

RANGER

CONFIDENTIAL



**Living, Working, and Dying
in the National Parks**

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FALCON GUIDES

GUILFORD, CONNECTICUT
HELENA, MONTANA

AN IMPRINT OF GLOBE PEQUOT PRESS

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Text designer: Libby Kingsbury

Layout artist: Mary Ballachino

Project manager: John Burbidge

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data is on file.

ISBN 978-0-7627-9626-7

For the one who pulled me back from the edge.

The season's over and they come down
From the ranger station to the nearest town
Wild and wooly and tired and lame
From playing "the next to nature" game
These are the men the nation must pay
For "doing nothing," the town folks say
But facts are different. I'm here to tell
That some of their trails run right through—well
Woods and mountains and deserts and brush
They are always going and they always rush.

—From *Oh, Ranger! A Story about the National Parks* by Horace Albright and Frank J. Taylor,
1928

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INTRODUCTION

For twelve years I lived and worked in some of the most sublime places in the world. Zion, Yosemite, and the Grand Canyon were all landscapes I was proud to protect. I participated in search and rescues, wildland firefighting, and law enforcement. I directed traffic around tarantula jams. I pursued bad guys while galloping on horseback. I jumped into rescue helicopters bound for the dark heart of the Grand Canyon and plucked the damned from the jaws of the abyss. I raced the sunset. I won arguments with bears. I dodged lightning bolts. I pissed on forest fires. I slept with a few too many rattlesnakes.

Hell, yeah, it was the best job in the world. And fortunately I survived it.

One of my dearest friends was not so lucky.

Park rangers bring to mind images fit for a postcard. A square-jawed outdoorsman wearing a stiff-brimmed Stetson rides horseback through lonely canyons. A freckle-faced young woman hikes to an altar of wildflowers under a shadowy cathedral of redwoods. A friendly guy stands on the porch of a hewn-log ranger station and waves to the happy campers passing by. These sylvan scenes make for pretty portraits of a ranger's life, but as every park ranger eventually learns, sunny postcards tell only half a story.

Even paradise has its problems. Criminals go on vacation too. In the United States, a park ranger is more likely to be assaulted in the line of duty than is any other federal officer, including those who work for the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF); the Secret Service; and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). A park ranger is twelve times more likely to die on the job than is a special agent for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). In light of such numbers, some describe park rangers—like grizzly bears, wild orchids, and sea turtles—as “endangered.”

Within these pages you will meet a few of the park rangers behind these statistics and read some of the stories behind the scenery of America's national parks. If my imaginary postcards were actual portraits of real park rangers I came to know and love during my intense and extraordinary career, the square-jawed outdoorsman would be Chris Fors, a hardy New Englander who used his sturdy expression to hide the fear and disillusionment he faced while working at the Grand Canyon. The freckle-faced young woman hiking through the trees would resemble Mary Litell, a rock climber determined to break the glass ceiling at Yosemite Valley. And the friendly ranger with a kind wave and goofy smile? That would be Cale Shaffer, a short guy with a big dream: to become a mountaineering ranger on Denali, North America's tallest mountain.

I cherish the memories I have of working alongside park rangers like Chris, Mary, and Cale. For better and worse, our time with the National Park Service (NPS) changed us in ways we could never have anticipated. In the beginning we were four passionately dedicated rangers willing to risk our lives to protect the national park ideal. But age wreaked havoc on our idealism, a little courage bled from each tragic experience, and hope seemed elusive when so many lives were lost. In the end I

watched someone toss a beloved ranger's ashes into the Grand Canyon.

Rangers rarely share their experiences with those outside the clannish NPS. Chief rangers and park superintendents have politically fragile careers. NPS public information officers are reticent about the darker sides of the park experience. Concessionaires—multi-million-dollar companies that run the hotels, restaurants, and gift shops inside national parks—think bad news equals bad business. Park rangers, including those at the highest ranks, have been disciplined, frivolously indicted, and even fired because they told the truth about living, working, and dying in a national park.

This is a work of nonfiction. The park rangers are real people. The stories are true. Quoted dialogue and statements are taken directly from government documents, dispatch recordings, other media sources, journals, letters, and the recollections of myself or the people I interviewed. In one chapter only (“Pine Pigs”) I portray minor events as if they occurred in one day. In a few instances I combine several conversations into one for the sake of narrative efficiency. I occasionally use my imagination when dramatizing the actions, thoughts, and motivations of the park ranger who dies by this story's end. With the exception of a few high-profile incidences, I omit the names of the deceased to allow them and their families some privacy.

