

Takedown

The inner workings of a huge California poaching ring—and how wardens busted it.

Article by Hal Herring.

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“If it’s out there, it needs killing,” Lodis Williams told his passenger on the long ride into the Greenhorn Mountains. The old man kept his lever-action .22 magnum close to his hand, the barrel vibrating against the truck’s gearshift, and he was true to his word, stopping the truck to take potshots at a raven, a hawk perched on a telephone pole, a single Gambel’s quail running down the road. The undercover game warden riding next to him just laughed, playing the part of an apprentice houndsman, but inside he was boiling. Sometimes in his work he met people that were so destructive, it was a pure pleasure to take them down.

At midmorning they spooked a small herd of whitetails from a dry meadow beside the road, and Williams cut loose with the rifle, levering and firing from the truck window as fast as he could. A doe slammed to the ground, its back legs kicking up dust. A yearling staggered into the woods, gut-shot and dragging a rear leg. “Right there’s our bear bait for tonight,” Williams said, driving on. He studied the young warden, his eyes suddenly cold after the excitement of the shooting. “If I found out that you were the man, I’d kill you before we ever got near a courtroom. You do know that, don’t you?”

In the fall of 1999, the game wardens

of Kern County, California, began hearing about a lot of poaching going on in the mountains east of Bakersfield. The California Department of Fish and Game’s Turn in Poachers (TIP) line was jammed with calls from legitimate hunters and houndsmen that hunted the Greenhorn and Paiute Mountains. “They were all saying there was a renegade outfitter in there, running hounds 24/7, booking hunts out of season, shooting bears on other people’s tags,” recalls Warden Bob Mahon. “Then we got calls saying that Lodis Williams had killed a 500-pound black bear and just taken the gall bladder and left the rest to rot. That really seemed to make a lot of people sick.”

Mahon, a fit, silver-haired outdoorsman in his late 50s, has patrolled the high country of the Greenhorns for 20 years, driving and walking the maze of tracks and trails through the open oak and grassland country up into the southern Sierra itself, where snow-fed mountain streams tumble and big Jeffrey pines creak in the wind. It is his home country, and it is great bear country, in large part due to the hard work of Mahon and his fellow Kern County wardens. Mahon had broken up a ring of bear poachers in the 1980s. He was nearing retirement, and now he had to do it again.

Mahon and all the other wardens in the area knew the renegade outfitter was Mike Milam, of Bakersfield. Milam had worked for a legitimate guide service before starting his own. In his late 20s, Milam was a professional houndsman with good Walker bear hounds, who had been running game in the Greenhorns since childhood. Milam had no shortage of clients and was involved in a loose partnership with fellow houndsman and taxidermist Jesse Merrill, who lived in nearby Arvin. Merrill referred taxidermy clients to Milam’s guide service, and Milam sent hunters to Merrill’s taxidermy business. It was an arrangement that, otherwise, could have worked very well.

Warden Bill Dailey, 30, a wiry and intense Colorado native, knew exactly what was going on, but stopping it was all but impossible. “I was chasing Mike Milam and Jesse Merrill for years,” says Dailey, “and they knew that. It became just another part of the game they were playing.” And they had plenty of company. Milam and Merrill were at the center of a group of houndsmen who traveled to the area to hunt each year. Lodis Williams, whose name would come up again and again, was at the center of another group that hunted the country farther to the east. Most of these hunters knew each other, and a lot of them got caught up in the greed.

Further complicating the issue was the California law permitting the training of hounds in the woods all year long, even when hunting seasons are closed. If the houndsman does not have a gun in his possession, he is not violating any laws. “These guys knew that,” says Dailey. “They were talking on the radios, keeping track of us, even though they knew we could hear them. We’d hear them say, ‘Okay, hide the guns’ or ‘He’s coming your way now,’ or even, ‘Bring the gun.’ At times there would be 13 houndsmen out there, all with radios, running dozens of dogs. They knew there were only three or four of us. It was a concerted effort, organized to break the law and get away with it. And it worked, for a while.” Late in 2000, it was clear that the game was becoming more serious. “The tips were now saying that these guys were getting more and more into selling bear paws and gall bladders,” says Dailey. “Gall bladders were selling on the Asian black market for \$800, and the fine for not tagging a black bear was only \$500, so we assumed that our tipsters were telling the truth.”

Planning a Takedown

In October of 2001, Mahon drove to the Kern County District Attorney’s Office in Bakersfield, where he discussed the

case with Assistant District Attorney Michael Yraceburn and planned a new strategy. "It was clear to me that the boldness of these guys was rooted in the money that was being made," says Yraceburn. "Lodis Williams was reportedly selling bear parts, and he was certainly using the resource to train dogs for sale. Jesse Merrill was promoting Milam's illegal guide business and getting customers for his taxidermy business—you're talking about \$1,500 per hunt, then a \$1,500 taxidermy fee, 30 or 40 times a year. It was the first time we'd seen an operation on this scale, and we wanted to help stop it."

