

Baggs game warden Kim Olson raised two daughters while moving around the state living in warden stations. Now headed to college, one looks back on the unique experiences — and strange house guests — that come with growing up

## A GAME WARDEN'S DAUGHTER

BY AMY OLSON

**G**ROWING UP, PEOPLE always asked my sister Katelyn and I if we were going to be game wardens when we got older. Our answer was always the same — “No way!”

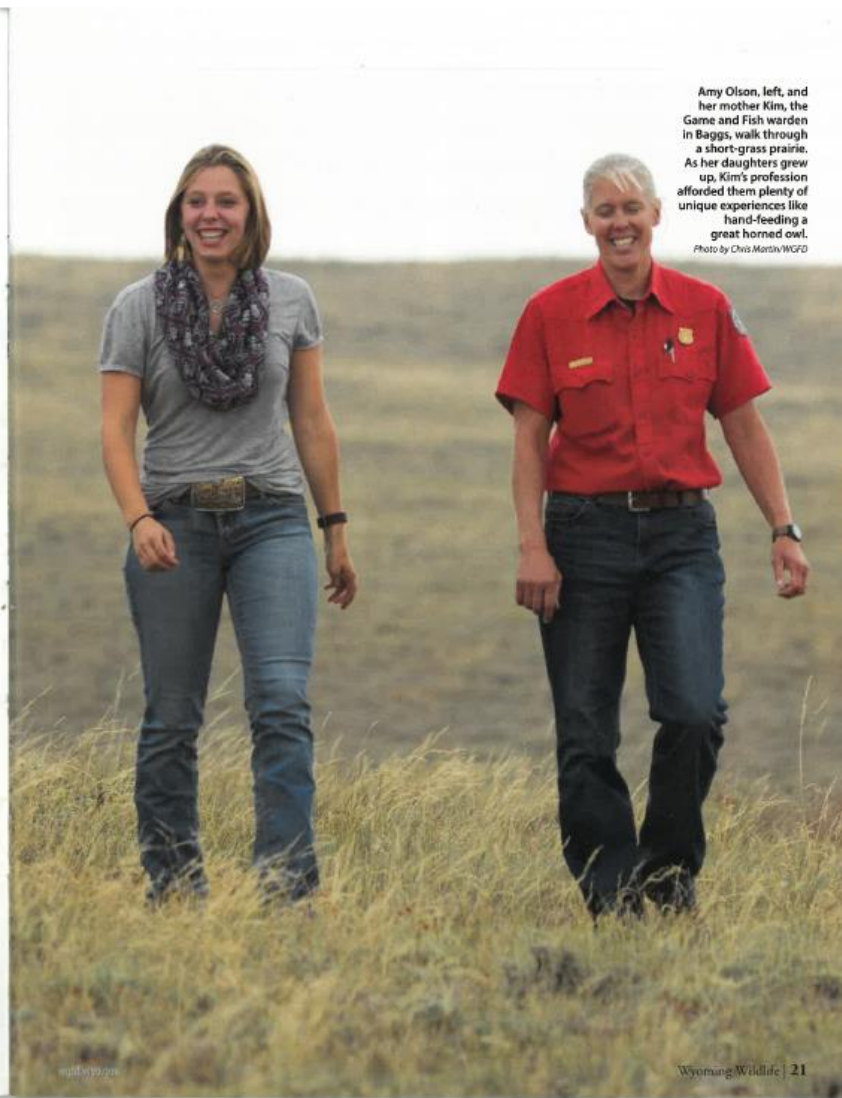
But through the years, I’ve realized how many unique opportunities I’ve taken for granted. By the age of 15 not many people know the difference between a ferruginous hawk and a golden eagle or can easily tell which one is meaner. Not many

kids have reared a pronghorn in their bathroom or fed a great horned owl from their fingertips. Most kids complaints are not about having to be their mother’s secretary, nor are they frequently asked questions about specific hunting areas. By the age of 18, most teenagers aren’t pressing their parents to get certified to do boat inspections.

