**Showcasing the DNR: More than patrol – how the ranks of conservation officers protect Michigan’s natural and cultural resources**

**By KATIE GERVASI**

**Michigan Department of Natural Resources**

When most people think of a conservation officer, their first impressions are often of an officer driving in a patrol vehicle or walking in the woods, checking hunters and anglers, or issuing tickets.

But there’s much more to the job than that.

The Michigan Department of Natural Resources Law Enforcement Division is home to a wealth of knowledgeable officers who have grown into their meaningful careers protecting Michigan’s natural and cultural resources for future generations.

“My dad was a conservation officer. I’ve been around it my whole entire life, it’s what I’ve always wanted to do,” Conservation Officer Dan Liestenfeltz said in an interview with Wolf Creek Productions’ “Wardens” television show, which highlights work of the DNR’s conservation officers. “I’m very fortunate to have this job. It is *the* greatest job on Earth, I’m not going to lie about that. I haven’t even felt like I’ve worked a day yet.”

Liestenfeltz patrols in Montmorency County in District 3, which covers the northernmost portion of the Lower Peninsula.

**Chain of command**

Conservation officers are assigned a county to patrol. They report to a sergeant, who supervises multiple counties within a district.

Sergeants report to lieutenants, who supervise districts, which range in size from five to 11 counties. District lieutenants report to one of two regional captains.

The captains report to the assistant chief of the Law Enforcement Division, who reports to the chief.

Additionally, a staff captain oversees lieutenants at the Lansing headquarters, along with the communications center – where the DNR’s Report All Poaching hotline is operated.

Lieutenants based out of headquarters supervise sergeants, corporals and civilian staff who manage and deploy state programs and operations to field officers, volunteers and public partners.

“It takes a strong, talented group of sworn officers and civilians to ensure that conservation officers in the field have what they need to be safe and successful,” said DNR Law Enforcement Division Chief Gary Hagler. “We rely on this same team to support programs for our valued stakeholders and constituents.”

**Sections organization**

The Recreational Safety, Education and Enforcement section includes a lieutenant, sergeant, corporals and civilian staff.

“Our team works with volunteers and community organizations, recreational stakeholder groups, charter boat captains, local governments and law enforcement,” said Lt. Tom Wanless, section supervisor.

The state marine specialist, a corporal rank, researches and interprets new and existing marine regulations and investigates local government requests to modify watercraft regulations.

The specialist is also responsible for ensuring marine safety education (known as boater safety) is being offered and taught consistently throughout the state, which includes recruiting, training and evaluating instructors.

The DNR relies on a vast network of [volunteer recreational safety instructors](https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/MIDNR/bulletins/26379b2) to help certify the next crop of recreational boaters.

Wanless’ team trains volunteer instructors and provides them with the supplies they need to offer classes at a local level – such as through local sheriff’s offices, hunting clubs, schools and more.

Cpl. Mike Hearn oversees Michigan’s off-road vehicle and snowmobile safety, education and enforcement programs – which requires a thorough understanding of the laws and equipment associated with each activity and collaborating with partner organizations.

“I work with volunteer instructors to administer in-person safety courses, assuring new operators are taught in a safe and consistent manner across the state,” Hearn said. “I also represent the DNR Law Enforcement Division on multiple workgroups, including the Snowmobile Advisory Workgroup and ORV Advisory Workgroup.”

Hearn also assists local officers with targeted snowmobile and ORV patrols, including special assignments for large festivals and other events, radar and sound enforcement patrols.

The Employment, Training, Legal, and Technology section consists of a lieutenant, sergeants, corporals and civilian staff, who recruit, hire and train new and existing officers.

This section’s personnel evaluate training methods and equipment and perform legal analysis and policy review, making updates as needed.

**Recruit school academy**

Michigan DNR conservation officers are among the most highly skilled and well-trained law enforcement officers in the state, and it starts with the Conservation Officer Recruit School Academy.

“Leading a group of recruits in training is both highly challenging and rewarding,” said Sgt. Todd Thorn, recruit school commander of the most recent graduating class. “It takes a great deal of time, energy and patience to transform a group of recruits into DNR conservation officers. It’s rewarding to be a part of their growth and watch them mature in their roles.”

As with any job, it’s important that conservation officers keep their skills up to date by receiving continuous training and education.

“It’s our responsibility to make sure new and existing officers maintain their training and certifications, have the equipment and technology they need to do their job and stay safe,” said Lt. Jason Wicklund, Employment, Training, Legal and Technology Section supervisor.

Sworn officers manage several committees within the Law Enforcement Division. Committees are a great way for officers to help shape the direction of the division, and their career.

Corporals work with committee leads to oversee [training programs](https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLAt8-P23ZJguP5u_Q8JI4aFDvJgt2RPtJ) for existing officers, including firearm tactics, snowmobile, marine, waterfowl, trapping, first-aid, active shooter response and emergency vehicle operation – just to name a few.

**Technology**

Whether on land or water, the nature of the job takes conservation officers to Michigan’s most remote areas, where officers are often alone, and the only emergency responder.

