



A Tough Path Worth Taking

BECOMING A WYOMING GAME WARDEN

By Bob Lanka



Credit: San Stiver

Bob Lanka is Supervisor of Biological Services for the Wyoming Game and Fish Department.

I know from experience that a day in the life of a Wyoming game warden goes something like this: You're out 'till around midnight with the local wildlife biologist doing winter spotlight herd counts. It seems like you just hit the pillow when the phone rings. One of the landowners in your district, who supports a lot of wintering game, just heard a shot and saw some headlights move off his east pasture. Without delay you roll out of bed, strap on your law enforcement duty belt, and head out the door, not knowing exactly what you'll find. As you hop into your green department truck with the dancing pronghorn on the door—the shield of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD)—you reflect on how you got to where you are today.

For most, being a game warden is a calling more than a job—and in Wyoming, this calling has a long and honorable history. In fact, this year marks the 75th anniversary of the state's competitive game warden exam, one of the most vigorous in the nation. First offered in 1938, it was established to ensure that game wardens earned the job through

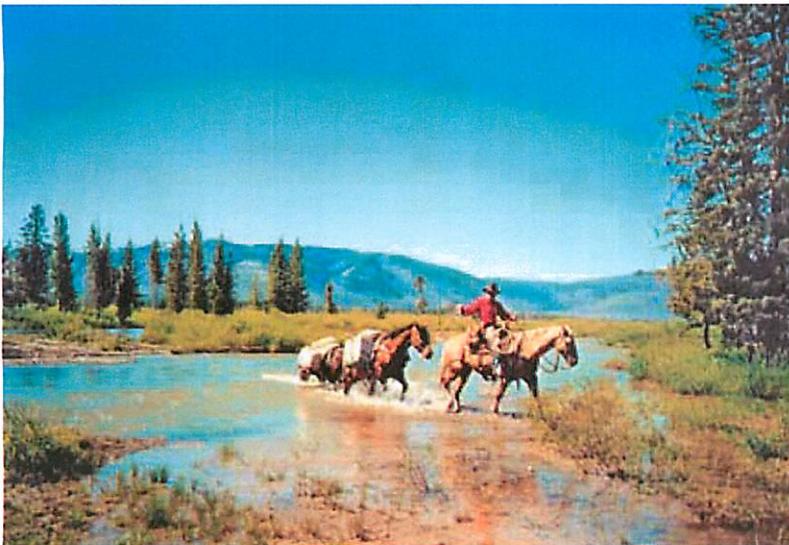
merit rather than political influence. About half of those who take the exam will pass, and maybe a half dozen of them will be offered jobs and begin what promises to be a memorable career.

Scope and Rewards of the Job

Being a game warden requires working weekdays, weekends, and holidays in all types of weather and at all times of the day and night. Though wardens in many states spend the bulk of their time on law enforcement, Wyoming's wardens have highly diverse responsibilities. Most spend about one-third of their time enforcing game, fish, and boating laws and regulations. Another third of their time is spent helping collect and analyze biological data and gaining the field experience needed to manage large and often migratory wildlife populations. The final third involves a range of issues such as mitigating wildlife damage to livestock and crops; working cooperatively with landowners, public land management agencies, and NGOs; providing hunting and fishing information; and being the local "expert" so constituents can find out what's going on with their wildlife and their department.

Part of the job's attraction is never quite knowing what the day will hold—whether trapping bears, darting and transplanting moose, flying in a helicopter to count bighorn sheep, getting a deer out of a resident's back yard, hazing 1,000 elk out of a rancher's field, talking to hunters, or catching poachers. "We are wildlife biologists, wildlife law enforcement officers, wildlife educators, problem solvers, and ambassadors to landowners, hunters, anglers, and communities throughout Wyoming," says Herb "Bubba" Haley, WGFD's North Pinedale Game Warden. After almost 17 years in the ranks, Haley still says, "I've got the greatest job in the world."

Only a select few get to do the job, however. The Wyoming Game and Fish Department has 85 commissioned enforcement officers including the department's Director and Chief Game Warden. We have 50 senior game wardens, each assigned an individual warden district, and 10 game wardens



Credit: WGFD

Some 15 miles from the nearest road, in an area known as the Thorofare, Wyoming game warden Jerry Longobardi leads pack horses across the upper Yellowstone River. Wardens in the backcountry enforce hunting and fishing regulations and collect wildlife management data.



who work around the state, handling watercraft and fishing enforcement during the summer and assisting regionally with tasks in specific districts as needed. Five individuals work 100 percent on law enforcement in our wildlife investigative unit, focusing on complex cases, such as commercial poaching and illegal license transference, which may result in state or federal wildlife law violations. Four officers work in our Private Land/Public Wildlife (PLPW) program, creating hunter and angler access agreements with willing landowners and helping with law enforcement on PLPW lands. Finally, two wardens supervise and work with a group of non-enforcement personnel in our Large Carnivore Section to address conflicts and management issues regarding grizzly and black bears, mountain lions, and wolves. The remaining officers are comprised of statewide and regional supervisors and a law enforcement program manager and coordinator.

