

22,000 kg of poached game

'Usually there are two or four guys, with guns, and often they've been drinking. The trick is to get their guns away from them'

— Wildlife agent

QUEBEC WILDLIFE AGENTS ARE IN A HUNT FOR TWO-LEGGED GAME — POACHERS IN AN INDUSTRY SO BIG THAT 22,000 KG OF CARIBOU, DEER AND MOOSE MEAT WAS SEIZED IN JUST ONE OPERATION



PHOTOS: CHRISTINNE MUSCHI THE GAZETTE

Île d'Orléans warehouse worker Maxim Pagé loads meat confiscated from poachers to be shipped to food banks and zoos. Details, Page A4

FROM PAGE ONE

"You feel a tremendous sense of satisfaction when you catch somebody poaching red-handed." Jean-Pierre Caron, retired wildlife protection officer



Wildlife protection agents seize deer and packaged meat (right) in a series of raids on poaching operations in the Granby region in November 2002.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF QUEBEC WILDLIFE DEPARTMENT

'Les Bougons des bois' sell black-market game to locals and are 'little kings' of their villages, wildlife agents say

Poachers are elusive prey

MARK CARDWELL
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

QUEBEC — In the 35 years he patrolled Quebec's forests, Jean-Pierre Caron never lost his thrill for the hunt of two-legged game.

"You feel a tremendous sense of satisfaction when you catch somebody poaching red-handed," said Caron, who retired in July as a senior wildlife protection officer with Quebec's Natural Resources and Wildlife Department.

The feeling was sweetest, he added, when arrests broke up well-established poaching networks or put an end to cruel practices, like the use of large neck snares — or collars — to catch moose and deer.

"I liked to say that nabbing a guy using a collar was worth three paycheques," Caron said.

It's little wonder, then, he and many wildlife officials are beaming over yesterday's announcement that a \$125,000 fine for poaching — the largest in Quebec history — has been meted out to a Montreal-area meat wholesaler that supplied ill-gotten game to upscale restaurants and specialty grocery stores across Quebec.

The company — Georges Carboneau et Fils Inc. of St. Hubert — pleaded guilty last month to 70 wildlife-related offences and five agricultural/food violations, related to the illegal sale of meat from caribou, white-tailed deer and moose.

The charges resulted from joint police-wildlife protection agency raids 18 months ago that netted a staggering 22,000 kilograms of illegal game. The record seizure is estimated to be worth \$400,000.

Most of the meat was found at the company's butchering facility, which was a popular game-cleaning spot for Montreal-area and non-resident hunters. The meat was either stolen from hunters' kills or taken as payment for services rendered, which is illegal in Quebec.

Company subsidiaries sold well-packaged cuts of caribou meat and venison — available commercially in Quebec — and moose meat labelled as buffalo to food businesses across Quebec.

Meat was seized at many of the 60-plus restaurants and specialty stores in Montreal, Quebec City and several other municipalities. No restaurants or stores were charged, wildlife officials said, because owners were unaware the product was illegal.

"For many years, Quebec's wildlife protection service has been waging a war without quarter (against those) who traffic in the illegal sale of game meat," Natural Resources Minister Pierre Corbeil said yesterday at a news conference in a warehouse on Île d'Orléans, where 18,200 kilograms of the confiscated game is stored.

In addition to the record fine, he announced the meat will be given to Quebec's four zoos, Quebec City's aquarium and Moisson Montréal, which will distribute it through community food banks.

The record fine and the two-year investigation that led to the massive seizure are an indication of the scope, scale and growing complexity of a problem that threatens both wildlife in Quebec and the lives of the people paid to protect it.



A wildlife protection agent seizes butchered game during one of a series of raids in Paspébiac recently.

COURTESY OF QUEBEC WILDLIFE DEPARTMENT

Defined as the illegal killing of fish or wild animals, poaching includes everything from taking more game than the law permits, hunting or fishing out of season or in closed areas, taking endangered species, collecting fish and wildlife to the commercial trade of illegally obtained animals or their body parts.

"Poaching takes many forms," Jean-Yves Desbiens, interim director of the wildlife protection agency's training school and a veteran officer whose career also spans four decades, said this week. "And it evolves constantly. That's what makes it so hard to prevent."

Like Caron, Desbiens refused to speculate on the number of fish and wildlife that are taken illegally in Quebec.

Studies elsewhere in Canada estimate it is roughly equal to the numbers taken legally. According to the latest Wildlife Department figures, big-game hunters in Quebec bagged more than 50,000 deer, 25,000 moose, 4,500 bears and 13,500 caribou in the last 12 months, ending Nov. 22.

Trappers have taken thousands more muskrats, weasels, foxes, wolves, coyotes, raccoons and skunks. Legally-caught fish — including salmon, trout, pike, bass, walleye and perch — number in the millions.

The poachers themselves fall into different categories, Desbiens and Caron said.

First and foremost are individuals or groups who kill for food, trophies or profit with no regard for fish and wildlife or their habitats.

The most common and most

dangerous of these offenders are referred to by the agents as "les Bougons des bois" — families and friends who consider Quebec's forests, lakes and rivers to be their personal food lockers. They also sell poached meat to their local communities, said the agents, who described the poachers as "little kings" of their villages.

"They're usually people ... who are involved in other illegal activities like selling contraband cigarettes or alcohol or drugs," Caron said. "They prefer to steal something rather than buy it."

He added they are also the people most likely to make use of neck or foot collars or other inhumane, homemade devices. Many hunt in the woods with bright floodlights at night, or patrol country roads at dusk in search of deer and moose they can shoot from inside their cars.

Professional poachers in search of specific animal parts like black-bear gall bladders, used to make valuable traditional medicines in Asian markets, also employ these methods.

