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Game of Horns: Iowa Poacher's Antler Addiction Leads to Historic Bust

When a serial outlaw was nabbed with 52 deer racks, the case became the biggest, and most bizarre, in state history.

CHRIS BENNETT • May 07, 2025 06:40 AM



Across a 30-year career, DNR officer Craig Roberg can't shake the most surreal serial poaching case of his career. "It wasn't driven by money, food, or attention," he says. "Just obsession." (Photo by Chris Bennett)



Staring at a headless deer splayed in a cornfield, game warden Craig Roberg had no inkling a killing spree was underway on Iowa farmland. The decapitated carcass, still oozing blood, was one link in a 52-kill chain, with each rack procured to satisfy a compulsion.

Shell casings, tire tracks, insider tips, and backroad tails led Roberg to the discovery of a peculiar outbuilding—a shrine by any other name. “Something felt off when I walked in,” Roberg recalls. “Racks to the ceiling around a single chair as the focal point—a spot for someone to sit and get turned on by antlers.”

Perseverance, a lifetime in the outdoors, and a generous helping of landowner cooperation led Roberg to wrangle one of the most bizarre wildlife busts in Iowa history. “It wasn’t driven by money, food, or attention,” Roberg says. “Just obsession.”

“I wish I could say it all had a great ending,” he continues. “But repeat poachers are hard-core addicts. They never stop. *Never.*”

100 Decapitated Deer

Check the walls of Bass Pro Shop: Many of the hanging horns hail from southern Iowa. Genetics, nutrition, habitat, and recent history have birthed a magnificent antler realm, including the 533 square miles of Decatur County.



Conservation Reserve Program kicked off in 1985, many farmers dropped smaller fields, partially triggering a change in footprint to more grasslands and big timber, along with a boom in turkey and white-tailed deer. Welcome to the home of monster bucks—and myriad poachers.



Perseverance, a lifetime in the outdoors, and a generous helping of landowner cooperation led Roberg to wrangle a buck-wild poaching case. (Photo courtesy of CR)

Raised in the rural reaches of central Iowa's Boone County, with his boyhood summers spent working in corn and soybean fields, Craig Roberg moved to southern Iowa in 1980, dragging tracks over Clark and Decatur counties as a state game warden. At the time, poaching was a different animal, i.e., headless deer were not part of



explains. “Antlers were not a factor. This was prior to the arrival of monster deer.”

“In those days, when I caught somebody illegally shooting a deer, I had empathy because they shot it for meat and consumed the kill. I had to do my job and enforce the law, but I understood their motivation.”

In approximately 1990, Roberg’s compassion withered. “We started seeing really, really big deer, and places like Cabella’s and Bass Pro began paying big bucks for showroom antlers. It was serious money, and once you put a price tag on something, that’s when things get bad. Then again, it was worse than bad. Things went completely haywire.”

By the early 2000s, a headless buck was commonplace. A southern Iowa game warden could encounter 50-100 decapitated deer per fall. Any year.

“Absolutely true,” Roberg says. “That’s how prevalent and chaotic poaching became.”

Amid the chaos, Roberg walked into the most surreal poaching case of his life.

Keeping Secrets



Ordinary start to a southern Iowa fall.

Roberg assessed the likelihood: Deer killed the night prior; midsize caliber rifle; shot taken from a parallel gravel road.



A decapitated deer, a link in the initial chain of poaching kills investigated by Roberg in fall 2004. (Photo by DNR)

Wielding a metal detector, he scanned the carcass and found no bullet. He scanned the road and adjacent ditch and found no shell casing. Following protocol, he cut out a flesh sample for potential DNA analysis and documented the process.

By all initial appearances, it was a poaching case with slim chance



However, Roberg, who carried an outstanding reputation that later resulted in Whitetails Unlimited Iowa Game Warden of the Year in 2006, possessed the patience of a stone.

“I’d learned long before to wait until someone talked,” Roberg recounts. “Funny thing about humans, they don’t like to keep secrets, even when the secrets are their own.”

Hiding in the Backyard

Into September and October 2004, Roberg investigated multiple illegal deer kills, all seemingly unrelated. However, from Nov. 6 through Nov. 12, his phone went wild with farm calls reporting the headless remains of 10 bucks, all within Decatur County’s High Point Township, essentially a 6-mile by 6-mile zone.

Translated: All 10 dead deer, in tandem with earlier kills, were found within the same 36 square mile locale.





“Call it addiction or something worse, but the worst poachers are set in their ways,” Roberg says. “For whatever the reason, that’s who they are.” (Photo by Chris Bennett)

Night after night, Roberg rolled along a checkerboard of county roads, searching for spotlights or headlights. Every morning, a new call, sometimes two, and more decapitated bucks. But each kill offered no physical evidence and no firsthand sighting.

