

NationalParks



SUMMER 2026

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THE MAGAZINE OF THE NATIONAL PARKS CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

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IN MAINE

A BROOKLYNITE IN
THE DESERT

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BRAVE ESCAPE

NationalParks

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TEN SIGNS about Indigenous history and climate change were removed from Acadia National Park last fall. A group called Save Our Signs is fighting back.



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Being There



©STEVE BROY

In my last letter, I shared my gratitude and excitement about my new role leading this incredible organization. Since then, it's been a whirlwind working with my NPCA colleagues, our partners and our allies on Capitol Hill to protect our beloved parks.

I recently completed the first leg of a listening and learning tour that will eventually take me to all of NPCA's regions. My first park visit as a staffer was to Florida's Big

Cypress National Preserve, a captivating place with egrets and herons, panthers and bears, ghost orchids and cypress domes — not to mention alligators. I encountered more of the reptiles in that one day than I had seen in my entire life.

But just as moving were the people I met and the stories I heard there: the struggles of seasonal rangers who remain passionate about their work even as an unprecedented staffing crisis at the National Park Service undermines morale. The perspective of Talbert Cypress, chairman of the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida, who spoke about his Tribal Nation's relationship with the land. The ongoing tug-of-war between those of us protecting a priceless landscape and those seeking to extract the oil and gas beneath it.

I was inspired, too, by my visit to Mission San Juan (part of San Antonio Missions National Historical Park in Texas), where I was welcomed by members of the San Antonio Mission Indian Descendants. Their deep connection to that place was formed long before the creation of the United States. For them, the missions are not just a globally important park site; they are the living, beating heart of their community, where the rites and rituals of their lives, from weddings to quinceañeras to funerals, say to the world, "We're still here."

I've loved and explored our parks since I was a teenager, and the recent trips reminded me that there is always more that these places can teach us. I returned home with a newfound appreciation for what we are working so hard to protect.

On the eve of America's 250th birthday, our mission is more important than ever. That's why so many of us are speaking up and speaking out for a park system that is fully staffed and resourced, honors history and science, and represents the best of America. Thank you, as always, for standing with us.

Onward,
Tiernan Sittenfeld

NationalParks



COLD DIPPING on Mount Desert Island in Maine.

Art Matters

We had the opportunity to work closely with three extraordinary artists on this issue. Cody Cobb, the photographer responsible for the cover photo, began experimenting with using ultraviolet light several years ago. After Senior Editor Nicolas Brulliard stumbled across some of the ghostly, glowing images in Cobb's "Spectral" series, he shared them with the magazine team, and we were immediately enthralled. Brulliard accompanied Cobb on a nighttime trip to Rocky Mountain National Park to see firsthand how Cobb elicits the natural fluorescence in everything from lichens to rocks to puddles. A gallery of Cobb's photographs from national parks (along with Brulliard's description of his method) begins on p. 40.

We were honored to collaborate again with Keith Henry Brown, who created a comic strip about his first experience in the desert (p. 34). This piece started with a conversation Brown and I had about a trip he took to Joshua Tree National Park. I loved hearing about how awed he was — and about the beginner's eyes a confirmed urbanite brought to the desert. It was a pleasure watching him use pencil, ink and digital tools to transform his story into gorgeous illustrations.

And finally, Katherine Emery delighted us with the photos she took to accompany Melanie D.G. Kaplan's story about an intrepid group of cold dippers (p. 24). Emery joined the women before sunrise and spent the day taking photos at three different spots in and around Acadia National Park. (She brought a bathing suit so she could shoot from the water if needed, she told me on the phone, but stuck to wearing snowpants and waterproof boots for wading.) The magazine staff had the best time sorting through Emery's images, which so deftly capture the dippers' camaraderie, spirit and joy.

I've been known to be unambitious when it comes to cold water, but after reading the dipping story and seeing the photos, I worked up the nerve to cold plunge myself (indoors — not in Acadia, alas!). I can attest — this piece is truly inspiring.

Rona Marech
NPMAG@NPCA.ORG

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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 for 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

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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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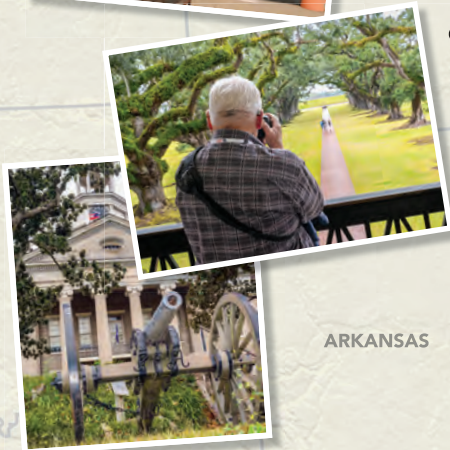
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FLYING COLORS

It's tough sometimes to find long-form articles that are both edifying and entertaining to read, but Michael Branch's "In the Sacred Grove" came across with flying colors. What struck me most was the section where Delaine Spilsbury reminisces among the trees. Branch let her carry the weight of the story on her own terms: her humor, her silences, her choice to finally share something her community had long kept private. Spending that time in the grove and learning about the painful history of the massacres at Bahsahwahbee was incredibly powerful.

The other thing that grabbed me was the moment where she explains the belief that the swamp cedars embody her ancestors' spirits; that reframed everything. The trees went from being a fascinating ecological element to something deeply personal and sacred, and I felt the gravity of what it would mean to lose them.

I also appreciated how Branch built the piece so that by the time he broaches the massacres, the reader is already invested in Bahsahwahbee. Its water, its trees, its role in Newe life for millenia. This made the violence land harder, and it made the conservation fight feel urgent rather than abstract.

JAKE WOHLKE

Sheboygan, WI

A CHANGED LIFE

I especially appreciated "A Fort's Tale" in the spring issue. As a participant in that civil rights campaign, I would like to add my own perspective.

In the spring of 1964, I was sitting in the Yale Divinity School cafeteria when the campus minister bounded into the

room, leapt onto a vacant table and shouted for attention. He'd received a phone call from his friend, Dr. Robert Hayling, a Black dentist in St. Augustine, who urged him to send students to the city to participate in the civil rights campaign there. Hayling believed having white students from the North dressed in suits and ties marching shoulder to shoulder with the local Black youth would draw national attention.

By that evening, I was driving south on I-95 with three Yale friends, including a Black seminarian from Bermuda, who had never experienced U.S. racism. We had been counseled to douse our headlights and approach the city on unpaved back roads, since Northern license plates would raise suspicions with the local police. When we arrived at Hayling's office, the air was hot and heavy, and the six large men inside wore holsters beneath their suit coats. They assured us that the weapons were for the defense of their families and then identified themselves as our trainers in organized civil disobedience.

This was the beginning of two weeks that changed my life. I went door to door in the Black community, discussing the importance of voting. I participated in multiple sit-ins at the local Woolworth's lunch counter and was dragged out, poked with electric cattle prods, put upon by police dogs and spent many days in the county jail. We heard from inside the jail about the arrival of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. The National Council of Churches finally provided bail, which allowed us to head back North without jeopardizing our seminary degrees.

VICTOR P. EHLY

Uncasville, CT

VIRTUAL REALITY

"Hawaii Dreaming" by Matt Brass is one of the best magazine articles I have ever seen. That feature alone should win National Parks magazine some prizes. The short but beautiful multimedia work made me feel like I was in Hawaii in a way photographs paired with text couldn't. Since I am unlikely to ever get to Hawaii, I thank Brass.

CAROL GICKER

Nevada City, CA

ART VS. CRIME

As a retired national park ranger, I'd like to share that carving trees in a national park site is a criminal offense, as is leaving graffiti ["What the Trees Tell Us"]. There is a point in time, however, when such defacing becomes art or artifact. It is interesting to learn of the shepherds who made the carvings at Valles Caldera. It wasn't illegal when they made them.

EARL HIGGINS

River Ridge, LA



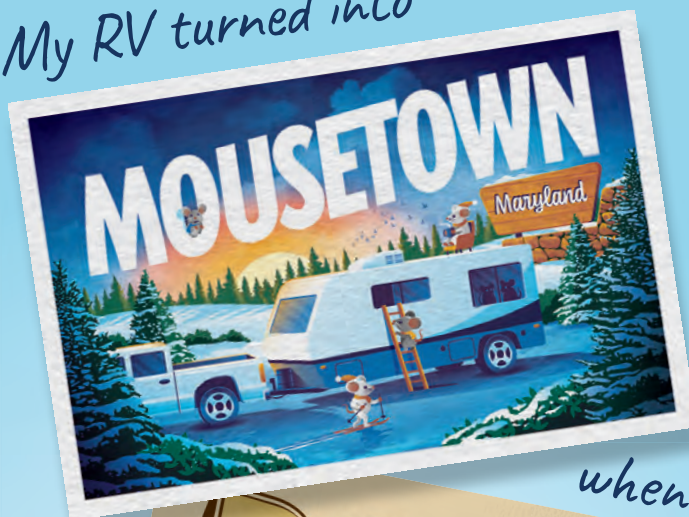
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"When we're approaching America's 250th birthday this year ... what does it mean to take care of the places that we said we were going to protect?"

Cary Dupuy, NPCA's Texas regional director, speaking to The Washington Post about the importance of keeping border walls out of national parks. This spring, NPCA learned of plans to construct additional wall sections along the U.S.-Mexico border, including in Big Bend National Park. Such a barrier would sever wildlife migration corridors, would lead to more intense flooding and could impact recreation access. The Trump administration has not been transparent about its ever-changing plans, and NPCA will continue to monitor the situation and speak up for all parks along the border.

"We support efforts to modernize and repair park infrastructure, but not when it's paired with massive cuts to Park Service operations."

NPCA Senior Director of Budget and Appropriations John Garder outlining the organization's concerns with President Trump's proposed fiscal year 2027 budget in The Independent. The budget, released in April, slashes more than 25% from Park Service operations, while advancing a \$10 billion fund that prioritizes projects around Washington, D.C.

"Mojave National Preserve belongs to the American people, not an international mining company."

Chance Wilcox, who directs NPCA's California desert program, talking to the Los Angeles Times about the Colosseum Mine, which was decommissioned in 1993 but restarted operations on national park lands in 2021 without Park Service authorization. Last year, the Department of the Interior reversed course, greenlighting the project. NPCA, represented by Earthjustice, filed a lawsuit in April challenging the decision.



RESERVATION LIMBO

In recent years, reservations at some of the most popular national parks have helped reduce overcrowding, protect park resources and improve the experience of visitors — a win-win-win solution, in other words. This summer, timed-entry reservations remain necessary to enter Rocky Mountain National Park — and other parks require reservations for busy areas, such as the road leading to the summit of Cadillac Mountain in Acadia National Park. But unfortunately, the administration decided to do away with reservation systems at Arches, Glacier, Mount Rainier and Yosemite national parks at a time when the Park Service is already reeling from substantial budgeting and staffing cuts. Here is what parkgoers can expect at these four parks during the summer season.

Arches

Feedback on Arches' reservation system, which the park debuted in 2022, was overwhelmingly positive. Eighty-four percent of respondents in a Utah State University survey said they favored such reservations, and the park said the program reduced congestion and helped ensure that visitors could actually get inside the park. The administration said it aimed to expand access by dropping timed-entry requirements, but now visitors may not be able to get out of their cars because they can't find a place to park. "Interior Department leadership chose chaos over conservation, at the expense of millions of visitors to Arches," said Cassidy Jones, NPCA's senior visitation program manager.



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Glacier

The Going-to-the-Sun Road is both the park's main thoroughfare and one of its highlights, so traffic is often heavy, and parking lots along the road tend to fill up quickly. The park first put a reservation system in place in 2021 to alleviate these issues but dropped it this year while implementing much more modest measures such as shuttle reservations and a three-hour parking limit at Logan Pass. The park also canceled its reservation system in the North Fork area. Sarah Lundstrum, NPCA's senior Glacier program manager, said congestion could force park staff to focus on traffic mitigation at the expense of other important tasks and will likely sour visitors' experience. "Traffic, long lines, closed gates and blocked views can ruin a once-in-a-lifetime trip to Glacier," she said.

Mount Rainier

In 2024, the park, which has seen a 32% jump in visitation over the past decade, instituted a pilot project to see how timed-entry reservations could begin to address chronic congestion in the popular Paradise and Sunrise corridors. (The park said the program was paused at Paradise last year because of a construction project there.) The decision to drop the reservation system "couldn't come at a worse time," NPCA's Graham Taylor told The Seattle Times, pointing to the closure of a state-owned bridge near the park's northwestern entrance because of safety concerns. "More visitors are being funneled through fewer entrances, exacerbating the challenging conditions timed entry is designed to improve."



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Yosemite

As early as 1994, the park's then-superintendent warned that a reservation system might be needed to mitigate the impact of ever-increasing crowds. The park began rolling out summertime day-use reservations in 2020. In 2023, when the program was briefly on hold, some visitors reported waiting for hours to get past the entrance gate. NPCA's Mark Rose said parkgoers can expect more of the same this summer. Eliminating Yosemite's reservation system while understaffing the park "creates the perfect storm heading into the park's busy season, with massive overcrowding that puts iconic park resources at risk," he said.



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The Park Keepers

A grassroots effort spearheaded by Minnesota librarians and historians is putting the preservation of U.S. history in the public's hands.

