

A day on the trail with a wilderness ranger

By Dylan J. Darling
The Bulletin

BEND (AP) — When Drew Peterson tells people he works as a U.S. Forest Service wilderness ranger, they may assume his job is defined by solitude.

But that is not always the case: On a busy summer day, a wilderness ranger may stop to talk with as many as 300 people, like a recent day patrolling the popular Green Lakes Trail off the Cascade Lakes Highway.

“It can take up to six hours to hike up the trail,” Peterson said. The trail runs about 4-1/2 miles from trailhead to Green Lakes.

Describing what a wilderness ranger is and what exactly he does quickly becomes complex. Peterson, 32, who now primarily patrols wilderness in the Ochoco National Forest but occasionally helps in the Deschutes National Forest, said the work combines about a dozen jobs, including customer service, trail maintenance and rule enforcement.

Peterson’s job is to make sure people are doing the right thing.

The current form of the program, in which wilderness rangers go to wilderness areas around the Deschutes National Forest, started in 2010, said Jason Fisher, who supervises the five rangers in the national forest. Though the title may bring up notions of adventure and exploration, often the work focuses on educating people about what they should and should not be doing.

“It’s not what a lot of people expect,” he said.

Wilderness rangers also venture to remote national forest corners, but Fisher said they focus on areas with high use. In the Deschutes National Forest, that includes Moraine Lake, the South Sister climbing trail and the Green Lakes Trail.

“If it has the most use, it has the most impacts from people,” he said.

Along the Green Lakes Trail, Peterson encounters

people in the wilderness for various reasons, such as hiking, backpacking, running or horseback riding. How he starts his spiel depends on who he’s talking with, what they are doing and what they have with them.

Conversation starters include where people are coming from, where they are going and whether they had a campfire, as well as if they have a map with them.

As popular and packed as some of the trails within the city of Bend, the Green Lakes Trail is mainly in the Three Sisters Wilderness. Passing through wilderness requires adhering to federal rules and regulations, which Peterson and other wilderness rangers enforce.

The rules start at the trailhead, where parties of up to 12 people are supposed to fill out a free wilderness pass. One part of the pass, where people plug in data such as where they are going and how long their trip will be, goes into a box at the trailhead. They should then sign and date the other part and bring it with them.

The rules are spelled out on the wilderness permit and take about three minutes to read. Peterson has timed it.

Along the trail, Peterson regularly checks to see if people have their wilderness permit with them. Runners he often lets pass by after getting a thumbs up or thumbs down as to whether they have

a permit.

On the hike up to Green Lakes on a Friday earlier this month, Peterson warned three parties he found in the wilderness without the proper permit, as well as a group backpacking with two dogs off leash. Leashes are required for dogs on the Green Lakes Trail.

Taylor Spike, 37, of Eugene, and his son, Paxton Spike, 6, were among the backpackers Peterson found in the wilderness with the proper permit and following the rules of the trail.

The elder Spike said he did not mind having a ranger checking on visitors.

“There are plenty of people having fires and doing stuff that they should know better,” he said.

Rangers help protect wilderness from potential damage caused by such activities.

“A lot of this could be ruined real quick,” Spike said.

Teri Jansen, 55, of Grants Pass, shared his sentiments.

“It doesn’t take very long to screw up the environment,” she said. Jansen was horseback riding at Green Lakes with her husband, Larry Jansen, 59, and their 12-year-old granddaughter, Shaylee Cooper. The group had their wilderness permit with them.

While he wants people to follow the rules, Peterson says he is not in the wilderness to be a cop. His goals are to educate and communicate with people coming into the woods. Even when giving a

warning he makes it clear that people are not in trouble. He just wants them to know the rules and what they can and cannot do.

“Our No. 1 goal is to help our visitors succeed,” he said.

The presence of wilderness rangers appears to encourage people to follow the rules. Last year, Peterson and other rangers regularly conducted an experiment. They went a couple of summer weekends without going up to Green Lakes and talking to visitors. They spent the rest of the year playing catch-up. Nearly all of the close to 30 campsites in the lake basin had a fire ring to be removed.

Due to heavy use, the Deschutes National Forest does not allow fires at the campsites around Green Lakes. Part of Peterson’s job is to dig up fire rings. Doing so takes about an hour. He said rangers remove the fire rings so they do not encourage other people to have a fire.

Like his conversations with people on the trail, Peterson walks around the campsites at Green Lakes and talks with campers. Before making the rounds, he stops.

“When I get into a lake basin, I like to sit and listen,” Peterson said. “The group that needs the most attention makes the most noise.”

A different kind of job, wilderness rangers work a

different kind of schedule — eight days on, six days off. The long work week gives them time to travel deep into the wilderness, where they may stay for up to a week. Wilderness rangers typically spend one day in the office per eight-day hitch, catching up on paperwork.

In college, Peterson knew he wanted to work outside. From Pennsylvania, he earned a forestry degree from the University of Vermont in 2006. His first job with the Forest Service was as a forester, and he found he wanted more variety to his job, leading him to become a wilderness ranger. He is now in his sixth season.

The wilderness ranger season stretches six months, from April to October.

“It’s kind of the opposite of a teacher schedule,” he said.

Being a wilderness ranger and maintaining a home life takes a patient spouse, which Peterson said he has in Cristina Peterson, also a seasonal worker for the Forest Service. His time away from home during the summer is balanced by months off, when he and his wife travel the country and rock climb.

Smiling between each conversation on the trail, Peterson enjoys being a wilderness ranger.

“It’s a full lifestyle that you have to embrace,” he said.

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