

Warden: Low pay, hard work

FROM 1

guard at the University of Montana? We are not able to recruit the personnel. We are down seven game warden positions. We cannot get out of the hole. The people are either not qualified or they don't want to do the job."

Among lowest paid

The pay for an entry-level game warden in Montana currently is \$16.72 per hour or \$36,670 per year.

Rookies with the Great Falls Police Department earn a base salary of \$38,844, according to Lt. Bryan Lockerby, and after one year of probation, they earn \$40,494.

The Missoula Police Department pays \$21.17 per hour or \$4.45 per hour more than Montana pays its new game wardens. Kropp says he expects to lose a Missoula-based game warden who recently interviewed with the city of Missoula.

The Montana Highway Patrol pays \$18.74 per hour at entry, but they have a good progression market after the first year. Even security police at the University of Montana begin working at \$19.71 per hour and then \$22.34 after the first year.

The turnover also means that the game warden force is relatively inexperienced. Of Montana's 73 field wardens, half have less than five years of experience. But Kropp says that can be good.

"Despite the fact that we have lost several senior officers, it's not all bad. We essentially have a young, motivated game warden workforce," Kropp said. "We're learning together and making some mistakes but, they are energetic and enthusiastic, so it's contagious and helpful to us older guys!

"It's not all about money but a good share of it is in terms of retention and recruitment. We have been recruiting heavily across Montana and nationwide and we are not finding anywhere near the number of qualified applicants that we used to. In part that has to do with pay," Kropp said.

"A good 15 to 20 years ago Montana wardens were among highest paid peace officers in state. It is one of the only agencies in the state that requires a college degree to do law enforcement work and right now our wardens are among the lowest paid in the state," he said.

Working relationships with hunters, landowners and the communities where they are stationed also deteriorate, according



FILE PHOTO

A Montana state game warden works undercover, scanning the horizon overlooking an elk herd on the edge of the Sun River Game Range west of Augusta.

to Kropp, and he said "the resource pays the cost for not having somebody present.

"It really stretches our work force thin in that we already have large geographic areas to cover and when a neighboring game warden's district is vacant and somebody has to cover two districts and that cuts into effectiveness."

Almost everything

Snyder said that Montana had everything he and his wife wanted for their young family but they were unable to get ahead.

"It was very largely a financial decision," Snyder said. Washington State was able to pay him \$10 an hour more and the cost of living in Moses Lake is the same or slightly less than in Great Falls.

"It just came down to the big thing my wife kept going back to and that was how hard we had to work to get by," Snyder said.

"It was very hard," said Lori Snyder of deciding to move. "My parents are in Cascade, two brothers and a sister are in Cascade and a sister is in Bozeman and their kids and everything. Having graduated from Cascade we have a lot of friends in that area. I went to college in Northern so it was a long decision-making process. However we needed to take care of the five us; this was going to be the best decision for us because opportunity for my husband to continue to do what he loves and eventually perhaps send our three daughters to college.

"We were making it and living in a place that was beautiful and had all the things we wanted. However, we needed to make decisions for the future," she said.

It helped that Snyder grew up in Washington State and he still has family there.

"That played a little in that I knew what I was getting into,"

Snyder said. "We have some good friends not far away. I went to Washington State University and have friends not far away and brother in Spokane. That was an influence. There were some other states that pay well too but they were not considered an option. Colorado pays well but we don't have any family there. That family aspect was very big. Wife's family was all in Cascade.

"But I would have still considered it even if family wasn't there," he said. "It was the opportunity. We considered Oregon also. They have some differences in structure, through state police. I wasn't quite comfortable with how they were organized. I wasn't sure that was going to be a real good fit.

"The epiphany I finally had was this: We moved to Montana in 1998. I am passionate about hunting and fishing I love to do it and that was a huge part of reason why moved. Over the years, I got to do less and less and less; part of it was due time and part of it was due to money. I would have to plan four weeks in advance to have enough budgeted so I could take my daughter fishing. All the things we moved here for, we were not getting to partake in those. From that aspect it started to make a lot more sense. It was not so far-fetched to look at living somewhere else.

"There are plenty of other guys that work for FWP that are in the exact same situation," Snyder said. "We have talked and the common theme is, we are just treading water, just getting by from day to day. I had to look at things like that we are not saving a dime to think of kids going to college. We weren't putting anything away for savings or at least, not much."

Kevin Arnold decided in the fifth grade that he wanted to be a FWP game warden and from

then on he worked to make that dream happen; he was a FWP game warden in the Paradise Valley.