Yraceburn's involvement allowed a new element to enter the game. Wardens Mahon and Dailey went to Sacramento and presented their evidence to Nancy Foley, head of Fish and Game's Special Operations Unit (SOU). The SOU is a very aggressive outfit, its agents accustomed to working undercover over long periods of time.

The SOU set into motion an operation they called Ursus III. The poachers of the Greenhorn Mountains were now the hunted.

Deep Cover

Early one cold, rainy morning in December of 2001, "Jake," an undercover SOU agent, met outfitter Mike Milam at a Denny's restaurant in Bakersfield. Jake played the part of a well-heeled, physically fit urbanite obsessed with killing a bear. Later, Milam drove Jake around logging roads, waiting for the big Walker hound in the back of his truck to "strike"—catch a fresh bear scent on the wind. It never happened that day, but the contact was made.

In August of 2002, before the hunting season opened, Milam called Jake to tell him the hunting was hot. "He wasn't lying about that," Jake recalls. "We treed a sow and two cubs immediately and let them go." That afternoon the dogs struck another bear, a young

boar, and treed it far from the road. "We're going to have to .44 this one, for you and for my dogs," said Milam. Jake took Milam's revolver and aimed.

"We were given the okay to take an animal if that's what it would take to get these guys," he says. Milam videotaped the kill and told Jake how they would get the bear back to town without getting caught. "We quartered it and put it in a backpack, and Milam explained to me how to ditch it over the side of the road if we saw headlights on the way out."

During the hunt, and before the kill, Milam confronted Jake three times about being a game warden. "All these guys had seen some kind of TV show or something that made them believe that if they asked you point-blank if you were a law officer, you would have to tell them. I don't know where they got that idea, but it worked against them."

A Poaching Life

In September of 2002, another SOU agent, "John," approached Lodis Williams and his friends at their camp in the mountains, telling them that he wanted to learn how to be a houndsman and asking to hunt with them. On his very first visit, the operation almost came to an end. "There was a houndsman camped there who had helped me on a case down near Los Angeles," John says, "and he knew me well. He would have blown my cover in a second to help his friends. But he had a heart attack while hunting and had to be life-flighted out of the woods before he ever came back to camp."

John kept quiet as Williams killed and wounded deer whenever he saw them, telling him it was for bear bait. "Williams would always say to me, 'If you turn out to be the man, I'll kill you.' Or he'd say he had a friend in L.A. that owed him a favor, and he'd do it for him."

But mostly, Williams and the other houndsmen talked about hunting, and they joked about the wardens. "These guys always said that no wardens could catch them," says John.

For 70-year-old Lodis Williams, who had been hunting the area for almost 50 years, that must have seemed true. Williams had been a predator hunter for many ranches in the past and had access to gated roads and miles of country that the wardens had difficulty patrolling. Williams sometimes stayed in a tiny room in his son's house in far-away Monterey County, but he mostly lived out of the back of his truck, running dogs and killing game. "One reason Lodis always needed bear baits was because he had such terrible dogs," says John. "As soon as a dog got some experience, he'd sell it, because he never had any money to live on. Every once in a while, he'd disappear back to Arkansas, where he grew up, and get a bunch more low-grade hounds. One day, he explained to me how I could finance a whole pack of Walker hounds by selling bear parts."

In the houndsman community that the agents infiltrated, Williams was the eccentric, but undisputed, expert. "Everybody knew him. And if I was riding with him, [BRACKET "they thought"] I must be okay. But a lot of people took me aside, too, and said, 'You watch out for that Lodis. He will get you into trouble for sure.' "And they were right. One time, he got so excited trying to get his rifle out the window to shoot a raven that I thought he was going to shoot me by accident. And he bragged to me once that he'd treed a hundred bears in one season. How many of them did he take? Nobody knows."

Dailey, Mahon, and the other uniformed wardens continued to monitor the houndsmen during the 24 months of undercover work, but they had to be careful not to tip their hands. "We saw infractions, and we wrote tickets for them, but we had to kind of pretend that

we didn't know that all this illegal activity was going on, and that was hard to swallow," Dailey says. Legitimate hunters were still calling the TIP line, and some of them were becoming infuriated by the lack of response. "We had people calling utains, telling them that he wanted to learn how to be a houndsman and asking to hunt with them. On his very first visit, the operation almost came to an end. "There was a houndsman camped there who had helped me on a case down near Los Angeles," John says, "and he knew me well. He would have blown my cover in a second to help his friends. But he had a heart attack while hunting and had to be life-flighted out of the woods before he ever came back to camp."

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