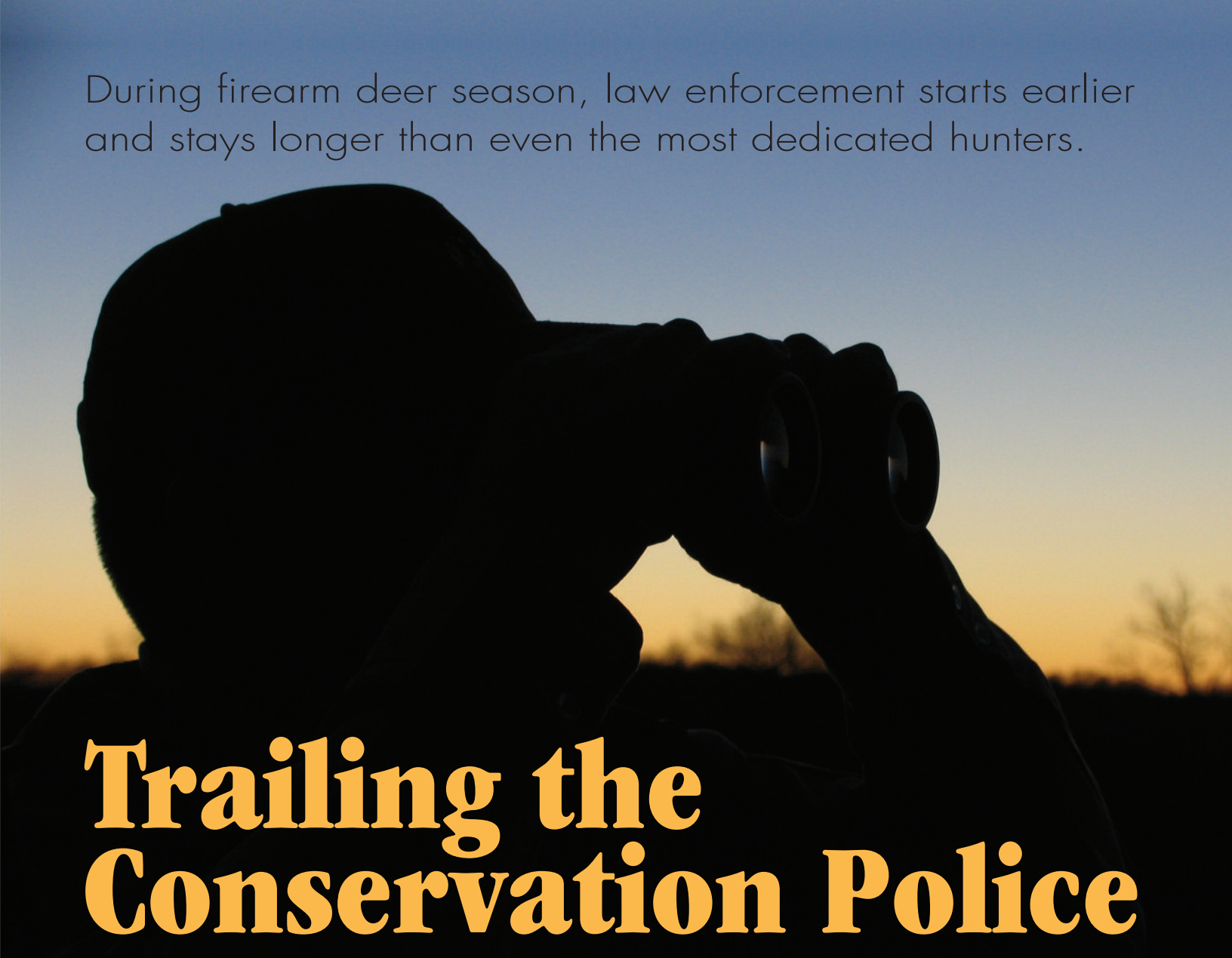
During firearm deer season, law enforcement starts earlier and stays longer than even the most dedicated hunters.



