

THE LOOK AHEAD

Red Butte's season begins, two shows at Utah First, three days of music in Torrey and Luke Combs at Rice-Eccles

Journalists from across The Tribune newsroom offer a look at events and happenings of interest for the week of June 2-8:

THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

Red Butte's summer starts, June 4 ▶ A sure sign that summer's coming: The first concert at Red Butte Garden, at 300 Wakara Way, Salt Lake City. Kicking off the season on Tuesday is the Jamaican reggae legend Burning Spear, with Australian musician Xavier Rudd opening the show. The show starts at 6:30 p.m. Tickets, at \$63 for the general public, are available at redbuttegardens.org. (By the way, more

than two thirds of this summer's Red Butte line-up still have tickets available.)

Back to back at the Amphitheatre, June 5, 6 ▶ Two concerts at Utah First Credit Union Amphitheatre, 5150 S. 6055 West, West Valley City this week. Wednesday night is the rock band Red Hot Chili Peppers, and Thursday night is singer-songwriter Sarah MacLachlan (marking the 30th anniversary of her breakthrough album, "Fumbling Towards Ecstasy"). Tickets for both shows are available at

TicketMaster.com.

Music and adventure in Torrey, June 6-8 ▶ Fort Desolation Fest is running Thursday through Saturday at the Cougar Ridge Resort in Torrey — promising music at night and adventures in the red rocks the event is near Capitol Reef National Park) during the day. This year's headliners include the psychedelic/soul band Black Pumas and country singer-songwriters Sierra Ferrell and Paul Cauthen. Tickets, passes and information on camping availability can be found at fortdesolation.com.

A Luke Combs double-header, June 7, 8 ▶ Country superstar Luke Combs — riding

high off the mega-success of his cover of Tracy Chapman's "Fast Car" — is playing stadiums this summer, and he's got two shows scheduled: Friday and Saturday, at Rice-Eccles Stadium, 451 S. 1400 East, Salt Lake City. The supporting line-up is different each night: Cody Jinks, Charles Wesley Godwin, Hailey Whitters and The Wilder Blue are scheduled for Friday, while Jordan Davis, Mitchell Tenpenny, Drew Parker and Colby Allread are set to round out Saturday's bill. Tickets for either show (or both, if you like) are available at lukecombs.com.

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Kane County commissioner and ex-wildlife official investigated for alleged big game baiting

Wildlife Board member Wade Heaton resigned last fall on the heels of a wildlife investigation.

By ERIC PETERSON

The following story was reported by The Utah Investigative Journalism Project in partnership with The Salt Lake Tribune.

It was a dream hunt more than 20 years in the making — that's how long Robert's father had been applying in annual state drawings for a highly sought after bow hunting tag.

Scoring the tag last year meant Robert and his father would be able to hunt on Heaton Ranch, where Kane County Commissioner Wade Heaton's outfitting company has touted game "as special and unique as the red rocks canyon and southern Utah terrain they call home."

The ranch is on the Alton Cooperative Wildlife Management Unit, part of a lucrative program for landowners who get vouchers for big game permits they can sell, typically wrapped with guiding services, for prices that can reach tens of thousands of dollars. Heaton's Color Country Outfitters auctioned a five-day, guided hunt on the Alton CWU in 2018 for \$90,000.

In exchange, the CWU's work with the state to manage the wildlife habitat on their property — and they must allow a smaller number of public tag holders to hunt there.

As public hunters, Robert and his father were scouting along on the Heaton Ranch last August, he said, separate from a larger, private guided group. They were more than a day into their trip, Robert said, when "the next thing we knew, we were caught up in this whole investigation with the Division of Wildlife."

A DWR investigator questioned them and seized one of his father's arrows, he said. The experience left them with a "bad taste in their mouth," he added, so they ended their hunt early.

The division was investigating possible big game baiting at the Alton CWU, according to a 62-page report obtained by The Utah Investigative Journalism Project through a public record request.

The report lists Heaton as a suspect — along with six others — and says the division was investigating unlawful big game baiting, unlawful killing/possession of protected wildlife and a pattern of unlawful activity at multiple areas in the Alton CWU.

At the time, Heaton was a member of the Utah Wildlife Board, which oversees the CWMU program. Five days after the lengthy report was completed on Oct. 4,



A mule deer is pictured on the Alton Cooperative Wildlife Management Unit in Kane County in 2022. The unit is operated by County Commissioner Wade Heaton.

2023, Heaton submitted a resignation email to the Division of Wildlife Resources.

"My life has continued to become busier and more complicated," Heaton wrote, "and I no longer feel that I have the time needed to serve on the Wildlife Board."

