

A Different Opening Day

When dove hunters flock to fields, the commission's wildlife officers fan out for enforcement.

WRITTEN BY MIKE ZLOTNICKI
PHOTOGRAPHED BY MELISSA MCGAW

Vectoring ground units with the use of aerial observation saves time and fuel when patrolling large areas with many hunts running concurrently.

IT'S AN OVERCAST MORNING as Capt. Matt Long wheels his Tahoe out of a Bojangles' drive-through in Goldsboro. A biscuit and coffee will be the start of a busy morning for the 24-year veteran of the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission. It's the opening morning of dove season, but he won't be carrying a seat and a shotgun into the field. He's on his way to a rural airport in Wayne County to meet 12 other wildlife officers from District 3 to work a dove detail.

Master Officer Milton Grady, II set up the detail with the supervision of Sgt. Kelly Brantley. Instead of the traditional "start, stop and listen" method of locating dove hunters, Long and his fellow officers will be vectored to active dove hunts from a commission-owned Maule airplane. Prior to opening day, Grady and WRC Pilot Joey Deal flew over parts of Wayne and Johnston counties to scout fields for likely dove shoots. It's a more fuel- and time-efficient way to cover a large area with the multitude of hunters that opening day brings. They plan to start the day in southern Wayne County and work their way north, the better to finish closer to home for some of the officers.

"There'll be a mix of officers today," says Long, "trainees paired with experienced officers. Officer Grady has Wayne County maps for everyone and a list of general statutes for quick reference."

Long also says that another contingent of wildlife officers is on a stake-out involving a field where they suspected baiting of doves taking place.

When asked how an officer identifies a baited field, Long replies that there are tell-tale signs such as cracked corn, white corn kernels in a yellow corn field, mixed seeds, or lots of spent shotshells on a small field or any grain that just looks out of place. This particular field was found in the previous season and scouted by officers before today. Officers made their way in about 4:30 a.m. and are

hunkered down in the woods surrounding the field. The purpose of the surveillance is to observe and identify all of the participants prior to making contact.

At 8 a.m. Deal lands and taxis to a stop. He's a tad late as he had waited for the fog to clear but still had to fly in on instruments. It takes a few more minutes for the rest of the cadre to arrive and for Grady to give a quick briefing. Shots can be heard to the south as Deal waits for the fog to clear. Sgt. Brandon Joyner joins Long in the Tahoe. With no plane in the sky the wildlife officers head out and drive for a few minutes, stop and pinpoint the first field of the day.

"With the airplane we can go from field to field," Long says. "Without it we have to hunt."

It's a short drive to a small cut cornfield. The officers park and split up to cover all sides of the field that hosts about 20 hunters. At this point there are two officers in the plane, four vehicles with two officers each and the four officers on the baited field detail. Robert Goddard of Leland had traveled to participate with some friends and greeted the officers. He had 12 doves by 8:22 a.m. and was taking a break.

"I got no problem with them," he said, nodding to the field. "They're just doing what they need to do."

Nearby Sgt. Carl Hatcher checks a hunter's shotgun to make sure it has a plug in the magazine to limit it to only three shells. In a surprise to the hunter, Hatcher is able to load a



Master Officer Kim Knight, left, and Sgt. Kelly Brantley confer over a map book before heading out on patrol.



Master Officer Brent Ward checks the harvest of a father and his daughter in a cut corn field.

fourth shell in the gun despite the hunter having installed the factory plug. As it turns out some shotguns with 3.5-inch chambers and factory plugs will accept a fourth 2¾-inch shell, and it's incumbent upon the owner to check before going afield.

"There's no difference between an unplugged gun and an improperly plugged gun," explains Hatcher. "We have to treat everybody equally. It's a violation. We'll check many people today and they need to be legal."

Master Officer Brent Ward issues him a citation and tells him to fix his gun and continue hunting. Ward says that on a typical dove detail plug and license violations, especially expired licenses, are the most common issues they experienced.

In one side of the field Richard Stokes of Wilmington is hunting with his 6-year-old

son Hudson. They have four doves, three mourning doves and a Eurasian collared dove, which is legal. Hudson is pretty upbeat about the morning.

"It's fun and I get to bring my own gun," he says shyly. "But I'm better with a gun with a scope."

A little after 9 a.m. the patrol heads out. Long passes a turkey farm. "Always smelled like money when I was growing up," he says. Wayne County is home to Long, a graduate of Eastern Wayne High School. Long's father worked in the turkey business, hence the money quip. Throughout the day fields, ponds, woodlots and other places will evoke a comment or memory of having grown up in the area he is now patrolling. Soon the group pulls into a church parking lot to listen for another hunt. Deal and Lt. Wes Barger

are now in the air, but opening day is loud in Wayne County and shortly they pull out and head to a noisy field.

Entering the field, Long drops Sgt. Brandon Joyner off to check hunters and drives farther down the road, where he finds Jamie Hughes of Selma hunting with his son Logan, age 9.

"How y'all doing?" Long says. "Here to check your license and birds."

