

Tracy Minton – *Interview was conducted in the staff break room at Elk Knob State Park, by Willard Watson and Ashley Warren.*

Q1 – Who are you, When and where were you born?

My name is Tracy Minton; I am the Park Superintendent at Elk Knob State Park. I was born in North Wilkesboro, North Carolina in 1971, October 14. I grew up close to Stone Mountain State Park, and the Blue Ridge Parkway, more specifically Daughton Park, in a small place called Hayes, North Carolina. I consider myself a Southern Appalachian person, I'm very proud of that. People speak differently there, they look at things a little different there, do things a little differently there than other people in the country in my opinion and I'm pretty proud of that.

Q2 – What did your parents do for a living? Did you contribute to the family income or help parents in their work in any way?

My Dad worked in an auto parts store in Wilkesboro; it was called Wilkes Motor Supply. So I have some fond memories of growing up and him taking me to work with him. He would take me across the street and we had like one chain restaurant in the entire town and he would take me there during my lunch and he would pretend that I was working with him that day. He would sit me down next to him. Later in life he got a job at a textile mill - which textiles used to be big in North Carolina. He worked at a place called Chatham Mills for many years in a place called Elkin, North Carolina.

More importantly when he was a kid he grew up on a livestock farm, so he was working with chickens and pigs and things of that nature and he learned a really strong work ethic. And

he wanted to play sports when he was a kid but he wasn't allowed to by his father. His father went to work in a mill when he was really young, like a teenager, his father was injured in an accident at the sawmill that they all worked at and the family owned and he had to work at as a young man. So he raised my father really strict and he wasn't allowed to do many things other than work, there wasn't time for that.

My mother, she worked at a place that also worked in textiles called Key City Furniture, of course they worked on the furniture end of that. She was also a full time mother so she quit work to take care of myself and my brother until we were old enough to go to school and then she went back to work. I can remember her getting up at daylight and working to keep the house taken care of and us were taken care of, and we were real mischievous we were always getting in trouble. She raised us real strictly but we still found a way to get around her watchful eye.

I can remember her taking me to church as a young man and barely being old enough to walk, it was a very short distance and I can remember it snowing, and it was pretty deep snow and she grabbed me by the hand and walked me to church, I can remember having to step up with my feet, having to step over the snow to get to church, and then of course we were the only people there other than the preacher, but we still had church and then went back home, so I have some fond memories of that.

Once my grandfather passed away my dad inherited half the farm but he did not have a farm because it was so hard on him growing up that he wanted us to have some other opportunities, so he did not stay in farming and he encouraged us to do other things. We did have to do some work like mowing around the house. We weren't given an allowance; we were

expected to generate our own money. So I would go to our neighbor who had a farm and I would pick berries on his farm or I would go pick blackberries in the wild and I would sell them to him for a very small amount so I would have some spending money. I was able to work in the garden and that type of thing, and of course they didn't pay me anything but it taught me the value of hard work and saving money and fending for myself so those were good experiences.

Q3 – What do you do for a living?

I'm the Park Superintendent at Elk Knob State Park, I've been here at this park for five years and I've been a Park Ranger or Park Superintendent for going on about 19 years, so I have a lot of experience with the Division of Parks and Recreation and I've moved around to several parks in my career, mainly in mountains of North Carolina, which I'm very fond of.

Q4 – Where was the first park you worked at?

I worked at a park in Bladen County, North Carolina called Jones Lake and I was a young man graduated from Appalachian State and I applied for several jobs and after working and being a seasonal employee, I was lucky enough to get a job with Division of Parks and Recreation entry level and worked at a recreation area where there was a lake and a swimming area and that kind of thing - which is completely different from what we do in the mountains. It was a great beginning experience and I met a lot of people from different places, different cultures, and it exposed me to a lot of new things in life. I stayed there about three and a half years and then I went to Lake Norman State Park in the Piedmont and stayed there about two years and then I

made my way into the mountains and I worked at Mount Jefferson State Natural Area I think it was there for about eight years before I came here.

Q5 – How did you decide on this profession?

