

# A History of LAW ENFORCEMENT OFF THE PAVEMENT

**'Wildlife Protectors' have served as guardians of North Carolina's natural resources for more than 75 years**

written by Jeremy Harrill



While many things in wildlife law enforcement have changed, the mission of wildlife protectors has remained the same: conserve North Carolina's natural resources through law enforcement and education and provide public safety.

## WILDLIFE OFFICER. GAME WARDEN. CONSERVATION OFFICER.

These are all titles for men and women across the country who have taken an oath to enforce laws dealing with the conservation of wildlife and public safety. Titles may vary from state to state, and duties may differ slightly, but their existence is essentially for the same purpose. These people are the guardians who stand watch over our nation's natural resources.

In North Carolina, those professionals who strap on a gun and badge for the cause of conservation are called wildlife law enforcement officers. I guess you'd say that it's the official, unofficial title. I suppose this title is a much more encompassing term that reflects the many and diverse duties of a modern-day officer. There are many who refer to us as "game wardens," a title that has been used throughout history all over the country, including North Carolina at one time, for those who have worn some shade of green uniform and enforced game and fish laws.

However, since the inception of the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission in 1947, and even some years before, those who have been called to this profession have been officially known as "wildlife protectors." This title was used until the mid-1970s and for a time was even stamped on the very badge that officers pinned to their uniform.

In fact, NC General Statute 113-128(9) specifically states that a "wildlife protector is an employee of the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission sworn in as an officer and assigned to duties which include exercise of law-enforcement powers."

The title had long since stopped being used by the public when I became an officer in 2003. On a cold November day while checking a couple of deer hunters early in my career, an older gentleman introduced me to his grandson not as the game warden or wildlife officer, but the local wildlife protector. I don't know why, but it really caught my attention. It made me stand up a little straighter. I suppose it welled up in me a deeper sense of purpose. It made me think about those who had walked in these boots before me and reflect on the fact that some had even given their lives while doing this very job.

Although the law books still call us wildlife protectors, nobody calls us that anymore. There's just something about that title that makes my mind wonder about the days

gone by. When I hear it, I can't help but think about our history, which is something we should know. Why?

Perhaps American author and historian David C. McCullough summed it up best when he said, "History is who we are and why we are the way we are." I believe history helps us understand ourselves. History tells us how we came to be and shows us how we were shaped by people we have never even met.

### A New Beginning

The late 19th and early 20th centuries were true low points for conservation across our country. Conservation had taken a back seat for far too long to the almighty dollar and populations of wildlife had dwindled to the point where some species were even non-existent, largely due to habitat destruction and unregulated hunting.

Fortunately, several champions of conservation began to emerge across the country, including such familiar figures as President Teddy Roosevelt and noted "Father of the National Parks" John Muir. North Carolina had its own conservation champion as well, a man by the name of T. Gilbert Pearson. Pearson was a biology professor at what is now the University of North Carolina Greensboro and a passionate birder. He was said to travel the country preaching conservation with an evangelistic zeal. He saw



Top: Early wildlife protectors placed a sign outside their home identifying them as the local protector so residents knew where to report a violation or purchase a license. This game warden badge (middle) dates back to the late 1920s and early 1930s; wildlife protectors wore this badge (bottom) after the Commission's formation in 1947.

the problem and desperately wanted to do something about it.

“We must labor joyously and without stint to form a line of defense, as best we may, between the wild creatures and the greed of thoughtless men,” Pearson once said.

Pearson had an idea that many thought was crazy. He wanted to create a statewide game law to protect wildlife. The big questions were how the law would be funded and how it would be enforced. Pearson knew that having a law without an enforcement mechanism would be useless. So, he suggested requiring non-resident hunters to purchase a hunting license for \$10 and that money pay for “bird and game wardens” who would enforce the wildlife laws.

The North Carolina Legislature passed the Audubon Act in 1903. The Audubon Society of North Carolina, which Pearson had founded one year prior, became the first state wildlife commission in the South and was given the authority to enforce game laws across the state.

The Audubon Law flourished for roughly six years before losing momentum. Several

counties across the state saw the amount of money coming in through these license sales and wanted it for themselves.

In 1909, 52 counties opted out of the Audubon Law and began legislating wildlife regulations locally. This marked the beginning of the end for the Audubon Law. Legislating wildlife laws locally had many problems. At one time during this period, 40

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different seasons existed for quail in the state and almost as many seasons for deer. There was no rhyme or reason for the seasons and regulations; they were being made based on money and politics instead of science.

