



NationalParks

FALL 2025
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THE MAGAZINE OF THE NATIONAL PARKS CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

INTO THE BEYOND

With most of Denali closed to traffic, a wildlife lover heads into the Alaska park to explore the deserted backcountry.

HEARTBREAK AND
HOPE IN BEARS EARS

HIGH PRIEST OF
BLACK HISTORY

PADDLING THROUGH
THE HEARTLAND

Spirituality Meets Artistry

"I never expected it to be so beautiful that it takes your breath away."

— Kaya C., on Stauer Opals

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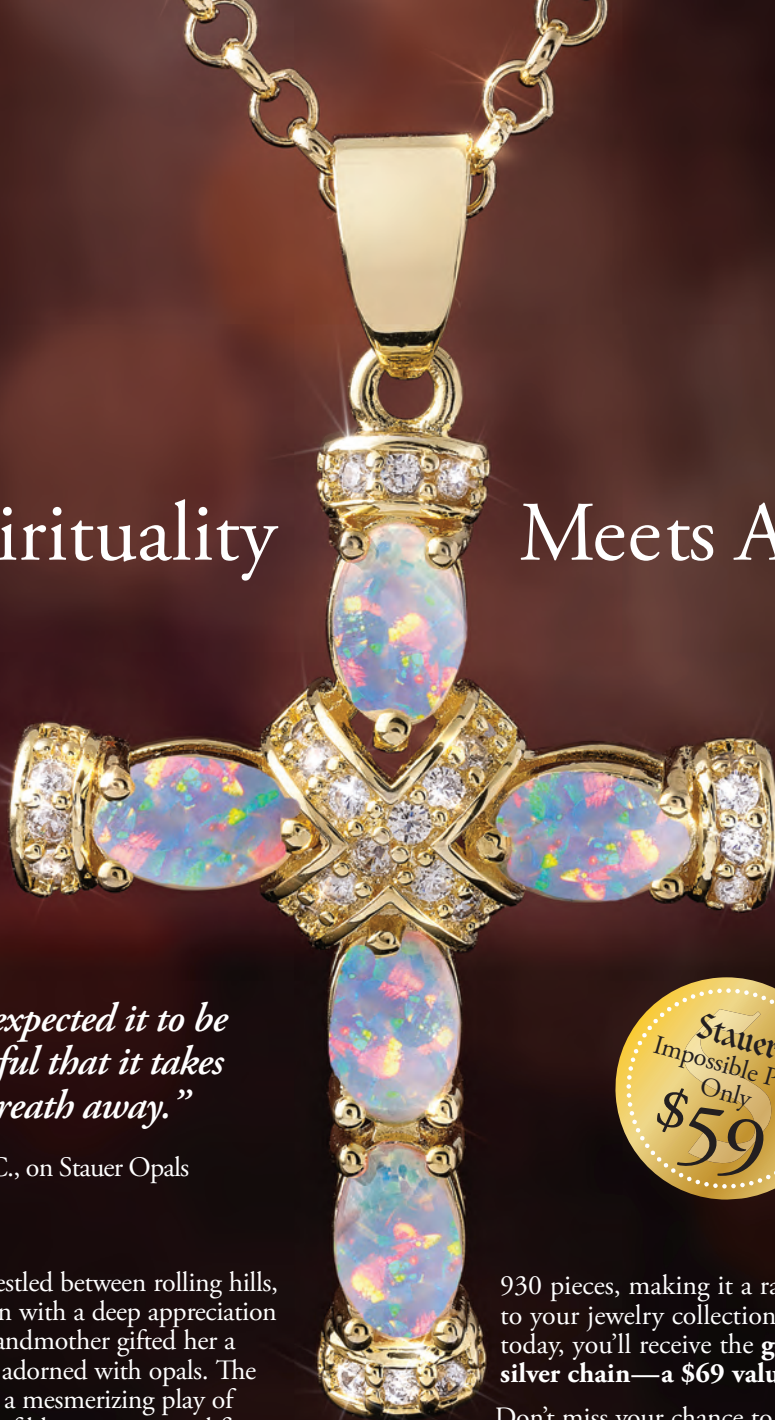
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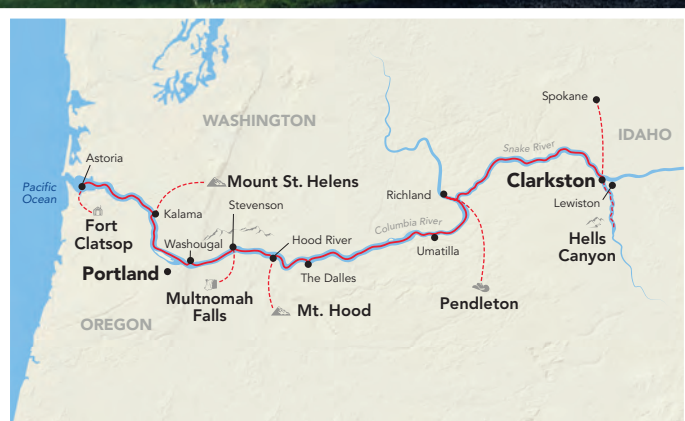
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NPS/KENT MILLER

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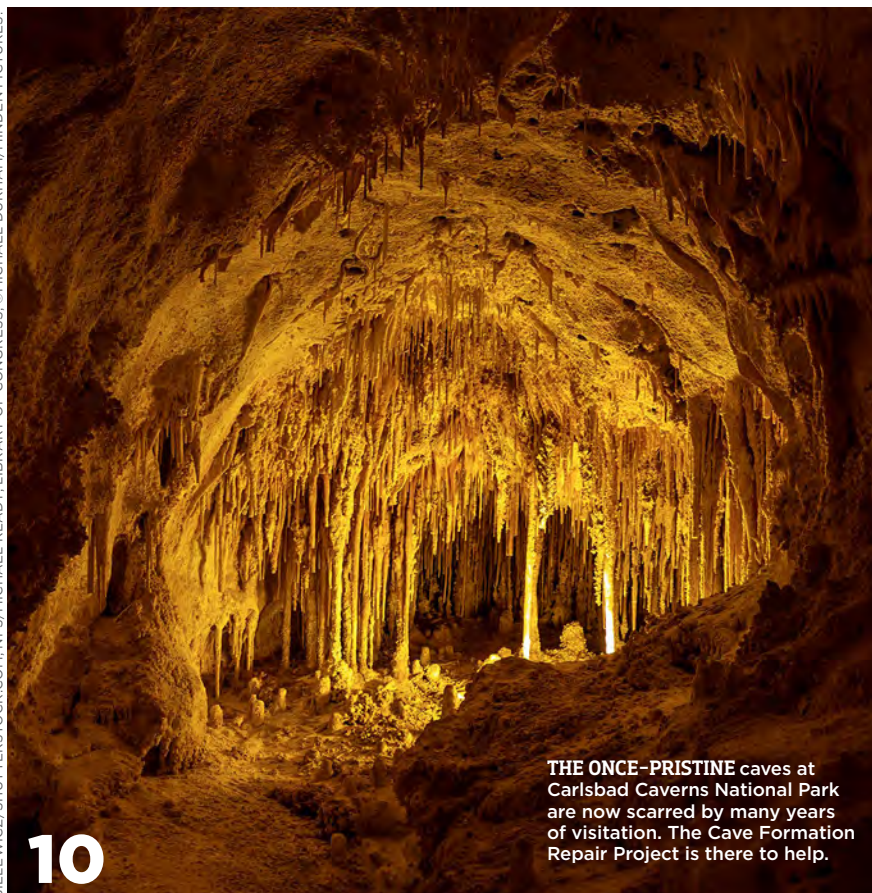
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Seasons Change



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It's hard for me to believe that when I publish my next President's Outlook in the Winter 2026 issue of this magazine, it will mark 10 years of sharing my perspectives with you here. It's harder still to imagine that it will be my last letter, but it will be. I want to let you know that I have made the deeply difficult and personal decision to step down from my role at the end of the year.

Being a part of the National Parks Conservation Association has been one of the greatest honors of my life, and there will be time for me to reflect on that later. But this organization and its mission always have been bigger than any one individual, and it takes the strength of all of us to fight the good fight. That was true in the beginning, when the visionaries who founded NPCA recognized the need for an organization that would bring Americans from all walks of life together to protect the landscapes and stories that define us as a nation. It was true over the century that followed, through triumphs and setbacks. And it's true now — maybe more than ever.

Sometimes, things will go our way, as when the provision to sell off hundreds of thousands of acres was removed from the Senate's "big, beautiful bill" this summer, averting a potential calamity for public lands. Sometimes they won't, and as a community of people who love the parks and believe in their inherent value to inspire and unite us, we will rally together and raise our voices in ever greater numbers. After all, we have been "fearless and outspoken," to quote NPCA's founder, Robert Sterling Yard, for all these years — and we're not about to stop now.

For as long as I have the privilege of serving NPCA, I'll be giving it my all. And after that? I'll be right alongside you as a supporter, rolling up my sleeves and advocating for the parks as I've always done — and the privilege will still be mine.

With gratitude,
 Theresa Pierno

'The Fight of Our Lives'

One of the most chilling developments is this administration's brazen efforts to rewrite history at parks. In accordance with President Trump's March executive order, signs or exhibits deemed too negative could be removed from national park sites. In July, The New York Times reported that Park Service staff have been forced to inventory materials that higher-ups could find problematic and submit their findings for review. Information related to climate change, slavery, women's rights, civil rights, African American history and labor history is at risk of being erased.

“The trend that we’re seeing is taking us in a direction that we think is very dangerous, very aggressive and, quite frankly, un-American,” he went on. “We’re in the fight of our lives. This is about as serious as it gets.”

I'm grateful to all my colleagues who are out there speaking up and fighting back. As always, you can learn more about what NPCA is doing and how you can help at npca.org/advocacy. And for storytelling about parks that strives to be accurate, fair and honest, please keep on reading.

NationalParks

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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.

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

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.

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.

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PRIDE AND PRAISE

Kudos to NPCA for the excellent “Parks in Crisis” story in the summer issue of National Parks magazine. You presented the facts related to how the Trump administration is threatening the future of the best park system in the world through extensive staff and budget cuts while simultaneously ignoring its responsibility to protect the parks’ natural and cultural resources for future generations.

As the leading voice for national parks and a strong supporter of the National Park Service, NPCA is alerting our country to the threats facing our national parks and how this will impact visitors’ park experiences. I am proud of the organization for which I had the privilege of being a senior vice president for 14 years.

RON TIPTON
Rockville, MD

DANG, THAT CROW!

Regarding crows [“Stone Age Bird”], I remember seeing a crow retrieve an acorn from an oak tree, drop it in the street and wait in a nearby tree. When a car came by and crushed the acorn, the wily crow would come down and eat the contents. As someone who spent over 30 years assessing the intelligence of children in school, I thought to myself, “Dang, that crow is intelligent!” It used a multistep process and an external agent to accomplish a task. So, that intelligence was not invisible at all, at least not to me.

MICHAEL SCHALLER
Temple City, CA

WALK WITH ME

I just read the President’s Outlook and Editor’s Note in the latest issue of National Parks magazine. Both inspired me to share some positive experiences from recent trips to national parks.

I was at one of the many geysers in Yellowstone National Park, surrounded by strangers. We were standing there silently, in awe of the beauty before us, when I spoke up in a voice intended to be heard. (I taught third grade for 32 years and served a decade as a union presi-

dent.) I said, “I think that people should take time to get out of the cities and come to national parks. I think that they would appreciate the chance to share the experience, and they would possibly realize we aren’t really different ... just humans enjoying the beauty of nature.” I heard lots of positive comments, such as, “Yes!” and “Absolutely!”

Within a few minutes I was approached by a family from Germany. The father asked me if they could hike with me, and we walked the trails for an hour or so. The next morning, I was asked by two young women from Ecuador if they could join me for a hike. We quietly walked together until we came upon two large bison. They left, but I stayed for a couple of hours to help a ranger direct people.

I am 69 years old and spend most of my time solo: I hike, ride my Harley, read and listen to music. However, whenever I enter a park, I meet strangers who become neighbors. I find nature — and our national parks — are a binding mechanism. I have hiked with men and women, with younger and older people, in groups and one-on-one. I have never felt judged or feared.

I strongly recommend that people get out to our most valuable national assets, our national parks. Forget the negative issues. Ignore divisions and inhale the fresh air. And if you see a man on the trails with a big smile on his face, say “Hi, neighbor.” I’ll be more than happy to walk beside you.

