**Showcasing the DNR: DNR conservation officers support communities by donating confiscated game**

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In game poaching cases, after Michigan Department of Natural Resources conservation officers wrap up the casework, their job is far from over. Assuming the meat is salvageable, officers have a short timeframe to ensure it goes to good use.

“These cases are usually made at unpredictable and inconvenient times,” said conservation officer Anna Cullen, who patrols Muskegon County. “Sometimes you encounter a person at 1 a.m. who just shot two deer with a crossbow while recreational trespassing. Now, you have to find a place to take these deer before they go bad and find the time to clean them after a 14-hour shift.”

Conservation officers are assigned to patrol a particular county. Based on community partnerships, each officer has established relationships and knowledge of local pantries and deserving individuals who will accept confiscated game – often during odd hours with little to no notice.

“One late night during the firearm deer hunting season, I seized two deer taken in violation of antler point restrictions,” said conservation officer Andrea Albert, who patrols Antrim County. “I went to a residence that usually accepts deer, but they weren’t home.

“I pulled over near a church to look up other people on my donation list. I contacted a subject and his wife who were living in a travel trailer parked on the church property. They were very happy and thankful to take the deer as it was obvious, they had fallen on hard times.”

In Baraga County, conservation officers Jeremy Sergey and John Kamps seized a bear from a group that received several charges related to the poached bear.

“Due to high temperatures, it was imperative that we locate somebody to take the bear ASAP,” Sergey said. “This required that the individual needed the meat and knew how to process it so the meat could be preserved that night. As a network, we located a 100% disabled veteran in the Manistique area who was struck by a car bomb while serving in Iraq during 2004.”

The veteran and his wife were able to process the portion of the bear they received, including 30 pounds of edible meat, 10 pounds of rendered fat (used to make candles, face cream and food products), 15 pounds of bone for broth and dogs, and 20 pounds of hide for dogs.

Following suit with unpredictability, donations also result from vehicle-wildlife accidents.

“If the animal is salvageable, officers will field dress and recover it, either by loading it on a trailer or having a wrecker make the pickup,” said Lt. Eugene “Skip” Hagy, district law supervisor for the eastern Upper Peninsula. “If further necropsy is necessary (foul play suspected), officers will complete this task and salvage any organs needed for biologists.

“The animal is then taken to a local processor and the majority made into burger. Officers then distribute the packages to local food banks, including churches, senior citizen centers and local families in need.”

Around 1 a.m. on Sept. 24, 2022, Sgt. Calvin Smith received a call from the DNR’s Report All Poaching hotline. A 1.5-year-old moose was hit by a car near downtown Sault Ste. Marie and needed to be removed.

Smith immediately responded to the scene and took responsibility for the moose.

Start to finish with clean-up, it took about three hours to field-dress the young moose. The only processor who would take the moose was in Engadine.

“Logistically it was a nightmare,” Smith said. “We were looking at 60 miles one way to reach the only licensed processor, otherwise we wouldn’t have had anybody, but we didn’t want the meat to go to waste.”

The DNR covered the cost of a flatbed wrecker to transport the moose. The processing cost was $315 total, at 60 cents per pound.

“It’s quite the project, but it’s very rewarding,” Smith said. “You’re salvaging a lot of meat that can go to good use. Because officers are so involved with their communities, they have a good idea who could use the meat. It took a couple weeks to get meat from the processor, and it took officers about two weeks to distribute it.”

The Michigan DNR and Michigan Conservation Officers Association work closely with [Michigan Sportsmen Against Hunger](https://www.sportsmenagainsthunger.org/).

MSAH is an all-volunteer, nonprofit organization, that coordinates participating licensed game processors throughout the state as drop-off locations for whitetail deer harvested by hunters during the hunting season and through deer management practices. The organization covers a portion of the processing fee for donated game.

“Hunger is not limited to cities, rural or suburban areas; it’s statewide,” said Dean Hall, executive director of Michigan Sportsman Against Hunger. “One out of 10 Michigan families must make a difficult decision each month on whether they should pay their mortgage, rent, utility or medical bills – or if they should buy food.”

During the 2021-22 season, Michigan Sportsmen Against Hunger provided more than 107,000 pounds of venison donated by hunters.

