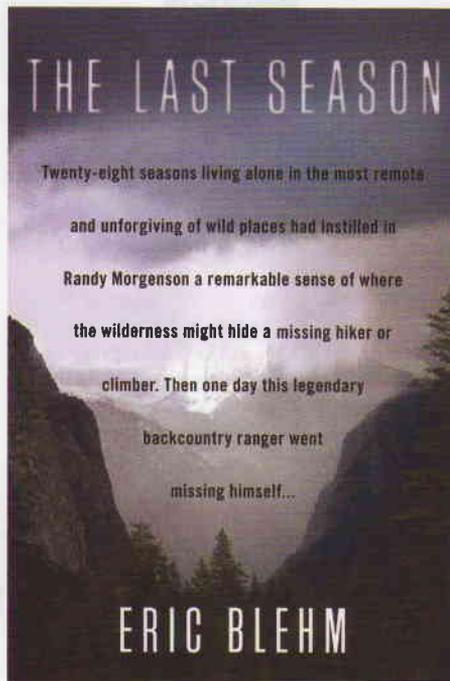


THE LAST SEASON

Book Review

BY PETER STEKEL



Lovers of the Sierra Nevada come in all shapes and sizes. Randy Morgenson was size large. When he disappeared without a trace in the wilderness of Kings Canyon National Park in 1996, Morgenson had spent 28 full summers as a National Park Service backcountry ranger plus a dozen winters in the High Country as a snow surveyor and ranger. Telling the story of what happened to Morgenson and how this long-term seasonal ranger impacted the lives of park visitors, colleagues and co-workers is the focus of a splendid new book by Eric Blehm called, *The Last Season*.

Randy Morgenson was raised in Yosemite Valley where his father worked for the Curry Company. As a boy during the 1950s, Morgenson played in the meadows of Yosemite Valley much the same way his contemporaries played in urban parks. Weekends were spent exploring the High Country with his brother and father, learning the natural history of the Sierra.

Growing up, Morgenson knew Wallace Stegner, Ansel Adams and other Yosemite notables. In fact, Adams presented Morgenson with his first camera. As expected with this sort of childhood, Morgenson became an adult skilled in the abilities, traditions and lore of generations of Sierran travelers, explorers, photographers, writers and scientists.

As a backcountry ranger, Morgenson lived outdoors in conditions that would make Spartans blush. On 24 hour-a-day call, he worked as a medic, law enforcement officer, search-and-rescue specialist, interpreter, scientist, camp-

ground ranger and at times, a garbage collector. In all these tasks it's plain Morgenson was an expert — a hero to heroes in an era sorely lacking in heroes — joined by 14 other men and women to patrol Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, an area the size of Rhode Island.

Though not misanthropic, Morgenson clearly enjoyed being alone and far from urban areas. For *The Last Season*, Eric Blehm interviewed family, friends and co-workers to get under the skin of Morgenson and uncover motivations to explain what makes a person desire the isolation of the High Country while at the same time, serving the public's needs.

Eric Blehm's handling of Randy Morgenson's disappearance is even-handed and fair, especially given that

passions still run high in the case. And it is a mystery. What happened to Randy Morgenson during his last season in Kings Canyon? Why did he disappear? What are the clues? Where was the tension in his life that caused some searchers to posit suicide? Who are the cast of characters in this story? What did the investigation uncover and finally, what was the denouement?

Blehm quotes copiously from Morgenson's lyrical journals, letters and other writings, and we get a great feel for his wilderness philosophy, how it developed and how he became known as the most fanatically environmentally conscious ranger in Sequoia and Kings Canyon — and maybe the entire National Park Service. "To be thoroughly aware each day that I'm alive, to be deeply sensitive to the world I inhabit and the world that I am, not to roam roughshod over the broad surface of this planet for achievement but to know where I step, and to tread lightly. I would rather my footsteps never be seen, and the sound of my voice be heard only by those near, and never echo, than leave in my wake the fame of those whom we commonly call great."

In understanding the life of Randy Morgenson, we learn not only about this amazing person but how Americans view themselves against the backdrop and importance of wilderness. **SH**

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