COREY SMITH
Xenia, OH

SLOT MEMORIES

I was reading through your Summer issue with my usual interest when, in “The Erasers,” I read: “Part of Antelope Canyon can be accessed by boat, but much of it is a spectacular slot canyon that can be visited only on tours led by Navajo guides.” Fantastic memories returned! On a 2015 national parks tour, I had the opportunity to go to a place called Antelope Slot. The tour guide knew someone who would take us there if we were willing to wake up early, ride in the back of a pickup truck and pay a little extra. About a dozen of us agreed. We barreled down the road with our Navajo guide at the wheel. Then, there was no road! We bounced over sandy ruts before arriving at the canyon entrance. Later, I wrote in my scrapbook: “Antelope Slot Canyon is one of the most beautiful places on Earth.” I just looked at the pictures and was amazed all over again!

BONNIE SIMMS
Orange City, FL

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

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ECHOES

"Building a bare-bones tented detention center on hot tarmac in the middle of the Everglades and exposing imprisoned immigrants to the elements is a cruel and absurd proposal."

Sun Coast Regional Director Melissa Abdo, as quoted in the Miami Herald, regarding the immigrant detention center dubbed "Alligator Alcatraz." The facility's operation also jeopardizes an ecosystem advocates and decision-makers have spent decades — and billions of dollars — restoring.

"It seems like it's a clear attempt to whitewash history."

Dennis Arguelles, NPCA's Southern California director, speaking to CBS News about a presidential executive order that led to the posting of flyers at park sites nationwide this summer, asking visitors to report any signage or other material they deem "negative" about past or living Americans. NPCA believes this directive interferes with the Park Service's ability to tell America's stories accurately.

"This bill is an affront to park lovers near and far."

Daniel Hart, NPCA director of clean energy and climate policy, decrying the recently passed budget reconciliation bill in GearJunkie. The legislation cuts \$267 million from the severely understaffed and chronically underfunded Park Service and mandates more oil and gas leasing on public lands.



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PHOTO BY CYNTHIA LACOE-MANIACI

MICHAEL MANSUR has been repairing broken cave formations on public lands since 2018 (left). Opposite page: Mansur prepares the stalactijack max, a MacGyvered piece of cave repair equipment, in Carlsbad Caverns National Park.

Vermont when he was 14 years old. Soon he was bagging groceries to save up for his first hard hat — a bright-blue aluminum one with a carbide lamp. He joined “grottos,” or caving clubs, in Vermont and New York, and learned how to map caves.

In 1986, Mansur flew to New Mexico to attend a weeklong Carlsbad Caverns restoration field camp. He and other participants spent days underground scooping garbage from cave pools with spoons attached to broomsticks. Sometimes he dangled from ropes to collect coins, batteries and other objects from cave ledges. Mansur returned for these field camps every year to help clean the caves. He moved to New Mexico, for the caves, in 1993.

At the request of cave specialists with the U.S. Forest Service, he attempted his first repair of a broken cave formation in 2018, at Black Cave in New Mexico’s Lincoln National Forest. It was a 2-foot-tall stalagmite, 10 inches in diameter, right next to the main trail. Mansur cleaned the surfaces, drilled a hole in both ends to insert a stainless-steel pin, and used a bio-neutral epoxy to glue the pieces together. Thrilled to make a formation whole again, Mansur started the Cave Formation Repair Project, a formal volunteer group.

Soon Mansur was working in caves in national forests and on Bureau of Land Management land. In 2019, he was asked to work at Carlsbad Caverns, one of America’s premier show caves and home to the Big Room, which is the largest cave chamber in the country. Park staff have documented more than 65,000 broken formations in the caverns.

“Caves are more than just holes in the ground,” said Hunter Klein, the

park’s physical science technician, who has worked on cave repairs with Mansur for more than five years both at Carlsbad Caverns and on Forest Service land. “Having those formations present and abundant for our visitors makes the wonder even greater.”

The group can only repair pieces they can find, and they only fix formations broken by humans. (Cave features falling naturally is a relatively rare occurrence.) “It’s like a crime scene,” Mansur said. “You’re like a detective trying to figure out not so much who did it, but what happened.” When a repair is finished, Mansur camouflages the joint with a mortar made of drill dust or mud. “The challenge,” he said, “is to repair something so people can’t tell you’ve repaired it.”

By now Mansur has organized more than 50 repair trips to Carlsbad Caverns, where almost half a million visitors come each year to gape at the caves’ beauty. Klein said Mansur’s cool head and multifaceted skills — he’s also a woodworker and a competitive weightlifter — make him well suited for the work.

“He’s like the best combination of an engineer and a surgeon,” Klein said. “He has the precision of a surgeon to do this without causing greater damage to the cave.”

Klein said Mansur’s care with these repairs helps conserve fragile cave environments. Volunteers wear medical gloves and eat over plastic bags, lest crumbs introduce alien nutrients into a low-energy ecosystem. Mansur’s use of hollow stainless-steel tubes to hold together formations that have an active internal drip even allows the features to continue growing.

“The cave can heal itself over time,” Klein said. “It’s not just gluing hanging things up for aesthetics.”

No two repairs are the same, and many demand new tools or techniques to be completed in the least invasive way. Stalagmites, which grow upward

from the cave floor, are relatively easy to repair because gravity helps the epoxy cure. But how to repair a stalactite, hanging from the ceiling? For that, the mechanically minded Mansur drew inspiration from his shower curtain rod and devised a tool he calls the “stalactijack,” made from PVC pipe, a stainless-steel bolt and a galvanized spring that adds gentle pressure from



PHOTO BY TODD ROBERTS

“You have to have a general curiosity and a willingness to fix things at all costs,” Mansur said. “Like MacGyver, you just have to make the right combination of stuff. We don’t so much use chewing gum like he did, but we have ways to support things with rubber bands.”

Unlike other skilled craftsmen who may guard their techniques, Mansur shares them freely in his book, “The Cave Formation Repair Project: Restoring the Beauty of America’s Great Caves,” which is in its third edition. In it, he highlights his own tools and those inspired by others. One volunteer thought to attach an electric palm sander to the outside of a bucket of water so that broken formations could be placed inside and cleaned of mud and algae ultrasonically, without damaging fragile crystals. Another developed a technique called photo-image matching whereby broken stalactites are organized and photographed to scale to help volunteers locate their corresponding bases on the cave ceiling. Another participant suggested using a butane torch to accelerate the curing process on delicate formations such as so-called soda straws.

Mansur invites anyone to join his trips, young and old, cavers and non-cavers alike — no experience is required. Every trip fills up within a couple of weeks of announcement. Klein has noticed the volunteers share some common traits. “The people who are drawn to Mike’s work tend to be meticulous but also have a creative side to them,” Klein said. “It’s kind of like art, or a really advanced puzzle.”

Over the past seven years, Mansur and hundreds of these volunteers have spent more than 6,000 collective hours repairing over 1,300 individual stalactites, stalagmites and other cave formations in six states, including almost 500 in Carlsbad Caverns alone. Satellite repair groups have formed in Texas, Colorado, Arizona and Utah, and

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The Cave Doctor

When delicate cave formations are damaged, Carlsbad Caverns National Park calls on the fix-it skills of Michael Mansur and his growing legion of volunteers.

Nothing good happens fast in a cave. Those popcorn-encrusted stalactites that hang like sparkling icicles from the ceiling? They can grow about a centimeter every century, meaning a 10-centimeter specimen was just getting started around the time of the Norman Conquest. Humans, however, have a knack for undoing nature’s labor in an instant.

Visitors to the spectacular chambers of Carlsbad Caverns National Park in southern New Mexico have snapped off formations to bring home as souvenirs. They’ve thrown rocks, swung hammers and toppled the fragile creations. Decades ago, even park rangers broke

formations by banging out melodies on stalactites in the Music Room. The once-pristine caves are now scarred by more than 100 years of visitation.

“It’s so sad. In such a simple motion — a baseball bat, your hand — you destroy what takes nature thousands of years to create,” said Michael Mansur, a retiree in New Mexico and the founder of the Cave Formation Repair Project. “It’s like people wanting to cut down trees just to watch them fall.”

Mansur, a compact, white-haired former mechanical technician at Intel, has been hooked on caves since his father took him into one in southwestern

TRAIL MIX

cavers are applying Mansur's knowledge in Mexico, Australia, Slovenia, the United Kingdom and China.

Klein said it helps that Mansur is an encouraging leader devoted to the work. "He's so enthusiastic for this project, it's hard to not get a little contagion of that for yourself," Klein said.

Mansur is aware that the work of repairing caves will never be finished. At 71, with knees and hips that have required their own medical repairs, he also knows he can't go on forever. It's why he'll spread the word to anyone who will listen.

"I'm just glad I was able to show so many people that this exists," he said, "that this restoration is possible, before I can't do it anymore."

JACOB BAYNHAM is a National Magazine Award-winning journalist in Montana.



MANSUR and a team of volunteers in the Music Room in Carlsbad Caverns. Mansur has organized more than 50 cave repair trips in the park.

PHOTO BY MIKE MANSUR



NPS/MATT JENKINS

Summer of Fire

This summer, wildfires tore through three national parks and seared several others. A July 4 lightning strike sparked a weekslong fire in Grand Canyon National Park, which destroyed a historic 1937 lodge (pictured) and some 70 other structures along the park's North Rim. While helicopters were dropping water on that blaze, other firefighting teams were battling flames in Black Canyon of the Gunnison and Kobuk Valley national parks and tackling a flare-up in Olympic National Park. Isolated burns also affected Grand Teton and Yellowstone national parks. (As of press time in early August, none of the larger fires in the Lower 48 were fully contained.)

Wildfires are expected to increase in frequency and severity as the climate warms and droughts intensify. Disasters like these underscore the importance of fully funding and staffing our public lands, said Sanobar Mirza, NPCA Arizona program manager. "Parks need the proper resources to manage them," Mirza said.

—KD

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4 minutes





PODCAST HOSTS Danielle LaRock (right) and Cassie Yahnian in their home state of New Hampshire. Their creation, “National Park After Dark,” started off as a true crime podcast but quickly evolved. “If it happens outdoors, it’s fair game,” Yahnian said.

LaRock floated an idea by her friend. They’d been swapping spooky and startling outdoor tales by text for months, she said, why not turn their conversations into a podcast? So that January, with no real experience to speak of, that’s exactly what they did.

“We bought \$25 microphones and plugged them into our computer and hoped for the best,” Yahnian recalled. They wanted the podcast to feel “like friends around a campfire telling each other stories,” she said, so they settled on a format with one person narrating and the other reacting in real time. Then they started mining books, park materials, newspapers, magazines (including National Parks) and library archives for inspiration. Within a few months, after featuring a double murder in Shenandoah, a climbing disaster in Denali and mummies in Mammoth Cave, they branched out, covering anything they deemed “dark,” from mysteries to mutinies.

Over the years, the friends, both 34, have transported their listeners to public lands around the world on journeys brimming with discovery — and, yes, death. They’ve covered World War II plane crashes in the wilds of Alaska, ghostly haunts in Harpers Ferry, the mauling of a marathon runner in Valles Caldera, the torturing of women suffragettes at a prison in Virginia, and the unfortunate demise of trailblazer Bessie Coleman, the first Black woman to receive a pilot’s license. And while it’s usually just the two of them trading tales and banter, they do host the occasional guest, from National Park Service personnel to survivors of wilderness ordeals.

“National Park After Dark” isn’t the only park-focused podcast on the air

these days. Listeners can tune in to any number of newsy, travel-based, science-forward and true-crime park pods, including NPCA’s own award-winning production, “The Secret Lives of Parks.” At first blush, the niche carved out by Yahnian and LaRock might seem, well, niche, but the friends’ quirky content and natural camaraderie has fostered a surprisingly broad fan base. By the end of the first year, their circle of listeners had grown so steadily that they were able to transition out of their full-time jobs and devote themselves to developing the podcast. “We’re really happy that our little weird interest that we thought was kind of just exclusively shared between us is not obscure at all,” LaRock said. (It is, in fact, shared by their 600,000 or so subscribers.)

Despite the sometimes graphic, often sensitive content matter, the duo has an unexpectedly wholesome aim. “We want to educate people on the outdoors and give them new appreciation for the places that they recreate in and the wildlife that they share spaces with and the people that came before them,” LaRock said.

In the case of one of their more popular stories, a two-parter about the night in 1967 when a pair of Glacier National Park grizzly bears killed two people in unrelated incidents, Yahnian said the intent behind their retelling was to add context and help listeners understand, viscerally, the importance of bear safety. You can get the back-country safety spiel so many times as to be inured to it, Yahnian said. “But when you hear about why it’s bad to feed the bears because these two people were mauled,” she continued, “then you retain the information.”

