

**“In twenty years, we’ll think these days
were really great.”** **Jim Hicks**



By Jeanne Barnett and Mimi Hall

Jim Hicks, a native Coloradoan, has spent most of his life in a vocation devoted to nature and wildlife. As an employee of the Colorado Division of Wildlife, he presently spends his time being “a law enforcement officer”. He told us (Jeanne and Mimi) one snowy fall day when we were searching for hunters without permits, “I started out in forestry, worked in timber sales and decided I didn’t like forestry, so I went into wildlife. I thought I’d become a biologist, and I didn’t think I’d be in law enforcement.

“I was born in Denver in 1944. My dad was in the service so we did a lot of traveling. I went to high school in Littleton, Colorado and then spent four years in the Navy. I then went to Colorado

State University and graduated in 1971 with a major in wildlife biology. I started working with the Colorado Division of Wildlife in 1972.

“I did a lot of hunting and fishing when I was young, and this led to my interest in wildlife management. I thought I would be a biologist but discovered that most of the field work is done by district managers. The district wildlife manager in Colorado is a multi-purpose position. This means that we do law enforcement, collecting of biological data, preparing of environmental impact statements and any other work involved with wildlife in specific geographical districts. The Division has a year training program with training in both the classroom and the field. Most

of the training occurs after one is assigned a district."

We wondered why Jim came to Steamboat. "I chose Steamboat because it seemed like a good place to live and had a variety of wildlife. I've been a warden for 10 years, and I enjoy most of the work. Collecting biological data is the most interesting. I also enjoy patrolling the high lakes in the summer."

We then asked Jim what type of work he did with the elk and deer on the range. "A lot of our wildlife census work is done in the winter and spring. We use helicopters to age and sex deer and elk populations. From this information we can determine how many surplus animals need to be harvested the next hunting season. Deer and elk are concentrated on their winter range in January and February. This is the easiest time to obtain a good census. The area around Steamboat is elk winter range; we find very few deer. The deer migrate west into lower country.

"In the spring we get out and look at the browse plants on the winter range. If the browse is eaten back too far, we know we have too many elk. We use this information along with the life tables we develop from the census to determine how many cow elk need to be harvested. We have to harvest does and cows to regulate a deer or elk population. It does not do any good to harvest just bucks and bulls, because one male can service so many females.

"Our major problem in this area is elk coming into the ranch valleys and interfering with livestock operations. This usually involves destroying hay in stacks or on the feedlots. We have most of the haystacks fenced or paneled right now, so most of our problems are in the feedlots.

"There is a very limited winter range compared to the overall elk range. We do have some areas where elk survive on natural vegetation, but the elk herds tend to concentrate near ranches where hay is available. It is the division's policy not to feed the elk or deer, but during severe winters, when the survival of a large number of animals is in question, we will feed them. We do not like to have large concentrations of elk. We prefer to feed small groups as far back into the natural vegetation as we can. We also move the feeding location around, if possible. This is so the elk do not damage browse plants. They should still rely on the browse and hay should be just a supplement to their natural winter diet. During normal winters we do not feed elk. We want the weak animals to be culled out of the herd. In some cases ranchers feed the elk, and we pay them.

"There are a lot of pros and cons about feeding the elk. But in my experience, it is detrimental to the elk population to have them dependent on hay. Concentrations of elk in one area for too

long creates disease problems. The range around the feeding area is usually destroyed. The elk tend to become domesticated and come back year after year.

"Deer or elk overpopulation has not been a problem for many years. There are enough hunters to control game populations. If populations become larger than is healthy, we can issue more doe and cow permits. In fact, as the Steamboat Springs area develops, the number of hunters may need to be controlled. If critical winter ranges are developed, and the number of elk that can be carried is reduced, then it may come to controlling the number of hunters. I would hate to see that happen, and I do not foresee it happening for many years.

"The Steamboat ski area used to be used as the major winter range. At one time a person could sit at the Holiday Inn and watch the elk move up and down Walton Creek. There has been quite a displacement of that herd. Those elk moved into other areas. But if more ski area is developed around Steamboat we will run out of places to put them. Displacement of elk herds pushes them into the ranches that are left, compounding that problem.

"The biggest problem I foresee is the loss of critical wildlife habitat. We cannot maintain large populations of deer and elk without winter range and other critical habitat. It's just like a ranch. If a person sells off part of his ranch, then he will have to sell off part of his livestock. That is what we will have to do to reduce the size of the deer and elk herds."

Jim went on to tell us about some of the political aspects of wildlife management. "The thing that worries me most is that wildlife



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management is getting more and more political. There are a lot of special interest groups. Hopefully the wildlife commission and the legislature realizes we can't satisfy everyone and that they should not hamper good wildlife management. The western slope will be changing rapidly over the next twenty years. I hope we will not look back then and find we have lost our good wildlife populations. In twenty years it may be too late to bring them back."

We were concerned with some of the violations, so we asked Jim what were some of the ones that gave him problems. "Poaching or the illegal taking of game is still a big problem. Some of the more blatant violations we spend enough time on, but generally we cannot spend a lot of time just working on one group or one individual. A couple of years ago we had a group from down south that was using dogs to hunt. That is illegal in Colorado, and we get a lot of complaints. We went in, camped next to them and documented all their hunting activity. We were warned by people who knew them not to arrest them in the field, so we made the arrest on the road. That case took about a week to complete.

