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National Parks

THE MAGAZINE OF THE NATIONAL PARKS CONSERVATIO

PROTEST LANDS

A VISUAL HISTORY OF RACIAL JUSTICE DEMONSTRATIONS IN AMERICA'S NATIONAL PARKS.

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National Parks
FALL 2020 / Vol. 94 No. 4

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A JOSHUA TREE in Mojave National Preserve.

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FEATURES

COVER:
A BLACK LIVES MATTER protester at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Washington, D.C.

©STEPHEN VOSS

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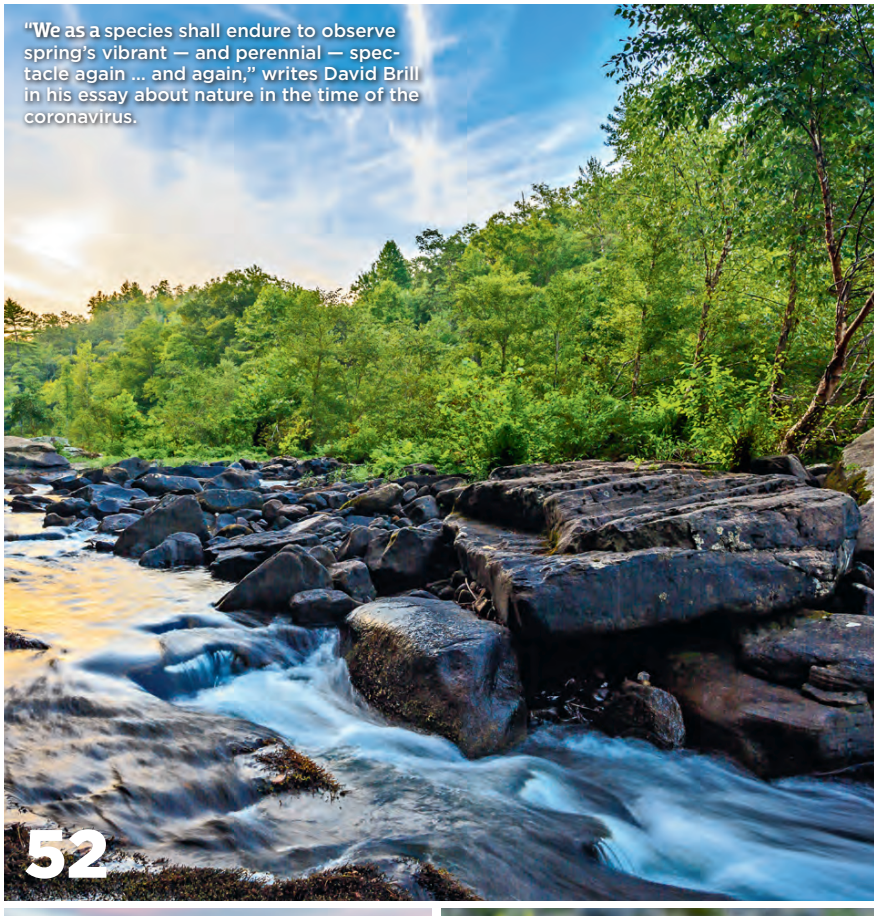

"We as a species shall endure to observe spring's vibrant — and perennial — spectacle again ... and again," writes David Brill in his essay about nature in the time of the coronavirus.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: NPS, ©BRIAN VAN DER BRUG/LOS ANGELES TIMES, ©DANA DAMEWOOD, ©MICHAEL ESTRADA

DEPARTMENTS

FALL 2020 / Vol. 94 No. 4

ON THE WEB
Follow NPCA on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and get park news, travel tips and more on NPCA's blog: **npca.org/blog.**

An Ongoing Fight

"When you put your hand to the plow, you can't put it down until you get to the end of the row."

— Alice Paul

Alice Paul wanted to win the right to vote for women, and she was determined to keep going until that right was won. She wasn't the only one. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, Ida B. Wells, Frederick Douglass and so many others joined the women's suffrage movement in the U.S., which began in the 1840s. Activists convened and campaigned. They picketed and lobbied. They were imprisoned and tortured. And they endured.

On August 26, 1920, the 19th amendment became law, and women across the country were finally granted the right to vote. But America wasn't at the end of the row. At that time, state and local laws called for poll taxes or literacy tests before a citizen could vote, effectively disenfranchising many African Americans, immigrants and poor people.

The work continued, with brave and determined men and women fighting to eliminate legal barriers that prevented people from exercising the right to vote. Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis and thousands of others demonstrated and marched. Sometimes, their peaceful protests were also met with brutal physical attacks. But they, too, endured, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was signed into law.

We continue to have our hand on the plow, and we aren't yet at the end of the row. But we are closer because of the women and men who fought so hard for our right to vote. That is a right none of us should take for granted.

When it is safe to travel, I encourage you to visit some of the national park sites that tell these important stories, including the Women's Rights National Historical Park in New York, Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail in Alabama, Belmont-Paul Women's Equality National Monument in Washington, D.C., and Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument in Alabama. And I encourage you to exercise your right to vote.

With gratitude,
Theresa Pierno

Editor's Note

©ANDRÉ CHUNG

A BLACK LIVES MATTER protester at the Lincoln Memorial in June.

100 Years of Dissent

Black Lives Matter protests have taken place across the country, but some of the most significant moments to date have occurred on national park land, from the violent clashes between protesters and police at Lafayette Square near the White House to the large peaceful gatherings on the National Mall. As photos of these events proliferated this spring, the magazine staff began thinking about pictures of other demonstrations for racial justice that have similarly unfolded on public lands. We embarked on a search and turned up a rich collection of photographs from the last 100 years. In some cases, organizers used national parks as stages to amplify their messages. Elsewhere, the lands became national parks to honor historic protests.

We found photos highlighting issues ranging from school desegregation to Indigenous people's rights, immigrants' rights and voting rights. We couldn't possibly print pictures of every demonstration, but we selected a representative sample for a photo essay, which begins on page 42.

It is stirring to look through these photographs of a signature marker of American democracy: dissent. Over the years, civil rights icons and everyday people alike have stood up for equality, and their determination offers hope in uncertain times. But the photos can also evoke feelings of sadness. So much has changed. So little has changed. Some of the images we're publishing are decades old but seem as though they could have been taken yesterday. Somehow many of the concerns Americans had 20, 50 and 100 years ago remain urgent — or at least unresolved. The earliest photo in the story is a 1922 image of an anti-lynching march. Since 1900, Congress has tried around 200 times to pass a federal anti-lynching law. The most recent bill passed in the House in February, but as of this writing, the Senate has failed to vote on it.

How much progress have we made as a nation when it comes to racial justice and equality for all? I hope these photos can contribute to this critical conversation.

Rona Marech
NPMAG@NPCA.ORG

NationalParks

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

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

EDITORIAL MISSION
National Parks magazine fosters an appreciation 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
To donate, please visit npca.org or call 800.628.7275. For information about bequests, planned gifts and matching gifts, call our Development Department, extension 145 or 146.

QUESTIONS?
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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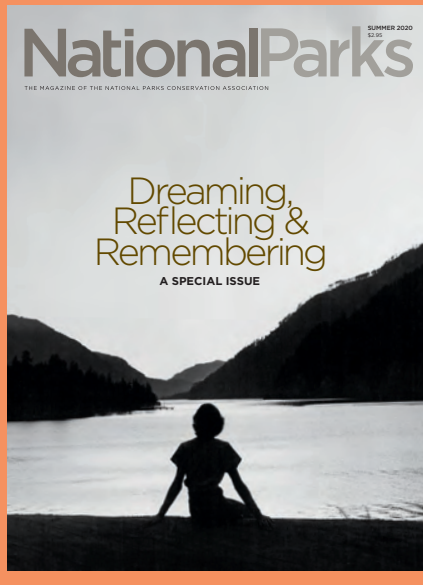


VICARIOUS TRAVEL

As a longtime NPCA supporter, I continue to appreciate your ongoing efforts. This note is a simple "thank you" for the special Summer 2020 issue. During a time when travel was not possible, it served me well in acting like a weekend on the road.

JONATHAN CHAPMAN
Windsor, CO

WHAT'S OLD IS NEW

Greetings to all who are facing this pandemic, presumably from home. I want to say that I loved the Summer 2020 issue and your ability to put together an exciting and interesting issue from earlier times. They seemed fresh and new, and I was halfway through the magazine before I noticed that all the stories were actually reruns. I laughed and kept on reading and enjoying myself. Thanks so much!

JAMES BOONE
Portland, OR

FOND MEMORIES

Thank you for the special Summer 2020 issue, "Dreaming, Reflecting and Remembering." We live in Washington, so Mount Rainier, Crescent Lake and Crater Lake are parts of home. We have made many trips to Glacier (and probably heard "The Voice of Glacier") and have seen the Grand Canyon and the Tetons. My husband doesn't fly, so we have cruised five times to Alaska. It is my place to return to. I have read "One Man's Wilderness," and last but not least, we have spent weeks in the Smokies. We hiked the "rigorous" hike [mentioned in "Sketching the Smokies"] to spend a night on top of the mountain. Thank you, especially at this time, for the memories these stories brought to mind. When I think of all these times with my family, I get teary. The issue made my day, week, month ... maybe my whole year!

JUDI STANDLEY
Kirkland, WA

FACING THE TRUTH

As I think back over my life, I remember hearing the name Frederick Douglass, but I did not know the story of his life until reading the article, "Renaissance Man." Thank you, thank you, thank you! Now more than ever, we see just how long Black people have been fighting for freedom and justice. People are opening their eyes to the struggles of minorities in a country that prides itself on promoting equality. It is critical to face the truth of history and share it with others. Please know that your work is important to this country.

SAUNDRA NELSON
Los Angeles, CA

A NOTE OF THANKS

In this very challenging season of our lives, I am again reminded of and grateful for the restorative power inherent in our parks and would like the people who serve in them to know it. I would tell them: Whether you are a law enforcement officer, interpreter, maintenance person, scientist or office staffer, thank you. Thank you for making our wondrous parks, monuments, historic sites, recreational areas and seashores available to us. Thank you for your extraordinary role in protecting us in those places and for protecting those places from us. And now, my confession. With no apologies, I admit to having gone far past

leaving only footprints and taking only photographs. The memories — the sights, sounds (or lack of them) and smells — are in my rucksack. If walking off with those is a crime, I suppose you park folks are abettors, and I thank you for being a partner in it.

STEVE SCARANO
Vista, CA

FAMILY TIES

I read with interest "The Voice of Glacier," in which Doug Follett recounts that he moved to East Glacier in 1927 when his father had a job there. He talks about befriending the Blackfeet. It brought back the memory of reading my grandfather's first cousin's narrative "The Old North Trail," which documents his 1896 journey to Montana with the commission investigating national forests. My grandfather's cousin became friends with the expedition's scout, and he spent 20 years taking thousands of photographs of the Blackfeet's homeland, culture and ceremonies. He eventually became a blood brother of Chief Mad Wolf.

MARGERY SPOFFORD
Sebastopol, CA

RECALLING PARADISE

Thank you very much for the collection of remembrances of Dick Proenneke in the article "Reflections on a Man in his Wilderness." My late husband, Arthur, and I had the privilege of meeting Proenneke on a memorable excursion to his breathtaking homesite in the summer of 1996 during a trip to Lake Clark in Alaska. I cherish my memories of that visit. Afterward, we watched the PBS special on Proenneke and shared DVDs of that show with many friends. Proenneke was an exceptional person, living an exceptional life — just as he wanted it — in his own paradise.

PHYLLIS SAARINEN
Newberry, FL

FORCES THAT SHAPE US

If quarantining has had a silver lining for me, it's been catching up on your excellent magazine. You've not only made me aware of Hampton National Historic Site's history [Winter 2020], but with stories about Emmett Till [Winter 2019], Minidoka [Fall 2019], Devil's Tower [Summer 2019], Harriet Tubman [Fall 2017] and Point Comfort [Fall 2019], you've threaded a running tale of slavery and racism as part of our nation's original sin. Such storytelling strikes me as a fundamental part of why the Park Service maintains, reviews and revises the content of its sites. Facts don't change. But new ones are unearthed and appraised from a fresh perspective. History lives.

I visit our Park Service treasures to gain an understanding of our world and the forces that shape it. By learning how we've arrived at this state, we can create a better future. Driving Gettysburg's roads, I can appreciate how the topography affected the battle. Walking a trail at the Grand Canyon, I can comprehend how the layered land was shaped. And, by walking through Manzanar's re-created barrack, its garden and cemetery, I can imagine the cruel perversion of seeing the snowy Sierras while incarcerated solely for one's lineage.

Whether each of us heads to parks for recreation or history or escape, we all go for something we can't get at home, something that enriches our lives and tells us about ourselves. Your magazine similarly enriches and informs, particularly when you cast light on a location or issue I'd otherwise miss. It takes a lot to stand out these days. National Parks does so for the right reasons.

RICK COHEN
New York, NY

FINDING THE BRIGHT SPOT

I am a bit behind in my magazine reading, and I just finished the Winter 2019 issue. The piece Kate Siber wrote, "Mississippi Reckoning," is so current today. I was deeply touched, angered and appalled at man's inhumanity to man. The bright spots are the sites and museums that have been opened and dedicated to recognizing and remembering our past. National Parks is a publication that I always read carefully, and I learn from it. Thank you and your team for a job well done. Now if all the senators and the president would only read it …

BARBARA ARNOLD
Madison, WI

Send letters to National Parks Magazine, 777 6th Street NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20001-3723. Or email npmag@npca.org. Include your name, city and state. Published letters may be edited for length and clarity.

We have never opposed hunting, but this can hardly be considered hunting.

Theresa Pierno, NPCA president and CEO, in The New York Times article, "Trump Administration Revives Banned Hunting Techniques in Alaska." In early June, the Department of the Interior published new rules that would allow unethical hunting techniques, such as shooting black bears in their dens, on national preserve lands in Alaska. NPCA strongly opposes these new regulations.

National park advocates joined communities along the trail in calling for an end to this risky, irresponsible energy project, and their voices made a difference.

Pamela Goddard, senior Mid-Atlantic program director, in a statement celebrating the cancelation of the multi-billion-dollar, 600-mile Atlantic Coast Pipeline that would have crossed under the Appalachian National Scenic Trail and run along the Blue Ridge Parkway, harming waterways, viewsheds and park communities.

