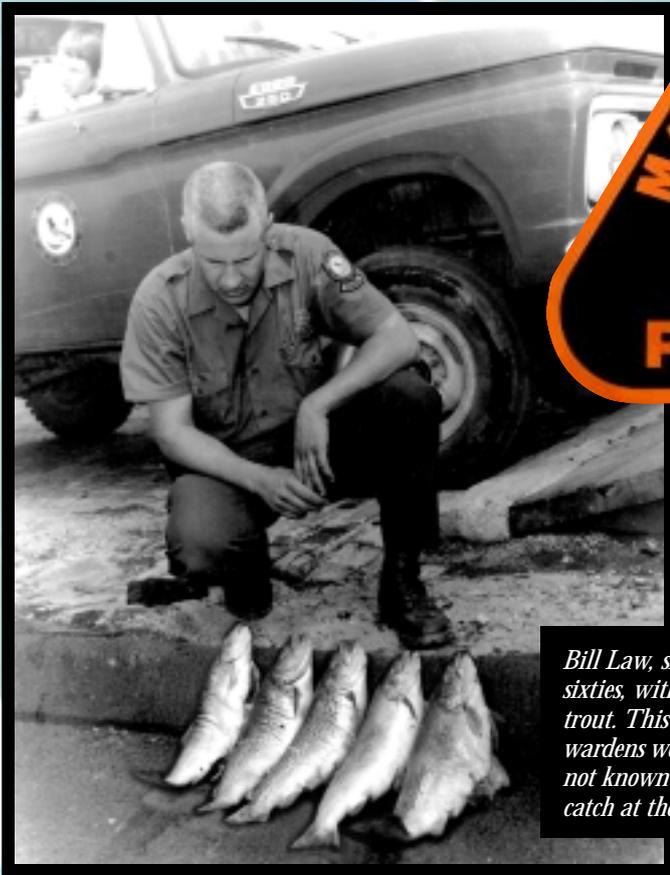


NRP— *Maryland's Natural Resources Police*



Bill Law, shown here in the sixties, with a nice grouping of trout. This was before the wardens were "NRP's" — it is not known if this was an illegal catch at the time.

Game Wardens have been an integral part of Western Maryland outdoor recreation for as long as residents can remember. Working under the authority of the State of Maryland, Game Wardens or Maryland Natural Resources Police, are the enforcement arms of the Department of Natural Resources. The DNR mission is to protect the gifts of nature, provide for public educational programs, and “protect the safety and welfare of Marylanders enjoying the outdoors and enforce natural resource laws.” Scarce is the local hunter or fisherman who does not have a story about encountering a law enforcement officer at an inopportune time. One wonders how the 218 NRP officers seem to be everywhere at the same time. Such was not always the case.

Maryland did not have game law enforcement until a conflict among northeastern states over oyster harvesting in the Chesapeake Bay promoted the state legislature to create the State Oyster Police in 1868, followed just three years later by the State Game Warden's Office. Watermen from other states were depleting Maryland's oyster beds, as harvests in their waters were poor. Enforcement of oyster harvests, for Maryland residents only, was deemed necessary.

In 1941 the Board of Natural Resources was created, and fifty-three game wardens were hired. During the early years of the Board, a Game Warden's duties were more diverse than today, and the territory to be covered was larger. Residents remembered legendary Game Warden, Joe Meinke, for his dedication during those years. A tall man with a gentle disposition, he seemed to be everywhere including elementary schools, where he offered advice to youngsters about the outdoors.

The current Natural Resources Police structure was created in 1971, when operations with other departments were combined.

While enforcement of state law is an important responsibility, (NRP officers are vested with the same powers as the State Police), the officer's duties are diverse and interesting, as they must match people's ingenuity to circumvent the laws that the DNR police are sworn to uphold.

