



READY WILLING AND ABLE

Volunteers offer their time, expertise, and passion to help visitors enjoy Montana state parks.

BY LAURA LUNDQUIST

GENEROUS GESTURES Volunteers Leo Perkins (left) and Dale Dufour swap stories at Travelers' Rest State Park near Lolo. The state park is one of many across Montana that relies on volunteers for everything from leading interpretive tours to picking up trash.

PHOTO BY LAURA LUNDQUIST

In mid-August, as the orange-gray sky above Travelers' Rest State Park darkened again, park manager Loren Flynn suspected trouble.

Leaves of surrounding cottonwoods fluttered, then flailed, assailed by western winds that eventually whipped up the nearby Lolo Peak Fire. Having already burned 19,000 acres in fits and starts during previous weeks, the fire roared back to life and headed northeast toward the community of Lolo and one of Montana's premier state parks.

The alert went out: Prepare to evacuate Traveler's Rest.

Flynn worried not only about the park buildings and the contents of his office, but also the precious artifacts collection in the visitor center. Travelers' Rest is one of only two sites in Montana where archaeologists have found physical

evidence of Lewis and Clark's early 19th-century journey. During a 2002 dig, archaeologists unearthed a blue trade bead, a button, a clump of lead used to make bullets, and fire-cracked rock in a spot that had been used for cooking.

Those and other items, along with an 1803 Harpers Ferry rifle that may have accompanied the expedition, were on display in the visitor center. Now they were threatened by the fast-growing blaze.

By himself, Flynn would have struggled

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to get everything out in time. But the park's volunteers answered the call. A few of the regulars, including Dale Dufour, helped pack up the artifacts so they could be shuttled to safety until the danger was past. “We had an art exhibit in there, too. Just in case the fire overran us, we took it all down,” Dufour says. “The same thing happened five years ago when the Highway 12 Fire burned. I was out here at night running from one side of the park to the other because big embers were falling everywhere.”

Flynn didn't ask Dufour to do that: Dodging wildfires is not a designated volunteer activity. But it shows just how dedicated park volunteers can become.

Deep connections like that are what Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks park managers try to nurture, because volunteers are as essential to state parks as electricity and running water. “I manage three parks spread over 90 miles with just two employees. We couldn't possibly make it work without volunteers,” Flynn says.

CAMPGROUND COUPLES

Lewis and Clark Caverns became Montana's first state park in 1937. Ever since, people have shown up there and at dozens of subsequent state parks offering to do everything from lead interpretive tours to pick up trash. Volunteer numbers swelled starting in the 1980s, as recreational vehicles became more popular and FWP needed volunteer campground hosts. At that point the agency knew it needed to formalize how it recruited, trained, and managed volunteers, and soon thereafter created a designated volunteer program, says Ken Soderberg, FWP State Parks Volunteer and AmeriCorps Programs specialist.

Because they often stay all season, campground hosts donate more hours than any other volunteers. Most are retired couples who park their RVs at state campgrounds for the summer. Many arrive from other states and happily play host to other campers for

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the chance to live in some of Montana's most beautiful spots.

That was the case with Sam and Ginny Garland, who don't own a home and travel the United States year round in their RV. They spent last summer surrounded by eastern Montana badlands while volunteering as campground hosts at Makoshika, near Glendive. “Ginny and I like to pitch in at a well-run park, which is what Makoshika is,” says Sam. The Garlands helped mow grass, tend trails, rake leaves, and provide advice to visitors. “We really are people people, and we like being with others who enjoy doing the same things we do, like hiking and camping outdoors.”

Everett and Elly Beenken had hosted at different state park campgrounds in the Flathead region, and in 2017 they volunteered to caretake Lone Pine State Park outside Kalispell. Because park manager Brian Schwartz manages two parks in addition to Lone Pine, he depends heavily on the Beenkens, who camp near the Lone Pine

entrance. The Beenkens make a good team: Elly loves interacting with visitors while Everett is the outdoor handyman, locking the park gates every night, doing odd repairs, and keeping an eye on the facility and surrounding grounds.

“He does just about everything I need in a pinch,” Schwartz says. “I was afraid they wouldn't return. Maybe they'd want to go to another state park. But Everett told me, ‘Elly likes it, so we'll come back next year.’”

That's why so many volunteers return, whether for a few days or a whole season: They like belonging to someplace special.

Different types of state parks attract different types of volunteers. Cultural parks, like Travelers' Rest and Chief Plenty Coups, draw history buffs. Bannack State Park, a ghost town and Montana's first territorial capital, attracts volunteers from around the state who enjoy reenacting its history. Bannack is remote—about 40 miles west of Dillon—so you don't find reenactors there every day. But during the park's annual

LEFT TO RIGHT: MATTHEW ROBERTS; STEVE AKRE; NELSON KEMNER; DALE J. DUFOUR; VICICI CORREIA



FIRED UP TO HELP This page: In August 2017, the Lolo Peak Fire raged near Travelers' Rest State Park, threatening the park's buildings and structures as well as a precious collection of Lewis and Clark artifacts. Volunteers helped park employees remove to safety the artifacts and an art exhibit. Fortunately, the fire did not reach the park.