For decades, the spectacular lands of the Badger–Two Medicine have been overshadowed by a cloud of uncertainty. Now that cloud is lifting.

NPCA's Michael Jamison, Crown of the Continent senior program manager, as quoted in The Missoulian in an article headlined, "Badger-Two Medicine Gets Protection Bill." In June, a federal appeals court upheld the cancellation of the last of the region's oil and gas leases. A month later, Democratic Sen. Jon Tester of Montana introduced legislation that would designate the Badger-Two Medicine, adjacent to Glacier National Park, a cultural heritage area.

PHOTO: NEW REGULATIONS WOULD ALLOW HUNTERS TO BAIT BROWN BEARS WITH DOUGHNUTS. KATMAI NATIONAL PARK & PRESERVE, ALASKA.

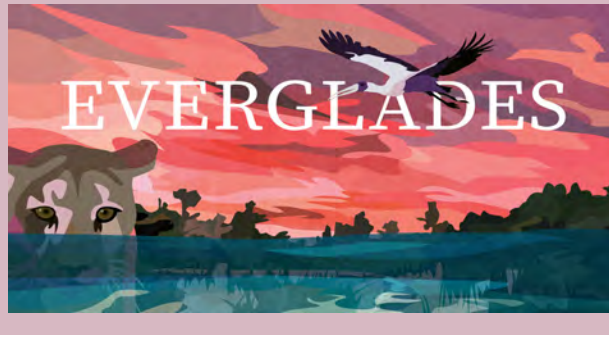
@STEVE LEVI | LEVIIMAGES

PARKS IN PERIL

For nearly four years, the current administration has worked to systematically undermine and outright attack the laws that protect public lands, the agencies that manage them and the irreplaceable resources in these places. Picture a 30-foot-tall wall ripping through a desert oasis, a field of oil rigs obstructing some of the nation's most prized viewsheds, Yellowstone without grizzly bears or Great Smoky Mountains without park rangers. These scenes are no longer as unimaginable as they once were. Concerned about the consequences of the administration's policies for public lands and surrounding communities, NPCA unveiled its "Parks in Peril" campaign this summer. To learn more about what's at stake — and what you can do — go to **npca.org/parksinperil.**

IGNORING A CHANGING CLIMATE

Climate change is wreaking havoc on national parks: Many plants and animals are on the brink of extinction, glaciers are melting, beaches are eroding, and historic structures are crumbling. At Everglades, rising sea levels threaten the park's ecosystems and the many rare animals that live there. Still, the administration continues to prioritize the interests of the polluters that are driving the crisis.

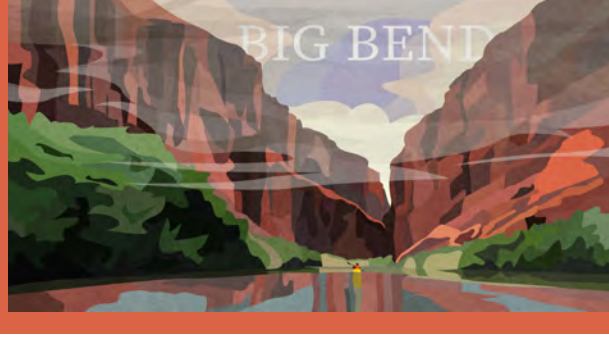


BUILDING A WALL, DESTROYING A PARK

Border wall construction at Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in Arizona has already resulted in workers bulldozing 100-year-old saguaro cactuses and clearing land directly above Native American graves. Coronado National Memorial could soon be in the same position, as new construction was proposed by the administration in March 2020.

ERASING CLEAN AIR SAFEGUARDS

Ninety-six percent of the country's more than 400 national park sites are plagued by air pollution problems, according to an NPCA study. But the administration continues to weaken invaluable clean air laws, allowing coal plants and other polluters to foul the air we breathe.



ENDANGERING PARK WILDLIFE

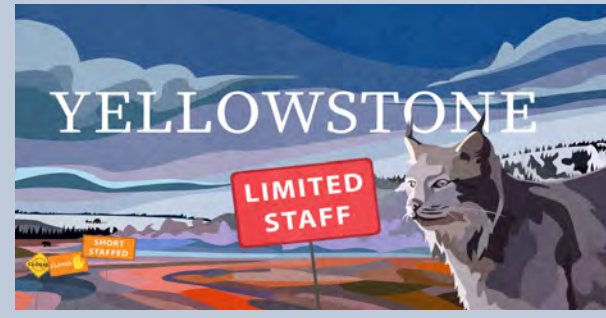
The administration has finalized new rules that change how the Endangered Species Act is implemented on the ground, gutting critical protections for threatened species that live in national parks, such as Olympic's northern spotted owls and sockeye salmon.

SILENCING PUBLIC VOICES

The administration has gutted a bedrock environmental law intended to ensure that the public has a voice in how public lands are used and that government agencies consider public health and the environment before permitting proposed projects on federal lands. At Colonial National Historical Park, the administration failed to conduct a transparent public process and allowed an energy company to build a transmission line that mars Jamestown's historical landscape.

CUTTING PARK FUNDING

Park rangers protect our most prized landscapes and cultural sites and keep them in good condition for future generations to experience and enjoy. Yet the administration has repeatedly called for massive cuts to National Park Service funding, which would result in fewer park rangers to defend these places. (One exception to the administration's call for cuts is its support of the Great American Outdoors Act, see story p.12.)



FAST-TRACKING OIL & GAS DRILLING

Nearly 24.5 million acres of public land — an area larger than the state of Indiana — have been offered for oil and gas leasing since the administration took office. And the Department of the Interior continues to put tens of thousands of acres on the table across the West, leasing some for as little as $2 an acre.

PAVING THE WAY FOR MINING

The state of Alaska is pushing forward with permitting for a private industrial mining access road through Gates of the Arctic National Preserve — and the administration is paving the way for the eventual construction of the road, which would impede caribou migration and threaten the livelihood of Alaska Native communities.

ELIMINATING CLEAN WATER PROTECTIONS

The administration's clean water rollbacks have eliminated protections for more than half of America's wetlands, rivers and streams, threatening wildlife in national parks and drinking water for millions of people across the country.

ILLUSTRATION BY ANGELINE BANDONG

OVER HALF of the projects on the Park Service's infrastructure repair backlog list concern park roads, such as the Grand Loop Road in Yellowstone National Park, pictured here.

©KEN LANE/FLICKR

A Big Boon for Parks

A landmark bill will provide billions in funds for national parks and other public lands.

In an extraordinary display of bipartisanship, Congress passed sweeping legislation this summer that will supply crucial funding to repair aging national park infrastructure, restore deteriorating historic buildings and further protect the integrity of public lands. The Great American Outdoors Act, which President Donald Trump signed into law on August 4, is a watershed achievement for NPCA's staff, supporters and allies, who have been advocating for this level of funding for the past two decades.

"You cannot overstate the importance of this bill and what it will mean for national parks, public lands and communities across the country. This is the largest investment our country has made in our national parks and public lands in more than 50 years, and it comes not a moment too soon," said NPCA President Theresa Pierno. "With this passage of the Great American Outdoors Act, our parks' crumbling roads, decaying buildings and outdated water systems will be fixed, more than 100,000 people will have much-needed jobs, and every American, no matter where they live, will have more access to outdoor spaces. This bill is a conservationist's dream."

The law dedicates a total of $6.5 billion over five years to tackle the most critical projects in a backlog of park repairs that has grown to almost $12 billion. Urgent infrastructure needs include restoring trails in Yosemite National Park in California, repairing sections of the Blue Ridge Parkway in North Carolina and Virginia, and fixing up Ebenezer Baptist Church at Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historical Park in Georgia. In addition, the new legislation permanently allots $900 million each year to the Land and Water Conservation Fund, a program that has played a critical role in protecting national parks by funneling money to the Park Service to purchase private land parcels within national parks to prevent inappropriate development. Some of the most vulnerable lands include an island in Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve in Alaska and plots in Mojave National Preserve in California and Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area in Kentucky and Tennessee.

The bill passed both houses of Congress with overwhelming majorities. This success is a testament to the efforts of thousands of park enthusiasts from around the country. Over the years, advocates joined NPCA on lobbying trips to Capitol Hill and sent a quarter-million messages to members of Congress to demand funding for deferred park maintenance and push to fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

"People across the country flew to D.C. to meet with their elected officials, made phone calls, attended meetings and wrote to their newspapers about the need to fix our parks," Pierno said. "Their voices were heard, and their perseverance paid off."

—EDITORS

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RETIRED LT. COL. JERRY CHEESEMAN
at Dry Tortugas National Park in January.

©STEVE ALBERTS

Call of Duty

For nearly 50 years, Lt. Col. Cheeseman and his troops have been a mainstay at Dry Tortugas National Park in Florida, where they have fixed up everything from a rusted iron lighthouse to leaky toilets.

Retired Lt. Col. Jerry Cheeseman held one hand over his brow to shield his eyes from the afternoon sun while he surveyed his men. They were some 50 feet below, replacing a shed over a fuel storage tank on a small patch of cement. From this windswept perch atop Fort Jefferson, they looked miniature. Behind them, the endless ocean rolled toward the horizon.

It was day five of a nine-day work mission, and so far, Cheeseman was pleased. The younger, active reserve members of his squadron had already departed for the mainland, after completing the repair and installation of air conditioners in the living quarters for the park's personnel. Now it was up to Cheeseman and his older cohort — mostly 50- and 60-somethings — to finish building the shed.

"I'm getting too old for this," said Cheeseman jokingly — not for the first or the last time that day — as he descended the steep spiral stairs from his vantage point.

Cheeseman and a rotating crew of men and women of the 482nd Civil Engineering Squadron have volunteered at Fort Jefferson most years since 1972. A mix of active and retired Air Force reservists, they have had a hand in building and rebuilding nearly every modern amenity there. With each major task typed out as a line item, the list of their accomplishments is 10 pages long. Some of their feats: constructing cannon platforms; installing a garbage incinerator and desalinization systems; restoring a lighthouse; setting up interpretive tour displays; building employee living quarters and campground latrines; and refurbishing and expanding a museum.

The centerpiece of Dry Tortugas National Park, Fort Jefferson was designed to control the trade route between the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico. Built over a 30-year period starting in the mid-1800s on a sweltering island with no source of freshwater, the fort is a 16-acre, roughly 16 million-brick testament to sheer will. Dry Tortugas is located about 70

miles from Key West, and even with the help of today's technology, maintaining the park is a challenge. Freshwater availability is still very limited, as are housing and generator power, which severely restricts the work that can be done. Everything must be transported by boat or seaplane, so deliveries are expensive and can be held up by stormy weather. This makes the efforts of Cheeseman and the 482nd invaluable, especially at a time when national park budgets are shrinking and the maintenance backlog across the National Park System has reached almost $12 billion.

"The 482nd works closely with park staff to identify and complete projects that make the park a richer and more pleasant experience for park visitors," said Jacqueline Crucet, associate director of national partnerships for NPCA, who helped bring in younger veterans to work with the 482nd at the park. "They are just so respectful of people and so dedicated to their work at Dry Tortugas. The colonel and his crew have done a great deal for this park."

But it's not a one-way street. At Fort Jefferson, the reservists can hone their plumbing, electrical, construction, engineering and management skills, which helps them prepare for deployment. During Operation Desert Storm in 1991, the Air Force called for 50 volunteers from the 482nd and immediately filled those slots. The reservists' readiness was a point of pride for Cheeseman.

"The mission of the reserves is to be trained and ready for deployment around the world," Cheeseman said. "This is good systems skills training for our active members of the squadron, and the park likes the free labor. One piece of government helping another. It's a win-win."

Cheeseman's own military career spanned 28 years, during which time he served in the Air Force both on active duty and as a reservist. Before retiring in 1992, he was a squadron commander during Desert Storm in Saudi Arabia,

"This is good systems skills training for our active members of the squadron, and the park likes the free labor. One piece of government helping another. It's a win-win."

where he and his troops deconstructed a temporary base used for aircraft missions. He now runs a South Florida construction management company — essentially a one-man operation — and volunteers as an advisor to the local Little League.

While Cheeseman is a fixture here, the other volunteers from the 482nd can vary from year to year. These days, most are retired, though active-duty reservists often leave their civilian jobs for a few days to come help, especially with the more labor-intensive projects. One such job was the construction of the concrete platforms on which the fort's iconic cannons sit.

"This is one of our better claims to fame," Cheeseman said, pointing to a cannon about the size of a box truck. "Up until the '80s, the cannons were just lying in the sand. For years, they rusted in front of our eyes."

Had the fort been fully outfitted as originally designed, it would have held 450 cannons, some of which could shoot iron shells 3 miles into the ocean. Most of the fort's cannons were sold for scrap in the early 1900s, but a few that were perched at the top of the fort with no easy way to lower them were left alone by scavengers. Today, Fort Jefferson houses six of the world's 25 known remaining Rodman cannons of this size and four smaller Parrott guns.

In 1982, the 482nd lifted one of the Rodmans onto blocks to hinder further deterioration. (Others followed in subsequent years.) Then in 2008, Nancy Russell, who was the museum curator for Dry Tortugas and who spearheaded the cannon conservation and mounting project, approached Cheeseman to see if he'd be interested in building a platform to hold an 11-ton swivel carriage and a 25-ton Rodman gun. No crane could be brought on the island, and no hauling equipment could be anchored on the fort itself, so lifting the building materials and tools made for a particularly interesting puzzle. Cheeseman jumped at the opportunity. With a lot of sweat and the help of a block-and-tackle pulley system, he and 17 reservists hauled the supplies to the top of the wall and built a replica of the original platform, using concrete with a wood texture. The first platform was completed in 2010, and they built smaller platforms for the other five Rodmans over the next couple of years.

"Seeing the cannon above the fort's wall as visitors approach by boat gives them a better sense of how vulnerable an approaching ship would have been

VOLUNTEERS restore the iron lighthouse at Dry Tortugas in February 1976.

U.S. AIR FORCE

to the fort's armament," Russell said. "Seeing the mounted guns up close inside the fort helps visitors understand the scale and complexity of that technology."

