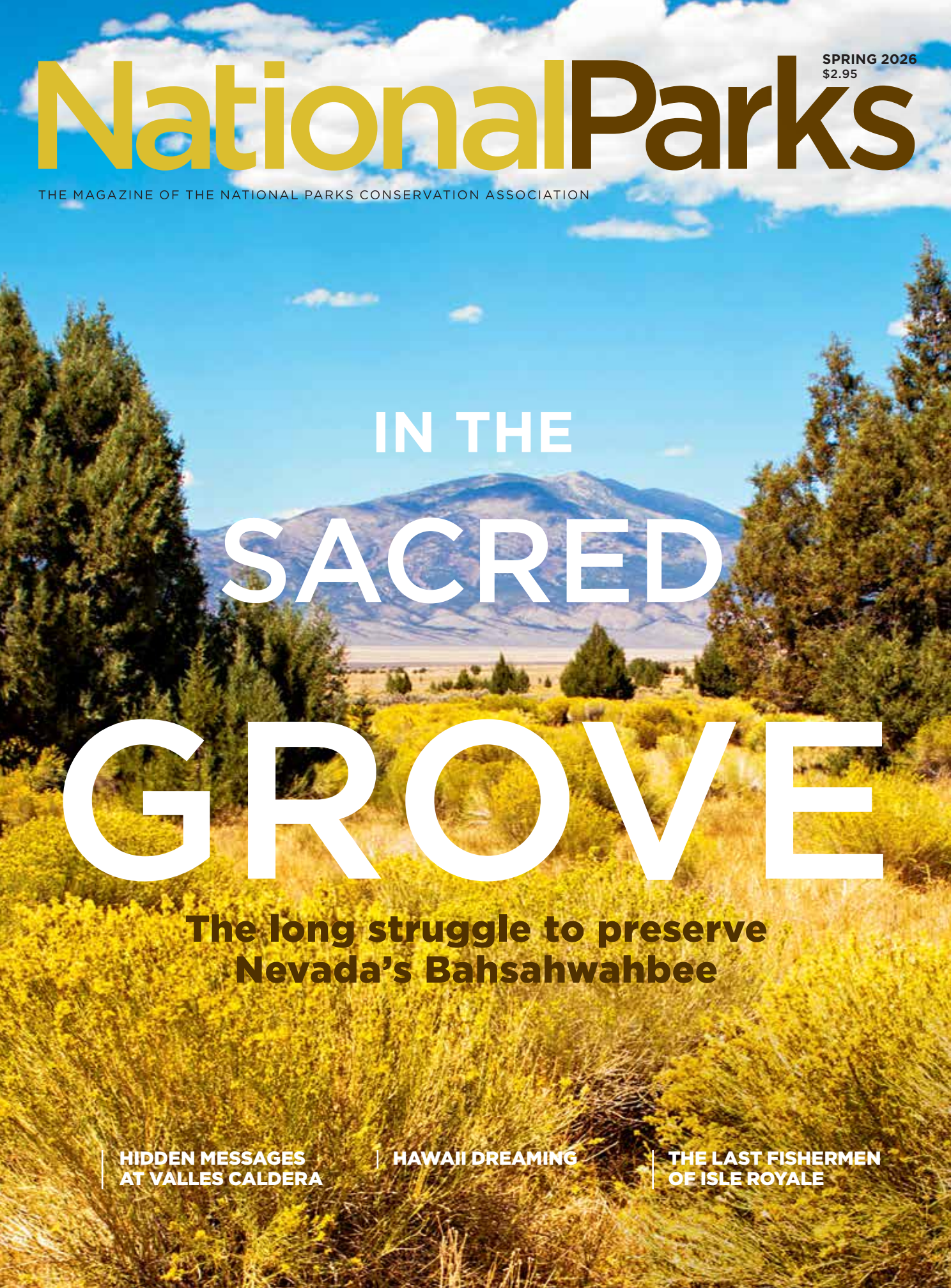




NationalParks

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THE MAGAZINE OF THE NATIONAL PARKS CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

IN THE SACRED GROVE

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Nevada's Bahsahwahbee**

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AT VALLES CALDERA**

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**THE LAST FISHERMEN
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BAHSAHWAHBBE — Shoshoni for "Sacred Water Valley" — in eastern Nevada.

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©MATT BRASS

A BEACH WADE-IN ends in violence in St. Augustine, Florida, in 1964. The city attracted international attention when peaceful efforts to end segregation there drew the ire of white supremacists.



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Full Circle



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When I was 15 years old, a month backpacking in the magnificent landscapes of Yellowstone and Grand Teton changed my life. I was struck by the breathtaking beauty and learned lasting lessons: how the burden of a heavy pack is eased by reaching a spectacular summit, how the pain of blisters fades with a swim in an icy alpine lake, and how strangers on the trail can become fast friends sleeping next to each other under the stars.

That summer, I also saw what had happened right

outside the parks, where the forest had been devastated by clear-cutting. I returned home with a new appreciation for our environment, a better understanding of its fragility, and the sense that I had found my calling.

I got right to work, starting my high school's environmental club, writing a postcard to my representative to protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and completing a National Outdoor Leadership School course in North Cascades National Park. I went off to Dartmouth College and afterward became a campus organizer and then a field director for West Coast environmental campaigns. That led me to apply for and receive a grant to work on the Roadless Rule, which resulted in protections for more than 58 million acres of our national forests.

Now, decades into a long career in environmental advocacy, I have the great honor of taking on the role of president and CEO of NPCA. I am humbled by the opportunity, and equally energized and inspired. This is not just another job to me — this is core to who I am, the perfect intersection of my personal and professional passions.

Our parks and public lands mean the world to my family and me. And at this moment, when our nation feels so divided, the solace and common ground these one-of-a-kind treasures offer have never been more important. While our shared lands are increasingly under threat, NPCA has been fighting the good fight for more than a century, thanks to the dedication and support of park lovers like you, and there's no stopping us now. I can't wait to work alongside you to protect our beloved national parks today and ensure a better tomorrow.

With gratitude,
 Tiernan Sittenfeld



News and Updates

A few things have happened since the last issue came out — to say the least. First of all: NPCA has a new president and CEO. Welcome to Tiernan Sittenfeld! You can find her inaugural magazine letter on p. 3.

I have some other updates. The magazine staff is launching a new front-of-the-book feature in this issue: Park Stats (p. 20). News is moving so rapidly, and we have been looking for a way to squeeze more park news into our pages. Park Stats allows us to efficiently convey some of the latest and greatest (and not so great, as is sadly the case too frequently these days) by highlighting numbers and fast facts.

We have more firsts in this issue. Matt Brass, a multi-talented artist, has photographed and created illustrations for us, but his Haleakalā travel story (p. 34 and above) represents the first time he has combined the two. And the cover story by longtime contributor Michael P. Branch is the first reporting on Bahsahwahbee that has appeared in the magazine, though the effort to preserve this site, which is sacred to the Neve people, has been going on for generations.

In other news, many readers responded appreciatively to Alan Spears' essay about truth-telling in the park system in the last issue (p. 6). Unfortunately, the Trump administration's efforts to whitewash history in park sites, which Spears described as "un-American," were continuing as this issue was headed to press. On Feb. 17, NPCA, Democracy Forward and a coalition of allies filed a lawsuit in Boston to halt the erasure of history and censorship of science in the park system, arguing that the secretarial order spurring the changes violates the laws governing national parks. To learn more, go to npca.org.

As I write this, I can still see mounds of Washington's so-called snowcrete out my window. It's difficult to picture, but by the time this issue lands in your mailboxes, green shoots will be pushing their way out of the ground and some buds will be unfurling. It's been a hard winter for many of us, but spring is coming.

Rona Marech
NPMAG@NPCA.ORG

NationalParks

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

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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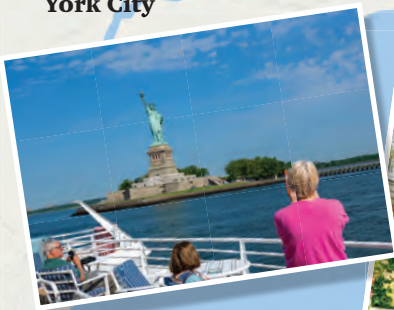
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SIDING WITH TRUTH

Thanks to Alan Spears for spotlighting the Trump administration's plans to rewrite history ["To Tell the Truth"]. Civics classes many years ago mocked the Soviets for thinking anyone would fall for revisionist accounts; President Trump is counting on everyone falling for them. Spears and those like him must keep on exposing the cover-ups, and we must all remain vigilant. Nations usually lie about themselves to other nations; Trump expects our nation to lie to itself.

CATHERINE CASTEEL

Eagle Lake, FL

America's accomplishments over the last 250 years cannot be permitted to mask the unpleasant history that allowed our country to achieve its global supremacy. The events and people depicted in the Winter 2026 issue of National Parks are presented fairly. I only hope that national park

staff haven't destroyed the signage that reflected hard truths about our country's past so that it can be reinstalled during a different administration.

PAUL L. NEWMAN

Merion Station, PA

ANTI DAM

Glen Canyon National Recreation Area is undergoing a historic transformation from human-made reservoir to emerging river wilderness ["Wild River, Ghost Lake"]. Scientists are documenting the remarkable emergence of riverine ecosystems, which are seeing native vegetation flourish and birds and beavers return. As Lake Powell continues to drop, Glen Canyon is emerging as a transformed national park, a place of

wilderness canyons and rich biology. To protect this wonderland (and the miles of river below Glen Canyon Dam in Grand Canyon National Park), the dam must be decommissioned so water can flow freely toward Lake Mead. Science indicates this is an inevitable outcome given climate trends and human water demands.

TOM RIBE

Santa Fe, NM

A TOAST TO THERESA

Thank you, Theresa Pierno, for your years of guidance, support and service. I hope you are happy, healthy and vibrant in your future endeavors.

CYNTHIA NELSON

Houston, TX

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

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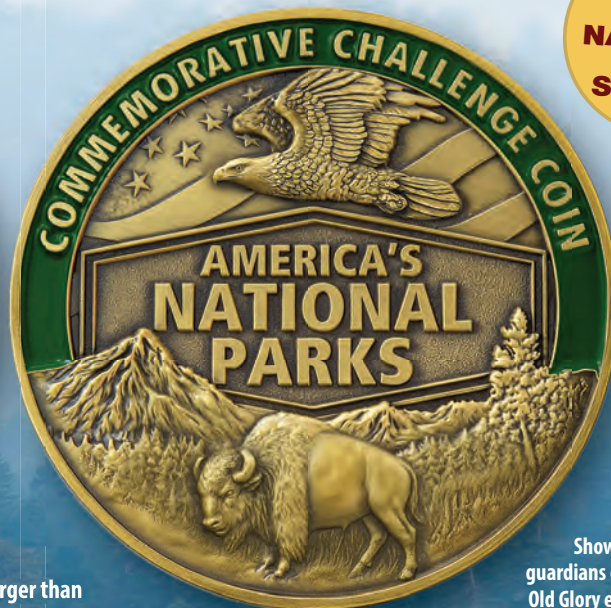
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"EPA's decision to disapprove Colorado's plan is dangerous for Colorado's national parks and for everyone who values clean, healthy air."

Tracy Coppola, NPCA's Colorado senior program manager, detailing to Cowboy State Daily how the Environmental Protection Agency's recent rejection of Colorado's Clean Air Act-mandated regional haze plan, which would have closed coal plants and cleared the air, harms parks and people.

"You can't abandon the Organic Act to hunt."

Kristen Brengel, NPCA's senior vice president of government affairs, speaking to the Wyoming Tribune Eagle about a Department of the Interior secretarial order that requires the National Park Service, among other agencies, to deregulate and expand hunting and fishing opportunities on lands it manages. The Park Service's 1916 founding legislation, the Organic Act, requires the conservation of wildlife. (About 80 park units allow recreational, subsistence or Tribal hunting.)

"It reverses years of collaborative work by the National Park Service, city of Philadelphia and community members, and sets a dangerous precedent of prioritizing nostalgia over the truth."

Ed Stierli, NPCA's senior Mid-Atlantic regional director, criticizing the federal government's removal of signs at Independence National Historical Park in PBS News. After the city sued, a judge ordered the slavery exhibits to be restored, though as of press time, the situation was in flux. Since the fall, the administration has been removing information related to history and climate change at national parks across the country.

PHOTO: GREAT SAND DUNES NATIONAL PARK AND PRESERVE IS ONE OF MANY COLORADO SITES WHERE AIR QUALITY WILL DECLINE AS A RESULT OF EPA'S RECENT DECISION.



