



Cliff Littell helps Merlin Repp, a fellow member of the Arizona Mountaineering Club, back up to Mather Point during the 2020 Grand Canyon Over-the-Rim Cleanup. Repp is toting a bag of trash retrieved from the ledges below the overlook, while Littell is untying a bag of coins Repp collected.

AT THE END OF THEIR ROPES

Children's toys, cameras, cellphones, sunglasses ... even trash cans and traffic cones are dropped or tossed into the Grand Canyon. There's a lot of rubbish below the rim, but there would be a lot more if it weren't for the Arizona Mountaineering Club, which conducts an annual cleanup. Unfortunately, no matter how much stuff these dedicated volunteers take out, they'll never get to all of it.

BY NOAH AUSTIN | PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN BURCHAM

“SEE SOMETHING SHINY down there. Or maybe it's a rock. ... It's round, and I think it's purple, but I have my sunglasses on, so I'm not sure about the color. ... It's about a foot to the left of your left foot. Does that make sense?”

This is what it sounds like to clean up the mess left by 6 million people.

It's a sunny morning in late September, and Deborah Roether is standing near Bright Angel Lodge on the South Rim of Grand Canyon National Park. She's shouting directions to David Sampson, who's 30 feet below her, on a rope anchored to the base of a well-worn observation scope

on the rim. Sampson is picking his way, a few inches at a time, along a small, crumbly ledge of Kaibab Limestone. He's hunting for trash — some of it blown off the rim, some of it inadvertently dropped, some of it intentionally thrown. But it doesn't really matter how it got into the Canyon. There's only one way to get it out.

That's where the Arizona Mountaineering Club, an all-volunteer group dedicated to rock climbing education and land advocacy, comes in. Founded in the 1960s, the club has been organizing the annual Grand Canyon Over-the-Rim Cleanup for three decades. Every year, members of

the group spend a day and a half hanging from ropes to pull man-made items out of Arizona's best-known natural wonder. It's a tough job — especially in 2020, with COVID-19 throwing a wrench into park operations and the event's logistics — but it has to be done if those 6 million annual visitors are going to see the Canyon at its best.

“Ninety percent of [park visitors] don't go below the rim,” says Roether, who's been with the AMC since 2014. “To have their experience be a rim experience, and to have that experience involve trash that doesn't belong there, is painful to me. It actually hurts when I see that.”

EARLY IN ITS HISTORY, the AMC was often tasked with rescuing members who lost their ropes or otherwise got stuck while climbing Camelback Mountain and other peaks in the Phoenix area. Today, though, its mission is to provide educational opportunities, climbing experiences and stewardship of the places where people love to climb. “When you have an organization that's as old as this, one of your biggest challenges is respecting the past, living in the present and planning for the future,” says John Furniss, a past president of the club who organizes the Grand Canyon event.



The club now has a rolling membership of about 300. Its members gather for regular climbing outings and also teach classes on basic rock climbing, anchors, canyoneering and other topics several times a year. And the AMC hosts multiple cleanup events, although the Canyon cleanup is the largest and longest-running.

Those decades of experience are a big reason the club is able to come back every year, park spokesperson Joëlle Baird says. “A lot of their volunteers have been coming back year after year,” she says. “This is a very unique place to rappel over the edge: We don’t have hard rock, and everything is crumbling. The type of volunteers the park is looking for are highly experienced people who feel comfortable in this kind of terrain. It’s a trusting relationship.”

Furniss echoes that sentiment. “Every year, we must operate in a way that earns us the opportunity to come back again,” he says. “Our relationship with the National Park Service is something we do not and cannot take for granted.”

Furniss retired in 2011 and decided it was time to “do some fun things,” so he and his adult daughter, Stephanie, took a climbing class with an individual trainer who introduced them to the AMC. After they completed the necessary training, they attended their first event at the Canyon in 2012, as rappelling partners. “For so many members, the interaction with park visitors from around the world is tremendous,” Furniss says. “To have the opportunity to have young girls come up and to be able to say, ‘Look down there,

ABOVE: Merlin Repp collects coins from the rock formations around Mather Point. The coins are hazardous to California condors and other animals at the Canyon.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Children’s toys, sunglasses, cellphones, cash and a camera tripod are among the unusual items retrieved during the 2020 cleanup.

at the end of the rope. That’s my daughter. That could be you.’ It’s such an opportunity to show what’s possible.”

