

# On His Minnesota Land, Lion Hunter Is Tough On Suspected Poachers

BY JENNIFER BJORHUS  
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MINNEAPOLIS — Long before he was accused of poaching an African lion named Cecil, Walter Palmer was stalking suspected poachers on his private hunting land in northwestern Minnesota. The Twin Cities dentist guarded his acreage and property lines so fiercely he alienated and even frightened local hunters, some Clay County residents and officials said. Run-ins with Palmer became the stuff of local hunting lore, said Clay County Commissioner Jenny Mongeau, whose district includes Palmer's land.

"You don't go close to it because he would report you," said Mongeau. "He has zero positive relations with any of the neighbors, which is very uncommon for this area."

A global furor erupted after news broke that Palmer, a veteran big-game hunter, had killed the famous research lion in a nighttime hunt in Zimbabwe in early July, maiming him with a compound bow and then finishing him off hours later. The lion was baited and the hunt was conducted on private land where, some authorities have said, there was no permit to kill a lion.

Despite accusations against Palmer, only the professional hunter he hired, Theo Bronkhorst, has been charged in Zimbabwe. Palmer, 55, has not responded to multiple phone calls from the *Star Tribune* in the past two weeks, including requests for comment on this article. Vilified by animal welfare activists and the target of

vitriol in social media, Palmer and his wife have not been staying at their Eden Prairie home or at their vacation home in Florida. Palmer's dental practice in Bloomington remains shuttered.

In his one statement to the media last month, Palmer expressed deep regret for killing the lion but denied knowingly breaking any laws, saying he "relied on the expertise of my local professional guides to ensure a legal hunt."

Palmer's Minnesota hunting refuge lies between the town of Barnesville and Pelican Rapids, about 45 minutes southeast of Fargo-Moorhead. Locals talk with envy about the nearly 900-acre spread of rolling hills, oak woodlands and small lakes. It's some of the most pristine countryside in the area, they say.

"That's his own personal little hunting refuge," said Shawn Olson, head of the Barnesville Rod & Gun Club. Olson said he's heard all the stories about territorial disputes but hasn't experienced any himself.

Palmer lives in Eden Prairie. Property records show he bought the core 520 acres in Clay County in 1999, and then added adjacent parcels over the years. He also owns another 230 acres on nearby Pelican Lake, in Otter Tail County.

Jason Stetz recalled the first time he met Palmer. Stetz, who owns Heart O' Lakes Quality Meats in Pelican Rapids, said he'd been out hunting, and was driving down the gravel road by Palmer's land when an odd deer appeared just off the road. Stetz said he pulled over and grabbed his binoculars thinking: "That's the ugliest damn deer I ever saw."



RACHEL WOOLF/MINNEAPOLIS STAR TRIBUNE/TNS  
The layout of John Quigley's aerial art of Cecil the Lion using humans, black tarp and flags is seen in St. Paul, Minn., on Saturday, Aug. 15.

The deer was fake, plastic. Something slapped Stetz's pickup, startling him. It was Palmer. He was angry.

"You were going to shoot that deer," Stetz recalled him saying. Stetz said he just had his binoculars out to look but Palmer insisted that Stetz was going to shoot the deer.

Palmer said he was going to call the game warden and told Stetz to get out of there.

Over the years Stetz and his friends and relatives would wrangle with Palmer over property lines, deer stands and trails of deer

blood. Palmer was always quick to accuse them of trespassing, Stetz said. Once, Stetz said, Palmer scared him while he was hunting when Palmer popped out of the trees in camouflage with a digital camera, snapping photos of Stetz.

As he told the British tabloid *Daily Mail*, Stetz recalled Palmer once kicked his cousin Keith Stetz out of a deer stand, accusing him of hunting on his land. Stetz said Palmer had a handgun. When Keith climbed down, Stetz said he recalled Palmer telling him: "There is no excuse for ignorance."

Keith Stetz did not respond to

messages seeking comment.

None of the confrontations over Palmer's boundaries resulted in violations, according to Lt. Phil Seefeldt, a DNR conservation officer who covered the area. Seefeldt said that the hunting disputes around Palmer's land are "kind of an ongoing issue."

Despite the friction, Stetz said Palmer invited neighbors to a party on the property around 2008. Stetz said not many people went, but he drove over. When he arrived, Palmer invited him into an old white schoolhouse near the old farmhouse on the land. Stetz peered in.

"I was like, Holy (expletive)!" Stetz said.

The schoolhouse was a museum, chock-full of mounted animals, he said, mostly head mounts on the walls. He said he recalls seeing deer heads, and "big game" type animals, but he can't recall exactly what kind. Stetz said the collection might disturb someone not familiar with hunting, but that he considered it "neater than hell."

"That's his shrine. That's his baby right there," Stetz said.

Stetz said relations with Palmer have improved in recent years and that, at least with him, Palmer seems to have "come around." Stetz butchers some of Palmer's deer for him. Palmer, he said, always brings in the biggest bucks.

Some locals suspect Palmer and his wife may be on the secluded property now, keeping a low profile to avoid the harsh public reaction to Cecil's killing. Stetz says he has no idea. All he knows is someone hired private security to watch the property.

## Bypass

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sary and a new traffic study should be completed.

"This is the very early stages of discussion and we will pursue this issue for as long as it takes," Kloucek said. "The \$8 million 4th St widening and the estimated \$22 million total road project cost ... appears to be a huge waste of taxpayer dollars. A traffic study needs to be done similar to the one done in 2001. This study, if done correctly, should clearly demonstrate the need for such a bypass and the justification of local state and national funding for this project."

However, Gall said there are no plans to abandon the reconstruction project on Highway 50.

