

Hiram M. Chittenden Award for Interpretive Excellence

John Thibodeaux  
Natural Resource Specialist (Ranger), 0401, GS-09

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## Executive Summary:

Natural Resource Specialist (Ranger), John Thibodeaux, exemplifies the spirit of interpretation through his exciting, innovative and engaging programming. He seeks to meet the needs of park guests both young and old by developing presentations and activities that foster interactive learning that is accessible to all. John strives to enlighten his local community not only about the importance of the Corps' flood risk management mission, but also wishes to impart a love and appreciation of the areas natural and cultural resources. At Ball Mountain and Townshend Lakes, in the Southern Region of Vermont, John has been pivotal in bringing back much desired year-round outdoor educational experiences to this rural community. His dedication and commitment to expanding interpretive services at his projects has in turn made these locations some of the strongest interpretive providers in the New England District (NAE).



As a veteran, John was drawn to a career where he could continue to give back to his community, and with his natural gift for articulate expression he quickly became recognized as a leader in interpretation at his projects, and throughout New England. He is sought out by influential members in the community to provide educational presentations at schools and local events. John has also been recognized by Corps leadership, and has been asked to be a representative on District, Division and National Committees. Since 2019, he has been a leader on the District's Interpretive Services Outreach Program Committee (ISOP), and in this role, he has significantly contributed to the continued enhancement of interpretive offerings in the District.

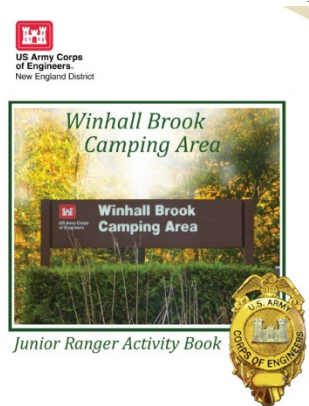
Being a father of three young boys has also been a motivating factor that drives his interest to further diversify the interpretive offerings at his projects. Seeing a lack of engaging content for young children, he developed a number of new programs targeted at this age group, and their families. This has drawn in many new visitors to the parks and instilled an appreciation of the natural world on a new generation.

John's experience, dedication and enthusiasm for public outreach has marked him as a highly respected and admired interpretive leader in the New England District, and it is for those reasons we enthusiastically nominate him for the Hiram Chittenden Award for Interpretive Excellence.

## Narrative Justification:

### (1) Creativity and Originality.

John Thibodeaux's accomplishments in interpretive services and outreach this past year were extremely robust. John takes an "all of the above approach" to interpretation to maximize its reach, even when resources may be minimal. He's developed and implemented formal, informal and indirect interpretation at his project, and served on multiple teams to reach beyond his project to achieve the full range of the Corps' Interpretive Services and Outreach Program (ISOP) goals. Shining examples include bringing a Junior Ranger Program back to the Winhall Brook Camping Area with the development of a Junior Ranger booklet, a full suite of Ranger led programs, and multiple indirect interpretive opportunities for visitors at his project. John has further emanated his passion for interpretation through his work as the Assistant and then Lead Coordinator for the New England District's ISOP Committee and a PDT member of the 2019 North Atlantic Division, Natural Resource Management Conference.



Ranger Thibodeaux designed a Junior Ranger booklet that offers a wide range of opportunities to learn, explore and connect for ages 6-15. It incorporates eight different book activities with five different campground explorations. This small 10-page booklet is big in scope. It incorporates family recreation, water and wildlife safety, flora, fauna, and night sky identification, history and culture, and flood risk management themes. This popular interpretive tool reached approximately 600 contacts in its debut season.

John acutely recognizes the needs of his audience. Knowing that his campground has many returning campers, he's developed new activities to incorporate each year. For example, one of the campground explorations this past year was an interpretive trail, featuring 30 different species of trees along the half-mile Winhall Woods Trail. Signs not only identify the tree, they connect their visitors with the ecological, economical and heritage importance of each species. Next year, he'll be adding animal tracks to the booklet, along with an interpretive trail through the campground with animal tracks stenciled along the paths. He also designs "rainy-day" thematic arts and crafts activities for campers with families.

John's creativity and originality are evident in the top notch programs he has developed for his park guests. Knowing that people retain 90% of what they do, the majority of his interpretive offerings involved active audience participation and engagement. Whether it be creating "aquascopes" out of PVC pipe to view invertebrates and other aquatic life at the bottom of a streambed, or designing athletic competitions, which mimic the specialized

### Junior Ranger Wildlife Olympics

Complete as many activities as you can!

