The early bird catches the worm

I was patrolling a trout stream during the pre-dawn hours on Opening Day. I picked a stream that had just been stocked with trout less than fifteen hours before the opener at 8 a.m. I was able to take up a position of concealment, and at 6:10 a.m. the first vehicle full of anxious anglers arrived at the stream. Two males emerged from the vehicle, walked to the stream, looked around and then returned to their vehicle to wait. I recognized these two anglers, and I had prior knowledge of their questionable behavior with regards to the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission. Shortly after 7 a.m., the two once again emerged from the vehicle, this time donning fishing attire. They headed to the stream. I quickly relocated to a vantage point where I could now see them stream-side. During the next twenty minutes, these two took turns running up and down a steep bank every time they heard a vehicle pass by. At 7:36 a.m., one of the two did finally cast a line into the approved trout water, caught a trout, wrapped it in a plastic bag and took off downstream with his catch through the forested area, later returning to my view, empty handed. After this, the individual opened a bottle of orange juice and began having breakfast like nothing happened. As the 8 a.m. hour approached, more anglers were showing up at my location, and I knew that these two would probably not be up to anymore preseason fishing. At 7:57 a.m., I approached the male who I witnessed commit the violations, again a person known to me. His first comment to me was asking if I brought him breakfast, to which I responded by asking him if he had any orange juice for me. The puzzled look on his face was priceless. I then explained to him that he had one opportunity to tell me where the trout was that he caught at 7:37 a.m., 23 minutes prior to the official season opener. He led me to a large, dead, fallen tree and under a pile of leaves was the trout in a plastic bag. Yes, you might say it was only a few minutes before the season began, but thousands of anglers around the Commonwealth that day played by the rules and waited until 8 a.m. The penalty for one trout taken from Commonwealth waters prior to the official season opening was $358.00 in fines and costs. Since this was this particular individual’s second offense inside of twelve months, he also qualified as a repeat offender under Title 30, costing an additional $200.00 which was granted by the Magisterial District Judge.—WCO Anthony J. Quarrracino, Jr., Southern Huntingdon County.

Santa’s coming to town

While patrolling a stocked trout stream, DWCO Jeff Colwell gave me a description of a poacher who was taking too many trout. Jeff was preparing me so that we could “switch off.” While he conducted surveillance on another angler, I could watch the first and then approach the poacher discretely without revealing our surveillance and patrol technique. Jeff passed the angler off to me with the following description: “Okay, there is a guy who has his limit in a red bag. He is continuing to catch trout and is giving those fish to kids and a few adults along the stream. He has a large white beard, white curly hair and is wearing a red hat.” Thinking Jeff was having some fun to pass the day, I asked, “Is he a jolly, fat fellow, real nimble and quick?” Jeff deadpanned response caught me off guard. “Yes, he is pretty big. He is coming to you right now.” Just then, I saw the spitting image of Christmas in a red knit cap, flannel and waders walking up the bank. He walked over to some anglers eating lunch, and I could hear him laughing “Ho, ho, ho” as he joked with them. When he finally got to his car, a red one, I approached him. Checking his red bag of trout and informing him that he was over the limit, he chuckled and agreed while pulling out his pipe and explaining that he couldn’t help himself, because he liked to give to kids. I don’t usually mind writing tickets to poachers, but, on that day, I did (I asked Jeff to do it).—WCO William Crisp, Cameron County.

“Southern” gentleman

During trout season, I was approaching an angler who was really concentrating on his casting. From my perspective, everything appeared normal. The fishing license was displayed, and he didn’t appear overly nervous. When I walked up behind the gentlemen and identified myself as a Waterways Conservation Officer, he was quite surprised by my arrival. We exchanged greetings, and I asked him where he was from. He stated Georgia. I then asked to check his fishing license. The information on his license did not match the physical description of the person I was talking to. I asked him for his date of birth and, to my surprise,
A walk on the wild side

