HOT ON THE TRAIL

DNR law enforcement extends the long arm of the law to the Hatfield-McCoy Trails.

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PHOTOGRAPHED BY ZACK HAROLD
Corporal Roger Jennings of the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources Law Enforcement Section stops a group of riders on the Hatfield-McCoy Trails for disobeying helmet rules.
May 2016, an all-terrain vehicle rider from Ohio was on a Mingo County section of the Hatfield-McCoy Trails when his ATV broke down. When he returned for it the next morning, the vehicle had been stripped and vandalized. Two front wheels and tires, a spare tire, a tool box, a radio, the battery, and several other parts had been plundered, and the gas tank had been punctured.

Altogether, around $3,500 worth of damage had been done. The man put up signs offering reward money for the parts, and ultimately paid it to the very people who took them, police say.

Corporal Roger Jennings, an officer with the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources, working with the West Virginia State Police, investigated and got confessions from two suspects, who were ultimately charged with felony grand larceny and destruction of property as well as a handful of misdemeanor charges. The case is still pending.

Incidents like this are rare on the trail system. “For the amount of folks we have to utilize the trails, actually it’s pretty safe,” Jennings says. “We don’t really run into a lot of that stuff.” But things happen. And when they do, that’s when the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources’ Law Enforcement Section steps in.

Keeping Everyone Safe

The Hatfield-McCoy Trails system has more than 600 miles of trails in Southern West Virginia and is open to ATVs, UTVs, 4x4s, and dirt bikes year-round. The DNR has provided law enforcement for the system since June 1, 2015, after the trails were restructured from a state agency to a multi-county economic development corporation.

Instead of using sheriff’s deputies or another law enforcement agency, working with the DNR just made sense, says Jeffrey Lusk, executive director of the Hatfield-McCoy Regional Recreation Authority. “This has been a great relationship,” he says. “We feel like they are very receptive to what we need in a law enforcement agency. They understand we need law enforcement but we’re also a tourism agency. We get extremely good feedback from landowners and from riders who have had accidents.”

Law enforcement investigated around 38 accidents in
Jennings sometimes checks more than 100 people in a day. Most checks are over quickly. Officers also provide assistance to ATV riders, calling a wrecker or emergency medical services if the need arises. Once, Jennings even came across a ginseng hunter who’d been lost in the woods for days. “If I hadn’t found him when I did, he would’ve been gone,” he says. He gave the man a few bottles of water and a ride back to the nearest highway, where he hopped out and headed for home—and, likely, a good shower.

Jennings routinely meets people from all over the East Coast who have come to Southern West Virginia to enjoy the trails systems. Recently, he met some people from Poland who were working in the oilfields of Pennsylvania and came to ride the trails. “Ninety-nine-point-nine percent” of Jennings’ interactions with people using the trails are very positive. “Most folks are here to have a good time and obey the law,” he says.

Maybe a couple times each month, Jennings will investigate litter incidents. People sometimes use the trail systems to find spots to dump their trash, or dump their trash on land surrounding the trails. He recently worked an incident off the Devil Anse Trail where someone left a truckload of trash: mostly household items, appliances and the like. If Jennings can track down
the culprits, they are typically charged with creating an open dump and littering on public lands, misdemeanors. Sometimes, people who dump their trash won’t even bother to remove papers with their addresses on them. “Some people don’t care,” Jennings said. “I get their physical address and go there and, a lot of times, they’ve moved.”

But again, these incidents are exceptions to the rule. “For the most part, the trails are pretty clean,” Jennings says. “If it’s an eyesore, a lot of times the trail folks take care of it.”

**Good People, Good Times**
Besides Jennings, two more officers are typically assigned to a detachment that serves Wyoming, McDowell, and Mercer counties, but one is currently on military leave. “The trail has asked us to provide more officers, so starting in July we should have a sergeant assigned to the trails,” Ballard says. The sergeant will serve a supervisory role but will also assist in patrolling the trails.

DNR officers have full police powers in West Virginia. Officers assigned to the trails also investigate other issues they come across while on patrol. But unlike other DNR officers, they seldom run into people committing hunting violations. The trails system is usually loud and hunters tend to stay where it’s quiet, Ballard says.

Working on the Hatfield-McCoy trails is almost like working a public affairs job in addition to enforcing the law, Jennings says. Most of the time, when he comes across a group of riders on the trails, they’re glad to see him. Jennings knows the twists and turns of the trails intimately and can easily get lost riders back on their desired paths or point them to the nearest gas station, food stop, and campground. “I like working it because you’re a representative of the state, more or less. Most of the people I work with are good people who come to the state to have a good time.”

Corporal Roger Jennings of the DNR’s Law Enforcement Section says he’s surprised how often people travel from out of state to use the trail system and don’t read the rules and regulations in advance. “Usually, with a helmet violation, we write a citation where they have to see the magistrate,” he says.