Recreation was something I knew I wanted to do and I loved to be outdoors of course and growing up that was all we did, I lived on a farm, there was a lake there where we could fish, swim - although we weren't supposed to do that, we would swim in the lake, we would just go out and have a really good time, outdoors, in the woods, in the wild. My brother and I both, we inherited a strong love of the outdoors from our grandfather who we never met, but he was the same way.

We wanted to be outside, we were encouraged to go and we weren't supervised. So we learned some things you do and some things you don't. I remember one time we got lost in the woods, maybe a mile or two from our house and we were less than 10, both of us and I remember we were in the woods so much that we knew to backtrack on the creek and to follow the creek upstream and we would find where we came from, and that's what we did, and I can remember thinking that out, so that was a great thing to know at that age and to be able to go back on. But that love of the outdoors eventually led me to pursue an education in recreation at Appalachian State. Wasn't sure what field I was going to go into and as time went on some doors opened with parks, more specifically the Blue Ridge Parkway, I worked as a seasonal there two different seasons and I had a great mentor with National Parks and she was an Interpretive Ranger and she gave me some advice on how to get a permanent job and she encouraged me to go ahead and pursue that and that's what I did and things just kind of fell in

place for that to happen, I would have worked in other fields, probably but I don't think I would have stayed in them, I think this is what I'm meant to do and best at because I get to tell other people about my experiences in the outdoors and I get to share beautiful places and beautiful special things with other people and I think that is what I was meant to do.

Q6 – How would you say the work has changed since you started?

When I began as a young park ranger, I would come to work and be really excited about doing something new that day. And we did not plan everything we did do, we would come to work and the boss would tell us what we were going to do that day. *If* he didn't have an assignment for us we would get together and decide what needed to be done and then we would go out and do it. Email had been invented, I am not that old, but we were not forced to check it every day. You didn't communicate with the district supervisors or the state supervisors in Raleigh, we did not communicate with them on a daily basis. We had different work assignments and stuff in the field that were based on what our boss wanted or what we thought needed to be done. Daily operations, if we didn't have a space that needed to be maintained like in the winter time, we would go out and find something to do in the woods. So I got to work with endangered species sometimes, we would do controlled burns in the woods to support diversity and wildlife, we really worked by the seat of our pants, we didn't really know what we were doing. That was exciting as a young person to come in and get to do what you wanted to do.

We communicate daily now with the regional supervisors and with Raleigh via email.

Staff at middle-management and upper-management has increased, there's more people there

and we specialize, we didn't have that before. Communication via smartphone or email, now there's social media, that kind of thing, it's a lot easier to communicate over distance and in very short periods of time I can get ahold of my supervisor and get an answer to any question I can think of. Whereas before we were expected to make just decisions, you know, good decisions that promoted the park before. So it is good both ways, it's just its different. As the park supervisor it all comes to me and then I'm supposed to communicate it to my staff, what Raleigh and the region wants us to do. So I have to spend a lot more time in the office, and I have to plan my outdoor work days and I'll plan what we are gonna do and then I'll go out with them. Now they have a little more freedom than me, the rangers are allowed to go out and patrol the grounds a little bit more than me, but I still go outside a lot and everywhere is a beautiful vista that you can see.

Q7 – Describe a typical work day?

A typical work day, I don't know that really is such a thing for a park ranger or a park superintendent, I would say the same thing for our mechanic that works here. You never know when you come in what's going to happen and we live on top of an island. On top of this mountain, the wind can be calm in Boone and the sun's out, you come up here its 20 degrees cooler, it's snowing and the wind is blowing 50 miles an hour or so. We never know if we are inspecting trails, that kind of thing, making sure the park is safe. Also we come in at different times, a typical, I could come in at 8 o' clock (in the morning) and work 'til 5 (p.m.) that's 25 percent of the time, I might come in at 8 (a.m.) and work 'til 9 (p.m.). My days off are kind of crazy, sometimes I'm off on Mondays, Tuesdays, and sometimes I'm off Saturdays and Sundays.