Working there has also helped some of those volunteers smooth a rocky transition back to civilian life. Marine Gunnery Sgt. Eddy Angueira tagged along on this trip at the suggestion of a therapist from the Department of Veterans Affairs. After serving in combat operations in Iraq, Angueira, 47, developed post-traumatic stress disorder, which eventually led to early retirement and depression. "I pretty much stayed locked up at home," he said.

But thanks to projects like this, he's been able to gain back a sense of belonging and connection that is helping him heal. "I feel very proud that I was able to contribute a small part to maintaining the restoration of an important landmark of American history," he said. "I want my kids to experience this."

©TIM LONG

SGT. JETHRO PEREZ, a member of the 482nd Civil Engineering Squadron, during a campground bathroom construction project in June 2018.

Sharing park experiences has also created strong bonds among members of the 482nd, even when the project is as unglamorous as this year's new fuel shed. Painting together, it took the team of retirees less than an hour to cover the entire structure. With the shed construction zipping along ahead of schedule, the mess hall at lunchtime on day five was filled with laughter and general cheeriness. Conversations wandered from the inhumanity of eating an entree of brats with no beer to wisecracks about "old guys."

One after another, the reservists said that Cheeseman is what keeps them coming back to Dry Tortugas. "The draw is him. He's our commander," said retired Senior Master Sgt. Joseph Cieslinski. Out of earshot, Cheeseman demurred. "All I do is get these men here," he said. "They're the ones that do all of the work."

Cheeseman said he returns year after year for many reasons. He loves the camaraderie, exercise and beautiful landscape. As a civil engineer, he marvels at the fort's architecture and relishes the chance to help preserve it. And most of all, he enjoys training younger generations of reservists.

Cheeseman (who wouldn't disclose his age despite repeated inquiries) has white hair and is well into retirement, but he intends to keep leading troops as long as he can. "I feel like I'm 57," he said.

KARUNA EBERL writes about nature, history and adventure from the sandbars of the Florida Keys and the high country of Colorado.

NPCA at Work

VETERANS AND NATIONAL PARKS are a natural pair. Both represent American ideals, and each can help the other.

In just a few years, NPCA's veteran outreach has grown from a few volunteer events into a full-fledged program that has engaged several thousand veterans. Collectively, they have donated roughly 13,000 hours of manual labor to tackle a variety of park projects. While rebuilding trails, constructing camping platforms or removing invasive species, veterans apply their leadership skills and reignite a sense of camaraderie with their fellow service members. But the hammers and hard hats are only part of the story.

NPCA staff — in collaboration with 40 veteran service organizations — have also organized educational, recreational and cultural excursions in parks across the country. Veterans have enjoyed high-adrenaline thrills and found moments of peace on scuba dives in Biscayne Bay, during campouts in Death Valley and on bike rides through San Antonio Missions.

Moved by their experiences, many veterans end up speaking out on behalf of national parks, and their voices have strengthened numerous NPCA campaigns to protect public lands. For example, some veterans have taken a stand against the Navy's use of Olympic's airspace for jet flyovers, while others secured NPCA's first audience with former Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke to discuss the Park Service's repair backlog.

"The parks challenge veterans to continue to serve a purpose and a mission bigger than themselves," said Erica Carroll, NPCA's Alaska field representative, who is an Air Force veteran and a current Air National Guard member. "These individuals have defended our country and our rights, and now they're helping ensure a national park legacy to pass on to the next generation."

— KATHERINE DEGROFF

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FAITH E. BRIGGS in the Wahweap Hoodoos, which were part of Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument until the Trump administration cut the site nearly in half, a move NPCA and its allies consider illegal.

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Wild Run

The documentary, "This Land," an exploration of public lands, conservation and racial justice, follows filmmaker and advocate Faith E. Briggs as she runs 150 miles through three national monuments.

Faith E. Briggs had been living in Portland, Oregon, for a year when the Trump administration announced that it was weighing whether to slash the size of some federally protected national monuments. The news made waves in her newfound community of environment-minded friends, and Briggs, a filmmaker and advocate, found herself trying to learn as much as she could about the controversy and wondering what she could do.

At the time, she was also thinking a lot about her identity as a conservationist. "I'd always seen a disconnect between the experiences of people of color and the conversations being had in environmental spaces," said Briggs, who is Black. "I was trying to navigate my own understanding of what my life looked like as a conservationist and trying to redefine that word for myself. To own it."

Briggs started talking to her friend, Addie Thompson, about an idea for a short film. The two are both serious runners — Thompson is an ultramarathoner and Briggs, a high school and college sprinter, had recently fallen in love with trail running — and before long, a daring scheme to run through several national monuments began to take shape. (They quickly realized that going to all 27 monuments the Trump administration was threatening with rollbacks, as they first imagined, was wildly impractical.) They would talk as they always do on runs, connect with the landscape through "human-powered movement," and show that people of color, who have historically lacked access or felt unwelcome in the outdoors, belong in those places — and that public lands are theirs, too. And of course, the film would publicize the threats national monuments face, and maybe help protect them in the process.

"This Land," which was released online in March, somehow manages to do all of that. The documentary follows Briggs — and four others who join her for various legs of the journey — as she runs 150 miles (around 20 a day) through Cascade–Siskiyou National Monument in Oregon, Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monument in Utah and Organ Mountains–Desert Peaks National Monument in New Mexico. Co-directed by Whitney Hassett and Chelsea Jolly and produced by Briggs, the film is both intimate and soaring. It shows Briggs and her fellow travelers philosophizing and laughing and also features breathtaking footage of vast, remote landscapes. Their choice of Grand Staircase-Escalante is especially poignant: Most of the areas of the site captured in the film lost national monument status in late 2017, when the administration drastically cut the size of that site and Bears Ears National Monument in Utah.

"It's a really scary time. It feels like everything is precarious and nothing is done," Briggs said. "Even if you create a national monument with a presidential proclamation, that could just

be undone." (NPCA joined a coalition of conservation groups to fight the monument rollbacks in court, arguing that in fact, protections established under the authority of the Antiquities Act cannot simply be undone. The case is pending, but in the meantime, the new boundaries are in effect, paving the way for oil and gas extraction and other commercial activities in areas of the monuments that the current administration excised — illegally, according to NPCA and its allies.)

As Briggs and Thompson had envisioned, the film also delves into issues of race and access. It broaches Briggs' family history (her mother, who is white, was temporarily disowned by her family when she decided to marry Briggs' father, who is Black) and touches on the history of people of color and the outdoors. After the landmark Supreme Court case Brown v. Board of Education desegregated schools and laid the groundwork for broader desegregation, parks that had been set aside for African Americans were dismantled, Briggs said in the film. "We lost a ton of recreational spaces for Black people, but it wasn't like overnight, they were going to be skipping around in the state park," she said. "That would have been dangerous. They weren't actually welcome there."

Battling that legacy was one of the points of the film, Briggs said in an interview this summer. "What does it mean for me to be running through those monuments," she asked, "as this Black woman with dreads and tattoos from a city, who doesn't come from a bunch of money?"

Dustin Martin, who joined Briggs for a day of running and filming in Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks, begins to answer that question in the film and picked up the topic in a recent

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JOSÉ G. GONZÁLEZ (left), the founder and former executive director of Latino Outdoors, joined Briggs (right) for part of her run through Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument in New Mexico.

©MICHAEL ESTRADA

"THE JOY and freedom of running is something people can understand," said Briggs, pictured in Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks, "whether you've done it on a playground or whether you've raced your sister up the street."

conversation. "The main thing is seeing people that look and sound like you using those spaces to make you feel included," said Martin, executive director of Wings of America, a nonprofit that promotes running to Native American youth. Briggs knew "in her heart that was the story she needed to tell."

Hassett, the co-director, described the 17-day, bare-bones shoot as both the most challenging and most fun of her career. The all-female film crew piled into a big production van, cooked their own food and often slept next to the van tires before waking early to start shooting. Managing the logistics was a formidable task, and unexpected twists and turns made it that much more complicated: Trails and public roads wouldn't be where they were supposed to be, rivers overflowed, or the weather would suddenly shift and the skies would open. The van once got stuck in mud. The crew rode mountain bikes to catch up to the runners in places, and sometimes they lost them altogether. "At certain points, we were using three different map sources to try to bring in one picture of where we were located and how to navigate," said Jolly, the other director.

Briggs described one especially harrowing day: "There were three or four river crossings that I couldn't cross. Three hours later, I was crawling under sagebrush trying to get back to the river and trying not to cry," she said. "Unlike national parks, monuments aren't set up with people's recreation in mind." (The crew used drones to shoot some of the stunning film footage — and in one case, to find Briggs deep in a wash. Drones are allowed in some monuments in certain circumstances, though rules vary from place to place.)

Yet even with all the behind-the-scenes (and some on-screen) drama, the pure joy of running clearly shines through in the movie. Thompson, who ran with Briggs for two days in Oregon and is the movie's associate producer, spoke about being overcome with giddiness on her first day of filming. "It all swelled at once, and I felt this burst of energy and appreciation," she said.

When Briggs and her collaborators were searching for financial support, they discovered that many potential funders were puzzled by the range of material. They didn't understand how a movie could coherently focus on conservation, running, inclusivity, and the relationship between African Americans and the outdoors. But that was around three years ago, before Ahmaud Marquez Arbery was chased down by white residents and shot dead while jogging in Georgia. And before a woman falsely accused Christian Cooper, who is Black, of threatening her life when he was birdwatching in Central Park in New York City. If they were shopping the movie around today, the filmmakers said, they think it would be a very different story.

"It's great the film is getting the traction it's getting. And I also think it's getting that traction because the conversation has changed. Why is the outdoors not as open or welcoming to BIPOC folks?" said Thompson, using the acronym for "Black, Indigenous and people of color." "People are asking questions that they haven't asked themselves before." (Eventually, the filmmakers secured backing from several funders, including Merrell, an outdoor footwear and apparel company, and Peak Design, which sells bags and camera gear, but even with that support, they had a very tight budget.)

Arbery's tragic death may have opened some people's eyes to how revolutionary running can be, Briggs pointed out. "You're reclaiming a degree of safety and power. Because you said, 'I can be in this place. I can run through it,'" she said. Moreover, the coronavirus pandemic may help people realize, if they didn't understand it before, that everyone should have access to green space, she added.

"For people who do environmental work and justice work, there is an understanding that there is always going to be a step forward and two backwards. This is a long road," she said, "but I'm feeling very hopeful right now."

—RONA MARECH

For more information and to view the film, go to www.thislanddoc.com.

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Free Flowing

For 30 years, activists talked about removing the Brecksville Dam in Cuyahoga Valley National Park. Now it's gone.

COURTESY OF FRIENDS OF THE CROOKED RIVER, WWW.CUYAHOGARIVER.NET

THE RAZING OF the Brecksville Dam, in progress in this photo, was complete by the end of June.

On the afternoon of May 21, the arm of an excavator slowly reached down from the east bank of the Cuyahoga River in Cuyahoga Valley National Park and plunged into the water. A handful of spectators who had imagined this day for years — in some cases, decades — stood above the river, social distancing, and started shouting and cheering.

Underwater, a jackhammer began driving into the concrete. And with that, the Cuyahoga was one step closer to flowing as it did 200 years ago, before this section of the river was dammed.

"It was a historic moment," said Pamela Barnes, the park's public information officer. "Someone joked that we should have a bottle of champagne."

As it turned out, boring a hole into the Brecksville Dam was not simple. After three hours, bystanders began trickling away, and several days passed before water finally began pouring through. "That dam was not going down without a fight," Barnes said.

Completed in 1952 to provide water to the American Steel and Wire Company, the Brecksville Dam stood 8 feet tall and stretched 163 feet across the Cuyahoga, a 100-mile U-shaped river in northeast Ohio that flows into Lake Erie. Also known as the Canal Diversion Dam, the structure created a pool that submerged a previously constructed wooden dam dating to 1827; both were demolished by the end of June.

The razing is part of a growing trend: Communities around the country are working with nonprofit organizations and state and federal agencies to take down outdated and unsafe dams. Restoring rivers' natural flow can significantly benefit water quality, wildlife habitat and ecosystem health. Dam removal also improves public safety and is particularly beneficial for recreational boaters. According to American Rivers, an advocacy group that tracks U.S. dam removals, nearly 1,500 dams have been removed in the past three decades. In 2019 alone, a record 26 states removed 90 dams, including 20 in Southern California's Cleveland National Forest and a century-old dam in Lexington, Virginia, where a teenager drowned in 2006.

"We've talked about removing the Brecksville Dam for more than 30 years," said Bill Zawiski, water quality supervisor with the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency. While other parts of the river met the agency's water quality standards in recent years, the water in the dam pools did not. (The pools were like a "dead spot" for fish, with increased sedimentation and decreased oxygen, Barnes explained.) The hope is that with the structures removed, the river will quickly revert to its pre-dam days in terms of temperature fluctuation and flow. The river bottom also should see a transformation, with silt levels dropping and rocks reappearing. Scientists expect that the river's insect and fish habitats will be completely restored over the next couple of years.

Zawiski said the Brecksville Dam removal, funded jointly through the federal Great Lakes Restoration Initiative and local and state agencies, was an important step toward the ultimate goal of delisting the river from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Great Lakes Areas of Concern. That list now includes 27 environmentally degraded areas that are the focus of major cleanup and restoration efforts.

The Cuyahoga was once a poster child for industrial pollution. In places, the river was so filled with trash and toxins that it could not support animal life, and it caught fire at least 13 times because it was coated with flammable pollutants. Public concern about the

river brought attention to pollution in other U.S. waters and helped pave the way for the Clean Water Act, the creation of the EPA and the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement, a commitment between the U.S. and Canada to restore and protect Great Lakes waters. Last year, locals marked the 50th anniversary of the last fire with a series of celebratory events.

Today, the Cuyahoga supports a robust and diverse fish population and great blue heron nesting colonies and is home to river otters, beavers and bald eagles. Kayak tours, regattas, riverside restaurants and new residential developments (all outside the park) attest to the river's ongoing recovery. The healthier watershed has benefited many of the 20 communities along the river, but not equally: Notably, some of the Cleveland and Akron neighborhoods with a higher percentage of minority residents haven't seen the same quality-of-life improvements, said Lisa Petit, the park's deputy superintendent. These inconsistencies have caught the attention of park staff, who are hoping to expand community outreach and improve river access going forward.