Trailing the Conservation Police

Story and Photos By
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Just how important is firearm deer season to the state's more than 230,000 licensed deer hunters? For many, the idea of not hunting simply isn't an option. Vacation days—even unused sick leave—get cashed in for the annual event. Deer season matters.

For members of the Illinois Conservation Police, participating in deer season truly is a can't-miss event. On opening day, nearly every Conservation Police officer in Illinois is up well before dawn, ready to hit the fields and forests of this legendary whitetail state.

There is, of course, a difference between the thousands of hunters and Conservation Police officers: none of the CPOs gets to hunt.

"There's just no way I could miss firearm deer season," Conservation Police Officer Kris Taylor chuckled while driving his state vehicle down a rural road in Alexander County. It was Sunday afternoon, the last day of Illinois' three-day opener for firearm deer season. And, like every other CPO in the state, Taylor was spending it at work. During the past two days, he'd visited five counties, responded to "a million" calls and investigated a couple of accidents where hunters fell out of trees.

Additionally, the seemingly endless processions of proud hunters in pickups and other vehicles, eager to brag, meet up with Taylor to show off their prize.

It's a workaholic's dream.

"The deer hunters who were successful on opening morning are home watching football right now," Taylor laughed. "But for us, deer season doesn't end until long after legal shooting hours end."

The fact is, the 153 members of the Illinois Conservation Police continue to work related tasks for days and weeks—even months in certain cases—after firearm deer season officially ends.

"Tonight and tomorrow, that's when the serious paperwork begins," Taylor explained.

Indeed, several hours later, long after darkness settles on this rural land-

Conservation Police work from long before sunrise until long after sunset during Illinois' firearm deer hunting seasons.

CPOs prefer to make hunter compliance checks before or after a hunter is actively hunting. Here, CPO Kris Taylor chats with a deer hunter prior to hunting.

scape and legal shooting hours cease, Taylor and fellow law enforcement personnel would still be working, patrolling in the dark at a nearby state conservation area where a dawdling motorist is being watched. Taylor is parked on a hill, lights off, observing the vehicle.

Perhaps it's merely somebody out for a Sunday night drive in the country. Maybe not. The motorist's headlights shine across a field as the vehicle stops. Deer are nowhere to be seen. "Spotlighting," or "shining," where unscrupulous hunters aim lights at wildlife after hours, is illegal in Illinois.

Since the site has been closed for hours, one of the CPOs decides to inform the motorist they need to move along. A few minutes later, the routine traffic stop reveals no wildlife violations. But the passengers are drinking beer. One of them is underage as well.

Much of the public isn't aware of the broad law enforcement responsibilities of Illinois Conservation Police. In addition to enforcing the laws pertaining to wildlife and the state's natural resources, CPOs also are peace officers, legally authorized to enforce everything from traffic laws to domestic crimes. During a routine shift, a CPO might investigate a fish kill one moment, then later respond to a sheriff's call to track a robbery suspect who'd fled into the woods.

"We get 12 weeks of police academy training before we even begin Conservation Law enforcement training, which lasts another 12 weeks," Taylor explained earlier in the day, when his patrol along a remote county road turned up an abandoned vehicle. The abused condition of the car suggested a stolen vehicle that had been ditched in the country. Taylor called in a report and checked the vehicle carefully for evidence of foul play. (The car would later be identified as stolen from nearby Cape Girardeau, Missouri.)

A few minutes later, a short distance up the gravel road, a deer hunter could be seen hiking near the edge of a woodlot. From all appearances, the hunter seemed to be getting ready for a late-afternoon hunt.

"This is one of the best times to do a compliance check," Taylor explained after the hunter noticed the state vehicle and stopped walking. "When at all possible, it's much better to check a hunter when they're coming or going, opposed to interrupting their hunt. I understand what it's like to be waiting for that buck of a lifetime—only to have somebody walk up on you."