Joey Jones loves national parks. Since 2014, when the Minneapolis hairstylist started adventuring in earnest, he and his husband have toured more than 35, from Gateway Arch to Everglades. They're the kind of visitors who pause to take pictures of park signs while hiking a trail or bagging a peak. They don't often read the information in the moment, Jones said, but when they're winding down later that day, they might pull out their phones and scroll through the images to learn about

the natural and cultural history of the public lands they just toured. He wasn't aware of another purpose for these photos until last summer when, in the midst of a haircut, a friend told him about a crowdsourcing effort to document national park signs.

The project was news to Jones — as was the impetus for it. A few months prior, President Donald Trump had issued an executive order titled "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History." Shortly thereafter,

the secretary of the interior issued a secretarial order of the same name. The orders ushered in a massive review of all park materials to ferret out any that "inappropriately disparage" Americans or that "fail to emphasize the beauty, grandeur and abundance of landscapes and other natural features."

Fearing this move was a presage of impending censorship, a cohort of Minnesota librarians and public historians teamed up to create Save Our Signs, a website that launched on July 3. They extended an open invitation to park visitors to submit snapshots of waysides, exhibits and panels from Park Service lands, with the goal of assembling as complete an archive of signs as possible. As SOS gained momentum, the founders' concern proved warranted: By fall, news outlets were reporting the

removal of signs at multiple parks. (At least 58 signs about Native American history, climate change, plastic pollution, Japanese American incarceration during World War II, slavery and more had disappeared across the country as of press time, though a judge's order prompted the return of some in Philadelphia.)

"I just thought that the national parks were there, and they were going to be safe, and they were always going to be safe," Jones said. "It's wild to me that we live in a time where people are trying to erase information." Inspired to act, he went home and scoured the images stored on his computer. He compared what he had collected to gaps in the budding SOS archive and began uploading. All told, he estimates he submitted pictures from 15 or 20 park sites.

Kirsten Delegard, the friend who informed Jones about SOS, is a co-founder of the initiative and the director of the University of Minnesota's Mapping Prejudice project. She views the administration's censorship of Park Service materials as a reaction to the agency's earlier efforts to expand the breadth and depth of its storytelling. "It's an attempt to turn back the clock on all of this very careful community work to really have deep conversations about what stories are our parks telling," she said. Delegard, who likes to joke that she raised her two kids in a tent in the parks, also believes the recent targeting of the Park Service underscores the value of the agency. "Probably more people learn about history in the national parks than they do in any classroom, in any school across the country, at any level," Delegard said. "If you want to control the way people understand the birth and development of this country, focus on the national parks."

The Park Service hasn't been the only agency to bear the brunt of a revisionist agenda. Jenny McBurney,

the government publications librarian at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, had been tracking undocumented changes to federal websites for a few months when she started pulling colleagues together to form SOS. "Data was being edited, oftentimes without mentioning that in the change logs," she said. "That's a big no-no in terms of data management." As she and others grappled with the problem, they realized the degree to which parks serve as information hubs because "they're kind of everywhere."

This is taxpayer-funded material, said Molly Blake, social sciences librarian at the University of Minnesota. "This really belongs to everybody." The SOS co-founder hopes the project inspires lesson plans, prompts conversations and — ultimately — leads to the restoration of removed resources. "We're not asking you to pass judgment

on the signs," she said. "You might read a sign and think, 'Actually, this should be added to it.' That's great. We want you to engage with it."

So far, park visitors have documented nearly 15,000 signs at hundreds of parks across 50 states, four territories and the District of Columbia. Park advocates have submitted close to 200 pictures for Women's Rights National Historical Park, over 320 for San Antonio Missions National Historical Park and more than 440 for Independence National Historical Park, for instance. Each image has been reviewed by a cadre of SOS volunteers to prevent irrelevant material from slipping into the archive. (They rejected a cute bison photo as "out of scope," McBurney recalled, and jettison any pics of park visitors.)

With a click or a swipe, SOS website visitors can read about subalpine

THE SAVE OUR SIGNS archive includes nearly 15,000 visitor-submitted photos of park signs, including this one from Manzanar National Historic Site (below). American history is complicated, as visitors to Manzanar know all too well, but "people can handle it," said SOS co-founder Amelia Palacios. Opposite page: A visitor surveys the community's colorful response to the removal of a panel at the President's House in Philadelphia.



PHOTO FROM SAVEOURSIGNS.ORG

meadow restoration at Mount Rainier National Park, Indigenous history at Effigy Mounds National Monument, the “rigid military caste system” at Fort Scott National Historic Site and much more. Users can filter by park and zoom around a map to locate data gaps. The site also tracks the status of removed signs.

While the nature of the anonymous submission portal makes tabulating the number of SOS contributors difficult, the sheer size of the archive signals that the effort has touched a nerve. “What makes you want to know something more than someone telling you you can’t?” asked Anne Mitchell Whisnant, a public historian and the director of Duke University’s Graduate Liberal Studies.

The co-author of several national park publications, including a 2011 report on the state of history in the Park Service titled “Imperiled Promise,”

Whisnant spoke with me about a recent trip to Hopewell Culture National Historical Park in Ohio. She observed a couple asking a Park Service representative in the visitor center whether any written material had been removed or whether the staff had been pressured not to tell certain stories. “I bet that conversation is happening in visitor centers all over the country,” Whisnant said.

She’s taken about 100 photos for the archive already and hopes to document signage from the Blue Ridge Parkway in the coming months. “I always take images of park signs when I go. Like, who cares about the view?” she said. “So, this is kind of my jam.”

Whisnant draws inspiration from the coast-to-coast resistance the recent erasures have spurred. Artists in Maine painted vibrant signs to highlight missing climate and Indigenous

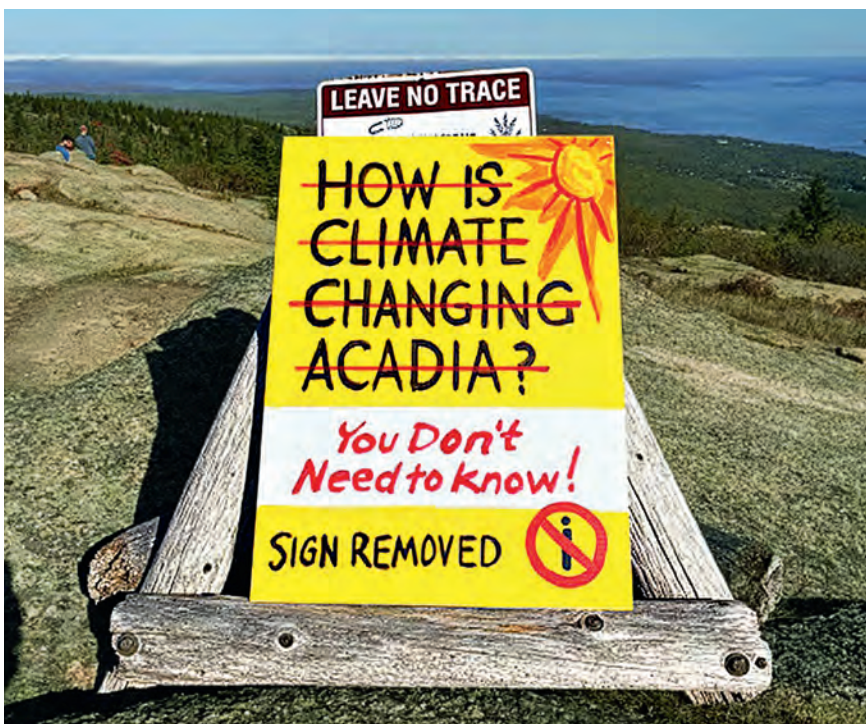
information at Acadia National Park. An eastern Sierra-based group posted a Facebook reel that followed one of its staff members as he toured Manzanar National Historic Site in January. Though he didn’t find any omitted or modified materials, he urged the public “to keep a watchful eye.” And in Philadelphia, the city took the administration to court when Park Service staff were forced to remove dozens of signs about the lives of enslaved people at the President’s House, part of Independence National Historical Park. (NPCA and a coalition of others, represented by Democracy Forward, filed a separate lawsuit to halt the erasure of science and history across the park system.) A federal judge demanded the restoration of the panels, but as park staff were complying with that order, the administration appealed the decision, and the exhibit remains in limbo. With a few signs rehung and many others still glaringly absent, community members have stepped in to fill the void.

On a sunny day this March, I gawked at the glue-marred gaps as visitors milled around. One person carried a binder full of printouts of the removed signs and happily answered questions or read off excerpts from the missing text. Just two days later, several blanks on the exhibit walls had been papered over with the prompt “add your voice” scrawled in the corner. A multitude had complied. “Presidents enslaved people,” read one note. “Democracy needs your courage,” read another.

“What power do we have in this moment?” Whisnant asked. Taking photos for SOS or scribbling your perspective at the President’s House “is public history at its best,” she said. “We are all the keepers of our national parks.”

—KATHERINE DEGROFF

ARTISTS PAINTED their own signs and staged them in Acadia National Park after 10 signs were removed from popular areas of the Maine park.



To learn more or submit images of your own, visit saveoursigns.org.

A Complicated Birthday

On the occasion of Stonewall National Monument's 10th anniversary, advocates celebrate — and pledge to keep fighting as the park faces one threat after another.

In June, New York City's Stonewall National Monument, the only site in the park system focused on LGBTQ history, will celebrate its 10th anniversary. If all goes according to plan, a sea of 250 rainbow flags will be erected on the fence that surrounds Christopher Park, a tiny parcel at the heart of the monument. A series of 27 posters that tell the story of the LGBTQ liberation movement will go up in windows of neighborhood shops. Those taking part in the city's Pride parade will go right past the monument and see a rainbow flag flying across the street from the famous bar where patrons fought back against a police raid in 1969, an uprising that changed the course of LGBTQ history.

Millions of people have visited the monument in its short life, and many walked away with “a deeper sense of our shared humanity,” as Timothy Leonard, NPCA's former Northeast program manager, put it. That's good reason to celebrate, yet this year's milestone is marked by an undercurrent of concern and anger because of recent events that have unfolded at the site.

After President Donald Trump issued an executive order related to gender identity in January 2025, all the trans flags at the park were taken down, and the words “transgender” and “queer” — along with the T and the Q in LGBTQ — were removed from the monument's website. Park rangers were instructed to avoid telling visitors about the role transgender activists played in the Stonewall uprising, Leonard said.

“The trans and the queer communities are central to the LGBTQ equality movement,” Leonard said. “This was

not the full story. It wasn't an inclusive history, and it became a problem, because when people visit park sites, that's what they're expecting.” (More than 70 House Democrats signed a letter to the National Park Service and the Department of the Interior calling for the reinstatement of content related to the transgender community, but nothing has changed yet.)

A year later, residents and park supporters were furious when the Interior Department issued a memorandum about what flags were allowed to fly at park sites and, as a result, Stonewall's pride flag was removed in the middle of the night. “It was a true affront to the community,” said Andre Becker, of the Christopher Park Alliance, which maintains the park gardens.

At one of several rallies, a rainbow flag was raised in the park in defiance of the guidance, and a coalition of groups sued for the right to display the flag. In April, that lawsuit ended in a settlement with the federal government, and an official rainbow flag now flies alongside a Park Service flag and a U.S. flag.

Not everyone is satisfied with the new arrangement, with the U.S. flag at the top, but “it's better than it was,” Becker said. Now “what still needs to be tackled,” he said, “is the erasure of the trans community ... and the rewriting of American history.”

His group is behind the 10th-anniversary posters. When they came up with the idea, they didn't know what, if anything, the Park Service would do



THE COMMUNITY was outraged when the original rainbow flag was removed from Stonewall National Monument. A lawsuit (followed by a settlement) led to the reinstatement of a rainbow flag — in a different position on the flagpole.

to celebrate the occasion, and “we just want the story to get out there,” he said. He wonders if outside groups will start offering their own free, uncensored tours of the monument if the erasure trend continues.

Leonard said these recent struggles only underscore how needed the site is. “There's never been a more important time to lift up the story of Stonewall,” he said, “and to take inspiration from it.”

—R.M.

You Know It When You See It

A superbloom comes
to Death Valley.

There isn't exactly a scientific definition of a "superbloom," which doesn't even appear in Merriam-Webster.

"If you find, like, a huge patch of flowers anywhere that fills your frame, that's kind of a superbloom," said Elliott McGucken, the landscape photographer responsible for this photo, who spent more than two weeks shooting in Death Valley National Park this spring. The general public tends to think superblooms entail seeing "hillsides of color solid with blooms," Jennette Jurado, a supervisory ranger at the park, said in an email. "People just want to see this amazing array of flowers," said Chance Wilcox, who directs NPCA's California desert program. "And if they want to call it a superbloom, call it a superbloom."

Well, a Death Valley superbloom it is, then! It's been 10 years since the right combination of weather conditions (rainfall at certain times, warm temperatures and a lack of harsh, drying winds) led to such an extraordinary explosion of color in the park. Visitors arrived in droves to see the swaths of shimmering gold, white and purple stretching across valley floors, slopes and washes.

"It does not feel real, and you most certainly do not feel like you're in the desert," said Wilcox, who was there in March, around the time blooms were peaking at the lower elevations. He was moved to overhear visitors breathlessly talk about the flowers. "They were experiencing all of Death Valley's magic, quirks and beauty," he said. "It was really spectacular listening to people fall in love with the place that I love so much."

—R.M.

