



## **Coalition To Protect America's National Parks Weekly National Park System Report**

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### **Incidents**

#### **Grand Canyon NP Search Suspended For Two Missing Hikers**

On the evening of Saturday, April 15th, the park received an alert from a personal locating beacon in a backcountry area near the confluence of Tapeats Creek and Thunder River. An Arizona Department of Public Safety helicopter flew to the location where a hiking party reported that two members of their party were missing – Lou Ann Merrell, 62, and Jackson Standefer, 14.

Merrell and Standefer were last seen crossing Tapeats Creek below the confluence with Thunder River, where they lost their footing and were swept down Tapeats Creek.

The park conducted an extensive search of both the Tapeats Creek area and the area of the Colorado River below the confluence with Tapeats Creek from the morning of April 16th to the end of the day on April 19th.

Three teams (approximately 20 people total) searched ground areas along Tapeats Creek and the Colorado River each day, staying in the field overnight. In order to cover areas that were inaccessible to the ground searchers, each day the NPS also utilized a helicopter and crew, an unmanned aerial system and operator, and an inflatable motor raft and associated search team.

On April 21st, operations were scaled back. The search will continue in a limited and continuous mode, focusing on public outreach and search efforts during regular backcountry patrols. The NPS will continue to follow up and investigate any new information that it receives.

Source: [Public Affairs, Grand Canyon NP](#).

#### **Sequoia NP Two Die In Separate Accidents In Park**

Two fatalities occurred in the park this past weekend, one on Mount Whitney and one in the Kaweah River.

On Friday afternoon, a group of climbers descending the eastern slope of Mount Whitney crossed paths with a solo climber who was heading up the Mountaineer's Route. Like the commonly used trail to the 14,494-foot peak, the route starts at Whitney Portal but is far more challenging. Sometime later, they saw a backpack fall and realized that the climber they passed might have fallen. As soon as they were able to obtain a cell signal, they called 911, reporting the incident to the Inyo County Sheriff's Office.

The sheriff's office began an investigation, but it was too dark to begin an aerial search. Saturday morning, they conducted a helicopter search and spotted the man's body after about four hours. He had apparently been traversing the north face of Mount Whitney, an area covered with snow and ice, when he fell. Because this area is in Sequoia National Park, Inyo County Sheriff's Office contacted the park; rangers recovered the body on Sunday.

The second fatality occurred on Saturday afternoon. A 21-year-old Tulare woman and three friends were alongside the Middle Fork of the Kaweah River a short distance downstream from the Hospital Rock Picnic Area when she fell into the river and was swept away. Her friends contacted the parks for help and a search and rescue operation was begun.

Further downstream, another visitor saw the woman in the river and managed to get her out. CPR was begun, but was unsuccessful.

Source: [KTVN-TV news story](#).

### **Chiricahua NM**

#### **Follow-up: Man Convicted Of Assaulting Employee Sentenced**

Gil Gaxiola, 33, the man who attacked and seriously injured park employee Karen Gonzales in 2013 has been sentenced to 76 years in prison. The sentence was handed down on April 17th in Cochise County court.

Gaxiola was convicted in March of attempted first degree murder, armed robbery, three counts of aggravated assault, kidnapping, and motor vehicle theft.

The charges stemmed from an incident in August, 2013, when Gaxiola assaulted Gonzales. He used a large rock to inflict serious and life-threatening injuries on her, then stole her assigned work vehicle. She was airlifted to an area trauma center for critical care treatment.

The National Park Service extends sincere thanks to all who worked tirelessly to ensure justice for Gonzales and her family. Special agents from the Service's Investigative Services Branch collaborated with detectives from the Cochise County Sheriff's Office on the case, which was prosecuted by the Cochise County Attorney's Office. Also making significant contributions to the detection, apprehension, and successful prosecution of Gaxiola were the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Arizona Department of Public Safety Laboratory.

Source: [NPS Investigative Services Branch](#).

### **Indiana Dunes NL**

#### **Follow-up: Three Park Beaches Reopen To Public**

A spill at the U.S. Steel plant in Portage earlier this month leaked a toxic chemical into Burns Waterway, a Lake Michigan tributary, forcing the closure of beaches in and around the park. Low levels of the chemical hexavalent chromium, which is a carcinogen, were found in Lake Michigan near the mouth of the waterway.

Between April 12th and April 16th, water and beach sand samples were taken by contractors working for EPA at three locations – West Beach, Cowles Bog Beach, and Portage Lakefront and Riverwalk beach. All water and beach sand samples were below laboratory reporting limits. Based on these results, the three beaches were reopened on the afternoon of April 17th.

