





# THE LAW BY OUR SIDE

Law enforcement agencies partner with  
The HSUS to get tough on crimes against animals

by JULIE FALCONER

**An hour before the raid** is scheduled to go down, word comes back to the teams gathered south of the target property: There's been a tip-off; the perpetrators are preparing to flee.

"Go, go, go!" A shout from the lead officer sends a line of police cruisers peeling out of the parking lot and down the rural highway.

The property is quickly surrounded, the escape routes blocked. The people who didn't flee into the surrounding woods mill around outside their trapped vehicles, sullen-faced and talking in low voices. Radio scanners crackle inside squad cars, and roosters call out in an unending chorus: three short notes followed by a sustained and plaintive caw.

The scene from which the drivers have just fled—a cockfighting arena half a mile up a winding dirt lane named Hades Hill Road—is nearly deserted. A disgruntled-looking man in a flannel shirt is hunched down on plywood bleachers at the far end of the main fighting pit. Samuel Darwin Boyd, the owner of the operation, mutters something to one of the deputies flanking either side of him, and the officer calls out a warning to the approaching HSUS crew: "He doesn't like you guys too much."

The next contenders in today's derby still occupy the perimeter of the pit, a bloodstained circle of dirt beneath a wooden pagoda. Victims of earlier fights lie in the weeds outside the clearing, some with steel blades still strapped to their heels; called "gaffs," these artificial spurs are designed to inflict maximum damage on other birds during fights. Behind the arena is a snack bar advertising sodas, fries, burgers, and hot dogs to the crowds gathering at this Cleveland, S.C., property to watch animals engaged in death matches.

Cockfighting has been the family business here for four generations, according to the Greenville County sheriff. When John Goodwin, HSUS manager of animal fighting issues, follows a footpath through the woods, he finds stark evidence of the lives sacrificed over the years: A giant crater, about 10 feet deep in the heavy clay soil, is filled with corpses. Birds killed this morning lie at the top of the dead pile, their red and gold plumage splayed out over deep layers of bleached feathers and bones.

With the property deemed secure, deputies erect a canopy in front of Boyd's single-wide trailer. They check IDs and write citations while other officers remove crates of birds and fighting paraphernalia from the backseats of cars and the beds of pickup trucks. Metal fight cages and tackle boxes filled with cockfighting tools are tossed on a patch of lawn next to a rusted swing set. Containers with birds are toted to the end of the driveway, where HSUS experts are busy handling the live evidence: the 197 roosters who were slated to fight today.





By filling gaps in resources and expertise, The HSUS enables law enforcement agencies to tackle animal cruelty situations.

Today's raid has been six months in the making, with HSUS staff providing the sheriff's office with information on cockfighters in the area, advice for planning the raid, and funding for the investigation. Now their goal is to ease the burden of a large animal seizure and ensure a successful outcome that will inspire local authorities to pursue more of these cases. With gentle care and feather stroking, the frightened birds turn docile in the handlers' arms, while other team members carefully document, tag, and photograph each animal.

Since cockfighting is a misdemeanor in South Carolina, none of the 85 people nabbed in the sting is wearing handcuffs or spending the night in jail. But the bust puts the region's animal fighters on notice: The days when they could practice this blood sport with little risk of interference are over.

It also sends an important message to law enforcement agencies—they can successfully tackle animal cruelty in their jurisdictions, and they don't have to do it alone. It's early June, and already The HSUS has deployed teams 16 times this year to the doorsteps of cockfighters in California, dog-fighters in North Carolina and Virginia, puppy mills in New Jersey and Tennessee, and animal hoarders in six states.

### RESCUING THE EVIDENCE

Just two months into his new job in Wayne County, W.Va., Gary Michels had never handled a cruelty case. But gazing at the desperate creatures on a property in the community of Prichard, the assistant prosecuting attorney knew something had to be done.

"You could just see in their eyes that they were in pain and they were hungry," he says.

Horses, mules, and donkeys—many severely emaciated—lived on a bare parcel of land with no hay or drinkable water. Dozens of

skinny, neglected hounds were chained to barrels and dilapidated doghouses. Bones scattered throughout the property were somber evidence of the animals for whom rescue had come too late.

But Michels couldn't file charges or seize the remaining victims without help. The local animal shelter could take the dogs but not the equines. County commissioners offered funding, but it wasn't enough. "We're a pretty poor county," Michels says.