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PARK STATS

2

Number of Emmy nominations for the ABC News segment "The Long Train Ride Home: Remembering Emmett Till 70 Years Later." The nine-minute film, which featured Till's cousin, the Rev. Wheeler Parker Jr., was spurred by a commemorative journey that NPCA coordinated with the Till family.

11

Number of years visitors had to wait to enter ice caves at Apostle Islands National Lakeshore. This February, the park reopened its ice caves for just one day when the ice shelf was stable enough for safe access.

2
MILES

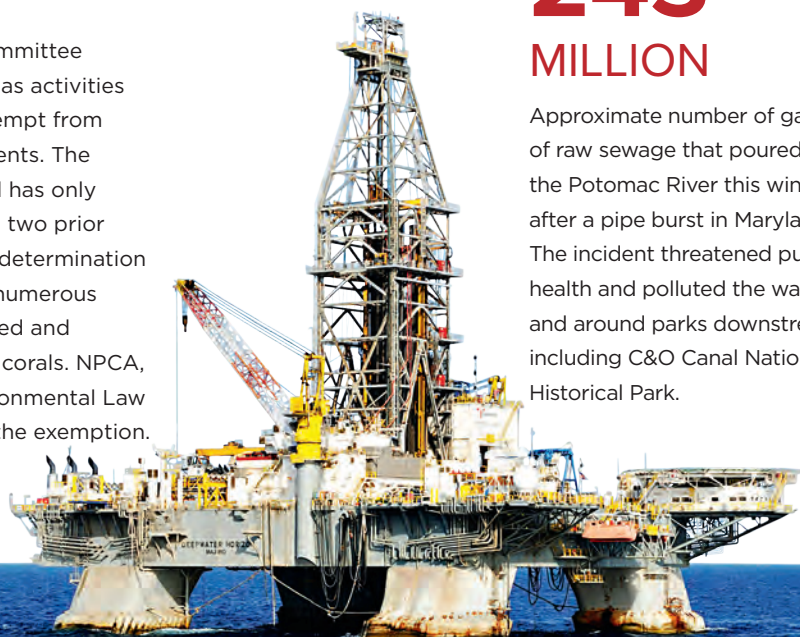
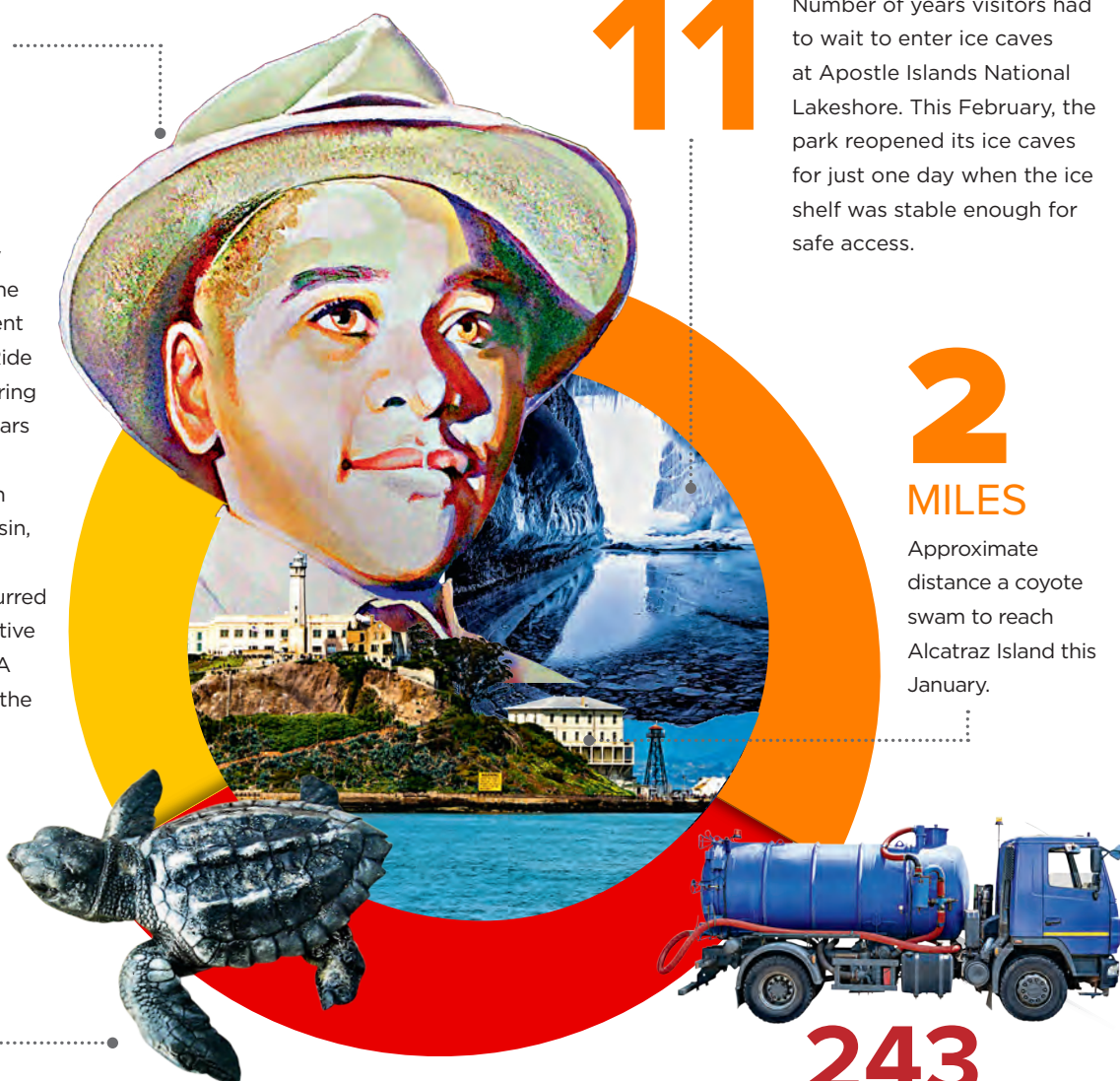
Approximate distance a coyote swam to reach Alcatraz Island this January.

6

Number of people serving on a committee who ruled this March that oil and gas activities in the Gulf of Mexico should be exempt from Endangered Species Act requirements. The committee was formed in 1978 and has only granted narrow ESA exemptions in two prior instances. The committee's spring determination involved no public input and puts numerous species at risk, including endangered and threatened whales, sea turtles and corals. NPCA, represented by the Southern Environmental Law Center, filed a lawsuit challenging the exemption.

243
MILLION

Approximate number of gallons of raw sewage that poured into the Potomac River this winter after a pipe burst in Maryland. The incident threatened public health and polluted the water in and around parks downstream, including C&O Canal National Historical Park.



An aerial photograph of a mangrove system with three kayakers. The kayakers are in a red, an orange, and a blue kayak, paddling through clear, shallow water. The water is filled with green seagrass or algae. The mangrove trees are lush green and scattered throughout the water. The sky is blue with white clouds.

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Theodore Roosevelt National Park, North Unit

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Theodore Roosevelt National Park spans two distinct units, each offering its own take on the North Dakota Badlands. The South Unit, near Medora, features a scenic drive through painted canyons and along the Little Missouri River, with frequent sightings of bison and wild horses. The North Unit, near Watford City, is quieter and more rugged, with dramatic overlooks and opportunities to spot bighorn sheep.



Theodore Roosevelt National Park, South Unit



Bison



Medora Musical

BASECAMP, BADLANDS STYLE

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OPENING SUMMER 2026

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Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library rendering

Theodore Roosevelt National Park — named one of *National Geographic's* Top 25 Best of the World destinations for 2026 — is 70,000 acres of open terrain and awe-inspiring vistas. Uncrowded trails wait to take you into the painted canyons of the Badlands where you can see bison, wild horses and prairie dogs. Nearby gateway cities offer all the amenities you're looking for, including comfortable hotels and excellent dining options, making them the perfect hubs for your park adventure. Once you get here, you won't want to leave.



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BEECH TREES in a mixed hardwood forest at Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore. Their seeds are a food source for some 40 species, including black bears.

student at Michigan Technological University who has been helping lead both parks' beech restoration efforts for the last three years. "It's like a foundation tree species."

Beech bark disease was first detected in 1890 on imported European beech in Nova Scotia. Since then, it's advanced across roughly half of the American beech's range, killing 50% or more of the trees in forests from Maine to North Carolina and westward to Michigan, where it appeared around the turn of the 21st century. The infestation begins when a non-native insect, often referred to as beech scale, swarms a beech by the hundreds of thousands. The tiny creatures feed on the trunk, opening wounds that a native fungus exploits. Eventually, the combination can sever the living layer beneath the bark that allows for the transport of nutrients and water, killing the tree. Survivors exist in a compromised state, vulnerable to other pathogens and windstorms. The long-lasting and cascading impacts of beech bark disease led federal forester Mark Twery to label it "one of the most dramatic introduced pest problems of Eastern forests."

Statistically, about 1% to 3% of beech exhibit resistance to the disease. During one visual survey at Pictured Rocks, just four of 186 beech trees appeared free of the infestation's telltale white fuzz. As efforts to document scale-less trees at both parks continue, managers are pinning their hopes on these hardy outliers.

"Restoring forest species, it's a long game," said Andrew Bishop, Pictured Rocks' chief of resource management.

Divas in Distress

Can scientists at Pictured Rocks and Sleeping Bear Dunes national lakeshores save finicky beech trees from a deadly invader?

IN THE UNDERSTORY of a Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore forest stands a cluster of cloned beech. They're easy to overlook, yet their petite frames carry the hope of their species: resistance to the devastating beech bark disease. Planted last fall, these 18 grafted trees represent the first success in a pitfall-lined journey to preserve American beech on the park landscape.

The native species, with its smooth bark and long life, is a defining component of northern and eastern hardwood forests. At Pictured Rocks and fellow Michigan site Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, where the tree can be found across tens of thousands of acres, its nutrient-packed seeds provide food for some 40 species, including turkeys, squirrels and black bears. "It's so ecologically important," said Tom Panella, a doctoral

HANNAH BRADBURN/NPS



A restoration ecologist, Bishop noted that the process for beech might not be as protracted as the century-long quest to save American chestnut, but “we’re talking about generations to get to the point where we could actually return beech as the important forest contingent that it was prior to beech bark disease.”

In 2019, staff from Pictured Rocks and Sleeping Bear Dunes partnered with Michigan Tech to pilot a grafting program, the preferred propagation method for increasing the presence of resistant trees on the landscape. The ultimate goal is to create pockets of trees whose flowers and seeds could spread resistant genes throughout the forest.

So far, what they’ve learned is this: Propagating the species can be a real beech. Panella, a self-described “plant nerd” who grew up keeping aquatic plants, not animals, in aquariums, has developed a love-hate relationship with the trees. “They’re just divas,” he said.

The labor-intensive grafting journey starts, counterintuitively, with exposing beech to the very thing that could kill them.

LeighAnna Seguin, a biological science technician at Sleeping Bear Dunes, explained how she and a few colleagues or volunteers hike out in late summer and use a paintbrush to collect scale eggs off infected trees. “It gets kind of messy,” she said. (By the end of a recent collection day, the hat of one of her teammates had been blanketed by the insect’s woolly deposits.) The eggs are sieved from the jumble of adults and their waxy, fluffy byproducts, and then stored in a refrigerator for up to three weeks until they’re hauled back out in coolers, often for miles, through the woods. “A big part of the work is trying to make sure that our eggs stay healthy and happy while we’re taking them on a field trip to different trees every day,” Seguin said.

The targets of these outings are beech without visible scale. Upon reaching such a tree, the team finds two flat spots on the trunk, cleans off any lichen and then secures around 500 scale eggs against each site using a combination of foam, house wrap, wire and silicone caulk. A full year later, they return, pry off the wrapping and count the number of egg clusters and insects. Seguin, who tracks beech data for Sleeping Bear Dunes, said that of the 47 trees they’ve tested so far, 25 exhibited zero evidence of scale, making them candidates for grafting.

In late winter when the trees are still dormant, Panella ventures out to one or two individuals that withstood the egg onslaught and collects a branch, called a scion, to serve as clone material.

Successfully lassoing and cutting down a bud-lined twig some 60 or more feet in the air while navigating deep snow and understory snags requires an arborist slingshot, a rope saw and an abundance of luck. If stars align, Panella said, he hooks the correct branch on the first shot. Sometimes, it takes hours.

Each year, Panella aims to gather enough scion wood to produce about 120 grafts. Though his success rates have steadily improved over the years, grafting beech is not for the faint of heart. His grafting instructor, Scott Rogers of the U.S. Forest Service’s Oconto River Seed Orchard in Wisconsin, told Panella he couldn’t imagine working with a more difficult species. There are more intricate steps, the wood is harder to cut, and the grafts take longer to heal.

A month after each resistant scion has been joined to generic beech rootstock, the foot-tall clones are moved from a temperature-controlled trailer to the university greenhouse, where they are nurtured for about two years. “Moving trees around,” Panella said, “that’s a big chunk of my life.”

Eventually, healthy grafted trees graduate to a carefully selected spot in the park understory, where deer, snowfall and other perils await. Of the hundreds of trees grafted by Panella and the doctoral student before him, only a few dozen have survived to be outplanted in the parks. And, of those, just the 18 planted at Pictured Rocks in 2025 are still living.

