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THE BLIND HUNTER

Every time a game warden gets to feeling smug and thinking he's seen it all, he gets proven wrong in a big way.

We were having fun breaking in a new trainee in the Sheridan District one fall. He'd gotten his share of jokes pulled on him and taken his share of ribbing for getting stuck, lost and confused. But, he was hanging in there and doing a great job. His name was Bengie and he eventually passed his probation period.

The phone rang at night that fall, and a rancher was on the other end to tell me about something he'd seen. He said that when I had been out earlier and dealt with some hunters near his place, that I'd missed another antelope they had shot. He said that before I arrived, two guys had drug a buck antelope off a side hill and hid it in an irrigation ditch, they walked on down to the rest of the party who had a couple more antelope down. Then he'd seen me arrive and take care of the situation, but no one ever went up and got the buck antelope.

Well, I didn't have the slightest idea what the rancher was talking about, since I hadn't gone out there. I could only surmise Bengie had.

I called Bengie and he surely had gone out to the place; on a complaint from the neighboring rancher who had witnessed them shooting at antelope from the road, which is illegal. Bengie had responded and written a couple of tickets for shooting from the roadway. There was another ungutted antelope in the back of the truck supposedly coming from another ranch. The antelope wasn't tagged before it had been transported or moved anywhere as required by law. Bengie inquired and the hunter stepped forth. He was blind! Well, Bengie had never known such a thing as a blind hunter, so he began learning some more about the job. Turns out they had a rifle with a side mount scope that the brother to the blind man would look through, give directions of "up", "down", "left", or "right", then "SHOOT" at the appropriate time.

Anyway, I explained to Bengie that he had missed an antelope on the hillside and he agreed to go along. We talked about the earlier episode on the way to the site. Bengie had checked all their licenses and knew they only had licenses to cover shooting doe antelope only. So, someone had shot a buck and hid it so we wouldn't find it. We wondered if the hunters would blame it on the unsuspecting blind man, who wouldn't know if he killed a buck, doe, or anything at all.

After some help from the rancher, we found and properly dressed the antelope, then headed for Sheridan. Bengie knew their outfits and they were staying in a motel somewhere. Accidentally shooting the wrong sex is understandable, but leaving a mistake to rot isn't and is dealt with severely.

We searched and soon found the vehicles at a motel. As we were debating how to approach the guys, out come about four of them to go to town. We got out and began quizzing them about the dead antelope. At first they tried denying it, but after realizing an eye-witness had seen them, admitted "Yea, the blind guy shot it." I looked at Bengé and thought he was going to explode before my eyes. We gathered our composure, and allowed the brother to explain. The scope was so offset, that if a shot was missed at 100 yards the shot gets off course quickly the further it travels, accounting for the near perfect neck shot on the buck at about 350 yards and it was all be accident. They did not know what to do, were scared and when Bengé showed up, decided to forget about the buck.

I thought about it and decided that the guy looking through the scope and telling when to shoot should get the ticket. After all, he had given some bad advice and caused the problem. While this guy was trying to decide his own fate, the blind guy stepped forth and proclaimed, "Now wait a minute, I'm part of this hunting party. I can take a ticket too, you know." I thought about it a minute, remembering Bengé hadn't given him a ticket for the earlier fail to tag and said "You got it, man!"

I cited him, got bail money from him and put the point of my pen where he was to sign the ticket. He was really trusting me now. For all he knew, I could be getting title to his house.

They were nice guys who had goofed up. The blind guy had a motorcycle wreck and couldn't see anymore due to the injury. He became a piano tuner and the family started taking fishing trips till they got the idea how to go hunting. Each to his own, and whatever works! I hope we didn't discourage `em! Bengé and I decided we weren't going to tell anyone about the incident, but who could keep a secret like that?

THE PREACHER

Every once in a while a game warden has to do something he'd just as soon not do. Due to the situation, sometimes a ticket needs to be issued when (if only no one else knew) he'd just as soon issue a warning and save someone the humiliation. Also, there are times when breaks are given only to later lead to serious doubts as to the logic. I had occasion in the fall of 1979 to witness both conflicts in one situation.

I received a call a doe deer had been shot in a closed area and that the man who shot it wanted to meet at a lodge on the Bighorn Mountains. I arrived to find an elderly man and his wife sitting in a truck waiting for me. The man explained that he had a cow elk license and was sitting on a side hill with his wife when several doe deer walked out below. He thought they were cow elk and shot one. When he shot, his wife exclaimed, "You just shot a deer!", to which he replied, "Nooo!".

