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FALL 2026
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HIKING IN WET SOCKS

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heat in Big Cypress.

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DUNES PUZZLE

| FOLLY ON THE
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| REJUVENATION AT
HOT SPRINGS

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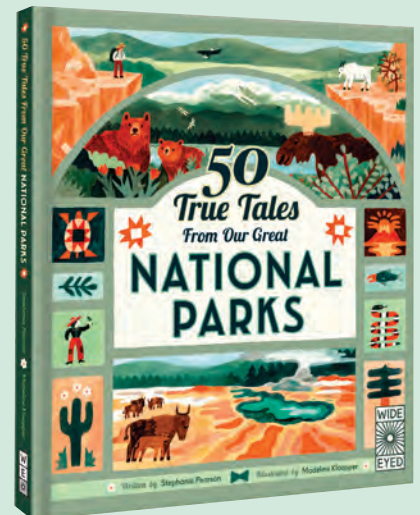
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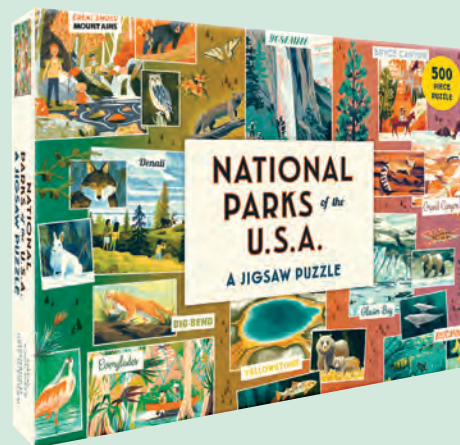
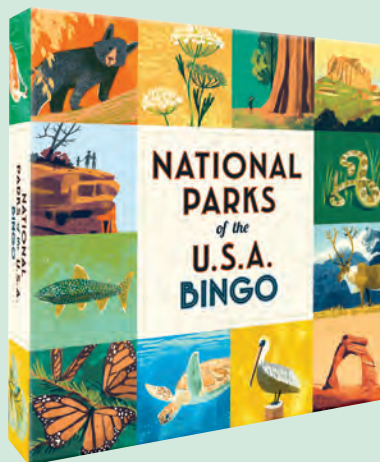
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© RAUL TOUZON

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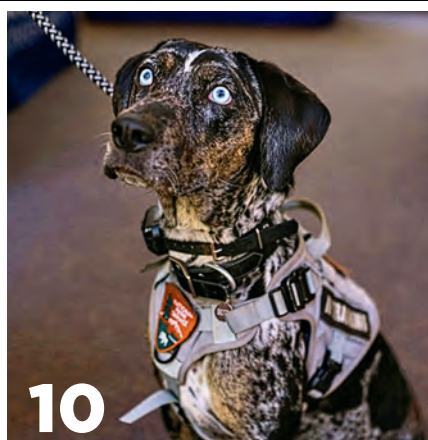
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On Welcomes and Wonder



©ANDRÉ CHUNG

I'm now six months into my tenure at NPCA and grateful to this community for making me feel welcome in so many ways. One example of the warm welcome I've received is the thoughtful gift one of my new colleagues gave me on day one: a national parks passport book. You may have one yourself, filled with inky stamped mementos of your own adventures.

Mine certainly has been put to good use. I've now made my way to more than half of NPCA's regions and have added many new stamps

to my passport. I continue to be dazzled by the incredible diversity of the parks I have visited and so impressed by my NPCA colleagues and our council members, partners and supporters. I've had the privilege of experiencing some parks for the first time, including Minnesota's Mississippi National River and Recreation Area as well as Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace National Historic Site and Stonewall National Monument, both in New York. My appreciation for these national treasures and the people who care for them only grows with each visit.

I've also been thrilled to see some familiar places with fresh eyes. Meeting with NPCA's Board of Trustees in June took me back to Yosemite National Park, which my husband and I visited a decade ago with our then-young sons who are now much taller than I am. The beauty of Half Dome beneath a perfect blue sky was as breathtaking as I remembered. A sight like this reminds me why park protection is often described as the "forever business." Life moves quickly, and passport stamps may eventually fade, but these soaring landscapes are timeless. As park lovers, we are in this for the long haul.

At NPCA, that means standing up and speaking out for parks under threat, time and time again. Recently, we helped stop what would have been the largest data center complex in the world on the doorstep of Manassas National Battlefield Park (p. 18). We enlisted passionate young canvassers to engage the public in the effort to save a National Mall beset by vanity projects (p. 16). We have walked the halls of Congress, tirelessly advocating for robust staffing and funding for our parks. Wherever and whenever the parks need us, we'll be there — thanks to the generosity of supporters like you who have rolled up your sleeves and whose generosity helps make all this work possible.

Onward,
 Tiernan Sittenfeld



A Feast for the Senses

The magazine's art director, Nicole Yin, mentioned in a recent meeting that this issue's long features are very *sensory*. National parks are a feast for the senses of course, but all too often, it's the sights that get the lion's share of attention. It's an apt observation that the anchor stories this fall are heavy — in the best way — on sounds, smells and sensations.

Katherine DeGroff's travel story, "Taking the Waters," delves into the bodily pleasures available to visitors at Hot Springs National Park: deliciously warm spring water, steaming towels and so-called vapor cabinets. Turn to p. 42 to find out about this medieval-looking contraption — and other surprises Katherine discovers in Arkansas.

In "Rock of Ages" (p. 34), Nicolas Brulliard reports on strangely shaped stone artifacts from Great Sand Dunes National Park that had mystified archaeologists for decades. When a researcher dared to tap on these rough-hewn rocks — well, you'll have to read the piece to find out what happened. Mini spoiler: Nicolas heard the remarkable sounds in person, and readers can go to npca.org/magazine to watch (and listen to!) a video themselves.

And finally, in our cover story, "It's Better to Hike in Wet Socks" (p. 24), Ken Ilgunas evocatively writes about the feeling of being in Big Cypress National Preserve: the vicious mosquitoes, the citrusy smell, and the cool, clear waters that hikers on the Florida Trail must "baptize their feet in," as he put it. "Big Cypress was not a place you kept out," he writes, "but one you let in."

When I was a full-time reporter, I sometimes wrote "see, smell, hear, touch, taste" in the margins of my notebooks as a reminder to take notes using my five senses. Those sorts of details — ones that blessedly remain out of reach of AI — make all the difference in painting a multifaceted picture. What a pleasure it is to work with writers who instinctively understand how to deeply pay attention to the places they are splashing through, soaking in, listening to and wandering around. Sensory delights lie ahead, dear readers — please enjoy!

Rona Marech
NPMAG@NPCA.ORG

NationalParks

EDITOR IN CHIEF: Rona Marech
SENIOR EDITOR: Nicolas Brulliard
ART DIRECTOR AND PHOTO EDITOR: Nicole Yin
ASSOCIATE EDITOR: Katherine DeGroff
FEATURES DESIGN: Jessie Despard
DESIGN CONSULTANT: Selena Robleto
NATIONAL PARKS

701 8th Street NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20001
202.223.6722; npmag@npca.org

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WHO WE ARE

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

WHAT WE DO

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

EDITORIAL MISSION

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

MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Members can help defend America's natural and cultural heritage. Activists alert Congress and the

administration to park threats, comment on park planning and adjacent land-use decisions, assist NPCA in developing partnerships, and educate the public and the media. Sign up to receive Park Notes, our monthly email newsletter, at npca.org/join.

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Keith Henry Brown's article, "Stars, Sand and Scorpions," captured the magic of Joshua Tree National Park in a truly unique style. The contrast he depicted between New York City and the desert was dramatic. No matter where you live, Joshua Tree provides a completely transformative experience.

KATHY VEJTASA
Eugene, OR



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HISTORICAL VALUE

I applaud your article "The Park Keepers." What our government is doing by way of lies and insanity, which our president calls "restoring truth and sanity," is an effort to wipe out American history, particularly the history of minorities (including women and their fight for rights) in this country of ours. It is important that we recognize and understand our history, blemishes and all. Truth has value. Honesty has value. Cover-ups have no place in a civilized country.

ALAN GOLDHAMMER
Orinda, CA

COMPLICATED FOUNDER

"Claiming Liberty" takes quite a different view of George Washington from that of Roger G. Kennedy, who was Park Service director from 1993 to 1997 and is considered an expert on the Founding Fathers.

Kennedy's views can be found in his book "Hidden Cities." Kennedy suggests that when Washington first lived in Philadelphia, he sent his slaves home to Virginia because he was afraid that they might escape. But later, under the influence of younger officers during the Revolutionary War, Washington came to oppose slavery. At that point, he purposely moved his slaves back to Philadelphia so that they could escape and he could avoid the objec-

tions his fellow Virginians would have raised if he had freed his slaves while in Virginia.

It is true that Washington's attitude was somewhat complicated by the fact that he wanted to leave his wife, Martha, properly cared for should he die first. Given that Ona was Martha's personal maid, it may well be that she was one slave who was not supposed to escape. How all of this fits together is not something I am able to explain. But the overall picture may be somewhat different from what the article suggests.

NORM MUNDHENK
Silverdale, WA

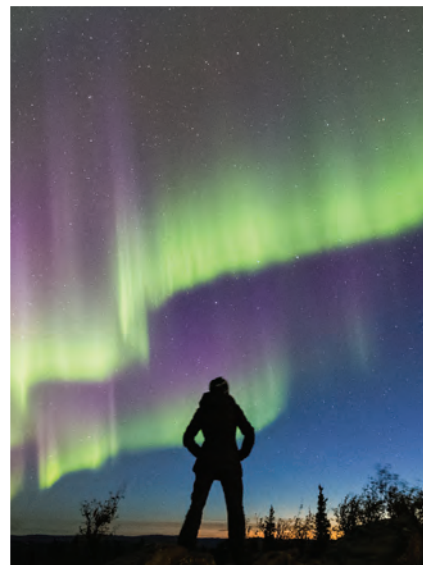
FIRST-PERSON REACTIONS

"Reservation Limbo" reminded me of some of my past park experiences. My husband and I, now in our 70s, have camped and hiked in many of our parks. We could always drive up to the entrance, pay the fee, find a campsite, and hike when and where we wanted. In recent years, that has changed dramatically. In 2020, we were shocked to pull up to Arches and not be able to enter. The sign said to try again at 2 p.m. It was 11 a.m., and the parking lot for waiting was full. We did not get to see Arches again. In 2021 we went to Olympic and Mount Rainier, our second time to both parks. We did not have to make reservations but made

sure to arrive by the time the entrances opened. Leaving the parks, we witnessed long lines of cars trying to get in. Yosemite in 2024 was the same. We experienced crowds everywhere but on longer hikes.

Overvisitation is a huge problem. The reservation system helps, but it means some of us don't get to enter. Federal funding cuts and staff cuts compound the situation. My heart sympathizes with the park staff. They are really up against it, and the preservation of the parks is at risk.

SUE GAZELL
Kingston Springs, TN



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SACRED STONE OF THE SOUTHWEST IS ON THE BRINK OF EXTINCTION



Centuries ago, Persians, Tibetans and Mayans considered turquoise a gemstone of the heavens, believing the striking blue stones were sacred pieces of sky. Today, the rarest and most valuable turquoise is found in the American Southwest— but the future of the blue beauty is unclear.

On a recent trip to Tucson, we spoke with fourth generation turquoise traders who explained that less than five percent of turquoise mined worldwide can be set into jewelry and only about twenty mines in the Southwest supply gem-quality turquoise. Once a thriving industry, many Southwest mines have run dry and are now closed.

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"President Trump's order to slash protections for Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante is both a betrayal to the American people and illegal."

NPCA President and CEO Tiernan Sittenfeld as quoted in The Herald Journal about the unprecedented rescission of protections affecting almost 3 million acres of national monument land in southern Utah, a move that shrinks both monuments by roughly 90%. As in 2017 when the president attempted a similar reduction and was challenged in court, NPCA maintains that no president has the authority to remove national monument protections.

"National parks belong to the American people, and censorship of any kind goes against the values these places represent."

NPCA's senior director of cultural resources, Alan Spears, sharing with ABC News why NPCA opposes the Trump administration's efforts to sanitize history and science by removing national park signage. NPCA and its allies, represented by Democracy Forward, sued the administration earlier this year, and dozens of signs remain in limbo while the case continues.

"This groundwater mining proposal would drain the desert and rob the Mojave of its rare springs and wildlife habitat."

Chance Wilcox, the associate director of NPCA's California desert program, criticizing in the Los Angeles Times a scheme that would suck water from beneath Mojave Trails National Monument and Mojave National Preserve at a pace 25 times faster than the recharge rate of the aquifer. NPCA and partners, including area Tribes, filed a lawsuit in July challenging the Bureau of Land Management's approval of a right of way for the project.





Call to the Wild

An eager pup at Grand Canyon does her very best to prevent humans and animals from mingling.

Not far from the historic El Tovar Hotel in Grand Canyon National Park, one of the park's newest workers starts her days with a walk around her spectacular backyard. By 7 a.m., she's on the job with the park's wildlife biologist, Brady Dunne. Her mission? Scare away the elk.

Blue is an almost 2-year-old Catahoula leopard dog, a leggy and lean 50-pound pup specially trained to haze the animals that get too close to visitors — a task she carries out with gusto. In May, she began work as part of the Conservation K9 Pilot Project,

an initiative to help park staff reduce human-wildlife conflicts.

