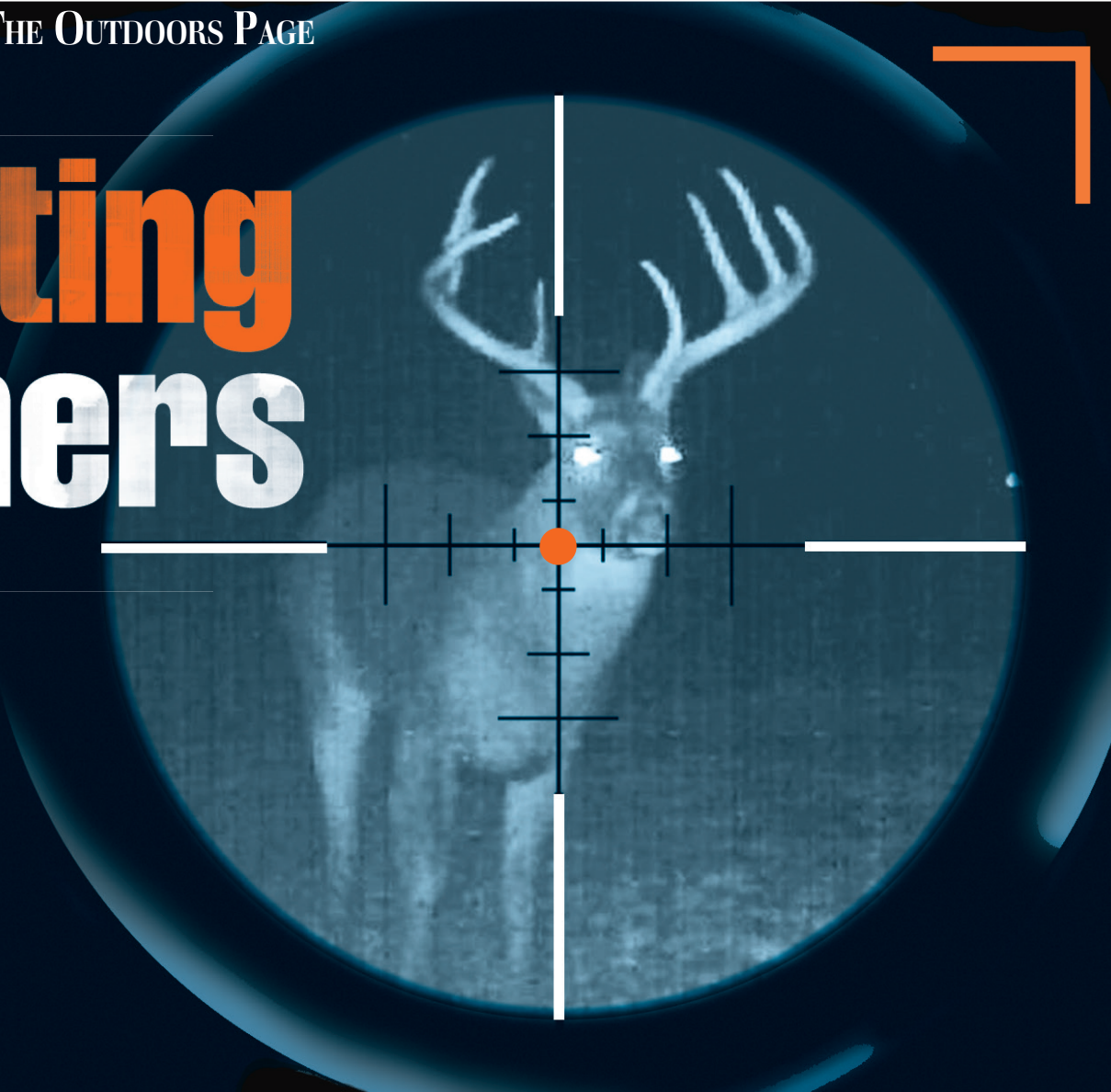


THE OUTDOORS PAGE



A poacher caught by a motion-activated camera.

Targeting Poachers



Wildlife crimes a persistent problem

By Blade Outdoors Editor Matt Markey and Blade artist Jeff Basting

Dead elephants, bloodied and butchered for their ivory tusks and rotting in the African sun. Bengal tigers, skinned and stretched into rugs and offered for sale in the illegal wildlife trade markets of Asia. Those are the images many associate with poaching.

But this is not a crime perpetrated only on the other side of the globe. Both Ohio and Michigan battle poachers who plunder the resources of white-tailed deer, waterfowl, game fish, and even ginseng.