Over the years, this inherent match up has caused unusual and humorous situations, according to Capt. Donnie Simmons, a veteran NRP officer. Capt. Simmons recalled that as a rookie, he accompanied an experienced officer into the field during male pheasant season. The officers encountered a hunter near his vehicle and struck up a conversation including the typical question, “have any luck?” The seasoned officer continued to engage in a pleasant conversation while nudging Officer Simmons and pointing to the front tire of the hunter's truck. Fingerprints appeared around the tire and hubcap. The experienced officer finally asked the hunter, “What about the hubcap of the truck?” Capt. Simmons recalls wondering why a question was being asked about the hubcap. Upon further inspection, it was apparent that a hen pheasant had been shot, and then squashed between the truck's hubcap and wheel to conceal it from NRP.

One of Captain Simmons easiest confessions was given by a suspect who was not even formally accused of a violation. During the 1980's, a state airplane was dispatched to the area during the last Friday of deer season. The plane was to cover the territory, ranging from eastern Allegany County to western Washington County and its purpose was to check for spot lighters. Spotlighting is an illegal activity because the beam of

light immobilizes deer and makes them an easy mark for hunters. At 11:00 pm, the pilot observed spotlighting activity on the west side of Sideling Hill, and he notified Captain Simmons, in the chase car, about the approximate location of the light. Captain Simmons was aware of a logging road and a hunting shanty located in that area, so he immediately began to pursue the spot lighters. The pilot verified that Captain Simmons was hot on the trail. Unfortunately, the pilot radioed the spot lighters had ceased their illegal activity and had turned off their vehicle's lights. Arriving minutes later at the cabin, Captain Simmons observed a vehicle parked nearby. He felt the hood, and it was warm. He looked inside the car, and in plain view was a spotlight. Approaching the cabin door, Captain Simmons knew he didn't really have a case, since no particular person was actually observed spotlighting deer. Knocking on the door, the hunters responded by asking "Who is it?" Simmons response was, "A Game Warden." Thinking it was a friend, the hunters opened the door, and Simmons watched as the group collectively dropped their jaws. Captain Simmons decided to bluff his way and stated, "We got a problem, and you know why I am here." One hunter stepped forward and said, "Yes, it's out in the trunk." Puzzled by the statement, Simmons had the owner open the trunk to see a doe that had been shot and quartered on Friday, lying on the floor of the trunk. The hunter had not checked in the deer as required by law and had unknowingly confessed to a violation the DNR officer never suspected him of committing.

Not all jokes are on the unsuspecting hunter. Sometimes the NRP unwillingly cause their own unusual situations. Setting up two robotic deer, one with a moving head and tail, produced such a situation for Captain Simmons. A chase car was located down the road from Captain Simmons who was well hidden, some distance from the robotic deer that he could electronically maneuver. Such stakeouts are controlled, so as not to involve entrapment, and the two officers had painstakingly taken all legal precautions and carefully prepared the site. The robotic deer began its motions, and the "stake out" began. Sure enough, a local resident stopped upon seeing the decoy deer. Surprisingly, nothing happened for what seemed like an unusual time; then the car sped away quickly with no shots being fired. The driver sped past the chase car, and the NRP officer in the vehicle communicated to Simmons that the car was speeding. Simmons replied, "Yea, but they didn't shoot." Simmons stood up to inspect the site only to learn that he was working the tail of a headless buck. The robotic deer had failed and its head was lying on the ground nearby.

Residents have heard funny stories about hunters from the metropolitan areas who think that chipmunks are squirrels, or goats and cattle are deer, and therefore, are fair game for the hunt. Captain Simmons believes most of the stories, although

amusing, are exaggerated, as he only encountered one mistaken "goat for deer shooting," and that was by a local hunter in the 1980's. The goat was brown, and the sun was in the eyes of the hunter. However, there was a house nearby, and the goat had a fluorescent marker around its neck! According to Captain Simmons, the hunters he has encountered, regardless of residence, are usually very pleasant.