In 1923, United States Chief Game Warden George A. Lawyer came to Greensboro to give a speech concerning North Carolina’s wildlife. He presented a dire warning to the

state’s leaders and outdoorsmen. “Unless there is some effort made to protect game,” Lawyer said, “the people of the state will see it vanish.”

In 1927, the state began to heed Lawyer’s words and the Legislature passed an act creating a state game commission, which took over the role of wildlife conservation enforcement from the Audubon Society. Fisheries were managed by the Division of Inland Fisheries until both units were consolidated into the Division of Game and Inland Fisheries in 1933.

By the time the 1947 General Assembly convened, the N.C. Wildlife Federation—a young organization that had grown to over 11,000 passionate members—introduced a bill to separate the Division of Game and Inland Fisheries from the Department of Conservation and Development and create an entirely new agency known as the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission. The bill passed, and the Commission took over as the agency responsible for wildlife conservation in North Carolina on July 1, 1947.

### On Patrol

Those charged with enforcing wildlife regulations in North Carolina were first known as game wardens in 1927, then game protectors in 1933 and then simply protectors in 1935. Beginning in 1947, they were officially known as wildlife protectors under the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission. In 1947, the Commission hired 104 wildlife protectors. By 1948, every county in the state had at least one wildlife protector.

Clyde Patton, one of the first executive directors, appointed in 1948, was a passionate conservationist who rallied people across the state and within the agency around his motto for the Commission: “More sport for more people, equal opportunity for all.”

It’s worth noting that a “refuge system” was implemented in 1927 to help wildlife populations in North Carolina. When the Commission was created in 1947, staff that continued to work at these wildlife refuges were called refuge protectors. They split their



work evenly between wildlife management duties and law enforcement work.

The Refuge System later changed to Wildlife Management Areas before the state adopted the current Game Land System in 1971. That year, 22 of 36 refuge protectors transferred to the Protection Division once they were tasked with full-time enforcement work. The remaining protectors continued working with the Division of Game, conducting wildlife management duties on game lands. (Note: Ollie Thompson was the last of the original refuge protectors to retire.)

### First in Flight

Somebody in the Commission had the foresight in 1948 to think that use of an aircraft would be an effective law enforcement tool. Two World War II pilots were already working for the Commission: Jack Campbell of Sanford and Hugh V. Hines of Wilmington. These men took a rented plane on a publicity tour around the state to talk about the value of having an aircraft program. After gaining the support of both sportsmen and wildlife protectors, the Commission bought its first plane, a Piper Cub in November 1948. With that purchase, the Commission became the first agency in North Carolina to have a plane.

The Commission has had as many as five planes at one time in the 1960s and ‘70s and today has two aircraft (a 1993 Maule and 2008 Cessna). These aircraft and the officers who fly them help officers on the ground with hunting, fishing, boating and trapping enforcement as well as help Wildlife Management biologists with different tasks. One Enforcement aircraft was recently outfitted with a state-of-the-art FLIR (forward looking infrared) system that helps officers during



Clockwise from top left: Graduates from the first Wildlife Protection School in 1950. Wildlife Protector Max Capel (left) and Refuge Protector Ollie Thompson (right) stand with a cache of furs from an illegal trapper in 1949. Wildlife protectors pose with an early enforcement aircraft in the late 1940s or early 1950s. Pilot Bob Milstead plans an enforcement detail in 1962.



T. Gilbert Pearson, a biology professor and founder of the Audubon Society of North Carolina, paved the way for funding wildlife enforcement through license sales. Right: Nasa F. Jennette became the state’s first bird and game warden hired by the Audubon Society in 1903.





Clockwise from top left: Wildlife Protector Thomas Williams uses an early mobile radio while on patrol in the 1960s. Officer Mike Criscoe with his enforcement K-9 named Link, a black German shepherd, search a vehicle for illegal wildlife in the 1990s. Camden County Protector Harry McPherson (left) and Chowan County Protector Robert Evans (right) prepare to unload a patrol boat in the mid-1960s. Opposite: Wildlife Officers Willis Brown and Steve Fine look for potential violations in the 1970s.

search and rescue missions, natural disasters situations and locating law violators who try to evade capture.

### Training and Standards

A goal of the early administration in the Commission was to raise the personnel standards of its officers and better equip them to do their job. Before 1950, there was no training for officers hired by the Commission. Wildlife protectors were simply hired, given a badge (but not a gun) and told to learn as they work. In 1950, the agency partnered with the Institute of Government at Chapel Hill and designed the first Wildlife Protection School. That year, the Commission sent each of its 125 protectors to a two-week school for 104 hours of training.