“Just three or four deer by themselves tell you that an active poacher is at work. But sometimes there’s not enough hours in a day to catch the worst of the bad guys,” he notes. “They’re seasoned, wary, and know how to stay out of reach.”

Night stalking through the witching hour became Roberg’s norm, bookended by handfuls of daylight shuteye between phone calls. “It was frustrating beyond belief. Farmers kept calling, taking me to dead bucks or giving me the locations. Several times, the deer still had their heads, and I knew the shooter might come back. For example, if a buck is laying in 5’ tall CRP, you know the guy is returning to cut off the head. I hid and waited, patient as I could stand.”

Roberg’s instinct stirred: The culprit was under his nose.



caught two men shooting a 12-point monster buck from a truck at 2 a.m. As they attempted to flee, Roberg rammed their vehicle, pushing it into a ditch and apprehending the pair. The rogues were from Joplin, Mo., and had driven 300 miles north the previous day.

However, the Joplin boys were the exception that proved the rule: A county poacher was pulling the trigger. “The No. 1 thing I learned from older wardens, backed by my own experience, is most poachers don’t travel far from home,” Robert details. “The biggest reason? They know the terrain, and how to get in and out. They know who the landowners are.”

Roberg kept a list of likely candidates—individuals with past hunting-related offenses or sketchy behavior. “I knew people of that poacher persuasion, but I was cautious about who I talked to, just waiting for a secret to slip.”

On Nov. 13, as the pile of dead deer stacked higher, Roberg’s phone jingled with a call from producer Kandi Kisky, now of Whitetail Freaks fame. She described a headless buck in a soybean field. Once on the scene, in a roadside ditch a stone’s throw from the deer, Roberg found a prize: a shiny .243 shell casing with a telltale firing pin mark.

Short on sleep, but with physical evidence in hand, Roberg’s



Watch and Wait

A badge and a gun don't get far in rural America.

"It's trust that does the job," Roberg says. "Over time, as people get to know you, a rapport and a relationship develops. I was at that point in my career. Landowners were my best help."



"I'd learned long before to wait until someone talked," Roberg says. "Funny thing about humans, they don't like to keep secrets, even when the secrets are their own." (Photo courtesy of CR)

The image of a lone lawman seated solo in a truck stop corner didn't hold with Roberg. Rather, he sat alongside farmers, drowning



Weldon, grabbed a chair, and dropped into banter with a handful of growers. As Roberg talked, a middle-aged regular sat down and leaned in at low volume: “You been finding any headless bucks shot with a .243 rifle? I don’t have the lead killer, but I might know someone that might have been there.”

Two cups of Joe later, Roberg left the cafe with a name, Ron Carney —a convicted felon and suspect on the radar from the get-go.

“Ron Carney was already on my list. I’d dealt with him in the past and I knew he’d had a history of run-ins with the sheriff’s department. Should I take a chance and go talk to him? No. He knew the ropes and wouldn’t give up anyone without leverage. Bottom line, I couldn’t afford to rattle him.”

Watch and wait in the shadows.

When the Levee Breaks

Five steps from his porch door, Steve Snow heard the muffled crack of a rifle burst through a 25-mph wind.

Ten days before Christmas, outside Garden Grove, beside Kandi and Don Kisky’s farmland, in darkness at roughly 5:15 a.m., Snow froze at the telltale pop, gauging direction and distance. A farmer and renowned hunter, Snow was attuned to the sound of gunfire. With



Immediately, he knew. Poacher. He knew.



"All around me, there are so many wonderful people in hunting," Steve Snow says. "But there's a nasty place where the worst dirtbags operate. They make up only a tiny percent of all hunters, but they're truly bad guys that never change their ways." (Photo courtesy of SS)

Motionless, Snow cast his eyes down a half-mile driveway toward a county road—the presumed point of origin for the blast.

Confirmation came 10 seconds later. Headlights. Wheels on gravel.

Allowing the creeping vehicle to drift just past the tree line, Snow slipped into a black Chevy truck and cranked the engine under a



“It was a car—not a truck. I followed whoever it was and they had no idea I was behind’em,” Snow recalls. “I followed about three miles into town and watched them pull into a house. I drove on by, turned around down the road, and then drove back by with my lights on to get a good look: It was a small red car. A beater.”

Immediately, Snow goosed the Chevy back home, parking directly across the road from his driveway in a CRP field. On foot in breaking daylight, he waded into 3'-tall brome grass and passed the shell of an abandoned house, convinced a downed deer was within proximity.

Indeed. Thirty-five yards past the house, Snow walked up on a dead buck still dripping blood. Head intact—10-point rack yet to be claimed. The shooter would be back.

Snow dialed Roberg with the report, but the wildlife officer was on the road beyond the county—outta pocket until the following day. For the rest of the morning, at bins almost within sight of the crumpled buck, Snow loaded grain alongside Don Kisky. At noon, in separate trucks, the pair drove into town for lunch, continuing to move grain on their return.