I work a third to half of all holidays, so that can be challenging trying to juggle family time with work, but as a superintendent if I come in from 8 (a.m.) to 5 (p.m.) typically what I am going to do is see if there are any communications from Raleigh, if anyone needs to get a hold of me, if there's anything I need to know about I'm gonna check with them I'm gonna check with my employees who are looking after the park and see if there is anything I need to attend to. Otherwise it's just a routine cleaning of the park, getting it ready for visitors in the morning time.

Then all staff should be working on a project or something they've got going on, on their own or with a partner typically, and then at the end of the day all staff come back in during the afternoon, communicate with me and make sure that nothing is going on that I need to know about or anything we need to face together. And then if everything is alright we get to go home, except for the closer at around 5 o'clock (at night).

Q8 – What type of people do you work with?

Well the staff here, I have a maintenance mechanic, I have two park rangers, I have an office manager, I have three seasonal employees that start in March or April depending on the funding. Some are local, some have moved here from other places. I've got one park ranger that is from Georgia, my office assistant was born in Germany so we have a very diverse staff as far as places we are from.

I meet people from all over the world. I was even able to speak with someone and actually take a couple out on an education program and take them to some of the more remote places in the park, they were from England and they have a friend in this area who requested I

take them on a program in the park since they were from all the way overseas. Usually all you have to do is put a post or some sort of article in the newspaper that explains how much cooler it is here and during the summertime people just come from all over once they get their hands on that information. It's a great place to come and people visit here from all over the world.

Q9 – When do you work?

The work flow increases around April. Even the work flow as far as office work picks up. People that work at the region and in Raleigh are even better able to get outside and to start projects within the park. Not only are the projects that we work on, the maintenance projects, we do trail work, we do a lot of boundary management. Since we are a new park we are always acquiring new land. We actually go out and find it, then we sign it, paint it, and clear it. So that's a lot of work. We are always trying to accomplish the goals that are set by Raleigh and the region and juggle that with tasks that I come up with at the park, that need to be done. We are always working on something different, always juggling another ball.

Q10 – Can you touch on the impact that the weather, the seasons, and being at this elevation puts on your work?

In the winter time things slow down. The ground freezes, people don't really think about that, but once the ground freezes you can't do any maintenance off road, you can't dig a hole, you can't dig in the ground, you can't climb a mountain when it is frozen because you will fall and injure yourself. So we try to take care of administrative duties, training, things like that, that employees still have to do, we try to do a little bit more of that. We try to purchase materials,

stuff like that in the winter time. Usually we try and get ready and usually we'll try to get out doors in March if we get any good weather. I have seen on this mountain when the weather was worst in March and winter would not end until after Easter. So if that happens we just kinda hunker down and bide our time.

In the spring and the summer, we are out working on trails. We work on trails one day a week, mandatory, and then we work on boundary one day a week. Sometimes I work on boundary two days a week to locate properties that we are purchasing and trying to monitor. So our maintenance duties and actual manual labor picks up, and it's pretty hard on park staff, they're hard workers, I couldn't ask for a harder working staff, and they're really pushed. We have our festival, the Headwaters Day Festival, and that's in September and then right after the festival we start picking up visitation for the fall and that pretty much lasts pretty steady through about Christmas. So we're pretty busy outside, and then on the weekends we have people here visiting and we are trying to take care of them, that is what we do on the weekends, we don't do anything else, we take care of the visitors. Make sure the facilities are clean, make sure they have educational opportunities to attend.

Then spring, fall, and summer the things we do are the same, but the weather can be crazy. In the spring, it can rain every day, it can rain for a week straight. In the summer and the fall is the prettiest weather and we are able to get outside more, typically. And your typical day in the summer the high is about 75, 76 degrees on a typical day and it can get into the low 80s, but it is very very rare. Also we can get inversion layers in the spring and in the fall. Where the low temperatures don't even get into freezing, so there will be frost in the valleys and other places but it doesn't get below freezing on the mountain and it is really really nice.

In the winter time we kinda pay for that, but there is something special about the winter time too. The rime ice forms on the mountains and it freezes onto the ridge lines around here and the storm will break and the sun will illuminate all the ridge tops together and it is really really beautiful, and the snow can do the same thing and freeze to the trees, it has a similar look but it's not like the rime ice.

Q11 – What do you do with downtime at work?

