

State Forest Rangers - Your Friends in the Woods!

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During the summer of 2013, “Smokey the Bear” came to visit the Balsam Lake Mountain Fire Tower in New York’s Catskill Park. Further scrutiny revealed that rather than being a real bear it was an assistant forest ranger in costume. Another ranger volunteered to carry the bulky bear suit up the mountain the previous day. To further the collaborative effort yet another ranger was in uniform to help get Smokey’s message about fire prevention out to the young and old. This is just one example of how friendly and helpful the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) Forest Rangers are. I offer nothing but praise for the many rangers that I have had the fortunate opportunity to work with in recent years.

In addition to educating the public, rangers work with Search and Rescue, fight fires, maintain trails and lean-tos and of course log many miles patrolling their regions. While they do not like to give tickets and summonses, rangers may do so if they find you flouting the rules as their authority significantly overlap that of state troopers.

Rangers tell me that the best way to summon assistance in the back country is to call the DEC Dispatch at **1-877-457-5680** anywhere in NY State (a number that you should keep written in your first aid kit and also in your cell phone “contacts” list)! If you hike anywhere in NY calling 911 works, but the operator will have to first forward your information to the rangers and might not understand what “I’m at the Cornell Crack!” means. Rangers, on the other hand are more likely to pinpoint your location. If cell phone service is not available and you are hiking with a group it is best to divide up and have one group stay with the victim while the others go for help. Hikers venturing into remote areas (particularly traveling solo) should consider purchasing a personal locator beacon (to be used only in dire, potentially life threatening or disabling emergencies).

A few years ago, two people got lost in the Catskills during a snow blizzard and sadly, one died. It was a ranger who went out and found the other man and kept him alive until he could be brought out to safety. Would you go out in the middle of a blizzard to help someone you had never met?

I recently received an email from a ranger and at the bottom of his message he included the following quote that I believe nicely sums up his ethic and those of his colleagues: “If in a day you were to touch the soul of just one human and inspire the magical world of nature, rest assured your efforts were a success!”