Reader beware. Ranger reality is rated R. Nature doesn't always play nice. Public servants curse from time to time. Search and rescue can involve wet work. Cliffhangers don't always have happy endings.

The service thus established shall promote and regulate the use of the Federal areas known as national parks . . . which purpose is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.

—The National Park Service Organic Act, 1916

Well . . . the only thing I can say is . . . Yosemite is one Goddamn beautiful place to get locked up.

—Man arrested for driving while intoxicated in a national park, 1993

1

THIS IS YOUR BRAIN ON THE GRAND CANYON



Nude from the waist down, the woman arched her back off the gurney and kicked a padded ankle restraint across the room. Obviously the Valium wasn't working. The doctor yelled for something stronger. A male park ranger fought with the woman's kicking legs while I leaned all my weight on her upper torso so a nurse could inject the drug into the catheter I had put in her arm. With all her panting and senseless blabbering, you would have thought we were trying to sedate a lunatic. But this young woman was not insane. She was just a girl who went hiking in the Grand Canyon.

It was April 1997. We were in the emergency room inside a medical clinic on the Grand Canyon's South Rim. The park ranger struggling to maintain his hold on the hiker's tan legs was Cale Shaffer, my newest and youngest employee. Sweat stains blossomed all over Cale's uniform shirt, and his dark brown bangs were falling in his face. An Outdoor Recreation grad from Pennsylvania, my newbie ranger stood five-foot-five in his hiking boots. Cale was twenty-two but could pass for fifteen, and the Eagle Scout hadn't rubbed off him yet. He looked much too young to be wrestling with the legs of a half-naked woman while a nurse had both hands in the woman's crotch, trying to slide a rubber tube up the patient's urethra in order to empty her bladder.

The sick hiker responded to this medical intervention in a bizarre, almost sexual manner, moaning and wiggling her hips out of the nurse's range. "Whoa there Nelly," the nurse said with an awkward giggle. A decade of rangers had desensitized me to a variety of disturbing sights, sounds, and smells. But in front of my Boy Scout of an employee, the carnality of this poor woman's delirium burned my cheeks with embarrassment. I made a little wish for the woman: Please, when this latest victim of the Arizona desert wakes up in intensive care a week from now, don't let her remember a thing about her trip to the Grand Canyon.

Earlier that afternoon, Cale found the hiker during a routine patrol of the Bright Angel Trail. He used his radio to call for a ranger-medical to respond, and within a half hour a skilled pilot landed the park helicopter on a patch of flat red rock. I stepped out, grabbed my medical packs, and climbed the slope to the trail where Cale introduced me to a young woman sitting next to a puddle of vomit. The hiker's vacant stare helped me make my diagnosis. To be certain, I held up her empty 1.5-liter canteen and asked her how many of these she had drunk that day.

"Six," she said, "maybe seven."

Nearly two gallons of water consumed in five hours. This explains why, by the time we landed on the canyon's South Rim, Cale and I were sitting on the hiker to keep her from jumping out of the rescue helicopter. "Let me out of here," she had screamed at

us. “I need to pee!”

Hydrate or die. This is never more true than when trekking in the Grand Canyon. But an overzealous effort to stay hydrated on a desert hike can also kill you. Too much water consumed too quickly can dilute your blood to the point that your sodium level drops to a critical level. Excess water in your diluted blood moves across membranes to places more salty. The brain is as good a place as any for this fluid to go—but there is only so much water the brain will accept without complaining. Not everyone with hyponatremia (also known as low blood sodium or water intoxication) goes nympho or tries to jump out of flying helicopters. Some become comatose and die. Some go into seizures. Some turn into fountains of vomit. Some see a kaleidoscope of angels. Some try to drink their flashlights. One bit a rescue volunteer so hard he drew blood. That’s your brain on a water overdose—swollen and soggy and making you do things normally reserved for bad acid trips.

Once our sick hiker was medically stabilized and on her way to the Flagstaff ICU, Cale and I drove the ambulance back to the rescue cache for supplies. On the way, my new employee hounded me with newbie questions. If he encounters another psychotic man hurling rocks at hikers, should he arrest him, write him a ticket, or ask him to stop? Can he put in for overtime pay if he misses his unpaid lunch hour for five days straight? Were the deadly scorpions he shook out of his boots each morning really deadly? How could he prevent the bighorn ram lurking behind Sheep’s Corner from butting him off the trail? And would I please explain, one more time, how you tell the difference between heat cramps, heat exhaustion, heat syncope, heat stroke, dehydration, and hyponatremia?

