



## Friends of the Forest River Rats by Susan Vitek

A little over two years ago, Dexter Allen, River Ranger in the Red Rock District of the Coconino National Forest, came to a **Friends of the Forest** meeting hoping to recruit a few volunteers for a new committee. After his presentation, he looked stunned when seventeen hands shot into the air.

Allen's main enemies on the Verde River—the only river in Arizona to win the coveted “Wild and Scenic” designation—are trash and tamarisk.

“I want a committee so I don't have to ‘steal’ employees from their regular patrol jobs,” Allen said. “Sometimes I have to take two or three employees off patrol, depending on the size of the group going down the river. I need to get all my gear trucked in by trailers, get trash hauled out, be re-supplied depending on the length of the trip, and then be driven back from wherever I take our kayaks out. The public would be astonished to see how much equipment we need to take in to get the job done.”

Spring is the time that the river rangers go after trash. As more people are “discovering” riparian areas due to increased media stories, the garbage left behind increases. Heavy rains push garbage left too near the shore into the river too.

Tamarisk, also known as salt cedar, is another problem on the Verde River. Fall is the main time to attack this thirsty plant, first brought to the United States from southern Eurasia to help prevent erosion. Its downside is insatiable thirst and a hardiness that crowds out plants native to riparian areas.

Helen Campbell, one of the drivers on the first River Rat trip, can attest to the amount of equipment the river rangers need. She drove a truck pulling a trailer of gear for a four-day river trip that included representatives of the Coconino, Tonto and Prescott National Forests who were planning cooperative efforts to clean up the Verde River, which runs through all three forests.

“Dexter needs people to drive a truck, usually pulling a trailer, to the ‘put-in’ location, and it's packed with gear for a one, two, four, six or more day excursion. At the end of the float, someone drives to the ‘take-out’ point and retrieves Dexter, his gear and anyone else who went on the trip,” Campbell said.

Campbell and Frank Wirkus drove the inaugural run just six weeks after Ranger Allen asked **Friends of the Forest** for help. Campbell described the trailer as “loaded to the gills” with six kayaks, six large ice chests, six sleeping mats, six chairs, six sets of paddles plus spares, camp stoves, propane, ropes and personal gear to keep six men happy for four days and nights sleeping along the river.”

Campbell and Wirkus drove a 23-mile rough dirt road to Childs and helped unload the gear. A seasoned camper, Campbell laughed when she saw the mountain of gear next to the small kayaks. Ranger Allen just smiled.

First the ice chests went in, and everything else was packed around them. Like a candle topping off a cake, their chairs and bright blue sleeping bags completed the mini-mountain on each inflatable kayak.

“Aha,” Campbell proclaimed, “There's no room left for the people!” Again, Ranger Allen smiled as each man slid his kayak from the muddy shore and, according to Campbell, “deftly leapt upon the mound of

‘stuff.’ They were riding high, smiling broadly, paddles adjusted and waving with gusto, merrily floating down the stream.”

Asked about unusual things seen on his frequent drives, Frank Wirkus described watching someone’s tropical fish tank floating down the river—complete with the fish swimming inside the tank. The next week when he returned, the tank (garbage) had washed to shore, empty. Wirkus said this is one way that non-native species get introduced to areas where they are not supposed to be.

There currently are fifteen members on the River Rat crew. They have logged 46 trips totaling 712 hours—hours employees could remain patrolling on the Coconino National Forest due to the **Friends of the Forest** volunteers. River Rat members take a government driver’s class and get to visit areas like Childs, Sheep’s Bridge and Horseshoe Dam. Mike Vitek, chair of the committee, says that the drive to Sheep’s Bridge goes over the spillway at Horseshoe Dam and then up the east side of the Verde River and is a long but also a very scenic drive.

If you want to make a difference, please visit the **Friends of the Forest** website at [friendsoftheforestedona.org](http://friendsoftheforestedona.org) or call Vitek at 282-1076.