When it comes to what the climbers find in the Canyon, the possibilities seem endless. Always, there are the expected items: children’s toys, cameras, cellphones, sunglasses. Then there’s the stuff Furniss puts in the “What were they thinking?” category: traffic cones, trash cans, tires, a motorcycle seat. In 2017, the club retrieved one of two 150-pound benches that an unknown group of miscreants chucked over the edge near Hopi House. And there are more sobering finds, such as memorials and containers of ashes. (Scattering ashes at the Canyon is allowed with a permit, but leaving the containers or other memorials is prohibited.)

There’s regional variation, too. Near Bright Angel Lodge’s famous soda fountain, ice cream spoons can often be spotted on the ledges below the rim. In other areas, wind patterns might mean hats are more likely to be blown off visitors’ heads. At Mather Point, where many people get their first glimpse of the Canyon, the problem is coins — the result of an unfortunate practice that park

rangers have been trying to discourage for decades.

In 2019, AMC climbers retrieved 30 pounds of coins from the ledges around Mather Point. In 2018, it was 51 pounds. Most of those thousands of coins are pennies, and pennies are mostly zinc — which is toxic to the critically endangered California condors that frequent the South Rim. Furniss has also found unusual bite marks on some of the retrieved pennies, indicating that other animals at the Canyon may be mistaking them for food.

The park’s management has done what it can to limit what goes over the rim. Signs at Mather Point now warn about the danger of dropping coins. Self-closing trash cans have greatly reduced the amount of garbage that gets blown over. And in recent years, encouraging visitors to carry reusable water bottles has meant fewer plastic bottles to collect.

The club has adapted, too, often in ingenious ways. Climbers collect trash in sturdy plastic bags, some of them a decade old, that once held Morton water softener pellets. Old patches of carpet protect the park’s trees when they’re used as anchors for the ropes. Sliced sections of fire hose, provided by a firefighter member of the group, keep the ropes from chafing and fraying on the South Rim’s rock walls. And a unique rappelling technique, developed for this event and now part of the AMC’s teaching curriculum, enables the climbers to have their hands free to collect trash.

But collecting trash isn’t the only reason the climbers want their hands free. After all, they’re rappelling to vantage points that almost no one gets to experience. “One of the common shots is of people leaning back with the Canyon behind them,” Furniss says. “It’s an opportunity to just sit back and enjoy the wonder.”

ON THIS SEPTEMBER SATURDAY, the Canyon is relatively busy thanks to National Public Lands Day, a fee-free day at national parks. At Mather Point, visitors watch as AMC climbers hunt for coffee cups and other detritus some 50 feet below. The most common question — “What are they doing down there?” — is an opportunity for those on the rim to educate the public. “Part of what we do is that ‘broken windows’ model,” Furniss says. “If we can help keep it clean, maybe others will recognize and respect the cleanliness of the space.”

The ongoing pandemic has made this year’s event a challenge. Some of the park’s facilities are closed or operating at reduced capacity, and Furniss had to submit a detailed COVID-19 mitigation plan to get the go-ahead from the Park Service. Instead of having 50 or more participants, the 2020 event has about 25, and they’re broken into small, physically distanced groups. Face masks, gloves and hand sanitizer are in heavy rotation, although climbers are allowed to remove their masks when they’re below the rim to get a better view of their surroundings.

For the AMC, safety precautions are nothing new. Each climber has trained extensively on climbing and anchor techniques. Near Bright Angel Lodge, pairs of rappelling partners leapfrog one another as they work their way along the rim, with a team leader examining each pair’s rope anchor — whether to an observation scope, a park sign or a sturdy piñon pine — before giving the OK to head down. Yellow caution tape keeps curious visitors safely out of the way, but close enough to learn what’s going on.

Late in the morning, Roether makes her way back onto the rim after a successful rappel. Neighboring pairs are already talking about her haul, which includes a GoPro camera, a Nalgene water bottle and two hats. She and Furniss said before the event that they expected to find a lot of face masks this year, but so far, there have been relatively few. That could mean they’re staying on people’s faces, or it could mean they’ve blown too far down to be retrieved.

That’s the frustrating reality: No matter how much stuff these dedicated volunteers take out of the Canyon — and during the 2020 cleanup, they take out 47 pounds of trash



and 14 pounds of coins — they’ll never get to all of it. That, Roether says, is why it’s important to engage with visitors and show them why this matters, so they can be part of the solution: “I constantly ask myself, *How can I impart a message that will evoke a response of caring?*”

Late in the afternoon, the teams have packed up and returned to the AMC’s traditional digs at Mather Campground. Still on the rim are a father and son, chatting at the flagpole near El Tovar.

“Did you see those people hanging over the rim on ropes, picking up trash?”

“Yeah! I guess we’d better not drop anything, huh?”

This is what it sounds like to care. ahh

To learn more about Arizona Mountaineering Club membership or classes, visit arizonamountaineeringclub.net.