

# Park Rangers on Patrol



By David Rainer, Staff Writer

A popular misconception among the public is that park rangers are basically “riding around looking at the trees.” Nothing could be farther from the truth. In fact, Alabama State Park Rangers are the ultimate multitaskers with duties ranging from plumbing repair to search and rescue.

Of Alabama’s 22 state parks, sizes range from the 40 acres at Florala State Park to the almost 10,000-acre expanse at Oak Mountain State Park. Obviously, the roles of the park rangers differ according to the size of the park, although there is never time to just gaze at the oaks and pines at either venue.

### **Multi-tasking**

Eric Skinner, one of the park rangers at Oak Mountain, said his job entails helping visitors enjoy their stay at the park but enjoy it in a safe manner in accordance with park regulations, which includes a prohibition on felling live trees. Therefore, while Skinner may not be riding around

looking at trees, he's looking after them. And many times Skinner approaches in stealth mode to assess a situation before his presence is detected.

"I actually came up on some gentlemen who were cutting live trees for firewood, which is illegal," he said. "I heard one tell the other man, 'we'd better hurry, I'm pretty sure this is illegal.' So when I turned the flashlight on, you can imagine what they said. They received a citation. I didn't kick the gentlemen out because they were up front with me, but they didn't get to keep their firewood.

"Most people feel like we are forest rangers. I was a forest ranger for three years in a non-law enforcement position. Most people see us as naturalists who see after the land, which we do. We're here to protect the natural resources of the state."

Mark Easterwood, Director of Alabama State Parks, said a ranger who can fill numerous roles is "invaluable" to Alabama's parks system.

"First of all, park rangers' jobs are multifaceted and not limited to law enforcement," Easterwood said. "Typically, in a large state park like Oak Mountain our rangers are primarily law enforcement. They also do a lot of customer service and assist our campers and hikers and other visitors to the park in whatever needs they have. They take care of a lot of traffic control, work any accidents and assist people who have problems with their vehicles. It's a pretty broad range of work that they do. At night, if campers have problems, like the power going out, a lot of times they're trained to take care of any maintenance problems. We expect them to do a lot of different things in the parks.

"As you go down into the smaller parks, most definitely they do a little bit of everything, from maintenance work to law enforcement to customer service. In some of our parks, there isn't a lot of additional help, so they pretty much have to do everything that is required in a state park."

Easterwood said once a ranger has that broad range of knowledge, it makes the path to promotion much easier. "Once they know pretty much everything that needs to be done in a state park, they are much better prepared to become managers and superintendents as they move up the ranks," he said. "If they move up to a park the size of Oak Mountain, they know everything that needs to be done by the people under them. That's invaluable when you've done it all yourself."

The main obstacle to promotion is a lack of positions to fill, Easterwood said. "It's a very interesting job that requires a lot of time," he said. "But I think our people

enjoy it. It takes a special person to be a park ranger. Most of our people are with us for a long time. There is very little turnover. It's a very rewarding job, but there's hardly a dull moment. There's something going on all the time, and usually it's something different."

Skinner said without a doubt he expects each day on the job to present special rewards and challenges.

"Like a lot of jobs, it can be easy at times and extremely difficult at times," Skinner said. "On the easier days, you just get to help someone out. Every summer, we'll have five or six instances where someone's child will get lost. It's a matter of the anxiety and trying to get the appropriate information under the stress. They can't remember what the child was wearing. You get all the information you can and apply it to the search. I look for a child that's out of place, like he's looking for something or he's scared. It's fun to get those two back together and reunite a family."

Although rare, there have been times when results of the search have been disheartening – when a drowning victim must be retrieved from the lake.

"This is a swim-at-your-own-risk lake," Skinner said. "Most every time, it's a child who comes with a parent or grandparent who are not at the beach. They may be at a pavilion or something and realize the child is missing. Most of the time we can locate the kids, but unfortunately, there are some we don't find in time."

## **Not an 8 to 5 Job**

Park rangers at the larger parks – Joe Wheeler, Oak Mountain, Lake Guntersville, DeSoto, Lakepoint and Gulf – pull eight-hour shifts, but their work might not be finished after that time.