About 300 to 400 elk regularly hang out at the Grand Canyon Village on the South Rim — a high-density area that is visited by more than 4 million people a year. “Elk sit in front of the El Tovar with their calves, surrounded by tens or hundreds of people taking selfies,” Dunne said. “It’s fine most of the time, but when it’s not, these animals are extremely fast and dangerous.” (Park staff ask visitors to stay at least 75 feet from deer and most other wildlife, 100 feet from elk, and 150 feet from black bears.)

Dunne started working at Grand Canyon in 2024 and found that he was responding to a lot of calls about elk — whose population has been growing in the last 20 years. “Many of them are extremely habituated,” he said. “If you can pet a wild animal, that’s a problem because people don’t realize it’s not a tame animal.”

Dunne has a long history with wild creatures. He spent more than 20 years in the Rocky Mountains studying large carnivores (think grizzly bears, cougars and wolves). After collecting more than 60,000 hours’ worth of field data, he shifted toward wildlife management, specifically focusing on researching and addressing conflicts between visitors and resident animals. That has landed him in some rather delicate situations — including being charged by a grizzly at Yellowstone when he was trying to guide the bear away from cars and people.

Park specialists like Dunne have limited options when trying to separate wildlife and humans. Public outreach is important, but training millions of visitors to stay away from wild animals (especially in the smartphone era) is unrealistic. And relocating or even killing animals that pose a threat to visitors isn’t anyone’s first choice, though it’s sometimes necessary. So Dunne, who considers himself a wildlife problem solver, started thinking creatively about how to dishabituate the animals.

“I thought, if I were an elk, what would I be most afraid of?” he said. That led him to buy Blue, whom he describes as a herding dog with grit and a strong prey drive. Blue won over the right humans, and the Grand Canyon Conservancy offered to fund the program, including basic obedience training at Wind River Canine Partners in Montana and sheep and cow herding training in Arizona. Then she learned from Dunne how to patrol on a 3-foot leash, using controlled barking and

NPS

“If you can pet a wild animal, that’s a problem.”

herding pressure to encourage elk to retreat to their natural habitats.

To be sure, the goal is not to drive animals out of the park, said Mindy Riesenberg, a spokesperson with the conservancy. “The elk are part of the experience. We want them there. We just don’t want them getting too close to the visitors.” The objective, she said, is to train the elk not to return to developed areas after they come face to face with what they might think is a wild wolf. “Over time, they will learn.”

When Dunne gets a call about elk, he goes to the location with Blue and two colleagues who help clear traffic. Dunne said he and Blue get as close as they safely can to the elk, moving away from the crowds of humans. Dunne gives Blue a series of sharp commands (“check it out,” “easy” and “quiet”), including her favorite: “bark.” Blue typically barks for less than a minute, and the elk react as they would to a predator — throwing their heads up and running away. Once they’ve dispersed, Dunne tells Blue to “leave it” (her least favorite command) before giving her a treat, pets and plenty of praise. During peak seasons (calving in the spring, rutting in the fall), they might shoo elk away 15 times a day.

Expenses for the three-year program include Blue’s veterinary care, an ATV to reach remote locations, wildlife monitoring and data analysis. Last year, staff deployed radio collars on nine habituated elk and five habituated desert bighorn sheep to learn how the animals move around the Village and how their behavior changes over time. Dunne said that based on his observations, the program is working — but he won’t know for sure until data show reduced wildlife presence, fewer emergency wildlife calls and fewer hazardous human-wildlife interactions. Also, the

human-dog duo just started dealing with bighorn sheep, which typically show up in the Village in late summer.

After Blue’s morning patrol, she joins Dunne in his office, he said, “trudging in like a sulking teenager.” They do a final sweep at the end of the day and then set off on a 2-mile hike on a private Park Service road. Blue chases a ball and runs until, Dunne said, she’s “gassed out.” They return to their stone cottage near the Village, where, with no elk or ball to chase, she finally relaxes.

Blue isn’t the first wildlife management canine in national parks. At Yosemite National Park, rangers used free-ranging hounds to help with bear issues as early as the 1930s, and the first formal human-bear-conflict

working dogs were employed there in 1997. These days, Yoshi, a Karelian bear dog, works with one of the park’s biological science technicians. At Glacier National Park, Bark Ranger Gracie, a border collie, worked from 2016 until her retirement in 2025, helping move bighorn sheep and mountain goats away from cars in a congested area.

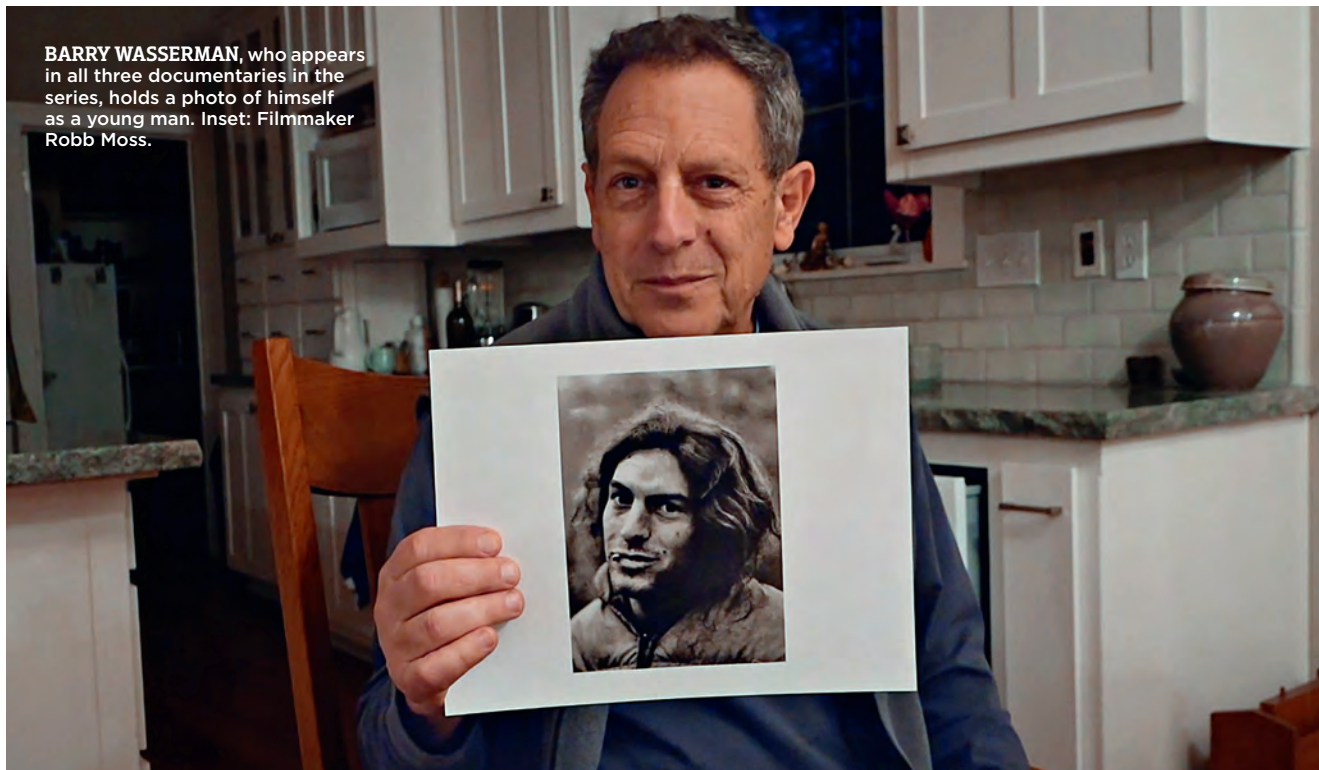
Dunne hopes that he and Blue will one day be loaned out to other parks facing habituation issues, such as Grand Teton and Yellowstone. “This is one of the biggest needs, and a really beautiful technique to solve the problem,” he said, “because people love dogs.”

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

A TOURIST FILMS elk from an unsafe distance at Grand Canyon National Park (below). Opposite: Blue, a Catahoula leopard dog, began working at the park in May to help reduce human-wildlife conflicts.



©UNAI HUIZI PHOTOGRAPHY/ISTOCKPHOTO



BARRY WASSERMAN, who appears in all three documentaries in the series, holds a photo of himself as a young man. Inset: Filmmaker Robb Moss.

COURTESY OF THIRD RIVER FILMS, LLC (ALL PHOTOS IN THIS STORY)

Going Downstream

A conversation with filmmaker Robb Moss about the latest installment of his river-running trilogy.



In October of 1978, Robb Moss took a 35-day trip down the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon. A film school student at the time, he brought a 16-millimeter movie camera to shoot his friends, most of them river guides like

him, who were in their 20s and seemingly carefree — and offhandedly naked for much of the trip. “You’re making images of people in the Colorado River, in the Grand Canyon, and juxtaposing these things. It’s just a kind of exuberant youth,” Moss said. “Everywhere you looked, it was unbearably beautiful.” The material he collected of their communal, unscheduled lives became his film “Riverdogs.”

Moss fell in love with filmmaking on that trip, and he went on to become an accomplished documentarian and a professor at Harvard University. Then two decades after making “Riverdogs,” Moss traveled West, where many of his friends were still residing, to film a handful of them in the hectic throes of

midlife. “People are now living with the life choices they didn’t quite know they were making,” he said. There are homes and babies and a divorce. One character, Barry, has a health crisis; another, Jim, leads the most unconventional life of the group, living off the grid in California and continuing to work as a river guide. Moss filmed his friends over four years, and that turned into “The Same River Twice,” which came out in 2003.

Now some 20 years on, Moss has released the third film in the series, “The Bend in the River.” An extraordinary meditation on friendship, nature, aging and the passage of time, the film includes bits and pieces from the other movies and follows five of the same characters — Jeff, Cathy, Danny, Jim and Barry, currently in their 70s. Moss again brings his camera into his friends’ everyday lives, which are mostly quieter and slower, and also on a couple of river trips, including a weeklong Grand Canyon journey. This time, the group

is swathed in long sleeves and sun hats, and their guides — the age they were when they started running rivers — are mourning what has happened to the much-diminished Colorado River. Older age is harder to film, Moss said, because less happens, but the narrative emerges from “ephemeral moments” as he put it, “which is really what I think our lives are built out of.”

When I saw the film at the DC/DOX film festival, I was riveted — by the portrait of youth, by images of the mighty (and less mighty) Colorado in three different time frames, by the anxious pulse of those years in the subjects’ 40s, by the ruminations of an older, wiser crew, and by the thrill of seeing people age before my eyes. I spoke to Moss by phone this summer about the latest film, which will be available on Netflix in December. “We all know where it ends for everybody, and that becomes more in view,” he told me. “That’s, I think, what the bend in the river is: You’re heading toward something, right around the corner.

You can’t quite see it yet, but you will at some point.”

A Q&A from our conversation, edited for clarity and length, follows.

When you were a student at University of California, Berkeley, you had your first experience on the Colorado River after you got a job as a driver for a river-touring company. What was that like?

We hiked down at Phantom Ranch to the river and then got a trip the rest of the way for driving the shuttle. It was so incredible being on these dories, and with these guys who just knew the water. I was just transfixed by it.

How did you become a river guide?

There was a whitewater school that the American River Touring Association was publicizing because river running was just starting. They needed guides. It was just a series of coincidences, but then also the spark of how beautiful it is to be

in a river, and then to be in a community of people who love rivers and who like spending time outdoors.

How long did you work as a guide?

I did it probably for less time than most of the major characters. I ended up going to graduate school three years into my river-running life. But the thing is that once we stopped being guides, we continued to run rivers, and it was a way for our community to continue staying in touch with each other. I don’t think the film has exactly messages, it’s not really designed in that way, but one of them might be: Stay friends with your friends. How beautiful it is to travel with a group of people your whole life.

Can you talk more about what drew and draws you to the Grand Canyon and rivers?

Being off the water was as fabulous as being on the water, but the river brought you to places you couldn’t get to any other way. The sort of specialness of that. Getting to know how to read water, how to know what water is doing by looking at the surface. And the utter attention you have to pay to the thing that you’re trying to negotiate. It connects you to the life of the river, that’s what it feels like. It doesn’t have to know you; it doesn’t know you. Its power and its life are so tremendous that there’s something glorious about being that small in such a big landscape. That’s the pleasure of being outdoors: being a small speck in an extraordinarily large and complex and beautiful environment.

In the film, you address the decline of the Colorado River and the role humans have played in that. The Lake Mead you filmed in 2023 was more than 100 feet lower than the lake you encountered in the ’70s.

A STILL FROM “Riverdogs,” which Moss filmed in 1978 on a 35-day trip through the Grand Canyon.



TRAIL MIX

The thought kept recurring that the river's running out of water as we're running out of time. In some sense, this deep geologic time and our tiny fragment of time were intersecting at a certain point, and in that crossing, there was something that filled me with grief. To see the lake just receding and receding and receding and receding until it was hardly there. I just had no idea where I was once we got to that part of the river. And also, the river was weaker. You could just feel it in the boats. It was something I needed to experience myself. Seeing it made it real in a way that it hadn't been.

Midway through, the film includes text that reads "We thought we were immortal, and the river was eternal." Do you wish you were young and naive still? I'm wondering if the aging you've captured seems melancholy — or how it lands for you emotionally.

