

In a test of their field search skills, warden Lori Oldfather and detection-dog-in-training Jin uncover a hidden squirrel carcass.



ON THE SCENT OF POACHERS

Rescued dogs help game wardens in the war against wildlife criminals

BY JULIE FALCONER

By mid-afternoon on training day, the smell of decaying body parts starts to waft through the sprawling warehouse, an equipment depot at the California Department of Fish and Game's regional office in Rancho Cordova. A strong breeze blowing through a gap under the south-side door passes over a plastic bucket with aging abalone, moves through the wooden pallets covering recently collected roadkill, and circulates to the opposite end of the building where a search is about to begin.

Rookie-in-training Jin has spent the morning outside, bouncing in and out of nearly a dozen watercraft in pursuit of invasive quagga and zebra mussels. Even so, the lanky yellow Labrador exudes intense energy, haunches vibrating with the effort to sit still. At the other end of the leash, game warden Lori Oldfather is also excited—and anxious for her partner to pass this hurdle to becoming a certified detection dog.

At a signal from the judge, warden and dog stride briskly across the concrete floor and down aisles bisected by towering wooden shelves, retired office furniture, and a sporting goods store's worth of outdoor gear. They work side by side in a methodical pattern that tests Oldfather's investigative skills as much as Jin's olfactory talents. When the dog shows interest in an area that turns up empty, her handler must calculate where the odor has originated and guide the search to those spots.

They locate the first two targets—a bear paw wrapped in plastic and the tattered remnants of a band-tailed pigeon—in quick succession. With each find, Jin receives lavish praise from Oldfather followed by a brief play session with a rope toy.

The pup then breezes past the third hidden object and heads to a group of pallets piled high with boxes, where an odor strong enough to disturb a human nose is now emanating. She scrambles atop the shifting mountain of cardboard, nosing each surface at a frenzied pace. The air is moving toward the back wall, and the scent is pooling several feet behind the source, temporarily stumping the team. But Oldfather senses they're close to a find and guides Jin around the bottom perimeter until they locate their quarry, a squirrel carcass wedged beneath the wooden slats.

Backtracking in search of the missed item, the determined dog eventually discovers the faded deer leg, hidden in a basket attached to a bicycle. Oldfather excitedly rehashes the details of the search with the judge, an experienced dog trainer and warden with the DFG special operations unit. Meanwhile, Jin races down the aisle after her toy, unaware that she's completed a major milestone in her new career and will soon be directing her energy to the vast and expanding underworld of wildlife poaching.

After she sniffs out an invasive mussel on the side of a boat, Jin receives praise from warden Lynette Shimek. Jin was a problem pooch with few prospects before Shimek transformed her into a valued detection dog.



Outside the warehouse, dog and warden teams continue to work in the adjacent boat lot, honing their ability to detect the tiny nonnative mussels threatening California's waterways. News of Jin's triumph elicits smiles and congratulations from the tight-knit group, but it's particularly gratifying for Lynette Shimek, a game warden who spent nine months transforming the Lab from an emotional wreck into a happy, healthy dog with a job.

Last year, Shimek's dedication caught the attention of HSUS California state director Jennifer Fearing. Impressed by the concept of a program that protects wildlife while also giving cast-off animals a second chance, The HSUS chipped in to help defray the costs of food and veterinary care for Jin and four other rescued dogs in the unit.

Jin's daily routines are a far cry from her past life. Purchased from a pet store as a puppy, she spent her first year in and out of shelters. By the time she came to the DFG

in 2008, she was a gaunt-faced dog with chronic diarrhea, no manners, and a raging battle with her inner demons. A noise as benign as a hiccup would cause her to jump up in the air and fight an imaginary monster, says Shimek. The only thing Jin had going for her was an obsessive zeal for finding balls—and the devotion of Shimek, a dog lover working to build a top-notch K-9 unit that would help even the odds in California's fight against poachers.

UNGUARDED WEALTH

For most people, the word "poaching" conjures images of exotic species: elephants with their tusks cut off, rhinos robbed of their horns, primates slaughtered for the underground market in African bushmeat. But poaching in the U.S. is equally gruesome. Bears are killed for their gallbladders and other body parts, which are used in traditional Asian medicine. Deer are shot and decapitated for trophies. Salmon from

dwindling populations are chopped up and used as bait to catch at-risk sturgeon, who in turn are sliced open for the eggs that can be processed into high-priced caviar.

