

# HIDDEN T

*Conservation officers protect and explore a wealth of ancient*

**RANGE CREEK CANYON** - Seconds after explaining that visitors to this remote canyon often have difficulty finding signs of the ancient Fremont people who lived here 1,000 years ago, Mark Connolly comes across a man with a quizzical look.

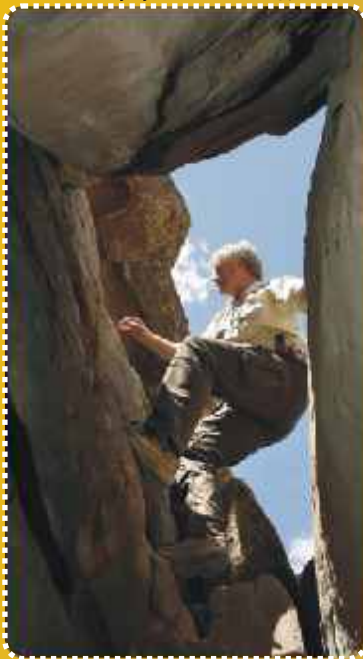
"We knew it was going to be hard, but we didn't think it would be this hard to find things," Ken Duncan, of Houston, tells Connolly. "Maybe you could give us some help."

Connolly's job is not to act as a guide, but to protect the numerous and varied artifacts that have put the rugged Range Creek on the "must visit" list of anybody with even a hint of interest in the ancient peoples of the Southwest.

Nevertheless, the conservation officer for the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (DWR) jumps out of his truck and tells Duncan to follow him. A short climb up a steep hill and they are standing among the collapsed ruins of a pit house tucked under a cliff. As Duncan and Connolly talk about the wonders of Range Creek while looking at a petroglyph of several deer and bighorn ram near the pit house, they are joined by Bud Thayer from Arizona and Jack Kelly from Montana.

The three retired buddies have come to explore the canyon, tucked between the Book and Roan cliffs in eastern Utah near the Green River, and share a fascination for the Fremont. The Anasazi culture from about the same period typically gets all the attention, with amazing ruins like those in Mesa Verde. But the draw of unspoiled and recently opened Range Creek brings people here to study the Fremont.

"It's been a bugger to find anything in



here. The vegetation is so thick," Thayer says. "We would appreciate it if you could give us some tips." Connolly gives the men detailed information on where to find more petroglyphs and granaries down the road before climbing back into his truck and continuing his daily patrol in the canyon.

"It makes my day when I meet people who are really into the history of the canyon," Connolly says with a smile before sharing a story of a 92-year-old woman from Oklahoma he helped last summer. "That's

the reward of the job."

## **To protect and explore**

Connolly, who began patrolling the canyon in spring 2005, was enjoying his retirement from being a DWR conservation officer when the state called and asked if he was interested in the job. It was a no-brainer for a man who took vacations from chasing wildlife poachers to explore the ruins and artifacts of the Southwest.

When he gets time, Connolly explores the canyon on his own; after all, he won't be able to tell if anything is missing if he doesn't know what is there. He visits sites at least once a week. If something turns up missing, the permit system - up to 28 permits can be issued daily - will tell him who was in the canyon when it happened, at least providing clues if not leading him right to the looter. He has yet to notice any looting. Chances are visitors to the canyon will meet Connolly while he patrols in his vehicle. He often takes time to see how people are doing and offer directions to rock art or granaries.

Connolly always carries a cooler full of water bottles for those times when he meets visitors who underestimated the heat in the canyon, which can reach 100 degrees.

Visitors are only allowed to hike or ride horses in the canyon during daylight hours, and some of the most amazing sites are deep within Range Creek. Most hikers only make it about four miles into the canyon before turning around. Walking down the road from the gate, at 7,000 feet, is easy, but the return is all uphill. Camping is prohibited within the canyon, but is allowed at the gate.

There is an easier alternative. Several guiding companies are offering tours of Range Creek. The guides, when accompanied by a DWR volunteer, are also allowed to drive the entire 14 miles of the road. The only other vehicles allowed in the canyon are for administrative purposes.