If I do have any downtime it is usually in the winter and it is really cold and we can't really do much outside, although there is always something to do inside. I try to get to know my staff a little bit better, I try to set down with them and drink a nice cup of warm coffee, I try to get to know how they are and how their families are. Park work is the people you are around, they are your family too, they sacrifice for this park, they come here when other people are on vacation or on holiday. We are always here and my employees dedicate themselves to the park so we consider each other family.

Q12 – Does your occupation have any special sayings or expressions?

I have no clue how they came about because we have been a division for over 100 years. The one I have heard the most over the years, and I have heard this at every state park I have been to, is welcome to whatever state park you're at, "Welcome to Elk Knob, where every day is a holiday, every day is a picnic," and its always followed by laughter, and people say it sometimes

if they are having a bad day, because nobody knows. If the park staff does their job everyday really is a holiday, every day is a picnic. It's like a tradition to say that, I don't know that I completely understand what it means, but we get to provide those things for other people to enjoy.

I heard somebody else say this and it eventually became true for me, "We get paid in sunsets," and that one is used a little bit less than the other one. I heard it a few times before I moved to Mount Jefferson, and they have a road that goes to the top of the mountain with two scenic overlooks that both provide a sunset view. So I would ride up there every night when I was closing the park, so I really was getting paid to watch sunsets. Occasionally I do take people to the top of Snake Mountain and let them watch the sunset as part of my job, so I really do get paid with sunsets, and I've seen some of the prettiest scenery and sunsets in the nicest places you would ever be able to see. At State Parks, "We're in the forever business." That's one of our old mottos and its true, if you will be doing work that is going to impact future generations you need to look at it that way.

Q13 – What special knowledge, skills, and abilities are needed? What techniques and methods?

That's a big one for any state park employee, it's gonna be kina surprising what you hear me say, we juggle so many different things we are always doing something different, some of the biggest responsibilities that I have: I hold a law enforcement certificate so I have to be able to enforce rules and regulations of the park or the state, I also have to be able to affect an arrest if

I need to, I am a certified first responder, I am also a certified burn boss for the Division of Parks and Recreation, I hold a North Carolina environmental educator's certification, and I'm also a law enforcement physical training instructor for the Division of Parks and Recreation. An employee having that many major certifications and doing that many major things would not be rare for the Division of Parks and Recreation, it's pretty common.

The more experience someone has, the more certifications that they are going to hold. So they do a lot of extra work for the public that the public never sees and they don't get extra money for it, they do it because they want to, and that's what makes us a good division.

Q14 – What are things about your work outsiders would not expect?

Probably I think most people view the job of a park ranger, and they think that we admire nature, we protect it, but we admire it while we protect it, and we do that, it's just so many other things to that and we do it in so many different ways. I always think of a park ranger in this warm fuzzy picture of showing a kid a wildflower, and they're up close together and the ranger has on the straw Smokey hat at they're smelling and looking at the flower and learning what it's called and its purpose in nature, and we do that which is awesome. And there's other ways that we protect it as well. One example is burning, controlled, ecological burns. Some wildflowers are dependent on fire and also some animals are dependent on fire, they need that fire as well because it creates habitats for wildlife as well. A lot of people don't think that they think that we are just there and that we are gonna show you what's here, what we love, and

that you'll love it too, it's not that we don't want to do that, but we want to do that in other ways too.

Q15 – What were originally the most difficult aspects of your job?

I don't know that originally it was very difficult. I think that I started in a job and it was fairly close to what I thought it was going to be. I wasn't really shocked. I kinda jumped right in and it was kinda what I thought it was gonna be, which is rare.

Managing large operations day use areas can be challenging because, you have a lot of people in a small space and they are interacting with each other which can be challenging but I don't think I ran into anything that I hadn't already done before in tourism or recreation. Later on through your career you know you have ups and downs like any other job or career and your morale can suffer but then all of sudden you are out of that and you are on cloud nine.

