



NationalParks

SUMMER 2025
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undermining environmental laws
and rewriting history. How will
parks weather an unprecedented
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NPS/DANIEL DENDLER

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Darkest Before the Dawn



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Back in March, just after the last issue of National Parks magazine went to press, the National Park Service released its visitation numbers for 2024. Those figures confirm that the parks are more popular than ever, receiving a record 331.9 million recreational visits last year — an increase of 2% from the previous year and nearly a million more visits than the previous record set during the park's centennial in 2016.

All of which underscores the folly of the current administration's efforts to slash the workforce at the Park Service ("Parks in Crisis," p. 24). The American public from all walks of life — as poll after poll shows — loves the parks and admires the dedicated rangers who protect them. But with more visitors than ever and less personnel to support them, the parks will be showing signs of strain as we head into the busy season. Park-goers may experience everything from longer entrance lines and fewer services to overflowing trash bins and unmaintained restrooms, and the park staff trying to hold it all together will be overwhelmed. If you do head out to your favorite parks this summer, please be sure to pack a little patience. Even better, thank a ranger for working so hard while under duress.

This is also a good time to think about seeing your parks in a different way. Going early, or late, or at off-peak times may not only help ease the burden on park staff but also open your eyes to new experiences.

"Parks After Dark" (p. 34), about how more visitors are seeking out nighttime experiences in parks, brought back a particularly fond memory. In 2016, I was able to join a star party at Mojave National Preserve hosted by NPCA and our partners. To see the splendor of the universe unfold in those impossibly dark skies really was the stuff of bucket lists. But it was just as moving to share the joy of the young people there, some of whom were not only seeing the Milky Way for the first time but also making their first-ever visit to a national park site. To watch their wonder come alive reminded me then, just as it reminds me now in this dark and uncertain time, that the parks have a way of bringing out the best in all of us, and that will always be worth fighting for.

With gratitude,
Theresa Pierno

NationalParks

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VOLUNTEER Rich Doucette erasing graffiti.

Helping Hands

A ranger I spoke to when reporting on the mass firing of probationary workers at the Park Service (p. 31) told me that seasonal volunteers outnumber seasonal staff at Voyageurs National Park. “There’s no way we can even keep our visitor centers open without them,” she said. “We definitely lean on volunteers too much for positions that should be paid.”

Relying on unpaid workers is clearly not the solution to the chronic understaffing that plagues the park system, full stop. But at the same time, there is no denying that volunteering in national parks provides any number of benefits. The all-around good vibes that pitching in can produce is more than evident in Nicolas Brulliard’s story “The Erasers” (p. 42). Nicolas joined a crew of volunteers (plus one ranger) who spent three days ricocheting around Glen Canyon National Recreation Area to remove graffiti carved into sandstone there. If you poke around online (as I recently did while dreaming about summer travels), you’ll find that you can easily sign up for volunteer projects — for a day, a week or longer — in a range of gorgeous parks. As I write this, some colleagues are headed to Shenandoah National Park to join a pre-season cleanup day. Having volunteered myself at numerous parks over the years, I can attest to how fulfilling it can be to spend a few hours pulling out weeds or picking up trash.

It’s been a frightening time for public lands as you’ll read in our cover story (p. 24), and many of us are trying to figure out what to do about it. Keep calling Congress (p. 29), but also consider giving some of your time to parks. When I’m weighed down with worry, getting my hands dirty alongside other community-minded people always makes me feel better. I hope some of you have a chance to clear trails or scrub away graffiti this summer. Helping out is a win-win-win: good for parks, good for visitors and good for the soul!

Rona Marech
 NPMAG@NPCA.ORG



WHO WE ARE

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

WHAT WE DO

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

EDITORIAL MISSION

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

MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Members can help defend America’s natural and cultural heritage. Activists alert Congress and the administration to park threats, comment on park planning and adjacent land-use decisions, assist NPCA in developing partnerships, and educate the public and the media. Sign up to receive Park Notes, our monthly email newsletter at npca.org/join.

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To donate, please visit npca.org or call 800.628.7275. For information about bequests, planned gifts and matching gifts, call our Development Department, extension 145 or 146.

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A PROUD AUNT

Your Spring issue contained an article about recycling found objects [“From Sea Scrap to Sculpture”], and it reminded me of my niece, Jill Pitko. Jill leads a Girl Scout troop of which her 11-year-old daughter, Luna, is a member.

Jill recently worked with her troop to design and build a larger-than-life jellyfish made of debris found washed up on the shores of their oceanside community in North Carolina. The sculpture, intended to raise awareness of the problems associated with single-use plastics, was displayed at the North Carolina State University Center for Marine Sciences and Technology as part of this year’s Earth Day activities.

I wanted everyone to know that there are responsible adults in the world teaching their children and friends that they can accomplish good things for the environment, even at a young age.

BARBARA FORRESTER

Lake Placid, FL

MIDWEST LOVE

I enjoyed the photo essay about ice climbing in Yellowstone [“Chasing the Ice”]. For those interested in a less extreme approach to this winter sport, Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore hosts the annual Michigan Ice Fest in February. The festival offers something for everyone, from courses in entry-level climbing to challenging climbs for more seasoned climbers. 2025 had great ice and was well attended. You can check it out on YouTube.

LAURA ROTEGARD

Indianola, WA

PADRE ISLAND PROPOSAL

I read with interest “Exotic Antics” about the invasion of nilgai antelope at Padre Island National Seashore in South Texas. An easy solution would be for the National Park Service to hold a guided hunt. The antelope could bring a profit to the park if the hunting fee were comparable to that charged by King Ranch. Once the nilgai have been eradicated from the park, King Ranch should be fined if more appear.

MARILYN DUSCHL

Three Lakes, WI

***Editor’s Note:** While a select number of national park sites allow hunters to help with species management, the legislation that established Padre Island National Seashore does not allow for recreational hunting in the park.*

FINANCIAL BURDEN

The article “More from the Coastal Debris Files,” which provided an update on the collapsing homes at Cape Hatteras National Seashore, called attention to the 2023 purchase of two homes for over \$700,000 with money from offshore oil and gas leasing. The park superintendent appears to consider this a win, but as a supporter of NPCA, I strongly disagree.

The article did not explain how the destruction of these houses was any different than the destruction caused by recent fires in Los Angeles, flooding in Kentucky or the hurricane in Tennessee. In all of those instances, homeowners were left to pick up the pieces.

Were the Cape Hatteras homeowners not insured? Why should public money pay for their loss? Building along the coast in tidal areas is no different than

building on a flood plain or in a fire-prone canyon. The owners take on a risk when they do so, and they alone should bear that risk!

LYNN ROSENBLATT

Marietta, GA



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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"There is only one Chesapeake Bay, and it deserves nothing less than to be preserved for generations to come."

NPCA President and CEO Theresa Pierno, as quoted in The BayNet regarding the reintroduction of legislation in the Senate to establish a Chesapeake National Recreation Area. The proposed park would foster public access to the bay and ensure the conservation of the watershed's diverse natural and cultural resources.

"He stood on the rim of the Grand Canyon and said he was going to protect it, and then he did."

Kristen Brengel, NPCA's senior vice president of government affairs, speaking to The Washington Post about President Theodore Roosevelt's use of the Antiquities Act, which he signed into law in 1906, to protect the Grand Canyon. Brengel's comment was in response to Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum's assertion that the law was intended to protect only small sites of archaeological value. The administration is reviewing six national monuments to ensure they are "correctly sized," according to the article. NPCA contends that any downsizing is illegal.

"It's very disappointing to see EPA changing direction here."

NPCA's clean air program director, Ulla-Britt Reeves, reacting in E&E News to a draft Environmental Protection Agency proposal on West Virginia's haze plan that aims to weaken a congressionally required program under the Clean Air Act. NPCA fears the move will lead to less accountability for states and the facilities causing polluted skies in 156 national parks and wilderness areas.

PHOTO: THOMAS POINT SHOAL LIGHTHOUSE, AN ANNAPOLIS LANDMARK, WOULD BE PART OF THE PROPOSED CHESAPEAKE NATIONAL RECREATION AREA.



© JAY FLEMING PHOTOGRAPHY



SINCE 2013, student artwork has been featured in over 130 exhibits at more than 40 park sites, including (from left to right): Big Thicket National Preserve (first and third), Women's Rights National Historical Park, Fossil Butte National Monument and Hopewell Culture National Historical Park.



A Growing Gallery

How one woman's vision turned into a multi-year project that has brought thousands of student artworks to dozens of national park sites.

It all started when Jennifer Marsh drove by an abandoned Citgo station in upstate New York. An artist by training and habit, she looked at the eyesore and saw possibility. What if, she wondered, the structure was blanketed by a colorful quilt that was part public art installation and part oil-independence manifesto? After receiving approval from the local planning board in 2007, she appealed to friends and strangers for fiber art submissions. The response was overwhelming. Individuals representing 17 countries and 29 states mailed her over 2,500 quilted, crocheted and woven handiworks. Marsh painstakingly pieced together and waterproofed the exuberant squares. With the aid of scaffolding and cherry pickers, volunteers then affixed the panels to every cracked and faded surface of the station.

The success of that collaboration inspired Marsh to try her hand at other crowdsourced art, including a gigantic

steel oak tree bearing around 14,000 handmade leaves that now greets the visitors of a children's museum in Alabama. She eventually funneled her artistic vision into workshops and library exhibits before landing on a novel market: the National Park Service. "I discovered the parks were, like, a phenomenal partner," she said.

Since 2013, Marsh's nonprofit, International Fiber Collaborative — of which she is the sole employee — has partnered with more than 40 park sites on over 130 temporary exhibits. All the art is made by youth from around the country. To pull it off, she's called every chief of interpretation she could track down and amassed an impressive index of interested educators. This year, Marsh expects to receive her 15,000th piece of student-created art.

"I kind of feel like it's a calling," she said.

Marsh, who earned a master's degree

in fine arts from Syracuse University, knows a thing or two about art as an outlet. "When I was a kid, I had a hard time learning, and so I really learned best about the world around me through art," she said. The park exhibits not only give students that sort of hands-on education, but they also introduce them to some of the lesser-known national park sites, which Marsh — a lifelong park visitor — finds "really exciting."

These days, the Ohio-based junior high art teacher coordinates about 10 exhibits a year, each with a ranger-selected theme that invites students, working individually or in groups, to explore a park's past, its wildlife or a more abstract concept. The current exhibit at Cape Lookout National Seashore, for example, features 40-odd interpretations of "Under the Sea," while the show opening in July at Salem Maritime National Historic Site will be a meditation on "Revolution and Reflection." The medium is largely open to the whim of the artist. Whatever can be painted, sketched, printed, stamped, sewn, glued or otherwise attached to a 21-inch-by-21-inch canvas is fair game. "I just don't like glitter," Marsh said.

Through it all, she serves as the courier and curator. After lining up exhibits for the year, she mails canvases

to the participating educators. Then when the teachers return the completed artworks, Marsh organizes them, combines individual pieces into vertical panels for display and ships the art to each park. Post-exhibit, the parks return the works, which she disassembles and distributes back to the teachers. (The parks pay Marsh a fee for her services, which she endeavors to keep low so that cost is not a barrier to participation.)

Marsh said she never ceases to be impressed by the students' range of work, from cozy campfires and squiggly stick figures to stirring representations of freedom. At Women's Rights National Historical Park in New York, the prompt in 2020 was "What does it mean to be equal?" Charlie Small, then a student at Montana's Colstrip High School, where half the population is Cheyenne or Crow, painted a Native American woman with a blood-red handprint across her mouth. The portrait represents Selena Not Afraid, a 16-year-old Montanan who went missing on New Year's Day in 2020 and was found dead 20 days later. "Murder is the third leading cause of death for Native American women ages 10-24," the artist's statement reads. "Living

on a reservation shines a new light on equality."

