

CRITTER COUNTERS AND WEED WARRIORS: THE WILD WORLD OF SOLSTICE CANYON

By Amy Morton

Most MBA students wear suits and ties to their summer internships, but Aaron Roth wears his Teva sandals to fit in.

“Paper-pushing is not a valued activity in the National Park Service,” jokes Aaron, 28, a student at the University of Colorado at Boulder. One of 26 business interns for the NPS, he signed on to spend ten weeks this summer writing a business plan for one of the parks. But he had to accept the mission before knowing where he’d end up.

His destination: the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area in Los Angeles, spanning nearly 155,000 acres to earn the distinction of the largest urban national park. Dividing Los Angeles into “The Westside” and “The Valley,” the mountain range is home to more than 25 known native species listed as rare, threatened, or endangered.

When Aaron learned he would receive free housing in the canyons of Malibu, he was thrilled by his luck. Maybe he’d learn to surf. Certainly he’d bring his mountain bike. But he had no idea that he’d soon be an expert on mountain lions, bobcats, and lizards, or that the “business guys” might learn as much in their nature dorm as on the job.

For example, what’s the best way to trap a lizard? This is the question Aaron faces when he finds a lizard lounging on his bed a few days after moving in the NPS dorm. Fortunately, one of his new roommates, Jeff, a quiet animal ecologist, springs to life when asked for help. “Is there one in your room?” he asked eagerly. “Can I catch it?”

Aaron relays this story when I meet him at the swanky Malibu Colony Plaza shopping center. Mansions cling to the hillside across the Pacific Coast Highway and luxury cars fill the palm tree-lined parking lot. Leaving civilization behind, I follow his government-issued natural gas vehicle (NGV) to his summer lodging.

Five full-time park employees, including three animal ecologists (“critter counters”) and two plant ecologists (“weed warriors”), and two graduate research students (“poop scoopers”) reside in a two-story rectangular dorm overlooking the Pacific Ocean from atop Solstice Canyon, a remote area north of Pepperdine University known best for its cascading stream and the remnants of a *Architectural Digest* home once built around it.

In front of the dorm are several plastic chairs and a hammock, all with trailside seating. If you walk straight out the screen door at the front of the building and continue onward, the downhill TRW Loop Trail greets you, connecting you to the fire road and other trails heading into the shady canyon. For some dorm dwellers, this is how you walk to work.

A former satellite equipment testing facility in the sixties, the dorm and its abandoned neighbor, a strange silo-like structure, represent a bygone era. While the NPS never builds within protected areas, it will occasionally take over pre-existing structures and maintain them, Aaron tells me. In this case, the government converted the office into a dorm for employees, interns, and graduate students working in the park.

“That meant modern amenities, but no closets,” Aaron points out on a tour of the building. Indeed, I note many piles of clothes as I peek into the dorm’s eight bedrooms. In Cass’s room, I spy two animal tails and the skull of a cow. The veteran resident at four years, Cass is an animal ecologist who tracks mountain lions using radio collars. To replace the batteries, she must trap and tranquilize the animals periodically.

Mountain lions remain a source of concern in California due to several recent attacks. But tracking them is “not as exciting as it sounds,” says Aaron. “There are so few of them, and they’re elusive. So it’s a lot of checking empty traps. Jeff has worked here for several years, and he’s never seen a mountain lion that he didn’t trap.”

When I meet Cass in the common room, where digital cable was only recently installed, I am surprised at how normal she appears. Shy even. It’s hard to imagine her shooting a tranquilizer dart at a mountain lion angrily pacing within a trap. Then again, when I meet Emily and Melanie in the kitchen, I can’t picture these girls collecting bobcat scat either.

Wearing a bikini top and shorts, Emily tells us they’ve just returned from an afternoon at Point Dume and Zuma Beach. Melanie checks her marinated chicken and potatoes cooking in the oven, and says to Emily, “Let me know when you’re ready.” The women in the house, at least, eat together, and pick up scat together.

By “laundering” and then examining the feces as part of their graduate research project at Colorado State University, Emily and Melanie can analyze the diet of the bobcat. “They can tell how the species is surviving,” Aaron later explains. “If they’re eating a lot of rats and garbage, that’s a problem. They should be eating other creatures.”

Other dorm dwellers, such as Nathan, who is typing on his laptop when we pass by his room, worry about endangered plant life. As Aaron and I leave the dorm and hike along Solstice Creek, he points out a flowering yellow plant alongside the trail. “That’s a mustard plant,” he says. “It’s an invasive species that springs up in disturbed areas and branches out and takes over. In some places I’ve seen, it’s just a swath of mustard.”

I begin to see how the bright yellow blooms stand out in stark contrast to the tan and green hues of this semi-arid Mediterranean ecosystem, one of only five in the world. They *do* look quite out of place in this setting. “Once you learn about invasive species, you re-orient,” Aaron insists. “They’ve become ugly to me.”

The stream gurgles louder and the temperature cools as we get deeper into the canyon, covered in a canopy of alder and sycamore. Aaron reflects on slowness of life here. Days start early, with the official work hours from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., and most of his roommates retire by 9 p.m.

The closest to a commotion he’s seen is when the animal ecologists were called to Griffith Park to investigate an alleged killing of a deer by a mountain lion. Cass returned to the office carrying the severed deer head in gloved hands. While the others rushed over, and even munched on cookies while inspecting, Aaron felt ill.

Cleary, nightlife is less interesting than wildlife in the dorm. But the group does take a monthly outing to The Canyon Club in Agoura Hills for their “Retro Disco Dance Party.” He chuckles to recall how Eric, an animal ecologist who he calls “the soul of brevity,” and Cass danced up a storm. “I don’t think Cass left the dance floor all night,” he swears.

But ironically, back in the real world, it was Aaron who stood out. His Teva sandals violated the club's attire policy, and he had to buy a pair of cheap black shoes to go in.