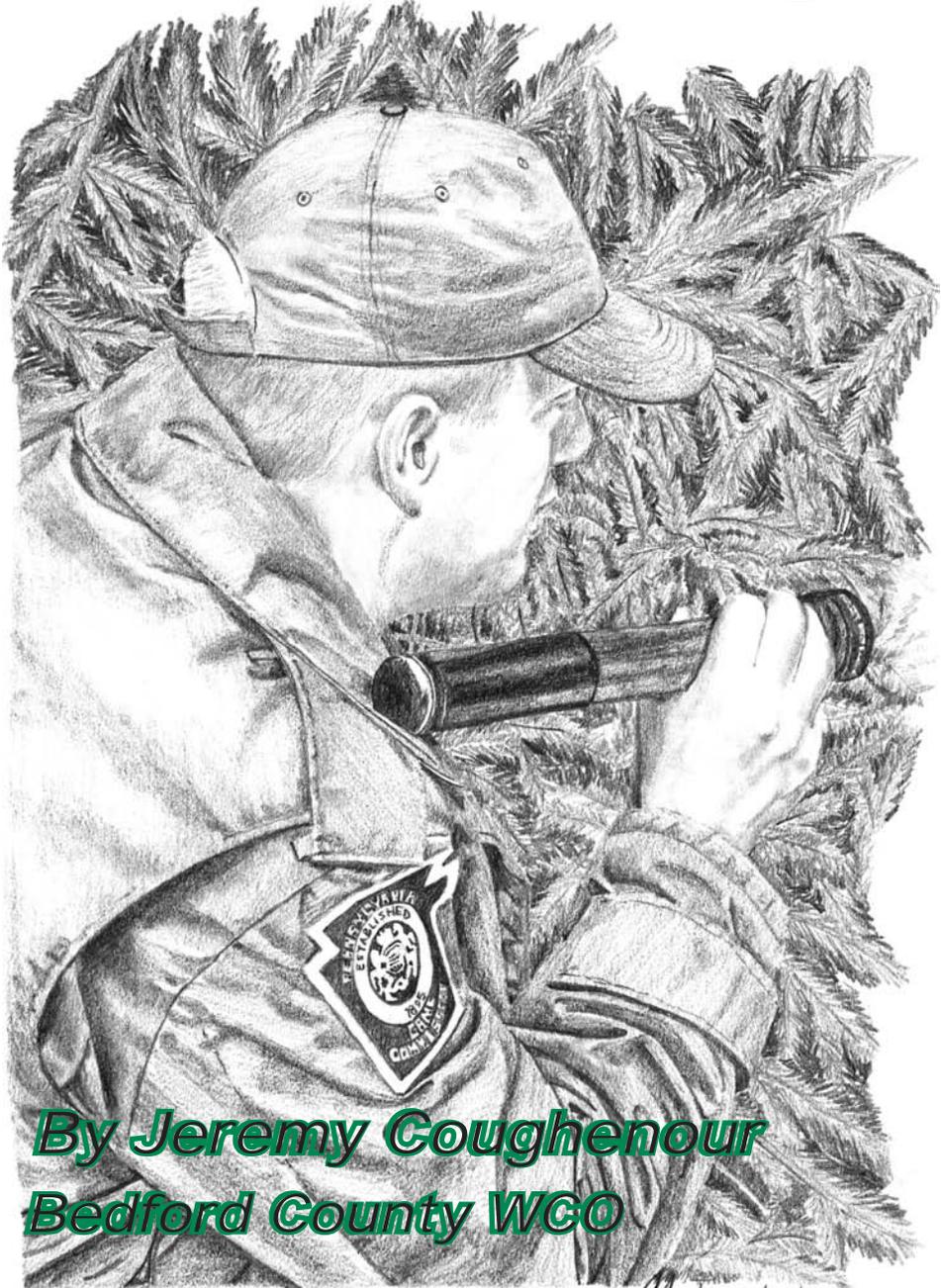


The Last Laugh



*By Jeremy Coughenour
Bedford County WCO*

“FOUR-EIGHTEEN from Huntingdon, can you call in by phone regarding a violation.”

