

NationalParks

SUMMER 2018
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THE MAGAZINE OF THE NATIONAL PARKS CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

A photograph of three children, two boys and one girl, dressed as Junior Rangers. They are wearing green vests and hats adorned with numerous colorful badges and patches. They are standing in front of the open back of a white van. The boy on the left is wearing a blue shirt and green pants, the girl in the middle is wearing a pink shirt and tan pants, and the boy on the right is wearing a grey shirt and brown pants. They are all smiling and looking towards the camera.

125 JUNIOR RANGER BADGES AND COUNTING

Meet the next generation of homeschooled kids. Their homes have wheels, and their classrooms are national parks and the big wide world.

DARING ART IN A POLITICALLY DIVISIVE ERA

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National Parks

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LESSONS IN MOTION

Homeschooling on the road isn't always easy, but enthusiasts say the big wide world — including national parks — is the best classroom.

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SNOW, STEAM, BISON, SKY

A winter adventure in Yellowstone National Park.

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'HARSH IS TRUTH'

In this divisive political era, is it possible for the Park Service to support contemporary art that grapples with hot-button issues from immigration to climate change? At these parks, the answer is yes.

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HIEN HUYNH performs in "Within These Walls" on Angel Island in the San Francisco Bay.

© ROBBIE SWEENEY

COVER:

ANDREW, CARA AND RACHEL CURREN, pictured in Moab, Utah, have so far amassed 125 junior ranger badges on their roadschool adventures.

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VERN TEJAS climbed Denali in the winter of 1988 with an aluminum ladder strapped to his waist.



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Our Museums of Nature

It has been so important for me over the years to share our amazing national parks with my children and now grandchildren. Beautiful places like Assateague Island National Seashore in Virginia and Maryland and powerful ones like Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Historical Park in Maryland. National parks are places to play, and they are also places to learn.

Education through our national parks has been important to NPCA since it was founded nearly 100 years ago. Historic documents reveal that Robert Sterling Yard wanted to create NPCA in part to “further the view of the national parks as classrooms and museums of Nature.”

Classrooms and museums of nature. I’m struck by this phrase, still so powerful today.

Yard left his role at the nascent National Park Service to form the organization he and Park Service Director Stephen Mather believed would be better suited to serve the “educational point of view.” NPCA was born.

Much has changed in 100 years. The Park Service has grown, with thousands of talented rangers now dedicated to educating park visitors on everything from America’s fight for independence at Valley Forge National Historical Park in Pennsylvania to Florida’s vast biodiversity at Everglades National Park to the women’s suffrage movement at Belmont-Paul Women’s Equality National Monument in Washington, D.C. Yard would be proud to see the role national parks play in the education of so many children, including those whose schooling revolves around these sites. (See “Lessons in Motion,” p. 28.)

While the Park Service has evolved over the last century, so has NPCA. Yard and other leaders of the organization realized soon after it was established that what the parks needed most was defenders to protect them from development, logging, drilling, looting and other threats. Our advocacy work has become more important over the years, but education — the very reason we were founded — remains at the core of everything NPCA does. We know Yard would be proud of that, too.

Warm regards,
Theresa Pierno



Editor's Note



© JESS CURREN

ROADSCHOOLERS Andrew and Cara Curren at Arches National Park.

This Is Freedom

I was dubious when Michael Branch proposed writing an essay with his 14-year-old daughter, but eventually, I agreed to give the format a chance — and I'm so glad I did. Their lovely piece, "Death Valley Angst" (p. 10), is as much a meditation on growing up as it is about a hiking trip. When I got to Hannah's heartfelt thoughts about edging beyond childhood, I welled up. Every time I read it.

The essay made me think about how observing children outdoors can throw their growth into relief. One day, your kid is no longer begging you to push her on the playground swing because she can propel herself. Or the determined 4-year-old, who seemingly just graduated from the baby backpack, hikes up a mountain. Or the colorful floaties disappear, and suddenly, a child is wildly flinging himself off a dock into a cold lake.

It can be a little painful to see the seasons slip by so quickly, but one of the amazing things about being in nature (with or without kids!) is that time magically seems to slow down; a simple afternoon can somehow feel long and luxurious. That's one of the arguments families make about their decision to homeschool their children on the road. (See "Lessons in Motion," p. 28.) They say they want to stretch out time, escape the tyranny of carpools and schedules, and soak up the world together. "This is what I craved for so long without knowing what it was," wrote Jess Curren, a parent. "This is freedom."

Life on the move isn't practical for many of us, but it's nice to be reminded of the possibilities out there and the virtues of, at least occasionally, stepping off the frantic merry-go-round. What better time than now to find some unhurried hours and freedom — whatever that means to you. Enjoy the summer!

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NationalParks

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WHO WE ARE

Established in 1919, the National Parks Conservation Association is America's only private, nonprofit advocacy organization dedicated solely to protecting, preserving and enhancing the U.S. National Park System.

WHAT WE DO

NPCA protects and enhances America's national parks for present and future generations by identifying problems and generating support to resolve them.

EDITORIAL MISSION

National Parks magazine fosters an appreciation of the natural and historic treasures found in the parks, educates readers about the need to preserve those resources, and illustrates how member contributions drive our organization's park-protection efforts. The magazine uses the power of imagery and language to forge a lasting bond between NPCA and its members, while inspiring new readers to join the cause. National Parks magazine is among a member's chief benefits. Of the \$25 membership dues, \$6 covers a one-year subscription to the magazine.

MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Members can help defend America's natural and cultural heritage. Activists alert Congress and the administration to park threats, comment on park planning and adjacent land-use decisions, assist NPCA in developing partnerships, and educate the public and the media. Sign up to receive Park Notes, our monthly email newsletter at npca.org/join.

HOW TO DONATE

To donate, please visit npca.org or call 800.628.7275. For information about bequests, planned gifts and matching gifts, call our Development Department, extension 145 or 146.

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If you have any questions about your membership, call Member Services at 800.628.7275. On a selective basis, NPCA makes its membership list available to organizations that our members may find of interest. If you would like your name removed from this list, please call us at the number listed above.

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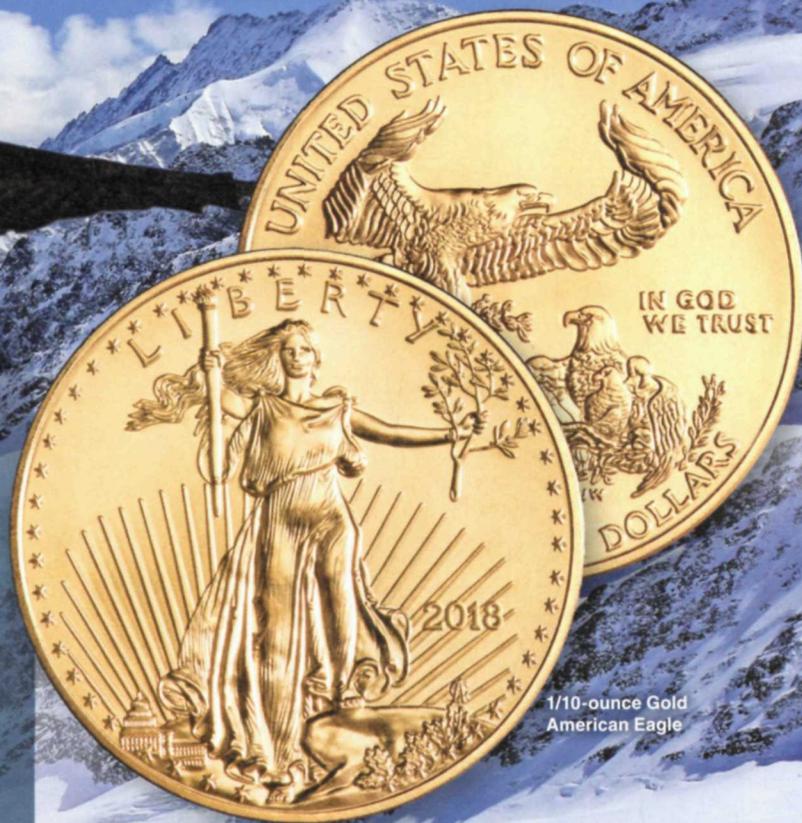
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A VALENTINE FOR OUR RANGERS

I appreciate “Saluting Our Rangers” [President’s Outlook, Spring 2018] as it complements the active practice I’ve followed for a couple of decades, during which I’ve sought out or coincidentally met hundreds of uniformed and support staff of the National Park Service — rangers, as well as maintenance, administrative and



volunteer personnel. I tell them I have two things for them to hear and that if I run into them again I’ll test them for memory: First, THANK YOU for what you do to make our beautiful parks, monuments, historic sites and recreation areas available to us “property owners.” And second, I urge them to continue that good work, as I’m counting on them for the sake of my grandkids.

The collective response of those hundreds would look and sound like this: Nobody has ever said that before. Tears well up. I needed to hear this. It’s all

about your grandkids. I love this job. I love this place.

By the way, almost all of them pass the test.

STEVE SCARANO
Vista, CA

A TRAIL FOR ALL

I am overjoyed that you published the excerpt from Jennifer Pharr Davis’ extraordinary book, “The Pursuit of Endurance.” Jennifer is an excellent and insightful writer who has the distinction of being the only woman ever to hold the speed record for completing the Appalachian Trail. Her account of the many challenges and the extensive pain associated with her journey reminds me of what I experienced when I completed the AT in 1978 (though it is hard to compare my 15-miles-a-day experience to her pace of over 45 miles per day!).

It is important to recognize that the Appalachian National Scenic Trail is a

unit of the National Park System and that it offers an extraordinary opportunity for more than 3 million hikers to walk for an afternoon or a day, or accept the challenge of completing the trail in one year or during their lifetime.

RON TIPTON
Rockville, MD

The writer served as a senior vice president of NPCA from 1999 to 2013 and recently retired as the president and CEO of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy.

A LAND (STILL) DIVIDED

The last place I expected political nonsense and narrow-minded stupidity was in your magazine. I was wrong.

Your lengthy editorial diatribe against a U.S.-Mexican border wall [“A Land Divided”] totally ignores the fact that the security of America is far more important than any possible environmental impact to our national parks! If America is harmed by people who immigrated illegally, the plight of animal migration is moot!

Time to realize our priorities.

MARC MOGIL
Sunny Isles Beach, FL

As a long-time Northwest newspaper reporter and editor (now retired), I am a huge fan of great storytelling. The Spring 2018 issue featured numerous examples of such great writing, includ-

ing “The Lion Catcher” (I cried) and “The Indian Chief and the President” (a real eye-opener), but the best segment, in my mind, was the two-page illustration, “A Land Divided.” The revelations were incredible, and the image was powerful.

Finally, Ms. Pierno’s President’s Outlook hammered the nail on the head regarding the needs of our park rangers and national parks. I wish many in the “other Washington” (D.C.) would hear your message and take the necessary actions.

CRAIG WECKESSER
Olympia, WA

HONORING ERIC

I wanted to send my condolences for the loss of Eric York. He sounds like he was a wonderful man, scientist and explorer. Emily Mount’s article was beautifully written and profound. It was an excellent way to honor him, and it touched me very much. Thank you, Emily.

DANIELLA CRESSMAN
Ribera, NM

ANOTHER MOOSE THEORY

The article on the size reduction of moose in Isle Royale National Park [“The Case of the Shrinking Moose”] posits two reasons for this phenomenon: dietary restriction due to overcrowding and global warming. The author (or scientists on the project) should be aware that dwarfism is common among large mammals restricted to islands (examples include pigmy mammoths that lived on California’s Channel Islands and the extinct Cyprus dwarf hippopotamus in the Mediter-

anean). It is now widely accepted that evolution can happen on relatively short timescales, so this hypothesis cannot be excluded. I point this out not only because of the difficulties of separating multiple hypotheses, but more important, because by citing global warming as a cause that cannot be conclusively demonstrated, I fear you are giving ammunition to climate-change deniers who think all scientists are going beyond their data when it comes to the projected effects of climate change.

LARRY W. ALLEN
Altadena, CA

PERSONAL HISTORY

Thanks to your inspiring story [“The Indian Chief and the President”], I now have a greater appreciation of the injustice done to the Ojibwe (or Chippewa) by the U.S. government. I feel a special connection to Chief Buffalo because his indefatigable zeal reminds me of the stubborn passion of my great-great-granduncle, Father George Antoine Belcourt, who lived among the Chippewa of Canada in the mid-19th century, made all of their causes his own and fought with the Hudson’s Bay company on their behalf. I’m grateful to you for helping me make this connection.

JANET BELLCOURT POMERANZ
Glen Cove, NY

A LONG LOVE AFFAIR

I began visiting national parks, monuments and historic sites in the early 1970s. I traveled to places ranging from Kennecott Mines in Alaska’s Wrangell-St. Elias National Park & Preserve to Dry Tortugas National Park in Florida.

I took a 10-day bicycle trip along the Natchez Trace Parkway and enjoyed some of the more obscure sites such as Fort Bowie National Historic Site in Arizona. Some of my favorite parks are Mesa Verde, with its amazing cliff dwellings, and Bryce Canyon, with its otherworldly hoodoo formations. Golden Gate National Recreation Area, an easy bicycle ride from my home, is my most visited park.

During my travels, I always collected brochures, trail guides, informational sheets and related publications, and over the decades, my stockpile of memorabilia and information for future visits grew quite large. Recently, as I approached my 70th year, I began downsizing and decided to part with my collection. I thought of NPCA and was delighted that Don Barger, a senior regional director, was interested. I organized my documents and crammed them into a large box weighing 30 pounds!

Don laid out my collection on a huge table to show his staff and sent me the photo. He wanted to inspire them with the collection of someone who had, in his words, a “lifelong love affair with our national parks.” I am so delighted that my collection has an excellent permanent home where it will be preserved, used and enjoyed.

Although I’ve stopped collecting mementos of my park visits, I hope I never stop visiting our wonderful parks. I’ve already seen more than 200 of them, but there are too many left that I have not yet explored!

PETER S. TANNEN
San Francisco, CA

CORRECTION

The story “Some Like It Very Hot” in the Spring 2018 issue incorrectly stated that Mount Whitney is the tallest peak in the continental U.S. It is the tallest mountain in the contiguous U.S.

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Echoes

It's ironic that we set aside great places like Saguaro National Park and people think that they can just come take the iconic cactus for which the park is named.

Kevin Dahl, NPCA's senior program manager in Arizona, quoted in the Arizona Daily Sun about the Park Service's efforts to deter thieves by implanting microchip IDs in cacti.

