For Joan Renaud, Oct. 5, 2019 was less about the journey up Mount Marshall and more about the descent. By then Marshall was the final mountain to check off on her hiking list of the 46 Adirondack High Peaks, but she was no stranger to its summit.

It had been a rainy and cloudy day. Renaud and her friend, Brenda Tirrell, were on their “Adirondack Attack.” The two New Hampshire residents had already hiked their home state’s 48 big mountains and were now working on New York’s prized peaks.
At the summit of Marshall, all they could see were trees and clouds. They changed into dry clothes, put on their rain gear, and set off for the journey back down. For the first time in all of their hikes, Renaud slipped and fell.

She tumbled into a large complex of tree roots.

“I thought this was great,” Renaud said, glad to have stopped her fall. “It was only once I tried to lift my leg up that I realized I was stuck on something.”

A sharp piece of root had punctured her right thigh.

Still close to the summit, Tirrell had cell service and called 911.

At first, Scott van Laer was supposed to be helicoptered onto the summit, but the weather was too bad. So van Laer, a forest ranger with the state Department of Environmental Conservation, ran more than 6 miles up the mountain. While Tirrell and Renaud waited, they ate some chocolate chip cookies.

Ranger Scott van Laer assists Joan Renaud as she prepares to get in a helicopter harness for rescue after being injured on Mount Marshall. Photo by Brenda Tirrell
The women stayed on the phone with dispatchers until they finally heard van Laer’s calls and the sound of a helicopter above. A lucky break in the clouds was closing up fast and van Laer helped Renaud into safety gear, hooked her up to a line dropped from the sky, and up she went.

Tirrell and van Laer then hiked to the nearest outpost where another ranger had a woodstove going. They ate macaroni and cheese and slept on cots. The next day the rangers saw Tirrell back to Saranac Lake’s Porcupine Inn, where they found Renaud safe and sound, her leg bandaged up.

The two friends look back at their “misadventure on Marshall” with a kind of fondness, mostly because of the people who came to their rescue that day.

“I can’t praise them enough,” Tirrell said.

Not all hikers are as experienced or as prepared as Tirrell and Renaud, and forest rangers have responded to the gamut of rescues.

The state has successfully promoted tourism opportunities in the Adirondacks and has preserved more land than ever before. According to the Adirondack Council, more than 800,000 acres have been added to the forest preserve since 1990. Private property protected under state easements has increased in that time frame, too, by more than 700,000 acres. From 2012 to 2016 alone, 69,000 acres were added to the forest preserve, the former Finch, Pruyn & Co. land, mostly in North Hudson.

But along with more land and more people—having varying degrees of hiking experience—come more unintended consequences.

Rangers are getting swamped.

“We’re keeping up with the search-and-rescue incidents, but barely,” van Laer said. He is also the forest rangers’ union representative, and he has been calling for more rangers for years. The union has even suggested giving up raises for the time being, in favor of hiring more staff.

While van Laer has the support of many local lawmakers and environmental groups, not everyone thinks more staff is the answer.

“Look, I have to put the people into the jobs to meet the mission, and right now, the mission of the forest rangers is challenged because of some of the high use in the Adirondacks,” said Basil Seggos, commissioner of the DEC. “Simply adding numbers isn’t the solution always.”
There are 141 forest rangers in the state, Seggos said, up from 120 when he took office in 2015.

In the High Peaks region, there are seven rangers and one lieutenant. In all of the department’s Adirondack-area Region 5, which includes the counties of Clinton, Essex, Franklin, Fulton, Hamilton, Warren, Washington and Saratoga, there are 45 forest rangers, according to the DEC.

In 2019, forest rangers statewide responded to 153 searches, 165 rescues, 16 body recoveries and three searches for fugitives. They also responded to 74 wildfires and worked on 29 prescribed burns.

Van Laer is a second-generation forest ranger, and often compares how things have changed since his father was scouting the backcountry in the 1970s.

The average amount of land for a forest ranger to patrol is up nearly 47%, to almost 54,000 acres, van Laer said in written testimony to lawmakers reviewing the state’s 2021 proposed budget. The DEC’s Region 5 had 10 more forest rangers in the 1970s, and the number of visitors to popular places like Cascade Mountain was half of what it is today.

