

# Careers If You Like Animals

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***Career Discovery***

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# Fish and Game Warden

## A Few Facts

### Number of Jobs

About 6,320 as of 2012

### Pay

Median income of \$52,780

### Educational Requirements

Associate's degree plus experience, or bachelor's degree

### Personal Qualities

Good communication, critical-thinking and decision-making skills, interest in wildlife conservation and law enforcement

### Work Settings

Outdoors and patrolling in vehicles in all kinds of weather

### Future Job Outlook

Expected growth of 2 percent from 2014 to 2024; slower than average

Fish and game wardens are also known as wildlife officers, conservation officers, or just game wardens. They are first and foremost law enforcement professionals. They work for state, local, and federal governments to protect and manage wildlife. Their job is to enforce federal and state laws, investigate reports of crop or property damage caused by wildlife, and collect biological data to determine the health of wildlife populations. Fish and game wardens combine the job of managing wildlife and habitats with enforcing the law. They know that hunting and fishing regulations are a critical way to protect wildlife populations. Every warden is a certified peace officer as well as a conservation expert.

Job duties vary by state and region, but in general, wardens patrol outdoor areas in the woods, along the ocean shore, by rivers, in deserts, in the mountains, and even in some city areas. They may need to patrol their assigned areas on foot, on horseback, in all-terrain vehicles or other vehicles, or from airplanes and boats. They are always on the lookout for poachers, illegal trappers, polluters, and other lawbreakers. They ensure that fishing

and hunting licenses are current and that hunters or fishers are abiding by the law (such as respecting hunting boundaries and catch limits). They also may help biologists and conservationists identify wildlife or environmental problems and conduct scientific research of wildlife in a specific area. If you are interested in a career with diverse responsibilities in the great outdoors, you might consider becoming a fish and game warden.

## A Typical Day on the Job

Michael Boone is one of five hundred game wardens who work for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. He describes a quiet but typical day on his job one Saturday. He starts out in his state-issued truck at eight o'clock in the morning, checking the camps of some hunting clubs in his assigned area. He talks with the hunters he meets, asks questions about how hunting is going and if they have seen or heard anything unusual, and just generally makes it obvious that he is around and on the job. Boone explains that building relationships is important because he can get information and tips from friendly citizens. He says:

In the past, particularly in East Texas, game wardens were not welcomed with open arms into some of these hunting clubs, some of these ranches. Over the years, with a little education, building up a rapport around your community, getting to know some of these guys, they understand we're only out there trying to help them, help them maintain control over their hunting clubs, their ranches, their private properties.<sup>29</sup>

Boone is looking for people who have shot more game than their licenses allow. He stops and checks a couple of hunters and their licenses as he drives along the country dirt roads, but everything is routine and legitimate. By noon, he is finished with his morning duties and can go home. He has a break until he begins his evening patrol at five o'clock. Since it is illegal to hunt at night,



*A game warden confiscates a reticulated python from an individual who was unlicensed to keep it. Fish and game wardens are law enforcement officers whose job is to protect and manage wildlife populations.*

it is important that he be a visible presence and seek out any illegal activity during this time.

First Boone stops at a marsh where he knows duck hunters often lie in wait; some may try to break the rules by shooting after the sun goes down. He sits still in his truck until the sun has set, waiting to be sure that he hears no shots. Then he moves on to two different deer hunting camps, showing up unannounced so that all the hunters know he is around and on the job. All is quiet at both camps, so at about seven o'clock the warden drives to an

old roadway that he knows illegal hunters have used in the past. He turns off his headlights and sits in the dark to be sure no one shows up. Sometimes, if Boone has gotten a tip from one of the hunters, he will go back to such a spot over and over for weeks to finally catch an illegal hunter. On this night, however, no shots ring out. By nine o'clock, Boone has finished his workday and can go home.

Not all of a game warden's days are as calm as this one. For instance, a game warden identified as Alice once received a report of a trespasser on a hunting camp's property while she was on night patrol. As she pulled into the campground, she spotted a car with its headlights on and shining into the woods. This is called spotlighting—a hunting technique that makes animals freeze blindly and is illegal. No one was in or near the car, but Alice quietly waited, watching the edge of the woods. Soon she saw the form of a man carrying a heavy load come out of the woods. She sprang into action, pulling out her firearm and calling firmly, "County Game Warden, drop what you're carrying and put your hands over your head."<sup>30</sup> The man was a poacher, illegally hunting a deer at night. Alice successfully arrested him and had him in jail within the hour.