That sounds like a lot of meat, but in reality, there are currently [38 processors](https://www.sportsmenagainsthunger.org/_files/ugd/a0a290_d5ac129f67354583906fb16183ea408d.pdf) affiliated with MSAH, which is why most conservation officers who patrol all of Michigan’s 83 counties rely on their community lists.

“There are no processors in Isabella County who are currently working with MSAH,” said Lt. Jeremy Payne. “The way it works now, is that the processor informs a food bank that a deer is available, but the food bank has to pay for the processing. If a processor is affiliated with MSAH, that processing fee will be covered.”

Officers donate to as many organizations as they can.

Officer Lisa Taube, who patrols Livingston County and has been a conservation officer since 2021, donated four deer last firearm season to Great Lakes Custom Meats and More, located in Howell.

Since 2019, conservation officer Sam Schluckbier, who patrols Allegan County, estimates he has donated over 250 pounds of venison to the Martin Area Resource Center.

In the northwest Lower Peninsula, conservation officers support the Manna Food Project, which feeds families in Antrim, Charlevoix and Emmett Counties.

“There are several local processors that partner with Manna to supply ground venison,” said Officer Duane Budreau, who patrols Emmett County. “I either have the person responsible for the game field dress it or I do it myself, then drop it off.

“There are still occasions when I donate a deer to an individual or family in need that is not part of the Manna Project. There is a local special-needs individual in my county that contacts the RAP hotline every fall to make sure he is on the list for deer, and I try to make sure he’s taken care of.”

The Michigan Conservation Officers Association is a group of individuals who support the needs of conservation officers, their friends, family, peers and neighbors, when they are faced with challenging times.

In January, the association donated a poached elk from a double kill that occurred during the December 2022 elk hunt.

“MCOA donated 120 pounds of elk meat to an Illinois game warden,” said Officer Breanna Reed, MCOA president. “The family lost their home in a fire and the Illinois Conservation Police Officers Association had a Go Fund Me page for him. Officers from District 3 reached out to MCOA regarding a poached elk. MCOA was able to coordinate with their association to get the meat to them.”

Conservation officers are never truly logged out of service and are known for giving back to their communities.

Officer Jenni Hanson, who patrols Gogebic County, was hunting her own private property and had trail camera footage of an eight-point whitetail deer she was hoping to harvest.

Her hunt ended early when she heard nearby gunshots on the private property that bordered hers that was posted “No trespassing.”

With the help of a neighbor, Hanson and her partner, officer Zach Painter, received a confession from a local poacher that he disobeyed the signs and killed the deer.

Hanson and Painter donated the eight-point beauty to a single mother of four young children.

“When I dropped the deer off, the kids were bouncing with joy that they got to help their mother butcher the deer and fill their freezer,” Hanson said. “That day, I knew I did my job, and I did it well. That family deserved that deer more than me.”

Pastor Roger Jaworski of Lakeview Bible Church in Crystal Falls, a father of five, was able to accept a deer from officer Alex VanWagner. Because of the connection, they will be able to pay it forward to help others in their community.

“We were so grateful,” Jaworski said. “My daughters had a real fun time processing the deer with me and learning where food comes from. I appreciate everything the officers do. We were able to connect VanWagner with additional resources to connect him to others who need deer in their freezer.”

In Ogemaw County, officer Kyle Bader and a probationary conservation officer recently seized five bluegills from an angler who had kept fish over his limit.

“My county partner, CO Brad Bellville, knew a 92-old-woman who recently lost her husband of over 70 years. She loves bluegill and doesn’t have anyone to catch them for her now. We took her the five fileted bluegill along with a bag of frozen bluegill from my fishing trip last spring,” Bader said.

The recipient of the fish was extremely thankful and texted Bellville later that day: “Couldn’t wait, ate them for lunch, they were wonderful.”

If you would like to contribute to Michigan Sportsmen Against Hunger, the option to donate as little as $1 is available when you purchase your Michigan DNR hunting or fishing license.

If you suspect or witness a natural resources crime, including fish or game poaching, recreational trespassing, environmental crimes or commodity vandalizing or theft, contact the Report All Poaching hotline. Call or text 1-800-292-7800 as soon as possible; the line is available 24/7. Tipsters may remain anonymous and may be eligible for a cash reward for information that leads to an arrest and conviction.

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