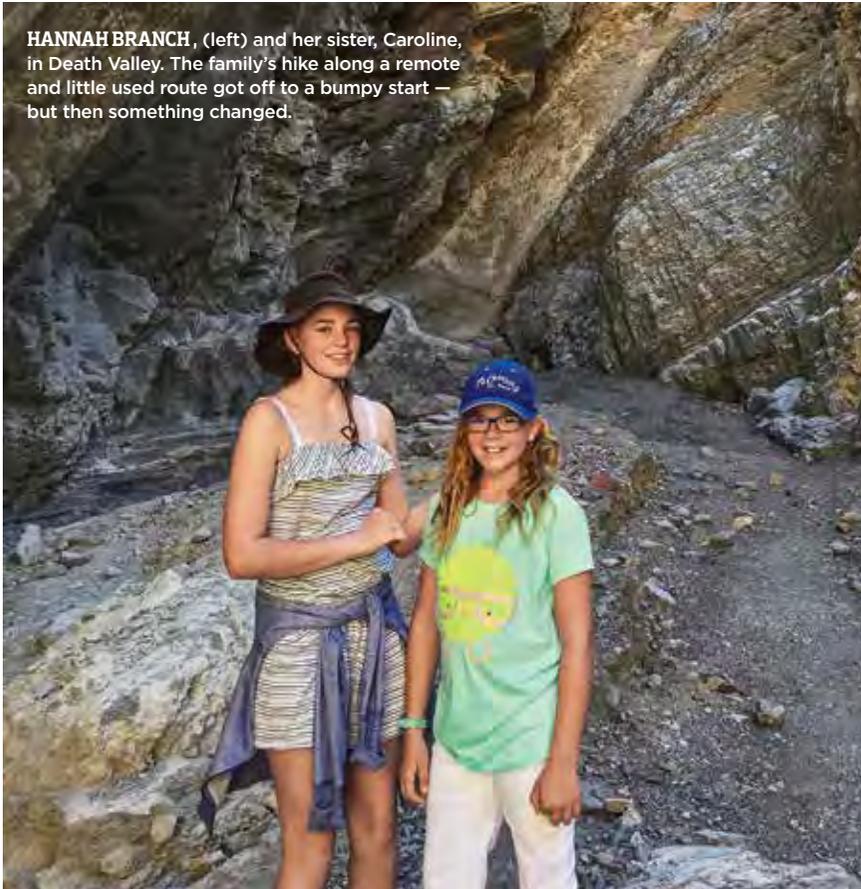
There are suitable sites for spaceports ... but next to this national park is not one of them.

Emily Jones, NPCA's Southeast director, quoted in the Savannah Morning News about the proposal to build a commercial spaceport less than 10 miles away from Cumberland Island National Seashore. According to a report by the Federal Aviation Administration, portions of the park would have to be evacuated more than a dozen times a year to accommodate launches and testing.

The unique and world-class underground chambers were why Carlsbad Caverns was first protected as a national park site in the 1920s and why we will continue to fight to defend this special place.

Ernie Atencio, NPCA's New Mexico program manager, in the Carlsbad Current-Argus regarding the Bureau of Land Management's proposed plan to lease federal land near the park to oil and gas companies. Park supporters argue that extraction just miles from Carlsbad Caverns would be disastrous for the site.





© MICHAEL P. BRANCH

HANNAH BRANCH, (left) and her sister, Caroline, in Death Valley. The family's hike along a remote and little used route got off to a bumpy start — but then something changed.

Death Valley Angst

On a desert hike, a father and his teenage daughter contemplate canyons, cliffs and the heartache that comes with growing up.

“I coaxed, cajoled, even stooped to doughnut bribery.” — A father’s perspective

When my daughter, Hannah, was an infant, I wheeled her all over the high desert wilderness near our home in a stroller I had customized with tires studded for snow and mud and slimed for protection from desert peach thorns. As she grew, I hiked and snowshoed her around the wild Great Basin hills and canyons in a backpack. As soon as Hannah could walk, we began logging the miles together, often hand in hand, observing pronghorn in flight, identifying wildflowers and

picking up gopher snakes to feel the cool smoothness of their scutes as they writhed around our wrists. But Hannah is 14 now, and hiking with me is no longer her top priority.

The trouble started on the third day of our springtime trip to Death Valley National Park, which is to say the third consecutive morning on which I had insisted that my family rise at daybreak to join me on a long, hard hike in the sublime barrenness of the park. For the day’s adventure, I had chosen Black Point, a route that has a long, exposed approach and no marked trail. The hike,

which looked remote and difficult to navigate, didn’t appear in our trail guide, though I had found some sketchy information about it online. It sounded perfect.

Anyone who has tried to wake a teenager before sunrise will have a sense of how my day began. Hannah didn’t want to leave her bed to join my hike, even as I explained with grown-up logic the importance of an early start in a place as blisteringly hot as Death Valley. She remained unimpressed. I coaxed, cajoled, even stooped to doughnut bribery. When at last Hannah became vertical, her painstaking bathroom ritual began, suggesting that she harbored a special concern about what the chuckwallas might think of the swoopy thing she was doing with her hair. When Henry David Thoreau wrote in “Walden” that “the man who goes alone can start today; but he who travels with another must wait till that other is ready,” he failed to specify how long the man who goes with a teenager might have to sit tight.

At last I succeeded in herding Hannah to the pickup, after which I subjected her, along with her little sister, Caroline, and my wife, Eryn, to a long, tense drive followed by a great deal of uncertainty in locating the trailhead. Once we were parked, more delays followed, as Hannah began for the first time to consider what she might need on the hike. While she appeared unconcerned with trivialities like water or sunscreen, she made sure to bring her phone, which I regarded as a positive hindrance to a decent hike. Meanwhile, I fumed silently, wishing I could slow the rising of the sun.

Until age 13, Hannah had been the most congenial and eager hiking partner I’d ever had. Now, seemingly overnight, she had become sullen and crabby, behaving as if being chauffeured to one of the West’s most spectacular landscapes was an unthinkable punishment. The first

2 or 3 miles of the hike only made matters worse as the broad canyon steepened and it became uncomfortably warm. No other humans were in sight, there was little prospect for shade, and the hike, which was not at all picturesque, even passed by an ancient trash dump. Hannah remained silent throughout, except to note archly that this arduous trek bore no resemblance to the sinuous vermilion slot canyons gracing the cover of our Death Valley trail guide.

As we slogged up the sandy wash toward the distant peak of Tucki Mountain, the surrounding landscape began to change dramatically. The canyon narrowed and deepened, and the ridges above us fractured into delicate fins. Another half-mile, and the Shiprock formation, an ocean liner in both size and shape, loomed over the canyon. I sensed that Hannah was as impressed as I was, though she trooped along without saying much. Soon the canyon constricted into a series of boulder-strewn chutes graced by numerous dry waterfalls, where light cascaded down the luminous face of smooth rock.

Hannah brightened as we encountered this series of gorgeous pour-overs, running ahead to climb one of the polished waterfalls. She scrambled up eagerly — she clearly didn't need the belay rope I'd carried in my daypack — and encouraged the rest of the family to join her on her perch atop the rock face. Her brooding silence had been replaced by laughter, which echoed from the canyon walls, redeeming the day.

And then something even more remarkable happened. Hannah took out her phone and began attentively photographing everything around her: the patina-streaked chute of the gleaming pour-over, the curved face of an alabaster boulder, the crimson halo of a cottontop barrel cactus. She was suddenly alert,

content, fully engaged with her natural surroundings. Without my help, or perhaps despite it, Hannah had found her own way into this hike. As I sat quietly, watching my lovely daughter gather images of the canyon, it occurred to me that I didn't comprehend her afternoon blossoming any more than I had understood her morning dormancy.

While other parents and their daughters watched Disney princess movies, my father and I watched golden eagles circle the sky. I got my first bee sting while working with him in the garden. After a quick cry and a Cookie Monster Band-Aid, we left for a walk. My dad taught me that there aren't many things a walk in the wilderness won't



© DENNIS FRATES

THE TROUBLE started on the third day of the Branch family's trip through the sublime barrenness of Death Valley.

Hannah would later tell me that Black Point was one of the best hikes of her life. I still do not understand why. But, ready or not, I am the father of a 14-year-old. After sharing Death Valley with a teenager, I'm beginning to suspect that in parenting, as in nature, it may be best to stop looking for an explanation and simply embrace the mystery.

* * *

***"I didn't know what was wrong."
— A teenager's view***

I've been experiencing nature with my dad for as long as I can remember.

fix. It wasn't until we traveled to Death Valley that this principle came into question.

If I acted like a grizzly bear that had been awakened and dragged out of a cave that morning, it was because that's how I felt. Maybe I was tired or frustrated with the early hour of the outing; maybe I missed my friends; maybe I was upset because I'm germ-phobic and hate sharing everything with everybody in hotel rooms; maybe I was low on protein because I didn't eat my yogurt; maybe I just hate being told what to do. A minute inside my head would be



Trail Mix

enough to make anyone grumpy. I rarely know what's going on up there.

The first 2 miles of the hike didn't look like a trail. I was hot and uncomfortable, and I hadn't put on sunscreen, worn a hat or brought enough water, despite the fact that my dad told me to do all of these things. My dad also told me not to bring my phone, but I wanted to make my own decisions. I ignored him and threw it in my backpack. There was no shade, and I panted as I followed my family up the canyon into a mess of beige everything: dirt and rock and dead-looking plants, mostly. I figured I would be asked, "What's wrong?" but I didn't know what was wrong, so I walked a few steps behind, hoping to avoid conversation.

Those first few miles felt like a few hundred in the heat. We finally reached a shady area with rock pour-overs. I ran ahead and scrambled up one of the dry

waterfalls to eat the sandwiches my mom had packed. Feeling the cool rock against my skin, I realized that just as nature had hurt me on the hike up, it was healing me once again. A light breeze rippled my shirt. I listened to my parents talk quietly as they approached. Suddenly, I was out of the sun and off the ground, and I didn't feel trapped or confused anymore. Soon we were laughing. My dad climbed into the alcove and shared his water. I grabbed some sunscreen from his backpack, feeling better about it since it was my choice instead of someone else's order. Looking out over the canyon, I realized that it was all pretty stunning. I took a million pictures because I wanted to remember everything. I'll never be sure exactly what changed in me, but something did.

My dad often says, in one way or another, that he misses that wide-eyed girl who used to walk with him every

day. I miss her too, Dad. I don't know where she went, but I know, deep down, that we won't ever get that girl back. I'm changing so fast that even I can't keep up. But this also means I can grow out of the bad phases as quickly as I fall into them.

Growing up is turning out to be more complicated than a bee sting. But, although I often feel uncertain about how to resolve conflicts with my dad, one thing remains true: Most problems, even those caused by a walk in the wilderness, can be solved with a walk in the wilderness.

MICHAEL P. BRANCH lives with his family in the western Great Basin Desert of northern Nevada. His recent books of creative nonfiction and humor writing are "Raising Wild," "Rants from the Hill" and "How to Cuss in Western."

HANNAH V. BRANCH is in her freshman year of high school. She enjoys speech and debate, jazz band, and orchestra. And, of course, hiking.

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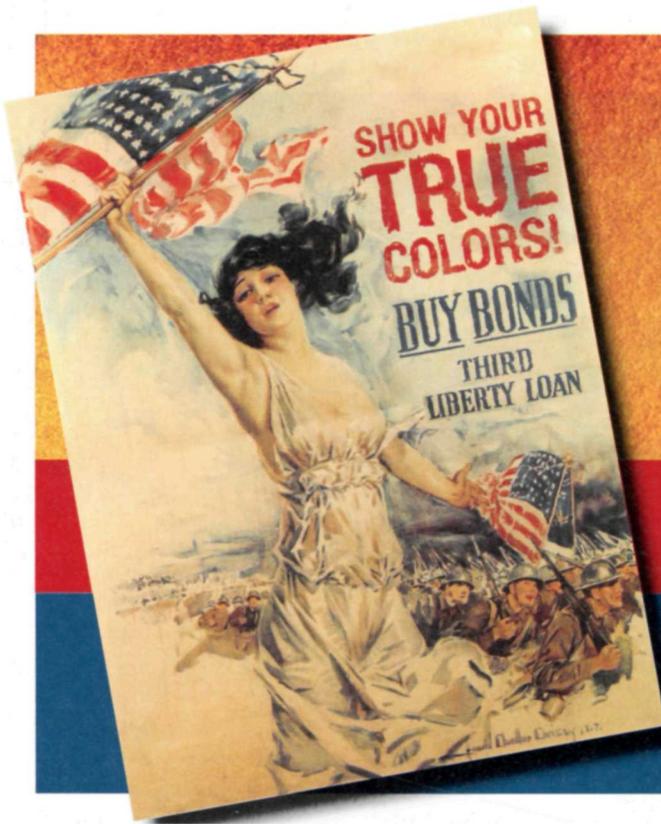


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A CHUG, found at Marquesas Keys, between Key West and Dry Tortugas. This boat and 30 others were destroyed after officials determined they were environmental and navigational hazards.

The Meaning of the Chug

For years, abandoned Cuban refugee boats were considered trash. Now the Park Service and others are preserving the chugs and their stories.

The seven tiny islands of Dry Tortugas National Park, most no more than a swath of white sand, interrupt the 200-mile stretch of open ocean between Havana, Cuba, and mainland Florida. Here in the park, tropical waters are the main draw, but curious visitors can find a

different kind of attraction tucked under the archway of a Civil War-era fort: an unassuming piece of aluminum bent into the shape of a boat hull. The vessel, reinforced with fiberglass patches and sealed with hand-smearred tar, helped keep 29 people afloat on a journey from Cuba to the park.

Kelly Clark, the park’s cultural resources specialist, picked up a rough-hewn wooden oar that was resting inside the boat, known as a chug. She noticed a bit of Sharpie scribble on the handle indicating the date it was found, July 4, 2007.

“Hah!” she said. “That’s the dog day!”

She remembers it well. A Cuban chug landed at the campground, which made for “some exciting camping stories” for park patrons. Those aboard the chug included a couple with a dog. When the Coast Guard arrived to transport the refugees off the island, the guardsmen refused to take the pet. The woman wept inconsolably as she and two dozen others boarded a cutter.

After the boat pulled away, Clark was left with a small, growling mutt that had escaped its tether.

Clark caught, comforted and fed the dog before sending it by seaplane to Key West. Eventually, she tracked down one of the couple's relatives, who drove down to pick up the dog and reunite it with its owners.

"I feel like I earned my merit badge that day," Clark said.

Every chug is full of such stories — of determination, survival, redemption — but for decades, the abandoned boats were disregarded. The vessels, which frequently contained unused oil and gas, were considered a threat to marine navigation and sensitive ecological areas. Often teeming with biohazards, including human waste, they also posed a health risk to park crews and others tasked with disposing of them. The Coast Guard would usually

sink or burn the boats, and the parks would dismantle them and haul away the pieces. Some were blown into mangroves, where kayakers and hikers would discover them. The more unusual ones might end up as decoration in someone's front yard, but even that was rare.

"To lots of folks in the Keys, they were seen as eyesores and treated like day-to-day trash," said Josh Marano, archaeological technician at Biscayne National Park.

Now that's starting to change. In recent years, Clark, Marano and other preservationists have begun to save, document, study and exhibit the boats

and artifacts found on board. It's important, they say, because the vessels — and items from medicine to children's backpacks — offer rare insights into the lives of refugees and the social and economic conditions in Cuba.

"You start to get an idea of how desperate they must have been, to decide

how many have died, but it's thousands."