Retired Sgt. John Williams also had his share of humorous situations. He recalled working with an experienced officer when he was a new employee. The two officers took elaborate precautions to secure an undetected area to observe spotlighting activity near the Pennsylvania line in Garrett County. The patrol car was parked on a hilltop, behind a grove of trees, where they could observe several fields. The experienced officer started to turn off special switches that disabled brake and backup lights, in case they had to move quickly behind a suspect. In the process, the officer pushed the "ON" button of the rotating red emergency roof light by mistake, sending a rotating red beam across the surrounding mountains for several seconds, before he could turn it off. Sgt. Williams stated, "We both sat silently for a while, until he broke the silence with the statement, 'Nobody saw that.' 'We both broke up laughing.'"

During a similar night patrol, Sgt. Williams was following a suspect's vehicle. Three officers were involved in the chase. The third officer observed Sgt. Williams traveling along a back road using just his parking lights for illumination. Being unfamiliar with local roads, the third officer assumed that Sgt. Williams was the suspect. Williams stated: "I was unaware of the situation until I slowly topped a small hill and the other officer, parked in the roadway ten feet in front of me, turned on his red roof light and headlights to stop and apprehend whom he thought was the suspect. He announced over the radio for all units to hear, "I'm stopping the suspect vehicle now." There was a long pause until finally Sgt. Williams spoke into his microphone and announced, "You stopped me!" Sgt. Williams' "apprehension" was heard by fellow officers who were following the chase on the radio.

Cpl. John Milbourne has had his share of humorous moments over a 24 year career in law enforcement. One of the most unusual fishing stories involved his observation of a fisherman at Deep Creek Lake who was successfully catching trout. The fisherman, apparently enthusiastic about his success, continued to catch fish beyond the specified limit. The illegal trout were placed in an elbow deep hole, near a tree trunk. Upon deciding to end a successful outing, the fisherman began to collect his legal and illegal fish. Apparently, one of the trout hidden in the hole was still alive and difficult to grasp. Cpl. Milbourne approached the area to observe a man, kneeling down near the tree, cursing and wildly moving his one arm about,



*Cpl. John Milbourne, 24 years as a "NRP."
(We're sorry not to have a photo of Capt. Donnie Simmons or Sgt. John Williams. Capt. Simmons had surgery on both knees and was unavailable for a photo. Sgt. Williams is retired. We thank all of them for their cooperation and input for this story.)*

in a hole near a tree. Observing the strange behavior, Cpl. Milbourne soon learned the fisherman was in possession of eight dead trout and one live one, in the hole near the tree. The unlucky fisherman was not only caught acting in a strange manner, but he was also provided with official documents from the corporal that explained why his strange behavior was not appreciated by the State of Maryland!

In recent years, the bear population of Garrett County has increased and presented problems for DNR enforcement. Poaching bear complaints prompted NRP to secure a robotic bear from the National Park Service. The bear was set up near the area where complaints originated, and three NRP officers established a "stake out." A delivery vehicle was observed stopping near the bear, and the driver proceeded cautiously in the direction of the bear. The DNR officers controlled the robotic bear's movements, and the driver quickly halted his approach to the bear and began to shake an object that could not be seen by the officers. The suspect quickly returned to the truck and sped away. Curious as to the "suspect's" behavior, the NRP officers moved to the site only to learn the driver was offering a treat of popcorn to the friendly bear.

There is little doubt that the NRP will continue to uphold their sworn duties as officers of the law. It is also likely that citizens will use creative methods to circumvent those officers who represent the public's interest in protecting natural resources. As long as the two conflicting interests continue, there will be interesting stories to tell. No doubt, other NRP have their humorous encounters with citizens from the past, while all officers await their next encounter with outdoorsmen with readiness and anticipation.



Legendary Game Warden, Joe Meinke, shown here with a collection of guns and lights compliments of "spotlighters". Photo taken in the 1950's.



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