"During the summer and on holiday weekends, we're on call," Skinner said. "Most of the time, it's as easy as going to campground and asking them to turn down the music. Then again, I've been woken up every hour on the hour some nights. That's just part of it.

"Some times I go down and find nothing. Some times I go down and get them to turn the radio down. Then there are some times when I go down and they don't want to turn the radio down. Most of those times, they've had too much to drink and that affects their attitude. Those individuals will usually be going to jail on a public intoxication charge and it could get worse, depending on how they act."

Skinner said many visitors run afoul of park rules because they haven't taken the time to become familiar with the regulations. "A person who will look at you and



*Park Ranger Eric Skinner patrolling Oak Mountain State Park.*

turn around and go back to what they were doing, those people usually don't know what they're doing is illegal," he said. "Most of the time a warning will suffice. There are some people; a ticket is what it takes. But most people will correct their behavior when it's pointed out."

Two items prohibited in Alabama's State Parks are illegal drugs and firearms, and Skinner has had to handle both. "I've dealt with anything from recreational drug use to people trying to sell drugs in the park," he said. "One case of drug use led to an arrest. When I took him to jail, I found out he gave me a false name. Of course, when his fingerprints returned, it corrected his ID and there were several outstanding warrants on this individual. So he got hit with another felony charge. If I catch you using illegal drugs, you will be arrested.

"I've taken guns from people, and I've taken guns from people who were planning to commit suicide. About every four or five years, we have a suicide and it's not pleasant. If we get a chance to stop someone, at least we've stopped them that day and given them a chance to think about it and maybe get some help."

Because Oak Mountain is so large, there are miles and miles of roads to patrol.

"Most people do not realize we are law enforcement officers," Skinner said. "We have blue lights, badges and guns, but some people think we're some type of security guard and don't take us seriously at first."

Actually, all Alabama State Park Rangers are required to complete the 12-week Alabama Peace Officers Standards and Training Commission Law Enforcement Academy, just like any other police officer or Conservation Enforcement Officer.

Easterwood said that at the larger parks, the park rangers are also officers of the local municipalities, which allows violations to be prosecuted through the municipality instead of having to go through the county system.

“We try to maintain a good relationship with local law enforcement,” Easterwood said. “We back them up when we hear the call, and they back us up, in turn. Rarely does any enforcement agency have enough people to cover the shifts you need. It’s mutual aid that works well.”

## Speeding, Search and Rescue

Skinner said the violation that he gets most often at Oak Mountain is speeding. “The fastest you can go in the park is 35,” he said. “It’s 25 in other areas and 15 up Pea Vine Road. I’ve written tickets for 64 in a 25 zone. It’s dangerous because of cyclists and hikers, particularly as winding as our roads are.”

Speaking of cyclists, Oak Mountain is a popular place for cyclists of every variety from the traditional family bikes, to the racers to mountain bikes. That activity keeps Skinner busy, as well.

“Our No. 1 call in the summertime is bicycle accidents – anything from slip and fall to broken bones,” Skinner said. Sometimes accidents occur where there is no easy access for emergency personnel. “We have had to do some back country rescues, where a person has fallen off a cliff and broken a bone,” Skinner said. “We have to go in, immobilize them, get them on a gurney and carry them out. Carrying someone on a gurney for two miles is not easy, but we’ve done it on multiple occasions. We had to carry one lady that broke her ankle down from Pea Vine Falls. We had to carry her out to Highway 11. The terrain was so rocky, we had to walk – literally – through the creek all the way back out to the road. I was up to my waist in the water. That was work.”

Finding lost hikers is another common call that Skinner fields. “Finding them at night is where we come in most of the time, because the search and rescue crew is not as familiar with our hiking trails,” he said. “The first thing we do is look for the vehicle if the individual doesn’t have a cell phone. We’ve had searches that have gone on for hours and some have gone on overnight. We’ve had lost hikers who have set fires that raged on, trying to set a signal fire. That’s reckless endangerment – not only from burning down the park but all the houses that surround us. We don’t advise anybody do that.”