The last question troubled Cale most of all. Even physicians have difficulty diagnosing a heat illness without the benefit of blood lab results. A few days earlier Cale had concluded that another delirious hiker was hyponatremic and refused to give the man a drink of water when he asked for it. Later, a field blood test showed that Cale’s patient wasn’t water intoxicated—he was dehydrated! What the guy needed most was water, and Cale had withheld it. Everything turned out okay (a more experienced ranger was flown in and gave the man fluids by IV), but Cale continued to beat himself up over it. He felt bad. He felt stupid. He was making so many mistakes.

“We all feel that way when we first start out.” I told him. “It gets better with time. I promise.”

* * *

Ten years earlier, in the spring of 1987, I strapped on a gun belt and placed a “Smokey Bear Stetson” on my head for the first time. (Although NPS uniform hats are now made by Stratton, rangers still call their hats “Stetsons” for the first company that made them.) After obtaining my Forestry degree in my home state of Tennessee, I worked at Cape Hatteras National Seashore. At the time, I had felt like a young ranger with too much responsibility, prematurely kicked out of the nest by a harried supervisor. Ten years later I was the distracted district ranger at the Grand Canyon who, as my superior had done a decade earlier, had to apologize for my failure to orient my employee properly to the complexities of his new job. I claimed the latest chain of events as my excuse. My district was the busiest (in numbers of search and

rescue missions) backcountry area in the nation. Last summer had been the deadliest hiking season in the park's history. The staff had yet to recover from the aftermath of so many fatalities, and the emergencies kept coming, leaving us little time for educating the park visitor and protecting the natural resource. As I recently explained to a reporter, "People come to the Grand Canyon and die; we clean up the mess."

My superiors were less than thrilled with the picture my public comment painted, but they knew we could not afford a repeat of last year's carnage. They developed a creative financing strategy that afforded me some additional funding to do my part in implementing a new program to prevent heat-related deaths in the Grand Canyon. I used a portion of this budget to hire Cale Shaffer. To stretch those funds even further, I asked Cale to assist me in coordinating the activities of a volunteer rescue team. This so-called volunteer rescue team was composed of a raggedy bunch of juvenile delinquents, otherwise known as "hoods in the woods."

Despite the high hopes we had for our new hiker-safety program, the year was off to a grim start. In March a private plane crashed while flying in a blizzard over the canyon's North Rim. After two weeks of searching the snowy forests by air and land, a cadaver dog found the female victim. When I reviewed the report, I noted that Cale Shaffer had photographed the accident site and assisted with the recovery of the remains. The senior ranger at the scene told me that the force of the crash had "augered" the victim's torso into the snow.

God Almighty! Cale seemed much too young to be unscrewing human body parts out of snowbanks. He had been a ranger less than a week. What was I thinking when I allowed him to go on that assignment? Shouldn't a district ranger protect her youngest employee from such atrocities?

By the end of my impromptu employee counseling session, the post-sunset rush hour out of the park had come and gone. I dropped Cale off at the shack he shared with another ranger and a wildland firefighter. Then I went home, ate dinner, and prayed that the phone didn't ring. When I finally made it to bed, I couldn't sleep. Awake, I considered the consequences of exhausted rangers responding to increasingly hazardous missions. I conducted a risk-versus-benefit analysis of my using disadvantaged youth to patrol a dangerous trail. I mentally reshuffled the paperwork piling up on my desk. I outlined strategies for keeping the strained relationship I had with my supervisor from deteriorating any further. I picked apart all the rescue operations that went poorly: the children who died on the trail; the people who drowned; the people who fell to their death before we could get a rope to them; the missing hikers we never found. I beat myself up over it. I felt bad. I felt stupid. I was making so many mistakes.

The following night, my neighbor, ranger Chris Fors, walked across the street with a six-pack under his arm. Sitting at my kitchen table, we proceeded to test how many beers it would take to drown our discontent. Chris and I were both in our early thirties. We both started at seashore parks back east before traveling thousands of miles from our friends and families to work out west. At first we had loved being park rangers, but now something felt horribly out of whack. Death haunted us, the Grand Canyon scared us, park managers disappointed us, and our careers were not following the script.

Today Chris Fors would agree: My promise to Cale Shaffer was a lie. Life for a park

ranger in a big park did not get better with time. It just got different. But for me to acknowledge this truth required less beer and more years of sober reflection. And at the Grand Canyon, meditative retreats on mountaintops were a luxury our jobs did not allow.

