virginia. The selection process for management positions is competitive and provides opportunities up to the GS-15 level.

What benefits do special agents earn?

Special agents with 20 years of Federal law enforcement service may retire as early as age 50. Retirement becomes mandatory at 57. Low-cost health, dental, vision, long-term care, and life insurance may be obtained through Federal employee programs. Annual leave accrues at the rate of 13 to 26 days per year, based on length of employment. Sick leave is earned at the rate of 13 days per year and there are 10 paid Federal holidays per year.

Agent based in southern California prepares night vision equipment for a surveillance operation in the Mojave Desert.
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Office of Law Enforcement
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For more information about the Service:
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April 2012

Item FW 1010