

The “Cappuccino Caper”

Many western Wyoming trophy mule deer buck poaching cases begin with a report from a concerned citizen detailing their finding of a headless deer carcass. The Cappuccino Caper started in the same typical fashion in late October of 2008. A winter range traveler contacted the Department after finding a large bodied mule deer carcass in the Rye Grass country north of Big Piney. The reporter stated that the carcass was fresh and there were several vehicle tracks in the area.

Local wardens responded to the area quickly to begin an investigation. Three game wardens combed over the entire scene, finding tire tracks, shell casings, garbage (including a coffee cup) and a deer carcass they determined had been killed the prior day. Wardens were able to determine by tire tracks that a vehicle had stopped in a crooked position, with the front of the vehicle pointed towards the deer. Identical tracks were found all along the small dirt road, but initially it appeared that the vehicle had traveled the road two times as there were two sets of tracks parallel to one another.



Investigators were able to use the location of two shell casings on the road to determine where the vehicle stopped, pointed it’s headlights towards the deer carcass and allowed garbage to fall off of the floor board on the passenger side of the vehicle. Further investigation over approximately one half mile of the road allowed wardens to determine the parallel tire tracks were made by a pick-up with dual rear wheels. They were also able to follow blood drops from the carcass to a location that was consistent with the back end of a pick-up.

Wardens concluded their work at the scene with a few small pieces of important evidence, but no suspect. They knew the deer most likely was shot in the dark based on the position of the vehicle in relation to the deer. They knew that the shooter was most likely the driver and they knew that the head was cut off, carried, and loaded on the driver side into the back of a pick-up. They also had a small, unique styro-foam coffee cup.

The wardens examined the cup and determined there was only one place in the county that served coffee using that type of cup. A visit to the “Mountain Mocha” drive-thru coffee shop in Pinedale confirmed that this establishment served this type of cup. An employee at the establishment examined the cup and was able to determine that it contained cappuccino when it was sold. She also noted that it was very uncommon for any of the normal customers to purchase a small cappuccino. She could remember selling a small cappuccino to a fairly regular customer, but couldn’t remember who it was or what they drove. The local warden asked her to keep her eye open for a dual wheeled pick up where the passenger routinely purchases a small cappuccino. She agreed to do so.

The following morning the coffee shop employee called the local warden and stated that a white dually Dodge pick-up had just come through the drive up and the passenger ordered a small cappuccino. She also provided a license plate number and stated there was a scoped rifle on the seat next to the driver.

Wardens quickly mobilized to find the vehicle and were successful by mid-morning finding the vehicle at a local business. Wardens conducted a search of the vehicle and found blood and hair evidence on the driver’s side of the truck as well as rifles, ammunition and a knife with blood and hair. The owner of the vehicle eventually confessed to poaching the deer and led wardens to a location where he hid the head near his rural residence. The suspect’s accomplice was quickly identified and confessed as well. Both suspects described their crime in detail and stated that they were drinking Crown Royal whiskey, driving around in the dark and saw the large buck on the side of the road. Both men were convicted of multiple wildlife violations, paid several thousand dollars in fines and lost their hunting and fishing privileges for several years.



This was an excellent illustration of how wildlife crimes can be solved with help from the public and thorough investigations by wildlife law enforcement officers.