

[SOUND OF RUSHING RIVER FADES UP AND UNDER]

Nate Hegyi: And what's the name of the creek?

Ron Arsenault: This is the Merrymeeting River.

Hegyi: Merrymeeting River, ok.

Arsenault: So, we'll go up here...

Hegyi, Narrating: Ron Arsenault is on patrol. He's a conservation officer with New Hampshire's Fish and Game Department. We're walking along this little river looking for folks breaking the law.

[RIVER SOUND FADES UP AND UNDER]

Arsenault: This is all general fishin', so this is open for anything. And this goes all the way up to Merrymeeting Lake... [FADES OUT]

Nate Hegyi, Narrating: It's a cold, windy spring morning. Not too great for fishing and there's no one really on the water. Ron is bundled up in a green Fish and Game jacket. Black boots. Same uniform he wears everyday. And then – Ron spots something.

Arsenault: Ooh, look what we have here!

Hegyi, Narrating: A length of rope just under the water. He starts pulling it in.

Arsenault: These are always fun. Ya never know... never know what you're gonna get! ...So, this is, uh, somebody's minnow trap and they're supposed to have their name... on their trap. So... looks like a crayfish in there.

Hegyi: Oh, yeah!

[MUSIC IN]

Hegyi, Narrating: Ron pulls out a small, mesh wire crate, the kind anglers use to catch live minnows for bait.

Arsenault: So, this trap is illegal. There's no name, no nothin'. So, I'll let the crayfish go, and we'll confiscate this trap, unless I see a name on here.

Hegyi: Oh, so you'll just take it then, huh?

Arsenault: Yeah, 'cause it's illegal.

Hegy: Um, what's he got in there, a cookie? It looks like a cookie, huh? Oh no, it's a sausage patty!

Arsenault: Yeah, a sausage patty... [HEGYI LAUGHS] Huh. Alright, Mr. Crayfish. Bye! [RIVER SOUND FADES OUT]

[MUSIC UP AND UNDER]

Hegy, Narrating: Most of Ron's days are like this, walking or driving around central New Hampshire, enforcing all the hunting and fishing regulations here.

And make no mistake, Ron is a cop. He carries a gun. He makes arrests. But this job is different from most forms of law enforcement.

[MUSIC OUT]

Hegy, Narrating: Hunting and fishing laws were made to prevent game animals from being wiped out, and to keep people safe. Also, hunting is considered a sport. Yes, it involves killing animals. But there is a code of ethics, rules about what is and isn't "fair" enforced by hundreds of laws. That makes Ron a kind of referee of the wild.

Arsenault, driving: Nobody likes a cheater. You know, any game, any ball game... Once you're a cheater, you're a cheater, you know? So, that's kind of... We're the referee for the, for the deer, you know? Or the game animal or the fish, you know. We're, we're catching the cheaters. That's what we're doin'.

Hegy, Narrating: And over the years, he's seen plenty of cheaters. But nothing in his career compares to the bust he and his colleagues made in the spring of 2023.

[MUSIC IN]

Hegy, in the truck: When you write your book after you retire, where will Operation Night Cat land?

Arsenault, driving: I haven't decided 'cause that could be a book in itself.

Hegy, Narrating: Operation Night Cat. One of the biggest poaching cases in New Hampshire history. A case that Ron stumbled upon one cold December day in 2022.

A case that slowly unraveled into one of the weirdest, wildest, darkest investigations of his life. One that made him question aspects of the justice system he had spent the past 17 years of his life working within.

Arsenault: If you're abusing animals like this, are you abusin' humans?

[THEME MUSIC UP]

I'm Nate Hegyi. From NHPR's *Document* team and *Outside/In*, this is a special three-part series. Operation Night Cat.

Michael Lewis, on the phone: This is a kind of gleeful celebration of violence.

Kevin Bronson: It's like they're playing Grand Theft Auto up behind their house, except with animals.

Shawn Cochrane, on the phone: They can do whatever they want and get away with it. Nobody can see over that wall!

[THEME MUSIC UP AND OUT]

Hegyi, Narrating: Episode 1 – Why Did the Deer Cross the Road?