The friends’ deft handling of the sensational is one of the things that convinced author Randi Minetor to sit down for an episode last September entitled “Death She Wrote.” Minetor’s series of books cataloging the various ways people have expired in parks frequently serves

as a jumping-off point for the podcasters. Indeed, LaRock leaned on Minetor’s “Death in Acadia” book for the part of the inaugural episode that detailed the 1977 unsolved murder of Leslie Spellman. (The young woman had set out from Vermont with the intention of hitchhiking to Bar Harbor and was found bludgeoned to death a day later, steps from the Maine park.) “They really want to tell a good story, but they want to tell an accurate one,” Minetor said.

Over the years, LaRock and Yahnian’s willingness to shine a light into shadowy corners has led them to dabble in some polemical waters, from the recent gutting of the Park Service workforce to the preponderance of missing and murdered Indigenous women. Though a few listeners have bristled at what one described as “woke nonsense,” the majority of fans have remained faithful to the pair. “Ride or die for these women,” wrote one reviewer, who went on to praise “National Park After Dark” for uplifting “voices that have been silenced throughout history.”

In 2023, the podcast partners decided to take the host-listener relationship to the next level. They teased a custom park trip to Alaska, complete with local guides, curated adventures in Denali and Kenai Fjords national parks, and the company of Yahnian and LaRock themselves. Spots for the weeklong adventure were snapped up in about four minutes. “The first time it happened, we were blown away,” Yahnian said.

The now-regular trips have taken them and their fans sandboarding in Great Sand Dunes National Park, hiking through Incan archaeological sites in Peru, jouncing along on a safari in South Africa and more. This November, around 10 lucky souls will be headed to Hawaii to explore a 500-year-old lava tube at Hawai’i Volcanoes National Park, snorkel in Honaunau Bay and sample local brews at a coffee farm. Aside from the obvious perk of touring amazing places, LaRock



What's Playing?

If you’re curious about the wide world of park podcasts, below is a non-exhaustive list of shows with current episodes.

“Crime Off the Grid” – Two former Park Service law enforcement rangers discuss past and present crimes on public lands.

“Dear Bob and Sue: A National Parks Podcast” – A husband-and-wife team provides play-by-plays of their park travels, complete with planning tips.

“Gaze at the National Parks” – Two friends share their outdoor adventures and their pride in the parks, one trail at a time.

“Parkography” – This pod is billed as bringing “the soul of America’s public lands to life.”

“Park Predators” – Hosted by an investigative journalist, this true-crime podcast explores cases from public lands around the world.

“The Secret Lives of Parks” – NPCA’s 4-year-old production explores the rich tapestry of park life with gentle curiosity.

“Who Runs This Park?” – A female adventurer interviews outdoors leaders, with a particular focus on national park superintendents.

and Yahnian love how the trips help them connect with their fans. “We’re always talking *at* people, and they know so much about us,” LaRock said. “We want to know about them and their experiences, and so we do a lot of listening.”

Nursing student Danielle Hartzler had only tuned in to a couple of podcast episodes before she found herself flying to Madagascar in 2023 with a dozen or so avid listeners. Since then, the Colorado resident has explored multiple continents and parks with Yahnian and LaRock. She credits the hosts with creating a community of “genuine, kind people who care about each other and the outdoors.”

These days, it’s not uncommon for “National Park After Dark” travelers to meet up on their own time for their own

A Light in the Dark

Four years after starting a true crime park podcast, two friends continue to swap tales and find joy in the community they’ve built.

When researching park stories, Danielle LaRock doesn’t just look for the highlights, she said. She wants the “highlights, lowlights and everything in between.” This philosophy has guided LaRock and her bestie, Cassie Yahnian, through more than 315 episodes of their popular podcast, “National Park After Dark,” which celebrates the obscure, macabre and paranormal. “Enjoy the view,” they say with every sign-off, “but watch your back.”

The podcast origin story goes back to 2016, when the women were working as veterinary technicians at a practice in New Hampshire. They started adventuring in the nearby White Mountains

and, while hiking, discovered a mutual interest in the history of their surroundings — the darker the better. The more they learned about the places they were exploring, LaRock said, “the richer our experience was when we were there.” They took note of the odd and interesting nuggets they happened across on their travels, whether those came from dedication plaques, gift store offerings or park staff. “Every single time we go to a national park,” Yahnian said, “we go to the visitor center, and we stop at the information desk and just talk to the rangers.”

Around Halloween 2020, when the women were living on opposite coasts,

adventures, no hosts required. Hartzler, for example, has skied in Jackson and sipped pisco sours in Flagstaff with friends she met on the Peru trip. “I kind of feel like these proud parents,” Yahnian said. “Like our kids are getting along, and they’re going out into the world together.”

Curiously, given their fascination

with all things unexplained, the two have yet to have a spine-tingling encounter of their own. “There’s been a couple places that we’ve had some creepy vibes,” LaRock said, noting their preference for staying in centuries-old park hotels. But so far, nothing has out-and-out spooked them. “When I tell you

I am desperate for that,” she said, “I am desperate for that.”

Not that either woman fears running out of podcast material. “The stories are there,” LaRock said. “Sometimes they’re just waiting for someone to pay attention to them.”

—KATHERINE DEGROFF

Free As a Bird?

This past spring, Roger Anderson was driving into Death Valley National Park along with his daughter and a friend when he saw a very large moving object that appeared to be heading straight for his car.

“What in the world is that thing?” Anderson remembered thinking, as he slowed down.

That “thing” turned out to be an ostrich, the world’s largest bird and a species native to sub-Saharan Africa.

Death Valley is no stranger to non-native animals. It is home to herds of wild donkeys, and many years ago an emu — the ostrich’s slightly smaller Australian cousin — was spotted at Badwater Basin. Still, when visitors started reporting ostrich sightings around April 1, staff wondered if it was a joke. “It was definitely exciting, bizarre news, even

for Death Valley,” said Abby Wines, the park’s deputy superintendent.

And it was not the fake kind. Not one but three big birds were indeed roaming in and near the park. A few days after the initial reports, three park employees, including a botanist and an EMT, headed to Echo Canyon, where one of the outsiders had taken up residence. Ostriches can’t fly, but they easily outrun most humans, so park staff approached the long-legged bird slowly, luring it with water yet avoiding making eye contact. After multiple attempts, they caught it with poles equipped with nooses and put it in a horse trailer.

The ostrich stayed in the trailer near Wines’ house for a couple of days while rangers tried to locate its owner. Eventually, an ostrich

farmer from the nearby Amargosa Valley took possession of it. The other two escapees were caught outside the park in the following weeks. Wines said she didn’t know the name of the fugitives’ owner, and when asked whether the runaways were his, the proprietor of a large ostrich farm in Amargosa Valley told us “not really, thank you,” before hanging up.

The three ostriches may be gone, but they made a lasting impression on the few visitors who saw them, even for a fleeting moment. Miriam Stabler, Anderson’s daughter, was able to capture footage of the unlikely encounter — a full nine seconds of the springy ostrich zooming away until it was no more than a small brown dot. “That was really a treat to see,” Anderson said.

—NB



PARKRANGER April Stiltz approaches one of the rogue ostriches in Death Valley National Park.



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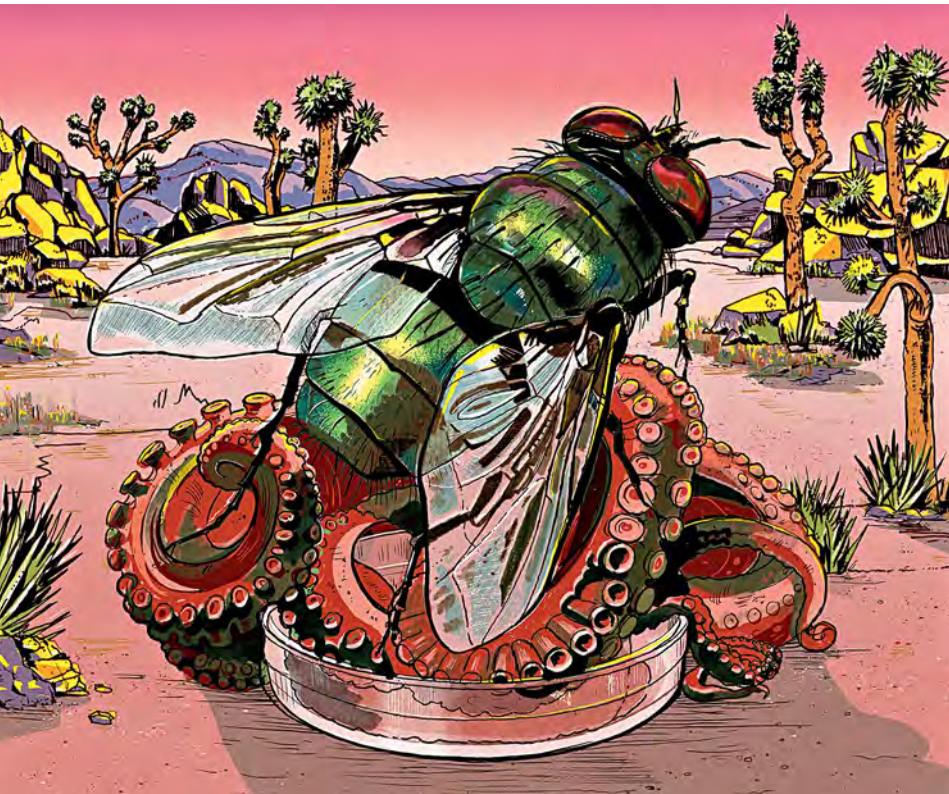


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Insect Informants

Studies in Joshua Tree, Yellowstone and Great Smoky Mountains suggest that flies could help solve murders and identify new species.

MOST PARK VISITORS could do without flies buzzing around their heads or landing on their sandwiches, but the pesky critters are the very reason Hannah Chu and Christine Picard go to national parks.

That's because Chu and Picard are scientists who have separately conducted studies of blowflies, the ones that make a habit of landing on feces and rotten meat before moving on to people's food — and puking on it. But while blowflies can spread disease and are unquestionably gross, they perform invaluable ecological roles, including pollinating and decomposing carrion. "We would just be buried under mountains of dead things if blowflies didn't exist," Picard said.

They also help humans in more surprising ways — from serving as tiny detectives to possibly acting as minuscule weapons inspectors.

Chu, who has a background in forensic science and entomology, is hoping that her recently published Joshua Tree National Park

study will be useful to local law enforcement agencies investigating suspicious deaths. And Picard's work in Yellowstone and Great Smoky Mountains national parks demonstrates that the insects can be used as an efficient way to assess the diversity of vertebrates in a given area and even identify species not previously known to be there. "We're not ready to stop looking for all the different uses that are available to us by these blowflies," said Picard, a biology professor at Indiana University, Indianapolis.

Little was known about blowflies in Joshua Tree before Chu's survey. In fact, a researcher who had supposedly tried to trap blowflies there decades ago told her he doubted she'd catch any in this hot and dry environment. Yet from June 2022 to November 2023, Chu placed traps at locations across the park — in the Sonoran and Mojave deserts and the transition zone where the two overlap. To improve her odds, Chu needed to pick the right bait. The most effective is a full-sized pig carcass, she said, but that would not have been a palatable option for park authorities. She experienced limited success with beef liver, pork liver and horse manure, before settling on dead squid. "The squid ended up being good because it was more wet," she said. "So in dry conditions, it lasted longer."

She would return to pick up the traps four or five hours later, drive back to the lab and place the flies in ethanol for identification. All in all, she captured an astounding 2,699 blowflies representing 12 different species, including one that had never been formally reported in Southern California. "That was really exciting," she said. "You wouldn't expect for all of these little flies to be there."

Chu's survey is important for the park, which keeps an inventory of species documented there, but it also

could assist the police in the area, which has had its fair share of untimely deaths, between homicides and hikers who fall victim to the park's harsh conditions.

Blowflies can detect a dead body — human or animal — from miles away if wind conditions are favorable, and the insects are among the first to arrive on the scene, sometimes within minutes. Once there, the female lays up to 250 eggs, and they typically hatch a day later. The larvae, or maggots, then feed on the decomposing flesh and go through three growth stages before forming a cocoon known as a pupa, from which an adult fly emerges.

Forensic entomologists can estimate the amount of time that has passed since a fly laid her eggs based on the larva's stage of development, which helps police narrow down the time of death and possibly confirm or rule out potential suspects. But the fly's life cycle can last anywhere from about two to four weeks based on environmental conditions, such as temperature, and the fly species, so it's crucial to know which flies live where. "It is that baseline data that I think is very, very valuable, because we so often don't have that," Chu said.