Until five years ago, The HSUS could respond to a limited number of such cases. But after Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, the organization expanded its emergency response resources. It wasn't only hurricanes and floods that spurred the purchase of state-of-the-art animal transport vehicles and massive numbers of kennels and carriers. Human-caused disasters in the form of puppy mills, animal fighting operations, and large-scale neglect situations were much more common. And without hands-on assistance to care for the animal victims, local agencies had to let many cases fall by the wayside.

Despite repeated complaints from neighbors, the Prichard situation had been festering for years, says HSUS West Virginia state director Summer Wyatt. "Luckily, I got in touch with Summer," says Michels, "or the case would not have been able to go anywhere."

Wyatt worked with Adam Parascandola, HSUS director of animal cruelty issues, to map out a plan. As with most of the organization's emergency deployments, the operation would require setting up a temporary shelter, gathering a skilled team with transport vehicles and other equipment, engaging a vet to provide medical care and exams, and coordinating the seizure with local officials. And since it was a cruelty case, careful documentation of the animals' condition was essential; any mistake could lead to dismissal of the

**20,700+**

Number of animals The HSUS helped remove from abuse and neglect situations in 2009 and 2010



During the six-month investigation of this Cleveland, S.C., cockfighting operation, The HSUS provided funds and expert advice, as well as hands-on help during the raid.

charges and the animals' return to a hellish home.

Two weeks after Michels' plea for help, HSUS teams led the 49 equines off the property—a pathetic parade of jutting hipbones, patchy coats stretched taut over rib cages, and neglected hooves. They gave Michels a stack of meticulous paperwork and photographs that would serve as key evidence. The property owner pleaded guilty and was fined \$900, a paltry sum for the suffering he caused. But as Michels explained to outraged community members, it was the best they could do under the law. More importantly, the defendant was barred from owning or living with animals for five years.

### LAWS AND EFFECT

Successful rescues can have a ripple effect, giving local authorities the confidence to pursue more cases. In Wayne County, officials now know how strongly their constituents feel about the humane treatment of animals. "I've gotten more support over this case than anything I've ever done," Michels says.

A public galvanized by a high-profile rescue can be a powerful force for change. It's no coincidence, says Goodwin, that as HSUS raids have increased in recent years, a record number of state laws have been enacted to combat puppy mills, cruelty and neglect, and animal fighting.

Virginia, for example, once had one of the nation's weakest cockfighting laws. The HSUS had lobbied the legislature for years without success. Too many lawmakers, Goodwin says, were sympathetic to cockfighters or believed it wasn't a problem in their area. Their wakeup call came in 2007, after an HSUS-led raid revealed that members of the notorious MS13 gang and Mexican mafia were traveling to Mecklenburg County to fight chickens—and that children as young as 4 years old were present at the events. The next year, Virginia passed one of the strongest cockfighting laws in the country.

For some law enforcement officials, a firsthand look at the suffering gives them a new understanding of why it's important to prosecute cruelty. During the 16 years he'd served as a municipal police officer, Sheriff John Montgomery of Baxter County, Ark., never handled an animal cruelty case. "They were misdemeanors," he says. "I hate to say it wasn't worth our time, but that was the general attitude."

His perspective changed in 2005, when he entered the so-called sanctuary run by Tammy and William Hanson. Of the more than 500 dogs kept in filthy conditions, more than 60 had been living in airline crates, their paws and haunches covered in urine burns. One of the crated dogs—a refugee from Hurricane Katrina—was already dead; the remains of other dogs were stuffed in black trash bags around the property. Of those who survived, many suffered from mange, torn tendons, tumors, maggot-infected wounds, and ingrown nails.

As bad as it was, the only charges Montgomery could levy against the unrepentant couple were misdemeanor offenses, and the pair made bond that night. "We would have loved to have charged them with something else," he says.

The investigation had been prompted by Desiree Bender, a longtime pit bull rescuer and shelter board member who helped care for the dogs during the chaotic weeks that followed, alongside staff from The HSUS, the local humane society, and the sheriff's office. Two years later, Bender became The HSUS's Arkansas state director and joined forces with the sheriff to draft a felony animal cruelty bill—a goal she'd been pursuing for 14 years.