The National Park Service is working with the EPA and other agencies to implement a long-term monitoring protocol to ensure the safety of park visitors throughout the upcoming beach season. Park staff also remain concerned about potential long-term harm to wildlife and other park resources.

For details on the testing results, go to the United States Environmental Protection Agency [website](#).

Source: [Public Affairs, Indiana Dunes NL](#).

### **Olympic NP**

#### **Follow-up: Search For Missing Man Moves Out Of Park**

The for 22-year-old Jacob Gray, which began on April 6th, transitioned to a limited continuous search on April 14th. This means that rangers will continue to follow up on any clues that emerge, but are not actively searching for him.

The focus of the search has shifted to U.S. Forest Service land on the south side of the Sol Duc River, and is being coordinated by the Clallam County Sheriffs Department.

Gray's unattended bicycle and camping gear were reported to the park on the afternoon of Thursday, April 6th, and rangers conducted a hasty search in the area of the bicycle, including the bank of the Sol Duc River. On the following day, rangers made contact with Gray's family and widened their search to include the road corridor of the Sol Duc River Road.

Concentrating their search around the river, which has been running fast, cold, and high, rangers continued the search from April 8th to April 10th . On the afternoon April 11th, members of Olympic Mountain Rescue joined the search and on April 12th extended the search area to the left side of the river outside the boundaries of the park, thereby increasing the search area to roughly four square miles. On the afternoon of April 13th, a search dog team from Everett Mountain Rescue out of Snohomish County searched the left side of the river bank.

Source: [Public Affairs, Olympic NP](#)

### **National Fire Situation**

#### **National Interagency Fire Center Firefighters Continue To Focus On Southeast**

The National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) remains at Preparedness Level 1 (PL1), the lowest of five preparedness levels.

Large fire activity continued in Florida, Georgia and Virginia throughout last week. The West Mims Fire in Georgia increased the most in acres burned. One new large fire also started in New Mexico. Wildland firefighters contained 18 large fires last week.

As of April 21st, 17,458 fires had been reported nationwide, up from 14,321 on the same date last year and the highest year-to-date total since 2011. Those fires had burned 2,227,918

acres, up from 1,412,141 at the same time in 2016. That total is the highest recorded since 2017 and almost four times the ten year average from 2006-2016.

Source: NIFC. [Click here](#) for more.

### **Big Cypress NP Cowbell Fire 75% Contained**

As of Monday, the Cowbell Fire had burned nearly 22,000 acres and was 75% contained. A total of 244 firefighters and overhead personnel, six helicopters, and four engines were committed. A Type 1 incident management team (Mike Wilkins, IC) is managing the fire.

Primary fuels consist of grass, southern rough and timber litter. Current heavy loading of fuel conditions remain favorable for very active fire behavior within the grass and shrub fuels. The current drought conditions have led both live and dead fuel moistures to reach levels of concern. All fuels are expected to burn readily, including those that appear green.

For full details, including maps and photos, go to the link below.

Source: InciWeb Incident Information System. Click on [this link](#) for more.

## **Natural and Cultural Resources**

### **Southern Colorado Plateau Network Climate Change Impacts: Park Pinyon-Juniper Woodlands Ravaged By Drought**

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports with “very high confidence” that terrestrial biological systems on all continents are now being affected by temperature increases, resulting in earlier spring events, shifts in the ranges of plant and animal species, and longer thermal growing seasons, among other impacts. Warming temperatures and increases in severe drought events in some regions are likely to lead to increased tree mortality and forest dieback, which in turn affect other disturbance processes, such as fire, erosion, and insect outbreaks.

These effects have been observed over the past decade in pinyon-juniper woodlands across the American Southwest. Millions of hectares of woodlands in the southwestern United States have been altered by severe drought conditions since the late 1990s. Extreme heat and lack of moisture have resulted in widespread mortality of many species of grasses, shrubs, trees, and cacti. During 2002 and 2003, greater than 95% mortality of non-seedling pinyon pine trees was observed in study plots at Bandelier National Monument in northern New Mexico.

On a landscape level, pinyon pines weakened by drought stress have become an easy target for mortality-causing insects like the pinyon Ips bark beetle (*Ips confusus*). Endemic bark beetle populations can increase dramatically when moisture-stress weakens large numbers of trees, over large areas. Without adequate precipitation or snowmelt, trees are not able to repel attacking bark beetles with increased flows of pitch. Once insect populations are large enough, they are able to successfully attack healthy trees, as well as those affected by drought.

The severe drought conditions of the past decade have also set the stage for wildfires like the large-scale stand-replacing fires in Mesa Verde National Park, where old growth pinyon-juniper woodland is being replaced by post-fire shrub land. Drought and warming temperatures can increase the flammability of live and dead forest fuels, cause snowmelt to happen earlier in the spring, and lengthen fire seasons.