The next cleanup steps include removing another, larger dam on a section of the river upstream from the park and restoring riparian habitat within the park. "It's like the river is in detention," Zawiski said. "When it's off the list, it'll be out of detention and can go back to school. That's when the river will return to a functional state."

The removal of the dam comes at a time of transition at the park. For decades, staff paid little attention to the river, said Andrea Irland, an outdoor recreation planner with the Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program of the National Park Service. "It ran through the middle of the park, and it's what the park was named for, but staff didn't encourage recreation in any way, shape or form," she said.

Petit said ignoring the river meant staff didn't have to worry about hazards or liabilities. "It was a fear factor," she said. "It seemed too big, too much to deal with. So we just didn't."

That is now changing. In 2016, the park, which manages 26 miles of the Cuyahoga between Akron and Cleveland, developed a strategic action plan and made focusing on the Cuyahoga a priority. Engaging with paddlers is a central part of that. The number of recreational boaters has exploded in recent years, and last October, the river was designated a state of Ohio water trail, with 24 public access points along nearly 90 miles of the river and whitewater that's suitable for beginners and experts alike. The park now supports a team of river patrol volunteers who educate the public on the inherent dangers of kayaking on a river that can more than double in size — and see dangerous levels of bacteria from combined sewage overflows — after a big rainstorm.

The kayakers who have been paddling the Cuyahoga for years are thrilled about the long-awaited dam removal. The days of awkwardly portaging around the dam are gone, as is the perilous hydraulic churn under the dam, which would pin down giant logs and spin them around for weeks. (Occasionally, daredevil paddlers would ask park staff if they could kayak over the dam; the answer, emphatically, was "no.")

Ryan Ainger, a park ranger and paddling instructor who grew up 2 miles from the dam, was giddy with excitement in the days before its removal began. "This is a project I've been following since high school," he said. "I can't even talk about it without smiling." He envisions long paddles — traveling the 37 miles between the southernmost part of the park and Cleveland, for instance. "It will be a safer paddle and will connect ecosystems that haven't been connected," he said. "The Cuyahoga will start going back to a free-flowing river, which is what it should be."

MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN is a Washington, D.C.-based writer.

KAYAKERS WHO HAVE been paddling the Cuyahoga for years are thrilled about the dam removal, which will allow them to take long, uninterrupted trips down the river that weren't possible before.

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A PRONGHORN near Beatty, Nevada, just outside Death Valley National Park.

A Speedy Comeback?

Pronghorn have made their triumphant return to Death Valley. Now the question is: How far will they go?

TWENTY THOUSAND YEARS AGO, a visitor to the American West would have encountered a ferocious menagerie. Lions harassed mastodons, saber-toothed cats pounced on horses, and short-faced bears defended carcasses from marauding dire wolves. Through this assemblage of predators scampered a svelte herbivore, reminiscent of a deer but most closely related to the giraffe: the pronghorn. To spot its fearsome enemies on the open plains, *Antilocapra americana* evolved enormous eyes and a 300-degree field of vision; to outrun American cheetahs, it gained cushioned toes and oversized lungs. Today, a sprinting pronghorn can reach 55 miles per hour — faster than any other land critter in North America.

When most of the continent's megafauna went extinct at the end of the Pleistocene, the pronghorn endured. In California, Native tribes such as the Kawaiisu hunted the species, and white colonists, who dubbed it the antelope, marveled at the "great droves, thousands in number" that dotted the Mojave Desert. But the large herds would not last. Market hunters shot them for meat; livestock outcompeted them for forage; fences thwarted their migrations. The final pronghorn in the Mojave was gunned down around 1950, leaving behind only a ghostly place name: Antelope Valley, the arid lowland north of Los Angeles.

Imagine, then, biologists' delight when a half-dozen pronghorn wandered into a busy area of Death Valley National Park, the Mojave's most iconic patch of public land, and set up shop this spring. "They're an expression of the way the landscape used to be, an animal we were still missing," said Chris Clarke, NPCA's California desert associate director. The pronghorn's appearance in Death Valley is also the outcome of decades of conservation work — and, with luck, the plucky band of pioneers will be the vanguard of a broader recolonization.

As many as 1 million pronghorn roam western North America today, with the majority in Wyoming and Montana. That's a small fraction of the 35 million or so that greeted colonists in the 19th century, but a spectacular increase from the early 1900s, when the population hit its nadir of perhaps 13,000. While pronghorn numbers are overall stable, the Sonoran pronghorn, a smaller subspecies known as the "desert ghost," has been extirpated from much of its range along the U.S.-Mexico border and may see its habitat further fragmented by the Trump

administration's border wall. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed reintroducing Sonoran pronghorn to an expanse of California desert called Chuckwalla Bench, but there's no timeline for the project.

In Death Valley, the first pronghorn sighting in recent history actually dates back to 2017, when Bill Sloan, a National Park Service wildlife biologist, received a grainy photo of a pronghorn in the park from a colleague. "I really was speechless — it was so totally unexpected," Sloan recalled. More pictures rolled in over the following years, from visitors and staff alike. Those early sightings occurred in the park's higher, northern corners and consisted primarily of "bachelor groups," loose bands of young males. The small herd that turned up in April, by contrast, included females, and they were loitering just 3 miles from the Furnace Creek Visitor Center.

At first blush, Death Valley might seem an unlikely home for an ungulate most commonly found roaming Wyoming's cold, lofty plains. Death Valley is forbidding habitat for most creatures: The hottest temperature ever recorded on Earth — 134 degrees — was registered there in 1913, and less than 2 inches of rain falls in the park each year.

For a few weeks each spring, though, Death Valley teems with life. When the rains come early and gentle, the park's deserts turn into vibrant carpets of desert dandelion, Mojave aster, desert pincushion and other wildflowers that draw bloom-peepers from around the world. For pronghorn, all that new growth means fine dining. According to Laura Cunningham, California director of the Western Watersheds Project, pronghorn may have followed the tasty flowers down from Nevada. A 30-mile trek across state lines would be downright leisurely for pronghorn, which in Wyoming migrate up to 150 miles for prime forage.

"I really was speechless — it was so totally unexpected."

"They shift their range to take advantage of resources on the ground," Cunningham said.

Sloan, though, pointed out that Death Valley experienced "superbloom" years well before 2017 without luring pronghorn. He thinks that as herds have grown just across the Nevada border, animals may be dispersing farther in search of new territory. "This has been a long time in the making," Sloan said.

In a way, the seeds for the pronghorn's recovery were planted by Minerva Hamilton Hoyt, the legendary socialite and gardener who, in the 1930s, first advocated for a network of protected areas in the Mojave. Hoyt's big-picture vision was at last fulfilled in 1994, when the California Desert Protection Act expanded Death Valley and Joshua Tree National Monuments (and redesignated them as national parks) and created Mojave National Preserve. In the years since, NPCA and other conservation groups have fought to stave off threats that would fragment the Mojave — a landfill along a migratory corridor, a cluster of fancy homes near Joshua Tree, suburban sprawl pretty much everywhere. Hoyt "had the big landscape picture in mind, and we're trying to fill in the puzzle pieces," Clarke said.

The Mojave's jigsaw became even more complete in 2016, when President Barack Obama designated three new national monuments in California: Mojave Trails, Castle Mountains and Sand to Snow. The monuments encompass 1.8 million acres, and, crucially, plugged the gaps between existing parks — creating the precise sort of contiguous landscape that wide-ranging pronghorn need to flourish.

"We built the ballpark, and the pronghorn are coming," Clarke said.

Just how far will they go? Fewer than 250 miles separate Death Valley and Joshua Tree — not an insurmountable distance for an animal that's been spotted 40 miles from the nearest water source, according to Sloan. But the coast is by no means clear. Massive energy projects such as Soda Mountain Solar, a proposed 2,000-acre development on Mojave National Preserve's border, would place new infrastructure in wildlife's path. The proposed Cadiz pipeline, which would funnel water from desert springs to subdivisions, could drain precious oases. Major highways cleave the desert, creating rivers of traffic that may stymie pronghorn unless the roads are retrofitted with animal-friendly underpasses or bridges.

An animal that survived the Pleistocene, though, can never be counted out — and in Death Valley, the species has already proved its resilience. Although the herd likely decamped from the park when food and water dried up in summer, they accomplished some crucial business before departing. On May 13, Sloan received the most thrilling photos yet: Pictures of two gangly, knob-kneed fawns in Death Valley's rugged northern mountains.

It seemed to Sloan only fitting that a creature that embodies superlatives has returned to such an extreme environment. "It's incredible that we can have the fastest, most keen-eyed mammal," he said, "in the lowest, hottest, driest, place in North America." NP

BEN GOLDFARB is an environmental journalist and the author of "Eager: The Surprising, Secret Life of Beavers and Why They Matter."

MIKE YOCHIM on Middle Teton in Grand Teton National Park in 1998.

COURTESY OF JAMES AND JEANNE YOCHIM

FINAL WORDS

A former Yellowstone ranger raced to finish a book about two threats — one that endangers national parks and another that ultimately took his own life.

By Kate Siber

Mike Yochim was an energetic young ranger when he visited Cache Creek for the first time in the summer of 1988. Back then, he was lanky and strong and falling in love with Yellowstone National Park. With every free moment, he ranged over the park's vast wilderness areas, coming to know just about every peak and valley.

To Yochim, Cache Creek was special. It sang its beauty out loud. With a friend, he stayed overnight in a tiny patrol cabin and ambled the old forests of ponderosa pine, spruce and fir. Alive with springs and seeps and streams, the valley abounded with wildflowers — bright pink Lewis' monkeyflowers, blue Columbia monkshood and wild geraniums in vibrant hues. Everywhere, it seemed, signs of life blazed and flowed.

But as he and his friend hiked out over a pass and a mountain, they looked back and saw a portent of future devastation. A plume of smoke, tinted an unnatural orange, billowed behind them. Back in town, Yochim learned that a wildfire had erupted and Cache Creek had been closed to visitors. Over the following weeks, blazes rampaged through the park. One day, in just six hours, 200-foot flames incinerated the backcountry paradise of Cache Creek.

Yochim didn't realize it at the time, but this was his first known encounter with the effects of climate change. Both June and July had been unseasonably dry in 1988, and unusually strong winds fanned small wildfires into conflagrations. Even the area's most seasoned firefighters hadn't seen conditions that extreme. Since then, scientists have linked the increase in fire activity in the park in recent decades with warming temperatures and decreasing precipitation. Now they identify the fires of 1988, which burned more than a third of the park, as the first of the West's modern megafires, a trend attributed largely to global warming. In the years and decades after Yochim's brush with those fires, he started to experience other harbingers of climate change — dipping into Yellowstone Lake and finding the water surprisingly temperate or sloshing through the backcountry on skis on disturbingly warm winter days. The signs added up to a sense of dread, a feeling that something was wrong without a complete grasp

COURTESY OF JAMES AND JEANNE YOCHIM (ALL)

YOCHIM AND HIS MOTHER at Yellowstone National Park in 1992 (top left). Above: Yochim at work on his book about the impact of climate change on national parks. Left: Yochim (left), his twin brother, Jim, and their father at Yellowstone Lake in 1969. Opposite page: In 1988, more than one-third of Yellowstone National Park was burned by wildfires, including this one on the Mirror Plateau in the northeastern part of the park.

HE WANTED TO FINISH A BOOK ABOUT HOW CLIMATE CHANGE WAS AFFECTING THE PARKS JUST AS ALS WAS ROBBING HIS ONCE VIGOROUS BODY OF ALL ITS BEAUTY AND CAPABILITY.

of the threat's scope.

In much the same way, Yochim came to understand the condition plaguing his own body. At first, in late 2012, he detected an unusual feeling in his throat. Then in early 2013, the muscles just under his skin started twitching, and his speech began to slur. No one else seemed to notice, but Yochim knew something was off. The first neurologist he saw chalked it up to stress. The anxiety medications, however, made his symptoms worse. Later, Yochim saw a neurologist at Stanford University who ran a litany of tests, ruling out many conditions, including a vitamin B12 deficiency, mercury poisoning and multiple sclerosis. What remained was arguably the worst possible outcome: amyotrophic lateral sclerosis or ALS. Also known as Lou Gehrig's disease, the degenerative disorder affects the nerves in the brain and spinal cord. Patients slowly lose the ability to control all their muscles, effectively becoming entombed in their bodies "I'd rather have cancer," Yochim told one of his three brothers after his diagnosis in September 2013.

About a year later, Yochim, then 48, moved in with his parents, Jim and Jeanne Yochim, who were still living in the house in a St. Louis suburb where he had grown up. As his body slowly came to a standstill, his daily rhythm transformed from near-constant adventure to quiet introspection. Over time, he lost the ability to move everything but his eyes and his mouth, which he

could open just wide enough for his father to brush his teeth. Immobilized, he used a special computer system that tracked his eye movements, allowing him to type out one letter at a time, stringing together words and then sentences and paragraphs. He spent his days writing about the parks. In August 2019, Riverbend Publishing released his fourth book, "Essential Yellowstone: A Landscape of Memory and Wonder," a collection of intimate portraits of the park. His next goal meant even more to him. He wanted to finish a book about how climate change was affecting the parks just as ALS was robbing his once vigorous body of all its beauty and capability.

In October, I traveled to St. Louis to meet Yochim and his family, arriving with two of his friends, Bill and Lynn Lowry, on a blustery fall day. The Yochims' tidy home is located at the end of a peaceful cul-de-sac on the edge of a forest where deer and fox roam. Yochim was sitting in his wheelchair in a cozy living room with cheerful yellow walls, family photos and a small jungle of houseplants and cactuses. A wood fire blazed in a stove, and the jolly singsong of a cuckoo clock occasionally rang through the room. Because Yochim couldn't move anything but his eyes and his head was held up in a brace, I squatted down so that he could see me properly as I introduced myself. Then, the five of us sat down on overstuffed couches as Jim fixed us cups of coffee.

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK/JIM PEACO

The Dynavox, the machine that translated Yochim's gaze into letters and words, allowed him to communicate well enough to get his needs met and have basic conversations, but tapping out one letter at a time was slow and took extraordinary patience. After I asked a question, it took 10 to 15 minutes for him to produce a couple of sentences and for the machine's robotic masculine voice to read them out loud. In the meantime, the conversation rambled on without him.