At the mercy of the tides, waves and wind, refugees also had to contend with sharks, Portuguese men-of-war and blistering sunshine. Innovation sprang from desperation. People began to add wood planks on top of inner tubes and then attached handmade sails. By the

1990s, many were crossing atop hulls propelled by modified car engines and crafted from blue tarps and expanding foam. One family even set their '51 Chevy truck afloat by securing it to steel drums. (They eventually made it into the country, but not on that trip.)

Then someone engineered the chug. Named for the noise the small, air-cooled engines made, the vessels were outfitted with handcrafted rudders, an engine near the center, and raised sidewalls to



ON THIS CHUG, hoses served as ballast for stability and helped protect the boat from sharks. The chug crossed the Florida Strait in 2009.

to cross with 20 people crammed into a boat the size of a Honda Civic," Marano said. "Not a lot of people really want to talk about that horrendous journey, but these vessels are now tools for discussion."

Starting in the 1960s, after the Cuban revolution, thousands began crossing the Florida Strait, seeking an escape from persecution and poverty. At first, a few attempted the journey aboard stolen fishing boats, but most simply took their chances on inner tubes.

"They rode anything that floated," said Jorge Duany, director of the Cuban Research Institute in Miami. "It was a very treacherous journey. We don't know

accommodate the weight of many passengers. The hulls, built out of aluminum, copper or fiberglass, were typically 20 to 25 feet long.

"This is pretty peak technological advancement for a chug," Clark said about the one at Dry Tortugas. "When someone figured out this design, it became the prototype. First one showed up, then within a year or two, it was the standard."

U.S. immigration policy played a major role in the Cuban exodus and the rise of the chugs. In 1994, after then-President Fidel Castro announced it was no longer a crime for Cubans to flee their country, the number of annual Coast

AN EXHIBIT at the Mel Fisher Maritime Museum showcases artifacts found on chugs, from kids' shoes and canned food to a Madonna figure, a doll and a hat.

Guard interceptions at sea jumped from a few thousand to more than 37,000. In response to the rafter crisis, the U.S. government revised the Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966, creating a new policy that became known as “wet-foot, dry-foot.” The program more or less granted Cubans who made it to shore the legal right to stay.

By dint of their location, Clark and her colleagues working in Florida’s coastal national parks were the first line of humanitarian aid to thousands who had just survived harrowing days at sea. In one season, hundreds of people landed on and around one 14-acre island in Dry Tortugas.

“There were some days when weather conditions were just right, it’s like, ‘We’d better take a nap now because they’re going to be here,’” Clark said.

During her 15 years at the park, Clark rescued a lot of people, some of whom had misjudged their swimming abilities and ended up a mile or two from land. Most were in need of first aid, food and water, and their clothes often reeked from fumes and were covered in oil. At the remote Tortugas, where it could take more than 24 hours for the Coast Guard to arrive, park staff distributed scrubs, feminine hygiene products, diapers and food that had been provided by a local donor. Though refugees were frequently exhausted, sick or traumatized by the dangerous journey, their spirits were usually high. “Everyone was pretty dang happy and kissing the ground,” Clark said.

Once the refugees made it to shore, the boats quickly turned from vital links to freedom into a cumbersome problem. “We’d often have discussions about where they might fit into the scope of collections,” Clark said. “But this is modern history, and there’s a fine line between hugely important cultural



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material and abandoned property.”

Eventually, a few years ago, Marano began developing a chug database in partnership with the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and the Florida Public Archaeology Network. Professional researchers and the general public were invited to submit chug details and photographs. It was an exciting step, but the timing was unfortunate. They unveiled the program at the beginning of 2017, less than a week before the U.S. government rescinded the “wet-foot, dry-foot” policy.

“Literally, it just ended overnight,” Clark said.

Immigration by sea came to an abrupt halt. Chugs were suddenly a finite resource and about to become more so. In March of that year, 31 chugs were destroyed as part of a multi-agency effort to clean up turtle nesting grounds on the Marquesas Keys near Key West. A small group of archaeologists raced ahead of the wrecking boat on foot, snapping pictures and gathering data about each vessel. Six months later, Hurricane Irma wiped out most chugs lingering in the mangroves and many that were on display in public areas.

“I wish in hindsight I would have documented them more thoroughly,” Clark said. “They are definitive of a time that might not exist anymore.”

Now, the handful of chugs that are still around are particularly valuable. In addition to the chug in Dry Tortugas, park visitors can inspect boats on several islands in Biscayne National Park, and chugs are on display at HistoryMiami Museum, Florida Keys History & Discovery Center, the Key West Tropical Forest & Botanical Garden, and the Mel Fisher Maritime Museum in Key West, where an exhibit of artifacts salvaged from chugs during the last 15 years opened in May.

On a recent afternoon, Corey Malcom, the museum’s archaeology director, pulled out a few items including a handmade snorkel, compass and school papers with English lessons.

“I don’t think anybody can look at these and not be moved,” Malcom said.

Just outside, a small group of curious tourists were looking at the chug that’s on display there. A couple in flip flops and swimsuits sipped from Corona beer bottles while examining the boat from all angles.

“So 24 people were on that boat,” the woman said. “Wow.”

KARUNA EBERL writes about nature, history and adventure from the sandbars of the Florida Keys to the high country of Colorado. Find her blog at quixotictravelers.com.

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MICROPLASTICS are so small — invisible to the eye in some cases — that they can be ingested by zooplankton and accumulate up the food chain all the way to our dinner plates.

quantities in 35 national parks from American Samoa to Cape Cod National Seashore. Park employees or volunteers pressed metal rings into the sand below the line of debris left by high tide. Then they scooped the sand into foil bags and mailed their samples to Clemson University’s Baruch Institute of Coastal Ecology and Forest Science. There, researchers dried, sifted and spun the sand with a high-density saline solution to separate out the bits of plastic, which they painstakingly counted under a microscope.

What they found was alarming — microplastics were present in every sample. Even our country’s most remote, protected areas are contaminated with it. Wisconsin’s Apostle Islands National Lakeshore had the highest recorded concentration of microplastics — 285 particles per kilogram of sand — and Alaska’s Sitka National Historical Park had the lowest, an average of 21 particles per kilogram.

Storms, ocean currents and proximity to rivers that flow through cities can all influence the distribution of microplastics, but unlike previous research, this study didn’t show a direct correlation between microplastic concentrations and distance from a large city. Cabrillo National Monument, in San Diego, and Gateway National Recreation Area, in and around New York City, had relatively low counts of microplastics. On the other hand, remote beaches at Alaska’s Cape Krusenstern National Monument and Katmai National Park and Preserve contained more microplastics than the shores of Boston Harbor Islands

Small Plastic, Big Problem

Plastic is polluting oceans and national park beaches alike, and new studies show that even the tiniest pieces pose a large threat.

If you’ve walked a beach recently, anywhere in the world, you’ve seen plastic. Every tide tosses ashore a fresh catch of bags, bottles, Q-tips, buoys and other debris. The seas are brimming with the stuff, and it can be disheartening to find plastic soiling otherwise pristine coasts.

But this unsightly garbage obscures a more insidious problem — much of the ocean’s plastic is less than a quarter of an inch in size. Though these “microplastics” are too small to be obvious to the casual beachgoer, they’re just the right size to enter the ocean’s food webs

and, eventually, find their way onto our dinner plates.

“Microplastics are everywhere,” said Anna Toline, a marine scientist and the National Park Service’s Ocean Program coordinator for the Southeast region. “Whether you’re way up in northern Alaska or at the tip of the Florida Keys, they’re there.”

Toline helped conduct a recent study by the Park Service and Clemson University in partnership with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Marine Debris Program that measured microplastic

© OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY/FICKER

National Recreation Area just outside New England's most populous city.

It's unclear whether further sampling would produce the same results because the study was just a snapshot in time, but some national parks are already developing more detailed studies of the distribution of microplastics and their impact on wildlife. At Fort Pulaski National Monument in Georgia, scientists are measuring concentrations of microplastics in oysters, and Great Lakes-area parks are creating microplastic monitoring programs that rely on citizen scientists.

Researchers have studied microplastics only for about a decade but have already learned that they pollute oceans, lakes, rivers and soil. They can be transported through the air and released when ice caps melt. They've been found in salt, beer and drinking water. A recent study found that more than 90 percent of bottled water from leading brands contains microplastics, with an average of 325 particles per liter.

Microplastics come from several sources. Some are microbeads, which were used as abrasives in face wash, cosmetics and toothpaste until they were banned by the Microbead-Free Waters Act of 2015. Other particles are fragments of larger debris. Most microplastics, though, are microfibers from synthetic clothing, fishing nets, carpets, wet wipes and cigarette butts. In the national park study, 97 percent of the microplastics found were microfibers. These fibers are small enough to slip through washing machine filters, and they often end up in the ocean,

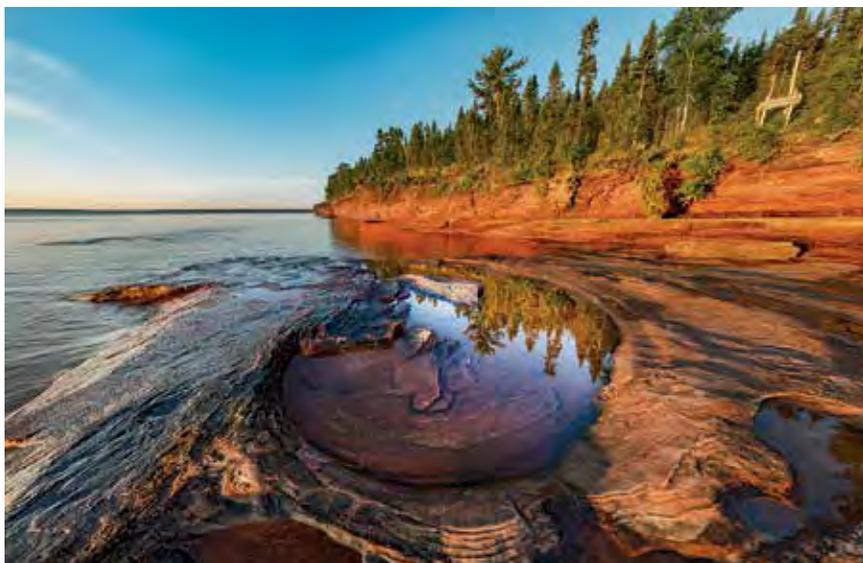
where they can tangle in the guts of the organisms that eat them.

This plastic is also a sponge for pollutants, soaking up everything from mercury to flame retardants and pesticides. A 2013 study showed that when fish eat plastic, they absorb these toxins and are more likely to develop tumors and liver damage. The smaller the plastic is, the more pervasive it is in the ecosystem. When filter feeders such as zooplankton, shellfish and coral eat microplastics, the toxins accumulate up the food chain.

"We have a systemic problem," said Chelsea Rochman, a marine ecologist at the University of Toronto and the lead author of the 2013 study. "We're mismanaging our waste, and that's coming back to haunt us on our own dinner plates and in our drinking water."

Scientists don't know how readily these toxins transfer to humans, but it's clear that the problem is only getting worse — the volume of plastic in the ocean is growing. A study published in *Science* in 2015 estimates that 8 million metric tons of plastic entered the oceans in 2010. That figure is on pace to double by 2025, when a total of 155 million metric tons of plastic will have accumulated in the oceans. Durable by design, that plastic will persist, pulled in the currents and blown by the wind. Gradually, it will be broken down into smaller pieces by the sun's ultraviolet rays, adding still more microplastics to the ocean's confetti soup.

The world's oceans and beaches probably won't return to a pre-plastic condition, but people can help by becoming "waste-literate," Rochman



IN A RECENT STUDY, all the samples collected at beaches in 35 national parks contained microplastics. A sample from Apostle Islands National Lakeshore (pictured here) showed the highest recorded concentration.



Trail Mix

said. When she shops, she avoids products made of plastics she can't recycle. She also takes care to recycle well, because machine-sorted recycling facilities will sometimes divert an entire

load to the landfill if it is contaminated with food, garbage or other nonrecyclable items.

"There's a hierarchy to your actions," Rochman said. "First, you refuse. If you

don't need it, don't use it. If you do need it, buy something you can reuse. If you can't reuse it, recycle. The last resort is the landfill. Never litter."

In addition to "reduce, reuse, recycle," Toline applies another "R" — "rewear." A 2016 study found that each laundering of a fleece jacket releases an average of 1.7 grams of microfibers, which can end up in the ocean. Nylon, polyester and acrylic clothes all shed microfibers when washed.

"I just try to do a little less laundry," Toline said. "Marine debris is never going to go away," she added. "The best we can do is to manage it, understand where it's coming from and try to educate people to reduce the input."

JACOB BAYNHAM is a journalist in Montana.

NPCA AT WORK

NPCA supported federal legislation that banned the production and sale of cosmetic products containing plastic microbeads and has been working to protect Gateway National Recreation Area's Jamaica Bay unit from plastic pollution. NPCA is advocating the installation of water refill stations in the park and supporting bills that would place a fee on single-use plastic bags in New York City and New York state. In addition, the organization has partnered with Subaru and the Park Service to develop a waste-reduction project at three pilot parks. To learn more about the Subaru initiative, which the partners hope will eventually spread to the entire park system, go to npca.org/zerolandfill.



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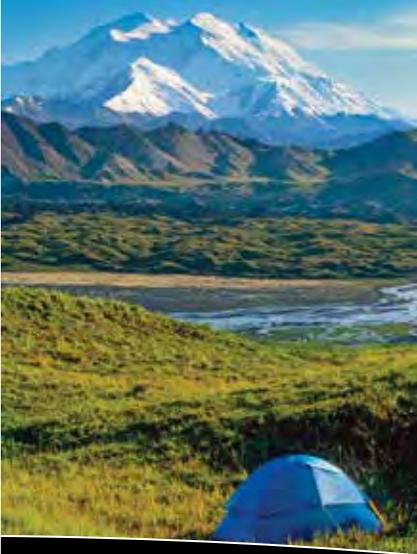
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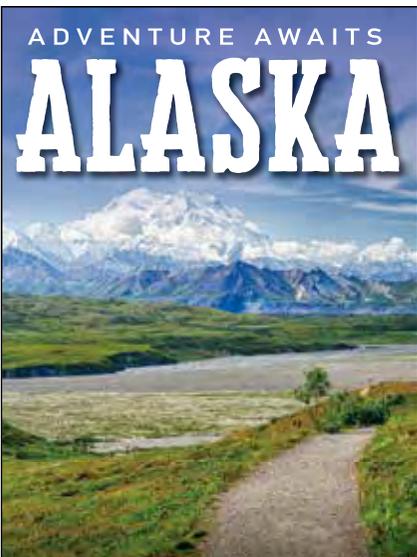
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**OFF The
BEATEN
PATH**



RHODODENDRONS blooming at California's Redwood National and State Parks.

The Flower Shot

Redwood photography is hard. Despite your best efforts, photos often capture only a small fraction of the gigantic trees. At the foot of the towering trunks, light is especially dim on cloudy days, making images a grainy blur of grays, browns and greens; on clear days, sunlight casts chaotic, visually confusing shadows. Add to this intermittent drizzle and fog, and you've got the makings of photographic frustration.

