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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 in Wyoming’s unique wilderness is fraught with constant scrutiny. Public hunting violations are not immediately apparent, and in their checks for compliance, the majority of their public contacts are with legal hunters.

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 roaming ambassador for the state’s wildlife.

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 rollercoaster 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 is a task that citizens should not be taken lightly nor should it be abused. 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 Nevik, 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 and enrich our 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 Duke, 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 mannersisms, 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 as wardens and biologists reflect positively on the department and the state of Wyoming.