I explained to him that I had no choice but to write him a ticket, but I'd call and let the judge know he'd turned himself in and that it was an honest mistake. I felt sorry for the guy and probably wouldn't write a ticket at all except that everyone in the lodge knew what happened as well as everyone that heard the message over the radio phone at the lodge. While explaining the situation and writing the ticket, a local goofball from the lodge came up and asked if he could have the deer. I jumped all over the guy for making an already embarrassing situation worse for the couple. I forgot to mention the elderly man was a minister in a small town in eastern Wyoming.

Anyway, the minister drew a map to lead me to the dressed out and hanging deer, and I let him go with his misery and humiliation. Warden Chuck Repsis was summoned to help retrieve the deer and it was exactly where he said it would be. We gave the deer to a needy family in town and later found the man had only been fined \$20 for killing the deer in a closed area. So, the case ended....we thought.

About five days later I got a call at our district office from the man. He stated he was at our checkstation headed for town and wanted to meet with me. Figuring he wanted to thank me for putting in the good word, I told him I would wait till he arrived.

When he got there, he wanted to talk outside and alone. I followed him outside and asked what was going on. He said, "Mr. Cram, you're not going to believe this." "Believe what?" I asked. He swallowed and said, "I did it again!" "Did what?" I asked. He said, "I shot another deer." "Where?" I asked. He said, "About 50 yards from the other one."

I stood in disbelief and wondered what the judge would say if we went to court again. He was going to think the poor guy is a menace, and I must be crazy for pleading leniency the first time. We visited a little more, and I found out then that this man could hardly see. I explained to him that he shouldn't be hunting and he could as easily have shot another hunter. I told him I really didn't know what to do and would have to think about it awhile. I told him to go home

and stay there until he heard from me. That was fifteen years ago. I haven't heard of anyone getting shot in the area, so I presume he is still waiting!

ONE OF THEM DAYS

People often call us with information while wishing to remain anonymous to the suspect they call about. We respect their wishes and go to great length to keep them uninvolved. But, occasionally something goes awry.

A woman called to report that her dog had dragged in a fresh elk leg, and she suspected her neighbors were poaching. She explained that the neighbors were in the yard next door and would see me drive up if I came out.

I told her we had an old undercover truck, and I could put on a windbreaker or something so the neighbors wouldn't realize who I was. She consented to this plan and gave me directions to her house south of Sheridan. This all seemed pure and simple, except for two things: our undercover truck had a broken door latch and my holster was falling apart.

I threw on a windbreaker, noticed the stitching was unraveling in my holster, jumped in our old 1959 Army OD pickup and headed out. I got just south of town and went around a sharp hair pin turn to the right. The driver's door came open...and I headed out. I gripped the steering wheel, pulling it to the left and promptly went across the road and into the borrow pit. Luckily it was gentle, and I was able to pull back onto the road. Luckily too, there was no oncoming traffic.

I arrived at the house and noticed people in the yard next door. I parked, got out and headed to the door. The informant came out to meet me and was halfway to me when KER-PLOP! My pistol fell out from under my windbreaker onto the gravel walkway. The poor woman gasped out loud and just shuddered, "My neighbors will know!". I bent down, picked up the pistol and tucked it back under the windbreaker and into my belt...and kept walking. The neighbors never even noticed! We went to the house and looked at the elk leg, which turned out to be one from last fall and nothing illegal about it. I apologized to the woman for scaring her to death and drove back to the office....holding onto the door with one hand.

THE PHANTOM DEER

Game wardens spend their entire careers learning lessons, then they retire because the lessons scare them to death.

One fall I decided to don some 'real person' clothes, shoulder a rifle and wander into a deer and elk area on foot. We are constantly accused of 'just riding around in trucks all day', so I figured I might catch some hunter unawares. And, so I thought, "Who knows, I might even see an elk and be able to call this my big elk hunt for the year.". I'd heard some shooting near the bottom of a creek about a mile off, so I slipped on some orange and headed out.

Upon reaching the creek bottom, I found a large bull elk lying on its back and fully gutted. I checked it closely, but couldn't find the mandatory elk tag that should have been visibly attached somewhere on the carcass. The 'whistlers' or canine teeth were still in the elk. I was surprised because they are highly prized by hunters. So, the elk had not been tagged as required by law and was therefore, not the property of anyone. I decided to remove the teeth and see if I could find someone that wanted to claim them. I marked the elk carcass so I could identify it later and proceeded on up the creek.

