

# *Affable Authority*

FWP game wardens mean business.  
But with a nod and a smile.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ALLEN MORRIS JONES



Investigating a report of a possible illegally killed elk, FWP game warden Shane Yaskus looks for sign of a carcass from a high vantage point near Butte. Game wardens regularly follow such leads in order to catch people who break game laws.



## Among law enforcement officers, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks game wardens are a species apart. They're peace officers, sure, but they're also hunters, trappers, and anglers. Writing tickets, confiscating game animals, they belong to the same community as the violators themselves.

Watching a warden walk up the gravel bar toward you for a license check, you think, maybe we know some of the same people, maybe we have the same interests in the outdoors. They're also the one branch of law enforcement regularly asked to approach people who are visibly armed. Think about that for a second. You're the game warden, you're on horseback in the Pintlers or the Highwoods, miles from the nearest security camera, and here's a poacher standing over his elk, rifle in hand.

"Seriously, dude? You want to confiscate my bull?"

"Afraid so."

Consider the guts it takes to have that conversation.

Game wardens are also major stewards of our fish and wildlife resources. Elk, trout,

walleye, mule deer—for the resource to survive in good condition, it must be managed, which includes regulated harvest. For the regulations to have teeth, they need to be enforced. Wardens are the half-hidden springs that help keep the clockwork ticking. I've never paid much attention to who they are and what they do. I've had my license checked a dozen times in 20-some years, but I've never really stopped to have a conversation, to find out who they are. Until recently.



**WARDEN SHANE YASKUS**, based out of Butte, is a burly guy, prematurely bald, big the way bouncers are big. Affable, confident in the manner of not having anything left to prove. I met him in the parking lot of the

FWP office in Butte. A warmish day in November. "Go ahead and climb on in. Just throw your stuff in the back there."

"Thanks."

"It's good you're kind of a small guy. Not a lot of room in here."

Over the next six months, I imposed on the goodwill of three FWP wardens, riding along during typical days at their work. Three seasons, three wardens, three different approaches. But there were commonalities as well. Their state-issued trucks, for instance, were all tricked out much the same: utility box in the bed, along with a shovel and winch, and usually a laptop computer on a dashboard swivel. Yaskus said, "I thought we'd start out with a TIP-MONT call south of town. A landowner said he watched two guys gut an elk over by a neighbor's barn."

"Sounds good."

In his late 30s, the father of four, Yaskus grew up in Stevensville, went to college in Utah, then to the Montana Law Enforcement Academy in Helena. "FWP had a hire going on while I was at the academy, so I got to graduate already wearing the Wranglers," he said (the jeans being standard FWP game warden attire). Given the salary of a game warden these days, Yaskus supplements his



Shane Yaskus checks a hunter's license at an impromptu game check station he set up in the Boulder Mountains north of Butte.



income with contracting work. "We built that house down there. The one with the darker siding."

Hunting season is, of course, a busy time for wardens, and this TIP-MONT call was just one of a number of similar reports Yaskus had been investigating. He had a general idea of where the elk carcass had been, but not the exact spot. As he drove, he checked the GPS on his dash. Then he pulled over and opened his laptop.

"Cadastral mapping. You can search landowners by name. It's kind of invaluable in this type of situation."

A few minutes later, Yaskus was talking to the owners of the barn. An elderly woman in her bathrobe, towel around her hair, stood in the doorway of a manufactured home. She said, "You know who you should really be investigating? Our neighbor up there with the hounds. Those hounds bark at all hours."

Yaskus was sympathetic but noncommittal. "So you didn't hear anything last night? No shots?"

"Nuh-uh. But my husband's up in the shop. You should talk to him."

Yaskus ended up passing the time with the husband, firearms on the back of the truck, small talk transitioning to business.

"I suppose I should probably take a look in your barn. Do you mind?"

It was another commonality I would find across the three wardens. Affable authority.

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He was a pal, but with an asterisk. Over the course of the day, I watched Yaskus set up an impromptu game check station ("I like to eat my lunch with the windows rolled down. Listen for shots.") and conduct an interview with a college kid who had shot an elk on a neighbor's property without permission ("You go on Facebook, there's a photo of him and his girlfriend with the elk." Yaskus grinned. "You wouldn't believe some of the things people put on Facebook.") Through it all he maintained that same sense of cordiality. Enjoying his work.



**FULLY-STAFFED, 75 game wardens** operate in Montana (currently four are female), overseen by 11 sergeants and seven district captains. District Two warden Joe Kambic is based out of Deer Lodge. In January, I waited in the early morning at a gas station off I-90. Ten minutes before dawn, the familiar FWP truck pulled up next to me. Kambic said, "You can put your bag in the back there. Just make room if you need to."

For Kambic, January usually means mountain lion hunting, trapping, and damage control hunts. But today was going to be all about ice fishing. Driving out of town, he offered me a ziplock bag of goose jerky. "Would you like a piece?"

"Thanks." I chewed, and chewed. "It's uh, yeah, it's... good."

"I love hunting ducks and geese, but I lie awake nights figuring out ways to choke

them down. Especially the thighs. I mean, how do you make goose thighs edible?"

"You're supposed to eat the thighs?"

"That's the law, yeah. As a game warden, I try to do it. But they can be chewy."

"My whole life, I never knew you had to eat the thighs."

Kambic, I discovered, was a bit of a philosopher about his job. A pragmatist. "If you followed the letter of the law," he said, "you could pretty much always find somebody doing something wrong. But the way I see it, if you don't write people up for violations that don't mean anything, maybe they'll feel like they can come back to you later and report a violation that does mean something."

