



No Walk In The Park

The National Park Service says, "Leave your handguns at home."

It's summer, and the living is easy. So why not pile everyone into the station wagon and take them to one of our nation's magnificent national parks? Our national park system sprawls across 84 million acres and is the envy of the world. But if you have a concealed carry handgun and never leave home without it, don't plan on visiting any of the 400 or so park facilities (or "units," as they are known in bureaucratic parlance). Your gun may be legal in your home state, but it's not welcome on National Park Service (NPS) land. Suddenly, you may have more to worry about than Yogi Bear swiping your picnic basket; you may have to worry about your own survival.

The national park system of the 21st century is but a pale shadow of Teddy Roosevelt's original vision. Many of the parks are now plagued by drug smuggling, methamphetamine production, marijuana cultivation and illegal immigration. The stereotypical park rangers in their well-pressed suits and distinctive hats are now working alongside SWAT-trained colleagues who carry M16s and practice fast-roping from helicopters into remote, dangerous areas.

To be fair, with such a vast wilderness to police, the NPS serious-crime rate is quite low. However, the rate might be even lower if there were more than 1,800 armed rangers available to protect visitors, employees



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and valuable natural resources. Also, when it comes to solving violent-crime cases, the NPS has a less than stellar track record. Nationwide, law enforcement agencies solve about 70 percent of all murder cases. The NPS only closes 29 percent of its cases. The national average for solving rape cases is 45 percent. The NPS lags behind, at 34 percent. The story is the same for aggravated assaults. The nationwide law enforcement case-closure rate is 58 percent; the NPS rate is 40 percent.

NPS rangers are highly motivated and professional. They are also frustrated by the technical and bureaucratic obstacles that prevent them from effectively doing their jobs. The International Association of Chiefs of Police surveyed a number of national park rangers. Many of them complained bitterly about being outnumbered and outgunned by the 21st century criminals they encounter on a regular basis. The rangers must also contend with obsolete communications systems that are poorly suited for the rugged terrain they must patrol. Many of the rangers surveyed said they do not feel that they can adequately protect themselves, let alone the millions of visitors who flock to the parks each year.

While this alarming state of affairs would give pause to most prospective park visitors, concealed carry permit holders probably assume that they could defend themselves and their families against most threats that they might encounter in a national park. Within reasonable constraints, virtually all states allow CCW permit holders to defend themselves, their families and other persons against deadly threats without fear of prosecution. While in a national park, a CCW permit holder might even be able to assist a park ranger in mortal danger. It's unlikely, but there is no harm in being prepared.

Alas, once again, logic proves useless against the entrenched antigen federal bureaucracy. For more than 50 years, the NPS has enforced a virtual ban on personal-defense handguns. NPS regulations state that all "loaded weapons are subject to confiscation by park authorities." Even if your personal-defense handgun is unloaded, it "must be rendered temporarily inoperable or... packed, cased [and] stored in a manner that will prevent [its] ready use."

The NPS steadfastly defends the prohibition on personal-defense handguns. The Service claims that such weapons are not needed on NPS property to protect against violent persons or large predatory animals. David Barna, NPS public affairs chief, seems all too eager to brush aside concerns about the NPS antigen policy. He pointed to the low violent-crime rate within the NPS system, and he claimed that "National park rangers and special agents have a strong record of solving cases." I don't know how Mr. Barna would define a "strong record," but the NPS' abysmal violent-crime case-closure rate is certainly not indicative of a record to be emulated.

Barna exhibited a surprising ignorance of the fundamental justification for concealed carry weapons laws. He told me, "Frankly, the low incidence of both violent crimes and animal attacks in the parks does not serve to bolster arguments that firearms and ammunition must be immedi-