

Q&A with Eric Blehm, Author of The Last Season

When did you first hear about Randy Morgenson's disappearance? Why did you decide to write about it in a book?

I went backpacking in Kings Canyon with retired Sierra Crest Subdistrict Ranger Alden Nash just weeks after Randy went missing. Nash had been Randy's supervisor for almost twenty years and knew the areas he liked to travel, so I was able to join in on Nash's own private attempt to locate Randy and end the mystery. At the time, I thought I knew the High Sierra pretty well. I'd been backpacking there almost every summer since I was fourteen and had hiked the majority of the John Muir Trail solo in my early twenties, but the hideaway lake basins and craggy unnamed peaks that Alden took me to during his search for Randy opened up a whole new world of the High Sierra. He took me into Randy Morgenson's High Sierra.

In Randy Morgenson, I found an amazing conscience to the wilderness, a writer who was mentored by Wallace Stegner and a photographer who had assisted Ansel Adams as a youth. I felt I'd stumbled upon a treasure chest when I read Randy's diaries from the high country. It was as if I'd discovered the Henry David Thoreau of the High Sierra or a modern-day John Muir who, on the side, also saved lives. His life became a story that I felt had to be told because it was both enchanted and troubled. No doubt about it, Randy had lots of skeletons in his closet. In the end, that made him a very conflicted—and very human—character.

In the book, some of the people involved in the SAR say that if Randy had a working radio the day he went missing, there might not have been the need for a search-and-rescue operation at all. How has the radio technology in the park system changed since Randy's disappearance? Are there technologies now in place that can prevent a ranger ever having to go without radio contact?

As a result of the Morgenson SAR, a board of review looked at the radio system in Sequoia and Kings Canyon and found it to be flawed. In fact, it has been flawed since it replaced the old telephone lines strung across the backcountry in the 1930s. There was a protocol in place when Randy disappeared that stated if a ranger was out of contact for twenty-four hours, the ranger's supervisor would be notified. Another twenty-four hours, and the supervisor was to initiate a search. There were times during Randy's career when he had been incommunicado with a broken radio for eight days and nobody came looking for him. It didn't instill a lot of confidence in the parks' radio system. When Randy went missing in 1996, it took four days for a ranger to get to his station after he'd been out of contact.

Since then, the system has, for the most part, remained unchanged. The same radio and radio repeater systems that Randy deemed unreliable are still in use almost ten years after his disappearance. Interestingly, another backcountry ranger named Jeff Christensen disappeared last summer (2005) in Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado. A massive search-and-rescue operation ensued, hundreds of thousands of dollars were spent, hundreds of searchers were put at risk while searching, and many rangers contacted me to tell me how hauntingly similar this disappearance was to Randy Morgenson's. In the end, Jeff Christensen was found dead from a fall that he had initially survived. He'd wrapped a T-shirt around his injured head and he also had a radio, though it wasn't disclosed if he had tried to call for help. Some rangers speculate that if the recommendations made as of a result of the Morgenson SAR had been heeded at a national level, rangers like Jeff Christensen might have been equipped with personal locator devices, which would have virtually stopped that search-and-rescue-operation before it began. I'm not

implying this would have saved Christensen's life, but it may have stopped the need for endangering the lives of hundreds of searchers.

One of the remarkable things in *The Last Season* is how beloved Randy was, yet how little recognition he received for his dedication to the parks. Is this typical of seasonal backcountry rangers? What challenges do they face that their permanent counterparts do not?

Various rangers I interviewed for the book (including high-level administrators in the Park Service) have said that seasonal rangers are treated like second-class citizens, despite often being referred to as “the backbone of the NPS.” They are hired and fired every season with zero job security. Their families have no medical benefits. They have no pension plans. They pay for their own law-enforcement training and EMT schooling. They are seasonal help. Temporary. In the thirties, they were called “ninety-day wonders” who worked the crowded summer seasons. Truth is, the seasonal rangers are more permanent than the so-called permanents—or so it goes at Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, where the backcountry rangers are a pretty fanatical and loyal crew. Pats on the back don't come very often to any ranger—permanent or seasonal. Randy was the most veteran seasonal ranger in SEKI, but there was nothing about his uniform or any seniority status to differentiate him from a first-year rookie. Permanent employees get ten-, twenty-, and thirty-year pins to commemorate years of service. Randy Morgenson was a seasonal employee for twenty-eight years at Sequoia and Kings Canyon. If you include his seasonal duties from Yosemite, he devoted more than thirty summer or winter seasons to the Park Service. Believe it or not, there is no official system in the entire Park Service for recognizing length of service for seasonal employees. That is a travesty.