©MICHAEL DEYOUNG



VOLUNTEER TIMOTHY COCHRANE, the retired superintendent of Grand Portage National Monument, holds a painting he found while cleaning out a cabin. The artwork, presumably by Elaine Rude, was one of the few items set aside for preservation.

middle of Lake Superior.

This project was my second cleanup on Isle Royale. Two years ago, I helped scour a fishing camp on nearby Wright Island that dated back to the 1830s. The experience taught me that, while not exactly fun, sweeping up mouse excrement while wearing a respirator could be surprisingly rewarding. These unconventional volunteer stints offer a fascinating glimpse into a rugged, solitary way of life that has all but vanished in the modern world. And they allow park staff to tackle enormous jobs they don't have the resources to do alone.

"It's one of the most consequential volunteer activities we do as an organization," said Tom Irvine, executive director of the National Parks of Lake Superior Foundation, who organized the volunteer trip in collaboration with the park. "It opens the eyes of our board members and others who participate on what this park was and how significant it was for so many people."

The logistics of this cleanup were complicated. Isle Royale is one of the most remote national parks in the Lower 48. Ninety-nine percent of the park, which consists of a 50-mile-long island surrounded by 400 satellite islands, is federally designated wilderness. Inhabited by moose and wolves, it's bisected by numerous hiking trails but doesn't have any roads. Public ferries and floatplanes drop off visitors at the two park entry points throughout the summer, but Fisherman's Home is inaccessible by land from either entrance. So we arrived from the Minnesota mainland — more than 40 miles away — by private boat. I went with Dave Miller, an experienced Lake Superior navigator who first visited Isle Royale as a child in the 1960s and later became fast friends with many of the

Cleaning House

Remote fisheries once thrived on Isle Royale. But what happens after the last fishermen move away and their camps fall into disrepair?

Covered in dirt, dust and, probably, rodent droppings, I had never been more grateful for the cleansing steam of a sauna. This sauna, tar-papered and worn, sat on a dock in an inlet on the southwestern shore of Isle Royale. Its stovepipe needed fixing before we could fire it up, but one of the people on our volunteer team knew exactly what to do. Soon enough, the fire was crackling, and I was near to spontaneously combusting, so I made a quick exit onto the dock.

Behind me, the thick pine forest on the peninsula protected the inlet from the summer wind howling across Lake Superior. Across the inlet, a ridgeline rose to an exposed summit. Below me, the water was so clear I could see the

sandy bottom. I waded in and let the 53-degree water wash away two days of grime.

I knew from the get-go that the work of clearing out one of the last remaining fisheries in Isle Royale National Park was going to be dirty. The son of the couple who last operated the fishery died in 2019, and many of the cabins and outbuildings known collectively as Fisherman's Home were dilapidated and filthy. In the past two days, a group of us had hauled away rodent-nibbled National Geographics, stacks of books, and bags of sugar and flour. We removed beds, box springs, broken chairs, homemade musical instruments and myriad other sundries required to live, work and play on an island in the

©STEPHANIE PEARSON

fishermen.

By all accounts, the park is wild, but it has been seasonally occupied by humans for at least 5,000 years. The Anishinaabe or Ojibwe, who called Isle Royale “Minong” (the Good Place), paddled from what is now Ontario or Minnesota in birch-bark canoes to pick blueberries, fish for fat lake trout known as siskiwit, hunt caribou and mine copper. Remnants of Indigenous occupation, from pottery shards to copper pits, have been found scattered across the islands. In 2011, Isle Royale was added to a co-management agreement between the Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa and Grand Portage National Monument. Since then, the Tribe has partnered with Isle Royale on dozens of projects, from trail maintenance to wolf reintroduction. In 2019, Isle Royale received the federal designation of “Traditional Cultural Property,” which officially recognizes the island as the ancestral home of the Grand Portage Band (who now prefer the name Anishinaabe).

In the 1800s, after the Soo Locks opened Lake Superior to the world, immigrant fishermen arrived. Their population peaked between 1915 and 1920, when more than 100 men — mostly Norwegians and Swedes — plied these waters, catching lake trout that they would sell to the island resorts or send by boat back to the mainland. Most fishermen worked solo or with a few hired men, but at least one fishery hired a few dozen workers per season.

“Isle Royale was a haven for newly landed immigrants,” fellow volunteer Timothy Cochrane told me. “It was a place to very slowly integrate into the new world.” The author of “Minong: The Good Place,” about the Ojibwe people’s relationship to Isle Royale, Cochrane worked for the National Park Service for decades, starting as a fire lookout and backcountry ranger on the island and

retiring from the agency as the superintendent of Grand Portage National Monument.

When the national park was established in 1940, very few of the fishermen owned the land on which they operated their fisheries. The park offered lifetime leases or special-use permits to those who agreed to continue fishing, and many stuck around through World War II, when food was in short supply. But their numbers dropped sharply in the 1950s after the arrival of the invasive sea lamprey, which decimated the lake trout population. By the time Cochrane arrived on the island in the 1970s, there were only five active fishermen left.

It’s still unclear how the park intends to use this historical site, but the cleanup was imperative for safety reasons. It was also important, as Cochrane put it, “to acknowledge the twilight of this enterprise and provide a graceful ending.”

Clearing out a century of accumulated possessions is a weirdly intimate project, one that sheds light on the joy and hardship the fishermen and their families experienced at the edge

of one of the world’s most ferocious freshwater lakes. Spread across a peninsula no more than a few hundred yards wide, Fisherman’s Home is made up of two small green cabins, a fish house, a net house, helpers’ quarters, a toolshed, a privy and the sauna. The fishery was founded by Edward Seglem, who had a playful sense of humor — a photo in a book his cousin wrote about the island’s fishermen shows Seglem wearing a big trout head over his face like a mask. In 1937, a couple from Duluth, Minnesota, Sam and Elaine Rude, took over the fishery. After Sam died in 1975, Elaine still summered on the isolated property, planting wildflowers and painting. She left the fishing to her son, Mark Rude, a businessman who lived near Chicago and traveled to Isle Royale as often as time would allow.

“A man with true grit,” as one former ranger described him in an online obituary, Mark Rude was beloved by park employees, Grand Portage Tribal members and fellow fishermen. Resourceful and gregarious, he crafted an effective moose-calling apparatus

AN ISLE ROYALE fisherman in an undated historical photo.



NPS



BOTH PHOTOS: ©TOM IRVINE

PARK SUPERINTENDENT DENICE SWANKE (at right) and a volunteer survey a deserted cabin. Over the course of three days, the crew hauled off thousands of pounds of garbage (left). Right: Fisherman's Home comprises a cluster of cabins and outbuildings, including this toolshed, located on a skinny peninsula on the southwest end of Isle Royale.

from an empty coffee can and reportedly loved to drink with friends, a practice evidenced by the large number of Captain Morgan rum bottles in the cabins. For a few years, Rude piloted the *Voyageur II*, a mail and passenger boat that ran between Grand Portage and Isle Royale. Fisherman's Home remained an important part of his life until shortly before he died at the age of 80 seven years ago.

Over the course of three days, our crew — which at times included Park Superintendent Denice Swanke, the Grand Portage Band's director of natural resources, Seth Moore, a few foundation board members and a handful of park employees — loaded dozens of trash bags onto an enormous vintage landing craft on loan from Apostle Islands National Lakeshore. After just a few hours, we'd filled the barge, at which point we started moving the garbage into a cavernous building near the shoreline that had been used to store fishing nets over the winter. Eventually, all the trash would be hauled to the Michigan mainland.

Before we threw anything away, however, a handful of park experts sifted through the detritus to identify and set aside anything that was worth officially

preserving. There were some exciting finds, such as a vivid painting of the camp, presumably by Elaine Rude, and a few doors possibly salvaged from a shipwreck. But very little made the cut since the park already has a collection of commercial fishing items on the mainland. Plus, it has Edisen Fishery, a historic site on Isle Royale that's better preserved and more accessible than Fisherman's Home. And park staff members are deliberate because, as Liz Valencia, the park's program manager for interpretation and cultural resources, told me, if they catalog something formally, they are responsible for properly storing and managing it.

By noon on the last day, the cabins were cleared and cleaned. Floors were free of mouse droppings, the moldy bedding was gone, and all the food was out of the cupboards.

Before leaving the island, we had an hour free to roam. It was abnormally hot, so I hiked across the peninsula to swim along the southeast-facing lakeshore. In bare feet, I slid down the algae-covered, jagged rocks and ungracefully landed in the water, thrashing around for a minute until I could stand the tingling cold no longer. After struggling back up, I sat on the

shoreline for a while, marveling at the fishing families' solitary lives.

Later, as we gathered on the dock to catch our respective rides back to the mainland, there was a somber reverence in the air. "These past few days were almost like going to a funeral," Cochrane said.

He and I rejoined Miller, who was pensive as he steered his craft out of the inlet. "Every time I leave, I wonder if this will be the last time," he mused. "Fisherman's Home became a real special place to me. I enjoyed working hard. Part of the challenge was just getting there.

"But I knew that if the weather was bad, I always had a place to stay," he said. "It was open arms."

Isle Royale's human residents, though few and far between, have always been a special breed, added Cochrane. "People were gracious, friendly and wanted to learn from each other," he said. "Out here, you had a sense that it was a different world."

STEPHANIE PEARSON is a National Geographic Explorer and contributing editor to *Outside* magazine. Her book, "100 Hikes of a Lifetime U.S.A.," published by National Geographic, will be on bookstore shelves in April.



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Extraction Nation

Mapping the thousands of active mining claims in and near national park sites.

Fifty years ago, Congress passed the Mining in Parks Act of 1976 in a nearly unanimous vote. Lawmakers understood then that mining was not an appropriate use of national park lands because of how harmful it can be to water, air, wildlife, plants and archaeological resources.

Unfortunately, the tides have now turned — and turned dramatically. The Trump administration is allowing a foreign company to mine gold in California’s Mojave National Preserve, marking a grim milestone: It is the first time a new commercial mining operation has been approved on Park Service lands in the 21st century. In January, Congress voted to lift a 20-year ban on mining in the Superior National Forest in Minnesota, a reversal that conservationists decried, saying a mine there would damage Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and Voyageurs National Park. In addition, the administration is shortening the timelines for environmental review and public engagement to ease the way for mining interests both on and off federal lands.

“The federal government is prioritizing public lands for mineral extraction above all other uses,” said Charlie

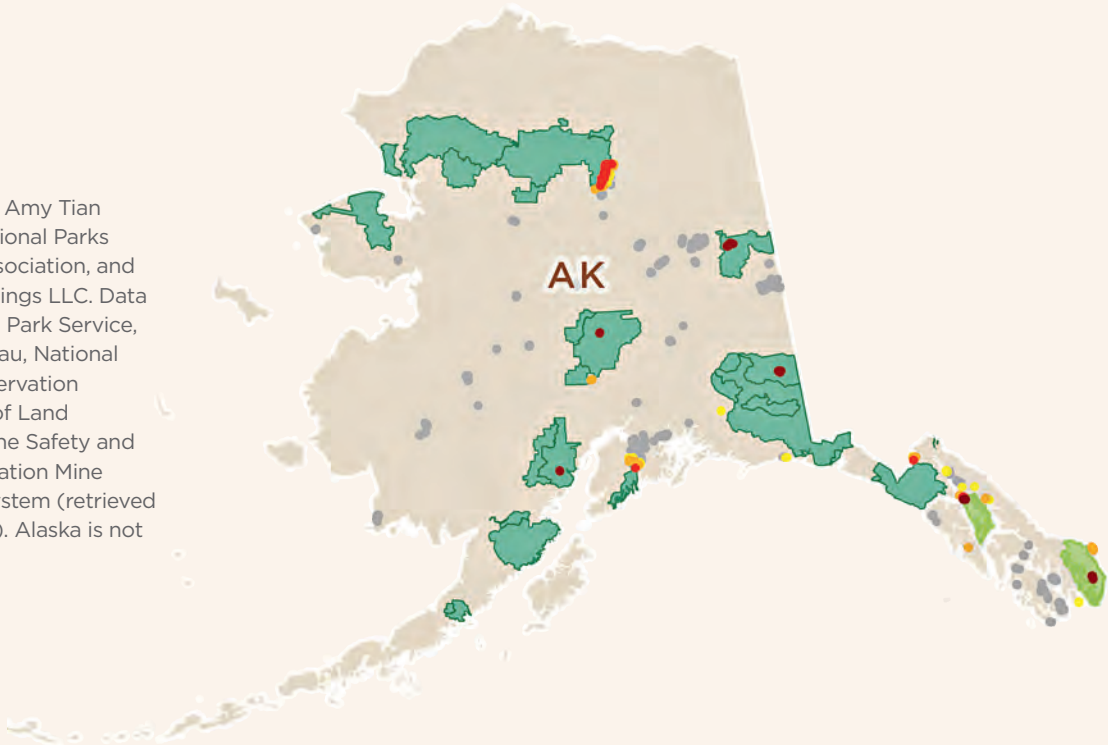
Olsen, NPCA’s energy and public lands policy manager.