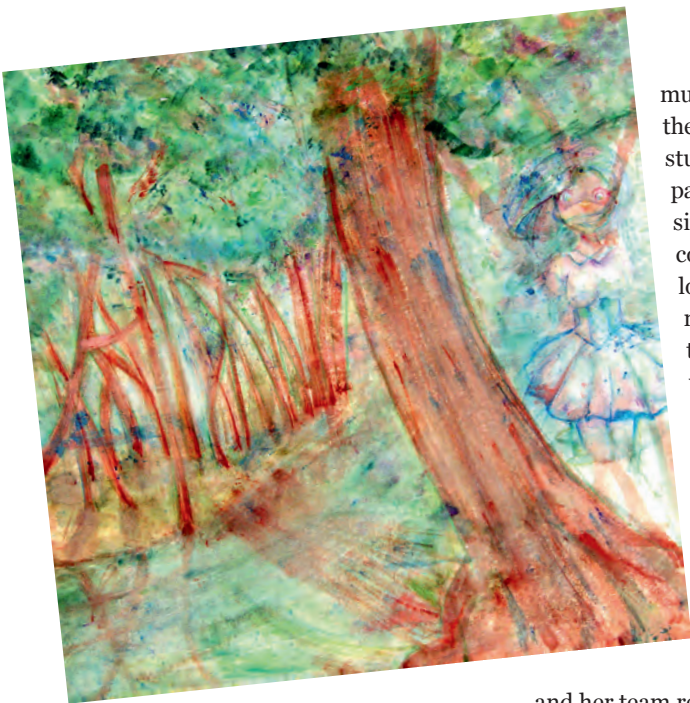
Karen Briggs, the art and business teacher at Colstrip, said exposure to the parks connects her students to the wider world. "We're a rural school, and Montana is pretty isolated," she said. "So it's good for them to learn and do and participate in things outside of their own little box." Briggs, who serves on the board of Marsh's nonprofit, encourages her students to use collage techniques to give their compositions dimension and texture. Over the years, her classes' eclectic designs have featured everything from "fossil" (aka chicken) bones to stalactites that sparkle (thanks to classroom-grown crystals). Morgan, a freshman involved with last fall's crystal experiment, said she was pleased with her group's submission to Mammoth Cave National Park and thrilled that her small town was represented in a park — and a state — she'd never visited.

While high schoolers often take the themes and run with them, Evelyn Abrams has found that her young students benefit from a little direction. "It's like any artist," the Maine educator and illustrator said. "When you're looking at a blank canvas, you're like, 'Oh my gosh, what do I do?'" So she

asks questions, prodding her students to think about what the rangers shared during their classroom Zoom session. Maybe, Abrams said, her second graders will start their drawing of Cape Lookout with a border of bright seashells and fish, or her fifth graders will add undulating mounds along the edge of their work about Hopewell Culture National Historical Park. Once they've overcome their blank-canvas block, "then they just go for it," she said. "They're able to express themselves and tell their story through their artwork." (A few may even have found their future career: Two kids told Abrams they want to be rangers when they grow up.)

Though it's rare for students to view their creations hanging in their final destination, occasionally geographies align. Such is the case for a group of Kentucky high schoolers whose art club teacher, Jennifer Sims, lives 8 miles from Mammoth Cave. This year, park rangers gave the teens an exclusive tour of the homestead of Floyd Collins, a spelunker who died 100 years ago in a cave that is now part of the park — and who served as the exhibit subject. "We got to go out in the backcountry to see parts that usually aren't open to the public," Sims said.

Her students' works have been a



"SWAMPY MEMORIES," created for Big Thicket National Preserve's 2024 exhibit (above). Below: "Into the Cave," made for Mammoth Cave National Park's 2025 exhibit.

much-anticipated part of the calendar. Since 2018, students have riffed on park themes related to the site's waterways, peoples, colors and creatures. "We love taking part, because no matter the theme, there is just this huge variety of artwork," she said. Last year's exhibit, which was a celebration of the preserve's 50th anniversary, was Urban's favorite. "That was the one that really hit it out of the park," she said.

Each January, she and her team receive boxes of multi-hued canvases from Marsh, and they spend the next few days hanging about 70 original works — from whimsical depictions of bears paddleboarding

to impressionistic swamp scenes — throughout the visitor center.

Sometimes Marsh, now a dozen years into a project with no set expiration, wonders whether she'll still be at it years from now. "I'm tired," she said. "And every year I'm like, 'I don't know if I'm going to do this.'" She's racked up thousands of miles on her sewing machine while stitching artwork together and has squirreled away canvases in basements, spare rooms and garages over the lifespan of these exhibits. Yet somehow, each summer, she finds herself picking up the phone to call her park contacts. "I just keep on," she said, "while there are parks who find that we're a good fit for them and we can help serve their mission of outreach."

—KATHERINE DEGROFF

Peruse all of the submissions at [flickr.com/photos/thedreamrocket/albums/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/thedreamrocket/albums/).

mainstay in Mammoth Cave's annual exhibit since 2014. (At the time, Sims was teaching kindergarten through eighth grade.) "I was already connected to the themes and to the area," she said. "It was really important to me that my kids get to take part in this."

Aspiring animator Ashley Banet created two of the seven canvases allotted to Sims' school this year. The 10th grader, who has been selling custom cartoons and portraits since she was 11, said she pored over available research before attempting to capture the explorer's experience. She hopes viewers will identify with some element in her art. "I want them to find themselves in the colors, in the shapes I put in with all the brushstrokes," she said.

Megan Urban, Big Thicket National Preserve's chief of interpretation and education as well as its public information officer, said the park's yearly student art exhibit has become a



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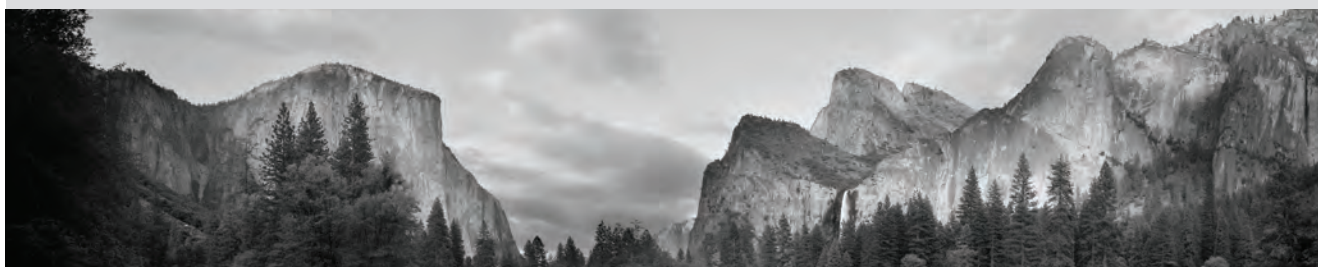
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AKASH PAMARTHY, RICHMOND TIMES-DISPATCH

Battlefield Barkeologists

Hardworking canines are helping staff at Richmond National Battlefield Park identify the unmarked graves of enslaved people.

Last summer, a new sign appeared at Totopotomoy Creek Battlefield. “Attention,” it read, “Dogs Working.” The 124-acre site, part of Richmond National Battlefield Park, isn’t a stranger to four-legged visitors. At any given moment, a half dozen pups might be romping around this former plantation in central Virginia, human visitors in tow. The canine laborers this past June, however, were on a much different

mission. They’d been deployed to seek traces of people buried on the property more than 150 years before.

Richmond National Battlefield Park’s 12 noncontiguous units preserve the Civil War-era structures, landscapes and history of this city (then the Confederate capital). Part of that story played out on what was once a 900-acre estate on the banks of Totopotomoy Creek known as Rural Plains. (The creek

gets its name from Chief Totopotomoi, a 17th-century Pamunkey leader, whose people have a long history in the area.) As Gen. Ulysses S. Grant’s forces marched toward Richmond during the Overland Campaign in 1864, Union and Confederate soldiers spent days advancing, retreating and jockeying for position along this tributary. Today, the site features a 1.5-mile trail that runs by a circa-1725 stone house, edges past agricultural fields and dips into the forest on its way to the water.

Visitors can easily find the graveyard for residents of the main house, which is set off by a white picket fence, but until recently no one knew precisely where the family’s enslaved workers were buried. (It was clear there had been another cemetery because a former landowner had mentioned its existence to park staff.) Tasked with searching a lot of land at a reasonable cost using minimal staff time, the park’s archaeologist, Lexie Lowe, started looking around for a method that wouldn’t disturb the ground.

Kristen Allen, the park’s integrated resources manager, said that they’d used ground-penetrating radar for other projects in the past, but that method proved unreliable and time-intensive on varied terrain. “Those things really have a hard time getting through the forest,” she said. For that technology to succeed in this situation, they needed a way to significantly narrow down the search area.

“The dogs seemed like a really good method to try out,” Lowe said.

So, they contacted Paul S. Martin, the owner of an archaeology consulting firm that specializes in pairing highly tuned biological sensors (read: canines) with more traditional remote sensing methods. But unlike other human-remains-detection dogs, which might be trained to sniff out the scent of those

who died within the last few decades, Martin’s dogs are trained to seek decomposition odors corresponding to historical, even pre-colonial, remains.

Martin said he fell into this line of work while volunteering with a sheriff’s office on a missing person case in 2002. He and his dog followed a tip about the man’s whereabouts to some Native American mounds in Mississippi and, amazingly, his pup started responding as if human remains were present, even though there was no evidence of a recent burial. He started wondering about the limits of canine olfaction. In other words, how far into the past could his buddy smell? “It opened up this whole line of research and questioning,” Martin said. He went back to school, eventually completed a master’s degree in anthropology and embarked on doctoral coursework with a focus on archaeological geophysics.

Today, his crew of handlers and their keen canines — coined “barkeologists” and “snoofers” — have traveled to sites in about two dozen states, including several national park units, and even overseas, where they’ve been involved in the search for World War II missing-in-action personnel. This work, Martin said, helps “provide recognition for those individuals who oftentimes have been forgotten.”

Environmental factors — such as extreme heat, wind and rain — can influence the perceptibility of smells. But in most cases, Martin said, the ideal time for pups to put their noses to the dirt is early in the morning, just as the sun is heating the ground. Such was the case at Richmond National Battlefield Park, where Martin and his dog Abby, as well as veterinarian Kathleen Connor and her pup Seamus, worked two different sites for around four hours a day over the course of about two weeks. Equipped with GPS-enabled collars,

Abby and Seamus crisscrossed 15 acres of uneven and bramble-studded land at Totopotomoy Creek and Glendale, another former plantation in the park. Martin used a laptop to track the dogs’ somewhat erratic paths, building a map of everywhere the Labrador retrievers had run. This information helped him identify any gaps in the canines’ coverage, which the teams surveyed on subsequent days.

“The dog is not just running everywhere,” Martin said. “To the untrained eye, it might look like that. But it’s very much a controlled process, very much like two dancers, in that the handler will react to what the dog does, and the dog will react to what the handler does.”

Even highly trained barkeologists need the occasional break, though, as demonstrated by Abby. “She’s very friendly through the whole thing,” Lowe said. “She’ll come up, say hi, and then go back to work.”

Allen and Lowe invited cultural resources staff from other parks and Tribal partners out to see this non-invasive technique in action. Martin would explain the whys and wherefores of the process, and then they all observed as one of the pups traversed the land.

To everyone’s delight, the doggy gamble paid off. Allen described being on hand to witness the canines suddenly stop, seemingly apropos of nothing, and either bark or sit to indicate they’d smelled what they’d been trained to identify. The experience was “very powerful,” she said. All told, Abby and Seamus alerted their handlers several times at both sites (receiving the occasional treat, toy or praise), but those responses don’t necessarily signify the presence of discrete graves. Rather, their signals are an indication that the particulars of the topography and climate have funneled decomposition odors into that spot.



“BARKEOLOGIST” ABBY sits at Totopotomoy Creek Battlefield, alerting her handler, Paul Martin, to the likely presence of an unmarked grave (above). Opposite page: Abby wears a GPS-enabled collar so Martin can track her movements at Richmond National Battlefield Park.

AKASH PAMARTHY, RICHMOND TIMES-DISPATCH

To confirm the dogs' finds, Martin used ground-penetrating radar soon after Abby or Seamus detected something and then returned in the fall to perform magnetometry, which maps underground features based on their effect on the geomagnetic field, on the identified hot spots. After synthesizing the disparate datasets, he pinpointed multiple burial locations. (In an effort to preserve the integrity of these archaeological sites, neither the Park Service nor Martin would disclose the exact number or location of these finds.)

In time, Lowe and Allen hope the park can honor the final resting place of all those who once stewarded the land. "We want to tell more stories and represent a more complete history of these battlefield landscapes," Lowe said, "because the history is a lot deeper than just the time periods of the Civil War battles." They would like to collaborate with the descendants of those buried on the properties and explore their ideas for how to commemorate and honor their ancestors. To that end, they recruited Orice Jenkins, a genealogist from New England with a personal connection to Rural Plains, to investigate who might have lived and labored at the plantation.

