



The Coalition Weekly Report

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Incidents

Great Smoky Mountains NP Visitor Falls To Death While Taking Photo

Wesley Stedham, 48, fell to his death last Tuesday while trying to take a photo at one of the park's scenic overlooks.

Witnesses told investigators the incident happened at 1:40 p.m. at the Chimney Tops overlook along Newfound Gap Road. Stedham fell about 50 feet after stepping down a steep slope below the overlook for a photograph. He suffered severe head trauma and passed away as a result of these injuries. Rangers and a rescue team had to rappel down by rope to reach Stedham.

There is no fence, wall or guardrail at the top of the slope and park officials say no park rules were broken by Stedham prior to his fall.

Terrain around the mountain's bare rock peaks is considered very steep and the hiking trail rises 1,400 feet within two miles. To reach the summit, there is a steep rock scramble that can be slippery when wet or covered in ice.

Source: [Mark Price, Charlotte Observer](#).

Arches NP Family Of Visitor Killed By Swinging Gate Suing NPS

The family of a women's rights activist from Uganda has filed a more than \$270 million wrongful death and personal injury claim against the National Park Service after she was decapitated by an unsecured park gate.

Newlyweds Esther "Essie" Nakajjigo, 25, and Ludovic "Ludo" Michaud, 26, were driving to get ice cream during a camping trip last June 13th when a metal gate blew closed in strong winds and sliced through the side of their car "like a hot knife through butter," according to the administrative claim, which was filed in October. The gate narrowly missed Michaud, who is originally from Paris but now lives in Denver.

Attorney Deborah Chang, who filed the claim on behalf of Michaud, as well as Nakajjigo's parents, wrote that the National Park Service has for years used entrance and exit gates made of metal poles with "spear-like sharp ends," and they were known to swing into roadways when left unsecured.

Employees “knew or should have known that winds strong enough to carve stone are certainly strong enough to blow an unrestrained metal pipe gate into the path of an oncoming vehicle,” wrote Chang, who plans to file a formal lawsuit if the claim is rejected..

The National Park Service and Arches National Park are accused of not securing the gate, which was installed to swing in the wrong direction and was being held open by a “flimsy metal tab” that was “worn down and rounded,” according to the claim.

Source: [Thomas Peipert, Associated Press, via ABC News.](#)

National Park System

Follow-ups On Previously Reported Incidents

Below are short follow-ups on incidents previously reported in this newsletter.

- *Cape Hatteras NS* – On October 18th, Ranger Valerie Streiff dove into the waters near Bodie Island Lighthouse to save a father and son who were in distress. A letter from the father appeared in the *Outer Banks Voice* just before Thanksgiving. He describes how the event unfolded, then includes this tribute to Streiff: “Without a doubt, [Streiff] is a certified American hero. That morning, she had run six miles before starting her shift for the park service. She had the skills and equipment prepared to be in the right place at the moment of need. She did not hesitate to act outside of the requirements of her job. There were others on the shore that day. Many of whom, no doubt, genuinely wished they could do something. Only one made it into the water to help. I am forever grateful to her and for her preparation. I remind my kids of her heroism multiple times each week since then. We have purchased a throwable buoy on a line for each beach trip. We’ve studied how to spot rip currents. We aim to be more prepared in case someone else is in need as we were. We aim to be more like Valerie. There are those who make a lot of noise about fixing the world we live in. And then there are those robust, red-blooded Americans who roll up their sleeves and put in the work to truly fix it. They pack flotation devices in the truck and renew their CPR certification and first aid skills and run in the morning to stay in shape and don’t sit on the shore waiting for someone else whose job description more closely matches the need. This Thursday when my family and I sit around the table and express what we’re thankful for, you can be assured that we will all mention Mrs. Valerie Streiff. Valerie, if you ever read this, you and your family are always welcome at our home and I hope to still drop off that six pack I owe you. Thank you for saving me and my son.” Source: [Outer Banks Voice](#).
- *Mount Rainier NP* – The snowshoer who was rescued from the mountain on November 8th died in the emergency room at Harborview Medical Center – but was revived through an extraordinary all-night effort by medical personnel. Michael Knapinski, 45, had a pulse when he arrived in the ER but his heart soon stopped beating. The medical team repeatedly performed CPR and hooked him up to an extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO) machine, which pumped blood out of his body into a heart-lung machine that removes carbon dioxide, and then back into the body. His heart remained stopped for 45 minutes. After the doctors restarted it, the medical team spent the night beside him to make sure he continued to stabilize. Two days later, Knapinski woke up. Trauma nurse Whitney Holen was there and said the first thing he wanted was to call his family. “He was crying and they were crying and I’m fairly sure I cried a little bit,” Holen said. “It was just really special to see someone that we had worked so hard on from start to finish to then wake up that dramatically and that impressively. It reminded me of this is why we do this. This is why we are doing the long hours, this is why we’re away from our families, this is why we’re here.” Source: [KOMO News](#).
- *Hot Springs NP* – Cedric Wiley, 30, has been sentenced to more than 13 years in federal prison for a shooting in the park in 2019. Wiley was charged with one count of assault with a dangerous weapon with intent to do bodily harm and one count of discharge of a firearm during and in relation to a crime of violence. The incident occurred on the evening of February 21st. Responding rangers found one person with a gunshot wound; the victim told them that

