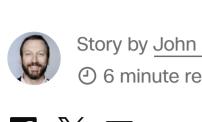


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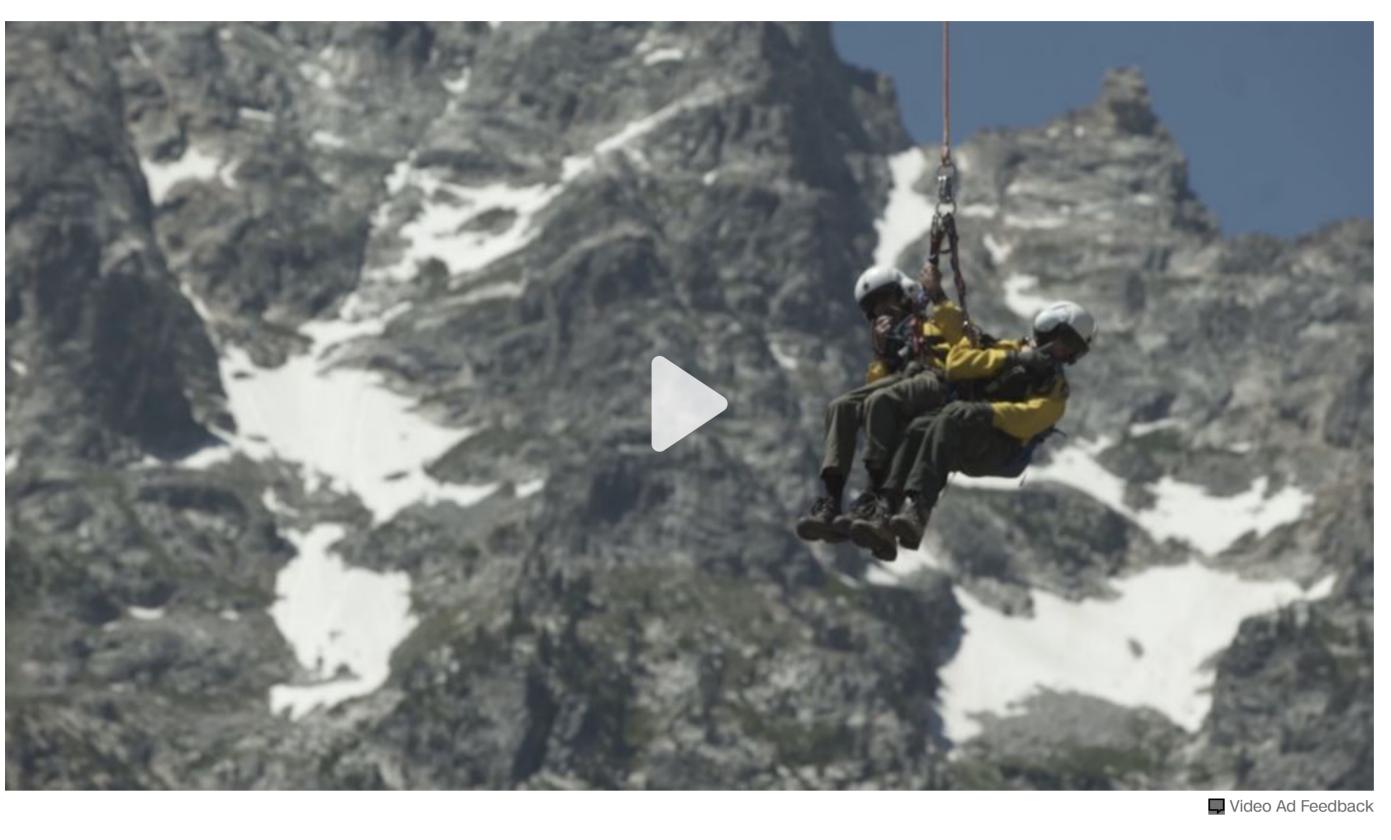
National Park Service Centennial

In the Tetons, the Jenny Lake rangers come to the rescue



Story by John Branch, CNN Video by Nick Scott, CNN ④ 6 minute read · Updated 5:26 PM EDT, Sun April 2, 2017

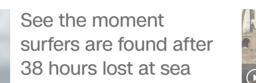
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Saving lives in Grand Teton National Park () 00:43





Editor's Note: CNN's John Branch worked for the National Park Service for five years at Grand Teton National Park.

(CNN) — Park ranger Ron Johnson peers down from a helicopter, watching friend and fellow ranger Darin Jernigan suspended from a rope about 200 feet below him.

Working as the spotter for this latest mission, Johnson works in tandem with the pilot tasked with inserting Jernigan into a high alpine meadow near Teewinot Mountain in the 310,000-acre Grand Teton National Park in northwest Wyoming.

Although they primarily use two-way radios and hand signals to communicate, Johnson and Jernigan also communicate with eye contact and instinct as the pair have dozens of times before.

