

On the lighter side
It's a Drug Dog, Not a Sandwich Dog:
Misadventures of a Park Warden Crossing the Canadian - USA Border

In March 1998 I participated in an interagency visit to Grand Canyon National Park with fellow park rangers Dennis Kaleta from Glacier Bay National Park and Gord MacRae from British Columbia's Tatshensheni Alsek Park. The purpose of our trip was to learn about the Colorado River's private and commercial permit systems, regulatory requirements, Leave No Trace practises, and aircraft flightseeing guidelines with a view to their applicability to Tatshenshini and Alsek Rivers. The two-week adventure and learning opportunity was highlighted by a week-long patrol down the Colorado River with National Park Service rangers Chris, Pat Hattaway, and Dave Trevino.



Dennis, Tom and Gord

On the trip down from Vancouver the connecting flight from Portland to Flagstaff was over booked. Gord and I offered to be bumped and they put us up in an airport hotel. We checked in and walked what seemed like half a kilometer to our room because of all our rafting gear. We got to the room, opened the door to find one queen size bed. We walked back to the check in desk and told them we were friends, but not that friendly wondering they saw to give us to a room with one bed. Fortunately, the next room with two beds was much closer. The trip to park headquarters the next day was uneventful.

Our trip down the river was not only educational and filled with lighthearted fun, but also provided an interagency cooperation opportunity. During our trip, Dave stopped and spoke to a private Canadian rafting group that was suspected of being run as a commercial trip. No charges were laid, but the following October, the same trip leader had his rafting permit canceled by the park service. An extended investigation revealed the trip leader had conspired to use his private permit for commercial gain. A key piece of evidence was a fax we had sent them showing the trip commercially advertised offering "primal music, breath work, and firewalking." To our disappointment, we didn't see any of these activities when we spoke to the group on the river, although we did see some scantily clad old hippie free spirits wandering about their

campsite. Perhaps we had just missed it. I recall having to step into the frigid Colorado river to hide my Mountain Equipment Coop sandals as Dave introduced me to trip leader as “Tom from the permit office.” A year or so after our trip, the same party leader was confronted by Glacier Bay rangers on the Alsek River. His customers and crew were interviewed, and he was eventually charged and banned from guiding (as per Dennis Kaleta).

As a cultural aside during our river patrol, we introduced our US counterparts, to what we called the “Canadian Maneuver.” The Colorado has numerous rapids and some like Grapevine, Crystal, Hermit, and Granite had drops from 15 to 18 feet. Running them was like approaching and going down a small hill. As we got close to the larger rapids, we’d sit at the very front of the raft watching for waves big enough to splash over the bow. Waves that Dave called “*beaver tails*.” When any were encountered, we’d flip over onto our backs with our yaps open to catch mouthful of the brown silt laden Colorado and then spout it back out like whales. Our US counterparts saw us as “*crazy Canucks*” (knuckle heads might have been more appropriate), but by the end of our trip they had all tried the maneuver at least once. Around the campfire that night, they’d be unofficially deputized as Canadian park wardens and rangers in the spirit of international interagency cooperation. Not surprisingly, this didn’t make our trip reports.



Approaching a beaver tail preparing for the Canadian Maneuver at Crystal Rapid

Before heading back home, someone from the permit office asked me to bring home a small teddy bear. It was part of an elementary school project tracking its travels from one school to another across states, provinces, and countries. I said, “no problem,” and slipped it into my day pack. A couple of days later while waiting in the Canada Customs line at the Vancouver airport, I watched as a RCMP dog handler, and his black lab worked their way up and down the line. The dog passed us by only to return and sit down next to me a short time later. I initially thought, “this is cute, the dog must like me,” or “maybe it had caught a scent of my dog back home.”

The RCMP officer requested my customs declaration paper and marked it with a big black “**X**” before moving on. A short time later a pre-screening customs agent asked to see my declaration paper. He noted the “**X**” and directed me to screening station off to the side. My heart stopped as I suddenly realized (yes, a bit slow) the dog had “indicated” on me, and I was about to be searched for drugs. I turned to Gord and told him I’d meet him on the other side. Noticing this, the agent asked if we knew each other and before we knew it Gord was asked to join me.

We were then directed to separate agents. I noticed Gord breezing through his check, while my agent meticulously rummaged through my daypack. She repeatedly asked me if I had any drugs, and each time I firmly denied having any drugs. Unfortunately, she did not appear to believe me.