A mine claim, as the Mining Law of 1872 established, is a parcel of land for which a claimant has asserted a right of possession and the right to extract a valuable deposit. The 1976 act represented an update and a compromise — while national parks would be closed to new mining claims, existing claims in newly established parks would be grandfathered in. Conservationists expected that those inholdings would eventually be reviewed and phased out, but that never happened, and to this day, companies have the right to dig for minerals including gold, silver, nickel, copper and uranium in and near a stunning number of national park sites. According to NPCA’s analysis, 123,788 active mine claims sit within 30 miles of national parks and monuments in the Western U.S. and Alaska. More than 1,200 of those claims are located within park boundaries.

New mining laws that fulfill the promise of the 50-year-old mining act are urgently needed to shield national parks from the threats posed by a potential mining boom, according to Olsen. “Systemic reform is the only way to protect the things we care about,” he said.

-RM

Map and data by Amy Tian and Nik Moy, National Parks Conservation Association, and Numbers and Strings LLC. Data sources: National Park Service, U.S. Census Bureau, National Landscape Conservation System, Bureau of Land Management, Mine Safety and Health Administration Mine Data Retrieval System (retrieved January 17, 2024). Alaska is not to scale.

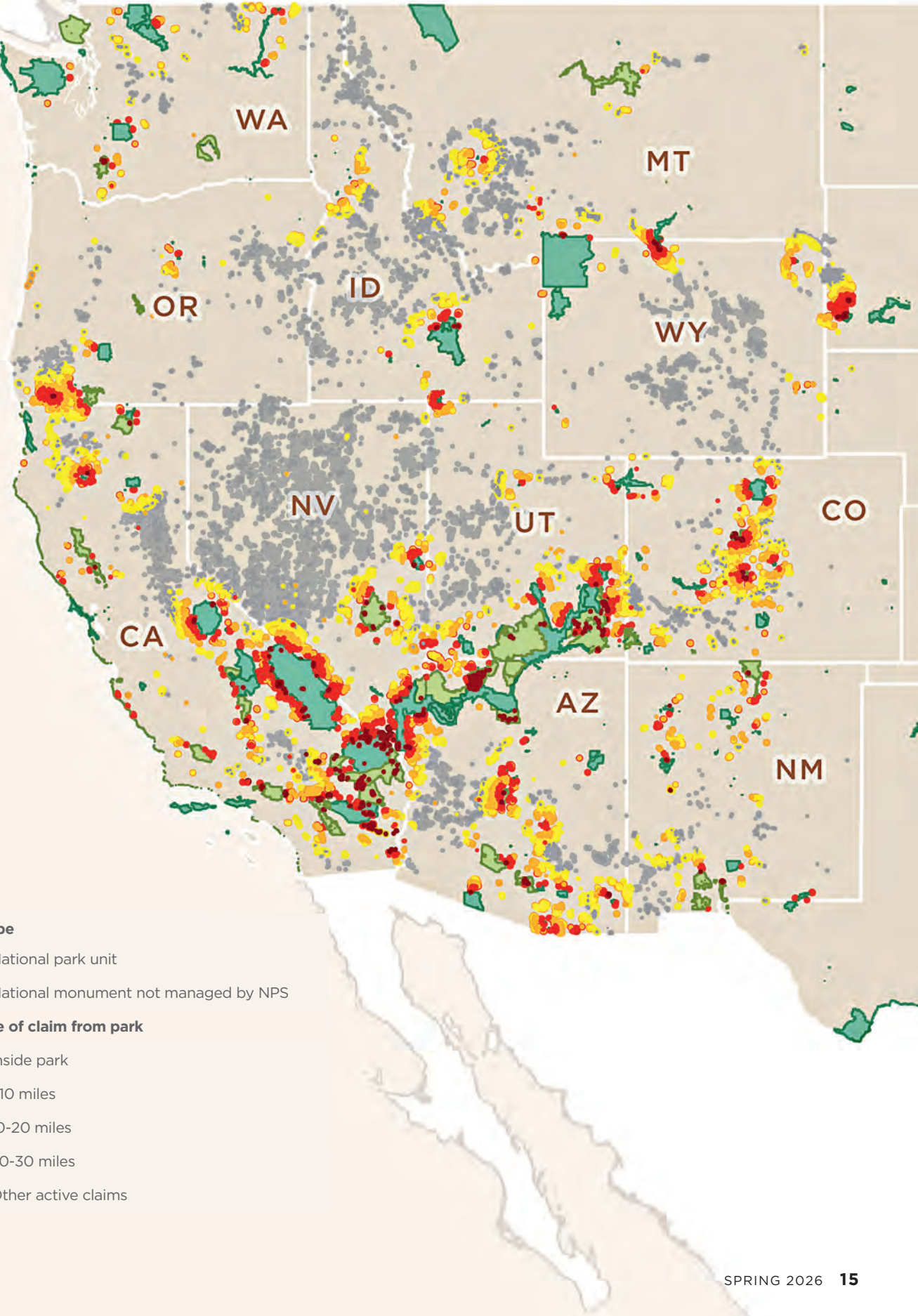


Park Type

- National park unit
- National monument not managed by NPS

Distance of claim from park

- Inside park
- <10 miles
- 10-20 miles
- 20-30 miles
- Other active claims



Spirituality Meets Artistry

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

— Kaya C., on Stauer Opals



In a quaint village, nestled between rolling hills, lived a young woman with a deep appreciation for gemstones. Her grandmother gifted her a delicate cross pendant adorned with opals. The opals shimmered with a mesmerizing play of colors, reflecting hues of blues, greens, and fiery oranges. Her grandmother shared the legend of the opals, believed to bring hope, purity, and luck to those who wore them.

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Goodbye to a Legend

Betty Reid Soskin, who rose to fame as the nation's oldest park ranger, died in December at 104. By all accounts, Soskin led an extraordinary life, which included episodes as a wartime union worker, a record-shop owner, a musician, a Black Panther supporter, a delegate to the 1972 Democratic National Convention, a housing advocate, a legislative aide and a memoirist. She helped plan the Rosie the Riveter/WWII Home Front National Historical Park in California, where she worked as a ranger from age 85 to 100. Her talks at the park were legendary — she spoke regularly to packed rooms, wowing audiences with her deep knowledge and charisma. In 2018, NPCA gave her the Robin W. Winks Award in recognition of her exceptional contributions to the park system. After Soskin's death, thousands of admirers flocked to the Facebook announcement her family had posted to pay their respects. "She wasn't just a park ranger," one person wrote, "she was a national monument."

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NATIONAL PARKS SPRING 2026

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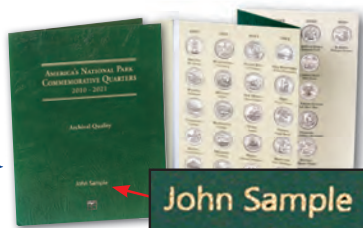
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PARK STATS



220

Number of the country's **573 national wildlife refuges** that are within 30 miles of a national park site, based on an NPCA analysis. In December, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service ordered a **review of all refuges, marine national monuments and national fish hatcheries** to look for those "established for a purpose that no longer aligns with the mission" of the National Wildlife Refuge System. **NPCA opposes rolling back** any protection of the refuge system.

©DAN GRAOVAC/USEFWS



\$14 million

Approximate value in grants the Department of the Interior **canceled in September**, purportedly because the recipients supported diversity, equity and inclusion principles. These **79 grants** supported critical conservation projects

on federal lands. A coalition of nonprofit organizations has **filed a lawsuit** challenging the cancellation.



1.76 INCHES

Amount of rain that fell on **Death Valley National Park** in November, breaking the previous record for the month set in 1923.

\$250

Fee for non-U.S. residents to buy an America the Beautiful Pass in 2026, **up from \$80 in 2025**. Non-residents over the age of 16 who opt to forgo the pass and pay park-by-park entrance fees will encounter a **per-person surcharge of \$100** at 11 of the most popular sites. Reports from the parks affected by the new policy indicate that these new fees are **discouraging visitation** and **creating obstacles** at entrance stations.



USFS.GOV



NPS/JACOB W. FRANK

1,285 feet

Length of a new bridge spanning the **Yellowstone River** that opened in November. The **\$134 million project** was funded through the Great American Outdoors Act and **replaced a 60-year-old structure**.

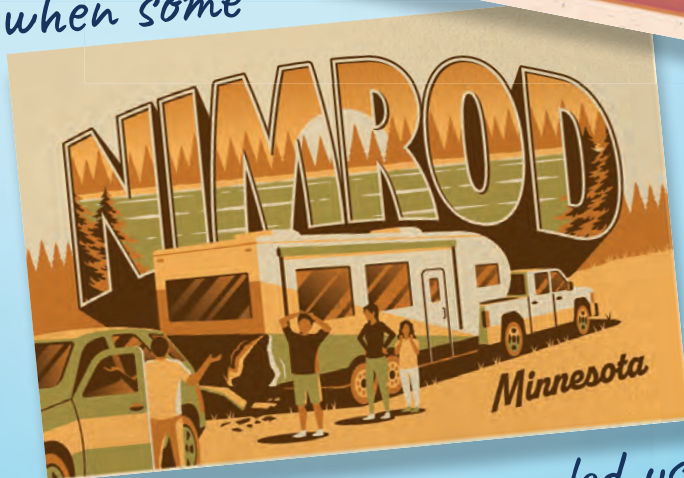
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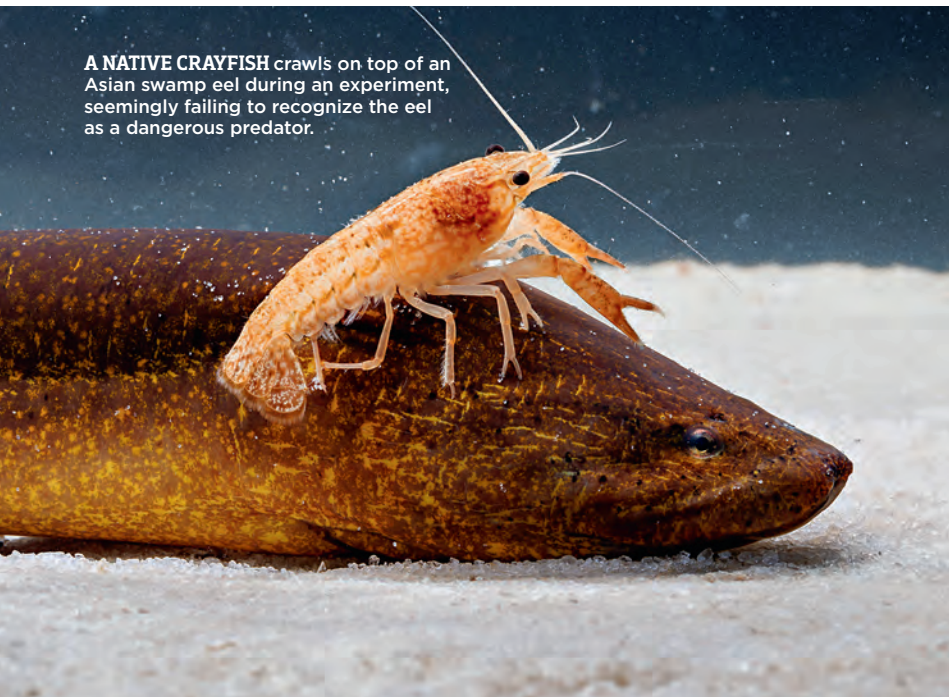
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A NATIVE CRAYFISH crawls on top of an Asian swamp eel during an experiment, seemingly failing to recognize the eel as a dangerous predator.



©BRANDON A. GÜELL

Native Naivete

A nightmarish eel is invading the Everglades and gobbling up native crayfish, a keystone species that is oblivious to the destructive fish.

THERE'S A NEW PREDATOR lurking in the wetlands of Everglades National Park. It's a snakelike, voracious fish that can breathe air, survive out of water for days and even cross roads. It is saltwater-tolerant, drought-resistant and can change its sex. Meet the Asian swamp eel, one of the most insidious invasive creatures wreaking havoc across South Florida.

"They're basically indestructible," said Brandon A. Güell, who conducted his post-doctorate research on these eels at Florida International University. "They're hardy and just super resilient, but in a terrible way. That's why they're such great invaders."

The eels are native to Southeast and East Asia, where they are eaten and used in Buddhist rituals. In Florida, they were first detected in canals near Miami and Tampa in 1997; it's possible they initially came from a live fish market. Two years later, they showed up near Homestead, just outside Everglades National Park. In 2007, the eels were discovered inside the park.

