

Forest ranger – not a job for the weak, timid



Seasonal forest rangers do a variety of work, including clearing the Pacific Crest Trail. Photo/Provided

By Susan Wood

Being a seasonal ranger is no walk in the woods. It often

involves hard physical labor.

U.S. Forest Service ranger is a coveted job, after all people apply by the thousands; a process that starts in January. The program runs from May to October.

While starting to inquire about the seasonal ranger program, longtime Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit forester extraordinaire Don Lane asked this reporter, “Have you seen the movie ‘Walk in the Woods’?”

“Why, yes, I have,” adding the proverbial: “The book (by Bill Bryson) was better.”

What Lane was getting at is that perhaps his latest ranger recruits may want to see the film to get a glimpse of living in the wilderness and how some people behave.



For ranger Miranda LeConte, interacting with people is her favorite part of the job. Photo/Provided

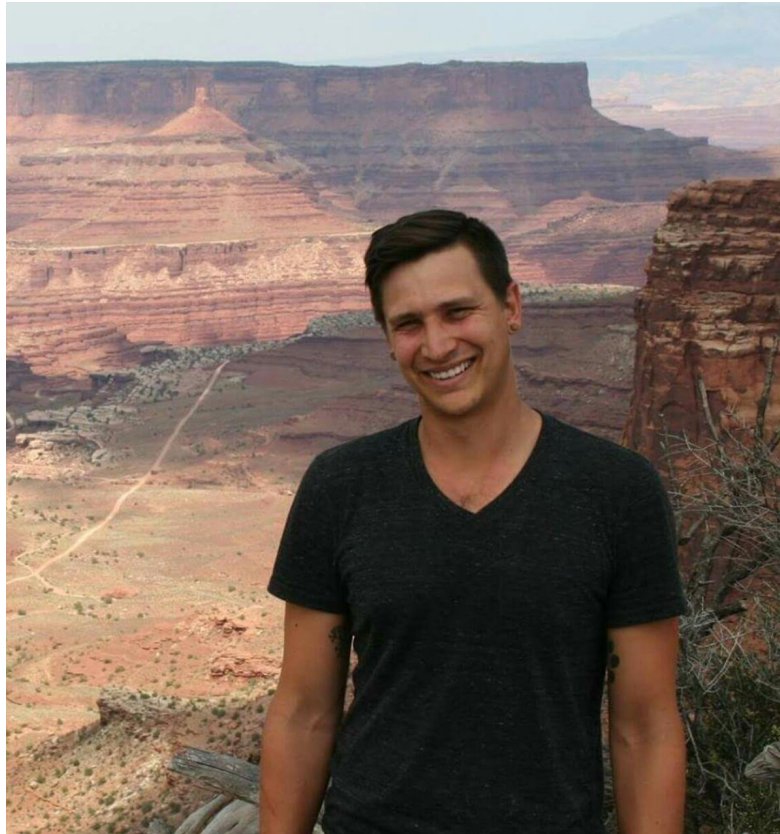
There are 18 rangers – two general foresters, nine Taylor

Creek interpretive personnel and seven staffers in the wildland program. As the supervisory recreation forester, Lane takes the responsibility of nurturing the newbies seriously. There's pride in that uniform, and it shows – even after 45 years with LTBMU.

“I have a responsibility to them. You have to inspire them, to motivate them and tell them the responsibilities. Once you put that badge on, people will react to it,” said the iconoclastic ranger to Lake Tahoe, who started with LTBMU before computers were installed. He recalled “the old days” when hiring recruits meant going through stacks of written applications – all diverse individuals with varied backgrounds and dreams.

What needed to be stressed is that the innate challenge to the seasonal work is staying committed. The schedule involves four 10-hour days a week.

With 5.7 million visitors descending on the jewel of the Sierra Nevada, the rangers are outnumbered in the Desolation Wilderness by one employee to 11,000 guests.



Brian Homberger, a native of Australia, is spending his summer as a ranger in Tahoe. Photo/Provided

“It’s not what you do that’s necessary. It’s what you can contribute,” Lane told *Lake Tahoe News*. “This is a dedicated team of professionals. It’s a privilege to work with these rangers who want to live in the wilderness.”

The seasonal rangers have a multitude of duties, from trail or facility maintenance to working in interpretation at the Taylor Creek Visitors Center on the outskirts of Camp Richardson.

