

How Much Is That Marmot in the Window?

"Steve W. McReynolds, 46, of Horseshoe Bend, is charged with killing a cow moose and yearling bull moose near Placerville on Oct. 20. He is being held on \$1,000 bond, and faces up to five years in prison if convicted. ... [Idaho Fish and Game officer Clay] Cummins said taking game out of season usually is a misdemeanor, but 'a felony occurs when the value of the property that is destroyed exceeds \$1,000. A moose is valued at \$1,000 under Idaho's civil penalty statutes."

—The Idaho Statesman

AFTER READING THE ABOVE, I CALLED IDAHO, ASKED FOR their moose appraiser, and got transferred to Fish and Game officer Ray Lyon. Ray said he didn't know who decided what a moose was worth—but \$1,000 was low. "Moose is good eating," he offered, "very lean. It has a fraction of the fat" of other red meats and "commands a premium price"—which we figured out might be \$1,600 for a dressed-out yearling bull or up to \$3,500 for a cow.

Why, then, I asked, is moose life so cheap in the eyes of the law? Ray said it probably wasn't done scientifically. Idaho's "civil assessments" on wild animals "were just picked out of a hat." Next I called Wyoming and received some surprising news. Four years ago, said wildlife law enforcement coordinator Russ Pollard, a moose in Wyoming was worth only \$560—"which is ridiculous." But they're appreciating fast. Today if you kill a moose out of season you will owe the taxpayers of Wyoming \$5,000.

"And if you run into one in your pickup?" Russ was silent for a moment, but then confirmed that liability for the moose would probably only prevail if you ran into it *on purpose*.

I was interested in the other animals. It turns out that a river otter is worth \$500 to the people of Utah, and a bobcat \$350. Swans, sandhill cranes, pelicans (which nest on the Great Salt Lake), and herons come in at \$100. But how about a plain old crow?

"The raven in Utah is kind of a gray area," conservation officer David Swen-

son told me. "For years and years they were protected...but you may take ravens if they are causing or are about to cause some kind of crop damage."

What if I shot one that was just cawing at me on my porch?

"You could say he was eating something from your garden or something, and there's not much that can be done."

New Mexico has no value set on smaller birds either, though the state Songbird Act, which sets criminal penalties, "covers all your songbirds and all your insectivorous birds," said assistant law enforcement chief John Miles—well, except your English sparrow. "We don't write too many songbird tickets."

Had he ever written *any* songbird tickets?

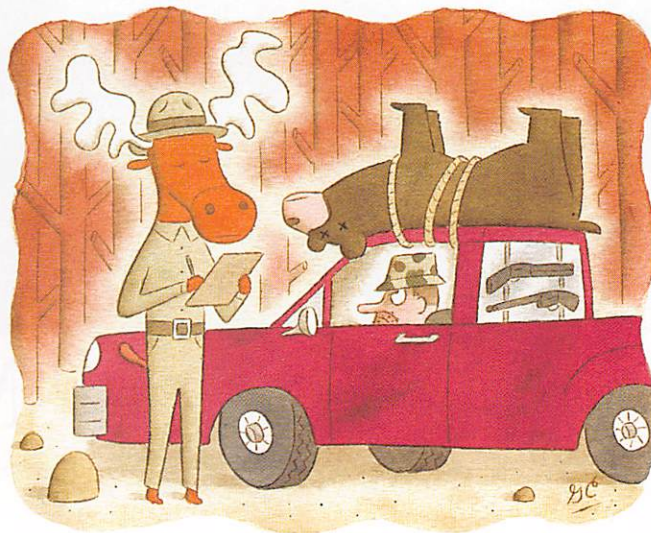
"When I first came on, I stopped a vehicle. They had a truckload of robins. They eat 'em—and I'm sure they were gonna use their feathers in religious ceremonies." But even in New Mexico, that does not fly as an excuse.

These laws, of course, are shot through with inconsistencies. Is it fair that in Arizona an antelope goes for \$150 while a raptor brings only \$40? The game and fish department's Tim Wade admitted that it comes down to your point of view. "If you're a bird-watcher, you'd more highly value a Mississippi kite than a javelina. A hummingbird would be worth a hell of a lot more than any dirty old bighorn sheep that somebody planted there anyway."

Which brings us back to, How do you figure this? Russ Pollard explained that the \$25,000 value of a Wyoming grizzly bear derives

from what it would've cost to shoot one legally—if you even could—fees an outfitter would've charged you, plane fare from wherever you lurked before you came to Wyoming, the "salability of the trophy," the hunter's time, the ranger's time, and on and on through 13 items.

Speaking of a ranger's time, if you took this civil restitution thing to its logical conclusion, wouldn't you eventually come to the value to society of a fish and game officer? Asking that, I decided, would be pushing it.



By Ted Conover