The cumulative impact on wildlife is staggering. Experts estimate that tens of millions of animals are taken illegally out of our nation's fields, forests, and suburbs each year, says Andrew Page, senior director of The HSUS's Wildlife Abuse Campaign. Millions more are poached from streams, rivers, oceans, and other waterways.

No species is off-limits. Poaching incidents in 2009 alone involved protected species such as the bald eagle, black abalone, California condor, elephant seal, Florida panther, and sea otter. More common but less publicized were the countless other cases in which moose, elk, deer, antelope, and other commonly hunted species were shot from roadsides and left to die in fields and even suburban backyards.

The motivations behind such crimes

POOCHES ON PATROL

Five rescued dogs have found their calling through the California Department of Fish and Game's K-9 detection dog program. Working vast terrains in the nation's third largest state, these talented pups bring boundless energy and sensitive noses to the serious job of catching poachers. Their rescue resumes and work ethic inspired a donation from The HSUS toward the costs of their care.

KATIE

STATS: 4-year-old spayed female Lab mix
TERRITORY: Siskiyou and Northern Shasta counties

Katie was initially adopted as a ride-along buddy by warden Joe Powell. The Lab mix fulfilled that role and more; she graduated with top honors from the K-9 program's third academy and has been on the clock with Powell ever since. With dozens of miles of river to patrol, Powell appreciates how much time Katie saves him simply by directing him up- or downstream in the search for anglers. Her only failing is a tendency to fall asleep during long surveillance gigs and to start snoring when Powell is listening for gunshots. "So I have to get out of the truck so she can sleep," Powell says.



COOPER

STATS: 4-year-old neutered male hound mix
TERRITORY: Alameda and Contra Costa counties

Cooper was adopted from an Oakland shelter by warden Roxanne Bowers, who had heard that the department would be launching a K-9 program and wanted to be ready with her own dog. Though the hound mix has been known to chew up gear and "eat the evidence," he's more than made up for these youthful mistakes. He provides companionship and security during surveillance work and serves as a great ambassador for the DFG. "He's the star; I'm the roadie. It's all about Cooper," Bowers says.



JIN (AKA JINBEAR)

STATS: 2-year-old spayed female Labrador
TERRITORY: San Joaquin and Calaveras counties

In 2008, Jin was a painfully thin, high-strung dog who'd already been through three homes in her first year of life. She fought a leash, jumped on people, barked constantly, and wasn't house-trained, says warden Lynette Shimek, who dedicated herself to mending the troubled pooch's ways. One year later and 15 pounds heavier, Jin passed her first detection test in November and is now training in the field, where her "endless happiness is always a plus" for partner Lori Oldfather. The Lab's current challenges are learning to follow commands in a distracting environment and to resist eating the animal carcasses she finds.



WRIGLEY

STATS: 4-year-old spayed female Lab mix
TERRITORY: El Dorado, Amador, and Alpine counties

Warden Christy Wurster never thought the pooch she adopted from a homeless man would be more than a pet: "I didn't think she was very smart because all she cared about was the tennis ball and she was too high-energy." The mutt graduated with flying colors from the DFG K-9 program's first academy. In the field, Wurster appreciates that dogs like Wrigley make wardens' jobs safer. "We can watch the suspects while the dog searches the car." And at public events, Wrigley is a popular representative of the DFG. "Everyone knows me by my dog now," Wurster says.




RUSTY

STATS: 3-year-old neutered male Lab mix
TERRITORY: El Dorado, Amador, and Alpine counties

When warden Erick Elliot was introduced to his four-legged partner, the former shelter dog was "wild and crazy almost to the point where he wouldn't listen to me at all," Elliot says. But with patient training, Rusty learned to direct his energy for the benefit of California's wildlife; he has located deer and bear carcasses in the field, enabling Elliot to get GPS coordinates of the exact kill sites. Rusty's transformation from his early days still amazes Elliot: "Give this rascal a job, and it changes [him]. All this energy becomes useful."





In the Castro Valley foothills near Oakland, hound mix Cooper and warden Roxanne Bowers search for a wounded wild turkey shot by a poacher. The California Department of Fish and Game estimates that a well-trained detection dog saves more than 800 personnel hours a year.

problem.

