



PARK RANGERS ASSOCIATION OF CALIFORNIA

THE SIGNPOST

President's Message

Reflections on Two Milestones: America's 250th and PRAC's 50th

As we move through 2026, two significant anniversaries invite us to pause and reflect on where we have been and where we are going.

This year marks the 250th anniversary of the United States. Across California, park professionals at every level of government are helping connect people to our shared heritage. Through daily work in maintenance, resource protection, interpretation, visitor services, and public safety, rangers and park staff—sworn and non-sworn alike—help preserve the stories, landscapes, and places that define our communities and our nation. Your efforts ensure that parks remain not only beautiful spaces, but meaningful places where history, culture, and nature are experienced and protected.

At the same time, the Park Rangers Association of California celebrates its 50th anniversary. Since 1976, PRAC has stood for professionalism, unity, and the advancement of the ranger profession across every type of agency—municipal, county, district, state, and federal. For five decades, we have advocated for training, standards, and recognition of the unique role park professionals play: not only as protectors of resources and enforcers of rules, but as stewards of history, interpreters of place, and connectors between people and the natural and cultural landscapes they cherish.

These two milestones are not separate. The work we do in our parks—whether maintaining trails and facilities, protecting resources, educating visitors, or ensuring public safety—helps tell the American story. Park professionals bring dedication and expertise that turn ordinary open spaces into places of learning, reflection, and belonging.



I am deeply proud of how PRAC continues to bring park professionals together across jurisdictions. Our strength lies in our shared commitment to the profession and to the public we serve. Whether through training opportunities, networking, or collective advocacy, we help ensure that rangers and park staff remain central to the visitor experience and to the long-term care of California's parks.

Looking ahead, I encourage all members to take pride in both the national story we help preserve and the professional legacy we continue to build together. Parks without dedicated, passionate professionals are simply land

with untold stories. With skilled staff across all disciplines, they become places of meaning, stewardship, and connection.

Thank you for the work you do every day and for your continued support of PRAC. Here's to the next 50 years of service to our profession and to the parks and people of California.

Kyle Roberson

President, Park Rangers Association of California



State Parks Rangers Arrest Homicide Suspect in Tuolumne County

Professionalism, Awareness, and Inter-Agency Cooperation Highlight Ranger Peace Officer Role

Written By: Kyle Roberson

On the evening of June 28, 2026, a routine patrol took a dramatic turn for two California State Parks peace officers near Columbia State Historic Park in Tuolumne County. What began as a tragic shooting in Sonora ended with the safe apprehension of a homicide suspect thanks to the vigilance and decisive action of State Parks rangers.

At approximately 7:15 p.m. on June 28, Tuolumne County Sheriff's deputies responded to a report of a shooting at a residence in the 17900 block of Lime Kiln Road in Sonora. The victim, 60-year-old Eric Brandon Udall, received life-saving aid but was later pronounced deceased at a hospital. Investigators quickly identified Timothy Allen Boling, 55, as the suspect. Boling, a convicted felon prohibited from possessing firearms and under Post Release Community Supervision (PRCS), fled the scene.

Deputies and detectives worked through the night. The following morning, the Sheriff's Office posted on social media identifying Boling as the suspect. Community members soon reported sightings in downtown Columbia and within Columbia State Historic Park.

As deputies staged nearby for a planned approach, two California State Parks rangers on patrol in Columbia SHP received direct reports from parks concessionaires that Boling was approaching individuals in the parking lot. The rangers made a cautious approach to the parking lot. From a distance, Boling did not readily recognize the rangers' patrol vehicle as law enforcement and began approaching them on foot. The rangers sprung into action taking Boling into custody at gunpoint and without further incident. Sheriff's personnel arrived moments later to take over.

The Tuolumne County Sheriff's Office publicly thanked the ranger for the professional response that helped ensure public safety. California Statewide Law Enforcement Association (CSLEA) President Alan Barcelona praised the action: "California State Parks rangers work daily to protect the public and enforce the law. We are grateful to the ranger who was aware of the search for this suspected killer, responded to reported sightings, and ultimately took him into custody."

This incident underscores the critical peace officer training, situational awareness, and inter-agency coordination that define the modern park ranger role. Park rangers routinely handle public safety duties alongside resource protection and visitor services. Especially in a setting with specialized locations such as "that new parking lot" or "around the corner from the old oak," it is the park rangers with their intimate knowledge of their turf and connections with the local community who often find themselves on scene first and with the most specialized knowledge. A ranger's presence in historic and natural areas provides both a deterrent and a rapid response capability.