[BREAK]

Hegyi, Narrating: From NHPR's *Document* team and *Outside/In*, this is *Operation Night Cat*. I'm Nate Hegyi.

[WOODS SOUND UP]

Arsenault: Oh, let's see if I can close this – ooh, ah! – this bag. I've had this forever! I got this bag in 2003 when I was in Iraq. [LAUGHS]

Hegyi, Narrating: Before becoming a Fish and Game warden, Ron Arsenault bounced around a bit. He served in the Navy for eight years – got deployed to Iraq. And when he got out of the military, he did some work as a landscaper, then at the town dump. But like that bulky, green Fish and Game-issued coat he wears almost every day now, this job fits him.

In part, because he's very chatty, good at explaining all the myriad hunting regs to people, and in part, because he really believes in those rules. I mean, he's even dinged his own family members for breaking the law, including his own son and his niece.

Arsenault: She shot her first deer, but it wasn't doe season and she shot a doe. She thought it was a buck. Went right to the check station, and right in front of everybody, I wrote her a ticket.

Hegyi: Wow!

Arsenal: And everybody at that point was like talking and spreading the word...

Hegy: Ron will get anyone!

Arsenault: Yeah, he's like, "He'd write his own mother!" [HEGYI LAUGHS] So, it's good because that goes around town and then, when the guy's like, gives you all the excuse, I'm like, "I wrote my own kid for this." They're like, "Oh..."

Hegy, laughing: "There's no way I'm gettin' outta this!" [LAUGHS, FADES UNDER]

Hegy, Narrating: Riding around with him, I could see how easily the idea of Ron being a bit of a hard-ass could get around town. He's kind of like a small-town sheriff. Everyone we saw knew his name or seemed to recognize his truck. It helps that he grew up here, a part of New Hampshire known as the Lakes Region.

Arsenault, driving: Down the road there I played Little league in the ball field. This is where I took my hunter's ed when I was a kid. This is what I mean, like, I'm... I'm vested.

Hegy, in the truck: Right, deep, deep ties.

Hegy, Narrating: The Lakes Region is a maze of tight, winding roads, quaint little New England towns, yes, big lakes – and also dense, leafy woods. It's the kind of place where if you see a deer crossing sign, you're like... what's the point? Because there are deer everywhere, which makes it a hunter's haven. It's the kind of place where the town barber pinned up photos of everyone's deer on the wall of his shop. Ron remembers it well.

Arsenault: When I was a kid I'd see the bucks on the wall, like, thousands of pictures on the wall.

Hegy, Narrating: It was a kind of locals-only trophy room. A place to brag about the deer they hunted. And many of the photos on that wall, Ron told me, were taken by a local family named the Kelleys.

Arsenault: The Kelley family was a well-known name, you know, around town for killin' big bucks.

Hegy, Narrating: Back in the day, the older Kelleys would show off their big bucks at the barber shop. But nowadays, the next generation shows off their kills on TikTok.

Tom Kelley, on TikTok video: [PANTING] I just smoked an absolute stud... in Illinois! [PANTING, FADES OUT]

[MUSIC IN]

Hegyí, Narrating: Tom Kelley has more than 20,000 followers on TikTok. He mostly posts videos of himself hunting.

Kelley, on TikTok video: [SIGHS] Sat here as long as I could and he came walkin' through and I smoked 'im with the ol' .308.

Hegyí, Narrating: And in these videos, you can see Tom is a young guy. He's in his early 30s, shaved head, decked out in expensive camouflage. He's pretty fit – lost a ton of weight on the Keto diet. He looks like an extra in some war movie like Black Hawk Down.

In one video, he's trembling with excitement after he kills a deer in New Hampshire.

Kelley, on TikTok video: [GIGGLES] I just killed a...[GASPS] big buck. [PANTS, SNIFFS] I sh– I can't even talk. [SIGHS] There's blood everywhere. I absolutely smoked 'im! [SNIFFS, SOUND OF FOOTSTEPS, FADES UNDER]

Hegyí, Narrating: In another one, Tom uses that AI-generated TikTok voice to call himself “the Alpha in these woods” before shooting a coyote. Hash-tag predator-control. Hash-tag night-hunter.