Obviously, this SAR operation was particularly difficult for the rangers involved because they were searching for one of their own. How do you think this affected the search? Do you think at times their closeness with Randy clouded their judgment? Looking back, are there things they could have done to find him sooner?

First of all, I can say without a doubt that the Sequoia and Kings Canyon staff put their heart and soul into this search-and-rescue operation. By all accounts, not a single person out there didn't give it their all. But yes, mistakes were made and, yes, I think that can be attributed in part to the emotional strain of the situation. The chief ranger at the time, Debbie Bird, called for an independent board to review the SAR about a year after it had ended. She told me that one of her regrets was not bringing in a fresh incident command team halfway through the operation. Apparently she realized too late how exhausted everybody was both mentally and physically, especially because they were emotionally involved with Randy, which is unlike a search for a park visitor. There were clues identified during the SAR that were either overlooked or discounted, and they could have led this mystery to be solved much earlier than it actually was.

Still, the nature of search-and-rescue operations is extremely subjective. One ranger who was involved in the Morgenson SAR told me that search-and-rescue success or failure “will always boil down to making judgment calls about a very complex array of human behavior, terrain, and weather. We can be fairly scientific about organizing resources and keeping track of where we have searched, but ultimately, just about every critical decision during a search has to be made by people based on human judgment using information available at the time.” The High Sierra is famous for keeping secrets. Recently, a World War II airman was found frozen in the Mendel Glacier. As one of the characters in the book says, “These mountains have a way of

swallowing people and spitting them out when and where they choose.” It took the mountains more than sixty years to bring closure to that airman’s family.

In *The Last Season*, you never really tell the reader your opinion of what happened to Randy Morgenson. After eight years of conducting research and getting close to the people who knew Randy best, what conclusion have you drawn?

I tried very hard to keep my voice out of the book as much as possible, relying instead on the words and opinions of those who knew Randy. There are a number of compelling theories about what had happened to Randy, all conveyed to me by educated men and women who know the mountains and knew Randy better than anybody else. I got to know Randy myself in my own way, through his writings, by reading the books he read, and most important, by spending a lot of time in the High Sierra. I felt his spirit in the backcountry, and I think at this point in time, I owe it to Randy not to disclose my gut feelings about what happened to him. Suffice it to say, each theory is well documented, and I think readers should trust their own instincts.

Is there a lesson in Randy Morgenson’s story? What have you taken away from this experience?

I think the biggest lesson is that sometimes a pat on the back is worth far more than a paycheck. Randy Morgenson felt underappreciated for what he devoted his life to, and the National Park Service could have easily rectified this with some simple gestures. But then again, Randy also made choices. He could have become a permanent ranger with benefits and a retirement pension at any time, but he was not willing to work in the frontcountry. He refused to pay his dues patrolling in a squad car. A reader told me that this story is about what happens when you lead your life without compromise. Randy didn’t compromise and that is what led to his disappearance. Some people will fault Randy for being stubborn. Others will admire him for his steadfast resolve to follow his heart in spite of what he felt society expected of him.

A lesson that Randy taught his entire life as a ranger and a human being was to stop and smell the roses—or, as Randy would have said, stop and smell the Polemonium. Randy touched a lot of people by encouraging them to “walk slowly and take a look around once in a while.” This is one lesson I’ve taken to heart. Another lesson or theme is that nature always wins. Randy knew who was in charge when he was in the mountains, and it certainly wasn’t him. That’s the answer to this question I think Randy would approve of—nature always wins.