Van Laer has also compared staffing levels in the Adirondack Park to the National Park Service, showing that local forest rangers are responsible for
nearly double the acreage. Yellowstone National Park, for example, has 60% more rangers and is less than half the size of the Adirondack Park.

A sign placed along Lake Flower Avenue in Saranac Lake in late 2018 showed support for increasing the state’s ranger corps. Photo by Brandon Loomis

Consequences

Van Laer said he is grateful that the state has kept the number of forest rangers at its fill rate, but he has continued to advocate for more.

In his written budget testimony to lawmakers, he discussed a rescue that almost turned tragic in February 2018. It was on Saddleback Mountain when some hikers without proper gear fell off a ledge. One broke his leg.

Getting to the mountain was difficult, even for experienced forest rangers, and van Laer said one of his colleagues was injured during the trek. Ten hours into the rescue, the injured ranger was using the sleeping bag and tent intended for the hiker with the broken leg.

Without enough winter clothing and survival gear for everyone, van Laer and another ranger continued to the injured hiker. While backup rangers from other parts of the region were on the way, van Laer and his colleagues were in danger and showing signs of frostbite. They left the hikers, who were now at least in warm gear.
More forest rangers arrived, and were able to get the man with the broken leg off the mountain, but it had taken three days before he was admitted to a hospital.

“Another life was saved by the overtaxed Forest Ranger force,” van Laer wrote. “The incident was one of the most difficult ever executed in the 100+ year history of the New York State Forest Rangers. The injured ranger recovered. I sustained frostbite on my toes but recovered quickly.”

In a response emailed to Adirondack Explorer, the DEC said staffing levels of forest rangers have been consistent “and at no time have Ranger staffing levels put the hiking community or the natural resources at risk.”

Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s office did not respond to multiple requests for comment on this issue.

**Overuse and staffing**

While preliminary data collected by the Adirondack Council show that visitors to the High Peaks may be declining in select areas, the Council has also said the overuse problem may be far worse than first realized.

The Adirondack Council has been studying the overuse issue, using car counts at trailheads as one way to measure the area’s popularity. But it’s a finicky way to guess the number of visitors. There’s no specific entry point into the Adirondacks—no toll booths as at national parks—and not everyone signs in at trailheads.

“We think that actually even with the surge in numbers that we have seen, there’s probably a significant undercount of how many people are going into the High Peaks right now, and the overuse problem is maybe worse than we have evidence to show at the moment,” said John Sheehan, communications director for the Council.

The Council’s recent study comparing 2017 and 2019 car counts at trailheads shows a 3.5% drop in cars at the Adirondak Loj, Cascade Mountain and Keene Valley. But counting cars at 10 popular locations in the High Peaks Wilderness Complex over a prime weekend, the Council noticed a 64% increase in cars between 2017 and 2019.
Van Laer has noticed a longer-term increase in people, too. In his budget testimony, he said the number of hikers registering at the Van Hoevenberg Trail rose 62% to over 53,000 people per year between 2005 and 2015.

More people are causing more traffic problems, accidents, degradation of trails and busier forest rangers.

The state does plan to deploy crews to make trails in the Adirondacks “more durable to increased use and analyze and develop new visitor flow solutions to better manage traffic and hikers.”

Part of how that is done will be determined by the Adirondack High Peaks Strategic Planning Advisory Group, a coalition of state agency employees and hand-picked stakeholders discussing overuse problems. It is currently seeking public input via written comments, but the meetings are closed to the public. The group plans to make recommendations to lawmakers in June.

Shuttles, visitor centers, educational kiosks, parking lots and a push to advertise non-High Peaks hikes are some of the new strategies the state is pursuing to address the region’s growing popularity.

As New York experiments with these things, however, forest rangers are finding themselves doing less educating and conducting more search-and-rescue missions—and writing parking tickets.
The lack of hiker education is putting a strain on local organizations, too. The Adirondack Mountain Club, for example, holds a number of workshops and programs for hikers.

“Our education staff is in a position where they’re having to turn away groups who are interested in coming and learning about responsible behavior in the backcountry and how to be prepared,” said Michael Barrett, the club’s executive director. “The interest is there. We just need to find ways to build capacity.”