Despite the rocky start, the threat of a separate disease and the naysayers who call the tree doomed, Panella said he’s hopeful. “We’ve kind of ironed out a lot” of the process, he said. “Our trees, they’re just doing a lot better than they have been in the past.”

First Do No Harm

“We don’t have great solutions when it comes to novel pests running across a forested landscape, annihilating species,” Bishop said. “I’m not trying to be a Debbie Downer,” he continued, but “damn, if we could do a better job of not introducing new forest pests, that would make it a lot easier.” One way people can help, Bishop said, is to prioritize native plantings. Not only will this minimize the risk of spreading unwelcome invasives, but it will also roll out the welcome mat for desirable species, such as birds and other pollinators.



KATHERINE DEGROFF is associate editor of National Parks magazine.



of ICE & HEART

Braving Maine's
cold waters with Mount Desert
Island's intrepid dippers.

The first time I experienced cold-water dipping, I had the urge to submerge. Years of entering chilly pools, lakes and oceans have taught me that immersing my whole body after psyching myself up is less torturous than being halfway under. But I'd never before been in water quite this frigid. So my rationale about taking the plunge was at odds with my body's distress signal, which insisted that a full-fledged dunk was off the table.

I was with four other women, three of whom I'd just met, at Compass Harbor, on the eastern coast of Acadia National Park. It was early February, just before sunrise, and we'd arrived at the water's edge after a short hike through snowy woods. We'd spread towels and yoga mats on the rocky beach to protect our feet, kicked off snow boots and — though it was just 9 degrees — stripped down to swimsuits. On the beach, ice-encased rockweed, a plump and spongy seaweed, covered the boulders. Someone pointed out a loon in the water, between us and the Porcupine Islands. The sky turned from pink to purple to deep blue.

My friend Shanna Merrill and I had driven to Bar Harbor to experience cold-water dipping in Maine — an idea equally exciting and dreadful to us both. The night before, at an Irish pub a couple of blocks from our hotel, we had clinked glasses before dinner. “To not dying,” we said, and laughed nervously.

At the beach, we followed the lead of veteran dippers, pulling neoprene boots and gloves from our bags and staging clothes

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN / PHOTOS BY KATHERINE EMERY



THE WALK BACK to the parking lot (top left) after a sunrise dip at Compass Harbor (bottom left). Right: Mariah Reading and Gail Gladstone, two of the group's founders, use a sledgehammer and an ice saw to create an ice hole for dipping at Long Pond. Previous pages: A sunset dip at Long Pond. The author is in the gray hat.

— cozy fleeces, sweatpants and bulky swim coats — for après-dip. One by one, the other women began walking toward the gentle waves. I knew these dips were brief; if I didn't summon some courage quickly, I might miss the whole experience. I forced myself down to the icy water, amazed at how well the booties protected my feet. Then the cold hit my calves. Knees. Thighs. I sucked in air and pulled my shoulders to my ears, as if to lift my body away from the cold. I felt an unfamiliar sensation in my legs, like a faint electrical current zipping under my skin. The veterans walked even deeper into the water. Someone yelled out "Wait till you get up to your Georgia O'Keefe!" followed by hoots and cheers.

Before wading into the water, the women had told me to listen to my body and figure out what was comfortable for me. They said simply being there with gear and excitement and intention — even without dipping a toe — was enough. So I listened. And after a couple of minutes, I turned around. I hadn't dunked. But also, I hadn't died.

I first heard of this dipping collective in 2025. I was seeking tips for my own cold-water training for a 5-kilometer springtime swim in the Chesapeake Bay and came across the cheeky and aptly named group, Cold Tits, Warm Hearts. (The Associated Press style guide, my editors pointed out, describes the anatomical reference as "impolite," but we agreed I could use it — sparingly.) I connected with one of the founding members, eco-artist and Maine native Mariah Reading, who had recently competed in the Ice Swimming World Championship. She offered some advice on swimming in chilly waters. And then I had a zillion questions about her dipping group, including: Can I join you sometime?

Cold-water dipping isn't new. George Dorr, who helped establish Acadia and was its first superintendent, used to swim daily in the frosty waters of Compass Harbor. But dipping (and other similar frigid-water activities) are definitely having a moment. Many credit the recent trend to Dutch extreme athlete Wim Hof (aka The Iceman), who has broken records related to cold exposure — including standing in a container while covered with ice cubes for nearly two hours. He says the many health benefits of exposing your body to cold, whether ice baths or cold showers, include improved quality of sleep, better focus, stronger immune response and reduction of inflammation, swelling and sore muscles. The scientific consensus on Hof's method is mixed: A 2024 study of his claims backed only some of them and said further research into the health effects is needed. The Mayo Clinic says cold plunging or cold water immersion may help build resiliency,



restore balance to the nervous system and improve cognitive function and mood, but warns about the hazards of cold water shock. Yet there are many wholehearted proponents: Some athletes use cold plunges to speed up muscle recovery. Actor and comedian Amy Poehler cold plunges for 11 minutes a week and says it helps with anxiety, depression and inflammation. "It will change your life," she said in a social media clip.

Wherever there's cold water, it seems, people are inspired to dip. The Bluetits Chill Swimmers in the U.K. counts 150,000 members. In South Portland, Two Maine Mermaids dips monthly around the full moon and in March hosted an event that attracted more than 1,600. In West Seattle, the Coldwater Collective holds weekly plunges at Alki Beach. This year, New Year's Day plunges took place at many national park sites, including Acadia, Olympic National Park, Glacier National Park and Cape Hatteras National Seashore. In national parks, dipping is permitted any time of year, as long as the parks are open and allow swimming.

There is no shortage of dipping spots on Mount Desert Island, or MDI as locals call it, the largest island off the coast of Maine. Acadia encompasses about half of the island, which counts four towns, including Bar Harbor on the east coast. In

There are birthday dips, lunchtime dips and spur-of-the-moment dips. Sometimes they dip in tutus.



WARMING IN THE SUN after a midday dip at Acadia's largest sandy beach, fittingly called Sand Beach (above). Right: It was sunny but only around 25 degrees when the women waded in at Sand Beach.

the summer, more than 4 million visitors flock to the park, but only about 10,500 people — including the women I met — live on MDI year-round. In the winter, the island is quiet and serene.

When the temperature drops, swimming enthusiasts tend to pack it in and hibernate. But in the late summer of 2020, Puranjot Kaur, who was training to circumnavigate MDI (44 miles in waters that only warm up to 50-something degrees in the summer) had a wacky thought: What if the water season didn't come to an end?

Other local women, she quickly learned, were also fantasizing about continuing to swim outdoors into fall and winter. They were going stir-crazy with pandemic pods and quarantines, and some were really struggling. Reading, who was wrapping up her work as a seasonal ranger at Acadia, said she had recently left an emotionally abusive relationship and was seeking connection. She, Kaur and two other women met up for a cold-water dip on December 20 in Somes Sound, a sheltered spot with views of the Acadia mountains.

"We look back at that first time and laugh, because we just had bathing suits and towels," Kaur said. "Now we have all the gear and systems." The women stayed in the water, amid bobbing chunks of ice, for a few invigorating, thrilling minutes.

"We were all depressed and sad, but it was empowering to put ourselves in physical pain and experience glee — and also the beauty of where we're all so privileged to live," Reading said. "The timing of it was really spectacular and necessary. We all needed each other. We all immediately bonded."

The women started dipping every weekend, exploring new waters and inviting dip-curious friends. In late January of 2021, a half dozen women gathered at Seal Harbor Beach, a crescent-shaped stretch of soft sand just outside the park. As they came out of the water, Martha Stewart — who has a house on MDI — happened to drive by. "She had her driver pull over so she could take a picture, which she later posted on Instagram," Kaur said. As Stewart was leaving, a dipper shouted out to her, "Cold tits, warm hearts!" And immediately, Kaur recalled, "We were like, 'Ohmygod, that's the name of the group! And now we need a logo! And hats!'" (Spoiler: They came up with a clever logo that now graces their stickers, hats, sweatshirts and long swim coats.)

Within a few months, there were so many dippers that the founders set up a WhatsApp group that now includes nearly 100 people, ranging in age from 20s to 70s. Although some refer to the group as a sisterhood and men are rare, all are welcome; after all, as Reading pointed out, men have nipples too.

Throughout the winter, the dippers — sometimes 20, sometimes two — meet several times a week. There are birthday dips, lunchtime dips and spur-of-the-moment dips. Sometimes they dip in tutus. They dip under full moons, under umbrellas, under sunny skies or under Andrew Wyeth skies — as one member described an overcast day. Once, a pair dipped in windchills of minus 20.

After my inaugural dip, we moved quickly to change into warm clothes. My hands were so cold, I had trouble pulling up socks and lacing boots. At the parking lot, we said goodbye, till our next dip at lunchtime. (Reading had set up a trio of dips specifically for our visit, but multi-dip days are not unusual.





"This group has changed my life."

On her 27th birthday in 2021, Reading spent 27 minutes in the water, which she spread over three dips.) Shanna and I blasted heat in the car, and I tucked my hands in my armpits until my fingers thawed. "You know how after you go to the dentist and your mouth feels so clean and fresh and tingly?" Shanna said. "That's how my legs feel."

We warmed up with tea at the Acadia Hotel and then walked around an eerily quiet Bar Harbor. Shops that sold ice cream, fudge and lobster rolls were closed for the season. We wandered into Sherman's bookstore (I was drawn to a section featuring "Women on the Water" and "Danger at Sea") and then to the chamber of commerce across the street, where a National Park Service desk serves as Acadia's wintertime visitor center.

"Thanks for coming to see us," said Matthew, a young ranger in his first season at the park. He spread out a map and showed us a section of Park Loop Road that was open for the winter. I told him we'd dipped that morning with a group of local women. "My job is just to tell you: Please be safe," he said. "The current can move very quickly. The water is very cold."

Midday, at high tide, Shanna and I met the morning dippers plus three more women near Acadia's largest sandy beach (fittingly named Sand Beach). The sun was strong overhead and sparkled in the water. But the air temperature had inched up to only 25 degrees, and we were surrounded by signs of winter: The sand was flecked with bits of snow, and on the cliffs hugging the water, ice spilled over rocks like white frosting dripping down the side of a cake.

As we set out our gear, I chatted with Sue Aripotch — a fine jewelry maker who spends time in the park almost daily. At her first dip, on New Year's Day 2021, she watched Kaur and other women swimming past the breaking waves. She planned to follow, but when the water was thigh-high, her bones throbbed with pain. She turned back, disappointed in herself. "All of a sudden, I hear applause from beyond the breakers, and that just made me feel so good — people celebrating my attempt to do something," she said. "This group has changed my life."

IN THE SAUNA after the Long Pond dip (top left). Some of the dippers run a small business renting out mobile saunas, which they sometimes bring to their outings. Bottom left: An ice fishing shack on Long Pond.

On Valentine's Day that year, Brenda Beckett, a scuba diver and physician assistant at the local hospital, joined a Sand Beach dip. She learned that the stress she carried from working as essential medical personnel during the pandemic ebbed when she stood in the icy water. She's generally not a joiner, but she

Dip Tips

If you do plan to dip, do it safely. Talk to your doctor first if you have underlying conditions including cardiovascular disease and high blood pressure. Make sure you're familiar with the conditions — the entry could be slippery, or the water could be too deep or too rough. Educate yourself about the right gear and how to quickly warm up afterward. One of the best ways to be safe: Bring a friend (or a few).

Gail Gladstone, one of the founding members of Mount Desert Island's dipping group, said national parks are great places to dip because they're beautiful and iconic — but they're also wild. In some cases, she said, it's not worth the risk. She advised taking your time. "You'll have that initial panic from the cold," she said. "I suggest breathing into that, feeling your presence, catching your breath, calming down, and then you'll find that peace on the other side. That's where the benefit is." She cautioned: "If you feel like you could stay in forever, that's when it's time to get out."

felt energized being in the water with others — even though she'd just met them. "I was hooked," she said. "I felt so alive."

Paula Huntsman, a seventh-generation Mainer and a school nurse, told me that the first time she dipped, she charged in and charged out — and felt such a burst of energy that she went home and organized all her knitting needles. "I felt really badass," she said. She also began looking at her own body differently. "I grew up with a mother who was pretty body shaming. So I never ever felt good about my body." Now, when she strips to the barest of clothing and walks into the water with women of all body types, she feels an acceptance she's never felt before.

As we walked into the surf at Sand Beach, I couldn't help but feel — with all the squealing and laughing — like we were a group of giddy schoolgirls playing hooky. At one point, standing and facing the Atlantic Ocean, we all raised our gloved hands to the sky and cheered. A couple of women dunked completely underwater. And then did it again. I looked at them with wild eyes, in awe of their confidence. I walked out to my waist and stood for maybe a few minutes. Then once again, I headed back before the others.

TAKING THE PLUNGE at Long Pond.

On the beach, under towels or parkas or ponchos, we peeled off our bathing suits, pulled on dry clothes and then drove to Huntsman's house for a late lunch. She'd made a red lentil curry soup, Beckett brought a salad, and Aripotch brought brownies made from sweet potatoes, each with two tiny pink nonpareils on them. (They were on theme; use your imagination.) The sunlight-filled home was cozy, and nine of us sat around a long dining table, engaged in a meandering conversation. After lunch, we drifted to the living area, where Beckett sat on the sofa knitting herself a gray sweater. I learned that some dippers have formed splinter groups — birders, writers, readers, sewers and felters. I kept hearing that the winters are so cold in Maine, and the days so short, that everyone has to have a winter project. These women had many.