But a year ago, with less than three years of experience, Arnold took a job with the U.S. Forest Service as a backcountry ranger in the Bob Marshall Wilderness. It was a perfect job for Arnold, who is single, and also grew up on a ranch in Montana.

"(Pay) was one of the reasons - probably the biggest reason," Arnold said. "But hands down, it was the hardest decision I ever had to make in my life.

"I was stationed in Park County, probably the best warden district there is. There is year-around stuff there from hunting to late season elk hunts, wolf issues, grizzly bears and a lot of backcountry work. You have the Yellowstone River always full of trout fishermen."

Arnold said the big pay difference between FWP and the Forest Service hinges more on overtime. As a FWP warden, he was allowed up to 80 hours of overtime per year. With the Forest Service, he has the opportunity to work longer hours and get paid for them.

According to the federal government salary table, a third year Forest Service law enforcement officer would make about \$46,625 or about the same as a 20-year veteran with Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

"I was born and raised in Montana and I came from a ranching family. You don't get into this job for the money," Arnold said. "But there was a point in my life, I had to decide ... It wasn't to make a lot more money but living in Paradise Valley south of Livingston, the cost of living was astronomical."

Snyder makes it clear that he respects Montana and the FWP law enforcement community.

"I worked with some tremendous people. Despite the money it was a very difficult decision. I agonized over it, making sure it was the right thing to do. Not everything is about money. That was in the back of my mind. I worked with some excellent people. I think this department and law enforcement here have very high standards.

"A game warden with FWP has full police authority so the scope of jurisdiction is quite a lot broader. They are a nationally recognized law enforcement agency. That speaks volumes to the quality of people in Montana," Snyder said.

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Jason Snyder grabs a breather while working as a Montana game warden in the Circle Creek country of the north fork of Sun River. Snyder is one of eight game wardens in the last year to leave Fish, Wildlife & Parks for a better paying job. Snyder and his family moved from Great Falls to Moses Lake, Wash., late last year.

COURTESY PHOTO BY GAVE YERK

Montana losing wardens

► Higher pay drawing experienced wardens to neighboring states

By MICHAEL BABCOCK
 Tribune Outdoor Editor

The choice was a tough one for game warden Jason Snyder and his wife, Lori, but in the end, the \$20,000 salary increase won them over. The Snyders moved to Moses Lake, Wash., and Montana lost another experienced game warden.

Snyder, who began his warden career with Fish, Wildlife & Parks in 1999 with an assignment to Colstrip, is one of eight trained officers who have left FWP since 2007 because of better salaries. In the past decade, 21 wardens have gone to other jobs for better pay.

Jim Kropp, head of law enforcement for Fish, Wildlife & Parks, said the trend has been going on for several years.

"We have been hiring our falls off to get fully staffed," he said. "In 2005 we received a vacancy savings exemption, which means we could be fully funded and keep all of our districts full. We have been running two hiring processes a year to keep people on the ground and we have not been able to do that."



COURTESY PHOTO BY WILDLIFE & PARKS

Former Montana game warden Kevin Arnold on duty in the Paradise Valley. Now, Arnold is a law enforcement officer with the Forest Service in Lincoln.

FWP has the authority for 74 field wardens, six regional investigators and three covert investigators. That does not include sergeants and warden captains.

"The investigators and the management haven't been the problem," Kropp said. "It's mostly been at the field level that we have the problems."

Kropp says the situation is hurting enforcement of Montana's fish and game laws because hiring and training keeps some wardens out of the field doing the work they need to do.

"The sportsmen that are paying for all of this are continuing to pay for the same training over and over every time we lose

an employee that we have trained," he said.

Bryan Gollie, president of the Montana Game Wardens Association, says that when he applied for his first job as a game warden, he was among 300-some applicants.

"We are seeing a real change in what people want to do. They say, 'I don't like the government because we don't have shifts.' But this is a lifestyle," Gollie said.

"We have a guy in Glasgow who applied for a job in Lewistown and got it, but he can't move because he can't afford to buy a house there. We haven't had a game warden in Lewistown for almost a year," Gollie said. "Think about the resources around that area and what is happening to them without a game warden there."

Gollie said Montana game wardens are a proud group but they want to be able to live well, too.

"We are very proud to be game wardens and to represent the state of Montana. But we want to be able to raise a family and not worry about them. We don't work shifts, we live in remote parts of state and we are counted on by so many different entities," he said.

"There are people asking 'why would I do this if I can get paid more as a security

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— Bryan Gollie, president of the Montana Game Wardens Association

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