For PRAC members across agencies, this story serves as a powerful reminder of the value of rigorous training in de-escalation, firearms proficiency, and legal authority. It also highlights the importance of strong relationships with local law enforcement partners.

PRAC continues to advocate for consistent standards, ongoing professional development, and recognition of the multifaceted responsibilities rangers carry. Incidents like this demonstrate why investment in ranger training and staffing matters—not just for state parks, but for every agency protecting California's public lands and communities.





Under the Flat Hat

Written By: Matt Cerkel

I know I've mentioned it before, but it is important to understand the history of park rangers in general and at your own agency. I was reminded of this point again by two events. First, I was recently assigned to put together a program on the history of land/park management, including the ranger program, at my agency, the Marin Municipal Water District (MMWD). The second event was a highly flawed article on "The cop-ification of National Park Service rangers.

Earlier this year, MMWD's Watershed Director asked me to put together a presentation on the agency's history of land/park management for a public workshop. It was very well received, and I was asked to refine it into a more formal presentation for the MMWD's board of directors.

A video of the meeting and my talk can be found here:

<https://youtu.be/EJLDmuRFyYQ?si=099kSzcBmHRPTBwQ>

Since then, I have also given an extended version of the presentation to a leading local conservation group. In my talk, I cover the origins of the MMWD's park ranger and park programs in the 1915-1917 period, when it was decided to employ uniformed park rangers, then called patrolmen, to oversee patrols, provide firefighting services, maintain park facilities, and enforce all rules and regulations. The early planner envisioned the MMWD watershed lands on Mount Tamalpais as a public park that would benefit the entire Bay Area, and those watershed lands were the keystone of land preservation in Marin County and perhaps the entire Bay Area. Back to the rangers, I mention that the first documented arrest occurred in 1921 when a ranger arrested two men for cutting Toyon. In 1975, the MMWD reclassified the patrolmen as rangers to "upgrade salaries in line with similar jobs to attract and retain qualified personnel" and provide better training in patrol and public relations techniques.

The 1975 MMWD also refined the rangers' duties as;

- Patrol
- Environmental Interpretation
- Fire Prevention and Control
- First Aid
- Search and Rescue
- Law Enforcement
- Routine Maintenance
- Fee Collection

These duties are not very different over 50 years later. In 1979, the MMWD rangers were once again reclassified as park rangers. This was done specifically to grant them peace officer status under Penal Code section 830.3(l). This section would eventually evolve into the current peace officer authority sections we use today. I will write more about the evolution of peace officer authority for local agency park rangers in California in a future issue of The Signpost. A version of this history presentation will next be used in the new park ranger orientation before the start of MMWD's field training program. This will provide historical context for new rangers and help them understand the evolution of the ranger program and its purpose.



MMWD ranger in the 1950s



Two Agencies, One Challenge: Recruitment, Retention, and the Future of Specialized Park Rangers in California

Chico and Sonoma Offer Different Paths — But Point to the Same Need for Unity, Advocacy, and Recognition of the Unique Ranger Profession

Written By: Kyle Roberson

Across California, municipal and county governments are grappling with the same stubborn challenge: recruiting and retaining dedicated park rangers. Two recent examples — one in Chico and one in Sonoma County — illustrate different tactical responses to this shared pressure. Both deserve thoughtful examination, not as isolated local stories, but as signals that the specialized field of park ranging is at an inflection point.

Chico's Bidwell Park: A Proposed Consolidation into Police Structures

Bidwell Park, Chico's iconic 3,670-acre regional treasure, has relied on park rangers for generations. The program's roots stretch back to the park's 1905 founding, when informal ranger and superintendent roles handled oversight from a central headquarters. By the early 2000s, a team of four rangers was actively enforcing rules and serving the public. In 2017, discussions intensified around arming and swearing in rangers to strengthen enforcement capacity.

Today, persistent recruitment and retention difficulties have brought the program to a crossroads. Many who enter ranger training ultimately leave for police positions offering clearer career advancement. As of mid-2026, only one of the three authorized park ranger positions remains filled.

