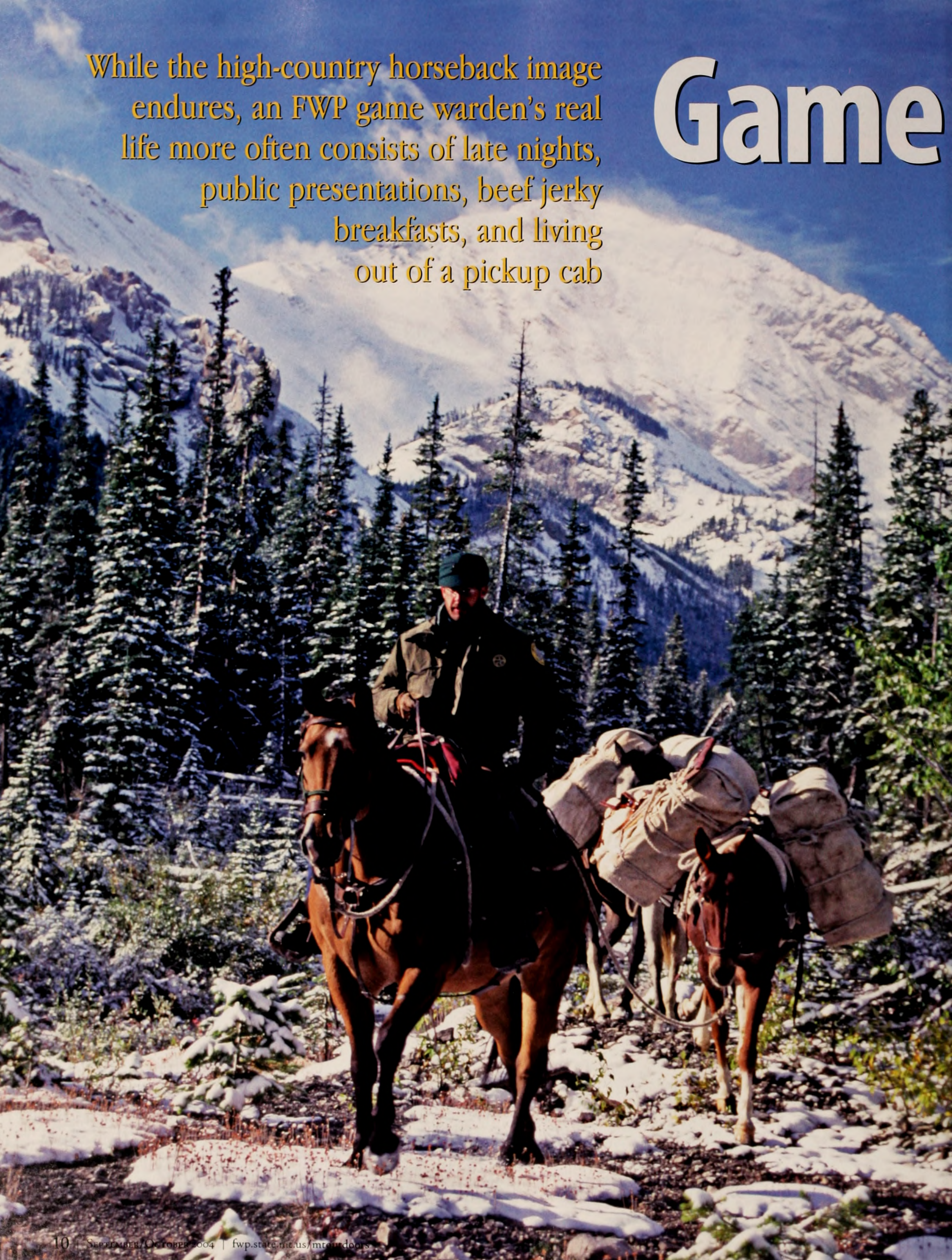


While the high-country horseback image endures, an FWP game warden's real life more often consists of late nights, public presentations, beef jerky breakfasts, and living out of a pickup cab

Game



Warden "Glamour"

Story and photos by Dave Hagengruber

HIGH ABOVE, A QUICKENING WIND WAS TOSSING FRESH SNOW OFF THE CREST OF THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN FRONT. BUT

standing at the trailhead below, the only sound to break the silence of the frosty morning was the creaking saddle leather from across the parking lot.

