

“YOU NEVER KNOW WHEN YOU’RE GOING TO RUN INTO THAT FELON WITH A GUN WHO DOESN’T WANT TO GO BACK TO PRISON,” BRASSARD SAYS. “YOU’RE ALWAYS TRYING TO BE ON YOUR A-GAME.” LESS THAN TWO WEEKS LATER, AN ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION OFFICER IN COLUMBIA COUNTY WILL BE SHOT AND INJURED ON THE JOB BY A RECKLESS HUNTER.

lack of legs. “It still has a long way to go in development and not a lot of time before this pool dries up,” she says. “They should be getting out by late July, but they can’t get out of the pool until they have lungs and legs. They’re not being triggered by the environment to finish development.”

Rather than testing a specific hypothesis, McNulty’s fieldwork is more open-ended. “The question I’m asking is how the system changes from season to season and year to year,” she says. Much of the information she collects is added into larger data sets that help show what’s happening across an entire region or continent. In other cases, her observations can help shed light on what will happen locally in the near future. “I’m just out there counting nuts and things, which seems pretty esoteric,” she says. But she can use that information to predict whether, for instance, a shortage of food will mean bears on the move the following summer.

This year, she says, the conifers are loaded with cones. “We’ll probably have a lot of irruptive birds this winter. Also, a lot of red squirrels, which will have an effect on songbirds, because the squirrels like to eat their eggs. There are all these cascading effects.”

Soon, winter will come and McNulty will be mostly office-bound, entering data into the computer and making plans for future research. Still, she says, “I’m lucky. There’s usually a time in a career where you become the desk biologist. I have plenty of that, but I also get to do hands-on fieldwork.”

ALAN BRASSARD

Job: Environmental Conservation Officer (ECO) for the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC)

Hometown: Moriah **Age:** 36

IT’S 3:30 P.M. IN MID-NOVEMBER—the height of big-game-hunting season in the Adirondacks—when Alan Brassard meets two of his fellow ECOs behind the Elizabethtown fire station. ECOs generally work alone, but Brassard has requested help with a sting operation, and ECOs John Blades, who covers northern Essex County, and Rob Higgins, who covers Warren County, have answered the call. The DEC has received complaints of shots fired pre-dawn along a road in Lewis. It’s illegal to shoot from a vehicle or to hunt by shining a light on a deer, a practice called deer-jacking. Brassard has identified a suspect, but he needs to catch him in the act.

Brassard is about an hour into his shift; he has wide discretion over his working hours and how he fills them, as long as it

supports the agency’s mission of enforcing the environmental laws and preserving the natural resources of the State of New York. Though he’s transferring to Warren County soon, he currently covers seven towns in southern Essex County, a significantly larger area than an ECO would in decades past. “We’re pretty much triaging,” he says. “You have to pick your battles.”

Earlier today Brassard answered a complaint about someone burning brush in Mineville; it turned out the man had a permit, and Brassard suspects the complaint is related to an ongoing feud between neighbors.

Though ECOs are focused on environmental law enforcement, they are trained in all aspects of police work and often assist other agencies; Brassard carries a Glock and wears a bulletproof vest. “You never know when you’re going to run into that felon with a gun who doesn’t want to go back to prison,” he says. “You’re always trying to be on your A-game.” (Less than two weeks later, an ECO in Columbia County will be shot and injured on the job by a reckless hunter.)

From their rendezvous point in Elizabethtown, Brassard, Blades and Higgins drive to a back road nearby, and stop alongside a wooded area near where the suspect is known to hunt. Brassard hops out and retrieves what looks like a decapitated seven-point buck from the bed of his truck. It’s a remote-controlled decoy that, when assembled, is meant to draw fire from unsuspecting deer-jackers. Brassard tucks the torso under one arm, the head under the other, and climbs 20 feet or so down a hill to place the decoy. The plan is for the other ECOs to keep a lookout at either end of the road, while Brassard hides in range of the decoy at a safe distance. When Blades or Higgins spots the suspect, they will radio to Brassard, who will activate the decoy. This is not sophisticated animatronics—the buck simply moves its head from side to side—but in the waning afternoon light it should be enough to catch a driver’s attention. And if he’s their perp, chances are he’ll jump at the opportunity to take an easy shot.

Just as Brassard gets in position, a pick-up truck drives by. After it passes, Brassard shouts from below, “Is that our guy?” Blades answers in the affirmative, saying, “We can’t win.” Brassard trudges back up to the road, a little out of breath, carrying the deer parts. “Unbelievable,” he says.

Their cover blown, Brassard, Blades and Higgins decide to try a different spot a couple of miles away. If they can’t catch their man today, maybe they can ensnare someone else. About 15 minutes after setting up the decoy and hiding behind a tumbledown camp across the street, though, they decide to abort the mission. The sky is darkening, and they fear they’ve been

Environmental Conservation Officer Alan Brassard uses a buck decoy to catch deer-jackers who shoot from the road.

