

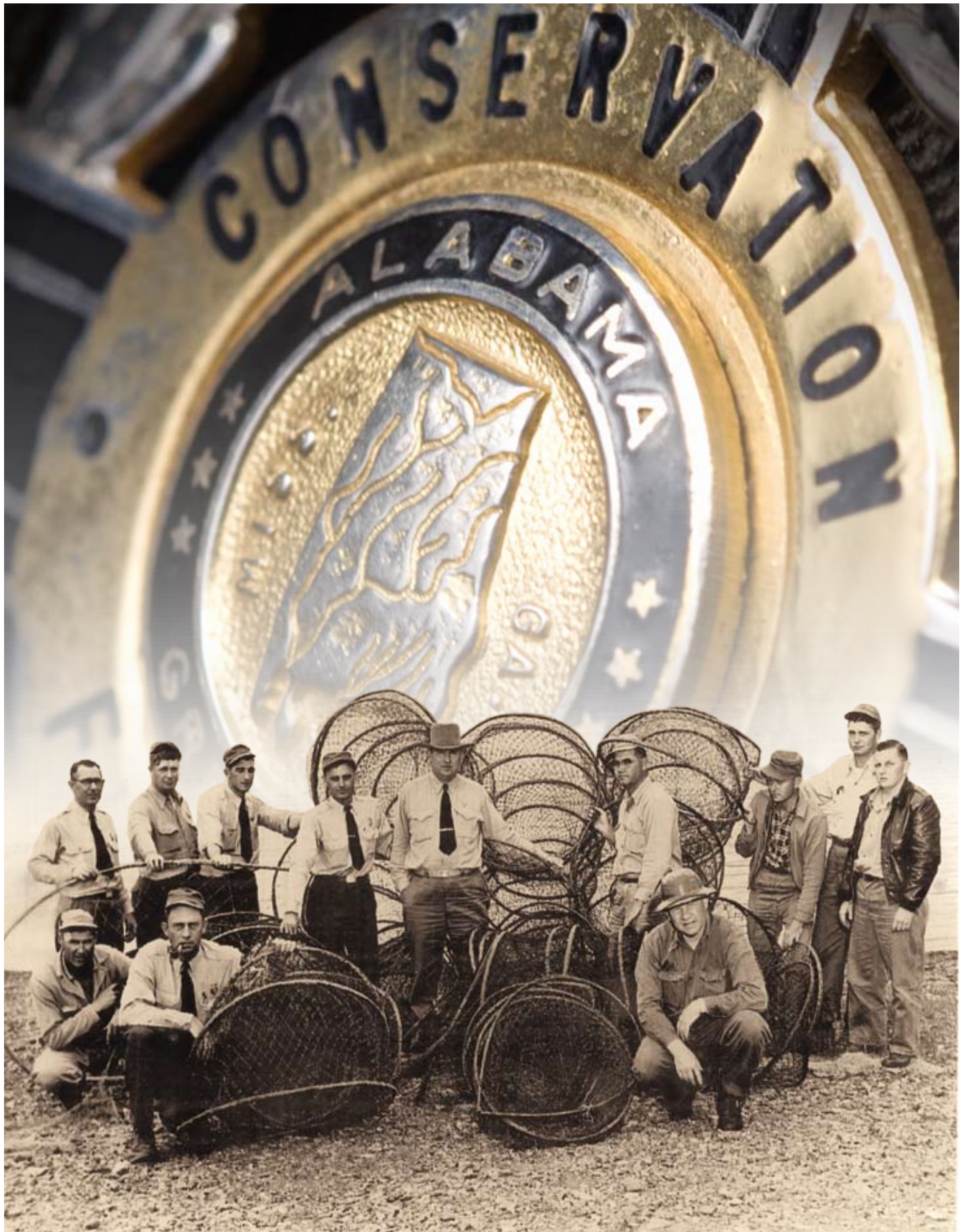


The First 100 Years

2007 Marks the 100th Anniversary of Alabama's
Conservation Enforcement Officers

By Kevin Dodd, Assistant Chief of Law Enforcement, Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries

If asked, "What was Alabama's first state law enforcement officer?" chances are that most people would answer incorrectly. Is it the State Trooper? The Alcohol and Beverage Control Agent? The correct answer is the Game Warden, a position established by the State of Alabama in 1907.



1907 — 2007

Need for Wildlife Law Enforcement

Native Americans saw the arrival of the massive flocks of passenger pigeons as a happy occasion. Winter roost sites on the upper branches of the Conecuh and Coosa Rivers provided highpoints in the dietary lives of Alabama's Indians.

The behavior of these birds set them apart. Noted scientists described the passenger pigeon as one of the most numerous birds on the continent with migrating flocks stretching for hundreds of miles and "obscuring the sun as though an eclipse." The colonial nature of passenger pigeons was evident in their roosting habits as they poured into historic roost trees by the millions piling upon each other until limbs broke under the weight. The ground beneath was caked thick with bird lime to the point that all vegetation died. Numerous writers noted the possibility of mining these places for saltpeter.

Alabama's Indians had netted, shot, trapped and batted pigeons from the air at these sites for meat and oil for thousands of years with little effect. However, technology tipped the scales rather quickly as hundreds of years of perfecting the poaching science in Europe swung into play. The flocks were followed relentlessly via telegraph by professional netters and trappers. Sulfurous smudge fires set beneath roosts felled thousands of asphyxiated birds. Millions of the young squabs were poled from nesting colonies and all manners of traps met the birds at every stop on their annual migration routes.