Hughes produces his license and hands over a vest with a game bag. "We have 10 or 12, I reckon," he says.

Long reaches in and starts methodically pulling doves out. "...14, 15, 16 and 17," he says as he pulls the last one out. They're under their limits of 15 each. "Make sure you keep a good count," Long advises.

The quick check didn't faze Hughes. "As long as you abide by the law you have no

problem," says Hughes as Long hops across a ditch where the Tahoe is parked. "I'm just trying to get him [Logan] some shooting time. Take it easy and be safe."

Long drives around a tractor barn and finds a couple of groups on seats in the field. He checks another father and son.

"I wish more people had an over-and-under like you," he tells the boy. "It makes it a lot easier for me to check."

Long ambles over to three young men, greets them and asks to see their licenses. The first man lays his shotgun across his folding stool and pulls a paper license from his wallet and hands it confidently to Long.

Several seconds pass as Long looks at the man and then back at the license.

"You don't look like an Amber," says Long. His friends laugh and the man scrambles to find his license, explaining that he's just taken his girlfriend fishing at the coast and had purchased her license.

Charles Visnosky of Goldsboro produced a HIP (Harvest Information Program) certification, a federal requirement for hunting migratory birds.

"I asked the lady three times for a dove hunting license and that's what she gave me," says Visnosky.

Senior Officer Jon Morgan writes Visnosky a warning ticket because he believes it was vendor error, and allows Visnosky the opportunity to purchase a license online using his smart phone before returning to the hunt.

"I was in law enforcement in the Navy," says a visibly relieved Visnosky. "That couldn't have been better. Very professional."

"Modern technology paid off," says Long as he heads back to his vehicle.

With Deal and Barger in the air the radio crackles with directions to different units working the detail as they hopscotch across the countryside. At 9:45 a.m. Long turns into a new field with trucks parked along the path that separates a cotton field and a corn field. Sgt. Joyner hops out to check hunters and Long drives to the end of the trucks, gets out and continues to check licenses and guns. Buckets, bags and vests get checked for doves. Long talks more about working a detail.

"It's about volume and compliance," he says. "It's a high-visibility patrol. It shows we're out working and not always hiding in

the bushes. We'll respond to landowner calls, and I'm surprised we haven't had more of those today."

This opening day detail in Wayne County had officers from Wake, Johnston, Halifax, Wayne, Nash, Warren and Franklin counties. Long said the local officers usually write the actual citations since they're local. They concentrated on southern Wayne County because it had the best dove habitat. It has great gnat habitat as well, as the pests are legion.

At 10:30 Long pulls out of the field, drives a short distance, pulls over and awaits Barger's direction. With the season opening a half hour before sunrise, many hunters are nearing limits or lunch and the shots taper off.

"This is where the hunt-and-peck gets hard," he says. "The plane really helps when the shooting slows down. Without an airplane you can run 300 miles in a day just looking."

Long drives on and soon the plane flies into view and reports on fields that have already been checked. Thirty minutes goes by with no gun reports. One truck turns around to check on a hunt around 11:30. At 11:35 Long gets an alert from the plane about

Capt. Matt Long shows evidence of a baited dove field. Tips can be grain different than what was planted, mixed seeds and even a lot of spent shells around a small field.



a couple of hunts near the town of Princeton. Long checks the hunters where his two-wheel drive Tahoe can go while the officers in four-wheel drive trucks drive the more questionable routes. One "hunt" that Officer Grady checks on turns out to be a deer hunter working on a tree stand. Not much is happening at noon as heat, limits and lunch have most hunters packing in.

During the lull Sgt. Joyner talks about his path to law enforcement. "The April '99 issue [of *Wildlife in North Carolina*] had an article titled "The School of Hard Knocks," he says. "I knew I wanted to work for state law enforcement, and that article steered me to the commission."

At 12:50 Barger radios about several hunts on the east side of Goldsboro and three trucks head out. En route Long fields a random call from a citizen on how to find her local wildlife officer in Wake County.

It's 1:10 when Long pulls into the field and checks a couple of hunters. Barger helps Long find a couple of others in the area while he's on foot.

"I like quick stops like this," he says, referring to quick compliance by the hunters. "Usually, it's the constituent who makes the check take longer." At 1:20 p.m. Deal radios about another hunt and Long and Joyner check a group of hunters from Sneads Ferry. The radio crackles again to direct Long to yet another hunt.

"We're still under a 100 miles for the day," says Long. "When you're busy you don't move as much."

At 1:45 p.m. Joyner and Long check one last hunt and at 2 p.m. Officer Grady calls to end the detail on the radio. Activity has dwindled and work hours have been maxed.

It was a good day for the detail as over 100 hunters were checked. It was a bad day for one group of hunters. The hunters gunning over the baited field—except for one who never got out of his truck—were all issued citations for hunting over bait, among other violations. The district detail disperses for the day, home to showers, family and for some, hot grills. Tomorrow is a regular patrol day. ♡

Mike Zlotnicki is the associate editor of Wildlife in North Carolina. He may be reached at mike.zlotnicki@ncwildlife.org or 919-707-0175.