I have no sense that I would like to go back to being young and naive. That was then. It was great. Great. But going back to it, that would undo everything, like what the hell? The river goes downstream, and you keep going with it, and that's what life is: being carried downstream.

In the second and third films, viewers see the house that Jim is working on but never finishes, and that becomes a central metaphor. Can you talk about that?

When he says, "It would be a blast to finish it, but it's perfectly half done, and I'm really happy with that," or something like that, people laugh because it seems so patently untrue. And Barry himself, when I tell him that, says, "I don't believe him," and then instantly, without any hesitation, says, "but there's something to be said for coming to find the perfection of what is." That's



FILM SUBJECTS Jim Tichenor (top) and Danny Silver (above) in "The Bend in the River."

what he means. It's a different kind of perfect.

You've joked about what the next film will be called — "The Naked and the Dead," for example. But seriously, will there be another film?

I'm loath to even speculate, but if it were possible, and if it presented itself, it certainly would be interesting to me.

And I hope people who are in the film would be around and allow me to film another one. And I'd love to see them as they age, too. That's part of the pleasure of this: that I've seen my own aging by filming their aging, and that our friendships have continued to evolve, and that our friendships live in time, over a really long period of time, and that's such an incredible pleasure.

—RONA MARECH

FOLLY ON THE MALL

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL BYERS
2026, LEVY CREATIVE MANAGEMENT, NYC

Leaking pipes, faulty filtration and algal blooms continue to plague the basin despite the recent work and new paint job. "The real issue is honestly being driven by climate change and water quality issues," Stierli said.

ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY

PROPOSED TRIUMPHAL ARCH

LINCOLN MEMORIAL

THE REFLECTING POOL

PROPOSED TENNIS CENTER EXPANSION

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON MONUMENT

EAST WING BALLROOM CONSTRUCTION PROJECT

U.S. CAPITOL

SMITHSONIAN CASTLE

PROPOSED NATIONAL GARDEN OF AMERICAN HEROES

THOMAS JEFFERSON MEMORIAL

PROPOSED GOLF COURSE EXPANSION

POTOMAC RIVER

The proposed structure would disrupt the symbolic connection between the Robert E. Lee Memorial in Arlington National Cemetery and the Lincoln Memorial. NPCA and members of its veterans council testified before the National Capital Planning Commission this summer, arguing that the arch cannot move forward without congressional authorization.

The planned statuary sits on a part of the Mall considered a "substantially completed work of civic art," meaning new additions are prohibited. NPCA and coalition partners, represented by Democracy Forward, filed a lawsuit in June challenging the project.

If you've followed Washington, D.C., news in recent months, you likely noticed one national landmark hogging the spotlight: the Reflecting Pool. The saga, which began with a nearly \$15 million paint job, is still unfolding but already has included multiple arrests, peeling paint and the return of algal blooms. The controversial makeover is just one in a long list of changes President Trump has implemented or proposed on national park lands in the capital — and advocates are calling foul. In its haste to break ground, they say, the administration has been cagey about funding and has flouted the law.

Besides overseeing the demolition of the East Wing of the White House to make way for a ballroom, the president has unveiled plans to construct a 250-foot arch adjacent to Arlington National Cemetery, install a garden on the Mall featuring 250 life-size statues of Americans he handpicked, turn the public golf course at Hains Point into a championship-style club, and massively expand the tennis complex in Rock Creek Park. Several of these controversial projects have already spurred lawsuits.

Ed Stierli, NPCA's vice president of government affairs, isn't opposed to new monuments or needed investments in park infrastructure but said NPCA is against forcing these projects forward in the absence of financial transparency, public input, and congressional and environmental review. So far this year, the administration has siphoned more than \$100 million in national park fee dollars for pet projects in Washington. Total costs will likely reach hundreds of millions — if not billions — of dollars, at a time when the Park Service is saddled with a shrinking budget and a roughly \$24 billion repair backlog.

Even if Trump were to get these projects privately funded, "the president doesn't have the power to decide what goes on America's front yard," Stierli said. "Only Congress does." That authority stems from the Commemorative Works Act of 1986, which outlines a comprehensive process for approving new monuments on federal lands in Washington. "This is a commemorative landscape," Stierli continued. "This shouldn't be changed without congressional approval, because that's what the law says."



Victory on the Battlefield

For five long years the world's largest data center project threatened Manassas National Battlefield Park. The plan was monstrous, the outlook bleak. Deep-pocketed developers, working in lockstep with several county representatives, hoped to construct as many as 37 massive energy-guzzling warehouses, some up to 100 feet tall, on 2,000 rural acres. But local landowners and preservationists, including NPCA, refused to be cowed. They applied strategic pressure and took the matter to court. This July, their efforts prevailed when the last developer pursuing an appeal with the Supreme Court of Virginia dropped its case, abandoning the project.

Kyle Hart, NPCA's Mid-Atlantic senior program manager, believes fending off this complex not only protected hallowed ground but also spurred a national movement. The bipartisan pushback against data centers, he said, from the press coverage to the introduction of local and state moratoriums, "started here. That started in Manassas." Hart also had a few words of warning for those pursuing data center projects near other park sites: "We're going to show up strong," he said. "We're going to win."

— K.D.

NPCA/MOORE



Indian Lodge



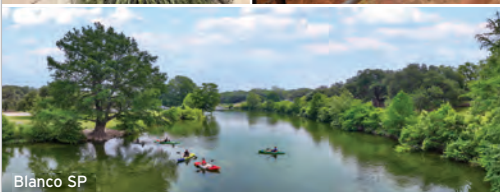
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PARK STATS

7

Age of the youngest climber ever to ascend El Capitan in Yosemite National Park. Joey Evermore turned 7 during the five-day ascent, beating the record set by his brother, who had summited the granite crag in 2022 at the age of 8.



Number of years since the Honouliuli Internment Camp closed on Hawaii's Oahu. In July, Honouliuli National Historic Site opened its doors to the public for the first time with limited guided tours.

80

two

Number of years Blackwell School National Historic Site existed without dedicated staff. The park unit, which was established in 2024 to highlight the history of de facto segregation of Mexican American students in Southwest schools, received its first full-time site manager this summer. Previously, staff from nearby Fort Davis National Historic Site had been pinch-hitting to keep Blackwell open eight hours a week.



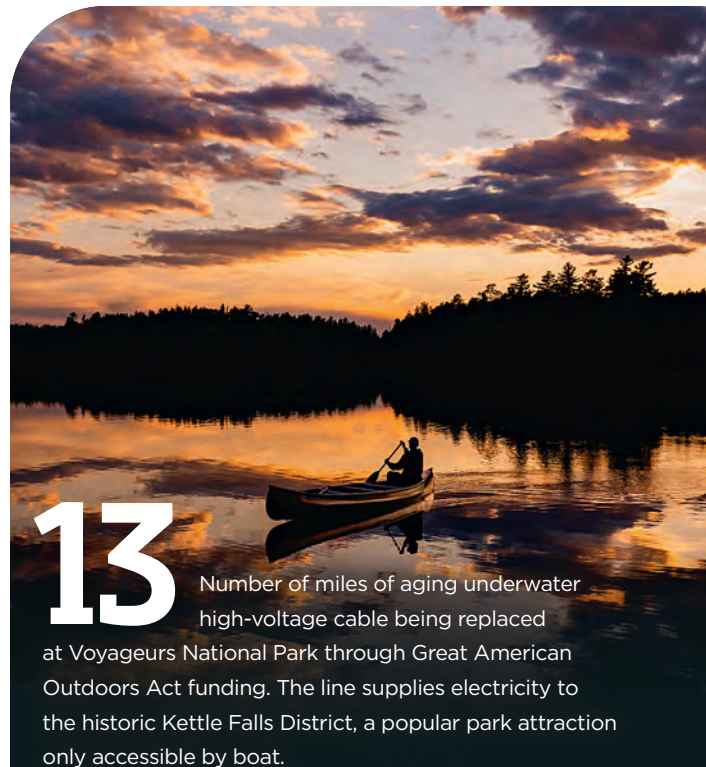
\$10.2 million

Amount of funding allocated on a two-year basis by North Carolina for wildlife crossings, thanks to longstanding efforts by NPCA and allies to ensure animals can safely cross highways near Great Smoky Mountains National Park and beyond.



37

Number of wolves estimated to reside at Isle Royale National Park based on this year's winter survey — the highest count since the late 1970s.



13

Number of miles of aging underwater high-voltage cable being replaced at Voyageurs National Park through Great American Outdoors Act funding. The line supplies electricity to the historic Kettle Falls District, a popular park attraction only accessible by boat.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: © JOE EVERMORE / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM; © MAGRAPHIC09 / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM; © VASYL HELEVACHUK / DREAMTIME.COM; © TDCAMERAMAN; © RAWPIXEL.COM / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM; NPS.



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The Pink Wave

A salmon run in an Alaskan park has exploded in recent years. Can a river have too many fish?

SALMON CARCASSES ARE among nature's most generous gifts. As salmon pour into Pacific Coast rivers to spawn and die en masse each year, they feed grizzly bears, eagles, wolves and many other beneficiaries. Their decomposing bodies, hauled ashore by predators and scavengers, leach nutrients acquired during years at sea into the soil to be taken up by trees such as cedar and spruce. Forests grow faster with the aid of fishy fertilizer.

Given their manifold benefits, it seems impossible that there could ever be *too many* salmon in a stream. Yet that may have been the case in 2013 in the Indian River, a stream that flows through Sitka National Historical

PINK SALMON MIGRATE up the Indian River to spawn. Astronomical pink runs have become increasingly normal in recent years, leading to low oxygen conditions in the river.

Park in southeast Alaska. That summer, nearly 300,000 pink salmon raced into the river to spawn, an enormous run in a river just 12 miles long. As the multitudes died, their decomposing remains sucked the oxygen from the water. For a 37-day period spanning late July to early September, National Park Service scientists in Sitka documented dangerously low dissolved oxygen in the river — a condition perilous not only for other returning salmon, but also for the river's residents, such as

cutthroat trout and Dolly Varden char, some of which appeared to asphyxiate. Some observers dubbed the situation “Salmonpocalypse.”

Although 2013 was an extreme year, it wasn’t a total aberration. Astronomical pink salmon runs have become increasingly normal in the Indian River, and low-oxygen conditions with them. Now the Park Service and its allies are trying to figure out whether the river’s hyperabundance of pinks is merely part of an Alaska-wide trend or whether a local fish hatchery might also play a role — and what, if anything, should be done about it.

Sitka, a 113-acre site that commemorates an 1804 battle between the Tlingit and Russian fur traders, has always been a place defined by fish. Four species of salmon, along with trout and char, supported a Tlingit fishing camp for roughly 5,000 years. That abundance flagged in the early 1940s, when the U.S. Navy extensively mined gravel from the river’s bed and mouth to build an air station and other military infrastructure; gravel extraction by private companies and government agencies continued into the 1960s. The incessant dredging destroyed spawning beds, made the river susceptible to devastating floods and suppressed its salmon population. By the early 1970s, fewer than 500 pink salmon spawned in the Indian River each year.

In the late ’70s, though, the runs began to tick up — and then explode. Pinks grow fast and return to spawn quickly, allowing for rapid population growth. During the 1980s, more than 10,000 pinks often bred in the Indian River annually, and in 1996 the run topped 180,000. The spawning window also began to widen: In the years after gravel dredging, pinks only came back in August and September, but by the 2000s they were returning from July through October.

In 2023, the Park Service contacted fisheries experts at the University of

Washington and U.S. Geological Survey to solicit research into the situation. The project fell to a team of researchers including Brian McGreal, a Ph.D. student in the university’s quantitative ecology and resource management department, who along with his colleagues spent a couple of years meeting

boom in pink salmon numbers around Alaska. Among the Pacific Coast’s five true salmon, pinks are the smallest, with mild, lean meat less toothsome than that of other species — traits that can cause them to get overlooked by anglers and managers. “Nobody pays a ton of attention to the pinkies,” McGreal said. In recent decades, pinks, known also as humpback salmon or humpies for the Quasimodo-like bulge that males develop during spawning season, have become by far the world’s most abundant salmon. Worldwide, their populations have more than doubled since the 1970s, and these days pinks may represent a whopping 80% of the North Pacific’s salmon — in part because they appear to tolerate warming oceans better than their fellow salmonids. Perhaps the Indian River’s fast-growing runs simply reflect the success of what McGreal calls a “climate change winner.”

But there may also be another explanation. About a half-mile from the mouth of the Indian River sits the Sheldon Jackson Hatchery, a facility run by the Sitka Sound Science Center. The hatchery, which was built in 1974, trains interns, apprentices and local high school students in the practice of aquaculture, and produces up to 3 million pink salmon, along with chum and coho salmon, every year for release into the ocean. As returning adult salmon approach the hatchery to spawn, most are intercepted by commercial fishermen, who harvest thousands of pink salmon annually from the inlet just beyond the hatchery’s mouth. The science center also studies returning fish for signs of emergent pathogens or pollutants that might harm wild stocks. “We look at our hatchery as a multifaceted tool that trains people to work in aquaculture, helps support our local commercial fisheries, (and) also helps us learn what’s going on in the ocean and support struggling runs,” said Arleigh Reynolds, the science center’s executive director.



PINK SALMON eggs.



A NEWLY HATCHED salmon, known as an alevin, emerges from its egg.