Enter our hero: the rhododendron. Deep in the old-growth forests of Redwood National and State Parks in California, spring is heralded by pale pink blossoms of native rhododendrons.

From about mid-May to mid-June, branches draped in cotton candy-like puffs of petals provide both a touch of color and a focal point that help photographers nail the redwood photo challenge.

"To get the shot, you have to have everything come together," ranger Mike Poole said. "You have to have a blooming rhododendron lined up with redwood trees in an eye-appealing way."

Photographers from around the world hoping to catch the peak bloom call the park to ask when they should book their plane tickets. "Ranger Mike" tells them nature doesn't run on a cal-

endar and warns that a single rainstorm can knock off all the flowers.

Undeterred, hundreds make an annual spring trip to Redwood. Some wait for weeks to see the flowers. Others hike the same trails every day, marking locations of rhododendron buds on a map so they can monitor their bloom status. Occasionally, patience and preparations are rewarded with the kind of colors and mystical light photographers dream about.

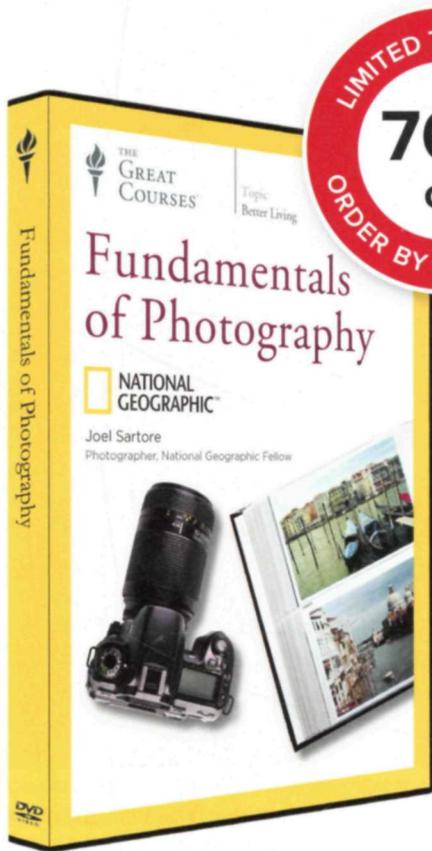
"If you're lucky enough to get low fog and sun rays lighting up the fog, that's kind of the holy grail of redwood and rhododendron photos," Ranger Mike said. "That's a difficult thing to catch."

EMILY MOUNT is a former park ranger, a naturalist and a photography instructor.



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FLOCK OF FLAMINGOS at Lake Ingraham in Everglades National Park.



© JUDD PATTERSON

Welcome Home?

Settling the question of whether flamingos are native to the Sunshine State.

DO FLAMINGOS BELONG IN FLORIDA? The state's promoters certainly would have you think so, and the pink birds have graced everything from tourist maps and postcards to lottery tickets and the opening credits of "Miami Vice." Seeing a live one is a more complicated affair, however. Driving to Everglades National Park's Flamingo Visitor Center offers no guarantee of spotting one of the eponymous birds, and your best bet remains a local zoo. In fact, for decades most biologists believed that a flamingo seen in the wild was simply an escapee from one of several captive flocks in the area. As far as Florida's wildlife authorities were concerned, flamingos were not native to the state and as deserving of protection as reviled invaders such as Burmese pythons.

Some local zoologists have harbored doubts about the prevailing narrative that flamingos were Johnny-come-latelies. A couple of flamingos tagged in Mexico have been spotted in the Everglades, and in recent years, birders have seen large groups in and around the park, including a flock of 147 birds. "If someone had 150 flamingos in a captive population and they disappeared, they'd notice," said Steven Whitfield, a biologist at Zoo Miami.

What's more, the flamingos spotted in Florida have seemed quite at ease in the region's wetlands and shallow waters, where they have found plenty of food to sustain them. Is it possible that South Florida is not just a rest stop for zoo escapees and castoffs but has served as a home to flamingos all along? In other words, are flamingos honest-to-goodness Floridians?

When Whitfield and several other biologists decided to investigate, they were motivated by more than intellectual curiosity. In 2015, they had captured

a flamingo near Key West, a feat that involved a net gun and multiple failed attempts. They fitted the bird — a young male they named Conchy after the Conch Republic, a nickname for the Florida Keys — with a satellite transmitter to track his whereabouts, but when they were about to let him go, state wildlife officials stopped them, saying flamingos were not native to Florida. Though officials eventually relented and Conchy was released in Everglades National Park, the episode inspired Whitfield and his colleagues to determine the bird's status in the Sunshine State.

First, they pored over historical accounts and reached out to museums with taxidermic flamingos or preserved eggs. They then looked at statistical patterns in decades of flamingo observations and examined behaviors among populations of flamingos in the Caribbean. (The range of the American flamingo, one of six flamingo species, extends from North America to the Galapagos Islands.) What they found — and published in a recent study — is that flocks of thousands of flamingos used to live in the Everglades and the Keys and that the birds may even have nested in the region. The reason they are no longer abundant is that locals used to hunt them for their meat and feathers.

“There were large groups of flamingos in Florida until the early 1900s,” said Whitfield, the study's lead author, “but people killed them all.”

One of the first accounts of Florida's flamingos is that of famed ornithologist and painter John James Audubon, who visited the Keys in the spring of 1832. “Ah! reader, could you but know the emotions that then agitated my breast!” he later wrote of the moment when he caught his first glimpse of a flock of flamingos.

Audubon did not estimate the number of birds he saw, but subsequent

“Ah! reader, could you but know the emotions that then agitated my breast!”

naturalists did, while also depicting the slaughter that was starting to take its toll on the flamingo population. In an 1857 letter to the Smithsonian Institution, Gustavus Wurdeman wrote about a flock of at least 500 flamingos in the Keys. Wurdeman, like other naturalists at the time, was not above shooting birds for collection purposes, but he was shocked by the actions of a hunter he had accompanied, describing a catch of more than 100 flamingos, some smeared in blood and others drowning in standing water at the bottom of the canoe. Another account from the mid-1880s mentioned a flock of at least 2,500 flamingos in the heart of what is now Everglades National Park. The last report of a large group dates to 1902, when 500 to 1,000 flamingos were spotted in the Everglades' coastal waters.

The researchers believed they had clear evidence of the flamingos' historical presence in the Everglades and beyond, but they also wanted to find out whether the birds had nested there. They uncovered a secondhand account of flamingo nests in the Keys and another of three females near Cape Sable in the Everglades that were about to lay eggs. And then there is Benjamin Beard Strobel, a young doctor who moved from Charleston, South Carolina, to Key West in 1829 and wrote of “some young flamingoes, cooked in a style peculiar to Key West” that he sampled during a dinner with a local notable. The researchers also located a handful of flamingo eggs in museum collections across the country with labels suggesting they were collected in Florida.

Very few flamingos were spotted

in the wild during the first half of the 20th century, but both the number of sightings and the size of flocks have increased since, a trend that matches the recovery of flamingos in the Caribbean. “More birds are making it here and at least exploring the region,” said Judd Patterson, a National Park Service biologist and co-author of the study. “It seems likely to me that if birds continue dispersing they might settle here and start to nest.”

Everglades biologist Lori Oberhofer said that as park managers and others work to increase the flow of freshwater into the Everglades, visiting flamingos will find an environment mirroring the conditions that supported large flocks more than a century ago. Oberhofer, who's seen flocks of 45, has little doubt flamingos belong in Florida. “We now have evidence that they are actually native and always have been,” she said.

The flamingo's formal status hasn't been revised yet, but Whitfield hopes the new research will prompt wildlife officials to change it. As for Conchy, he settled into his watery home in the Everglades and spent two years there before his transmitter gave out in October. Conchy has developed something of a cult following among local birders, so Whitfield is counting on them to keep him apprised of the young flamingo's wanderings. “We have captive birds here at the zoo that are 40 years old,” he said, “so Conchy can keep going for a long time.” **NP**

NICOLAS BRULLIARD is associate editor of National Parks magazine.



AN EASTERN BLUEBIRD at Antietam National Battlefield in Maryland. Bluebirds typically nest in tree cavities, but at Antietam, they also use the open mouths of cannons.

© MIKE FITZPATRICK

Birds on the Battlefield

As green space shrinks and suburbs expand, a growing number of wildlife seekers are heading to historic parks for their nature fix.

ON SEPTEMBER 17, 1862, during what became known as the Battle of Antietam, Union troops needed to cross Antietam Creek to flank the Confederate Army. Union Maj. Gen. Ambrose Burnside had orders to take a stone bridge crossing the creek, even though it meant his forces would be wide open to Confederate fire from troops entrenched on high bluffs on the far side. The hours-long battle was expectedly fierce, and more than 500 of Burnside's troops were killed or wounded in the attack. More than 20,000 others on both sides died, were injured or went missing elsewhere on the battlefield that day, making the Battle of Antietam the bloodiest single-day battle in American history.

On a spring day several years ago, I and a dozen others stood in appreciative silence on the very same bridge, painstakingly restored to its 1862 appearance by the National Park Service and now known as Burnside Bridge. The subject of our admiration at that moment was not battlefield heroes, however, but a living spectacle: a flock of small cliff swallows fluttering on the muddy bank of the creek. I was leading a birding walk for the Potomac Audubon Society, and my group marveled as the cloud of swallows darted between the bank and their nests on the underside of the bridge.

Visitors to historical and cultural national parks should not be afraid to stop and smell the flowers or lift their binoculars once in a while. In addition to preserving important parts of American history, many national battlefields, national monuments and national historic sites protect large areas of land, along with the plants and animals that live there. Appreciating the natural aspects of these parks can enrich a visitor's understanding of historical events by providing a living context and connection to earlier times. As the Antietam battle unfolded, ancestors of the same cliff swallows we watched at Burnside Bridge had likely just finished their own nesting season and were heading toward South America.

An inveterate birder, I always am scanning the skies, whether I'm looking out a glazed window or visiting prehistoric ruins. I've watched red-headed woodpeckers at Gettysburg National Military Park in Pennsylvania, ruby-throated hummingbirds at Thomas Stone National Historic Site

An inveterate birder, I always am scanning the skies, whether I'm looking out a glazed window or visiting prehistoric ruins.

in Maryland, and Chihuahuan ravens at Texas' Fort Davis National Historic Site. I saw my first gray flycatcher at Chaco Culture National Historical Park in New Mexico, sallying among ruins at Pueblo Bonito, and my first pinyon jays near preserved pueblos at Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado.

Historical or cultural parks increasingly have become major draws for nature lovers due in part to a reality of modern living: These parks are often bastions of green space in otherwise developed landscapes. Kennesaw Mountain National Battlefield Park, the site of an 1864 attack by Union Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman, has become one of the Atlanta region's most popular birding destinations largely because it

protects nearly 3,000 acres of woods in a densely populated county. Similarly, the mandate to maintain historical conditions on the grounds of national battlefields in the mid-Atlantic, such as Manassas and Monocacy, means that the parks also host grasshopper sparrows, eastern meadowlarks and other grassland birds that are losing habitat to suburban growth.

Visitors have always been able to enjoy battlefield parks in any way they saw fit as long as they respected the sites and other visitors, but there used to be little institutional focus on anything outside the traditional history, said Maria Burks, who was the superintendent of Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania County Battlefields Memorial National Military Park in Virginia in the early 1990s. "It tended to be a particularly conservative group of military enthusiasts running those parks, concerned all about the valor of the battlefield and specific maneuvers," said Burks, who worked for the Park Service for 39 years.

That single-mindedness is changing. Manassas National Battlefield Park Superintendent Brandon Bies admits he's more of a history guy than a nature guy but said he's proud of the efforts he and his staff have taken to protect and restore wildlife habitat at the park. For example, Manassas has planted native warm-season grasses across thousands of acres of battlefield and partnered with the National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative to provide grassland habitat for the declining northern bobwhite quail. That work is helping the park expand its reach: Although he doesn't officially collect numbers, Bies

said that wildlife watchers are one of the quickest-growing groups of park visitors. "It doesn't matter what draws them here," he said. "I know that once people get here, they'll learn about the history and fall in love with the park."

Parks across the country are following suit. More and more historical and cultural sites advertise bird walks, from Valley Forge in Pennsylvania to Tumacacori in Arizona. Adams National Historical Park in Massachusetts is helping bees, butterflies and other insects by planting wildflower beds and maintaining a historic garden as part of its work with the National Pollinator Initiative. Visitors to Cabrillo National Monument can learn about the history of Spanish exploration while watching gray whales migrate along the California coast.

My group identified a total of 56 different bird species that morning at the Burnside Bridge, including three warbler species — yellow, blackpoll and chestnut-sided — in the famous Burnside Sycamore at the base of the bridge. The tree, now massive, was present during the battle, though just a sapling. Standing in the tree's shadow and watching the warblers flit through its branches, I thought about how soldiers might have watched those same species in the hours before battle more than 150 years ago. They would have heard the crows and the blue jays calling overhead, as we did, and marched through the same stands of box elder and hackberry. I closed my eyes to listen to the rustle of leaves and the bird calls, and I felt transported. **NP**



MATHEW BRADY/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

WAR WHISKERS

Burnside's legacy extended well beyond the battlefield: Sideburns (previously called "burnsides") were named after the general, who was known for the thick patches of facial hair that covered his cheeks.

NICK LUND focuses on energy issues for NPCA.

Homeschooling on the road isn't always easy, but enthusiasts say the big wide world — including national parks — is the best classroom. [By Kate Siber](#)

LESSONS IN MOTION

The Curren family home is bright, airy and decorated with the trappings of a happy middle-class American household — pretty photos, colorful throw pillows, plants, an inviting bowl of fruit. National park magnets adorn the fridge, and there's even a designated spot for the yoga mat. But this house is atypical. For one, it's a grand total of 188 square feet. It also has wheels.

Jess and Sam Curren, along with their three children, Cara, 8, Andrew, 10, and Rachel, 12, live on the road most of the time, completely untethered from the standard-issue suburban existence they once maintained in Lehi, Utah. Their 27-foot Airstream serves as kitchen, bathroom, bedroom, office and — when they're not out exploring — a schoolhouse, too.

The inspiration for the Currens' drastic lifestyle change arose in 2012, when the family, self-described outdoorsy adventurers,



CARA, ANDREW AND RACHEL

Curren jump down sand dunes in Death Valley National Park. Now 8, 10 and 12, the kids have been roadschoolers since 2013.

THE CURREN FAMILY on a spontaneous overnight backpacking trip in White Sands National Monument in New Mexico (below). Right: “I realized how beneficial travel would be to me as an adult, not simply for the kids,” said Sam Curren, shown here with two of his kids in California’s Redwood National and State Parks.

embarked on a five-week trip to California. On their way home, they were surprised to notice that they didn’t feel particularly homesick, and they didn’t miss the neighborhood barbecues, the home-improvement projects or shuttling between activities. They started to dream of a more nomadic life, shorter on possessions but richer in experiences.