[MUSIC FADES OUT, TIKTOK SONG CLIP FADES UP]

AI-generated TikTok voice: I am the alpha in these woods.

Song clip, “Wolves” by Big Sean: “Oooh... Yeah. Uh. I was raised by the wolves. I was raised by...” [SONG CLIP FADES OUT]

[MUSIC FADES BACK UP]

Hegyí, Narrating: Now, I want to be clear. Most hunters follow all the regulations out there. They care about safety and making sure there are still animals to hunt for generations to come.

But Tom Kelley? He was developing a reputation as a guy who sometimes broke the rules to get his trophies.

[MUSIC FADES OUT]

Hegyí, Narrating: These rules were inspired by a hunting code of ethics. It's known as “fair chase.”

In the United States, this code dates back more than a 130 years to when Teddy Roosevelt (before he was president) got together with a group of his hunting buddies. They wanted to stop the mindless killing that almost wiped out entire species here. The idea was to level the playing field, to give the animals more of an edge at surviving.

It's why there are now regulations about, say, using a truck to chase down a deer, or killing a bear at night, or throwing some seed down to attract ducks. The consensus is... it's not fair.

But in practice, these laws can also be really confusing. And I know this because I am a hunter myself.

There are different licenses you need to get, restrictions on what firearms you can use, where you can hunt animals, what time of day, which season.

And these rules, they can change year to year, and differ state to state. Like, an animal that might be protected in New Hampshire could be fair game in neighboring Massachusetts.

But it's a hunter's job to know these rules. And Tom Kelley, the guy who loved to "smoke" bucks for TikTok, he'd been caught cheating.

For instance, Tom got in trouble in Maine for something called "baiting." This is where you put out food to lure an animal into a certain spot... and then ya shoot it.

Arsenault, driving: I hate baiting. [LAUGHS] Let me just say that.

Hegy, in the truck: Why do you hate it?

Arsenault, driving: Because it's cheating in my book. Anybody can throw a pile of grain in the woods and shoot a deer.

Hegy, Narrating: In 2020, Tom was charged with baiting and shooting a deer on some property his family owned in Maine, a state where you are not allowed to bait deer during the hunting season.

Those charges were ultimately dropped, but then, he was charged again in Maine, this time for illegally hunting a black bear over a bait site. Those charges stuck and Tom lost his hunting privileges for a year.

Point is, Tom was on Ron's radar as a person to watch when he got a call from a local police chief.

It was a cold December night in 2022 and the chief said he was driving near Tom Kelley's house when he noticed something odd. So, the chief calls Ron and he says...

Arsenault: "We were headin' to a call and four or five deer just crossed right by his house." And I'm like, "Oh, I bet he's got a bait right there. I'll check it out tomorrow morning."

Hegy, Narrating: So, the next morning, Ron swung by Tom Kelley's property. It's a little two-bedroom house on six acres of land, a big yard surrounded by dense forest.

Arsenault: When I pull off the side of the road, there's like, uh, it looks like a cattle path that is goin' into the woods. I followed the path. It was only probably... 150 feet... maybe? And I got to the edge of the yard, took out my binoculars, and looked, and I could see the pile of grain with a big bale o' hay in front of it. So, it was very clear that it was bait.

Hegy, Narrating: Deer love to eat grain. And according to New Hampshire's baiting laws, Tom had left them an illegal feast.

But then, Ron noticed something else – a motion sensor camera aimed at the bait site. Ron suspected Tom could be using this camera to alert him whenever an animal came by the bait site so he could grab his rifle. And this potential shortcut for bagging game could also be evidence for Ron.

[MUSIC IN]

Hegy, Narrating: So, a couple days later, Ron comes back with a search warrant. He seizes Tom's camera and starts digging through the SD card. And sure enough, Ron found evidence confirming his suspicions – a picture of a deer at the bait site that Tom later killed.

Arsenault: Like, the night before he killed it, it was there at the bait... eating. So, I'm like, "Well, he shot that deer and he used that bait to lure in the deer, so, that's the aid-in-use of taking a deer over an illegal bait." So, I'm like, "Well, I have a charge right there, but... I wanna go more... because I want... the phone."