It came from Tom Flowers, who was loading his string of pack animals. I'd stopped by to visit with the Choteau-based Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) game warden before he headed off on a patrol into the Bob Marshall Wilderness. For five days, he would visit hunters and their camps and check trails, camping along the trails or sleeping in U.S. Forest Service cabins. After exchanging small talk and bidding Flowers goodbye, I hopped into my truck and watched him ride up through the timber toward a mountain pass. Opening the window, I could hear the stock animals' hooves as they picked their way along the trail.

The picture I took away that day of Tom Flowers, Montana game warden, is still fresh in my mind. When I was a young man, I dreamed of being a game warden. It seemed like such a glamorous, heroic job. And for many people who live in or visit Montana, the image of a horse, a sidearm, a gold star, and a million acres of wilderness may still be what comes to mind when they think of a Montana game warden.

But is that an accurate picture of these men and (a few) women? Curious, I began meeting with Montana game wardens across the state. What I learned amazed me. Yes, wardens still ride the backcountry and sneak up on poachers, just as I dreamed of doing when I was young. But they also help landowners reduce game damage, teach kids how to fish, and save people's lives. And they must master a dizzying array of laws, technologies, and biology, plus possess a rare combination of good humor and tough-mindedness. It turns out that wardens have to do more, and know more, than I ever imagined.

BIG SKY, BIG WORK AREA

Montana has 70 game wardens in the field covering the state's nearly 150,000 square miles of land and water. That averages out to over 2,000 square miles per district, though some wardens are responsible for districts of up to 4,000 square miles. That's one person patrolling an area twice the size of Delaware.

As easy as it might seem to disappear in such vast country, game wardens are among FWP's most visible employees. Most hunters, anglers, or park visitors will never meet a wildlife biologist, fisheries technician, or park manager, but there's a good chance they will someday run

into a game warden.

That's because one of the main duties of Montana game wardens is to "make contacts" (as they call it). And it's been that way since the appointment of the first warden in 1901. Interaction with the public is one of the ways wardens fulfill their chief mission, which has changed little during the past century.

"Wardens are here to protect the wildlife, parks, and fisheries resources of the state," says Jim Kropp, chief of the FWP Enforcement Division. "We take that very seriously, and that will always be our primary focus."

According to Kropp, who



NO PLACE LIKE TRUCK Game wardens, like Jim DeBoer (above), spend long hours in their pickup, which often becomes a combination home and office. Yet wardens, like Tom Flowers (left), still get to ride into the backcountry to check on hunters, wildlife, and trail conditions.

previously worked as a field warden in Bozeman, Billings, Great Falls, and Harlowton, wardens live and breath their work around the clock. “Being a Montana game warden is not just a job; it’s a way of life,” he says.

That lifestyle can be rewarding, but it doesn’t come easy. Wardens spend long hours away from home and do dangerous work. What’s more, because criminals are always using the latest technologies to break laws, wardens have to keep pace. Though the mission of game wardens hasn’t changed over the past century, the tools and techniques for enforcing fish and wildlife laws have undergone tremendous change.

“When I first signed on 20 years ago,” says Great Falls game warden Steve Vinnedge, “the only way to find residency violations and license fraud was to page through thousands of carbon copies of hunting and fishing licenses sold by vendors. You can imagine how efficient that was. Today, it’s all electronic, and even though sitting at the computer may not be very glamorous, it gets results.”

Vinnedge says that computers have become particularly helpful in catching those trying to circumvent Montana’s residency requirements and avoid paying non-resident license fees: “With the Internet and other tools, it’s getting easier and easier for us to see who is a resident and who isn’t.”