Anglers itching for a fishing experience with more of a wilderness flavor may wish to give Hemlock Creek a try (see photo below). Hemlock Creek enters the Allegheny River just southward of the village of President, in President Township, Venango County. It is regulated as Approved Trout Waters from its mouth through the Porcupine Creek confluence (+/- 1 mile length) and essentially parallels the McCrea Schoolhouse and President Road. Thereafter, the Hemlock Creek valley leaves this roadway and for the next four plus miles is open for walk-in recreational opportunities by the general public, until reaching the Venango/Forest county line. Throughout this length, Hemlock Creek and its accompanying tributaries flow through a roadless mix of hardwoods and conifers, offering both a pleasant diversion from the crowds as well as hours of wild trout fishing opportunities. Be prudent by taking a topographic map, a GPS and a compass, and be familiar with their use.—WCO Mark T. Kerr, Venango County.

Think spring

Many people look forward to receiving items in the mail. As a Waterways Conservation Officer, I look forward to receiving my preseason and in season trout stocking list. Even though it is mid-December, I am reminded that it will not be long until the warm days of spring and trout fishing. As I review the stocking schedule for next spring, I am reminded to thank, ahead of time, those faithful men and women who assist me in stocking trout. They brave the cold and rain and sometimes snow from early March through the end of May to help stock trout in our streams and lakes. As sportsmen, we owe these dedicated men and women our thanks for all their hard work.—WCO Joseph Morris, Lawrence and Butler Counties.

A long night

It all started at 8 p.m. on a cold, rainy, Friday night and ended at 8 a.m. on Saturday morning. WCO Tolbert and I decided to team up and patrol the streams on the east side. Around 9 p.m., a vehicle pulled into the parking lot and three individuals exited. They walked downstream toward the lake, shining their flashlights in the water. The three individuals returned to the car and started out of the parking lot. The vehicle stopped twice: once on Route 5 and once on Middle Road. Two individuals exited the vehicle and headed to an area south of the Route 5 bridge. This part of the creek is posted and there are two large holes that hold hundreds of steelhead, a spot favored by poachers. Officer Tolbert and I were able to position ourselves up stream. By using binoculars and night vision, we observed an individual in the posted area. He was in the Iron Bridge hole, using a ripping technique. We called WCO Visosky and DWCO Gustafson for assistance. Officer Tolbert went to the truck and I went into the grape vineyard on the west side of the creek. The poachers would be using the path on the west side of the creek to access Middle Road. If the vehicle returned, Officer Tolbert would be able to stop it. After positioning myself just off the path in the vineyard, I saw an individual approaching. When I confronted him, he dropped a bag of fish and ran into the vineyard. After a brief foot chase, I lost him. Officer Tolbert and Deputy Gustafson set up a perimeter around the vineyard and a small patch of woods. Officer Tolbert called a Border Patrol Station in Erie and two agents were dispatched with a K-9. Border Patrol Agent May and Rocky, his K-9, were able to track the individual hiding in the woods. Officer Visosky located the vehicle and the driver at the I-90 truck stop. The third individual avoided capture. We recovered three snagging rods with weighted treble hooks and three sacks containing 48 steelhead. Fifteen citations were filed on the two individuals apprehended, with fines and costs totaling over $4,000.00. In this case there was honor among poachers, since the apprehended poachers refused to reveal the third offender. I would like to thank all the officers involved for a great job.—WCO James Smolko, Eastern Erie County.

We are fortunate

During the course of an average day, a Waterways Conservation Officer routinely checks fishing licenses and encounters people from around this country and other parts of the world. It is interesting to discuss fishing from the state they are from and compare it to what they like about fishing in Pennsylvania. Recently, I spoke to people from England, Spain and Czechoslovakia. One day while checking anglers on the North Fork of the Redbank Creek in Brookville, I encountered a couple from Belgium who had trout on a stringer. They were visiting relatives in the Brookville area and said they always combine their trip with the opportunity to fish in Pennsylvania. They had fished for
steelhead a couple of days in Erie and now wanted a few trout to eat as they really enjoyed the flavor of fresh trout. When I asked them what fishing was like in Belgium, the man stated that they had to travel about 150 kilometers one way to find a stream to fish for trout and that they would not eat the trout they caught because of pollutants in the water. They were amazed at the amount of beautiful places open to fish in Pennsylvania. Sometimes we forget how fortunate we are to live in an area with clean streams and landowners who leave their property open to public fishing.—WCO Rick Valazak, Jefferson County.