In the late afternoon, some of the lunch crowd and a few others drove to Long Pond. The 4-mile-long glacial lake, which sits mostly inside the park, is a popular spot for summer swimming and paddling. By this point, my body felt exhausted, as it does after a hard workout. But I had my eyes on the prize: A group of women, including some dippers, had purchased two mobile saunas — to extend their time together after dips and also to rent out to folks in the community — and one would be parked at our final destination, steps from the lake. The thought of immediate heat after our last dip of the day made the idea of freezing water much more palatable.

Long Pond, which was frozen over, was dotted with bright green and yellow fishing shacks. We hit the sauna first, and when we were sufficiently steamy, we ventured out to the water. The day before, a few women had made a hot tub-sized hole in the ice near the shore with a sledgehammer and an ice saw. Shanna, who had taken to cold water like the Mainer she is, entered first and had to break up a thin layer of ice that had formed overnight. I followed, cautiously lowering half my body into the ice hole. In the water, we held hands and made noise, and it felt like a party. But every second, I was thinking about the moment I'd return to the sauna. After the first person made a move to exit, I scrambled onto the ice and toward the warmth, steam rising off my body. We barely had time to shiver before pulling off our booties and stepping inside.

Enveloped by dreamy heat, we chatted about travel and dogs and significant others and bathing suits. As my body warmed, I realized how much I'd enjoyed the day of dipping and laughing and freezing and thawing. I'd been accepted and supported almost immediately — not because of the length or depth of my dips, but because I was there, being me. And that felt good.

Yet I could also tell I'd been holding back. I consider myself pretty adventurous, but I tend to be sensible and deliberate in my risk-taking. (Dunking in near-freezing water? Not sensible.) The part of me that's silly and impulsive often gets overruled. Plus, I'm an introvert — motivated more by a force on the inside than anything outside.



As the conversation started to wind down and the women talked about heading home shortly, I realized I wasn't quite ready to call it a day. I enlisted Shanna, and we walked back to the water hole, glowing in the setting sun. She waited on the ice as I slipped into the water one last time. Before I knew what I was doing, I quickly went under, still wearing my winter hat, and sprung up frantically. I gasped for air and shrieked and pulled myself out of the hole, exhilarated and freezing.

When we walked back into the sauna, the conversation stopped for a moment. One of the women turned to me and said, "Oooh, the braids are wet!" Another: "Woohoo!"

Reading added sage oil-infused water to the rocks on the sauna stove, and a light mist swirled into the room. After dipping and recovering over the course of 12 hours, my shoulders finally fully relaxed, and a sense of calm washed over me. With nothing left to psych myself up for, I closed my eyes and took in a deep breath of steamy air. Then I exhaled, slowly, feeling happy and brave and warm.

MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN is a Washington, D.C.-based writer. Her first book, "Lab Dog: A Beagle and His Human Investigate the Surprising World of Animal Research," was published in 2025. Learn more at melaniedgkaplan.com.

KATHERINE EMERY is a freelance photographer who seeks to document meaningful stories of connection that shape our communities and our future. She lives on Mount Desert Island, where she's learning about lupine and rockweed, tides and turnips. Find her at katherineemery.com.

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STARS, SAND & SCORPIONS

A NATIVE NEW YORKER TAKES HIS FIRST
TRIP TO THE DESERT



ART & WORDS

KEITH HENRY BROWN

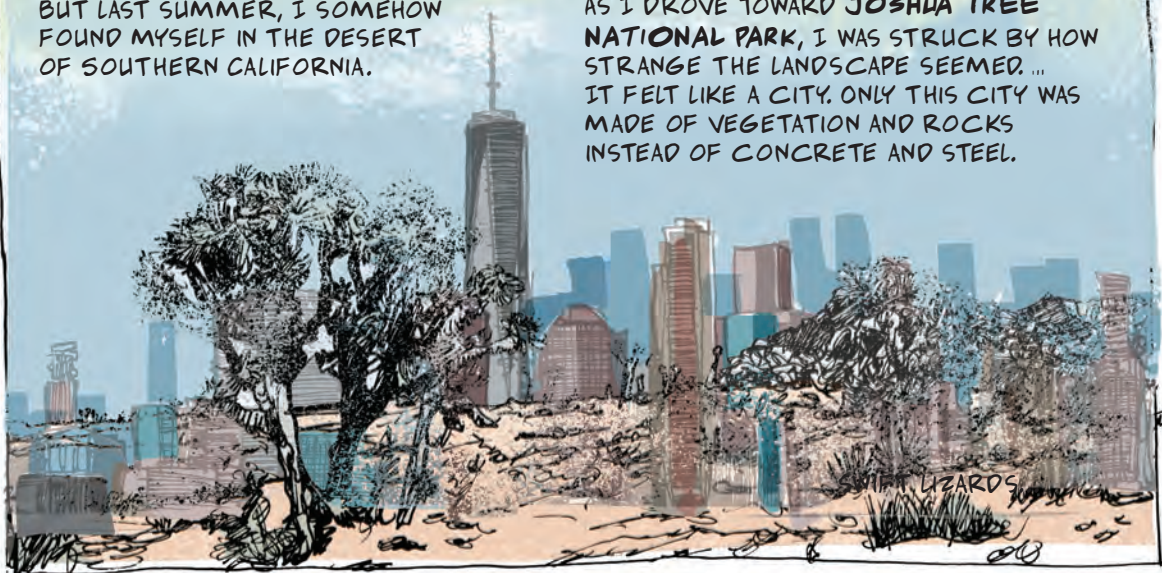
I'M A NEW YORKER
THROUGH AND THROUGH.
I'VE LIVED HERE ALL MY LIFE.

I THINK IN TERMS OF STREETS,
BUILDINGS AND NOISE.



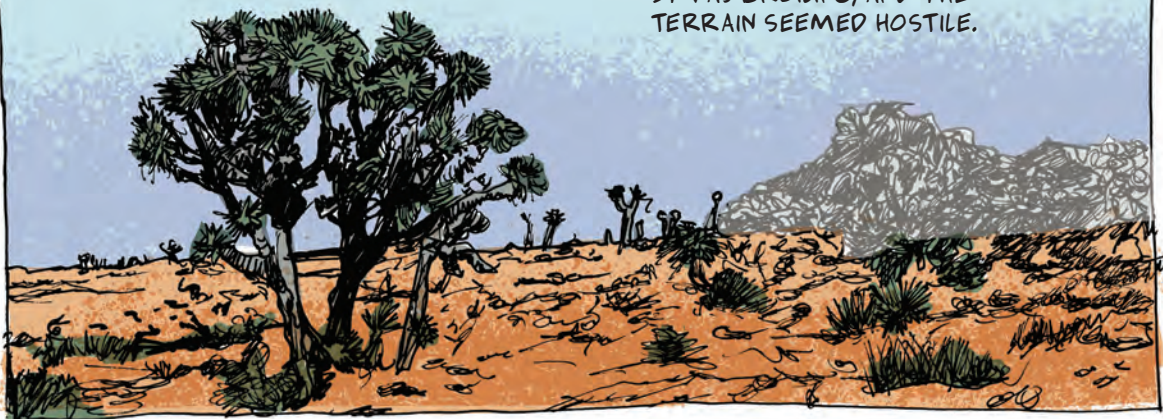
BUT LAST SUMMER, I SOMEHOW
FOUND MYSELF IN THE DESERT
OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA.

AS I DROVE TOWARD **JOSHUA TREE**
NATIONAL PARK, I WAS STRUCK BY HOW
STRANGE THE LANDSCAPE SEEMED. ...
IT FELT LIKE A CITY. ONLY THIS CITY WAS
MADE OF VEGETATION AND ROCKS
INSTEAD OF CONCRETE AND STEEL.



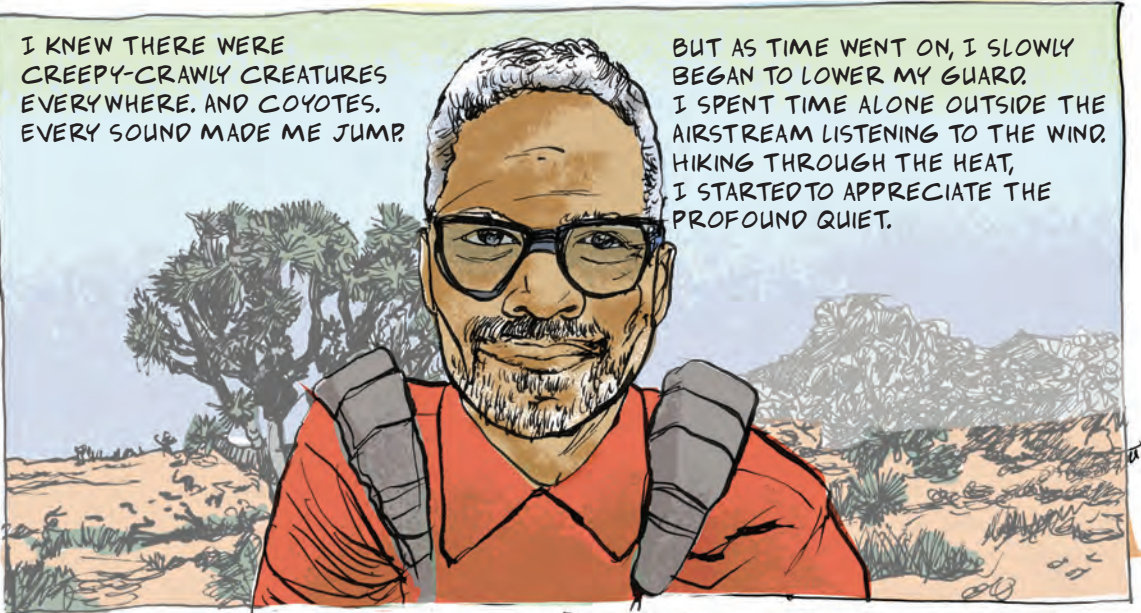
I RENTED A SMALL AIRSTREAM AND SET UP CAMP JUST OUTSIDE THE NATIONAL PARK IN
THE SMALL TOWN ALSO CALLED **JOSHUA TREE**.
AT FIRST, ALONE IN THE DESERT, I WAS TERRIFIED.

IT WAS BROILING, AND THE
TERRAIN SEEMED HOSTILE.



I KNEW THERE WERE
CREEPY-CRAWLY CREATURES
EVERYWHERE. AND COYOTES.
EVERY SOUND MADE ME JUMP.

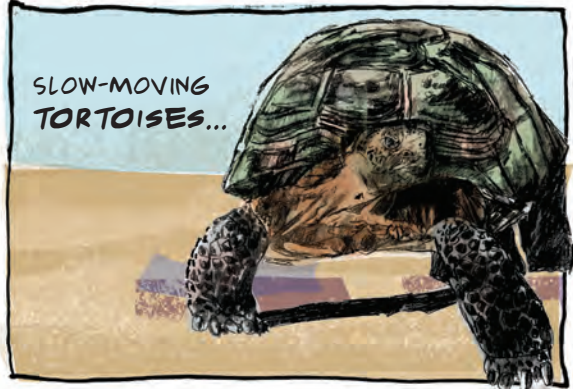
BUT AS TIME WENT ON, I SLOWLY
BEGAN TO LOWER MY GUARD.
I SPENT TIME ALONE OUTSIDE THE
AIRSTREAM LISTENING TO THE WIND,
HIKING THROUGH THE HEAT,
I STARTED TO APPRECIATE THE
PROFOUND QUIET.



I COULD HEAR THE
SKITTERING OF SMALL
DESERT ANIMALS SUCH
AS HISSING **SNAKES**...



SLOW-MOVING
TORTOISES...



WATCHFUL **LIZARDS**...



AND ... **ROADRUNNERS!**

HAVING GROWN UP WATCHING THE CARTOON,
I WAS FASCINATED BY HOW CLOSELY THE
REAL THING RESEMBLED ITS BRIGHTLY
COLORED, ANIMATED COUNTERPART.
WHERE THE HELL WERE THEY GOING
IN SUCH A RUSH?



I WAS SURPRISED TO DISCOVER THAT I LIKED BEING SO FAR AWAY FROM EVERYTHING. I COULD SEE THAT THE DESERT WAS ALIVE IN SUBDUED, BEAUTIFUL WAYS. AND THE TOWERING MOUNTAINS IN THE DISTANCE WERE INCREDIBLE.

SOMETHING ABOUT THIS PLACE PULLED ME INWARD. THE WARMTH OF THE AIR, THE STILLNESS, THE BOUNDLESSNESS.

BREATHTAKING!

I FELT LIKE I WAS IN THE BELLY OF SOMETHING ANCIENT.

AS A BUDDHIST AND A SPIRITUAL PERSON, I FOUND IT ESPECIALLY EASY TO MEDITATE IN THE DESERT.



OF COURSE I MISSED CREATURE COMFORTS, BUT SOMETHING HELD ME THERE. THE DESERT FELT EVEN MORE REAL THAN WHAT I USUALLY THINK OF AS REALITY.

THERE'S ONLY SO MUCH QUIETUDE A BROOKLYNITE CAN HANDLE. THE INTERNET WAS MOSTLY NIL, BUT I MANAGED TO CREATE A CONTEMPLATIVE SOUNDTRACK OF NICK CAVE, MILES DAVIS AND THE SCORES FROM SERGIO LEONE FILMS.



