

University of Northern Colorado

## Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC

---

Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park

Colorado National Parks

---

July 2024

### Life at Gunnison Canyon sheer delight for ranger

Kit Miniclier

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/blca>

---

# Life at Gunnison canyon sheer delight for ranger

By Kit Mincicler  
Denver Post Staff Writer

Ranger Larry Harper is one of a vanishing breed, and his domain may be one of the best-kept secrets in the National Park Service system.

Harper is the uncrowned king at the north rim of the Black-Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument, a hidden spot few know about.

Although the canyon is only 1,300 feet across at its narrowest point, it is 97 road miles from Harper's world to the busy south rim visitor center.

The south rim attracts more than a quarter-million tourists a year — most of whom swing off U.S. 50 only long enough for a stroll and a snapshot.

Those who are in on the north rim's secret — fewer than 50,000 people last year — would like to keep it that way.

They fear it will become spoiled by those who fail to pause long enough to see the glistening blanket of stars, hear the laughter of coyotes at sunrise, watch swallows dart among the cliffs or cast a line in one of the best fishing spots in Colorado.

They don't want crowds in the handful of campsites clustered in the pines and juniper at the canyon's lip.

Harper, too, enjoys the peace, but he's also got work to do.

"Larry's job is unique. It harkens back to what the early Park Service was," said Ron Thoresen, chief ranger for the Black Canyon, on Colorado's Western Slope near Montrose.

In an era of rangers with advanced degrees and specialized jobs, Harper is responsible for law enforcement, emergency medical care, fence and road repair, daily cleaning of toilets and trash pits, supplying firewood and providing information about everything from

## CANYON FACTS

■ **WHERE:** South rim is 15 miles east of Montrose. North rim is 13 miles west of Crawford.

■ **DATES:** Canyon is 2 million years old. Proclaimed a national monument in 1933.

■ **DEPTH:** Deepest point 2,650 feet from rim to river. Average depth 2,000 feet.

■ **LENGTH:** About 53 miles. On the deepest, most spectacular 12 miles are within the monument.

■ **FACILITIES:** South rim has paved roads, light snacks, film at the tourist center, and 102 camp sites. North rim has unpaved roads, 13 campsites.

■ **FEES:** South rim \$3 entrance fee, \$4 camping fee. North rim free entrance, free camping and free firewood.

■ **VISITORS:** Last year, south rim, 236,614; north rim, 48,825. Average stay, 1.05 minutes. Source: National Park Service.

wildlife and geology to basic camping.

He is the only ranger on the remote north rim, although 13 rangers are assigned to the more developed, heavily visited south rim.

Harper, 37, wears a badge, gun and handcuffs, but he declined overhead red and blue lights for his vehicle, preferring low-key diplomacy to more visible trappings of law enforcement.

Before he joined the Park Service last year as a summer employee, he spent 15 years as an emergency medical technician, so he knows how to use the big orange box of emergency supplies on his truck.

Even a sprained ankle in that-

Please see **RANGER** on 2-B



AUG 29 1988

# Ranger rules remote north rim of Gunnison canyon

RANGER from Page 1-B

canyon "is a major medical emergency," because it takes 20 to 30 people to get a special liter 2,000 feet up to the rim, he said.

In the last four years three people have fallen to their deaths within the canyon. One was a fisherman who fell while trying to get to the Gunnison River, and the other two were rock climbers.

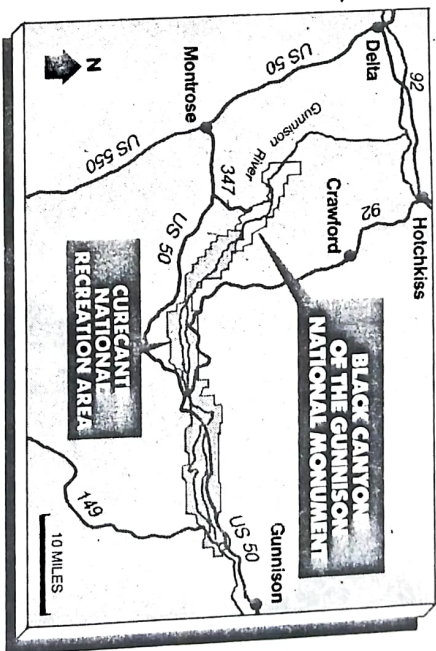
Harper, who used to rock climb for fun, says the sport has only a short spectrum "between bandages and body bags." Still, the gray and white walls of the canyon are a magnet. Last year 107 technical climbers registered with rangers. Another 102 registered in the first seven months of this year.

Away from the danger and thrill of the sheer canyon walls, Harper makes it a point to visit with his campers each evening and morning.

He is prepared to answer their questions about everything from the canyon's 5-foot-high poison ivy plants to its wildlife, including the brook, lake, cutthroat and German brown trout waiting 2,000 feet down in the river.

Harper sometimes is asked to help embarrassed new arrivals erect tents or cook food. "They buy this high-tech equipment and don't know how to use it."

One novice complained that a bag of freeze-dried shrimp almost-dine looked like applesauce. "I told



him that is the way it is," he said. "He is one of the nicest Park Rangers we've ever met" because he takes time to visit, said David Robertson of Roanoke, Va.

The campers on the north rim also seem to be a different breed from those encountered in larger, more accessible campgrounds.

During one night recently, campers spoke in subdued tones from sunset until everyone was obviously up and about the next morning, and one couldn't hear either a radio or tape deck, although 11 of the 13 campsites were full.

Harper's day often begins at 4 or 5 a.m. when a climber or fisherman knocks on his door to register

before going down into the canyon. Then, about 6 a.m., he becomes a horseless cowboy, rounding up and

chasing cows that browse around his hut during the night.

Like Harper's job, his World War II-vintage quonset hut is a throwback to a simpler era. Gas lights his lamps, heats his stove and cools his fridge. The washing machine sits quiet and unused, because the generator died in 1979.

Problems often are solved in non-technical ways. When he first moved in this summer, a half-dozen mice would crawl all over his room at night, so "I finally got a bunch of bull snakes and turned them loose inside."

Harper plans to resume his studies in park and recreational management at Mesa College in Grand Junction after leaving his post in November.

But for now, he enjoys his solitary sunset hour from a comfortable perch on the rim.