#### Station 1

A snowshoe hare can leap 10 feet (3 meters) in a single bound.  
I can jump \_\_\_\_\_ feet in one leap!

#### Station 2

A bison can jump over a 6 foot (1.8 meter) fence. A mountain lion can jump 15 feet (4.5 meters) straight up into a tree.  
I can jump \_\_\_\_\_ inches vertically!

#### Station 3

A beaver can hold its breath under water for up to 15 minutes.  
I can hold my breath for \_\_\_\_\_ seconds!

#### Station 4

A great blue heron can sleep on one leg for over an hour.  
I can stand on one leg for \_\_\_\_\_ seconds!



#### Station 5

An owl has the ability to stare for hours.  
I can stare without blinking for \_\_\_\_\_ seconds!

#### Station 6

A grizzly bear can smell a carcass from 2 miles (3.2 km) away.  
How far can you smell food? \_\_\_\_\_ inches

#### Station 7

A pronghorn can sprint 60 miles (97 km) per hour or 25 yards (75 feet) in less than one second. A bison can run 35 miles (56 km) per hour, or 25 yards (23 meters) in about 1.5 seconds.  
I can run 25 yards in \_\_\_\_\_ seconds!



Engineering Challenge! You will need: Paper (standard 8.5in x 11in), coins and two books, chairs or in our case some large 3-Ring binders.

1. Set the two objects 6 inches apart. (a \$1 bill is pretty close). These are your land masses and cannot be moved.
2. Fold or cut your paper to make a bridge. No glue, tape or anything else allowed! ... See More



movements of wildlife, John immerses the participants in the whole experience, creating multi-sensory opportunities to learn and connect. When visitors can't be at the campground, Ranger Thibodeaux brings programs to people's homes by posting videos on his project's Facebook page geared to getting families with young kids learning and moving. Videos included a water safety themed workout and multiple STEM challenges.

Ranger Thibodeaux's ISOP accomplishments extend beyond the Winhall Brook Campground. He's led numerous dam tours for school and community groups interpreting the Corps missions. He has also hosted hundreds of middle school students annually to present a program on being a Park Ranger. Since he started his career at Ball Mountain & Townshend Lakes, John has almost quadrupled the interpretive contacts from just under 400 a year in 2016 to over 1,500 in 2019.

Recognizing that developing high-end programming takes practice, John has compiled the programs he's created to serve as a well-developed foundation for seasonal rangers to utilize which has enhanced ISOP offerings at Ball Mountain Lake. He also coordinated and led an ISOP Training for all Summer Hires in the Upper Connecticut River Basin (UCRB) focused on building and implementing the programs and other key items to being a good interpreter.

This past year, he also played a prominent role on a project development team (PDT) to organize and host the 2019 North Atlantic Division, Natural Resource Management Conference in Boston, MA, reaching over 100 participants. During the conference, he facilitated a multi-district ISOP roundtable, where participants shared ideas and created synergy within the field of interpretation. He simultaneously hosted a trivia competition throughout the conference, interpreting Corps missions while serving as a fun team building exercise.

As a member of the New England District ISOP Committee, John helps create and share interpretive programs, displays and other media to achieve Corps goals throughout NAE. Last year he stepped up his role in the committee to serve as Assistant Coordinator and then Coordinator. During this time he helped create a water safety PSA designed specifically to prevent water related fatalities, reminding hunters to wear life jackets when hunting on or around the water. He also helped create portable banners that highlight the Corps Mission in the New England District. The highly visible, and professional looking Corps Mission displays serve as an asset for the whole district to borrow and use at events, and fairs.



His natural ability allows his audience to connect with our parks and each other, creating lasting bonds and a culture of stewardship for our public lands.



## (2) Made a Positive Experience for Visitors.

John's passion to increase visitor's awareness and appreciation for the natural world was evident when he began working in Winhall Brook Campground. John noticed a lot of families were camping together but still connected to their devices. It was then, that John created numerous programs that would entice the family unit to put down their devices and connect with nature using hands-on programming. John is skilled at making connections with diverse audiences through the use of age appropriate educational activities for young and old. He can create a program that is stimulating, entertaining and informative for the whole family. His energy, enthusiasm and excitement in all of his programming is evident, and serves to draw his audience in, creating an effective learning environment. One of the campgrounds most sought after



programs is the water safety relay where a family is timed in the life jacket relay, life ring toss and then timed on finding the essential items needed for a boat safety check.

Another successful program John has created focuses on conservation of native bird species. Participants are provided binoculars and list of local birds they might see along the trail down to the location of several blue bird nesting boxes established by the Ranger staff. Once there, they get to see inside the box and learn about the importance of protecting these species. This is just one example how John develops interpretive programs with content that fosters understanding, appreciation and protection of the natural environment.