"Michael loved to talk — I don't mean too much — but he really just loved to talk," Jeanne said. "He said a couple weeks ago that if he could get back one thing, it would be the ability to talk." Yochim's words were so precious and few that whenever the robotic voice erupted into the conversation, we all fell silent to listen.

Yochim called ALS an unrelenting and hateful disease, and I asked him what it was like to experience his body in this way. "I feel like I'm in prison sometimes," he said. "Even solitary confinement."

Once a voracious hiker and cross-country skier, he estimated that he had hiked more than 15,000 miles and skied more than 5,000 miles in his lifetime. Back then, he was an enthusiastic gourmand and impressive backcountry chef, wowing his hiking partners with dishes such as pasta with cream sauce, sun-dried tomatoes and peppers. Eventually, all of that was beyond reach. He was not only immobile, but he couldn't even chew or swallow. Still, he didn't stop enjoying the life he was able to lead. He still went to the symphony in his wheelchair. He decorated his room — a converted sun porch off the living room — with his photographs of national parks, maps and plaques commemorating the years he devoted to the Park Service. On nice days, he would sit in his parents' garden and enjoy the suburban nature around him. One afternoon, he was sitting still as marble when

a fledgling wren took its maiden flight and zoomed in for a rocky landing on his finger. "It righted itself and then looked right at me, then flew away," he told me in an email. "Such a neat encounter with nature's wildness, right in my backyard."

Jim and Jeanne have a Midwestern can-do attitude, but caring for their son undoubtedly took a toll. They had expected to live out their retirement traveling but found they couldn't leave their son alone and needed to arrange their own social engagements and doctor's appointments around his schedule. And then there was the sadness and helplessness that came with watching Yochim navigate the cruelty of the disease, needing to ask for even the simplest things. "It tears at my heartstrings when he says, 'Can you move my finger?'" said Jim, who operated the wheelchair most of the time and alternated with Jeanne to turn their son over several times each night.

The family had always been adventurous. As young parents of four sons, Jim and Jeanne road-tripped across the country and camped in parks from Shenandoah to Zion. Yochim's earliest memory was an image of his dad losing his sunglasses in the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone. On a trip to that park when Yochim was in his teens, his twin brother, Jim, said he thought park rangers were cool and he wanted to be one. Yochim didn't know why, but the first thought that came to his mind was "You won't, but I will." He ended up spending nearly his entire career in Yellowstone as a ranger, guide and park planner who worked on snowmobile management among other projects.

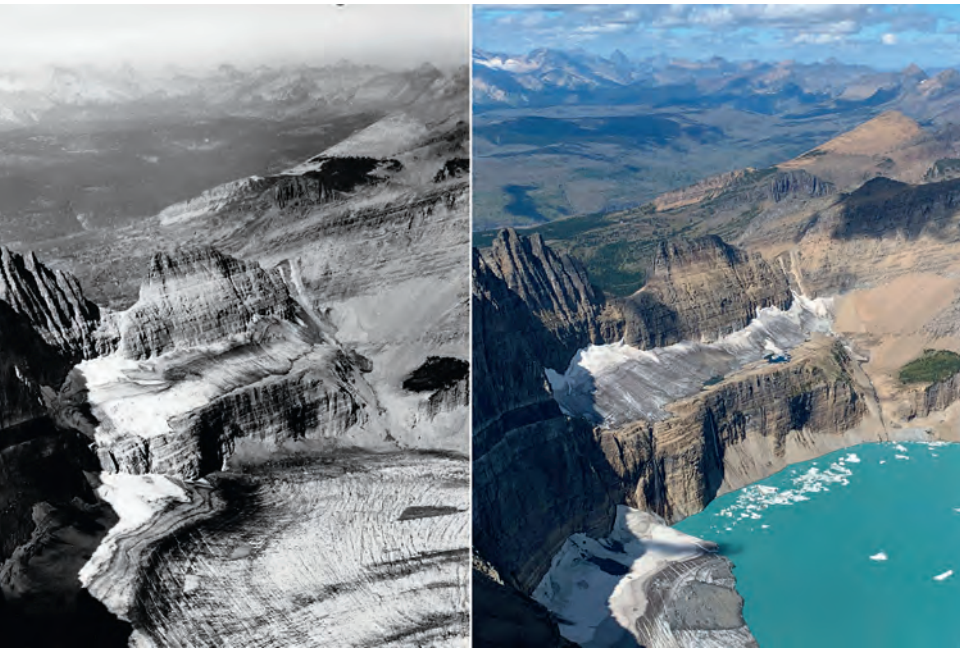
Yochim loved Yellowstone from the beginning, but his appreciation for its rhythm deepened with time. His book, "Essential Yellowstone," is a collection of remembrances, from watching a magnificent bison lumber through his campsite as if it owned the place to spying on a muskrat playing in shallow water. (It sneezed so cutely Yochim burst into laughter, alarming the little critter.) Over the years, he scaled peaks and skied to backcountry hot springs to see the otherworldly shapes they created in the snow. Sometimes, it was the smallest things that tuned him in to the texture of the place — the scent of sweet willows or the cries of a Clark's nutcracker.

"It's been five long years since I was in the West, the landscape that is so uplifting for me and many others," he told me. "Not a day — indeed, hardly an hour — passes without my longing to be there."

Yochim often spent his time reading or visiting with friends, but mostly, he wrote and researched material for his latest book, "Requiem for America's Best Idea: National Parks in the Era of Climate Change." He accessed the internet through the Dynavox technology, which allowed him to click, double-click and scroll with his gaze, and he emailed sources and prospective publishers. He kept a disciplined schedule, writing (on a good day) a couple of paragraphs in the morning and a couple in the afternoon.

Through the project, Yochim came to a much more intimate understanding of the sobering reality of climate change in the parks and beyond. In Yosemite, small mammals such as the pika and some bird species are already moving upslope — and may eventually have nowhere to go. In Grand Canyon, vast high-elevation forests, particularly pinyon pine stands, are dying. In Glacier, all of the glaciers have shrunk, with some diminishing by as much as 85% since 1966. Much of the Everglades will be inundated by 2100 because of sea-level rise.

"As the glaciers melt, forests burn, and wildlife move or die out across the West, all in the face of climate change, our collective memories of the unimpaired national parks will gradually fade, much like my increasingly distant recollections," he wrote in his book. (Often in our email conversations, he copied and



LEFT: T.J. HILEMAN/COURTESY OF GNP ARCHIVES; RIGHT: LISA MCKEON PHOTO/USGS

GLACIER NATIONAL PARK is undergoing significant changes because of global warming. On the left is Grinnell Glacier in 1938, and the photograph on the right shows the same glacier in 2019 (above). Opposite page: Yochim on a trip to Glacier in 2014.

pasted excerpts from his book to save time.)

It wasn't until he immersed himself in researching and writing his book that he realized the depth of the parallels between the disease that imperiled his own body and the human-made disease that threatens the Earth — the merciless parade of losses; the grief, anger and frustration; and the urgency that comes with knowing viscerally that there isn't much time left. "If we don't curtail our carbon emissions soon — and radically curb them — my experience may well become the universal experience," he wrote in "Requiem."

During my visit, I was struck by the intensity with which Yochim answered my questions. I noticed that sometimes a technology glitch would erase his words and force him to start all over again. His parents said that occasionally the calibration between the screen and his eyes malfunctioned and he would have to reset the whole thing. During my visit on that cold fall day, I asked what motivated him to work so persistently despite the frustrations and setbacks. "I think in part it's because I believe we should pass on to our kids and grandchildren a world that is livable, lovable and beautiful," he said. But it also was more personal, as I learned later through email conversations.

COURTESY OF JANET KURMAN HESSELBARTH

"AS THE GLACIERS MELT, FORESTS BURN, AND WILDLIFE MOVE OR DIE OUT ACROSS THE WEST, ALL IN THE FACE OF CLIMATE CHANGE, OUR COLLECTIVE MEMORIES OF THE UNIMPAIRED NATIONAL PARKS WILL GRADUALLY FADE, MUCH LIKE MY INCREASINGLY DISTANT RECOLLECTIONS."

"One of the reasons I write is to avoid thinking about everything I've lost, including the abilities to talk, eat, walk, take care of myself and so much more," he told me. "I can easily sink into a morass of deep depression. I take an antidepressant, which helps, but writing is probably more important in keeping me out of the depths of depression. It's challenging and creative, and helps me escape the shackles of my body, at least for a while."

Yochim hoped to finish "Requiem" and see it published this year. But in case he wasn't able to, his friend, Bill Lowry, agreed to finish it for him. On February 29, in the early evening, Yochim was sitting at his desk writing an email when his heart stopped. His father was only 10 feet away and didn't hear a sound. When he came over just before dinner, he noticed his son's eyes were closed and he was unresponsive. He was gone.

Lowry now has Yochim's manuscript. He fashioned the notes and bullet points into the conclusion and wrote the epilogue with Brian, Yochim's brother. Lowry, along with Jim and Jeanne, is following up with potential publishers. They are determined to see the book published to honor Yochim's memory. "It's what he worked so hard for," Jeanne said.

In "Requiem," Yochim describes an acquaintance of his, Anne, who also had ALS. As she was deteriorating, her husband asked her if she wanted to continue to live even if she lost the ability to move her eyes. Believing a cure for ALS was imminent, she said yes. Eventually, she did lose the ability to move her eyes. She could still hear, smell and feel but had no way of communicating. Before he died, Yochim often wondered what she did to pass the time in the dark confinement of her head.

"Did she envision herself, as I would, on the shore of Yellowstone Lake, watching the setting sun highlight a departing storm while the tempestuous waves at my feet slowly calm? Could she sit on the fallen giant in Sequoia National Park's Log Meadow, feeling the exuberance of summer life in that spot of heaven?" he wrote. "I hope she had some such place of tranquility and natural beauty, even if it was only the view from her deck. ... This is, perhaps, the most important reason to prevent the worst of climate change, to save our places of wonder and inspiration, our citadels of safety, our retreats of renewal and transcendence. In saving our natural cathedrals, we'll save ourselves too."

KATE SIBER is a freelance writer living in Durango, Colorado. She also writes for Outside magazine and is the author of "National Parks of the U.S.A.," a children's book.

THE DIY DESERT

Grab a map, load up on water and choose your own adventure at Mojave National Preserve.

By Julia Busiek
Photos by Ian Shive

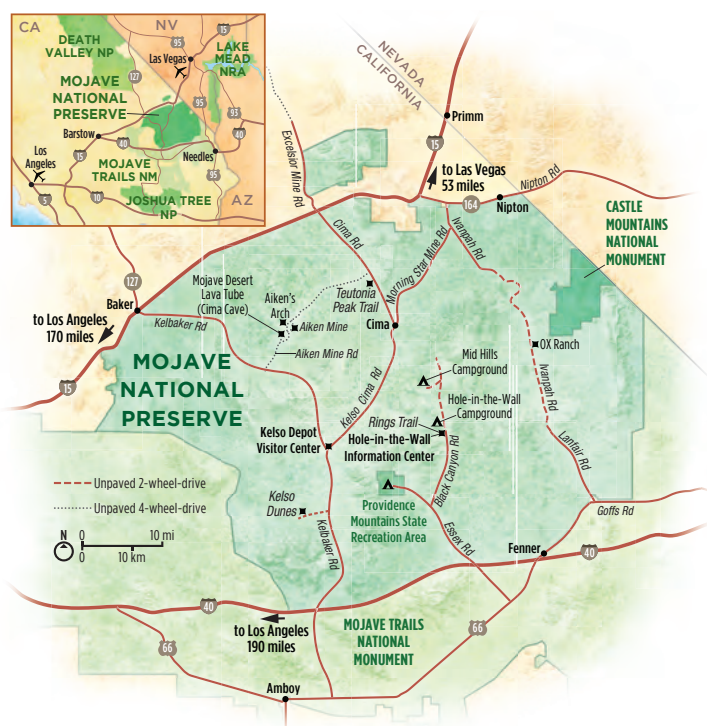
A HIKER on the Rings Loop Trail in Mojave National Preserve.

THE WONDERS of the preserve include red cinder cones, craggy lava flows, sand dunes, Joshua tree forests, granite mountains, dry lake beds and ancient rock art. Here, the landscape along the Teutonia Peak Trail (top) and near Zzyzx Road (bottom).

Two hours after leaving Las Vegas, we rolled to a stop at Hole-in-the-Wall Campground. It was 2:30 a.m., and my pal Liz, who had been asleep in the passenger seat even as we rattled over 40 miles of Mojave National Preserve's dirt roads, finally roused and peered out the window into the dark night. "Are we here?" she asked.

I will be honest: At that point, I did not think the preserve was going to be that cool. Broad strokes, the big wilderness parks in California protect and honor the superlatives: Redwood National Park has the tallest trees on earth. Death Valley is the hottest, driest and lowest place on the continent. Sequoia, designated in 1890, is the state's first national park (by about a week), and Yosemite is possibly the most legendary. Mojave National Preserve, meanwhile, didn't even *exist* until 1994. Its northern boundary is, like, an hour from the Luxor Casino on the Las Vegas Strip. Greater Los Angeles is two hours west of the park. Given how easy it is to get here, why didn't someone manage to make it a national park before, well, someone else managed to build a replica of an Egyptian pyramid on the Strip?

This was all in the back of my mind while Liz and I uncurled from the car and set up camp. No sooner had we crawled into our sleeping bags and switched off our headlamps than a shooting star streaked overhead — then another, and then another. As it turned out, we were catching the tail end of the Orionid meteor shower. I'd like to say we planned for this, but in truth this was just the first in a series of lucky strokes and good turns the desert and its residents would do us in the coming days. Liz and I stayed awake chatting for an hour, and I counted 18 shooting stars, to say nothing of the gazillion stationary ones or the vivid wash of the Milky Way reaching all the way across the sky.



©KAREN MINOT

In the morning, I put myself on coffee duty while Liz scrambled some eggs. The first three water spigots I tried in the campground didn't work. At the fourth, I pulled up on the handle and a huge spider tumbled out into my empty water bottle. So we made coffee with water from the gallon jugs we'd picked up the night before, then hurried to meet up with the preserve's archaeologist, David Nichols.