ONE NIGHT, I HEADED INTO THE NATIONAL PARK AFTER THE SUN HAD SET.

STANDING ATOP A SURREAL ROCK FORMATION, I LOOKED OUT OVER WHAT FELT LIKE AN ENDLESS PANORAMA OF BOULDERS, CACTI AND, OF COURSE, THE ICONIC JOSHUA TREES. EVEN IN NEAR DARKNESS, I COULD MAKE OUT THEIR OUTSTRETCHED ARMS, WHICH REMINDED ME OF THOSE TUBE MEN YOU SEE IN FRONT OF SANDWICH SHOPS OR TIRE STORES.

OVERHEAD, THE SKY WAS BOTH DARK AND BRIGHT—BLACK AS INK, PIERCED BY COUNTLESS PINHOLES OF LIGHT. THERE WERE MORE STARS THAN I HAD EVER SEEN. I HAD NEVER KNOWN A SKY COULD FEEL SO VAST.

THE DARKNESS, SURPRISINGLY, DIDN'T FRIGHTEN ME. I FOUND MYSELF REFLECTING ON EVERYTHING BACK HOME AND EVERYTHING STILL AHEAD OF ME.

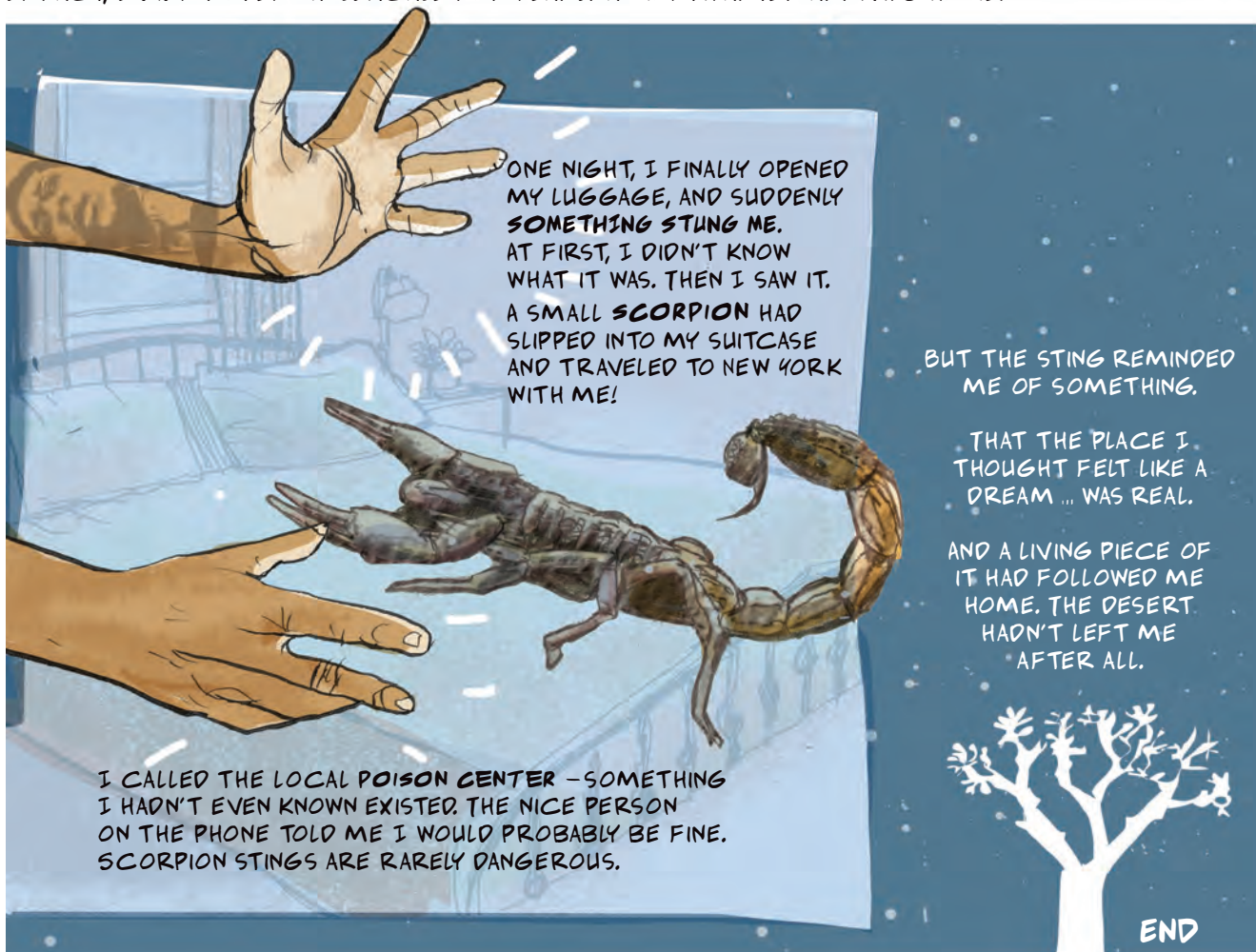
I WISH EVERYONE COULD VISIT A PLACE LIKE THIS, WHERE THE NOISE OF EVERYDAY LIFE SUBSIDES, AND YOU CAN PAUSE, BREATHE AND SIMPLY BE.



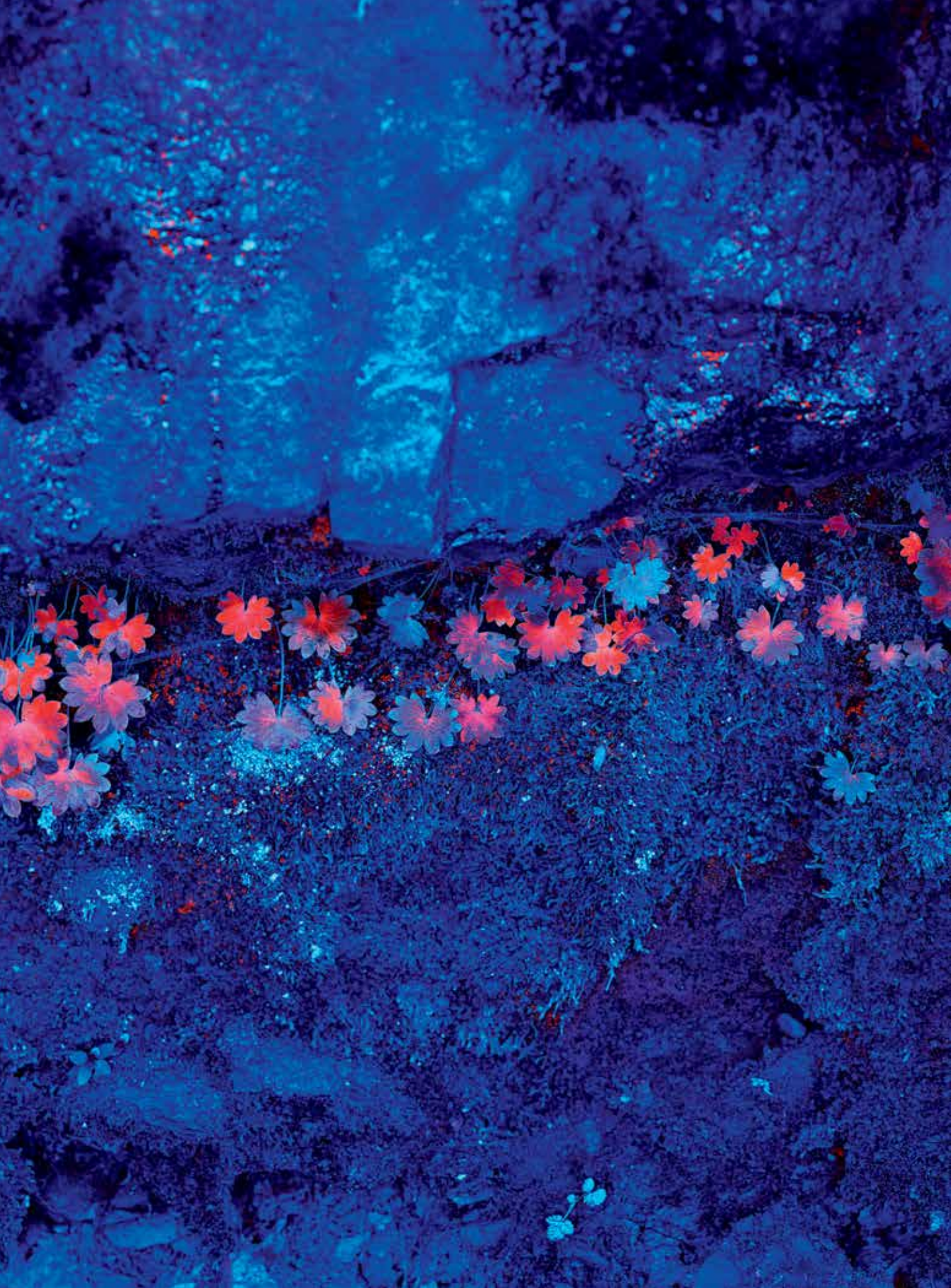


EVENUALLY, I RETURNED TO BROOKLYN. MY MEMORY OF THE EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCES I'D HAD IN THE DESERT STARTED TO FADE, AND I QUICKLY FELL BACK INTO MY REGULAR BUSY LIFE.

IN FACT, I DIDN'T OPEN MY SUITCASE FOR NEARLY A MONTH AFTER ARRIVING HOME.



KEITH HENRY BROWN IS AN AUTHOR, ILLUSTRATOR AND VISUAL ARTIST WHOSE WORK SPANS COMICS, FINE ART AND CHILDREN'S BOOKS. KNOWN FOR HIS BOLD MIXED-MEDIA STYLE, HE WAS CREATIVE DIRECTOR FOR JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER AND HAS CREATED MANY ALBUM COVERS. HE IS THE ILLUSTRATOR OF THE KIDS' BOOKS "BIRTH OF THE COOL," "BECAUSE OF YOU, JOHN LEWIS," "MY DAD IS A DJ," AND "PUSHING HOPE," A GRAPHIC NOVEL ABOUT THE CENTRAL PARK FIVE. HIS NEW BOOK, "POSTCARDS FROM MALCOLM X," WRITTEN BY MIA WENJEN, WILL BE PUBLISHED THIS OCTOBER.



Hidden Colors

Photographer Cody Cobb
shines a black light on
national park landscapes
to reveal a palette
ordinarily invisible to
the naked eye.



ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK (left).
MOUNT RAINIER NATIONAL PARK (previous pages).

On

an early October evening, the tundra landscape of Rocky Mountain National Park seemed drained of all but one color: the dull light brown of dirt and rocks and whatever hardy bits of vegetation survive above 12,000 feet. Photographer Cody Cobb and I set out after the sun had disappeared behind the mountains, and the subdued palette turned even more drab as the light faded. After we reached the end of the trail, dusk transitioned to darkness, and soon we could make out little but shapes and outlines.

Then Cobb took out a small ultraviolet flashlight, turned it on, and pointed it toward the granite and gneiss outcrops in front of us. All of a sudden, what had been a black canvas a moment earlier turned into a radiant mural: The rock face was now laced with streaks of gold and dappled with large and small azure patches, and a scarlet figure reminiscent of a pictograph danced near the ground.

“It’s there all the time,” Cobb said. “We just can’t see it unless you use a UV source to provoke it.”

The stunning display was produced primarily by fluorescent lichens. This phenomenon is similar to phosphorescence, but unlike phosphorescent substances, which retain their luminescence for some time after being exposed to light (think glow-in-the-dark toys), fluorescent materials stop glowing as soon as the light source goes dark. (Bioluminescence is the light produced by chemical reactions within living organisms, such as fireflies and many marine animals.)

Scientists still have plenty of questions about what fluoresces and what doesn’t — it wasn’t until three years ago that a study of 125 mammal species concluded that they all glowed under UV light, for instance. After years of practice, Cobb now knows about the fluorescence of things such as algae, dead trees and lichens — but he keeps being surprised by the spectacles he encounters during his nighttime wanderings. “I like the fact that I don’t know exactly what is going to show up,” he said.

UV light — also known as black light — can be used for a range of purposes including crime scene analysis and the detection of pet urine stains. At first, Cobb also employs black light as an investigation tool, spending time searching for a potential fluorescent

tableau. Once he has found one and set up his tripod and digital camera, the light becomes a paint brush of sorts. For the duration of his minute-long exposures, he sweeps the scene with the beam of his light in an oscillating motion. “There’s this physicality,” he said. “It’s like performance art or something.”

Originally from Louisiana, Cobb moved a couple of decades ago to Seattle where he worked in computer graphics and animation. He had spent virtually no time in nature until then, and he had a revelation during a trip to Mount Rainier National Park. “I’d never seen anything of that scale,” he said. “I’d never really experienced awe before.”