This kind of information is also essential because the presence of a fly species not known to live in the area could indicate that a body has been moved, said Jeffery Tomberlin, the principal investigator of Texas A&M University's Forensic Laboratory for Investigative Entomological Sciences (got the acronym?). Tomberlin, who was not involved in the park studies but has participated in more than 200 criminal investigations, also said a toxicological analysis performed on the insects could show whether victims consumed narcotics before their death. Even if the body is no longer there, the victim's DNA could be obtained from a fly larva collected on the scene.

"Sometimes you can get an identification of a person based on what's in the gut of the maggot," he said.

"Sometimes you can get an identification of a person based on what's in the gut of the maggot," he said.

That is how Picard can detect the presence of vertebrates in an area without having to spot any of them. She and a student, who is now a professor at a different university, attracted blowflies with a hunk of rotting meat, caught them with a net, dissected the flies' gut and sequenced the DNA of the animals



COURTESY OF HANNAH CHU

ENTOMOLOGIST Hannah Chu.

whose bodies or feces they fed on.

Picard's student, who captured flies in Indianapolis public parks, found a lot of dog DNA — and one big surprise. "Out of this downtown sample, she got lion DNA, and I was like, 'Whoa, what's happening?'" Picard said. It didn't take long to figure out the fly had likely visited the Indianapolis Zoo a couple of miles away.

In Yellowstone, a park with an exhaustive species list that they could

use to cross-reference their results, Picard and her student collected DNA from easy-to-spot ungulates such as elk and bison, but also from small rodents that would otherwise be harder to detect. In the greater Great Smoky Mountains, they identified DNA from an armadillo, a species known to exist in neighboring Georgia that had not been reported in the park, though the animal's presence was later confirmed by a camera trap. Picard said this sampling method is particularly beneficial in arduous terrain that researchers would have to traverse to conduct species inventories. "The big advantage is the flies are doing all of the work," she said. "The flies are out there, sampling."

Picard is also working with public health researchers to learn how blowflies could spread pathogens, such as E. coli, from sewage overflows. And she and her collaborators received a grant from the Department of Defense to look into whether the insect could sample the compounds found in chemical weapons — and be the literal fly on the wall. "Anyone who's using chemical weapons typically doesn't invite people to come in," she said.

Picard said that basic facts about the blowflies' ecology, such as where they go when they're not feeding and how far they travel, remain mysteries, but these questions drive her fascination and fondness for the oft-reviled insects.

"They do all these different things in the environment," she said. "They sort of move in a disgusting world, but they're very attractive insects to look at."

NICOLAS BRULLIARD is senior editor of National Parks magazine.



BLACK ABALONE suffer from threats including disease, poaching, coastal development and landslides, to name a few (left). Opposite page: A scientist marks an abalone with iridescent epoxy in preparation for translocation. This colorful spot will make re-finding the animal easier as epoxy tends to withstand the environment better than numbered tags.

numbered in the millions, their presence a visual touchpoint for many people growing up along the coast.

Over the last century, however, the fate of the abalone took a decidedly downward turn. First came the fishermen, rapacious in the face of a seemingly inexhaustible supply of the single-shelled delicacies. Then in the 1980s, a disease that causes death by starvation began its northward march through the abalone's range. The devastation was particularly acute in the Channel Islands. "They were going from thousands and thousands to, like, three, essentially overnight," said Pete Raimondi, a professor at UC Santa Cruz who has been studying the mollusk for more than 30 years. "There were just piles of shells everywhere."

Though the harvesting of black abalone was outlawed in California in 1993, poachers kept collecting them. In 2009, the animal's outlook was so dire that the snail became just the second marine invertebrate designated as a federally endangered species. The National Marine Fisheries Service appointed experts to map out a recovery plan, but disaster — in the form of devastating landslides in 2017 and 2020 — continued to plague the abalone. "These guys don't move very fast, so they can't get out of the way of bad things," Raimondi said.

When the debris flows entombed some abalone and threatened many others, staff from a host of agencies embarked on a series of risky rescue missions. The animal attaches itself to intertidal crevices using its muscular foot, which is the most visible part of its body. If that foot is sliced in the process of prying the creature from its rock of choice, it can easily die. "There was

a concern up until that point that you couldn't move black abalone because they were too fragile," said Walter Heady, a senior scientist with the Nature Conservancy's California chapter. As the alternative to human intervention was certain burial, the rescuers took a chance. They managed to free a few hundred snails and return them to the wild. Since the species has never been successfully propagated in the lab, the scientists' best hope was that those released would spawn on their own.

Members of the recovery team — newly confident in the animal's hardiness — began eyeing non-emergency translocation as a viable restoration option for the species. When compensatory mitigation funding from a 2015 oil spill materialized, Raimondi and others proposed relocating abalone from an area teeming with mollusks to a site with low densities. The question became: Where would they collect the transplants?

Fortunately, staff at Channel Islands National Park have been monitoring black abalone on four of the park's five islands since the early 1980s and on Santa Cruz Island since 1994, said Stephen Whitaker, the park's lead marine ecologist and a member of the species recovery team. "Our data were critical for identifying populations of black abalone that were robust enough to serve

"They were going from thousands and thousands to, like, three, essentially overnight."

as donor populations for restoration efforts," he said.

The healthiest abalone communities wound up being on a section of Santa Cruz Island's coastline where the marine snails could be found stacked three high in places. Whitaker's data indicated that the population had been slowly, if mysteriously, rebounding since 2015. (Though the Park Service monitors all of Santa Cruz and has jurisdiction over the waters from the shoreline to 1 mile offshore, it owns only 24% of the island's land mass. The rest, including the abalone donor site, is owned by the Nature Conservancy.)

As for where they would release the abalone, the scientists had a ready answer for that, too: the Jack and Laura Dangermond Preserve, where only a few dozen snails remained. Located on a jut of mainland north of the Channel Islands, this 24,000-acre Nature Conservancy property is closed to the public and free from poachers. Better still, with 30-odd years of Dangermond monitoring data in Raimondi's figurative pocket, "we knew where the black abalone used to live, I mean, to the crack," he said. "So it was really easy to figure out what the best places would be to put animals back."

Nate Fletcher, who works with Raimondi as a research specialist, coordinated the first black abalone translocation in March 2023, followed seven months later by a second. Each time, the process took about four days, from the initial survey at Dangermond to the collection of the animals on Santa Cruz Island to their transfer via coolers and boats to a lab in Santa Barbara where they were weighed, measured, tagged and genetically sampled, to their placement the following day in the preserve. Incredibly, 246 of the 250 individuals collected survived the ordeal.

Fletcher and his colleagues returned to Dangermond monthly for the first year to check on the new inhabitants before throttling back to quarterly visits. The abalone haven't made the re-spotting particularly easy. Not only did they immediately crawl into new homes, but some managed to shed their identifying tags while nestling between rocks. Add the fact that other organisms can grow on abalone shells, further camouflaging them, and "they can be pretty cryptic," Fletcher said.

Despite the challenges, the monitoring team routinely counts 70% or more of the transplants each visit. But one thing they hadn't clocked before February was a juvenile. Until genetic testing is complete, Fletcher can't say for sure whether the three glimpsed this winter are the product of the relocated abalone or of the 50-odd mollusks that were already there, but the size was right for animals spawned after the move. If success is defined by two criteria, namely survival and reproduction, Raimondi said, "I think we've got them both."

Members of the species recovery team are now considering future translocations. The overall goal, Heady explained, is to establish strongholds of black abalone along the mainland and throughout the Channel Islands so that subsequent generations of what he calls this "very charismatic invertebrate" might one day recolonize its historic range.

"This body of work highlights the importance of protected lands and waters for the recovery of imperiled species," Heady said. "In this case," he added, the conservation of Santa Cruz Island "facilitated the natural recovery of black abalone populations to the larger region."

KATHERINE DEGROFF is associate editor of National Parks magazine.



Mollusks on the Move

To help save the endangered black abalone, scientists are relocating some of the marine snails from the Channel Islands to the coast of mainland California.

ON A STRETCH of shore northwest of Santa Barbara, success looked no bigger than a half-dollar. Well, three half-dollars to be precise. This February, researchers from the University of California, Santa Cruz spied a trio of diminutive black abalone clinging to sharp rocks, holding their own against the tides.

They were the first juveniles detected following the experimental move two years earlier of 250 adults from the Channel Islands, an archipelago off the coast of Ventura that is largely managed by the National Park Service. Reaching this milestone was no mean feat: It required decades of data collection, collaboration across agencies and a certain amount of dogged optimism on behalf of a beleaguered species.

Black abalone are marine mollusks that range in hue from onyx to cerulean and max out at about 8 inches in length. The species is historically significant to the Chumash people, who for millennia harvested the snail for food and used its distinctive shell for ceremony, trade and decoration. Thriving in the turbulent intertidal zone from the southern tip of Baja California in Mexico to northern California, the oblong creatures once

Life & Death

IN BEARS EARS

The national monument had been a source of inspiration over the years. After I lost my father, it called to me more urgently than ever.

I SAT ON THE RIM of Arch Canyon, a 1,000-foot-deep crevice in Bears Ears National Monument, watching sharp evening light and shadows play out along the cliffs and stone pillars. Crisscross layers in the rock showed the patterns of windblown sand from Sahara-like dunes that existed here some 280 million years ago. In the shifting light, one of the namesake arches suddenly became visible against the cliff. Two hundred feet below me, I could see a small masonry dwelling with intact roof timbers that had been securely built into a ledge of the cliff, a remnant of the flourishing community of Ancestral Puebloan people who lived here over 700 years ago.

As I gazed over the scene, I was flooded with confusing feelings of guilt, relief, awe, anger and grief. It was surreal to witness this spectacle just two days after sitting by my dad's side as he slipped away.

I almost hadn't made it to the hospital in time. My dad was unconscious, but my

daughter, who had flown there from New York, had kept a monologue going, telling him that Ernie was on the way. Just 15 or so minutes after I arrived, the nurse watching the monitors said, "I think this is it." He took his last gasping breaths, and then all was still. He had waited until his firstborn was there.

MY FIRST VISIT to the Bears Ears landscape was on a junior college field trip in 1978. This extraordinary corner of southeast Utah, which was designated as a national monument in 2016, now protects 1.36 million acres of breathtaking canyons, arches and monoliths. The monument encompasses everything from dry desert washes to lush aspen forests in the highlands. It's overlaid with a rich layer of thousands of years of cultural history and fascinating archaeological sites.

Over the course of a week, our busload of students camped, hiked, climbed, visited

BY ERNIE ATENCIO

PHOTO BY ELSEBETH ATENCIO



THE AUTHOR at the bottom of the Grand Canyon in 1992. He worked at the park's North Rim as a seasonal ranger both that year and the next.



© TOM TILL/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ancient sites, and clung to the back of a flatbed truck as we bounced up an insanely steep and windy road to nearby Natural Bridges National Monument. It was the first time I had ever seen cliff dwellings and the artifacts that give clues to the lives Ancestral Puebloans had lived. Those experiences made a lasting impression that undeniably altered the course of my education and career.

In the time since that first journey, I have worked to protect these important lands, and I've returned many times to guide trips, learn and play here. This place has become a touchstone for me, almost a second home. It is a landscape that never fails to inspire, stir my curiosity, and bestow a sense of serenity and sanity. Three years ago, when my dad

fell sick, I thought I'd have to cancel the trip that my wife and I had planned. But after he died, just a few weeks later, Bears Ears called to me even more urgently.

A good friend who is Diné talks often about the spiritual power of this landscape. In the 1860s, Bears Ears was a literal refuge for Diné people attempting to escape U.S. aggression. While hundreds of Diné died on a brutal forced march known as the "Long Walk" and some 1,500 others perished during their subsequent incarceration, many hid out in these wild and remote canyons. Today the Navajo Nation, along with several other Tribes and Pueblos, sees Bears Ears as a sacred place of healing.

I didn't know it at the time, but healing is what I went for.

MY RELATIONSHIP WITH my dad was turbulent. He'd married right after high school and became a father to me nine months later. As an angry young man, bitter that he had missed out on adventures and opportunities, he blamed his eldest son. I knew he felt this way because he made sure that I did.

I was not an easy teenager, and there were plenty of police arrests and serious offenses to tick him off, but it didn't take much to provoke him. It could have been something as minor as shoddy work cleaning out the bathtub. He struggled to support our family and was very sensitive to complaints or lack of appreciation for the meager food or clothing we had access to in our household. When he raged,

I was not an easy teenager, and there were plenty of police arrests and serious offenses to tick him off, but it didn't take much to provoke him.