Projections from multiple climate models predict that surface temperatures in the American Southwest will continue to rise, and that annual precipitation in this region is likely to

decrease. Less is known about how regional precipitation patterns may be affected in the future by climate change-driven fluctuations in sea surface temperatures and atmospheric circulation patterns.

Source: Briefing Statement. Click on [this link](#) for more.

## **Agency Management**

### **Systemwide**

#### **President To Order Review Of National Monument Designations**

The Washington Post carried a story in its April 24th edition on the president's intent to review twenty years worth of national monument designations. Here are the first two paragraphs:

“President Trump will sign an executive order Wednesday instructing the Interior Department to review national monument designations his three predecessors have made over the past 21 years, according to administration officials and GOP lawmakers, a move that could upend protections that previous presidents have put in place in Utah and elsewhere across the country.

“Presidents of both parties have invoked their executive authority under the 1906 Antiquities Act to provide safeguards for federal lands and waters. But some of these moves — including Barack Obama's designation of the 1.35 million-acre Bears Ears National Monument in December and Bill Clinton's 1996 declaration of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, both in Utah, have sparked fierce criticism from Republicans.”

The article is by reporter Juliet Ellperin and is called “[Trump To Issue New Order Calling Into Question Two Decades Of National Monument Designations](#).” Click on that headline to see the story.

[Note: All executive orders and other presidential actions are posted to the [White House webpage](#). This one should appear there on the [executive orders](#) subpage on either Wednesday or Thursday].

## **Park People, Friends and Allies**

### **Lake Clark NP&P**

#### **Centennial Of Outdoorsman Richard Proenneke Commemorated**

The spring edition of *National Parks Magazine* contains a remembrance of Richard Proenneke on the occasion of last year's centennial of his birth. It was written by Patty Brown, who was a park ranger in Alaska and California for 20 years, and includes reminiscences by NPS rangers and others who visited him at his cabin in the park. Here are the opening paragraphs:

“In 1968, Richard Proenneke — a 52-year-old Iowan who'd fallen in love with the Alaska outback — headed to a remote spot in the southwestern part of the state to test himself. Using simple handheld tools, many of which he'd fashioned himself, he constructed a log cabin on the edge of Upper Twin Lake and went on to live in his expertly crafted home, alone, for the next 30 years.

“His quiet life and wilderness ethic — the belief that wildlife should not suffer for his presence — could easily have gone unnoticed, but his story became widely known in 1973, when Sam Keith published the book *One Man's Wilderness: An Alaskan Odyssey*, based on Proenneke's daily journal entries and photographs. Eventually, large swaths of the diaries, more than 250

steno pads in all, were published in three edited volumes, and several filmmakers used footage Proenneke had shot in biographical movies.

“To read *One Man’s Wilderness* is to be swept into a slower, simpler world. Fans of the book (and the other publications and films) admire Proenneke’s self-sufficiency, close observations of nature and unencumbered, off-the-grid lifestyle.

“He wrote: ‘I have found that some of the simplest things have given me the most pleasure. They didn’t cost me a lot of money either. They just worked on my senses. Did you ever pick very large blueberries after a summer rain? Walk through a grove of cottonwoods, open like a park, and see the blue sky beyond the shimmering gold of the leaves? Pull on dry woolen socks after you’ve peeled off the wet ones? Come in out of the subzero and shiver yourself warm in front of a wood fire? The world is full of such things.’”

To read the entire article, including tributes from those who knew him, go to the magazine’s web page. It’s entitled “[Reflections On A Man In His Wilderness.](#)”

Source: National Park Conservation Association’s [National Parks Magazine](#).

## **Other News And Notes**

### **Systemwide**

#### **National Park Service In The News**

A selection of additional recent news stories pertaining either directly or indirectly to the operation of the National Park Service:

