



From Mountains to Desert



Volunteers in National Parks and other sites across the United States contribute so much to America's public lands. These volunteers come with all different kinds of skills and abilities. Like many animal and plant species across the world, our volunteers also adapt to their new work environment and the needs the park or monument has. The flexibility and willingness of Volunteers in Parks (VIP) makes a difference to America's treasures on a daily basis. This is the story of volunteer ranger, Mike Doyal.

Last summer, I was a volunteer in the Backcountry Office at Rocky Mountain National Park. It meant four months of 32-hour work weeks helping hundreds of park visitors plan trips and complete backcountry camping permits. The office (open 12 hours daily, 7 days a week) needed all of the ten-person staff to answer daily phone inquiries, complete permit requests and assist visitors with planning a backcountry trip or completing a permit. Every day was busy but satisfying.

My next adventure took place at White Sands National Monument. Working 32 hours each week as a volunteer at White Sands National Monument has been a very different experience yet equally rewarding. The monument has fewer staff, a much smaller land mass, and fewer annual visitors than Rocky Mountain but it has offered a broader range of experiences.

White Sands National Monument has an annual visitation rate of about half a million visitors. If you've

heard about White Sands before, you probably know that it is the largest gypsum dunefield in the world at 275 square miles. Because of the uniqueness of the monument, I've had lots of library time learning about the geology, biology, and history of the dunes and monument. I've also staffed the visitor center desk, developed interpretative programs, and created the "Birds of White Sands" touchscreen program—all new learning experiences for me!

Working at White Sands has provided a unique opportunity to enjoy spectacular sunsets, stunning views of star-filled night skies, and morning visits from finches and loggerhead shrikes, while watching hawks soar just above the edges of the dunefield. On my off time, I explore the dunes and nearby mountains and visit numerous historical sites, museums, and recreational areas, all within an easy driving distance from the monument.

There are many opportunities to volunteer at different national parks.

If you are interested in making a valued contribution to support our nation's treasures, visit <http://www.nps.gov/getinvolved/volunteer.htm>.

—Mike Doyal, VIP



VIP Mike Doyal