I took the brunt of it. I was ungrateful, he'd say. I was not worthy. Violence was not unfamiliar in the world I grew up in, and it was how he expressed his disappointments in life. Though I wasn't fully aware of it then, I shielded my three younger siblings from the physical abuse, if not the emotional trauma.

In one unforgettable incident when I was around 14, my dad threw me down the basement stairs, then after I cried that I might have broken my leg, he came down and kicked it. As I grew older and stronger, I started defending myself, and our conflicts turned even more vicious. In my later teens, one of those fights escalated to the point of throwing kitchen chairs at each other, and I couldn't take it anymore — I had to escape. I ran as hard and fast as I could down the street, sobbing. When I returned an hour later, it was like nothing unusual had happened, and we never discussed it.

That's just the way it was, and I did not realize how I had normalized that destructive behavior until much later in life. After he died, one of my aunts told me, "Your tío was so concerned about the abuse." The word "abuse" startled me. Neither my father nor I had considered this behavior to be abuse — I thought it was just discipline. Whatever it was called, it never occurred to me that the violence had been common knowledge in the family. I thought it was all my dirty little secret.

Yet looking back, I realize that that kind of family dysfunction is not an easy thing to hide and that they all knew. After the basement stairs incident, my parents



COURTESY OF ERNIE ATENCIO

ERNIE ATENCIO, middle row at left, with his parents and three siblings circa 1974 (above). Left: Cedar Mesa and the Valley of the Gods in Bears Ears National Monument.



PETROGLYPHS at Newspaper Rock in Bears Ears (above).
Right: An Ancestral Puebloan cliff dwelling at Cedar Mesa.

brought in my mother's macho brothers — all of them strict military vets who believed in corporal punishment — for an intervention. Sitting around the kitchen table, my uncles lectured me about respecting my elders and the Ten Commandments. But then they all went silent and looked uncomfortably at each other when I described how my dad had treated me that day.

The father-son relationship became particularly heated after I dropped out of high school, and my dad's older brother — the one who my aunt said was concerned — invited me to live with his family in northern New Mexico for several months. A sociologist and Chicano activist, he not only helped calm the situation but inspired me to finish school. He later became one of my most important professional mentors.

Immediately after I graduated high school, an experience as a minority scholarship student on a three-week Outward Bound wilderness course set me on a new path. Just over a year later, I was at Colorado Mountain College in an experiential outdoor leadership program. I ended up working for Outward Bound and other outdoor education programs, and I spent many seasons as a national park ranger, including at Mesa Verde National Park, where I gave tours of cliff dwellings and shared the stories of the people who had lived there. I studied cultural anthropology in graduate school and traveled and adventured and pursued anthropological studies around the world.

Through it all, I unexpectedly found myself eager to share stories with my dad of the latest wilderness trip or

mountain peak or exotic cultural escapade. I suppose it was my unconscious desire to please, and for him to experience some young-man exploits — at least vicariously. And to my surprise, he relished it. We still had hostile moments occasionally, but by then he was mellowing into middle age and, like a dark and destructive storm, our violent fights had passed, even if a shadow lingered on the horizon.

One story that particularly interested him was about an expedition up Pico de Orizaba in Mexico, the third-tallest peak in North America. I told him about our summit day, when one of our three rope teams got lost in the snowy mist, and about how I had pushed on solo after the rest of my team had called it quits. I described peering into the crater of the volcano and finding a large

metal-girder cross at the summit that was studded with icicles blown horizontal by the wind. The adventure had continued into that night at a smoky little cantina in a nearby village where cross-cultural misunderstandings got heated, and we ended up fleeing with some drunk and rowdy locals shooting at us.

My dad hung on every word and wanted details. I remember a wistful smile on his face and a softness in his eyes, and something that looked like pride in his son. Wild places and adventure can be healing and fortifying, even secondhand. It was good tonic for us both.

I thought about those exchanges after his death, when I watched the sun set from the rim of that canyon in Bears

This place has become a touchstone for me, almost a second home.

Ears, and again the next day, when I hiked to a site called the Citadel, located under an overhang on a remote knob of rock. Even in his younger days, he probably could not have handled the steep, exposed route across a narrow neck of sandstone required to get there, but he would have loved hearing about the dicey scramble and the



It is surprising how the years pass, and you never get around to those difficult conversations.

commanding view. I can picture him even now — how he would have shaken his head with a distant stare as he imagined the scene.

AS I EXPERIENCED MORE of my own tests and conflicts as a young brown man making my way in the world, I began to empathize with the challenges my dad had faced. He grew up in a small village in the mountains of northern New Mexico at a time when it was an isolated, anachronistic world unto itself. My Hispano family roots in New Mexico go back to 1598, and the Indigenous blood much further. An archaic form of Spanish that is still widely

BEAR EARS HAS BEEN IMPORTANT to me since my first trip there in 1978, and in 2012, I joined the effort to protect these lands.

The five Tribes of the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition (Hopi Tribe, Navajo Nation, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, Pueblo of Zuni and Ute Indian Tribe) had developed a proposal for a national monument, and I pushed for the establishment of the site, first as a volunteer with

my New Mexico congressional delegation, and later in my job at NPCA.

Bears Ears National Monument was designated by President Barack Obama in 2016. That victory was not permanent, unfortunately: The following year, President Donald Trump hacked up the monument, shrinking it by 85% and dividing it into two small, disconnected parcels. Downsizing any monument created under the Antiquities Act

spoken in the region was my dad's first language, and he never quite took to English. My parents actively discouraged us from speaking Spanish to mainstream us, and I never became fluent, but relatives often said that he was eloquent in his native tongue. Soon after marrying, he and my mother moved to San Diego for a brief time, hoping to establish residency for free junior college tuition. But once there, an environmental allergy triggered a mysterious illness that partially blinded him, and they had to return to New Mexico. He had hoped to follow in his father's footsteps and attend seminary to become a Presbyterian minister but never had another opportunity to go to college.

At 28, after running into employment dead ends at every turn, he and my mom packed up the four kids and a U-Haul trailer to move to Denver because relatives in the area promised that there was plenty of work. He found a series of jobs, but as a visually impaired foreigner from another culture, his options were limited, and he never climbed beyond low-wage labor and menial service work.

As I became more secure in my own life direction in my

is illegal, according to many legal scholars, and NPCA and its partners took the fight to save Bears Ears to court, in a case that is ongoing. After President Joe Biden restored the monument in 2021, the state of Utah sued to reinstate the boundaries Trump had imposed. NPCA is also involved in that case, which is currently on appeal.

In the second Trump presidency, Tribes and conservationists face new worries that the monument, co-managed by the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service in collaboration with the five Tribes of the Bears Ears Commission, could be rescinded or slashed to allow for uranium mining. In May, administration lawyers made the argument that presidents have the authority to abolish national monuments, but those who care about Bears Ears and other protected sites maintain that any attempt to shrink or wipe out a monument is illegal and will be met with fierce opposition. And so the advocacy continues.

—Ernie Atencio

mid-30s, my dad's reality came into focus. I began to see him differently and better understand how ill-equipped he had been for the challenges of raising a family in a poor barrio in a big city. He had missed out on the good life he might have lived in a different time or place. This became clear one night in a mountain village when I was traveling in the Himalayan foothills. I had a dream of my parents as sturdy and confident mountain goatherds, living a hard but happy life chasing livestock up and down the steep slopes, instead of as hapless, displaced villagers just squeaking by in the city. I don't remember a lot of my dreams, but that one stayed with me.

In their 60s, after retiring from their various jobs in Denver, my parents had the opportunity to move into a house my sister had bought in the village where my dad was born, not far from where I live. This is an agricultural community in a verdant valley off the main road. It's still primarily Hispano but has embraced the hippies and other creative, alternative newcomers who arrived in the '60s and '70s. My dad slipped right back in without missing a beat, fluently speaking the local Spanish at the senior center with friends he had grown up with, irrigating and mowing the orchard, and finally realizing his dream by becoming a lay minister in the Presbyterian church. I'm sure those were some of the best years of his life.

While he was still mobile, I made an effort to share real — not just vicarious — outdoor experiences with him. Once, we whitewater rafted the Río Grande, which he had never had the chance to do even though he grew up right next to it. After the first couple of rapids, the boat guide decided that my elderly dad would be safer sitting in the middle of the boat instead of paddling from the outside edge. It was a splashy, raucous ride, and when we reached the takeout, it took a few minutes to help him unfold his creaky, stiff joints and get him out of the boat. He said, slightly disappointed, "I thought the rapids would be bigger."

I was taken aback by his sense of adventure and realized maybe I got some of that from him. A year or two later, I took him to explore the archaeological sites at Chaco Culture National Historical Park. By then he could not walk far, but he pushed himself to tour the massive sites and gazed at them with awe. He was riveted by the canyon, the buildings and the petroglyphs, and fascinated by the few potsherds we saw along the trails. It was a full day for him, and I think he slept all the way home.

Despite some healing moments, my relationship with my dad was still uneasy and unresolved. It is surprising how the years pass, and you never get around to those difficult conversations. But the day he died, I had one final opportunity to say my piece. After he passed, the nurses removed all the tubes and wires from his body and cleaned the adhesive from his skin, and he lay peacefully in bed. My daughter and wife had gone to wait for me in the car, and after all the bustling activity around a hospital death,



COURTESY OF ERNIE ATENCIO

THE AUTHOR and his father preparing for a whitewater rafting trip on the Río Grande in 2010.

it was suddenly quiet. Just the two of us were in the room. Many believe that the soul can still hear our voices for a short period of time after death, so I finally told my dad the hard truths that I had been too nervous or guarded to share before.

I asked why we had never talked about the violence I'd suffered when I was young. I told him that I had spent a lot of time and money on therapy, grappling with my past and my own inherited temper, and even after all these years, I carried emotional pain from my childhood. I said I understood his lament that he had missed out on his own young adult adventures, but it was not my fault. I told him that I had come to empathize with the challenges he had faced as a young man, but that that was no excuse. People talk about forgive and forget, which sounds liberating. I told him that I was still working through forgiveness, but I knew I could never forget.

I CARRIED ALL THIS with me later that week at Bears Ears. Over the years, even as I sought to make peace with my dad, I told myself that after suffering his brutality, I did not have any obligation to feel grief when he died. But grief has its own agenda, and mine was strong, if muddled.

Bear Ears contains possibly 260,000 archaeological sites, some dating back 12,000 years to the days of mammoth-hunting, and everywhere I turned, something spoke to me about the scale of history, and the passing of generations. It dawned on me that even the etched and painted rock



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A KIVA in the national monument. For Puebloan people, the juxtaposition of dark and light in this ceremonial chamber represents the cyclical nature of life and renewal.

images decorating alcoves and cliff walls may have been part of the Puebloan recognition of mortality and their effort to leave something behind to last.

At one site with an intact subterranean ceremonial chamber called a kiva, crooked poles of a wooden ladder sticking through the opening in the roof connected the darkness below with the vivid light of early morning sun, which made me think of death and life, grief and joy. For Puebloan people, the kiva's juxtaposition of light and dark represents the journey from the womb of the Earth to emergence and life, and the cyclical nature of life and renewal.

Though I can't explain it exactly, that time in Bears Ears helped clarify and shift my feelings for my dad. His story and life challenges are part of who I am — and I realized that my story was also part of him. Whatever damage was done, I credit him and my mom with raising four good people despite the hardships. In that wild landscape surrounded by the magic and mystery of remnants of another time, I felt a measure of solace. That dream from 30 years ago flashed before me; I could picture my parents living a

happy life off the land, herding goats in some steep mountains somewhere, and a kind of peace descended.

Looking across a canyon at a cliff dwelling appropriately called Eagles Nest, because it appears completely inaccessible from the ground, I thought of the generations who toiled and lived there. Entire lifetimes possibly spent constructing a single small village had come and gone. Sons carrying emotional scars had grieved fathers who bore their own scars. Life went on, families and communities persevered. The cliff dwellings and farmlands had passed from parents to children to parents to children over centuries.

All turned to dust now, but somehow still alive.

ERNIE ATENCIO is the former Southwest regional director for NPS and has been exploring, learning from and helping protect public lands his entire adult life. He lives with his wife next door to Rio Grande del Norte National Monument in his northern New Mexico homeland. His kids are now grown, but he began dragging them around to national parks and wild places before they could walk.



NIOBRARA RIVER DREAMS

A writer explores one of America's
wildest grassland corridors.

By George Frazier

SEVENTY-SIX of the Niobrara's
568 miles are protected by a
national park site.