As members of the Jenny Lake Climbing Rangers based at Grand Teton National Park, they handle real rescue incidents and regular training missions like this one held in July in the park. Intensive, ongoing training is crucial for the 19-member group returning to these mountains year after year.

The Jenny Lake Rangers handle about 75 rescues annually, including everything from a temporarily lost child who has wandered away from a campground to a hiker with a twisted knee or sprained ankle to more serious injuries and accidents that occur due to significant falls high in the peaks.

Summer in the Park: Exploring Grand Teton National Park

A range full of unstable terrain

The Tetons can be a dangerous place.

The range is full of jagged peaks, steep inclines, loose rock and unstable terrain, which means there are a limited number of flat places where a helicopter can land.

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The July training mission focused on the team's "short haul" insertion technique. A short haul mission places personnel and resources near an accident scene by dangling them from a fixed length rope below a helicopter. A common technique for this team, short haul is vital to expediting high mountain rescues.

"It is certainly one of the more dangerous things we do," says Jenny Lake District Ranger Scott Guenther. "There is not a lot of margin for error with that, but it has saved a lot of lives. With short haul, we are able to get to a patient within what we call the 'golden hour.'"

That golden hour is about how long it takes to reach critically injured patients and successfully administer initial aid. The next step is to extract them from the backcountry.

"Patients that may have died 20 or 30 years ago, we are now able to save and get to the hospital to get the interventions they need to save their life," says Guenther.

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People still die on the mountain.

In July, an experienced mountain guide fell 2,400 feet to his death during a descent with clients after a successful morning summit of the 13,770-foot-high Grand Teton. The Jenny Lake Rangers were sent to the scene to assist with recovery of his body.

Sheer beauty and grandeur aside, the real appeal of the Tetons is the ease of access to the range. Visitors can reach virtually any part of the park in a day's hike. That access can get some visitors in trouble as they enter the high alpine environment quickly after departing the trailhead.

Nestled between the popular town of Jackson to the south and Yellowstone National Park to the north, Grand Teton National Park reached 3.1 million visitors in 2015.

Most people visit between Memorial Day and Labor Day. Unpredictable mountain weather, loose rocks on trails and climbing routes, wildlife encounters, slippery alpine glaciers and other factors can all turn a short day excursion into a bad afternoon.

When things go wrong in Grand Teton National Park's backcountry, the Jenny Lake Climbing Rangers come to the rescue. Along with five year-round permanent rangers, 14 seasonal employees arrive each spring and stay until summer crowds taper off at the end of September.

The seasonal rangers work a variety of jobs during the rest of the year: Johnson is an avalanche forecaster at Yellowstone, while Jernigan is a physical therapy instructor. Others work as college professors, freelance writers, ski guides or ski patrol workers across the Western United States and Canada.

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Decades of experience on the mountains

The strength of the group is its collective experience. Seasonal ranger George Montopoli is serving his 38th summer, while John Carr and Jim Springer are working their 35th and 31st seasons, respectively. The group's rookie, Molly Tyson, is in her sixth season.

Unlike many National Park Service employees who work at a number of parks over the course of a career, the Jenny Lake group has little turnover.

"One of my favorite things is that esprit de corps you build with these folks. You have to have strong camaraderie to be able to trust each other with your lives in the backcountry during rescue events," Guenther says.

Johnson, who has worked 25 summers as a Jenny Lake ranger, agrees.

"Being able to look at someone and know that they are there for you and you for them is a bond that is rare in almost any other work group. We understand that, and we need that."

Most rescues start with a call to the Teton Interagency Dispatch Center or a 911 call to the local sheriff's office. The Jenny Lake daily search and rescue coordinator assembles the squad at the team's rescue cache located at the base of the mountains. Here in this small wooden building, the team assesses the situation, holds a briefing, gathers the requisite gear and heads to the scene.

The rangers agree there isn't any hierarchy when it comes to planning a rescue. "Everybody has equal say in what they think should happen," says Johnson.

"When an incident occurs and we are getting that collective information, we use the fresh perspective of the newer folks and the wisdom of folks that have been here 20, 25, even 30 years," he says. "It's that mix and lack of ego that hopefully allows us to come up with the decision that is most appropriate to handle the incident that needs to be done."

100 years, 100 national park experiences

Preventing the need for search and rescue

"Search and rescue missions account for maybe 10% of our time," says Guenther.

"The rest of the time we are out there patrolling the backcountry and talking to visitors in the ranger station. A big part of our mission is what we call 'preventive search and rescue,' " which involves educating visiting climbers and hikers about current route conditions and providing up-to-date information about park trails and campsites.

"When I came here 26 years ago, I made all the same mistakes that we rescue people for now," says Guenther. "My roots help me to have good conversations with people that are about to take on an adventure in the backcountry.

"Our job is to make sure people recreate here in a safe manner, and protect this resource at the same time."

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Donations can be made to the Jenny Lake Climbing Rangers via the Grand Teton Association, the park's official non-profit partner.

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