Here, little piggie

On a recent sunny day in March, I was patrolling an approved trout water in Washington County, making sure no one was fishing in the closed waters. As I pulled into the lower end of Little Chartiers Creek, I noticed a vehicle parked at the end of the road. I pulled my vehicle up next to it, all the while watching the creek for signs of an angler. Before I could get out of the car, out of nowhere a man was standing at my driver’s side window. This took me by surprise. The gentleman did not have a fishing rod and appeared eager to talk to me. I got out of the patrol vehicle and asked him what was up. He said that he walks the area frequently and that the strangest thing had just occurred. He continued with a story about a truck that had pulled into the lot, from which a man got out and released a guinea pig. Red flags started flying as my mind is trying to grasp this revelation, because I know he has the guinea pig in his car. So, I asked him, “You don’t have the guinea pig in your car do you?” Of course, he replied, “Yes I do. What do you think I should do with it?” Well, four months of police academy and another six months of Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission training hadn’t prepared me for this question. I got back into my patrol vehicle and replied, “I guess you have a new pet.” As I was driving away, I could hear him yelling, “Do you have a box?”—WCO Bob Wheeler, Western Allegheny County.

On borrowed time

During the course of a year, I encounter countless properly licensed anglers enjoying the fishing opportunities that Pennsylvania has to offer. As a Waterways Conservation Officer, it is my duty to inspect fishing licenses and permits. In most instances, the angler is properly licensed. The license inspections are generally quick, painless and a great way to engage in conversation. This past year, I checked two anglers who decided to take a chance at beating the system. The first violator was proudly displaying a license on his shirt. When I asked for his license, he hesitantly handed it to me. I read the information on the back of the license and asked him his name and date of birth. He quickly gave me a corresponding date and the name “Stefan Doe.” The license read “Steffanie Doe” and also had an “F”, indicating it was for a female who was 5’ 4”. I asked “Stefan,” who stood 6’ tall, for an alternate form of identification. He told me that he did not have any on him and insisted that the license was his own. I then explained to him that I was going to have him sign his name three times as it appeared on the license. “Stefan” said, “I ain’t going to lie to you, this ain’t mine.” I said, “I’m not going to lie to you. You’re going to be charged with fishing without a license and also for borrowing a license.”

The second violator was displaying a license that he tried to pass as his own. He explained that his buddy Dustin must have accidentally switched licenses with him and that he did, in fact, have a current license, but he wasn’t carrying it with him. I filled out a form to allow the individual to produce his license by mail, with only a warning; however, before he signed it, I explained the repercussions if he were not telling the truth. He then confessed that he did not have a license and told me that Dustin was in jail and gave him the license to use.—WCO Patrick W. Ferko, Northern Somerset County.

Illusive nibbling

We had stocked Beaver Creek in Downingtown with trout the day before, and I decided the next day that it would be my first stop on patrol. The first angler I met up with, Matt, is a young man who is one of my usual stocking helpers. He works nights at the local hospital. He was very excited to show me a 13- or 14-inch trout that he had just caught and was about to release, as well as a deep hole in the creek that contained at least 50 trout. He said that he got off work and came right out and started fishing at 8:10 a.m., and in 80 minutes he had caught 8 trout. The young man’s success was a very pleasant and positive start to the day for both of us. The next angler was a Senior Lifetime license holder who was fishing at the Lloyd Avenue Bridge, only about 200 yards from where Matt had been fishing. As I approached this older gentleman, I smiled and asked, “Are we having any luck?” To my surprise, he turned and growled with more than a little attitude. “I have been fishing in this spot since daybreak and not a single nibble;” he complained. “There aren’t any fish left in this creek, and you should start stocking more.” All I could do was turn and smile, imagining that the fish knew exactly who should get their illusive nibble and who should not.—WCO Thomas E. Benevento, Southern Chester County.