"The letting's going to be here in another two-three weeks," he said. "That's not going to change. We're not going to stop anymore. Once the letting gets out and we get a contractor, within a month after the contractor's been approved, the contractor's going to start working." Yankton City Manager Amy Nelson told the *Press*

& *Dakotan* while there's no pursuit of such a project now, a long term transportation plan includes a truck bypass.

"We do have in our community plan a bypass route," Nelson said. "We do have it in a long-range plan. We haven't talked about it recently as a commission in terms of it being a capital improvement project."

The community plan, adopted in 2003, includes a map outlining a proposed route that could potentially be used for a truck bypass, turning north at Bill Baggs Rd. before shifting northwest until a newly constructed stretch of road would meet up with E. 31st St. where Peninah St. ends. The bypass would then follow 31st St. to its intersection with Highway 81/Broadway Ave. and meet up with W. Highway 50.

No timelines were set in the community plan. Nelson said there has been light discussion, but nothing official at the City Commission level.

"It has been (discussed) informally, I would say," she said. "I've discussed it with individual commissioners and it's been discussed prior to me coming here."

She added at this time the bypass isn't in the budget.

"Right now, in our budget, there's not a funding mechanism for it," she said.

Nelson said the scope of such a project would require a number of entities for it to move forward.

"This is a discussion that would be broader than just a community discussion," she said. "It would be a county discussion and a DOT discussion. I think those entities together would need to work collaboratively if this was something that we wanted to put forward for an actual project. ... We would need to have a lot of stakeholders come to the table at once before we were ready to. It's not something we could, or should move forward on individually."

Nelson said she hasn't heard much demand for the bypass in Yankton.

"I have had a couple of informal conversations with individuals, but to be honest, not many," she said.

Nelson said Kloucek is set to address the commission on the issue during their next meeting on Monday, Aug. 24.

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could be made at the next meeting on Aug. 24, but it is up to the commission.

"It's not scheduled, per se, on the agenda, but they can do it at any time," she said. "If they're ready to make that appointment, they will. If they're not, they'll do it on the 14th of September, but I would suspect they'll be ready to make that appointment or an announcement who they're appointing at the next meeting. I have not confirmed that with anybody."

The candidate appointed will serve the remainder of Balaidd's term, which expires in spring of 2016.

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## River

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grew into full force with the assistance of a number of search crews.

Assisting in the search were South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks; Nebraska Game and Parks; Ponca (Nebraska) Fire and Rescue; Yankton County Search and Rescue; the Union County sheriff's personnel and Union County emergency management.

The effort used a wide variety of resources, including sonar devices and search dogs.

"We're still in search mode," Limoges told the *Press & Dakotan* earlier in the week. "We have a lot of assets in the water."

The rescue effort was hampered by the unseasonably cool weather. The week included rain, overcast skies, strong winds and high temperatures in the low to mid-60s.

In addition, authorities were faced with covering a large search area and the possibility of rugged, changing and unpredictable waters.

On Wednesday, authori-

ties used a plane to launch an aerial search, Limoges told the *Press & Dakotan*.

While the weather improved, the effort still faced challenges. The National Weather Service reported on Wednesday that Union County sustained winds of 25-35 miles per hour (mph) with gusts to 40 mph.

The search received its first break Wednesday afternoon with the location of the body. Authorities are now waiting for positive identification to learn if the body is the missing swimmer.

During media interviews, Limoges said this week tragically isn't the first time his office has needed to search for missing persons in the Missouri River.

The sheriff urged the public to use extreme caution – including the wearing of a life jacket – when going on or near the river.

The Missouri River can exhibit treacherous conditions, particularly during poor weather conditions, Limoges said.

"The river is relentless, and it's not always very giving," he told one media outlet.

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## Ribbon

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"We know the demand curve is there. We certainly would like to meet that demand," Smith said.

The governor's task force also received presentations on distance learning Wednesday from the South Dakota Innovation Lab system operated by the Mid-Central Education Cooperative from Platte and from Julie Mathiesen, director for the statewide Technology and Innovation in Education center at Rapid City.

Mid-Central director Dan Guericke said the SDIL approach shares teachers among multiple schools, and that allows the pay to average about \$47,000 plus benefits, which he said is

substantially better than many teachers receive in south-central South Dakota. That is about \$7,000 more annually than the state average salary.

The task force members seemed most affected, however, by the data delivered by University of Pennsylvania professor Richard Ingersoll regarding teacher shortages. He said shortages have been normal since the 1950s but the underlying problem is turnover, even in math and science, rather than an inadequate supply.

Nationally the turnover rate is above 20 percent in poor rural and poor urban schools, and nearly half of teachers leave the profession within the first five years, Ingersoll said, citing long-term data from several decades of federal census surveys.

Current numbers for South Dakota indicated 30 of 151 districts have hiring difficulties this summer. "It's not trivial, but it's 20 percent of your schools," Ingersoll said.

Job dissatisfaction is the No. 1 reason teachers quit, and pay ranks high too, according to the national data.

Ingersoll's advice was to address the turnover problem through orientation and induction programs for new teachers and mentoring of less-experienced teachers by more-experienced colleagues.

"It does make a positive difference. I was surprised," he said about mentoring. Research found mentoring improved commitment and retention, strengthened classroom practices and increased student achievement.

"It's not rocket science. On the other hand, no one is saying it's easy to improve those things," Ingersoll said.

Many of the task force members said in closing remarks they were surprised to learn so much of what they'd been led to believe about South Dakota schools have been myths.

The task force meets again Sept. 9 and will start setting goals and discussing recommendations for reaching them, said one of the co-chairs, Rep. Jacqueline Sly, R-Rapid City. The last meeting will be Oct. 1 and if necessary Oct. 29.

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