That’s the radio message I received at about 3 p.m. on the first Saturday of the regular firearms deer season in 2011. As I called the Southcentral Region Office for the information, I was hoping that it would pan out. The dispatcher told me that they had taken a call regarding a 5-point buck that had been killed in Shawnee State Park and not tagged. Apparently the deer was field-dressed and hidden in the woods. The caller gave a general area of where in the park, but no other information about who may be involved. As I hung up the phone,

I thought, man, there are a lot of places to hide a deer in there. A field-dressed and partially covered deer is one that is going to be picked up later.

As I started toward the park, I called Deputy Jeff Eisaman to see if he would be available to assist with the stakeout. Jeff said he would, just before dark. He was on his way to a Christmas tree farm to get the family tree for the holidays. I advised him that I would meet him in the park in an area where I could hide my marked vehicle. I was in the park earlier in the day, and the hunting pressure was heavy. I even cited a man in the area where the deer was supposed to be. I was worried that I wouldn’t be able to get in the park undetected, but luck was on my side and no one saw me as I slipped my vehicle into a hiding spot.

I was starting to get restless as I waited for Jeff. The suspected area was along Route 96 with only a small

parking lot that was easily visible from the road. My plan was to have Deputy Eisaman drive by the area in his private vehicle, and I would bail out of his vehicle to locate the deer. Jeff then could park a short distance from the site and radio to me if anyone was entering the woods.

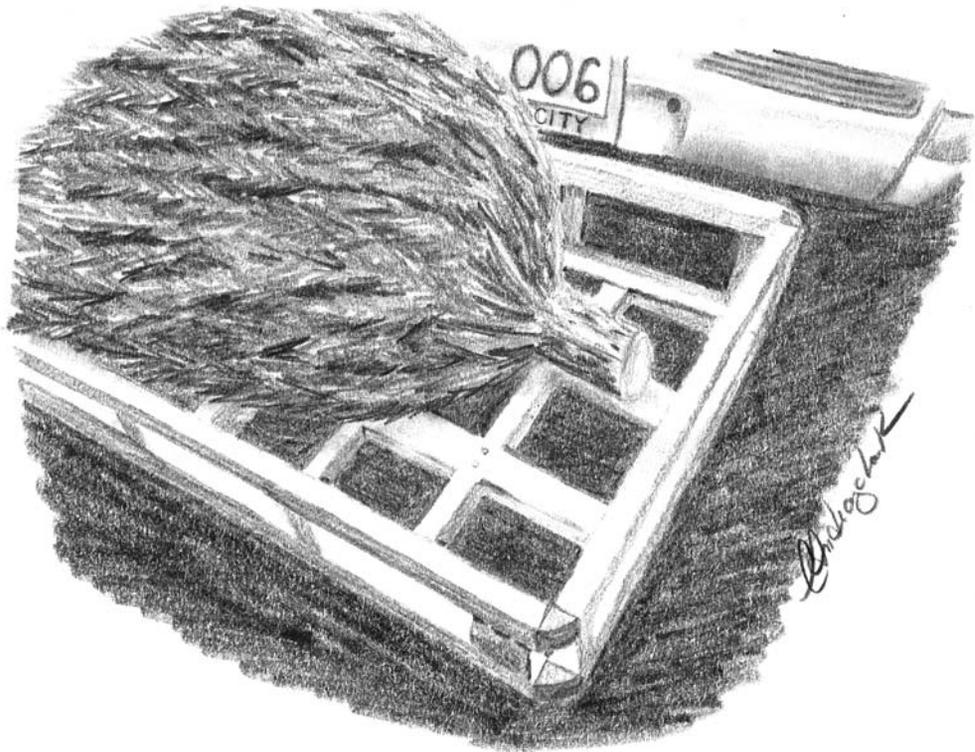
With daylight fading fast, I saw Jeff in my rearview mirror. He had a fresh-cut Christmas tree on his deer rack. Perfect, I thought, no one will suspect his vehicle at all. I grabbed my patrol shotgun and jumped in with Jeff. I tried to fill him in with as much as possible in the short time it took us to get to the area. As I got ready to bail out, I told Jeff if that deer is still

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here, they will be back.

