

Wyoming Warden

A Different Type of Law Enforcement

by Jay Lawson

A game warden faces many challenges in a given day, but one that remains constant is maintaining a positive attitude and demeanor when dealing with the public. The law enforcement role they play is a unique one, for unlike most types of enforcement, violations are not immediately apparent, and in their checks for compliance, the majority of their public contacts are with legal hunters and anglers.

A typical morning during hunting season would involve numerous field checks of honest sportsmen—the majority of them wanting to visit briefly and gain the warden's viewpoint on local hunting conditions. This is a crucial role for the warden; at once being information specialist, law enforcement officer, and in a sense, a roving ambassador for the state wildlife agency.

Interspersed with these positive public contacts are the encounters with those in violation, some intentional and others the result of carelessness or loss of judgment during the excitement of a hunt. The warden must then fill a more serious law enforcement role, using his or her judgment to determine a proper course of action. Some of these encounters are unpleasant, especially with belligerent or angry individuals. And, of course, an hour later you are contacting more legal hunters. It can be a roller coaster emotionally, and the challenge is to adapt one's conduct and behavior to fit each encounter.

In his famous essay, "The Man with the Badge," turn-of-the-century Wisconsin game warden Ernie Swift, who later became executive director of the National Wildlife Federation, observed that, "A successful game warden by nature is an individualist. He enjoys being his own boss, working out his own problems."

He went on to describe the tremendous responsibility that comes with a warden's enforcement role saying, "Pinning a badge on a man does something to him. His mental outlook has to adjust to the responsibility and authority vested in him. The authority to restrict the liberty of fellow citizens should not be taken lightly nor should it be abused."

In Wyoming, we make every effort to select game wardens who can fill this unique dual role of public relations specialist and peace officer. Our screening process is intense and stringent, but it pays off in quality field personnel. Some excerpts from letters I have received during the past few months are indicative of the success our wardens are having.

From the Douglas area, a Missouri hunter wrote, "Dear Chief Lawson: Just a short note to reiterate what you probably already know about Rod Lebert, one of your fine, outstanding officers. We met during the 2001 antelope season while he checked my antelope that I had just killed. He was impressive and very professional, answering my many questions and giving my hunting partners and me information about other public hunting areas and how to access them. He appears to be very dedicated to his job and an officer who I am

sure the Game and Fish Department is proud to employ."

From Worland, the mother of a young hunter wrote to commend game warden Matt Lentsch for his role in the Paintrock Hunter Mentor Pro-



Incidental to their law enforcement duties, Wyoming game wardens often take time to assist young hunters and anglers.

gram: "To begin with, I want to bring attention to the exceptional job that Matt has done of organizing, coordinating and launching this program, as well as motivating both mentors and young hunters alike. Through his design of scheduled events, the kids not only learn essential hunting skills, but they develop ethical attitudes, and respect and responsibility towards Wyoming's wildlife ..."

From the Gillette area, a bird hunter writes, "... I guess what I wanted to pass on to you was that Kevin (Shea) just seemed to be very good at his job—he talked with us about the hunting we had been doing, found out the things he needed to, checked out our licenses, found out about other hunting activity we had seen in the area. He seemed to be in control of the situation while meeting the public in a very positive way. He was good enough to get us some literature on the walk-in areas that we had been looking for, and overall, it was a very positive experience. This young gentleman is doing a great job for the Game and Fish and for sportsman out there ..."

And in another positive letter from the Green River area, "My husband and two other couples

and I recently returned from a mule deer hunt near Kemmerer. It was certainly one of the most enjoyable hunts that I have ever been on. The quality was fabulous, and the scenery was breathtaking. Out-shadowing it all was the warmth, kindness, and helpfulness of your game warden Duane Kerr ... After I shot my buck, Duane helped me fill out my tags. I was pretty excited, and started to feel a little shaky. Duane asked me to sit down, and said, "You're not going to faint are you?" When I replied no, he said, 'Good, I don't have enough cold water to throw on you.' And we both laughed. While we were dragging my buck down to the road, two more bucks come over the ridge. My husband's friend Roy shot one and Duane helped him look for it for about 20 minutes till they spotted it at the base of the ridge where Roy shot it again and dropped it. May I say that I feel that his helpfulness went way beyond the call of duty. I hope you appreciate this employee of yours. Being a lady hunter I know when men are being condescending or merely tolerant of my presence. I never felt anything but welcome in Wyoming and I hope to return to hunt there many times in the future."

At times, game wardens encounter hunters who are young and inexperienced and others with a physical disability. A good example is this feedback from the Elk Mountain area, "I have hunted in Wyoming for the past 20 years and met a lot of nice people. This year I met one of the nicest. I had some back surgery earlier in the year and was trying to load an antelope I had killed and was having a difficult time. One of your game wardens, Brian Nesvik, came by to check my license and saw that I was having trouble and he gutted and loaded my antelope for me. He did not have to do that, but it was greatly appreciated ... It is nice to know that your game wardens are such nice people and are so willing to help the hunters out in the field."

Biologists fill this same role, as evidenced by the letter from an Iowa hunter, "I wanted to let you know what a pleasure it was to hunt elk and experience the great outdoors in the Washakie wilderness ... What I also wanted to pass on to you was the positive experience I had with wildlife biologist Kevin Hurley, who was extremely professional and helpful in checking licenses and providing information about the wildlife of Wyoming. He was very knowledgeable and informative with bear, sheep and elk facts to assist us with our understanding of the habitat and animals..."

Game wardens also provide assistance with attempts-to-locate requests during family emergencies. A recent example from the Pinedale area, "Jerry Withers of Cheyenne dropped by today to heap praise on Duke Early. Apparently, someone called the Cheyenne office to advise that a close friend of Mr. Withers died and asked that a message be transmitted to Mr. Withers. The message was relayed to the Pinedale office, then to Duke. Mr. Withers traditionally camps at the same campground each year, but that campground was full this year. Duke spent some time at it, but was able to locate Mr. Withers and his wife to deliver the message."

Mr. Withers appreciated Duke and the department going to the trouble of finding them, especially during this busy time of the year for Duke. Mr. Withers noted that Duke came by later and checked the big game carcasses they had in camp."

And, finally, there was the Cheyenne hunter that I ran into in the grocery store. Having just been checked with an elk in a remote portion of the Snowy Range, he was extremely complimentary of the warden's attitude and mannerisms, and stated, "What a great game warden. Where do you get those guys?"

These outtakes from letters complimenting our personnel portray the extra effort being put forth to assist both resident and nonresident hunters and anglers. It is extremely gratifying to receive such feedback, and the actions of these game wardens and biologists reflect positively on the department and the state of Wyoming.