Lake Tahoe News was given the opportunity to speak with the four new seasonal rangers and their supervisor Chris Engelhardt, the wildland recreation area manager, on the day before National Trails Day about their moment of discovery when they decided to be a ranger.

“What I realized was wild with a big ‘W’ was not like any place on Earth. I was consumed. Once I learned about it, I

took on the responsibility to take care of it,” Miranda LeConte said.



Chris Engelhardt, left, supervises the seasonal rangers in LTBMU. Photo/Provided

LeConte recalled working in 2013 at the Eldorado National Forest visitor center when she had the opportunity to take a day hike to a lake in the Desolation Wilderness.

“Once I put my feet in the water, it started for me,” she said.

From there, her calling resembled poetry in motion.

At age 23, the Camino resident studies environmental management in the winter. In summer, she’s a first time LTBMU ranger now going through an extensive training regimen. The training has recently involved going out in the woods and meeting up with people – her favorite part of the job.

“From those experiences, I can talk to the public and make contact, seeing why people choose to go into the wilderness,” she said.



This is Sam Yarbrough's first season as a ranger.
Photo/Provided

There lies a delicate balance. An appreciation and respect may develop between backcountry enthusiasts, but at the same time, a challenge may arise if someone is wary of authority. Consequently, the job requires support of hikers and backpackers, but may also involve telling them they're doing something wrong – whether consciously or unconsciously.

Inevitably, a kinship is created between the rangers. LeConte commended and thanked her buddy and fellow ranger Shannon Maguire for helping her use a crosscut saw to do trail maintenance.

"I never used one before. But Shannon taught me. She was good and stressed safety," she said.

It's not the first time Maguire has stepped up to the plate.

At age 35, it's her eighth season as a returning seasonal ranger. In the winter, she works in ski patrol for Sierra-at-Tahoe. Last year, she was awarded employee of the year. She likes how her summer gig involves diversity of tasks.

"My favorite part is that it changes every year, and every day

could be different,” she said. “One day you could be doing trail maintenance and another day campground cleanup.”

She also enjoys talking to people in the wilderness and maybe catching them early if they’re not prepared. These circumstances have occurred this year with the substantial snowpack. For instance, the Bay View Trail still has substantial snow and one of the streams to Velma Lakes is so high hikers can’t get across it.



Shannon Maguire has specialized training to fight fires. Photo/Provided

Maguire, who’s originally from Albuquerque, has gained quite a repertoire of skills in the mountains. She and Engelhardt hold “a red card,” which makes them fully trained in firefighting

techniques – a valuable skill to possess in the ever-so challenging fire seasons in the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range.

All recruits are expected to be eyes and ears in reporting fires and carry a Forest Service radio as well as a map and compass to be able to figure out coordinates. Maguire and Engelhardt may completely suit up with fire gear that includes the heavy shelter kits.

It's Sam Yarbrough's first season as a seasonal ranger. At age 26, she attended college in Colorado and now hopes to live in the woods to develop an even greater appreciation of it. She hopes the people she encounters will too.

"I'm encouraged to inspire us to protect the regional wilderness, and I want to explore as much as I can," she said.

As the fourth recruit, Brian Homberger came the farthest on his journey as a Lake Tahoe seasonal ranger. The 26-year-old hails from Melbourne, Australia, scoring a Tallac site cabin where seven people divvy up four rooms.

It's all a part of the job for Homberger, who loves to get down and dirty with his field of study. He hopes to apply what he gains in this ranger experience with a degree in biology and discipline in restoration ecology. In the winter, he works in a native plant nursery.

What Homberger has experienced in plants, Engelhardt, 39, has picked up on in the wildlife – listing the grouse and small rubber boa constrictor as the most unique sightings he's made in the Desolation Wilderness.

In tune to John Muir, Engelhardt considers all the rangers as naturalists – especially when it comes to the pristine nature of the Desolation.

He cited a water quality survey conducted there in 2011, and every lake showed no sign of giardia – a parasite associated

with contaminated drinking water that causes intestinal infections.

No wonder all the rangers expressed the mission of harboring the greater good of their jobs.

“We become experts on wilderness values. We’re not just hiking the trails with shovels,” Engelhardt said.