Chico Police Chief Billy Aldridge has proposed eliminating the dedicated park ranger classification entirely. The plan would convert those positions into sworn police officer specialty assignments focused on the park, while adding civilian community service officers for broader coverage. Officers in these roles would reportedly use park ranger vehicles in an effort to preserve approachability, recognizing that rangers are reflected differently in the eyes of the public. The stated goals are improved retention within the police structure and more consistent daily presence.

This approach represents a fate experienced by many park ranger agencies in California before - redirecting resources toward existing law enforcement infrastructure.

Sonoma County: Reclassification and Shifted Enforcement

In July 2024, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors took a different route. They cited recruitment challenges and reclassified Regional Park rangers from Peace Officers to Public Officers (effective August 15, 2024). Primary law enforcement duties in the parks thus shifted to the Sheriff's Office through an interagency agreement.

County leadership framed the change as better alignment with Regional Parks' core mission of nature connection, interpretation, and stewardship. They noted that rangers had not conducted an arrest involving cuffing, detention, and jail booking in at least a decade - not taking into account the effectiveness of ranger patrols and alternative enforcement mechanisms. By removing the stringent peace officer training and background requirements, the county stated they would be able to accelerate hiring and expand the applicant pool — Two years after the recruitment solution and the county is still experiencing a vacancy rate over 50-percent.

This, too, is a form of consolidation: deemphasizing the law enforcement designation within the ranger series while moving heavy enforcement responsibilities elsewhere.





Same Challenge, Different Solutions — And a Clear Opportunity

Both Chico and Sonoma are responding to real recruitment and retention pressures with practical, locally driven solutions. One agency is folding ranger functions more deeply into sworn police structures; the other is refocusing rangers on public officer and interpretive roles while bolstering external law enforcement support.

These are not failures of individual programs — they are symptoms of a larger systemic issue facing many city and county agencies: the difficulty of sustaining a specialized workforce in a competitive public safety labor market.

Here is where PRAC sees both an urgent need and a powerful opportunity.

Park rangers are not simply “park police” or generic public safety staff. We are a distinct breed of professionals who combine law enforcement training with deep passion for — and knowledge of — the natural, cultural, and historic resources we protect. We interpret stories, lead educational programs, manage vegetation and fire risk, engage communities, and serve as the living bridge between people and the places they love.

When agencies consolidate or reclassify without fully accounting for this specialized value, we risk reducing vibrant parks to mere “green spaces” — pleasant to look at, but lacking the passion, expertise, and personal connection that turn spaces into cherished places.

A Call for Strength Through Unity

To safeguard the profession and help other agencies avoid similar pressures, we must strengthen our networks. PRAC exists precisely for this purpose: to connect municipal, county, district, state, and federal park professionals for training, recruiting support, professional development, and collective advocacy.

Through stronger collaboration we can:

- Share successful retention strategies and innovative career pathways.
- Develop joint training opportunities that build both enforcement readiness and interpretive excellence.
- Present a unified voice to policymakers and taxpayers about the irreplaceable role of specialized rangers.
- Support one another in keeping resource protection and visitor connection at the center of our work.

Parks without dedicated, passionate rangers are not the same parks. They lose the interpretive spark, the proactive stewardship, the community trust built over time, and the unique ability to make every visitor feel personally connected to the land.



As President of the Park Rangers Association of California, I believe our greatest strength lies in our unity. By standing together — learning from Chico’s and Sonoma’s experiences while charting our proactive path — we can demonstrate to decision-makers, taxpayers, and park visitors alike that investing in specialized park rangers is not a luxury. It is essential to preserving the soul of California’s public lands.

Let us use these moments not as warnings of decline, but as catalysts to reinforce the value of our profession and redouble our commitment to supporting one another across every agency and every corner of the state.

Parks need rangers. Rangers need each other. Together, through PRAC, we ensure both endure.