Barrett is glad to see the state looking at programs for addressing overuse, but he thinks adding forest rangers is a piece to the puzzle.

“Part of the solution should be doubling the number of rangers in the wilderness,” Barrett said.

David Gibson, of Adirondack Wild, is also advocating for doubling ranger numbers, though he expects that to take time.

“The governor’s invested $14 million in a mid-mountain center at Whiteface (ski area),” Gibson said. “Think what (that much money) could get in terms of support for the rangers. And I’m not saying exclusively for the forest rangers. DEC is understaffed in so many areas, but that is a glaring one.”

Peter Bauer, executive director of Protect the Adirondacks, said he would like to see 175 forest rangers in the state, with a focus on the High Peaks.

The DEC is getting 47 additional staff members, according to the proposed 2021 budget, but none of those positions will be forest rangers in the Adirondacks.

Local lawmakers are calling for more rangers, too.

“When you buy more land and more work for them to do, you have to make sure you have the right numbers,” said state Sen. Betty Little, R-Queensbury.
Rangers and education

Once upon a time, rangers were the primary source of hiker education.

“The rangers have suffered for the last two decades from a slow and steady shift in their priorities toward law enforcement rather than forest preserve protection, and that is a tragic loss for the forest preserve and for the people of New York,” Bauer said. “It’s time to bring the rangers back to being first and foremost custodians of the forest preserve, and not simply another division of law enforcement.”

Peter Fish, a retired forest ranger, experienced that shift in responsibility firsthand.

His career began in 1969. Rangers drove red trucks then, wore a patch with a “friendly little tree on it,” and were often referred to as “peace officers.” Then the trucks turned green and more police-like, the badges changed, and rangers were required to carry firearms.

“Quite frankly, I found wearing the gun was a huge turnoff because the people could not take their eyes off it when I was talking to them,” Fish said.

His role as educator and helper continued, however, and oftentimes that meant going out to the backcountry and just meeting people.

Fish has hiked all 46 High Peaks, but in his lifetime he has summited Cascade 150 times and Marcy 770 times.

On the job he would check out what people were wearing, the time of day they were hiking, how much water they were carrying, gauge their level of fitness and more. One time, as he was carrying an injured hiker out of the woods, he watched an underprepared-looking hiker walk in. Fish knew he would be turning back into the woods for another rescue, and he was right.

“There was not a person I met on the trail that I didn’t size up and talk to,” Fish added. “That was a thorough education thing.”

Despite the calls from the union for more staffing, Fish thinks the current forest ranger numbers are enough. That’s because there’s a “flat season,” he said. The public doesn’t flock to the High Peaks in winter as in the summer.

Van Laer countered: Rescues in the winter usually require twice the people.

But Fish thinks assistant forest rangers can fill personnel gaps, “so we’re not stuck paying for them full-time when rangers have nothing to do.”
“Generally, the public doesn’t know the difference between a forest ranger and the assistant,” Fish added.

And he would know. Fish started the assistant training program in 1978. One of the benefits of the program, he said, is that forest rangers can experience burnout. Assistant forest rangers are only on for a season, so they can leave the program before that happens.

Fish thinks the staff is too low in the assistant program, but DEC said it does hire assistants “during peak times” and “the DEC’s Division of Lands and Forests also hires summit stewards to assist in the Adirondack High Peaks on search-and-rescues and overall efforts to conserve the lands and waters.”

Fish worries, however, that rangers are getting pulled out of the woods, the place the ranger was invented to patrol.

Though retired, approaching his mid-80s and lacking the uniform, Fish is a perfect example of how you can’t take the forest out of the ranger. While he doesn’t get up into the High Peaks anymore, he joked about how long it had been since he had hiked: “I haven’t been on a mountain since yesterday.”

Fish had climbed Baxter, still sizing up his fellow hikers, asking them if anybody knew where they were and if they had registered at the trailhead.

He likely would have approved of Renaud and Tirrell, the arguably over-prepared duo who continued their High Peaks hikes about a month after their Mount Marshall mishap.

Whatever the appropriate staffing level, the two friends are grateful for the help they got that day. Renaud thought back to her ordeal atop a rainy mountain and recalled the comfort of knowing they had alerted the rangers.

“I was concerned,” she said, “but confident that we were in touch with someone, and that help was coming.”