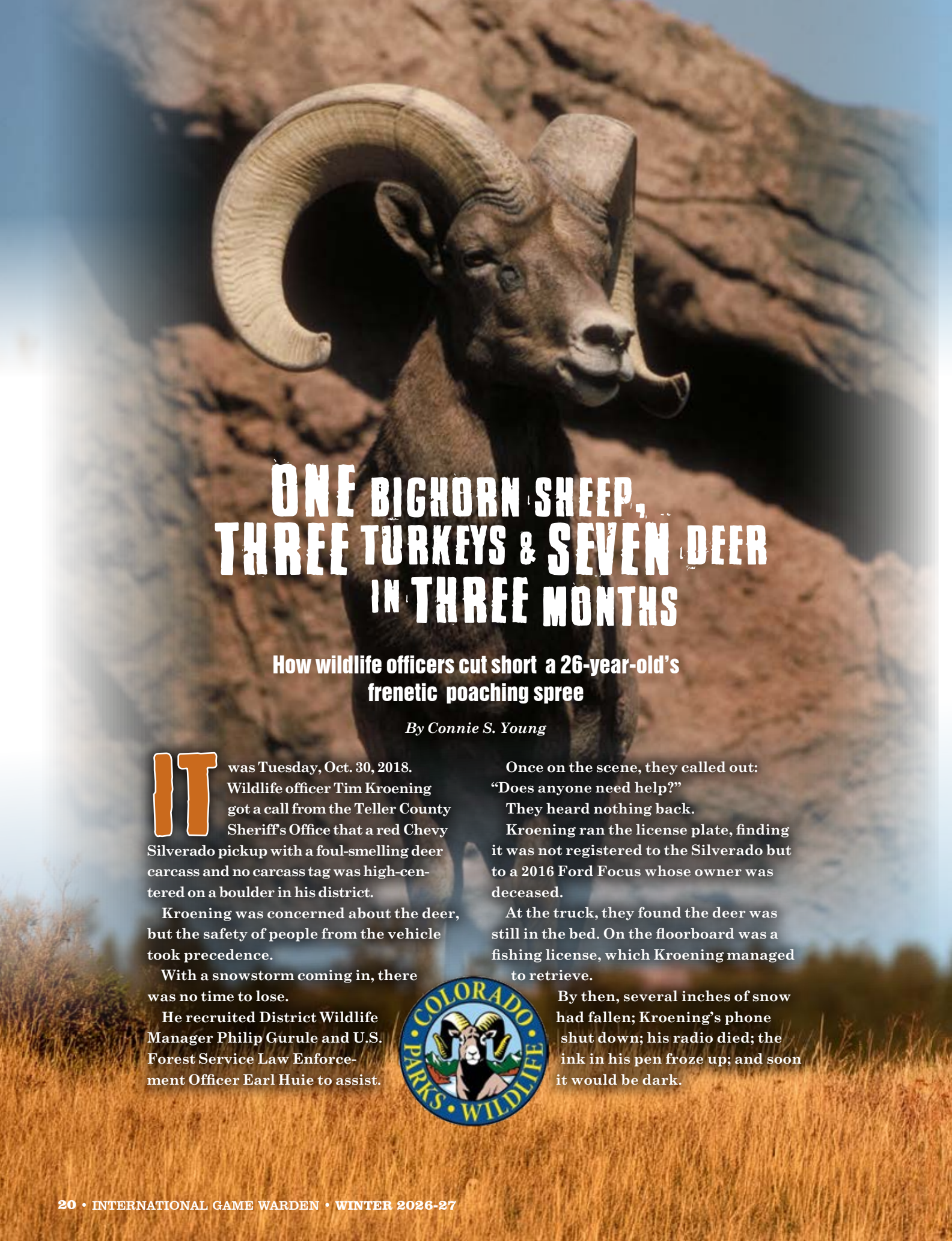


ONE BIGHORN SHEEP, THREE TURKEYS & SEVEN DEER IN THREE MONTHS

How wildlife officers cut short a 26-year-old's frenetic poaching spree

By Connie S. Young

IT was Tuesday, Oct. 30, 2018. Wildlife officer Tim Kroening got a call from the Teller County Sheriff's Office that a red Chevy Silverado pickup with a foul-smelling deer carcass and no carcass tag was high-centered on a boulder in his district.