CROWD PLEASER Left: At Travelers' Rest, volunteer Bruce Mihelish explains to kids how scientists verified Lewis and Clark's presence at the site. Above: Volunteers dig in to help restore vegetation.



Living History Days in September, dozens of volunteers, many dressed in period costume, converge on the ghost town to re-create the gold rush bustle of the 1860s. The town comes alive with miners, shopkeepers, bandits, a blacksmith, and others who portray Bannack's history of the period.

Roughly 1,300 to 1,500 people volunteer at Montana state parks each year. Most help

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at special events that last just a day or two, like National Public Lands Day or National Trails Day. “Special events like that create a unique environment and experience that make people want to return to help out again and again,” Soderberg says. The celebrations draw volunteers to some of Montana's smaller or more remote parks, like Council Grove, near Missoula, or Makoshika.

At Travelers' Rest, the core group of

volunteers are mostly Lewis and Clark enthusiasts who don't wait for special events. On any day, visitors can find one or more volunteers out on the park's hiking trails, eager to share their passion. “I love talking to people,” says volunteer Bruce Michelish, a former insurance company manager. “We Lewis and Clark fanatics want to keep the story alive. So every opportunity I've got, it's fun to share the story.”

Volunteers Jack Puckett and Colleen Frank take pride in their knowledge of the Native Americans who gathered in the area long before the Corps of Discovery came through in the early 1800s.

Dufour, the Travelers' Rest volunteer who helped during last year's fire, is a former U.S. Forest Service employee. Though also a Lewis and Clark fan, Dufour says he is even more interested in the area's natural history. During his 13 years as a volunteer, Dufour has documented 140 bird species either living in or passing through the park. It's a rare day when visitors see him without a camera. Almost every photograph on the park's Facebook page is his.

Dufour's passion for birds is matched only by that for the park itself. Few things bother him more than discovering that someone has damaged an area or exhibit. “I



PITCHING IN Left: In 2017, Sam and Ginny Garland, previously of Virginia but now year-round RV travelers, spent the summer as campground hosts at Makoshika State Park near Glendive. “We'd definitely do it again at another Montana state park,” says Sam. Above: Volunteers trim shrubs and spread wood chips at Milltown State Park as part of National Trails Day.



CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE PAGE: MONTANA STATE PARKS; VICKI CORREIA; DALE J. DUFOUR; VICKI CORREIA; VICKI CORREIA; MONTANA STATE PARKS

MANY WAYS TO HELP Clockwise from facing page: A volunteer cast of characters assembles each September at Living History Days at Bannack State Park; at Travelers' Rest State Park, volunteer Michael Delaney reenacts Mark Twain; volunteer Ritchie Doyle entertains kids at a summer weekend event; a local Cub Scout pack plants trees; and Salish elder Tim Ryan demonstrates how a fish weir works; volunteer Barbara Melton helps interpret displays and teach Native American history in the visitor center at First Peoples Buffalo Jump.

get really upset with vandalism," Dufour says, his voice rising. "This is 'my' park they're doing that to."

THANKING VOLUNTEERS

Not everyone has as much time or dedication for state parks as Dale Dufour and Everett Beenken. Finding volunteers for some parks is a constant struggle, Soderberg says, especially sites far from urban areas. Retaining volunteers is another challenge. The self-satisfaction gained from donating time to a worthy cause can motivate people, but park managers know volunteers need to feel appreciated, too. So they host thank-you dinners, invite experts to give volunteers-only lectures, or arrange special activities

like an evening cruise on Flathead Lake.

Organizing appreciation events and coordinating volunteers can take time from a park manager's busy schedule. "Having volunteers is awesome, but it's not exactly 'free,'" Flynn says. Still, the investment produces big dividends. FWP estimates that volunteers contribute 40,000 hours of work each year—especially helpful recently as park revenue has lagged behind rising costs.

Volunteers' contributions will likely continue. According to a 2015 Corporation for National and Community Service survey, roughly one-third of Montanans donates time to meet a wide range of needs, making Montana 12th in the nation in volunteerism.

As with most acts of altruism, park volunteering benefits those who give just as much as those who receive. That's the case for Leo Perkins, a retired teacher from Deer Lodge who enjoyed taking his students on Lewis and Clark-related field trips. Volunteering at Travelers' Rest allows him to continue sharing Corps of Discovery lore with young and old alike, he says. And it brings him together with like-minded friends.

"Where we see real success with volunteers is when they feel like they are part of a community of other volunteers, park staff, and park visitors," Soderberg says. "They become advocates not only for that park but for Montana's entire state park system." 🐾