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FEATURED

Thanksgiving Eve dog shooting in Dummerston results in state charges

By Bob Audette, Vermont News & Media
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Vermont Game Warden Kelly Price and his deputy investigate the site where a dog was shot and killed when she was shot on Thanksgiving Eve. Photo by Kelly Fletcher For the Brattleboro Reformer

DUMMERSTON — A 64-year-old Dummerston man is expected in court on Jan. 30 to answer to a charge of cruelty to animals for shooting and killing a dog on Nov. 22, 2023.

According to information from the Vermont State Police, John J. Wehner also faces a charge of giving false information to law enforcement during the investigation of the shooting of 10-year-old Sadie the night before Thanksgiving. The dog had apparently wandered into Wehner's yard while her owners Jared and Amy Stewart were visiting Amy's parents, who are neighbors of Wehner.

“Over the past nine years we’ve visited Amy’s parents on many occasions, and we’ve taken Sadie for walks in the woods dozens of times,” wrote Jared and Amy Stewart in an email to the Reformer. “We’ve always felt safe there and she loved going for hikes.”

Amy grew up in Dummerston, the daughter of Gail and Ron Veenema, a retired veterinarian.

At just past 5 p.m., when it was getting dark, Sadie was out and running around and had wandered into the neighbor's yard, they wrote.

Unbeknownst to them, Wehner had set out a coyote bait pile that probably attracted the dog.

According to the Stewarts, Wehner shot from the window and struck Sadie twice.

Though they rushed the dog to a veterinarian hospital, Sadie died.

Wehner said in a phone conversation with Vermont News & Media that he's used the bait pile for about 20 years and he's killed about 100 coyotes in that time. He said that what happened in this incident was a tragic accident and that he never meant to kill the dog.

Game Warden Kelly Price, who submitted a supplemental affidavit in support of the charges, said he could not comment on the investigation at this time.

Price did say it is not illegal to shoot at coyotes from the window of your home. "But that does not mean a person should be misidentifying what they are shooting at," he said. "Any person who shoots a gun is responsible for where the projectile ends up."

The Stewarts wrote that Sadie, a black lab mix, was a rescue that was 2 years old when they adopted her in 2015.

They live in Atkinson, N.H., having gotten married and moving there after graduation from Brattleboro Union High School in 1998, and were in Dummerston with their two daughters when Sadie was shot. Their two sons were on the way but had not arrived by that time.

"It has been a difficult time for my family as well as my parents," wrote the Stewarts, who called Sadie a family member. "We continue to struggle with the trauma and heartbreak surrounding Sadie's unnecessary death.

"The trauma is quite significant for anyone in this situation, but especially for a young person who will remember this for the rest of their life," they wrote. "It is sad that our Thanksgiving holiday was ruined both this year and for years to come, as I'm sure as Thanksgiving comes around in the future this will always be on our minds."

The Stewarts urged hunters to be 100 percent certain they know what they are shooting at before they pull the trigger.

“We would also question the need for any type of bait station, especially for individuals who don’t own any livestock or pets. Are they necessary?” they wrote. “We think the laws need to be changed in Vermont to disallow any night hunting (even for coyotes), as well as to provide more protection to pets and their owners. Our sweet Sadie girl did not deserve to die in such a horrific and painful way.”

The Stewarts said it’s true that you don’t often know what you got until you lose it.

“We have great memories of Sadie, but we miss all of those little things that she brought to our family that are now absent.”

Windham County Deputy State's Attorney Steven Brown said his office is aware of the case and has conferred with the Department of Fish & Wildlife. After reviewing the investigative materials, the State’s Attorney requested that Wehner be cited for two misdemeanor offenses, Brown said in an email to the Reformer. He had no further comment at this time.

Supporting affidavits submitted by the Vermont State Police and Vermont Fish & Wildlife won’t be released to the public until Wehner’s arraignment on Jan. 30.

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