Like Yaskus, Kambic kept a pad for making notes. He had a cell phone, GPS. What he didn't have, conspicuously, was a computer. "I don't know, man. My style is, I'll do my computer work at my desk. It's a tool, but when I'm in the truck, I'm dealing with people. It's boots on the ground. Last Thursday I got stuck in a snowbank and had to dig myself out. The computer wouldn't have helped me much in that situation."

On Georgetown Lake, Kambic walked from ice house to ice house, crunching through old snow. He had his spiel, his banter. Shaking a corner of a tent: "Game warden. Everybody decent in there?" The Super Bowl was just a few weeks away, and football was in the air. He told a 12-year-old boy, handing his license back to him, "Afraid I am going to have to fine you for that Cowboys sweatshirt, though. That's a jailable offense right there."



**Brett Logan** Great Falls



**Shane Yaskus** Butte



**Joe Kambic** Deer Lodge





“A lot of my strategy is just to be as visible as possible.”

Above: Joe Kambic talks to ice anglers at Georgetown Lake. With an average work area of 2,000 square miles, wardens need to cover a lot of ground each year. Below: Brett Logan files a report in his Great Falls office.



The boy held his license, smiling uncertainly. Over the course of five hours, Kambic checked nearly 100 ice anglers. Of these, only four failed to produce their licenses.

One fisherman said, accepting the warning ticket, “I know what you could do to me, so I appreciate this. I truly do.”

Driving away from Georgetown, Kambic said, “A lot of my strategy is just to be as visible as possible. If somebody catches that bull trout in the summer and they’d really like to keep it, maybe they’ll think, ‘I’ve seen the game warden in here a couple of times on his horse. I’d better put it back.’ Well, that’s a win for us.”



**SOMETHING ABOUT OUR CULTURE**, we want to see the glamour in law enforcement. Primetime TV is filled with interrogation rooms and search warrants, car chases and shootouts. But the essential aspect of law enforcement, it has always seemed to me, is the furthest thing from glamorous. It has something to do with the notion of public service, with working on behalf of the greater good. A lot of paperwork, a lot of time on the phone.

When I met with game warden Brett Logan, he was putting off having to investigate a long-dead mule deer doe that had washed up on a riverbank.

Tall and lanky, Logan grew up in Driggs, Idaho, the son of a ranch manager. He went to Carroll College in Helena, playing defensive end until an injury made him reassess his priorities. I met him at his office in the FWP regional headquarters in Great Falls.

“Hey, I got a dead deer for us to investigate, but give me a few minutes. I need to make a phone call first.”

Warden sergeant Dave Holland looked in and introduced himself. “So what’s your article about?”

“A day in the life of three different game wardens. Maybe something about the technology. How it’s changing the job.”

“Things are changing. The trunked radio system. Has anybody talked to you about our radios?” He showed me what looked like a standard walkie-talkie. “Used to be, our radios were analog; you needed line of sight to the repeaters. But this is closer to a cell phone. We can talk to Lewistown on this thing if we need to.”

Logan came back. “Dispatch is sending TIP-MONT calls to our e-mail now, and I guess they’re going to be putting the Automated Licensing System on our phones. That’ll be handy.”

The new technology, he said, would let him and the other wardens immediately check to see if anglers or hunters caught without a fishing or hunting license actually did buy it. Many claim they forgot it at home.

“But now,” he took a deep breath, “we still gotta go dig through a dead deer.”

At Morony Dam on the Missouri, Logan produced a pair of blue latex gloves and a skinning knife, and walked down a long flight of concrete stairs to the water. A mule deer doe, hairless after a winter under the ice, lay

wheel to any number of passing vehicles. A guy overseeing the community of sportsmen, but a part of it as well.



**LIKE A NUMBER OF US** who grew up hunting and fishing, I admit that I’ve sometimes had ambivalent notions about game wardens. The fish and game laws are so (necessarily) complex that simply by pulling on your waders, or shrugging into an orange vest, it can feel like you’re already on the verge of breaking some kind of law. In that context, I’m not sure what I had hoped to take away from my ride-alongs. Maybe I was perversely hoping to find aspects of the job that I could



Brett Logan investigates a bloated deer carcass—not the type of glamorous law enforcement action depicted on TV shows.

on the shore. “Oof. Man, can you smell that?”

“You’ll notice I’m standing upwind.”

“Yeah, I noticed that.” He twisted a front leg around. “I don’t see any bullet holes. What happens, they’ll fall through the ice in the winter, then sink to the bottom. Weather turns warm, they float to the surface.” A few minutes later, “Yeah, looks like she fell through the ice. Case solved.”

I didn’t see much glamour during my day with Logan. No drama. Rather, I watched him talk for 15 minutes with a fisherman below Morony Dam (they shared photos on cell phones: “Pike on Tiber. Thirty pounds. Can you believe it?”). I listened as he politely let the chattiest citizens keep rambling on. And noticed how he lifted his fingers off the

object to. Maybe I wanted to see these guys swagger, show some bravado. Instead, and common to all three wardens, I found judiciousness, and humor, and sympathy, and a deep regard for the resource. I saw a studied respect for the law, and discretion enough to know when to apply it. Dammit, I didn’t expect to like these guys so much.

Yaskus, Kambic, Logan. Computers in trucks and next-generation radios, GPS units, and cadastral mapping. The tools may be changing, but they are still hanging off the timeless armature of good people doing earnest work. *Boots on the ground*, I thought. That’s what the job’s about. The boots, and the quality of the folks who fill those boots. 🐾