2

PLOVER PATROL



On his first day working for Cape Cod National Seashore, the district ranger issued Chris Fors his gear—a black plastic briefcase, a metal clipboard, a ticket book, a box of bullets, and a revolver. The gun, a hand-me-down from the FBI, was an old .38 Smith and Wesson six-shooter. It was a cool pistol, though. It looked like an antique.

After showing his new employee around the office, it was time for a lunch break. The boss suggested that Chris try a local diner in the nearby community of Provincetown, Massachusetts. Chris Fors had a deeply masculine voice and his Yankee accent was quite strong, but to an original Cape Coddler, even a born-and-bred New Englander like Chris would always be an outsider.

When the young ranger entered the diner and ordered his food, the locals in the place didn't pay much attention to him. He wasn't wearing a uniform, and with his Scandinavian skin, short blond hair, wire-rim glasses, and young face, he looked like a tourist. Just another college kid sitting alone at a table, eating his fried clam strips. A pair of salty Cape Codders slid into the booth in front of him. The men appeared to be on their lunch break from the dock or the cannery. Chris could overhear their conversation. They were bitching about the ranger's new employer, the National Park Service.

A sixty-mile peninsula of gravel and sand that reaches out into the Atlantic like a beckoning finger, Cape Cod is one of the longest expanses of uninterrupted sandy shoreline on the East Coast. It is also one of the few remaining nesting habitats for the piping plover, a bird named for its whistling song—a plaintive *peep-lo, peep-lo*—that, like the Hank Williams whippoorwill, sounds as though the bird is calling for a long lost lover. Weighing less than a cup of coffee and covered with feathers the same smoky beige as dry sand, the piping plover has a black ring around its neck. A black band across its forehead connects two disproportionately large eyes. Thumb through the *Peterson Field Guide to Birds of North America* and you will see that the piping plover (*Charadrius melodus*) is not the most beautiful bird in the book, but it is certainly one of the cutest. It is a teddy bear among North American shorebirds, and we almost lost it forever, twice.

The first time was in the years before 1918, when fashion called for real bird feathers in women's hats. After the Migratory Bird Treaty Act passed in 1918, plover populations rebounded until the boom years following World War II. The Migratory Bird Treaty protected birds from plumage hunters; it did not, however, protect them from cars and condominiums. Threatened once again, the piping plover became an endangered species in 1986. By 1988 the Cape Cod population had dwindled to thirteen breeding pairs.

Plovers build their nests out of nothing more than dimples in the sand. Sometimes the birds decorate their nests with sea-polished rocks and shiny fragments of seashells

before the female lays four mottled eggs. The sandy color camouflages these eggs from predators, such as foxes and seagulls, but it also contributes to the eggs being crushed by shoes and off-road vehicle (ORV) tires. Chris Fors arrived at Cape Cod in May 1989. The summer nesting season for piping plovers had begun, and the park superintendent had ordered the closure of several beaches to ORVs. These closures turned the piping plover into the spotted owl of the East Coast.

As he ate his lunch in that Provincetown diner, Chris eavesdropped on the angry locals. The men were working themselves into a fury, complaining about park policies and verbally burning the little piping plover in effigy. "Let's go on an egg-stomping hunt," one man said. "No," said the other, "let's take a shotgun and blow a bunch of the little bastards to bits."

Then one of them suggested something so radical the young ranger nearly choked on a french fry.

"Why don't we torch the ranger station?"

"Yeah," the other one agreed, "like those guys did in Tennessee!" Recently, in response to another unpopular park policy in another national park, some locals in Tennessee had burned down an entrance station in the Great Smoky Mountains. The men had seen it in the paper. It sounded like something they should do too.

This conversation put Chris Fors on high alert. The men left the restaurant and climbed into a couple of rusty pickup trucks. When Chris rushed to write down the license plate numbers, he didn't have a pen on him!

Chris returned to the ranger station and showed his new boss a napkin with license plate numbers written by a finger dipped in ketchup ink. The district ranger was astonished. The new kid had turned up quite a doozy. On his first day! Before he even had a uniform! What a shit magnet!

The incensed locals ended up being more talk than action, or perhaps they noticed that the federal government had them under surveillance. In any case, they didn't torch any government buildings. They didn't blow any "little bastards" to bits. However, these men were far from the last confrontational locals threatening violence that Chris would encounter.