Work completed by mid-afternoon, Snow entered the abandoned house and crouched in a stakeout position at a window overlooking



“I was scanning with my binocs and seeing nothing. Sure enough, I walked into the field and the deer was gone. Nothing but tire tracks in smashed grass. The sonuvabitch had already got in and out with the buck.”

The next morning, Dec. 16, upon Roberg’s arrival, Snow led a re-enactment tour: dead buck site and in-town house location. Roberg left with the data, details, and description, ready to put the pieces in order and obtain warrants.

Keeping his ducks in a row, Roberg returned to Snow’s house in late afternoon to confirm several eyewitness details. As the pair stood talking in the long driveway, they heard the proverbial levee break—or rather, explode.

Irony upon improbability, a gunshot rang out.

Finding the Honey Hole

“We were standing in Steve’s barnyard area, and suddenly heard a shot,” Roberg recalls.

“We looked way out across the road and a guy runs out of the CRP field with a rifle in basically the same spot where the buck was poached the previous day. He had parked somewhere close by because the next thing we see is a red four-door junker.”



In the passenger seat? A loaded .243 rifle. The red car? Registered to Ron Carney's mother. And the man behind the wheel? Justin Mason.

"He looked like an average Joe," Roberg says. "Relatively young; maybe the guy you pass in public and don't notice."

Roberg approached cautiously and calmly. Mason was more nervous than a whore in church.

"Red flags were up everywhere, but I didn't want to spook him. He was big-time skittish, but I didn't put stock in that. Lots of innocent people are nervous around law enforcement for a variety of reasons. But nerves or whatever, he immediately started talking about deer hunting, and I got a ton of information whether he realized it or not. When you've got someone that doesn't shut up, it's best to get out of the way."





Craig Roberg's outstanding reputation resulted in recognition as Whitetails Unlimited Iowa Game Warden of the Year in 2006. (Photo courtesy of CR)

First, Mason admitted responsibility for the gunshot heard minutes earlier. Next, Mason rolled out the standard poacher's excuse to explain rifle possession during what was then shotgun-only deer season: "I was shooting at a coyote."

Continuing, Mason claimed to have four legal bucks at his home. "I knew he didn't have that many tags," Roberg notes.

"He next told me where he was living, at the home of Ron Carney's sister, and the location matched what Steve Snow had seen.

Mason's name had been on my rumor radar since the first illegal kill in August, but I had nothing to go on but smoke. That smoke was turning to fire."

Mason's admission of residence was telltale. Physically, the house was ground zero on Roberg's poaching coordinates—dead center inside an 8-mile-diameter circle of buck decapitation sites.

"No more doubt," Roberg says. "This was my guy."

Keeping cards tight to chest, Roberg wrote Mason multiple citations and let the suspected poacher go with a polite nod.



Unexpectedly Weird

On Dec. 17, a Friday, significantly less than 24 hours after the eye-to-eye with Mason, Roberg had six other game wardens, a sheriff, and two deputies split into two teams, both backed by separate search warrants. One warrant for Carney's residence; one warrant for Mason's residence. They would be looking for far more than deer hanging in a corn crib.

At roughly 8 a.m., the 10-man team gathered 25 miles north of Garden Grove. "We met up in Osceola, in Clarke County. It was just far enough to ensure no one close to Justin Mason put two-and-two together. If you see that many game wardens gathered, it's fair to say there's either a meal or something is about to go down."

At 9 a.m., the two teams hit the residences of Mason and Carney. The result? No honor among thieves.





“We found parts of six or seven deer at Mason’s place, and he and Carney were more than willing to talk. From their separate homes, without any communication between the two, both made the same claim: The stash was at Mike Mason’s place.”

Roberg dialed a judge, requested an additional search warrant, and rolled 10 miles south to Woodland, Iowa, up to the rural farm property of Mike Mason, the father of Justin Mason.

“All along, for months, I’d thought this was just another poaching case, certainly a really high number of kills, but nothing worse,” Roberg notes. “Stepping onto Mike Mason’s place, that’s when things got unexpectedly weird. Like nothing I’ve ever seen.”

Feeding Addiction

By noon, warrant in hand, Roberg began a final search.

“The property included a ranch-type house and multiple outbuildings. We first found several fresh racks on the bed in Justin’s room, but not any crazy numbers,” Roberg recalls. “My sense going in was that after months gone by, we might find 10 racks or so. Little more, little less.”

Instead, within the tin sides and tin roof of an 8’ x 12’ storage



“I went through a walk-in door and saw a scene that I can’t fully explain today. Dead center of the shed was a wooden chair surrounded by antlers. Eevvverywhere around the chair from the floor upwards, to the walls.

