

## It's Dark, but We See You: Release the Horseshoe Crabs

A police helicopter thundered over a darkened Jamaica Bay in fast pursuit of a boat with no lights and a load of ill-gotten quarry.

As the craft ducked and dodged across the water, the airborne officers used night vision goggles to follow its spectral path.

The 30-minute pursuit on Monday night ended at a dock in Sheepshead Bay, where, the police said, two men tried to unload their haul: 200 horseshoe crabs.

"They tried to lose us," Officer Chris Maher, who was in the helicopter, said, but officers and federal police officials intercepted the men on land.

What began as a routine flight by officers from the [New York Police Department's](#) aviation unit on Monday night ended with federal criminal charges that the two men in the boat had illegally taken the animals, which can be sold as bait for up to \$5 each.

Each spring, in May and June, horseshoe crabs crawl onto beaches up and down the East Coast to lay their eggs. Huge groupings of the sharp-edged arthropods attract shore birds that feed on the eggs — as well as people motivated by profit to take the whole animal.

The poachers have become a problem in New York in recent years, said Marin Hawk, who deals with the management of horseshoe crabs at the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission. Since New Jersey instated a moratorium on taking the animals in 2008, she said, demand has increased in other states where they can be taken, but only inside of strict quotas and with proper licenses. Such licenses were not found on the men in Jamaica Bay, the authorities said.

The first clue that the men were not properly authorized may have been the hour they chose to work: after 9 p.m. on Memorial Day, under cover of darkness. The police said that the two men, along with two others, used no lights as they scooped the animals out of the shallow waters and tossed them into two boats.

Officer Maher said that during a flight the previous night he had witnessed a boat at the same spot — known as Ruffle Bar — and the behavior struck him as suspicious. He later learned that it violated federal regulations.

The next night, Officer Maher and his partner, Officer Lester Sanabria, again scanned the bay and, from 500 feet above, caught sight of men along the bar, he said.

They piloted down to catch a better look through the night vision goggles. "They definitely looked at us," he said.

No lights on the boat, no flood lights from the helicopter 200 feet above. Just a long, dark moment. "They stared at us," he said, "and then they jumped in the boats and sped off in different directions."

The men were identified by the police as Robert Wolter, 28, and Joseph Knauer, 33. Both live in Bergen Beach, Brooklyn, the police said, a stone's throw from the bay. Each could face a \$500 fine or up to six months in federal prison if convicted, said Lt. David Buckley of the United States Park Police.

The two men who fled in the other boat are still at large.

The horseshoe crabs were rescued alive and returned to the water, Lieutenant Buckley said.

As for Mr. Wolter and Mr. Knauer, he added, "they were cited and released."