Conservation officers rely on their high-quality technology and equipment to stay in communication with dispatch units, and to effectively manage the diverse situations they encounter.

The technology sergeant is responsible for researching technology options, and the implementation of software, equipment and training for Law Enforcement Division personnel at all levels.

“The goal is to provide improvements that reduce administrative time for officers in the field and to maximize their presence in the woods and on waterways,” said Sgt. Mark Papineau, who is the first officer to assume the newly created technology role. “My work is never complete, as technology is an ever-changing beast.”

Papineau spent 12 years gaining experience throughout the state as a field officer before promoting into his current sergeant role in 2019.

**Emergency management**

Within months of Papineau beginning his technology sergeant role, the coronavirus pandemic hit Michigan, activating the state’s emergency operations center.

As all conservation officers do, Papineau adapted quickly, assisting the division’s emergency management operations.

“As public servants, we are the DNR’s representatives for the Michigan Emergency Management Plan and work closely with the Michigan State Police Emergency Management and Homeland Security Division and other state agencies to ensure the welfare of Michigan residents and visitors,” said Capt. Jen Wolf, who oversees emergency management operations with Chief Hagler.

Severe weather, extreme flooding, and civil protests accompanied COVID-19 in the first half of 2020, keeping all emergency management staff throughout the state busy with response and recovery efforts, providing safety and reducing negative effects of these incidents.

Wolf and Papineau established partnerships early into the pandemic to secure important items during the nation’s shortage of personal protective equipment.

They developed and implemented a plan to safely distribute nearly 118,000 personal protection items to all DNR personnel from March 2020 to November 2021, including masks, face shields, gloves and hand sanitizer.

Throughout the pandemic, conservation officers stayed on the frontlines.

**Special investigations**

Detectives in the Special Investigations Unit receive specialized training to investigate some of Michigan’s most serious poaching crimes.

Another group of detectives doing specialized work are conservation officers with the Environmental Investigation Section.

These officers investigate natural resource and environmental protection law violations pertaining to land, air, water and waste, and they are an important resource for local communities faced with environmental conflicts of a criminal nature.

“After working 15 years as a field conservation officer, I became interested in promoting to detective within the Environmental Investigation Section,” said Detective Holly Pennoni. “I wanted to have a bigger impact on protecting our communities against environmental crimes that threaten the health, safety and environment in which we live and recreate.”

In September 2021, the Environmental Investigation Section was the first conservation law enforcement agency to receive the annual Chief David Cameron “Leadership in Environmental Crimes Award” from the International Association of Chiefs of Police.

DNR detectives earned the global award as a result of their [investigation of a Flint-based company](https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/MIDNR/bulletins/2f0b331) that illegally disposed of more than 47 million gallons of environmentally harmful liquid into the City of Flint’s sewer system over eight years.

[Corporals in the Great Lakes Enforcement Unit](https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/MIDNR/bulletins/2557316) enforce state rules and laws regulating state- and tribal-licensed commercial anglers. The officers also monitor aquatic invasive species and commercial fish wholesale operations that occur on land.

Utilizing special marine equipment and vessels, corporals from the unit often assist other agencies and departments.

In August 2021, the unit assisted archaeologists from the Michigan History Center and a dive team to recover a World War II aircraft that will be transferred to the Tuskegee Airmen National Historical Museum in Detroit. The effort recently premiered on an [episode of Wardens](https://www.outdoorchannel.com/show/wardens/1465) broadcast on the Outdoor Channel.

**Working out of class**

Like many other DNR staffers, conservation officers have opportunities to try different roles in “working out of class” career development positions. They do this by filling in for personnel performing tasks outside their normal job duties.

When a position of rank (sergeant, lieutenant, et cetera) becomes available in the DNR Law Enforcement Division, it is temporarily filled until a permanent candidate is selected. Working out of class positions allow officers to test a role to determine if it’s a career path they would like to consider.

Mark Zitnik has been a conservation officer since 2015 and patrols Alger County. He is currently working as a sergeant in a working out of class role.

“I get to see behind the scenes, what it takes to be a leader, and why a sergeant operates the way they do,” Zitnik said. “The responsibility that I’ve been given has allowed me to experience a variety of aspects of being a sergeant, including viewing and managing budgets, keeping the team on track, meeting deadlines, and consistently being available to answer a call when team members need assistance or guidance, while gaining the respect of my fellow peers. I believe I will be a better officer after this experience.”

The varied duties of the job, which often align with officer personal interests in working and being outdoors, help provide careers rich with rewarding opportunities, great team camaraderie and vital contributions to the greater good of serving Michigan’s people while protecting the state’s natural and cultural resources.

If you or anyone you know are interested in becoming a conservation officer, the first steps begin at [Michigan.gov/ConservationOfficers](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79136_79772_81097---,00.html). The DNR is currently hiring conservation officers, with an application deadline of March 31.

Check out previous Showcasing the DNR stories in our archive at [Michigan.gov/DNRStories](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79137_79770_79873_80003---,00.html). To subscribe to upcoming Showcasing articles, sign up for free email delivery at [Michigan.gov/DNR](http://www.Michigan.gov/DNR).

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