At first, some scientists downplayed the danger; populations were small and localized to canals, where the eels seemed to subsist on aquatic

insects. But by 2014, the numbers of eels had exploded, and their reach had spread. By 2019, they were in the park's Shark River Slough. Now ecologists are warning that the eels threaten to upend the food web of the entire Everglades.

The scale of the damage was revealed in a 2023 study that showed populations of native crayfish and small fish collapsed by as much as 99% after the swamp eel entered the ecosystem. This matters because these crayfish feed a whole suite of native species in the Everglades, including wading birds such as the white ibis.

Güell, a behavioral ecologist, wanted to understand how the eels were so effectively decimating a species called the slough crayfish. Güell guessed that because the crayfish did not evolve with the eels, they wouldn't view them as predators, something ecologists call the "prey naivete hypothesis."

"Responses are triggered by recognition," Güell said. "You're only going to respond appropriately if you recognize the threat."

To collect his specimens, Güell zipped through the Everglades in an airboat, whipped by saw grass and cattails, and besieged by mosquitoes, spiders and biting alligator fleas. That's not to mention the alligators themselves. Güell learned to keep an ear cocked for their warning bellows as he waded through the clear water, sieving crayfish from the swamp.

The eels were harder to collect because they're so elusive. Güell caught them by electrofishing. From a boat, he dipped an electrified wand into the water and then scooped up the stunned eels with nets. The eels display a curious immunity to electricity, and stunning them requires higher voltage than for other fish of the same size.

Back in the lab, Güell started out with simple observation. He put an eel

in a tank, then dropped in a crayfish and watched what happened.

Crayfish evolved to avoid predation through a combination of fighting, fleeing and freezing. They displayed no such reactions toward the eels. “The crayfish was not aware that there was anything else in the tank,” Güell said. “It would walk toward the eel.”

Later, Güell used photographs and videos to evaluate the crayfish’s behavioral responses to the eel and to a fish called a warmouth, a crayfish-eating sunfish native to the Everglades. Güell measured how active a crayfish was before and after he placed an eel or a warmouth in the same tank, on the other side of a clear, perforated partition. Then he observed how far away the crayfish stayed from each predator over an 18-hour period. Finally, Güell assessed how likely the crayfish were to feed after long-term exposure to the predators. (Typically, crayfish forage when they feel sufficiently safe.)

The results were stark. When exposed to the warmouth, the crayfish mostly scurried to a corner and stayed still, sometimes raising their claws in defense. They rarely ate. But when exposed to the eel, the crayfish barely responded at all.

This lack of response was illustrated by a photograph Güell took early in his study, which showed a crayfish crawling atop an eel’s head, apparently oblivious to the mortal peril.

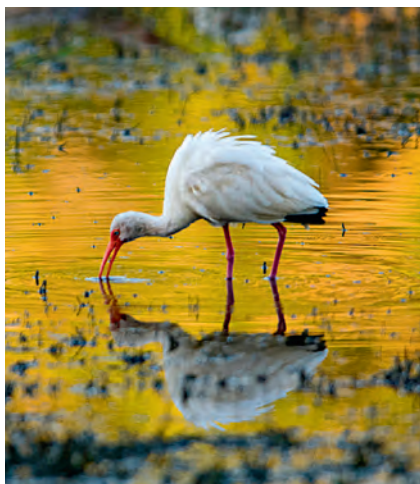
“Anyone looking at that might think, ‘Oh, this is so silly,’” Güell said. “But this is the equivalent of a cottontail sitting on top of a Burmese python. That just doesn’t happen. Zebras don’t hang out on a lion’s head. It’s this crazy naivete.”

The Burmese python, of course, is the poster child for invasive species in the Everglades. But the impact of the Asian swamp eel may be even worse, according to Mark Cook, an avian

“This species just went under the radar for 20 years. And now it’s a contender for possibly the most destructive aquatic animal ever introduced to South Florida.”

ecologist for the South Florida Water Management District. That’s because while pythons prey on midsize and large animals, eels are taking out the small, abundant species that create the food web’s foundation.

“This species just went under the radar for 20 years,” Cook said. “And now it’s a contender for possibly the most destructive aquatic animal ever introduced to South Florida.”



THE EEL INVASION affects white ibises, which feed on crayfish.

One of the eel’s most damaging attributes, Cook said, is its ability to survive in dry conditions. Crayfish use the dry season to rebuild their populations, burrowing in the mud and releasing their young when the bigger fish have moved to deeper water. This way, the juvenile crayfish can grow in a nursery-like environment largely free of predators.

“When the habitat dries down, instead of disappearing, the swamp eels just stay in place and burrow with the crayfish,” Cook said. “So, when the

crayfish emerge, the swamp eels all feast on the young crayfish and basically wipe them out.”

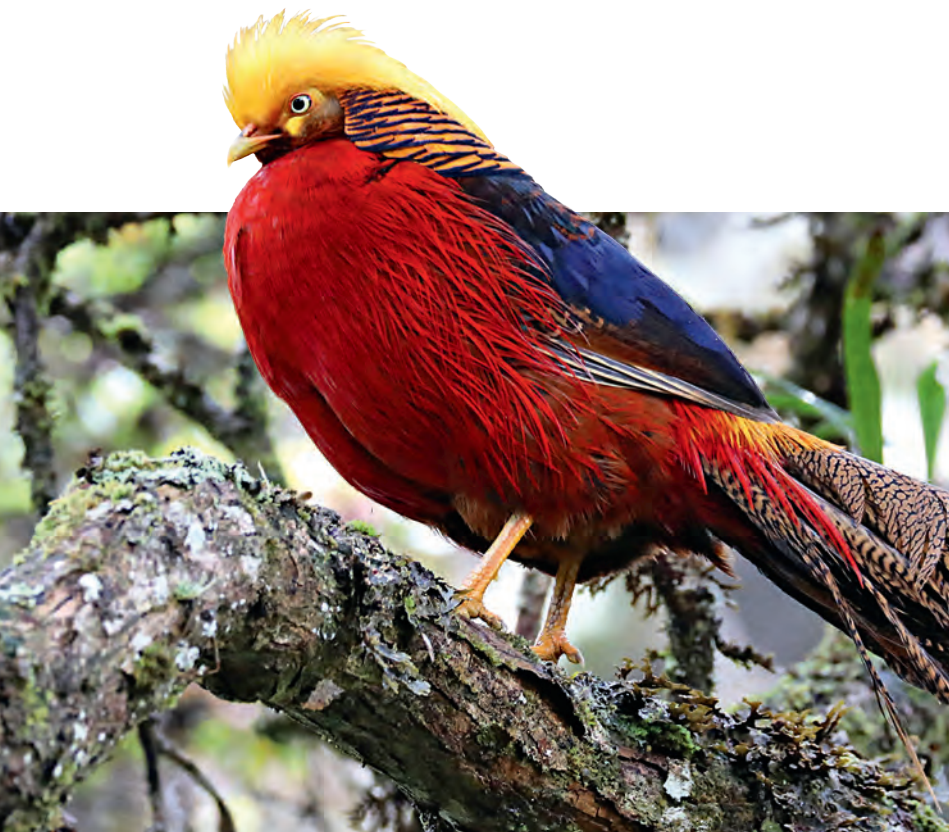
Cook is especially concerned about how these eels will affect iconic Everglades denizens such as alligators, turtles, otters and wading birds. “If you’re cutting out crayfish and small fish, that’s it,” Cook said. “You’re having a major effect on the functioning of the aquatic ecosystem. Without that, so much of the Everglades disappears.”

Cook and Güell said it’s too late to eradicate the eels, and their adaptive traits make them difficult to control. Still, invasive species in the Everglades sometimes drop off unexpectedly, due to cold snaps, disease or predators learning to eat them. Indeed, Güell, Cook and others have documented ibises, storks, egrets, herons and even crows eating swamp eels in the Everglades.

Ironically, the very canals responsible for bringing the eels into the Everglades may also help mitigate their damage. Current Everglades restoration efforts are focused on channeling the right amount of water to the right places at the right times to help all native species, from white ibises to alligators to crayfish, making the latter more resilient to the eels’ effects. For Güell, that offers a glimmer of hope.

“We can see pulses in crayfish numbers seasonally when management is pushing water in certain places in certain ways,” he said. “Hopefully that can play tug of war with the negative impacts we’re seeing from the eel.”

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



A GOLDEN PHEASANT in Waikamoi Preserve, near Haleakalā National Park. Researchers estimate that a couple of hundred of these non-native birds may now live in the area.

Counting Haleakalā's Rainbow Chickens

Has the golden pheasant from China taken up residence in the national park?

HALEAKALĀ NATIONAL PARK'S forests are home to striking birds, from the scarlet 'i'iwi to the yellow and olive-green kiwīkiu, but one of the park's newest arrivals may outshine them all — at least in the color department. The male golden pheasant sports a golden-yellow crest that would be the envy of Fabio, a bright red chest, a green upper back, an orange cape, touches of shimmering blue on its wings and a long black-and-cinnamon tail.

"There are so many species of colorful pheasants, and the golden pheasant is one of the most spectacular," said Thane K. Pratt, a retired wildlife biologist who's focused much of his career on Hawaiian birds. "It's just so beautiful."

Of course, the appearance at Haleakalā of a new non-native species — as gorgeous as it might be — is no cause for celebration. Over centuries of human occupation, the Hawaiian archipelago has been besieged by invasive animals and plants, and as a result, many endemic species have died out or are on the brink of extinction. "So, when a new invasive species shows up, it catches the attention," Pratt said.

The golden pheasant was first detected on the northwestern slope of Haleakalā volcano in 1996. As reported sightings ticked up, questions arose within Hawaiian birding circles. How many were there in the wild? Where did they range? And perhaps most importantly, were they there to stay? As a member of the Hawaii Birds Records Committee, Pratt agreed to track down answers about the pheasant's status on Maui.

Golden pheasants are native to the mountains of China, but they've become popular ornamental birds across the world. People breed them to enhance the brightness of their colors or prioritize mutations that create varieties such as salmon pheasants or dark-throated pheasants. Some golden pheasant enthusiasts let their birds roam on their property, and they escape; other owners release them deliberately into the wild. But those feral populations usually blink out because of inadequate climate or habitat, or an abundance of predators.

Until recently, the United Kingdom was believed to be home to the only established golden pheasant populations outside of China. There might have been as many as 2,000 wild golden pheasants in Britain at some

point, but releases there became illegal in 1981, and numbers dwindled. When Will Smith, a researcher at the University of Nottingham, studied golden pheasant demographics, he found only small groups here and there totaling maybe 40 birds. “The only reason they lasted as long as they did was because there were illegal releases, topping them up,” Smith said.

The golden pheasant was added to the British list of wild birds in 1971, but its standing remained controversial among birders. Smith said that while some almost mythologized them and went on quasi pilgrimages to spot them in the dense, opaque forests they favor, others “saw them as a bit of a joke, because they’re like, you know, rainbow-colored chickens.” Following the publication of Smith’s research in 2023, British ornithological authorities changed the status of the golden pheasant to that of a species “whose naturalized populations are either no longer self-sustaining or are considered extinct.”

Golden pheasants were first brought to Hawaii around 1865, and over time, their spectacular plumage has been incorporated into featherwork, including elaborate hatbands. The first detection of a golden pheasant in the wild was made just a few miles from the park in a remote and rugged area far from urban settlements. Pratt said it’s unlikely the pheasant or pheasants got there on their own, as they’re not strong long-distance flyers. “There are a few breeders locally,” he said, “and somebody must have just decided, ‘Wouldn’t it be nice to release some?’ And they did.”

What could have been an anomaly turned out instead to be the start of a trend. In the following years, researchers, land managers and others reported additional observations — typically, the extremely shy bird is more often heard than seen. Pratt looked through golden pheasant detections

“You can’t just keep adding birds and expect them all to get along.”

logged on the popular birding website eBird, but he soon realized he had other sources of information at his disposal.

In Haleakalā and neighboring protected areas including the Waikamoi Preserve managed by The Nature Conservancy, staff conduct recurring forest bird surveys and have set up audio recording devices and trail cameras. The primary goals of those efforts are to monitor forest birds and the movement of invasive mammals such as feral pigs and goats, and the area surveyed only partially overlaps with the golden pheasant’s favored habitat. So the datasets were not tailored to Pratt’s purpose — but they were free. The data trove, which included 128,219 audio recordings, was also massive. “It got to be a much, much larger project than I anticipated,” Pratt said.