Hegy, Narrating: Considering his history, Ron suspected that Tom had illegally killed more than just one deer.

Arsenault: So, if he's killin' a deer illegally, he's going to tell his buddy, and he's gonna say, "Hey, buddy, come meet me 'cause I shot this, blah, blah, blah," and you're gonna have all this information on this phone.

Hegy, Narrating: So, a few days before Christmas, Ron goes to Tom's house, knocks on the door, shows him another search warrant, and seizes Tom's phone.

Arsenault: There's just so much data in that phone. It was like 1.6 terabytes of data.

[MUSIC OUT]

Hegy, off mic: Wow. So, these are photos—

Arsenault: There's photos, there's text messages, there's videos, there's, um... instant messages!

Hegy, Narrating: Now Ron, he is old school. Not very good with technology.

Arsenault: You know, gimme a chainsaw. Give me the, give me the wood, I'll cut the firewood, I'll split the firewood. You know, I'll drag the deer out – whatever. [LAUGHS] But you start getting into this technical stuff and it's like SIMs and MIMs and texts and, you know – I had no idea! What the heck is this?!

Hegy, Narrating: But the thing about Ron is that he is obsessive. He's like a bird dog that once it catches a scent, he cannot break away. So, he found younger colleagues to help explain how to comb through a phone's data and then every night, Ron would spend hours on an old, heavy laptop, searching through Tom's text messages, using keywords like "deer," "bait," "night hunting."

Arsenault: My wife would be— sh— yeah, she's sittin' there doin' her games on her computer, and it's like, "You're still workin' on that?!" I'm like, "Yeah, I'm still workin' on it." I'm like, "This is what we gotta do! We gotta, gotta get it, you know?"

Hegy, Narrating: And as he started sifting through all these texts and images, looking for evidence of more illegal kills, Ron found what he was looking for.

[MUSIC IN]

Hegy, Narrating: He also discovered something he did not expect. Something much bigger.

[MUSIC UP]

Hegy, Narrating: That's next, after the break.

[MUSIC UP AND OUT]

[BREAK]

Hegy, Narrating: From NHPR's *Document* team and *Outside/In*, this is *Operation Night Cat*. I'm Nate Hegy.

Poaching is a crime that usually conjures up certain images, mostly overseas, of dead elephants and rhinos with their tusks and horns removed for sale on the black market. But technically, poaching is any illegal activity used to take an animal. That minnow trap from earlier? That's poaching.

That said, “poaching” is also a really loaded term. Many people who violate hunting and fishing laws do it on accident. So, Fish and Game officers reserve the label for the ones who know they’re breaking the rules.

Arsenault, driving: The poachers are the most egregious violators in our... world.

Hegy, Narrating: And as Ron was digging through hunter Tom Kelley’s phone, he found something that made him think... poacher.

Arsenault: Here’s a video of, uh, Kelley. This is the bobcat. Let’s play it.

Hegy, Narrating: And in this video, I could see a pair of red crosshairs trained on a bobcat. Its eyes were glowing because the camera was in night vision and it was attached to Tom Kelley’s rifle.

[GUNSHOT]

Hegy, Narrating: The bobcat keels over. Dead.

[MUSIC IN]

Hegy, Narrating: Bobcats are a protected species in New Hampshire. During the 20th century, they were hunted almost to extinction in New England. And I should say that it’s also illegal to hunt most species at night for safety reasons.

Ron thinks Tom lured this bobcat into his backyard using meat scraps from deer. He shot it and then sent the video to a group of friends.

But that wasn’t all. What Ron found next really got his attention. Tom’s friends were sending back their own videos of themselves killing bobcats, too. Ron sat me down in front of his work laptop to show me some of those kills.

Arsenault: There it is. That’s a bobcat.. Bobcat... ‘Nother bobcat... [SCOFFS] Bobcat.

[MUSIC POST]

Hegy, Narrating: This group seemed to consist of at least five guys, including Tom Kelley. And to Ron, the evidence from Tom’s phone showed all of them looked like poachers with a capital P.

Not only because they were violating state law by killing a protected species. It seemed they were also violating federal law.

Ron says he saw evidence of Tom and the others taking their dead bobcats across state lines. Then, they would register or “tag” them in states where it’s okay to hunt bobcats, making their illegal kills look legit.