COURTESY OF SITKA SOUND SCIENCE CENTER
(BOTH PHOTOS)

with salmon managers, Native officials and other stakeholders in Sitka and crunching decades of data. In March, McGreal and others published their analysis in the journal *Alaska Park Science*.

The Indian River’s exploding population, McGreal and his coauthors noted, may simply epitomize a recent

Making salmon management even more complicated is that it's occurring against a backdrop of rapid climate change.

Come spawning time, though, not all of the hatchery's fish beeline to the place where they were raised. The facility draws its water from the Indian River, which means that its pink salmon, which imprint on the smell of their birth creeks, associate the river with home. As a result, many captive-born fish "stray" into the Indian River as returning adults. But how can scientists tell whether a given salmon was born in a hatchery or in the wild? By examining their "otoliths" — literally, *ear stones* — minute flecks of calcium carbonate that form in the inner ears of nearly all fish, and that accumulate layers like tree rings over time. The Sheldon

Jackson Hatchery, like other Alaskan salmon hatcheries, exposes incubating eggs to carefully controlled intervals of wet periods and dry, a sequence that leaves an otolithic signature, like a serial number tattooed on the tiny stones. Biologists can thus figure out where the Indian River's fish were born by extracting the otoliths from their carcasses and examining them under microscopes. Some years, hatchery strays comprise fewer than 5% of the river's pink salmon. Other years, they make up a third or more — suggesting that the hatchery's output may significantly contribute to the pink eruption.

As one indication that the Indian River is healthy despite the stray hatchery fish, Reynolds notes that there isn't evidence to suggest that pink salmon are dredging up each

other's redds, or gravel nests — a hint that there's still plenty of habitat to go around and that the stream may not be exceeding its carrying capacity despite the low oxygen levels. Still, the science center is taking measures to reduce the hatchery's stray rates. Recently, the hatchery partnered with seaweed farmers to grow mats of algae near the saltwater net-pens in which the salmon fry grow up, the idea being that the young fish will imprint on the algae and



eventually follow its scent straight back to the hatchery, rather than deviating to the nearby river. "I think everybody, including all of the aquaculturists, wants to decrease those impacts," Reynolds said.

Making all of this more complicated is the curious life cycle of pink salmon themselves. Whereas other salmon species vary in how long they spend at sea, virtually all pinks return to spawn after exactly two years. That means that the Indian River's pink salmon are naturally two populations that almost never mix: fish that spawn in even years, and fish that spawn in odd years. According to statistical analyses that McGreal hasn't yet published, the hatchery appears to have little influence on the river's even-year runs but may be

augmenting the odd-year population, for reasons that McGreal hopes to eventually identify. "My big goal is to have applicable pieces of information that the park and the hatchery can use, hopefully in collaboration with each other," McGreal said.

As McGreal is quick to acknowledge, however, untangling the factors influencing salmon runs is difficult when you don't know their historical numbers. There's reason to believe the Indian River boasted a prodigious pink run before gravel mining destroyed it and scientists started counting fish. Isabella Brady, a Tlingit educator, recalled in a 1998 report that it once "seemed like you should just be able to walk across the river on the humpies, there were so many of them." It's conceivable that the park's current hyperabundance isn't a novel situation but a return to erstwhile conditions. "It wouldn't surprise me one bit if we're getting very close to what it used to be," said Bill Coltharp, the science center's aquaculture director.

Making salmon management even more complicated is that it's occurring against a backdrop of rapid climate change. As the 49th state has gotten hotter and drier, streams like the Indian River have suffered lower flows and warmer temperatures — droughty conditions that make low-oxygen years like 2013 more likely to recur in the future. That means that understanding how many salmon the Indian River and other streams can sustain has never been more urgent. "Everybody wants to figure this thing out and do right by these fish," McGreal said.

BEN GOLDFARB is an environmental journalist and the author of the books "Crossings: How Road Ecology Is Shaping the Future of Our Planet" and "Eager: The Surprising, Secret Life of Beavers and Why They Matter." He is working on a book about the wonder, diversity and world-changing powers of fish.

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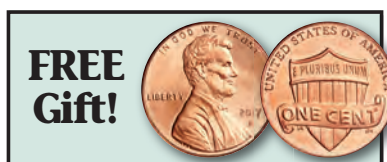
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BY KEN ILGUNAS

“The mud will suck the life out of you.”

“Here we’re closer to the equator, so the sun cooks you faster.”

“Don’t step on the spicy noodles” — otherwise known as snakes.

These were some of the replies I received from members of the Florida Trail Hikers Facebook group when I asked whether it was possible to hike, in a little over a day, the 30-some-mile section of the Florida National Scenic Trail that cuts through Big Cypress National Preserve.

In short: The hiking community answered my query with a resounding “no.” I learned that in wet seasons, the route is known as an “underwater trail.” Hikers have no choice but to baptize their feet in the swamp’s waters and mudflats, and the legendary mud can slow them down from, say, 3 mph to 0.3 mph. Sometimes, almost the entire Big Cypress section is

flooded. One Florida Trail enthusiast told me that one year the land was so sodden he had to collect and pile dead palm fronds just to raise his tent above the water. Another year, campers had to sleep on picnic tables. One trail expert advised me to set aside “4 nights/5 days to be on the safer side to avoid exhaustion.”

I was not looking for an Ironman-style challenge, but I had only about 30 hours between a work event in Fort Lauderdale and a flight out. And I really wanted to see nearby Big Cypress, a vast lowland wilderness of cypress swamp, marl prairie, pine-lands, hardwood hammocks and mangrove forest.

Most visitors who go to the preserve stick to the visitor centers or short boardwalks or nature trails along the highway, and off-road vehicles are popular. “Not a whole lot of people want to venture into a swamp,” said Lisa Andrews, outreach and education coordinator at the park, who kindly offered to pick me up at the I-75 rest area, on the far side of the preserve, should I attempt



NPS

the hike. “They think it’s going to be nasty, smelly, slimy, dirty.” Plus, Big Cypress is inhabited by wildlife that is unfamiliar to me and therefore extra scary: Florida panthers, cottonmouths, alligators and invasive Burmese pythons, some nearly 20 feet long and capable of swallowing deer and even alligators.

But for those who love the park, as Andrews does, or want to explore the backcountry on foot, as I did, the Florida Trail is perhaps the best option. One of the country’s 11 national scenic trails, it begins at Big Cypress’ Oasis Visitor Center and runs roughly 1,500 miles north and west to Gulf Islands National Seashore near Pensacola.

As it had quickly become clear, under normal conditions — even in the dry season — it would be all but impossible to cover the southernmost 30 miles of the trail in the short window I had, but there was a loophole of sorts: Big Cypress was in the midst of a serious drought. That was not good news for the

swamp or its creatures, which depend on water, but it meant the trail would be uncharacteristically dry. As a former backcountry ranger in Alaska national parks and thru-hiker who had crossed North America’s Great Plains, I knew I could do fast miles on those stretches of dry ground. On the other hand, a waterless swamp meant I’d have to haul my own drinking water — 12 liters under a scorching sun.

As I pondered the possibilities, I could see that the thought of the hike stirred in me a familiar mix of excitement and fear — usually a reliable sign that I was about to do something at once foolish and worthwhile. I settled the matter with a bullheaded and perhaps delusional “why not?” Some weeks later, at the end of April, I began my hike before dawn in a state of mild trepidation.

Walking into a swamp for the first time in pitch blackness at 4:45 a.m. may not be the ideal way to introduce yourself to a strange landscape. My headlamp led the way, blasting a white

THE 30-SOME-MILE section of the Florida National Scenic Trail that cuts through Big Cypress is known as an “underwater trail” (left). Right: Seminoles in 1926. The preserve, which is part of the ancestral land of the Miccosukee and Seminole peoples, is currently home to several active Indigenous villages and many cultural sites. Previous pages: The preserve’s 729,000 acres include cypress swamp, marl prairie, pinelands, hardwood hammocks and mangrove forest.



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spotlight down a narrow tunnel of leaves, trunks and palmetto fronds. I was alert to every rustle at first, though the only actual threats that materialized were throngs of mosquitoes that I found both unusually evasive and impressively vicious.

Every few feet, I walked face-first into a spiderweb, suggesting either that the trail had gone unvisited for some time or that the spiders here were particularly assiduous. I grew accustomed to pinching the webs off my face as if removing a mask and later, took to swatting at likely strands with my trekking pole as if it were a machete taking down invisible vines.

As the first glimmer of daylight seeped into the trees, the forest awoke with birdsong, and with the sun lighting my way, my worries began to dissipate. I stopped constantly thinking I was about to step on a snake — or alligator. (These fears were not exactly unjustified: Andrews had told me a story about an alligator that once exploded from the water after a professor and his students accidentally stepped on its tail.)

The enclosed green tunnel I had entered widened, revealing an open savanna. Around me was a true mosaic: grassy knee-high prairie; stands of charred but living cabbage palms, their trunks blackened by fire (likely from a controlled burn); breezy pine forests; and, despite the drought, an unending palette of varied and vibrant greens.

In the distance was the strangest landform of all: a cypress dome, which looks like a small hill on the otherwise flat expanse, but actually signals a depression. The cypress trees grow tallest in the center of the domes, where nutrients are dense and water often pools, and grow shorter along the edges, leading to the rounded shape. In some domes, the pondlike

pools are too deep in the middle for cypress to take root, creating a watery hole in the doughnut that persists late into the dry season and draws a range of wildlife: wading birds, frogs, fish, alligators, the whole desperate congregation. As Andrews put it, the gators have “a little fast-food restaurant.”

A few hours in, I arrived at a picnic table and paused, taking stock. I stood on it to gain a little elevation, and my 3-foot rise brought my altitude from 6 feet above sea level to 9 feet — a whopping 50% increase. (The preserve’s highest ground reaches only about 18 feet above sea level.) In Big Cypress, topography is measured less in feet than inches, and each inch can create a different ecosystem. A slight rise means pine, while a slight dip means cypress. A deeper hollow becomes a dome or gator hole.

To me, the landscape appeared perfectly still, but when there’s water, it is always moving: rainwater sliding across the limestone in a wide, shallow, seemingly motionless sheet. That slow movement has shaped not only the ecology of Big Cypress but also its human history.

The national preserve was established half a century ago, but people have been part of this watery ecosystem for thousands of years. What is now Big Cypress is part of the ancestral homeland of the Miccosukee and Seminole peoples.

During the first half of the 19th century, the Indigenous people of Florida fought U.S. efforts to remove them in a series of conflicts now known as the Seminole Wars. As the fighting ground on, the Tribes took refuge deeper in the Everglades. Then in the 1850s, under pressure from the U.S. military, thousands were forced from the Big Cypress region to Indian Territory west of the Mississippi River. A smaller number remained in South Florida; their descendants continue to maintain a connection to the preserve, which is currently home to several active traditional villages, many cultural sites, and numerous hunting, gathering, ceremonial and burial grounds.

The water itself has its own history of disruption. Through-



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ROSEATE SPOONBILLS, a Florida panther and an alligator (from top to bottom). Right: In some cypress domes, the pondlike pools in the middle persist late into the dry season, drawing a range of wildlife.

out the 20th century, canals, roads and levees interfered with the sheet flow that once moved generally southwest through this corner of Florida.

Then, in the 1960s, plans were unveiled for what would have been one of the world's largest jetports in the heart of the Greater Everglades, with six runways, supersonic aircraft, and new roads and development that would have pushed into the swamp. Opposition to the airport, and to the growth expected to follow it, brought together an unlikely coalition of hunters, fishermen, environmentalists, Seminoles and Miccosukees.

They managed to stop the project, and in 1974, Big Cypress became America's first national preserve (tied with Big Thicket in Texas, established on the same day). The designation protected an area nearly the size of Rhode Island while allowing



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many older uses to continue and explicitly safeguarding Miccosukee and Seminole rights to stay in their villages and use the land and water in their customary ways. "They had to call us something different," Andrews said, "so they called us a preserve instead of a park."

Those compromises, while essential to creating the preserve, did not permanently settle the many arguments over Big Cypress, which has since expanded to 729,000 acres. To this day, the preserve remains contested ground, with disputes over oil and gas activity, off-road vehicle use, Tribal access, wilderness designation, and how best to restore the water's old, slow movement across the land. (See sidebar p. 31.)

Out on the trail, with no one else in sight, that long history and those ongoing battles were mostly invisible to me. What I walked through felt like wilderness, and because I was moving so fast, I could only partially take it in. Ari Hirschman, a moderator of the Florida Trail Hikers group who has hiked Big Cypress several times, told me he's the sort of hiker who, like me, enjoys pushing himself to go harder and faster. But once,

while helping a slower hiker through a water-logged section, he was forced to bring his pace down to hers.

"The fact that this lady was going so slow," Hirschmann told me, "just allowed me to really look and see everything and enjoy the hike and the path." At that pace, he noticed what speed can blur: tiny carnivorous plants floating in the swamp water; the reddish hue of bromeliads, air plants that grow harmlessly in trees; and the way the light made everything look Technicolor.

His words were on my mind as I powered through, and I tried, even as I hurried, to take note of the smaller things: The land smelled citrusy, like a warm mug of lemongrass tea, and in some corner of the soundscape a barred owl hooted, a pileated woodpecker thumped, and palm fronds swished in the wind. Overhead, three turkey vultures soared.

