**Showcasing the DNR: Park rangers on the job**

**By LISA HOBAUGH**

**Michigan Department of Natural Resources**

Park rangers are responsible for protecting, preserving and enhancing Michigan’s state parks and natural resources, while ensuring the safety and welfare of park visitors.

These hard-working employees can be found in state parks, recreation areas, boating access sites and harbors managed by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. They perform a multitude of tasks, ranging from customer service and maintenance of lands and facilities, to public safety, law enforcement and emergency response.

All rangers participate in the day-to-day work activities of the unit and are responsible for performing various duties needed to operate and maintain the facilities the DNR oversees. They are also responsible for leading, training and directing teams of state workers during the height of Michigan’s busy summer season of camping and recreation.

**Two types**

The DNR hires more than 1,300 seasonal staffers at state parks, state forest campgrounds, boating access sites, trails and harbors. More than 50 seasonal park rangers are hired to help carry out day-to-day operations and maintenance and other essential duties.

Rangers are categorized as either commissioned or noncommissioned.

In addition to operation and maintenance duties, commissioned rangers also have responsibilities as a parks and recreation officer.

These officers are responsible for the enforcement of DNR Parks and Recreation Division rules and regulations, land use orders of the DNR director and state laws that apply on DNR Parks and Recreation Division-administered lands. This may require commissioned rangers to make physical arrests, write tickets, evict visitors and assist with other law enforcement actions.

As new employees, all rangers complete a four-week Operations Academy provided by the Parks and Recreation Division. This training provides a robust learning experience on the duties concerning maintenance and operations of the state’s parks and recreation system.

In addition to the Operations Academy, commissioned rangers must also complete the DNR Park’s and Recreation Division’s seven-week Law Enforcement Academy. This is an immersive training experience that prepares employees to perform the law enforcement, public safety and emergency response requirements of their jobs.

**Finding the right stuff**

There is no set formula for finding the perfect park ranger. Each of Michigan’s 103 state parks and other facilities around the state have unique features and opportunities. Park rangers often have a great appreciation for the outdoors and fond lifelong memories that draw them into this field of work. They often excel in providing customer service, enjoy providing recreational opportunities for others and getting hands-on experience with the maintenance and management of lands and facilities, and much more.

When asked why they chose this career path, the top DNR park ranger responses often include a love for being outdoors, the variety of work experiences and interaction in the experiences of visitors.

**Doing the job**

The following are just a few profiles of DNR park rangers – commissioned and noncommissioned – from across the state who have diverse backgrounds, experiences and job responsibilities.

**Mitch Babcock – noncommissioned ranger, Clare Field Office, Clare County**

Babcock has been with the DNR since 2009, starting as a seasonal park worker and moving quickly up to the rank of ranger. Babcock has had the opportunity to work at many state parks as both a commissioned and noncommissioned ranger. He works on the major maintenance crew at the Clare Field Office, where he and the crew tend to boat launches and assist with construction projects in the region. Throughout his tenure, his diverse talents have been put to work.

“After my first summer as a seasonal park worker, I knew that this was the career path that I wanted,” said Babcock. “Growing up on a farm, having working knowledge in several trades, and working a few years as a seasonal park worker, best prepared me for the core duties of a park ranger.”

Babcock has been found building docks, cleaning campsites, plowing snow and responding to emergencies – including putting Band-Aids on little kids who have taken a spill off their scooters. His blend of kindness, commitment and willingness to take on any task assigned is what makes him a great example of a park ranger.

His favorite part of the job?

“I am now working out of an office that takes care of sites I grew up using. I feel like I am giving back to my community while doing something I love,” he said. “Being an avid outdoorsman, I spend a lot of time at places I help maintain and that helps me bring new ideas to the table.”

**Jacquelyn Culberson – noncommissioned ranger, Bay City State Park, Bay County**

Culberson has several decades of parks and recreation experience in her background, beginning with Saginaw Parks and Recreation. It was here she realized her love for people and the greatness of the outdoors. She is known for her big personality and contagious enthusiasm, making her the perfect person to be a ranger who focuses on outreach.

“My favorite part of my job as an outreach ranger is that I have the privilege to provide presentations on introducing non-traditional groups to state parks to increase diversity in park attendance,” Culberson said. “It is a great honor to be a woman of color working for the state parks and preaching the gospel on the many state parks and what Michigan has to offer.”

**Dan Young – commissioned lead ranger, Ludington State Park, Mason County**

Young started at Ludington State Park right out of high school, employed as a seasonal park worker and with a Michigan Civilian Conservation Corps during the winters. Meanwhile, he pursued a degree in criminal justice. After graduation, he landed a job as a police officer in his hometown of Ludington, but it wasn’t quite the calling he had hoped for. A few years later, Young applied for a ranger position at his former stomping grounds of Ludington State Park. After getting the job, it didn’t take long for him to discover it was where he was supposed to be.