* * *

As a boy, Chris Fors did not want to be a park ranger; he wanted to be a fireman. Whenever the sirens came through his neighborhood, he ran out of the house, jumped on his bike, and pedaled like mad to the end of the street. Watching the fire trucks go by, Chris felt a little jolt of adrenaline. It felt good. It was a comforting distraction from the arguing and drinking going on at home. One summer, when Chris was ten, his dad loaded him and his two sisters into the car and they headed west for the Great American National Park Vacation. When he recalled the trip many years later, what remained foremost in his mind, other than the fact that Mom had stayed home, was the tragic event at Yellowstone. He had left his Matchbox cars, his entire collection, under a lodgepole pine at their last campsite. But by the time Chris remembered his forgotten toys, Dad was well on his way to the next park on the list. It was too late to turn back.

The vacation felt odd and sad. Dad kept an open can of beer between his legs as he drove, and whenever a cop came up in the rearview mirror, he asked Chris to hide the

beer for him. On their way to see the Grand Canyon, they stopped in Las Vegas for the night and got a hotel room. Chris and his sisters watched television while Dad went out. The next morning their father announced that the vacation would be cut short. They had spent all their vacation money. On their way back to Massachusetts, they took a short side trip to see the Grand Canyon.

Chris's first view of the seventh natural wonder of the world made little impact on his young mind. He was ten years old. Old enough to know that something was wrong with a dad who drinks all the time. Old enough to be depressed about his parents' impending divorce. Young enough to be even more depressed about the toys he'd left behind in Yellowstone National Park. In light of all this, the Grand Canyon was just another big empty hole in the ground.

When Chris was sixteen he volunteered as an "on-call" probationary firefighter. At nineteen he became an emergency medical technician (EMT). He paid his way through college by working as an emergency dispatcher and an ambulance driver. An exceptional artistic talent earned him a spot in a landscape architecture program at a prestigious school in Rhode Island. While his classmates designed entryways to shopping malls and lawyers' offices, Chris drew up plans for fire stations and fire engines. It took less than a year to see that a career in landscape architecture would be long on salary but short on adrenaline. He dropped out of the design school and enrolled in the Natural Resources program at the University of Massachusetts.

It wasn't easy to decide what to be. A fireman? An EMT? A cop? How about a game warden? The times his father had taken him hunting and fishing were islands of good family memories in a stormy sea. Chris was already leaning toward the profession of game warden when a friend told him about a park ranger course they were offering at UMass. If you took the ranger class, you could apply for a summer job at Cape Cod National Seashore. Park rangers were cops, firemen, EMTs, *and* game wardens! You could be a park ranger and do it all! All of the fun stuff in one job. For one paycheck. Neat!

* * *

Public nudity at Cape Cod was a cocklebur in the briefs of the superintendent. And he passed this minor, yet ever-present, irritation onto his rangers. "This particular freedom—there's nothing like it," one nudist told a reporter for the *Provincetown Banner*. "It's not a sexual thing; it's a spiritual nature-loving thing." The Park Service, however, remained unsympathetic to the close-to-nature attributes of nude sunbathing. Unofficial clothing-optional beaches resulted in public spectacles. Looky-loos bottlenecked traffic on the highways. Some people were trampling fragile plants by running up to the tops of sand dunes for a better view. Rangers were told to use "the lowest level action necessary to ensure compliance." This was code for enforce the law, but don't write any tickets—and for God's sake, be sure to "remove your sunglasses and smile when you talk to these people."

Sure, okay, Chris thought; getting out of his patrol car to talk to topless women was fine by him. But there were times he wondered if things had gotten out of hand. Especially when he had to approach families carrying lawn chairs, beach towels, and seahorse float rings, pull the male adult aside, and say something like, "I'm sorry sir,

but I don't recommend this beach."

"What do you mean?" The tourist wanted to know. "This beach looks fine to me."

"There are all kinds of beaches here at Cape Cod National Seashore. There's the topless beach and there's the full frontal beach, the straight beach, the lesbian beach, and the gay beach. Did you see all the cars parked on the side of the highway? Well, those are the people who came to see the scenery. No, not the natural scenery—the au naturel scenery, if you know what I mean. And I'm afraid some of those people aren't the type you want within two miles of your wife and kids. I suggest you drive over to . . ."

"But we've walked all this way, with all this stuff."

"Uh, but this beach is where, uh, the homosexuals, they, uh."

"Look, ranger, I don't have anything against homosexuals."

"But sir, these guys call themselves 'The Dune Bunnies.' See those sand dunes there? They climb to the top of the highest dune, strip down, and get it on right there in the open, in broad daylight. It's quite the free sex show, let me tell ya."