But this is how my sister and I were raised, and this is the story of being a Wyoming game warden’s daughter.

Amy Olson, left, and her mother Kim, the Game and Fish warden in Baggs, walk through a short-grass prairie. As her daughters grew up, Kim’s profession afforded them plenty of unique experiences like hand-feeding a great horned owl.

Photo by Chris Martin/WGFD





Amy, left, and Katelyn Olson bottle-feed the pronghorn fawn they named Antonio at their warden housing quarters in Rawlins before it was taken to the Wildlife Research Center at Sybille. Photo courtesy of Kim Olson

## A 'wild' home life

A few things are common knowledge at the Olson household: there's a good chance a critter lurks behind a closed bathroom door; and at least one person should be dressed for company at all times.

"When you live in small town America, everybody knows you're the game warden," said Kim Olson. She's spent seven years as the Wyoming Game and Fish Department's warden in Baggs. "Most people don't comprehend that there's a personal life going on at the warden station as well."

In Wyoming, 50 wardens are stationed in housing owned by Game and Fish, in order to remain accessible to residents in their districts. In such cases, office and home life merge instantly upon move-in. And although warden housing isn't built for rehabilitating animals, wildlife occasionally get a short stay there in emergency situations until they can be released back into the wild or taken to a facility designed to help.

"The girls have never known anything but life in a warden station," Kim said. "There's a world full of kids who have grown up like this, but not many people know about them."

Originally from Cheyenne, Olson and her husband Kurt spent 9 years in Utah, where she also was a game warden. Both girls were born there but when they were ages 2 and 4, the family returned to Wyoming. Kim became a Wyoming Game and Fish warden 12 years ago — the fourth female warden hired by the state. Her first district assignment was in west Rawlins. Their stint in Baggs marks the longest the family has lived in any one place.

In a world where fewer and fewer children spend time outdoors, Kim said her daughters Amy and Katelyn have a solid foundation for how to be smart and safe in the wild. And when they want to take a hike in the woods with friends? It's not every mother who could yell confidently to them on their way out the door. "Have fun, don't forget the bear spray."

"They can take a hike in the woods and don't freak out about stuff," Kim said. "They have a healthy respect for wildlife, but not a fear that everything on the planet is gonna eat them. We've always had a pretty strong connect to nature. The girls don't shy away from too many things, and that's good."

— Amy Bulger, WSGFD

**IN A JOB WHERE** "bring your kid to work day" doesn't exist, it becomes easy to make any day "bring your kid to work day," or to just bring your work home. In our world, this wasn't ever a challenge since the game warden station where Mom worked conveniently happened to also be our home.

Many parts of this situation were desirable. When my mother was having an "office day" she could watch my sister and me. When she brought random animals home, we'd get to help care for them.

But raising a family at the warden station also led to much confusion when hunters called. My mother preferred that hunters and people looking for information call the main warden number. They would call asking for Kim, and when told she would be home that evening they asked if they could call her office number instead of the home phone. They were shocked to find out those numbers were one in the same.

But talking with people on the phone was nothing compared to some of the critters that came through the door.

Once, the nearby Sinclair Oil Refinery had a run-in with some grebes. These animals were not ideal creatures to be kept in cardboard boxes in our dining room, but that's what happened until they could be cleaned up and released again. Katelyn and I helped wash the oil off of their wings and feed them — an interesting task due to their violent nature. They were probably just scared and trying to protect themselves, but their bright red beady eyes and dagger-like beaks didn't help make them look friendly. We fed the grebes the only fish we could easily get our hands on — sardines and anchovies bought from the local grocery store. We always wore gloves up to our elbows to protect from getting bit. To this day, those red eyes still haunt my darkest nightmares.

The good parts about having a home office outnumbered the bad, but there were occasional surprises when my mom would bring home animals that needed care and leave them in our half-bath downstairs.