Given the sparse funds allocated for the enforcement of hunting and fishing laws, game wardens need all the help they can get, particularly in cash-strapped states like California.

“We’re barely hanging on, we’re barely able to answer the calls, and we know we’re only scratching the surface of the amount of poaching that’s taking place,” Foy says.

Encompassing 156,000 square miles, about half of which is public land, and more than 1,100 miles of coastline, the Golden State has a rich variety of ecosystems and wildlife—more than 600 bird species; a vast array of reptiles, amphibians, and marine mammals; carnivores ranging from coyotes to mountain lions; and large mammals such as black bears and bighorn sheep. But with too few people guarding this natural wealth, the state’s wildlife crime rivals its illegal drug trade in terms of revenue generated, Foley says. The commercial trade in wildlife and wildlife parts alone is estimated at \$100 million annually.

Yet California has the lowest number of field-level game wardens per capita in the nation: about 210 when fully staffed, or one for every 191,000 people, Foley says. By comparison, Florida, which has a similar coastline but half the population, has more than 700. For the men and women on the front lines of California’s wildlife wars, this translates into an average patrol area of nearly 800 square miles. And in addition to poaching, the state’s wardens must investigate a range of habitat destruction crimes within their vast territories, not to mention industrial pollution and dumping of household wastes.

“You have so much area to patrol, but there’s only one of you and you can only patrol one area at a time,” says warden Joe Powell. Lurking in the back of his mind, he adds, are constant worries about what’s happening in all the places he can’t get to.

STAFFING SOLUTIONS

These realities spurred Shimek, a warden for 20 years, to create a K-9 unit trained to work wildlife crimes, an idea that first took root in the 1990s with her adopted border collie, Brett.

Like many other field wardens, Shimek

are simple: greed and cheap thrills. “I’ve worked in this job now for 22 years,” says Nancy Foley, chief of the California DFG law enforcement division, “... and I never saw anybody poach animals to put meat on the table.”

In California, the recent increase in poaching for profit has been particularly worrisome, says Sacramento-based warden Patrick Foy. Last year, DFG officials busted organized commercial operations selling a range of animals for their meat: lobsters, white sturgeons, abalone, deer, geese, and squirrels. But even lone scofflaws can do a significant amount of damage, as did the two men caught in 2008, one with 335 birds, mostly waterfowl, in his freezer, and the other with 23 deer tails tacked to a wall.

As disturbing as such cases are, they represent just the tip of the problem. It’s estimated that only 1 to 5 percent of poachers are caught, says Page; most of the crimes are never even discovered. To combat these dismal numbers, The HSUS and its Wildlife Land Trust affiliate have been reaching out to state wildlife agencies with offers to help their conservation enforcement efforts. So far, that support has taken the form of enhanced rewards for poaching tipsters, donations of robotic decoys and surveillance equipment, and grants to innovative programs like the DFG’s K-9 unit. HSUS outreach has also resulted in more than 100 news stories on poaching cases and tips for concerned citizens interesting in helping to curb the

often brought her pet to work for companionship during the long hours of driving and surveillance. But she soon realized that Brett had the potential to do a lot more than ride shotgun in the truck.

He was smart and inquisitive, and like other dogs, gifted with a sense of smell estimated to be a million times stronger than that of humans. This is a crucial skill given that successful poaching convictions often hinge on small details, such as the exact location of the perpetrator when he fired a weapon; a pair of dogs can find an expended bullet casing in a 10-acre crime scene in about 15 minutes, says Shimek.

Already an experienced canine obedience trainer, Shimek began teaching Brett to detect ammunition and animal carcasses. But no one took the dog seriously, she says, until he tracked down a key piece of evidence in the shooting of a highway police officer.

After Brett succumbed to cancer in 2001, Shimek spent four years lobbying for an official K-9 unit and two more piecing together the necessary funding. Even so, in the early days, she paid thousands of dollars for dog food and veterinary care out of her own pocket. To bridge the funding gap, the nonprofit Californians Turn in Poachers and Polluters agreed to help raise money, and The HSUS and other conservation-minded organizations



Dedicated wardens are key to the detection dog program: They must complete a four-week academy, constantly challenge their dogs' skills, and attend regular group training sessions.

donated to CalTIP's K-9 fund.

Shimek has since led four K-9 training academies with a total of 19 graduates. These efforts have not only provided wardens with an extra set of eyes and ears, a powerful nose, and a partner they can depend on—they've also provided five rescued dogs with lifelong homes and jobs they excel at.

