

# South Dakota Black Hats

*Good Guys Defend the Forest*



**I**N THE MOVIES, the good guys always wear white. Not so in South Dakota. There, they wear black—hats, that is.

Those “good guys” are the South Dakota Black Hats, a crew of specially trained men and women who defend the state’s forests from the effects of wildfire.

Their defense is twofold. They clean up the forests to minimize the impact of wildfire. And, when a fire breaks out, they attack it—hard and fast—in an effort to quickly control the blaze.

The crew is named after a highly-skilled American Indian wildland firefighting team called the Black Hats, which originated in the mid-1960s on South Dakota’s Pine Ridge Indian Reservation.

The original Black Hats—a name they gave themselves—traveled the country fighting wildfires. They were considered to be among the best in the business before disbanding in 1988.

## **Black Hats reborn**

The new Black Hats were organized in June 2002 by the South Dakota Wildland Fire Suppression Division to fill a critical void in the state’s wildfire prevention and response activities.

Specifically, the state needed work crews to carry out three large fuel-reduction

projects it was managing on private land in the forested Black Hills. In addition, another permanent hand crew was needed to provide the initial attack on new wildfires.

Neither is a job for the faint of heart. During fuels reduction work, crew members begin their day at 6:30 a.m. with a 30-minute briefing to review the day’s goals before heading to the project site.

For the next eight hours, save for a 30-minute lunch break, crew members carry out the day’s objectives, which can range from cutting and piling downed timber and brush to removing standing trees that are dead or deemed to have low survivability.

The tree debris is then gathered into several teepee-shaped piles that can later be burned or hauled away.

When the daily site work is done, the crew then heads to a fitness center for two hours of physical conditioning, which includes running two miles, weight lifting and strength training.

During wildfire season, approximately April 1 to October 31, crew members are on-call 24 hours a day and must maintain a 45-minute response capability to their headquarters in Rapid City.

The rules are tough. The demands are high. And the work is grueling. But that’s because people’s lives and homes are at stake when wildfires are raging. The crew has to be ready.

## **Looking at a leader**

Dulcie Running Hawk, 34, is a squad boss with the Black Hats. That makes her responsible for the day-to-day work and safety of four other crew members—whether they’re clearing downed debris or fighting fire.

“When we’re on a fire, it’s my responsibility as a squad boss to make sure these four people make it home every night,” said Running Hawk.

Safety is paramount on the fuels projects as well, Running Hawk said. That means



Black Hats Squad Boss  
Dulcie Running Hawk

watching for hazardous site conditions, and ensuring that safety procedures are being followed, and workers are properly rested and hydrated.

Running Hawk has been with the Black Hats since its inception. In a sense, it's a destiny for her because fire has long been a part of her life.

When she was young, her father worked as a seasonal wildland firefighter and later headed a 20-person firefighting crew from the Cheyenne River Sioux Indian Reservation in west-central South Dakota.

At 17, she joined his crew. For the next three years, Running Hawk learned the trade and honed her skills as a wildland firefighter. It was hard, physical work. It was even harder working for her father. She wanted to quit more times than she can remember.

"It was quite interesting working with my father," she said. "He had to be harder on me because I was his daughter. There were so many days when I would come back and complain to my mom about how hard firefighting was. When I talked about quitting, she said, 'It's up to you.'"

Running Hawk stuck with it until she met and married her husband at age 20. They immediately moved to Germany where he was stationed in the U.S. Army for nearly four years.

In 1991, the couple returned to the United States and settled in Rapid City. By then, she was the mother of four children.

In January 2002, fire intervened in her life again. Running Hawk had been working at the Federal Beef Plant in Rapid City when it was heavily damaged by fire. Shortly thereafter, the business closed.

Running Hawk began searching for work and a means to support her family. That's when she heard about the state's efforts to assemble a fuels mitigation/wildland firefighting crew. She knew it was something she could do.

In short order, she and 19 others were hired and trained. Most were inexperienced at



firefighting. A few had professional tree-cutting experience. All brought diversity to the team which, unlike the original Black Hats, is not entirely American Indian.

### Fire in the Hills

The crew had barely gotten its feet wet when a large wildfire broke out in the Black Hills near the town of Deadwood.

Running Hawk was there. Suddenly, everything she'd learned 17 years before came flooding back. It was exciting, nerve-wracking and exhausting all at the same time, she said.

"Being out on a fire is very scary," Running Hawk said. "You don't know what the fire is going to do. The fire can change. A lot can happen. You have to know where your safety zones are, what the weather is doing, what kind of terrain you are working with.

"But I like the excitement of being a firefighter. You know you are out there saving lives and property. Afterward, when the fire is put out, you know you did a good job and your crew did a good job. I like that feeling."

Work on the fuels-reduction project is just as rewarding, she said, because the homeowners have been both appreciative of their efforts and happy with the results.

"When you are on fuels, you are also doing it to protect the houses in case of a fire breaking out in that area," said Running Hawk. "When we're done with our job, we know that a house has a better chance of being safe from a wildfire." ■

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