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It took four generations to destroy this country's grasslands, George Frazier writes in his book *"Riverine Dreams: Away to the Glorious and Forgotten Grassland Rivers of America."* These complex biological communities once blanketed the middle of the country, but in 80 years, homesteaders and farmers plowed most of the existing prairie lands. "Gone were prairie dog colonies larger than European nation states," he writes. "Gone were the fathomless herds of buffalo, elk and antelope. Gone were plains wolves and grizzly bears that had followed those herds for millennia."

But is a prairie revival underway? Will efforts including grassland rewilding and restoration of heartland rivers (the yang to the ying of the prairies) continue to expand and resonate with future middle Americans, he asks. Or will indifference, invasive species and climate change "lap away at the last tiny islands of prairie" until they disappear forever?

To find some answers, Frazier embarked on a "grand grasslands barnstorm," traveling by canoe down eight different rivers — "because when it comes to exploring wild places, even the brownest river is bluer than the bluest highway." In this excerpt, he paddled down a stretch of Nebraska's Niobrara River that is part of a national park site with his then 19-year-old daughter, Chloe, and walked through an ancient forest, a relic of the last ice age, with one of the forest's foremost experts.



IT WAS THE SEASON OF THE YELLOW PUCCOON.

Everywhere, the prairie reached up with bouquets of creamy *Lithospermum caroliniense* flowers arranged atop furry stalks of blithe greenery. It was always the season of wind. In the Nebraska Sandhills, wind and time flow together in syncopated tandem, their invisible orbits entwined in a never-ending dance.

On the edge of a spoon-shaped plateau perched a breathtaking 400 feet above the Niobrara River, the wind roared, gusting 40 miles per hour. Only the cinched chin strap kept my hat from blowing off to the Rosebud Reservation 10 miles across the South Dakota line. The overlook, in a grove of ponderosa pine atop the precipitous drop-off, revealed a shocking panorama.

Below an oak-covered ridge, the river marched with military precision for a quarter mile before hard-pivoting left at a bend where a spring poured down over the face of a beautiful

sandstone cliff. In the valley of the spring, oaks, elms and linden trees, typical of an Eastern deciduous forest, dissolved into an altogether different environment — one of the strangest woodlands in North America, a relic from a lost age. Beyond the thread of river forest, a scroll of native grasslands — northern mixed-grass prairie, tallgrass prairie and Sandhills prairie — unrolled toward the horizon in the four cardinal directions. Like the wind and the river, the entire landscape was moving — waving and rolling. Numerous plant communities were visible from the overlook. The spirit of the river somehow unified them all. Niobrara National Scenic River, the national park site that includes 76 miles of the waterway, is considered the biological crossroads of the Great Plains. A little-known national treasure, the river flows through one of the wildest grassland corridors left in America.

Spanning 20,000 square miles, the Sandhills harbor exten-

A BISON HERD at Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge, near where the author and his daughter started their trip down the Niobrara River.

sive never-plowed grasslands, wild rivers, tens of thousands of namesake sandhill cranes, uncountable natural lakes, wet meadows and marshes, and a fascinating flora and fauna adapted to the harsh environment. The Niobrara River nicks the northernmost flume of the Sandhills on its 568-mile journey from the shortgrass prairies of Wyoming to the Missouri River. Translated from the Omaha-Ponca term that means roughly "broad water" or "water spread out," the liminal river joins six different ecosystems, serving as a biological ecotone: Here dozens of species reach either their eastern or western limits, and sometimes they hybridize to create unique organisms found nowhere else.

I'd always wanted to paddle the section of the river christened "wild and scenic" by Congress in 1991. My curiosity about the area dated back to grad school, when a geographer friend

told me that spring-chilled microclimates allowed stranded remnants of a long-vanished ice age forest to freakishly survive into modernity.



RUNNING A THIN-SKINNED Kevlar canoe was a bad idea. Chloe and I had arrived at the upper Niobrara National Scenic River Trail with a used Wenonah canoe I'd acquired the previous winter. Our plan: paddle all morning, hike into the riparian zone with one of America's foremost ice age forest experts in the afternoon, then paddle to Rocky Ford Rapid before sundown. As soon as we launched below Cornell Dam (where we had each paid a \$1 launch fee for the privilege — what else as valuable as access to a wild and scenic river costs only \$1?), we scraped the

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SMITH FALLS is the highest waterfall in Nebraska. The nearby aspen and birch forest is a remnant of the last ice age.

delicate hull of the Wenonah across the jagged top of a moss-covered rock. A sloppy start.

As navigator in the bow, Chloe had to guide us through small rapids and around boulders and outcrops. At 7 miles per hour, the obstacles came at us fast. It was a tough job.

Ripe plums grew in briars along the banks, so we pulled out below the first bend to check the canoe for damage and gorge on what we could knock down with our paddles. The bushes sagged with small wine-colored fruits, each with a worm we had to flick out before eating. Chloe said she felt rich.

The first miles of river passed a series of canyons and at least a dozen separate springs, although I lost count. Springs ran from forests on both sides of us. The river meandered at will, untouched by channelizers who had had their way with most of our grassland rivers. When it got hot, the river would enter another wooded canyon that cooled things off.

We pulled into slack water below a short series of rapids, and Chloe, who had noticed movement downstream, got out her binoculars. “What are those fat things?”

I took the field glasses. A pickup truck was backing around slowly on a flat, angling to get a long trailer down close to the water. Three guys began unloading inflated floating devices off the trailer. An old school bus had pulled up to the launch, and people were getting out with their coolers and pool toys and heading down toward inflated tubes molded into the forms of floating chairs, loveseats, porch couches, full-on sunken living rooms and classic canvas-hided black rubber donuts, each fitted with drink holders aplenty. We paddled toward them, and the river swung into another secluded meander and then straightened out as a light mist began to fall.

We had reached our stopping point for the morning, Smith Falls State Park, home to the highest waterfall in Nebraska. From the park down to where it leaves the Sandhills, the Niobrara runs through a series of light rapids and tight turns, turbocharged by the effluence of cool springs, making it the most popular stretch of river and a bustling scene of activity during summer. But we had stopped here because the park is also a window into a lost time.



THE BOREAL FOREST, the most unusual plant community of the Great Plains, occurs on the south side of the river in steep spring-branch canyons. Intimate microclimates refrigerated by the waters of springs and waterfalls that tap deep into the heart of the Ogallala Aquifer, spring-branch canyons create slivers of habitat where the magical forests can survive.

On a map of ecosystems, boreal forest — also called ice



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age forest, snow forest or taiga — appears as a green ribbon wrapped around the Earth immediately below the southernmost arctic tundra. It represents a quarter of the world’s forests and is relatively uninhabited by people. During the last ice age, forests like these covered much of the future northern United States, but after the glaciers retreated 10,000 years ago, boreal forests retreated along with the ice. Most of them, at least. The geology of the Sandhills and their unique interaction with the Niobrara created a refuge that allowed the remarkable ghost ecosystem to persist to the present, hundreds of miles from its nearest counterpart.

Wildlife biologist Gordon Warrick had recently retired from the National Park Service, where he had worked on natural resources management for the Niobrara National Scenic River. After meeting him in the Smith Falls State Park headquarters, we walked down to the footbridge over the river. A Nebraska native, Warrick had been coming to the spot for almost his entire life. While attending college in Kearney, he worked summers at the Nature Conservancy’s nearby Niobrara Valley Preserve and ran canoes for an outfitter. We crossed the bridge and followed the path leading to Smith Falls.

As soon as we reached the trees below the waterfall, the temperature dropped. Warrick explained how this was unusual in the Great Plains. “We’ve got the bluff line on the south side of the river that is very steep because the river is downcutting. That creates a sharp north-facing slope that doesn’t get a lot of sun. It doesn’t get the desiccating south wind. It’s in the shade much of the time. So that’s a degree of microclimate right there. But then, going into a spring-branch canyon, the evaporative effect further cools things, and we get even more trees. This creates a virtually closed canopy and a cool, moist climate.”

Beyond the thermocline, we began to see birch and aspen, two keystone species of the boreal forest. It was astonishing that this waterfall and the thin, refrigerated wafer of woodland had remained stable enough to support this oddball forest since the last glaciation. Similar spring-branch canyons south of the river harbor ice age forests along a 30-mile stretch.

We passed some tall, papery-barked white birches, then stopped at a cluster of aspens, their leaves trembling in the wind. I initially mistook the trees for quaking aspen, the familiar tree of the Rockies. However, true to the crossroads nature of the Niobrara, these aspens were an east-west hybrid.

We lowered our voices at the falls. The water thundered over the chin of sandy soil like a glistening beard, creating a stain of moss-covered bedrock on the vertical cliff that reminded me of the Shroud of Turin. After emerging from the scour pool at the bottom of the waterfall, the discharge cascaded down the hill and dumped into the river near the footbridge. A typical prairie river might be fed by one or two half-hearted springs per mile,

but Smith Falls spring was one of hundreds in tight proximity, watering the soul of the river and its wondrous forest. I'd never seen anything like it.

Below the waterfall, Warrick took a thin side trail parallel-

boreal brothers and sisters. From the ridge, it was easy to see that many of the big aspens and birches on the slope above the young trees were dead. Tree mortality and standing deadfalls are expected in old-growth forests, but with so little genetic diversity, biologists keep close watch on the ice age trees, especially the aspens.

Warrick seemed to know each tree personally and spoke about one of the giant, dead standing birches like a personal defeat. "Two years ago, we ran a fire through here to burn away the understory. The fire top-killed some of the big trees, not all of them, but ones like this." He pointed to a steep ravine and a grove of toddler birches. "That's the big dead tree trying to regenerate." At least 50 feet from the dead trunk, the tree's subterranean component had reincarnated through vegetative propagation after the death of the "bole," as Warrick called it. For many trees, life does not end when the trunk dies. "They are all interconnected by this root system," Warrick said. "After something like a fire, anything that sets them back to the ground, this stimulates a flurry of vegetative growth in the short term."

We weren't alone in the forest. As we walked back down to the river, we saw some of the tubers using smartphone apps to identify woodland flowers, and a guided group was getting ready to cross the bridge near the waterfall. Interest in the ancient forest, Smith Falls and the river has created a unique opportunity for tourism in this remote part of the plains. Measured by proximity to large cities, the Niobrara is about as remote as any grassland river. Along its winding course, the largest town is Valentine, with about 2,600 residents.

Adventure travel and ecotourism are becoming increasingly significant to Sandhills economies.

According to a Park Service report, 80,000 people visited the Niobrara National Scenic River in 2023 and spent an estimated \$8 million. This was a sharp rise from visitor spending of \$2.6 million 10 years earlier.



AFTER BIDDING farewell to Warrick, Chloe and I waited in line for the ramp at Smith Falls, eventually joining the 50 or more tubes on the water ahead of us — the first traffic jam I'd ever experienced on a grassland river. Our destination was Rocky Ford Camp, where we'd left two trucks for the ferry back to our camp. The takeout was just upstream from an impressive rapid, known as Rocky Ford, that our canoe — and whitewater skills — were not prepared to navigate.

On the last bend, the river constricted and swept us left



MANY BIRD SPECIES find refuge in the park and surrounding area. Pictured: sandhill cranes (top), indigo bunting (above right) and Baltimore orioles (above left).

ing the river up into the bluffs to explore more spring-branch canyons. Soon, we were 150 feet above the river. As the din of the falls receded, we began to hear birdsong again.

The intermingling of species in the central Niobrara River valley is not limited to trees. When a flicker flew over us, I asked if it was the yellow- or red-shafted variety of the jaunty speckle-chested woodpecker. Warrick thought it could be a hybrid. Because the ranges of several closely related eastern and western species overlap, the forest is a hot zone for avian hybridization. The yellow- and red-shafted varieties of northern flicker, eastern and spotted towhee, Baltimore and Bullock's oriole, indigo and lazuli bunting, rose-breasted and black-headed grosbeak, and eastern and mountain bluebird are all thought to hybridize to some extent in the Niobrara woodlands.

The trail was steep near the top of the canyon. At the summit, a few ponderosa pines grew among their deciduous and



CANOERS PADDLE DOWN the Niobrara near Springview, Nebraska.

toward the bank. We had to concentrate to avoid big rocks. The bank had been partially stabilized with fill rock to keep the river from swallowing a nearby road. We eased the canoe as close to the sandy loam of the curve as possible and could almost touch the shore at the outside of the arc.

Chloe made a whistle like the call of a black-capped chickadee (two descending notes, slight pause, followed by one note: chick-a-dee!) to get my attention. A mink climbed out of a hole in the bank and scurried up the duff onto a field of bluegrass. Mink are shy and reclusive by nature. This was a first sighting for Chloe, and rare for me as well. We steadied the boat in the current and watched while the mink scrambled through the grass to the edge of a mud slide it probably used at night for sport. Pausing to sniff blades of grass at the top of the slide, the mink was aware of us 10 feet away in our yellow boat. It made one more trip to its hole, then hustled over the bank and into a plum thicket, disappearing from sight.