It's a trend Shimek plans to continue. Canines with the excessive energy and borderline obsessiveness that mark a good detection dog are also the kind "people are continually sending to shelters," she says. "People think they're bad dogs, but they're not. They have a strong work ethic and you just need to channel that."

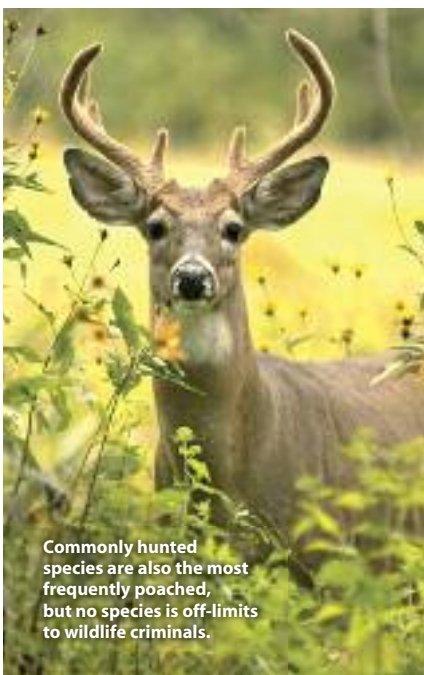
Using positive training methods, Shimek first teaches each dog basic obedience, followed by training to track people, detect invasive mussels on watercraft, and locate commonly poached wildlife species as well as firearms, gunpowder, and spent ammunition. The process costs upwards of \$6,500 per detection dog but yields a tremendous payout. The DFG estimates that each four-legged staffer saves at least 800 personnel hours a year.

Sometimes the mere presence of a dog saves wardens precious time in the field by thwarting attempts to outsmart law enforcement. Squirrels stuffed behind spare tires, bear gallbladders wedged under hub-

caps, deer carcasses stashed beneath piles of junk in the backs of horse trailers, guns buried under brush piles—the state's game wardens have seen it all. "People might think they're clever enough to hide it so you won't find it," says warden Erick Elliot. But when he mentions that he has a trained dog ready to search—and that lying to a warden is a violation—"people will fess up most times."

For wardens investigating marijuana grow camps—organized drug operations where poaching and pollution are prolific—the K-9 unit also produces "dual-purpose" dogs, German shepherds with additional training to protect their handlers and apprehend suspects. This could seem like overkill to people who think of wardens as doing nothing more hazardous than checking fishing licenses. But according to the DFG, game wardens are more likely to be assaulted in the line of duty than highway patrol officers. They often work alone in remote areas with no cell phone reception, hours away from any potential backup. Most of their contacts have weapons, and many don't like law enforcement of any stripe. "People are so willing to fight with an officer," says Shimek, "but they're not willing to fight with a canine."

While none of the rescued dogs in the unit is certified as dual-purpose, their unimposing looks make them excellent



Commonly hunted species are also the most frequently poached, but no species is off-limits to wildlife criminals.

At the Harbor Bay Parkway in Alameda, Calif., detection dog Cooper helps bridge the divide between anglers and warden Roxanne Bowers.



peacekeepers in countless situations, defusing anger so no one gets hurt. Lab mix Rusty, a former shelter dog rumored to have once been as wild as Jin, wins people over with his playful exuberance. “When I bring this dog into a hunting camp, he’s an icebreaker,” Elliot says. “You can be talking to violators, and they’ll still look at him and say, ‘Nice-looking dog.’”

PUBLIC RELATIONS

The day before the training session, on a patrol of a popular fishing spot along the San Francisco Bay, Roxanne Bowers is searching for signs of sturgeon poaching. While she works her way down a long line of fishermen that stretches to a distant ferry terminal, many anglers refuse to make eye contact with the woman in uniform, but her freckled-faced hound mix Cooper draws smiles, especially from families

with children.

“Your English is much better; it’s very good,” Bowers says to a young Vietnamese man, a regular at the spot. “Good luck today,” she tells another pair after Cooper inspects their backpacks for hidden fish. “You guys will get something—you’re in the right place at the right time. It’s a good fishing spot.”

