

California State Park Insignia - Hats




Ranger Al Whittington in a ranger hat, 1940.



Modern ranger felt dress hat on left and straw summer hat on right. The ranger hat has a leather hat band that is tooled with the lettering "State of California" along with grizzly bears and poppy flowers around the band.

The Ranger Hat

The most recognized state park ranger symbol is their hat. Sometimes referred to as a "Smokey Bear" or campaign hat, it is known throughout the California state park service as "The Stetson". This name comes from the original maker, John B. Stetson.

The ranger Stetson has a colorful past. It starts in 1858, when John B. Stetson went west, possibly to die of "consumption," which he had contracted working with his family in the hat trade. During the summer of 1862, while sitting around a  campfire near Pikes Peak, Stetson, showing his fellow wanderers the felting process, decided to make a felt hat. It was big and very peculiar looking, but it gave protection from the wind, rain, and sun. Some of his companions admired it, but most of them considered the odd-looking hat to be a perfect object for jokes and wisecracks. All kidding came to an abrupt halt when a Mexican bullwhacker offered him a five dollar gold piece for it.

A healthy Stetson returned to the hat trade in Philadelphia in 1863. His first commercially successful hat was copied after the one he had made around the Pikes Peak campfire. Called the "Boss of the Plains," it was a natural colored hat, with a four-inch brim, four-inch top, and a strap that served as a band. This "Boss of the Plains" is truly the hat from which all modern Stetsons evolved.

Most early California state park rangers wore a soft-brim Stetson. At the first employee conference in 1938, a uniform study was requested to standardize uniforms. A year later, a uniform committee recommended a State Park uniform, consisting of Lincoln gray-green trousers and jacket, gray shirt, black tie, black leather goods, and the stiff-brim Belgian Belly color Stetson. Since this first official uniform, everything but the Stetson has seen drastic change.

Today, the state park ranger uniform consists of green pants and jacket, tan shirt, and black leather gear, topped by the well-known "Stetson". This hat, proudly worn by rangers for over 50 years, is fittingly named after the man who regained his health in the great outdoors.

Other Hats

A wide variety of caps have been authorized for state park uniform wear. The first known cap was a winter cap with "CSP" on the front, used in the 1950's in the Sierras. All the small state park patches have been used on caps, as have many badge patches. Additionally, several official volunteer caps have been authorized since the 1970's. Below are just some of caps and cap insignia worn over the years, including a current issue riot helmet.