I'd emailed Nichols the week before, hoping he'd be able to point us in the direction of some interesting stuff to see. The preserve has been his office since 2001, and he's still adding important discoveries to his roster of archaeological finds. (The park is his backyard, too — he's one of a few dozen people who own remote, off-the-grid homesteads within its boundaries.) "Nothing is better than asking questions while cruising through the preserve," he had replied, offering to show us around. That was a relief, since it's surprisingly hard to find much advice about the preserve online, and what I did turn up focused on the same handful of highlights. But the park is the size of Delaware. There had to be more to it.

We met Nichols at a trailhead near our campsite. The holes in his Park Service-issued jacket indicated routine encounters with sharp rocks or cactuses. After quick introductions, he set

> **"When Congress created the preserve, they basically drew a line around all the good stuff and said, 'OK, the Park Service gets all this.'"**

THE KELSO DUNES (top) and rock formations along the Rings Loop Trail (bottom). The 1994 California Desert Protection Act, which created the preserve, affirmed what now seems obvious — that the desert is sparse, but not empty.

off down the trail, walking like someone who spends a lot of time covering rough ground on foot. Liz and I hustled to keep up as we descended into a mazelike canyon. While we navigated a sort of sketchy ladder of metal rings hammered into the rock, Nichols — whose affection for this prickly place was immediately apparent — filled us in on how and why Congress established the preserve.

It dates to the passage of the California Desert Protection Act. Signed 25 years before our visit, in October 1994, the act determined the fate of 9.6 million acres of Southern California desert, establishing 69 new wilderness areas, expanding Joshua Tree and Death Valley national monuments and "upgrading" them to national parks, and creating Mojave National Preserve.

"When Congress created the preserve, they basically drew a line around all the good stuff and said, 'OK, the Park Service gets all this,'" Nichols said in his amiable Southern California drawl. The park's wonders are many: red cinder cones, craggy lava flows, sand dunes that glimmer bone-white in the sun, one of the world's largest Joshua tree forests, sculpted granite mountains, dry lake beds and a trove of rock art documenting thousands of years of human history on the land.

Nichols paused suddenly, looked around, then veered off the trail, making toward a cluster of nondescript boulders perched upslope. We followed him into the shade of a refrigerator-sized rock. "Yep, this is one of them," he said.

When my eyes adjusted to the shadows, I saw a dizzying array of circles, squiggles and branching lines. Thick as my finger, the carvings were pale against the dark rhyolite boulder. We would eventually encounter rock art from three distinct cultures: the Mojave, the Chemehuevi and an ancient people who predated both of these groups. "This is the archaic stuff," Nichols said. "Old. Thousands upon thousands of years."

The going theory, Nichols said, is that this style of rock art was made by people in the throes of hallucination induced by consuming datura, a poisonous white flower that still grows in roadside ditches around the preserve. "People on datura see circles, flashes, dots and lines," Nichols said. He pointed to the shapes wrapping around the boulder. "Like this."

Feeling lucky to have such an expert guide, we marched on. Our trail passed more carvings — accompanied in one instance by a few sporadic scratches. "That's graffiti. Modern people don't go through the effort it takes to grind in an image that will last for thousands of years," Nichols said.

Under the floodlights at the car rental lot in Vegas the day before, I'd felt like a poser climbing into the obnoxiously large

ARCHAEOLOGIST DAVID NICHOLS has worked at the preserve since 2001. One of a few dozen people who own off-the-grid homesteads in the preserve, he helped the author find ancient rock art and historical cabins that didn't appear in any of the guides she had consulted.

Jeep I'd reserved for the trip. But it paid off: We spent the next three days putting the thing through a vehicular hell of deep sand, loose rocks and washed-out gullies, making the most of the thousand miles of dirt roads that cross the preserve. Paved roads are few and far between. The only ones we traversed were Kelbaker Road and Kelso Cima Road, twin desert highways that meet near the center of the park at Kelso, a semi-revived ghost town that was once the heart of a Union Pacific Railroad outpost.

Our second day out, we stopped by the Kelso Depot, a stately Mission Revival building that now houses a visitor center and gift shop. (It's also one of the few places in the preserve where you can fill up your water jugs, which — after the spider-bottle incident — Liz and I got a little fanatical about doing at every opportunity.) We ambled through the exhibits, admiring black-and-white photos of the depot in its heyday and in the depths of its abandonment, before the Park Service brought it back to life in 2005.

Our water supply duly topped up, we headed off to see a remnant of long-ago volcanoes that bubbled up in the heart of the park. The cave — actually a lava tube, the hardened shell of an ancient underground eruption — is not easy to find, even though it is one of the park's star attractions. The turnoff from the highway is unmarked, and no signs tell you which path is the right one to follow through the ensuing maze of dirt roads. If we hadn't been trailing Nichols' truck, we might still be searching for the place.

The Park Service's scant presence in the preserve was a mathematical reality at first: Back in 1994, the chair of the House Ways and Means Committee registered his distaste for the California Desert Protection Act by appropriating a first-year operating

Drain the Desert?

Some pockets of the Mojave Desert see less than 3 inches of rain a year. So you might think this parched landscape is about the last place on earth you'd go looking for extra water. But for the past decade, NPCA has been battling an ill-conceived plan to do just that.

The Cadiz Water Project would pump 16 billion gallons of groundwater a year from ancient aquifers underneath the Mojave Desert and sell it to cities in Southern California. Cadiz Inc., the corporation behind the scheme, owns 70 square miles in the heart of Mojave Trails National Monument, about halfway between Joshua Tree National Park and Mojave National Preserve — and the aquifer the company would tap extends under all three parks. The Obama administration blocked the project, but President Donald Trump's deputies revived it in 2017.

NPCA AT WORK

Hydrologists say the project would suck water out of the Mojave 10 times faster than the sparse rainfall can replenish it. That would spell disaster for desert species that depend on the complex network of natural springs that dot this otherwise arid landscape.

"The Cadiz Water Project posed an existential threat to the California desert, especially in the face of climate change," said NPCA's Chris Clarke, who has worked alongside a diverse coalition of environmental groups, elected leaders such as California Sen. Dianne Feinstein, ranchers and Native American tribes to defeat the project.

Desert defenders scored a big win in August 2019, when California Gov. Gavin Newsom signed a bill requiring independent scientific proof that groundwater mining projects in the Mojave will not harm the desert's delicate natural balance — a standard the Cadiz Water Project has repeatedly failed to meet.

Clarke advocated staunchly for the bill and said its success is likely to doom the project, which first surfaced in 1982. "Californians rose up and rejected the Cadiz project soundly, from the grassroots to the halls of the legislature," he said. "People are learning that the desert is not just a place to get resources from — it's a place worth celebrating and protecting for its own sake."

> "We've found that if we don't lock these old cabins, people don't shoot at them. Instead, they'll want to come in and check the place out."

budget of $1 for the park. But over time, this hands-off approach became part of the management philosophy.

"Early on, it was decided to make this a park people could discover for themselves," Debra Hughson, longtime chief of resources at the preserve, told me when we spoke. "We're not going to put up exhibits all over the place and put a trail here and a trail here and a trail there."

Eventually, we followed Nichols to the toe of a chunky black lava field, where the gravelly desert floor gave way to a cluster of symmetrical cinder cones. Lack of road signs notwithstanding, in the age of Instagram, some of the preserve's more photogenic attractions seem to be gaining prominence. We arrived a couple of minutes after a group of about 50 boisterous college geologists on a field trip. Nichols looked pained at the sight of the crowd — evidently a rare phenomenon at the preserve — so we drove off to check out some nearby petroglyphs. When we came back, we had the place to ourselves.

From the parking spot, we followed a faint trail through the cinder to a ladder leading down into a gaping pit. Then it was an army-crawl through a low tunnel, trying not to crack our heads on the ceiling in the near-pitch dark. Eventually, Liz straightened up ahead of me and said, "Whoa."

The tunnel opened into a vaulted room as long as a city bus and twice as high. A few shafts of sunlight blazed in at odd angles through holes in the roof, illuminating clouds of dust we had kicked up from the sandy floor. For a few minutes before another group crawled into the cave, we took turns twirling our fingers through the rays of light, seeing how we could make the dust billow and swirl in our wake.

THE OLD CABINS in the preserve are maintained by a core group of amateur historians and preservationists who bring in the furniture, dishes and firewood. The interior (top) and exterior (far right) of two different restored cabins. Bottom: Abandoned mining equipment at the Aiken Mine.

The California Desert Protection Act hinged on compromise. "The Mojave National Preserve is absolutely worthy of national park status," said NPCA's David Lamfrom, who oversaw the California Desert program until 2019. "But if the environmentalists had insisted on designating it as a park, that would have meant no more ranching and no more hunting." To secure the broad support the bill needed to pass, conservationists settled for preserve status, which allows a broader range of uses. Hunters have long come to the Mojave in pursuit of deer, birds and bighorn sheep. And though most grazing leases were retired in the early 2000s, one working ranch remains.

Rob Blair is the fourth generation of his family to run cattle in the Mojave Desert. To put it mildly, his is not an easy job. In wetter parts of the West, a cow can find all the grass it needs on a few acres. But the Mojave is so arid that each of Blair's animals needs hundreds of acres of open range, and the terrain is so rugged and spiky that even all-terrain vehicles aren't much use. The only practical way to cover ground is on horseback.

Evidently, all those years in the saddle have left Blair with

time to think, and he's used some of it to make himself into a bona fide cowboy poet. Another lucky break: Our visit coincided with the park's 25th anniversary celebration, which was held in a dusty lot behind the Kelso Depot, steps away from a busy train track. While a food truck dished out barbecue sandwiches, staff and dignitaries reflected on how the desert had changed since the Park Service came to town in 1994. The afternoon's festivities opened with Blair reciting a few of his poems.

He took the stage sporting, I kid you not, a ten-gallon hat, a crisp Western shirt, a bowtie, a white mustache, stiff jeans and stiffer-looking boots. On just about anyone else, this ensemble would have been a get-up, but Blair made it look genuinely dignified. Raising his voice to be heard over the freight train rolling past the depot, he introduced himself: "My wife and I raised our family in a house my great-grandad was living in in 1919, just the other side of the Providence Mountains here. So, we've put down some roots." He took a breath, looked off into the distance, and began:

Well there's a land, have you seen it?

It's the cussedest land that I know.

From the Providence Mountains that screen it, to the Clipper Valley below.

And some say God was tired when he made it, and some say it's a fine land to shun.

And maybe there's some that wouldn't trade it for no life on earth, and I'm one …

> **Sunset on our last night in the desert found Liz and me high on a mountainside overlooking a Joshua tree forest, sitting on a porch swing made out of an old steel bed frame, drinking the last of the beers we'd brought with us.**

THE PETROGLYPHS in the preserve have been attributed to the Mojave, the Chemehuevi and an ancient people who predated both of these groups.

By some measures, Americans' appreciation for the desert was slow to blossom. Yosemite Valley was first set aside as a park in the 1860s. Death Valley and Joshua Tree weren't protected for another 70 years or so, and big machines were still digging open-pit mines in land that would become Mojave National Preserve decades after that. When it finally came to pass in 1994, the California Desert Protection Act affirmed what now seems obvious — that the desert is sparse, but not empty. It is fragile but resilient. Plants and animals survive on thinner margins here than almost anywhere else in the country. Scars on the land can take millennia to heal, but with rigorous protections in place, eventually they will.

The question remains: What to do with the hundreds of abandoned structures — a century's worth of mines, homesteads, ranches and railroads — that still dot the park? Should the Park Service knock them all down, haul truckloads of rusted metal and cracked rubber off to the dump, try for a clean slate? Or are these remnants now just as much a part of this place as the Joshua trees, deserving the same care and protection?

The debate has simmered here for the past 25 years, and the conclusions vary from site to site, person to person, budget cycle to budget cycle. The Park Service has razed some buildings, restored others and blocked up many of the mine shafts so people don't fall in. The rest of the structures are still out there, awaiting rediscovery and cranking up the intriguing character of this place.

Sunset on our last night in the desert found Liz and me high on a mountainside overlooking a Joshua tree forest, sitting on a porch swing made out of an old steel bed frame, drinking the last of the beers we'd brought with us. At our backs, an American flag flapped lazily over a 90-year-old cabin with fresh tar paper walls.

That afternoon, we'd been complaining to Nichols about the wind. Late October is generally a great time to be in the Mojave — it's after the perilous summer heat and before the snow arrives. We had enjoyed clear skies and warm days, but every evening, the wind had come up at sunset and blown hard all night long, shaking our tent and making it tough to get much sleep.

"You should stay in one of our historical cabins tonight," Nichols had replied. "We've fixed up a handful of them so they're pretty comfortable, and if no one else has gotten there first, the place is yours for the night." As much as I'd enjoyed my all-night meteor vigil, Liz and I were both ready for a good night's sleep. So we followed Nichols down a rough road that climbed into a range of lumpy granite peaks somewhere north of Kelso.

We parked behind the cabin, and Nichols showed us inside. I was surprised to find the door unlocked, thinking of the beefy padlocks I'd seen on old buildings in other national parks I'd visited. "We've found that if we don't lock these old cabins, people don't shoot at them," Nichols explained. "Instead, they'll want to come in and check the place out."

Inside, the three rooms were tidy and spacious. Skillets hung from hooks above the sink, and a bouquet of silk flowers, a logbook and a photo album rested on a table by the door. A 50-gallon drum had found a second life as a handmade woodstove, with firewood stacked neatly beside it. Nichols pointed out a few spots where his team had made repairs, shoring up the walls and patching the rodent holes. "This was a historic preservation project, so in everything we did, we were careful to match the original structure," Nichols said. "But everything else in here — the furniture, the dishes, the firewood — that's all been brought in by volunteers. There's a core group of amateur historians and preservationists that keeps a real close eye on these old cabins and does a lot of work to maintain them." Nichols eventually headed back toward his own Mojave homestead, leaving Liz and me to take in the 100-mile views from the cabin's front yard.

After sunset, when the wind came up and the high desert air turned chilly, we latched the cabin door and got the woodstove burning. We cooked dinner by the light of a kerosene lantern and played a few hands of cards with a well-used deck we found on a shelf.

