

CSI:MSU



26

Greg Ward

“MISSISSIPPI STATE IS THE ONLY UNIVERSITY IN NORTH AMERICA TO OFFER A COURSE IN WILDLIFE FORENSICS AND ONE OF A FEW UNIVERSITIES OFFERING A DEGREE IN WILDLIFE LAW ENFORCEMENT.”

RICH MINNIS

You may think television has the crime scene investigation landscape covered with programs set in New York, Las Vegas, Miami and anywhere the U.S. Navy operates. It has, however, missed a location where a lot of laws are broken: the nation's hunting and recreational fishing areas.

Teaching current and future wildlife law enforcement officers how to investigate wildlife crime scenes is something professionals in Mississippi State's College of Forest Resources have done since 1983. Among those professionals is assistant research professor Rich Minnis.

"Wildlife crime scenes are outdoors and cover an extremely large area, unlike most traditional crime scenes, which are indoors and very small," Minnis said. "As a result, we have to be innovative and adapt the techniques used in traditional forensics for wildlife."

Forensics is the application of scientific procedures to criminal investigations, and MSU's experience in the field began with continuing education courses for conservation officers and other law enforcement professionals. The scope of the program increased in 2004 when Minnis and his wife, Clare Chesnavage, taught a forensic science course for undergraduate wildlife law enforcement students.

"Mississippi State is the only university in North America to offer a course in wildlife forensics and one of a few universities offering a degree in wildlife law enforcement," Minnis said.

The husband-wife team agrees that officers investigating crimes ranging from hunting out

of season to importing restricted animals face challenges not encountered by their urban counterparts.

"Many times the same officer will work a crime scene, collect evidence and present the results in court," explained Chesnavage, who has worked for the Naval Criminal Investigative Service. "As a result, we emphasize how to properly identify and collect evidence so it can be examined in the lab and then finally presented in the courtroom."

Another first for the program came in September 2004 when MSU hosted a wildlife crime scene investigation training session in conjunction with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Forensics Laboratory.

The three-day course was open to officers with wildlife and fisheries management agencies in the Southeast and was



Rich Minnis, second from right, conducts a crime scene investigation session.

The top ten wildlife violations for 2004, according to the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks...

1. No license - resident = 2572
2. Hunting from public road = 1043
3. Trespassing = 958
4. Baiting = 859
5. No hunter orange = 717
6. No boat registration = 680
7. Violation of personal flotation device and running lights = 655
8. Unlawful possession = 515
9. No fishing license - non resident = 455
10. Headlighting deer = 379

previously only available to USFWS special agents at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Georgia.

Captain John Moran with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's Division of Law Enforcement Investigation Unit was one of the participants in the course and he said such training is important because of wildlife officers' responsibilities for both law enforcement and investigation.

"We're trying to provide officers with as much investigation information as possible because in most states wildlife officers do not have full access to state crime labs," he said. "I hope what Mississippi State started with this course will continue and expand to include sessions that will provide training and resources to enable participants to go back to their states and train other officers."