The Cop-ification of National Park Service Rangers

<https://www.sfgate.com/national-parks/article/national-park-service-ranger-cops-22309853.php>

An Article Review By: Matt Cerkel

The reporter discusses the new National Park Service shifts in NPS law enforcement ranger uniform and vehicle identification from ranger to police and even tries to link it to the current administration. These changes, some of which I have mixed feelings about, include putting "POLICE" on patrol vehicles, a shift back to green external carriers with "POLICE-FEDERAL OFFICER" patches, and adopting rank insignia. Some of these changes have been supported by rank-and-file NPS law enforcement rangers for years. The reporter seems to have an anti-law enforcement bias, only shows photos of non-law enforcement rangers, fails to mention the fact that the NPS law enforcement rangers got a unique badge in the 1990s, doesn't interview any current NPS law enforcement rangers, and misrepresents the history of NPS ranger law enforcement, making it sound like it only came about in the 1970s. If the reporter had done a basic internet search, they would have learned that the law enforcement ranger role has been part of the NPS since its beginnings in 1916. The National Park Service's first director, Stephen Mather, stated the following: "It is believed, however, that no efficient protection can be given to the parks without the support of a well-organized and disciplined police force of some description." This force would be the U.S. Park Rangers (NPS law enforcement rangers).



US Park Ranger patrol truck with the new markings.

Take the time to learn both the internal history of your agency's ranger program and the overall history of the ranger profession. It can better inform the agency decision-makers, new employees, the public, and even reporters.

<https://npshistory.com/publications/ranger/they-were-called-park-rangers.pdf>



Discounted California Naturalist Course Enrollment for Park Rangers Association of California Members

More information about this new process:



UC Environmental Steward is building a new partnership with the Park Rangers Association of California (PRAC) and are working to offer their members a discount of \$55-60 (or 50% off the UC ES portion of their course fee) to enroll in California Naturalist Courses. PRAC is a professional organization created for Park Rangers and other uniformed park employees of municipal, county, park district, state and federal park agencies in California, and Nevada. We think this will be a great way to increase enrollment in your courses and help build relationships with local parks. A few things to note:

The discount would be taken out of the course fee that is remitted to UC Environmental Stewards, so course partners will not bear the financial burden of this arrangement.

PRAC members who are interested in taking a course will first connect with UC ES and we will then help them connect with our course partners to help ensure managing this discount goes as smoothly as possible while we establish this program.

To Enroll in a California Naturalist Course for a \$55-60 discount follow these instructions:

- 1). Find a Course that works for your location and schedule at <https://www.ucanr.edu/program/uc-environmental-stewards/become-certified-naturalist-or-climate-steward>



- 2). Email UC Environmental Stewards director, Gregory Ira at gcira@ucanr.edu with the subject line **PRAC Discount** with the following information:

- Name of the local partner organizations offering the California Naturalist course they wish to attend
- The course start date

- 3). We will then follow up with the partner who will help you register and receive the discount.

About the UC California Naturalist Certification

Courses combine classroom and field experience in science, problem-solving, communication training and community service. Students are taught by an instructor and team of experts who are affiliated with a local nature-based center or natural resource focused agency. Upon completing certification requirements, participants are eligible for four academic credits through UC Davis Continuing and Professional Education for an additional nominal fee. Subjects covered in each California Naturalist course include ecology, geology, plant communities, forest, woodland and range resources and management, wildlife, communication and interpretation, participatory science, and energy and global environmental issues.

Product Spotlight

63 Industries Karga

By: Matt Cerkel

Recently, I was assigned a new patrol vehicle, a Ford F250 Super Cab pickup truck. For nearly 31 years, I drove patrol trucks with service bodies, which made it easy to carry and organize my necessary equipment and ensured quick access to vital emergency equipment. This changed when I moved into a pickup truck with standard side and cross boxes for storage, so I needed to find a solution.

During my research, I found the 63 Industries Karga product line. The Karga backseat platforms let you make full use of the unused vertical space in your back seat. The platform allows a single-or double-level shelving to be installed in the cab of extended or crew cab trucks; this was exactly what I was looking to store my EMS equipment along with my patrol bag.

Karga is easy to assemble and install. Karga shelf secures to the child seat anchor system and is easy to remove when needed. It comes in two sizes: 40% and 50%, which represent the space it covers in the backseat. The Karga system also comes in single-or double-level configurations. When I purchased mine for the F250 Super Cab, it was then only available in the single-level variety, but they've since added the double-level option, so I may need to purchase the second-level conversion kit to add a second shelf.

Once installed, the Karga provided me with storage for my trauma bag, airway bag, and patrol bag. Between the shelf and the seat, it also created storage for small items like a box of exam gloves and LED flares.

If you are looking for a storage solution for your patrol vehicle that won't break the bank I highly recommend the Karga system <https://63ind.com/>.



The Karga secured into the child seat anchor system



Karga 50% Installed



Karga with EMS gear bag