One day when I was an elementary school student, I went sprinting



Katelyn, who was about 7, and Ron Lockwood, a former Game and Fish biologist team up at an elk trapping on Fossil Butte near Kemmerer. At that time, the Olson family lived near Fontenelle Creek. Photo courtesy of Kim Olson



Kurt, Katelyn, Amy and Kim Olson pose during a hike near Laramie in September when both daughters moved in for school at the University of Wyoming. Photo by Chris Martin/WSGFD

into the house to use the bathroom; the long walk home from school had gotten the best of me. I was extremely lucky to not wet my pants when I opened that bathroom door to find an adult golden eagle sitting on the floor staring at me.

After that encounter, I made a strong request that my parents warn me when there were animals in the bathroom. For safety measures, I posted a notice on the door clearly stating: "EAGLE INSIDE."

Another chance encounter happened when Mom brought an owl home. After learning how well-tempered it was, Mom didn't care much if she left the top open on its makeshift cardboard-box house. Soon, the owl felt like exploring. One day it was spotted sitting on a potted cactus, which quickly became its favorite perch. We even fed it while it sat there on that prickly perch.

Later on, a rather scaly animal came home in a shoebox on one cold, rainy afternoon.

Mom commonly brought us home little treats and, figuring this box held something nifty, I asked her what was inside. She nonchalantly said, "Go take a look." Needless to say I was not thrilled with this treat ... until later when a local rancher stopped by to ask some Game and Fish questions. He brought his sons with him who were about my older sister's age. When Katelyn tempted them to open the mysterious box, they did — and ran right back out the front door screaming. Little did we know, two rough-and-tough ranch boys can easily be scared when surprised with a snake. Not too many kids are lucky enough to get to test that theory.

But Mom's job focused on more than just small animals.

It was never a question of if, but when, someone would pick up a young deer or pronghorn they thought was "abandoned" by the mother. At our house, it was common knowledge that does take off to go eat and return to their youngsters later. Yet every year, Mom receives some type of call to come save some young "abandoned" animal. One year, someone brought over a young pronghorn that was actually completely healthy. Mom was asked to keep it until she could take it to the Wildlife Research Center at Sybille.

Well, when an animal spent more than a week at our house and my sister and I carried out duties such as bottle feeding it, the little one must be given a name. His was Antonio. We let Antonio stretch



Katelyn, then in middle school in Rawlins, holds a grebe after washing it. The Olson family cleaned the bird after it had a run-in with oil at the nearby refinery. Photo courtesy of Kim Olson

his legs in the backyard and couldn't wait to bottle feed him after school.

The half-bath wasn't a fitting home for a pronghorn though. Soon enough he had overspent his stay at the Warden Station/Hotel.

**M**Y MOTHER AND HER job taught me many things in life. For a while she was one of few female game wardens in the state. Some people might call it feminism, but she taught me to be a strong, independent woman. She also taught me that just because your job involves digging through dead animals for bullets doesn't mean it isn't a good job for a woman (unless you become easily queasy).

She is a game warden and, although many people resent any law officers, my mother took this job because of her love of animals. She wouldn't say that to anyone, but I can tell. She complains about the injustice of poaching and the misuse of perfectly good meat. She saves rattlesnakes from being run over, purely because "it didn't do anything to you." She brings closure and an end to suffering for many injured animals on the highways, and she brings justice for any poached animals that she can. And she still gets upset when she has a week where it seems like everything just dies, no matter what she does to help. She beams with pride when a young child becomes interested in her career field and is so helpful to so many people. She is a Wyoming game warden, but best of all she is my mother.

None of the animals she helped hung around our house for too long, but I will never forget the lessons they taught me while they stayed or the experiences brought about by them.

At the end of last summer I moved away to college. I will no longer be an acting, unpaid secretary. I will no longer give presentations to children when my mom cannot be present. I will no longer feed elk hamburger to hungry owls, hawks, or eagles or bottle-feed young deer and pronghorn.

But for the rest of my life, I will always be able to say that I am a Wyoming game warden's daughter.

— Amy Olson is a freshman at the University of Wyoming studying journalism and agriculture communications. This is her first story for Wyoming Wildlife.