

Fur, Fins & Feathers

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- Story by Beth Ipsen, Public Information Office

Alaska Wildlife Troopers Protect Natural Resources Through Wildlife Enforcement

Even as a commercial fisherman in Kodiak and big game guide in the Alaska Range for eight years, Scott Quist had a strong desire to protect the wildlife resources that his livelihood depended on. Quist spent years seining for salmon and herring in Kodiak, Togiak, Cook Inlet and longlined for halibut out of Kodiak and Seward. He also was a brown bear guide on the Alaska Peninsula.

This ambition made the jump from resource user to enforcer of wildlife management almost 20 years ago seem like a natural career progression for him. Like Quist, many of the almost 100 Alaska Wildlife Troopers statewide have backgrounds as resource users either in commercial fishing, big game guiding, subsistence, sport or personal use fishing and hunting.

Quist, now a sergeant with Alaska Wildlife Troopers, uses his past experience to his advantage while conducting wildlife enforcement patrols – whether it's flying overhead during the Bristol Bay commercial fisheries season or contacting caribou hunters in the field in the Brooks Range.

“The majority of the people I come in contact with are interested in the same things I am – protecting the resource for future generations,” Quist said. “There are a lot of people that make minor mistakes, but by and large, the majority of people want to protect the resource.”

The Division of Alaska Wildlife Troopers' mission is to protect people living and visiting Alaska and the state's natural resources through wildlife enforcement, education and public participation. This involves enforcement of commercial big game services, commercial fisheries, sport fishing and sport fish guiding, game and trapping, plus public education and participation and search and rescue. Not to mention, wildlife troopers do this in a state that is one-fifth the size of the contiguous United States. To do this, they use a variety of modes of transportation from planes, helicopters, boats, all-terrain vehicles and snowmachines. The Division of Alaska Wildlife Troopers manages both the marine vessels and aircraft sections for the Department of Public Safety. The department has boats ranging from the 443-ton, 156-foot Stimson to a 6-foot inflatable boat. The aerial arsenal includes R-44s and an A-



Alaska Wildlife Troopers navigate the crowded waters while patrolling the Bristol Bay salmon fishery. Photo courtesy Klas Stolpe.

Star helicopters as well as fixed wing aircraft ranging from a King Air turbo prop, two eight-seater Caravans, to smaller Cessnas and Super Cubs.

For Quist, it was the combination of protecting the resources and pursuing his interest and passion as a pilot for the state that drew him to a life as a wildlife trooper.

“Flying is the ticket to the wilderness,” Quist said.

The job entails enforcing regulations and statutes put in place by the various law making groups – the state legislature, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Board of Game and Board of Fish. The board and ADF&G can also enact emergency orders closing certain seasons when the game or fish counts are low. It’s a task that puts troopers on the front lines of the battle to manage Alaska’s wildlife resources.

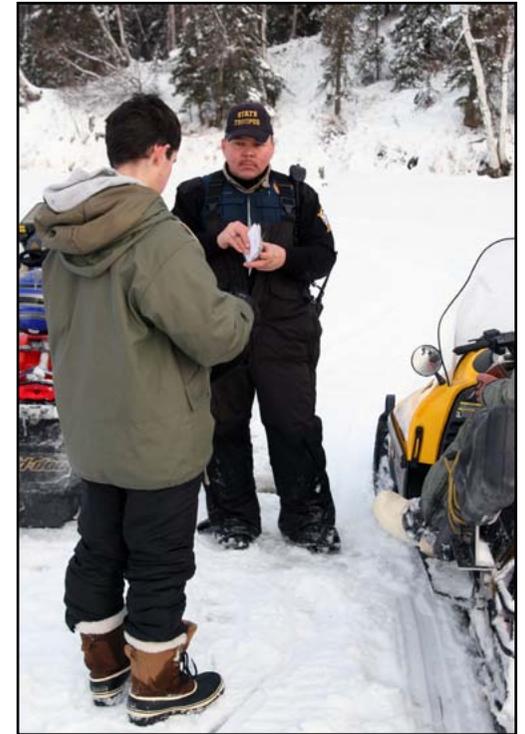
“We’re the ones telling people what they can and cannot do when they’re out in the field,” said Lt. Bernard Chastain, commander of AWT’s Wildlife Investigations Unit.

The state’s process for enacting fish and wildlife laws and regulations is multi-faceted and includes public involvement. The public can submit a proposal to the various boards, which could potentially become a regulation. However, with so many different users wanting a piece of the pie, sometimes those interests butt into each other and put the different users at odds. For example, sport, commercial, subsistence and personal-use are all vying for the prized king salmon, which have been scarce this year.

As Chastain pointed out, the reason for the enforcement is to ensure equality for the different resource users.