The division's investigation was referred in December to the Utah County Attorney's office to be evaluated for possible charges, according to a DWR spokesperson. The Utah County Attorney's office did not respond to questions about the status of the case.

Heaton is the operator of the Alton Cooperative Wildlife Management Unit, the division confirmed. Under DWR rules, he could lose the opportunity to operate the CWU if he is convicted of a wildlife violation. A conviction related to the investigation also could have an impact on the status of the property as a CWU.

Heaton did not respond to multiple requests for comment. The Utah Investigative Journalism Project and The Salt Lake Tribune are identifying Robert, the public hunter, by a pseudonym because he is listed as a witness, not a suspect, in the report, and he does not want to be publicly connected to possible wildlife violations.

Robert and his father are two of the 11 "involved others" in the report, which appear to include additional hunters.

'A BUCK DEER HAD BEEN SHOT'

Most of the pages of the released report are blacked out; the division said that because no charges have been filed, a DWR spokesperson

explained. The division considers the investigation ongoing, the spokesperson added.

But one of the few unredacted sentences states that at the beginning of the investigation, DWR investigator Mark Ekins "received an email" in mid-August "regarding the unlawful baiting of big game" on property "south of Alton, Utah, in Kane County."

The report also notes that the initial report was an assertion that "the Alton Cooperative Wildlife Management Unit (CWU) was baiting big game."

Days later, on Aug. 26, Ekins and DWR conservation officer Shane Kitchen went to "an alleged bait site [Ekins] had been investigating on the Painsaught [Plateau] in Kane County," Kitchen wrote in a supplemental report.

Earlier that day, Kitchen said, "it was believed that a buck deer had been shot while at the bait site." In another supplemental report, an officer with a K9 unit said he also had been asked to "locate a buck deer that had been shot but not recovered."

Kitchen's report indicates the officers made contact with Wade Heaton, then 50, another man, and Robert's father. They seized a camera from Heaton and a phone from the other man, the report said.

Baiting big game for hunting only became illegal in Utah in 2021, after all of the state's immediate neighbors had already banned or restricted it. Baiting is defined as placing food or nutrients to manipulate the behavior of wildlife, and it now can draw charges ranging from a class B misdemeanor to a third-degree felony, the DWR points out. A

conviction can lead to the suspension of hunting privileges.

Robert said he and his father did not shoot a buck, and they didn't see anyone else shoot a buck while they were at the ranch. They did notice salt licks and water troughs in the areas where they were hunting.

"We asked the outfitters about it three different times and they were like 'No, the division knows about it,' and 'We've talked to the division about it and they're fine with it,'" Robert said.

They deferred to Heaton, Robert said, knowing that he was on the Wildlife Board. "As far as we were concerned, Mr. Heaton is the division," Robert said.

The 2021 law includes exemptions for salt licks placed by agricultural producers for agriculture purposes. Hunters can hunt over such salt licks, according to DWR. Heaton Ranch is a cattle ranch that has also invited guests to help with cattle drives, and Robert had taken pictures of cattle in the area where they were hunting.

The unredacted portions of the reports do not specify what the officers were investigating as having been possibly used as bait. Robert acknowledged he did not know the full extent of the investigation.

In the years prior to the ban, the Heaton Ranch had baited game with apples, according to 2019 reporting by The Tribune. The practice had become increasingly common, especially among bowhunters in southern Utah. The Tribune reported, because it was effective in luring mule deer to places where concealed hunters could get off a clean shot.

Concerns that baiting could

contribute to the spread of infectious diseases in deer herds — and discuss the square with the Western hunting principle of fair chase — helped lead to the ban.

In 2024, Heaton had been accused of having cornered deer behind an 8-foot fence for a guided hunt. When a cornered animal was caught on a video that was sent anonymously to KSL-TV and shared with regulators, it triggered an investigation into possible illegal trapping.

Heaton told KSL the group of deer had running room but some mistakenly cornered themselves. "I don't think there was anything illegal that went on with it," he told the station. "It was too bad. And obviously that's not the way people like to hunt."

Ultimately, no charges were filed.

'YOU HAVE TO KEEP YOUR NOSE CLEAN'

DWR explained in a statement that it could not comment on the baiting allegation because it is still under investigation. DWR did stress that Heaton's status as a former member of the Wildlife Board has not impacted the investigation.

"Regardless of who is being investigated, a conservation officer will investigate the alleged violation and collect any pertinent evidence," the statement read.

Crowe Jones is the wildlife section chief for DWR and previously oversaw the CWMU program as the agency's private lands coordinator. While not addressing the specifics of Heaton's case, Jones

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