

## GAME WARDEN LAW ENFORCEMENT ALONG THE TEXAS-MEXICO BORDER

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The task of enforcing the game, fish and water safety laws along the international border between Texas and Mexico involves game wardens in many problems.

The Rio Grande, which divides the two countries, originates in Colorado, wanders through New Mexico to the American Dam at El Paso, continues through the mountainous regions of the Big Bend, the South Texas brush country, the citrus orchards and sugarcane fields of the Rio Grande Valley, and flows into the Gulf of Mexico at Brownsville—1,896 miles from its origin, with 1,254 river miles of international border between El Paso and Brownsville, Texas.

Both Lake Armistad and Falcon Lake are major lakes in Texas created by dams extending from the United States to the Mexico side of the river. The international border follows the center of the channel of the old riverbed in both these lakes and in several smaller irrigation basins along the rest of the river.

The fact that access to much of the river is extremely difficult creates an ideal situation for law breakers, the most outstanding problems being smuggling and the illegal entry of undocumented aliens. This might not seem to concern officers enforcing game, fish and water safety laws. However, Texas game wardens must be prepared to cope with the inadvertent contacts with smugglers or illegal aliens, for their own safety and in order to assist other agencies in protection of the nation's borders.

Drug smuggling occurs the entire length of the Rio Grande River, but especially in the shallow portions of the river which can be waded on foot or with pack animals. Drug smugglers often shoot first and ask no questions. They are not particularly interested in whether they are aiming at a game warden, drug law enforcement officer or customs patrol officer. Smuggling from Mexico to the United States is not limited to drugs. It includes game birds and animals, protected non-game birds and animals and endangered species.

This past year one ring of illegal fur dealers was arrested and furs valued at more than \$1.5 million were seized by Federal authorities. Texas game wardens made several other arrests for apparent smuggling of endangered or protected furbearers into this country. Smuggling of mourning doves, white-wing doves and ducks is common, mainly by wading or crossing by boat in deeper portions of the river or major lakes at Zapata and Del Rio.

The smuggling of wildlife resources is not a one-way road. Deer killed in Texas often are carried to Mexico by wood haulers, sand haulers, or by other transportation. Market hunters operating on the Texas side successfully smuggle deer carcasses across international bridges because there is little, if any, inspection of vehicles entering Mexico. In a recent case some county vehicles, caught and convicted of illegal hunting, apparently had good contacts on the bridges. Investigation indicated that most of their illegal proceeds were going into Mexico.

Small villages dot the entire length of the river on the Mexican side. The villagers wade or cross in small boats to hunt on adjacent Texas ranches, mainly for deer and at night with headlights. These hunters do not discriminate between bucks, does and fawns. If they do not manage to take a deer, the alien hunters usually will kill cattle, sheep or goats taking only that portion they can carry back, normally the hind quarter in the case of cattle.

One particular group of hunters has encountered U.S. officers on several occasions and fired on them each time. One border patrol officer was killed and another wounded.

Bag limits in Mexico are liberal for migratory birds, including ducks, geese, mourning and white-wing doves, and red-billed pigeons. This fact, plus lax law enforcement on that side, encourages illegal traffic in these species. According to law only the number of birds which may be taken legally in Mexico can be imported into Texas, but professional smugglers are hired to bring birds into the United States in excess of Mexican

bag limits. Airplanes are the preferred mode of transportation, but every other method is also used, including trucks, cars, boats and pack animals.

Not satisfied with the limited white-wing dove hunting available along the immediate border in the United States and Mexico, enthusiasts travel great distances to take advantage of the white-wing populations in the interior of Mexico. It is not uncommon for one hunter to kill 200 or 300 white-wing doves per day. Some 75 birds per week can be imported legally into the United States, but hundreds more are smuggled. Ducks, geese and mourning doves are of lesser interest because they are plentiful in the United States; however, these species also attract U.S. hunters because of the larger bag limits and the lack of resident sportsmen. Since Mexico is the wintering grounds for many ducks and geese, it is a bonanza for both hunters and smugglers.

Fishing along the entire Rio Grande has been and will continue to be a complex problem for game wardens. Here again, Mexico has liberal regulations concerning means, methods and bag limits. Devices are allowed in the Mexican side of the river and lakes that are illegal in Texas waters. These include traps, hoop nets, trammel nets, gill nets, snag lines and electrical producing devices known as telephones. Nets used in the river often extend all the way across to the Texas side, while in both Falcon and Armistad, traps and nets are used extensively. Mexican fishermen do not cull their fish, but each species taken is marketed. In some instances, Texas fish houses provide the Mexicans with nets and other illegal tackle, then import the fish they catch. Often, fish are caught in Texas waters, taken to the Mexican side of the river by boat, then loaded on land vehicles and brought back across the bridges under legal import regulations.

