

From the Refuge to “The Abyss”

by Dianne MacLean

People come to Alaska for a variety of reasons. For some it's definitely a fling: the great fishing, abundant wildlife, every day a Kodak moment, then returning home to the security of routines and the conveniences of modern lifestyles. But for some, Alaska is true love, and it is not enough to be a spectator. There are many people like that on the Peninsula, and many who work on the Refuge. They live within the seasons, cycles, and challenges that are unique to life here, often exposed to unforgiving circumstances where routine decisions affect the well-being of everyone involved. The setting is beyond your average great place to be; the logistics are more complicated, the weather is more unpredictable, help is much further away. Alaska provides the yardstick of “bigness” against which other places are measured.

During the past fire season I was sent from the Kenai Refuge to a fire on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. I thought that would be...‘nice.’ But compared to the grandness of the Chugach range, or Prince William Sound, or the Kenai Peninsula, just how “grand” could the Grand Canyon be?

My assignment was to manage the helicopter base, where I would address the needs of the aircraft and their crews, and respond to the priorities of the fire. In short, my job was to make things run better, rather than worse, regarding helicopter efficiency and safety. The Grand Canyon National Park has facilities on both the north rim of the canyon and the south rim. Flying between the south rim and north rim is known as “crossing the abyss.”

Visitors to the rims can use picnic tables along the paved drives, or enjoy the massive stone and timber lodge, shops and restaurants. Step away from those conveniences and the visitor, or the firefighter, is engulfed in a hostile environment the scale of which I had not seen anywhere outside of Alaska. Outings rapidly escalate into life-or-death situations when people come ill-prepared, still accustomed to security and convenience. Even those of us whose jobs demand preparedness found sudden shock in any lapse: failure

to carry enough water, to allow enough time, to anticipate the worst.

Late one afternoon, a call for help came in to our helibase. A rafting accident had just put 15 people into the Colorado River, and the Park needed a helicopter from the fire to help pull them out of the canyon, before it got too dark. As we flew from the North Rim, our pilot radioed that we were “crossing the abyss.” Our ship might as well have been a mosquito transported to Mars. The scene was otherworldly—beautiful and vast on the scale of the Chugach Mountains turned upside down. Trying to take a photograph seemed pointless. A twisted car body lay nestled among rocky teeth several hundred feet below the south rim, where a despondent individual had driven off a month before.

The helicopter threaded downward through the narrow canyon walls. On the ground, the turning rotors generated a wind of superheated canyon air that was painful to breath, and we rescuers were made aware of our own vulnerability: the immediate need to drink, to have brought enough gear, to not lose communications with the rest of the world. The rescue proceeded in that tense, forced calm so necessary in emergency response. It brought a sense of accomplishment as a team, of appreciation for one another's abilities. As our pilot called in that we had just crossed back over the abyss and were returning to the helibase, I thought about Alaska and the Grand Canyon and of their similar, beautiful harshness. Without this harshness, many things would be easier, but there would be no test, less of a challenge to meet, and perhaps less of life to appreciate.

Dianne MacLean is a career firefighter, working in both prescribed fire and fire suppression. She came to the Kenai Refuge last year from the Forest Service, after working several summers on the Chugach National Forest, which followed twelve years of service on the Okanogen National Forest in Washington. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://kenai.fws.gov>.