Jenkins first happened upon this Hanover County estate about five years ago while digging into his family tree. He was most curious about his maternal grandmother's ancestry, as she'd been his best friend, so he'd been following that line back in time as far as he could go using DNA, as well as historical records. He wound up in the 1700s, in the Richmond area of Virginia. More specifically, he traced his ancestors to plantations owned by the sons of John Shelton, the original owner of Rural Plains. Through his research, Jenkins discovered that a man by the name of



RECENT GENEALOGICAL work has revealed the names of 90 people enslaved on the Rural Plains plantation between 1739 and 1865. The primary structure remaining on the property is this nearly 300-year-old house.

Bristol, likely the father of his seventh great-grandmother, might have been born at Rural Plains.

Intrigued, Jenkins visited the park and eventually connected with a few rangers. When the opportunity arose for the park to hire someone to assist with genealogical research, Jenkins seemed like a natural fit. He was well aware of the project's complexities. Not only was the search itself tricky — after all, enslaved people are generally nameless outside of probate inventories, which itemize property assets — but many of the records he would have used had been destroyed when the Confederacy set fire to Richmond in 1865. Undaunted, Jenkins pivoted to other sources, and his perseverance was rewarded. "Altogether, I was able to identify around 90 distinct names of people that were enslaved on the land

between 1739 and 1865," he said. One of his most interesting discoveries was a nearly 200-year-old advertisement listing two people, Roger and Moll, who fled Rural Plains (or possibly one of the landowner's other properties) and ran away together. "I'm hoping that they escaped somewhere where they could be free," Jenkins said.

His goal for this research mirrors that of the park staff. "I just want to see these people remembered," he said. "I have trouble saying John Shelton built Rural Plains, because I don't think he did. I think the people that he enslaved, they're the ones who labored to build that house and to clear those fields and to plant those crops. So, I want their names to be remembered and to be called out and to be memorialized in some kind of way."

—KATHERINE DEGROFF

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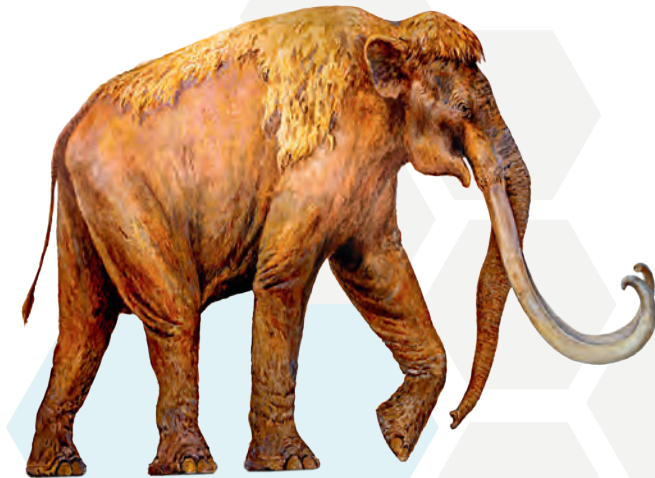
A Mass Revival?

A biotechnology company said it brought back dire wolves. Should these former park denizens be next on the de-extinction list?

Colossal Biosciences, a Dallas-based genetic engineering company, made headlines around the world this spring when it announced that it had revived the dire wolf, a larger and toothier cousin of the gray wolf that was wiped out about 10,000 years ago. Colossal said it extracted DNA from dire wolf fossils and used dogs as surrogate mothers. Most experts saw the claim as little more than fantasy, with one calling it “colossal baloney.” To be clear, NPCA is focused on preserving the parks’ current species and is not endorsing the revival of extinct animals, but nonetheless, the announcement led us to do some fantasizing of our own. Dire wolves used to roam the lands that make up today’s national parks, so what other vanished creatures could be brought back from beyond the brink? —NB

PTEROSAUR, Denali National Park and Preserve ▼

Parks have worked hard to restore North America’s biggest bird, the California condor, so why not revive a truly gigantic flying creature? Denali’s largest pterosaurs weighed about as much as a microwave oven, but their wingspan was equivalent to the height of a two-story house. Denali visitors need not worry: Though pterosaurs would make for an unnerving sight, the winged lizards preferred to dine on fish.



▲ COLUMBIAN MAMMOTH, Waco Mammoth National Monument

This is an obvious next step since Colossal is already working on reviving woolly mammoths. Waco’s variety, the Columbian mammoth, is less hairy, which might actually be a good thing since temperatures have risen quite a bit from the most recent ice age.



CAROLINA PARAKEET, Great Smoky ▲ Mountains National Park

Colonists and others brought a bunch of drab invasive birds to America, such as the European starling and the house sparrow. On top of that, they managed to get rid of the green, yellow and orange Carolina parakeet, one of the continent’s most stunning avian residents and a onetime denizen of Great Smoky Mountains. Why not bring back a dash of color to our forests?



◀ GROUND SLOTH, White Sands National Park

White Sands warns visitors that its animals are hard to see because they tend to be nocturnal and/or tiny, such as the Apache pocket mouse. But Harlan’s ground sloth, the area’s erstwhile behemoth, was as tall as an elephant, so it would be hard to miss. Also, sloths are in these days, so adding this big furball to the park’s roster might boost visitation numbers and plush toy sales.



MAMMOTH: ©IAN DAGNALL/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO
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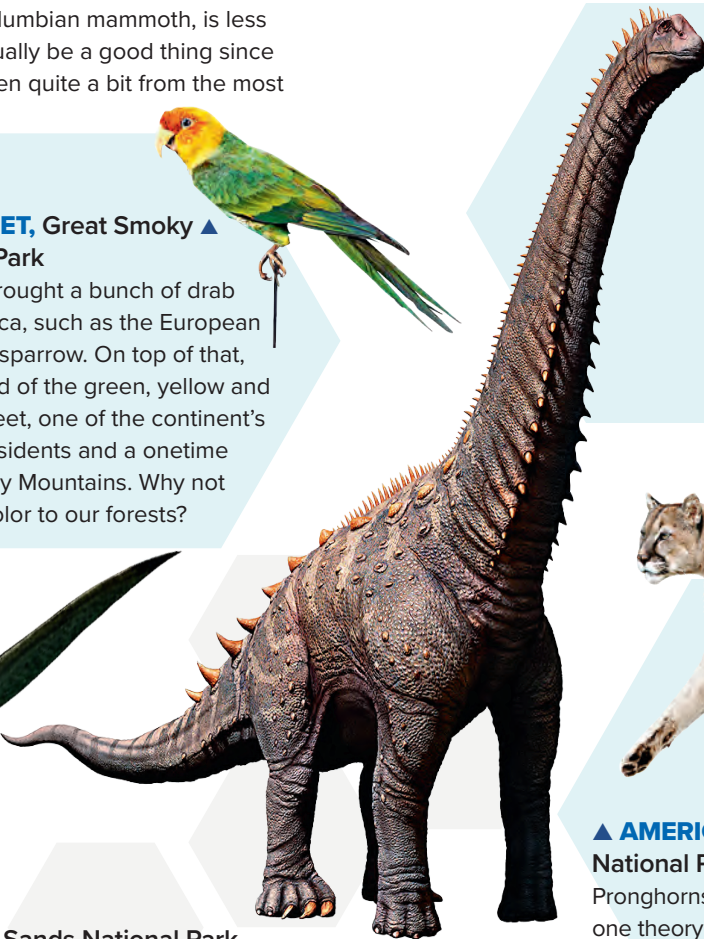


▲ HAGERMAN HORSE, Hagerman Fossil Beds National Monument

America has had a long love affair with the horse — brought here by the Spaniards a few centuries ago. Imagine the depth of affection the horsey folks would feel for a truly native equine. So let’s not horse around, and let’s restore the Hagerman!

◀ ALAMOSAURUS, Big Bend National Park

Remember the Alamosaurus! They say everything is bigger in Texas, and that certainly is true when it comes to dinosaurs. The Alamosaurus might have been the largest creature to ever walk North America’s lands, and a specimen discovered in Big Bend was 100 feet long. Added bonus: The revived dino would make for a size-appropriate state reptile for the largest state in the Lower 48.



▲ AMERICAN CHEETAH, Grand Canyon National Park

Pronghorns are America’s fastest land animals, and one theory is that they got so fast because they had to outrun the American cheetah, which is known to have denned in Grand Canyon. The antelope eventually left the speedy predators in the dust, as the cheetahs didn’t make it out of the last ice age, but have pronghorns gotten a little lazy in the intervening millennia? Restoring the American cheetah would light a new fire under them.

HORSE: ©ROMAN UCHYTEL
ALAMOSAURUS: ©MARK TURNER/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO
CHEETAH: ©ROMAN UCHYTEL

IN MEMORIAM



COURTESY OF CELINE FRANÇOIS

Farewell to Glacier’s famed ranger-poet

G. Douglas Follett, Glacier National Park’s longest-serving ranger, who first worked there for a summer when he was a teenager and went on to have a park career that lasted nearly six decades, died in March. He was 98.

In 2010, National Parks magazine published an extended interview with Follett, replete with stories of reverent visitors, shrinking glaciers and the Blackfeet people he’d first encountered when he moved to East Glacier as an infant for his father’s job at the Great Northern train depot. A World War II Air Force veteran, Follett taught history at Columbia Falls High School, just outside the park, for 35 years, and charmed Glacier’s summer visitors from 1961 until his retirement in 2019.

In his conversation with National Parks writer Amy Marquis, Ranger Doug — as he was known — said that he had started writing poems after the Great Spirit came to him and told him to “get your act together, you bald-headed little guy.” Some of his poetry was about startling interactions with wildlife — an up-close meeting with a grizzly or a golden eagle that blew his hat off when it swept out of the sky to snatch a marmot. He also wrote of the subtle beauty of the park, including this snippet about autumn leaves, which appeared in the article:

“Walk with me when North Winds blow, and whisper of the coming snow. Tossing golden leaves on high as summer bids a sad goodbye,” the poem goes. “These and other things you’ll see, if you will come and walk with me.”

—RM



COURTESY OF MATT BERGER

PURPLE RAYS are one of the distinguishing features of the Panamint desert-aster, a newly described species in Death Valley National Park.

rocks the size of bowling balls and then across razor-sharp limestone that cut his hands and pants.

Good things come to those who suffer. Two hours into his hike, he came upon a stout, spiny shrub with a single purple flower growing out of a crack in the yellowish bedrock. Berger looked closer. It was definitely an aster, and apparently the same species he had photographed before. But that plant was supposed to have yellow flowers. Here was one with a beautiful crown of violet rays. Berger's knowledge of the park's plants is encyclopedic, but this one was stumping him.

"I'm pretty excitable when it comes to seeing a cool plant in general," Berger admitted. "I'll shout and yell. But this one, I was out there by myself. I was just kind of flabbergasted. I just looked at it with my mouth open. What? What is that?"

What it turned out to be was the single-most thrilling thing he had found in a lifetime of botany.

Berger lives in Ohio but spends much of the year in California as a contract botanist identifying weeds and rare plants for the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. Growing up, Berger was first enamored with insects. When he noticed interesting bugs gravitating toward native plants, he started collecting those seeds and sprouting them. Eventually, he grew more intrigued by the plants than the insects. He went on to get an undergraduate degree in horticulture and a master's in plant pathology.

After college, Berger found another passion in thru-hiking. He and a friend first tackled the Appalachian Trail in

2012, when Berger, who is lanky and tall, took on the trail name Sheriff Woody. (His stout friend became Buzz Lightyear. Buzz quickly learned to keep walking whenever his companion stopped to gawk at a sedge or some curious moss.) In 2014, he first hiked the Pacific Crest Trail, which introduced him to the California deserts.

Death Valley itself is one of the hottest and driest spots on Earth, but the park also encompasses a wide range of habitats, from tall mountains riddled with springs to pinyon and juniper woodlands, and it's a wondrous place to a botanist like Berger. "It's just so remote and rugged and beautiful," he said. "There's a ton of plant diversity, really a ton of endemic plants."

Berger was pretty sure the purple-flowered plant that stopped him in his tracks was one of those endemics, but which one? Normally, when confronting a botanical novelty, Berger would consult an inventory of California flowers and plant identification apps on his phone. He didn't find the plant in the one resource he had with him, and since he had no service, he took some photos, pocketed his phone and trekked back to his car.

As soon as he found service, he searched every relevant field guide and website but found no match in California or any neighboring state. Bewildered, Berger decided to fire off an email and some photos to Bruce Baldwin, an aster expert and the curator emeritus of the Jepson Herbarium at the University of California, Berkeley. Baldwin opened the pictures and gaped.