I shortly found a hunter puffing up the hill ahead of me and caught up to him. The first thing he asked was if I had seen the elk he'd shot down below. I said I had and he proceeded to tell me all the details about how he had gotten the bull, and then missed a cow that was with him. I finally told him who I was and asked for his elk license. His first words were, "I lied to you. I didn't really shoot that elk, my friend did!" Turned out that the hunter I was talking to had a general elk license and by law had to shoot a bull elk only. His friend had an either sex license and could shoot a cow or a bull. The two had decided they would use the bull only license on the bull, then they'd still have an either sex license to share the rest of the day. That would improve their chances of getting another elk (more options). I checked the license and the tag had not been torn off.

By now the guy was getting real nervous and I tried to calm him by downplaying the severity of the offense. I explained that we'd have to go find his friend and take care of the matter. He explained that his friend was probably in camp and we could head there. I knew where the camp had to be and headed off, waiting occasionally for the out-of-

shape man to catch up in the deep snow. We had just reached the top of the hill when an explosion went off right behind me! I whirled and shouted, "What happened?". He motioned and said something had crossed through a clearing to our right. I hadn't seen anything and asked if it was a deer. He said, "I think so." I responded, "You think so? You aren't sure?". He replied, "Well, it was about this tall and it was grey!". I asked if it had antlers (since this deer area was limited to bucks only) and he again responded, "I think so". I came back with "I hope so, let's go have a look".

We entered the clearing and began to look for tracks. There were none! I completely circled the clearing and went beyond. There were no tracks at all in the two feet deep snow!

I suddenly got a chill up my spine and realized that there never was a deer. I could only guess that he had either accidentally fired his rifle during his haste and fear or something even more scary...he shot at me! I really concentrated on calming him down this time and suggested he go on ahead to his camp and wait while I would peel off to where my truck was parked, then catch up to him later. I slowly started off to the left while watching his every move and unsnapped my holster.

Once he was gone I hurried to my truck, and then headed for the camp. We got there about the same time and his friend was already there. I wrote the friend a ticket for not tagging the elk, gave him the teeth from my pocket and explained I could confiscate the elk if I so wished, but this time I'd let them have it. As for the phantom deer shooter, I never mentioned the incident but let him know how easy it was to get caught in a party hunting situation and hoped he'd learned his lesson.

My real thoughts upon leaving the camp were that I'd learned a real lesson myself. A warden can get careless thinking everyone is a nice guy. Treat people with respect, but never, never let your guard down around people with guns!

DISTRICT III PHONE TAP

The vast majority of contacts made during hunting season are commonplace; not worth rehashing. In fact, most of us hear so many hunting stories, we'd love to hear no more...ever.

But occasionally something happens whereby its merit to be retold can't be denied.

During the fall of 1986, I received word through an informant that a local resident had taken a couple of elk to his brother's processing plant to cool. The elk were supposedly part of an over limit of elk and were untagged.

I contacted Dayton warden, Bob Peterson and proceeded to the locker to check out the devious story. When we arrived at the plant, the plant owner greeted us in his usual friendly way and invited us to look through the plant if we wished. We subsequently found an untagged deer and the two untagged elk as reported. An employee of the plant admitted to bringing the deer in and produced a 'slick' license from his wallet. He understood he had to be ticketed. Both agreed the plant operator knew nothing about it.

We explained that we'd heard the elk were brought in during the night, possibly after the plant owner had left for the night. He quickly proclaimed "I'll get to the bottom of this!" Whereby he telephoned his brother. Presumably talking to his brother's wife, he asked where his brother was, when he'd be back, etc. He then growled, "There are some extra untagged elk down here and two game wardens are about to take me to jail." He was just putting the finishing touches on a believable conversation, when a horrible sound came over the phone (loud enough for both Peterson and I to hear): "Beep, beep, beep, beep. Hang up your phone! Hang up your phone now!"

Now Bob and I were having some real fun! I called the owner by his first name. Sam's ears were turning red, but he continued to talk to the very loud recording. I again said "Sam....there's nobody there!" Sam turned, hung up the phone and exclaimed, "I know! But he's my brother, man! What else could I do?!" We all had a good laugh. The tags were found and Sam now has an answer when asked of his most embarrassing moment.