“The only problems we have with campfires are in the back country. There are no fires allowed in the back country camping areas. When I’m doing my patrols at night, I leave the windows down and I just follow the smoke. That, unfortunately, is a cita-

tion. They don’t understand the risk they’re taking is far greater than the small advantage the fire provides.”

## Widespread Duties

Although Bill Key patrols an area far removed from the forests and foothills of the Appalachians at Oak Mountain, the Gulf State Park Ranger also has to deal with the dangers of fire, especially around holidays like the Fourth of July. In 2008, an errant bottle rocket started a fire that scorched several acres in the park, which added to Key’s duties for several days – patrolling the burned area looking for hotspots that might rekindle the blaze.

For Key, his duties are as widespread as the people he meets during his rounds, and those visitors – from snowbirds to the rowdy college crowd – change with the seasons.

“People don’t realize how varied our jobs are,” Key said. “At one point of the year, we’ll be loaded up with spring breakers. Sometimes they’ll have concerts with bands like Widespread Panic. Their fans like to camp out a lot. We have our hands full during spring break.”

“With close to 500 sites in our camping areas, we stay busy. The spring breakers come in about the time the snowbirds leave. You could roll up the sidewalks at 9 o’clock when the snow birds are here. Spring breakers are here to have a good time. That’s just the nature of the beast.”

For the most part, fortunately, Key said because the campgrounds are family oriented the rangers don’t have to deal with a great deal of trouble. “Most people are well-behaved,” Key said. “Occasionally we get a few bad apples and we take care of that pretty quickly.”

Because a portion of Gulf State Park is situated on the Gulf of Mexico, patrols often lead them to the water’s edge.

“We’ve had to deal with near drowning,” Key said. “We don’t get as many drowning fatalities as people think. We get one occasionally. We have to drag a few out of the water. Most of those are going to be alcohol-related. The fire and police departments in Gulf Shores help us out a lot and we try to do the same for them.”

Like Oak Mountain, Gulf State Park has plenty of roads to patrol, and Key has to break out the ticket pad.

“Some people think it’s a shortcut from Orange Beach to Gulf Shores,” he said. “It’s

really not. The speed limit is low in the park. Roads are for bikers and pedestrians also. That’s why the speed limits are low. They just need to slow down and smell the roses – it’s a park.”

Key said when people slow down they can appreciate the diversity the park offers.

“One morning I might be patrolling the beach and see porpoises out there playing,” he said. “Then an hour later when I’ve back on the trails, I see white-tailed deer. It’s kind of like the wide variety that we have with this job. It runs the whole gamut.”

For Mark Jackson, one of the rangers at Lake Guntersville State Park,

his duties include one that is unique and rewarding. He gets to lead eagle-watch tours during weekends in January.


“We wear a lot of different hats – PR, law enforcement, management, education – but I’ve got a special place for the eagle awareness program,” Jackson said. “I was involved in it before I went to work for State Parks when I was at the Raptor Center at Auburn. I was coming then and helping with the program. This is a special place for me.”

The reaction when a bald eagle is spotted is also special for Jackson. “You might have an 85-year-old little old lady who has never seen an eagle before,” he said. “You get her focused on an eagle through a spotting scope – the look on her face makes it worth getting up at 5 o’clock in the morning.”

“It’s an awe-inspiring event. You have a majestic creature like the bald eagle, which pretty much came back from near extinction in North America to the status it’s in now, a lot in part because of the efforts of our department. It’s something that makes you proud.”

Although the proximity of Oak Mountain State Park to Birmingham and its burgeoning suburbs presents special challenges for Skinner, he can’t imagine doing anything else.

“It’s never dull,” Skinner said. “We do have days when everything goes as planned. Then we have days that as soon as you come on duty somebody has wrecked a bike. As soon as you get them in an ambulance, there’s an altercation on the beach.”

“Most people have a misconception that we ride around, look at the trees and wave at people. It’s not quite that easy, but I wouldn’t trade it for the world.” 



DAVID RAINER