It’s in the mail

Recently, while patrolling with DWCO Robert Reiner at Memorial Lake State Park, I was watching several people fishing from across the lake. As I walked around the lake to check fishing licenses, a man and a woman watched me as I approached them. They did not think I saw them hide their fishing rods in the bushes. The couple then walked to the parking lot and got into their car. When the man started the car, I
walked up beside the driver’s window and said, “Sir, why are you leaving without your fishing rods?” The man explained that they had forgotten their fishing licenses at home and that they were driving to their house to get them and would be right back. Waterways Conservation Officers hear this story over and over. Usually, they really don’t have a valid license at home. I explained to the couple that I could save them a thirty-five mile round trip by having them sign a Notice of Violation (NOV) form and that they would be required to mail their licenses to me with a copy of this form within seven days. I also explained that they could continue to fish today, and I warned them that if they did not have a valid fishing license, they should tell me now, otherwise they would not only be charged for fishing without a license, but would also be charged with giving false and fraudulent statements to an officer. The man looked me straight in the eye and said, “Officer, I’ve been honest with you right from the beginning. After you get our licenses in the mail, you’ll want to shake my hand the next time you see me.” After DWCO Reiner and I issued the NOV forms and gave them their copies, I said to the man that since I probably wouldn’t be seeing him again for a while, I wanted to shake his hand right now. This put a big smile on his face. I was really glad I shook his hand that day, because a few days later I received a pair of fishing licenses in the mail that were purchased prior to that day along the lake. — WCO Douglas L. Deppen, Lebanon and Southern Dauphin Counties.

Bright Eyes and Shiny Braces

My tall, thin, fourteen-year-old son was simply a sight to behold in Dad’s waders and wading shoes that required three layers of extra thick socks to get them close to fitting. But I didn't chuckle or even call attention to his attire. He wasn't that excited about this trip to Erie for some early spring steelhead fishing. Cool weather and overcast conditions had dimmed his enthusiasm.

Our guide for this trip was Fish Man, an affable and knowledgeable friend of mine with whom I have fished for many years. Fish Man immediately sensed the reluctance of a teenage boy to be in Erie in an uncomfortable outfit on a cold day and went right at him. “Hey Logan, we’re going to get you your first steelhead today,” he promised. “In fact, I think that you will out-fish your Dad today.” Logan liked the idea of a guarantee to catch a fish. Fortunately, I knew that these were not hollow promises, but rather that Fish Man would deliver. First, I have never gone fishless with this masterful guide of the Erie water system. And second, if Fish Man devoted his fish catching prowess to Logan, instead of me, then guess what—in all likelihood, I probably would be out-fished.

Fish Man has an innate ability to teach. He connects with people, and young folks take immediately to his educated, but easy-going, style. My son was no exception, and it was heartening to watch. During the drive to Walnut Creek, and then as we walked into the stream, Fish Man continued to draw my son into his world of loving the outdoors. The stories flowed as easily from Fish Man as any Lake Erie tributary does after the spring thaw. And Logan was buying them—hook, line and sinker. They had connected, and Logan had long ago forgotten about the clumsiness of his outfit, now laden with a poncho as the drizzle started as he landed his first Erie steelhead. Not one to smile profusely, all I could see were braces and bright eyes as he proudly displayed the soon-to-be-released fish for me to capture on film.

And so went the day, fish after fish, all successfully put back into the cold creek unharmed, a fact that I would learn later was especially meaningful to Logan. To his credit, Fish Man took the time to explain to him the various rock structures and compositions that could be seen on the 100’ high walls along the stream. The two of them also spent time fossil hunting, finding remnants of what were once delicate plant leaves, now permanently engraved on the shale stones. From each fish caught and released to each stone turned over, wisdom about nature and life was being transferred in a manner few experience. It was so much fun to fish with my son, even if, or especially because, I was out-fished. — PA Fish & Boat Commissioner G. Warren Elliott.