The Power of a Uniform

Elk #16 ambles through the field checking his harem. He sidles up to each cow and sniffs her rump. Raising his massive rack of antlers, he sees two young bucks, chases them out of the field, and resumes his inspection. He lifts his face to the sky and bugles – a loud, mournful sound that resounds through the Cataloochee Valley in the Smokies. Bugling tells females he's here and warns other males to stay away. Then he goes back to grazing.

But that happened two weeks ago. Now Elk #16 is the odd man out, relegated to the edges of the field and no longer the center of attraction. He's lost all his cows to Elk #67, a younger, more powerful male. Elk #16 grazes with young bulls, the teenagers as we call them. These two-year old bucks with only a single shoot for an antler don't have a chance to mate this year and they know it. But Elk #16 still thinks he can get his women back. He calls out with a pitiful bugle, which only says to me that he is finished and should be relegated to the assisted living section of the valley.

Visitors line up on the side of the road and watch in fascination, some through binoculars. They take pictures and edge cautiously into the field until I ask them to get back on the road and close to their cars.

"This is the rut, the mating season and these placid animals are wild and could charge at any moment." I know that it's not my assertive words that convince them to move back; it's my uniform.

Oh, the power of a uniform.

I'm a member of the Elk Bugle Corps, a large volunteer effort in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The Park System calls us all VIPs (Volunteers in the Park). We

educate the public about the elk and the history of the park but most importantly, we keep people at least 50 yards from these large grazing animals. A bull can weigh up to 800 lbs.; that's about the weight of two refrigerators. No matter what elk do and where they go in the park, they have the right of way.

Families first settled in the Cataloochee Valley in the 1830s, decades after elk became extinct in North Carolina. Elk disappeared from the Southern Appalachians because they were overhunted and lost their habitat when settlers cleared land and moved in livestock.

After years of study and research, the Park reintroduced 25 elk from the Land between the Lakes on the border of Kentucky and Tennessee. The next year, they brought in another 27 from Elk Island National Park in Canada. For a while, it looked like the elk population would not sustain itself but now there are about 150 elk.

Every Tuesday from June to October, I report to the Worlds Headquarter, a small building near the Cataloochee Ranger Station. I put two antlers in my trunk, and drive out into the Valley looking for visitors. Visitor contact is the metric of the success of this program. How many people do you actually talk to?

Antlers fascinate children and their parents as well. Some groups want each family member photographed with two antlers coming out of their heads. Antlers are heavy, so the picture consists of a child in front with the adult holding up the antlers in the back. Bull elk lose their antlers every March. Right after, the antlers start growing again, each year getting bigger and more complex. "It's like your baby teeth," I explain. "Your teeth fall out and you start growing your adult teeth, but for elk it happens every year."

"Don't give them too much information," Pat, our shift leader, says. "If they want to know where the bathrooms are, you don't need to tell them about the life of Thomas Crapper, the plumber who invented the modern toilet."

On my first day after an intensive training session, I put on my brown pants and belt and check that I have the proper boots and socks. The section in the training manual on uniforms takes up two pages: neutral color socks, no spread between front buttons when sitting, a straight line through shirt, belt buckle and fly.

You can't smoke, drink or gamble while in uniform or attend a demonstration – and who knows what else. However, I'm not taking any chances. I wait until I get to the restroom in the park campground before I put on my shirt. The government-issued tan shirt with a VIP logo feels loose and comfortable. And of course, a green baseball cap with the VIP logo. What is a uniform without something on your head?

I hum "You're in the army now." I look good in a uniform and we all look the same. Uniforms make people look trim and slim though Pat's gut spills out of his pants.

No one in my family was ever a police officer, firefighter, or soldier. This is my first experience wearing a uniform. I was never on a sports team or a girl scout. Society may have called the "dress for success" office attire a uniform, but we all knew it wasn't a real uniform. Now that I no longer have to punch a clock, I'm trying to overcome an underprivileged childhood.

In Cataloochee Valley, I meet Pat, and two other newbies. We all get into the E-ride, an electric car similar to a golf cart, to patrol the valley. I'm pumped.

The E-ride is light and fun to drive. However, we spend almost four hours in it. We stop to talk to visitors; that's the rewarding part but this job is not for me. As the thinnest person in the car, I'm squashed and bounced around on the dirt roads. My neck and back ache the next few days. But I'm determined to keep my National Park Service shirt and hat.

After my first shift, I'm about to hand in my resignation to Ranger Mark LaShell, who's in charge of the Elk Bugle Corps, but Mark suggests that I don't need to be in the electric car.

"Just rove around on foot and do your own thing," and I jump at his idea. Most volunteers are happy to sit in the E-ride and only get out to talk to visitors. Cataloochee Valley is not a demanding physical activity, for either volunteers or visitors. It's not much hiking and a lot of talking to people in cars.

