

Surprise On Valley Farm

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MOST WILDLIFE poaching cases start with just a bit of information. The ensuing investigation may last a few hours, other times weeks or even months. The information gathered usually leads to evidence collection, interviews and interrogations, and possibly crime lab reports. The results may indicate no violation, or lead to an admission of guilt or a court case. There are many other possible scenarios, because every case is different, but for an officer to actually witness the act of poaching is rare. I recall one case though, that proved to be a combination of all of these scenarios.

When WCO Jim Donatelli received a report of an illegal deer hunting stand on what I'll call Valley Farm, he assigned me to check it out. There was no urgency, as archery season was still a couple of weeks away. That assumption quickly changed, though, when we received a second call that several stands illegal for various reasons, were scattered around the farm.

Most of the farm's acreage is located in a large fertile valley and consists of several rectangular plots separated by wide fencerows grown up in cherry and oak with impregnable autumn olive and multiflora rose. The plots varied from hayfields to grains and even a few areas of reverting farmland. Travel around the field edges for people and wildlife was made simple by ATV trails. The trails made travel to the stands easy, too. One, sometimes two corners of each field had a stand. Some were new, some old, some on the ground and some in trees.

Once archery season began, I patrolled the southern half of the county in the mornings and late afternoons. Throughout the season I made it a habit to pass by the farm, but the only evidence of anyone being in the area of the stands was fresh ATV tracks. By the mid point of the season it appeared the stands were not for archery hunting, but were being prepared for the firearms season.

Expecting there might be multiple hunters using the several stands on opening day, WCO Donatelli enlisted the assistance of some additional officers. The first day of the firearms deer season typically starts out busy at daylight and then gets even more busy throughout the day. Therefore, the additional officers would be available to assist us only the first 30 minutes or so after daylight, before returning to their own areas. Our plan was to meet a half hour before shooting time at a nearby restaurant parking lot. Because I was the only one who knew the location of each stand, I prepared maps and distributed them to each member of the team.

Communicating via radio, each team would simultaneously enter the property and go directly to its assigned stand. Then, anyone found to be violating any game laws would be escorted to where WCO Donatelli and I would deal with the appropriate paperwork.

As had been the case for several years, opening day was again without snow, but temperatures were in the low teens. As I pulled into the parking lot I noticed a couple PGC vehicles in the far corner of the lot. When everyone arrived we gathered in a group, most warming their hands with steaming coffee cups. In addition to WCO Donatelli and me, LMO Jim Deniker, WCO Don Chaybin, Deputy Bruce Ellis, and Deputy Waterways Conservation Officer Mark Casorick were there to assist. Final details were discussed and everyone headed for their assigned areas.

After parking my vehicle, I waited until a few minutes after starting time before relaying the signal to move in. By then I was hearing occasional shots echoing through the valley, but none close enough to be on the farm. Hoping to prevent anyone from taking a deer illegally, all teams moved quickly to their assigned stands. I was not too surprised when no one was

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at either of the two stands I checked. I was certain there would be hunters at a few of the others, though.

"I can't believe it," I said over the radio when the last team reported in. No hunter in any stand; no hunters were even seen on the property. I apologized to everyone for the wild goose chase, thanked them for their efforts, and we all went on our way, looking forward to the many adventures we undoubtedly would experience the rest of the day.

I wrote off the lack of hunters on Valley Farm to the fact that many Mercer County hunters travel to camps or homes of family members in other counties to hunt the first day or two of the season. Saturday would probably be the most likely day to finally bring this investigation to a conclusion. Even so, I planned my patrols for the rest of the week to pass through the valley at least once a day.

Saturday came and went with the same result: no hunting activity on the farm. With many other incidents and investigations to continue with during the second week of the season, I did not plan to spend much more time at Valley Farm.

Even though during the remainder of the season I didn't expect to find anyone hunting from the stands, I hoped to encounter a family member hunting on the farm. That would provide me the opportunity to discuss some issues with them, and let them know they could expect to see me in the future. Often, interaction with a violator, with a little work, can result in gaining a good informant. Sometimes they even give up their bad habits.

The week passed without any activity on the farm, until the next to last day of the season. I had been patrolling solo all day that Friday. No snow and very few hunters were making it an uneventful day. I had plans to meet my family at a local restaurant for dinner at 5 o'clock, just about quitting time, so I started working my way toward home around four o'clock. However, I just couldn't ignore the quiet urge lingering in the back of my mind to make a pass by Valley Farm.

The farm could be checked out from the two lightly traveled country roads dividing it into four distinct sections. As I neared the small bridge over the creek that bisected the farm, I slowed because I had seen more deer sign here than anywhere else on the farm. If I were hunting, this is the area I would be concentrating on. Something caught my eye when I glanced up the small creek bed, an ATV. Being a dark color, it easily blended in with the brushy cover.

I continued down the road and parked out of sight of the ATV. Being as quiet as possible, I walked back to where I could see the ATV and caught a glimpse of orange from behind a large tree a few yards from the machine. This was not one of the areas where illegal stands were located. With about 20 minutes of hunting time remaining, and not wanting to disturb the hunter, I returned to my truck and decided to patrol nearby and return at quitting time to do a routine license check. Following normal procedure, I radioed WCO Jim Donatelli to let him know my location and plans. "I'll work that way, keep me informed," he said.