It wasn’t such a far-fetched idea. Both parents have a thirst for adventure and portable jobs. Sam, 38, works as a computer programmer and Jess, 34, as a freelance photographer and blogger. After experimenting with a house swap the following year, they purchased the Airstream and a truck, sold their five-bedroom home, jettisoned almost everything they owned and hit the road.

The Currens were motivated primarily by the desire to spend more time with one another, but they also wanted to educate their children in a different way. “A lot of education at this age is just opening their eyes and giving them a taste that

“We dictate our time
and how we spend it,
rather than having
it handed to us.
This is freedom.”

workbook.” Now, while the kids still do some sit-down lessons and homework, the family mainly uses the real world as their classroom, visiting science museums, historic sites, state parks and national parks as they pinball from coast to coast.

“This is what I craved for so long without knowing what it was,” Jess wrote on her blog, *CurrentlyWandering.com*, in September 2015, nearly two years after embracing life on the road. “Freedom from social norms, free to be who we were meant to be without social pressure. Free from soccer schedules, school schedules and even work schedules. We dictate our time and how we spend it, rather than having it handed to us. *This is freedom. I love it.*”

A growing number of American families are taking the idea of homeschooling and adding wheels in a phenomenon known as roadschooling. “The growth in this lifestyle choice has been exponential and continues to be exponential,” said Kimberly Travaglini, the founder of Full-time Families, an organization that connects roadschooling families through a website, app and rallies. Since 2010, the organization has ballooned to more than 2,000 members, and Travaglini, who roadschools her own four children

in a 42-foot recreational vehicle, estimates there are thousands more who are currently traveling the United States.

At one time, families living on the road — pipeline workers, entertainers or seasonal workers — chose the lifestyle for employment-related reasons. Broader social acceptance of homeschooling, widespread availability of Wi-Fi and the rising number of remote jobs have made the choice attractive to a wider demographic. Now, telecommuting professionals are opting for a peripatetic existence as a way to see the world and offer their kids a freer, more hands-on education.



all of this is out there,” Jess said. “That’s what’s most important to me and my kids — love of learning and exploring and being a well-rounded individual.”

Letting go of the norms of conventional education proved to be a process, however. At first, the Currens felt compelled to follow a traditional curriculum while traveling. “I remember one time I was trying to encourage the kids to get their workbooks done so we could go explore the national park,” Sam said. “Then I thought, ‘This is dumb. We should be maximizing our time exploring, not reading about it in some





THE CURRENS' backcountry campsite in Big Bend National Park in Texas (left). Below: The Travaglini family at Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado.



© COURTESY OF KIMBERLY TRAVAGLINO

© SAM CURREN

“What happens is a number of people stop, they look at their lives and they say, ‘What are we doing?’” said Brian Ray, founder and president of the National Home Education Research Institute, who estimates that roadschooling started taking off about 10 years ago. “They’re interested in a way of life in which the education of children and life are integrated. School is not something you do separate from life. Learning is a part of life.”

Roadschoolers have different ways of structuring their travels. Some live full-time on the road while others take extended trips from a home base. They’ll typically spend anywhere from a few days to several weeks exploring a particular region, attending events and stopping at museums, parks and roadside attractions before moving on. Most spend a considerable amount of time in national parks, not only because they’re spectacular, but because they provide rich material for science and social studies courses. In 2015, for example, the Currens devised a unit on Native American history and hit eight parks in Arizona, from Montezuma Castle National Monument to Walnut Canyon National Monument.

**“School is not
something you do
separate from life.
Learning is a part of life.”**

Almost all the national parks offer resources for teachers and homeschoolers, from ideas for day trip activities to videos, lesson plans and webchats with rangers. “We have a lot of families who indicate they use our online resources like our ‘Nature Notes’ videos to learn more about the park before they come,” said Jamie Richards, spokesperson for Yosemite National Park. “Then when they get here, you see a lot of youth who are fully engaged and ask great questions.” Yosemite is one of a few parks with an education department that offers field trips for visiting classes and remote learning programs via webinars. At some park sites, rangers will meet with

roadschooling families who call in advance and are traveling during low-traffic times.

“Boy, that’s memorable when you get a personal tour, and you get to see behind the scenes,” said Dee Young, a Kansas-based roadschooling mother who, with her son Barrett, met then-Director of the National Park Service Jonathan Jarvis and then-Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell on a trip to Washington, D.C. (The superintendent at Fort Scott National Historic Site in Kansas, where the family had volunteered, helped make this unusual meeting possible.)

Almost all parks also offer junior ranger programs in which kids complete a series of activities, take an oath to protect and continue learning about the parks and receive a badge or certificate. The Curren children have amassed 125 badges so far at sites ranging from New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park to Channel Islands National Park in California.

Other kids, such as Marie Young, have become almost obsessed with the junior ranger program. Marie, an outgoing 13-year-old from Texas, has taken four national park trips of about two weeks with her mom, Kate Woodward Young. On these long adventures, as well as many shorter trips, they have

visited about 200 park sites while amassing 175 junior ranger badges — and Marie is gunning for more.

“The junior ranger programs are something I can do to learn about the park without having to sit through boring tours or read all the signs,” she said. “I’d rather have a fun way, and the booklet kind of sums up what I need to know about the park.” Now an expert, she wrote the junior ranger booklet for Waco Mammoth National Monument in Texas, where she volunteers. She frequently helps at the junior ranger booth, providing information and encouraging other kids to participate in the program. She is emphatic about how her park experiences might help her later on.

“I think it’s especially going to help me through college,” she said. “If I have to take any history courses, I’ll for sure ace them.”

People choose roadschooling for diverse reasons, but of the dozen families interviewed for this story, many were concerned about trends in public education, including the growing use of standardized testing and increased emphasis on math and English at the expense of social studies and the arts. They wanted a more kid-led, real-world, hiking-boots-on-

LIVE VICARIOUSLY

Many roadschooling families maintain blogs about their adventures. You can read and see more here:

fulltimefamilies.com
currentlywandering.com
statebystate.net
lindstromsontheroad.com
familiesontheroad.com
diaryofaroadmom.com
roadtripteacher.com
wanderschool.com
barrygoodtimes.com
facebook.com/walenskifamilyadventures
facebook.com/RoadschoolingFamilies

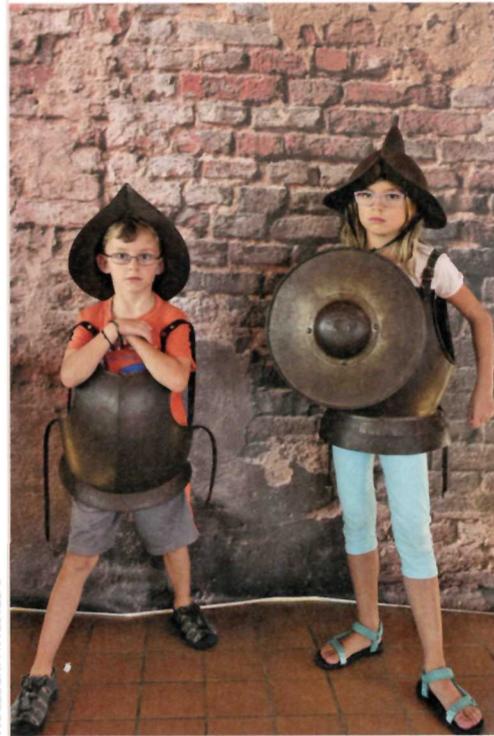
the-ground education for their children and were in a position to make it happen.

“Rather than reading about things in a book, we could go and touch and be there and talk to park rangers who know all about it,” said Christine Lindstrom, who is living in an RV with her husband, Staffan, and three children. “We thought what a gift that type of education could be for our kids.”

Other families make the pedagogical choice to accommodate their kids’ special needs. Dee Young said Barrett’s struggles with learning challenges prompted her to choose roadschooling. Barrett never went to public school and never missed it. He particularly loves living-history demonstrations, in which rangers dress up in period garb, so throughout elementary, middle and high school, he and his mom road-tripped to many national park sites. (Barrett’s father made this financially possible by staying behind to work.) Now Barrett is studying at Pittsburg State University in Kansas and hopes to become a living-history interpreter himself.

For some parents, the decision to roadschool has just as much to do with their preferences — or regrets about their own education. “As a kid, I never had a lot of time to experience things and be myself,” said Karen Milde, a marketing consultant from Vancouver, Canada, who has started to take her small children on national park road trips in the Pacific Northwest. “I was always boxed in to doing piano or going to Chinese class or dance class.”

Many adults are pleased to discover just how much they are learning while roadschooling. At Manassas National Battlefield Park in Virginia, for example, Sam Curren had an aha moment in the rolling fields where the Confederate and Union



© STAFFAN LINDSTROM



© COURTESY OF DEE YOUNG



© COURTESY OF KATE WOODWARD-YOUNG



© STAFFAN LINDSTROM

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Peter and Emelie Lindstrom at Cabrillo National Monument in California, Marie Young (in vest with junior ranger badges) at the George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum in Texas, Emelie and Peter working on junior ranger booklets at Pennsylvania’s Gettysburg National Military Park, Barrett Young at Palo Alto Battlefield National Historical Park in Texas.

armies clashed. “I was standing where it actually happened, and I was able to connect to history in a way I had never been able to before,” he said. “That was a moment — and we’ve had lots of those — when I realized how beneficial travel would be to me as an adult, not simply for the kids.”

Although the Curren children spend a lot of time together and with their parents, they each cultivate their own interests. “I’m pretty sure I’m the only kid in this family who actually likes hiking,” said Andrew, the 10-year-old, with a laugh. He fondly remembers visiting Wizard Island in Oregon’s Crater Lake National Park when he was 6 and sledding down the dunes at White Sands National Monument in New Mexico. Rachel, 12, loved seeing the jagged Canadian Rockies. She excels at writing and math and particularly loves baking. And

Cara, the youngest, has an abundance of energy and is what Sam calls “our silly imagination girl,” coming up with creative games and play.

Even with an unusual lifestyle, the Currens have fallen into a rhythm. Sam wakes up at 5:30 a.m. to work. The kids wake up a bit later and do math and writing homework in the mornings four days a week before heading out to explore. Jess was a wedding and family photographer before the trip; now she chronicles the family’s adventures on her blog, which brings in a small supplemental income from outdoor brands. The family typically camps in one place for anywhere from two to 10 nights and rarely drives more than three hours to the next camping spot. Although they don’t often stay in cities, which aren’t easy to navigate in an Airstream, they will venture into

“When we started, my parents were not on board. They were like, ‘You are going to ruin your kids. They’re going to need therapy.’”

urban areas to visit science museums, zoos and aquariums. Occasionally, they’ll do what they call “boondocking”: They find a remote location way out on Bureau of Land Management land and camp off-grid for a while, sometimes with other roadschooling families they’ve met on their travels. In the evenings, the kids read on their Kindles, listen to audiobooks or play Minecraft, a video game. They are allowed two hours of screen time each week in half-hour increments — but know they can get away with more when their parents are sitting around the campfire with friends.

In general, roadschoolers abide by the same regulations as homeschoolers. Conveniently, the Currens’ home state of Utah doesn’t require them to submit test scores or curricula of any kind. Eleven states, including Idaho, Texas and Connecticut, require virtually nothing from homeschooling parents, whereas others, such as Pennsylvania and Vermont, ask parent educators to submit lesson plans, standardized test scores and even professional evaluations. Depending on their state’s requirements, some homeschoolers and roadschoolers skip traditional subjects that their kids aren’t interested in — trigonometry, for example — a practice that irks critics, who contend that those students are at risk of getting an incomplete education. Critics also commonly say that homeschooled children lack opportunities for socialization, a characterization that roadschooling families refute.

“I feel like they get a lot more socialization and interactions than you do when you’re in school,” said Jennifer Jones, a mom based in Marble Falls, Texas, who has homeschooled and roadschooled her eight children. “Socially, the kids are around all different ages of people and backgrounds instead of fitting in a class with all the same people who are all the same age.”

Sometimes strangers will pipe up with criticism. The Travaglino family has encountered people who believe they’re irresponsible for not giving their children their own bedrooms or that they’re “living off the government.” “Not true at all,” said Kimberly Travaglino. “People sometimes just can’t wrap their heads around this.” They’ve also met people who have offered them food, thinking that they travel because they’re homeless and destitute.



© JESS CURREN

Perhaps the most vociferous critics of roadschoolers, however, are concerned family members. “When we started, my parents were not on board,” said Jess Curren. “They were like, ‘You are going to ruin your kids. They’re going to need therapy.’”

Despite the criticism, the community has continued to grow and evolve. The Currens, who eventually won their parents’ support, maintain a robust network of traveling families on Instagram. Travaglino runs a roadschooling Facebook page with 11,000 followers and a coaching business for roadschooling newcomers. Full-time Families has an app that connects families on the road and hosts rallies in large campgrounds with as many as 80 clans who gather to play games, take seminars and house tours, and attend dances and socials.

For some, this lifestyle also has a natural lifespan as kids become teenagers and seek more independence. Last year, the Currens started to feel that even their unconventional life had become routine and started daydreaming about the next challenge. That fall, Sam took a post as a visiting professor of computer science at Brigham Young University-Hawaii for four months. “At first, I cried every night,” said Jess. The kids also missed traveling, but soon the family grew to love their new routine. They decided it would be good to have a home base and stable community and bought a condo in Driggs, Idaho. They plan to live there when it’s snowy — and squeeze in a lot of skiing, as they did last winter — then rent it out the rest of the year while they travel.

“Investing more of our resources into adventure instead of possessions will continue,” Sam said. “As our kids grow up, we’ll adapt here and there to be able to fit their needs. If they need to be mostly still, we’ll make it happen. But I highly suspect that when our kids go to college and their friends ask, where are your parents? They’ll say, ‘I don’t know, let me check Instagram!’”

KATE SIBER is a freelance journalist based in Durango, Colorado. Her last story for the magazine was about Death Valley.

CARA CURREN counts the names on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

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**A winter adventure in
Yellowstone National Park.**

**SNOW,
STEAM,
BISON,
SKY**

BY GREG M. PETERS

WINTER CAN BE an ideal time for wildlife viewing in Yellowstone. Here, a bison grazes on a snowy hillside.



© GREG M. PETERS

CHRISSY PETERS,
the author's wife,
skis along the
road to Tower Fall
overlook.

skidded to a stop and bent over to examine the specimen. It was huge. And right in the middle of the snow-covered trail.

"Check that out," I exclaimed as my wife, Chrissy, caught up to me. "It looks fresh."

"There are tracks everywhere here," Chrissy said, looking around. "They can't be too far away."

I turned my attention back to the giant pile of bison scat. I poked at it with my pole to see if it was frozen. It wasn't, despite the 9-degree temperature.

"Don't go too fast," Chrissy cautioned. "The bison are probably right down the trail." Her words faded under the scrape of skis on snow as I pushed

off. Golden late-afternoon light spilled across the forest; trees flashed by, their shadows cutting across the trail.

As I skittered around another sharp switchback, I caught sight of something in my periphery. Jerking my head up from the trail, I watched as a massive brown creature crashed through the forest and

onto the trail less than a dozen yards ahead of me. I jammed my skis sideways, but I couldn't scrub enough speed to stop. Heart pounding, I shot into the woods. Equally startled, the bison thudded straight down the trail, snow flying in its wake. I watched transfixed, both terrified and amazed that such a huge animal could move so fast. Then I noticed a second bison running pell-mell down the trail a few yards ahead of the first. In a flash, they were out of sight.

