

# Rangers' jobs tough, but rewarding

■ Work combines educating the public about nature with enforcing hunting, fishing and camping rules

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JORDAN LAKE — Yogi Bear never drove a truck around Jellystone Park in the wrong travel lane with an AR-15 assault rifle on the floorboards, and Ranger Smith never had to take away two cases of beer from a large crowd of drunk U.S. Marines who weren't happy about the \$100-plus tickets they got after their beer was confiscated.

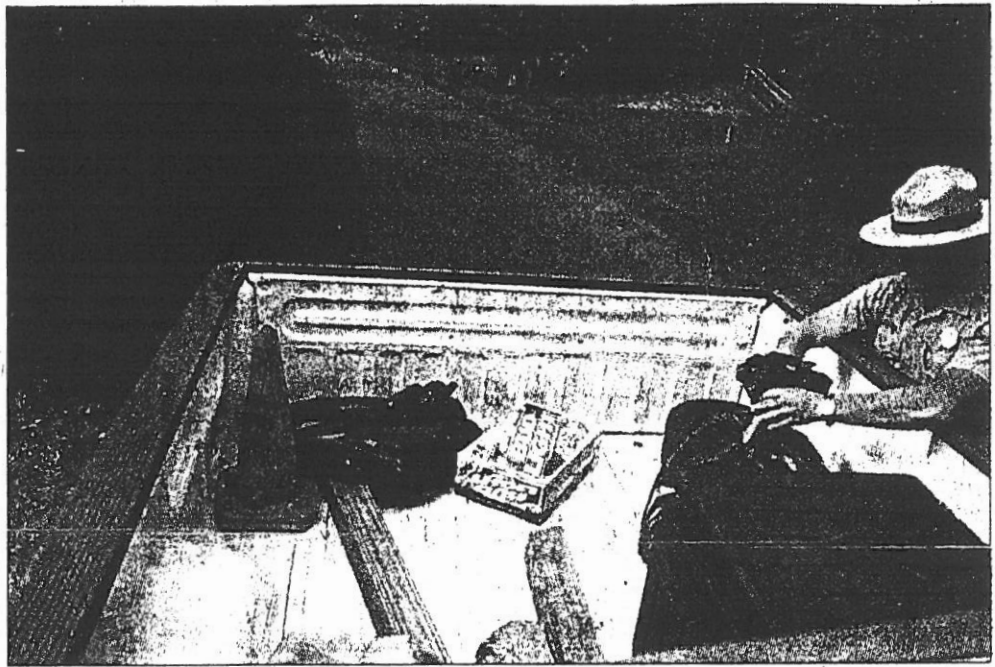
But it is the stereotype of the bumbling cartoon ranger the state rangers at Jordan Lake say they must fight every day as they educate the public about the natural beauty at the lake while enforcing laws pertaining to traffic, hunting, fishing, boating and camping.

In fact, few if any law enforcement agencies have more jurisdiction and more laws to enforce than state rangers. Yet few state enforcement agencies have a lower entry level salary than a ranger.

A starting marine fisheries employee



Rangers were forced to shoot a raccoon that was acting strangely around campers.



HERALD PHOTO — JOSH DOOLEY

Among the tasks of a ranger at Jordan Lake is removing confiscated alcohol from campers who either don't know the rules or ignore them.

can expect to make about \$26,000 per year. An entry level ranger can expect to make about \$6,000 less, despite the fact the ranger has many more duties than his counterpart at marine fisheries, according to Bill Totten, a superintendent at Jordan Lake.

"We don't begrudge the other departments their pay, we just point the pay disparity out to show that there is a problem and that's why we have such a high turnover rate," Totten said.

Those rangers who do stay credit a love for the job, for the park and a desire to educate as their reasons. Talk to a ranger about the job and he'll spend about two minutes telling you the pay is lousy and two hours telling you the job is great.

Mark Flaughner is one such ranger. Flaughner's been a ranger for more than a decade. When he first started, he described himself as being "gung-ho" and a little too aggressive. But time in the job has provided Flaughner with perspective and wisdom.

"Our primary goal is to achieve maximum compliance with minimum enforcement," Flaughner said.

That means when faced with minor violations, rangers will usually give a warning to people breaking a rule. Serious

infractions such as weapons or drugs always lead to an arrest. But for infractions such as speeding or loud music, rangers may first issue a verbal warning. Sometimes, they'll even give a second warning.

If a problem persists, a camper can not only expect to get a ticket, they may very well be forced to leave, without a refund. Some campers who are ticketed get angry and leave on their own, despite being told by rangers they are welcome to stay if they abide by the rules.

As Flaughner drives slowly around Loop B in the Poplar Springs campground, his radio crackles to life. A red truck towing a boat sped past the ticket booth, according to the booth attendant, who said a the truck had no ticket showing the owner had paid to get in.

A campground host radios to Flaughner, informing him the truck has parked at site 36 in Loop B.

Earlier, Flaughner commented on the site as he drove by, saying the tent had been up since Thursday with no one around.

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## Rangers

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"People will come on Thursday and set up camp, then go back home, spend the night there, go to work on Friday and then come here after work. They come a day early to get the best campsite. But it ties that site up Thursday night when they have no intention of staying there. That's not allowed," Flaughner said.

When he swings by the site, a couple is there, just beginning to unload their red truck. Flaughner steps and speaks with the couple. The woman wags her finger at the man as the ranger tells the man to watch his speed in the park.

Then Flaughner informs them that setting up camp but not staying there is against the rules and could prevent them from being able to reserve a site in the future. The man pleads ignorance of the rule, which Flaughner repeats before wishing them a nice stay and stepping back to his truck.

"You can pretty much tell when they haven't spent the night. I've told him it's against the rules and that if he does it again..." Flaughner said.

