

Southern Illinois Man Pleads Guilty To Poaching White-Tailed Deer

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VIENNA – A southern Illinois man who operates a “high-fence” shooting facility in Johnson County has pleaded guilty to poaching white-tailed deer following an investigation by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources conservation police and other agencies.

Jerry Stafford, 58, of Vienna, who owns Samson’s Whitetail Mountain, entered a negotiated plea on Jan. 6 to one count of unlawful take in connection with the illegal

harvest of 8-point and 12-point wild white-tailed deer. He also pleaded guilty to one count of open dumping for improper disposal of animal carcasses. Both are Class A misdemeanors.

Stafford operates a “high-fence” shooting facility, where customers pay money to shoot raised or imported game mammals in a fenced area, which runs counter to the principles of fair-chase hunting. Illinois Conservation Police began investigating after learning he was advertising “low-fence hunts” in conjunction with Illinois’ official deer hunting dates. According to investigators, Stafford’s guides took clients outside the high-fence area to hunt deer in the wild. Investigators documented violations including outfitting or guiding without a permit, uncased firearms in vehicles, hunting with the aid of a motor vehicle and the use of lights, hunting before legal shooting hours, hunting without permission, and violating tagging requirements.

During their investigation, police found an illegal dump site where wildlife killed on the property had been disposed of over a lengthy period. Runoff from the site flowed directly into a nearby creek, creating a risk of disease transmission.

In addition, investigators documented evidence of animals escaping from the high-fence facility, including fallow deer, javelinas, and aoudad. A javelina is a wild animal similar to a pig, and an aoudad is a type of wild sheep. An animal feeder was found just outside one of the high-fence gates with white-tailed deer and elk tracks around it.

The case was filed in Johnson County following a joint investigation between the Illinois Conservation Police and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, the Illinois Department of Revenue, and Illinois State Police air operations assisted in the investigation. The Illinois Attorney General’s Office prosecuted the case.

Stafford received 24 months court supervision. Court costs and fees were \$300. He was ordered to pay \$20,200 in restitution to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

“We appreciate the assistance of our partner agencies in bringing this case to justice, and I would encourage anyone who is aware of poaching crimes in Illinois to come forward with tips,” **said Jed Whitchurch, director of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources Office of Law Enforcement.** “Conservation laws are in place to ensure wildlife resources are around for future generations to enjoy. People have a responsibility to understand these laws and to follow them.”

To report poaching and other illegal activity, complete the Target Illinois Poachers (TIP) incident reporting form at <https://bit.ly/IDNROLETIP> or call 877-2DNRLAW.