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Who Are Our Game Wardens

Part One in a
Three Part Series
about Wildlife Law
Enforcement

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Images courtesy of National
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**The past is a legacy of achievement,
and the future holds challenges
every bit as daunting—possibly
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Circa 1907 – Game Warden Paul Kroegel (1864-1948) carried a menacing 10-gauge shotgun in a one-man effort to save the brown pelicans from extinction on the newly formed Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge. Training and focus of game wardens has changed dramatically over the last century.

The two simple words, “game warden,” can produce a variety of responses. Whatever that response might be, the common understanding is that the person who holds this title enforces the laws that manage and protect our country’s wildlife. History tells us this profession has been in existence for centuries and has stood to define the person who is the steward and protector of wildlife. Although the original game wardens evolved in Europe and protected the game belonging to kings and aristocracy, this position of trust and authority was established in North America through what has come to be known as the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation.

The fair and non-preferential application of law is a binding agent, holding the North American Model together. The principles—that wildlife is held and protected in the public’s trust; that the allocation of wildlife shall be by law; to prohibit practices that are considered unethical—are among others that require the administration of laws and regulations to make the model work. Game wardens, sometimes referred to by a variety of other titles, are men and women who have dedicated their lives to this profession and have played a very significant role in the success of our wildlife conservation programs.

It has been nearly 35 years since I began my career in wildlife law enforcement. I have learned through observation and work over these years that there truly is a common resolve and ethic that officers share, regardless of official title or jurisdiction. I have worked in three states over my career, and I can assure you that the dedication to duty and mission is universally understood and applied, regardless of the state where the officer works. I have been fortunate to meet and, more importantly, work with fellow officers from many states, provinces and territories. Although I do not consider myself a historian, I had the opportunity to work with men many years my senior, who provided me with an understanding of where we came from and what it means to be a member of this profession. There is pride in such a rich and unique heritage. The past is a legacy of achievement, and the future holds challenges every bit as daunting—possibly more so—than what our predecessors faced.

The issues, concerns and challenges affecting game wardens today are more complex and cover a broader spectrum than at any other time in our history. Reflecting on what I learned from the men who came before me, it seems that the issues were fairly straightforward in those earlier days, and game wardens focused their work on basic game management, hunting, trapping, and fishing. In the early part of the twentieth century, market hunting was in the recent past, and hunting, at least in part for subsistence, was a major component of daily life across the country. The quarry being hunted was defined as game, and game poaching needed to be stopped if the management program was to work. Game and non-game species alike benefited from this system. While exotic species were introduced, the impact from their introduction and spread was yet evident.

Commercial market-hunting of our native wildlife had an important influence in the development of the North American Model. It had huge impacts on wildlife populations. In the latter part of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, curbing illegal market and subsistence hunting was a major task. Illegal markets continue to exist and have a tremendous impact on a wide variety of wildlife, often involving species protected by law. Today, poached animals from all continents, whether alive or dead, either whole or their parts, are bought and sold through illegal markets that have been estimated to be second only to the illegal drug trade. Today’s game wardens not only have to be familiar with the local wildlife, they need to have knowledge of wildlife from around the world. Legal, regulated commercial markets for wildlife still operate today and are part of many management plans, but it is important to note that these markets are regulated, which means there must be enforcement of the regulations.



TOP The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has primary responsibility for law enforcement activities on National Wildlife Refuges. Service agents frequently assist state fish and wildlife agencies in the enforcement of waterfowl hunting regulations as shown in this undated photograph from the USFWS. **ABOVE** U.S. Game Management agent Childers with 121 mink skins that had been illegally taken and seized in Alaska in 1951.

The laws and regulations used to control and direct wildlife management are of critical importance. The rule of law, administered for the benefit of wildlife and all people, is an important concept within the North American Model. There was a day when seasons were simple and bag limits liberal. I remember looking at a Wyoming hunting license issued in the early days of the game and fish department that allowed the taking of a variety of big game—more than one of some species—over the period of a lengthy hunting season. I now see hunting seasons that are staggered, layered or segmented either through time or in regard to what may be taken and by what method. There are permits that are valid in multiple hunting units, single hunting units, or sometimes just a part of a hunting unit. All these varieties and combinations of seasons, bag limits and permits are developed to improve game management; however, our hunting has become more complex, and in some cases more complicated, than what it was in the days of our forefathers.

Invasive, exotic species of animals and plants present a threat of unparalleled proportions to our country. One hundred years ago the introduction of exotic animals was thought to be a benefit to sportsmen; today exotics are regarded with concern, and their release is at least discouraged, or more commonly, prohibited. Never before have we experienced such a serious threat to our native wildlife and ecosystems. Game wardens are on the front lines, providing assistance by enforcing importation and possession laws, informing and educating the public and assisting in the actual removal and eradication of these threats.

Invention and technology have brought forth what seems to be a never-ending cavalcade of hunting equipment and accessories. Some of these items are of significant benefit to the hunt and conservation, while others may have more debatable functions. New innovations sometimes push against the traditional methods and mores. Determining when the lines of acceptance have been crossed and what can or may be allowed during the hunt are questions that game wardens continually face. There are more types of guns, bows, arrows, sighting devices, and other hunting equipment on the market today than at any other time in history. Technology has provided some very

imaginative devices to serve the hunter. Frequently the laws regulating the legal methods for hunting may not adequately address the item in hand. Game wardens must have a solid understanding of the law to answer and resolve these questions.