The Park Service might not lock the structures in their care, but they don't exactly broadcast them either. The homestead wasn't labeled on any map that I saw, and its existence barely registers online, which may be attributable to the plea posted on the wall not to divulge its whereabouts on social media. Earlier, I'd asked Hughson how a regular person could ever hope to understand the rich history of Mojave National Preserve. "You can learn a little bit about it in the visitor center," she allowed. "But say you see an old cabin on the hill and want to know, what's the story behind that? You have to do your own digging. That, or you'll leave with a sense of emptiness and vastness, and a lot of open questions."

All over the park, we saw how this ethos has evolved into a point of pride for people who care for and about this place — and how it leaves space for them to share their love in arresting ways that feel closer to the truth than anything I've seen in a curated exhibit or a carefully worded plaque.

The cabin's walls were a collage of faded photographs, handwritten notes, instructions and recollections from the mining family who built this cabin and lived in it throughout the 20th century. Before we stoked the fire and rolled out our sleeping bags on the worn floorboards in front of the stove, we flipped through the logbook, reading aloud entries from a cast of characters who had discovered the cabin and others who have always known it was here. "Being able to get away from the nightmare that is casino work and have this place so close is a gift," someone had scrawled a few days before us. "Once again, a perfect night in the preserve."

travel essentials

The northern boundary of Mojave National Preserve is 50 miles south of Las Vegas on Interstate 15. Gas up at Primm, Nevada, or Baker, California, and don't expect much in the way of services in the preserve: There are no stores, restaurants or hotels. Park maps indicate where you can find drinking water, but bring extra and fill your jugs when you have the opportunity.

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THE AUTHOR and her rented Jeep.

The Park Service manages two campgrounds: Hole-in-the-Wall and Mid Hills. Hole-in-the-Wall is close to a ranger station and a well-marked trail with lots of petroglyphs. Mid Hills is at higher elevation, in a nice pinyon-juniper forest, and the sites offer more privacy and some lovely views. The state of California operates a tiny campground at the Providence Mountains State Recreation Area, in the southern part of the preserve (the state park predates the preserve by decades). If you're seeking solitude, you can camp pretty much anywhere, but the Park Service asks you to use previously disturbed areas and to follow Leave No Trace ethics.

JULIA BUSIEK has worked in national parks in Washington, Hawaii, Colorado and California. She lives in Oakland, California.

IAN SHIVE is an award-winning photographer, author, educator, film producer and environmental advocate. Follow him on Instagram: @ianshivephoto.

Eds. Note: *As the magazine was going to press, a fire was tearing through Mojave National Preserve, burning tens of thousands of acres. Our hearts go out to the preserve and the community.*

LANDS OF PROTEST

A VISUAL HISTORY OF RACIAL JUSTICE DEMONSTRATIONS IN AMERICA'S NATIONAL PARKS.

ON AUGUST 28, 1963, about 250,000 people joined the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom to advocate for the civil and economic rights of African Americans and other disenfranchised groups. From the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech, in which he laid out his vision for equality, justice and freedom for all.

THE DEATH OF GEORGE FLOYD, an African American man who was killed by a white police officer during a May 25 arrest in Minneapolis, spurred worldwide protests calling for an end to police brutality and systemic racism. One of these protest sites, Lafayette Square, was chosen by protesters for its strategic and symbolic location: The 7-acre urban park, which is managed by the National Park Service, sits across the street from the White House.

"Place matters. It can be as important where to place a protest as what you have to say," said Timothy Zick, the author of "Speech Out of Doors: Preserving First Amendment Liberties in Public Places" and a professor of government and citizenship at William & Mary Law School. "If you're talking about the National Mall or Lafayette Park, you're within earshot or eyesight of people in charge, so it does matter to be there."

The National Park System is filled with iconic venues, and people demanding civil rights, racial justice and equality (and exercising their First Amendment rights) have long made use of national park sites to legitimize their causes. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech, delivered in 1963 during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, resonated all the more because he spoke in front of the Lincoln Memorial, steps away from the statue of President Abraham Lincoln, whose moral authority King summoned in his opening lines. In 1978, Native Americans calling for tribal sovereignty marched across the country from one national park site to another, starting on Alcatraz Island in California and ending at the National Mall. They carried a sacred pipe over more than 3,000 miles, ultimately smoking it at the foot of the Washington Monument.

While some national parks become protest sites, some protest sites can become national parks because of their historical significance. For example, the area of downtown Birmingham, Alabama, that witnessed some of the most powerful peaceful protests and some of the most violent police repression of the 1960s civil rights movement became the Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument in 2017.

The right to protest for what is right, in the words of King, is "the greatness of America." The images on the following pages highlight some of the protests for racial justice that have taken place at national parks over the decades and serve as a reminder of what that greatness looks like. *—Editors*

THIS SUMMER, against the backdrop of a global pandemic, protesters calling for an end to police brutality and systemic racism demonstrated at national park sites in Washington, including the Lincoln Memorial, the National Mall and Lafayette Square. Similar rallies have taken place in cities across the country, making Black Lives Matter one of the largest movements in U.S. history.

DENIED THE USE of a Washington, D.C., music hall by the Daughters of the American Revolution because of her race, Marian Anderson sang at the Lincoln Memorial on April 9, 1939. Around 75,000 people attended her defiant performance at the stony feet of the author of the Emancipation Proclamation.

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CIVIL RIGHTS ICON and then-Chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee John Lewis marched with about 600 others from Selma toward the Alabama state capitol to register Black voters on March 7, 1965 (top). Lewis and others were severely beaten by police near the Edmund Pettus Bridge, forcing the marchers to turn back, but a much larger crowd completed the 50-mile walk — now part of the Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail — under National Guard protection a couple of weeks later. Lewis died this summer after serving as a U.S. representative from Georgia for more than three decades. Bottom: Thousands of African Americans marched silently toward the White House in June of 1922 to protest lynching and urge congressional action. They carried signs bearing messages such as "Is this civilization?" and "Congress discusses constitutionality while the smoke of human bodies darkens the heavens."

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A SMALL GROUP of Sioux occupied Alcatraz Island (now part of Golden Gate National Recreation Area) on March 8, 1964, to claim the island under the provisions of the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie (top). Native American activists organized several subsequent occupations — including at Mount Rushmore and another at Alcatraz that started in 1969 and lasted 19 months — to denounce violations of their treaty rights and to call attention to poverty in Indigenous communities and other social inequities. Bottom: Children and parents were among the crowd of 25,000 that assembled at the Lincoln Memorial during the 1957 Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom to urge the government to uphold and enforce the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision, which desegregated schools.

IN APRIL 2006, protesters convened at Washington, D.C.'s Meridian Hill Park before advancing on the National Mall to defend immigrants' rights. For months, protests like this one, as well as boycotts and school walkouts, took place across the country as millions of participants demanded comprehensive immigration reform.

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MEMBERS OF several tribes with historical ties to the Yellowstone region assembled at the Roosevelt Arch at the northern entrance of Yellowstone National Park in the fall of 2017 to advocate for the renaming of park features that currently pay homage to people who participated in the massacre or subjugation of Native Americans (top). Bottom: In 2018, Japanese Americans at Tule Lake National Monument in Northern California protested the incarceration of immigrants and the separation of families at the border. Demonstrators hoped to call attention to the similarities between the Trump administration's practices and the incarceration of about 120,000 people of Japanese descent — the majority of them American citizens — at camps including Tule Lake during World War II.

CÉSAR CHÁVEZ, pictured in the center of this 1966 photograph, walks with workers demanding better pay and conditions during what was known as the Delano grape strike. Chávez united generations of farm laborers — many of them Latino and Filipino — elevating their voices and prompting them to strike, march and organize for their rights. His legacy is recognized at the César E. Chávez National Monument in Southern California.

THE FOOTPATHS of Obed Wild and Scenic River continued to beckon to the author during the early days of the pandemic.

NPS

Constancy Amid Chaos

Nature in the time of COVID-19.

I'M WRITING TO YOU FROM THE PAST — May 2020 to be precise. At this threshold, with the economy in tatters, more than 350,000 citizens of the world dead of COVID-19, and protesters crowding the streets of cities across the globe in the wake of George Floyd's death, I wish desperately to know what you all now know about how this story of a crippling disaster and social disruption has played out.

Have we managed to flatten the virus' curve? Do surgical masks still obscure our otherwise welcoming smiles? Has the Food and Drug Administration approved a vaccine? Has Floyd's tragic death resulted in meaningful change to policing in our country? Have Americans and their elected leaders mobilized in pursuit of racial justice? Has some sense of normalcy returned to our lives? Or have things only gotten worse?

My wife, Belinda, and I are about as well positioned as anyone to weather a crisis, particularly a highly infectious one: We live on the Cumberland Plateau in rural Morgan County, Tennessee, and occupy a cabin nearly a mile off the blacktop. We're surrounded by 29 acres of woods, and down the bluff behind the cabin flows Clear Creek, part of Obed Wild and Scenic River, a national park site encompassing the river, adjacent waterways and adjoining trails. Though the roads and trails of our beloved Great Smoky Mountains National Park have been barricaded through much of the spring and conservancy groups have been asking hikers to stay away from the 2,200-mile Appalachian Trail, the footpaths of Obed have continued to beckon to us.

We feel an abiding sense of safety and peace here in our isolated home, and yet we worry — not for ourselves, but for a daughter late in pregnancy with our first grandchild, for parents all well into their 80s, and for the world's marginalized populations wanting for food, shelter and other essentials amid a global economic collapse. Belinda and

I have bestowed a moniker on the fear and anxiety that the current situation inspires, The Beast, and each of us has, on occasion, allowed it to slink into our psyches.

Springtime's abundant surge of new growth in a time of pandemic suggests not so much nature's indifference to our plight but rather its blessed constancy in spite of it.

Spring right on cue

I was struck by the jarring contrast between the deadly arrival of COVID-19 and the bounteous awakening of spring, which occurred in the southeastern United States at about the same time, in early March. And I contend there's a measure of cosmic purpose in the coincident phenomena — one portending loss, the other promising rebirth. In time, one will prove ephemeral, the other, eternal.

This spring like every other, right on cue, the forest floor bristled with the first emergent spikes of dormant wildflowers and plants, and soon enough the cinnamon and sensitive ferns, bloodroot, wild geraniums, ginger, trilliums, mayapple, foamflowers, spring beauties, and phlox appeared lush and fully formed. And the now-returned hummingbirds hover near the eave where the feeder should be, reminding us that it's time to mix up a fresh offering of sugar water in welcome.

Pollinators large and small alight on the awaiting blossoms of our blueberry bushes, promising a bounty of fruit later in the summer. In the darkened forest surrounding the cabin, the male whip-poor-wills once again voice their incessant nocturnal come-ons to prospective mates, and we wish them well in their romantic pursuits. Spring thunderstorms rumble through, bestowing on the plants life-sustaining water and inclining Belinda and me to savor the snug shelter of our cabin.

Springtime's abundant surge of new growth in a time of pandemic suggests not so much nature's indifference to our plight but rather its blessed constancy in spite of it. Indeed, at a time when so much seems grim and uncertain, spring's arrival provides the perfect metaphor to buoy spirits and inspire hope.

During my 1979 end-to-end trek of the Appalachian Trail, like all thru-hikers, I was privileged to witness the moment-to-moment changes occurring in the forest over the course of my five-month journey. From watching one season yield to the next, daylight surrender to night, and darkness give way to morning, I discovered that, in the midst of chaos, order and purpose are present for us.

That sanguine observation has sustained me over all the years since my AT adventure, but it seems more relevant now than ever. We humans, like the plants and animals of the forest, are on this journey for the long haul, and months or years hence, though our social norms and economic structures may be irrevocably altered, we as a species shall endure to observe spring's vibrant — and perennial — spectacle again … and again.

A healing space

Throughout my life, I have sought solace in nature. In some cases (the lure of the AT, for instance), I was *drawn* into nature's soothing embrace; in others (instances of personal or professional struggle), I was *driven* into it. Now, it seems, the latter more often applies, and the promise of comfort for nerves jangled by the cascade of bad news spilling across my computer screen prompts me to lace up my boots and head out into the wilds. The positive effects of entry into nature remain undiminished, but these days, they are not necessarily instantaneous.

Similarly, it took time for nature to work its magic on me all those years ago on the AT. Filled with nagging doubt along the trail's first difficult miles, I considered quitting. But then, at the instant when it mattered most, an encounter with a fellow thru-hiker — a grieving widow — lent perspective and kept me on the path north toward Maine.

Though I didn't realize it at the time, I was about to learn the first, and perhaps the most lasting, lesson about life on the trail. Put simply, if one is receptive and open to change, the trail — and in a larger sense, nature itself — seems always to answer one's questions and meet one's needs. It sounds mystical, and I wouldn't

THROUGHOUT HIS LIFE, the author (above at Obed Wild and Scenic River) has sought solace in nature. In some cases, he was *drawn* into it; in others, he was *driven* into it.

believe it if I hadn't experienced it so many times along my journey.

And I experience it still. Recently, on a warm spring day with bluebird sky, I set out on a familiar trail in Obed, my mind beset with worry: The Beast had slithered into my daypack. But nature, it seemed, wanted nothing to do with my sour mood or its intrusion on an otherwise placid and pristine tract of woods and so was about to meet my needs once again.

As I took up the trail, a great horned owl, in rare defiance of its nocturnal wont, swooped low across the footway and roosted in a nearby tree. I stood stock-still, heart a-thumping, and watched it in wonder for a full 10 minutes before those enormous wings carried it to another roost deeper in the forest. The Beast, no match for the owl's powerful talons or potent symbolism, was long gone.

Social distancing al fresco

Though the hike occurred on a Monday, the trailhead parking lot was full of cars bearing license plates from distant counties and states. While Obed's visitor center was closed, the park — which naturally encourages parties to disperse — had remained open (unlike many national and state parks), and it had become something of a mecca for locked-down hikers eager to stretch their legs. I shared the path with dozens of other foot-travelers and half that many dogs.

Yes, the rules of social distancing still applied, and we all courteously pulled off the trail to let others pass, but the ubiquitous surgical masks were absent, and almost every person I met offered a warm greeting and wore a contented smile. My encounters on the trail contrasted starkly with my experience on weekly forays to a crowded grocery store, where worried eyes peering out from above fabric face coverings

NPS

THIS SPRING, right on cue, wildflowers (such as mountain laurel, above) emerged to bask in May's sunshine.

telegraph anxiety and eagerness to clear self-checkout and return home.