POSITIVE IMPRESSIONS

Though game wardens must be computer literate, an even more valuable skill is the ability to communicate. Wardens help instruct hunter and angler education classes and regularly speak at schools, sporting clubs, and civic groups. And the hundreds of contacts made each year with individual Montanans and visitors give each warden opportunities to provide information and make positive impressions.

“Every contact we make with a hunter or angler in the field is an educational event,” says Shane Reno, game warden in Havre. “It’s a chance to pass along information, answer questions, and build relationships.”

Wardens continually study to become walking encyclopedias of statewide fish, wildlife, and state park laws, policies, and

Dave Hagengruber is FWP’s aquatic education specialist in Helena.



IMPROVING THEIR AIM

Game wardens are constantly training: Mike Fegely and fellow wardens practice at a firearms range (above), while warden Wendy Kamm (above right) instructs colleagues in ice rescue techniques. Game wardens are also constantly meeting with landowners, civic groups, hunters, anglers, and state park users. Warden Rick Schoening (far right) stops a boat to check for life vests and fishing licenses. Warden Shane Reno (right) helps a young ice angler get her lure down to the fish.



“Whether we’re answering questions about park or third-graders, the essence of being a warden is being

regulations. Reno says he has been quizzed about every imaginable resource or issue—and not just those related to his work area.

“I’ll get asked about fish management policies in the high mountain lakes around Dillon,” Reno says. “Or someone might ask me about the strange bird they saw at their feeder in Kalispell two months ago.”

Reno, who helps train warden recruits, tells newcomers that the more they know about the outdoors, the greater their credibility with the public.

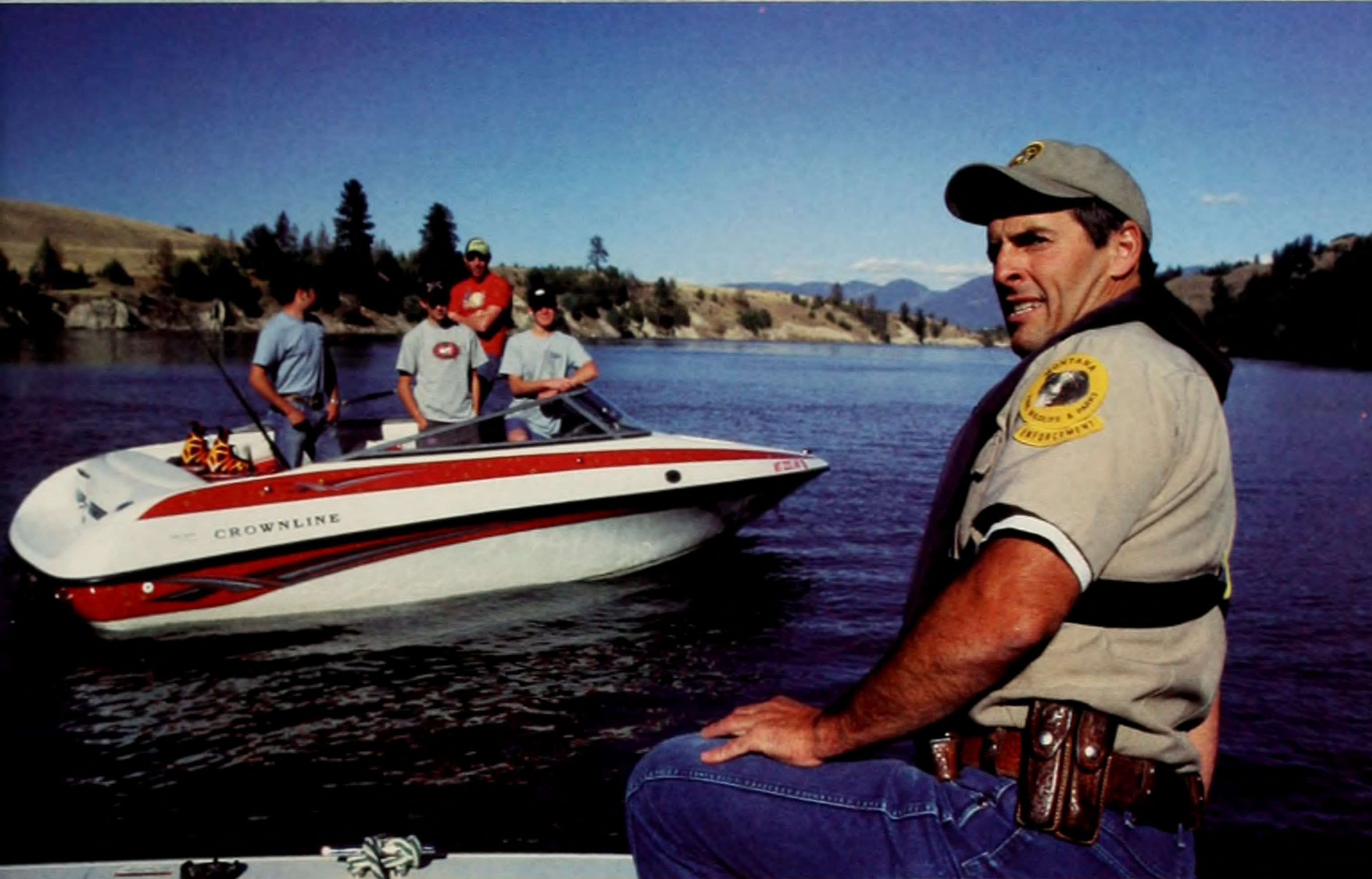
“To be able to tell someone, ‘That bird you saw is probably a western tanager’ is so valuable for a warden,” Reno says.