He puts the truck in gear and it only rolls about a hundred yards before he stops.

"There was a beer sitting on the picnic table at that site back there, just plain as day," Flaughner says as he puts the truck in reverse.

Flaughner takes his time getting out of the truck, adjusting his hat until it sits just the way he likes it. He shuffles a few papers, adjusts his glasses. He's stalling. The woman at the campsite, in question bustles about as a child plays in the woods and her husband fiddles with their boat moored just below the site.

"I like to give them a little time to see if they try to hide the alcohol. If they do, you know they know it's against the rules," Flaughner said.

The only thing the camper can

inform the ranger they had seen the raccoon earlier.

Drummond calls for Ranger Jody Kelly on the radio as he tracks the animal. Drummond notices the animal is limping and appears to have a broken hind leg. The animal doesn't like being followed by a ranger and a reporter and climbs a tree.

Kelly arrives and the two rangers discuss the possibility of the animal being rabid. After reviewing its behavior and its injury, the rangers decide it is hurt and not rabid. The campers are told to call 911 if the animal appears again.

Drummond heads off to the boat ramp, where he plans to help a man who is slowly taking down his sailboat — too slowly, as the park is closed and Drummond can't shut the gate until the man leaves. But Drummond's radio crackles to life; the raccoon is back.

About 10 campers were gathered at their picnic table when the animal walked right up and sat underneath the table, a clear sign something is seriously wrong with the animal. Drummond and Kelly arrive and spot the animal, which eventually climbs another tree.

The rangers have a quick discussion and realize they must kill the animal. A third ranger brings a shotgun and as Kelly lights the animal with a flashlight, Drummond shoots the raccoon, killing it quickly.

"We try to trap animals and relocate them when we can, but this raccoon was not a good candidate. Raccoons are not endangered and there's certainly no shortage of them here. It showed no fear of people and there are children and pets around here," Drummond says.

Drummond is able to close Vista Point and head back to the ranger station, where other rangers are gathering before the final campground patrol of the night.

Grant Gibson is one of the rangers who heads out on patrol.



do to make her situation worse is to lie. All the rangers hate it when they are lied to, especially when they watch someone hide contraband.

The woman goes about her business and greets Flaughner in the same friendly manner he greets her. He explains the alcohol ban and reminds her there are signs throughout the park informing campers of the ban.

She pleads ignorance. Flaughner tells her to pour out the open beer and then tells her he will have to take the rest, almost two cases. She complies in polite fashion and Flaughner opts not to ticket her.

"They probably knew it wasn't allowed but she didn't try to hide it and she was cooperative so I didn't write her a ticket. But with that much beer there, we would have been back tonight and seizing it then would have been much more difficult. They wouldn't have been as cooperative because they would likely have been intoxicated," Flaughner said.

The radio crackles to life just as Flaughner gets back in the truck. Ranger Dan Stamm is asking for an alcohol sensor to be brought to a Crosswinds Campground site where he's talking with several campers, one of whom was driving a truck with an open container.

Flaughner and ranger Mark Smith respond to Stamm's call for assistance. There are seven adults at the site and they are not happy about losing their alcohol after just arriving. The driver of the truck is given a ticket and the group's alcohol is seized.

Angry, the group stops the unloading process and loads their equipment again, deciding to leave. They tell the rangers they'll never camp at the lake again. The rangers have heard this pronouncement before. They tell the campers they are welcome to stay if they follow the rules. The rangers tell them they are welcome to come back, if they follow the rules.

The campers look like they will not take advantage of the ranger's invitation, heartfelt though it is.

"We're not here to spoil anyone's good time. We're here to make sure everyone can have a good time. We want this to be a place where a family can come and parents don't have to worry about their children being exposed to illegal activities," Smith said before climbing back into his truck.

In addition to ticketing people, rangers have other unpleasant duties. On a recent Friday night ranger Dwayne Drummond found himself having to perform one of those duties.

Drummond was patrolling the Vista Point campground when he spotted a raccoon sitting underneath a Ford Explorer. Campers were standing right next to the Ford in broad daylight.

Raccoons are shy, nocturnal creatures. To see one out in the day close to people alerts the ranger to the possibility the animal may be carrying rabies. The campers

rangers who heads out on patrol late Friday night. Gibson's been at the job for several years and has a four-year degree, as do most of the rangers. After checking a few boat ramps, which are deserted, Gibson responds to a ranger's call for assistance at a Crosswinds site, where the ranger has several intoxicated Marines who aren't happy about their alcohol being seized.

As Gibson drives to the site, he sees a motorcyclist watching his truck very closely. Moments before, Totten radioed Smith, telling him to stop two motorcyclists heading out of Crosswinds. Smith is at the gate when the two bikes pull up.

Both attempt to go around the gate. Smith yells for one to stop, putting his hand on the bike as the rider keeps going and heads out. Flaughner has better luck with the second biker, who stops.

Meanwhile, Gibson pulls up, notices the rangers have one biker stopped and quickly realizes the man he just passed is probably the other biker. Gibson turns around and heads back to the main road, quickly spotting and stopping the man, ordering him back to where Flaughner and Smith have the other biker stopped.

Gibson then heads down to the camp site where Totten and Stamm have several Marines seated at their camp site, grumbling as the rangers sort the situation out. It takes more than 90 minutes to write all the tickets. Some of those who were ticketed could be heard cursing.

In the end, no one was arrested, the beer was confiscated and the site was quiet again. It was 1 a.m., two hours past the time the rangers' shift should have ended.

"Those people weren't interested in learning anything; they were here to party. We're not here for them, we're here for the family next to them who can't sleep because these guys are yelling and hollering and blasting their music," a ranger said before climbing into his truck and heading home.