“You couldn’t count the racks crammed in on this chair. No way. I don’t want to be too graphic, but it was evident that the chair was positioned so someone could sit in it and soak in the antlers. In my opinion, I was looking at not just an addiction, but also a fetish. The storage building was a story all by itself.”

Possession of antlers is not criminal. However, Roberg had a chain of DNA samples preserved from the months prior. Yet, DNA became a footnote once Mason was transported by law enforcement to the tin shed. One rack at a time, Mason provided antler histories. His memory of each set was phenomenally detailed.

Two hours later, surrounded by his beloved antlers, Mason was still talking.

For the Sake of Horns

“We’d bring him a rack and he’d hold it in his hands with total kill recall: where, when, who, month, gun, year, and more. I’d encountered so many poachers, but this was unreal, so far past normal.”



was much more going on. He was getting turned on by looking at the antlers and reliving the moment. Mason was enamored by the horns and everything he said matched what I'd seen and recorded in the field. He described it as a true addiction, and that's the way it looked to us."



"Sometimes there's not enough hours in a day to catch the worst of the bad guys," says Roberg. "They're seasoned, wary, and know how to stay out of reach." (Photo by Chris Bennett)

All told, 52 racks were seized, not including those with valid tags attached. The antler sizes told a tale. There were no true monster bucks present. Nothing for Johnny Morris to buy. Most of the racks came from deer three to four years in age.



Care about so much.

And long-term, what was Mason's antler scheme? He did not poach for profit, procurement of meat, or social media acclaim, Roberg says. Just horns for the sake of horns.

"I don't believe he'd have ever sold a one. This was classic self-gratification. His plan was simple: Keep killing deer and getting antlers. I have no doubt if we hadn't caught him, he'd have kept filling up buildings with racks."

Evidence collected and confession completed, the case went into the court system—not necessarily a poaching preventive.

Bad to Worse

In a report published at [Whitetails Unlimited](#), Roberg summarized DNR legal action against Mason and multiple cohorts in what was then the largest seizure of illegal deer in Iowa history.

On January 13, 2005, Carney pleaded guilty to taking a doe deer with a rifle, and wanton waste of deer. He was fined \$290 and ordered to pay restitution of \$750 ... On August 23, Jake Mason and Steve Powell were tried and convicted of illegal transportation of deer ... The two men were fined \$247 each. On September 22, 2005, a final plea agreement was reached with Justin and Mike Mason.



possession of 12 buck deer. In addition, he pleaded guilty to three counts of taking deer with a rifle, three counts of wanton waste of deer, one count of shooting a rifle from a public road, one count of having a loaded rifle in a vehicle, and one count of taking a doe deer with a rifle. Justin Mason was fined \$2,918 and ordered to pay restitution to the Iowa DNR in the amount of \$48,750 ... In addition, Justin Mason was suspended from purchasing any DNR license for five years.

Mason's case aside, Roberg believes the penalties associated with serial poaching are too light. "It's a tough and complicated question to break down, but at some point, there should be a felony conviction. Misdemeanors aren't effective to stopping the worst offenders."

"How bad does it have to get?" Snow echoes. "This is going to get worse. Back in 2004, everything was spotlight poaching. That certainly still goes on, but that's yesterday. Thermal technology is unbelievable for locating deer in the dark and that's what poachers are using right now. Everybody knows it's happening all the time."

Therein lies the question: Did Mason stop decapitating bucks? Do serial poachers ever stop?

A Big Zero



Snow explains. “But there’s a nasty place where the worst dirtbags operate. They make up only a tiny percent of all hunters, but they’re truly bad guys that never change their ways.”

Roberg concurs: “Call it addiction or something worse, but the worst poachers are set in their ways. For whatever the reason, that’s who they are.”



“I wish I could say it all had a great ending,” says Roberg. “But repeat poachers are hard-core addicts. They never stop. *Never.*” (Photo by Chris Bennett)

Mason’s exploits remain in Roberg’s memory. “I had other cases that required more groundwork, perseverance, landowner cooperation, and farmer help, but Mason stands out and not just



“There was a whole lot between the lines.”

Looking back over decades of tenure, Roberg recalls poaching violations committed by hunters in the heat of the moment. “Those were errors in judgement often done by good people. They made a one-time mistake and paid their dues. They were genuinely sorry and embarrassed, and never did it again.”

However, across his career, how many serial poachers did Roberg encounter who showed sincere repentance?

“I don’t have to think long to answer the question,” he concludes. “Zero.”

For more from Chris Bennett ([@ChrisBennettMS](#) or cbennett@farmjournal.com or 662-592-1106), see:

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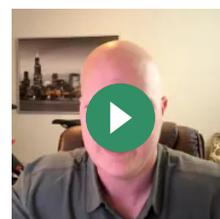
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