Some aristocratic sportsmen considered passenger pigeons unworthy of game bird status due to the sheer numbers. But during the span of a few decades, the argument fell moot as the species became extinct.

First Game Wardens

The loss of species such as the passenger pigeon, the heath hen and the Carolina parakeet served to steel the resolve of a nation

to better utilize remaining wildlife resources. Alabama sought to incorporate conservation or "wise use" into a form of governmental oversight. Wildlife conservation laws had been attempted on a local scale with poor results. Laws intended to protect game animals and require a license for nonresidents were enacted for select counties but no provision was made for enforcement.

In 1907, Governor W.D. Jelks urged the Alabama Legislature to organize a body to oversee the wildlife resources for the welfare of the public. He stated that no real protection could be secured short of a provision for game wardens. Representative Henry Steagall of Dale County authored a bill that called for the formation of the State Game and Fisheries Department, the office of a Conservation Commissioner and the employment of Game Wardens. Representative John Wallace of Madison County was appointed Commissioner of the Department and wasted no time in appointing H.M. Henderson and W.F. Sirmon as Alabama Game and Fish Wardens in November of 1907.

This marked the first state law enforcement officer of any type in Alabama. The assignment of an additional 65 officers soon followed. These officers were not salaried but were entitled to a portion of any fine collected in their cases. The intent of the enforcement effort was twofold: to gain widespread compliance with game laws and, it was hoped, to convert the convicted violator.

Curtailing Illegal Activity

The practice of market hunting was still alive in many parts of Alabama and Wallace meant to learn from

Currently, approximately 134 Conservation Enforcement Officers are employed by the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.



Until 1953, game wardens had no official uniform and had to provide their own clothing and transportation.

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earlier failures. Untold numbers of quail and other game were being collected for northern markets and early laws made the trade illegal. Wallace was quick to direct enforcement efforts at curtailing this activity. He also directed the Game Wardens to cease the continual slaughter of game by the itinerant "pot hunter." It is difficult to lay blame on the numerous poor sharecroppers who occupied every piece of tillable ground in the state, but their year round practice of hunting to "fill the cooking pot" had a devastating effect on game populations. The European practice of taking songbirds for the table was common in Alabama and wintering flocks of robins were a favorite target.

A procession of laws was passed to address these issues but the non-salaried officers met popular resistance in the field. Convictions numbered very few in the first decade as the idea of conservation law enforcement took hold. In 1922, game wardens became salaried employees appointed through written examination, interviews and required training. The new system resulted in a substantial increase in arrests and cooperation of the courts. The force was limited to 33 officers in 1930. Even with the scarcity of jobs during the Great Depression, the position of game warden was not very popular and turnover rates were high. The gravity with which conservation cases were viewed is evidenced by judgments handed out by various courts. Records for 1939 indicate penalties of \$25 for dynamiting fish in Covington County, \$300 for possession of muskrat hides



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during closed season in Marion County and 129 days of hard labor for seining fish in Bullock County.

Conservation laws generally fall into three categories: the long-term benefit of the species, the equitable distribution of the resource and the general safety of the public. Some well-intended laws had negative effects and game wardens endured the growing pains of the new science of fish and wildlife management. This was the case with the Carmichael law, which set stringent length limits on all pan fish only to be repealed years later because it was counterproductive.

From Game Warden to Conservation Officer

In 1953, game wardens underwent a name change to “conservation officer” as a better reflection of their changing duties. For many years, officers had provided their own personal clothing and transportation. They now began to appear as a unified force with a common uniform, issued vehicles, vessels and occasional assistance from Department airplanes. News articles from 1950 detail the use of the airplane as a spotter for seining activity along remote stretches of the Conecuh and Pea rivers. In 1962, all officers were finally equipped with two-way radios and state-owned patrol cars.

The next 40 years saw wildlife populations increase in response to officers’ efforts. Advances in fish and wildlife management accounted for much of the success but each measure built upon the cornerstone of law enforcement. Noticeable trends have surfaced with some violations being more common in certain areas and time periods. Early days saw the commercial exploitation of marketable game. The 1930s and 1940s saw the popularity of seining, dynamiting and illegal fish traps; the 1970s and 1980s witnessed a surge in night hunting of deer. From the 1990s to the present, deer baiting has become the most prevalent violation. In the early years, these trends necessitated the formation of a highly mobile group of officers known as the “flying squad” to travel across the state to work violation hotspots. As time and attitudes have changed, the focus of law enforcement has shifted to reflect public sentiments.

A common thread through the past century has been the dangerous



Conservation Enforcement Officers have an exciting and rewarding outdoor job that demands strength, character, and a high degree of self-motivation.

aspects of the conservation officer’s job. Numerous officers have been assaulted or killed in the performance of their duties.

Success Story

Today’s wildlife resources face the same perils they did 100 years ago. Greed and the illegal commercial exploitation of numerous species have challenged officers to stay abreast of worldwide trends and technology. Unlike their horse-bound predecessors, today’s officers often rely upon covert investigations, satellite tracking and forensic sciences. Alabama Conservation Officers currently number 134 statewide and are among the best-trained and most profes-



sional law enforcement officers found anywhere.

The establishment of Alabama game wardens surely ranks among the most successful ventures by state government. Despite the absence of passenger pigeons, the future looks bright for conservation in Alabama. [GA](#)



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The first official uniform of a Game Warden included this hat.