

Social Media: A Powerful Investigative Tool REALLY?

(All suspect names have been changed for this article)

As recently as the early 2000's, law enforcement agencies, including those enforcing conservation law, would have laughed at anyone who even hinted that social media, Facebook in particular, would, in the near future, be an effective and efficient investigative tool capable of producing solid evidence against those who wish to violate the law.

Who's laughing now? I'll tell you. It is the officers around the world who have successfully brought criminals to justice after gathering mountains of evidence from Facebook and other social media sites. Such avenues include Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and others.

Ironically, and laughable, is the fact the criminals are literally sharing with investigating officers photos, videos, audio files and admissions of guilt in their own words. In many cases, the officer doesn't have to leave the office. This "free" information is often so complete, when confronted with their personal social media posts, offenders realize they have no defense.

Let us study a case earlier this year in the Deep South. Here, evidence obtained from several Facebook pages in concert with some top-notch investigative work by conservation officers in Georgia and Florida stopped a brazen group of deer poachers.

On January 14, 2016, Corporal Jason Shipes, who is a 15-year veteran with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources' Law Enforcement Division, received a tip. The lead was from a concerned sportsman of illegal activity on Old Crow Hunting Club (OCHC) in Du Pont, Georgia, a small town in Clinch County. The place is tucked away about



Georgia and Florida Conservation Officers Work Together to Shutdown Poachers

25 miles from the Florida state line.

The information Shipes received indicated some members of the OCHC had exceeded the bag limit of antlered deer during the 2015-2016 deer season and had possibly hunted without valid hunting licenses. The tipster also provided a screenshot of a post on OCHC's closed-group Facebook page. Glowing brightly on the screen were the four potential violators' names – Thomas Johnson, his brother Charles Johnson, their father Scott Johnson, and Mark Smith.

NOW ENTER FACEBOOK.

Corporal Shipes began investigating the four subjects, clearly understanding if any of them had social media accounts and regularly posted, he would likely gather some valuable information to get the case moving forward.

He was right.

The OCHC Facebook screenshot consisted of several photos and a single text statement. The statement indicated the four subjects were responsible for killing approximately 20 different deer during

Investigative Tool!



license had expired on the first day of firearms season (Oct. 17) and he had not purchased a new one to cover the rest of the season. He also discovered Halie Johnson, Thomas Johnson's wife, who may have been involved in the illegal activity as well, had not purchased a valid Georgia hunting license since the 2013-2014 season. The other three suspects did have valid licenses to hunt big game in the state.

Cpl. Shipes also recognized that he would be contacting Florida Fish & Wildlife Commission (FWC) officers for assistance as he determined all suspects were from Florida – Trevor, Halie and Charles Johnson from Maclenny, Scott Johnson from Glen St. Mary, and Mark Smith from Sanderson. Georgia Rangers and Florida Officers often work together on cases crossing the state line. This would be another shining example of a solid partnership in conservation law enforcement.

Prior to assembling the LE team, Shipes wanted to gather more evidence. He began carefully examining the Facebook screenshots and photos from the OCHC page and the suspects' individual pages.



The original screenshot, provided by the informant, was posted on January 13th to an OCHC closed group Facebook page from

the personal "public" Facebook page of Thomas Johnson. The screenshot included five photos, along with a statement riddled with poor grammar and careless punctuation so common to Facebook. It read in part: "... We have killed 9 in my house ole daddy killed 4 baby brother killed 5, and Mark killed I think 5 to. So it wasn't to bad of a season for team Johnson And I can wait to do it all over again."

One photo in the post showcased a juvenile family member sitting on a dog box in the rear of Trevor's vehicle with six different sets of antlers. Another shot depicts Charles Johnson with an eight-point buck, possibly taken at the camping area of OCHC. The third shot was of Thomas with an antlerless deer

the 2015-2016 season, endearingly calling themselves "Team Johnson." The page also stated the four were active members of the nearly 11,000 acre club.

NARRATIVE

Georgia's 2015-2016 deer season began with archery only on September 12, 2015 until primitive weapons were allowed on October 10th. General firearms season began on October 17th and ended on January 10, 2016. State law allows up to two antlered and ten

antlerless deer per person each season (two additional does may be harvested in lieu of the two bucks). Also, all deer harvested must be recorded in a harvest record at the time of the kill.

On January 15th, Cpl. Shipes began gathering information on each of the subjects, including current addresses, driver's license information, and to confirm possession of valid licenses required to hunt in the State of Georgia during the 2015-2016 deer season.

He determined Charles Johnson's



at what appears to be the skinning area of a hunting camp.

The fourth and fifth pictures depict Scott Johnson with two antlered deer. The fifth picture had a “+17” (similar to a watermark, Facebook’s way of indicating that there were 17 additional photos attached to that post.) Shipes contacted the informant and asked, if possible, could he send the additional photos attached to this post. Soon, the retrieved pictures were part of the growing evidence file. The others were various photographs of the subjects with harvested deer.

