

# Northern Wyoming Daily News - 5

## Gillette residents lose hunting privileges in Washakie County elk poaching case

WORLAND – Two Gillette residents pleaded guilty Thursday for taking 11 elk and only possessing three tags from hunt area 48 in Washakie County last November, while three family members also pleaded guilty to unlawful transfer of a hunting license.

According to a press release from the Washakie County Eugene Thompson, 45, and his girlfriend Tanyae Maldonado, 37, told Fifth Judicial Circuit Court Judge Thomas P. Harrington that they had gotten carried away and didn't notice any fallen elk in the herd, so they continued to fire. At least 11 elk had been killed by Thompson and Maldonado on Nov. 15, 2017, according to Wyoming Game and Fish Department investigators.

Thompson's parents George Steele, 66, and Wanda Steele, 73, and sister Tammy Thompson, 53, also pleaded guilty to transfer of licenses.

Wildlife Investigator Daniel Beach stated in his investigative report that Eugene Thompson and Maldonado secured additional tags from George Steele, Wanda Steele, and another member of the hunting party. Two days later, security camera footage at the Casper Sportsman's Warehouse showed a coordinated effort by Eugene Thompson, Maldonado, and two others from the hunting party to purchase additional licenses.

During the investigation, Eugene Thompson told investigators that he made sure not a single elk came off that mountain without a tag on it. He further said that he and Maldonado were "sick to their stomachs" when they discovered how many elk they had shot.

Investigators found several pictures on Eugene Thompson's and Maldonado's cell phone of them posing with the elk, including one where Maldonado appeared very happy with her take. The GPS coordinates from where the pictures were taken also showed that they were trespassing on private land while they were hunting and Eugene Thompson was charged with that as well. Washakie County Attorney John Worrall told the court, "An ethical hunter wouldn't have had to think about contacting the authorities right away," when they realized they made an error."

"If you shoot something, make sure it isn't dead before you start shooting again," said Worrall after the hearing. "I just don't understand how you can make that error in judgment and not figure it out before you drop 11. That's not sport at all."

Among court costs and fees, Harrington suspended Eugene Thompson's hunting privileges for nine years and Maldonado, George Steele, Wanda Steele and Tammy Thompson for six years each.

Worrall said that he felt the lengthy suspension of hunting privileges was the best option in this case rather than jail time or extremely high fines that the defendants would never be able to pay. He said, "Hunting was a very important part of this family's life. Taking that privilege away from them for so long sends a very strong message."

"Game and Fish did a lot of work on this investigation and presented an extremely good case to me," said Worrall.

Worrall went on to say that this particular herd was very healthy and vibrant, "Two people getting 'carried away' can have long-lasting impact on that herd. With at least 11 gone from the herd, we may see it impact the number of licenses that will be available for next year," he said. "Look, this is Wyoming. We love to hunt. It is our culture and we take great pride in it. It is also very important to us that the rules are followed properly for the sake of fairness and sportsmanship. Situations like this only hurt the ethical hunter," Worrall added.