

Rollin' on the River **By Susan Vitek**

The “Wild and Scenic” Verde River is the destination for the Friends of the Forest’s River Support volunteers. These men and women, who have been licensed to drive to various put-in and take-out points along the river, are about to see a huge puzzle pulled into place.

Volunteers meet the crew at the Camp Verde Ranger Station. This is where River Ranger Dexter Allen finally has seen his dream come true—enough storage space to hold everything that he needs in the same location. And now, because of the River Patrol volunteers, Allen doesn’t have to take a forest service employee off their regular job for driving duty.

Volunteer Rick Baldauf, a former accountant from Michigan, sums up the reason he joined the River Patrol: “I find all trips interesting, and they get me out to see areas where I might otherwise not go. I probably will never live down my very first trip. I was driving to Childs—my first time hauling a trailer on such a bad road. I didn’t realize that I’d lost the tail gate until I was close to the river, so I thought I’d just pick it up on my way out. But it wasn’t there,” he lamented.

A driver’s anxiety level increases in direct proportion to the condition of the road. In the spring, the goal of the river rangers and their volunteers is to clean up trash. Refuse like tires, coolers, parts of fences, etc., accidentally get pulled into the river when it swells past its normal boundary and the force of the water drags items off private property.

And there are the ever-present careless campers who don’t follow the “Leave No Trace” policy. They want to find the river clean and pristine, but they don’t leave it that way.

At the put-in site of Beasley Flats, that huge puzzle is about to be solved—how to get all the gear into small rubber boats and kayaks. Baldauf helps the crew unload the inflatable boats and places them near the water. Then he helps carry their gear—sleep pads, large coolers, chairs, stove, human waste containers, toilet seat, extra paddles, throw bags for rescue situations, first aid gear and a satellite phone.

Standing high above this scene, one thinks there is no way that everything will fit. Piece by piece, articles are placed in the boats. Safety is the main rule of the day, and safety gear has to be easy to reach.

The crew carefully contort their bodies, bending in all directions with various items in their hands, looking for a good “fit.” Here a space, there a space, everywhere a little space. But just putting things in the boat isn’t enough. Everything has to be strapped down tight—kept in place so that when staff and volunteers ride over rapids, the gear remains in the boat or kayak.

Ranger Allen says that since the water is so high this spring, they will be dodging waves instead of dodging rocks when the water is low in the middle of summer.

Two Canadian geese have landed several hundred feet away and seem to be enjoying the show. They remind us of their presence with their noisy comments. After five minutes, they are either rested or bored, and fly on to another destination.

Now that the boats are all loaded, Baldauf takes a few things back to the truck and trailer. Several days or even a week later, another volunteer crew arrives to pick up the group and the trash they've collected—tires, Styrofoam building materials, a small cooler. This can be about 200 pounds of trash placed in the rubber rafts.

At the pick-up point, an FOF volunteer spots a weld that has broken on the rack that holds the boats onto the trailer and points it out to the River Ranger. If undetected, the metal could damage the boats, which cost \$3,000 to \$6,000 each.

This group of River Patrol volunteers have many reasons for doing this work. First, it frees up an employee to remain at his/her regular job, they get to see areas that they might otherwise not have access to, and they spot unusual things, like a crested saguaro cactus, blue herons, wildflowers, blooming cacti, javelinas and a bird dining on a snake. They feel good because they are helping make the “Wild and Scenic” Verde River just that again!

If you are interested in making a difference, become involved with Friends of the Forest. For more information, visit www.friendsoftheforestsedona.org or contact the Red Rock Ranger Station at 203-2900.