[MUSIC UP AND OUT]

Hegy, Narrating: And this appears to be a violation of a federal law called the Lacey Act.

It was written by a Republican congressman from Iowa, John Lacey, back in 1900 because at the time, we were raining hellfire on America’s birds. Commercial hunters were killing them by the millions to sell as food and to literally put a feather in women’s caps.

While some states allowed this, others didn’t. So, in order to get around these state laws, these commercial hunters would launder their birds, pretending that they killed them in states that allowed this kind of hunting when in reality they killed them in states that didn’t. The Lacey Act put an end to that.

So, Ron called up his colleagues in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and told them about what he was seeing.

Arsenault: “Hey, we got some bobcats gettin’ cranked up in New Hampshire at night, and they’re taggin’ ‘em illegally going across state lines.”

Hegy, Narrating: The feds, Ron says, were intrigued. And this is the moment this bust became wide enough to earn its own name. Ron’s wife was the one to coin it.

Arsenault: We were sittin’ at the table one night, and I’m like, “Hey, we’re gonna meet with the feds. We’re gonna make this an operation. We got to think of something.” She was like, “Operation Night Cat.” And I’m like, “That’s perfect!” I’m like, “Hired.” [LAUGHS]

Hegy, Narrating: In his nearly two decades on the job, Ron had never stumbled onto a case this big. He was jacked.

Arsenault: And it all started with four or five deer walkin’ across the road. Because if you look at it all the way, at the beginning, it was like, why’d the deer cross the road? To kill a bobcat. [SLAMS HAND ON TABLE, LAUGHS] It’s like... it’s crazy!

[MUSIC IN]

Hegy, Narrating: Before sunrise on January 12th, 2023, a month after those deer crossed the road in front of Tom Kelley’s property, Ron and his buddies in law enforcement executed a search warrant on Tom’s house.

Inside, the officers find a taxidermied bobcat, rifles with night-vision scopes and mounted cameras, and the bait site in his backyard. They also find what looked like a sniper's nest on Tom's back deck, made so animals can't see him getting ready to shoot. Ron showed me pictures of it.

Arsenault: This is where his— He's shooting from up here. See how he has the plywood around the, the railing so it's like a blind?

Hegy, off mic: Yeah.

Arsenault: So, he had, he had a tripod up here with his, uh, .22 with a night scope. And this is the bait pile, like, right here, I'm standing at. And he would just get a— He had a motion sensor there. It would go off and he would shoot—

Hegy, off mic: Right out of his—

Arsenault: —right out of his porch. He just opened the slider and come out and psheew!

Hegy, Narrating: As Ron is searching Tom Kelley's house, his colleagues at New Hampshire Fish and Game, along with local police and federal agents, arrive at the houses of the other guys in the poaching group.

One of them is a man named Randy Inman. Randy apparently got tipped off that law enforcement were gonna search his house.

Kevin Bronson: Randy, I think, calls in sick. He's at work. He says he's sick and comes screamin' home.

Hegy, Narrating: This is conservation officer, Sgt. Kevin Bronson.

Bronson: And honestly, at the beginning, when I got the information from Ron that he'd been shootin' some cats, my hackles were still not really up. And I thought it would be like, "Ok, so we've got a cat somewhere and a red fox." And... and it wasn't. It was way more than that.

Hegy, Narrating: They uncovered evidence that Randy had illegally killed at least 20 animals there at night. Foxes, bobcats, coyotes.

Bronson: It's like they're playin' Grand Theft Auto up behind their house, except with animals.

Hegy, Narrating: Randy was shooting so much that his girlfriend at the time later told investigators she couldn't sleep. It was like Tom and Randy were in some sort of competition. Who could get the most kills? To show me, Ron scrolled through examples of photos and videos on his computer.

Arsenault: Gray fox. Bobcat. Gray fox. Bobcat. Red fox. Red fox. Gray fox. Gray fox. Red fox. Coyote. Bobcat. Coyote— Crow! ...Bobcat... Red fox. They... killed... everything.

Hegy, Narrating: They would shoot these animals using a night scope, record it, and then share the videos with the group.