"Here? In the park?" The tourist couldn't fathom what the twenty-two-year-old park ranger was telling him.

Lewdness was not a rare thing at Cape Cod. Chris participated in a few undercover sting operations where young male rangers posed as homosexuals in an attempt to put a stop to the exhibitionist sexual trysts taking place along a park nature trail through a charming grove of trees rangers called the "Enchanted Forest." The rangers took a lot of heat for their "overzealous law enforcement." Even sexual adventurers don't like being busted. Nor do nudists, topless women, or losers who drive all the way from Canada to hide in the bushes and spy on sunbathers.

Some days Cape Cod rangers used all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) to patrol the sand roads that remained open even when the beaches were closed to motorized traffic. During such ATV patrols, Chris Fors stayed busy with keeping Jeeps out of the plover nesting areas, dogs on leashes, and bathing suits on bodies.

One hot July day, Chris stopped his ATV at a point where he could see between two dunes to the beach. On the sand was a woman he had warned earlier for topless sunbathing. The woman had put her top on as he had asked, but as most people did, she had removed it again as soon as the ranger left. Now she was topless again, lying on her stomach, and a man was standing above her. It looked strange. Something was wrong about it, but Chris couldn't tell what. Until he saw the jerking motions.

He must have appreciated the poetic justice and the craziness of it all. Because on that day in July, when Chris saw the pervert masturbating above the oblivious topless sunbather, the ranger knew he was going to make his first arrest. A righteous arrest. An arrest the superintendent had to agree with, and one the chief ranger couldn't second-guess. A man was committing a flagrant act of open and gross lewdness in front of a defenseless woman. Here? In the park? Not on his watch! Chris cranked down on the accelerator of his ATV. He couldn't wait to bust that perverted freak.

As soon as the perverted freak saw the ranger, he zipped it up and sprinted for the bushes. Chris caught and cuffed the guy, and when the sunbather figured out what had nearly happened, she ran up to her hero and said, "Thank you, trooper!"

Standing next to the bikini-clad lady, Chris felt great, like a good guy. Still, did she have to call him a trooper? Couldn't she see the patches on his ball cap and on his

sleeve, the brown arrowhead-shaped fabric with the bison and the sequoia tree and the snowcapped mountains under the words “National Park Service”? Was it really that difficult to figure out? Wasn’t it obvious? He didn’t work for the state. He wasn’t a trooper. He wasn’t a police officer, and he wasn’t a forest ranger, either. There are national forests, and there are national parks. Cape Cod National Seashore was a national park. He was a park ranger. If she was going to call him a hero, was it too much to ask that she give credit where credit was due?

“I’m a park ranger, ma’am.”

“Oh, yeah, right. Ranger, trooper, whatever,” she said. “Thank God you showed up when you did!”

After a week of saving topless damsels from drooling perverts and protecting cuddly critters from ignorant brutes, the time came when Chris and a few other Cape Cod rangers felt as though they deserved a night on the town. They got off work and went home and showered for the second time that day. Then they put on their best shirts and their cleanest jeans and headed out to a local bar. Hey, maybe some girls would be there. Pretty girls who would like to meet some park rangers. But once the rangers entered the club, it was obvious they were not welcome by some of the locals.

“Here come the pine pigs,” murmured someone at the end of the bar. Then the lead singer of the Provincetown Jug Band, a town favorite, grabbed the microphone and announced the arrival of the “Tits and Ass Plover Patrol.” Laughter filled the dark room. Chris smiled and tipped his beer bottle to the band. It was funny. Still, he wished they would hurry up and start singing the next song. But the crowd loved the joke, so the band milked it until it was dry.

Four months on the Tits and Ass Plover Patrol and Chris began to feel a peculiar pull. Yellowstone. Yosemite. The Grand Canyon. The big parks. The “Crown Jewel” parks. The parks symbolized by the arrowhead patch he wore on his sleeve. The parks with bigger animals to protect, bigger scenery to guard, and bigger bad guys to bust. Sure, Cape Cod was cool. But a ranger born in the east longed to be out west where the national park idea began—in the wildest, rockiest, most majestic landscapes of western North America.

Back then if you told Chris Fors that, after living and working in a big park in western North America, a park ranger would suffer from paranoia, anxiety attacks, and nightmares—gruesome dreams that would wake him up screaming and grasping at his sheets—the twenty-two-year-old New Englander would have called you a loon.