I plan to do the same thing each week, but the weather, flowers, and visitors and elk behavior keeps changing. This is my opportunity to meet visitors, many new to the Smokies. Maybe I can encourage a few to get off the pavement and on a trail. And we always refer to them as visitors, never tourists and certainly never *tourons* (tourist/morons), though it's tempting sometimes. It's their national park, as well.

Elk don't like the sun, so it's difficult to find them during the day. Visitors are not impressed by turkeys in the fields when they've come to see elk. Some people sit in folding chairs with their picnics, and binoculars all day, waiting for dusk and hoping to see elk in the shadows.

"When do they let the elk out?" asks a woman.

I explain about the sun and that elk are free to go wherever they want, as long as they stay on public land. But I don’t let on about Elk #22 who was euthanized. Elk #22 was bullied by bigger males as a boy and caused a lot of trouble. He went where elk didn’t belong, ate non-elk food, and generally became a juvenile delinquent, if people still use that expression. An EBC volunteer even wrote a children's book about it, *Bully for You No. 22*.

Talking to folks for a while, I realize that they’re interested in more than just elk behavior. They’re fascinated about the history of Cataloochee. I show them a few photos of the elk pen on Big Fork Ridge Trail, where the elk were placed for a couple of months when they were first brought to the park.

I carry historic 1940s pictures of Steve Woody and the Woody House and encourage people to walk the one-mile to see the house. The white frame house has three rooms upstairs and three downstairs with a couple of fireplaces. The house is empty and open to the public; the park feels there would be more vandalism if the buildings were kept locked. The grass around the house is mowed to keep the feel of the open historic landscape.

I don’t carry a two-way radio since they're in short supply and I’m very junior. Only Pat has a radio. He acts like our shift leader because he’s the only one who was here last year. The rest of us accept this.

Another half-mile past the Woody House, I reach backcountry campsite #40, where a sign still warns campers about bears. Rangers are quick to put up warnings and slow to take them down. I hear giggling coming from the back of the campsite and walk

to investigate. A long clothesline stretches across two large trees. Is someone squatting here? Who would know and question them? Now what do I do?

I don't have any authority, other than my uniform, which may not be much help once they see the Volunteer badge sewn on my shirt. As Ranger Mark says in his regular emails, you can ask folks to do something, you can even tell them to do something, but you can't make them do anything. "So walk away if you feel uncomfortable." My problem is that I'm never uncomfortable when I feel I'm right.

I approach the site to find a young couple with two toddlers.

"How long have you been here? I ask.

"Since yesterday," she says. "It poured last night." Just a family drying out at the campsite. I'm almost disappointed as I walk back.

I usually hike in a T-shirt and shorts but now I'm in long pants. Roving in the government-issued shirt and pants is hot. The heavy cotton shirt washes well and stays wrinkle free. I wash the shirt by itself. If this shirt got messed up, it would take an act of Congress to get another one. We provide our own pants in UPS brown.

My volunteer uniform brings me closer to visitors and gives me a license to talk to everyone. When I meet other hikers on the trail as a civilian, I say "hello" but rarely get into a conversation. We all understand that we have miles to cover. Here, I have all the time I want to answer questions and listen to their stories.

"Did you move these elk so we see them better?" People have trouble accepting that the elk are not controlled or moved anywhere; they're wild.

By late August, children have gone back to school and the real rut hasn't yet started. The number of visitors has decreased, and I take the opportunity to walk to two small family cemeteries.

At the end of my shift, several cars have stopped on the side of the road. In a large field, a bull elk walks around while four females and their calves graze. Then he bugles. It begins deep and resonant, becomes a high-pitched squeal, and ends with several grunts.

I love this job.

By September, my shift is 12:30 to 4:30 P.M. and will continue to get earlier as days get shorter. Summer is definitely over, and the rut has started. During the rut, it's like an elk Peyton Place and all the clichés that we use for humans are true:

Following the herd

Big rack

Young buck

The biggest and most powerful male attracts all the girls.

On the trail to the Woody House, three women on horseback warn me that a hunting dog is spooking their horses. Is this another potential confrontation? By the time I find the dog, it's leashed and walking with a couple in their early 60s. The man wears a bandana around his head, 1970s hippie style.

"Welcome to your National Park," I let that sink in. "You know that dogs are not allowed on backcountry trails in the Smokies or any national park."

"But horses are?" he asks.

"That's right. Dogs are predators and give off a scent that disturbs the wildlife. Horses are not carnivores, even though they mess up a trail."

The guy flashes me the two-finger peace sign and that’s supposed to make it all OK. I escort them out. They talk about their experience volunteering in the Virginia national forest with their dog. "That's different! Dogs are allowed in national forests. We're in a national park."

At the trailhead, I show them “no dogs” sign but they shrug me off. Some visitors seem to think that park regulations are just suggestions and not real rules at all.