Jeff pulled alongside the road and I bailed out. I ran to get into the woods deep enough so a passing car would not see me. Jeff then drove to an area of the lake about a half-mile away where he could watch the small parking lot for any activity. After a quick test of our portable radios, we were good to go.

I started into the woods. The information reported indicated the deer was not far off of a gated road that runs through a section of the park. I found the road and started walking in a zigzag pattern as I headed farther from the main road. I soon came across a fresh drag mark heading to the parking lot. As I looked at the blood on the leaves, I thought that maybe it was from a deer that had been killed earlier in the day. I had cited a man earlier who was on a drive in this area, and they did kill at least three deer. I continued on another



100 yards or so when I saw the buck. Just like the caller stated. No tag, and it was gutted. I called Jeff on the radio and told him I found the deer. He said he was parked across the lake and had a good view of the parking area.

I settled in behind a large oak tree about 40 yards from the deer. It was dark now, and I started planning on what to do if no one came to retrieve the deer until later that night. What if they didn't come back until tomorrow morning? But as luck would have it, I had to wait only 20 minutes or so until my portable radio crackled. "A truck just pulled into the parking lot and dropped two guys off. They are on foot heading your way." I told Deputy Eisaman to wait for my signal and then make his way toward the parking lot. It didn't take long before

I could hear the rustling of the leaves getting louder and louder as the duo made their way toward the deer. I was tempted to watch their approach to the deer, but was afraid they would see me. I decided with all the noise from the leaves I would be able to tell when they had possession of the deer and started dragging it out. When I heard the deer being dragged away, I whispered on the radio, "start toward the parking lot."

I came out from behind the large oak and started toward the men. It surprised me at first how far they had dragged the deer before I could make them out in the now very dark woods. As I hit them with the beam of my flashlight, I yelled, "State officer, let me see your hands." The two men dropped the drag rope they had attached to the deer instantly. The look on their faces was

priceless. I ordered them to keep their hands where I could see them and not to move. I radioed Jeff to tell him I had stopped the subjects, and that I needed him to walk back the gated road until he found us.

As I was waiting for Jeff to get to our location, one of the suspects asked what the problem was. You're kidding, I thought. Then I asked, "Who killed this deer?"

The two fumbled for answers. Finally one said, "We found it." They knew quickly from the look on my face that I wasn't buying the answer.

Jeff arrived and both suspects were patted down for safety. Two hunting knives were confiscated. Then I told them to continue dragging the deer toward the parking lot.

As we neared the parking lot, I told them that they both were in possession of an improperly tagged deer and that they were in trouble. Then I read them their Miranda Rights and told them now was the time to help themselves by being truthful. Both agreed they wanted to talk more about the deer. Jeff and I separated the two and listened.

The one man admitted to me that he had shot the deer earlier in the day on a drive. Turns out, it was the same drive in which I had uncovered other violations. He stated he didn't

have an antlered deer tag because he had already killed a buck in archery season. After he killed this 5-point, he said he knew not to bring it out to the road because a "warden" was in the area. He gutted the deer and hid it to be picked up later. He also stated that his accompanying friend had no idea the deer wasn't tagged, and that he just recruited him to come pick it up. Jeff got the exact same story from his interview. I told him to go ahead and call the driver of the truck who dropped them off. I was trying not to smile as he called the truck driver and said, "Hey, come pick us up, the game warden got us."

As the truck pulled into the lot, its headlights illuminated Jeff's vehicle. On the deer rack was the clearly visible Christmas tree. The two men both chuckled a bit. Turns out they had passed Jeff's vehicle on their way in to pick up the deer. They said they were laughing at him because they thought he was a hunter, and all he had on his deer rack was a tree. They didn't realize that he was actually the lookout for the parking area. As the two walked away, Jeff and I both agreed that we had gotten the last laugh. The man cited for killing the deer later pleaded guilty to unlawful killing and taking of big game and was fined \$1,000.



It's the Law:

Q: Can I take a coyote without a furtakers license during the firearms deer season if I have only an antlerless deer tag left?

A: Yes. During any big game season, coyotes may be taken while lawfully hunting big game.