Montgomery advocated for the bill tirelessly, winning the backing of the state sheriffs' association and testifying several times before the legislature. The bill failed in committee, but their efforts caught the attention of state attorney general Dustin McDaniel. Two years later, McDaniel helped shepherd the legislation to enactment—





**Each year**, The HSUS's Humane Law Enforcement Awards ceremony pays tribute to dedicated public servants who have gone above and beyond the call of duty to protect everyone in their communities, two-legged and four-legged alike. Their role is a vital complement to The HSUS's resources; with no power to serve warrants, arrest abusers, or unilaterally conduct seizures, the organization needs such allies to help rescue animals who would otherwise languish in abhorrent circumstances with little chance of intervention.

## **ODDIE SHOUBE**

*Sheriff, White County, Tenn.*

Since his election in 2006, Shoupe has written dozens of animal-related citations. People in his community "know I mean business," says the former military officer and state trooper. In April, Shoupe and HSUS teams raided a puppy mill in Sparta, saving 221 dogs and two cats from squalor and neglect—the second time the sheriff has dismantled an abusive breeding facility in his county. He used his experiences to show state legislators the need to regulate such operations; in July 2009, the Tennessee Commercial Breeder Act was signed into law. "Having a sheriff stand up before the Senate Judiciary Committee and talk about the cruelty he'd witnessed, and the economic impact on his department and his community, was invaluable," says Leighann McCollum, HSUS Tennessee state director. For Shoupe, looking after his community's animals is both his passion and his job: "We're here to protect them just like we are the children."

## **GARY MICHELS**

*Assistant Prosecuting Attorney, Wayne County, W.Va.*

Law enforcement agencies had been receiving complaints about the neglected animals on Gary Belcher's property for years, says Summer Wyatt. So when a neighbor told Wyatt about the situation, the HSUS West Virginia state director wasn't overly optimistic that officials would take action. Then she received a call from Michels. "He wasn't going to play the game of, 'Oh well; they're just animals,'" Wyatt says. Instead, Michels drove to the property to see the conditions for himself. In May, he led local authorities in seizing 49 horses, mules, and donkeys along with numerous dogs and domestic rabbits. The owner pleaded guilty to misdemeanor animal cruelty and was barred from owning or living with animals for five years. "Had it not been for Michels," Wyatt says, "we would have fought a hard battle."



Prosecutor Gary Michels helped The HSUS's Summer Wyatt rescue this mule and dozens of other animals.

## **DUSTIN MCDANIEL**

*Arkansas Attorney General*

"We've come so far in just two years," says Desiree Bender, HSUS Arkansas state director. "Arkansas went from being among the five worst states in the nation on animal cruelty statutes to ranking 25th." Bender gives much of the credit for this transformation to McDaniel, who championed strong anticruelty legislation enacted last year. The new law established felony-level penalties for cockfighting and other malicious acts of cruelty, and it increased penalties for a number of lesser cruelty offenses. McDaniel also allocated funding to train the state's law enforcement officers on the new law. "He answers his cell phone any time of day for us," says Bender, who once called the attorney general for help seizing eight fighting dogs after their owners were arrested. McDaniel was on his honeymoon at the time, but he took the call and made it happen.

## **W.A. "DREW" EDMONDSON**

*Oklahoma Attorney General*

In his five consecutive terms in office, which ended last year, Edmondson proved to be a true ally to animals in the Sooner State. After a citizen initiative banned cockfighting in 2002, his office successfully defended the new law when cockfighting interests filed legal challenges against it. He's long promoted The HSUS's animal fighting rewards program: At a press conference announcing the rollout of the program in Oklahoma, he urged residents to help combat this "immensely cruel activity." And he filed a landmark lawsuit against factory-style poultry farmers for dumping waste in the state's waterways. "We have been blessed to have him as a forceful advocate for animal and environmental protection issues," says Cynthia Armstrong, HSUS Oklahoma state director. "Attorney General Edmondson has served our state with distinction, never hesitating to do what's right—regardless of the fallout."

## **LARRY ROLLINS AND JOHN BOLIN**

*Director and Officer, Gaming Control Division,  
Indiana Gaming Commission*

In its three years of operation, the Indiana Gaming Control Division has done a lot more than take out illegal slot machines and poker establishments. Under the leadership of Rollins and Bolin and with HSUS assistance, the 16-person undercover team led raids on two dogfighting operations in 2009. Last year, acting on a tip from The HSUS, they busted an alleged breeder of fighting roosters. "It's been a crash course for us," says Bolin, adding that he's gained new respect for animal protection organizations. To maximize their agency's impact, Rollins and Bolin plan to form an animal fighting task force with officials in neighboring Kentucky. Animal fighters "know we're out there, but they don't know who we are, and that drives them crazy," says Rollins. "So much the better."