By 10 a.m., I'd already walked 9 miles. I was pleasantly surprised to have made such good time, but I still had more than 20 miles to go, a hot late-April afternoon ahead of me and a pack heavy with water that pinched my shoulders. I had to carefully calibrate my pace. If I lingered too long in the shade,

I would pay for it later. If I pushed too hard, I might pay for that, too. Keep going, but not too fast. And not too slow. Take breaks, but not too many.

Then, at last, I reached a stretch where the trail dipped into shallow water. Most hikers obsess over keeping their feet dry. But during my time in Alaska, I had learned that in wet country the better strategy is not necessarily to avoid wet feet, but to manage them: Wear shoes that drain, use thin socks, air your feet when you can and put on dry socks at night. In seven summers in Alaska, despite consistently having wet feet on hikes, I don't recall ever getting a blister. On a hot, dry Montana hike last summer, I had about five within the first hour.

Eric Emery, a retired Navy veteran from central Florida who has hiked the entire Florida Trail seven times and the Big Cypress section 11 times, had learned the same lesson. He'd seen hikers approach flooded stretches as if playing "the floor is lava," hopping from root to rock to grass clump in a doomed effort to preserve dry feet. "You waste a lot of time doing that," he told me. "Once your feet are wet, they're wet. So I just hike through the water."



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SOME ENTHUSIASTS believe the best time to hike in the preserve is the winter, when the water is high. “It’s one of the most beautiful things on Earth,” said Eric Emery, who has hiked the entire Florida Trail seven times.

The trail’s real pest, Emery told me, was the “soul-sucking” mud: “It gets like walking through knee-deep wet cement.” In 2017, he said, several hikers dislocated knees while trying to pull their legs out of the mud, and one hiker pulled all the muscles along one side of his ribs in an attempt to yank himself loose by hoisting himself up with a cypress tree.

The best conditions, Emery told me, are watery, not dry. He prefers to hike in January or February, when the temperatures are mild, the rainy season is over, and the swamp water is knee-to-crotch high. “It’s just you and the swamp water,” he said. “To me, it’s one of the most beautiful things on Earth to see.”

My own feet were submerged for only about a mile in all, but each time a new watery section appeared, I looked forward to sinking ankle-deep into it. I’d heard about hikers seeing turtles underfoot and fish swimming ahead of them. The swamp water wasn’t deep enough for that, but I at least could watch the tadpoles and water bugs zigzag in front of me like NFL kick returners headed for the end zone. The water wasn’t slimy or algae-infused as I’d expected, but clear and cool enough to ease whatever swelling had begun inside my shoes. I’d forgotten to pack an extra pair of socks, but I soon made peace with the ones I had, irreversibly soggy though they were. Wet feet came to seem less like a failure of preparation than the price of admission. Big Cypress was not a place you kept out, but one you let in.

In the early afternoon, in one forest thicket, the usual scent of citrus was replaced by something musky. I called out, “Hey bear!” and plodded on, now under a merciless sun, my shoulders aching.

In some sections, the ground changed to limestone caprock, pocked with solution holes that your whole leg could fall into. The surface felt like floor tiles at best and railway ties at worst. The hikers had warned me about these ankle-breakers, and Andrews had told me that if I could see a cross-section of the limestone below me, it would look like Swiss cheese. I had to shorten my stride and choose each footfall carefully.

I found a few bear prints in the mud next to what looked like a bare human footprint. Were people really hiking barefoot out here? Given what I’d heard about boot-stealing mud and the softness of the ground, it occurred to me that this might not be the worst place to go barefoot.

By midafternoon, I made it to Oak Hill Camp, one of the designated campsites along this section of the Florida Trail,

NPCA at Work

NPCA’s advocacy for Big Cypress predates the preserve’s establishment, when the organization’s leaders helped defend the landscape from a jetport. Marisa Carrozzo, Coastal and Wildlife Associate Director with the Sun Coast region, said NPCA’s ongoing work on behalf of the park site has included securing funding, restoring the flow of water and fighting so-called Alligator Alcatraz, the notorious detention center advocates say threatened Big Cypress’ dark night skies, wetlands and more. (Though the facility closed over the summer, questions over mitigation and future use linger, and conservationists hope that the land the detention center was built on will eventually be permanently protected.)

Much remains to be done, but Carrozzo takes heart from two campaigns on the cusp of success. The first concerns the protection of the prized ghost orchid. In 2023, NPCA joined others in a lawsuit pursuing Endangered Species Act protections for the plant, which has been decimated by poaching, habitat loss and climate change. Last year, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service indicated its intention to list the species — only found in Big Cypress, other parts of southwest Florida and Cuba — as endangered, a decision NPCA expects any day. Such an outcome would have cascading impacts, Carrozzo said, helping protect both the trees on which the dove-white epiphyte lives as well as the giant sphinx moth, one of the orchid’s few known pollinators.

Similar good news could be forthcoming in a yearslong battle over oil development. NPCA went to court in 2016 to prevent Burnett Oil Co. from conducting seismic testing in the preserve but lost the case in 2017. That summer and the following one, 30-ton trucks mowed down over 500 cypress trees and carved nearly foot-deep troughs across some 100 square miles of the swamp. NPCA continues to demand full restoration of the damaged area, which remains heavily scarred almost a decade on. Now, there’s a chance to transfer the majority of Big Cypress’s privately held subsurface mineral rights to the federal government. Carrozzo believes the sale, which would provide “the ultimate protection,” is a “once-in-a-generation opportunity.”

—Katherine DeGroat



"A WALK through a wilderness has a way of making you feel both proud and humbled," writes Ilgunas, pictured below in a selfie he took in the preserve.

had before dawn. It's remarkable how a single day in a strange place can make it feel almost familiar. I set up my tent and used a sweaty bag of shredded Gouda as a pillow. The ground was warm and soft enough that I did not regret leaving my sleeping pad behind. I slept effortlessly.

At first light, I rolled out of my one-person tarp tent. My feet went back into my wet socks, then into my wet shoes, and I started north.

where I sat in the shade beneath towering oaks. After a minute of stillness, the woods came alive. I heard steps rustling in the dry leaves and wondered what large mammal might be approaching, only to realize it was a bug. Skinks and anoles added to the commotion, skittering across open ground and up tree trunks, sometimes popping their heads out from behind the bark to eye me curiously.

I wanted to stay longer, but I had to watch the clock. By 4:30 p.m., the sun had shifted, and I no longer had the shade of the oaks. The shallow water felt uncomfortably warm. Twice I wandered off the trail — well marked with dark orange blazes — and wondered whether these were ordinary blunders or heat-induced ones. As the temperature rose to the 90s, it felt like my IQ was moving in the opposite direction.

Most hikers wear fast-drying synthetic clothes, but my cotton shirt, usually a backpacking no-no, held sweat against my body, cooling me down. Heat is a serious threat here, and hikers are sometimes evacuated from this trail — either because it's too hot or too exhausting — and at least one has died from heatstroke.

I crept beneath a small bush to collect myself in the dappled shade. Civilization had not entirely abandoned me: I had a couple of bars of 5G, enough to watch highlights from the Sabres-Bruins game from the previous night. I made myself a cheese burrito and slugged a whole liter from my generous water supply. Then I slogged on, entering a state similar to a runner's high, in that I felt like I could keep moving forever, except it wasn't so much a "high" as the grim acceptance of a day spent at the speed of an endless trudge.

At 7:30 p.m., when I reached Ivy Camp — just around 4 miles from my I-75 endpoint — I took a moment to admire my progress while noting, with faint disbelief, that the day had an actual end. I could have reached the interstate if I'd pushed on for another couple of hours, but my pickup wasn't until morning, and the swamp no longer felt as menacingly exotic as it

In the last miles, the blaring interstate traffic, however unpleasant to the ear, became a welcome sign that I was close to my destination — and that I'd probably catch my flight.

I reached the rest area well before Andrews expected me. I called her, then lay on a bench with my feet drying in the sun. My pack, sitting on the ground next to me, was fuller than ideal: I'd packed 4 liters too much of water and had ended up carrying an unnecessary 9 extra pounds for the whole hike.

When Andrews arrived, she looked at me with some amusement.

"It looks like you set a record," she said.

I didn't feel like a record-setter. A walk through a wilderness has a way of making you feel both proud and humbled. I'd been scared, sunbaked, heat-addled, thoroughly exhausted, and I was unreasonably filthy for just one day out. I was merely happy to have done it, leaving with a visceral gratitude for the luck of having a life that lets me dip in and out of wildernesses, whether familiar or foreign.

I'd walked through a land where bugs could sound as loud as bears, where cypress domes looked like hills, and where terrain that appears flat and forgettable from the highway is alive with small wonders, whether above or in water. Next time, I told myself, I'll do it underwater. I'll do it slow. But even in a hurry, I had taken some of the swamp with me: in my memory, in the heat still coming off my skin and, of course, in my shoes.



KEN ILGUNAS is the author of "Walden on Wheels" and "Trespassing Across America," as well as the host of the "Out of the Wild" podcast and Substack.

ROCK OF AGES

Great Sand Dunes National
Park's strangely shaped
stone artifacts had stumped
researchers for decades
until an archaeologist dared
to tap on them.

By Nicolas Brulliard

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“They were all given these weird names because people didn’t know what they were.”

In her Longmont, Colorado, home one April 2013 evening, Marilyn Armagast Martorano was about to do something nearly unthinkable for an archaeologist: tap on artifacts that were likely thousands of years old. She placed pieces of foam under the elongated stones from Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve’s museum, which she had to return to the park the next day. Then she grabbed one of her daughter’s percussion mallets and struck — gently — one of the stones. Instead of the expected dull sound, a crystalline, musical note reverberated across the room, giving Martorano the shivers.

“I just remember tapping them and thinking, ‘Oh, my God! They play!’” Martorano said. “It was shocking.”

In that moment, Martorano solved a mystery that had perplexed archaeologists in the area for decades. Fred Bunch, the

park’s chief of resource management and a childhood friend of Martorano, said the assumption had been that the main function of the artifacts another park staffer had dubbed “French baguettes” was utilitarian and had to do with food or survival. “All these people came up with ideas. Maybe it was this, maybe it was that,” he said. “It wasn’t until Marilyn started her research that we realized, well, this is something totally different.”

Martorano identified these strange objects as lithophones, or portable musical instruments made of rock. Her discovery — the result of years of collective research and a bit of luck — has led museum curators across the region to take another look at similar pieces in their collections to figure out whether those too are lithophones. It has also inspired concerts and musical compositions. What’s more, it has provided new insights into the culture and musicality of the people who lived around Great Sand Dunes thousands of years ago, said

Adrienne Anderson, a retired National Park Service archaeologist with decades of experience in the region.

That musicality was inescapable as Martorano played a set of lithophones for me when I visited her in March. On a couple of plastic folding tables, she had set out five lithophones, along with an ordinary piece of sandstone, a mano (a stone artifact used to grind food), a bit of petrified wood and a stone with natural ringing qualities from the shore of a lake near Rocky Mountain National Park. (“This isn’t an artifact,” she said. “I just found it.”).

These lithophones were not from the Great Sand Dunes collections — they were on loan from History Colorado, a network of museums — but they were similar to those in size and shape. Their lengths ranged from perhaps 1 foot to 2 feet, and their forms, likely achieved through careful pecking using other rocks as tools (one was adorned by faint zigzagged lines) were those of elongated cylinders tapering at both ends. They were made of especially dense rock like granite or basalt.

The lithophones were not resting directly on the table; instead, Martorano had placed them on a looping rope so that each lithophone was in contact with the rope at two strategic spots. The reason, she explained, has to do with the way soundwaves travel through a lithophone and meet at two points called nodes. Strike a lithophone at one of these nodes, and the sound will be dull. Conversely, resting a lithophone on points other than the nodes will impede the path of the soundwaves and muffle any note it could produce.

Martorano grabbed a pair of mallets like the one she had used for that fateful tap 13 years earlier and first struck the ordinary rock and the mano. The resulting noise was the sort of clank one would expect when hitting a rock with another. Then she hit the petrified wood and the lake stone, producing sharper and clearer sounds. Finally, she tapped on each of the lithophones in quick succession, like a marimba player practicing her scales. It was hard to believe that such delicate notes emanated from pieces of solid rock. “You think of metal bells,” Martorano said.

ONE WHO PUZZLED over Great Sand Dunes’ French baguettes early on was Jack Williams, who was riding his horse there one day in 1938 when he spotted a rock sticking out of the sand. He decided to get off his horse and kick the rock. “I remember when he told me this story,” said Bunch, who has been working at the park for decades. “He said, ‘Hell, I damn near broke my foot!’” While 6 inches of the rock were above the surface, some 18 inches of it were buried.

Williams, who would later work for the Park Service, donated his find to what was then Great Sand Dunes National Monument. Hunting for artifacts was a sort of tradition for locals.



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MARILYN ARMAGAST MARTORANO, an archaeologist, demonstrates how ancient lithophones might have been played (opposite page). Lithophones are still being used in various parts of the world, including Vietnam (top) and Ethiopia (above).

While many kept what they found, “over time, people brought into the park and donated to the park more of these strange things,” Anderson said, “until they had a pretty darn extensive collection of them.”

Anderson first came across Great Sand Dunes’ elongated artifacts in the early 1970s. At the time, they were labeled “roller manos” or “pestles.” “They were all given these weird names because people didn’t know what they were,” she said. Because some were found in an area that had been a wetland, one of the theories surmised they could have served as anchors for snares to catch ducks.