Kroening was concerned about the deer, but the safety of people from the vehicle took precedence.

With a snowstorm coming in, there was no time to lose.

He recruited District Wildlife Manager Philip Gurule and U.S. Forest Service Law Enforcement Officer Earl Huie to assist.

Once on the scene, they called out: "Does anyone need help?"

They heard nothing back.

Kroening ran the license plate, finding it was not registered to the Silverado but to a 2016 Ford Focus whose owner was deceased.

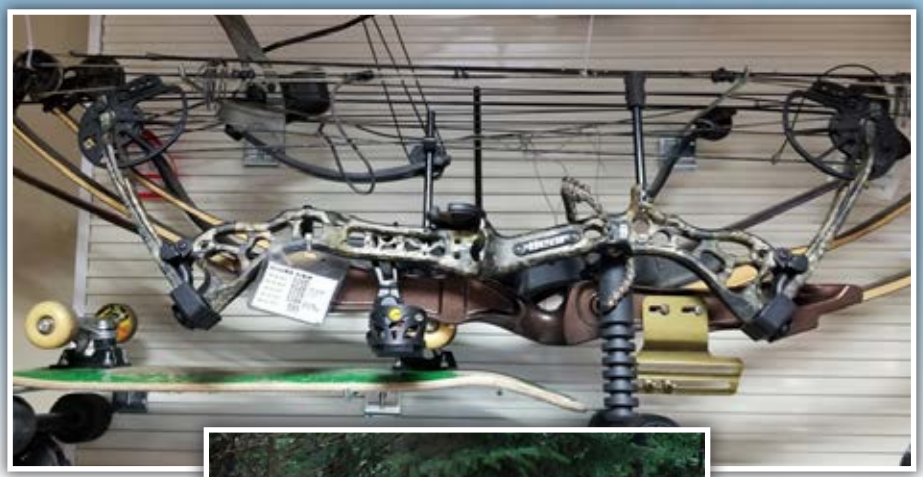
At the truck, they found the deer was still in the bed. On the floorboard was a fishing license, which Kroening managed to retrieve.

By then, several inches of snow had fallen; Kroening's phone shut down; his radio died; the ink in his pen froze up; and soon it would be dark.

IT WAS TIME TO GO.

They loaded the deer in the bed of the OHV and held on as the vehicle slipped and slid up the steep, slick, rocky trail.

In the CPW database, Kroening and Gurule found that five people had licenses for that unit, but not one had hunted in the gulch where the truck was found. Also, the person whose fishing license they found in the truck had no 2018 hunting license whatsoever.



Colorado wildlife officers seized the suspect's compound bow from a pawn shop near the man's home.



On Nov. 4, 2018, the officers learned the truck was gone.

While on his regular patrol a few days later, Gurule asked a ranch manager acquaintance to call him if he saw a red Chevy Silverado.

And he did – that very day. He told Gurule he had helped a young woman find her campsite, where he also found the Silverado. But when wildlife officers later drove to the campsite, it was empty – no trailer, no truck, no people.

What was still there? Turkey feathers and a rotting turkey head.

On Dec. 20, 2018, a U.S. Forest Service law enforcement officer who was checking hunters in Chaffee County would have a "you have got to be kidding me" kind of day.

She stopped a red Chevy Silverado – yes, that Chevy Silverado – and saw a loaded firearm inside. So she told the driver he would be getting a citation. Seconds later, he floored it. But instead of escaping, he lost control, tumbled down a steep embankment, and rolled the vehicle, at which point a bag containing animal quarters flew right out of the back of the truck.

