

## Konrad Schmidt's "The Tail End"



### "Yes, Mr. Warden, Sir"

I would always like to consider collecting fish a wholesome experience, but others, especially those in law enforcement, will always view it as a suspicious activity that must be investigated. Most simply can't comprehend why anyone would be trying to catch something that is not going to be eaten, used for bait, or counted as data in some official research project.

In 1988, I was surveying the Rum River near Onamia, Minnesota. I could hear a vehicle coming down the road, but couldn't see it because the river flowed through a deep, forested ravine. I glanced up just when it became visible for a second or two as it shot over the road culvert. I only got a brief look, but thought it looked like a conservation officer's pick-up. They may be unmarked and different colors, but they're always conspicuous. My suspicions were confirmed when I heard the driver skid to a stop, turn around and punch the accelerator. Within a minute he was on the bank asking me what I was doing. I told him I was surveying non-game fish on a volunteer basis and had a permit in my car if he needed to see it. He accepted my explanation and never did ask for the permit, but he just couldn't grasp that someone would do this as a volunteer. He kept asking me, "You sure you're not with the DNR or a university working on a degree?" I tried to convince him I really enjoyed looking for non-game fish and compared it to birding, using nets instead of binoculars. He just shook his head, wished me luck, and left me be. I got the feeling he considered me crazy as a loon.

I also met a conservation officer while using a backpack shocker. The same type of pick-up pulled up, but the driver didn't appear to be in uniform. I

thought my keen detection abilities were slipping until the sun shined on the metal insignia pinned to his lapel—M.C.O. (Minnesota Conservation Officer). I knew it! He strolled over to the stream bank and nonchalantly asked, "Can you tell me why we are shocking in the stream today?" I appreciated his sense of humor, but he insisted on seeing my permit.

Other enforcement agencies are just as bewildered when they uncover me in places where no law-abiding citizen would venture. Municipal police departments are the worst, and my best story involves Mendota Heights' finest. I had just finished a site on a small stream and was approaching my car when another car came speeding up the hill. My friend, who had a few more and serious brushes with the law, calmly sat on my bumper and whispered, "P-I-G-G-Y." I didn't make the connection until the unmarked car abruptly stopped, partially boxing in my car, and the driver got out with a detective's shield hanging on his belt. Then, a black-and-white showed up and snapped the trap closed. The detective informed us we had been under surveillance because he believed we were bow hunting in the city limits. How in the heck did he deduce that? Here we were wearing hip waders and had a push seine on broom sticks. He asked to look in the car and pulled out the seine. He commented that from a distance it looked like a bow in a case. He then asked what we were doing, and was surprised to learn there was a stream at the bottom of the ravine and that there were actually fish in it. Having completed his interrogation, he let us go. As the units pulled away, I couldn't help wondering if things had been slow that day and they just needed something to do.