

Commentaries of a Game Warden

by Chris Johnson

I have worked on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge for the past 14 years as a law enforcement officer. My actual title is Refuge Officer but I prefer to call myself a “Game Warden.” Over the years I have gathered all sorts of tales from my adventures, and have heard all kinds of excuses and reasons from people about why they had to do it. I will share a few of my stories with you. As I sit down to write this article I have to laugh and shake my head as I recall some of these incidents, and this in turn reminds me of other incidents. I will try to keep this article to just a few stories and if readers enjoy the topic, I am sure that I can find a few more to tell in a future article.

Part of my patrol area is Hidden Lake. Hidden Lake is a popular camping location in the spring and summer for families but in the winter I would say Hidden Lake is the most popular location for ice fisherman, after Lake Trout on the Peninsula. There was a core group of ice fishermen that was there almost every day. I don’t know if they were just getting bored or wanted to spice up their ice fishing experience. I realized this group was fishing with live bait, which is illegal. This became a game of cat and mouse. I would try and sneak up on them to catch them with their live bait on their lines. They would post “look outs” with spotting scopes to keep an eye out for the game warden. If a game warden was spotted, they would send a “chase vehicle” out to warn the fishermen. With receiving that information the fisherman would quickly cut their lines. When the game warden would finally reach their location, he would discover only “dangling” lines in empty holes. This game became a challenge for me. I would devise different strategies to approach the lake undetected. Eventually, I did catch these anglers with live bait several times, but I’ll admit that on not a few occasions I found only dangling lines in an empty hole.

It was late fall on the Kenai River just below Skilak Lake. It was spitting snow and about 20 degrees. I was hiding in the bushes and I observed a man land a large Rainbow trout. I watched him kill the fish and put it in his boat. I decided to contact the man at Lower Skilak boat ramp. The season for Rainbows was open and the only requirement was that if you retained a rain-

bow over 20 inches, it had to be recorded on the back of your fishing license. Well, I contacted the man at the boat ramp and he told me he had not caught any fish. I searched his boat high and low because I knew he had kept the fish. While I was searching the boat, the man was squirming around a lot. I thought he was really nervous about something or else real cold. Well, after about 15 minutes the guy couldn’t handle it anymore and told me the fish I was looking for was down his pants. The man opened up his pants and pulled a 24-inch Rainbow trout out of his pant leg. He had failed to record the fish on his license and was afraid that I was going to take the fish from him. I lent him a pen.

In this next story the moose gets its revenge and shoots back. I responded to a call about a sub-legal moose found dead off of Marathon Road. I hiked into the kill area with a State Protection Officer and the reporting parties. The Protection Officer and I proceeded to start quartering and skinning the moose in the hopes of recovering a bullet. As we finished with each quarter of the moose, we moved it out of our way. We finished skinning and examining a hindquarter with the hoof attached and moved it over to our pile of already examined meat. About three feet from that location, one of the reporting parties had set his rifle down against a tree stump. We set the examined quarter down and then started working on another quarter. About two minutes later a shot rang out and tree bark splattered all around us. One of the reporting parties dropped to the ground like he had been shot. My first thought was that one of the men with us had shot. My next thought was that we were under fire from somebody claiming the moose. After several minutes we were able to sort out that the rifle leaning against the tree stump had gone off, after the hoof of the moose quarter we had just moved fell and hit the safety and the trigger. The man that dropped like he had been shot actually had been hit by tree bark and was OK. After that we got down on our knees and prayed and thanked God that no one had been hurt.

I was working in the Kenai Russian River Ferry area, and I was in uniform standing right behind this guy that had a snagged fish on his line. The man

landed the fish and then clubbed it. He took the hook out of its tail and put the hook in its mouth. He then unhooked the fish and turned around to put the fish in his backpack. Well, when he turned around and saw me standing there in uniform, his eyes got as big as saucers and that fish went about twenty feet in the air and came right back down on top of the surprised snagger.

To combat the illegal and dangerous practice of hunters shooting from their vehicle or on or across a road, we use a decoy's set up just off the road. We have had a number of close calls from people shooting at animals from on or across the road. On one occasion a hunter was shooting at a spruce grouse that was on the road near the peak of a small hill. The hunter missed his shot and hit the mirror of a vehicle coming up the hill. On another occasion there was a father and son parked in their camper along the side of the road sleeping. Somebody took a few shots at a couple grouse in the road approximately 100 yards down the road. Two shots entered the camper just inches away from the father and son sleeping in the camper. There also have been several occasions when hunters have shot their own vehicle when trying to shoot at game from their vehicle.

When a hunter comes along and shoots at our decoys, we pop out of the trees and have a little meeting with the hunter and we discuss the merits of shooting from their vehicle or from or across the road. One afternoon I set my decoy up on Swanson River Road; along comes a car and out pops a guy with a .22 rifle. He stands right in the center of the road and opens fire on the decoy. I come out of the trees yelling, "Game Warden, put your gun down!" The guy does not hear me. He's got tunnel vision and audio exclusion, an

effect to the human body when it's under stress commonly called the "fight or flight" syndrome. Any way he keeps shooting at this bird like it was coming to eat him. He fires 14 rounds and then starts to reload before I can get him convinced that the bird was not going to get him.

Wayward hunters aren't the only ones fooled by a grouse decoy. I have, for example, had my decoy stolen by a hungry coyote. The coyote looked at me, looked at my grouse decoy then back at me, then figured he could beat me to the bird and grabbed the decoy. I tracked him for about a quarter mile where he must of stopped to take a bite out of his stolen meal and left the decoy.

I have also had the decoy attacked by a hawk. The hawk just flew down and knocked over the decoy. Another time a raven flew down and started picking at the decoy until I shoed it away.

It has been fun reminiscing about old times. Retelling these stories has jogged my memory of other incidents. Other officers have reminded me of other stories and similar situations, in which they have been involved. Until next time, remember to bring some kids hunting or fishing. Share the experience, and show them the right way to do things. They are our future.

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