

# Extraordinary Views & Exceptional People



Photo taken by Karen Gentry, 2019

**A**fter the last embers of a recent fire were finally extinguished, brand-new ranger, Ian Reid mounted his snowmobile and rode to the top of Dee Wright Observatory to see how extensive the burn had been. When he reached the summit, the Sisters District Ranger turned off the engine, took a deep breath and surveyed the devastation. It was the first time he would look from this point with awe at the forest he was now tasked with protecting.

*"It was a breath-taking moment. The photos don't do justice to what the experience is like. You're up on a ridge in the middle of the Cascade Crest with a 360-degree view of mountains. It will literally take your breath away".*

Even with the damage from the fire, Ian was overwhelmed by the beauty of the place. The view from Dee Wright Observatory offers a panoramic view across 65 square miles of jet-black lava rock, overlooking the Mount Washington and Three Sisters Wilderness areas. From the top deck, onlookers can see 16 mountain peaks and the second largest glacier in Oregon. Since the Observatory falls at the edge of both the Willamette and Deschutes National Forests, it provides unique opportunities for the two national forests to work in tandem and often requires some out-of-the-box thinking to ensure it runs effectively. Co-managed spaces are easily neglected unless someone with patience and understanding takes initiative. Two years after Ian was struck by the beauty of the Observatory, two very special Central Oregonians approached Discover Your Forest with an idea.

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US Forest Service volunteers and life-long educators Steve Ponder, and Kathy Campbell hatched a plan. These two Sisters residents envisioned turning Dee Wright Observatory from a beautiful but hidden space, into a well-known education destination for visitors from around the world. As a first step, they approached Ian Reid in the Sisters District and pitched a volunteer docent program that had been implemented successfully in other areas on local public lands. With extensive experience in volunteering and caretaking of sacred spaces, Kathy and Steve knew many of the key players they would have to get on board for this dream to come to fruition. After drafting a proposal and presenting it many times, they eventually gained the full support of the Sisters Ranger District on the Deschutes National Forest and the McKenzie River Ranger District on the Willamette National Forest. The next phase was handing off their dream to someone who could protect, improve and implement the Dee Wright Interpretive Ranger program for years to come. The volunteers and Forest Service representatives involved knew this program would fall right in line with the goals of Discover Your Forest. Karen Gentry, Education and Volunteer Program Director for Discover Your Forest, worked in partnership with the Forest Service to pilot an interpretive program in the late summer of 2018.

The program eventually developed at Dee Wright arose from a growing interest in Forest Service circles for "Shared Stewardship". USDA Forest Service Chief Vicki Christiansen explains the term by saying, "Shared Stewardship is about working together in an integrated way to make decisions and take actions on the land." This practice can take many different forms, depending on the region and specific needs of the national forest. As the nonprofit partner of the Forest Service in Central Oregon, Discover Your Forest was created to be an a venue and advocate for Shared Stewardship within our communities.



Travel to Dee Wright on McKenzie Pass

Steve and Kathy are two of nearly 3,600 DYF volunteers who donate time and energy on public lands in Central Oregon. During their time at Lava Lands, Lava River Cave and even Mt. Bachelor, it became clear to Steve and Kathy that there is a difference in visitor experience if a ranger is on site and available. Regarding the program they worked to create, they recall “The pilot program verified that visitors would love to have Interpretive Rangers on hand, so we recruited several new volunteers for the following spring and worked with Discover Your Forest to provide the needed training.” Having Interpretive Rangers on-site at any location in the forest enables visitors to ask questions. At Dee Wright, there are a lot of great questions: “How long has this lava been here?”, “When did a fire burn this area?” and of course, “Who the heck is Dee Wright!?”.

The Dee Wright Observatory was built by hand using the black lava rock that poured out of the Belknap Crater nearly 12,000 years ago. It was constructed in 1935 by a Civilian Conservation Corps crew during the height of the Great Depression, one year after the crew’s foreman, Dee Wright, passed away. Wright served 24 years of his life as a Forest Service packer and his dedication to the forest incited the memorial. Along with its history, the Observatory is full of biological and geological facets to captivate a wide variety of visitors.

In Summer of 2019, Discover Your Forest launched the first season of a complete Interpretive Ranger program at Dee Wright! In the program’s short history, we are overjoyed to hear feedback from the seven volunteers who called it home. Our volunteers include retired educators, public speakers, and others who simply want to give back and support the forest they love. Whatever their background, all the volunteers agreed that the highlight of their time involved the visitors to Dee Wright. One volunteer, David Hewett, recounted during his brief stay meeting visitors from the Philippines, the country of Georgia, Guatemala and a group from inner-city Los Angeles. David told us, “I couldn’t think of anything more radically different from where they came from. I was able to see it through their eyes, the same way that I saw it for the first time back in the 1970’s.”



Steve Ponder & Kathy Campbell

*From July to September of 2019, the volunteers at Dee Wright Observatory were in contact with nearly 3,000 visitors! This was made possible by volunteers donating close to 300 hours of their time.*

Though we are exceptionally proud of the new program, there are hurdles to overcome and definite plans for expansion in the coming years. “We would like to see guided walks on the Lava River National Recreation Trail, visits from school groups, and even stargazing at night could be offered”, Kathy Campbell notes with hope and excitement.

“Although Discover Your Forest is proud to support and delegate the second largest volunteer force on our National forests, the plan to implement a new program comes with the task of staffing it. The immediate hurdle for Discover Your Forest and the Forest Service is finding volunteers for the 2020 summer season” Karen Gentry noted. Gentry is currently recruiting volunteers to greet visitors, answer questions, provide information and potentially lead hikes on the Lava River Trail. Shifts are self-scheduled, with a commitment to fill two to four shifts per month during July-September. Each shift typically lasts two to three hours, depending on weather and season, but generally run mid-morning to mid-afternoon.

The goal of the Deschutes National Forest Dee Wright Observatory Roving Interpretive Ranger Volunteer program is to assist the Deschutes and Willamette National Forests by enhancing the visitor experience at the Dee Wright Observatory and Lava River National Recreation Trail. If you are interested in volunteering for this special opportunity or would like more information, contact Karen Gentry at (541) 383-4771 or email [karen.gentry@discovernw.org](mailto:karen.gentry@discovernw.org).