Just a couple minutes before the end of hunting hours I again parked my truck and walked along the road where I would be able to see whether the hunter was still in position. The hunter and the ATV were. The heavy cloud cover was quickly bringing darkness on, and the wind was picking up and the temperature was dropping.

I quickly made my way back to my truck, grabbed my coat and a flashlight. While walking back where I could observe the hunter, WCO Donatelli called to let me know he was nearby. I advised him the hunter was still in place and not showing any signs of leaving. "Don't drive to my location, just hold up where you are," I instructed. Then I placed a quick call home to tell everyone to go ahead to dinner, I would be delayed.

Twenty minutes after quitting time it was pitch black. I could not see either the ATV or the hunter. This is a dangerous time to approach a hunter, and guessing he would soon start the ATV and head toward the road, and me, I waited at the edge of the road.

Ten minutes later I heard the sound of cartridges being ejected from a bolt action rifle. Shortly, the engine of the ATV roared to life. Quickly placing a call to WCO Donatelli to tell him to start my way, I noticed the battery low light was flashing on my cell phone. Not a

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problem, as it appeared this incident was about to end. I was wrong. As the ATV began to move, the headlights were going away from the road, deeper into the farm property. There was no house or road reasonably close in that direction. Catching up to the hunter would not be difficult, the engine noise of the ATV would cover any noise I would make trotting along the damp creek bottom.

When within about 20 yards of the ATV I was able to keep up at a fast walk. A hundred yards or so into the pursuit the hunter brought the ATV to a halt. I could not determine what he was doing, but there was a lot of movement as he sat astride the vehicle. Suddenly the explosion of a rifle roared through the darkness.

Startled does not come anywhere near describing my reaction. When I got back up, only to my knees, I crawled to the edge of the small clearing where I was out of sight of the hunter. I had no idea in what direction he had shot.

The engine of the ATV died, but the headlights stayed on. I crept out to where I could see better and saw the individual in the headlights of the ATV, bent over a deer, knife in hand. I vividly remember the steam rising from the fresh kill. I didn't dare move, but I got my cell phone out of my coat pocket in case it rang. Once the hunter loaded the doe on the ATV and started the engine, it was safe to make a call to WCO Donatelli. "Jim, did you hear the shot?" "No" he replied.

"I can't believe it; this guy just shot a deer. Do you want me to take him now, or wait till he gets to the road?"

"Let him come out. Where do you want me?" he replied.

I directed him to a location on the road where I guessed the guy would come out. He was traveling much faster now. No way I could keep up with him on foot. I detoured from him, heading cross country in the direction of my truck. In the dark, I was stumbling and trying to protect my face from unseen branches. I attempted to call WCO Donatelli to tell him he was on his own until I could get to my truck and catch up with him. As the phone began to dial, the lighted screen went black. My battery was dead. So much for communication.

Arriving at my truck, gasping for breath and stinging from the many scratches from the multiflora rose, I threw on my red light and took off up the road. Cresting a small hill I saw the lights of an ATV on my right on the other side of a cut cornfield heading toward the farm house. Knowing I couldn't beat him to the house traveling by the roads, I steered from the highway and took a shortcut.

What a disappointment when I stopped the ATV and discovered it wasn't the right one. The driver did tell me that he saw another ATV being chased by a vehicle with a red light. Heading in that direction, I soon saw the headlights and red light of a vehicle on a farm path off the main road in the creek bottom.

Arriving, I was pleased to see the doe, the correct ATV, and the suspect in the custody of WCO Donatelli. Taking me aside, Jim told me the suspect was claiming the doe in his possession was shot about 20 minutes before quitting time. I advised him that I recognized the hunter from seeing him in the headlights of the ATV.

"Sir," Jim said to the guy, "you're saying you shot this deer before quitting time, approximately an hour ago?" The hunter concurred. "Well, this officer has something to tell you."

"Sir, I was standing about 20 yards behind you when you shot this deer from your ATV," I said, pointing to the still steaming doe. The hunter lowered his head in silence.

Once the paperwork was completed and the deer loaded onto WCO Donatelli's deer rack, we sent the hunter on his way and were able to review the events of the past couple of hours.

Just as WCO Donatelli was not aware of my actions after my phone shut down, I didn't know how events played out for him in stopping the ATV.

Jim was able to add some humor to the evening when he described seeing the first lights he suspected were from the ATV and the suspect making his getaway. Jim described racing down the road, pursuing the lights of the vehicle, emergency lights flashing and siren screaming, only to discover when he caught up with the vehicle that it was an Amish buggy.

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Fortunately, he didn't spend much time explaining to the driver what was happening, and soon spotted the correct vehicle and was able to stop it.

Although no one was ever found hunting from any of the illegal stands on Valley Farm, not giving up on working the area led to the apprehension of a more serious violator. The use of illegal hunting methods and devices is not uncommon throughout the state. Without the help of property owners and hunters reporting illegal activity to authorities, many deer, turkeys, bears and other wildlife would be unlawfully taken that should have been available to hunters. Many thanks to those who get involved in protecting our hunting heritage. □