“In a time where resources are limited around the state – populations increase, more people are out fishing and hunting, there is a limited resource – it needs to be fair and equitable for everyone,” Chastain said. “If we’re not making sure people aren’t taking over the limit and taking animals and fish they shouldn’t, and the low numbers cuts off the season, it isn’t fair to the people that are abiding by the laws put in place.”

AWT also relies heavily on the reporting of violations. The public plays a critical role in providing information to help successfully prosecute violators.



Trooper Thomas Akelkok checks fishing licenses for a couple of ice fishermen on Long Lake in the Valley.



The 443-ton, 156-foot Stimson is the largest of the marine vessels used by the Department of Public Safety.

In 2011, Alaska Wildlife Troopers conducted:

Game: More than 50,248 hours of game enforcement, patrols and investigations and made 26,100 resource user contacts

Commercial Fisheries: More than 28,969 hours of commercial fisheries enforcement, patrols and investigations and made 17,617 resource user contacts

Sport Fish: More than 27,561 hours of sport fish enforcement, patrols and investigations and made 42,724 resource user contacts

Subsistence: More than 4,859 hours of subsistence enforcement, patrols and investigations and made 5,657 resource user contacts

License Checks: More than 1,279 hours of license enforcement, patrols and investigations and made 3,808 resource user contacts

Trapping: More than 5,140 hours of trapping enforcement, patrols and investigations and made 1,148 resource user contacts

Boating Enforcement: More than 3,816 hours of boating enforcement, patrols and investigations and made 17,089 recreational boating contacts

Boating Safety: More than 396 hours of boating safety education and made 3,174 resource user contacts

Public Education Presentations: More than 286 hours of presentations, 1,949 hours of public outreach with over 5,216 public members, made 241 village visits and participated in 46 public meetings

Public Safety: More than 26,166 hours of assistance to AST and other agencies



Trooper Francis Fay seals a couple of brown bear hides while on patrol on the Alaska Peninsula.

“Preserving our hunting and fishing heritage means as much to us as it does to you (the public),” Chastain said.

A big component of enforcement is actually education whether it’s through public appearances or by talking to people in the field. In 2011, wildlife troopers conducted more than 396 hours of boating safety education, made more than 286 public education presentations and spent 1,949 hours of public outreach to 5,216 public members. Wildlife troopers also made 241 village visits and participated in 46 public meetings such as advisory board meetings, Board of Game and Board of Fish meetings and resource user associations. This year, Alaska Wildlife Troopers have contacted 71,099 users as of Sept. 6.

“Clearly the vast majority of people we contact are not doing anything wrong. They’re out using Alaska’s resources and they’re just trying to abide by the regulations and trying to do the right thing,” Chastain said. “But there are clearly people out there intentionally doing things wrong.”

The bigger the operation, such as commercial fishing, sport fishing or big game hunting guide, the bigger impact the violation has on the resource.

“Those types of violations tend to be more detrimental to the resource because they’re usually reoccurring,” Chastain said. “It’s our job to try to focus our effort on the ones that are doing it intentionally and the ones that are causing the most harm to the resource.”

Because of the limited number of wildlife troopers who cover such large areas, many spend a season in other parts of the state augmenting enforcement. Quist spent several years traveling from his home post of Fairbanks to Bristol Bay for commercial fishing, then back for moose hunting season in the Interior. He's recently transferred to the King Salmon post, an area where he has lived and worked in before, but will continue to help with other efforts around the state. Wildlife troopers also bulk up their numbers on Kenai Peninsula to help with enforcement for the different types of fishing seasons.

It isn't always about fur, fins and feathers. Because AWT manages the Department of Public Safety's watercraft and aircraft sections, plus their knowledge from patrolling vast areas of wilderness, they are often called upon to help in search and rescue missions. In 2011, wildlife troopers were directly tasked with 7 percent, or 55 of DPS's 719 calls that had the potential to turn into search and rescues. Likewise, wildlife troopers managed 27 of DPS's 343 cases that resulted in an actual search and rescue or body recovery. However, because of their watercraft and aircraft resources and familiarity with the terrain, AWT personnel were called upon to help with 75 percent of these cases. In addition, 1,134 of the department's 4,875 hours spent on search and rescue related incidents were logged by AWT personnel.

"In my mind, if I was lost, I would want the local wildlife trooper looking," Quist said. "They know how to operate the equipment to get into the area and they know the country."

To Quist, it's the most important element about his job.

"We save lives," Quist said. "There's nothing that gives us more job satisfaction than reuniting someone with their love ones and saving a life."



For more information about Alaska Wildlife Troopers, visit the Alaska Department of Public Safety website (click on patch).

The PA-12 Super Cub is a popular mode of transportation for Alaska Wildlife Troopers, allowing them to land in remote locations throughout Alaska.



Trooper Jon Simeon surveys the land looking for sheep hunters during a joint state and federal enforcement effort in the Wrangell-Saint Elias National Park.