© EMILY SIERRA



MARTORANO SAID she'd like for the lithophones to be played one day near the dunes, a setting known for its unique acoustic properties.

Martorano, a native of the San Luis Valley who had done groundbreaking research on trees peeled by Native people for nutritional, medicinal or other purposes in Great Sand Dunes, worked on several contracts for archaeological work in the park in the early 2000s. Part of the work involved cross-referencing what she and her colleagues found during their excavations with the artifacts in the park's museum collections, and she remembers opening a white drawer and spotting some of the

enigmatic two-footers. "There were lots of jokes," she said.

It wasn't until 2008 that she and her firm began the first formal study of these artifacts. Right away, the prevailing idea that they were tools used to grind food didn't sound plausible to Martorano because it was clear it would have taken an inordinate amount of time to make them. "Why would you necessarily do that if you just want to beat on pinion nuts?" Martorano said.

Park staff consulted with Tribes associated with Great Sand Dunes, but Tribal members didn't know about the long stone artifacts or were reluctant to share what they knew, Bunch said.

"We need people asking new questions, and we need people looking at things in a new way to really understand the past."

At some point, the park placed ads in local newspapers to connect with people who might have collected similarly shaped objects and would be willing to share them for potential study. Several of those were sent for microscopic analysis, which did identify some elm material — on artifacts a woman had kept under an elm tree in her backyard — but found no evidence of wear consistent with a grinding use. "There were no patterns," Anderson said. "That was the problem."

For several years, a few of the objects were sitting around Martorano's office. "It just bothered me," Martorano said. "I saw them almost every day, and I kept thinking, 'What are these things?'"

Then one day, a colleague forwarded her an online video of French researcher Erik Gonthier in which he demonstrated the musical properties of lithophones found in the Sahara. "I kept watching that, and I thought, 'Wait a minute, his look just like ours,'" she said. "And so I thought, well, you know, maybe I ought to tap on them."

She did, and the following day, she met Bunch in the small town of Mosca just outside the park to return the artifacts. She asked him if he wanted "to see something cool" and took the stones out. "And she set them out and tapped on them, and, oh, man, my jaw dropped!" Bunch said.

AFTER THE EXALTATION came the hard work. Over the next five years, Martorano thoroughly documented 21 lithophones from Great Sand Dunes and the San Luis Valley and one from the Front Range, counting hundreds of individual peck marks on some specimens. She enlisted the help of a percussion expert to analyze their acoustic properties. Each produced at least two different notes for a total of 57 different notes. Martorano also conducted an extensive review of the literature and discovered the existence of ancient and contemporary lithophones in numerous countries, including Ecuador, Ethiopia and Vietnam. "I started studying them and just got blown away by the fact that they're found all over the world," she said.

The result of Martorano's research was a report more than 160 pages long. "When you're an archaeologist and you present a new idea, you better have some good data," she said.

Martorano then became a kind of lithophone evangelist and gave as many lithophone presentations to archaeological societies in the region as she could. None of the lithophones she had examined had precise documentation of the archaeological setting in which they were found, and only one came with enough contextual information to estimate its age — about 6,000 years old. Lithophones are artifacts known as ground stones, and those were so common at certain sites that they were a bit of an afterthought for some archaeologists. "I started hearing from

people, 'Oh, we found one of those, but we left it in the field,'" she said. Martorano said she hopes that as archaeologists know what to look for and record lithophone discoveries in situ, they might glean clues to some of the many questions she has: Were they played individually or arranged as a kind of xylophone? What sort of mallets were used? Did the lithophones have a ceremonial or spiritual purpose?

Holly Norton, Colorado's state archaeologist, said that by considering a completely novel dimension to a long-known type of artifact, Martorano has also encouraged archaeologists to apply creative thinking to their work. "Her ability and her willingness to ask questions that are kind of outside what are the typical confines of archaeology I think give other people the permission to do the same," she said. "And I think we need that more than ever. We need people asking new questions, and we need people looking at things in a new way to really understand the past."

Martorano's work has spurred other types of creativity. Michael Udow, a composer in Martorano's hometown, was inspired to create his own set of lithophones out of granite countertop and compose a concerto that was performed by the Longmont Symphony Orchestra. Nathan Hall, a Denver-based composer, was intrigued as soon as he heard about Martorano's lithophones. After documenting the notes played by the lithophones that History Colorado had loaned to Martorano, he contacted local Tribal authorities, who had no objections to his playing the instruments. He then linked up with a percussion ensemble. The album resulting from their collaboration, titled "Gentle Worship," was released last September. Hall, who has an interest in unconventional instruments, said he'd like to think that humans have always had some kind of music. "It just might not sound at all like the music of today," he said.

Martorano said she'd like for the lithophones to be played one day near the dunes, a setting known for its unique acoustic properties. Meanwhile, she uses her loaned lithophones to educate the public and is in regular contact with museums and collectors to figure out whether some of their artifacts might turn out to be lithophones. In particular, she's developed a suspicion that the neolithic jadeite axes found all over northern Europe might prove to be musical if only someone dared tap on them. When she accompanies her husband on fishing trips, she takes out a mallet and taps on rocks to see if they ring.

"It's just one of those things that, you know, it has you, it's got you," she said, "and you want to know more, and you want to share it."

NICOLAS BRULLIARD is senior editor of National Parks magazine.

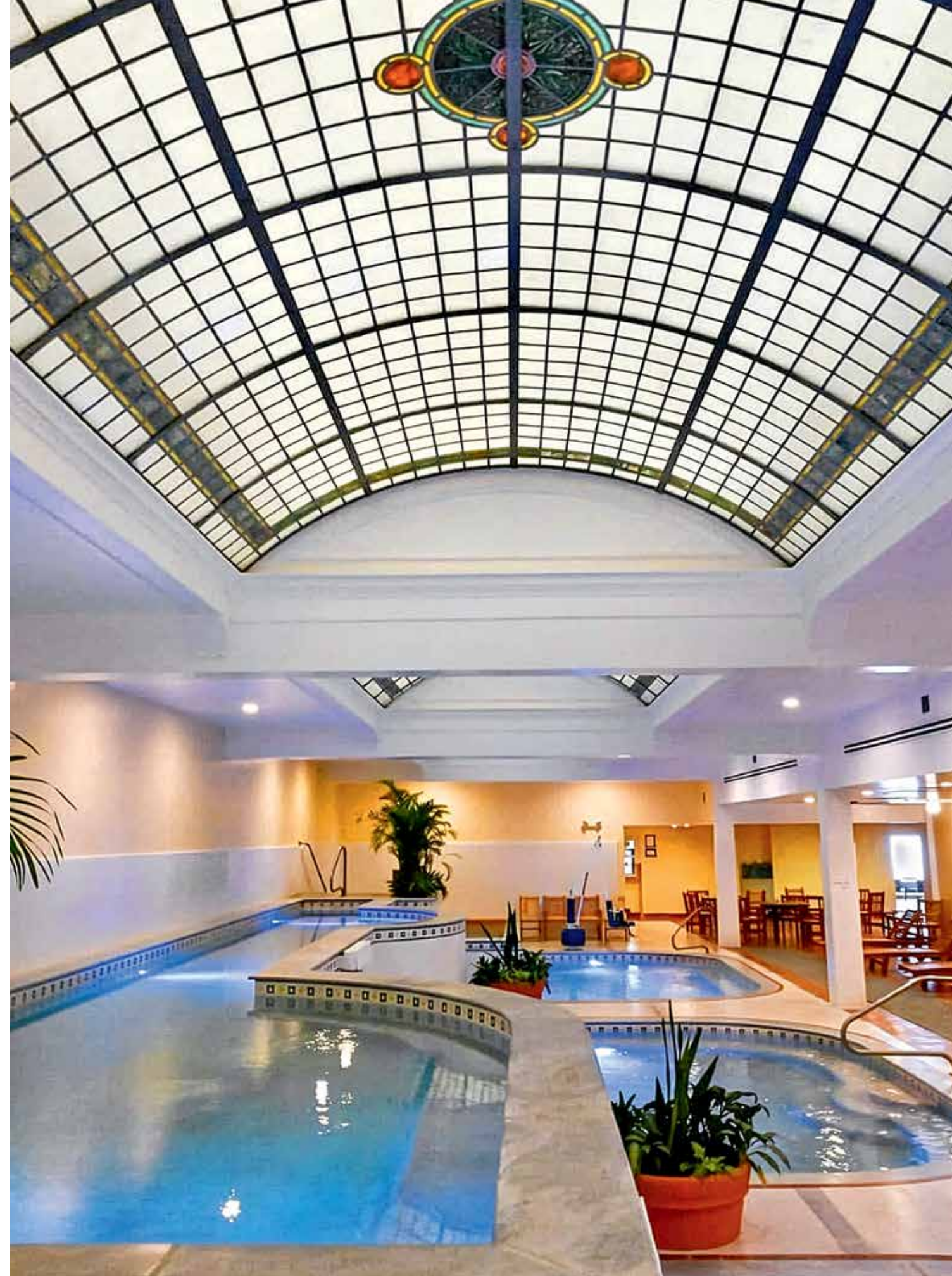


OPPOSITE PAGE COURTESY OF QUAPAW BATHS AND SPA; NPS (LEFT)

Taking the Waters

A writer finds rejuvenation
at Hot Springs National Park,
where the primary resource
just begs to be enjoyed.

by Katherine DeGroff





COURTESY OF BUCKSTAFF BATHHOUSE

“Have you done this before?” asked the woman beside me, who looked as unsure as I felt. A no-nonsense attendant had just cocooned us in eggshell-colored, calf-length sheets and directed us to a couple of chairs, where we waited to be ushered into the tiled room beyond. When I assured my seatmate this was all new to me, she told me that she was from St. Louis and was here on a sort of post-retirement, routine-shaking trip.

We were ensconced in the women’s wing of the Buckstaff, a century-old bathhouse in Hot Springs National Park, and were moments away from understanding the meaning of a “traditional” bathing experience. One by one, the guests around me were called away. My new acquaintance disappeared first, followed by my friend Andrea. I was regretting my choice to forgo a swimsuit — my aversion to public nudity a holdover from middle school gym class when my peers and I perfected the art of changing without disrobing — when a bubbly woman with a mass of curly hair called my name, introduced

herself as Brittany and led me into a long hall lined with bathing stalls.

Brittany had been a bathing attendant for a month and loved it. She was a people person, she explained while steering me into a curtained booth with a high-backed porcelain tub, and had already met women from all over the world. Relieved of my sheet, I clambered self-consciously into the waiting basin and sank into its delicious warmth. Brittany topped up the tub and flicked a switch on an ancient blue tank near my feet. A powerful jet chugged to life, enveloping me in pulses of water direct from the park’s thermal springs.

The last time this water had touched the air was some 4,000 years prior, when it fell on the nearby mountains as rain, snow or ice. In the intervening millennia, it had percolated as much as 8,000 feet through layers of sedimentary rock, gaining heat with depth, until a fault line redirected the mineral-enriched water to the surface, where it exited at an average temperature of 143 degrees. This reputedly healing elixir then traveled through a system of pipes and temperature-moderating tanks before pouring out of the bathhouse’s taps.

“Do you feel like a lobster yet?”

Brittany deposited a cup of spring water into my hand for sipping, laid a loofah on the tub’s edge, and left me with the promise she’d return in 15 minutes to wash my back and feet. Having no desire for someone to scrub me like a potato, I promptly set to the task myself.

I’d come to Arkansas for a conference, but I’d extended my stay to explore a park I’d never visited, to adventure with a longtime friend, and to reset and recharge after a whirlwind of a spring. Luxuriating in a historic bathhouse on a Saturday morning in May was certainly helping on the reset front, even if the setting — and the methods — hewed a little closer to old-school sanatorium than modern wellness retreat.

When Brittany returned, I abandoned the tub and, weak-kneed, wobbled to a row of padded massage tables. There, she wrapped my body in steaming towels and placed a bracingly cold one on my face. The sensation was so wildly refreshing that I was momentarily distracted from anxious thoughts about the upcoming “vapor cabinet,” which a local shop owner had warned me about.

The medieval-looking contraption, once believed to cure everything from rheumatism to obesity, consists of a metal locker set into a cupboard. I passed one in use, but all I could see was a nimbus of hair and a pale face, eyes closed. The sight was unsettling, seemingly more marble sculpture than flesh and blood. I’m not particularly good with heat, so within seconds of taking my seat in the cabinet, I found myself contemplating how I might reach my sheet — now atop my personal sauna — and wave it in surrender. Instead, I tried leaning into the discomfort. I listened to the water trickling out of pipes beneath me, watched as it beaded and ran down the tiles beside me. I focused on my breathing and embraced the cleansing sweat. Just as I reached my breaking point, Brittany returned with a cheerful “Do you feel like a lobster yet?”

She freed me, shuffled me to a row of ground-level, baby-sized tubs and instructed me to sit in the warm water. A nearby sign informed me the sitz bath was used to relieve hemorrhoids, prostate issues and lower back pain. From this soggy but happy perch I watched the



COURTESY OF BUCKSTAFF BATHHOUSE



NPS

VAPOR CABINETS through time (above). Opposite: Guests are wrapped in warm sheets in the men’s wing of the Buckstaff Bathhouse. Page 42: A woman is assisted into a bath at Ozark Bathhouse in 1960. Page 43: The current-day thermal pools of Quapaw Baths and Spa.

attendants move around in practiced choreography, shepherding guests from one station to the next. I glimpsed Andrea glide by looking relaxed and radiant.

