

IAMI's 2019 Investigator of the Year

It was a story that stretched from Georgia to Texas. It was a story that involved two Malibu Wake Setter ski-boats. And, yes, like all great law enforcement tales (and Michael J Fox movies), it was a story that involved a guy named Biff.

You see the story of our 2019 Investigators of the Year begins in the suburbs south of Atlanta where a 2012 Malibu Wake Setter ski boat was stolen in September of 2014. It continues a year-and-a-half later, where a 2015 Malibu Wake Setter ski boat was destroyed by a winter storm in Texas in February of 2016. These two similar boats will be forever linked together in a tale that resulted in the arrest and imprisonment of a knucklehead that tried to get just a little too crafty.

In March of 2018, the diligent owner of a marine repair facility Southwest of Atlanta on Jackson Lake contacted the Georgia Department of Natural Resources because something just wasn't right. He was contracted to repair a 2015 Malibu Wake Setter, but when he noted the installed engine was a 2012 model year, he began to scratch his head and get curious. One of our Investigators of the Year arrived, confirmed the Hull Identification Number on the transom belonged to a 2015 Malibu Wake Setter, and got to work.

After determining the location of the Confidential HIN, and performing some interior removals, our investigator confirmed the real identify of the vessel – a 2012 Malibu Wake Setter boat. And just like that – the vessel aged three years. Further inspection found the VIN removed from the trailer, which had been recently re-painted.

Our investigator next went to the Georgia Crime Information Center for more information on the 2012 Malibu. He confirmed that the vessel was reported stolen from Henry County, Georgia in September of 2014. Upon contacting Henry County with the news, the stolen vessel was located, he was told something akin to “stolen boat...don't care...” (anyone ever heard that before?) and he continued his own investigation into the situation.

The registration number on the vessel (and tag number on the trailer) both traced back to an individual that we will call “James” who also resided in the southern suburbs of Atlanta. After ensuring the marine repair facility secured the vessel, our first investigator tapped our second investigator from the Georgia DNR marine theft unit, and the chase was afoot.

Our two investigators met back at the repair facility with investigators from Butts County, Georgia to interview the staff on the known history of the Malibu. They learned that Biff (y'all didn't believe me about Biff, did you?) dropped off the boat with his friend who we will call “Bob” to be checked out. Why? Well – “Bob” was going to be purchasing the Malibu from “James” and they were not going to settle for a price until the boat was checked and some repairs were completed (and paid for by “Bob” – what a great deal for “James”)

“Bob” and “James” knew each other through a mutual friend, and this hand-shake of a sales agreement was brokered approximately a week before the boat showed up at the repair facility. “Bob” stated he knew the vessel had engine trouble (in fact, the engine was locked up and was in need of a full replacement), but still believed that what he thought was a 2015 Malibu was still worth in the \$50,000.00 range. Our investigators turned their attention to “James.”

Searching the Georgia DNR databases, they located the Texas Title and Bill of Sale for a 2015 Malibu that “James” used to apply for the Georgia boat registration. They found it interesting that the registration application was dated April 4, 2016, but the sale date on the Texas documents was April 20th. Their curiosity was piqued.

Further research on the 2015 HIN affixed to our 2012 Malibu lead our investigators to Chubb Insurance. Chubb processed a claim for the 2015 Malibu as it was completely destroyed in a Texas winter storm in February of 2016. The vessel was sold as salvage by Cooper Capital with the auction closing on April 20, 2016. The winning bid of \$2,000.00 was placed by none other than the investigators new friend, "James." It was clear that "James" had falsified documents, concealed facts, combined two boats together, and was up to no good.

Our investigators met with the Meriwether County, Georgia Sheriff's Office (who had jurisdiction over "James'" residence) and obtained both a search and arrest warrant from the County Magistrate. All parties executed the search and arrest warrants together.

Upon arrival, it was clear that "James" knew why law enforcement was visiting. There was evidence of at least one additional piece of stolen property (a large cargo trailer) and evidence that other pieces of heavy equipment were recently removed from the property. It was clear that the operation "James" was running involved more than just Malibu Wake Setters.

"James" was charged with a laundry list of crimes including theft, criminal use of an article with an altered identification mark, filing false documents, altering a HIN, removing a license plate with intent to conceal, and additional local tax issues. He plead guilty to two counts of theft by receiving stolen property and two counts of criminal use of an article with altered ID. He was punished with 9 total years to serve as a guest of the State of Georgia.

Truly an outstanding result – brought about by the diligence and attention to detail of many, led by our two 2019 International Association of Marine Investigators Investigator of the Year.

Our 2019 Investigators of the Year are:

- From Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Marine Theft Investigator, Sergeant Chad Welch (Now Lt. Chad Welch)
- From Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Game Warden First Class, Freddie Hays