Pratt enlisted the help of colleagues, including Chris Warren, the coordinator of Haleakalā’s forest bird program, to sift through it all. The picture that emerged was incomplete, but it documented the presence of males, females and juveniles, and it showed an increase in the golden pheasant’s numbers and range. Though it’s impossible to know for sure, the team estimated that perhaps a couple of hundred birds lived in a territory that includes the northern areas of the park. That the golden pheasant would have found its place was not a foregone conclusion, as many non-native Galliformes, or chicken-like species, from ring-necked pheasants to chukar partridges, have staked their claims to various areas of the park. “You can’t just keep adding birds and expect them all to get along,” Pratt said.

Still, the golden pheasants found a sliver of suitable high-elevation montane forests largely unoccupied by

their fowl compatriots. That habitat has few feral cats, and owls don’t tend to forage under the canopy, so predators are not much of an issue either. Smith, who was not involved in the Maui-based research, said a banding and recapture program would be necessary to confirm the Haleakalā golden pheasants are birds born in the wild rather than released captives, but he said existing signs point to a self-sustaining population. “It already looks like that might be what’s happening,” he said.

If the golden pheasants are not going anywhere, then the next question is whether they are damaging their fragile environment. But with Haleakalā facing such formidable threats from invasive species already — non-native weeds using up water and nutrients, feral cats preying on native petrels, malaria-carrying mosquitoes decimating honeycreepers — a few pretty golden pheasants don’t rank high on conservationists’ list of things to worry about. “We have to do that sort of triage of resources and be like, is it actually that big of a deal?” Warren said.

The Hawaiian Islands used to count several species of native ground birds, but most of those went extinct after humans settled the archipelago many centuries ago. Not all pheasant species disperse seeds, but Warren said if golden pheasants are performing this ecological role, it’s possible the potential benefits could outweigh the damage they cause.

“I think you’ve got to have a more holistic view of these birds,” Warren said. “I’m just saying it might not be all bad.”

NICOLAS BRULLIARD is senior editor of National Parks magazine.



WHAT THE TREES TELL US



Long ago, Hispanic
sheepherders carved
names, dates and
drawings into Valles
Caldera's aspens.
Can a small team of
surveyors record the
etchings before they
disappear?

By Elizabeth Miller

HUNDREDS OF LEAN, pale-barked trees knit a canopy of shimmering green leaves over the ridge. As Steve Daly hiked through the grove, he glanced over the trees, dismissing most as too slender and thus too young. When he spotted gnarled bark worn from white to dark gray, he strode over a thicket of boot-snagging deadfall for a closer look.

“Hello, old-timer,” he muttered, a hand braced against the bark as he scanned the tree from bottom to top, then turned away. “No, no stories to tell.”

On a sunny afternoon in August, Daly had joined a small crew of volunteers searching for human traces left in aspen bark in a distant corner of northern New Mexico’s Valles Caldera National Preserve. Over 17 years, dozens of volunteers have spent countless summer and fall days inspecting aspen trees, lured by a love of the place and a curiosity about the fragments of history they might find.

For more than two centuries, the land that would be designated as a national park site in 2014 was grazed by sheep, and in idle hours, sheepherders wandered into the forests and etched surnames, town names and dates into the aspens’ bark. They wrote in both English and Spanish, and made drawings as well. Because the sheepherders left few journals, these dendroglyphs, as they’re called, offer a rare record of people who played a key part in the environmental and cultural history of the preserve. Many decades later, the carvings are vanishing as trees are mutilated by elk or die from old age or climate change-induced drought or wildfire. So far, volunteers have found and documented more than 3,000 dendroglyphs, but they’ve only covered around half the park’s 88,900 acres, and they’re racing to document the rest before it’s too late.

“This is a historic resource, and we are losing it,” said Randal Pair, the project’s volunteer team leader, who schedules and plans about four days of surveys per month. That late summer day, he had driven down a rutted dirt road with two other volunteers: Daly, a retiree who also helps maintain trails and monitor archaeological sites, and Trish Weller, who had joined the team that spring. I had ridden with Pair and the volunteers; two staff members, a volunteer for another project and an intern who were all interested in learning more about the dendroglyphs had followed in a Park Service truck.

Valles Caldera’s main feature is a collapsed volcano within the Jemez Mountains northwest of Santa Fe. Conifers and aspens hug the rim and cover lava domes, while open grass-



lands blanket the valleys. Multiple Tribes, including the Jemez Pueblo, or Hemish, long saw the landscape as significant and still hold ceremonies here. Historically, the Hemish and other Tribes hunted, fished, farmed and collected obsidian within and near the caldera, and set small fires that cleared some conifers, opening space for aspens.

AS EARLY AS THE 1700S, settlers in what was then a territory of Spain began grazing sheep in these high meadows. The practice continued as the land became part of Mexico and then the United States, and it persisted until the years after World War II, when the sheep industry waned. At the grazing peak in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Valles Caldera may have seen 50,000 sheep each summer.

The impact of these massive flocks still shapes the preserve’s ecology. Grass species that sheep disfavored and aren’t as nutritious still dominate the meadows. In addition, the animals’ hooves cut into wet meadows and streambeds, increasing channelization and erosion — and the land never fully recov-

ered. By devouring the grass understory in ponderosa forests, sheep changed the nature of the wildfires that historically sped through those grasses and left most mature trees alive. Without the regular grass-powered fires, brush and smaller trees accumulated, and they have fueled bigger, hotter and more damaging wildfires.

“Sheep aren’t very easy on the land,” explained Craig Martin, who has studied the history and ecology of Valles Caldera and the Jemez Mountains for decades. “They have sharp hooves, and that’s a bad thing for the soil, and when they eat, they tend to eat the entire plant, including the roots.”

Hispanic sheepherders at times found themselves working under a “partido” system, similar to sharecropping, in which “partidarios” rented a flock for a few years and paid the owner in offspring and wool. In theory, the system allowed sheepherders to accrue their own herds, but the vagaries of grazing livestock in the wild rarely worked to the herders’ benefit.

Daily life was largely uneventful. Sheepherders slept in tents and moved camp about once a week as flocks browsed the grass.



VOLUNTEER STEVE DALY shows a dendroglyph to Victoria Prieto Ruarte, then a National Park Service intern, and Trish Weller, a fellow volunteer (far left). Left: a carving interpreted to represent the Virgin of Guadalupe. Below: Volunteer Yvonne Keller sketches a dendroglyph made by Alejo Lujan, a prolific carver in the 1910s and 1920s, during a survey trip a few years ago. Previous pages: A dendroglyph carved in cursive by Simon Martinez on July 3, 1911.



Midday hours were often quiet, dull and hot, and the sheepherders would retreat into shady aspen groves.

“It was lonely, it was isolated, and they had a lot of time on their hands,” Martin said. “Most of their day was moving the sheep to a new place and then sitting back and watching what was going on.”

Dendroglyphs, or arborglyphs, are found elsewhere in New Mexico’s mountains and across the American West. A 2010 effort by Forest Service archaeologists recorded 277 carved trees in the San Juan National Forest in Colorado. Basques who found work in the growing sheep industry in the mid-1800s etched trees in California, Idaho and Nevada, including in today’s Great Basin National Park. People across the world, from Australia to Estonia to Sweden, have carved on trees. Because of the prevalence in the American West of aspens, which have a pale, soft bark, the practice flourished there, mostly at the hands of sheepherders. Few of the cowboys herding cattle through Valles Caldera after World War II, for example, left behind dendroglyphs.



WHEN ADAM DEAN, a park ranger at Valles Caldera, guides public tours to see dendroglyphs, he prompts visitors to ponder the line between protected history, as the dendroglyphs are now considered, and graffiti, which is illegal.

“If you say, ‘Well, this is art,’ what makes modern dendroglyphs, which are of course prohibited, not art?” Dean asked. “People have also said, ‘Are we missing out on future windows to ordinary people’s lives by not allowing carvings?’”

It’s a reasonable question. The National Historic Preservation Act draws some boundaries, typically recognizing certain buildings older than 50 years as historical resources. Dean said that carvings of names, human figures and ranch brands acquire cultural value over 50 or more years, even if time is an imperfect way to assess their worth.

In 1978, contract archaeologists from the University of New Mexico noted the many engraved aspens in Valles Caldera as they surveyed the site of a proposed geothermal power project in what’s now part of the park. It wasn’t until 2008 that the

late Anastasia Steffen, who would become the park’s cultural resources program manager, organized the Volunteer Aspen Survey Team. She soon handed off leadership to longtime Los Alamos resident Colleen Olinger.

Olinger, who had worked as a park ranger at nearby Bandelier National Monument and run a bookstore and publishing company that focused on local history, led the volunteer team until her death last April. At first it wasn’t clear whether the work would continue without her, but Pair, who had begun overseeing the fieldwork as Olinger’s knees aged out of the rough hiking required, took on the rest of the organizational tasks. He directed volunteers over the summer to survey a remote corner of the preserve because he knew Olinger wanted to get to those distant aspen groves. The decision was, as he described it, a “yes, captain” moment. Daly and Pair both wonder if Olinger expected the area to be rich in dendroglyphs. If she did, she was right.

“It’s been paying off,” Daly said. “The trees-per-hour ratio has been incredible.”



AN ASPEN GROVE shows its fall colors on the south rim of the park’s Valle Grande. More than 3,000 dendroglyphs carved in the trees’ pale, soft bark have been documented in the park so far (far left). Left: A shepherd and his flock in Valle Grande in the mid-20th century.

COURTESY OF MARY ANN BOND BUNTEN

Before leaving the truck on our outing, Pair passed out maps of the small area of the park to be surveyed that day. Red stars marked dendroglyphs they had found in the weeks before. Lauren Ray, the park’s visual information specialist, marveled at the nearly trailless landscape as we hiked toward the survey site.

“How many people have seen this part of the park?” she said. “It’s so hard to get back here.”

To search, volunteers spread through the trees, walking in parallel lines about 50 feet apart, as much as brush, deadfall and uneven ground allowed. They had donned bright colors to spot one another through the trees and carried whistles for when, inevitably, dense

woods obscured even flashes of yellow and orange.

They stopped to stare at all but the smallest trees, straining to distinguish etchings made by humans from other marks. Aspen bark will form knots where the tree drops a branch, horizontal fissures develop as the tree ages, and bears occasionally leave claw gashes on tree trunks. Over decades, aspen bark blackens, gnarls and peels, splitting carved text. Letters can be swallowed by their own scarring.

Most often, volunteers find names and dates. The surnames Martinez, Lujan, Trujillo and Sanchez occur repeatedly. Volunteers found the name Alejo Lujan at least 100 times, often alongside the name of a place called Cow Spring. From the repetition, they can infer how the shepherd worked across the countryside. Dendroglyphs also include religious symbols, such as crosses and possibly Stars of David, as well as images of birds, sheep, horses, arrows, hearts, boots, houses and, once, a mermaid. Volunteers have documented drawings of human heads and bodies, some more risqué than others.

“These inscriptions contain a self-told record of an otherwise little-chronicled peoples: when they were on the land and who they were, along with hints as to why they were there, their values, their humanity, and occasionally their whimsy,” Steffen and Jonathan Knighton-Wisor, an archaeologist, wrote for a Park Service publication in 2016.

Steffen championed the citizen-science survey to document the carvings as risks to them increased. Most aspens don’t live past a century, and volunteers keep an eye out for older trees. Many of the “glyphs” found this summer were on standing dead trees. As they hiked, Daly, Weller and Pair scanned the length of fallen trees and even sifted through decaying strips of bark loose on the ground. Occasionally, they have reassembled dendroglyphs from pieces of bark. The oldest decipherable date ever found is 1887 — not because the practice began then, but because earlier traces are likely lost.

Other forces are also erasing this record. Searching for remnant sugar in winter, elk gnaw on aspen bark and gouge potential inscriptions in the process. As drought stretches on in the West and climate change takes its toll, aspens die faster, but the bigger threat is wildfires, which, in a hotter, drier Southwest, are becoming more common and more devastating. About 70% of the park’s current area has burned since 2000, and countless dendroglyphs vanished in those fires.

Even after glyphs are found, volunteers wrestle with what they say or depict. When Weller couldn’t read one on a tree, she took a photograph home to revisit on a television screen. Her husband looked at the picture and quickly deciphered the name in front of him. “Well, that’s William Ruiz,” he said. Daly once stepped back from a baffling tangle and then recognized a drawing of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

“That was a cool one,” he said.

If interpreting what the shepherders drew is tricky, deter-



COURTESY OF NEW MEXICO TOURISM DEPARTMENT

AS EARLY AS the 1700s, settlers in what was then a territory of Spain began grazing sheep in Valles Caldera's high meadows.

mining why they drew it is near impossible. Perhaps they were signaling territories or marking a return to the same pastures. They might have been exercising the impulse to leave a mark that to this day has people scratching names or initials onto trees and rocks. They might simply have been bored.