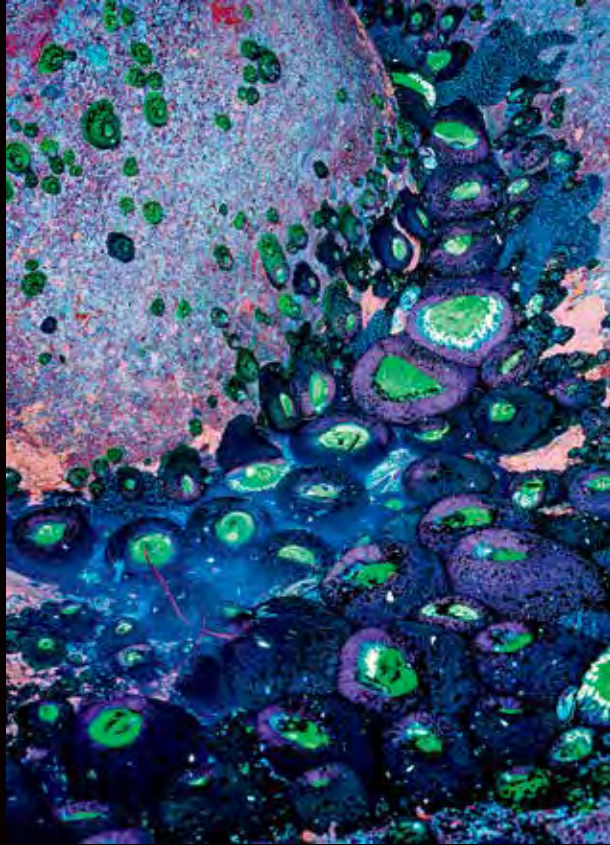
Cobb kept venturing into the wild, and at some point, he decided to bring a camera along. He sought to capture his solitary experiences, often in the sparse, mineral landscapes of the American West. Eventually, he began exhibiting his work in art galleries and shooting for magazines. Then several years ago, Cobb purchased a black light for a commercial photography project involving fluorescent flowers. Out of curiosity, he took the light outside and, after discovering that plenty of other natural objects fluoresce, he started assembling a collection of images he titled “Spectral.” (See a national park-focused selection of these images in this photo essay.) Some of Cobb’s subjects, such as Joshua Tree’s eponymous yuccas or Olympic’s tide pools, may be familiar to parkgoers, but through his camera lens — and in the glow of his black light — they become otherworldly.

Cobb’s photographs are also distinguished by the clarity of their lines and focal points, a quality that stems in part from his design background. “One of the hardest things about making calm landscape photography is reducing the chaos down to these calm moments without being too minimal and too boring,” he said.

Sometimes, though, the chaos is difficult to tame. Other times, Cobb feels like he’s fighting against bright moonlight or other sources of ambient light that threaten to wash out any fluorescent hues.

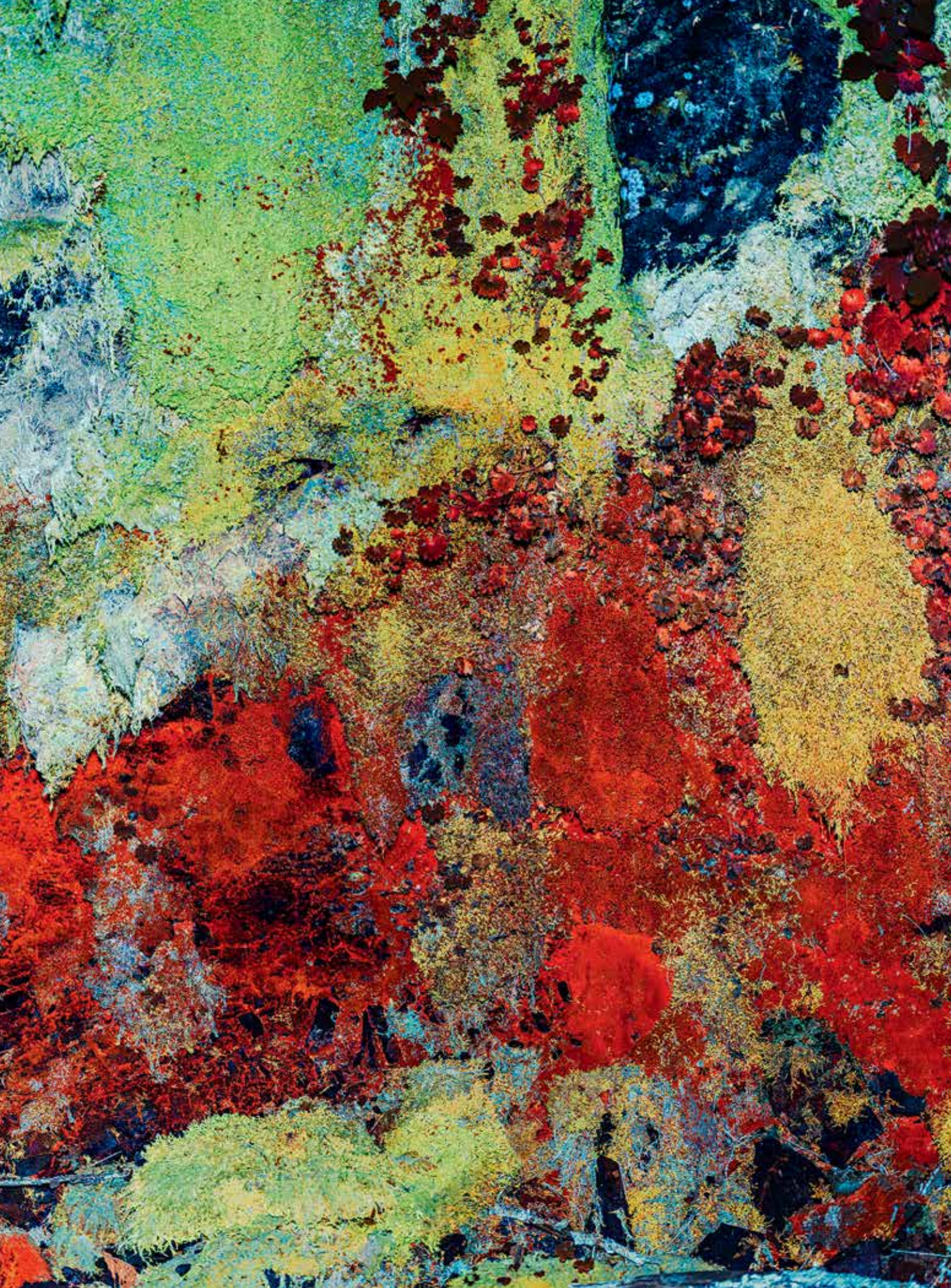
“I’m in such little control of everything,” he said. “All I can really do is go, put myself there and see what happens.”

—Nicolas Brulliard

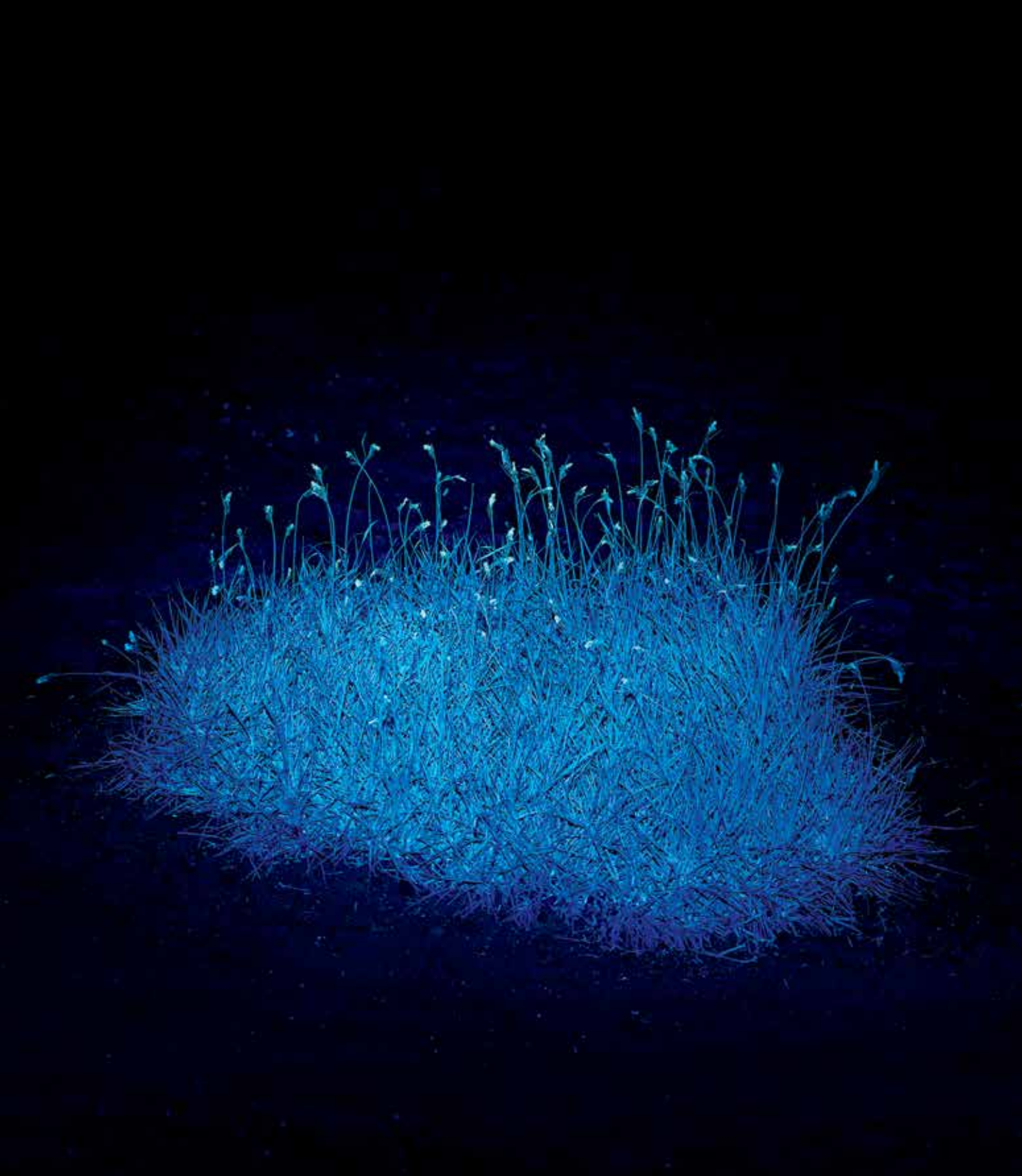


OLYMPIC NATIONAL PARK (this page). **ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK** (opposite page).





JOSHUA TREE NATIONAL PARK (above). **ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK** (top).
MOUNT RAINIER NATIONAL PARK (opposite page).



MOUNT RAINIER NATIONAL PARK.

To view more of Cobb's fluorescent images,
visit codycobb.com/spectral.

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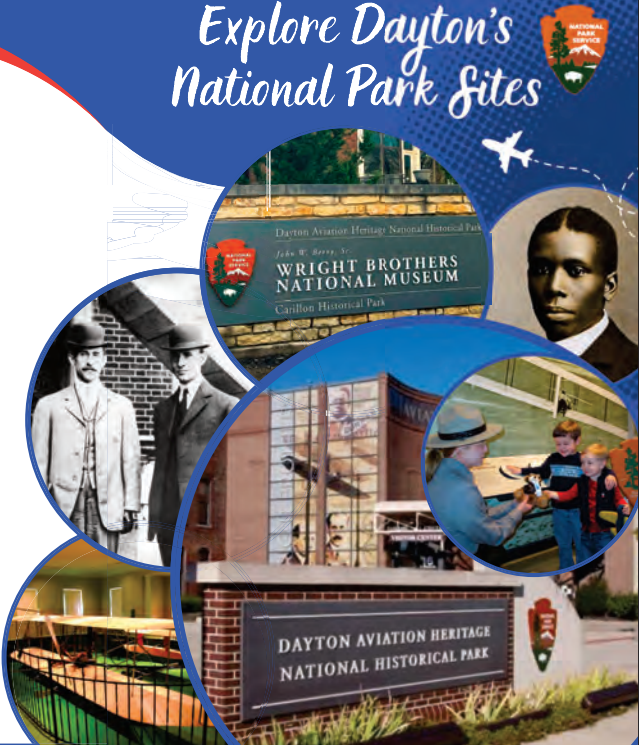


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Gettysburg National Military Park and Eisenhower National Historic Site. Courtesy Gettysburg Foundation.

CLIMB HIGHER. SEE MORE.

From the ground, Gettysburg looks like a story you already know—monuments, markers, a battlefield rendered in bronze and stone.

Climb higher. Look again.

What emerges is not just a memorial, but a landscape of decisions, where the course of a nation shifted in hours, in yards, in single human choices made under fire.

From up here, you begin to see how close it all was. How fragile. How unfinished.

This is not history at a distance. It is a place that asks something of you.

To begin to see it, start at the Gettysburg National Military Park Museum & Visitor Center. Step inside the Cyclorama, where the battlefield rises around you. Walk the field with a Licensed Battlefield Guide or National Park Service Rangers who read every ridge and tree line not as scenery but as consequence.

The decisions at Gettysburg did not end in 1863. At Eisenhower National Historic Site, Dwight D. Eisenhower returned as both general and president, hosting world leaders at his farm—where decisions made not in hours but across years shaped a world held in balance.

Then go further. Find the decisions that never made the markers. The ground that still carries weight.

Gettysburg isn't just a place to visit. It's something to reckon with. It's a place that stays with you.

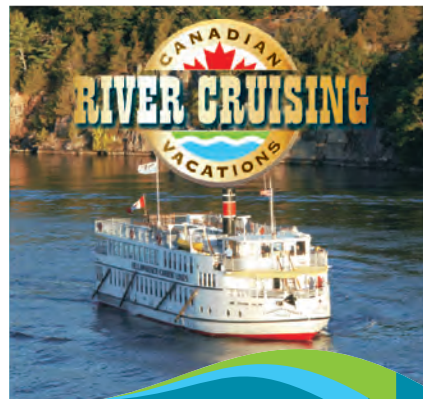
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Courtesy Ian Coristine

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Courtesy Visit Springfield

SPRINGFIELD, IL, THE PLACE TO BE ALONG ROUTE 66 FOR THE CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION!