We hadn't anticipated getting quite that close to the park's wildlife when we started our day at Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel, located in the northern part of Yellowstone National Park, just a few miles from Gardner, Montana. Our plan was to take a snowcoach, a modified van with oversized tires, up the Grand Loop Road to the Swan Lake Plateau. From there, we had two options: We could cross-country ski the 5-mile Sheepeater Ski Trail along the plateau, returning to the road for a snowcoach ride back to the hotel. Or we could forgo the ride and continue our adventure with a 5-mile descent down Bunsen Peak Trail and a half-mile walk back.

We debated our options on the snowcoach ride. Rachel, our driver, was concerned we might get lost

(or worse) and asked us to check in at the front desk if we skied the full 11 miles back to the hotel. Sure thing, we promised, and trundled out of the van into the cold, crisp February air.

Known internationally for its abundant wildlife, geysers and other geothermal features, Yellowstone looks like a jagged square carved out of northwest Wyoming, although its northern boundary is actually in Montana and its western boundary runs through both Montana and Idaho. The 3,472-square-mile park welcomed more than 4 million visitors last year, most of whom traveled there from June through September. In winter, the number of visitors plummets.

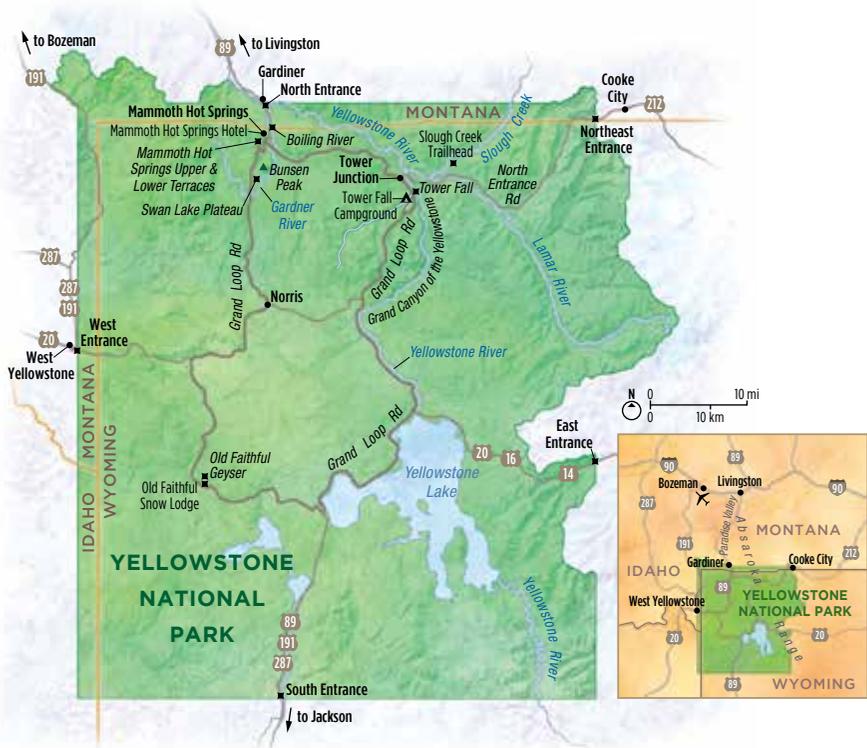
The lighter crowds make winter an ideal time to visit any part of Yellowstone, but the northern section of the park is an especially alluring cold-weather destination, particularly for those interested in seeing wildlife. Most of Yellowstone sits high on the Yellowstone Caldera, a mix of basins, plateaus, lakes and mountains. This wild, wind-swept country is almost entirely above 7,000 feet and experiences long, cold, snowy winters. But parts of the park's northern reaches, anchored by the Yellowstone and Gardner Rivers, are 1,000 feet lower. The drop in elevation proves especially critical for some of the park's wildlife, which flock north during the winter months seeking warmer temperatures and better forage.

Though wintertime access to the park is limited, visitors have a couple of options for getting around. Those who want to drive themselves are confined to the North Entrance road, the only park road that's plowed. It stretches for a total of 45 miles along the park's northern boundary from the Mammoth area, where the eponymous hotel and park's administrative offices are located, to the old mining town of Cooke City, Montana, just outside the park's northeast corner. To venture deeper into the park's interior, travelers can book snowmobiles or snowcoaches. Both are relatively expensive and require reservations, but they go to some of the park's famous attractions.

Our driver was headed to the groomed ski trails and warming hut at Indian Creek, but we hopped off a couple of miles before that. As the bright yellow

snowcoach drove off, we shouldered our packs and pushed off into the fresh snow. I was just six weeks off a severe ankle sprain, so Chrissy broke trail as we skied from one orange trail marker to the next.

The conditions were perfect, and we moved through pockets of lodgepole pine trees and wide-



© KAREN MINNOT

open meadows buried beneath an undulating carpet of white. Views spilled out in every direction. Behind us, to the south, Trilobite Point, Quadrant Mountain, Antler Peak and Dome Mountain rose above the plateau, their sharp contours pressing into the soft blue sky. Ahead, Bunsen Peak towered 1,500 feet above the flats. To our right, the steep, rocky cliffs of the Gardner River Canyon dropped to a small ribbon of green still flowing in the middle of winter.

We didn't see anyone else on the plateau, and the sense of solitude was intoxicating. But we weren't the only ones moving through the landscape. The fresh snow provided ample evidence of local residents. Snowshoe hare tracks zig-zagged from tree to tree. A line of coyote prints led us from meadow to meadow. Even the squirrels and mice left faint tracks in the snow.

The trail, marked by abundant blazes, proved easy to follow. One hour slipped into a second and then a

YELLOWSTONE

covers 3,472 square miles stretching from Wyoming into Montana and Idaho. The author stayed in the northern section, which features a plowed road and one of the park's two lodges that are open during winter months.



RANGERS ADVISE

visitors to give bison, above, and other wildlife plenty of space and to avoid startling them, but it's especially important in winter, when animals need to conserve precious calories to survive.

third as we slowly skied our way through the miles. When we reached the trail juncture where we had to make a decision about our route, I lobbied to keep skiing: "It's all downhill from here. I bet we'll be back in an hour or less."

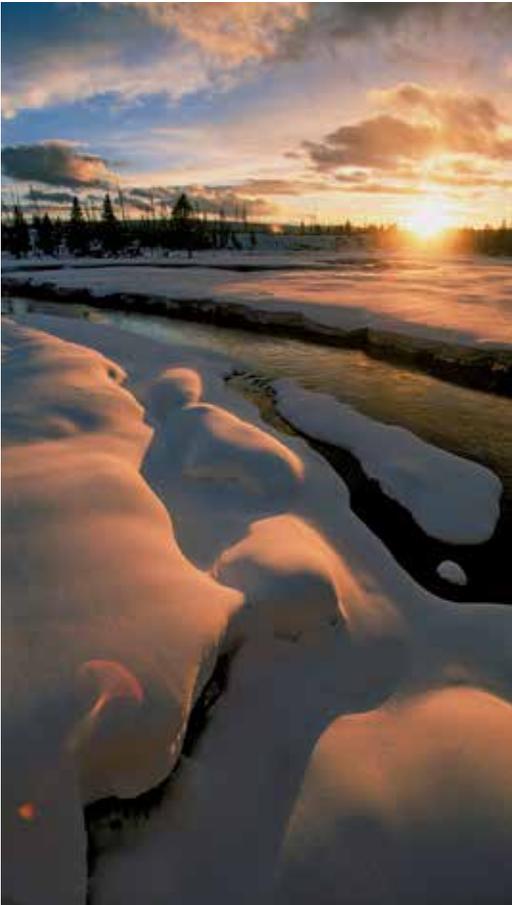
Closer to two hours later, we carefully descended down the last section of trail, wary of spooking the bison again. (Rangers advise visitors to give wildlife plenty of space and to avoid startling them and making them run unnecessarily, but it's especially important in winter when animals need to conserve precious calories to survive.) Our concern was warranted: As we inched down the final switchback, we found the pair, one of them parked on a bridge that we needed to cross, the other a few yards ahead munching grass just off the trail. Chrissy suggested that we take off our skis and boots and ford the small creek well below the bridge. I wasn't enthusiastic about the prospect of wading barefoot through the frigid water, so we waited, hoping the bison would move enough to let us pass.

The bison was in no hurry. It took one small step and then another, ever so slightly widening the gap between us. Chrissy and I matched it, step for step, until the creature had fully crossed the bridge. With just enough space to feel comfortable, we sneaked

across the span and quickly scooted off the trail, bushwhacking through some shrubs and grasses until the bison were safely behind us. We regained the trail, breathing heavily, and paused for a moment to watch the animals methodically push away snow with their massive heads as they searched for grass. We skied the final mile under the late-afternoon sun, powered by thoughts of a cold beer and warm shower.

On the morning of our second day, we packed a lunch (and our skis) and drove toward Cooke City, passing herds of elk and bison grazing along the road just east of Mammoth. When we stopped for a restroom break at the historic Tower Junction area — where Teddy Roosevelt once camped and a rustic lodge bearing his name now hosts summer visitors — a fellow motorist told us that wolves had been spotted near Slough Creek, another few miles down the road. Wolves!? We sped off, our eyes peeled for the telltale cluster of cars marking the animals' location.

A short walk led us to the packs we hoped to find: wolf-watchers bundled in oversized parkas peering through massive scopes and cameras with giant lenses. Eerie but inspiring, the unmistakable notes of wolf howls mingled with the wild yips of coyotes hidden somewhere in the vastness. A friendly woman with a German accent let us look through her spotting



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scope. Roughly a thousand yards away, two wolves lay in the snow, curled next to each other. We watched awestruck as the gray one tilted her head and howled at the opaque gray sky. We counted at least four others, barely discernible in the distance.

Elk, bison and now wolves — we felt as if we'd hit the Yellowstone jackpot. But then one of the watchers told us about a trio of river otters that lived along the Lamar River, farther down the road. Ten minutes later, we found ourselves staring up an S-curve the river cut through the snow-covered valley. Sure enough, just a few moments after we arrived, a portly otter waddled down the bank and slipped into the current, joining two others already braving the icy water. In a matter of seconds, they vanished downriver.

Back in the car, we kept pushing east, with the vague notion to drive all the way to Cooke City. But soon we again found ourselves outside the car, binoculars in hand, watching a moose munch red osier dogwood branches along Soda Butte Creek. Nearby, a second moose hid behind a small clump of the rust-colored vegetation, and we marveled at how such a huge animal could effectively disappear behind the leafless shrubs.

DURING THE WINTER, when the number of people in the park plummets, it's possible for visitors to go for long stretches without seeing another soul.

NPCA AT WORK

Are the grizzly bears that roam in the country's oldest national park at risk?

NPCA staff were alarmed last year when the Interior Department decided to remove the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem grizzly bear from the endangered species list. Though the population in and around Yellowstone and Grand Teton has increased from fewer than 150 to over 700, NPCA argues that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's removal of federal protections could undermine the grizzly's recovery. NPCA has joined tribal and conservation

partners to challenge the decision in court, saying the delisting plan fails to ensure the bear population won't decline again, restrict hunting on privately owned land in Grand Teton, consider how to connect this isolated population to other grizzlies or account for climate change.

NPCA is also fighting Wyoming's aggressive hunting plan. That proposal, which hadn't been finalized at press time, would permit hunters to kill 23 grizzly bears just beyond national park boundaries and would allow baiting, the controversial practice of luring bears with food for an easy kill. The judge is expected to rule by Sept. 1, when

the Wyoming hunting season opens.

"The stakes are too high to rush removing important protections for Yellowstone grizzly bears," said Stephanie Adams, NPCA's Yellowstone program manager. "The final rule does not ensure the long-term health of this population."

The grizzly delisting is not the only threat Yellowstone is facing. Mining companies have plans to develop two large-scale gold mines just north of Yellowstone, and — in one case — within view of the famous Roosevelt Arch at the park's northern gateway. Fortunately, the U.S. Forest Service has proposed banning new

mining on about 30,000 acres of public land for 20 years, and NPCA and its allies are hopeful that Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke will approve the ban. "We oppose the development of gold mining on the northern border of Yellowstone because it threatens the wildlife, the waters, the experience of millions of visitors as well as the thriving local economy," Adams said.

Last year, U.S. Sen. Jon Tester and Rep. Greg Gianforte of Montana introduced companion bills that would permanently protect public lands near Yellowstone from mining. "I'm optimistic," Adams said. "The proposed ban is good news, but we need a lasting solution."

A COYOTE (top) and one of the park's snowcoaches heading toward the Indian Creek ski trails (bottom).

Travel Essentials

Winter travelers have two options for lodging inside the park: take a snowcoach to the Old Faithful Snow Lodge in the park's interior or drive themselves to Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel, where we stayed. The hotel, which was built in the 1930s, is loaded with charm and period-specific details but has been upgraded over the years. It serves three meals a day, rents cross-country skiing equipment, offers ski lessons and arranges snowcoach shuttles, making it a one-stop shop for winter adventures. Beginners and experts alike can glide through 30 miles of groomed trails in the Mammoth and Tower Junction areas, and the most adventurous can venture off trail on a self-directed tour of Yellowstone's backcountry. (Hotel rooms will be temporarily unavailable after Labor Day because of renovations, but the rest of the hotel's facilities will remain open.)

Just 5 miles from Mammoth, the gateway town of Gardiner, Montana, has plenty of food and lodging options. The new Wonderland Cafe and Lodge boasts local food on its gastropub-style menu and rents a handful of studio, one-bedroom and two-bedroom units (all with kitchens). Down the road, the Yellowstone Gateway Inn offers renovated rooms with full kitchens.

Wintertime visitors also can stay in West Yellowstone, Montana, a small town on the western edge of the park that is known for its snowmobile scene. West Yellowstone is closer to Old Faithful and Norris Geyser Basin than the other gateway towns and is a great option for those interested in hiring a knowledgeable guide to show them Yellowstone's famous geothermal features. Visitors setting out from Jackson, Wyoming (and using the park's South Entrance) can also reserve spots on snowcoaches or find trained snowmobile guides at local outfitters.

The best way to get to the North or West Entrance is to fly to Bozeman, Montana, and rent a car for the 90-minute drive to Gardiner or the two-hour drive to West Yellowstone. Travelers also can fly to Jackson Hole Airport, which is located an hour or so from the South Entrance.



TOP: © ANDREW WELLS; BOTTOM: © GREG M. PETERS; OPPOSITE PAGE: © JOSE AZEIJUNROA PHOTOS



"We haven't seen any bighorn sheep yet," Chrissy mused when we were back in the car, returning to Tower Junction to spend the final hours of the afternoon skiing the road up to the nearby campground and the Tower Fall overlook.

"So wolves, river otters, moose, bison and elk aren't enough for one day?" I ribbed as we eased through our ninth or 10th knot of bison walking right up the road.