Probably the greatest moment for me in my career was when I worked at my first mountain park and it took me five years to achieve, so that was probably the peak of enjoyment in my entire career when I first came to the mountains because I was so happy to be the place I was at. I can remember being a young ranger and driving across the state, I would be on 421 heading west, northwest and all of a sudden the Blue Ridge Mountains would appear and I can remember smiling ear to ear and not being able to control it, and just knowing I was going back there. That was just so special to me I couldn't get it out of me. You can see why I enjoy working here and being here, I mean this is home to me. My ancestors and people from

both sides of my family have been here in the Blue Ridge Mountains for many, many generations and they are very special to me.

Really the most challenging thing I have ever done in my career was become a manager and that took me a couple of years to adjust to. And having to do more office work, it wasn't anything I didn't know what I was getting into, I had other people to mentor me and tell me, "You need to make sure this is what you want." It took me a couple of years to adjust to that.

I was introduced to a project called the Mountain Bogs, so actually the park for several years now has managed three mountain bogs and they no longer represent, like many many years ago, 500 years ago, these places would have been pristine, they would have had very little impact from humans. Now they have grown up with vegetation, the plants that are supposed to be there are dying or they are already gone and vegetation has grown inside, it should be fairly open to the sun. We met with biologists and they said, "What are gonna do is, look that way..." and as far as I could see there were 15 to 20-foot-tall trees in that direction and I couldn't see through the bog, they said, "the bog actually ends about 300 feet in that direction, what we are gonna do is cut the invasive trees that are sucking the water out of the bog," and I can remember saying, "We're gonna do what?"

So park staff worked with biologists from all over the state, primarily Western North Carolina, and we went in there with waders, boots that kind of thing and were literally wading through the water and cutting down invasive trees that were taking the water out of the bog. They estimated it would take five years to do and it took two years. So that speaks for the people I work with and how they work. That was the greatest accomplishment that I will have

ever make, there's no doubt in my mind because that was the hardest work I have ever done, and now you can go down in there and the flowers are, one good example is the gray's lily, which is a rare flower in this area. The gray's lilies are coming back into the bog. So I can't get you a true count on how many that there are because there are so many that we can't get an accurate count, but they needed sunlight and now they are coming back.

But that is gratifying because when you do something, you work really hard, and you accomplish something you get to see the results. And that's not the only one. We have gotten through the worst phase of the work but we aren't done and Grandfather Mountain is going to take over supervision of those sites because they are closer than we are. That work will never be done.

Q16 – What else is satisfying about your work?

Some of the experiences you have are kinda crazy and you may not like it at the time but it ends up being some of your best memories, even disagreements you have with your staff or your friends, everybody gets angry or there is a misunderstanding or somebody says something maybe they shouldn't say because they are not happy. Just working with other people from other places and working together with them to accomplish something. And the people I worked with in those first few years I'm still friends with most of them and I'm still in contact with some of them. One guy I worked with he was like a brother to me and we would fight like brothers and every couple of months we would have an argument and then it would all go away the next day. He was just like family.

One of the memories I have is the wild fires, that we sometimes go and fight. In 2016, eight parks were closed due to the wild fires that were burning at South Mountain State Park and Chimney Rock State Park. They closed Elk Knob to deploy the staff here to the fires to assist. So I was sent to Chimney Rock State Park for the second time in my career to fight a fire there. I got to be the crew leader so I took out a crew of other park superintendents, park rangers, maintenance staff out to help to fight this fire. It was the second driest I think I ever remember this area being since I was a child, I can remember one other time it was really dry. I can remember thinking, "somebody is going to throw a cigarette butt out or start a campfire illegally at Elk Knob and this whole place is gonna burn," it was so dry, I was so terrified. Even though fires are good you don't want them when there is so much fuel it will be so hot that it would just kill everything, you don't want that, you want a controllable event.

So you get sent to a place like Chimney Rock State park and you work at a fire and you work 15 to 16 hour days and everyone is real grumpy but we're all still working hard, and you get covered with dirt and soot and you go to your hotel room and you pass out, then you get back up at daylight and you do it all over again. So you really form a comradery, you become a family in places like that. You'd be surprised you really get to know people who have never worked in your park. But we trained together and work together at special events like fires. The family element is really my favorite part.

Q17 – What advice would you give someone beginning this line of work?

