

Deer & Snakebites



Iserved as a Waterways Conservation Officer for 24 years. I've been retired for awhile but some people still remember me. Last year one of those people sent me a news feed. It was about a guy being extradited to PA for felony Game charges and for threatening the life of a PA Game Warden. I'd been waiting for that little pig sucker to pop on my radar again. It had been several years since I'd busted him, but he was a hard man to forget. Let's call him Jack. He had a live-in girlfriend we'll call Jill. Jack and Jill were running an illegal reptile rescue operation out of their trailer in Mifflin County. I was the special investigator assigned to the case.

It was an easy case to build. Jack's number was listed on Facebook, he answered his phone and he had loose lips. He told me about a rattlesnake den in the state forest by his place and offered to take me hunting, even though they were out of season and he had no license. He even sent me a picture of a large black phase timber rattlesnake in a tank at his home. He had just caught it and asked if I wanted to come see it – stupid question. I planned to meet him two days later. We secured the search warrants and put a team together consisting of officers from the Fish & Game Commissions, local police, animal control & Jack's probation officer (he was on probation for Game violations). My job was to meet him, see the rattler & scout for other violations in the home. I was to call my handler with an update before we left for snake hunting and then the team would move in to execute the warrant while we were gone. It was a good plan that went south quick.

Jack told me to meet him at a gas station located about ten miles from his trailer. He wanted to meet there be-

cause his place was hard to find and had no cell service. I got there a little early and he arrived a lot late. He was driving an old Jeep with magnetic stickers on its sides which advertised his reptile rescue business. He was a wiry man in his thirties who hadn't bathed in a very long time. I watched him hop out of the Jeep, run into the store and come back out with a pack of cigarettes.

I watched him throw the cellophane wrapper from the cigarettes on the ground and thought – count one. I walked over to introduce myself and he told me to hop in the Jeep. I would have gone with him if it weren't for the mess in the back seat. When I opened the door, I was greeted by a small swarm of flies coming off the severed tail of a gray squirrel. I thought – count two. I looked at it and then at Jill, a small woman, who was sitting in the front passenger seat. She said, "Sorry, I forgot about that." She then told me she had killed the squirrel a few days earlier and meant to skin and salt the tail but hadn't gotten around to it. As weird as that story was, it was nothing compared to her voice – she sounded like a six-year-old with a lisp. I told Jack that I'd follow him in my own truck.

The ten-mile trip to the trailer cut through state park land. Midway through the park I saw a large doe eating something on the opposite side of the road. I watched Jack accelerate and swerve across the lane to hit it, missing by a foot. When we got to the trailer Jack was pumped and asked if I'd seen the deer. He then bragged about how many he'd killed over the years with his cars. I thought – count three. I lost count after we entered the trailer.

Getting in was tricky because he had an angry Pitbull outside that was on a

chain which reached to the front door. He had to hit the dog with a stick and then move the chain to the back of the trailer so that we could enter. The heat and stench inside the singlewide were overwhelming. The entire living space had been gutted and was lined floor-to-ceiling with aquariums full of (mostly) illegal snakes and turtles. Any free space was decorated with antlers and other animal parts. Adding to the décor were the iron bars on every window and the assortment of rifles and shotguns propped in every corner.

In the center of the room was a large cat that was scratching at the carpet. It was missing an eye and had puss draining from the socket. Jill told me they'd rescued it off the road the week before. I saw the timber rattlesnake in a 100-gallon tank and then asked to use the bathroom. The bathroom was as filthy as the rest of the trailer and the bathtub was filled with spare reptile husbandry parts and a broken aquarium. I tried to call my handler in Harrisburg but had no cell coverage. I tried the bedroom, just a mattress on the floor and dirty clothes everywhere, but had no coverage there either. I went back to the "living room" and found Jack reaching into the rattler enclosure with a short snake hook fashioned out of a metal clothes hanger duct tapped to a stick.

I went out to the truck and came back with my camera. I told Jack that the snake was the coolest thing I'd ever seen and he told me I hadn't seen nothing yet. I was standing next to Jill and the puss-eyed cat when Jack flung the rattler from the cage to the carpet. It started lashing out at all of us. The cat hid behind me. Jack circled the snake and pinned its head with his hook and then grabbed it behind the head with

his hand. He then lifted it off the ground and asked if I wanted to touch it. I did. He asked if I wanted to hold it. I didn't. What I wanted to do was get the hell out of that trailer so I told him the light was better outside for photos. We went out and he wrapped the rattler over his shoulders and told Jill to take the head. She didn't want to do that but he yelled at her until she got a grip behind its head and then he put the rest of the snake on her shoulders. I took a lot of photos. She was terrified. I told Jack that we needed to get going. He agreed and Jill put the snake away in the tank. I felt a wave of relief as she closed the lid. It was short lived because he wasn't done showing off. He popped the lid on a tank containing a small northern copperhead. He flicked that snake on the carpet like he'd done with the rattler but it was much smaller and faster.

