

Fish and Game Warden Pilots

Most people probably don't know that the Department of Fish and Game has an Air Services Unit. The Fish and Game aircraft are piloted by Warden Pilots. When all the Warden Pilot positions are filled, there are eight pilots who fly and maintain seven airplanes from four bases statewide. This unit of Fish and Game wildlife protection might possibly qualify as the world's smallest air force. The scope of the Warden Pilot's duties is enormously varied. From piloting an airplane on law enforcement patrols over land and water, day and night, in single and multi-engine and turbine powered airplanes to aerial fish planting in high sierra lakes, to personnel transport, and all manner of scientific research the DFG pilot gets the job done.

Warden Pilots are a unique breed indeed. They must be able to wear several hats. All Warden Pilots have got to be commercial pilots, qualified to fly multi and single-engine airplanes in visual and instrument conditions. Many of the pilots hold an FAA airline transport pilot license, the most advanced type of pilot certificate available. All the Warden Pilots are experienced FAA airframe and power plant mechanics. Some pilots possess, as an additional rating, an inspection authorization on their mechanics license. The FAA requirement for obtaining a mechanic's license, at Sacramento City college for example, includes four semesters of full time curriculum at 17 college units per semester, pass a practical test and pass the FAA written tests for aircraft airframes and aircraft power plants.

Warden pilots are required to be able to maintain their own fleet. Since much of the airborne work done is at low level, a most demanding and hazardous type of flying, Warden Pilots are all experienced in low level aviation. They must pass check flights annually on low level operations from the Federal Office of Aviation Safety, and an internal check ride by their own check pilots. Warden Pilots are experts at vertical and oblique aerial photography. They are experts at airborne radio telemetry.

As the name implies, warden pilots are also Game Wardens, all are graduates of post certified academies, and they are responsible for keeping up all the required training to maintain their status as peace officers.

Fish & Game Warden Pilots are faced with an even greater disparity in salary compared to CHP pilots; in spite of having vastly greater minimum hiring standards and qualifications. Warden Pilots are required to maintain their own airplanes whereas CHP pilots are not. Warden Pilots maintain and operate an older fleet, the majority of their planes were built in the eighties; whereas CHP pilots fly much newer equipment. Warden Pilots must fly long single pilot patrols at minimum altitude over the ocean, often out of sight of land, lengthy nighttime patrols over the most rugged terrain in the United States, and fly at absolute minimum altitude during fish planting operations in steep high altitude mountains. CHP pilots normally fly with a two man crew. Warden Pilots are full peace officers and have been in existence in that role since 1950.

They fill a very critical role in policing ocean fisheries pollution, night poaching, illegal stream diversions, marijuana plantations, and oil spills. Warden pilot salaries range around \$60,000 a year where their CHP counterparts are making on average \$90,000 per year.

This past year the Department of Fish and Game tried to hire two replacement pilots to bring their staffing level back up to eight. They were unable to do so due to the qualifications required and the level of pay offered. These positions remain vacant creating a large gap in environmental enforcement.

MOTTO

As Fish and Game management issues gain complexity in today's political climate, the California Warden Pilot in his trusty airplane will adjust and respond.



As if low level flight wasn't dangerous enough, during a routine low level flight over the Sacramento Valley, this 1981 Fish and Game Cessna 185 was hit by shotgun blasts. After landing, warden pilots counted 13 pellet strikes to the airplane. Fortunately, over the years, the bullet and shotgun strikes to the DFG airplanes that have occurred were with no injuries to the crewmembers onboard.



Warden Pilots face the hazards of law enforcement and the dangers of airplane failure



A DFG Warden that landed this DFG airplane in an open field after a major mechanical failure to the engine, he not only went home at the end of his shift, but there were no injuries to persons nor property damage on the ground. Warden Pilots train for emergencies frequently but hope they never experience one of the most scariest emergencies of all... catastrophic engine failure. Pilots in these situations go through the same thought processes as a peace officer involved shooting. There is the initial denial that this situation can be happening followed by realization and then action. The result of the pilot's action or inaction is the difference between life or death. The difference between an off airport landing and an airplane crash is a nano-second in judgement.