WHAT KROENING REALLY WANTED, THOUGH, WAS FOR HIM TO LOSE HIS HUNTING PRIVILEGES FOR LIFE.

He and his passenger then took off on foot until the officer showed her rifle and ordered them to stop. She held them at bay until the two men were taken to a hospital and later to the Chaffee County Jail, where the driver said the deer quarters were from roadkill he planned to package and freeze; he just hadn't had the time.

For those crimes, the man later pleaded guilty to unlawful possession and reckless driving and was fined $949.

On Feb. 2, 2019, a Fremont County landowner contacted CPW officer Zach Holder, reporting he had seen a camp with what appeared to be animal quarters. Holder checked it out, finding spent ammunition, archery equipment, a Colorado big game regulations brochure, and a trailer with no license plate. But the kicker? Partially hidden under a bush were the heads of six deer and a ¾-curl bighorn sheep.



Simultaneously, a CPW investigator was conducting surveillance in Colorado Springs at residences where the man may have been staying. The investigator also knew they needed to find the suspect's compound bow, so he asked himself what he would do with it if he were a poacher.

His answer? Sell it to a pawn shop. So off he went to the one down the street, within minutes finding what appeared to be the suspect's bow.

Kroening and Gurule petitioned the court for a warrant to search the shop and seize the bow, quiver, arrows, sales receipt, and video footage of the man selling the items.

The judge signed the warrant that night.

Days later, Kroening also obtained a search warrant for the suspect's residence and an arrest warrant with the bond set at $10,000 per animal.

At 8 a.m. on Feb. 15, 2019, some 14 CPW officers and a U.S. Forest Service officer convened near the suspect's home, ready to serve both warrants.

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District Wildlife Manager Phil Gurule (left) and now-Area Wildlife Manager Tim Kroening sit in a side-by-side similar to the one they used to reach the truck. They rode back on rocky trails in a snowstorm with the deer in the bed.

They caravanned to the house, then hustled to their assigned posts.

Gurule had been told the front door wouldn't open, so he headed inside the garage, shouting, "Police!"

Then he and Kroening heard a commotion behind the house – the suspect was attempting to flee through the backyard. But wildlife officer Robert Carochi drew his gun and ordered, "Put your hands up!" Once the suspect complied, he was frisked, cuffed, and placed in a patrol vehicle.

Meanwhile, one by one, three men appeared in the garage. They were similarly frisked, cuffed, and directed to sit on the sidewalk.

CPW officers collected meat, a front quarter, pieces of bone from the house, and wildlife parts and hunting equipment from the suspect's vehicle. Drugs and drug paraphernalia were found in the bedroom of one man, who was arrested.

A wildlife investigator went to the patrol car to see if the suspect would talk. But his hands were shaking, and he admitted he had been smoking methamphetamine. So there would be no interview. He was taken to the El Paso Criminal Justice Center, later being charged with felony tampering with physical evidence used in a crime (selling archery equipment), misdemeanor vehicle licensing violations, and 20 misdemeanor wildlife crimes.

He pleaded guilty to illegal possession of a bighorn sheep and three or more big game animals. He was fined $4,600, sentenced to six months in jail with three years of supervised probation, and had to forfeit all weapons and gear he used while poaching.

What Kroening really wanted, though, was for him to lose his hunting privileges for life.



Then-District Wildlife Manager Tim Kroening was alerted by the local sheriff's office that a truck in his district was high centered on a boulder with a dead deer in the back.

He got just that. The Colorado Wildlife Commission and CPW state hearing examiner gave the poacher a lifetime suspension of his hunting and fishing privileges.

It was a far cry from the game warden the man said he had always wanted to become.

Kroening just shook his head. "He's the furthest thing possible from our profession."

➲ *Connie S. Young is a freelance writer in Denver who has covered more than 30 law enforcement cases for Colorado Outdoors magazine.*