- **Systemwide** – The *Washington Post* had a feature entitled “An Incredible Look At National Parks From Space” this past Monday. It features stunning NASA images of ten national parks from space – Hawaii Volcanoes, Yellowstone, Crater Lake, Grand Teton, Acadia, Death Valley, Grand Canyon, Biscayne, Katmai and Kenai Fjords. [Slide show](#).
- **Chaco Culture NHP** – The April 23rd edition of the *Santa Fe New Mexican’s* weekly magazine on arts, entertainment and culture has an article on the serious potential impacts that future drilling will have on Chaco Canyon’s outlier road system, mostly located in the broad basin outside 53-square-mile Chaco Culture NHP. An estimated 4,000 oil and gas wells will be drilled in the area around Chaco in the next several years. [Full story](#). [Submitted by member Ann Rasor]
- **Grand Canyon NP** – The *Denver Post* was one of a number of papers to carry a story on drones being used for the first time in a search at Grand Canyon – specifically, in the incident that leads this issue. Says reporter Astrid Galvan: “The Grand Canyon is the only national park with its own fleet of unmanned aircraft for locating people who have gotten lost, stranded, injured or killed. Under a program that began last fall, it has five drones and four certified operators.” [Full story](#)
- **Badlands NP** – The headline on a recent *Huffington Post* story reads “How A National Park Worker Sparked The ‘Rogue Twitter’ Movement.” It tells the ‘story behind the scenery’ (so to speak) about the Badlands NP employee who irritated the President by hijacking the park’s Twitter account to broadcast some climate change facts. [Full story](#). [Submitted by member Cathy Halainen]

### **Systemwide**

#### **Upcoming Events**

Upcoming events and activities of potential interest to members of the Coalition:

- **Yellowstone NP** – As announced in the last issue, a memorial ceremony for past Yellowstone superintendent Bob Barbee, who died last October, will be held at 2 p.m. on May 20th in the Old Faithful Rec Hall. For details, click on [this link](#). [Submitted by member Joan Anzelmo]
- **Appalachian NST** – The Appalachian Trail Conservancy's Maine 2017 Conference will be held in Waterville, Maine, on the week of August 4th. There will be hikes, excursions, bike rides and other activities that highlight the state of Maine. Participants will have the option of staying in dorms or camping on the grounds of Colby College and can participate in a variety of interesting guided or self guided trips. For more information, click on [this link](#) to the conference website. [Submitted by member Sarah Peskin]

[Editor's note: I received a member submission about NPS alumni meetings but unfortunately misplaced it. If you sent it, would you please submit it again? Thanks.]

### **Systemwide Weekly Park Status Update**

Here's a listing of extended area and facility closures and reopenings from across the Service:

- **Indiana Dunes NL** – As noted in the incident report above, Cowles Bog Beach, West Beach and the Portage Lakefront and Riverwalk sites have reopened. [More information](#).
- **Big Cypress NP** – Portions of the park, including Monument Lake and Burns Lake Campground and some trails, remain closed. [More information](#).
- **Grand Canyon NP** – The North Rim will open as scheduled on May 15th, but with limited visitor services and water conservation measures due to a break in the North Rim water pipeline. A rockslide from a winter storm took out more than 300 feet of the North Rim water pipeline and damaged the North Kaibab Trail. This is believed to be the most significant damage to the North Rim water pipeline in the past 20-plus years. [More information](#).
- **Yosemite NP** – Progress continues to be made on repairs to the Big Oak Flat Road. In early April, road crews dug down 65 feet to the bottom of an underground spring that caused soils to erode. The slope has been stabilized and soil and rock have been brought into the park to rebuild the roadbed. The park will announce a date for the road's reopening as soon as it's available. [More information](#).
- **Denali NP** – Due to longer days and warming temperatures, the park has determined that there is no longer adequate snow cover for the use of snowmobiles for traditional activities in the 1980 additions to the park that are south of the Alaska Range from the West Fork of the Chulitna River to the Southwest Preserve. [More information](#).
- **Yellowstone NP** – On April 17th, the park opened several roads for the summer season: Mammoth Hot Springs to Norris, Norris to Madison, Madison to Old Faithful, Madison to West Entrance, and Norris to Canyon Village. [More information](#).

Source: NPS.gov News Release website.



## **A Closing Observation**

"The young people of today are the lawmakers, the scientists, the industrialists, the conservationists, the cattlemen, and the lumbermen of tomorrow. It is vitally important that they learn today the values of the national parks, and the principles underlying their preservation. For they will have the say tomorrow as to what becomes of these properties of the people."

[Direct Newton B. Drury](#) (1940-1951)

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The *Weekly National Park System Report* is a publication of The Coalition To Protect America's National Parks. It is prepared by Coalition member Bill Halainen, former editor of the *NPS Morning Report*, and produced and disseminated by Coalition staff. Tips on and links to park-related stories are appreciated; please send to Bill at [BHalainen@gmail.com](mailto:BHalainen@gmail.com).

The Coalition is a non-profit organization of past and current NPS employees and their allies that "studies, educates, speaks, and acts for the preservation and protection of the National Park System and mission-related programs of the National Park Service."

To receive a copy of this free publication, join the coalition. Any current, retired or former salaried (GS, wage grade, seasonal, temporary, or SES) employee of the National Park Service can join the Coalition. For more information, click on [this link](#).

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