In 1951, the Commission held its first pre-service school, where people were selected for and attended a three-week school but were not guaranteed a job upon completion. They were put on “stand-by” and offered jobs as they became available.

The Commission completed its 58th Wildlife Law Enforcement Recruit School in 2022. The Recruit School is now seven months long, significantly longer than that initial 104-hour school in 1950. Recruits get about 1,200 hours of classroom training before heading to the field for a six-month field training period. Once they make it through the academy and the field training, they are assigned to an open county in the state.

### Wildlife Protection Day

In 1950, Patton implemented a unique idea to increase awareness of the importance of natural resources and to “protect game against unscrupulous hunters.” He designated Thanksgiving Day as “Wildlife Protection Day” where he would deputize all male employees of the Commission not regularly engaged in law enforcement work.

Patton wanted to send an imposing message to those who even thought about violating the game and fish laws. The very first Wildlife Protection Day was on Thanksgiving Day 1950, which was the opening of wild turkey, quail and rabbit seasons. Wildlife

Protection Day became an annual occurrence and continued through 1956.

Patton also thought it was important for people to know their local wildlife enforcement officer. So each year the agency published officers’ names, addresses and telephone numbers in *Wildlife in North Carolina* magazine. To introduce the officers to the public, the magazine published a section in each issue called “Protector of the Month” from late 1953 through 1977. The segment gave a lot of details about the officers in a relatively short bio—including the officer’s birthday, the name of his wife and her maiden name, as well as the names of their kids. There was even one that talked about how fast the featured wildlife protector could run and made the point that it was futile to run from him if you violated fish or game laws. The popular “On Patrol” section returned to the magazine as part of a redesign last year.

In the early days of the Commission, wildlife protectors were required to put a sign outside of their house, identifying them as the local protector. If people wanted to report a violation or purchase a license, they would simply go to the protector’s house. Al Griffin, the son of early Wildlife Protector Ralph Griffin, (1950–83) recalled to me that when he was a kid, people would line up in their driveway waiting to buy a license so that they could hunt or fish on opening day.

### Technology Advancements

One of the most important advancements in wildlife law enforcement has been in communication capabilities. In 1950, the Commission had one plane and two cars equipped with radios. A specially formed group of officers called the Wildlife Patrol utilized these radio-equipped vehicles to work special details in problem areas in the state. By 1956, all patrol vehicles were equipped with radios. In 1964, there were 14 base radio stations strategically placed across the state in the homes of a wildlife protectors. Their wives operated the radios and served as dispatchers.

In 1974, a violation hotline consisting of six phone numbers was created. In 1980, the Commission went to a centralized radio

system in Raleigh that was staffed by sworn wildlife officers. Today, the Commission has specially trained communications personnel who are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, year-round. These communications dispatchers receive over 50,000 violation calls each year.

Wildlife officers had to provide their own firearms until roughly 1957. In 1954, Wall Ellis, a Mitchell County wildlife protector, shot and killed a suspect who attempted to assault the officer with a deadly weapon. Following this incident, defense attorneys

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would imply that the Commission didn’t fully trust their officers as they didn’t even provide them with sidearms. In 1958, all officers were equipped with a .38 caliber Smith & Wesson revolver. Officers carried those until 1971, when Wildlife Protector Dewey McCall was killed by a trout fisherman after citing the angler for possessing

undersized fish on Upper Creek in Burke County. McCall was shot in the chest by the assailant. During the encounter, McCall returned fire, hitting the suspect, however his shot did not stop the assailant. In 1972, the Commission purchased the more powerful .357 magnum for its officers. Wildlife officers have been issued several different sidearms since then. The Commission equips today’s officers with the most up-to-date equipment and training.

A major change came in 1959 when boating safety enforcement was added to the wildlife enforcement officer’s duties. The Legislature charged the Commission with enforcing the Boating Safety Act, which required boaters to register vessels and to carry specific boating safety equipment. Today, there are well over 300,000

registered boats in North Carolina and boating enforcement has become a major public safety aspect of the wildlife officer’s job. In 2015, the Commission initiated a boating enforcement campaign called, “On the Road, On the Water—Don’t Drink and Drive.” Wildlife enforcement officers annually partner with other state and local





agencies in an enforcement and educational effort to deter impaired operations on our state's highways and waterways.

