

Waypoint Column
Outdoor Canada
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Game wardens take a lot of guff from people who hunt and fish.

We gripe when we're ticketed for keeping one walleye too many, or for shooting ducks a few minutes past legal. And the worms we were carrying in a no-bait zone?

Honest, officer, I was just taking them to another place to fish. Yeah, right.

For their part, the men and women charged with protecting our fish and wildlife accept all this and more: budget cuts, arbitrary job description changes, bureaucratic and political interference, long hours, poor pay, midnight patrols, verbally abusive and violent suspects, encounters with dangerous animals and little public gratitude

For most game wardens, it's more than just a job; it's who they are. It's their livelihood, to be sure, but it's also their life. Behind that badge thumps a heart that lives for the music of wild geese, the haunting bugle of a bull elk on a crisp September morning, pastel summer sunrises on a remote lake and the electric tug of a fish on the line.

Take, for example, a game warden we'll call Mark. It's tempting to say they broke the mold after Mark, but that's unfair to many others like him.

Mark grew up on the prairies. As a boy, he'd accompany his dad on goose and duck hunts. Bursting with excitement, he'd jump out of bed when his father came in to wake him well before dawn.

The youngster started off toting a popgun, then graduated to a Daisy BB gun. As the birds set their wings over the decoys, Mark would raise his gun and pretend to shoot while shotguns boomed around him.

The summer he turned 14, Mark and his dad dropped by the local hardware store. The excited lad clutched a \$50 Canada Savings Bond, which his father had saved. When they left the store a short time later, Mark owned a shiny new 20-gauge Cooney Model 39 single shot shotgun.

Finally, after years of make-believe, he was ready to hunt with his dad. On their first hunt together a few weeks later, fate drew a greenhead mallard into range. At the shot, Mark's first duck landed lifeless in the golden stubble. A hunter was born.

A few weeks later, Mark's dad died of a massive heart attack. He was just 44. Mark was devastated. The plans they'd made included hunting and fishing trips long into the future.

Many falls went by. The love and respect for fish and wildlife that Mark's dad had instilled in him led him to a career as a game warden.

But for Mark, the hunt eventually lost its magic. He still loved to see the birds and animals, and was genuinely pleased when he checked hunters who had enjoyed success. But his urge to hunt was gone.

Mark was off duty one October morning while a drama unfolded at a marsh in his district. A father and his 14-year-old son had been hunting since dawn, but hadn't fired a shot. They were strolling back to their vehicle when a flock of large white birds flew overhead.

The father whispered, "Snow geese." When the teenager's shotgun boomed, a Trumpeter swan plummeted to the ground. The boy ran over and picked it up. After his dad joined him, and they realized their mistake, their mood quickly darkened. "I should have known better," the father said. Solemnly, they carried the swan back to their truck.

When they reached town, they phoned Mark to turn themselves in. Later, in his office, they glumly described the shooting. Both father and son accepted blame.

Listening intently, Mark was touched by their honesty and remorse. He was also seized with an overwhelming feeling of irony: the pair reminded him of himself and his late father so many long years ago. Mark thought: *There, but for the grace of God and a bad decision made in the heat of the hunt, go I.*

Mark decided against issuing a ticket. The kid and his father had beat themselves up enough. Instead, Mark told the youngster he was going to take him before a judge.

(Later, the youth indeed faced a judge. After hearing Mark explain the circumstances, the judge ordered the teen to pay \$50 to Ducks Unlimited Canada. He also stipulated the kid couldn't hunt again until he passed a waterfowl identification course with 100 per cent accuracy. He did.)

The teen was close to tears as Mark thanked them for coming into the office, for doing the right thing. After shaking their hands, he offered brochures on waterfowl identification.

As the father and son turned to leave, Mark stopped them in mid-step.

"You have to promise me one thing," he said.

The teenager looked worried, as if expecting a final stern lecture.

Instead, Mark smiled, and calmly said: "You have to promise me that you won't ever quit hunting because of this one mistake. We need more hunters like you and your dad."

Relieved, the boy grinned back and said he didn't plan to quit. That's good, Mark replied.

One morning last fall, Mark shook his own 12-year-old son awake well before sunrise. A few hours later, the sound of approaching geese broke the silence of the dawn. As the flock swung into range, the boy stood to shoot.

In the next few seconds, Mark felt the magic return.