Arsenault: And they could talk to each other like, “Hey, nice shot!” And they'd communicate with their phones, like, they all got the message. They all got to watch it. Like, they, they would get a message sent to their phone and they could watch the video and they'd be like, “Hey, nice shot!” “Oh, you shot that one in the eye!” Or, you know, whatever. [HAND SLAP SOUND]

[MUSIC IN]

Hegy, Narrating: With all this evidence, Fish and Game felt confident they could charge these guys for poaching-related crimes. They allegedly killed dozens of animals illegally. And yet, some of the most concerning stuff they found wasn't a violation of legal code. They were violations of moral codes. The stuff that goes beyond fair chase and into cruelty.

Hegy: And so, what is this video?

Arsenault: So, this is the deer video.

Hegy, Narrating: Ron wanted to show me a particular video that disturbed him. So, me and my producer, Lauren Chooljian, met him at a little cabin next to a lake to watch it.

I had seen the first part of this video before on Tom's TikTok. It's from one of his scope-mounted cameras. This time it's daylight, in a forest, and Tom shoots a deer.

[GUNSHOT, RELOADING SOUND]

Arsenault: And then he cut it about here. But it gets worse. I mean, it looks like the front two legs are broken, and it's plowin' and jumpin' and just... I don't know why he wouldn't shoot it again.

Lauren Chooljian: It looks like a fish that's, like, flapping when you pull it in the boat. This is, like, my one insight into your world is that, like, the fish is, like, pissed at you.

Arsenault: This is the beginning. Somebody else would be shooting at this animal while it's, you know, clearly, it's right there. He has the scope up to it. You should be... shooting it again to put it out of its misery.

Hegy, Narrating: What Ron, Lauren, and I are watching here... a deer, flailing around on its back legs... it is an ethical hunter's worst nightmare. Bad shots do happen, of course, but it's your job to kill an animal quickly and with as little pain as possible, especially when it's as close to you as this deer was to Tom.

Hegy: You can see that he's got a pretty clear shot, too, right through those two trees.

Chooljian: Yeah. It's wild to think that the camera is on his gun. So, he's, he's – his gun is pointed at the deer.

Arsenault: Right... 'cause he wants to get everything on video so he can put it on, you know, whatever app that he has. [GUNSHOT ON VIDEO] Ope, he shoots at it again. [SOUND OF FOOTSTEPS ON VIDEO] So, that was two minutes long before he shot again. [SOUND OF RUNNING ON VIDEO] But when it was laying there, not moving would have probably been the best time to do it. And now it looks like he's chasin' the deer... And there, there it is again.

Hegy: That's a clean shot to the head.

Hegy, Narrating: Tom doesn't take it. Instead, he watches... And he kept watching it through the scope for another couple minutes before finally putting it out of its misery. And after the deer was dead... he said something.

Kelley, on video: [PANTING] Stay down, asshole. [PANTING] [FADES OUT]

Hegy, Narrating: My producer, Lauren looked up from the video, a little stunned, and turned to Ron.

Chooljian: Have you ever called a deer an asshole?

Arsenault: No... He's not the one who put a bullet in him. Yeah...

[THEME MUSIC IN]

Arsenault: When you take it all together, you're like, "Oh man, these guys are really bad. Yeah, these guys should never hunt again."

Hegy, Narrating: The protected bobcats. The killing at night. The videos. The bragging. It all bothered Ron. Not just because Tom and the other guys appeared to be poachers, breaking the law – and seeming to have a good ol' time doing it.

It bothered Ron because a lot of these guys knew better. Because they were law enforcement themselves. Former and current corrections officers at the New Hampshire State Prison for Men. And this is what really unnerved Ron.

Arsenault: It just makes you wonder, like, is this happening somewhere else, too? Like, if you're abusing animals like this, are you abusin' humans?

Hegy, Narrating: Next time on *Operation Night Cat*.

[THEME MUSIC UP]

*Operation Night Cat* is a special three part series from NHPR's *Document* team and *Outside/In*.

This episode was reported and written by me, Nate Hegyi, with help from Lauren Chooljian and Jason Moon.

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[THEME MUSIC UP AND OUT]