Today, wildlife enforcement officers are held in high regard, both across the state and the nation, for their efforts in detecting impaired operators. Officers are specially trained in the detection of impaired operators and even have a specialized team that trains other agencies across the state in standardized field sobriety testing. They have received numerous national awards for their efforts in Operation Dry Water, a nationwide campaign held each year during the Fourth of July weekend.

### Off-Road Patrol

It wasn't until 1956 when each officer was assigned a vehicle; prior to that, most officers provided their own transportation and were reimbursed for gas money. The first four-wheel drive vehicle issued was an

International Scout, in 1967, although only a few were put into use. They became standard issue for officers in the early 2000s.

Today, the Commission has the largest fleet of boats in the state and the largest fleet of four-wheel drive trucks and all-terrain vehicles. These specialized resources have made the role of the wildlife officer even more vital to the citizens of our state, especially in times of natural disasters. Wildlife officers have played a key role on the front line of recovery efforts during several weather events, such as hurricanes. In recent years, during some of the crippling snowstorms, wildlife officers have patrolled the highways with four-wheel drive vehicles to help stranded motorists. During some of these inclement weather events, wildlife officers have even transported doctors and other medical personnel to hospitals.

Covert operations have been around since the beginning of law enforcement. The reality is that there are some cases that can't be worked in a uniform. This is especially true for larger and more egregious wildlife cases. There have been several notable covert investigations. In the late 1970s and early '80s, special cases including Operation Smoky (a bear poaching case) and Operation Rock (sale of striped bass) made national headlines. In more recent years, several other covert investigations have uncovered major poaching operations and large-scale commercial sale of wildlife species. In 2012, the Commission created a special operations unit that targets these larger scale cases.

### Teaching Opportunities

Since the beginning of the Commission, education has been a primary focus of how the Enforcement Division accomplishes its conservation and public safety missions. Officers

have equipped hundreds of volunteer instructors to teach hunter education and have certified tens of thousands of students in hunter education. In addition to those classes, thousands have been certified by officers in boater safety education courses.

Technology and the pace at which it is changing requires our officers to constantly adapt. Wildlife officers are incorporating a lot of modern technology into how they do their jobs and accomplish their missions, including body-worn cameras, drones, night vision, trail cameras, wildlife forensic technology and computer software.

While officers are always changing to keep pace with technology, one thing that never changes is something that Teddy Roosevelt said in 1899. During an address to the State of New York about game protectors, he said, "I want as game protectors, men of courage, resolution and hardihood." Obviously, if he was speaking today, he would include women in his description.

The word "hardihood" is one that you don't often hear these days. It is defined as "a trait of taking on a task that is inherently dangerous or risky." The job of a wildlife law enforcement officer is often described as dangerous and has been identified as one of the most dangerous law enforcement professions.

These officers are faced with checking people, often in remote areas at night and often carrying guns. They work in the most rugged areas and in some of the most inclement weather conditions. These officers face the very real possibility of encountering dangerous people in dangerous situations. They often must do their jobs with no backup and with limited-to-no communication. So, it does take hardihood to be a wildlife officer. During our rich history, unfortunately, we have had 11 officers lose their lives for the cause of conservation in our state.

One thing that has become obvious while digging through the history of our past is that wildlife officers have always had that hardihood. It's something in the DNA, I guess.

As a district captain, my duties are filled with more administrative work than days in the woods or on the water. I don't get out into the field as much as I'd like. But every time that I do, I am so impressed by our officers



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**Top: Wildlife Officer John Sprowl checks the license and safety equipment of a jet skier on Jordan Lake. Bottom: Wildlife Officer Lindsey Bijas talks with some Jones County bear hunters while on patrol.**

Wildlife officers can utilize drones (above) for assistance on patrol and a fleet of vehicles, boats and aircraft during campaigns to reduce alcohol-related accidents.



and the lengths they will go to protect people, wildlife and wild places. It makes me so proud and hopeful for our future because I see the "hardihood" in them that Teddy Roosevelt talked about in 1899.

Yes, it's important to know our history. When we know our history, we can better see and appreciate the legacies that we have inherited from those before us and the magnitude of the responsibilities that have been passed on to us. Only once we know that, can we best set a bearing for the future as we take our place in the story today...which, incidentally, will be the history of tomorrow. ♦

*Jeremy Harrill is a district captain and the unofficial historian of the Commission's Law Enforcement Division. He is collecting historical items to be featured in a planned wildlife enforcement museum at the State of North Carolina's Samarcand Training Academy. Anyone interested in donating items can contact Harrill at [jeremy.harrill@ncwildlife.org](mailto:jeremy.harrill@ncwildlife.org).*