The trail induced the opposite inclination, and along the way I saw people lolling on sun-drenched rocks, bending to snap photos of flowering plants or dangling bare feet in the cool water of the creek. It seems that in these troubled times, my fellow hikers and I were less intent on an aerobic, endorphin-inducing dash through the woods than on a soothing immersion in them. The Japanese have a name for such quiet engagement with nature: forest bathing, "shinrin-yoku."

A hike that normally takes me just over an hour occupied me for four, and I found myself captivated by features of the trail that I had passed by dozens of times without really noticing them: the spreading carpet of ancient lycopodium, the green-blue water of the river lapping the edges of huge boulders, the clusters of delicate bluets that had survived February's frost to bask in May's warm sunshine, the lush explosion of cream-white mountain laurel blossoms accented with delicate pink striations. By the time I arrived back at the car, my forest bath had washed me clean, and my reserves of optimism had been fully recharged. I'm comforted to know that if and when The Beast returns, its exorcism and my cleansing await at the nearest trailhead.

From the past, a message of hope

By the time you read this essay, the cycling of seasons will have carried us past spring, through summer, and into fall.

From my springtime vantage point, I'm picturing squirrels scurrying for fallen acorns beneath oak trees washed in reds and golds. I'm imagining the welcome nip of crisp mountain mornings that occasion the reach for a wool sweater. And I'm envisioning the trails of our national parks teeming with life — the wild denizens of the forest joined by footloose trekkers bearing the burden of their backpacks, but little else.

That is my hope. But, if COVID-19 is still cutting a deadly path across the world, and humans continue to peer from a troubled present toward an uncertain future, they can be assured of this: In time, spring's promise of awakening and renewal will, yet again, be fulfilled. NP

DAVID BRILL'S writing has appeared in dozens of publications, and he is the author of five nonfiction books including "Into the Mist: Tales of Death and Disaster, Mishaps and Misdeeds, Misfortune and Mayhem in Great Smoky Mountains National Park" and "As Far as the Eye Can See: Reflections of an Appalachian Trail Hiker," now in its eighth (30th anniversary) printing. David and his wife, Belinda, welcomed their first grandchild on July 4.

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A GROUP OF DESCENDANTS of Nicodemus settlers (as well as descendants by marriage and other supporters) pose in front of a century-old school building in town. Angela Bates, the executive director of the Nicodemus Historical Society, is third from left.

Promised Land

After the Civil War, more than 26,000 African Americans left the South to homestead the Great Plains, carving out farms, free lives and community on the prairie.

IN SEPTEMBER 1877, several hundred formerly enslaved people packed their belongings and left Kentucky by rail for Kansas. When the train could take them no farther, they disembarked and continued for two days on foot. The terrain was bleak and unfamiliar, but the odyssey was inspired by a dream: the chance to live as free citizens on their own land around the newly formed town of Nicodemus.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, thousands of African Americans made similar migrations to the Great Plains, fleeing the white violence that followed the Civil War in the South. Under the Homestead Act, they staked claims on farmland from New Mexico to the Dakotas.

Many of these Black homesteaders settled in communities that grew to several hundred people in population. While most were farmers, some became educators, pastors, business owners, postmasters, restaurateurs and musicians. Others pursued careers in local and state politics.

"They represent, to me, what African Americans did with their freedom," said Angela Bates, whose great-great-great-grandparents were among the first homesteaders of Nicodemus. "They became landowners in an environment that was hostile, at a time when the nation was hostile toward them. They hunkered down and said, 'If we could do this for our masters, we can do this for ourselves.'"

Now, Nicodemus National Historic Site, Homestead National Monument of America and the University of Nebraska are collaborating on a study of Black homesteaders on the Great Plains. Over the last three years, the effort — partially funded by the National Park Service — has produced ethnographies of six African American homesteader communities: Blackdom, New Mexico; DeWitty, Nebraska; Nicodemus, Kansas; Dearfield, Colorado; Empire, Wyoming; and Sully County, South Dakota. "This research will help us bring this story to life," said Mark Engler, superintendent of Homestead National Monument of America in Beatrice, Nebraska. "The connections we draw with this history become much more relevant and stronger when we see the face of an actual individual."

The ongoing research, which will eventually be compiled in a book, also highlights the scope of Black

homesteading. Poring over thousands of homesteading records and census documents, the research team established that more than 26,000 African Americans participated in homesteading the Great Plains. "This was a small group of people who did some amazing things," said Richard Edwards, who directs the Center for Great Plains Studies at the University of Nebraska and is heading up the research. "Their story needs to be part of our national narrative about homesteading."

The Homestead Act of 1862 granted 160 acres in certain states to citizens or those intending to become citizens who staked out unclaimed property, built a home, cultivated the land and lived there for five years. (The land had been previously taken from Native Americans, many of whom were by then living on reservations.) The act was the first major piece of national legislation without a racial exclusion for its benefits. Once the Civil Rights Act of 1866 (and later the 14th Amendment) granted African Americans citizenship, they were entitled to all the rewards that homesteading promised — although they often risked everything to gain them.

From 1868, when the first land patents were granted, to 1961, almost 1 million Americans successfully homesteaded the Great Plains. While the vast majority were white, Edwards and his colleagues found that Black families were granted more than 3,400 land titles, making them owners of an area the size of Rhode Island.

Homesteading demanded both courage and resourcefulness. When that early group reached Nicodemus in 1877, they saw no buildings, just tendrils of smoke rising from dugouts where some early settlers were living. It was too late to plant, and were it not for the charity of some white neighbors and a hunting party of Osage Indians, few would have survived the first winter.

"Prejudice is a luxury that you cannot afford in an environment like this. If the nearest help is 5 miles away, who cares if you're Black."

Transforming the unplowed prairie into viable farmland was grueling and hazardous. Homesteaders endured grasshoppers, tornadoes, hailstorms and drought, and they faced the constant threat of their fields being trampled by cattle herds that cowboys were driving to market. Crop prices were volatile.

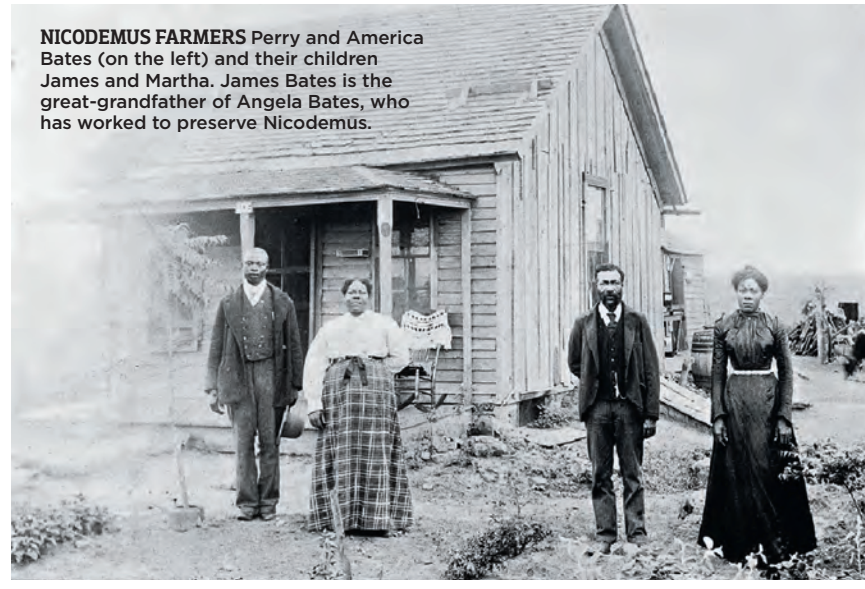
Even with scant money to pay a teacher or buy materials, building a school was an immediate priority for most Black homesteading communities. One of the founders of Nicodemus, the Rev. S. P. Roundtree, carried a brand on his cheek, the punishment for being taught to read by his master's son. Nicodemus opened a school that first year in the dugout of a woman named Jenny Fletcher.

Despite economic, environmental and social hardships, African American homesteaders crafted vibrant social lives on the Great Plains. They had sewing circles, newspapers, investment clubs, concerts, dances, ice cream parlors and churches. In DeWitty, Black homesteaders formed a baseball team — the Sluggers — that played teams from neighboring white towns.

Occasionally, Black homesteaders dodged the "separate but equal" norms of the Jim Crow era. DeWitty's most prominent couple, a white man named Charles Meehan and his Black wife, Hester, lived in open violation of Nebraska law prohibiting interracial marriage. In other communities, schools taught white and Black students together, integrating the classroom well before Brown v. Board of Education.

"Prejudice is a luxury that you cannot afford in an environment like this," Bates said. "If the nearest help is 5 miles away, who cares if you're Black."

Still, these homesteaders couldn't escape racism altogether. The town of Torrington, Wyoming, near Empire, segregated its restaurants, printed degrading caricatures in its newspaper and worse. In 1913, local deputies beat



NICODEMUS FARMERS Perry and America Bates (on the left) and their children James and Martha. James Bates is the great-grandfather of Angela Bates, who has worked to preserve Nicodemus.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

NICODEMUS IS THE only Black homesteading settlement that has survived. The town currently has a population of around 20 residents.

©DANA DAMEWOOD

to death Baseman Taylor, the brother of Empire's most prominent homesteader. They were never charged with a crime.

Eventually, these communities dissolved. Poor rainfall and then the Great Depression drove many farmers from their land. Children left the farm to pursue education or to find a spouse. A few crumbling buildings remain in Dearfield, but of all Black homesteading settlements, Nicodemus is the only one that has survived. (It currently has a population of around 20.) And yet these homesteader communities may have succeeded even as they vanished.

"The idea was not to build permanent settlements," Edwards said. "The idea was to be a place where the homesteader generation could get relief from violence, make a living and prepare their children for lives likely to be led elsewhere."

Edwards estimates there are between 100,000 and 250,000 living descendants of African Americans who homesteaded the Great Plains. Among them is Bates, executive director of the Nicodemus Historical Society and great-great-granddaughter of Tom and Zerina Johnson, one of the community's founding families. Bates' great-grandmother gave birth to the first baby in Nicodemus, a boy named Henry, born in a dugout.

Bates grew up in Southern California, but every summer her family packed their station wagon and drove "home" to Kansas. Bates was thrilled to ride horses, pump water and live the country life. In the 1990s, she worked for several years to establish Nicodemus National Historic Site. Now in her sixties, she lives southwest of town and devotes herself to collecting, preserving and sharing the history of the families who homesteaded this unforgiving prairie.

"Their spirit of determination and tenacity, their strong will and faith in the Lord is the legacy that burns in our veins as descendants," Bates said.

That legacy is most apparent during the Homecoming and Emancipation Celebration in late July, which typically draws several hundred descendants from around the country to Nicodemus. The sleepy town comes alive with a parade, a baseball game, a gospel extravaganza, a dance and a community feast. (This year, the event was held virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic.) In those moments of togetherness, Bates feels closest to her homesteading ancestors and the landscape where they first felt free.

"Nicodemus is not just a physical geographic spot in the middle of the United States," Bates said. "It's a connection to this land and to family. It's a state of mind." **NP**

JACOB BAYNHAM is a freelance journalist in Montana.

HISTORIC TRAVEL **DESTINATIONS**

Photo Credit:
Jeremy Hess on behalf of Destination Gettysburg

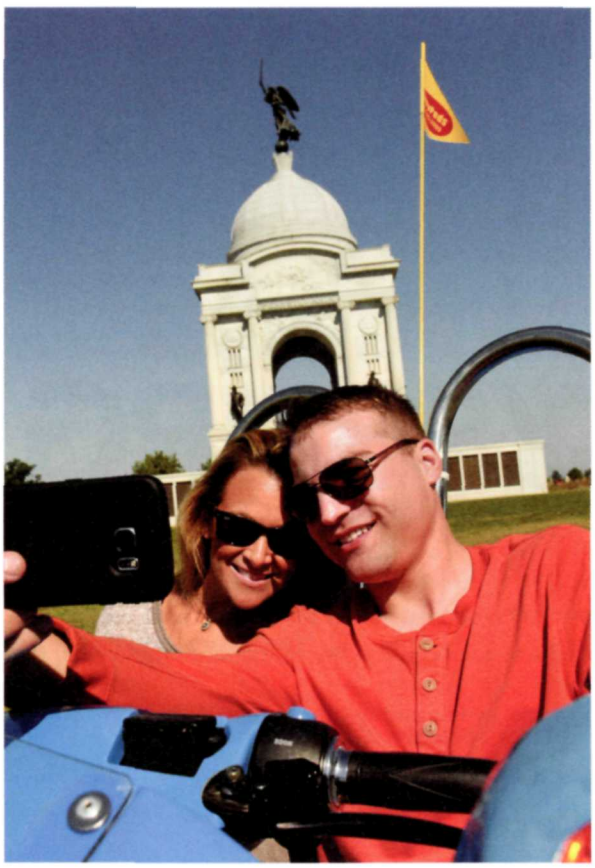


Photo Credit:
Jeremy Hess, for Destination Gettysburg

FALL INTO INSPIRATION.

Leaves of red, yellow and orange transform Gettysburg into a kaleidoscope of color throughout the fall season. Looking out over Gettysburg National Military Park, the colorful masterpiece will take your breath away, while reminding you of the mission of the brave men and boys who valiantly fought on these hallowed grounds over 150 years ago.

History surrounds you. Walk through Soldiers' National Cemetery and ponder President Lincoln's famous Gettysburg Address as Dedication Day draws near. Listen to the stories that lie in Gettysburg's historic streets. Learn of the military tactics and maneuvers used during the battle and stand in the shoes of the town's civilians whose lives were upturned by three fierce days of fighting in the place they called home.

Mix in local eats and drinks to round out your trip. Delight in the warm flavors of fall – crisp homegrown apples and pumpkin – locally grown and turned into culinary pleasures served up at our town eateries. Sip on locally crafted hard cider, wine, beer, mead and spirits. Then, venture out into the countryside where you can pick your own juicy apples straight from the rolling hillsides of Adams County's apple orchards.

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