

Wildlife Officer Has Job That Suits His Hobbies



WILDLIFE OFFICER FRED TAYLOR of Ash hitches up his boat prepares to patrol the Waccamaw River on a recent Saturday.

STAFF PHOTO BY DOUG RUTTER

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Fred Taylor has a pretty good job for someone who likes to hunt deer and duck, and fish in the Waccamaw River.

His job as an enforcement officer with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission takes him outdoors every day where he can breathe fresh air and converse with sportsmen like himself.

Taylor, who lives on Big Neck Road in the Ash community, has been a wildlife officer for 14 years. He started out in Harnett County and transferred to Cumberland County before settling in Brunswick County eight years ago.

"This county's got a lot more activity as far as hunting, fishing and boating," Taylor said. "I like to hunt and fish, and I can do a whole lot more hunting down here."

As a wildlife officer, it's Taylor's job to enforce hunting, fishing and boating regulations and teach students safe hunting and boating practices. He's one of approximately 200 officers in the state.

Taylor's duties include patrolling inland waterways, inspecting boats for safety equipment, investigating boating accidents and searching for lost hunters. He shares the load in Brunswick County with Wayne Miracle, who works the Southport area.

And then there are the alligators. Brunswick County is home to a healthy population of alligators, and Taylor's called on to relocate about six or seven of them every year from populated areas to the Green Swamp.

When wildlife officers move an alligator, they use a noose to keep the reptile's mouth shut. Then they tie the alligator's legs behind its back so it can't move.

Taylor said the largest alligator he's moved was the 500-pounder that came up on the strand at Holden Beach one night last September. The 12-foot long reptile took two officers nearly three hours to capture.

"He was so big we couldn't really just walk up to him and throw the noose around him," Taylor recalled in a recent interview. "He was just about as tough to turn loose as he was to catch. He was a real strong alligator."

Taylor said there has never been a report of an alligator attack in Brunswick County, and there shouldn't be as long as people don't feed them.

"As long as they stay afraid of people and eat their natural food, they'll stay away from people," he said.

The Macon County native said he loves working in the outdoors. He worked indoors in the textile industry for eight years before getting a position with the wildlife commission.

"This is a pretty demanding job as far as hours," he adds. "It's hard work and there's a lot of time involved, but there's a lot of rewards in it too."

One of the best parts of the job is working with students, whether it be seventh-graders taking a boating safety course or high school teens competing on the hunter safety team.

Taylor has been teaching the hunter safety program in Brunswick County for six years. The West Brunswick team recently won their first district championship and will compete for the state title later this month in Raleigh.

The wildlife officer said members of the hunter safety team don't get the same recognition as basketball or football players, but they learn important skills they can use the rest of their lives.

"It's fun to watch the kids who can't excel in some of the big sports do well with the hunter safety program," Taylor said. "We're real proud of the kids who go through the program."

State law requires the hunter safety course for all new hunters when they reach age 16 and other first-time license buyers, such as people moving to North Carolina from other states.

The hunter safety class is part of the Future Farmers of America (FFA) program, which Taylor said has become more of a wildlife enforcement program in recent years because fewer people are involved in farming.

Taylor said he tries to teach young people that they should eat whatever they kill, whether it be a dozen crappie hooked in the Waccamaw River or a 10-point buck shot in the Green Swamp. "If everybody catches a lot of fish that they're not eating, then there's not as many the next time."

Comparing Brunswick County with other counties, Taylor said local hunters are fortunate to live in an area with a lot of vacant woodlands.

Hunters need to respect the land and the abundant game that's available so it will be around for future generations to enjoy, he stresses. "That's the thing I try to instill in them is to treat the game and the land like it was their own."

As part of an effort to restock the area with wild turkeys, Taylor said the wildlife commission released 15 of the birds this spring on the Waccamaw River. Each turkey cost the state \$500.

If the population grows as expected, Taylor said there could be a local turkey season in seven or eight years. "If people will leave them alone and not destroy them and let them raise, they'll be all up and down the Waccamaw River."

If there's a down side to being a wildlife officer, Taylor said it's dealing with the people he catches breaking laws.

Approaching someone who is illegally hunting at night can be dangerous, he said, because hunters know they stand to lose their license, gun and vehicle if they are prosecuted.

Taylor doesn't like to talk about it, but hunters have taken serious shots at him twice. "You come home at night and you're thankful that everything worked out OK," he said. "It gets hairy sometimes."

Although it's his job to enforce the rules, Taylor said he gets along with most of the local hunters and fishermen. "Everybody knows me and how I work and I try to be fair, so it works out pretty good," he said.

This is the first year local wildlife officers have used a deer decoy to catch night hunters. Taylor said the decoy's first season was rough. Hunters shot it, and a few of them tried to steal it.

Taylor said he's used the decoy mostly in the Green Swamp and it has helped him enforce hunting rules. Twelve people have been arrested so far using the decoy and all of them have been convicted.

Besides hunting and fishing, Taylor enjoys clogging with his 10-year-old daughter, Holly. Video shot at a recent clogging competition is proof positive that the 46-year-old is still pretty light on his feet.

"I like clogging because it's a family activity," Taylor said. "It's something my daughter and I can do together, and we try to stress that it's a healthy drug-free activity."

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