

Murray Goes Eeling

I became interested in wildlife enforcement through my involvement in hunting and shooting game as a youngster. All my family were involved in the sport at one time or another, and I started out with a borrowed wreck of a single barrel shotgun at the age of thirteen.

My father had been a Wildlife Ranger with the Acclimatisation for as long as I could remember, as had my Uncle Harry from over the hill. In the late 1970's after discharge from the Navy, I became caught up in the Acclimatisation Society movement as a councillor and was appointed a wildlife ranger. In those days the system of training as a ranger was virtually non-existent in the Acclimatisation Society and one learnt the best way they could. I will always remember going out hunting and hoping against hope that I would come across somebody doing something wrong so I could do my thing. At the same time I was terrified because I really didn't have a clue what I was doing.

This sad state of affairs continued on until I was asked to attend a rangers course run by the Wildlife Service. The tutor on this course was an ex-Army Lieutenant Colonel from the Army who was in charge of the Species Protection Unit of the Wildlife Service. He succeeded in convincing myself and several others that there was a whole world out there apart from pheasants and ducks. I had always wondered about the pigeon poaching situation in the north and why no-one was doing anything about it.

In those days there was no representative or field officer from the Wildlife Service stationed in the area and the poachers really had it all their own way. All the wildlife rangers in the north were basically acclimatisation society oriented, caring only about illegal game hunting and their shooting, and who generally dived for cover if anybody brought up the subject of poaching native species. Many of them were old and past it anyway.

Several of us who had attended the wildlife course, decided that we would like to have a crack at some of these pigeon poacher characters. I had always been upset at the thought of somebody shooting such a lovely bird that was part of our native heritage and was keen to do something about it.

Without any backing from the acclimatisation society, I decided to write to the Conservator of Wildlife in Rotorua who was in charge of the greater part of the North Island, for advice. After many communications with the Department, it wasn't until my adventure with Tim and my first pigeon poachers that we saw results. From that day on, we had the support of the Wildlife Service and would soon become unique in our prowess at catching pigeon poachers.

Becoming adept at detecting poachers, learning their habits and methods, came very easy to me. I had always had a mischievous background and inclined toward getting in to more than my share of trouble as a youth. As the saying goes - set a thief to catch a thief. Well I wasn't actually a thief, but I had done my share of poaching. Ducks, pheasants, uncle Harry's watermelons, the neighbours apples and other minor misdemeanours. I knew how to think like a poacher. Besides that, I had always had a bent toward law enforcement and liked being able to out-think someone.

Life chasing poachers, whether they be after pigeon or game, can be many things. Some days it is tedious and boring, with nothing seen or heard for hours on

end. It can be miserable, wet, hot or cold, but at the end of it all there is usually a twist or something similar that will make your day.

On one particular opening day of the duck shooting season, I had pre-planned an operation with Ed and Murray to patrol a stretch of tidal river looking for duck shooters hunting without licences. We had heard that this particular stretch of water had not seen a ranger on it for many years, and there were rumours that illegal hunting was rife.

We arrived at the launching ramp around 8.30 am with our borrowed aluminium dingy and outboard and set off down river. Ed knew the area well as he had grown up here and had done his share of poaching and dodging rangers in his younger days. We hadn't planned on it raining cats and dogs though.

The day had started with light drizzle which gradually progressed to steady rain, and by the time we were halfway through our patrol down the river we had all become thoroughly disillusioned, not to mention rather damp, even with our wet weather gear.

We had checked five or six hunters who all proved to be legal and were on our return journey back toward the launch ramp feeling disappointed at the lack of excitement, shivering cold with water dripping off our noses, wondering what on earth possessed us to be in this stupid game anyway, when Ed suddenly suggested that we might look at a pond that he knew was a short distance inland from the river. Since we were wet anyway, we decided that there was nothing to lose by spending another half hour in the pouring rain.

Ed pulled into a short creek in the mangroves and grounded the boat on the bank edge, and cutting the motor we set off unenthusiastically behind him. About half a mile inland we came upon a valley surrounded in titree, scrub and bullrush nestled among the farmland. As we came around the shoulder of the valley, I spotted water and the beginning of a pond. It was surrounded in titree and looked an ideal duck-shooting site.

Stepping up onto the dam face I saw some dead ducks lying on the surface of the pond among a number of decoys. There didn't seem to be anybody about and it took a while before we located what appeared to be a maimai on the other side in the titree. There was not a sound as we approached the hide in the rain, and it looked as though we had arrived too late. Leaning into the maimai I saw huddled in the corner, a frightened face. It was a young lad about ten years old.

'Hi, boy. Are you here on your own?' I asked.

He replied in the affirmative, and Ed said, 'Where's your dad. Did he shoot the ducks?'

'No, my grandpapa shot them. He's just gone to look for a pheasant. He heard one crowing a while ago.'

I began to smell a rat. Not many people will suddenly go off pheasant shooting in the pouring rain and leave a young boy behind.

