
Sonoma County's only mounted park ranger wants to take you along for a ride

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THE PRESS DEMOCRAT | August 2, 2017, 12:09PM | Updated 17 hours ago.



Winding along the narrow dirt trail high above Lake Sonoma, park ranger Poppy Lozoff sat atop her horse Candyman, pointing out native brush, gray oak and smooth red madrone trees that were shedding their bark at the height of summer.

“Refrigerator trees,” she said, citing a nickname for the madrone, because it feels cool to the touch.

Pointing in another direction, Lozoff warned of poison oak, a branch leaning into the path of the riders ahead and behind her.

Lozoff, a U.S. Army Corps of Engineer ranger — and Sonoma County's only mounted park ranger — was leading visitors on a horseback tour of the Skaggs Springs Vista Trail. The trail ride, about 1.3 miles in all, represents a new partnership between the Army Corps, which oversees the sprawling Lake Sonoma Recreation Area — the county's largest park, at 17,500-acres — and The Ranch at Lake Sonoma, an equestrian center based at the South Lake Trailhead.

Until now, horseback riders out here in the northwestern corner of the county have largely had to rely on their own mounts to get around.

Now they can sign up for \$119, hourlong rides led by Lozoff, with horses provided by The Ranch.

"An Interpretive Ride With a Ranger" at Lake Sonoma

“You are joining a long line of tourists that have been coming out to this area,” said Joel Miller, Lake Sonoma’s supervising park ranger. “Some of the trails were originally put in as part of the Skaggs Springs Resort for horseback riding and hunting and walking.”

A portion of the proceeds from the ride fares will go to Friends of Lake Sonoma, the group that advocates for the park surrounding the North Bay’s largest reservoir.

The new program offers a wider segment of the public a glimpse into the history of park rangers and mounted patrols, harking back to a time before the creation of the National Park Service, when Army riders were the only ones who patrolled America’s vast public lands.

Leading the Lake Sonoma ride is the culmination of a lifelong dream for Lozoff, who has been riding horses since she was a girl.

“It’s an honor for us to be able to do this again, to put a ranger back on horseback, and do a tour on horseback, too,” Lozoff said.

The recent ride led by Lozoff took just under an hour, and throughout she explained the history of a homeland for the Dry Creek Rancheria Band of the Pomo tribe. As the

group climbed to Skaggs Springs Vista, she pointed out a ridge tribal members once used as a defensive lookout. She talked about the history of Skaggs Hot Springs, which served as a recreation area to San Franciscans seeking an escape from city life since before the Civil War. The Skaggs Springs Resort at one point served up to 300 people a day, before the stock market crash of 1929 ended most Americans' ability to afford such luxuries. The resort closed in 1942.

"You truly are in the Wild West out here," Miller said, pointing to a spot off in the distance. "This is the Wild West. Black Bart robbed a stage on the other side of the ridge right there. This is about as wild as you can get."

All that history, in one form or another, rests around and beneath the vast lake created here by the completion, in 1983, of Warm Springs Dam.

"There's only so much you can convey with words," Lozoff said of the landscape. "The rest of it, on a horse, you're feeling it. You're in it."

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