

BACK TO GLACIER PARK

DESANTO, NOTED GLACIER PARK RANGER, AUTHOR, CLIMBER, DIES

July 12, 2017 at 7:41 am | By Chris Peterson

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Jerry DeSanto skis the North Fork in this photo from 1999. (Chris Peterson photo)

Noted Glacier National Park ranger, botanist, author and mountain climber Jerry De Santo died last week. He was 89.

DeSanto was born in Duluth, Minnesota on May 6, 1928. In 1946, he joined the United States Air Force and served with the occupying force in Europe until he was honorably discharged in 1949.

DeSanto had a master's degree in Italian history and met the requirements for a doctorate in the same, but turned down the degree to return to the Park Service. He also had a degree in geology.

Over the course of his career, he saw all of the Park, stationed in the Belly River, Goat Haunt, Two Medicine, East Glacier, Walton and the North Fork. He was stationed at Polebridge for the last 11 years of his career. In 1983, he survived a grizzly attack in the Park.

"He was the best man at my wedding," said longtime ranger Dave Shea. "We were very good friends. We traveled many miles together on the trails. He was pretty exceptional historian and botanist."

Jack Potter, Former Park Chief of Management, noted DeSanto was a "renaissance man."

"He had so many different interests," Potter said. "He had a great sense of humor. A really fun guy."

In 2009, De Santo received a lifetime achievement award by the Montana Native Plant Society.

De Santo was a ranger-naturalist in Yellowstone Park from 1961 to 1965, and became an avid and skilled birder in addition to his intensifying interest in plants. After completing the National Park Service Ranger Trainee Program in 1965, DeSanto accepted a position as a permanent ranger in Glacier National Park in 1966. His assignments in Glacier included Belly River, headquarters, Goat Haunt, St. Mary, Two Medicine, East Glacier and Walton. In 1974 he became sub-district ranger for the North Fork, stationed at Polebridge, where he remained until his retirement in 1986. DeSanto's dedicated stewardship of his assigned area became legendary.

He was a consummate outdoorsman and tireless hiker and explorer. He accomplished first ascents of Mount Peabody and the west face of Kintla Peak. DeSanto always was ready and willing to guide a fellow botanist to some special place, especially if it required a superhuman effort to get there.

As a botanist, DeSanto collected the first Montana specimens of pinewoods peavine and northern rattlesnake plantain. He also collected first Glacier Park records of bitterroot, bird's egg lady's slipper and Macoun's gentian, among others.

He was a skilled photographer and writer. He combined his great wildflower photographs with his knowledge of alpine plants to produce "Alpine Wildflowers of Glacier and Waterton Lakes National Parks."

He possessed an ability to tie several disciplines together in describing events, plants or people, as exhibited in his widely acclaimed book "Bitterroot." The book is an exhaustive source of information on Montana's state flower.

His letters and writings are stored at the University of Montana Mansfield Library. De Santo contracted viral encephalitis in 2000, which severely affected his health. He was living at the Montana Veterans Home.

Funeral arrangements were unavailable at presstime.,

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