Our mink elation lasted for one nanosecond. Beyond the final bend, the river made two tight meanders before straightening out and barreling directly into Rocky Ford Rapid. After we cleared the final curve, Chloe pointed left with her paddle. We needed to turn the boat toward a two-story log building a few hundred yards ahead of us. This required crossing the river.

The soft rushing sound of a rapid intensified, and a river-spanning field of rocks blocked the channel ahead. Chloe swung portside to aim at the takeout, but the current pushed us toward

the riffle. I tried a draw stroke to straighten the canoe but over-adjusted. We slipped through a chute between the rocks, and the white noise got whiter. A final shelf of rock stood between us and smooth water.

We were perpendicular to the current now. When it was too late, we both saw the boulder straight ahead. The canoe struck hard, and the current swung us around. The river began to swamp in through two holes under Chloe's seat. I got out, steadied myself, and pushed the wounded boat back into the stream, towing it the rest of the way to shore. We borrowed a bailer and pailed out enough water to flip the canoe and drain it.

I'm a careful planner, and with a thousand-plus fresh grassland river miles notched on my paddle, it felt discouraging that one brief mental mistake could quickly end a voyage. At least we'd picked a good place to bash holes in our canoe: the tail end of a day on the river, vehicles parked at the ready, the day before we were set to return to Kansas.

GEORGE FRAZIER writes about the importance of wild places and native ecosystems in middle America. His previous book is "The Last Wild Places of Kansas," (2016) University Press of Kansas.

Excerpted from "Riverine Dreams: Away to the Glorious and Forgotten Grassland Rivers of America" by George Frazier. Copyright © 2025 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.



My Own Private Denali

With most of the Alaska park closed to traffic, I heeded the call to explore the deserted backcountry.

By Robert Annis

DAWN in Denali National Park and Preserve is an ideal time for wildlife viewing. Pictured: a moose and her calf.

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he brown spot in my camera's viewfinder grew larger and began taking shape — four strong legs, two short rounded ears and a powerful shoulder hump. It was a male grizzly, and it was quickly coming our way across the scree. My heart was beating so loudly, I was sure the other photographers could hear it pounding over their clicking shutters.

When the grizzly got within 20 yards, I began to calculate how much time we'd need to retreat to the van if he kept hustling toward us. I assumed a couple of my comrades were doing the same mental math and wondered which of our group would be the consensus sacrifice in the panic. I was pretty sure it would be me.

Thankfully, the bear slowed, and his body language gave no indication that he was concerned about the wildlife paparazzi snapping photos. Instead, he focused on the field of ripe berries surrounding him. We watched as he shoveled clumps of the dark fruit into his mouth with his mammoth paws. It felt like our encounter lasted hours, but likely only 10 minutes had passed before the beautiful brown bruin turned from us and ambled away alongside the quiet dirt road.

Originally established in 1917 for the primary purpose of protecting Dall sheep, Denali National Park and Preserve has expanded in size and scope over the years. Today its mountains, taiga, tundra and glaciers sprawl across 6 million acres of south-central Alaska. The park's vastness is a siren call for those seeking solitude, adventure and extraordinary wildlife sightings. During the busiest pre-pandemic years, some 600,000 people visited Denali annually, primarily between May and September.

I'd been to Denali twice before that bear run-in, but during my previous visits in 2020 and 2023, I had not been able to venture beyond the park's front country. The hiking was amaz-

ing; Savage Alpine Trail in particular offered great views of the Alaska Range, even if the vicious wind threatened to launch me off the mountain. But what I remember most is the perpetual Patagonia parade. Gazing down from the jagged ridges, I could see an army of brightly colored, fleece-covered ants marching along the trails. As someone who visits parks to get away from other people, I yearned for a wild, remote Alaska experience. Unfortunately, the weather held me back on my first sojourn — a spur-of-the-moment trip — and then more recently, a geologic mishap stopped me.

For many visitors, the quintessential Denali experience involves boarding buses and bouncing along the park's 92-mile main road, which runs east to west, bisecting the park. (People driving their own cars generally are not allowed past mile marker 15, where asphalt gives way to gravel, unless they're staying at Teklanika River Campground at mile 29.) But in August 2021, when a long-active landslide worsened due to thawing permafrost (caused in part by climate change), park managers made the decision to close a 300-foot section of the road, starting at mile 43. This effectively shut down more than half of the park to everyone but those willing to fly, bike or hike around the road closure.

Work to reroute the road and build a bridge over the landslide area began in 2023, but a wide array of factors, including the remote location, steep and unstable slopes, short construction seasons, and local labor shortages, have caused multiple delays, said project engineer Steven Mandt. Wonder Lake Campground and five other stops west of the closure — Polychrome Overlook, Toklat River, Stony Hill Overlook, Eielson Visitor Center and Kantishna — will remain shuttered until 2027, when the road is slated to reopen to the public.

Though traffic continues to flow on the open part of the Denali Park Road, the western half is "a virtual ghost town compared to the high daily volume of buses and visitors prior to the closure," said Simon Hamm, who co-owns the Camp Denali lodge with his wife, Jenna Hamm. "The heart of one of the world's celebrated wilderness parks has suddenly gone from near congestion to visitation levels that existed nearly 75 years ago." In the recent past,

traffic would pile up when a photogenic creature wandered into view. Now when visitors spot animals like our grizzly, "there's no pressure to move along so the next busload can have their turn," Simon Hamm said. "Provided the animal is unperturbed, we have the luxury to observe it for however long we choose."

During the early days of the pandemic, scientists around the world noted that while humans sheltered in place, wildlife ventured into areas they previously had avoided. That may be the case in the Denali backcountry as well, though it's unclear

how the absence of buses has affected the movements of bears, caribou, moose and wolves. The National Park Service has seized the opportunity to research how wildlife has reacted to the closure, but its study is set to continue for two years after the road reopens, so it will be a while before all the data is in.

The closed road would seemingly be the death knell for the private lodges in Denali's backcountry, but in 2022, three (of four) began flying guests in via small commuter aircraft or helicopter. That caught my attention.



A GRIZZLY BEAR stands out amid the autumn foliage. Fall in the park is brief but vibrant.

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Venturing into the Denali backcountry would be the culmination of my two biggest obsessions.

ROUGHLY HALF of the park's 92-mile main road has been closed to all vehicle traffic since August 2021, when a long-active landslide worsened.

For more than a decade, I've traveled the world photographing wildlife and writing about the outdoors. Two subjects I keep returning to over and over are national parks and grizzly bears, which I've been infatuated with since my first sighting in 2018. I have a modified arrowhead logo symbolizing three of my favorite national parks (Acadia, Yosemite and Katmai) tattooed on my left leg, while an image of a brown bear — based on a photo I took in Katmai — graces my right leg. I've visited every national park in the contiguous U.S. and Hawaii and have been slowly ticking off the Alaska parks.

Venturing into the Denali backcountry would be the culmination of my two biggest obsessions, and I dreamt of returning to finally explore that last frontier. The promise of few visitors and abundant wildlife made it all the more enticing, and the flights to the lodges, though expensive, seemed well worth it. After several months of plotting via email with lodge staff, I picked a week in early September.

When I arrived at the Denali Air terminal just outside the park for my backcountry flight, the valley was covered in a fog thicker than the inside of Willie Nelson's tour bus. But after a short wait, our pilot, Roger Füiten, determined that the weather had improved enough to fly, and we climbed into the Cessna 206 that would take us deep into the park. Because the plane was so small, the gear and passengers needed to be weighed before loading. Sliding into the copilot's seat, I thought about the earlier weigh-in and wished I'd skipped breakfast that morning (and also every morning for the last couple of decades).

Füiten flew so close to the mountains we could see the Dall sheep lazing about on an impossibly steep rock face. But the fog was still hovering over the airstrip when it came time to land, and we had to go back to the terminal. Although bummed by the delay, I was just as relieved that Füiten didn't ask "Who feels lucky?" and plunge the plane downward into the cloudy gloom. Fortunately, the fog dissipated enough that we were able to land on our second

attempt a few hours later. Less than 10 minutes after arriving, our small group was on its way to Kantishna Roadhouse.

A former mining camp, Kantishna is operated by Doyon, Limited, an Alaska Native corporation. (Denali sits on the traditional lands of the Ahtna, Dena'ina, Koyukon, Upper Kuskokwim, Tanana and other Native Tribes who have lived there for thousands of years and continue to use the land to this day.) My cabin was sparsely furnished, but comfortable enough, with running water and electricity provided by a large diesel generator.

At Kantishna, days started out with an optional outing to seek out wildlife. Before sunrise, three or four of us would pile into a van with our coffees and massive camera lenses, and head east on Park Road. On the second morning, we hit pay dirt when we spotted a caribou just as the sun had begun peeking over the mountains. Illuminated by a thin ray of light, the caribou strolled across a field dotted with willow, seemingly posing in front of Denali itself. (I should mention here that

President Trump issued an executive order changing the name of the park's eponymous peak back to Mount McKinley, after a former president who never visited Alaska, but it will always be Denali to me.)

During breakfast, as we ogled pics of the ungulates we had spotted earlier, our guides would lay out potential hikes for the day. The first hike I embarked on was the 5-mile McKinley Bar Trail, not too far from Wonder Lake. It was relatively easy, passing through spruce forests and across wooden boardwalks above the reedy marshes. The wild blueberries were abundant along the trail; with every stop, we scooped up handfuls, their sweetness a tasty enticement to continue.

The return of autumn coincided perfectly with my stay. The golds and reds of willows, poplars, blueberry bushes and fireweed contrasted sharply with the green spruce trees. It looked as if a humongous box of bright crayons had spilled across the tundra.

At the end of each day, we hung out in the main lodge,

As someone who visits parks to get away from other people, I yearned for a wild, remote Alaska experience.



NPS/ALEX VANDERSTUYF

DALL SHEEP, one of the park’s “big five” mammal species — along with wolves, caribou, moose and grizzlies — are a draw for many visitors (left). Right: Denali National Park and Preserve consists of 6 million acres of land in south-central Alaska. The park entrance is accessible by train, car or bus.

sipping Alaskan Ambers and Husky IPAs. Around 7 p.m., we’d gather in the dining room to eat a gourmet dinner, usually something along the lines of freshly caught salmon served with vegetables grown on the premises and slathered in an exotic-sounding sauce.

Despite our different backgrounds and ages, the other Kantishna guests and I quickly felt a sense of comradery. We told stories from home and shared discoveries big and small from the day: the bear fur stuck to the side of a tree or the blueberry-and-bone-filled scat found on the trail.

The McKinley Bar excursion was a good warmup for my second hike: a 12-mile climb to Friday Ridge and back. Official hiking trails are limited in Denali, so our route took us along a narrow, overgrown social trail. Making my way up, I couldn’t decide what I hated more, the low-hanging willow branches or the unrelenting gradient of the path. “I’ve climbed ladders less steep than this trail,” I thought, albeit with more colorful language. With each step, the ache in my Hoosier flatland legs intensified.

As we hiked through spongy tundra and higher on the rocky cliff face, hints of the Alaska Range began to appear in the distance. Finally reaching the ridgeline, I gulped down some water and took in the park’s most famous mountain in all its majesty. Towering above the rest of the Alaska Range at 20,310 feet, Denali is the highest mountain in North America and a bucket-list climb for many alpinists. Comparatively, the Kantishna Hills are barely bumps on the topo map, but as far as my weary body was concerned, Friday Ridge was my Denali.

When my time at Kantishna came to a close, a staff member drove me to Camp Denali, a more rugged lodge 2 miles away. After the initial pleasantries, I was led to my cabin, which was a seven-minute walk from the main lodge. (I’d quickly learn that the trip back was almost entirely uphill, which is one way to get your blood pumping first thing in the morning.)

Cabins were devoid of power, save for a battery-powered wall light. An outside spigot provided water, while heat was generated by a small woodburning stove in the corner. The



sparse furnishings — just a bed, desk, chair and washbasin — wouldn’t have been out of place when the national park was established. Given that I look like a turn-of-the-century lumberjack, why shouldn’t I live like one?

After breakfast in the lodge the first morning, visitors broke out into groups, mainly hikers and wildlife photographers. Still recovering from my Friday Ridge climb, I happily joined the photographers out to the road closure and back, looking for any sign of movement in the hills. We saw a few bears from a distance, lots of caribou, and plenty of ptarmigans and other birds with impressive names I immediately forgot.

