



# Scared Straight

**A young deer  
poacher learns  
a valuable  
lesson from a  
seasoned  
Florida Fish  
and Wildlife  
Conservation  
Commission  
lieutenant**

**Captain Gregg Eason moves through a scrub  
thicket like the one he caught Dickie Howard  
and his cousin one night.**





By Bob H. Lee

**A** three-quarter moon rose above the pine forest and deep shadows fell across Forest Road 8 in southeast Marion County. As darkness descended, a 23-year-old man, whom I will call Rick, sat behind the steering wheel of a Chevy pickup truck parked on the west shoulder of the road in the short grass. Next to the truck stood a four-strand barbed wire fence which bounded Sunnyhill Restoration Area – 4,405 acres of public wilderness managed by the St. Johns River Water Management District and closed to hunting.

The upper Ocklawaha River drains through the property leaving a wide marsh that spreads out to sandy ridges interspersed with oak hammocks, pine forests and head-high patches of dense scrub thicket.

It was around 7 p.m., Saturday, November 20, 2004. Rick waited anxiously inside the truck with the lights out, wondering why he'd let himself get talked into being there. He had agreed to be the lookout and pickup man for two friends, Dickie Howard and his cousin, while they went into the woods to drag out a deer Dickie had illegally killed earlier that day.

Late autumn in most places would be free of insects, but not central Florida, and not inside the truck's cab that night. Mosquitoes buzzed Rick with abandon, and finally, fed up with the pesky bugs, he turned on his ThermaCELL™ and sat it on the dash. A ThermaCELL™ is an effective and quick-acting palm-sized mosquito repellent device that uses butane to activate the repellent. Within seconds the signature orange glow from the burning gas came on – Rick settled back and tried to relax.





The orange glow of a ThermaCELL™ - mosquito repellent device - heating element was one of the clues that led Captain Eason to Dickie Howard.

Sunnyhill is a dream come true for poachers. Since legal hunting is prohibited, the deer grow old and gray. The bucks grow mega-sized antlers: the kind of antlers that make a young man's heart pound, cause him to become careless, maybe even cut a few days from work. The challenge for careless young men illegally hunting deer on Sunnyhill is, of course, not to get caught.

## THE LOOKOUT

As Rick sat nervously in his pickup truck alongside Forest Road 8 that night, traffic was steady. Unfortunately for the illegal hunting party, Lt. Gregg Eason, in his silver Ford F-150 patrol truck, was part of the south-bound traffic flow. As he whizzed by the parked Chevy at 55 miles per hour, two faint lights registered simultaneously in his side vision – a dim orange glow inside the truck's cab and a white flash, no more than a flicker, from back in the woods.

The flash might have been a firefly, maybe the sliver from a flashlight beam, or Eason's mind playing tricks. He wasn't sure. But he had no doubt what the orange glow meant. It was a ThermaCELL™, just like the one in the center console of his patrol truck. To the sharp-eyed officer, the mosquito repellent device meant only one thing:

the guy sitting inside the dark truck had been waiting there awhile.

Eason didn't let off the gas. Instead, he kept driving at the same speed until he was about a mile down the road and then pulled over. He was far enough away so the man sitting in the Chevy wouldn't hear the telltale wha, wha, wha of the heavy lugged, off-road tires decelerating. He waited until the first north bound truck passed, then got in behind it. When they were one curve from the Chevy, he cut the lights and passed by the blacked-out truck as he hung in the slipstream of the vehicle ahead.

On this drive-by he gave the truck a good, hard look. He didn't see any lights back in the woods, but something just didn't feel right. Eason needed to check out the guy sitting in the darkened truck with the ThermaCELL™ glowing on the dash.

## LT. GREGG EASON

Back in 2004, Gregg Eason was 36, a lieutenant and nine-year veteran of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's Division of Law Enforcement. He supervised six officers in Marion County. Eason was and still is an ordained Baptist minister and Marine Corps veteran; now he is also a captain in the FWC's Northeast Region Investigations Section.