Apart from doing nocturnal patrols in cars and aerial surveillance, Caron said the only way to catch poachers is to hide and wait at discovered

traps. (The two wildlife protection agents who were killed in the Beauce region this month were carrying out aerial surveillance when their aircraft crashed in heavy fog.)

Pouncing on poachers who come to check their traps deep in the forest is an exhilarating but nerve-wracking experience, Caron added.

"Usually there are two or four guys, with guns, and often they've been drinking," he said. "The trick is to get their guns away from them, which isn't always easy to do. You have to be diplomatic but firm, tell them it's not worth somebody getting killed for."

Because provincial conservation laws are not in the federal criminal code, poaching infractions are limited to fines (\$2,200, for example, for a moose, which is about what it would fetch on the black market), hunting-license suspensions of up to two years and the confiscation and possible loss of firearms and vehicles.

While Quebec wildlife protection officers are licensed to carry weapons, Caron said he never had to point one during his career.

Like many of his colleagues, he said, he had several weapons pointed at him. "It's never fun. You're far from the city, deep in the woods at night. If something happens, you're a long way from help."

Quebec is the only jurisdiction in Canada in which wildlife agents have been killed in confrontations with offenders.

Founded in 1867, Quebec's wildlife protection service lost its first officer in 1972. Since then, two of the seven who have died in the line of duty were killed by poachers. Both deaths occurred at night in the woods. One agent was killed with a bullet in 1985; another was shot by a crossbow in 1989.

Less of a threat for agents — though not for wildlife — are poachers in search of trophy fish or animals.

"It's an ego thing," said a senior undercover wildlife agent who asked not to be identified. "They'll do anything to get the biggest buck so they can show it to their friends."

Another category of poachers are the otherwise legitimate fishermen and hunters from all

walks of life who bend or break conservation rules and regulations. "Some people figure it's harmless if they take a few extra fish or ducks," Desbiens said. "But it's illegal and it's serious because it impacts on the overall health of the resource."

Of the 3.4 million Quebecers who practise outdoor activities, 815,000 fish, 410,000 hunt and 8,700 trap — injecting \$3 billion in direct spending into the provincial economy, another \$1.5 billion in spin-off services, and creating 32,000 jobs.

The task of providing round-the-clock protection for fish and wildlife in an area the size of western Europe is a daunting one for Quebec's 320 full-time and 160 part-time wildlife protection agents.

Fanned out across the province in two central headquarters, 13 regional offices and 85 local offices (19 of which are seasonal), their primary task is to uphold an expanding list of a dozen provincial and federal laws that deal with fishing, hunting, migratory birds, conservation, environment — even agriculture.

In addition to protecting fish, wildlife and their habitats, the agents' ever-broadening mandate now includes the search for illegal dumps in the forest and the protection of wild garlic and ginseng. Fiddleheads might soon be added to that list.

Equipment and training have changed dramatically since Desbiens followed his father's footsteps and entered Quebec's wildlife protection service in the late 1960s. "We used our own cars back then to do investigations and the trucks we did have had no radios or spotlights," said Desbiens who, like his father, also sold fishing and hunting permits from his home.

In addition to graduating from high school, agents were required to take a 10-week course. Poachers, Caron said, had lit-

tle to fear. "We simply didn't have the resources or knowledge to do investigations back then. When we found collars, we just took them down instead of catching the guys who were putting them up."

Today, there is a permanent wildlife protection school in the Laurentian wildlife reserve an hour's drive north of Quebec City. In addition to teaching police surveillance and investigation methods, the school's 20-week course provides better training.

Desbiens credits a combination of improved investigation skills, canine units, modern communication and surveillance equipment, and a wildlife-dedicated crime lab with reductions in the poaching of salmon, for example, and in ending practices like fishing with explosives.

Closer working relationships with biologists and technicians at the environment and agricultural ministries and with various police forces and wildlife agencies also facilitate investigations.

Desbiens also credits commercial outfitters and trappers with helping to keep poachers looking over their shoulders in the forest and on the million-plus rivers and lakes that dot the province.

"Our members make their living from fish and wildlife," said Marc Plourde, director-general of the Quebec Federation of Outfitters, which represents about half of the province's 700 outfitters. "It's in their interest to help protect these resources."

He said the abundance of fish and wildlife in Quebec — moose and deer populations, for example, are at record levels — suggests protection efforts are paying off.

But not everyone agrees.

According to Paul Legault, a veteran wildlife protection officer and the president of the agents' union, job cuts and years of wage freezes have sapped morale and reduced the efficiency of anti-poaching operations.

"The senior officials you've been talking to say everything's great," he said. "The truth is that the situation is bad and it's getting worse."

The main problem, he noted, is that the number of full-time agents has been reduced by a quarter since 1990, when there were 460. In 2003, 45 seasonal agents were let go, a move that shaved \$1.4 million off the wildlife protection agency's \$30-million annual budget.

The result, said Legault, is that agents now issue about 7,000 tickets a year, down from 17,000, and catch maybe five per cent of the poachers.

"There just aren't that many agents in the bush anymore," Legault said.

"There are no hard numbers and the ministry would never admit anything was wrong, but the word on the ground is that poaching is returning to the levels it was at years ago."

"If you're a poacher," added Legault, "you'd have to be awfully unlucky to get caught."

Online extra: When Quebec laid off 45 of its 170 seasonal conservation agents in the summer of 2003, an aide to the parks minister said he expected a vigilant public would offset the loss of anti-poaching personnel. Learn more at our website: www.montrealgazette.com



Jean-Pierre Caron (top): "Bougons des bois" danger to agents. Jean-Yves Desbiens: Poaching "hard to prevent."