“I enjoy and appreciate the law enforcement aspects of the ranger position but also enjoy the variety that a ranger job provides,” Young said. “I love the maintenance tasks and enjoy being a training instructor and helping in various ways at the Law Enforcement Academy. Mostly, I enjoy working hard and putting effort into things that directly benefit our customers by providing an outdoor experience that people come back for year after year.”

Young was able to combine his criminal justice education with his love of the park –home to his family’s annual camping tradition during his formative years – as well as the customer service and maintenance skills he learned as a seasonal park worker and Civilian Conservation Corps member.

“Training and education as a police officer was a tremendous help to me to be able to hit the ground running as a ranger. I had relationships with my local police agencies and dispatch that most rangers typically do not have starting out, as well as an understanding of what the court system was like in my county.”

Young has contributed to the development of his fellow ranger staff by lending his experience in the development of employee training, not only at his park but also as a law academy instructor.

“I have been beyond blessed to be a part of this team and given the freedom to grow in the positions I have had,” he said. “Like any job it has its challenges, but the benefits heavily outweigh those challenges.”

**Michelle Trowbridge – commissioned ranger, Sleepy Hollow State Park, Clinton County**

On any Friday or Saturday summer night, you’ll find Trowbridge walking the campground welcoming campers and talking to people. She prides herself on bringing positivity to her work environment, and that’s probably from her background as an educator.

“I know people might not think my degree in education would be particularly helpful in this setting, but I use a lot of my teacher skills in training new seasonal park workers, problem-solving to help with unhappy campers, and being in front of a class readied me to work with groups of students when classrooms visit the park,” she said.

Trowbridge started with the DNR as a seasonal park worker while working as a paraprofessional at her local school district. What started as wanting a little extra summer income turned into five summers, then seven more seasons as an outreach coordinator, before she became a ranger in late 2018.

While you can take the teacher out of the classroom, you can’t always take the classroom out of the teacher, which is exactly why she is beloved by her peers.

“I give out personalized written thank-you’s to each staff member and monthly treats with cheesy sayings on them to keep things positive,” she said.

**Mike Signorello, commissioned lead ranger, Sign Shop, Hartwick Pines State Park, Crawford County**

Most people don’t realize that the brown wooden signs marking the entrance to state parks are made by one person who works an old routing machine. That’s Mike Signorello, who oversees the sign shop inside Hartwick Pines State Park.

That’s a pretty big leap from his degree in biology and conservation. However, the “leap of faith” he said he took to leave a higher-paying job to join a Michigan Civilian Conservation Corps camp to learn a new trade has paid off.

Today, Signorello oversees a team of AmeriCorps service members who help create many of the DNR signs visitors see in parks, on trails and along waterways. Like many authentic craftspeople, he is modest and sees himself as a lifelong learner, as well as a teacher.

“I really enjoy building on the functions of the sign shop and training program,” he said. “I can’t pass up the opportunity to improve what we do and how we do it, and I get to do that through innovation and creativity.”

That worker spirit of innovation is prevalent throughout state parks and harbors and is an unspoken requirement for any of the jobs within the agency.

**Andrew Lundborg – commissioned park supervisor, Grand Haven State Park, Ottawa County**

As a child, Andrew Lundborg had the unique experience of growing up in Silver Lake State Park. His father, Pete, was the manager there for more than four decades. Hearing late-night calls from campground visitors and seeing the work that goes into managing a wide swath of unique natural resources didn’t dissuade him from following in his father’s footsteps.

“My favorite part is the overall variety of opportunities that are available within the DNR,” Lundborg said. “As a park supervisor, I enjoy the daily operations of the park as well as planning for what comes next. I also play an active role in training academies to help prepare our new rangers for their career in the outdoors, and I assist with wildland fire suppression and prescribed burns in my region.”

This diversity of roles is common within the DNR, as the agency provides several opportunities to cross-train with other divisions, such as wildlife, forest resources or fisheries, to help grow an employee’s passion and resume.

**Considering applying for a park ranger position?**

When asked what she would say to anyone thinking about becoming a seasonal park worker or ranger at a Michigan state park or harbor, Trowbridge said, “I would say do it! It is one of the most fun and rewarding jobs you may ever have. How many other jobs give you the chance to help people create fond, lifelong memories?”

For more information on how to become a park ranger or seasonal park worker, visit [Michigan.gov/DNRJobs](http://www.Michigan.gov/DNRJobs). To view park ranger positions, click on the “View DNR Job Openings” link and search for “park ranger,” or click on the “Seasonal Park Workers” link.

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