Such illegal fishermen are particularly hard to deal with because normally they set their nets and other devices close enough to Mexican waters so that, when encountered by Texas game wardens, they have a short distance to escape out of the wardens' jurisdiction. If they should happen to get caught, the usual procedure is to incarcerate them pending court action. Very few alien fishermen in such cases have paid fines. Usually, they prefer to serve jail time, even seeming to enjoy the privileges of American penal institutions.

Unlawful taking of wildlife resources is not limited to the river and adjoining lands but extends into the Gulf of Mexico. Fishermen from several countries, including Cuba, Japan and Russia, frequent waters adjacent to Texas, taking large numbers of shrimp and finfish. Many foreign shrimp boats simply mix with our fleet and disregard Texas laws and limits. Finfish fishermen use long lines all along the Texas coast, a distance of some 367 miles.

Fish taken unlawfully from the Gulf seldom are landed in Texas. If detected by game wardens, American as well as foreign fishermen fishing illegally in Texas waters will attempt to escape to international waters and market their catch in other states or countries.

To cope with the many problems of illegal hunting and fishing along the border and in the Gulf, the need for specialized equipment is imperative. This Department has provided many pieces of such equipment for game wardens. Four-wheel drive vehicles are required along most of the river because of rough terrain. These vehicles also are used for launching boats where no ramps are available. Launching and patrolling can be hampered by steep river banks, gravel bars, heavy brush and thick stands of cane. A large flat boulder or a trail cleared with machetes can provide an ideal launching area from which boats can be lowered into the river by winch from a four-wheel drive vehicle.

A typical boat patrol can last for 2 or 3 days and cover a distance of some 75 to 100 miles. To cope with such distances and to carry the required equipment, usually 18 to 20 foot, flat-bottomed, john-type boats are used with large outboard motors and power trim to protect the propeller and lower motor units when in shallow water.

Game Wardens often encounter dangerous traps. Barbed wire, stretched across the river about 18 to 30 inches above the water, is a favorite trick used by illegal fishermen to deter law enforcement officers.

In three South Texas counties, 21,650 feet of illegal gill nets, 41 fish traps, and 41,750 feet of trotlines, plus 2 electronic devices and 1 trawl, were confiscated by game wardens in 1 year. This represents illegal devices from only 109 miles out of the total length of the Rio Grande in Texas. Confiscation figures are not available at this time for the balance of the area patrolled by game wardens.

The four-wheel drive vehicles also are used extensively in patrol for illegal hunting along the river's entire length in Texas.

Large boats are used in the 2 major lakes on the American side to enforce water safety and patrol for illegal fishing activities. Twenty-one foot aluminum boats, powered with two 150 horsepower outboard engines, enable game wardens to stay out in rough waters and operate at enough speed to allow capture of illegal fishermen before they can escape to the Mexican side. The dual engine concept also provides some safety from loss of power and drifting into foreign waters.

All the boating equipment is utilized in recovery of drowning victims. Many such victims in the Rio Grande are illegal aliens drowned while attempting to swim across the river to seek work in the United States. Some bodies have been found where cause of death was other than drowning, apparently indicating involvement in smuggling or other criminal activity.

The Gulf of Mexico also is patrolled by one 65 foot patrol boat, one 50 foot patrol boat, one 38 foot, one 34 foot, and four 30 foot boats. These Gulf boats are equipped with electronic navigation devices including radar, loran and marine radios. The Parks and Wildlife Department currently is in process of securing another 65 foot patrol boat to cope with problems encountered in the Gulf. Department owned aircraft supplement the patrols in the Gulf and river areas for observation purposes. Two single-engine aircraft over the Gulf of Mexico.

All the boats, aircraft and vehicles are radio equipped to use all frequencies, including 2 Parks and Wildlife frequencies and 6 peace officers agency's frequencies. Night scopes have been very effective in the river areas. One man patrols along the river are never authorized because of the dangers involved. Normally at least 2 boats with 2 men per boat are assigned for river patrols. Single boats do work the lake areas during daylight hours in surveillance for water safety and fishing violations; however, even on the lakes 2 boat patrols are necessary to provide some degree of safety for the law enforcement officer when on patrol at night.

In each patrol area, Texas game wardens are always armed properly with handguns, rifles, or shotguns and are provided with such equipment as binoculars, spotting scopes and lifesaving devices to cope with the dangers they may encounter in law enforcement patrol along the international border and elsewhere.

Law enforcement, even with the best of equipment, and in these modern times, will and does present a great challenge to game wardens assigned the duties of enforcing the law along any international border.