Courses in wildlife law are not normally taught in law school or in general law enforcement training academies. At best, it is given brief mention. It has only been through the efforts of wildlife agencies and their law enforcement staff that adequate, professional training is provided in this unique area of law. There was a day when a new officer received a badge, a law book, and was told to go out and enforce the law. He was usually told to ask if he had any questions, but otherwise he was left to figure things out by himself. Game wardens are no longer trained this way. This unique area of

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law is only covered in specialized training by subject matter experts who have gained experience from those who work in this arena. Statutory and case law concerning wildlife forensics techniques developed for the identification of wildlife and other related topics are in addition to the general law enforcement training needed for a person to be commissioned as a game warden.

Wildlife law enforcement and management are not the only items on the menu for today's game wardens. They always have, and continue to be, the front line in the agency's community relations and education programs. An important part of their job is the face-to-face contact with the hunters, anglers, trappers, and wide array of outdoor enthusiasts. They answer questions,

give instruction, provide assistance, render aid, and promote proper conservation to a diverse public made up of people of all levels of knowledge and expertise. While technology has provided society with many quick and efficient means to provide, acquire, and communicate information, the value of face-to-face communication and hands-on instruction will never be replaced. Personalizing wildlife conservation and the North American Model with everyone, and sharing this message and encouraging participation in a natural, organic fashion is the key to ensuring our amazing conservation programs are carried into the future. Technology has its place and function, and officers are using it for everyone's benefit. But, the core of human understanding is best touched through word-of-mouth and the guiding hand that our forefathers used to help us. Today's game wardens are doing this on a daily basis, working to educate people on the importance of the conservation model and the value of our natural resources.

Each state has its own unique evolution of game management and the role game wardens have played. It is safe to say that across the North American landscape the duties of a game warden are more diverse today than ever before. There has never been a time when game wardens have been called upon to serve so many functions as we are seeing today. It is true that on September 11, 2001 the world changed, particularly in North America. The term "homeland security" came on the scene almost instantaneously and has been indelibly etched in our lifestyle ever since. Game wardens

were called upon to provide security for our nation; a mission they continue to carry out. Key facilities, ports and borders were, and continue to be, patrolled and guarded by them. Today, while performing their traditional duties of patrolling and enforcing wildlife laws, our officers are fulfilling another important mission of providing local, state and national security, particularly in the less populated areas of our country. Game wardens have been providing law enforcement in remote, primitive areas throughout our history. They are mentally and physically well-adjusted to work in, and deal with, the rigorous conditions of the rural and backcountry environments. The equipment they use is designed for this type of work. In short, they are trained,

equipped, and able to work in areas where other law enforcement officers are not. These attributes have brought game wardens to assist local, state, and federal law enforcement in their missions on an increasingly frequent basis.

General law enforcement functions are not the only areas where game wardens have become a highly regarded resource. In the wake of the devastation left by violent natural disasters, game wardens have played a major role in victim rescue and recovery. These officers are well-versed in operating boats, ATVs, and four-wheel-drive trucks in a wide variety of conditions. They know how to find their way with or without map and compass. They are familiar with working in extreme environmental conditions and are not hesitant to get wet and muddy. Throughout their history and careers, they have slept in the rain, worked in the sweltering sun, and made do with what they have at hand. Their response to events such as hurricanes Katrina and Rita shows what a valuable resource they are.

The future for game wardens is every bit as challenging as what is reflected throughout history. The entry-level qualifications for a game warden are as high, or higher, than other law enforcement jobs. Even though it appears the number of qualified candidates is annually declining, it is important that these qualification standards remain high. There are a number of thoughts as to why we are seeing this declining trend in the number of qualified applicants. One is pay and benefits. Another is similar to an issue involved in hunter recruitment and retention; people are not being exposed to the culture and they don't understand it. Whatever the combination of reasons, it is vital that this profession is supported and allowed to grow so that this important mission continues to be served.

In the spring of 1973, William Morse, of the Wildlife Management Institute, had an article published in *The Wildlife Society Bulletin*. His article, titled "Law Enforcement—One Third of the Triangle" reviews wildlife law enforcement at that time and provides data and survey results. In his summary of recommendations, Morse provides three essential tasks for agencies to address in their law enforcement programs:

1. Keep law enforcement strong, viable, and modern by research, improved management, and good recruiting and training.
2. Increase the prestige and professionalism of officers.

3. Keep enforcement in state fish and wildlife agencies for the benefit of enforcement and of fish and wildlife."

He concludes with five recommendations, involving "administrative effort, support, and modest expenditures" as being significant in accomplishing the aforementioned tasks. These five recommendations focus on various types of law enforcement research: better record and reporting systems; maintaining an officer workforce commensurate with the ever-increasing interest and demands on the wildlife resource; providing opportunities for the professional development of officers through various forums; obtaining full peace officer enforcement power for officers; and, "Always keep in mind that wildlife and fisheries programs involve three things: research, management and enforcement."

I believe the wildlife law enforcement community is in general agreement with Morse's article. While some may say there has been little change since the time of Morse's assessment, there have been significant improvements in training, equipment, technology, and professional standards for our officers; but improvement is a never-ending process. The overall mission of today's game wardens is as vital to the conservation model as ever. The demands placed on them by our society for non-traditional services will continue to increase. The game warden profession is an honorable one serving an important mission. It has evolved and continues to change through time. But be assured, these men and women will work tirelessly to ensure that the success of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation is carried on into the future. ■



Illegal wildlife trade has persisted for decades as witnessed by the two images above. **TOP** A federal game agent, operating undercover in 1937, halted an illegal wildlife trade in Webb County, Texas. **ABOVE** This current image shows hundreds of wildlife products confiscated at the JFK Airport.