On days when Connolly is off or otherwise engaged in the project, fellow conservation officers Mike Milburn and Alan Green take up the patrol. If none of the conservation officers are available, rangers from Utah State Parks and Recreation fill in.

There also are field groups from universities working sites in the summer months, and archaeologists are always coming and going.

Then there is Corinne Springer. She spends the entire summer on the historic Wilcox Ranch, watching the place and making sure everything, like the antiquated well-water system, is working properly.

For Springer, also an archaeologist, living in Range Creek is a dream. "I never thought in my lifetime that I would have an opportunity to be one of the first people to look on a site that the Fremont left. I thought those days were long gone," she says. "This is like being an archaeologist 100 years ago."

*Reprinted courtesy of the Salt Lake Tribune and author Brett Prettyman. Contact him at [brett@sltrib.com](mailto:brett@sltrib.com) or 801-257-8902.*

# REASURES



## *Fremont Indian rock art and artifacts at Range Creek Canyon*



### RANGE CREEK FACTS

- 575 - Number of hikers in 2005
- 28 - Maximum number of permits that can be issued daily in Range Creek; the allotment has not yet been reached.
- \$2.5 million - Total paid by federal and state agencies to Waldo Wilcox to buy the property in the bottom of the canyon. The total does not include gas and mineral rights in the canyon.
- 1885 to 2001 - Cattle ranches operated continuously in Range Creek through those years.
- 8-10 - Percent of the canyon inventoried by archeologists so far
- 350 - Number of sites documented.
- 0 - Number of sites dug by archeologists in the canyon
- 435-636-0260 - Number to call for information on Range Creek

### Getting a permit for Range Creek

Visitors to Range Creek are required to obtain a \$5 per day permit per person from the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources to enter the canyon. Permits are not available at the gate or in the canyon and are only available on the internet at [wildlife.utah.gov/range\\_creek/](http://wildlife.utah.gov/range_creek/). The canyon is open April 15 to Dec. 1 (weather and road conditions allowing). Visit [www.slttrib.com/outdoors](http://www.slttrib.com/outdoors) for a slide show and video on Range Creek.



### HISTORY of RANGE CREEK

The Fremont are believed to have lived in the Southwest between A.D. 700 and 1350. Some archaeologists believe as many as 600 Fremont may have called Range Creek Canyon home at the peak of their storied history. By 1500, the Fremont people had vanished. Not until some 400 years later are there records of inhabitants finding Range Creek. Cattle were run in the area starting in 1885, and the first homesteaders arrived in 1915.

Ray Wilcox purchased Range Creek in 1951 from Preston Nutter. The Wilcox family ran cattle on the land until Ray's son, Waldo Wilcox, sold his 1,600 acres along Range Creek for \$2.5 million in 2001. Although they collected some artifacts, the Wilcox family had protected the canyon from outsiders for five decades.

The canyon opened to the public in 2004, and it was not long before officials announced the first known case of looting. Two stone blades and a pottery fragment went missing in summer 2004.

Therein lies the biggest problem in protecting the countless items left by the Fremont in Range Creek Canyon. Duncan Metcalfe, curator of archaeology with the Utah Museum of Natural History and lead Range Creek researcher, says only 8 percent to 10 per-

cent of the canyon has been surveyed, but that small portion turned up 350 sites - everything from unsealed granaries to massive petroglyph panels to a quiver of arrows tucked into a crack in the cliff wall. The real discoveries will come when archaeologists take a shovel to the pit houses Fremont sites that have not been disturbed are as rare as hen's teeth in this state," Metcalfe says. "The intellectual capital of Range Creek is unknown, but the potential is huge."

Metcalfe says in a perfect archaeology world, he would have had 10 years to survey the canyon before the public was allowed to visit. Metcalfe admits that might be selfish and says he understands the public interest in the amazing canyon.

"The question is how do we meet the public needs and do our job to understand who the Fremont people were and why they disappeared?" Metcalfe says. "People see an arrowhead and think if they don't pick it up somebody else will. You multiply that by hundreds and thousands and what you end up with is loving the canyon to death. The DWR has taken a moderate and measured approach to controlling the number of people in the canyon. Mark Connolly is the best gift the state ever gave to this canyon."