

# Wildlife officers on the job play increasingly dangerous role

An armed confrontation between a teenager reportedly fishing without a license, his father, and two Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife officers occurred on July 17 at the popular Crab Creek area in Grant County.

By **Kevin McCullen**  
*Tri-City Herald*

An armed confrontation between a teenager reportedly fishing without a license, his father, and two Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife officers underscores how perilous the job has become for those who protect the state's natural resources, officials say.

Leaders of Fish and Wildlife's enforcement division said the July 17 incident at the popular Crab Creek area in Grant County could have led to injuries to one or both officers, or worse.

A handgun was reportedly pointed at one officer's head before he persuaded the suspect not to shoot him, and a second officer later exchanged shots with the 18-year-old suspect during a chase near Ephrata before the teen was arrested.

It marked the first time in "10 to 15 years" that a state wildlife officer fired his weapon at someone, said Lt. Steve Crown, who leads training for an enforcement division that includes 105 commissioned officers.

To Mike Cenci, deputy chief of field operations for the Department of Fish and Wildlife, the incident highlights the peculiar dangers his staff faces in enforcing fish and wildlife laws over thousands of square miles. Enforcement officers frequently are alone during contacts with potential criminals.

"From a policing perspective, we are encountering a rougher crowd out there these days," Cenci said.

"Fish and wildlife policing is an inherently dangerous job, and there have been a number of studies done in the past that show wildlife officers are more likely to be assaulted than a city police officer or a sheriff's deputy," he said.

"But from where I sit, it appears our officers are encountering more dangerous people," he added.

Fish and wildlife officers in the past few years have arrested felons in illegal possession of firearms and found and eradicated marijuana grows on public lands. They also have discovered graffiti at public boat launches and restrooms in Grant County and Pierce County, done by gangs claiming fishing spots as territory, Cenci and Crown said.

Gangs have gravitated to some of the remote lakes in the Potholes region because local law-enforcement agencies have clamped down on them. "So they have spread out to recreate, and, oddly enough, a lot of gangbangers like to fish," Crown said.

Officers also have investigated scores of violations of the state's fish and wildlife, commercial-fishing and habitat laws, as well as several incidents during the past three years of spree or thrill killing of wildlife by poachers, Cenci said.

"Some of our worst poachers have criminal backgrounds. We are seeing an increase in significant crimes by some of these offenders," he said.

Those trends appear to be mirrored nationally.

There have been three shootings involving game officers in California in the past two years — two drug-related — and wildlife officers working the Arizona border six months ago were shot at, said Steve Tomac, a Nevada game warden and regional director of the North American Wildlife Enforcement Officers Association.

In Wisconsin, a natural-resources officer killed a suspected bank robber in a shootout in March.

"We seem to be running into more criminal activity in remote areas," Tomac said. "It used to be a game warden rarely had a violent confrontation, and now it's becoming more commonplace."

The recent confrontation at Crab Creek could have been deadly.

Fish and Wildlife officer Chad McGary was checking anglers about 8:30 p.m. when he contacted Jose Juan Garcia Meraz, 18, of Mattawa, Grant County, who did not have a fishing license, investigators said.

As they walked to his vehicle, McGary heard a clinking sound in the man's pocket. McGary ordered him to stop, but Garcia Meraz shoved him, pulled out a .45-caliber handgun and pointed it at the officer's head, Cenci said.

Garcia Meraz then told the officer to hand over his service weapon, but McGary refused, Cenci said. The father of Garcia Meraz, Nicolas Garcia Godinez, 60, also approached the officer with a knife, Cenci said.

McGary said he would not shoot the younger suspect, Cenci said. "He [McGary] told him he would throw his gun in some bushes, and he finally convinced him."

Garcia Meraz then drove off and returned. But by then McGary had recovered his gun and arrested the father, who had a warrant out for his arrest, Cenci said.

The son then drove off again, and McGary contacted Capt. Chris Anderson of Fish and Wildlife, who began pursuing him.

During the chase, Garcia Meraz reportedly turned around and drove toward the officer's vehicle, firing shots at it and hitting it on the driver's side. Anderson returned fire, but neither man was hurt, Cenci said.

Garcia Meraz eventually was arrested after his car stalled. He has been charged with attempted first-degree murder and is being held on \$1 million bond in the Grant County Jail. His arraignment is set for Monday, said Grant County Prosecutor Angus Lee.

Garcia Godinez, who also will be arraigned Monday, has been charged with second-degree assault and was being held on \$100,000 bond. Both men also had holds placed on them by Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

"Our officers are quick thinkers and they are good communicators, and that is one of the things that saved Officer McGary's life," Cenci said. "By all indications these officers operated with cool heads and got themselves out of a dangerous situation and operated with valor."

How the incident began highlights the unusual nature of a fish and wildlife officer's job. The vast majority of hunters, anglers and outdoor enthusiasts they meet are law-abiding "and pretty good folks," Crown said.

"A police officer who responds to a burglary in progress or a domestic-violence incident can go in ready, knowing what's ahead," Cenci said. "But if someone is hunting or fishing and the season's in progress, how do you know?"

Crown said Fish and Wildlife will use the incident in training to reinforce with officers the necessity of "changing the conflict quickly," to remain calm and be continually aware of their surroundings.