“This is not a job for someone who doesn’t

like dealing with people,” he adds. “Whether we’re answering questions about state park camping fees or untangling fish hooks for a bunch of third-graders, the essence of being a warden is being able to work with people.”

Wardens use these same skills when meeting with landowners, who own much of Montana’s fish and wildlife habitat. In areas where hungry elk and deer eat hay and crops, wardens spend many hours talking to ranchers on the phone or in person.

“In an area like southeastern Montana, where so much of the land is privately owned, it’s a priority for us to stay in touch with landowners as much as possible,” says Miles City game warden Todd Anderson.



**mping fees or untangling fish hooks for a bunch of
able to work with people.”** —SHANE RENO, HAVRE GAME WARDEN

FWP offers assistance with game damage to landowners who allow free public hunting. “The hunters really expect us to help landowners who allow public access,” says Anderson. “The help we provide farmers and ranchers in winter, spring, and summer pays off in the fall when those landowners then let folks on to hunt.”

Wardens sometimes spend years developing relationships with the landowners in their districts. “We try to stay in touch with landowners all year long,” Anderson says. “If I’m out checking anglers and pass a ranch, I try to swing by and visit, to check up on their impressions of deer numbers and see how the last hunting season went.

Then, when we start hearing from hunters later in the summer and fall, I can steer them toward the right places.”

Those strong people skills make many Montana wardens among the best in the West. In July, the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies singled out Montana’s Chad Murphy to receive its top law enforcement award. The association noted, among his other accomplishments, how the Whitehall warden has successfully improved relations between landowners and hunters.

Good people skills are often instinctive, but much of what wardens do requires year-round training. Some training is academic, such as classes teaching DNA and

forensic evidence collection, or courses on new arrest and search-and-seizure laws. Other training is physical, such as regular qualification shoots on the firearms range, self-defense, whitewater boating, and even ice rescue. All training is taken with the utmost seriousness. In the game warden business, danger is always close at hand.

“In the fall, many people a warden encounters are armed,” says Wendy Kamm, game warden at Fort Benton and also FWP’s ice safety and rescue instructor. “We typically work alone in the most remote parts of our districts, where the nearest backup may be hours away. Training is important to win a case in court or to keep every aspect of a case legal. But most importantly, it’s so we can keep everyone safe.”