Back then, his hair was cut in a military flattop. He stood 5 feet, 10 inches tall, weighed a solid 185 pounds and was a fastidious dresser, both on and off the job. He spoke with subtle confidence, chose his words carefully, never hemmed and hawed or said the same thing twice. He was the definition of "command presence," a desirable trait for those in the law enforcement profession.

## Earlier that Saturday

The deer were still in rut that autumn afternoon, when Dickie Howard, 24, illegally killed a "good-sized eight-point" buck on Sunnyhill Restoration Area. He dragged the deer to within 200 yards of Forest Road 8 and stashed it behind a tree, planning to come back for it after dark. He walked out to his truck parked on the opposite side of the road, where the Ocala National Forest boundary met the road right-of-way. Dickie had a tree stand back in the forest, where it was open season and legal to hunt deer. He figured if the game warden checked him, he'd take him right to his hunting stand. Proof he was on the up and up.

From Dickie's point of view, daytime hunting in a closed area was a more "legitimate" form of poaching, one rung below the "real poachers" who hunted deer at night.

## A cursory inspection

Eason rolled to a stop behind the Chevy truck, walked up to the driver's door with a flashlight in hand, and asked, "Hey, what's going on this evening?"

"Oh, ah...I just had to stop for a minute to use the bathroom," Rick replied.

"Is that right? How about showing me where."

"Well...right over there'," he said, gesturing to a spot about twenty yards away next to the fence.

"How about you walk over and show me exactly where."

Rick led Eason to a spot near the fence, but Eason's light didn't show any wet places on the grass. Instead, he saw where two sets of foot tracks entered the fence; made their way across a freshly plowed fire-break and into the Sunnyhill Restoration Area.





**Deer poachers often cut the lowest strand on a barbed wired fence to drag a deer underneath. Dickie Howard had a pair of wire snippers in his back pocket the night Lt. Eason caught him. Background: Captain Eason's unmarked FWC patrol truck is parked on the road shoulder of Forest Road 8, next to Sunnyhill Restoration Area.**

Suspicious now, Eason tried a bluff. "Listen," he said. "The gig's up. So far everything you have told me is a lie. You are the lookout for someone hunting in Sunnyhill. You have two choices, keep digging a deeper hole by lying, or tell me the truth. Tell the truth and I won't put you in jail."

After a bit more coaxing by Eason, Rick admitted to being the lookout/pickup man for Dickie Howard. He told Eason the all-clear sign was one honk of the horn. Eason took Rick's driver's license and told him not to leave. Before ducking through the barbed wire fence and into Sunnyhill property,

## Unaware of the cruel hand fate had just dealt them, the two men dragged the deer toward the road and stopped.

Eason leaned on the horn hard for a few seconds. Then he followed the foot tracks under the surreal glow of a waxing moon. He knew if the men in the woods saw him standing in the open, or profiled against the skyline, they'd run away.

Earlier, while Rick was sitting nervously in the Chevy and Eason was driving past, Dickie and his cousin stomped through the brush and young

oaks in the dark, trying to find the deer he had hidden earlier in the day. Dickie was worried about turning on a flashlight, but figured they were far enough back in the woods that no one passing by on the highway could see it. So he blinked the light on for only a "second or two," before they found the deer.

It was at precisely that moment that Eason happened to drive by the parked Chevy and peripherally saw a flash of white light.

Meanwhile, unaware of the cruel hand fate had just dealt them, the two men dragged the deer toward the road and stopped when they could see the Chevy through a gap in the foliage. But there next to it in the moon light was another truck with a big decal on the door and a game warden talking to Rick.

Dickie and his cousin backtracked down the trail, padding along as quietly as they could in the dark. Their plan was to leave the deer, circle around through the woods and come out onto the highway a quarter-mile down from the truck, then walk back casually to see what was going on.