The last names found on the trees echo those found in surrounding towns, and descendants of these sheepherders likely still live nearby, but connecting the dots is no easy task. Volunteers have combed through census and tax records. Park Service interns have searched databases such as Ancestry.com. As a graduate student in 2012, Knighton-Wisor dug in and was able to match the name Nicolas Gallegos, found several times in the same cursive, to 1920 census records for a local who lived in nearby San Ysidro, married a woman named Adela, and had three children.

"A lot of these, since they're such common names, could be multiple people," Dean said.

Once, Daly's brother-in-law showed a photograph of a name, date and the town name Chimayo to friends from that town. They pulled out a picture of three brothers who had herded sheep in Valles Caldera, pointed to one of them and said, "That's him."

"That's about as close as I've come," Daly said.

Daly is still on the lookout for connections, now searching among the park's aspens for the family name of a rancher who is descended from a sheepherder and still grazes his cattle just north of the park. Over 17 days of work in 2025, volunteers recorded 153 additional carvings. On our August trip, they did not discover any new glyphs, but Daly had found a couple the

week before that he hadn't had time to record. Pair, who hadn't seen them but knew they were nearby, sent the Park Service people ahead to look for them. One of the newcomers spotted one, and called him over.

"Holy cow — script!" Pair said as he approached the aspen ringed by dense pine trees.

Two dendroglyphs adorned the trunk, one in script and the other in block letters. The volunteers and Park Service staff stared and squinted until they could read off a town name, Chamita, and the last name Martinez. Daly measured the dendroglyphs' height from the ground and the tree's circumference. Weller grumbled as she sketched one dendroglyph for the official record, trying to re-create how a gnarl in the bark split an A in the block text. Pair photographed the glyphs. He would deliver all the data to park staff at the end of the season.

The team wanted to show the rest of us an example of how lovely these carvings can be, so we walked over to another one they had found and recorded earlier in the summer. Even more than a century later, the lines spelling out the name Simon Martinez and the July 3, 1911, date showed delicate flourishes. While logging that dendroglyph, one of the volunteers present that day looked over and saw the name repeated on an aspen tilted toward the ground, this time in block letters. Was it the same person? Was it his son?

"There's a story there that we may never know," Weller said.

ELIZABETH MILLER has reported on environmental issues in the American West since 2011. She lives in Santa Fe.

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HAWAII DREAMING

CAPTURING THE SPLENDOR OF HALEAKALĀ NATIONAL PARK
IN PHOTOS AND ILLUSTRATIONS *By* MATT BRASS

I began dreaming of going to Hawaii when I was a kid. I pictured islands suspended in the vast Pacific Ocean and isolated ecosystems shaped by wind and fire and wave. At the time, I was fascinated by marine life, and I imagined arriving with a sketchbook — so I could draw the creatures and places I'd seen in books and on VHS cassettes.

I'd always been into nature of all kinds, and one of my favorite things to do was re-create the natural world with pencil and paper. I was obsessed with studying the anatomy of animals and memorizing their structures as I drew them.

I was inspired, in part, by my mother, a career painter. Life flowed between creating alongside her in her home studio and exploring outside — riding my bike through the woods and open fields of eastern Washington, where we lived in an isolated town on the Oregon border. On weekends, we'd load up the '78 VW bus and head to the Blue Mountains or trace the Columbia River west to the coast.

Unfortunately, travel to tropical islands isn't as simple or cheap as those road trips, so despite

my excitement, the actual journey to Hawaii took decades to materialize. Finally last year, when I had adult children of my own, an opportunity arose. Plans evolved until, before we knew it, we had a group of seven: my brother, his two kids and three of my children. We spent much of our time in Haleakalā National Park, where travelers can encounter as many different ecological zones between sea and summit as they would on a road trip from Mexico to Canada. We were mesmerized. I took photos by the hundreds, some showcased here, but there was a magic, an expanse, an energy that eluded me. The tree cathedral of Hosmer Grove, the grandeur of the volcanic crater, the darting 'i'iwi — I couldn't quite capture them with my lens.

And so, on the flight home, I picked up my pencil and tablet and began to draw.

MATT BRASS is an artist and photographer based in Knoxville, Tennessee. To learn more, go to mattbrass.com.



HALEAKALĀ
CRATER



WEDGE-TAILED
SHEARWATER

KŪLOA POINT TRAIL

Along the Coast





BANYAN
TREE

PĪPĪWAI
STREAM

IN THE
RAINFOREST

Waimoku
Falls



ABOVE THE CLOUDS



MY SON AND MY NIECE
AT KALAHAKU OVERLOOK



CHUKAR



SILVERSWORD



The Newe people's ancient connection to Bahsahwahbee is marked by ceremony, sustenance, tragedy and endurance. Will local Tribes succeed in their effort to preserve their hallowed lands?

BY MICHAEL P. BRANCH

IN THE SACRED GROVE

ELY SHOSHONE ELDERS Delaine and Rick Spilsbury walk among Rocky Mountain junipers, known locally as swamp cedars, in Bahsahwahbee.

L.E. BASKOW/LAS VEGAS REVIEW JOURNAL



©AP PHOTO/RICK BOWMER

I sit in the midmorning sunshine on the tailgate of my old pickup, sipping lukewarm coffee and waiting for the arrival of Ely Shoshone elders Delaine Spilsbury and her son, Rick Spilsbury. Having barreled across 320 miles of remote high desert since dawn on this trip from my home outside Reno, I'm now at a small gas station on the south edge of the mining town of Ely, Nevada. With a population of roughly 4,000, Ely is by far the largest community in this part of the Great Basin Desert — a 200,000-square-mile expanse so named by 19th-century military officer and explorer John C. Frémont because no drop of water in this vast desert reaches the sea. Here in White Pine County, the population density is around one person per square mile — a number so low that this area easily meets the standard used by the U.S. Census Bureau during the 19th century to identify “unsettled” frontier territory.

Delaine has asked to meet here because this gas station — which adjoins the Tsaa Nesunkwa Dispensary — is run by the Ely Shoshone Tribe, and so the sale of gas, weed and sundries supports the local Indigenous community. In front of me rises the Egan Range, carpeted with pinyon pine and Utah juniper trees. Behind me, open desert rolls out to the towering Schell Creek Range. As I gaze up at the high peaks, a gleaming, midnight blue Cadillac EV rolls up. In the driver's seat, a small woman sits so low as to barely be visible over the steering wheel. She parks the car cautiously and climbs slowly out, waving to me.

“I just can't get used to a car that doesn't have a key,” Delaine says, laughing. Her waist-length, slate-gray hair is gathered into several sections with ties. She wears jeans, a T-shirt and a Patagonia ball cap with sunglasses perched on the bill. Her jewelry is gorgeous: wide silver and turquoise bands on both wrists; a large oval of silver-rimmed turquoise on her pointer finger; long, colorful beaded earrings; and a beaded medallion

“THIS HAS ALWAYS been the place where Newe people held rain dances, round dances, vision quests, harvest rituals,” Rick Spilsbury (pictured) told the author. It's also the site of unspeakable horror: Many of his ancestors were killed here in massacres that took place in the 1800s. Right: A golden eagle, one of 15 raptor species that have been documented in Bahsahwahbee, which is part of the Pacific Flyway.

necklace ornamented with three dangling pendants. Her face is deeply weathered, her eyes absolutely mischievous.

“I gotta go get some health food,” she tells me, laughing again. Delaine is 87 years old, and Rick, who follows behind her, is 60ish, tall and broad shouldered, with a ponytail of straight black hair splitting his shoulder blades. Rick shakes my hand in greeting, saying loudly enough so his mother can hear that she's doing a great job learning to drive her new car. He lays his broad-brimmed hat and a water bottle on the back seat of my truck, explaining that he'll let his mom ride shotgun so she's better able to hear the conversation. Rick asks if I need anything and then follows his mother into the store. When he and Delaine emerge, she's smiling broadly and holding up a large bag of potato chips in each hand. “See?” she says. “Traditional Indian food. Very healthy!” I am quickly learning that Delaine, who has an infallible instinct for when to turn a conversation toward levity, also has a delightful habit of laughing at her own humor.

We climb into my truck and head southeast on Highway 50, aptly named the “loneliest road in America.” After driving through the elk range of Steptoe Valley, we climb from the sage and rabbitbrush scrublands into the pinyon-juniper woodlands. The winding road finally crests the Schell Creek Range at Connors Pass. From this 7,722-foot saddle, we gain a sweeping view eastward across Spring Valley to Great Basin National Park's Wheeler Peak and the dramatic western escarpment of the Snake Range. Then we begin our descent, switchbacking slowly down into the valley. We roll past a sprawling cattle operation and, soon after, pass by the tall, white turbines of a wind farm, the juxtaposition a potent reminder of how past and future land-use practices in the Great Basin overlap in real time.

After a few more miles, Rick indicates where I should pull off onto a dirt apron, and from there we follow a sandy, meandering two-track to an old ranch gate constructed from hand-hewn juniper poles wrapped with barbed wire. Rick hops out, drags the gate open and waves me through. He directs me to park near a timeworn, handmade stock corral. Delaine sits silently next to me in the truck, looking wistful. Rick leans forward from the back seat and says, simply, “This is the place.”

We have come to visit one of the most important sites in the Great Basin Desert. We have reached Bahsahwahbee.

NEVADA IS THE DRIEST STATE IN THE U.S. IT encompasses more than 300 distinct mountain ranges, which

are often snowy but separated by vast, arid valleys. Many of those basins are flat, white, bright, baked, cracked saline and alkali playas where even the hardiest desert plants are unable to survive.

Yet Spring Valley, as the English name for Bahsahwahbee suggests, is distinguished by the unusual presence of over 100 natural springs. A more precise translation of Bahsahwahbee from Shoshoni (the name of the language is spelled differently from that of the Tribes) is “Sacred Water Valley.” While no river runs through it, this valley is dotted with wet meadows and springs that have long made the area an oasis for both people and wildlife. The treasure also lies beneath our feet. While the water table in the Great Basin typically ranges from 50 to 500 feet below ground, in Spring Valley, the water hovers just below the surface. In the springtime, parts of the valley can flood, swollen

with snowmelt from the massive peaks that cradle it.

The Newe, an Indigenous people including the Duckwater Shoshone Tribe, the Ely Shoshone Tribe and the Confederated Tribes of the Goshute, are the original human inhabitants of vast expanses of the Great Basin. Archaeological evidence shows an Indigenous presence in this area dating back at least 10,000 years to a time when wildlife would have included camels, giant short-faced bears, large-headed llamas, cheetahs and jaguars,



©ALAN MURPHY/BA/MINDEN PICTURES

and Aiolornis incredibilis, a vulture-like creature with a wingspan of up to 18 feet. In recent centuries, Newe people have come to Bahsahwahbee to hunt elk, mule deer, pronghorn, rabbit, grouse and waterfowl. Fifteen species of raptors, 56 species of songbirds, and 21 species of waterfowl and shorebirds have been documented in Bahsahwahbee, which is part of the Pacific Flyway. In addition, there are 24 state or federally protected species at or near this site. The unusual presence of so much water in the valley also makes this an exceptional spot for gathering traditional food and medicinal plants, including Indian ricegrass, basin wild rye, sagebrush, saltbush, Mormon tea, pickleweed, saltweed, willow, watercress, sedges, bulrush and cattail.

Beyond all this, what makes Bahsahwahbee special are its trees. Valleys in the Great Basin are so arid that you can traverse basin after basin for hundreds of miles without seeing wild trees on any valley floor. But Bahsahwahbee is graced with a unique occurrence of Rocky Mountain juniper, a species usually restricted to high, cold mountains. In Nevada, it grows at elevations of up to 9,000 feet. What, then, are these trees doing down here in this exposed valley thousands of feet below their normal range?

There is no other region on Earth where a juniper species thrives under these conditions: at the wrong elevation, in the wrong soil type, in the wrong habitat. Even more inexplicably, these trees flourish in an area that historically has seen seasonal floods — a singular situation that has led Bahsahwahbee’s celebrated trees to be known locally as “swamp cedars.” The trees occupy this unlikely spot because their range shifted during the Pleistocene glaciation. When the glaciers receded,

DELAINE AMBLES TOWARD THE FRINGE OF TREES below us with her walking stick in hand, and Rick follows, carrying a folded three-legged stool. I trail them both as we silently wend our way downslope.

