

MEET BUCK

Oregon's only anti-poaching K-9

Blue Mountain Eagle

Fresh snow had just melted and the scent trail was more than a day old when a yellow Labrador retriever named Buck went in search of evidence linked to an elk that had been poached on March 19 near Cottage Grove. Time — and snow — work against tracking dogs. Still, Buck was hot on the scent of gunpowder and shell casings. He found casings, also known as brass, among grass and twigs, invisible to the human eye. Three times Buck signaled his handler, Oregon State Police Fish and Wildlife Senior Trooper Josh Wolcott.

Finding three casings confirmed the story OSP F&W Senior Trooper Martin Maher had heard from two suspected poachers, according to a press release. Five shots had been reported through the Turn In Poachers Line, five bullets recovered, two elk were down. During his interview with members of the hunting party, the deceptions of that morning came out. First, the teenager claimed he had shot both elk. He had a tag for one, and the other he had shot accidentally. However, his tag was for a different unit so it was invalid. Both kills were poaching. The penalties would be severe.

Then another member of the group confessed. He had poached the second elk in two shots, then picked up his brass to conceal evidence of the crime. They had not anticipated the shots would be reported. Or that they would be approached by Senior Trooper Maher, who would spot the second carcass nearby. And they certainly hadn't anticipated that Buck, Oregon's only anti-poaching K-9 unit, would be able to track the scene of the crime to confirm the number of brass casings following an overnight snowfall.

Buck is just one resource in Oregon's anti-poaching arsenal. The culture of poaching is pervasive and entrenched, as demonstrated by the young elk hunter's inauguration into the deceptive practice of hiding a wildlife crime.

The Oregon Hunters Association and Defenders of Wildlife, a national conservation group, both lobbied for stronger legislation and prosecution against poachers. In January, The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife launched a new anti-poaching education and awareness campaign to teach Oregonians how to recognize and report poaching. Because of Oregon's vast land and water areas, assistance from the public is the only hope for unearthing crimes that are all too easy to bury.

That's where Buck comes in. Buck locates gunpowder residue, human scent and evidence trails that troopers would not find visually. Sometimes that scent leads to additional evidence. Sometimes the scent itself marks a specific location.

Earlier this year, OSP F&W troopers served a search warrant on a residence in Roseburg. Residents were suspected of poaching various bird and game species in the area. Troopers suspected the evidence had been burned or buried. Or both.



Contributed photo

Oregon State Police Fish and Wildlife Senior Trooper Josh Wolcott and anti-poaching K-9 Buck pose after patrolling during pronghorn antelope season.

They were right. When Wolcott gave Buck the “show me,” command, the dog surveyed the area by scent and found remnants of a burned turkey carcass and feathers in a fire pit. They found deer bones in burn barrels. They thought they were done, but Buck signaled a find to Trooper Wolcott, in front of an old overturned boat.

“We could smell something bad,” Trooper Wolcott said. “It smelled like old rotten insulation.” Buck gave the signal that he had found what he was looking for. Trooper Wolcott and OSP F&W Trooper Jason Stone started looking. They found a partially decomposed buck deer under a blue tarp under the transom of the boat.

Buck started his career with OSP F&W and Senior Trooper Wolcott in 2018. They completed training in Indiana at the Canine Resource Protection School and began working as a team in May of 2019. Buck proved his worth immediately.

Their first assignment as an anti-poaching team was a saturation patrol during pronghorn antelope season on Hart Mountain in Eastern Oregon. Trooper Wolcott positioned himself on a high plateau and glassed the ridges and valleys around him. He saw a pair of hunters aim for and kill an antelope buck. He continued watching, waiting for them to tag the animal. They didn't. He watched as one of the pair started hiking out of the kill zone. Wolcott knew what would come next: The man would

return with a four-wheeler, they would load up the animal and be gone. He suspected they would try to get away with the animal without tagging it because either they didn't have tags and were poaching from the start, or they had tags, but would high-grade. High grading, also called trading up, is when someone kills an animal, but delays tagging it in hopes of getting a larger one later. In those cases, the smaller animal is often hidden and left to waste.

When Trooper Wolcott saw the man leave the site in a hurry, he knew the race was on. He got in his pickup, started the engine and looked for a road that would take him nearest the kill site. But he was unfamiliar with the territory and had to loop around, then hike in to where he thought it was. When he got there, 30 minutes had passed, and there was no sign of the men, the antelope or a four-wheeler. He thought he had lost them, and was going to give up, but Buck started signaling that he was on a scent. Wolcott followed Buck more than a mile across two ridges and another canyon, eventually finding the kill site.

Both men were loading the antelope onto a four-wheeler. It had been over an hour, and the antelope still had not been tagged. When the men saw Wolcott and Buck, they placed a tag on the antelope. Wolcott cited them for failure to immediately tag their animal.

Buck and Trooper Wolcott will continue as a team, barring the unexpected, until Buck reaches retirement age, which is about 9 years old. Part of Buck's assignment, along with all Oregon State Troopers, is community development and relationship-building. A larger part is paws-on-the-ground nose work to detect poaching.

It can be difficult to find the scene of a crime with no visible evidence. For Buck, it is a game.

“He has the best job a dog can have,” says Trooper Wolcott, “He's doing what comes naturally to a dog like him and then he gets to play.”

When Buck catches the scent, it looks like a fish on the end of a line. His grace changes to chaos as he whips his nose high in the air, holding it in place to catch the scent. His body flails behind, changing direction in mid-air. Then its game on. He plunges to the ground and runs his nostrils along the turf like a vacuum, sucking up every morsel of scent. He is thorough if not methodical, sampling grass here, ground there, and the wind constantly. When he finds the scent, he signals by stopping, sitting and then looking over his shoulder expectantly at Trooper Wolcott.

For Buck, the payoff for a job well done is straightforward: play time with Trooper Wolcott. Buck switches from working the case to retrieving a ball in an instant. Watching Buck switch from working dog to playing dog is a transformation exemplary of perfect work-life balance. He has mastered the art of compartmentalization. When he runs fast after the ball, every ounce of his purpose dedicated to the chase, he demonstrates what it means to live in the moment.