Wardens call this approach “cultivating your district”—establishing trust with local residents, including law-abiding hunters and anglers, who are often key informants on poaching crimes. The sunny-natured Cooper has a knack for making friends, and sometimes that goodwill trickles over to the person by his side. The resulting gain in citizen lookouts for the

wildlife protection cause helps wardens compensate for the realities of understaffing.

Even if Bowers doesn’t win any confidantes, she and Cooper make an impression and, she hopes, help change the minds of people who view law enforcement as the

enemy. It’s a form of community policing in which the dog-warden team excels, as exemplified in her story of a recent encounter with a

teenage boy who was “mean-mugging” her until he spied Cooper. The boy asked if he could pet the dog, and all of the sudden, the would-be hoodlum “turned into a sweet, loving kid,” Bowers says.

While the detection dogs make great ambassadors to the public, perhaps more

“When I bring this dog into a hunting camp, he’s an icebreaker.”

Uniting Against Poachers

While coordinating state ballot initiatives against leghold traps, bear baiting, and captive hunting in the 1990s, Wayne Pacelle made a surprising discovery: “There are a lot of hunters who agree with us, but the leadership of the hunting lobby is more extreme than the rank and file,” says the HSUS president and CEO.

This knowledge has inspired The HSUS and its Wildlife Land Trust affiliate to reach out to conservation-minded hunters—and the state agencies that license them—with offers to help combat the most egregious wildlife abuses. “In the past, the areas where we disagreed defined our relationship,” says Andrew Page, senior director of The HSUS’s Wildlife Abuse Campaign. “Now our effort is to find areas of common interests, build bridges, and work for a common good.”

In one area, there’s no disagreement: Poaching is an enormous threat to our nation’s wildlife, with tens of millions falling victim each year to outlaws who see animals as objects to be exploited for profit or destroyed for personal pleasure.

“In most cases, you can’t even use the word ‘hunter,’ ” says Robert Koons, executive director of the Humane Society Wildlife Land Trust. “So often these are just joy killings—shotguns aimed out the windows of a pickup truck, night shooting of animals blinded by bright lights, law-breakers out in the woods with guns but no license.”

But with wildlife protection taking a back seat to other budgetary priorities, and with game wardens spread thin across immense territories, fish and wildlife agencies are hampered in solving these tough crimes. The result is that most poachers go unpunished.

To help chip away at the problem, The HSUS and WLT donate grants and equipment, conduct public outreach, and push for stronger laws. They also offer rewards of up to \$2,500 for tips on poaching cases, bolstering smaller state rewards. “When it comes to poachers, the thinking is that ‘\$200 isn’t enough to sell out a buddy, but \$2,500 is,’ ” Page says.

Last year, the enhanced rewards helped bring convictions in several cases: the killing of a deer in Oregon whose headless body was dumped on a street corner; the slaughtering of an alligator in Georgia whose body parts were sawed off; and the shooting of a black bear cub in Florida, where the species is threatened.

Though the efforts have been well-received among partnering agencies—“We need every tool we can get to help combat poaching,” says California Department of Fish and Game warden Patrick Foy—

fringe elements have sought to drive a wedge in these relationships through inaccurate portrayals of The HSUS’s fight against wildlife abuse.

Extreme rhetoric from radical groups like Safari Club International, the U.S. Sportsmen’s Alliance, and the NRA helps foster this divide, Pacelle says. Their stance is no surprise, given their flagrant disregard for traditional hunting ethics: The NRA opposes bills to upgrade poaching penalties, SCI supports captive hunts that trap wild animals inside fences for easy kills, and the Sportsmen’s Alliance is all too ready to hunt polar bears to extinction.

The hypocrisy is not lost on conservationists like Ted Williams, an outdoor writer who recently ignited a fierce debate on his blog when he agreed with Pacelle’s assertion that hunters should better police themselves. “Where are hunting organizations and publications on canned hunts ... ?” Williams asked. Why don’t they speak out against “varmint” hunting, he wondered, “where prairie dogs are left to rot on

the ground and poison raptors with lead”? Why are they not vocal about Alaska’s all-out war on wolves and bears? “Usually they’re silent,” he wrote, “and when they’re not silent, they’re often on the wrong side.”

State fish and game authorities who share Williams’ sentiment are eager to collaborate with The HSUS, motivated by a mutual passion to preserve wildlife in the face of dwindling financial resources. A high-tech decoy can cost up to \$5,000 but “saves wildlife before it’s taken illegally,” says Steven Lane, a lieutenant with the Oregon State Police Fish and Wildlife Division. With the help of a robotic elk donated by The HSUS and WLT in

October, the agency busted a convicted felon who shot at the artificial animal from a vehicle.