Ranger Thibodeaux continues to make a positive experience for visitors on a daily basis, no matter what the challenge is in front of him. He was the first park ranger in the New England District to brave the camera and create ranger lead programs focusing on STEM disciplines to share on social media outlets. His Engineering Challenge program received 1.1K views within the first week of posting. John continues to create interpretive material that enhances the visitor's experience which is evident in the devoted following he has created within his local community. He is sought out by local schools to create programs on "being a park ranger." These programs highlight the skills required by our Park Rangers and offer the next generation a glimpse into the career of a natural resource manager.

John not only leads his basin in interpretive efforts, he is very involved in the development of newly hired seasonal ranger staff within the New England District. John recognized a need for seasonal staff to be trained in Interpretive Services and held a training program for all seasonal rangers within the Upper Connecticut River Basin (UCRB). John saw the value in mentoring other team members so that they could also contribute to the success of the UCRB interpretive program. In prior years, seasonal rangers were hesitant to create and develop programs, but this past year the program numbers were the highest they have been, with over a thousand contacts made.

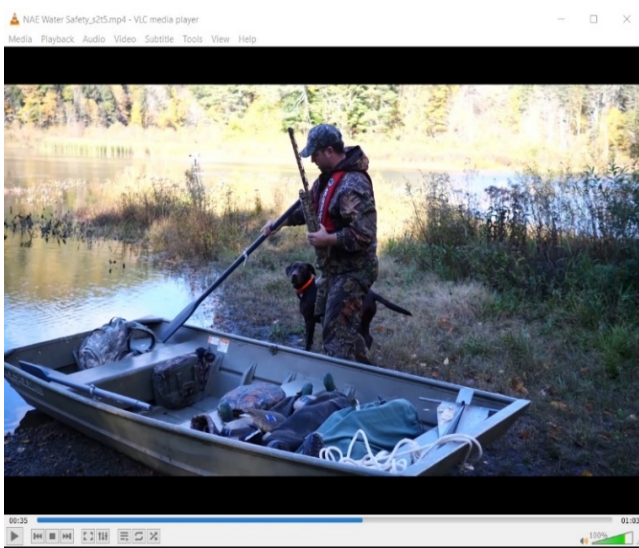
(3) Enhancement of the Public's Understanding of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Site.

John has become the embodiment of the Corps missions and his dedication to telling the Corps story is commendable. Over the past year, he has become a go-to person for professional interpretive programming, and has provided critical opportunities for the community to connect with our public lands. His professionalism in his outreach efforts has been revealed through the numerous formal interpretive programs on Ball Mountain and Townshend Dams, Corps history, the role of park rangers, STEM activities, and features and resources found at the local projects and throughout New England. John continues to educate the public regarding the role the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers plays at the local level, through presentation of interpretive programs to schools, visitors in the campground and at the dams, and to virtual visitors on USACE social media.



John has accomplished the impressive feat of creating a Junior Ranger Activity Book specific to Winhall Brook Campground, focused on hiking, bird identification, aquatic invertebrates, nature scavenger hunts and water safety. Additionally he has implemented a firm schedule of Ranger-led weekend programs for the public to enjoy, related to native bird hikes and identification, native flora and fauna identification, night sky programs, pollinators, nature arts and craft projects, and water safety presentations and games.

John continues to spread the powerful message of water safety throughout the district and beyond, in the creation of a cold water safety public service announcement. John's enthusiasm and passion for interpretation is further exhibited in his initiative to hold seasonal ranger



interpretive training seminars for all new USACE employees in his basin. John is an active member of the New England ISOP committee and continually contributes new ideas, programs, and plans to all New England District park rangers. John is extremely passionate about interpretation and education, and has contributed innumerable hours to the development of high-end quality interpretive programs. His selfless service and commitment to the Corps mission through interpretation, is well deserving of recognition. It is not often that we have the ability to recognize excellence, and it is with full support and gratitude that we would like to honor John with this award.



Citation:

The Hiram M. Chittenden Award for Interpretive Excellence is presented to Ball Mountain & Townshend Lakes, Natural Resource Specialist (Ranger), John Thibodeaux, for his exceptional efforts in the area of Interpretive Outreach and Environmental Education. His commitment to excellence and desire to improve this field is evident in the quality of programs that he provides. John has been able to establish a respected line up of interpretive services at his projects and continues to strive for more. He stands as a terrific example of Corps values, and is an asset to his projects, the New England District and the Corps.