"From a distance, it doesn't look like much," Baldwin told me later. "But seeing those close-ups and especially those purple rays radiating around the periphery of the flowering heads was a shock."

Baldwin replied, telling Berger it

"I was just kind of flabbergasted. I just looked at it with my mouth open. What? What is that?"

might indeed be a new species. To be able to formally describe it, they would need a specimen. Because the flower was in a national park, Berger would need a permit. He applied and received it about six months later. He thought he might have to wait until the following spring to collect the plant in flower, but then, in August, Tropical



COURTESY OF MATT BERGER

BOTANIST MATT BERGER picked up the trail name Sheriff Woody while thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail.

Storm Hilary slammed into California and dumped a year's worth of rain on Death Valley in a day. Berger wondered if the deluge might make the aster bloom out of season.

That December, Berger flew to California for a job surveying transects of the Mojave Desert. He finished his work a day early and drove back to Death Valley. He couldn't bring a plant press, so he MacGyvered one. At a local thrift store, he bought the heaviest book he could find — a Webster's dictionary — and a couple of belts. He

packed these supplies into a backpack and walked back to the plant, which was in full bloom.

"It had mature seeds, it had flower buds on it and good fresh leaves," Berger said. "It had every piece you need to identify and describe a plant."

Berger carefully collected his cuttings, which he pressed between pages of the dictionary. Then he cinched the book tight with the belts. He carried the dictionary back to Ohio and mailed the specimens to Baldwin.

At his lab, Baldwin confirmed with DNA sequencing that the plant was a new species, which the pair named after the Panamint Mountains, where it grows. Last December, Baldwin and Berger published a paper introducing the world to *Xylorhiza panamintensis*, or the Panamint desert-aster.

Berger said that although the flower is new to science, other people had photographed and puzzled over it before. And the plant was surely known by Native Americans in the area.

For now, Berger said, it's fortunate that the Panamint desert-aster grows in remote areas and is protected within the park. But it may already be at risk from climate change, and it could be further threatened if the area is ever reopened to mining. In April, the Trump administration promoted the mining of rare earth minerals inside nearby Mojave National Preserve.

"I think every living thing has a right to exist," Berger said. "I know there are people who could care less. But knowing about the plant, knowing where it grows, is important if there's going to be any plan to conserve it."

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

New Bloom

A plant hunter strolled through Death Valley National Park on his day off. Then he found a flower he didn't recognize.

EVEN AMID the barren, sunbaked moonscape of the Cottonwood Mountains of Death Valley National Park, the shrub didn't exactly scream out for attention. It was shin-high, parched and scruffy looking.

When Matt Berger, a 35-year-old botanist who loves plants so much he botanizes whether he's working or not, first walked by it on a hike in February 2022, he identified it as a familiar native plant in the aster family. He snapped a photograph and continued on.

A year later, on another day off, he found himself driving back to the park to poke around for rare flora. He left his car on the side of a gravel road and walked back into the foothills of the Cottonwood Mountains, at the north end of the Panamint Range, scarcely a mile from where he had been the year before. It was rough going, first up an angled apron of

CARDINALS have been known to attack their likeness in mirrors and windows.



Stone Age Bird?

A cardinal picked up a rock and did something unexpected in Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

O**FTEN, SCIENTIFIC ADVANCES** are the result of long years of toil in the lab or the field, but every now and then they fall into the researcher's lap — especially if that researcher is willing to take a long, hard look at a mirror.

On a sunny June morning two years ago in the northeastern corner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Jason Love and his two companions were sorting out their gear for a multi-day backpacking trip. The trio of scientists was there to set up recording devices to capture bat sounds near shelters on the Appalachian Trail.

Love was done packing before the others and was absent-mindedly looking around the parking lot of the Big Creek Ranger Station when he spotted, some 35 feet away, a male northern cardinal repeatedly pecking at the side mirror of a white Ford Escape SUV. Cardinals are known to attack their likeness in windows and mirrors, which ornithologists interpret as the birds' way of defending their territory against an imaginary — but particularly persistent — intruder.

Love, who is a birder, was familiar with the behavior and found the display “amusing,” but something stood out: After each peck, which

produced an audible “clack,” the cardinal dove to the ground before flying back up to the mirror.

“When I took a closer look through binoculars, I saw that it was picking up pieces of gravel and attacking its reflection with that,” Love said. “I knew that was special.”

Love, the associate director of Highlands Biological Station, a research and environmental education facility affiliated with Western Carolina University, beckoned to his colleagues, Rom Stanek, an undergraduate student at North Carolina State University, and Reagan Jarrett, a research assistant at Highlands. The cardinal was too far away for them to film him with a smartphone, but Stanek happened to have a high-quality camera with him, and the team was able to capture several minutes of the bird's shenanigans. (Love thought about protecting the car from the winged vandal, but none of them had anything on hand to cover the mirror, and he reasoned that shooing the cardinal away would have been futile. “It probably just would have come back,” he said.)

After witnessing the cardinal's hammering for some 25 minutes, the three had to leave to meet the driver who would take them to their trailhead, but Love was already thinking that the description of this incident could make for an interesting academic paper. As they departed, the cardinal was still pounding away. Who knows how long the bright-red passerine had been at it before Love noticed and how long he continued afterward, but Friedrich Nietzsche could well have been describing a frustrated cardinal when he declared that the worst enemy you can meet will always be yourself.

For a long time, the use of tools was considered a distinctly human ability, said Robert Shumaker, the lead author of a revised edition of the book

“Animal Tool Behavior.” “There was the assumption that no animals used tools,” Shumaker said. “And, you know, chimpanzees shattered that myth.” Primates use tools more frequently and in more diverse ways than any other group of animals, but Shumaker and his co-authors cataloged examples of tool use by an incredible variety of creatures, from female digger wasps using a pebble to compact soil around their burrow's entrance to veined octopuses assembling a shelter out of two halves of a coconut shell. “Most people assume that to use tools you have to have hands, and that is certainly not true,” Shumaker said. “We see tool use in all kinds of species that don't have hands, and birds are probably the most dramatic example.”

Among avian tool users, crows have received much attention from researchers, who documented behaviors such as New Caledonian crows fashioning small hooks at the end of twigs or stems to extract prey from their hiding places. It's easy to assume that the use of a tool by an animal is a sign of higher cognitive abilities, but Shumaker said the link is not always there. There is no evidence, for example, that a hermit crab exhibits sophisticated thinking when it picks up a shell to protect itself. “You can never, ever directly examine thinking or intelligence,” he said. “It's invisible.”

Love pored over the relevant scientific literature to find out if what he had witnessed was indeed novel behavior. He found no other example involving a cardinal using a tool, with the exception of a 1940s paper documenting “anting” where birds rub ants on their feathers — the ants being the “tools” in this case — possibly using the insects' formic acid as protection against parasites.

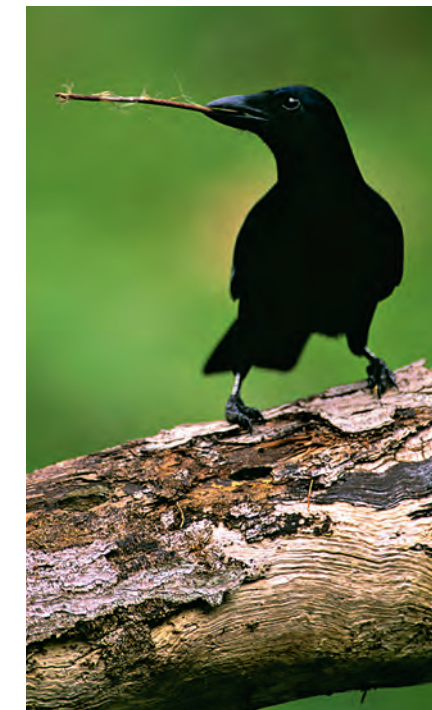
After Love submitted a draft of his paper, a reviewer suggested that he extend his research to include relevant behaviors posted on social media. So Love, Stanek and Jarrett spent “many

“Most people assume that to use tools you have to have hands, and that is certainly not true.”

hours” on YouTube and Google looking for videos of cardinals and other birds fighting or attacking mirrors. “You can go down a rabbit hole pretty quick,” Love said.

After weeding out false positives involving the occasional St. Louis Cardinals mascot and videos that were too grainy, the three found just two videos of a cardinal carrying an object during an encounter with a rival or a mirror, but the object (a flimsy twig in one case and something that looked like a sunflower seed in the other) wasn't used to strike anything. The team also found a few videos of other bird species using a tool while being aggressive, including one of a raven dropping a stone near a dog. Based on what is known, “it turned out to be pretty rare

RESEARCHERS have documented New Caledonian crows using tools to uncover food.



behavior for any bird,” Love said.

The final version of the paper, which Love, Stanek and Jarrett co-authored and published recently in *The Wilson Journal of Ornithology*, also made the point that content from trail, security or smartphone cameras posted online — and evaluated with scientific rigor — could prove useful in figuring out how widespread certain animal behaviors are. “Scientists are giddy about all the data that are out there,” he said.

It's unclear how the Great Smoky cardinal's epic battle with itself ended. Maybe the car owner drove away, taking the bird's pesky rival out of the picture, or the cardinal finally cracked the mirror, either eliminating the reflection or creating “two of it, getting more mad,” as Love conjectured. In any case, when he and the others came back to the ranger station parking lot three days later, both the car and the cardinal were gone.

Shumaker said Love's paper may prompt behavior ecologists to take a closer look at a common species that they might have neglected. “It will not surprise me if there are more behaviors in cardinals and similar birds that just haven't been documented yet,” he said.

For his part, Love said the cardinal discovery has inspired him to pay attention to what birds do in addition to checking off species he's spotted on birding apps. “I'll watch birds a little longer, just to see what they're up to,” he said. And just maybe, he might spot academic paper-worthy behavior once more.

“We're planning on hitting the trail again this summer,” he said. “So I'll keep my eyes out.”

NICOLAS BRULLIARD is senior editor of *National Parks* magazine.

PARKS IN CRISIS

Gutting the workforce, undermining environmental laws and rewriting history. How will parks weather an unprecedented assault on their mission?

BY THE EDITORS

FOR THOSE who care about public lands, the news has been heart-wrenching of late: thousands of employees leaving the National Park Service through coercive tactics; threats of national monuments being chopped up and opened to fossil fuel production or mining; a proposed federal budget that would strip more than \$1 billion from the Park Service and could result in the shuttering of hundreds of parks; playing fast and loose with historical facts on park webpages. It's a lot to absorb, and it may be tempting to look away, but now — maybe more than ever — we need to stay informed and stay engaged. And if you're tuned in, you'll see that as dark as the landscape seems, there are reasons to remain hopeful. "The public outcry right now has been amazing," said Kristen Brengel, NPCA's senior vice president of government affairs. "I think we have confirmed the fact that Americans love the national parks and don't want to see them understaffed, underfunded, destroyed in any way." Turn the page to learn more.

A Season of Park Threats

A timeline of the Trump administration's orders and decisions that have harmed national park sites and the staff members who care for them.

"The cumulative impact harms morale and threatens to reduce the ranks of an already understaffed Park Service."
 John Garder, NPCA's senior director of budget and appropriations

JANUARY

January 20

- A federal government hiring freeze goes into effect. Within days, the Park Service rescinds **2,000 job offers**, and hundreds of vacant positions remain open indefinitely. 7,700 seasonal Park Service jobs are exempted from the hiring freeze a month later, but the delay causes complications as spring break crowds arrive and parks scramble to prepare for summer.
- President Trump signs an executive order to begin withdrawing the U.S. from the Paris Climate Agreement.

January 28

Federal employees receive emailed buyout offers. Other proposals, including for early retirement, follow. More than **2,500 Park Service staff** accept the offers by the March deadline.

February 4

Federal agencies are ordered to identify which of their leases can be terminated without incurring a penalty. By March 4, **34 Park Service leases are slated for cancellation**, though the number eventually falls to 11 after advocates push back.

FEBRUARY

February 3

Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum issues **"Unleashing American Energy,"** a secretarial order that calls for a 15-day internal review to maximize mining and oil and gas production on public lands, including national monuments.

February 13

All instances of the abbreviation "LGBTQ+" on Stonewall National Monument's website are altered to "LGB." Some three weeks later, NPCA audits the Park Service's website and discovers the agency has deleted or scrubbed at least a dozen pages related to LGBTQ+ history.