The diversity of the work—as well as a passion for wildlife—is what attracts people to the job and keeps them in it for the long haul. “I’ve wanted to be a game warden since I was a little kid, and now I can’t believe I get paid to do the things I do,” says Kyle Lash, one of our newest game wardens. “I don’t work with anyone who doesn’t care about the wildlife we manage, the habitats they rely upon, and the landowners, hunters, anglers, and citizens we serve. Working with this group of dedicated professionals is something I am glad to be a part of.”

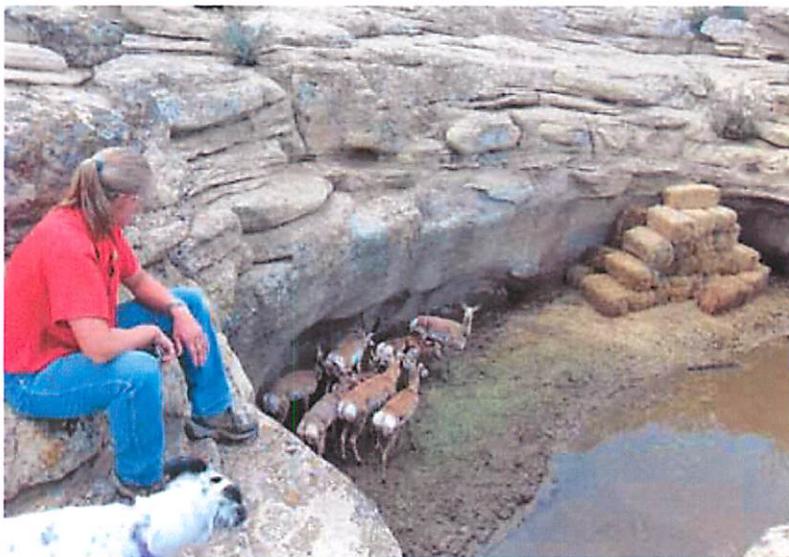
Earning a Coveted Slot

Those who do want to be a part of this profession must meet several rigorous requirements that the state has established to ensure that Wyoming hires the most well-qualified candidates. These requirements include:

Education. Candidates must have a bachelor’s degree in wildlife management, range management, biology, zoology, or ichthyology, including at least 20 hours of coursework in these fields. This educational foundation is more important than having a law enforcement background because game wardens are wildlife managers as well as law enforcement officers, and the department offers its own training in the law enforcement aspects of the job.

Exam. Candidates who meet the educational requirements will then need to pass Wyoming’s competitive game warden exam. Our [website](#) shows

sample questions from the exam, which covers a range of issues in four broad categories including: (1) wildlife management, such as species identification, diseases, data collection, and damage management; (2) fish, including identification and distribution of warm and cold-water species; (3) law, covering Wyoming statutes, court procedure,



Credit: WGFD

Game warden Kim Olson looks down on a herd of pronghorn antelope that inexplicably got trapped in a rock-bound water hole. She and colleagues built a hay-bale ladder in hopes that the pronghorn would climb out. When that failed, the animals were tranquilized and physically hauled out—one of the many unexpected tasks that arise in the life of a Wyoming game warden.

legal terms, and search and seizure; and (4) other issues ranging from federal-aid programs and map reading to endangered species, boating safety, trapping techniques, and firearms safety. “In preparation for the test,” says Lash, “I took the time to look through the department’s website and read all the suggested materials, and took time to call and visit with working Wyoming wardens.”

Interview. Those who pass the exam will have a formal oral interview before a panel consisting of the wildlife division’s chief game warden, the two assistant chiefs, and other department personnel. These leaders will be looking for candidates who can deal with pressure, think on their feet, and represent the department and the game warden position in the most professional manner.

Background Check. Before making the final hire, the department does a background check and



administers a polygraph test. Each candidate also takes a psychological exam and fills out a personality profile to help us determine if a qualified candidate is the right fit for the job.