"Very few of our officers have encountered physical force problems with violators. Most wildlife violations are misdemeanors with no jail time involved. Outside of verbal abuse, not much physical happens. Checking hunting camps on horseback and stopping vehicles are probably

the most dangerous parts of the job. Trapping elk can also be dangerous.

"Most of our poaching occurs from August through the hunting season. Most people don't like to poach in the early summer while the young are being raised, compassion among thieves. The division recently started 'Operation Game Thief', and it has been successful. It gives people a place to complain, yet remain anonymous. The most common violations we come across are fishing without a license, over possession of fish, shooting the wrong animal while hunting, using someone else's license, failure to tag big game and a loaded firearm in a motor vehicle."

We then asked if the Colorado Division of Wildlife did any projects with the Forest Service. "We do cooperative projects with the U.S. Forest Service, such as burning old stands of oak-brush to stimulate new oak-brush growth. Oak-brush resprouts from the roots and greatly increases the amount of the plant growth."

We asked Jim if he gets to talk to people out in the field during his long day.

"Most of the year the job involves putting in a lot of hours. Most of the people we contact in the field are friendly and pleasant. We do run into a few characters that feel there should be a separate set of rules for them. But the majority of the people we contact are cooperative and appreciative of the job we are trying to do. The most frustrating part of the job is the fact that

there is never enough time to do everything that should be done. I enjoy my job; I don't know anything I would rather do."

I (Jeanne) went out with Jim Hicks for a day to see exactly what it is a law enforcement officer does. (This is what happened:) Jim and I started at 8:30 a.m. Sunday morning near Treehaus checking game. Jim checked one duck hunter; he was o.k. ("Checking" a hunter is making sure he or she has the correct license.) At 9 a.m. our party of two went out to Grouse Park near Lake Catamount. An elk herd of 83 resides here. Jim proceeded to talk to some of the residents, and they said that a man had shot an elk in his own backyard. We went to check the rumor. At 9:15 a.m. we stopped at the house where the alleged shooting had taken place. The accused man said that he had not shot an elk or anything else all season. Jim wanted to look around the place, because he could see the blood on the ground. We found the elk in the upper section of the new house that the man was building. The cow's head was found in a ditch a little way from the house. I served as a witness that Jim had found the elk. Then we took pictures of the elk, just in case the man wanted to go to court. Jim took the elk and fined the man \$400.00 for an illegal cow elk. (When an illegal animal is found the meat is usually donated to people who need it.)

Around 10:00 a.m. we found ourselves back on the road patrolling more homes. We stopped at one house where there were four animals. The licenses were checked, stories exchanged, and everything turned out fine. At 10:30 a.m. we drove along, and Jim spotted a herd of deer on a hillside. He stated, "I hope no one finds them...it'll be a slaughter." At 10:45 a.m. we stopped and checked three unattended cars, and we waited for a while, but no one showed up...11:00 a.m. — we went out toward Lake Catamount. There were a few hunters, and we stopped to check them out. All was well.

We spent a large amount of time driving around in Jim's truck. At 11:00 a.m. we stopped a few hunters to make sure they had the correct licenses. Everything was all right, so Jim and I went on our way. At around 11:30 a.m. we went into Sarvis Creek National Park. We stopped at a camp. Jim knew the people we saw there because they come up every year from Texas. They invited us into camp. We sat down by the fire and had something to drink and the people told us about their hunting luck this season. We sat and talked to the group for a long time...I didn't mind because my feet were cold, and I got a chance to warm up. At 12:15 p.m. we were on the road again. We patrolled Lake Catamount for a while longer, and Jim stopped at one camp to check animals. Everything was in order.

Around 1:00 p.m. Jim and I were coming back from Lake Catamount, and we were informed by

Officer Neil Cantwell that three shots had been heard near Rabbit Ears Pass. We took a back road through a neighboring ranch, and Jim asked if we could go take a look around. The man consented. Before we went to check out the back pasture we drove up to the pass so Jim could look down to see the whole area. He was looking for anything suspect or any hunters. Jim spotted the hunters, but now we had a problem...how to get down to them. We drove back down the pass and took a back road that led up to where Jim had spotted the hunters. The roads were very muddy, and the truck had trouble getting up the hills. It took a little time to get where we were headed, but we finally reached our destination. Jim looked around the general area but could not find anything. He decided to look around to see if anything was hidden where he couldn't find it. When Jim returned to the truck he had not found anything. Using the binoculars Jim espied the hunters watching us from the highway above. They had been doing that the whole time. We had to drive through the hay pasture to get out because it was too muddy to go the way we had come. At approximately 3:30 p.m. we finally got out. We stopped at some houses to see if anyone had seen anything. The neighbors thought the hunters had hidden their stuff where Jim could not find it and were going to come back when the mud froze. We went back up on the pass to see if we could see anything, but we spotted nothing.

At about 4:15 p.m. our day came to an end. Jim said that he would let us know when the elk started to come down from the hills for hay. The day I spent with Jim was great. I learned a lot about Colorado wilderness and how hard Jim's job really is. He is an intelligent man who cares about wildlife and the future of our community.



"Everybody and their brother has got their own idea on how game should be managed."