The scene of an animal fighting case can be intimidating to the uninitiated. In HSUS law enforcement training courses, instructor David Hunt emphasizes the value of cross-department communication: “Prior to doing dogfighting cases, I didn’t know anyone in animal control,” says the Franklin County, Ohio, investigator. Now they all have each other on speed dial. The payoff goes beyond a more coordinated approach to taking down animal abusers: Hunt’s animal control colleagues have provided him with tips on illegal drug and counterfeiting cases.

creating felony-level penalties for cockfighting and egregious animal cruelty and adding provisions to facilitate the seizure of animals in cruelty cases.

For Montgomery, it was a fitting conclusion to a case that haunted him for years. “As bad as what that original incident was, out of that something good happened,” he says. It showed what could be accomplished “once you had law enforcement, the attorney general’s office, and The Humane Society of the United States all working together.”

### TOOLS FOR THE JOB

Since no law is better than its enforcement, McDaniel also allocated \$250,000 for a training program developed by The HSUS and Arkansas’ criminal justice institute. In the past two years, Bender has helped bring workshops to law enforcement agencies in every county. “They’ve been wanting this information for a long time,” she says. “I bet I receive two e-mails a day from law enforcement about when the next class will be.”

That’s no surprise to Eric Sakach, who has been training officers on taking down animal fighters since the early 1980s. When Sakach completed the police academy in 1976, the year he was hired as an HSUS undercover investigator, the only mention of animals was in the context of police canines—a situation that’s still true of most police academies today, says The HSUS’s senior law enforcement specialist.

As a result, many officers’ first exposure to animal fighting comes during a response to a noise complaint or domestic disturbance report: “They arrive on the scene, and all of the sudden 50 people come racing off the property with a chicken under each arm or dogs in tow. And they’re left with the idea that something is definitely wrong here, something is illegal, but they’re not quite sure what it is or even what sections of the law to go to to deal with it,” says Sakach.

One of Sakach’s students was David Hunt, an investigator with

the Franklin County (Ohio) Sheriff’s Office. During a narcotics search in 2002, Hunt saw some unusual items: a jerry-rigged treadmill, veterinary drugs and syringes, copies of *Sporting Dog Journal*. A police sergeant with 20 years’ experience at the time, he knew nothing about dogfighting. Neither did his colleagues, he discovered.

In Ohio, “most animal crimes fall under the agricultural statute, and police officers get their training in the penal codes,” he says.

With Sakach as a mentor, Hunt quickly became his agency’s dogfighting expert, inspired by his love of dogs and the knowledge that this was a sorely overlooked crime. He’s since conducted more than 100 animal fighting investigations, and as an HSUS consultant he shares his experience with officers across the country.

With his background as a narcotics officer, Hunt knows how to motivate his audiences. “I just try to hit them smack between the eyes,” he says. He does this by revealing the amount of cocaine, crack, ecstasy, and marijuana and the more than \$100,000 in cash seized in his dogfighting busts. “I try to stress to people, when you do a dogfighting case, you’re basically taking out a miniature organized crime syndicate,” he says.

In recent years, The HSUS has expanded its training efforts, helping officials address everything from cases involving a single abused pet to ones with hundreds of victims. And the training doesn’t end in the classroom. It’s not unusual for HSUS experts to spend hours on the phone helping a sheriff determine whether an animal situation violates state law or local ordinances, re-

viewing affidavits, or walking a deputy through a search warrant.

For Deputy Chad Long, the continuing mentorship has been

“When you do a dogfighting case, you’re basically taking out a miniature organized crime syndicate.”

— SGT. DAVID HUNT,  
FRANKLIN COUNTY (OHIO) SHERIFF’S OFFICE



This dog was one of 45 pit bulls rescued in Randolph County, Ala., in 2009, after a tipster provided details on two notorious dogfighters. The HSUS’s national animal fighting and cruelty tip lines receive more than 300 calls a month, generating insider information that is often key to investigations. “The effect of that raid went far beyond even just Alabama,” says The HSUS’s Chris Schindler. “When you dismantle significant operations in dogfighting, it’s felt nationwide.”