Poaching includes killing an animal out of season, trespassing with the intent of hunting or stealing game without the landowner's permission, killing protected species, using prohibited firearms or tactics, exceeding the legal bag limit, or attempting to hide or mask the amount of game in one's possession.

In simpler terms, poaching is the illegal taking of game, fish, or protected plants. Poaching is a crime most often carried out far from the public eye.

A case from Michigan this fall had four Ottawa County men ticketed for poaching nearly 60 wild ducks from a private agricultural pond and illegally hunting over bait. They killed 35 wood ducks and 23 mallards and set out over 200 pounds of corn as bait.

"This was not hunting," said MDNR conservation officer Dave Rodgers, who investigated the case. "Hunting involves a lot of hard work and fair chase. What these guys were doing is killing."

A study by the Boone and Crockett Club, the hunting and conservation organization founded by Theodore Roosevelt to "maintain the highest ethical standards of fair chase and sportsmanship," indicates that 92 percent of hunters in the U.S. want to see stiffer penalties and higher fines for poaching.

"Poachers are not hunters, nor conservationists. They are thieves," the club states.

Douglas E. Andrews, one of nine Toledo area men charged with more than 250 wildlife-related violations in 1993, was convicted at the time for directing a major statewide commercial fish and game poaching ring, Operation Clanbake, which uncovered the massive poaching operation, was considered one of the largest cases in ODNR history.

In 2006, Andrews was charged with 12 new poaching-related offenses, all while under a lifetime suspension of his hunting and fishing privileges as part of the penalty for his involvement in the 1993 case.

MDNR assistant law chief Dean Molnar makes a clear distinction between the hunter who follows the rules but forgets to tag his deer and the poacher who breaks multiple laws and then tries to hide his actions.

"Someone who intentionally and willfully breaks the law is poaching, and that is different from someone who just makes a mistake," he said. "Someone shining a light on deer in the middle of the night and shooting them is clearly poaching. Someone who excessively over-bags fish or wildlife and attempts to hide their crime is also poaching."

Last month, Ohio wildlife officers charged five people with illegally removing 254 ginseng roots from a state forest in Muskingum County. Officials were alerted to the theft of the plants through the Turn-In-A-Poacher (TIP) hotline. Both Ohio and Michigan have toll-free lines for citizens to report suspicious activity, and officials rely heavily on tips.

"We can't be everywhere, so the public — they are our eyes and ears," Mr. Molnar said. "Unfortunately, we are arresting people on a regular basis for illegally taking deer and other wildlife. These poachers are stealing the fish and game that belong to the people of the state."



MDNR

Four Michigan poachers were caught with 58 ducks this fall.



ODNR

The carcasses of poached deer were discarded in Ohio's Carroll County.



Poachers removed the head of this buck after shooting it in Delaware Creek Park in Toledo.



ODNR

Justin Angles was one of two men convicted of poaching the trophy buck 'Big Boy' from Side Cut Metropark in 2008.



ODNR

Six men from Tennessee and Georgia had their boats confiscated after they were found guilty of poaching 141 smallmouth bass over the limit on Lake Erie.



ODNR

Operation North Coast earlier this year involved the confiscation of many trophy deer mounts and led to charges against 28 individuals accused of violating fish and game laws.

Major poaching case in Ohio



In 2006, seven people were convicted in Brown and Clermont counties of 127 wildlife violations including killing around 100 deer at night with spotlights and rifles, removing the tenderloins, and leaving the carcasses to rot. They paid \$15,480 in fines.



Major poaching case in Michigan

In 2012, Brian Birchmeier of Owosso was ordered to pay \$75,000 in restitution after he faced 125 wildlife-related charges and was found to have illegally possessed more than 100 deer and 170 antlers along with shoulder mounts and turkey beards.

BLADE ILLUSTRATION/JEFF BASTING

Fighting poaching

Both Ohio and Michigan have multiple options for citizens to report poaching:

OHIO

- "Turn In a Poacher" (TIP) toll free number 1-800-POACHER
- Poaching can also be reported online at wildlife.ohiodnr.gov (landowners tab)
- Those reporting poaching can remain anonymous and are eligible for rewards.

MICHIGAN

- "Report All Poaching" (RAP) toll free number 1-800-292-7800
- Poaching can also be reported online at: michigan.gov/dnr (law enforcement tab)
- Those reporting poaching can remain anonymous and are eligible for rewards.

** Wildlife officers in both states stress that the more information the caller can provide, the better chance the investigation will lead to an arrest and conviction.*