Taylor hiked across the field to meet the hunter where he checked his license, deer permit and firearm, then, a moment later, wished him good luck. The hunter appeared surprised to see anyone at all in what could fairly be described as the middle of nowhere.

But showing up in unexpected places is part of the enforcement technique. Patrols often occur precisely where few people expect to see Conservation Police. One year, on opening day of firearm deer season, when most hunters assumed every CPO was busy with deer hunters, several members of the Conservation Police devoted a portion of their day to monitoring a group of duck hunters in an area where reports of illegal activity had reached Conservation Police. Occasionally, it helps to think like a poacher.

"I can't tell you how many times I've been told by somebody that they couldn't believe we would show up there," Taylor said.

This article is dedicated to acting Region 4 Commander Kim Rhodes, a 28-year veteran of the Illinois Conservation Police who recently succumbed to cancer. Rhodes was a dedicated teacher, having trained 92 percent of the last 153 conservation officers attending the CPO academy, and he received numerous awards for his work.

Observing hunter activity from afar enables Conservation Police to detect certain violations without interrupting law-abiding hunters.

What might also surprise many individuals is the fact Conservation Police might be monitoring their activities without the subject being aware of it. A fisherman in a secluded cove of a lake might be watched through powerful binoculars as he or she discards trash overboard or keeps one bass too many. A deer hunter might try to skip tagging a freshly killed deer as they glance around a seemingly empty forest. Individuals making a drug deal along a park trail might be interrupted by a CPO on a mountain bike.

Even the skies have eyes. As Taylor and his fellow law enforcement officers wait in the darkness of a state conservation area, long after legal shooting hours, a plane flying overhead radios in a message.

At a distant entrance to the site, a new vehicle has stopped, and headlights shine into an open field where deer are standing. The pilot of the plane—Conservation Police Sergeant Tony Rendleman—reports to his staff what his bird's-eye view reveals.

"Some hunters who didn't fill their tags have been known to get pretty desperate Sunday evening," Taylor explained. It's why Conservation Police enforcement details often include suspected "road-hunting" areas.

What's more, scores of would-be poachers have been nabbed while attempting to shoot at deer that weren't even real: Life-size taxidermy mounts placed in safe, off-road locations can trigger a response from poachers on the prowl.

It's now after 10 p.m. and Taylor and his law enforcement peers decide to do some follow-up work around a few properties where suspected poachers might be sneaking deer out of the woods, or where an illegally taken deer is being skinned out behind a dark farm house. Police radio activity has diminished.

Long ago this day began much like firearm deer season began early Friday morning, when the phone started ringing in DNR's Region 5 headquarters. Although field officers work long hours covering hundreds of miles during the intense few days, dispatcher Susan Barnes might well be the busiest human anywhere in Region 5 during firearm deer season.

In addition to enforcing Illinois wildlife codes, Conservation Police have full police authority and will enforce everything from traffic laws to drug violations.

"I'm the only one here now," Barnes explained from her Benton office. Barnes works the law enforcement desk alone as she answers non-stop calls from the public while monitoring police radio calls for the entire 27-county region. Callers have thousands of requests: Permits have been misplaced by frantic hunters; someone somewhere seems to be trespassing; somebody else somewhere reports hearing a shot in the dark—long before legal shooting hours.

For Conservation Police, following up and responding to a flood of calls while constantly watching for signs of trouble is all in a day's work. And every officer is expected to work these critical days. Even the dedicated deer hunters on staff cannot request a vacation.

"Every year we highlight priority weekends on the calendar," Sergeant Rendleman explained afterward. "Vacations are scheduled around those priorities."

For Taylor, who was just getting ready to set out on a new patrol, a good night's sleep sometime after midnight was his final priority. But, first, a new set of headlights has entered the closed hunting area.

"Let's stick around for a while," Taylor suggested.