February 24

The administration bans overnight travel as well as trips exceeding 50 miles for federal employees and places a \$1 cap on credit card spending. Previously, staff with credit cards had authority to pay utility bills for facilities, purchase replacement parts for equipment and buy necessities including toilet paper.

March 13

Agencies are asked to submit phase one of staff reorganization plans, which are intended to help the administration reach its reduction-in-force goals.

March 14

- News stories indicate the administration plans to undo protections for newly designated Chuckwalla and Sattitla Highlands national monuments, triggering bipartisan pressure to stop these actions.

- The administration revokes an executive order signed by former President Biden that was designed to strengthen Tribal sovereignty and expand self-determination for 574 federally recognized Tribes.

MARCH

February 14

The administration **fires 1,000 probationary Park Service employees** who are either new to the agency or new to their roles. After a federal judge finds that the firings were unlawful, staff are offered their jobs back, though for many, the mid-March reversal comes too late.

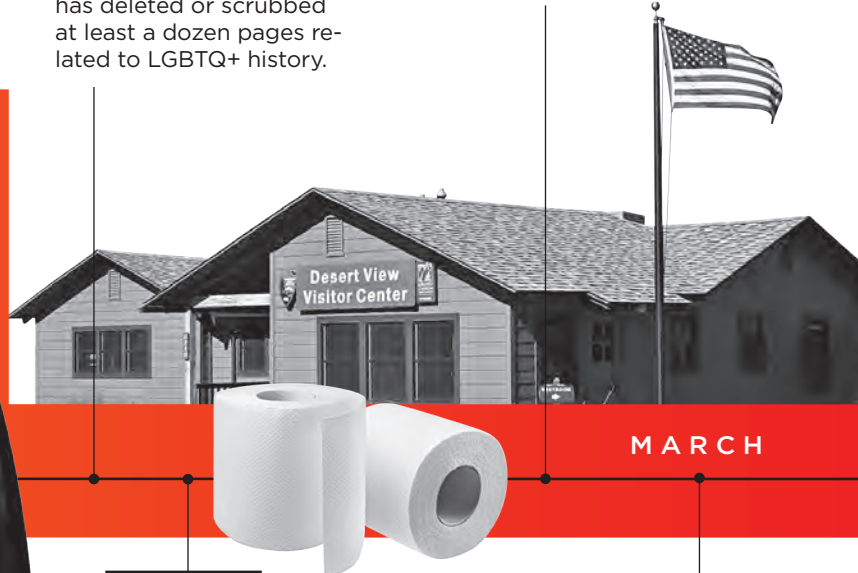
March 5

The Park Service reports that there were **331,863,358** recreation visits to park sites in 2024, the most in the agency's 108-year history.

"LGBTQ+ history is history, period."

Alan Spears, NPCA's senior director of cultural resources

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March 20

The Interior Department announces its intention to open millions of acres of Alaskan land to mining and oil drilling and to transfer federal land to the state to pave the way for a new pipeline and the **Ambler Road**, which would cut through Gates of the Arctic National Park & Preserve.

MARCH



March 27

President Trump issues an executive order entitled “Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History” that directs the Department of the Interior to conduct a review of historic monuments, memorials and similar properties for “partisan ideology.” This order effectively targets efforts by the Park Service to broaden its representation of the nation’s history.

“No agency has been spared from these sweeping cuts — the Park Service is just another casualty of the same indiscriminate slashing hitting every corner of the federal government.”

Kristen Brengel, NPCA’s senior vice president of government affairs



April 6

The Washington Post reports dozens of Park Service webpages have been edited to soften the descriptions of shameful periods of history from slavery to Jim Crow. After an onslaught of negative press, the content on several pages is restored.

April 8

The Supreme Court halts a federal district court order requiring the rehiring of fired probationary employees from six agencies, including the Department of the Interior. Confusion over the implications of this ruling reigns.

APRIL

April 3

Secretary Burgum issues an order requiring Park Service facilities and services to remain open unless closures are approved by the agency director and an assistant secretary within the Department of the Interior. NPCA’s Kristen Brengel describes the order as “more red tape when park staff are already stretched dangerously thin.”

April 7

The Bureau of Land Management issues a press release promoting the continued operation of an open-pit mine within Mojave National Preserve despite the bureau’s lack of jurisdiction.

April 14

The Park Service submits phase two of staff reorganization and relocation plans, as mandated by the administration.

This is a developing story. For the latest news, please visit npca.org/news.



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Q & A: Kristen Brengel

NPCA’s senior vice president of government affairs sounds off on the state of park affairs.

IF YOU’VE BEEN FOLLOWING news about national parks lately, you may have seen a quote (or two or three) from Kristen Brengel, NPCA’s head of lobbying. These days, she has been devoting a lot of time to media interviews, but she’s also doing all her usual business: working on legislation, talking to Capitol Hill politicians, disseminating information and raising alarms when alarms need to be raised. In short, she’s got her finger on the pulse of what’s been happening to public lands under the new administration, so we sat down with her at the end of April to learn how bad things really are and where we go from here.

What scares you the most right now?

My biggest concern is losing a generation of people who want to work for the Park Service and want to grow Park Service interpretation, science and research, and take care of our incredible sites from Yellowstone to Gettysburg to Everglades.

The first Trump administration tried to downsize two national monuments illegally. What will happen if this administration attempts to shrink monuments again?

It’s not clear to me what the legal strategy would be until it happens. The great thing is, we have so many scholars and fabulous attorneys that we work with who are experts on conservation and conservation laws. And we will absolutely take legal action the second anything happens to one of these national monuments.

Does NPCA still believe in creating new history-focused parks given the way historical facts have been removed and whitewashed on park webpages?

We absolutely want to continue to expand the park system. Just because we’re in an administration that may not value those stories, we don’t want to stop protecting these places.

This interview has been edited and condensed for print. To find out more about how to take action, go to npca.org/advocacy.



COURTESY OF KRISTEN BRENGEL

We had a scare recently about green groups getting their tax-exempt status revoked. It hasn’t happened — yet — but can you talk about that?

What I really thought was fantastic is how quickly a coalition of green groups jumped into action, and how thoroughly our attorneys were able to dissect what could happen and prepare us. So I feel like we are well positioned to fight any attack on us as an institution or on anyone else in our community.

Aren’t these attacks on parks going to backfire given that Democrats and Republicans alike love national parks?

We don’t need a poll to tell us that people love our national parks — 332 million people visited national park sites last year. So the parks speak for themselves, and I do believe the administration has struggled to justify cutting park rangers and other staff. The American public is rejecting their indiscriminate, reckless slashing.

What is your advice to readers who want to do something about threats to public lands?

The biggest thing that people can do right now is lean on Congress. Congress is in charge of the Park Service. They fund them, and they govern them. Regardless of who your member of Congress is, we need people to contact them continuously and let them know that you’re concerned about the parks.

—RONA MARECH

A PROTEST at Yellowstone National Park, March 1, 2025.

Resistance Rangers

An underground movement fights back.

SHORTLY AFTER what's been dubbed the Valentine's Day Massacre, when approximately 1,000 National Park Service employees were fired, an informal collective of staffers started an after-work group chat for current and former agency colleagues. Their aim was simple: combat the fear with solidarity.

Originally, the focus was limited to internal support. Members leveraged their disparate skill sets to disseminate guidance, present trainings, raise funds for laid-off friends, share wellness tips and swap morale-boosting pet pics. Within two weeks, the collective's ranks had swollen to several hundred, and their vision had expanded to include public organizing. "I think we realized that this administration is purposefully taking our voices away and separating us," said Ranger E., a founding member who requested anonymity for fear of retaliation. "For us to do our job and uphold our mission statement, we needed to bring in the public, who we know love us."

They created an Instagram account complete with a nom de guerre, Resistance Rangers, and a logo of a flat-hat-wearing skull and crossbones. Mobilizing at warp speed, the leaders of this underground movement then called for a nationwide day of action on March 1. Around 13,000 outraged park lovers converged on 170-odd park sites, bearing signs with messages such as "Make America grateful for federal workers again" and "Fire DOGE not rangers." The outcry garnered coverage in outlets from the Los Angeles Times to The New York Times. The Resistance Rangers, now over 1,000 members strong, repeated the effort later in March with similar results. "When we put out the call, people have responded," Ranger E. said.

At one of those rallies, at Great Falls Park in Virginia, around 30 fired-up



attendees — including a 6-year-old junior ranger and a Swedish-born artist in his 50s — waved posters and voiced their concerns about the loss of park staff and the potential privatization and mining of public lands. "This is the only inheritance I have," said a woman leading the group chants.

No one present claimed to be a Resistance Ranger, but many said they've been following the group closely. "I'm at the point where I have notifications turned on for Instagram for Resistance Rangers," said Nicole, a New York transplant. "I need to know everything."

The group's master plan continues to evolve, but Ranger E. said it likely will fea-

ture more demonstrations once the agency unveils its reduction-in-force plan. In the interim, the members are expanding their website and social media presence and providing avenues for community building and civic engagement. (Their website, for example, pairs park threats with suggested actions, such as emailing the secretary of the Interior to demand a halt to job cuts.) Undergirding everything is the Resistance Rangers' commitment to caring for their national park family.

"Even when it's energizing, it's exhausting," said Ranger E., who has been devoting 20 to 25 hours a week outside of her full-time job to this project. But "that's also what makes ourselves feel equipped

and ready and like we're not just victims."

In true ranger fashion, she invoked the past, referencing the dark epochs — and activism — preserved by the Park Service at sites such as Stonewall National Monument and Brown v. Board of Education National Historical Park. "I have hope because I know, being a steward of this history, that when people refuse to be pushed aside, and when people stand up for what they believe in and stand together and don't let themselves get isolated and continue to show up and continue to push for change, then change can happen," she said. "And that's what we've been seeing in the Resistance Rangers."

—KATHERINE DEGROFF

Voices from the Front Line

What has it been like to get caught up in the whirlwind of firing and rehiring and more firing at the National Park Service?

ON FEB. 14, around 1,000 National Park Service employees who had recently been hired or switched positions were summarily fired. It was confusing and chaotic: Some workers also lost their homes because they were living in park housing. They were told the terminations were performance-related, but many had received sparkling reviews. Because of the sudden staff reduction, many parks had to dial back visitor services. Even before the firings, one ranger said, the summer was going to be an all-hands-on-deck situation because of understaffing, a chronic systemwide problem. "Every one of us was going to have to walk around with a roll of toilet paper and washcloth and be part of the maintenance team," he said.

Other administrations have trimmed the federal workforce, but a so-called reduction in force — or RIF — is unlawful if it doesn't follow certain steps and procedures. That's the position a court took in a ruling a month later that ordered the reinstatement of the fired workers. Many returned, but for others who had already moved on to other jobs or homes, the reversal came too late. The whiplash didn't end there: Additional court rulings in April overturned the reinstatement, and as of press time in May, it was unclear what would happen next.

Though some workers declined to be interviewed with their jobs on the line, others are now ex-employees or believe the stakes are too high to stay silent.



SAM PETERSON, 26, ranger at Lake Roosevelt National Recreation Area in Washington

Sam Peterson was a high school history teacher when he spent a summer interning at Lewis and Clark National Historical Park. By the end of the first week, "I knew that this is what I wanted to do," he said.

Competition for full-time ranger jobs is fierce, and newbies usually start with seasonal work. But Peterson applied to every open permanent position he could find and eventually was hired as a park guide at Lake Roosevelt in northeast Washington. His wife was able to secure a teaching job nearby, and last June, they moved into park housing.

"Being a park ranger is just a dream for me," he said.

In December, Peterson was promoted to a lead interpretive ranger position. He also agreed to direct a project researching the Native American boarding school that had once operated at the site.

Then everything unraveled: The hiring freeze put his promotion in limbo, and in February, he was fired. He and his wife were given 60 days to clear out of their house.

Within a few weeks, Peterson got a new job at a museum in Oregon.

Follow Resistance Rangers on Instagram and Bluesky or find them at resistancerangers.org.

So while he feels lucky in some ways, he also is experiencing a lot of grief and frustration.

"This whole 'Let's run the government like a business' attitude does not make sense to me," he said. "It means you're trying to extract profit — but from the American people."

Though Peterson — a plaintiff in a separate legal appeal before the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board also arguing that agencies didn't follow legal procedures in terminating workers — was offered his job back, by then he'd upended his life and signed a lease on a house. But one day, he plans to work for the Park Service again. "My goal is to serve the American people, to serve our nation's treasures and to share them with the American public," he said.