You know I had some luck getting into this line of work. My advice to someone who wants to be a park ranger or a park superintendent my advice to them would be to volunteer at a park, learn what it's like, don't get any wild ideas about something you've never experienced. Go in and see what they do, if you like it, go to college and get a degree. We don't require degrees with state parks but it is hard to compete with other people who are applying, sometimes with a master's degree. So take care of your education, and then you need to be a seasonal employee a lot of people do that when they are in college, I didn't do that, I was still unsure about what I wanted to do. I started being a seasonal after I graduated. So once you are a seasonal for several years and during that time you need to find a permanent employee who can mentor you and give you advice on how to move along on your career and how to get a permanent job. They went through it and they were able to accomplish that, to get a permanent job.

It can be very difficult at times, I remember one job I applied for had over 100 applicants, it can be very very competitive, and it's not that you can't do it, you just can't give up. And a lot of times you spend anywhere from two to three years trying to get a permanent job, but if you are patient and you work hard and you get a good reputation, that's what they're looking for. It is hard, but it's not impossible.

Q18 – Memorable Moment from Work?

I can share something that was really funny and it all worked out but it wasn't ideal. I was working at a park one time; it was the first park I worked at. We decided that we were gonna burn some unique habitat in the park, natural resource managers in Raleigh had identified that that area needed to be burned, but to be careful it could turn very hot very fast and there could be some risk involved, so proceed with caution kind of thing. So the park staff we got a permit and we are required to contact the next middle management and let them know we want to burn and then they say proceed or they say don't proceed.

We had everything lined up, we planned it, we had lines in, we spent a lot of work and then we were waiting for the weather parameters to be right for us to burn. And it was in a small wetland next to the park office, I know you're sitting there thinking, it's a wetland how is it going to burn anyway? It had been fairly dry and they were trying to get fire in it when it was fairly dry. I was a young park ranger, I had my certification to work on burns but I was not a manager and didn't know that much about what the managers knew. So we were told to take a drip torch, which is a tool that starts the fire, and I was told to start the fire. So I took the drip torch fuel down on the ground and it was leaking fire so the fire would start and it would ignite in this bush and it would start burning and then go out and then I would try again and we would put down fire in a 20-foot line and it would go out so eventually I gave up, and my friend David said, "Give that to me." So he takes it and he tries it, well he's a little more patient than I was and he just keeps trying it.

This went on for 35 to 40 minutes and finally he gets it to start and it starts leeching into the wet area. All of a sudden it reaches a pitch pine tree and proceeds to climb the tree and ladder fuels, that's what a fire will do, so the fire starts going up into the tree and all of a sudden the tree explodes into fire, which is perfectly natural - we had taken fire away from this area or the tree wouldn't have been there. So anyway the tree doesn't die all it does is it goes up into the tree it crowns and it burns and then it goes into the next tree, and it starts travelling tree to tree. A fire will actually form its own weather that's why it is so dangerous, it can be calm one moment and then it gets hot and the wind starts blowing and start you know start forcing the fire somewhere you don't want it to go. It actually went tree to tree to tree to tree to tree all the way at the opposite end of the unit, in I'm talking a minute.

We had most of our staff around the ignition point for safety so there were only a few people on the other side, so we start racing over to the other side. The air filled with smoke, we are in the park, it's the winter time so nobody is there. Smoke everywhere, you can't see, you can't see where the fire is at. So we drive around the burn unit and we had pumper units with water in them to put the fire out if we needed to. It had actually jumped the line in three or four different places, luckily we were trained well enough to know what it was going to do because they teach you that and during your experience you watch stuff like that happen and you know what to do. So we scouted out and found all the areas where the fire had gone over the line and out of the unit and we found all those and we got those sprayed out with water, got them put back out.

And we got a new park superintendent and he hadn't started the job yet, and he was a great supervisor, he had park housing right across from the burn unit and actually some of the

fire leached into the yard of his park house and burned in a 10 (foot) by 10 (foot) spot in his yard, and so he comes to work and he's moving into his house and he sees this big black patch of burned out grass in his yard and wants to know what happened so we told him that. It turned out to be a really successful burn and we didn't do anything we weren't supposed to do. But when you're working in nature, nature has its own plans, it's not always going to comply with what humans want to do. That's one thing you have to learn when you work in parks, you're at nature's mercy, you work for nature, I don't think it's the other way around. So that was a valuable lesson that day, and even though we didn't do anything wrong, I still learned a lot and I know what can happen very quickly with a fire.