When he tried to grab it, I saw the copperhead slip its head out from under the hook and sink its fangs into the meat of Jack's right hand. I'd never been so proud of a snake. Jack pulled his hand back and started spewing blood and profanities while stomping around the trailer. I slipped the snake back in its tank while he was ranting. I asked Jill for gauze to control the bleeding but had to settle for a dirty shirt. It didn't take long for the swelling to start and I'm sure the pain was intense but Jack told me not to worry because he was immune to venom. He showed me several scars on his hands and arms where he claimed to have been bitten before. He said he knew the cure and then yelled, "Jill! Get me a beer!"

The beer didn't stop the swelling but Jack still wanted to go snaking. I convinced him to wait awhile. A half hour later his fingers looked like fat sausages and I suggested we call a buddy of mine. Jack said his neighbor had a landline so we paid him a visit. I called my handler in Harrisburg and said, "Hey bubba, I'm at the guy's house I told you about and he just got bit by a copperhead. What do you think we should do?" There was a pregnant pause before he asked, "Are you serious?" I assured him I was and agreed with him that we should probably go to the hospital.

I told Jack that he could lose a finger or something if he didn't get treated. He agreed to go but insisted on driving himself. I followed him in my truck. Jill and I both took pictures of the antivenom being administered. Once Jack was stabilized, I told him that I had to go but would call him later. Jill followed me outside and said she wanted to show me something on her camera. She flipped through a slew of pictures before stopping on an image of a gecko clinging to her naked breast. She told me that was

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her pet lizard and then looked up at me and said, "Sorry, that's inappropriate." Then she proceeded to slowly show me ten more of the same type of photos. I smiled and told her she had nice pics but I had to go. I drove the truck out of the lot and called my handler. The search warrant team was on the move as scheduled. The only difference was that I would be babysitting Jack from the hospital instead of the woods.

I parked my truck in the far end of the lot where I could discreetly watch his Jeep. Nature called an hour later and Jack's Jeep was gone when I got back. I went straight to the emergency room to find out where he was. He should have stayed overnight but the nurses told me he pulled the IVs from his arms and walked out. They had no idea where he was going and neither did I. My handler wasn't happy but the team was already converging at the staging area for their brief so I went there as well.

Jack's probation officer told us that he was prescribed anti-psychotic medication but was probably off his meds. Also, he said that Jack hated law enforcement

and was extremely confrontational. My mind flashed to the guns in the trailer. I didn't notice any guns in the Jeep but there was a lot of crap in the car and it could have concealed an arsenal. We sent an unmarked vehicle to scout the trailer and found no one there. We left the vehicle at the state park to monitor the main approach to the home. Animal control took possession of the Pitbull while we tried to enter the trailer. It was surprisingly difficult to breach the deadbolted door. We wound up destroying it. It took us three hours to search and secure all of the evidence from the trailer, outbuilding and deep freezers. Jack and Jill arrived two hours into the search.

Our unmarked vehicle alerted us via radio and then followed them into the drive, blocking their exit. Two team members approached the Jeep with shotguns raised and ordered Jack to shut off the engine and exit the vehicle. Jill threw herself out of the car and onto the ground. Jack had to be pulled out. While he was being handcuffed, he was asked if he had anything to declare in the vehicle. He said the only thing in there was a dead rattlesnake. Turned out that Jack really wanted to go snaking that day. He left the hospital with Jill and did some road hunting. It was just one of a multitude of Fish & Game charges levied against him that day. Jack & Jill plead guilty to most of the charges. The fines were steep but the best part was that the judge revoked their fishing and hunting privileges for ten years.

Jill had enough trailer trash and split soon after the cases cleared. I don't know where she went but I kept tabs on Jack. I even kept photos of him in my clipboard and gave copies to my deputies and other officers adjoining Mifflin County. Jack's bounty was a case of beer to the first one who caught him fishing while on revocation. None of my guys ever got him but apparently a game warden did – I guess I owe her a case of beer.

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