CRAZY DAYS

Though wardens still patrol remote back-country areas, they increasingly find themselves in crowds as they patrol Montana’s rivers and reservoirs. For Rick Schoening, who patrols the Polson district, the arrival of hot weather means crazy days on the water.

“As soon as the air temperature hits 85 degrees, things go nuts on Flathead Lake,” says Schoening. “All spring I work checking anglers, and most of them are well prepared, very knowledgeable, and safety conscious. But as soon as it gets hot, the big pleasure boats and jet skis show up, and my job turns into what I can only describe as a lake version of the state highway patrol. I’m running up and down the lake all day, trying to keep people from hurting themselves and each other with their jet skis and boats.”

Schoening estimates he checks more than 1,000 boats in a typical year, making sure the crafts contain the required life vests and fire extinguishers and that drivers aren’t intoxicated. He is also responsible for patrolling the lake’s six state park units, which means sometimes finding himself in the middle of an argument over campsites, or a dispute between intoxicated family members on a camping trip.

“Being a warden on Flathead might sound fun and exciting, but there is no ‘Baywatch’ aspect to this job,” he says. “I believe strongly in what I’m doing out here, but it’s not pleasant having to pull over some 45-year-old boater and explain to him how to behave on the water. By the end of



the summer, I'm just dying to wake up to a good frost telling me the hunting season is right around the corner."

Though game wardens enjoy the fall season as much as anyone, their work usually doesn't take them on backcountry horse rides across sunny, snowcapped mountains. I learn that on a cold and foggy morning in late November when I meet up with Jim DeBoer near Twin Bridges. Though I'm still groggy from leaving home before 5 a.m., DeBoer has been patrolling for spotlighters along the Ruby River bottoms since just after midnight. Soon he will begin contacting hunters and answering phone messages. After lunch, he'll grab a quick nap at home, then head back out in the field to catch the "rush hour" as hunters return from hunting in the hills. With luck, he might make it home in time for a late supper with his wife.

"Don't mind the mess. I haven't had time to clean house for the past few weeks," DeBoer jokes as I slide onto the seat beside him and watch the light creep into the eastern sky. He's referring to the cab of his truck, which often serves as a warden's home and office, especially during the hunting season. It's littered with notebooks, pens, Styrofoam cups, and candy wrappers.

"This time of year, I think I spend more time in this truck than at my house,"

"Being a Montana game warden is not just a job; it's a way of life."

—JIM KROPP, Chief,
FWP Enforcement Division

DeBoer says, "and I'll bet during hunting season, my wife answers as many phone calls as some folks in the Helena office."

As FWP's senior game warden, DeBoer is just a few days from the end of working his 35th general elk hunting season. Many people might figure he'd deserve a little time off once the season ends. But as most elk hunters are cleaning their rifles and preparing for Christmas shopping, DeBoer's busy season is still in progress. Mountain lion hunting and late-season hunts will soon be under way, and trapping, snowmobiling, and game damage complaints are sure to occupy his time far into next year. As enforcement chief Kropp says: It's a way of life.

Despite the many rigors of game warden life, it still seems like a dream job to me. And I'm not alone. Each new game warden

POACHER PATROL As the sun sets, Jim DeBoer settles in for a long night in the field. He holds an electronic device that moves the head of a decoy mule deer, set up nearby. Catching poachers is the most well-known job of a warden, but it's by no means the only one.

job opening attracts 40 to 50 applicants. (Successful candidates must have a four-year college degree and graduate from the Montana Law Enforcement Academy. After being hired, they have to complete a field training program.)

DeBoer and I sit overlooking the Jefferson River, watching deer slowly filter out of the bottoms and bed in the grassy benches above. He offers breakfast of beef jerky and coffee, along with some reflections on what it means to him to be a Montana game warden.

"On most days, I think this is the best job in the world," he says. "Sure, sometimes toward the end of the season it gets tough those nights I have to climb out of bed at 2 a.m., but most of the people out here, the folks hunting and fishing, are as nice as it gets. And after all these years, I still have plenty of days when my job feels like an adventure. So how could anyone ask for a better career than that?" 🐻