After closely examining characteristics of the antlers in all of the photos,

Shipes was able to determine they matched the antlers in the original photo on the dog box in the bed of Trevor’s truck.

On January 16th, Shipes received another screenshot from OCHC’ Facebook page. Thomas had posted a question: “Anybody want to go listen to some dogs tomorrow with me and lulu?”

The next day, Shipes and his supervisor, Sergeant Patrick Dupree, responded to OCHC to possibly make contact with Thomas Johnson and to attempt to identify specific locations where some of the photos had been taken. They located a skinning shed, grassy field, travel trailers, and a wooden split rail fence,

all of which appeared in photos from the Facebook pages.

They also patrolled the area, looking for Thomas and any signs that he was illegally deer hunting with dogs out of season. Although they did not make contact with him, they did find fresh deer and hound tracks, as well as boot prints, indicating someone had been running deer dogs in the area.

With enough evidence in place to establish probable cause, the time had come to meet with Florida Officers to discuss interagency cooperation in pursuing the investigation. On January 18th, Shipes met with FWC Investigator II Todd Hoyle in Fargo, GA. Hoyle



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Charles's page revealed that he legally harvested an eight-point buck on September 27, 2015, twenty days before his license was to expire. Since Charles failed to purchase a hunting license after October 17, 2015, any further hunting activity would be illegal. Several text conversations after that date indicated Charles continued to hunt throughout the winter, killing at least two more deer and hunting deer with dogs illegally.

hunting without a big game license, hunting deer with dogs without a deer dog license and failure to obtain a harvest record. His fines totaled \$715. Steve Johnson paid \$750 in fines for failing to record and report his harvests and Mark Smith was assessed \$1,000 in fines for no harvest record and exceeding bag limits.

In total, the case amassed to 20 documented violations and nearly \$4,000 in fines – and the violators actually presented the evidence that convicted them via Facebook.

Just a few years ago, social media was fairly insignificant and primarily used for entertainment. Today, even though it continues to provide entertainment value, its significance has skyrocketed with millions of subscribers. People post everything from last week's grocery list and how Aunt Betty was dressed improperly at the family reunion all the way to crimes as they are being committed.

Law enforcement officials have known for a very long time most criminals will eventually tell on themselves. With social media, and its innate opportunity to share their illegal activities, many seem such a springboard to boast proves irresistible. With a few clicks, one post can reach a very large audience in a very short amount of time. And, for most of them, this facet of social media is entirely too tempting.

Corporal Shipes seems convinced that social media should be explored regularly within the investigative process.

"So much illegal activity is blatantly posted to social media and the law enforcement community is just beginning to tap into this resource," he said. "The large amount of evidence was amazing to me and how valuable it was to our case and to shutting down these poachers."

The takeaway for law enforcement is the fact social media is a powerful tool in bringing those who choose to break the law to justice. Use all the tools at your disposal ... but no selfies!📷

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provided Florida driver's license and Florida hunting and fishing license information of the suspects. During the meeting, the officers also decided to utilize Facebook's Legal assistance to preserve the personal Facebook pages of Thomas Johnson, Scott "Charles" Johnson, and Mark Smith, as well as Olive Leaf Hunt Club's closed group page. Shipes secured and served search warrants on the pages through Facebook's legal site.

During the first half of February, information from the Facebook page warrants arrived and the Georgia Ranger began a thorough and tedious examination of the materials.

Trevor's page yielded 2,132 pages of information including text messages, conversations between users, photos, and specific data related to those photos such as times, dates and GPS locations indicating when and where the photos were taken, and when they were uploaded to Facebook. It also included text communications between Thomas and other Facebook users specifically related to the photos and screenshots already in evidence. The OCHC information was 131 pages long, but did not provide any additional evidence regarding the investigation.

On February 23rd, the information requested from Facebook's legal department related to the pages of Charles Johnson and Mark Smith arrived. Charles's information contained 756 pages and Mark's was 33 pages.

Mark's page contained evidence, including photos and text, that he had exceeded the season bag limit in Georgia, taking at least three antlered deer. Many of the photos were clearly taken on, or near OCHC's property.

On March 29th, five Georgia and Florida Officers successfully made contact with each subject at their residence and conducted interviews. During the interviews, the defendants voluntarily relinquished 19 sets of antlers to the Georgia Officers. Several sets were from illegal kills in previous years, but Shipes chose not to bring additional charges for those violations due to the cooperation of the subjects during the interviews and their willingness to turn over all of the antlers that had been obtained illegally.

All four primary subjects were cited for a total of 17 separate violations, and three warnings were issued to Trevor's wife. After seeing the volume of indisputable evidence against them, most of it from their own Facebook posts, all four of the defendants chose plea agreements over going to trial.

Six charges were brought against Thomas Johnson including violating recording requirements and exceeding the bag limits. He paid \$1,500 in fines. His wife Halie received three warnings for hunting without a non-resident license, hunting without a non-residence big game license and failing to obtain a harvest record.

Charles Johnson was charged with hunting without a non-resident license,