Wiley had been his assailant. Wiley was indicted by a federal grand jury in June of 2019 and entered a guilty plea in August of 2019. Source: [KATV News](#).

National Fire Situation

National Interagency Fire Center National Preparedness Level Drops To PL 1

The national preparedness level has dropped to PL 1.

NIFC has stopped producing daily reports in favor of a weekly summary. On November 26th, the center reported eight new incidents and nineteen large fires contained.

Resource Commitment Trend

Category	November 10	November 25	November 27
Area Command Teams	0	0	0
NIMO Teams	1	0	0
Type 1 Teams	0	0	0
Type 2 Teams	4	4	0
Crews	46	17	11
Engines	198	105	26
Helicopters	24	9	3
Total FF/Overhead	3,406	1,483	502

Fires/Acreage

Category	2010-2019 Ave	2020 Total	Difference
United States: YTD Fires	55,160	52,113	- 3,047
United States: YTD Acres	6,568,484	8,889,297□	+ 2,320,813

Sources: [NICC Incident Management Situation Report](#); [National Interagency Fire Center](#); [IMSR Archives](#); [InciWeb Incident Information System](#).

Congressional Actions

Reports on legislation, upcoming hearings and new public laws of relevance to the national parks, prepared by Don Hellmann, former assistant director, legislative and Congressional affairs for the National Park Service.

New Public Laws

Nothing to report.

Senate Actions

The Senate was in recess for the Thanksgiving holiday.

House Actions

The House was in recess for the Thanksgiving holiday.

National Park Service

Around The Parks

Park reports are in alphabetical order. Included are proposals in the works for new areas or changes in designation for current NPS units.

- *Channel Islands NP* – The park is seeking proposals from interested parties to lease historic structures to provide rustic lodging, food, beverage, campground management/support, and other services on Santa Rosa Island. The request for expressions of interest ([available at this link](#)) are for a long-term lease for up to 60 years. Multiple lessees may be accepted if found to be necessary for the success of the new visitor service. The lease will require that the lessee rehabilitate and/or preserve the structures and land described in the RFEI document. Respondents can submit proposals until Wednesday, February 24th, in paper or electronic format. Please submit hard-copy RFEI submissions to Channel Islands National Park, Attn: Commercial Services, 1901 Spinnaker Drive, Ventura, CA 93001. Or email electronic copies to: john.hansen@nps.gov . Source: [National Park Service](#).
- *Crater Lake NP* – “A record number of visitors this past July and August tested the short-staffed national park,” reports *The Oregonian*, “where rangers spent the summer scrambling to rescue stranded hikers, protect natural areas, and prevent outbreaks among workers and visitors during the coronavirus pandemic. ‘We were operating with far less than half our staff with record numbers of visitors,’ park Superintendent Craig Ackerman said. ‘It became a problem trying to manage.’ Crater Lake set crowd records for July, when 209,678 people visited the park, as well as August, which drew 222,638 visitors, according to preliminary data provided by the National Park Service. The August number is particularly impressive, far surpassing the month’s previous record of 176,895 people, set during the National Park Service’s centennial anniversary in 2016. A total of 550,870 people visited Crater Lake between June and September, according to park data, making it the fourth busiest summer on record. The seasonal total was balanced out with a slow June, when the park was closed for a week, and a relatively slow September, when wildfires blocked off several access roads to Crater Lake.” Source: [Jamie Hale, The Oregonian](#).
- *Cuyahoga Valley NP* – The former Brandywine Country Club in Peninsula is officially becoming part of the park. As part of the Great American Outdoors Act, \$3.8 million will be used to acquire the property. The 215-acre former golf course has been closed since 2018 and was on the market for several months afterward, leading to speculation that the land might be sold for development. The property is owned by the Conservancy for Cuyahoga Valley National Park, which signed a purchase agreement last year to acquire the property, with plans to convert it to parkland. The conservancy declined to release the terms of the purchase agreement last year. Source: [Emily Mills, Akron Beacon Journal](#).
- *Gateway NRA* – The long-running debate over the future of former military buildings at Fort Hancock on Sandy Hook moved to the front burner in November when nearly 200 people joined in a virtual open house regarding a project currently under consideration that would convert 21 of them into residential apartments. “Opponents of the project say that the national historic landmark should remain something for the public to continue to enjoy,” reports the *Middletown Patch*. “But proponents of the plan that would allow Stillman Development international to convert the structures into 93 apartments while other buildings on the grounds to be turned into restaurants, bars and event space, insist the project is needed to help preserve buildings that have been decaying for years.” The article lines out the arguments raised by each side regarding the proposal. Source: [Jeff Arnold, Middletown Patch](#).
- *Great Smoky Mountains NP* – Four years ago, the Chimney Tops 2 Fire burned out of the park, claiming 14 lives and causing hundreds of millions of dollars in property damage. Last week, a federal judge reiterated a finding that the National Park Service had an obligation to provide notices of the fire’s progress to neighbors. The losses incurred in the fire became the topic of