'Where did he go son?'

The boy pointed off in to the titree behind the maimai and shrugged his shoulders. I nodded at Ed and Murray and ducked off through the titree, knowing that they would fan out in slightly different directions. I stumbled and muttered my way through the soaking wet scrub for fifty yards or so before coming out into open ground that began to rise up to the head of the gully that made up the pond catchment. Near the top of the ridge were several puriri trees with totara dotted here and there. The

grassland was rather long with large rush bushes everywhere. No grandpapa anywhere.

I stopped and looked back at the pond and the maimai. It was roughly in a line between my position and where we had stepped up onto the dam face. Grandpapa would have had an excellent view of our approach. So where would he go.

I mentally put myself into his position and thought about where I would run to if I had seen rangers approaching. Looking back up the hill at the puriri's I decided that had to be it and set off straight up the hill. In the corner of my eye I spotted Ed and Murray scouting around near the head of the pond. Ed was beginning to head my way. He would be thinking like me.

Halfway to the puriri's I nearly tripped over grandpapa. Here he was, lying curled up on the ground among the rushes, pretending to be a quail. I walked quietly up behind him and stopped with my boots just touching his back. He lay there in the rain pretending that I wasn't there.

'Excuse me sir. What are you doing down there?'

Grandpapa came springing into life, climbing to his feet, ventolin inhaler to his mouth, coughing and gasping for breath.

'I'm having an asthma attack. I couldn't breathe. I had to lie down.'

I turned and waved Ed up. He had seen the action and was on his way. I could see his grin splitting his face long before he reached us.

Turning back to grandpapa, who didn't appear to have trouble breathing, I produced my warrant and asked him if the ducks down on the pond were his.

'No. They aren't mine. I'm not shooting.'

'What about the boy down there. Your grandson?'

'Yeah. He is with me. He was shooting with his dad, but he went off to play rugby so I am looking after him.'

I called out to Ed and Murray, asking them to look for a shotgun. It had to be somewhere close, because he hadn't had time to hide it very well. Within several minutes Murray stooped down and produced a shotgun from the rushes not far away. I turned to grandpapa.

'Do you know who that belongs to?'

'Yeah. I guess it must be mine.'

'The boy said you were pheasant shooting. Do you have a game licence on you?'

'No I don't.' He was really looking pretty dejected now, not to mention wet. He was around sixty but appeared to be spry for his age.

Ed approached us and said, 'How are you Graeme. Are those your ducks down there?' Poor Graeme nodded miserably and Ed continued, 'What about the hawk. Is that yours as well?'

'Yeah, well everybody shoots hawks don't they.'

I explained to grandpapa that hawks were now a protected species and that he had committed an offence by shooting it.

We escorted him back down to the maimai and his grandson, where I attempted to write out an offence notification in the rain. This was really a mission. The water dripped off my hat onto the book. The pen refused to write in the wet mire on the page, and I began to wonder what the hell I was going to do when Murray came to the rescue with a pencil. Why hadn't I thought of that.

I turned to grandpapa and asked him where his ammunition was.

'I haven't got any.' came the reply. Shaking my head in dis-belief I asked him if he would mind lifting up his jersey and show me what he had underneath.

He let out a sigh and produced a cartridge belt of shells from around his waist. God really loves a trier.

Leaving grandpapa with the boy in the maimai, I went to join Ed and Murray who were gazing at the ducks and hawk floating out in the pond. Murray explained that he couldn't see any sign of a boat. The boy had told him that his father was bringing back a dog later to retrieve the birds.

I looked at Ed and said, 'Well that's our evidence. We have to have it. Any suggestions?'

We both turned and looked at Murray at the same time. Grinning.

'All right, all right. I'll be the dog.' Murray began stripping down to his underwear.

Ed cackled, 'Yeah, well you always reckoned you were good at diving. Now's your time to prove it.'

'I'm going to leave my socks on anyway. It looks bloody cold in there.'

He waded out among the duck weed and lunged in with a, 'Jesus. Why did I volunteer for this.'

Ed and I both encouraged him from the bank with a 'Fetch, boy. Fetch.'

Even grandpapa cracked a smile at our antics.

There were seven ducks on the water. Murray had gathered six plus the hawk, and was dog-paddling well toward the seventh when it suddenly bobbed under the water before his eyes.

'Jesus. There are eels in here. A big bugger.' came Murray's strangled yell. He lunged out, grabbing the duck and kicked out so hard for the shore that one of his socks came off. Ed and I were now beside ourselves with laughter. Murray landed, threw the game unceremoniously at our feet and said, 'I'm not coming out with you buggers again. I get all the shit jobs.'

We laughed even harder. We were still chuckling on our way home. The day had looked to be a real dud. We were wet, cold and tired. But who could help laughing at poor grandpapa's fake asthma attack, or Murray fleeing in fear of losing his family tackle.

The last word probably goes to the Grandson...

"Hey Grandma ! Poppa got nailed by the Rangers...!!"