Candidates who meet the department's standards and earn a job offer then serve a 12-to-15-month probationary employment period. During this time,

each new hire is required to take and pass a rigorous 13-week training program at the Wyoming Law Enforcement Academy (WLEA) to become a certified peace officer in the state. On their first day at the academy, each individual must pass a standardized physical fitness assessment in order to be allowed to begin the training program. (Those who fail this assessment are sent home.) The training at WLEA includes fitness training, classroom work to learn applicable Wyoming and federal laws, and practical field exercises that cover issues like firearms training.

Usually, the first game warden job for someone just out of the academy involves enforcement of fishing and watercraft laws. Throughout the early part of their career, game wardens typically move from one location to the next, receiving close supervision and gaining the experience they need to build their skills and advance their career. Typically, after two to three years, those who show the necessary skill and dedication may be promoted to the rank of a senior game warden and assigned their own district.

Those who have been in the profession for many years have seen some changes in types of issues they confront. They still see mainly routine violations such as hunting out of season or exceeding bag limits, but they're also seeing an increase in more serious violations. They've seen a rise in illegal commercialization of wildlife and also more wanton destruction of wildlife, such as the illegal take of mature male ungulates on winter range out of season and without a license for the antlers only.

Watercraft use on Wyoming's reservoirs has also increased dramatically, resulting in an increase in accidents that can cause serious injury or even death. Many of these incidents are related to an increase in boating under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs, and Wyoming wardens are often the first on the scene to handle these crises.

Wrapping Up Another Day

So what happened with that late-night phone call? Pulling into the ranch yard you can see that the landowners are not happy. You interview them and get limited details, approximate time and a vague description of the intruder's truck. Walking out to investigate you find a crime scene—a large, yellowish elk carcass with only its head removed, the remainder left to waste. No doubt this was a bull poached for its antlers.



Credit: WGFD

Red shirts and sidearms are standard issue for wardens like Adam Hymas, who works with colleagues to field check a recently harvested pronghorn. Monitoring hunter compliance with bag limits and hunting licenses keeps wardens busy at "the office"—Wyoming's wide outdoors.



Credit: WGFD

Game warden Craig Smith (at center) steadies a captured ewe bighorn sheep as others take biological samples. Far beyond law-enforcement officers, Wyoming's game wardens help catch and mark wildlife and also help relocate animals to keep herds stocked and healthy.



Despite feeling disgust, you force yourself to keep a clear mind and sharp eye. At the scene you find two sets of footprints, one shell case, tire tracks, and a bullet lodged in the elk's chest. You also find a beer bottle, an unusual brand in these parts. As you leave the scene, you call a long-time sheriff's deputy who knows almost everyone in the county, hoping he can give you a lead. He knows of a couple people who might engage in poaching. As you drive by the house of one of them, you see a pickup in the drive with treads that match the tracks you saw earlier. You investigate, and notice blood in the back and an empty beer bottle from that same unusual brand. Based on your investigation, collected evidence, training, and skill, you obtain a confession from the guilty parties, who are cited and sent to court.

You got lucky. Most cases don't end this quickly and many are never solved. The judge, an outdoor enthusiast, passes down a harsh sentence: winter range violation, large fine, restitution for the animal, and loss of the truck and rifle used to take the elk. As you leave the courtroom you take some satisfaction in a job well done. But there is still a poached elk lying dead in your district, stolen from the herd and from those who would enjoy seeing it or giving it fair chase. Disgust rises again in your throat.

Are you interested in becoming a Wyoming game warden? Are you someone who can talk to a class of fourth graders in the morning and fourth-generation landowners in the afternoon? Are you part wildlife biologist, range manager, psychologist, educator, and law enforcement officer? Can you read people and situations, and know when to simply issue a warning versus come down hard? Can you work with little supervision but still realize you are not self-employed? Can you work long hours in isolated country in adverse weather? If you answer "yes" and have the education and drive to be successful, then we want you—and so would most other state agencies in the nation. ■

This article has been reviewed by subject-matter experts.



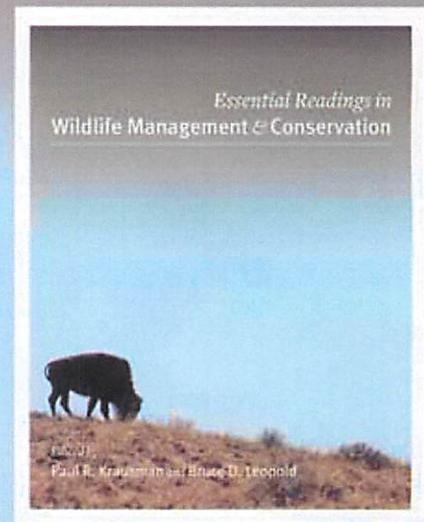
For complete details on the Wyoming game warden exam and scope of the job, go to wildlife.org.

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