A moment later, we spotted a handful of cars parked on the shoulder. Just a dozen yards up the steep slope, a group of dusky bighorn sheep with fully curled horns grazed on tufts of last season's grass poking through the snow. We high-fived.

When we finally made it to Tower Junction, the sun began to shine through the monochrome sky. At the top of the climb we could see the 20-mile-long Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone fading into the horizon. Yellow, tan and gray cliffs, lit by the soft afternoon sunlight, spilled down to the river 1,000 feet below.

Our last day in the park dawned clear and cold. Committed to enjoying one of the more unusual park experiences, we donned bathing suits and layered on thick socks, fleece shirts, pants and down jackets. After a short drive to the trailhead parking lot, we left the warm car and walked up the frozen path. Dark gray American dippers zipped across the Gardner River, and delicate crystals of frost covered the gnarled juniper branches, grasses and pale green sage along the trail.

After 10 minutes, we reached our destination: the Boiling River, nearly obscured in swirling mists of steam. Slippery rocks lead to a spot where water from the just-this-side-of-scalding Boiling River meets water from the just-barely-in-liquid-state



THOUGH SOME geothermal sites in the park look inviting, entering is verboten in most places. Castle Geyser, above, erupts every 10 to 12 hours.

Gardner River. It's one of only two geothermal sites in the park where visitors are permitted to soak or swim. We stripped off our outer layers as quickly as humanly possible and slid into the water. It turns out there is an art to soaking in the Boiling River on a breezy 2-degree morning in February. Icy blasts of cold air swept up the valley as swells of cold water from the Gardner River flowed into the soaking pool, forcing us to sit as close to the hot cascades as we could bear while keeping everything but our faces below the water's surface. But we soon found the right positioning and relaxed while the sun rose above the snow-draped ridges.

Our early morning start left us just enough time to ski the 1.5-mile Upper Terrace Loop Road before heading back home. In the winter, the road serves as a groomed snowshoe and cross-country ski trail that winds among the boils, pools, cascades and skeletal forests of Mammoth Hot Spring's Upper Terrace.

Around every turn, a new feature appeared: terraced pools of steaming water, bulbous mounds of multicolored limestone capped by soft pillows of snow, cascades of mineral-rich water bubbling up from the earth. Steam clouds drifted skyward and disappeared into the cold. Two mule deer browsing in a stand of juniper trees watched as we skied past. On the final bend, the entire valley opened up before us: Far below, the Gardner River flowed green through the sage-covered foothills. Snow clung to jagged gray and brown cliffs. Electric Peak stood craggy and severe against the distant cobalt sky.

We skied the final few hundred yards in silence. The rhythmic sound of our skis on the snow slowed as we neared the trailside parking lot. When we glided to a stop, I finally broke the quiet. "That was fast," I said, smiling. "Let's ski it again."

GREG M. PETERS is a writer based in Missoula, Montana. Find his stories at gregmpeters.com.

Side Trip

Follow the Yellowstone River 55 miles north out of Gardiner, through the aptly named Paradise Valley, and you end up in Livingston, Montana. Flanked by the stunning Absaroka Mountains, this railroad town steals the heart of many a visitor with its old brick buildings, unpretentious vibe and fun-loving spirit. A handful of cafes and bars offer food, drink and late-night dancing, and the old Murray Hotel is an interesting spot to spend the night. History buffs will enjoy the Yellowstone Gateway Museum, and downhill skiers will find their thrills at Bridger Bowl Ski Area, which is just 30 miles away in Bozeman.

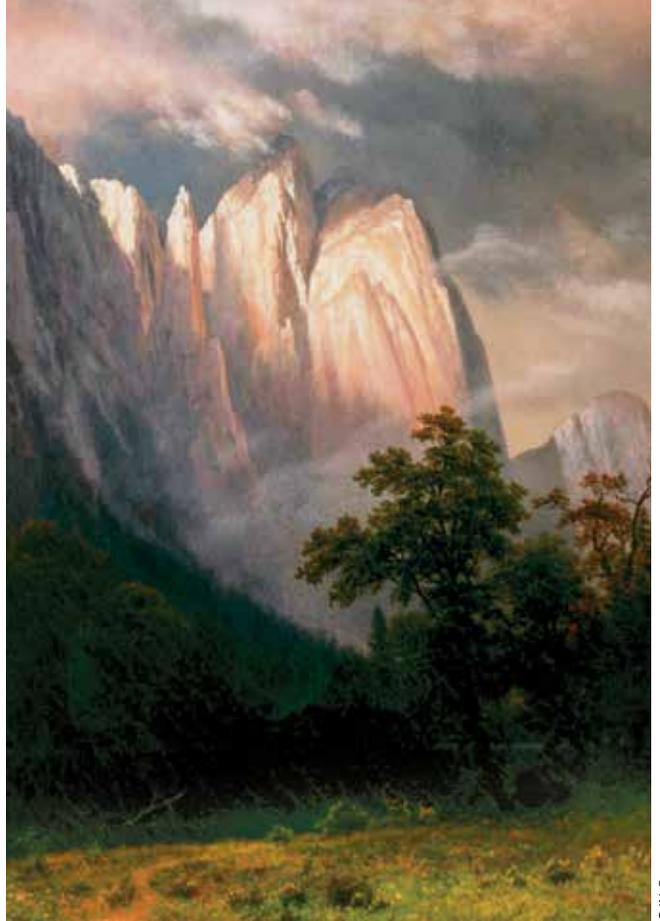
**In this divisive political era,
is it possible for the Park Service to
support contemporary art that
grapples with hot-button issues from
immigration to climate change?**

**At these parks,
the answer is yes.**

'HARSH IS TRUTH'

By Melanie D.G. Kaplan

"34,000 PILLOWS" by the art duo
Diaz Lewis at the "Home Land
Security" exhibit in San Francisco's
Presidio.



sculpture made of scissors at an old military base. Leaps and turns at a former detention center. Provocative words on the wall of a Colonial meeting house.

This is contemporary art at our national parks.

Artists have found inspiration in the country's parks and wild places since before the U.S. established its first national park in 1872. The depictions of the American West by Hudson River School painters and by photographers such as Carleton Watkins and Ansel Adams helped define the landscape, contributed to the formation and growth of the conservation movement, and played a significant role in the creation of new parks.

The relationship has long been reciprocal: The National Park Service has displayed art in public spaces, commissioned works and cultivated artists. Last year, the agency offered about 60 artist-in-residence programs across the country for painters, sculptors, dancers, potters, videographers, writers, composers and photographers.

Some of the artists who have recently won residencies or shown their work in parks use familiar media: watercolors, oil paint, photographs. Others are departing from those sorts of traditional visual practices. They are incorporating surprising materials and art forms, showcasing provocative texts, grappling with weighty topics — from climate change to social justice — and unapologetically presenting their perspectives.

“In the last year, we’ve received so many more requests from artists all over the country to do things in parks,” said Charles Tracy, arts partnership specialist for the Park Service and superintendent of the New England National Scenic Trail. “I think a

lot of it may be in response to the political climate. Artists feel like it’s even more important to work in these nationally significant public spaces.”

Some park managers do, too. A growing number understand the value of art in advancing civic dialogue and engagement, Tracy said, and are breaking with tradition and looking beyond plain air painting and landscape photography. Because the Park Service doesn’t have a centralized system of artist residencies or exhibit opportunities, Tracy handles requests on an individual basis, working with funders, artists and parks.

Linda Cook, superintendent at Weir Farm National Historic Site in Connecticut, which is dedicated to American impressionist painting, is the Park Service’s de facto arts superintendent, keeping track of arts programs across the country and promoting arts activities. “Sometimes artists will tackle issues in the parks that don’t fall within our purview,” she said. “They add to the interpretation that parks can provide. We usually engage visitors in words and text, but art is often a far more personal connection.”

From coast to coast and at sites as varied as a historic military park and a remote fire lookout, contemporary art projects at national park sites are touching on political themes, provoking conversations and drawing crowds. Read about five recent works on the following pages.

ALBERT BIERSTADT'S 1870 oil painting “Cathedral Rocks, Yosemite” (above). Right: Artist Do Ho Suh used stainless steel military dog tags to construct “Some/One.” The piece was part of “Home Land Security,” a 2016 exhibit of contemporary works by 18 artists and collectives from around the world.

HOME LAND SECURITY

Several years ago, curator Cheryl Haines traveled to Iran to visit an artist. When she returned and began describing the experience to friends and colleagues, she was struck by the questions they posed. “Were you afraid?” people asked. “Were you in danger?” It seemed to her that the questions stemmed from a fundamental misunderstanding.

“Even the most well-educated and seemingly sophisticated people in our community don’t really have an understanding of different cultures,” said Haines, executive director of the FOR-SITE Foundation, a Bay Area arts nonprofit. It was this sentiment, combined with the U.S. political climate and conversations about barriers between nations and people, that inspired “Home Land Security.” The 2016 exhibition showcased contemporary works by 18 artists and collectives from around the world in former military structures in the Presidio of San Francisco, which is part of Golden Gate National Recreation Area. The works, including sculpture, video, painting and performance art, explored the theme of national security, challenging visitors to consider the physical and psychological borders people create, protect and cross. Haines, who previously had curated a popular show on

Alcatraz Island of work by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, collaborated with the Park Service, the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy and the Presidio Trust on the exhibition.

Haines said the large number of artists and compelling physical space — the military bunkers and other buildings hadn’t previously been open to the public — presented an enormous but interesting curatorial challenge. Each artist was carefully selected, she said, “to illuminate the social and national history of a place and bring it alive with their artistic voice.”

“Home Land Security” opened a few months after the Brexit vote and ran through the U.S. presidential election. In the chilling installation, “2487,” the artist, Luz Maria Sanchez, reads the names of the 2,487 people known to have lost their lives crossing the U.S.-Mexico border between 1993 and 2006. Other works included “Some/One,” a larger-than-life suit of armor that Do Ho Suh crafted out of thousands of military identification tags representing individual soldiers; “Encirclement,” Michele Pred’s sculpture made of objects confiscated by the Transportation Security Administration such as scissors, pocket knives and lighters; and “34,000 Pillows,” which two artists collectively known as Diaz Lewis created in response to the congressional mandate



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© ROBBIE SWEENEY (2)

JOHNNY NGUYEN, in foreground, and Eric Koziol (photo at left) and Lynn Huang (bottom) perform “Within These Walls” by Lenora Lee Dance on Angel Island.

that every day, Immigration and Customs Enforcement fill 34,000 beds in their facilities with immigrant detainees. More than 200 visitors participated in pillow-making.

Building on the success of the exhibit, the Presidio Trust followed up with “Exclusion: The Presidio’s Role in World War II Japanese American Incarceration,” in 2017. Running until next spring, the show opened 75 years after the signing of the 108

civilian exclusion orders, which forced Japanese Americans from areas of the West Coast and held them in incarceration camps during the war. “Exclusion” invites visitors to explore the decisions — ostensibly in the name of national security — that led to these orders, which were signed at the Presidio. One installation shows the names of all 120,000 detainees.

Visitors learn how some Americans spoke against the incarceration, but most were silent. Stations throughout the exhibit encourage people to leave notes about free speech and about the tension between national security and civil liberties. To date, more than 2,000 visitors have left comments, which are on display.

“My grandfather was interned at Manzanar, and through his experience he never stopped fighting for his rights and was a big social justice advocate,” one visitor wrote. “Finding his name on the wall behind me made me feel a responsibility to others who don’t have a voice, and to stand up and make my voice heard.”

WITHIN THESE WALLS

Between 1922 and 1940, three of Lenora Lee’s grandparents immigrated to the United States from China and were processed on Angel Island in the San Francisco Bay. Their experiences — and those of the estimated 170,000 Chinese who, along with many others, were interrogated and detained on the island in the first part of the 20th century — inspired Lee’s most recent work. “Within These Walls,” an immersive, multimedia performance by her company, Lenora Lee Dance, premiered last September at the Angel Island Immigration Station. The show marked an ignominious date: the 135th anniversary of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the first federal law preventing a specific ethnic group from immigrating to the U.S.

“I feel like performance is an opportunity to speak,” said Lee, who has been using dance to reflect on the experience of Chinese Americans and other Asian Americans in the San Francisco area for 20 years. “Because of what’s going on politically now, this is an opportunity to engage in that conversation in a creative way, to share from an inside perspective how families were torn apart.”

Now part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, Angel Island Immigration Station had been slated for demolition until the discovery of 200 Chinese poems — about heartache, longing and freedom — on the walls of the barracks, where some people were detained for months. Visitors reach the island by ferry, then walk or take a shuttle to the station, a journey Lee described as a kind of “pilgrimage” that set the stage for “Within These Walls.” She created the performance to reflect daily life at the station, with 14 dancers and unsuspecting audience members playing the roles of new detainees. When people arrived for each performance, two cast members addressed everyone, including fellow

dancers, as though it were 1927. “I’m sure you’ve all been anxiously awaiting your arrival here after your long journey by boat,” said Eric Koziol, who played the inspector.

Audiences traveled through a labyrinth of rooms in the two-story barracks as the dancers moved around them, original music played, and video was projected on the walls. During the 65-minute performance, Lee wore a headset and directed complex, simultaneous scenes in a variety of settings including shower rooms, interrogation areas, dormitories, the office and the beach. The dances are based on real accounts. One, for example, showed an invasive medical examination; another

depicted a mess hall riot. Audience members were so drawn into the performances that some reflexively reached out to comfort dancers (some of whom are dealing with their own immigration issues today).

Lee began working with the Park Service to showcase her large-scale dance pieces in 2015, with a performance about veterans called “Fire of Freedom” at Fort Mason, the Golden Gate National Recreation Area headquarters. The next year, she worked with longtime collaborator and composer Francis Wong of San Francisco-based Asian Improv aRts to premiere “Double Victory” at Fort Point National Historic Site in San Francisco. That live performance, commissioned by the Park Service and the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, honored Chinese Americans who fought for the U.S. in World War II, despite racist treatment at home.

“Within These Walls,” which ran for two weeks and will return with a sequel in 2019, is Lee’s most complex work to date. After the performances, she talked about the Exclusion Act and connected it to present-day immigration issues. Some audience members came out of the performance crying or angry.

Matthew Spangler, professor of performance studies at San Jose State University, described the performance as moving and beautifully rendered. “And, of course, so timely given the global dialogue around immigration,” he said. “I was there with my 7-year-old son, and the piece made a big impression on him.”

“WE USUALLY ENGAGE VISITORS IN WORDS AND TEXT, BUT ART IS OFTEN A FAR MORE PERSONAL CONNECTION.”



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POET XOCHITL-JULISA BERMEJO, the first participant in the Poets in the Park program, was an artist-in-residence at Gettysburg National Military Park in 2017 (left). Right: Artists Shawn Skabelund and Kathleen Brennan created “The Edge Effect: re-Imagining the East Jemez Landscape” inside the historic fire lookout at Bandelier National Monument.

in this Civil War place, having to look at Confederate flags and monuments every day?” she said. “Just being there was its own form of resistance.”