Sometime later, feeling rather boneless after a full-body massage, I dressed and wandered to the bathhouse’s front desk. “What’s the needle bath?” I asked. I’d seen a note indicating that this part of the ritual was not



COURTESY OF VISIT HOT SPRINGS



COURTESY OF QUAPAW BATHS AND SPA

BATHHOUSE ROW looks much like it did a century ago, though several of the bathhouses, including Quapaw (pictured above), have been renovated and given new life in recent decades. Left: Visitors can see both town and park from Hot Springs Mountain Tower.

currently permitted, per National Park Service guidance. Turns out, I'd missed out on a cold shower following the hot-towel wrap. The practice has been discontinued, the man at the desk informed me, for fear of Legionnaires' disease, a severe form of pneumonia.

Over brunch at the hotel, Andrea and I debriefed. "Did you let your attendant loofah you?" I asked.

She nodded. "At that point," she said, "in for a penny, in for a pound."

Hot Springs was established as the country's first so-called reservation in 1832 and became a national park in 1921, around the time Helen Keller and Babe Ruth could be found "taking" the waters. A turn-of-the-century brochure described the town as "one of the most beautiful spots belonging to Uncle Sam" and billed it as a land "where crutches are thrown away."

Doctors prescribed the thermal waters for gout, tuberculosis, alcoholism, paralysis, malaria, "hysteria," digestive issues, skin diseases and more.

The bathhouse experience was considered advanced medicine, explained Park Service volunteer Greg Fisher on my first morning in town. I'd popped into Fordyce, the largest remaining bathhouse, because it houses the park visitor center and I was jonesing for a map. After a helpful geography lesson, Fisher informed me that the building had been restored so that approximately 90% of it appears as it did in its heyday. Two upper floors of elaborate woodwork, mosaic tile and stained-glass ceilings transport visitors to the extravagant bathhouses of yore.

Doctors took a holistic view of their patients, Andrea and I learned. Not only did they prescribe physical therapy, hydrotherapy, massage and weight training, but they also encouraged socializing and directed people to the fit-

ness trails circling town. Some of the treatments sounded horribly archaic, from mercury rubs to treat sexually transmitted infections to "electrohydraulic" baths, in which electricity was passed through a patient immersed in a bathtub. I even saw a placard describing how foot cysts were treated, in part, with sideward knuckle punches. But many of the regimens aligned with commonsense advice that would hold up today: warm water, rubdowns, movement. Even the antiquated weight machines, with their velvet-lined seats and exposed gears, were recognizable precursors of modern equipment.

As we explored Fordyce's parlors, healing rooms, gymnasium and dressing areas, it became clear that these facilities represented the height of innovation and luxury in the Edwardian era. I mentioned this to Andrea, who responded that, given the array of ailments visitors were seeking to cure, there was likely a measure of des-

peration involved as well. If everything else had failed you, the baths might have represented your last hope.

The evolution of Hot Springs into a wellness destination began centuries ago, when Native Americans made use of the abundant warm water percolating out of the mountainside. By the early 1800s, shortly after the Louisiana Purchase tacked this land onto the growing United States, settlers began setting up crude canvas huts above the myriad springs. Wooden bathhouses and troughs to channel the water replaced these slapdash constructions in the ensuing decades, but those burned or rotted so frequently that strict building standards were instituted to guide future bathhouse construction. By the end of the 19th century, there were about two dozen bathhouses of various quality, offering single baths, starting at 20 cents, or packages of 21 baths, starting at \$3.

The eight bathhouses that line the park's Bathhouse



VIEW OF Central Avenue from Bathhouse Row (above). Opposite: The park maintains multiple public fountains that pipe potable water from dozens of thermal springs.

Row, including Fordyce and Buckstaff, were part of the last wave of construction. Erected between 1892 and 1923, these buildings of stone and brick, with their elaborate facades and design flourishes, ushered in the belle époque of spa leisure. (While the waters were purportedly accessible to everyone, African Americans had to construct their own bathhouses until integration arrived in the 1960s.)

Widespread antibiotic use changed the world of medicine, leading fewer people to seek out the park's healing waters. By 1985, every bathhouse but the Buckstaff had shuttered. Today, the park uses several of the architectural gems along Bathhouse Row and leases the others to a variety of operators, including a brewery and a children's museum.

The park's 5,500 acres of gentle green mountains enfold the commercial and residential heart of town. By design, the bathhouses lie within the park boundary; the busy street they front, with its opposing row of businesses, does not. I found the juxtaposition of town and park oddly dissonant, as if I'd popped into a jazz bar only for the musicians to switch to Taylor Swift's greatest hits halfway through the set. On the park side, arching magnolias, elegant bathhouses and a promenade of red brick harken back to an earlier era. Along the other, a hodgepodge of kitschy museums, new age shops, clothing boutiques and ice cream parlors jockey for attention, while the occasional darkened storefront speaks to present hard times.

During our time in Hot Springs, Andrea and I managed to visit several of the bathhouses and stay in one, Hotel Hale, which is run by the town mayor and his wife. We discovered an underground bookstore, climbed 306 stairs for an impressive view from atop the privately operated observation tower and ate our fair share of tourist-town treats. We also whiled away an afternoon sipping jalapeño- and watermelon-flavored creations at Superior Bathhouse Brewery, which claims to be the only brewery in the world to use thermal spring water in its offerings. I enjoyed our urban — and decidedly decadent — wanderings, but after a while, I found myself yearning for some semblance of a more traditional park experience. My search paid off on the trails.

Here, the water was practically pushed on us.

We spent two days traipsing across Hot Springs' forested slopes, stepping onto the prowlike viewpoint of Goat Rock and scrambling over colorful outcrops of novaculite to Balanced Rock. On our journey around North, West and Sugarloaf mountains — which Andrea's phone told us involved ascending the equivalent of 110 flights of stairs — we often paused amid our panting to nerd out on the life around us.

Lizards of all sizes skittered by, some with stripes, some with splotches. Birds flitted, chipmunks scurried and flowers bobbed. We hiked beneath a canopy of oaks, pines and hickories, a pair of turkey vultures surfing currents overhead. At some point, Andrea began using the Merlin app to identify the trilling, seesawing calls around us. Among our avian neighbors were Carolina chickadees, great crested flycatchers and red-eyed vireos.

I countered her Merlin with my Seek, using it to identify unfamiliar plants. Here was the purple fringe of the endemic Ouachita blazing star, there a large-flowered tickseed. I knew sedges and ferns and irises, but used the app to help with goat's rue, heartleaf skullcap and plantain-leaved pussy-toes. I picked up a small, oblong nut the color of young leaves and brought it to my nose. The smell was both spicy and floral.

Our first day, we passed only a handful of people and one black Lab along 7 miles of trail. As we hiked, we alternated between comfortable silence and rambling conversation. Andrea, that envious combination of kind and brilliant, was one of the first people I met when I moved to Virginia more than 15 years ago, and she's seen me through job, life and relationship transitions. Boots scuffing, we talked of neighbors and work, parents and partners, her son and my pets. We shared the land and



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GULPHA CREEK

flows beside the park's sole campground. Crossing it affords access to many of the trails east of town.

COURTESY OF VISIT HOT SPRINGS

scent memories of our childhoods and debated the perils of AI — and the concomitant explosion of data centers in our area.

When our water bottles got low, we simply refilled at one of the public, spring-fed fountains that dot the town. My favorite of these installations was one we visited on our last day. Not only did it serve up cold spring water rather than thermal, but it also was situated a stone's throw from the sweetest little pocket of park I'd ever seen. A family picnicked on the magnolia-lined green; a twosome crunched through leaves with their caramel-colored pup. It was idyllic: enmeshed in small-town life, yet part of the national park.

Our final night, Andrea and I sat in rocking chairs on Fordyce's porch and watched the evening unfurl along Central Avenue. Swifts swooped above, while cars, trucks and a clutch of motorcycles zoomed below. As the smell of waffle cones vied with that of diesel, passels of tourists ambled by. Now and then, a street musician plied his craft.

I was musing on Fisher's final piece of advice to me at the visitor center — "to drink the water, touch the water and learn about the water" — when I noticed a man holding the hand of a young girl. She approached the decorative fountain burbling up near me. He cautioned her not to touch it. "It's one of the hot ones," he said. And, indeed, when I looked closely, I could see the steam wafting above it. For the next 10 minutes or so, I

focused on this octagonal pool and the stream of people who seemed compelled to tarry there. No matter their age, most couldn't help testing the water.

I'd never been to a park like this, where the protected resource is so readily consumable. You can't pocket a piece of fossilized wood from Petrified Forest or toss the cone of a giant sequoia in your pack in Yosemite. You certainly can't touch the hot springs of Yellowstone. Yet here, the water was practically pushed on us, in the form of fountains, bath treatments, beer and more. I thought back to the people I'd seen filling carloads of jugs with the park's water. The first time it happened, I wrote it off as an oddity. But then it happened again. And again. I finally interrupted someone replenishing a jumble of containers to ask how long she'd been using the spring water. "For years," she replied.

Perhaps she preferred its taste to that of tap water. Perhaps she hoped for healing. Whatever the reason, the curious and the committed, the desperate and the dignified have been drawn to the town and its waters for centuries. Now as then, the springs gush forth. And the park does its part, faithfully meeting its unique mandate to share its primary resource with the public "in an unending and unaltered state." In a world of near-constant change, it's reassuring to know this, at least, has remained the same.

KATHERINE DEGROFF is associate editor of National Parks magazine.



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Courtesy: Visit Springfield

of Springfield's premier outdoor destinations, Lincoln Memorial Garden, a truly zen experience.

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A FIELD OF REMEMBRANCE

People come to Gettysburg for many reasons.

They leave with a deeper understanding of sacrifice, citizenship and what democracy still requires. This November, they will find a new way to remember.

As the nation commemorates its 250th anniversary, Gettysburg Foundation, in partnership with the National Park Service, invites Americans to help create A Field of Remembrance near the Eternal Light Peace Memorial.

Beginning Nov. 12, more than 7,000 commemorative American flags will stand near the Eternal Light Peace Memorial, representing the estimated number of soldiers killed during the Battle of Gettysburg while remembering the more than 51,000 Americans killed, wounded, captured or missing during the battle. Together, they transform a number from history into a landscape of remembrance, making the human cost of the battle visible in a way few visitors have experienced.

Whether you plan to visit Gettysburg this fall or participate from home, every sponsored flag becomes part of a national act of remembrance.

Anyone can sponsor one or more commemorative flags and help build the field. Together, those acts create a place of remembrance



Courtesy: Gettysburg Foundation

that belongs to everyone who helps build it while helping preserve Gettysburg for future generations.

Proceeds support Gettysburg Foundation's preservation and education work in partnership with the National Park Service, including stewardship of the Eternal Light Peace Memorial and preservation of the historic David Wills House.

This November, we hope you'll experience A Field of Remembrance. Until then, we hope you'll help build it.

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Carry Them Forward. Preserve the Ground.

7,000 flags planted at Gettysburg in memory of
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Port Arthur is a paradise for outdoor enthusiasts. Bordered by the Gulf of Mexico, Sabine Lake, and the Neches River, Port Arthur is perfect for boating, paddling and fishing. Nature lovers can explore Sea Rim State Park, McFaddin Beach, and McFaddin National Wildlife Refuge, along with Village Creek State Park and the Big Thicket National Preserve, offering abundant shorelines, wooded trails and camping spots. Port Arthur lies along both the Central and Mississippi flyways, making it a top birding destination with 30 trails within a 40-mile radius, including world-famous sites like Sabine Woods and Cattail Marsh. Designated the official Cajun Capital of Texas, Port Arthur is rich in flavor and history, showcased at the Museum of the Gulf Coast. Visit Port Arthur, true Texas with a Cajun twist!