multiple lawsuits filed against the NPS on behalf of families that lost lives or homes in the fires and on behalf of insurance companies that say the NPS should foot the bill for their claims. In a new ruling related to the suits filed by the insurance companies, the judge found that the park's fire management plan mandated that park employees give notice to neighboring communities. Source: [Jeff Farrell, Mountain Press](#).

Opinions

Opinions, op-eds, letters and articles expressing specific opinions about issues pertaining to the national parks or national park system.

- [“Raise the Entrance Fees for Our National Parks,”](#) Kevin Williamson, *National Review*. “The National Park Service has two perennial complaints,” writes Williamson. “One is that it is underfunded, and the other is that the national parks are overcrowded. Call me Machiavellian, but that, my friends, looks to me like the kind of problem that can be solved — and solved pretty easily: Keep raising the price of admissions until the parks aren’t overcrowded anymore...[If] we are going to talk about the national parks like they are assets, then it is time to start treating them like assets. There is no real alternative to rationing access to the national parks, and the most straightforward — and fairest — way to ration access is through pricing.”
- [“Empty Promises Will Plague Our Public Lands,”](#) Marne Hayes, *Bozeman Daily Chronicle*. Hayes focuses on the shortcoming associated with the implementation of the Great American Outdoors Act, particularly on her home state of Montana: “Montanans expected a list of LWCF projects securing more than \$116 million for over 60 projects on Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, and Fish and Wildlife Service lands, as well as roughly \$23 million for federal public lands acquisitions – a list necessary to remain in compliance with the Great American Outdoor Act. But that didn’t happen. Not one single LWCF project has been named. Not one fishing access site, not one tennis court or community park, not one expansion of public land access or improved recreation site. Not a single one. To make matters worse, no reasonable explanation was given by the administration. At best this is disappointing. At worst it is dishonest.” The answer: Keep fighting for full implementation of GAOA and promises made to Montana.

The Federal Government

News from around the federal government – including DOI, kindred agencies and the courts – of consequence to the NPS.

- *OMB Designates Most Of Its Work Force As Schedule F* – “The leadership of the Office of Management and Budget reportedly plans to reclassify the vast majority of its workforce into a new employment category, removing job protections and effectively making them at-will employees,” reported *Government Executive* on November 23rd. “Last month, President Trump signed an executive order creating a new Schedule F within the excepted service for employees ‘in confidential, policy-determining, policy-making and policy-advocating positions’ and instructing agencies to identify and transfer competitive service employees that meet that description into the new job classification, an initiative that could strip hundreds of thousands of federal workers of their civil service protections. The order has been widely derided by stakeholders and experts as an effort to politicize the civil service that would allow the president to purge agencies of employees viewed as disloyal and to instill partisans throughout the federal government. Agencies’ preliminary reviews of their workforces to determine who should be moved into Schedule F are due to the Office of Personnel Management by Jan. 19.” Source: [Erich Wagner, Government Executive](#).

Park People

NPS Alumni
Passing Of Glen Gossert

Glen Leslie Gossert, 85, of Romney, West Virginia, passed away on Thursday, November 19th at Hampshire Memorial Hospital. Glen was preceded in death by his wife of 50 years, Alda Lucille (Funk) Gossert.

Glen went to school in Quincy, Pennsylvania, then attended classes at Penn State University in Mont Alto. He had been a mason for construction companies. He was employed at the C&O Canal NHP from the mid-1970's until his retirement in 2009 as the Oldtown maintenance supervisor.

Glen was a member of the former Association of National Park Service Maintenance Employees. Following his retirement Glen enjoyed cruising and traveling with his son and daughter-in-law, Faye.

Glen is survived by his son, Jared Gossert, and his two daughters, Millisen G. Gossert Crawford and Glenna G. Gossert Bender.

Submitted by member Rick Erisman.