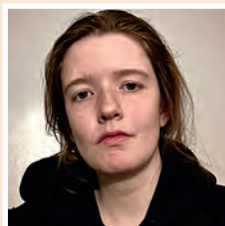


STEPHEN ROBBINS, 70,
*ranger at Jimmy Carter
National Historical Park in
Georgia*

"It just feels so mean-spirited, the whole thing," said Stephen Robbins, who lost his job in the mass firing. "This wasn't really thought

through."

Teaching about Carter and his legacy is a passion and joy, said Robbins, a retiree who began a second career as a ranger following a stint traveling and volunteering at parks around the country. He and his wife bought a house in the area after they were offered park jobs, one more reason he's relieved to be back at work now. But what will happen next? "It makes me fearful about the repercussions of that trauma and what's going to come out of it," he said.



**BETSY WALSH, 27, career
seasonal at Thomas Edison
National Historical Park in
New Jersey**

Betsy Walsh followed her parents into public lands work — they'd had experience on fire crews, in park concessions and so on — though Walsh herself fell into a Park Service career via an interest in public history. She held positions at three historical parks before finally getting her big break — a permanent job — at Thomas Edison.

Moving away from her friends and family in Boston was hard, but "it felt like a very farsighted, practical decision," she said.

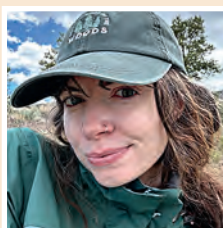
Walsh, whose job entailed everything from working the register to leading tours, was on a planned furlough, a feature of all career seasonal positions, when she was fired. Initially, the stress took a toll: She was exhausted, she broke out in

hives. "I really believe in public service," she said. "It feels very insulting to be told that I'm like a waste or not important."

But after a week, she began to move forward with her life. She broke her lease and returned to New England. Then she got the call about reinstatement. "I want my position back," she said, "but I can't justify moving back when I already moved out, and also when it's possible I'd be subject to a RIF again."

Staffing cuts will have costs that this administration hasn't accounted for, she said. She believes that visiting parks will be more hazardous without enough rescue workers and rangers, and she's concerned about local economies, privatization, drilling, white-washed history, censorship, archive mismanagement and the loss of institutional knowledge.

"I'll be OK," she said. "I worry about the Park Service not being OK."



**OLIVIA FORD, 30, park guide
at Great Basin National Park in
Nevada**

When Olivia Ford was working as a software engineer in New York City, she sometimes spent 14 hours a day planted in front of her computer. One day, feeling burnt out, she typed "outdoor jobs" into a search engine — and that's how she ended up becoming an AmeriCorps volunteer and a year later, a park guide, at Great Basin.

"I found the thing I want to do for the rest of my life," she said.

She was underground giving a tour of Lehman Caves when word of the firings came down. Walking into the visitor center afterward, she immediately understood what was happening from the forlorn looks on her colleagues' faces. By the end of the day, she had turned in her badge and keys. That evening, people gathered at the general store in the tiny town of Baker to commiserate. "I think if I just went home alone and had to sit with just being fired from my dream job, it would be really tough," she said.

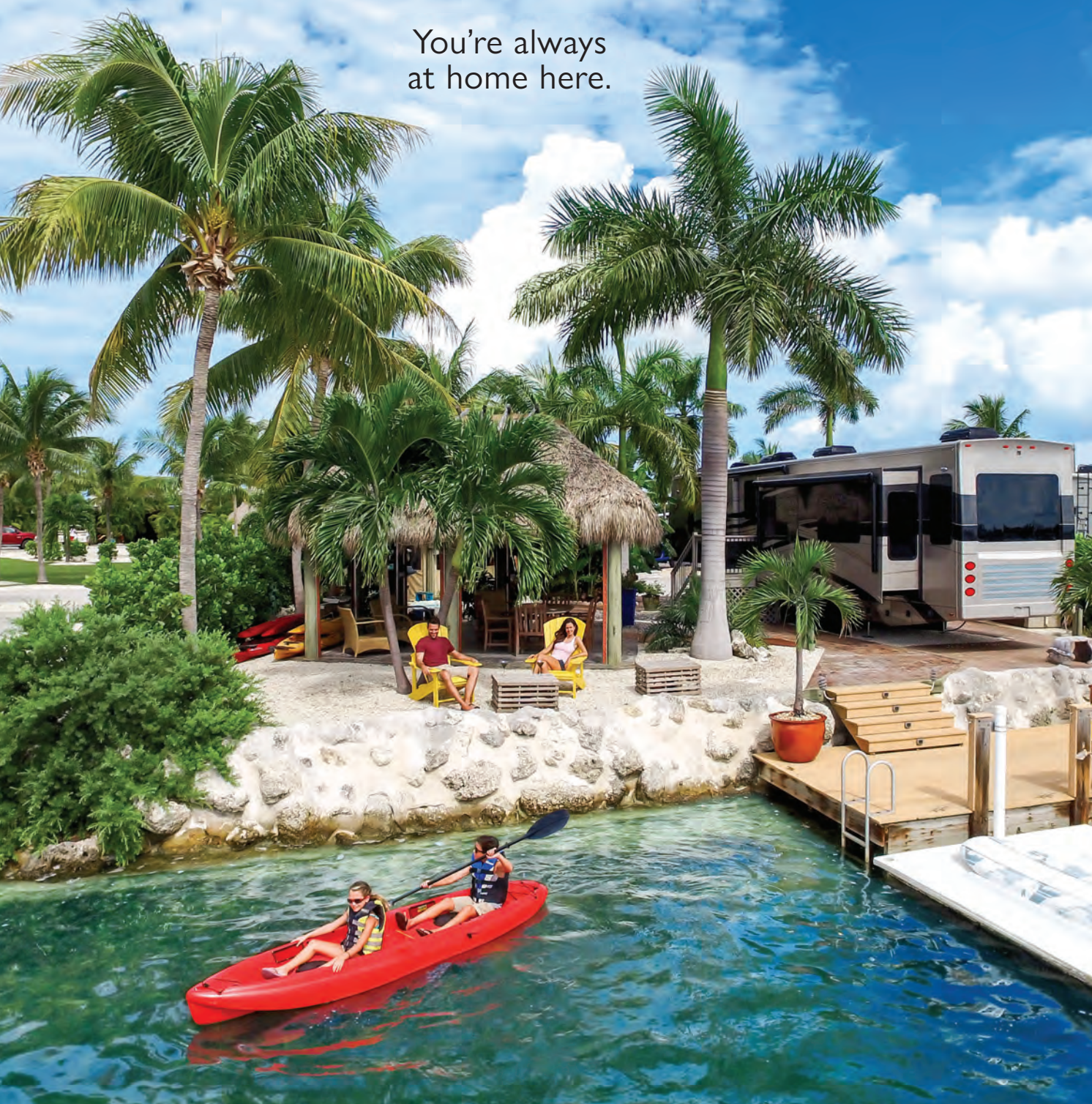
Initially, the park had to cancel programs and reduce visitor center hours because of the sudden staff shortage, but the Great Basin National Park Foundation stepped up to pay for fired employees to return for a month. Ford lined up a job she could do after that, but before she started, the court ordered the rehiring, and she went back to being a ranger.

It's been deeply demoralizing, she said, to see how distrust has been sown toward agencies from the Department of Veterans Affairs to the Department of Education. "People have these jobs for a reason," she said. "All of these things touch the lives of Americans every day, whether they know it or not. To me, that's been the most heartbreaking part of all."

—RONA MARECH

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PARKS AFTER DARK

National parks are offering a growing number of nighttime programs for visitors looking for novel experiences or those eager to avoid daytime crowds and rising temperatures.

BY JEREMY MILLER



he sun had just started to dip behind desert mountains as the hikers began to arrive at Saguaro National Park's Rincon Mountain District, a half hour east of downtown Tucson. The last rays of sunlight painted the sky a brilliant pink. These visitors came on this sweltering early October evening for a leisurely mile-and-a-half hike, but this walk had a twist: It would unfold entirely in darkness.

Dusk offered some respite from a record heat wave — for two weeks, high temperatures had not dropped below 100 degrees. Soon the stars were shining, and the unmistakable scents of the Sonoran Desert — the smoky-sweet resin of creosote, the mineral aroma emanating from the dry soil — filled the air.

Our guide for the evening was Jeff Wallner, an interpretive ranger. A native of Wisconsin, Wallner had worked at Saguaro for over 30 years. He wore a wide-brimmed National Park Service hat and spoke in a folksy Midwestern drawl. Saguaro's nighttime programs date back to the early '90s. Since then, thousands of visitors have participated. Some activities are strenuous and involve climbing to the summits of rugged peaks. Others, like this one, consist of short, easy walks meant to educate visitors about the ecosystems of Saguaro and the nocturnal behaviors of the animals that inhabit this beautiful stretch of the Sonoran. Embracing night is also more of a necessity at Saguaro than in most other parks, since hiking in the blazing daytime temperatures of mid-summer and early fall can be dangerous, even deadly.

Before our group of a dozen or so plodded into the darkened desert, Wallner had us play a game. From a bag, he retrieved several large laminated cards and distributed them to the group. Each featured an image of an animal native to Saguaro — deer, fox, skunk, badger, mountain lion, javelina, among others. Once everyone had a card, Wallner recited short riddles. When we thought he was describing our animal, we would hold up our cards. As we learned, many creatures that call the park home can also be found in northern climes and are not physiologically suited to the desert. Instead, most have developed strategies to survive in this harsh environment. To endure the Sonoran's brutal summer temperatures, they lie low during the day — in shaded enclaves and burrows — and emerge at dusk and at night.

"Things really pick up here after dark," Wallner said.

NIGHT IS BECOMING an increasingly popular time to visit national parks. The Park Service does not keep statistics on

nighttime visits — other than overnight stays — but Jeremy White, a physical scientist focused on preserving the parks' night skies, said that in the course of his work he's seen an increase in nighttime visitation in parks, often because of activities related to astrophotography, stargazing or the observation of natural phenomena such as meteor showers and aurora borealis. Park visits are on the rise overall, and at crowded national parks that limit daytime entries during the high season, some visitors without the required permits are getting in before sunrise or later in the evening. While the agency has no direct evidence that climate change is contributing to a modification in visitation patterns, White said, high temperatures are altering visitors' schedules in some locations. "The parks, especially the desert parks, are definitely encouraging visitors to push their activities into the early morning or later into the evening," he said. "The staffs know that that this means increased visitation at night."

Schedules vary from one year to the next, but more than 100 national park sites have offered night programs. While

many of these focus on astronomy, there is much more to do at night in the parks than marvel at stars overhead. At Voyageurs National Park in Minnesota, one of the nation's darkest parks, the Park Service has operated nighttime boat tours on Namakan Lake, which straddles the U.S.-Canada border. At Bryce Canyon, White Sands and Canyonlands national parks, visitors can embark on guided nighttime walks. Darkness is only one part of the night experience. As the clamor of day fades, the rich soundscapes of the parks emerge — the crashing of ocean surf, the sluicing of mountain streams, the whistling of wind through stands of pines. And sometimes, at places like Saguaro, park-goers can contemplate — and even commune with — a menagerie of animals roaming the night.

Growing numbers of travelers are also exploring the parks at night on their own, White said. These self-guided visits often entail night photography or venturing into the backcountry with headlamps. My first experience in a national park at night was back in the 1990s on a hike to the summit of Longs

Peak, in Rocky Mountain, which we began on a brisk August night in the light of a full moon.

Many parks are located far away from urban centers and have taken steps to mitigate light pollution. As a result, more than 40 national park sites are now certified as International Dark Sky Places by the group DarkSky International. Some of the darkest and remotest national parks, such as Death Valley and Big Bend, have become de facto stargazing meccas with night programs focused heavily on astronomy. Other dark sky parks, such as Chaco Culture National Historical Park in New Mexico, Glacier National Park in Montana and Great Basin National Park in Nevada, boast their own observatories. At Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve in Colorado, visitors have attended night photography sessions, learning techniques to photograph the Milky Way and other celestial objects. "Visitor interest in experiencing naturally dark night skies has definitely grown over the past 20 years," said Karen Henker, a spokesperson at Arches and Canyonlands national



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WHITE SANDS NATIONAL PARK offers nighttime guided hikes from March to November (above left). Above right: In 2023, Saguaro National Park was certified by DarkSky International as a location that provides visitors an authentic nighttime experience even in the vicinity of artificial light. Previous pages: Visitors stargaze from Shenandoah National Park's Big Meadows during the park's Night Sky Festival.



