

Call of the wild

Local Fish and Game officer is among reality television's newest stars

BY MARK FOYNES
Contributing Writer
NEW DURHAM — Ron Arsenault doesn't spend his workdays in a cubicle. His office isn't bounded by four walls. "My office moves with me, wherever I have to go to get my job done," explained conservation officer Arsenault, who grew up in New Durham.

He's among the N.H. Fish and Game officers featured on Animal Planet's reality series, "North Woods Law." Each episode takes viewers out into the field where F&G officers perform their duties, ranging from wildlife encounters to confronting violators and performing rescue operations.

"No two days are ever the same, so you never know what to expect," Arsenault said. "The seasons change, the scenarios change, so you know you never get bored – every day is a new adventure."

Arsenault's duties cover a broad geography that spans the foothills of the White Mountains to the Seacoast. "So wherever I am is my work site," he said.

Based out of F&G's New Hampton Lakes Region station, he added, "A nice thing about my territory is its diversity – I have the Big Lake, some of the mountains, and other terrains, so I get to sample all of the state's landscapes."

Arsenault noted that once a month, he participates in federal Joint Enforcement Agency-funded missions that bring him to the Seacoast to assist with shoreline and aquatic species related efforts.

While he's headquartered just outside Meredith, much of his patrol area is concentrated around the eastern sections of Lake Winnepesaukee, Merrymeeting Lake, and the surrounding forests and foothills. Monitoring the 2,000-acre Red Oak site in New Durham is also part of the C.O.'s beat.

Arsenault has been a N.H. Fish and Game officer for 10 years and is among the department's personnel featured on the Animal Planet series, "North Woods Law." The program allows viewers to witness the day-to-day realities of field staff who enforce and uphold a wide array of the state's outdoor and wildlife regulations. These provisions include matters relating to illegal hunting and trapping, off-road vehicle compliance, and helping maintain the state's fresh- and saltwater fish stock. Conservation officers also perform emergency rescue operations, many of which involve lost or injured hikers.

"I've spent a fair amount of time on Mt. Major," Arsenault said. He recalled one rescue



NH FISH AND GAME – COURTESY PHOTO
RON ARSENAULT is a conservation officer with New Hampshire Fish and Game.

mission in particular that involved retrieving 37 lost hikers from the mountain.

"That was an interesting mission," he recalled. "There was a party of 35 lost hikers together, plus another two, who were up there at the same time."

Arsenault, a 1997 Kingswood graduate, grew up on Brackett Road in New Durham.

"I was always outdoors, out in the woods or on the river in my canoe," he recalled, noting that walking the woods and going fishing were among his favorite activities growing up.

After graduating, Arsenault hitched up with the Navy. Serving with the Seabees, he spent two years on active duty, including a one-year tour in Iraq in 2003. Arsenault signed on for an additional six-year stint with the Reserves.

This experience proved to be an important professional stepping stone, according to Arsenault. He explained that conservation officer candidates can qualify for a position by earning a relevant two-year post-secondary degree, graduating from the police academy, or serving two years on active duty in the armed service.

In becoming a conservation officer, Arsenault didn't anticipate becoming a reality TV star.

"They point a camera at you as you do your job, but the bottom line is you're just doing your job like you normally would," he observed.

Arsenault said that "North Woods Law" has been useful in helping the public – in N.H. and nationally – to understand and appreciate the efforts of his colleague conservation officers.

The program's web site says it "features the

Conservation Officers of N.H. Fish and Game who work tirelessly to preserve and protect the natural resources of the Granite State."

It continues, "N.H.'s wild and rugged landscape makes the state a premiere destination for outdoorsmen and women and makes the work of Conservation Officers diverse and demanding."

"Whether they're assisting biologists in managing the state's wildlife, patrolling backcountry roads during hunting season or conducting search and rescue operations on windswept mountains and roaring rivers, every day presents a new challenge in the Live Free or Die State."

According to Arsenault, N.H. F&G has a four-year contract with the Animal Planet network, which is now airing the program's second season. The current iteration is a spinoff of an earlier version that was set in Maine.

Growing up in New Durham, Arsenault lived the all-American outdoor boyhood amidst the region's woods, water, and wildlife. "Being a conservation officer was the job I was basically born to do," he said.

Arsenault added, "I've kind of lived it," noting that growing up in rural New Hampshire gives him a high level of familiarity with the state's landscape, its wildlife, and the people.

"Well, I guess you can learn these things, but I just had a little leg up since I didn't have to learn as much through on the job training having grown up here," Arsenault chuckled.

Arsenault works something of an unconventional schedule. It's pegged to 160 hours per month, rather than a



NH FISH AND GAME – COURTESY PHOTO
RON ARSENAULT is featured on the television show North Woods Law.

strict 40-hour workweek.

"It's really driven by when there's the greatest need for services," he explained. Since there are spikes in demand for services correlated to weekend outdoor recreation, he puts in a fair amount of time on Saturdays and Sundays. But the upside, from a personal perspective, is that he has a fair amount of flexibility during the traditional workweek.

"That allows me to attend my kids' ball games and things like that," he explained, noting that being on call 24/7 for emergencies evens out the ledger between him and his employer. He said that F&G strives to help conservation officers achieve an optimal work-life balance in a career that is physically, intellectually and emotionally demanding.

"In a given week, I might be off on a week-day at three in the afternoon, but find myself later that week in the middle of the night on the side of a mountain on a search and rescue," he said.

One of the key threads of the "North Woods Law" TV show is the manner in which conservation officers apply community policing techniques to the state's forests, fields, and streams.

"We see our role as a hybrid between enforcement and education," Arsenault said. Recognizing that people who like to spend time outdoors generally want to help protect the state's natural resources, he said most violators just need a simple nudge to help keep them in compliance.

"Some of the laws and regulations are common sense," Arsenault reckoned. He continued, "But there are a lot of them, so we try to help people better understand our shared stewardship responsibilities."

Arsenault considers himself vigilant but

reasonable. "It's easy to break a regulation, since some are very detailed. But we want people to enjoy and cherish our natural resources and get out to experience the outdoors in a way that helps us maintain a healthy balance."

Arsenault said many violators express gratitude toward him after an encounter, having learned how best to maintain an equilibrium between their outdoor experience with the state's stewardship objectives. "So, one of my primary goals is to help people just correct their thinking," he added.

"It's a basic principle of law enforcement to apply corrective measures with the least amount of force necessary," Arsenault said.

"Rather than writing a ticket, I would much rather say goodbye to

someone with a warning knowing that in the future we can be partners in keeping New Hampshire a great place to explore the outdoors," he said. "About the last thing we want to do is suspend someone's license."

"Most everybody wants to do right, so that helps make my job a little easier," Arsenault elaborated.

While calm and steady in his general approach, there are some things Arsenault will not abide.

"Don't lie to a conservation officer," he said. "We've seen it all and usually know when someone's being honest – or not."

In the interest of vigilance and due diligence, Arsenault added that every interaction is entered into a master database that can often be

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