National Park Service Recent NPS Management Changes

Here's a listing of recent personnel changes in the NPS. Click on the links following the brief summaries for additional details:

- *Blue Ridge Parkway* – Superintendent J.D. Lee has retired. Lee, a 33-year veteran of the National Park Service, served as acting parkway superintendent from September 2017 until February 2018, when he was assigned permanently. He began his career as a seasonal law enforcement ranger and wildland firefighter in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. He worked at parks coast to coast and was deputy superintendent of Big Cypress National Preserve in Florida just before coming to Asheville, where the parkway is headquartered. Source: [Karen Chávez, Asheville Citizen Times](#).
- *Point Reyes NS* – Craig Kenkel has been selected to serve as the park's superintendent. He will take on his new duties in January. Kenkel currently serves as the superintendent of Cuyahoga Valley National Park and First Ladies and James A. Garfield National Historic Sites in Ohio. Source: [Kurtis Alexander, San Francisco Chronicle](#).

From The Archives

This section contains incidents taken from *Morning Report* issues published during the corresponding week (approximately) 25 years ago in 1995. All entries appear in the original verb tense; "submitters" are those people who originally submitted the incident report.

- *Joshua Tree NP* – A park maintenance worker came upon David Gebhart, 31, near Fried Liver Wash on the morning of November 9th. Gebhart was incoherent, mostly naked, covered with cactus spines, and suffering from severe dehydration. Although he didn't know what day or month it was, Gebhart was adamant in his conviction that he was being pursued by various law enforcement agencies who were trying to kill him at his wife's request. He was taken to a local hospital, where he spent three days being treated for dehydration and exposure. Rangers determined that Gebhart had left his home in Twenty-Nine Palms four days before he was found, and that his wife had reported him missing and suicidal on the 8th. His vehicle was found later on the 9th about 15 air miles away in another portion of the park. Cooler fall temperatures contributed to Gebhart's survival. Submitted by Chief Ranger Judy Bartzatt.
- *Bryce Canyon NP* – Two helicopters flew into the park to a location near Sunset Point at dawn on the morning of November 21st. A Bell 206B-3 outfitted with a "spectra" camera held its position while a bungee jumper leaped off the landing gear of a Llama SA 315 which hovered at an altitude of 900 feet above ground. The Llama then flew out of the park with the bungee

jumper dangling below. The entire sequence was repeated shortly thereafter. The helicopters then flew to a local landing area, where they were contacted by park staff. Plum Productions, the filming company, had earlier contacted the park for commercial filming information, and stated at that time that they would be filming from a helicopter during a short fly-over. There was no mention of low level flights or bungee jumping. The company had given the FAA office in Salt Lake City a full description of its plans, but the FAA failed to advise the park. The FAA has agreed to inform park staff of future requests for low altitude flights over the park. The company was filming a commercial for a popular soft drink. Submitted by Chief Ranger Larry Nielson.

- *Capitol Reef NP* – Last April 8th, rangers observed and photographed two people digging and removing minerals from a remote section of the park. A consent search of their vehicles led to the discovery of more minerals and detailed notebooks containing GPS coordinates and travel records. Ranger Bob Kreiling and special agent Pat Buccello coordinated an extensive, seven-month investigation involving staff from eight Colorado Plateau Cluster parks and the Bureau of Land Management. Investigators found that the two were members of a group that sells rocks and minerals commercially, and that the group collects specimens from throughout the west, some from parks and public lands. Undercover operations in Utah, Colorado and Wyoming resulted in purchases of minerals and an offer to provide larger specimens as soon as they could be secretly taken from Capitol Reef. One of the recent sales included shipment of 500 pieces of selenite to Brazil. On November 16th, NPS rangers, criminal investigators and a special agent served search warrants on two Salt Lake area homes and found further evidence of thefts from parks. They discovered large amounts of rocks and minerals, Native American remains, drug paraphernalia, a large quantity of unsecured dynamite, and a backhoe. A variety of felony and misdemeanor charges are pending. Submitted by Chief Rangers Office.

A Closing Observation

"The Everglades is a test. If we pass it, we get to keep the planet."

[Marjory Stoneman Douglas](#), journalist and conservationist known for her staunch defense of the Everglades against efforts to drain it and reclaim land for development.

Acknowledgements

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- Production: Steve Pittleman
- Regular Correspondents: Don Hellmann, Emily Thompson, Dennis Burnett, Rick Smith, Duncan Morrow and Mark Forbes
- Issue Contributors: Rick Erisman

If you see something that might be of interest to Coalition members, send it to Bill Halainen at the Weekly National Park System Report: BHalainen@gmail.com. Please don't submit them via his personal email address or Facebook page.

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The *Weekly National Park System Report* is a publication of The Coalition To Protect America's National Parks. It is prepared by Coalition member Bill Halainen, former editor of the *NPS Morning Report*, and produced and disseminated by Coalition member Steve Pittleman.

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

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