

## You Never Know

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AS WE ROUNDED a bend in the township road that cuts through SGL 117 we noticed a red truck parked near a gate. Needless to say, I was not anticipating an investigation and case that would take four months and new technology to solve. This was a case in which no deer was poached nor any other wildlife violations that we normally encounter had occurred.

It was a warm and humid Sunday afternoon. Deputy Jim Lorch and I were wrapping up what had been a relatively slow day. We had patrolled an area enrolled in the Game Commission's Hunter Access Program for quad and dirt bike activity. As we headed back toward Jim's house we cut through a section of SGL 117 near Burgettstown. We had been through the area earlier in the morning and found no activity. That ended when we rounded the bend.

Where the truck was parked was not an issue. We pulled over because this is a popular area for people to shoot clay pigeons. In the past I had found a lot of empty shells and litter, and thought it would be worth the time to see what might be going on. As I walked up the hill behind the gate there was no shooting or any sign of it occurring. I stood there listening for just a few moments when two men on mountain bikes came down the trail. Neither was dressed in mountain biking attire. In fact they both were wearing jeans and carrying backpacks. This area also has no real trails for biking. The weather that day was not agreeable to their clothing, and the ice tea container was not the best drink for typical mountain biking exercise. We spoke for a few moments and it was obvious they were not expecting to see me when they rounded the bend on the trail. They seemed to be in a hurry and headed back to their truck. They loaded their bikes and were off.

Things, however, just didn't add up. The clothing, their nervousness, and the fact that this area is not known for mountain biking had me suspecting something else was going on.

As Jim and I drove to his house we talked about the encounter. We both concluded that marijuana might be being grown in the area. This activity occurs on Game Lands, and several plants had been found in planters along the roads and maintenance trails. I decided to make this a priority the next day.

Monday was still hot and humid. I drove back to the gate and parked. I took a walk and found the clear signs of bikes being ridden through high grass. I followed this until I found where the bikes had been laid down in the grass. A small opening could be seen through the thick autumn olive bushes. I proceeded with caution.

In training we were taught that growers will sometimes booby trap their sites. I worked my way through the trail, often on hands and knees. After searching the area I could find nothing. While heading back I saw a small crawl space. When I bent down I could see the sun reflecting off of a green fence. I crawled to the fence and found the marijuana. Another trail could be seen leading to another set of marijuana plants. Both sites were in small man-made clearings, and the plants themselves were planted up against the edges so that they were camouflaged by the dense autumn olive bushes. I took some photos of the small plants and left the area.

After drying off with a towel and cranking up the AC in the truck, I placed a call to our new Law Enforcement Supervisor, Scott Tomlinson. Although we have the enforcement power to enforce such violations, I decided to call and see if we wanted to turn this over to the State Police. After discussing the issue we decided that because this was on State Game Lands, and we already had a description of two possible suspects, I would continue with the investigation. To add to the investigation we had the ability to place new field surveillance cameras that would greatly enhance our ability to catch the growers red handed. The only problem now was identifying them.

I decided to spend more time in the area and patrol it at different times and days of the week. This paid off a couple of weeks later, on a Friday evening, when the same red truck was seen in another parking lot just down the road from the first encounter. I quickly jotted down the license plate number and called it in. I then drove behind the gate and into a maze of switch grass fields. I drove on top of the hill and found the two mountain bikers coming toward me. They were the same two guys, wearing jeans and carrying backpacks. I spoke with them for a couple of minutes about their biking dedication and the tick problem.

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The driver of the truck, who I will call Marty Jane, told me he found the Game Lands when he was beaver trapping years earlier. His partner, who I will call Walter Weed, was quiet and extremely nervous.

At that point I left the grow sites alone, so as not to jeopardize our investigation. Then, by the end of July we were ready to place the cameras. The plants were growing nicely, and we had enjoyed a relatively wet summer. I enlisted the help of WCOs Matt Kramer and Seth Mesoras. Matt is a neighboring officer and Seth was our tech geek with the cameras. The cameras were new and I did not want to mess up this investigation with my technological inadequacies.

We set out and found the first two sites. While searching the area a third site was found by WCO Mesoras. We were fortunate to have two cameras and we decided to place one at the first site and the second at the newly discovered site. After climbing, crawling and pulling out numerous thorns (some of which came out days later) we were set up. Now all we had to do was wait for the cameras to record the action.

The cameras themselves are small with a tiny lens attached by wire to the battery and recording device, which we buried under debris. Motion sensors were placed around the area to activate the camera when there was activity.

Two weeks later WCO Kramer and I were back to check the cameras. We downloaded the recordings and went back to the truck to take a look. One of the first date and time stamped recordings showed Marty Jane and Walter Weed tending their plants. Both cameras captured both individuals spraying the plants and checking on their progress. The date was July 30, which was the same day the cameras were set up. We decided to leave the cameras and see if there was any more activity over the next couple of weeks. The cameras did not record any more of our suspects, although there were a lot of recordings. Most of these were wind and weather related.

During a region meeting I asked officers for help in eradicating the marijuana. Eleven officers showed up to help, including two supervisors, LES Tomlinson and Information & Education Supervisor Tom Fazi. We pride ourselves on helping our fellow officers.

At the beginning of September we met and gathered the necessary evidence and pulled the plants. A catalog of records and photographs of the evidence also was recorded at that time. Twenty-one plants were found, most more than seven feet tall. I believe more existed in other locations, but we could not find them despite doing a thorough search.

By the beginning of October we were ready to make our arrests. We met the suspects at their homes and placed them under arrest. Both were charged with a felony to manufacture a controlled substance, a misdemeanor for possession of a controlled substance, and a summary violation of the Game and Wildlife code for planting, cutting, digging and injuring plants on Game Lands. Both individuals pled guilty to the felony and Game and Wildlife code charges.

This was a case that used our training and knowledge, as well as new and innovative technology. This was a perverse use of Game Lands and what they are designated for. The potential danger of these grow sites for our users, our Game Lands workers and our officers can be great if this activity persists. We were fortunate that no booby traps existed on these sites. That is not always the case and we must always remain alert. I want to thank my supervisors for the trust they placed in me to handle a complicated and taxing investigation. I also thank the many officers who assisted me throughout the investigation. It was a group effort and shows the dedication they have, not only to the resource, but also to the public this affects. As we go around the next bend, we never know what we might get into.