Halfway along the new route, Dickie thought he heard the game warden's truck pull away. Believing they were now safe, the two men decided to abort their plan. They retraced their steps to where they had left the deer and crept up the path towards the Chevy for a quick peek, just to make sure the coast was clear.



**Something as benign as a Styrofoam coffee cup stuck on a fence post can mark the pickup spot for a deer poacher's illegal kill. This fence line is the eastern boundary for Sunnyhill Restoration Area.**



**FWC partners with the St. Johns Water Management District to protect their properties. This water district sign marks the eastern boundary of Sunnyhill Restoration Area, a water district property.**



## Lt. Eason follows the tracks

Slipping between the barbed wire strands, Eason followed the foot tracks into a path that was narrow and dark and twisting. It weaved through a thicket of scrub oak that blocked out all but a dappling of starlight and the angled light from a low-hanging moon. Forty yards down the trail he stepped to one side, pulled apart some young saplings and squatted to hide his silhouette in the heavily vegetated tunnel.

"Maybe a minute or two passed," Eason said, "When two vague shadows moved towards me. With a gun in one hand and an unlit flashlight in the other, I whispered into the dark, 'Dickie.'"

"Yeah," Dickie answered.

"Is this Dickie Howard?"

"Yeah," Dickie mouthed the word hesitantly, unsure who stood ahead in the darkened tunnel, but prayed it was Rick.

"Game Warden." Eason's flashlight lit up two pale faces staring back at him, mouths agape, stunned by the bright white light.

Scared speechless, Dickie had only one thought, "Oh, shit."

## Wrapping it up

A short time later, FWC Officer Joe Simpson arrived to assist Eason with processing the scene and the three suspects. Dickie decided to cooperate and tell the truth about what had happened. What Dickie didn't realize was that once you start talking to someone like Eason, the man will shortly pick your bones clean.

Sure enough, before long, Dickie admitted to illegally killing another buck – a very nice 10-point he'd shot in the same area a few months before. That time it was during archery season and he killed the deer with a high-powered rifle.

Wanting some recognition for his prize deer, he had posed for a picture with it, and a bow and arrow, and then submitted the photo to a popular outdoor magazine. The magazine had no way of knowing the deer was taken illegally and later published the picture on its front cover.

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After learning of the illegal 10-point deer, Eason and his officers recovered the evidence at Dickie's dad's house located less than a mile down the road from Sunnyhill Restoration Area. While they were there, the dad sidled up to Eason and said, "Listen, you can't blame my boy. He learned from the best."



## Fast-forward six years

The afternoon of Tuesday, September 21, 2010, was hot and muggy, when Eason and I dropped by Dickie Howard's home in the community of Summerfield, about 15 miles south of Ocala. The modest mobile home had clean white siding wrapped all the way around, with a raised wooden deck built at the entranceway. Dickie was at work, but his wife, Barbara, was home and stepped

out the front door to greet us. She was a pleasant-looking woman with an easy smile, wearing a t-shirt that said, "Born to Be Wild."

I thought her choice of clothing was more a reflection of what she found comfortable to wear than a window into her character.

She struck me as being sincere and honest, and like many young mothers who have two children, wanted the best for her family.

When I asked what she thought about me interviewing her husband for this story she seemed genuinely excited, and thought he would be too.

"You see," she told me, "Dickie's made the turn. He doesn't do that [illegal hunting] anymore. We had a friend over for a cookout the other day and he asked Dickie to go with him to poach on the water district property. Said he had it all figured out. Dickie told him, 'No way.'"

"Dickie thought he had it all figured out too, but lost his hunting license for two years and had to pay some pretty stiff fines.

To be honest with you, I don't know if his heart could take being scared that bad again – once was enough."

**Author's note:** The author interviewed Lt. Gregg Eason, Barbara Howard, and her husband, Dickie Howard, for this story.

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