As we enter the forest, I’m struck by the size of the trees. When spotted on its native ground up in the mountains, this species tends to be modest — 10 to 20 feet tall — and in exposed situations, it often appears more like a battered shrub than a

we ate a lot of watercress here. You know, that stuff tastes pretty good,” she says, chuckling. Delaine explains that when she was growing up, Native people lived scattered in the canyons outside Ely, which long before contact with settlers, had been the largest Native village in the valley. “Most of our houses were kind of like caves,” she says. “We were in abject poverty. No running water. We hunted and fished and gathered pine nuts and mined turquoise for subsistence. I actually worked in those mines with

“This has always been the place where Newe people held rain dances, round dances, vision quests, harvest rituals,” Rick says. “The springs that bubble up have always been sites of special healing ceremonies. Before colonization, Indigenous people from all over traveled to gather here at Bahsahwahbee. This place brings people together.”

“My mother was from Snake Valley, and my dad was from White River, so they may even have met here,” Delaine says. “This has always been a site for religious ceremonies, like Rick said, but also a place to renew old friendships, and for young people to find mates. And for everyone to replenish food and medicinal stores before snowfall. It must have been great back then. Without money and cars, it must have been like going camping all summer long.”

“How long do you think your people have been gathering at Bahsahwahbee?” I ask. “10,000 years? 12,000?”

“Maybe as long as 20,000 years,” Rick replies.

Delaine shakes her head emphatically from side to side. “Since time immemorial,” she says.

BAHSAHWAHBEE HAS A VERY DARK PAST.

Newe people had used the area as a sacred site of ceremony and sustenance for millennia, but everything changed with the arrival of white settlers in the Great Basin during the 19th century. Newe territory was within the Permanent Indian Frontier that the U.S. had established in 1830, but repeated incursions by white trappers, hunters and others effectively erased the established boundary. In 1859, U.S. Army Capt. James H. Simpson led an expedition to find a more direct route from Camp Floyd (south of Salt Lake City) to Genoa (at the eastern foot of the Sierra Nevada); the route he opened vastly increased the movement of white settlers through the heart of Newe territory, including Steptoe, Spring, Snake and Antelope valleys. The California Trail and the Overland Stage route also passed through Newe lands in Nevada, as did the Pony Express, which began mail service in 1860 and had stations throughout Shoshone and Goshute territory.

This increased presence of newcomers created immense pressure on the high desert’s natural resources. For the Newe, as a hunter-gatherer people, the disappearance of game that resulted from increased trapping and hunting proved devastating, as did the tendency of white people to monopolize the few available water sources and overgraze the land to the detriment of wild food sources. Introduced diseases including smallpox had reached Indian Country even earlier, taking an enormous toll. By the start of the Civil War, the Newe population was a fraction of what it had been before the 1700s. The isolation of surviving Native people from their traditional food sources resulted in wretched poverty.



THE LATE Rupert Steele, chairman of the Confederated Tribes of the Goshute Reservation, offers a blessing at Bahsahwahbee. He fought for decades to preserve these lands and to educate others about Tribal history and culture (above). Right: In recent centuries, Newe people have come to Bahsahwahbee to hunt elk, mule deer, pronghorn (pictured), rabbit, grouse and waterfowl.



COURTESY OF MONTE SANFORD (LEFT); ©BAXTERNATOR/ISTOCKPHOTO (RIGHT)

the trees were left stranded on the valley floor. Under usual circumstances, that is where they would have perished, just as they disappeared from other Great Basin valleys. But at Bahsahwahbee, the high water table and springs have allowed the trees to survive.

For decades, local Tribes have sought to protect the resources of this sacred site. In recent years, they have campaigned with allies to designate Bahwahwahbee as a national monument of around 25,000 acres within the larger Spring Valley. Their aim is to preserve this place’s outsize historical significance — including chapters of grave injustice and survival — by making it part of the National Park System.

proper tree. But in Bahsahwahbee, the larger junipers grow at least 40 feet tall and are full and conical. Some of the trunks are nearly 3 feet in diameter — remarkable girth for a slow-growing desert tree — an indication that many of the trees are at least 300 years old.

We reach a clearing within a ring of especially large trees, and Rick sets up the stool for Delaine, who eases herself onto it. She digs a bag of potato chips out of her pack, and Rick opens it for her as she begins to reminisce.

“When I was little, I used to come out here pretty often. The valley was so wet that the water was a lot of times right there at the surface. There were fish in big ponds. Lots of antelope. And

a real shovel! We still lived in the old ways with our families as we had when we were hunting and gathering.”

I ask what role Bahsahwahbee had played in the life of the Native community when she was a kid.

“Every once in a while, we would all get together, just like in the old days. And the primary place we came to was here at the cedars,” she says. “That’s why Bahsahwahbee was sacred to the Shoshone people, because it was so full of game and fish and food. It was the only place around where there was really good shade and grass, and the people that wandered around these valleys all ended up here for their ceremonies a number of times each year.”



WHILE NO RIVER runs through it, this valley is dotted with wet meadows and springs that have long made the area an oasis for both people and wildlife (above). Left: Swamp cedars on the valley floor and the Schell Creek Range beyond.

By 1859, reports of sporadic Native American raids on emigrant caravans had reached U.S. Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston at Camp Floyd. Although Johnston was well aware that white traders were, as he put it, “instigators, if not participants, in the robberies perpetrated,” he nevertheless felt compelled to act. Johnston mustered four companies of cavalry and hired Elijah Nicholas Wilson to serve as guide and interpreter. Wilson, a young white Mormon pioneer who had lived much of his life among the Shoshone and was known to them as Yagaiki, was fluent in the regional Native culture and language. Having determined through Wilson’s interrogation of a couple of local Native people that there was to be a large rendezvous in Bahsahwahbee, Johnston directed Wilson to lead the troops westward by night to avoid discovery. Arriving in darkness, the general ordered his men to surround the encampment.

At daybreak, the soldiers descended on the unsuspecting Newe. Wilson remained stationed on a nearby hill, from which he witnessed the ensuing massacre. He described what he saw in his 1910 autobiography, “Among the Shoshones” (republished as “The White Indian Boy”) — an account corroborated

by Tribal oral histories. Wilson reported that women as well as men fought back fiercely, and that even children wielded sticks in a futile attempt to defend themselves against the onslaught. “This was the worst battle and the last one that I ever saw,” Wilson recalled. “It lasted about two hours, and during that short period of time, every Indian, squaw, and papoose, and every dog was killed.”

Wilson reported that at least 350 warriors were killed, which suggests that, including women and children, between 525 and 700 Newe were murdered. Likely one of the largest slaughters of Native people ever perpetrated by the U.S. government, the massacre remains relatively unknown because Johnston never reported it to the War Department.

Increasing tensions between Native people and settlers led to a series of skirmishes that would come to be known as the Goshute War. During the conflict, a band of Goshutes attacked the Overland station north of Spring Valley, killing the operator. In response, volunteer cavalry were dispatched from Fort Ruby under the command of Capt. S. P. Smith to seek retribution. Smith and his men went first to Duck Creek in the foothills of

the Schell Creek Range, where they ambushed an encampment of Newe and killed 24; when five others arrived at camp the following day, they too were murdered. Following this massacre, the company marched over the Schell Creek Range into Spring Valley under cover of darkness. They surrounded another group of Newe camped in the swamp cedars, where they’d gathered for religious ceremonies. At dawn on May 6, 1863, the soldiers launched their surprise attack, and although many of the cavalry’s horses were mired in the swampy ground, at least 23 Newe were massacred.

Even late into the 19th century, when the murder of Native Americans by the U.S. military had become infrequent, self-appointed groups of white vigilantes sometimes picked up where the U.S. Cavalry left off in their mission to force Indigenous people off ancestral lands through intimidation and violence. In 1897, long after the Treaty of Ruby Valley, signed in 1863, had purportedly brought peace to Native-white relations in Newe territory, such a vigilante attack occurred at Bahsahwahbee.

According to Tribal oral histories, including many conducted with the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of victims of

the massacre, the Newe had congregated at Bahsahwahbee for seasonal celebrations. “The camp was not a war camp because the arrows were not tipped with rattle snake venom,” one elder testified in an oral history collected by an anthropologist in 2010. “It was a gathering camp, not a war party.”

Nonetheless, a violent gang descended on the Newe. They raped the women before murdering men and women, children and elders and desecrating the bodies. According to oral history accounts, “They found everyone dead at the camp site and witnessed terrible and horrifying scenes.” Another interviewee said, “They killed everybody, pregnant women, cut them open, burned the babies and chopped them up.”

The only survivors of the 1897 massacre at Bahsahwahbee were two little girls who would have been about 10 years old at the time. The girls were outside the camp when the onslaught began, and seeing the melee, had ducked into a ditch, where they remained hidden. Once the vigilantes cleared out, the girls fled south, traveling 20 miles until they eventually reached the ranch of Mormon pioneers George and Anna Swallow. When the children arrived, disheveled and exhausted, they were asked how

they had managed to get there by themselves. One girl answered only “ne mimia,” Shoshoni for “I walk.”

After their escape, one of the girls, Annie Jack, eventually made her way to the Goshute Reservation near Ibapah, Utah. The Swallows took the other little girl in, named her Laurene Mamie Swallow, and raised her as their own. Mamie lived and worked at the Swallow Ranch until she was about 16, when she married Joe Joseph, a Paiute ranch hand. The Josephs settled in the tiny Nevada-Utah border town of Baker, where Mamie had 11

PRESERVING NATIVE HISTORY

Preserving and commemorating Bahsahwahbee — which the Newe people view as sacred land — has been a multigenerational effort by the Confederated Tribes of the Goshute Reservation, the Duckwater Shoshone Tribe and the Ely Shoshone Tribe. In 2021, the three Tribes launched a major campaign to establish Bahsahwahbee National Monument within the National Park System.

During the next few years, conservation allies, including NPCA, area businesses, state and national Tribal organizations, and the Nevada Legislature publicly endorsed the Tribes’ vision. “This Native American history is nationally significant,” said Neal Desai, NPCA’s senior director of the Pacific Region, “and it’s important for all to know.”

By 2024, a bill had been introduced in the U.S. Senate, with the goal of securing a roughly 25,000-acre monument through President Biden’s use of the Antiquities Act. The administration failed to act, yet the Tribes remain undeterred.

children, the last of whom was born only a few months before her death in 1925. Laurene Mamie Swallow Joseph’s headstone still stands in the old Indian Cemetery in Baker. An orphan, a witness and a survivor, she was also Delaine Spilsbury’s grandmother.

I FINALLY BROACH THIS MOST DIFFICULT TOPIC and ask Delaine and Rick about the tragic history of this beautiful place.

“Were you told the story of what happened here at Bahsahwahbee?” I ask, reflexively avoiding the word “massacre.”

“The story of this place wasn’t shared that much because the elders were ashamed,” Delaine says. “They just tried to live in another world. Psychologically it’s been a secretive thing.”

“And there weren’t many witnesses left alive to tell the stories,” Rick says.

“White people wouldn’t have believed us anyhow,” Delaine adds. Rick nods.

“It was too hurtful to talk about, and Bahsahwahbee wasn’t threatened. We had no desire to tell the story,” Delaine explains.

“Now we do,” Rick adds. “But if this place weren’t endangered, we wouldn’t have shared the story.”

“It was so vicious,” Delaine says. “They wanted to scare the hell out of the few Indians who were left.”

Rick nods again. “This place is important to the American people, whether they know it or not,” he says.

Minutes pass in silent reflection. I breathe in the distinctive aromatics of sage and juniper, squint slightly at the indescribable clarity of the high desert light.

Rick finally speaks. “It’s such a beautiful day today. Strange to think that our people were slaughtered here.”

“Not once but three times,” Delaine adds.

She now has a faraway look in her eyes. “It’s awful what they did to their bodies. Maybe they were trying to keep them out of heaven. Does heaven have a dress code? I don’t know.” She pauses. “And Grandmother. She was just a little girl.”

Delaine plants the tip of her walking stick in the ground and, with a little support from Rick, rises from the stool.

“Come on,” she says to me. “You need to take a picture of me next to a big tree. I’m kinda short, so it’ll make it look even bigger.” She smiles warmly. Delaine leads the way toward a copse of junipers, and then poses in front of an especially tall and graceful one.

“For the Newe people who are left, we believe that the swamp cedars embody the spirits of the lives lost during the massacres,” Delaine says. “Their bodies are in these trees. This is where we come to visit our relatives.”

I’m struck by the realization that Delaine is not speaking metaphorically. She does not mean

that the swamp cedars represent or symbolize her slain ancestors, but instead something more radical. To the Shoshone, these trees are their lost people — the physical and spiritual embodiment of them — and Bahsahwahbee is their sacred burial ground.

“Bahsahwahbee is where we pay our respects to our ancestors and mourn what happened to our people,” Rick says. “If we were to ever lose this grove of trees, it would be my own personal extinction event. The death of all life related to the people who lived here. It would be an existential crisis.”