Get your kicks on Route 66 as you bask in the glow of the neon lights at the new IL State Fairgrounds Route 66 Gate 2 Experience and take part in the Route 66 Mural and Wayside Exhibit Trails.

New for 2026, take in the exclusive Bob Waldmire Art Exhibit and David Schwartz Photo Exhibit at The Pharmacy Art Gallery. Explore the Carpenter Park Route 66 Alignment, uncovered after nearly 90 years and ready for you to enjoy.

Enjoy Springfield's premier summer series for its 17th season, History Comes Alive! Meet the Lincolns at historic sites throughout the city, and learn about their lives in Springfield. Historic portrayals at locations such as the Lincoln Home National Historic Site, the Old State Capitol, and the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum visitors are invited to become a part of living history.

Foodies can look forward to the History Cooks collection! The Lincoln Home National Historic Site will feature a cooking demonstration that ties in Springfield's historic past.

Join the IL DNR for free Walk, Hike, and Bike Tours or reserve your spot on a Springfield Walks ghost tour.

Relax and stroll the trails at one of Springfield's premier outdoor destinations, Lincoln Memorial Garden.

Make your plans and reservations to stay a few days! There is truly something for everyone in Springfield, Illinois.



OVERNIGHT IN THE HEART OF ILLINOIS ROUTE 66

Murals, Wayside Exhibits, Culinary Delights and so much more await you in legendary Springfield! Visit the new Bob Waldmire Art Exhibition, on display thru December 2026 and walk a quarter-mile stretch of uncovered original Route 66 pavement at the Carpenter Park Alignment along the Sangamon River! All this along with world-class Abraham Lincoln sites.

LEGENDARY SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS

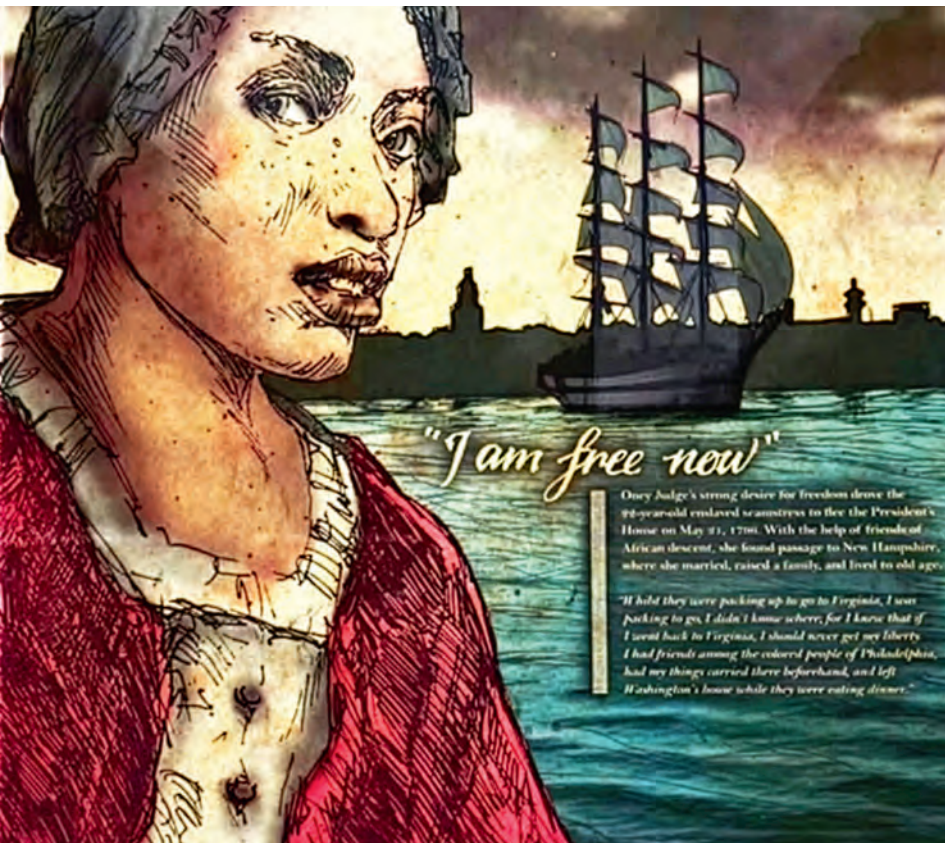


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A SIGN ABOUT Ona Judge at Independence National Historical Park's President's House that was removed in January following an executive order from the administration.

Washingtons' notoriously short-tempered granddaughter, Elizabeth Parke Custis Law, as a wedding present.

But Judge had different plans. On May 21, she packed her clothes. Then, while the Washingtons had dinner, she slipped out of the president's house — now a site in Independence National Historical Park — and into the Philadelphia evening. At the docks, she was aided by friends, likely members of the city's free Black community, who had quietly secured passage for her on the *Nancy*, a ship bound for Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where abolitionist sentiment was strong.

It was the beginning of a life of liberty, but according to the law, Judge was a fugitive. In 1793, Washington himself had signed the first Fugitive Slave Act, which gave slaveholders permission to pursue runaway slaves across state lines, even in Northern states, some of which had by that time ruled slavery illegal or instituted gradual abolition laws.

Three days after Judge's disappearance, an ad was placed in *The Philadelphia Gazette & Universal Daily Advertiser* by Washington's steward. "Absconded from the household of the President of the United States, ONEY JUDGE," it read, using her nickname, and described her as "a light Mulatto girl, much freckled, with very black eyes" and "many changes of good clothes." The ad offered a \$10 reward for her return. Thus began a yearslong effort to capture Judge, which she would elude — by her own wit and resolve, and with the help of allies — at every stage.

At the site where the president's house once stood (the original residence was torn down in 1832), the names of

Claiming Liberty

Ona Judge, an enslaved servant in the home of George and Martha Washington, escaped from the president's house and eluded every attempt to apprehend her. Now the administration is trying to remove exhibits that tell her story.

BY THE SPRING of 1796, Ona Judge had been Martha Washington's personal maid for around a decade, since she was about 10 years old, and had lived in the president's residence — first in New York, then in Philadelphia — for six years. During that time, she had served alongside eight other enslaved people brought from Mount Vernon, where Judge was born, and where the Washingtons would eventually hold more than 300 individuals in bondage.

As Washington neared the end of his two-term presidency, Judge knew the family planned to return to private life in Virginia, taking their enslaved staff with them. Also, she had learned she was to be given to the

COURTESY OF DEANA TRAVETTI



GEORGE WASHINGTON at Mount Vernon in 1797. More than 300 enslaved people lived at Washington's Virginia estate in 1799. Opposite page: This silhouette meant to represent Judge is based on the information available about her appearance and duties.

"Oney" and eight others — including Austin, Judge's half-brother, and the Washingtons' chef Hercules — are inscribed on a wall. On the sidewalk, impressions of footprints are a tribute to Judge's flight to freedom. Until recently, 34 panels also focused on "Freedom and Slavery in the Making of a New Nation" for visitors and passersby. The exhibit was completed in 2010 after a campaign by the Avenging the Ancestors Coalition.

In January, however, the panels, which included information about Judge, were removed by park staff in response to an executive order by the Trump administration that sought to restore "truth and sanity to American history," prompting an outcry from people across the country. The city sued, and in February, more than a dozen panels were reinstalled on a judge's orders, though the rest remain in storage while the case is ongoing, and proposed new exhibits sanitizing Washington's relationship to slavery have been posted on the park's website.

At other park sites, materials related to slavery, civil rights history, 19th century labor conditions and a white explorer's participation in a massacre of Native Americans have also been removed or revised. (In February, NPCA and several partners represented by Democracy Forward filed a separate lawsuit in federal court to halt the administration's efforts to erase history and censor science in all national park sites.)

Raina Yancey, a lawyer who also leads Black history walking tours in Philadelphia and is seeking to intervene as a plaintiff in the city's lawsuit, said the panels' removal was "a slap in the face to the activists who had that site built up and dedicated to the nine enslaved individuals." Yancey's mother

DOOR HANDLE from the president's house in Philadelphia. Judge successfully escaped from the presidential residence on May 21, 1796, while the Washingtons were having dinner.



©MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION, 2003.00.0225

was a part-time ranger at Independence, and she grew up running around the park. She said she didn't learn about Judge until years later, but her story and the park exhibit have become integral to the tours she leads. "It must have been absolutely terrifying for her to take that journey," she said, "so I just love her bravery."

Though it was fairly common during the post-revolutionary period for enslaved people to self-emancipate by escaping, the risks were high. Recaptured slaves were often brutally punished or sold off into harsher circumstances. And it was rarer for a woman to take such a leap — the vast majority of fugitives were men. But Judge was likely inspired and emboldened by her time in Philadelphia, where more than 5% of the population was free and Black; in the early 1790s, only around 200 enslaved people lived in the city.

"It's really the first time that Ona and her enslaved companions are surrounded by Black freedom," said historian Erica Armstrong Dunbar, who spent nine years exhaustively researching Judge's life for her book, "Never Caught," after happening across the 1796 ad. "Freedom is contagious."

Judge would have encountered — and likely befriended — free Black citizens as she accompanied Martha on social visits and errands and even attended the circus. Still, the Washingtons apparently had trouble grasping Judge's motives. Martha was distraught to lose her maid, whom despite the constant demands placed on her, the couple felt was "brought up & treated more like a child than a

Servant.” The president believed Judge was seduced by a “Frenchman.” The runaway ad claimed “there was no suspicion of her going off, nor no provocation to do so.”

Dunbar attributes some of the Washingtons’ bafflement over Judge’s escape to “paternalistic justifications” of slavery, and she said the president must have understood Judge’s yearning to be free. “George Washington had just fought a war about freedom,” she said.

For years, George and Martha had been moving their enslaved servants out of Pennsylvania and back again, to subvert laws mandating that enslaved people who entered the state should be liberated after six months. The president knew this subterfuge wouldn’t sit well with the public. “I request that these Sentiments and this advise may be known to none but yourself & Mrs. Washington,” he wrote to his secretary, Tobias Lear. A further wrinkle was that the president didn’t actually own Judge; her mother, Betty, was connected to Martha’s first husband’s estate, which meant that if Judge escaped, Washington would have to compensate his wife’s heirs for the loss.

In Portsmouth, Judge found lodging through a network of allies and took a job as a domestic laborer. In January of 1797, she married Jack Staines, a free Black sailor, and they boldly published their wedding announcement in the newspaper. Before long the couple had a daughter, Eliza. They would eventually have another daughter and a son.

Washington made at least two attempts to apprehend Judge. After she was spotted by a friend of Martha’s granddaughter Nelly in late 1796, the president asked his Treasury secretary, Oliver Wolcott Jr., to contact Portsmouth’s customs officer, Joseph Whipple, who devised to lure Judge with a false job offer. When Judge came to inquire, Whipple’s probing questions made her suspicious, and he admitted

his motives and tried to convince her to return to the Washingtons. To placate him, Judge agreed to meet him later and board a ship, but she never showed.

Three years later, Washington asked Martha’s nephew, Burwell Bassett Jr., to try again. When he arrived at Judge’s door, Bassett promised that if she returned with him to Mount Vernon, she’d be granted freedom. Judge stood her ground. “I am free now and choose to remain so,” she told him, according to an interview she gave to the *Granite Freeman*, an abolitionist newspaper, in 1845. Flustered, Bassett left but plotted to return and seize Judge and Eliza by force. But someone tipped off Judge — possibly Sen. John Langdon, whom Bassett was staying with, but whose views on slavery had softened. By the time Bassett

circled back, Judge had hired a horse and carriage and fled to Greenland, New Hampshire, 6 miles away.

“For me, it’s so extraordinary,” said Yancey, “because here’s this woman, she doesn’t have a lot of power, and she’s outsmarting the most powerful man in the country.”

Washington died in 1799, and in the 1845 interview Judge said “they never troubled me any more after he was gone,” though her path was far from smooth. She remained in New Hampshire with her husband and children, doing odd jobs for scant pay. After Staines’ death in 1803, the household’s finances were even more precarious, and Judge moved in with a free Black family, the Jacks. She outlived her three children, and she probably never reunited with her relations in Virginia, including her half-sister Philadelphia, who was given to Elizabeth Parke Custis Law in her place. (She was eventually freed by Custis Law.)

Amid the hardships, Judge became literate and found solace in the Christian church. She would remain a fugitive until her death in 1848 at around age 74, but in the *Granite Freeman* interview, Judge said she had no regrets about the life she lived. “No, I am free,” she said, citing the conditions that allowed her to educate herself, “and have, I trust, been made a Child of God by the means.”

Dunbar said that while it may complicate our ideas of figures like the Washingtons, presenting the “hidden stories” of people such as Ona Judge can give the public “a more holistic and accurate depiction of this nation,” which in turn allows them to better understand their country and themselves. “All it can do is enrich the history,” she said. “It doesn’t subtract anything, it doesn’t remove anything. It’s additive.”



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DORIAN FOX is a writer, teacher and freelance editor based in Boston.



A SEA LION swims past a scuba diver in the waters of Channel Islands National Park, California.
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