

WHO *are* the BACKCOUNTRY RANGERS?

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER STEKEL



(Opposite page) George Durkee and wife Paige Meier have served 20 years at Rae Lakes in Kings Canyon (below) Rick Sanger is stationed at Pear Lake in Sequoia National Park.

Being a National Park Service wilderness backcountry ranger must be a dream job. From a tiny cabin deep within the wild heart of the Sierra Nevada the ranger embarks upon adventurous hikes, exploring little-traveled corners of Yosemite, Sequoia and Kings Canyon. Meeting other intrepid wilderness hikers, the backcountry ranger is a fountain of knowledge and mountain lore, not unlike the people who first wandered these mountains.

In a romantic sense, all of this is true. But there's a lot more to being a backcountry ranger.

There are 6,000 square miles of wilderness within the Sierra Nevada. The land is administered by the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and National Park Service with 95% of Yosemite, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks designated or managed as wilderness. Amazingly, there are only about two dozen people responsible for patrolling this nearly 2 million acres of NPS wilderness.

Wilderness savors wildness, not just remoteness. After the Wilderness Act was passed 40 years ago, an era began of increased awareness of how people influence this wildness. The Act also precipitated shifts in management to make wilderness more pristine. With this greater focus and attention it became important to know what was out there, where work was needed and how to educate people on their personal responsibility for keeping the wild in wilderness. Never before was the need for a backcountry ranger felt so acutely in our Sierran National Parks.

Rick Sanger loves being a wilderness backcountry ranger. Stationed at Pear Lake in Sequoia National Park, Sanger says, "Ever since my first trip to the Sierra as a 16-year-old Boy Scout, I've always considered it the best place in the world." That's why he's willing to work long hours, endure Spartan living conditions and estrangement from civilization. "Dealing



(Below) Rick Sanger's secluded station is located six miles from a trailhead



with the physical demands of the job is harder than doing without the amenities of an urban lifestyle," he says. And though Sanger gains strength during the summer, he also finds himself losing energy. By the end of the season, "I'm wiped out instead of pumped up and strong."

George Durkee has worked as a backcountry ranger since 1973; first in Yosemite and then, after 1976, in Sequoia and Kings Canyon. Durkee recalls, "When I joined the Park Service in the early '70s, I was handed a gun and a shovel and sent out into the wilderness to learn my trade. Within my first two weeks, I'd fought a forest fire, arrested a person for stealing camping gear, rescued a climber injured at the base of Half Dome and given instruction to hundreds of backpackers on the fine art of tying their food in trees away from herds of hungry bears."

Currently stationed at Rae Lakes in Kings Canyon, Durkee has served the last 20 years with his wife, Paige Meier. Effectively they've created a two-for-the-price-of-one employee for the NPS. A trained nurse, experienced hiker and natural historian, Meier assists with all the duties of the ranger station.

Backcountry use has changed in the 40 years since the Wilderness Act was passed. Guided stock parties have given way to backpackers. Hikers have changed from younger people trying to get away from material goods and live more simply to people commonly with less free time than money. There are more women and smaller, definitely fewer, organized groups.

Backcountry ranger duties have always revolved around education says Dick Martin. The current Superintendent of Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks worked as a backcountry ranger over 20 years ago. "In my experience, a small percentage of people were immune to education and required law enforcement action."

Martin's observation holds true today for Rick Sanger. His station is six miles from a trailhead and attracts less experienced hikers. Sanger sees them in every stage of unpreparedness — lacking food, proper gear or adequate conditioning. "A big challenge is gauging how I can best interact and

assist a visitor," he says. Sometimes it means giving them permission to leave. "I've done that and it turns people around to realize they are here by choice."

Educating the public and protecting wilderness hasn't changed over the years but, "Life was simpler when I was a back-country ranger," Dick Martin recalls. "We weren't as knowledgeable or sophisticated as rangers are today and we solved problems locally."

Casual observers would argue that sophisticated, complex management is the antithesis of wilderness. As Wilderness Coordinator for Yosemite, Laurel Boyers experiences that paradox every day. But the 30-year NPS veteran says, "We don't always understand the complexities, interactions and politics that come into play in making a decision." Boyers says, "Yosemite has a Park-wide wilderness work plan with five pages of things to keep an eye on." The job entails more than checking permits. "We're doing water quality impact studies, resource protection, maintenance, interpretation, look-

ing for threats caused by invasive plants..." and the list keeps growing.

Because they're seasonal employees, rangers lack health benefits and are laid off every autumn. "But I get paid for hiking around my favorite place all summer," Rick Sanger says philosophically. "Think of what I save in health club costs!"

To George Durkee, the lack of immediate day-to-day rewards is sometimes discouraging. "You're working with systems that recover slowly," he says. Repairing a meadow where a campfire has destroyed the ground, "It takes decades to see a difference."

On the other hand Durkee says, "In a world frantically concerned with the bottom line, most of us in the Park Service are still unrepentant idealists. I'm still possessed of the same sense of wonder and curiosity about the park I work in as when I first put on the uniform of a park ranger, 30 years ago. There are days in my job that pass with such magical and wondrous grace, I cannot imagine doing anything else." **SH**



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