

Ah being a climber ranger in Rocky Mountain National Park, RMNP, means spending everyday hiking to stunning, remote alpine rocks, hiking over the pristine tundra past glaciers and hanging lakes, summiting mountains, scaling alpine faces, standing on tops of spires, taking in the view of Colorado and its borders. This is your job—you get paid to do it. Leave that cubical and desktop behind and sign up—right? It sounds dreamy, but it does come with caveats as Kevin Sturmer East District Climbing Ranger explains.

Tell me about an average day at work:

*You come in with a plan for the day, like: a Climbing Patrol at Lumpy Ridge or maybe Hallett. When out in the wilderness we are authorities of the resources and are models of proper use ethics. But you have to be flexible.*

*Sometimes that plan will go status quo, but most days it changes quickly with the demands of the park the requirements of rescues.*

What are some of the demands that take you away?

*Search and rescues—SAR--A SAR call changes the day for more than just climbing rangers. A Search and Rescue in Rocky (this is not the case in all parks) is a park-wide operation pulling from all divisions within the park. Regardless of what you were doing, what route we are on, even if it is a day off from work, we all stop what we are doing to gather and respond.*

Tell us about a typical SAR:

*It is a complex task. We are not a fire department waiting for a call; an emergency happens it takes time to pull resources together. Once briefed and ready with the proper gear, the rescuers head out. Plan A in Rocky is always on foot due to the more challenging terrain. As location gets further away, the rescue takes longer. We don't have immediate access to helicopters and there can be further challenges for air operations due to the landscape and weather. We have used military and medical helicopters--that is plan B.*

*Most of the SARs are minor injuries and are a couple of miles on a trail. We treat the person and get them out.*

*Rescuer safety is a priority on a SAR.*

Are there more SAR's in Rocky than in other national parks?

There were over 4.5 million visitors to RMNP in 2018 and about 200 rescues per year. We are in the top 5 for the busiest park and for SARs. We are the third most visited national park and normally in the top five parks for SAR incidents. In 2018 we were the third busiest SAR park as well. Most of the SAR calls are between May and October.

With that many people, you get a lot of bad luck and bad days, and we are there to help.

Climbers are one of the smallest user group that needs rescuing, A lot of climbers self-rescue to a point. But when a SAR is climbing related sometimes, that means the situation can be more serious.

We are in a designated wilderness area with special rules and regulations. No rule says wilderness has to be safe.

What steps do the Climbing Rangers take to prevent SARs and promote safety?

*A big part of the job is being a good model of commonsense, safety and exhibiting good climbing practices. We are climbers first and understand wilderness and smart decisions against the elements.*

*I rarely go up on Longs and tell people you need to turn around but will show by my behavior—subtly letting them know by example. While out alpine climbing and bouldering we are a model of good, safe climbing tactics*

*All of the rangers have a different approach. Some of the staff are blunt. The climbing rangers define their own style using different tactics. The different approaches complement each other making a strong crew.*

Besides safety what is one of the essential topics Climbing Rangers like to talk about with visitors?

*Leave No Trace is one. Pack it in, pack it out. No one wants trash or to leave trash. But it happens--microtrash--tape, chalk, wrapper, corners of wrappers. We are hyper-aware, and if we see, trash we make it obvious that we see it and pick it up.*

*Trash is a great way to get people to talk about LNT. It opens up all kinds of conversations—like stashed pads are trash and disintegrate into a lot of microtrash.*

*I like to use opportunities I witness to strike up conversations. Like if I see someone spill a chalk bag—I'd approach them by going over and helping them pick up some chalk and strike up a conversation: Where are you from? What are you climbing on? And then bring up you know this is a designated wilderness area and we are lucky to have climbing access here. I bring up that there are different rules in the wilderness area than in a city park climbing venue, forest service, or climbing gym.*

What is an important message the Climber Rangers like to bring to climbers?

*Climbing in wilderness areas comes with responsibilities.*

*For example, one of our new climbing rangers came across someone not following the appropriate rules for bivying. She brought this to their attention by educating them. Do you know that climbers are the only people that get to bivy in the wilderness? We have sacred privileges with these bivy permits that the general public doesn't get and we want to protect this by being good stewards she continued to explain. It's important for people to know that their behavior is a reflection on the group.*

*It's interesting to get people talking about how climbers get a lot of freedom as opposed to other sports that are limited to fields and trackways.*

What is one of the most challenging parts of the job?

*Challenging rescues can be the hardest. Besides that, the job can be challenging since we are climbers and a part of the user group we are monitoring. I can relate to climbers but know the difference, and sometimes you are ashamed of our user group. It is challenging getting the message across that climbing access in the park is a special thing, and we have special privileges and that someone from our peer group could be compromising it for themselves and future generations.*

*All climbers want to do the right thing; it is just sometimes they don't know they are doing things that are inappropriate and that is our job to help them understand.*