NPS/ANTHONY SLEIMAN

EVERGLADES NATIONAL PARK visitors spot an alligator during one of the park’s nighttime programs (above). Below: Fireflies at Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Opposite page (clockwise from top): Animals partially or fully nocturnal, including a javelina, a lesser long-nosed bat pollinating a saguaro and an Ord’s kangaroo rat.



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parks. She said Arches has created an area exclusively for night sky viewing that includes benches for lying down and gazing up at the stars. Other parks in Utah, she said, use overlooks or campground amphitheaters to offer formal programs with telescopes. On clear nights, staff may rove the viewing areas with high-powered binoculars to help visitors take in the moon, planets and bright deep-space objects.

As parks increase nighttime access, they are improving signage and disseminating relevant information, both online and at visitor centers, White said. “We want to make sure that our park visitors are safe,” he said. “That translates to providing good information, making sure people fully understand the risks and are prepared with their headlamps, extra layers and water.” It has also meant that parks have been doing everything from controlling parking and traffic flow to providing locations to set up cameras and telescopes. “We just want folks to understand that these are wild places still and to have that extra level of awareness,” he said.

AFTER WALLNER collected the animal cards, we got in our cars and convoyed from the visitor center to the Mica View Trailhead, a few miles into the park’s interior. As I rounded a corner, I caught a glimpse of a tarantula in my headlights. In the bright light, the spider looked like a furry hand ambling across the pavement. At the trailhead, Wallner summoned us to a picnic table where he handed out flashlights. He turned one on, and it emitted a red glow. The red light, he explained, provides illumination without deactivating the rod cells in our eyes, which are responsible for night vision. Later, Wallner said, he would distribute a different kind of flashlight that emits ultraviolet, or “black,” light. (Those are used for a special purpose, which he disclosed later.)

Flashlights in hand, we set out. Dim red circles bounced along the trail. After a few minutes, Wallner pointed a bright flashlight into the night, illuminating a tall saguaro. Hundreds of saguaros surrounded us in this dense stand – one the park refers to as a “cactus forest” – but the flashlight beam focused our attention on this lone specimen, its arms cast upward against the backdrop of star-fringed mountains. Wallner turned off his flashlight, and the cactus vanished into the blackness.

We pressed farther into the backcountry, and the stars brightened. So, too, did the light dome of Tucson. Despite the

glow, in 2023 Saguaro was certified as an Urban Night Sky Place by DarkSky International, a designation that recognizes places near cities that offer visitors an authentic nighttime experience even in the vicinity of artificial light. Park officials have taken steps to reduce ambient light from exterior fixtures at park buildings and in surrounding communities. “Saguaro does not have the darkest skies of any national park,” said Drew Reagan, communications manager at DarkSky International. “But it is a critical area of darkness in an area very close to a major urban center. It is a refuge for animals and people to escape the worst effects of urban light pollution.”

Indeed, national parks are among the last redoubts of darkness in a rapidly brightening world. In the U.S., 8 out of 10 people can no longer see the Milky Way from where they live. Even if the Park Service today works hard to protect darkness, that was not part of the agency’s original mandate, said astronomer Tyler Nordgren, who wrote “Stars Above, Earth Below: A Guide to Astronomy in the National Parks.” (Nordgren also popularized the phrase “Half the park is after dark.”) “By preserving large chunks of the landscape free from

floodlights, streetlights and billboards, the Park Service, just by accident, was also preserving the dark skies above them,” he said.

Saguaro’s night programs, like others across the country, are not merely aimed at connecting visitors with the night and the animals that dwell in it. They are also designed to educate visitors about the night skies that Indigenous people saw centuries ago, before sprawling cities filled the valleys and climbed the mountainsides. Jacelle Ramon-Sauberan, a member of the Tohono O’odham Nation, co-leads stargazing programs in Tucson and tours at nearby Kitt Peak National Observatory, teaching visitors about the culture and way of life of the “desert people” of the Sonoran. “We have a story that talks about how Coyote created the Milky Way,” Ramon-Sauberan told me. Another story, she said, tells of one of the Tribe’s staple foods, the white tepary bean, which the Tohono O’odham believe was gifted to them from the Milky Way. “To understand our past and to know where we came from, we have to be able to see the stars,” she said.

Spencer Burke, a ranger at Saguaro, said the night sky is critical to understanding the cultural meaning of some of the



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TIME-LAPSE IMAGE of the night sky above the Casa Rinconada kiva at Chaco Culture National Historical Park.

land features and sites that make up national parks, which were part of Tribal territories before being eventually annexed by the U.S. government. Prior to coming to Saguaro in 2023, Burke worked at Mesa Verde National Park, in southwestern Colorado. In his time there, he oversaw the park’s dark sky certification application, which was approved in 2021. At Mesa Verde, the U.S.’s first national park created explicitly to protect cultural resources, the night sky may have shaped the very design of the ancestral sites, including Sun Temple, that visitors come from across the world to see. The Ancestral Puebloans were highly attuned to the night sky and used the moon and constellations as a celestial calendar to help them determine when to plant and harvest.

“For most of our history as a species, we have been looking up at the same night sky,” Burke said. “Light pollution not only has a huge impact on species. It also affects our bodies and our psyche, because we’re missing out on this connection with the universe and that connection with the skies our ancestors saw.”

BACK ON THE MICA VIEW TRAIL, the group moved farther from the parking lot and into the night. We paused near a picnic bench, and Wallner retrieved a plastic bag and handed out small plastic vials, each containing a specific scent. Our task was to identify the smell and then find others in the group with the matching scent. This lesson, Wallner said, illustrates how bats use their keen sense of smell to find their young in colonies writhing with hundreds of babies. The aroma emanating from my vial was pleasing — a far cry from the musty ammonia smell of juvenile bats — and instantly recognizable as mint. Others had vanilla and lemon. In the darkness, our sense of smell was heightened, and we found our scent partners within seconds.

As we pretended to be bats, real ones flitted overhead, pinging out repetitive metallic chits. Among the multi-species swarm was the lesser long-nosed bat, one of the saguaro’s pollinators. The tiny winged mammals — only 2 to 3 inches in length — are drawn to the cactus’s pale, trumpet-shaped flowers, which open at night and are reported to have a perfume reminiscent of the smell of overripe melon. The bats don’t hold back, going in headfirst and coming out covered in pollen, which they unwittingly deliver to the next flower they plunge into. “Bats get a bad rap, but they are really one of the unsung heroes of this ecosystem,” Wallner said.

The next activity Wallner led required us to use our ears — and our voices. He used a small audio recorder to play the calls of the array of birds that swoop through Saguaro’s darkness. Then we broke into several groups with the task of learning one of the calls — the hoot hoot hoot of the great horned owl, the eerie shusssssh of the barn owl, or the poor-will of the appropriately named common poorwill. First, we vocalized our calls individually. Then, like a mad conductor, Wallner told us to

deliver our calls all at once, our voices rising into the night in a deranged avian chorus.

On the trail, I spoke with Gina Mercer, a Phoenix resident visiting this side of Saguaro for the first time in years. “I’ve never been here in the dark,” she said. “It’s so cool.” Mercer was there with her daughter Maddie. One summer a few years ago, Maddie made the trek to the bottom of the Grand Canyon and back up, getting on the trail at 3 a.m. “The temperatures at the bottom were 115 in the daytime,” she said. “There is just no way you can hike in heat like that.”

The longer she walked in the dark toward the bottom of one of the world’s deepest canyons, the better her eyesight got. In the darkness, Maddie spotted the largest scorpion she’d ever seen. (“It was a little bit scary,” she said.) She also found that darkness made the difficult trail seem less daunting “because we couldn’t see how far we had to go, especially on the way back up,” she said.

After about 45 minutes, we reached the turnaround point and began working our way back toward the trailhead. With adequately night-adapted eyes, some people in the group walked confidently without the aid of flashlights. It turns out that night hiking can be not only enjoyable but also liberating once you overcome fear and allow your eyes to drink in the darkness.

And yet night tourism brings its own set of risks and potential impacts. In addition to introducing potential safety hazards

as people negotiate winding roads and rugged trails in the dark, increased nighttime visitation in the parks means more ambient light, from the headlights of cars to exterior lighting of park buildings. Which is to say, without careful management, night tourism can jeopardize the very resources the parks are meant to protect.

Research shows that visitor recreation taking place in wildlife habitat can disrupt animal behavior and movements substantially. A 2018 study published in *Science* by researchers at University of California, Berkeley, for example, found that animals worldwide have increasingly shifted their daytime schedules to accommodate ours. According to the report, “an animal that typically split its activity evenly between the day and night would increase its proportion of nocturnal activity to 68% of total activity near human disturbance.”

Even seemingly modest undertakings such as hiking and mountain biking can alter the way animals go about their business. Another study conducted near Boulder, Colorado, found that species sensitive to human disturbance such as black bears and coyotes shifted more of their activities to nighttime to avoid hikers, mountain bikers and horseback riders. The researchers also observed that some animals, such as bobcats and mountain lions, abandoned certain locations altogether if human activity became too intense. In other words, the ways visitors recreate in protected spaces can drive animals farther into the wilder-

ness and deeper into the night. But how will animals adjust as people continue to encroach on their habitats during their few remaining hours free of human interference?

Nordgren, the dark sky enthusiast, said we must become more aware of our shadowed surroundings if we hope to be better stewards of the night and the animals that rely on it. “To do night tourism better, we’ve got to do it in a way that respects wildlife, that doesn’t impinge upon the sea turtles laying their eggs, or the birds that are hunting at night,” he said. “We have to take care to think about how we humans interact with and impact the natural world around us.” To that end, some national parks, including Joshua Tree and Yellowstone, have prohibited “spotlighting” wildlife with artificial light. Other parks such as Grand Teton National Park are using trail camera footage to reveal critical routes used by animals, often at night, and rely on that information to devise protections for those areas.

Though the main loop roads in Saguaro are closed to cars at night, bikes are not restricted, and all trails remain open to foot traffic after dark. With climate change bearing down on the Sonoran and projected to increase average temperatures in the Southwest by up to 8.5 degrees Fahrenheit by the end of the century, nighttime visitation could spike in the years ahead. Nonetheless, Burke said that with proper training, people can recreate responsibly at night in Saguaro and other parks. “We need to let people know that they have a much better chance of seeing animals and not disturbing them if you keep quiet and use the red-light feature on your flashlight,” he said. “We can balance the needs of visitors with the needs of nocturnal animals.”

At our final stop, Wallner handed out the UV flashlights that he had promised earlier — it was time for the night’s grand finale. The UV light, for reasons not fully understood, causes scorpions to fluoresce. “Shine the light along the edges of the trail, and you might get lucky and find a scorpion,” Wallner said.

With that we headed off, probing the darkness with our ultraviolet wands. The scorpion hunting, however, proved tricky. Pieces of bark and plant material as well as certain rocks glowed under the black light, producing false positives. But within a few minutes, an excited call came from up the trail.

“Found one!” exclaimed a young woman, her teeth glowing in the stray beam of a black light like the grin of the Cheshire Cat.

There, no larger than a dime, amid a scattering of sticks and dried mesquite leaves, was a bark scorpion. It sat motionless, glowing green. It almost appeared painted onto the desert floor. The group gathered around to look at the tiny arachnid.

“Amazing,” said Gina Mercer. “I live here, and I’ve never seen one. I wonder how many of these guys I’ve stepped right over in the middle of the night.”

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© TYLER NORDGREN/SPACE ART TRAVEL BUREAU

The image shows a person, identified as Alex Anderson, standing on a sandy, reddish-brown canyon floor. He is wearing a grey t-shirt, khaki shorts, a green baseball cap, and black gloves. He is holding a long, yellow telescopic pole with both hands, reaching up towards a high, layered rock wall. The rock wall is composed of horizontal layers of sandstone, some of which are covered in graffiti. The person is looking up at the wall, and his shadow is cast on the ground. The overall scene is set in a desert canyon environment with warm, reddish tones.

THE ERASERS

Three days with the graffiti fighters of Glen Canyon National Recreation Area.

After we anchored the boat on Lake Powell's rocky shore at the southwestern edge of Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, the five of us trudged uphill across a vast expanse of sand and thorny shrubs under an unseasonally hot sun. Our destination on that October morning was Wahweap Window and an adjacent sandstone recess, two large alcoves that resemble the orbital cavities of a giant skull emerging from the soft earth.