The next day, I joined a group doing a 6-mile jaunt through the scree and tundra in a light drizzle. Because there were no trails, we were dependent on our guide’s instructions: When she pointed us toward a ridge, that’s where we went.

Up on the hilltop, we gazed upon miles of red berry thickets, small pockets of forest, hills transitioning to mountains and a seemingly never-ending expanse of tundra. I shuddered at the thought of getting lost in this vast wilderness without a GPS device or map and compass.



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THE GLACIER-FED McKinley River flows across gravel floodplains in the park before feeding into the Kantishna River.

That night, I woke up in the wee hours, needing to do what middle-aged men need to do at that time. Walking out the door, I saw Denali underneath the clearest sky, illuminated by thousands upon thousands of stars. I had my camera and tripod at the ready for such a sight, but instead of taking action, I muttered, “I’ll take the photo tomorrow,” and went back to bed. As luck would have it, it was overcast the remaining nights, and the scene never did repeat itself.

I regretted that moment of somnolent procrastination, but the rest of my visit was damn near perfect. To be sure, I felt more than a little guilty about enjoying something that was accessible to so few, but I was glad I’d jumped at the opportunity. When Park Road is finally reconstructed, the crowds could be even bigger than before given the pent-up demand, Simon Hamm told me, and some cruise-affiliated hotels close to the park have announced plans to increase occupancy. (Closer to publication, Hamm revised his projections, saying that unfortunately, given the current economic uncertainty and the threats national parks face under the Trump administration, it’s hard to know what to expect.)

9 f course, flying in isn’t the only way to get into the backcountry right now. Though it requires some grit, visitors can still take the bus to the East Fork stop and hike or bike into the far reaches of the park.

During my week in Denali, I only saw one backpacker, a lanky young man from Japan. Bikepackers were more prevalent; each day we saw about a half dozen chugging along. On my last day in the park, shortly after the hair-raising grizzly encounter, our group watched as two cyclists churned their way up a steep rise. The first rider was pushing upward with a steady cadence. His companion struggled a bit more under the weight of the loaded panniers and a huge backpack. Just looking at him made my spine hurt.

At the top of the hill, the pair doffed their packs and took a breather. When I walked over to warn them about the nearby grizzly, I learned their names were Ken and Kit Werley, a father and son from Los Alamos and San Diego, respectively. Like so many other visitors I spoke to, Kit said they were there because they wanted to experience “one of the most beautiful places on Earth with no traffic.”

They had started their journey at 6:30 a.m. “We had to push our bikes about 4 miles through and around the closure,” the younger Werley said. “We went up a wash, did about 10 stream crossings and pushed through thigh-high scrub before making it back to the road. It’s already been an adventure!”

He looked a bit weary but couldn’t stop smiling.

I knew the feeling. Denali can do that to a person.

ROBERT ANNIS is a freelance journalist based in Indianapolis.

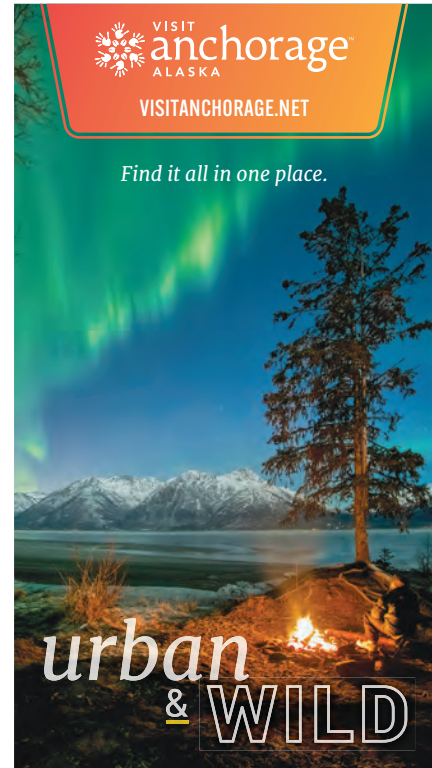
HISTORIC TRAVEL DESTINATIONS



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CARTER G. WOODSON sitting at his desk in his Washington, D.C., home, which is now a national park site.

When he started working as a guide at the Carter G. Woodson Home and Mary McLeod Bethune Council House national historic sites in 2010, he felt he'd been preparing for the role his entire life.

It wasn't until Fowler worked on his master's thesis that he learned two of his grandparents had moved in the same circles as Bethune and Woodson. He also discovered that his boyhood Sunday school teacher had worked as a secretary for Woodson, in that very house, when she was a teenager.

"That's one of the great things about history," said Fowler, who is now the supervisory ranger for the Woodson and Bethune sites as well as Frederick Douglass National Historic Site. "We're all connected in some kind of way. It's almost like I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing because I have connections to these special places and people."

When Fowler led tours of the 3,380-square-foot house, which Woodson purchased in 1922, he'd start by saying, "Dr. Woodson was the leading African American scholar, activist and historian during the Jim Crow era. Period." He would tell visitors how Woodson institutionalized the study of Black history by bringing lessons into churches, colleges and community centers, and how he broke new ground through his study of Black social and cultural history. "He was all about Negro life and history, all day, every day," he told me. "He wrote the books, taught the teachers and preserved the rare objects, all in his home."

But when I visited the neighborhood in late May, that home sat vacant. Food wrappers and bags littered the sidewalk in front of the three-story brick row house. Inside the property next door that serves as the site's entrance, ladders and a sheet of insulation cluttered the foyer,

Founding Father

Closed for years, Carter G. Woodson's home is scheduled to reopen in 2026, the centennial of Black History Month.

JOHNN T. FOWLER II has loved Black history for as long as he can remember. The son and grandson of Baptist preachers, he was born in Washington, D.C., into a family of educators. The last Sunday of every February, his church would set up a display for Black History Month, and 10-year-old John was drawn to the pictures of Carter G. Woodson, Mary McLeod Bethune and Frederick Douglass — pioneering African Americans who once lived in his own city.

SCURLOCK STUDIO RECORDS ARCHIVES CENTER, NMAH, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

and brown paper and painter's tape covered the floors. The home has been closed to the public since 2020, for the second and third phases of a prolonged renovation. An expected opening in 2024 came and went, and President Donald Trump's administration has made deep cuts to the National Park Service's budget and proposed deprioritizing small historic sites. Still, on the eve of the centennial of Black History Month — which Woodson founded as Negro History Week in February 1926 to be around Douglass' and Abraham Lincoln's birthdays — the Park Service is preparing to finally reopen the property. And Fowler is preparing, too, brushing up on his narrative about the man known as the Father of Black History.

Woodson was born in New Canton, Virginia, in 1875, the fourth of nine children of parents who had been enslaved. He grew up working on his family's farm and, later, in the coal mines of West Virginia. Woodson's formal education began at the age of 20. He graduated high school at 22 and went on to study at Berea College in Kentucky and the University of Chicago. In 1912, he earned a Ph.D. from Harvard University — only the second person of African descent to do so. (W.E.B. Du Bois was the first.) Woodson moved to Washington to be near the Library of Congress as he finished his dissertation, taught in the D.C. public school system and served as a dean at Howard University. But he discovered that schools weren't teaching the history of Black people. He believed the economic, social and political struggles Black people were facing would be overcome if more was understood about their past and accomplishments. So he left academia in 1922 and set out to make a change.

Woodson's work focused on the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (now the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, or ASALH), an organization he'd

founded in 1915. He examined the public records of Black people, prominent and lesser-known alike — birth and death certificates, marriage licenses, census data and obituaries. Then he told their stories in newspapers, speeches, journals and books. He wanted the world to know the contributions they'd made and that Black history is U.S. history. This was his life's work, carried out in his D.C. home until he died there in 1950.

Crystal R. Sanders, associate professor of African American studies at Emory University (home to some of Woodson's books and papers), hung a postcard of Woodson in her office early in her career. Woodson set the bar "for how to conduct rigorous, scholarly investigations for the path of African-descended people," she said, adding, "I remember being so excited to put that postcard up

and wanting students who come in for office hours to ask me who he was."

Woodson was a quiet man, his last surviving employee told Fowler years ago, and each morning he'd walk alone to the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA for meals. His life and home were filled with words. Woodson's residence served as the headquarters for his organization and its publications, now called the Journal of African American History and the Black History Bulletin. From his home, he also ran Associated Publishers, Inc., which published novels, poetry, academic books and children's books for the African American community.

At a time when Washington was still segregated, Woodson opened his row house to all. He mentored young scholars, who would pull books off his shelves and find inscriptions such as "To

the high priest of Negro history." One of those scholars was the poet, playwright and novelist Langston Hughes, who worked as Woodson's assistant.

Fowler described Woodson as a "hoarder" of Black history. "If [a book] had anything to do with Negro history anywhere in the world, he would have it," he said. "And if he didn't have it, he could let you know where you could find it." Volumes reached the ceiling and made it difficult to enter some rooms, and Woodson was often seen carrying stacks of books around the neighborhood, earning him the nickname "The Book Man." He was known to sit on his front stoop and read African folk tales to children.

"Carter G. Woodson is in some ways a one-man show," said Sanders, who serves on the executive council of ASALH. "He's operating from his house, trying to run ASALH and making sure teachers around the country have the material they need. This is ground zero for ensuring that Negro History Week will be a success." When Woodson prepared the curriculum for the first Negro History Week, he didn't know if it would catch on. "But teachers in these segregated schools readily took on the challenge," Sanders said. "Not only was it a success, it was a faucet that could not be turned off." The initiative led to the establishment of Black History Month in 1976.

In addition to promoting African American history, Sanders said, Woodson provided a model of how African Americans can respond to societal wrongs. "That's something I take with me today," she said. "We're looking at a rollback of civil rights, and we've been here before. Woodson laid the blueprint. He provided scholarly evidence of the ways African American people used whatever resources they had — not only to survive but to create a culture."

Sanders said she doesn't know anyone who can teach a U.S. history course today without teaching about the African American experience. "They may try," she

"He provided scholarly evidence of the ways African American people used whatever resources they had — not only to survive but to create a culture."

said, "but thanks to the experience of Dr. Woodson, there would be pushback."

Trump did issue a proclamation recognizing February as National Black History Month, but other actions suggest the current administration is undermining the preservation of Black history. In April, news reports showed that Park Service pages about Black abolitionist Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad had been amended to downplay the realities of slavery — the original language was restored after a widespread backlash. The administration has vowed to eliminate diversity, equity and inclusion programs from the federal government and targeted the National Museum of African American History and Culture in an executive order seeking to restore "truth and sanity to American history."

Alan Spears, NPCA's senior director of cultural resources, said sites such as the Woodson home are particularly at risk. "My sense is that the budget cuts would almost exclusively hit smaller historic and cultural sites like Woodson," he said.

Sylvia Cyrus, executive director of ASALH, said the "inclusion" element of DEI has been understood to be about "perceived exclusion" and said that's not the case here. "Black history is an important piece of American history, and it's American," she said. "Our goal is not to exclude or minimize the history of George Washington, but it is to say we need to include the great contributions of George Washington Carver."

ASALH was headquartered in Woodson's home until 1971, and the Park Service purchased the property and two neighboring row houses in 2005. The home had been neglected for

decades and was in "horrible condition," a park official told The Washington Post in 2013. "Drug addicts and prostitutes lived in the home before we got it." The house needed extensive restoration and stabilization work and was hit in August 2011 by both an earthquake and a hurricane, further damaging the structure. Fowler led tours of an empty house for a couple of years before the site closed again for the Covid pandemic and yet more renovations.

Cyrus said the budget to complete the renovations is "as secure as anything could be in these times" and said she looks forward to the 2026 reopening. The plan is for ASALH to have a working office in the house, where staff can interact with the community. Woodson's home will be open for guided tours, and the two neighboring houses will be used as the visitor center, bookstore and exhibit space. Fowler said the home still has some original floors, fireplaces, door-knobs and windows. When it reopens for tours, visitors will find some of Woodson's original possessions, including his desk, chair, typewriter and some books.

"It's so important for our nation to be able to preserve sites like the Carter G. Woodson house ... to inspire Americans," Cyrus said. Woodson showed us, she said, that "if you believe in something and work hard for it, you can make it happen. America is a better place because of his work."

MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN is a Washington, D.C.-based writer. Her book, "LAB DOG: A Beagle and His Human Investigate the Surprising World of Animal Research," will be published by Hachette/Seal Press in October.



JOHN T. FOWLER II, the supervisory ranger for Carter G. Woodson Home National Historic Site, standing in front of Woodson's former row house, which has undergone extensive renovations in recent years.

NPS/KELSEY GRACZYK



VISITORS watch an eruption at the summit of Kīlauea in Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park in May.

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