BETWEEN 1950 AND 1985, THE POPULATION OF LAS Vegas (including the surrounding county) grew from around 47,000 to over 560,000, a 12-fold increase in the number of residents who needed enormous amounts of water to live in one of the driest cities in America. Realizing that their meager share of the drought-stricken and dwindling Colorado River was unlikely to keep pace with skyrocketing demand, the city’s water utility



©AP PHOTO/RICK BOWMER

DELAINE SPILSBURY smells a Rocky Mountain juniper, a species usually restricted to high, cold mountains.

ranchers, local governments and Tribes, SNWA reversed course. Following federal and state court rulings invalidating the water transfer, SNWA commissioners voted unanimously to abandon the effort. “Over the course of the past 30 years it’s clear that the project does not make sense environmentally or economically,” Commissioner Justin Jones said at the time.

Delaine, Rick and I head back to the truck. We’re silent for a good while on the drive back, but eventually Delaine asks me to pull over so she can check on the pinyon nut crop up in the Schell Creeks.

While stopped, we share a snack, and Delaine, after examining the cone-laden native pines, delights in how bountiful the pinyon harvest will be this year. Meanwhile, Rick discovers an enormous, fully toothed elk jawbone, which he points out to me but doesn’t disturb.

As we roll up in front of the gas station back in Ely, Rick reaches for my field journal, in which I’ve been taking voluminous notes all day. I hand it to him, and he sketches a makeshift map that will guide me to their home for dinner later. In this sparsely populated landscape, cell reception is unreliable, and homes don’t all have addresses.

“Bring some veggies,” Rick calls over his shoulder, as he and Delaine make their way to their car. Delaine smiles and waves to me as she drives slowly away, past the entrance to the Ely Shoshone Reservation, then north up Steptoe Valley. After the Caddy disappears, I sit quietly on my tailgate. Gazing across the sweeping basin to the backlit, serrated crest of the Egan Range, I sip water that now tastes more delicious than it ever has before.

MICHAEL P. BRANCH is an award-winning humorist and writer of place-based creative nonfiction from the American West. His books include “Raising Wild,” “Rants from the Hill,” “How to Cuss in Western” and “On the Trail of the Jackalope,” and his essays have appeared in venues such as CNN, the San Francisco Chronicle, Slate, Outside, Orion and High Country News. Branch is University Foundation Professor, Emeritus, at the University of Nevada, Reno, and he was inducted into the Nevada Writers Hall of Fame in 2024. This piece is excerpted from his book “Water Warriors,” to be published by Counterpoint Press in 2027.

HISTORIC TRAVEL DESTINATIONS



Courtesy Visit Mississippi

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Unlike modern highways, there are no billboards, stoplights, or commercial traffic to distract from the journey. Whether you're driving, cycling, or stepping off the road for a short hike, every mile encourages a deeper connection to the landscape and the stories it holds.



Courtesy Visit Springfield, IL

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Courtesy Mike Matejka

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America's stories live here nps.gov/pull and friendsofpullman.com.



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celebration, Allegany County highlights stories and places that helped shape the nation's journey. Walk or bike the C&O Canal National Historical Park and the Great Allegheny Passage, follow scenic byways, and discover immersive historic attractions like the Allegany Museum, National Road Toll Gate House, and the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad. Spring's fresh green landscapes and riverside paths set the stage for reflective exploration. After a day outdoors, enjoy local dining, scenic rail excursions, and vibrant small-town culture. Allegany County is a meaningful springtime basecamp for honoring heritage and connecting with America's story in the heart of the mountains.

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MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. encourages a young civil rights activist in St. Augustine, a place he dubbed a “rock-bound bastion of segregation and discrimination.”

The centuries-old city had been the center of an unfolding national — and international — news story for months at that point, owing to the civil rights drama playing out on its streets. The previous summer, four youths had been arrested for participating in a sit-in and wound up spending six months in jail and reform school. Four others, including the local leader of the NAACP Youth Council, Robert Hayling, had been savagely beaten and nearly burned alive after trying to observe a Ku Klux Klan rally in September. Over Easter weekend, Mary Peabody, the 72-year-old mother of the then-governor of Massachusetts, had been arrested for trying to integrate a restaurant, an event that “drew the nation’s attention to racial conditions in St. Augustine as no other incident had,” according to historian David R. Colburn.

About a month after the May 17 gathering on the Castillo’s grounds, the U.S. Senate passed the landmark Civil Rights Act. The timing was likely not a coincidence given the spiraling situation in Florida. On the morning of the vote, a prominent Washington, D.C., newspaper featured a shocking photo of a St. Augustine motel manager pouring acid into the pool where Black youth were attempting to swim as the guests of a paying customer. David Nolan, a historian who moved to the city in 1977, described it to me as “the splash heard ’round the world.” If any senator was wavering, he said, that photo clinched their vote.

Still, this chapter in history remains little known. “St. Augustine has been called the most important place you’ve

A Fort's Tale

St. Augustine and Castillo de San Marcos National Monument played a vital role in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The park is now working to tell this little-known story.

THE FLYERS CIRCULATED through the Black neighborhoods of St. Augustine. “Come, see, hear,” the leaflets urged in all caps. “Sunday, May 17, 1964 at the ‘Freedom Tree’ on the lawn of the Old Fort.”

At the appointed time, dozens of neatly dressed men, women and children filed onto the grounds of the Castillo de San Marcos National Monument, a 17th-century fort overlooking the Matanzas River in northern Florida. They circled a squat cedar tree and began to sing and pray. Soon, Hosea Williams, a leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, addressed those gathered, exhorting them to remain steadfast in their goal to desegregate St. Augustine.

BACKSTORY

never heard of in the Civil Rights Movement,” Nolan said. “And part of that is because St. Augustine hasn’t pushed that for a long time.” In fact, many of the Castillo staff were unaware of the Freedom Tree’s significance until about 10 years ago. While more remains to be done, the Park Service has been working to give this critical period of history the attention it is due.

The struggle for civil rights in St. Augustine is nearly as old as the city itself, said J. Michael Butler, a history professor at Flagler College. “Before the more well-known Underground Railroad was established,” he said, “there was an underground railroad in colonial America that led south.” St. Augustine welcomed 11 freedom-seekers in 1687. Six years later, Spain’s King Charles II offered emancipation to those who traveled to Spanish-controlled Florida, adopted Catholicism and served in the militia. Some of those newly free people then contributed to the building — and repeat defending — of the Castillo. In 1738, they established a legally sanctioned free Black community just 2 miles north of town. Generations later, men from St. Augustine served in the United States Colored Troops, and about two dozen were elected to public office in the 19th century.

The city’s Black community was “founded by folks who were fighters,” said Ted Johnson, a former ranger at the Castillo. “And they had resistance and resilience in their blood.”

When Black leaders of St. Augustine learned that the U.S. government planned to fund the city’s quadricentennial celebration in 1965 but that no Black community members would be involved or even invited, they decided to act. Requests to form a biracial committee fell on deaf ears, so Hayling and the NAACP Youth Council took aim at



THIS IMAGE of Monson Motor Lodge manager James Brock pouring muriatic acid into a whites-only pool garnered global attention on the day the U.S. Senate passed the Civil Rights Act in 1964.

tourism, the city’s mainstay.

Picketing and sit-ins of local restaurants, hotels and stores began in earnest in the summer of 1963. Children carried signs with words, such as: “Don’t buy in segregated St. Johns County” and “Are you proud of your 400-year history of slavery and segregation?” The tactics diversified to include beach wade-ins, night marches and Castillo rallies once the SCLC came on the scene the following spring. (Though city leaders decried the interference of an outside group, especially one that included Martin Luther King Jr., whom many believed to be a Communist, Butler said local organizers had no other recourse because “the white resistance here was so strident and so violent.” They couldn’t rely on assistance from local law enforcement either, he said, as the chief of police and sheriff were “literally

meeting with white supremacist groups every morning” to share information.)

By the summer of 1964, the crisis had reached a boiling point. Some activists had lost their jobs, been threatened with college suspensions or seen hikes in their doctors’ fees in retaliation for their involvement. Hayling’s dog had been killed, and the cottage King had rented for one of his visits had been sprayed with gunfire and then firebombed. Despite the deployment of several hundred Florida State Highway Patrol officers, interactions between the armed mobs and nonviolent demonstrators often escalated from terrifyingly tense to bloody and chaotic in a blink.

Andrew Young, an SCLC leader who would later become a U.S. congressman and United Nations ambassador, spoke about the night he was attacked on the city’s plaza in a documentary he made, “Crossing in St. Augustine.” “It was the closest I’ve ever come to walking through the valley of the shadow of death,” he said. In a separate film about the campaign, Young explained that the city holds the distinction of being the only one “where the hospital bills [for the SCLC members] were bigger than the hotel bills and the food bills.” Not even the bystanders were immune from the violence. By June, at least 25 journalists and cameramen had been assaulted while reporting. And businesses that integrated had been targeted so effectively that they reversed course.

Though Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law on July 2, the conflict in St. Augustine persisted. “It’s not like everyone was holding hands and skipping through the streets,” said the Castillo’s Johnson. In fact, reprisals from the white supremacist faction were fierce and immediate, from beatings and intimidation to a Molotov cocktail launched into the newly

©AP PHOTO/HORACE CORT

desegregated Monson Motor Lodge. (The business had been the epicenter of some of the most publicized encounters of the movement, including the acid-in-pool incident, as well as the arrests of King and 15 praying rabbis. “We came,” the rabbis wrote, “because we could not stand quietly by our brother’s blood.”) Integration of private businesses ultimately required the intervention of the federal courts. Schools weren’t fully desegregated until 1970, 16 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Nolan points to Andrew Young’s return in 2009, documentary crew in tow, as the moment when St. Augustine finally started acknowledging its past. By then, some of the campaign’s iconic landmarks had already been lost. “The idea seemed to be: ‘If we could make the buildings disappear, then this whole history will not have happened,’” Nolan said.

By the time Johnson arrived at the Castillo in 2014, 30-odd plaques identifying the locations of civil rights-era events dotted the town — thanks to ACCORD, a local group — and a monument to the civil rights “foot soldiers” had been erected in the plaza. Nolan supplied Johnson with a copy of the May 17 flyer promoting the gathering on the park site’s grounds and shared a film clip of people singing around the Freedom Tree. That was all the ranger needed to start digging.

Johnson’s time at the fort lasted only a year, but he returned to this project four years later while serving at nearby Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve. Before he retired from the Park Service in 2025, he had vastly expanded the Castillo’s online resources detailing the park’s Black and civil rights era history. He also connected with Maude Burroughs Jackson, a longtime activist. In an interview with Johnson, Jackson — who had been 21 in

Forward Thinking in Florida

This year, the aging seawalls of Castillo de San Marcos (pictured here) are getting a much-needed overhaul. Rising seas, sinking lands and repeat storms have so compromised the coquina walls of this quarter-mile barricade that water surges past on a near daily basis, threatening the integrity of the oldest masonry fortification in the continental U.S.

A multimillion-dollar project will completely rebuild or rehabilitate all five segments of the existing seawall, raising them to a uniform height of 10.5 feet, a gain of 5 feet in some sections.

Vanessa Trujillo, NPCA’s Sun Coast senior conservation program manager, called the two-year restoration “a really significant climate-resilient initiative” and said the project will buy the fort about



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50 years, based on projected sea-level rise.

Elsewhere in northern Florida, the Park Service is taking steps to relocate Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve’s Fort Caroline memorial 300 feet inland. Trujillo said the proposed move, which would protect the exhibit from flooding, “is a bold adaptation choice, signaling that we must plan ahead, not wait until resources are lost.”

1964 — spoke about getting arrested on three occasions, making lunch for King and missing her wedding because she was in jail. Jackson also spoke about the group’s use of the fort after a hard day on the streets. “We would meet there just to relax,” she said, “and just reflect on what could be.”

In recent years, staff of the Castillo and Timucuan hosted workshops for area teachers who, Johnson said, were “starving” for this multicultural history. The fort also secured a spot on both the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom and the African American Civil Rights Network.

Kristine Brunsman, Castillo’s supervisory park ranger, hopes to have an interpretive panel installed at the fort that tells the civil rights story and, one day, she’d like to replace the Freedom

Tree, which was likely the victim of a long-ago hurricane. “The Civil Rights Movement,” she said, “is a critical part of not only who we are as a nation, but who we are as a town, who we are as a park.”

The choice to use the fort in 1964 is what Butler finds particularly compelling. Sure, those gathered were criticizing the government for failing to live up to the standards set by the Constitution, he said, but they were also looking to that same government for protection. “Federal property was seen by people who protested as an asylum,” he said. “That idea of the Freedom Tree being a beacon, a place of safety and refuge when all hell is breaking loose is pretty powerful.”

KATHERINE DEGROFF is associate editor of National Parks magazine.



THE NORTHERN LIGHTS over Crater Lake
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