People may believe that a uniform gives the wearer special powers or liberties. Maybe a police officer in a tin pot country, but not here in the parks. A uniform gives me not more power but actually less. I have to be careful how I act. In a T-shirt and shorts, I'm not always too diplomatic when I see visitors doing something careless or foolish. When I've met a dog on a trail, I've chewed out its owner. “Dogs are not allowed on the trails in national parks, don't you know that?” I take pictures of the offending dog and owner and send them to the Deputy Superintendent.

I may be brash, opinioned, and loud but I have to be so much gentler when I’m in uniform trying to spread the message. I leave my freedom of speech at the park entrance and I’m OK with that.

I am still in awe of living so close to a national park. Cataloochee is always mentioned when someone writes about “Secrets in the Smokies.” It might make the area more mysterious but there’s nothing secret about it; Cataloochee is in a national park. It takes me ninety minutes to drive into the Cataloochee Valley but other volunteers have a much longer trip each week. I feel privileged to be part of the EBC team. It’s a prestigious volunteer activity, not that easy to get into, because most volunteers come back year after year.

I arrive in the Valley to find a row of empty vehicles opposite the Palmer Chapel but no one in sight. When I jump out of my car, I see about twenty visitors in the woods within kissing distance of Elk #67 and his cows. I run through poison ivy and tell everyone to get back on the road. "The elk could charge at any time." And visitors listen and move to safety.

We watch Elk #67, still the dominant bull in the valley, strut across the road, and settle on the Palmer Chapel lawn. A family came to see the Chapel, but they'll have to wait. A male elk on one side of the road and his females on the other is not a stable situation. It's only a matter of time until all the cows are going to cross the road.

As I head back to my car, Elk #67 mounts an anonymous cow. I wonder how parents will explain this elk behavior to their children. I snap a picture of the elk copulating and put it on my blog. I'm not sure if anyone will read past it. Another, more prestigious blog, picks up my entry. Who says sex doesn't get attention?

Visitors keep pouring into the valley as the rut winds down. We now have three shifts on the Elk Bugle Corp and I'm on between 11:30 A.M. to 3:30 P.M. Traffic control has now become our main job in October. The one-lane road deep into the Cataloochee Valley was not built for the SUVs and monster trucks that seem to populate the valley. Cars have to back up, swing around, and cooperate. Ranger Mark feels sure that without EBC volunteers, there would be fistfights on the road.

I ask folks in their vehicles to pull over to the side and turn off their engine. Almost everyone complies and thanks me. But each week, there seems to be an old man in a huge truck that gets very upset.

The first one says, “I’m leaving and I’m never coming back again.”

The second one asks, “What are you in charge of?”

The third one says, “I’m trying to leave, if you’d let me.”

What’s upsetting these guys? That I’m female, that I look like I’m law enforcement but I'm not. Ranger Mark has reminded us again that we can’t make visitors do anything. We don’t have all the equipment around our belt, as he puts it, and we shouldn’t become park Nazis.

Once I got on the EBC, I started looking at volunteer uniforms in other National Park units. While park rangers all wear the green and the gray, VIP uniforms vary from park to park. Volunteer uniforms are designed to look different from rangers. I've noticed that in small national park units, they don't even get VIP government issued uniforms. The individual park picks an outfit that the VIPs can put together themselves and sew the volunteer patch on the sleeve.

At Fort Matanzas National Monument in Florida, volunteers wear Bermuda shorts with polo shirts and canvas shoes. Their outfit makes sense since they work on boats but somehow, it’s not the same. These VIPs don't look official, just boaters helping out.

At Manassas National Battlefield in Virginia, the VIP uniforms have recently changed to blue work shirt and black pants. The VIP I talked to said that the previous uniform looked too much like a ranger's uniform. Visitors got confused and expected VIPs to enforce rules. Also, since Manassas is so close to Washington D.C., legislators came to the visitor center and saw several people in uniform at the desk. They couldn’t tell the difference between rangers and volunteers. The legislators may have thought that

everybody behind the desk were rangers and that Manassas had too many people on the Park Service payroll.

The next year I switch to working at the Oconaluftee Visitor Center. I'm behind the desk for four hours, answering questions, and suggesting hikes for visitors. The most popular question is not "Where's the restroom?" but "What is there to do around here?" Sometimes I go off-script and say "Well, for starters, there are 803 miles of maintained trails in the Park and I've hiked them all" and that leaves them speechless.

Once I'm set free from the desk, I rove popular trails to offer a “uniform presence” in the backcountry. In the middle of the summer, Smokies volunteers are issued a brown ball cap to replace the forest green one, to look even less like rangers.

But next year, the Park will form a North Carolina VIP roving group who will patrol the backcountry throughout their whole shift. No more standing behind a desk, no need to wear long pants. In the backcountry, you can wear shorts. This volunteer gig is for me.