

Park's oldest volunteer an 'American treasure'

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George Simmons holds two of 101 mice at the White Grass Ranger Station, where he works as a seasonal volunteer, last month. Simmons, 86, has been living at White Grass Ranch every summer for about 15 years and is the park's oldest volunteer. (Angus M. Thuermer Jr./Jackson Hole News & Guide via AP)

WHITE GRASS -- It's easy to lose track of the date at the tiny cabin that serves as the White Grass Ranger Station in Grand Teton National Park.

No wonder, then, that George Simmons turned 86 this year without even noticing until a visitor wished him a belated birthday.

Simmons -- who's known as Black George, although he's white -- is the park's oldest volunteer. He's spent the summer season in the one-room ranger station cabin for 15 years.

Though he may occasionally lose track, others measure time by Simmons himself. He arrives at the cabin as soon as the snow is melted and the ground has firmed up, and he leaves when the snow returns and begins to settle. During the winter, he will visit friends and relatives in other states.

But the cabin is home, even if he is only there a few months a year. Inside, he relives his travels with Death Canyon hikers whom he offers root beer floats.

His signature greeting, "Yeehaa," comes from his time in Texas in the 1980s. It was desolate, and people were so excited to see a friendly face they exclaimed "Yeehaa!", Simmons said.

When he started in Grand Teton, he typed the weekly morning report, full of information on the weather, local elk populations and people to whom he had served root beer floats.

The report is now a tradition in Grand Teton National Park, said Scott Gunther, a ranger who supervises Simmons.

"He's an incredible statistician," Gunther said.

His real contribution to the National Park Service is his mere presence, Gunther said. He engages the public and makes immediate connections with visitors. People meet him and then return with friends.

Simmons wants visitors to appreciate national parks, and specifically Grand Teton National Park. He also wants them to think of him as a friend.

The reactions of the visitors he meets are recorded in sketchbooks that act as a log each season.

Some simply say thanks for the coffee or tea, or root beer float. Other messages are more personal.

"You have and will forever leave a lasting impression on my life. Thanks for all that you do to make the world a better place," reads one comment.

"You are truly an American treasure," another says.