

GRAND CANYON EXPLORER

Grand Canyon Pioneers Society - Monthly Bulletin

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Search and Rescue at the Grand Canyon

Ken Phillips, head of Search and Rescue at the Grand Canyon, and Bil Vandergraf, a wilderness ranger at the Grand Canyon, presented a program about search and rescue at the Canyon at our November meeting in Sedona. Ken has been at the Canyon for 16 years and Bil for 10 years. The mid-air collision on June 10, 1956, over the Canyon in which 128 people died, was the worst civil air accident in the United States to that date. It led to the creation of the Federal Aviation Authority and to the upgrading of the rescue capabilities at the Grand Canyon. "We had no technical rescue equipment then," Ken said. "A Swiss Air recovery team that was training in Colorado was brought in to help with the disaster."



Today the Search and Rescue (SAR) team at the Canyon conducts an average of 400 search and rescue missions a year including 250 helicopter medivacs and 12 inner canyon fatalities. "We average two to three helicopter evacuations a day during the busy summer months," Ken said, "and one every week or two during the winter months. We use a McDonnell Douglas MD 900 Explorer helicopter, which, since it has no tail rotor, is much quieter."

Ken explained that helicopter evacuation was the most effective way to bring an injured person out of the Canyon. An important part of the SAR operation is a preventative program. "We try to decrease the potential number of incidents with an educational program," Ken explained. "We encourage people to drink enough water and to be prepared before they go into the Canyon. Also, we make sure that our training and equipment is more than adequate so that we can respond effectively." Ken added that many rescues are along the rim, such as lightning strikes or falls. SAR is "authorized" by federal mandate to assist in rescues. Ken explained that this differs from "required." "Since 1884, 31 National Park Service personnel have died in rescue operations," he said. "We are not required to put our own lives in danger if the situation is too hazardous to respond."

Most of the distress calls used to come from signal mirrors or ground-to-air calls. Today many reports come from satellite phones or cell phones. "Calls from phones are much better," Ken said, "because we are able to determine the location of the injured person." "Most of the calls come from day hikers because they are usually less prepared and have

less experience," Ken said. He added that most of the calls come from the Bright Angel and Kaibab trails. "Rarely do we hear from anyone on the backcountry trails because those hikers are more prepared for the Canyon." Rescues are expensive. "In 1997 the National Park Service spent 3.4 million dollars on Search and Rescue," Ken said. "Today people may have to pay the helicopter and ambulance charges for their rescue."

Bil showed a video and told about a particularly involved rescue. "Todd Bowers and a friend drove to the Grand Canyon from Indiana," Bil said. "They stopped at Grandview, looked over the edge, and on a whim decided to hike down the trail. This was on July 5, 1996. All they had to drink was a bottle of Gatorade." "Five miles down the pair ran out of Gatorade," Bil continued. "Todd decided to go to the river for water and since there wasn't a direct trail, he headed down the drainage. His friend hiked out and waited in the car. He waited all night, all day, and at 5:00 p.m. went to the Visitor Center to report that his friend was lost! The Visitor Center personnel reported the account to us."

"A helicopter search was launched," Bil said. "We thought we were looking for a body. The helicopter checked Cottonwood Drainage and sees a body. He landed one mile away. Rescuers found Todd alive with a core temperature of 105 degrees." A major rescue was started before dawn on July 7. "We had 3 helicopters and 50 rescuers. We ruled out a short haul rescue (bringing the injured man up in on a rope) because of the location. " Bil continued talking about the rescue while showing dramatic video footage. Todd survived. He was carried down to where a helicopter could land and flown to the hospital in Flagstaff. The total cost for the rescue was \$62,000.

Besides rescues, there are a number of searches each year -- from a child who has wandered away from the campground to hikers lost in the Canyon. Ken told the story of a couple who were lost in August 1992. "They belonged to the Air Force and had top security clearance," he said. "We found them dead in Horn Creek. The Air Force was very interested in the cause of death. We did some unusual tests to determine the cause of death. By getting maggot larva from the bodies scientists were able to find the time death. Weather records showed that there had been rain that day. The couple died in a flash flood."

Ken added that any time the rescue team is involved in a fatality, they have a debriefing process where they talk about the incident. "This keeps our team from burnout in dealing with fatalities," he explained.

We all agreed that we had a most interesting program and applauded Ken and Bil, both for the presentation and for the work they do at the Grand Canyon.

GCPS Outings for 2001

January

20: The travels of the flute-playing Kokopelli presented by Jay Cravath, speaker for the Arizona Humanities Council.

Time: 12:00 Noon for lunch

1:00 PM for presentation

Place: Poco Diablo Resort

1736 Highway 179, Sedona

Jay Cravath, received the 1994 Arizona Humanities Council Distinguished Scholar Award and has received acclaim for his lecture program on Native American Traditional Music created for the Arizona Humanities Council Speakers Bureau. He is a research assistant at the Center for Indian Education in the College of Education at Arizona State University and is currently working on his Ph.D. As a composer, Cravath has written and arranged several documentary film scores as well as an original overture recently performed by the Wickenburg Chamber Orchestra.

February: "Fateful Journey" - an account of death on the Colorado River by Dr. Tom Myers. We'll meet in Sedona at Poco Diablo Resort at 12:00 noon for lunch. The program will begin at 1:00 p.m.

March: A living history of the Life of John Wesley Powell presented by Todd Weber at Sharlott Hall Museum in Prescott. There is also an exhibit of Gary Ladd's Grand Canyon photography at the Museum. We'll meet at the Palace Bar on Whiskey Row at 11:30 a.m. for lunch. Thanks to Gus Scott for arranging this program.

Thank you

We recently received a donation \$40 from Roy Burriss to be applied to our scholarship fund. For those not familiar with the Scholarship, we have awarded it each year to a graduate student of Northern Arizona University for research on the Grand Canyon and the Colorado River. The Society had to hold on making the award this year because of the lack of funds, but this donation will be added toward the next year's award.

GRAND CANYON PIONEERS SOCIETY PIONEER AWARD

NOMINATIONS now being ACCEPTED for the GRAND CANYON PIONEERS SOCIETY PIONEER AWARD.

The Grand Canyon Pioneers Society is now accepting nominations for the 2001 Pioneer Award. The Society wants to honor an individual who has made a significant contribution to the understanding of and knowledge about the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River.

The individual honored will have made a significant contribution to the understanding of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado in such areas as: Geology, Creation, River Running, Backcountry Hiking, Photography, History, Administration, etc., that is, any area that advances the knowledge of the Grand Canyon.

The form has been shortened to make it easier for the individual making the nomination. The one page form to nominate an individual for the Pioneer Award may be obtained from:

Lee Albertson, Chairman
Grand Canyon Pioneer Society Pioneer Award
12219 South 71st Street
Tempe, AZ 85284-2314

Phone: 480-838-2710

Email: Albertson1213@msn.com

The completed form must be returned by February 15, 2001. If you have any questions, please contact Lee Albertson.

Outings Contacts Information

Outings Coordinator:

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The Bulletin welcomes comments, stories, or Reflections and Remembrances.

Please send them to

Diane Cassidy
8540 North Central Avenue #27

Phoenix, AZ 85020

or e-mail them to Diane@grandcanyonbooks.com

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