I can remember thinking, "What do we do now?" And fortunately the supervisors knew what to do and they told me what to do, so I just did what they were doing and voila on the job training, I knew exactly what to do the next time it happened, and that was not the only time it happened, that is a frequent occurrence for burning, it's a little bit risky but the rewards are great because it's great for wildlife. We were actually older areas where there were plants like sundews there were even Venus fly trap at some point at the park, they were just lost because the fires we stopped.

Q19 – Earlier you said when you get new land for the park you sign it, paint it and clear it, what does that mean?

When I say clear, we don't timber the area – I don't want you thinking that, we actually clear the boundary so its marked. It's not that we go through and kill all the plants, but just that its

visible. We trim the trees that are facing the outside and what that is, that's a way to protect the resources, if someone comes in and they take resources from the park and the park boundaries aren't labeled or they're not visible then it's not illegal, we can't use a citation or anything like that or it would get thrown out of court if we write a citation to someone who doesn't know where they are at. So the parks have to be managed from the outside, you need to see it, we actually put paint on trees, so we put stripes and they mean something. We can put anywhere from one to three stripes on a tree depending on if it's a line tree or a corner tree, that kind of thing. Then we have a diamond shaped sign that goes on every other tree and that takes a lot of work, my staff, they climb a lot of mountains. You get to see a lot pretty country and pretty things, but they work really hard too.

We don't put up any structures, its public land so people have access. Now as long as they're following the rules and regulations, they're not breaking any laws they have free reign to the land, it's theirs, the taxpayers own this place we are just stewards of it, we try to protect it the best we can.

Q20 – Anything you'd like to add?

The only thing I'd like to add, and this was a couple weeks ago I was talking to my mom and I try to get her to come here more because it's such a pretty place. And she was talking about a sunset that she had seen and talking about how beautiful it was, and I told her, "that's awesome and I'm so glad you had that experience," and I said, "I've probably seen 1,000 sunsets better than any you've ever experienced, and that's my job." And she's like, "You know,

I never thought about that either you probably have.” And that’s one of the benefits going along for the ride and the experience.

And sometimes when I report to work, I don’t make it to work, I’ll sign in on the radio so everybody knows I’m on the job, and then before I get to the park if I see something. And the vista you get from the park gate down towards Todd that can be some of the prettiest scenery, depending on what’s going on with the weather, that you’ll ever see. So sometimes I don’t make it and it will be 15 or 20 minutes before I actually get to the office, and they’ll be like, “Where you been?” and I try to keep a camera or a smart phone so I can get a picture.

One of the oddest things, and I’ll close with this, I came to work one morning in March, about 7:30 in the morning and it was not good weather, it was definitely still winter and extremely harsh conditions. Nobody is on the road, the roads are slick and I come to open the park gate and before I get to the gate I see a fox squirrel sitting in the middle of the road and he’s eating something. I start coming up on him and I slow down so I won’t hit him and I come up next to him and he’s not paying any attention to me. So I put down the window and I started talking to him, and of course he didn’t talk back and I just started talking to him and he’s looking at me and he just continues to eat. And then I noticed that he was using his tail as a shield from the wind and the snow so he’s got like his own umbrella. And all of a sudden he decides, I don’t like you, and he turns and runs up the mountain out of sight. And I still to this day do not know what was going on with him but you know, just seeing a fox squirrel on top of a mountain, we don’t see those here so that was rare already, but to see one on the coldest day, he was adapting to his surroundings, he was struggling and I guess whatever he found to eat was so valuable he didn’t want to leave it behind because the ranger was talking to him.

So that was a very memorable morning from everything was frozen, I heard some wildlife moving around that I didn't normally hear. After working in nature for a long time you can still hear things in the woods at night, particularly, that you don't even know what they are. So that's one of the good things about the job is you are always seeing something unique and new. It doesn't matter how long you are on the mountain, there's always something new.