Though criticized for working with an animal protection organization, Lane found that most of the state’s hunters appreciated this additional tool for catching wildlife thieves. “We still continue to have a faction of people who think it’s their God-given right to go out and kill wildlife,” Lane says. But law-abiding hunters and nonhunters “want a common goal—to protect wildlife.”

And when HSUS staff and state wildlife officials sit down together, they usually find common ground. “They see that we’re really not the horned creatures out there to beat up on them,” Koons says. “We start to be more sensitive to some of the issues they face, and they get to know by extension what we’re doing and some of what motivates us.”



HSUS-backed rewards for information helped three state wildlife agencies bring convictions in alligator, deer, and bear poaching cases last year.

important is their effect on the wardens themselves.

Given the rigors of the job, the odd hours, and the low pay, recruiting and retaining staff can be a challenge. Game wardens have higher educational requirements than many other types of law enforcement because they must conduct their own investigations; collect, process, and analyze evidence; and write search warrants. Nevertheless, they're some of the lowest-paid law enforcement officers in the state, Foy says.

Every year, Foy finds inspiration when training cadets at the DFG's yearly academies. "They have the same fire in their belly that I did—they want to catch poachers and polluters," he says. But he also knows that

down the road, some of these future wardens will face the tough choice of whether to leave the department for higher-paying jobs in other law enforcement agencies. And every year, he watches talented staff "leave Fish and Game because they have to pay the mortgage."

Still, many wardens have been on the job for decades and share the attitude expressed by Bowers: "Do cops protect banks because they love banks? Probably not. But I love the outdoors."

This dedication to guarding the state's wildlife is the reason the woefully understaffed DFG enforcement division still managed to bust dozens of commercial poaching operations in 2009. How many of

these successes are attributable to the fledgling K-9 unit can't be determined, but one thing is clear: The dogs have a huge impact on their handlers' morale and job satisfaction.

"It makes sense that dogs and game wardens would work side by side to protect game and the environment," Bowers says. "[Cooper] makes my day so much easier and so much brighter."

And perhaps this is the dogs' most valuable contribution to the war against poachers: They stand by the side of heroic game wardens, helping them face the frustrations of a difficult job and keep up the fight for wildlife. ■

Help Protect Wildlife from Poaching

Each year in the U.S., tens of millions of wild animals are victims of illegal hunting and fishing. Poaching is a broad term that includes, but isn't limited to, killing protected species, killing animals outside of their hunting season, exceeding legal bag limits, using illegal weapons, killing animals on closed land, or leading others to kill animals illegally as an unlicensed guide. It can also take many forms: from kids shooting songbirds in suburban backyards to organized killing of black bears for the illegal sale of their parts.

With vast territories to cover, game wardens can't always be in the right place at the right time, and most poachers go unpunished. Here's how you can help stop this assault on our nation's wildlife.

- ▶ Going for a hike? Know your state's wildlife regulations and hunting seasons so you can identify violations. Many poachers are caught only because a conscientious person reported suspicious activity.
- ▶ Look up the number for your state's poaching hotline or wildlife agency, and keep it handy whenever you're enjoying the outdoors.
- ▶ If you see suspicious activity, don't confront anyone. Get a description of the poacher, the vehicle (including license plate number, if possible), and the surrounding area, as well as any other details that you think will help law enforcement. Then call your state's poaching hotline or wildlife agency immediately.
- ▶ Let your elected state officials know that you support increased funding for wildlife law enforcement. Tell them how poaching affects your community, and ask them to take action.
- ▶ When there's a poaching incident in your area, write a letter to the editor of your local paper about poaching's toll on wildlife and the need for strict enforcement and maximum penalties for the offender.



"We're only just starting to understand the full impact of what's happening to wildlife because of poachers in this country," says The HSUS's Andrew Page.

- ▶ If your state wildlife agency has a K-9 program, spread the word about the good work they do. You may be able to sponsor a specific dog—or raise money to pay for emergency veterinary bills and other related expenses.

▶ **TO FIND NUMBERS** for state poaching hotlines and wildlife agencies—and to donate to our antipoaching programs—visit humansociety.org/magazine.