Courtesy The Big Thicket

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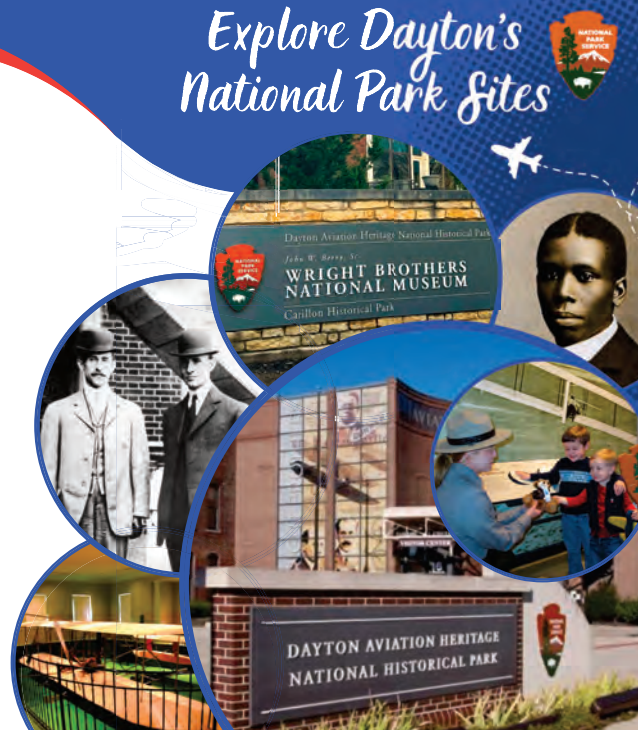


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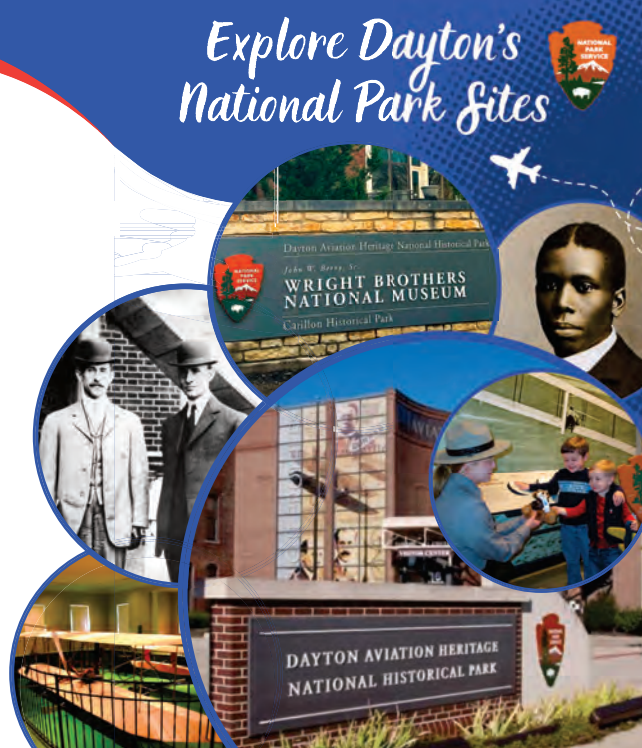


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HAND-COLORED WOODCUT depicting the turbulent period historians call “Bleeding Kansas.”

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Blood on the Prairie

A deadly conflict over slavery that played out at Fort Scott and across territorial Kansas served as a bloody prelude to the Civil War.

IT WAS A COLD DAWN in December 1858 when James Montgomery, a blue-eyed former preacher from Ohio, led a group of armed men into the town of Fort Scott to attempt a prison break. The territory of Kansas was just 4 years old and bitterly divided between settlers who wanted it to be a slave-owning state, like neighboring Missouri, and those who wanted it to be a free state, aligned with the North.

Montgomery had recently become an abolitionist after slave owners burned down his house, just north of Fort Scott. He and his posse — they called themselves “Jayhawkers” — were riding into Fort Scott to bust out two of their comrades being imprisoned by local deputies inside one of the town’s hotels.

Once in town, the Jayhawkers forced the citizens into a large circle in the plaza, while a group stormed the Fort Scott Hotel and rescued the prisoners. The whole escapade might have ended without bloodshed but for a pro-slavery resident and former deputy marshal named John Little who fired into the melee outside his father’s store, wounding two of Montgomery’s men. Then he made a mistake that cost him his life.

“He stands on a box to look out the transom glass above the door,” said Arnold Schofield, a former historian at Fort Scott National Historic Site.

“And he’s backlit by the lamps in the building. He’s an easy target. So, they take aim, they fire, and he drops to the floor.”

After the Jayhawkers escaped with the freed prisoners, Sene Campbell, Little’s grieving fiancée, wrote Montgomery a scathing letter, calling him a “minister of the devil.”

“Remember this,” Campbell warned. “I am a girl, but I can fire a pistol and if ever the time comes I will send some of you to the place where there’s ‘weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”

The incident is just one of many deadly episodes that transpired during the turbulent period historians call “Bleeding Kansas.” From 1854 to 1861, the new territory was a crucible in which America’s division over slavery boiled over. Marked by tit-for-tat violence between diametrically opposed groups, these years in Fort Scott and the rest of Kansas sowed the seeds for one of the most devastating chapters of American history.

“I believe that our Civil War started out here in Kansas,” Schofield said, “between 1856 and 1860.”

The U.S. Army built Fort Scott in 1842 on the edge of Indian territory, home to the Osage and to relocated Eastern Tribes after the Indian Removal Act of 1830. A line of similar forts ran from Fort Snelling in Minnesota to Fort Jesup in Louisiana.

Named for Gen. Winfield Scott, the commanding general of the U.S. Army, Fort Scott was home to infantrymen and

BACKSTORY

dragoons — horse-mounted troops who escorted settlers traveling on the Santa Fe and Oregon trails. Detachments from Fort Scott fought in the Mexican-American War from 1846 to 1848. They also kept the peace along what was then considered the “permanent Indian frontier.”

Manifest destiny had little regard for frontiers, however, and eventually westward expansion made Fort Scott obsolete as a border post. The military abandoned it in 1853 and subsequently sold the buildings, which became the town of Fort Scott.

Around that time, legislators in Washington were trying to create two new Western territories, Kansas and Nebraska, out of an unorganized portion of the Louisiana Purchase. The question of slavery in these new territories had seemingly been settled by the Missouri Compromise of 1820 — because they were above the 36 degrees 30 minutes north latitude line, Kansas and Nebraska would be free states. Southern congressmen, however, were loath to create states that would oppose them in Washington. To win their support, Stephen Douglas, a fiery senator from Illinois, proposed that the slavery issue be settled in the new territories by way of popular sovereignty — in other words, a vote — and the Kansas-Nebraska Act was signed into law on May 30, 1854.

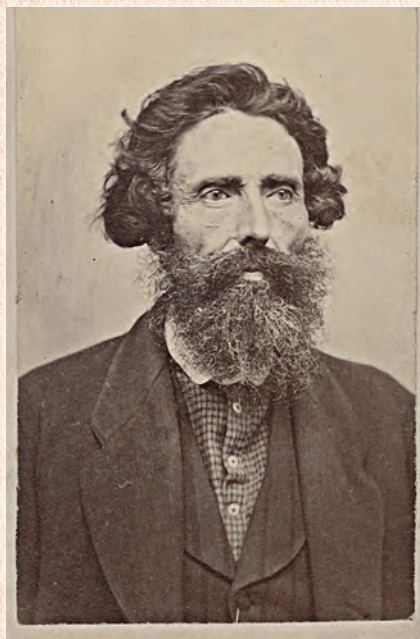
“When they were established, part of the thought was, OK, Nebraska comes in as a free state, and Kansas comes in as a slave state, and you keep the balance,” Schofield said.

Still, slave-owning farmers in neighboring Missouri feared that if popular opinion didn’t swing their way, the new Kansas Territory could become a haven for escaped slaves, said Nicole Etcheson, a history professor at Ball State University and the author of “Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era.” “There’s a lot of talk by some Missouri leaders,” she said, “that we’re surrounded by all sides and we’re

not going to be able to keep slavery in Missouri.”

Pro-slavery migrants from Missouri poured into Kansas. Then anti-slavery settlers started arriving from Midwestern states and as far away as New England, where idealists organized societies to send abolitionists to the new land. Similarly, “dark lantern societies” cropped up in the South to flood Kansas with pro-slavery migrants. In 1856, about 30 pro-slavery agitators from South Carolina arrived in Fort Scott.

JAMES MONTGOMERY, an abolitionist (below). Opposite: An 1855 ad for a Free State convention.



KANSAS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

With so much at stake, early elections in Kansas — for territorial governors, legislative representatives and eventually a constitution — were fraught affairs, full of fraud, fighting and whiskey. “Parties came over the river from Missouri, and they voted,” Etcheson said. “These parties were organized. They were sent out to different polling places. There were threats.”

Thanks to these so-called border ruffians, pro-slavery candidates often won by thousands more votes than there

were eligible voters. When Midwestern migrants realized they were being disenfranchised by pro-slavery Missourians, they coalesced to ensure Kansas became a free state.

“This whole process radicalizes the Midwesterners,” Etcheson said. “It makes them abolitionists, when they hadn’t been before.”

Eventually, this tinderbox caught fire. In 1856, after pro-slavery forces sacked the anti-slavery town of Lawrence, the famous abolitionist John Brown gathered a small group and attacked several families near Pottawatomie Creek, about 50 miles north of Fort Scott. Using pistols and broadswords, they murdered five pro-slavery men, just one of a litany of violent acts from both sides that marked the next few years.

The divide ran directly through the tidy grass parade grounds of Fort Scott. On the north side sat the Fort Scott Hotel, an establishment operated by and for people who opposed slavery in Kansas. On the south side was the Western Hotel, run by those supporting slavery in Kansas.

Schofield, the retired historian, said the psychological terror of these times was enough to send some newcomers back to where they came from. Settlers sometimes woke up in the dead of night to a knock on their door and a note tacked to it telling them that if they weren’t gone in 24 hours, they would be killed.

“I would not want to be living in eastern Kansas Territory during this time,” Schofield said. “It’s just a very tense, violent atmosphere.”

The town of Fort Scott escaped some of the early bloodshed. Because it’s only 5 miles from Missouri, most early settlers there were pro-slavery. By 1858, though, the demographics had changed. As in the rest of Kansas, most new arrivals were now from Midwestern and Northern states and opposed slavery. The shift ruptured Fort Scott’s fragile

peace, and Army troops were periodically dispatched from Fort Leavenworth to quell the unrest.

One of the main instigators was Montgomery, the guerrilla fighter who led the prison break in Fort Scott. Montgomery was a charismatic leader and the kind of folkloric bandit who rode his enemies' horses and torched their homes and always slipped away unscathed when lawmen set out to arrest him.

In May 1858, Montgomery and his free-state fighters evicted pro-slavery forces from Linn County, north of Fort Scott. In response, pro-slavery guerrillas dragged 11 free-staters away from their families and shot them dead in a ravine. That incident, called the Marais des Cygnes massacre, was allegedly plotted in Fort Scott's pro-slavery Western Hotel. To avenge the killings, Montgomery and his men rode into Fort Scott one summer night and set fire to the Western Hotel. Shots rang out but no one died, and the hotel was spared major damage thanks to its hardwood siding.

Today, several of these buildings still stand, and the stories they tell about

"I would not want to be living in eastern Kansas Territory during this time."

different chapters of American history are part of what makes Fort Scott National Historic Site unique, according to Carl Brenner, a ranger there. Within Fort Scott's neat complex of renovated and reconstructed buildings, visitors can walk through the site's various iterations as a frontier outpost, a focal point of the "Bleeding Kansas" strife, a Civil War military base, and later the garrison from which the U.S. Army protected workers expanding the railroad. Fort Scott, Brenner said, is a time capsule of our country's evolution.

"This space is truly the story of America growing up," Brenner said. "The fort is really an onion with all these layers of history woven into each other."

By the time the anti-slavery faction won out and Kansas entered the Union as a free state in 1861, the violence was spilling over into the rest of the country. Two months after Kansas

became a state, the Civil War began with a Confederate attack on Fort Sumter in South Carolina that would lead to four years of bloodshed and the death of some 750,000 soldiers. The Army returned to Fort Scott, a strategic position to protect Kansas from Confederate invasion, and the first Black troops ever to join the Northern armies were mustered on Fort Scott's parade grounds, 12 days after the Emancipation Proclamation was issued.

The local issues that divide Fort Scott (estimated population 7,500) these days are less explosive. People debate whether to pave over the brick streets, for example, or how best to attract businesses. Nationally, though, political divisions feel wider than ever, and Etcheson, the history professor, sees troubling parallels to Kansas' past.

"What makes it all so volatile and makes it pertinent today," Etcheson said, "is that the two sides don't accept each other's legitimacy."

Etcheson has been teaching the Civil War for more than 30 years. Each semester she asks her students why they're interested in this era of history. She used to get answers like, "My boyfriend is really interested in it," or, "My father took me to the battlefields growing up." More recently, Etcheson started hearing something that lends the "Bleeding Kansas" period a chilling new relevance.

"In the fall of 2016," she said, "I started getting, 'I think we're going to have another Civil War, and I want to understand what caused the first one.'"

JACOB BAYNHAM is a National Magazine Award winner. He teaches journalism at the University of Montana.

FREE STATE CONVENTION!

All persons who are favorable to a union of effort, and a permanent organization of all the Free State elements of Kansas Territory, and who wish to secure upon the broadest platform the co-operation of all who agree upon this point, are requested to meet at their several places of holding elections, in their respective districts on the 25th of August, instant, at one o'clock, P. M., and appoint five delegates to each representative to which they were entitled in the Legislative Assembly, who shall meet in general Convention at

Big Springs, Wednesday, Sept. 5th '55,

at 10 o'clock A. M., for the purpose of adopting a platform upon which all may act harmoniously who prefer Freedom to Slavery.

The nomination of a Delegate to Congress, will also come up before the General Convention.
Let no sectional or party issues distract or prevent the perfect co-operation of Free State men. Union and harmony are absolutely necessary to success. The pro-slavery party are fully and effectually organized. No jars nor minor issues divide them. And to contend against them successfully, we also must be united. Without prudence and harmony of action we are certain to fail. Let every man then do his duty and we are certain of victory.

All Free State men, without distinction, are earnestly requested to take immediate and effective steps to insure a full and correct representation for every District in the Territory. "United we stand; divided we fall."

By order of the Executive Committee of the Free State Party of the Territory of Kansas, as per resolution of the Mass Convention in session at Lawrence, Aug 15th and 16th, 1855.

J. K. GOODIN, Sec'y.

C. ROBINSON, Chairman.
Herald of Freedom, Print.



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