The teddy bear project suddenly came to mind and I thought, "Oh no I've been set up as a mule, and was now screwed." I told the agent about the teddy bear. She gave it a quick once-over, then flippantly said, "That's not it." Racking my brain, I remembered the sandwich I had been offered on the short flight from Flagstaff to Portland. I had saved it in the top compartment of my pack for later. When I mentioned the sandwich to the customs officer, she dismissed it sternly explaining "It's a drug dog, not a sandwich dog!" like I knew nothing about handler dogs. She continued her search and asking if I had drugs and I continued to answer "no."

Wrapping her search up, she pointed me towards an area where she explained I would undergo a "pocket" search, and then ominously pointed to a curtained room, where she said I'd then be taken, asked to remove my clothes, and subject to a body search. "Yikes, yikes and more yikes!" I recalled Gord smiling as he walked away. Did he know something I didn't? No wonder he was happy.

At the smaller cubicle desk, a male customs agent asked me to empty my pockets. His attention was drawn to my park warden badge case. Opening it, he went back and forth looking between my peace officer identification picture and badge and looking at me. He asked if I had told the other agent I was a park warden. "No, I wasn't given the opportunity to" I replied. I kept my thoughts of being presumed guilty until proven innocent to myself. The atmosphere quickly and noticeably became less tense and a bit more relaxed. The questioning changed from asking if I had drugs to looking for an explanation as to why the dog had indicated on me. Had I been partying? Had I been somewhere other people were partying?

I explained who I was, the purpose of our trip, and that our evenings had been tame. I mentioned we had had a couple of beers at a lounge the night before. I told him we had passed two hikers smoking a joint along the Havasu Creek trail a two days earlier but could not think of anything else. After the first agent's response, there was no way I was going to bring up the sandwich again. In any case between this, my park warden ID and badge, it was enough to convince the agent to forgo the body search. To my great relief, I was finally allowed to clear customs.

I'll never forget coming out of the customs doors to the smiling faces of Gord, and Kevin McLaughlin and Judy Unrau who were picking us up at the airport. The sense of relief was immense. The beer tasted exceptionally good as I retold my story to them at the first opportunity.

Sometime later, I shared this adventure with Will Devlin, a dog master at the time. He said it was unlikely the dog indicated on my sandwich as they are specifically trained not to do things like that. That said, I've always thought it was the sandwich! I wanted to go back and tell that customs lady that given my circumstances, perhaps on the odd occasion it could have been a "sandwich dog" as well. I took some comfort later, after hearing of a priest whom Canada Customs had pulled aside for a drug search where they'd no more success finding drugs on him than they had with me. Maybe the "sandwich dog" was on shift again.

My customs adventure didn't end here. Ten years later in March 2008, I returned to the Grand Canyon for a 21-day private rafting trip on river with work colleagues, family, and friends. Driving south from Whitehorse with Kevin McLaughlin, we picked up my son Brett in Calgary, where he was going to university. I told Brett to make sure all his gear and clothing were completely free and clear of any university adventure remnants, given the typically more serious and grumpy US customs agents.

Arriving at the Sweet Grass, Montana USA border crossing, we were met by several agents and at least two drug dogs. We answered the standard questions and watched as they inspected my car using mirrors on long poles and their dogs. My stress level rose as the intensity of their search was unusual, with lots of discussion between agents.

Before long, one of the agents returned to my door and asked if I had recently run over a rabbit or other animal. "Not that we could recall." It appeared the dogs had detected the scent of an animal I must have run over. Some of its bloody remains had gotten caught on the undercarriage of the car and the moment of tension was quickly replaced by relief. The incident brought back memories of my previous customs encounter and near body search. Drug dog, sandwich dog, and now dead animal it seemed. All reasons why border crossings never fail to make me nervous.

PostScript. It's a good idea to have kept your park warden badge case. On reviewing this story, Kevin told me about his return from our 2008 Grand Canyon River trip. *"I got pulled aside for a detailed search after our trip on the Colorado as well. What saved me from a potential cavity violation was my empty badge case. We had lost our badges due to the LE cluster, and the customs lady wanted to know what was supposed to be in the empty slot in my wallet. When I told her she relaxed and became a little more hospitable. We had a nice conversation about it and then she sent me on my way."*

As told by Tom Elliot with input and memory corrections and verifications from Gord MacRae, Dennis Kaleta, Kevin McLaughlin, Brett Elliot and Will Devlin.