



Postcard From the Field: Warm Fire Survey
Kaibab National Forest, North District

The volunteers are chomping at the bit to get going in the morning. They wait for the Forest Service folks to roll into the Jacob Lake Admin Site, listen to the orientation, and be on their way into the field. That's what they've come for—these five men and two women— to be out for the last few sweet days of fall, perfected on the Kaibab Plateau. They're part of a cooperative project between the U.S. Forest Service and the Kaibab Vermilion Cliffs Heritage Alliance, a partnership whose aim is to aid federal land management agencies in finding and protecting cultural resources on the Arizona Strip.

The kitchen is stocked with food--breakfast, lunch, and dinner for four days--fuel for the physical labor. In the chilly pre-dawn light, the volunteers roll out of tents, campers, and bunkbeds, making a beeline for the kitchen and the hot coffee—stout cowboy coffee steeping in a big blue enamel pot. They seem partial to a hot breakfast of bacon and eggs, and dinners simmered slowly in a dutch oven, grub they might not be able to justify in more modern, sedentary lives. While they finish off breakfast, they pack bag lunches and tend to last-minute details--stirring up Gatorade, topping off water bottles, and snugging up boot laces.

When the forest archaeologists--Britt, Connie, Erin, and Wade—arrive they all assemble out front. They pore over maps and discuss who will go where. This is a seasoned bunch who's covered considerable ground on the Kaibab and in Grand Canyon too. There's some good-natured grumbling about the requisite "safety talk." Several are ex-military and they've had their fill of long lines and piles of paperwork.

Still, they'll heed instruction from the pros, will dutifully walk transect lines, record sites, and stop to examine anything of interest—a pot sherd, an arrow point, or the odd, out-of-place rock. Most of this crew prefers surveying, because they can keep moving and not dawdle too long in one place. Others like the slower pace of mapping and recording, the chance to look more closely, define a feature, flag diagnostic artifacts, take compass readings, and pencil in rock outlines on a map as precisely and clearly as possible.

Beyond the exciting artifacts, the day's adventures might include a flat tire on one of the trucks, punctured by the sharp rimtop limestone. Out on the ground, the crew must pay attention to a few things—the burned ground is booby-trapped with punjie-sticks of tree stumps, soot-stained dirt seeps into socks, and skin is baked and blasted by sun and wind. The height of luxury will be the warm shower back at camp that evening.

They do this for no money, their rewards intangible--the thrill of the search and the find, the chance to soak in the astounding scenery, the camaraderie of the campfire--along with the contribution of useful work and maybe even new knowledge. Then, there's the best return, the realization that people once made their lives here too. People so different, but still so much the same.

--Rose Houk

Volunteers for the project on the Kaibab in October 2007 included Chuck Biddulph, Gale Dom, Greg Edmunson, Mike Grebinski, Brad Heap, Roger McPeek, and Christine Albano. Kaibab National Forest archaeologists included Britt Betenson, Connie Reid, Wade Parsons, and Erin Woodard. Rose Houk, Coordinator for the Kaibab Vermilion Cliffs Heritage Alliance, helped in the kitchen.