Her discomfort ended up fueling the creative process. She learned that the Mexican-American War was a catalyst for the Civil War, which made her feel connected to this park’s history. Every day, she wrote poetry and walked the battlefield at sunset. The poetry inspired by her residency will explore heroism — especially as it relates to Mexican Americans. “I’m tired of people from my community feeling like outsiders when we have hundreds of years of history here,” she said. “The president likes to say Mexicans are murderers and rapists and drug lords. I’m trying to bring out other images.”

THE EDGE EFFECT

At a time when skepticism about climate change is widespread, it’s more important than ever that federal, state, local and tribal agencies gather scientific research and work together, said installation artist Shawn Skabelund. That’s the persistent message in a piece of art that he and photographer Kathleen Brennan created inside a historic fire lookout at New Mexico’s Bandelier National Monument. “The Edge Effect: re-Imagining the East Jemez Landscape,” which was on view from late April through early May, was inspired by the devastating wildfires in the Jemez Mountains over the last 40 years.

Skabelund said climate change, fire suppression, livestock overgrazing (which affects vegetation and alters the path of wildfire) and other human activities have contributed to fires that have drastically changed the landscape and the fabric of the local communities. The artwork featured an abstract map showing the geographic topography and watersheds surrounding the park. Skabelund also created a “vortex form” with 192 pieces of filament. He explained that the fishing line ran from an old circular fire spotter — an instrument used to find the coordinates of a fire — to the ceiling, symbolizing the boundaries that have fractured the

landscape.

“Our piece is all about the lines,” Skabelund said, “and a landscape that through time has been demarcated with lines and boundaries. Because of all these boundaries, we no longer have

Lee said witnessing some of the scenes can be intense for members of the audience. “People were put in situations where they feel how real these experiences are,” she said. “We can hear the news about immigrant experiences, but to see it in front of you is really powerful.”

A POET IN THE PARK

Last autumn, Chicana poet and activist Xochitl-Julisa Bermejo, who said a national park residency was on her “writerly bucket list,” became the first participant in the Poets in the Park program at Gettysburg National Military Park.

“In her application, she approached poetry with empathy and feelings that related both to Gettysburg and our current time,” said Tanya Ortega, who heads the National Parks Arts Foundation, the nonprofit that works with the Poetry Foundation to fund the residency. “She wrote about giving a voice to underserved populations.”

Los Angeles-based Bermejo, who calls John Muir a hero and whose first book of poetry focused on borders, said she approached her three-week stint in Pennsylvania as a way to shake off the malaise and shock she was experiencing as a result of the political climate. Encouraged by park staff, she initially planned to explore what she described as “the deep sense of melancholia that has taken over our collective American psyche since the last presidential election.” But she switched course once she began exploring the park. Other visitors looked at her suspiciously, and she saw how her presence — a Mexican American woman walking alone in a park she described as “very white” — was controversial in itself. “My first few days, I was like, ‘What am I doing here, a woman of color

“WHAT AM I DOING HERE, A WOMAN OF COLOR IN THIS CIVIL WAR PLACE, HAVING TO LOOK AT CONFEDERATE FLAGS AND MONUMENTS EVERY DAY?”



© MINESH BACRANIA

a community that’s concerned with the environment as a whole. Yet fire knows no boundaries.”

Skabelund was an artist-in-residence at Bandelier in 2015, and Jeremy Sweat, the park’s chief of resource management, invited him back after hearing about “Fires of Change,” an exhibition Skabelund curated at the Coconino Center for the Arts in Flagstaff, Arizona. Sweat described the collaboration as a new type of residency — one that uses art to tell stories and to bring more people, including those who aren’t especially science-oriented, into the conversation. “These are their lands, and we manage them on their behalf,” he said. “If the art is a little edgy or makes them a little uncomfortable, that’s a good thing.” (Sweat emphasized that staff selected Skabelund because of his experience working on “Fires of Change” and that hosting the artist was not an endorsement of his political views or other activities.)

Skabelund began displaying his art at national parks in 2012, thanks to an arts residency coordinator at Grand Canyon National Park who took a risk in supporting his overtly political work. He created an installation that addressed uranium mining within the park, an issue he’s even more concerned about today, in light

of the current administration’s push to allow uranium mining in areas adjacent to the park.

Skabelund’s views (for example, he’s outraged about President Donald Trump’s decision to shrink Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monuments) sometimes make it difficult to find homes for his art. “I think most parks play it way too safe,” he said. “I find it challenging as a conceptual, political and social artist to find parks accepting of this type of work.”

TALKING TRUTH

The voice of Frederick Douglass rang through a cavernous, nearly 300-year-old meeting house in Boston last year. “If there is no struggle,” he said in a recording of an 1857 speech, “there is no progress.” As the famous abolitionist, orator and social reformer spoke, his words were projected on a two-story wall, and musicians played the marimba and mbira, an African thumb piano.

The performance was part of “Harsh is Truth,” a sound and video projection installation created by Masary Studios, a trio of Boston artists. The name of the work, which explored the definition of “truth,” was inspired by William Lloyd Garrison’s promise



© MASARY STUDIOS

MASARY STUDIOS, a trio of Boston artists, created the installation, “Harsh is Truth,” at the Old South Meeting House, a site along the Freedom Trail in Boston National Historical Park.

to be “harsh as truth” in *The Liberator*, the abolitionist paper he edited. The artists presented the piece at the Old South Meeting House, a site along the Freedom Trail in Boston National Historical Park.

“We were commissioned to create art and not censor ourselves,” said composer and percussionist Maria Finkelmeier. “We were allowed to be controversial, and that’s very powerful.”

After the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville last summer and counter-protests in Boston, Finkelmeier recorded pedestrians at Boston’s Faneuil Hall talking about how to define truth, and whether there should be a limit to free speech. “It was a difficult project because we were trying to give a lot of people a voice, and it’s a politically charged environment,” she said.

The heart of the installation was a 40-minute piece of original music and site-specific animation that supported the pedestrian recordings and the words of Douglass, Jesse Jackson, and poet and musician Gil Scott-Heron, which were simultaneously performed and projected onto the wall. The location was carefully

chosen: The meeting house has served as a space to protest and debate since colonists demonstrated against the tea tax and abolitionists debated slave owners.

Commissioned by “Art on the Trails to Freedom,” the piece was a collaborative effort between the Park Service and New England Foundation for the Arts, a Boston-based arts organization. Charles Tracy, the arts specialist, said he selected Masary because of the group’s experience creating site-specific work and willingness to take risks. “We challenged them to explore contemporary connections with the Freedom Trail’s history of civic discourse, dissent, resistance and revolution,” he said.

Finkelmeier encountered some pushback from pedestrians she interviewed, who questioned the purpose of the recordings, but she feels strongly that art can play a critical role in the debate about truth. “In this administration, where people don’t always converse, using art and human connection is really important,” she said. “We have to keep creating.”

MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN is a Washington, D.C.-based writer. She last wrote for the magazine about a group of Cherokee who biked the Trail of Tears.

HISTORIC TRAVEL DESTINATIONS



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Courtesy Tombras Group

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VERN TEJAS PAPERS: ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, CONSORTIUM LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA ANCHORAGE

VERN TEJAS, who in 1988 was the first person to successfully climb Denali in the winter by himself, posed with the aluminum ladder he strapped around his waist to prevent falling into hidden crevasses.

It was 1988, and Tejas was attempting to become the first person to climb Denali, the highest mountain in North America, alone in the winter-time — and survive the ordeal.

Tejas knew that the greatest foe he faced was not the weather, although temperatures hovered at 40 to 50 degrees below zero. Nor was it the terrain, although the ice was crisscrossed with crevasses that could swallow a climber. It was fear: Four years earlier, renowned Japanese adventurer Naomi Uemura had made it to the summit of Denali only to disappear without a trace on the way down.

As the snowstorm raged outside his cave, Tejas would slice the darkness into one-hour blocks. He would exercise for an hour, stretching his arms and legs in the cramped space. Then he would listen to his radio, repair his gear or heat a pouch of stew.

Lying on his back, Tejas would hopscotch raisins across the floor of the cave, perfecting a one-man strategy game. And he would think.

“Being alone is something most of us never get to experience,” said Tejas, speaking recently by phone from Argentina, where he was taking a break after leading a mountain expedition. “There’s always TV or music playing. Being alone in Denali in winter gave me the luxury of getting to know myself. I felt like I was the last person on Earth, and I discovered I was a pretty good person.”

Tejas had felt compelled to climb the mountain since the first time he had spotted the peak, some 15 years before his solo winter ascent. On a summer trip, he and a friend drove within sight of what was then called Mount McKinley. (The Department of the Interior renamed it Denali, which means

A Ladder to the Top

Thirty years ago, Vern Tejas overcame extreme cold and other dangers to become the first person to survive a winter solo ascent of Denali.

WHEN STORMS THREATENED — as they did every few days — Vern Tejas would burrow into the snow, building a cave just large enough for himself and his gear. In the dark, he would practice the harmonica, the notes blending with the sound of wind whirling across the mountain.

“the High One” in the native Koyukon language, in 2015. It is part of Denali National Park.) As the two gazed up at the peak, the sky lightened, the clouds skidded away and the 20,310-foot-tall mountain revealed itself, resplendent in purple and gold and peach.

“We were just overwhelmed by the beauty,” he recalled.

Born in Oregon, Tejas moved to the Gulf Coast of Texas as a small child. He rarely saw a hill, let alone a mountain, but when he was 12, he joined a Boy Scout trip to a mountain range in New Mexico. He scrambled ahead of the other campers and group leaders to reach the summit first. He fell in love with climbing at that moment. Seven years later, he moved to Alaska.

Tejas apprenticed himself to veteran climbers, studying how snow and wind moved across the mountains. After five years of scaling smaller peaks, Tejas ascended Denali for the first time with a group. For the next decade, he climbed every mountain he could, joining teams in the Alaska Range, the Andes and Canada. He was part of teams that made the first winter climbs of Mount Hunter, a peak in Denali National Park, and Canada’s Mount Logan, the second-highest peak in North America. He led many tours of Denali, getting to know the mountain’s moods and idiosyncrasies.

A few weeks before his 35th birthday, Tejas set off on his solo climb. The mountain’s intense cold, unpredictable storms and treacherous terrain made it exceedingly difficult to climb, even as part of a group, and the memory of Uemura’s death was still fresh in the minds of the members of the climbing community.

“We thought that if anyone could do it, he would be the one,” said Roger Robinson, a longtime mountaineering ranger at Denali. “The key to climbing

“We thought that if anyone could do it, he would be the one.”

Denali is patience, and Vern knew how to set his head that way.”

Tejas drew up plans for each hazard he would encounter on the journey. He strapped a 16-foot extension ladder around his waist, which he hoped would catch him if he stepped into a hidden crevasse. He chose his clothes carefully: Wearing too few layers could lead to hypothermia, but so could wearing too many layers, since trapped sweat would become icy after he stopped for the night.

“Solo climbing is much more intense,” he said. “You have no backup. Everything you do could be the difference between life and death.”

Tejas settled into a daily ritual. He’d wake at dawn, heat some granola and hot cocoa for breakfast, strap on his skis, and move as quickly as safety allowed. Daylight lasted for about eight hours when he set off in mid-February, and about an hour before sunset, Tejas would begin to dig his shelter for the night. Insulated by snow, the temperature inside would reach a comparatively balmy 28 degrees.

Tejas packed food for 16 days, but the frequent storms slowed him down, and as he approached the summit, his food supply was running low. Then, as he dug his cave one night, he discovered a bag crammed with packages of sweet and sour pork that had been left by an earlier expedition.

He reached the summit on March 7 but had little time to spend at the top. He planted and photographed a Japanese flag in homage to Uemura, took a few more photos and began his descent as a whiteout swirled around him.

On the 27th day, Tejas made it back to base camp, where a pilot picked him up and flew him to the small town of Talkeetna. Robinson remembers seeing Tejas step off the plane. “He looked weathered,” Robinson said. “You could tell it had taken a toll on him, but he was very cheery.”

Afterward, Tejas received invitations to join expeditions around the globe. In 2010, he set a world record for the shortest time (134 days) to climb the highest points on each continent. He has now ascended the so-called Seven Summits 10 times.

Tejas, often guiding jointly with his wife, Carole, continues to lead climbs around the world through his company, Alpine Ascents. Now 65, he returns to Denali nearly every year and so far, has climbed it 58 times. Still, the memory of his return from that 1988 climb stands alone.

After arriving in Anchorage, he gorged himself at an all-you-can-eat buffet and attended an Irish dance in honor of St. Patrick’s Day. Halfway through the evening, the emcee invited Tejas onstage and presented him with a traditional Irish drum in celebration of his achievement. The crowd jumped to their feet and applauded.

“It was such an emotional experience to go from being totally alone to 500 people clapping for me,” Tejas recalled. “It was so overwhelming. That was years ago, but I’m choking up thinking about it.” **NP**

JULIE SCHARPER is a freelance journalist and journalism professor in Baltimore.



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PRESIDENT THEODORE ROOSEVELT, Yellowstone National Park, 1903.

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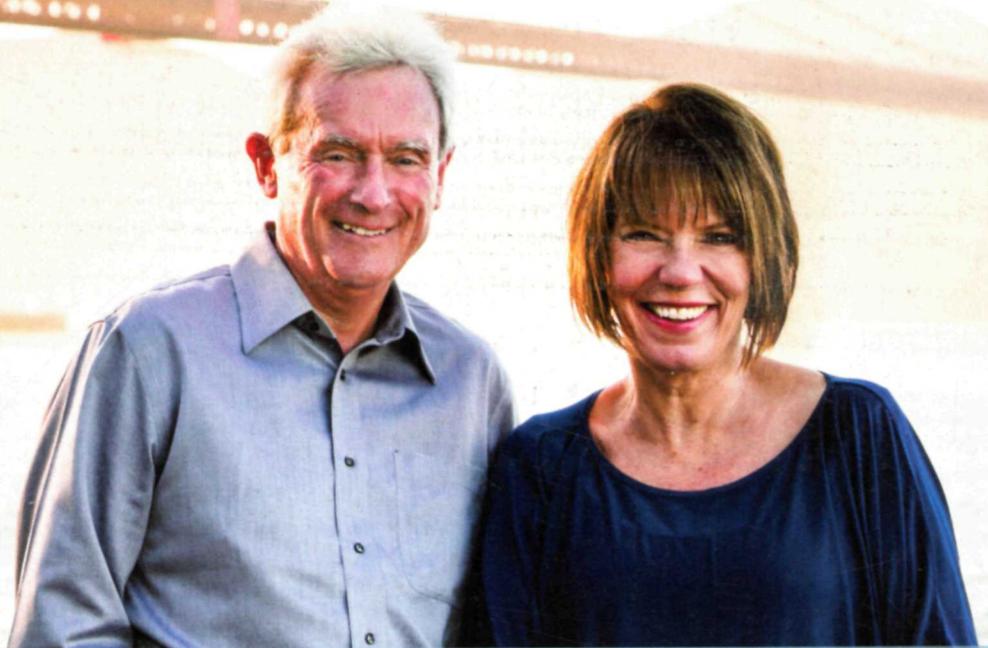
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