"Like any other law enforcement officer, conservation officers may have to deal with dangerous situations," says Nebraska conservation officer Dina Hopper Lincon. She tells an even scarier story. "One night I had to chase a drunk driver who nearly ran over several people in their campground. He jumped in the lake and tried to swim away from me, so I chased him down in the boat and caught him. It turns out he was wanted for a number of assault charges."<sup>31</sup> Lincon's arrest of a dangerous criminal is a reminder that wardens are law enforcement officers first.

## How Do You Become a Fish and Game Warden?

The federal government and many states require that fish and game wardens have a bachelor's degree. Some states accept a two-year associate's degree with related experience. Typical

## The Importance of Diplomacy

“As law enforcement officers, game wardens are tasked with enforcing all Nevada state laws and, many times, we are doing so when those we come in contact with have weapons on them. That’s always a challenge that we try to keep in mind and approach differently than others in our field. . . . We try to relate to people and portray ourselves, as an agency, in a positive light. We are out there for the good of everyone.”

—Buck Tingle, Nevada game warden

Quoted in Heidi Bethel, “Nature’s Calling,” *Edible Reno-Tahoe Magazine*, 2014.  
[www.ediblerenotahoe.com](http://www.ediblerenotahoe.com).

be skilled at communicating and interacting with people. “This is not a job for someone who doesn’t like dealing with people,” says Shane Reno, a game warden in Montana. “Whether we’re answering questions about state park camping fees or untangling fish hooks for a bunch of third-graders, the essence of being a warden is being able to work with people.”<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, game wardens are courageous and do not mind taking risks. Dina Hopper Lincon explains that she finds the challenges of her job exciting. She says, for example, “I think most conservation officers enjoy catching spotlighters. It is some of the most adrenaline rushing work we do.”<sup>33</sup> Game wardens have to be responsible, conduct themselves with integrity, and work independently under stressful conditions—but that does not mean that they can’t enjoy their work. Says Missouri game warden George Allerby, “I get to work outdoors, meet new people and catch bad guys. On top of that, they pay me for it!”<sup>34</sup>

## What Is the Future Outlook for Fish and Game Wardens?

The number of fish and game wardens hired by state and federal governments tends to remain stable over time. Most new hires

are to replace older wardens who are retiring. The number of projected job openings between 2014 and 2024 is expected to be about two thousand.

## Find Out More

### **GameWardenEDU.org**

website: [www.gamewardenedu.org](http://www.gamewardenedu.org)

This private online resource can be used as a guide by anyone interested in becoming a fish and game warden. It provides state and federal requirements, job descriptions, salary information, and a guide to finding a school with a degree program suited to an individual's interests.

### **Game Warden.org**

website: [www.gamewarden.org](http://www.gamewarden.org)

This website offers a comprehensive resource for anyone interesting in learning about a career as a game warden. It includes a state-by-state listing of eligibility requirements, descriptions of academic majors related to the profession, and many articles about what it is like to be a game warden.

### **US Fish & Wildlife Service**

1849 C St. NW

Washington, DC 20240

website: [www.fws.gov](http://www.fws.gov)

Federal game wardens typically work in the law enforcement arm of the US Fish & Wildlife Service. At the official government website for the service, people can learn about the extensive work for nature preservation and conservation done by this bureau of the US Department of the Interior.



# OTHER CAREERS IF YOU LIKE ANIMALS

Animal control officer	Ichthyologist
Animal cruelty investigator	Marine biologist
Animal photographer	Microbiologist
Animal trainer	Naturalist/wildlife biologist
Apiarist	Ornithologist
Aquarist	Park naturalist
Dairy farm owner	Pet portrait artist
Dog day care provider	Pet sitter
Dog handler	Ranch manager
Ecologist	Reptile farmer
Ethologist	Rescue sanctuary manager
Guide dog trainer	State animal health inspector
Habitat specialist	Veterinary acupuncturist
Herpetologist	Veterinary assistant
Horse groom	Zoo curator
Horse rancher	Zookeeper
Horse trainer	Zoologist

Editor's note: The online *Occupational Outlook Handbook* of the US Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics is an excellent source of information on jobs in hundreds of career fields, including many of those listed here. The *Occupational Outlook Handbook* may be accessed online at [www.bls.gov/ooh](http://www.bls.gov/ooh).

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