



## Outdoor School

### —Conservation Officers teach SUNY Cobleskill students

By Captain Mike St. Jeanos and Lieutenant Tom Harrington  
Photos by Lieutenant Tom Harrington

It's the early afternoon of Saturday, October 1, 2011, at SUNY Cobleskill, and Environmental Conservation Officers (ECOs) Nate Doig and Mike Terrell are hiking up a steep and muddy hill in cold, rainy weather to reach an injured hunter. They already had a busy morning—checking for illegal deer at a roadside check station and arresting one subject—and the afternoon is shaping up to be just as busy. They barely had a minute to take a break from the inclement weather when they received a report of a hunter being shot nearby. But, that's how the job goes: from 0 to 100 miles per hour in an instant.

With any potentially serious crime, time is of the essence. The ECOs (police officers working for DEC's Division of Law Enforcement) needed to help the victim, and also needed to secure the crime scene: preserve

evidence, identify the responsible party and identify any witnesses. The afternoon and possibly a good part of the evening would now be committed to addressing this issue and the investigation would require the assistance of additional personnel. This is not unusual for events officially known as "Hunting Related Shooting Incidents" (HRSI).

As the ECOs climb the steep hill to reach the crime scene, a peculiar sight takes shape—there are thirty-five SUNY Cobleskill students, along with their instructor, trailing behind them. That's because this isn't a real incident, but a mock exercise to allow these students the unique opportunity to observe firsthand what an HRSI investigation looks like. The injured hunter, the probable shooter, and his hunting partner are all ECOs in disguise.

The exercise evolved from a program wherein college students interested in becoming ECOs could ride along with an ECO for a day or two. Students were able to personally observe and experience the job, which helped them decide about potential future employment while also satisfying a course requirement for graduation. In order to accommodate the large number of requests, DEC restructured the program to create simulated events like the one described here. That way, a greater number of students could observe ECO work, in as real-life a setting as possible, but in a more efficient manner.

To get the program started, Lt. Tom Harrington, Technical Sergeant Keith Isles, ECO Mike Terrell and I met with SUNY Cobleskill instructor Mark Cornwell at a local diner. Harrington and Terrell, along with several other ECOs, are alumni of SUNY Cobleskill, a testament to the college's program. During the next couple of hours, we settled on a plan: laying out scenarios culled from real-life cases, generating scripts for our role players, and enlisting the help of several other ECOs and investigators. Although the initial work was time consuming—including follow-up visits to the "crime scene" for preplanning and staging the event—our goal was to generate a protocol which can be repeated year after year, and possibly even expanded for use at other colleges.

Today's event is going well, and the students remark on how much they are learning and enjoying partaking in "a day in the life of an ECO." It started out in the classroom with a short overview of an ECO's job duties and a rundown of the day's planned events. Then the students, along with their instructor Mark Cornwell, headed out to a rural crossroads a short distance away on the college property. There, they were greeted by a DEC police vehicle with two officers, ECOs Mike



ECO's use a K-9 unit to locate empty shell casings and other clues that help them unravel the mock crime.



Students gather to get a closer look.



Students observe the mock scenario play out.



An ECO uses forensics to check if a deer has been shot with a firearm.



Arp and Mike Terrell, interviewing the driver of a vehicle they have stopped. The stop leads to the arrest of the driver (played by ECO Mark Vencak) for having a loaded firearm in a motor vehicle, as well as an illegal deer which is found hidden in the back of the truck. The driver states that he shot the deer with his bow, but a forensic check of the wound with a lead test kit proves that it was shot with a firearm. This led to an additional charge for taking a deer with a firearm during a “bow only” season.

As the scenario played out, students asked questions and the officers explained their actions. Everyone was out in the cold and rain, on their feet for hours, experiencing the stress and difficulties of the road check and arrest, just as if they were actually on the job. To help everyone warm up, a hearty meal of hamburgers, hotdogs and hot soup (donated by the NYS Conservation Officers Association, and prepared by ECO Marty Skotarczak) was served. It was a welcome reprieve.

After lunch, the students were transported to the college’s former ski lodge where officers were recreating the previously mentioned HRSI. The students watch as the drama unfolds: three hunters argue in the woods and ECOs show up to begin their investigation. The victim (played by ECO Tim Card) has been “shot” and has a bandaged and “blood-soaked” arm. Standing with him are an out-of-town hunter from NYC and his grandfather (played by ECO Jason DeAngelis and Investigator Norm Channing, respectively). Everyone takes their roles seriously, and the observers nearly forget this is a carefully scripted mock scenario.



As the mock crime comes to a close with ECOs interviewing involved parties, students gain valuable knowledge by observing a real-life event which many officers face each day.



One of DEC’s detector dogs hot on the trail.

The ECOs separate the hunters and interview them individually, and then call for a K-9 unit and BECI investigators. BECI, short for Bureau of Environmental Crimes Investigation, is DEC's plainclothes criminal investigative unit. Lt. Charlie Honikel and Investigator Jesse Paluch head to the scene. As with most HRSIs, the shooters' accounts of the incident don't add up, and it's up to the officers to uncover the truth. The K-9 warden and his dog locate an empty shell casing, a shotgun wad and a hidden shotgun. These "detector dogs" are great assistance in many cases as they can locate evidence such as spent shell casings, firearms and venison, as well as track missing persons and fugitives.

With the new evidence in hand, the officers are able to pinpoint the exact location where everyone involved was standing, and lay out a string line which shows the path of the shotgun pellets from the shooter to the victim. In the end, the investigation proves that the shooter, originally reported to be the grandfather, is in fact his grandson, a convicted felon not able to legally possess a firearm, and who has used illegal-sized shot to shoot at a turkey decoy which he had negli-

gently mistaken for a live bird. In fact, the grandfather had been covering for him, hoping they would all go free. The grandson is subsequently arrested. Interestingly, this scenario was actually taken from a real-life incident we had previously encountered in the field.

The day concludes with a short debriefing and discussion of the day's events. Everyone involved—students, class instructor, ECOs, investigators—agree it was a great experience. The ECOs and investigators thoroughly enjoyed working with possible future co-workers, and the exercise helped them to look critically at their investigative process, which can lead to future improvements in procedures. But most importantly, about three dozen students were able to experience the job of an ECO, and the relationship between DEC and SUNY Cobleskill was strengthened. All in all, it was a "win-win" experience; one we anticipate repeating in the future.

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Programs like this allow students to experience an ECO's job, and strengthen the relationships between DEC and college students.