



Oregon State Police patrol for poachers from the sky



Oregon State Police Sgt. Lynn Withers, right, meets with Troopers Aaron Baimbridge, far left, and Scott Jennings on Oct. 20 at Roseburg Regional Airport before leaving to patrol for poachers.



Oregon State Police Sgt. Lynn Withers, right, and trooper Scott Jennings meet Oct. 20 at Roseburg Regional Airport before leaving to patrol for poachers.



Oregon State Police trooper Don Frerichs receives information on a potential poaching case on Oct. 20 in the Cavitt Creek Road area.



Oregon State Police trooper Don Frerichs investigates an area off Cavitt Creek Road on Oct. 20 for signs of poaching.



Oregon State Police Trooper Don Frerichs checks the serial number on a hunting rifle confiscated Oct. 20 in the Cavitt Creek Road area.



Oregon State Police Sgt. Lynn Withers, left, speaks with Trooper Don Frerichs on Oct. 20 after stopping two men suspected of poaching in the Cavitt Creek Road area.



Oregon State Police trooper Don Frerichs investigates an area off Cavitt Creek Road on Oct. 20 for signs of poaching.

High in the sky, two Oregon State Police troopers are on patrol.

They're tracking headlights below. At 6,000 to 8,000 feet, the plane isn't easy to detect from the ground. But with high-tech equipment, the troopers can follow a vehicle's dome light.

The troopers in the air are in radio contact with troopers on the ground. They're all looking for nighttime poachers.

On a recent night, Trooper Scott Jennings piloted the 1977 Cessna, based in Klamath Falls, with Trooper Aaron Baimbridge on board. From their perch, they alerted ground-based Troopers Don Frerichs, Wayne Merritt, Jason Stone and Lynn Withers to suspicious activity.

"It's an expensive piece of equipment," said Withers, a sergeant who supervises the Fish and Wildlife Division in the Roseburg OSP office. "But I think the deterrent factor and the number of solid cases it has helped make justifies the expense. People have no clue we're up there, and that's pretty fun."

Depending on weather, maintenance schedule and availability of troopers, Jennings flies the plane about three times a week in the fall. He patrols over the southern half of the state. OSP also has aircraft based in Salem, Bend and Baker City.

It's illegal to shine headlights or other types of lights on a game animal. "An animal crossing the road in front of you through the lights is not illegal," Withers said. "But when you jockey a rig around, blocking both lanes, that's the same offense as shining a spotlight out into a field."

Jennings has flown over Douglas County several times during the past couple of months, looking for suspicious lights.

"I would say it's pretty effective," Jennings said. "I've heard through the grapevine people know the plane is out there."

Baimbridge joins Jennings for flights over Douglas County. With six years of experience on the ground, Baimbridge can direct troopers into remote areas to check out suspicious nighttime activity.

Observations from the air netted results on four poaching cases in the past six weeks. In one case, the plane tracked a vehicle to a residential driveway, where a trooper apprehended suspects and confiscated a poached animal.

“There’s a lot of technology in the plane. It’s surprising how easy it is to see what’s going on below,” Baimbridge said. “The other night we had situations in the Glide, Days Creek and Sutherlin areas, and I was able to be part of all three.

“Even if we don’t catch people, the fact people know we go up deters a lot of them,” he added.

Withers said there’s been significant improvement in high-tech equipment in recent years for ground and air vehicles, making it easier to see nighttime activities.

Although poaching might not be as prevalent as it was in Douglas County several decades ago, the troopers said there’s still plenty of illegal hunting at night.

Withers said troopers rely on tips from the public about shots heard or lights seen at night. If a plane is in the air, information can be relayed, and the aircraft can be overhead in minutes.

“The plane gives the pilot and the observer the opportunity to see 10 to 20 miles at a time, versus a trooper on the ground, who is only able to see a ridge line or the road he’s traveling on,” Withers said. “The plane can cover half the county in one night.”

Jennings said from what he’s seen from the air while flying over Southern Oregon, illegal activities are a major problem.

“As law enforcement, we’re being proactive in using the plane,” he said. “Maybe it’ll stop future poaching from happening. I think it’s well worth it.”

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