The formation's hardened layers were deposited eons ago and shaped by wind and water millions of years later, but what drew us there was the consequence of much more recent forces: graffiti. Etched into the rock of the smaller of the two caverns were countless names and dates, many of them overlapping each other. Not only was virtually every easily accessible surface covered, but enterprising vandals had likely used ladders or climbing equipment to reach spots 10 feet high or above. "Wow, there is a lot!" said Rich Doucette, a volunteer, as we scrambled inside.

We moved to Wahweap Window, so named because of a small opening in the back

of it, and the graffiti there was even more extensive. The walls had been inscribed by generations of visitors, and we made a game of looking for the oldest dates. We found an "1887," but was it authentic? A "104 B.C." showed unequivocally that not all dates were. Alex Anderson, the park's volunteer program coordinator, had not visited the Window before, so he snapped pictures of old-looking signatures, including an extremely dubious "John Powell," the lake's namesake.

Amid the numerous dates and names were elaborate drawings — here a shark, there an anguished face reminiscent of Edvard Munch's "The Scream." I was of course horrified to witness such defacement in a national park site, but I found myself feeling a little bit of awe, too. It was clear some of the vandals had taken their task seriously. "Look at this one right here," Doucette said. "The font is incredible."

Our group had spent much of the previous day scrubbing off such engravings in another part of the park, but park archaeologists would have to review the graffiti inside the Window and the other alcove before removal could take place. I asked Jim Austin, a veteran graffiti fighter, how much work he thought it would take to clean up the site. "I'm thinking a hundred man-days," he said. "This is probably the worst graffiti in the whole lake."

VOLUNTEER COORDINATOR
Alex Anderson removes graffiti from a high-traffic area in Antelope Canyon.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY NICOLAS BRULLIARD



WHEN I FIRST BECAME AWARE of the existence of Glen Canyon’s Graffiti Removal and Intervention Team — known by the apt acronym GRIT — a few years ago, I wondered how much graffiti was out there and whether it was possible to remove it all in a park that includes 1.2 million acres of canyon country and some 2,000 miles of lake shoreline. In any case, I thought it’d be gratifying to help in some small way and fun to boat around the lake. I connected in May of last year with Anderson, and he agreed to let me join an upcoming trip.

I had trouble locating the diminutive National Park Service boat dock to the side of the sprawling Wahweap Marina, and when I got there, the rest of the crew was already busy loading gear onto the boat. I greeted Anderson and introduced myself to the others. I would learn more about each of them over the next three days, but it was immediately apparent that Austin, 69,

sporting a yellow Glen Canyon volunteer shirt, a wide-brimmed, neck-flap hat and a worn-out orange life vest, was a regular. I gathered that Doucette, 26, and Elijah Succarotte, also 26, knew each other and were GRIT newbies like me.

Glen Canyon began organizing graffiti removal trips in 2004, the year after a couple of park lovers donated a 55-foot-long houseboat for that purpose. About a dozen times a year, groups of around eight volunteers would scrub graffiti by day, and come evening, the rechristened “True Grit” would anchor in a picturesque cove. “It was a sweet gig,” said Austin, who used to sleep on the deck under the stars.

The program ground to a halt with the onset of Covid. The aging True Grit needed extensive repairs, and the Park Service, lacking the funds and staff to make them, put the boat in dry storage. Anderson, 29, was hired in 2022, and GRIT trips

resumed in 2023 on a Commander Ram, a much-smaller — but faster — motorboat.

National park sites regularly suffer from acts of vandalism, whether that’s spray-painting historic buildings at Gettysburg National Military Park, defacing petroglyphs at Big Bend National Park or carving hearts into aspens at Rocky Mountain National Park. Parks in urban settings are particularly vulnerable targets, but even though statistics are hard to come by, plenty of anecdotal evidence shows that the big parks of the Southwest have been hit hard, too.

The region’s sandstone, some of it covered with a dark patina known as desert varnish, makes for a seemingly infinite canvas, and the only tool one needs is a piece of rock. “It’s much easier to create a mark that is visible with not a whole lot of effort,” said Rachel Adler, an architectural conservator for the Park Service’s



LONGTIME VOLUNTEER Jim Austin tackles the last graffiti of the day in Antelope Canyon (left). Above: Austin, Elijah Succarotte and Rich Doucette (left to right) in the small Park Service boat used to reach graffiti sites around Lake Powell.

Vanishing Treasures program. Adler said that instances of graffiti possibly increased at the beginning of the pandemic, a time when many parks were not staffed but people continued visiting. Since a number of these parks are expansive and staffing levels have not kept up with the increasing numbers of visitors (and continue to drop as the current administration cuts jobs), it’s not difficult for graffiti artists to carve away without a ranger in sight. Adler said she is asked multiple times a year by area parks to provide graffiti remediation expertise. “It definitely is a big issue,” she said.

Some of the most damaging graffiti is done on top of ancient rock paintings and petroglyphs. In certain cases, archaeologists may decide to leave it in place rather than risk altering the original image further. “It’s not a victimless crime,” said Anastasia Walhovd, a preservation archaeologist at Archaeology Southwest and an enrolled member of the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. “It directly impacts Tribal communities, their sense of place and their heritage.”

In 2016, a centimeter-deep “Andersen” was carved into Frame Arch, a geological formation at Arches National Park that is culturally significant to area Tribes. Instead of damaging the arch even more by grinding off the inscription, park staff filled it in with rock and soil collected nearby mixed in with an acrylic binder. That’s why Adler uses the word “mitigation.” “Once something has been graffitied, it has been permanently altered,” she said, “and you can’t bring it back to the way it was before.”

Graffiti in a national park can lead to stiff fines and even prison time, but successfully prosecuting these crimes is a



RICH DOUCETTE surveys extensive graffiti in an alcove near Wahweap Window in the park's southwest corner.

challenge as the perpetrators are rarely caught. Sometimes they are, though. After Casey Nocket drew faces with permanent markers and acrylic paint in seven Western national park sites in 2014, outraged internet sleuths identified her.

She was eventually sentenced to a fine and 200 hours of community service and banned from park sites for two years.

The “see something, say something” approach is a major tool for graffiti prevention. Savehistory.org, a collaborative effort between archaeologists, Tribal partners and government agencies, set up a tip line to report vandalism, as well as the looting and trafficking of artifacts, and several states have established steward programs where volunteers visit archaeological sites regularly and notify land managers about graffiti and other violations. Sue Fritzke, a former superintendent of Capitol Reef

National Park, said enlisting the help of volunteers and visitors is crucial. Once on a day off, she saw two young people jump over a fence and head toward a petroglyph panel, evidently intent on carving their names on it. “All of these visitors were there, and they started yelling at the kids,” Fritzke said. “I didn’t have to do anything.”

THERE WAS ROOM IN THE BOAT for our packs, a 5-gallon jug of water, our tools and little else. Once we all had found a place to sit, Anderson dispensed mandatory safety instructions and set expectations for the trip. “There’s a lot of graffiti out there, guys,” he said. “We’re not gonna get it all.” Then Anderson backed the motorboat away from the dock, and we headed toward our graffiti-rich destination: Antelope Canyon.

Whenever the boat sped up and the engines roared, we sat in companionable silence, but during quieter intervals over the next three days, I would learn that Succarotte was an avid reader

(he had brought “Walden” with him) who had spent time in a Buddhist monastery and that Doucette’s move from Philadelphia to the West, which he had made after borrowing the money for the plane ticket, was a chance for a fresh start. I also learned that Austin was a retired chemist from Phoenix who had been on more than 20 GRIT trips since 2008. “I just love this part of the world,” he said.

Part of Antelope Canyon can be accessed by boat, but much of it is a spectacular slot canyon that can be visited only on tours led by Navajo guides. We would work on a section of the canyon within the park, making sure to stay off Navajo land. As we approached the canyon’s mouth, Anderson slowed the boat, and we glided between the narrowing walls. High up on either side we could see Lake Powell’s famous “bathtub rings,” deposits left behind by mineral-rich waters. (Lake Powell’s water level varies some 20 to 60 feet seasonally — often rising with snowmelt in spring and early summer and dropping the rest of the year — and it has been on an overall downward trend from its 1983 high, in part because of a climate change-fueled drought.) When we couldn’t go any farther, Anderson dropped anchor. We disembarked, carried buckets of tools through the muck to the shore and started walking up canyon.

Soon, we came across graffiti, mostly names and hearts scrawled on the walls. Some looked so fresh they seemed to have been etched that day (and maybe they had been). Others had been scratched into sandstone so friable the perpetrators might have used their fingers.

The most extensive graffiti display was perhaps 100 feet long, and we decided to start our work there. Vandals occasionally use charcoal, paint or permanent markers, but most of the graffiti in the park is carved into the rock. Some of those etchings are so superficial that a squirt of water is sufficient to erase them, but others are so deep they can only be removed using all the tools in our arsenal. It’s crucial not to use a heavier hand than necessary, but the panel we were looking at would require the more intensive approach.

Austin gave us a quick tutorial on how to use our tool set — everyone’s bucket included gloves, safety glasses, a rag, a sponge, a spray bottle, a paint scraper, a couple of brushes, a hammer and a pair of earplugs. “This stuff looks like these scrapers will do a pretty good job,” he said. He scraped steadily at a large “J,” producing a small plume of rock dust. “With some good force like that and you’re basically now done.” He then moved on to a deeply carved “Jackie” and demonstrated how to gently tap the rock around the letters with the hammer before smoothing out the erased inscription. “Obviously, we want as little impact as possible,” he said, “but we definitely want the graffiti gone.”

We each picked a spot and got going. Anderson affixed a paint scraper to a pole to tackle graffiti a dozen feet above the canyon floor. Succarotte worked calmly and methodically, while Doucette chose those inscriptions that required a hammer to efface and banged away, his knuckles white from the effort. I



AUSTIN DEMONSTRATES how to use a paint scraper to erase graffiti carved into the sandstone (bottom). Top: Doucette (left) and Succarotte carry graffiti-removal tools up Antelope Canyon.

zeroed in on a “C+R” heart and started scraping. Soon, sweat mixed with rock powder streamed down my face. Erasing graffiti sure seemed to require a lot more effort than creating it.

So why do some visitors deface national parks? Research into the motivations of those who carve their names over a rock art panel, for example, is nonexistent, said Aaron Wright, a preservation anthropologist who’s written about the challenge of protecting Southwest petroglyphs from vandalism. “They may not even know themselves,” he said. Adler, the Park Service



archaeologist, finds it perplexing, but she wonders if some people simply want to leave a trace of their passage on Earth. “I don’t know if this idea of mortality gets into people’s heads, like, well, at least I can, you know, do something that will last,” she said.

It may last awhile, but sooner or later — at least in Glen Canyon — it likely will be expunged by a GRIT volunteer. One time, Austin found a name and 20 individual years carved into the rock, presumably corresponding to that person’s annual visits to Lake Powell. “There is nothing more pleasurable than erasing 20 years’ worth of graffiti,” he said with a smile. Several years ago, Austin had a unique opportunity to learn why someone had etched his name into one of the park’s canyons — because the perpetrator also carved his phone number. “I don’t remember

his name,” Austin said. “Let’s say it’s Kevin.” Austin called him, and he answered. The exchange went something like this:

“Hey Kevin, I’m working with the Park Service down here at Glen Canyon, and I’m standing on a rock, and I’m looking at your name and phone number in this rock,” Austin said. “You wanna tell me why that’s there?”

Kevin stammered a bit.

“Well, I was with a bunch of people, and they were all doing it, so it was just a thing to do,” he said. He seemed ashamed, said Austin, who told Kevin that next time, he should tell his friends to find a better occupation.

Kevin’s explanation may not seem the most insightful, but it helps explain the park’s strategy when it comes to graffiti reme-

THE CREW’S CAMP in a large cove within Padre Bay. The accessibility of beaches and campsites throughout the park varies as the lake’s level fluctuates.

diation and prevention. Leave a bunch of graffiti in place, and some visitors might think it’s OK to add their own. But if you remove graffiti from one area, would-be vandals tend to stay away. That’s one reason Wahweap Window’s cornucopia of graffiti still stands. Until the park can devote the necessary resources to remove it all, there is not much of a point in erasing only part of it.

Once we were done with our panel, we walked farther into the canyon, cleaning as we went, before turning around at a fork. When we passed the first batch we had cleaned, we took a second to admire it. “I think it looks good,” Austin said. “It looks natural.” The graffiti was gone, but in its place were large discolored splotches. Austin assured me that, with time, those would weather and blend in with the surrounding rock.

The canyon was now completely in the shade, and all but a handful of visitors had left. Just before we got back to the boat, Austin scrambled up the slickrock to reach one last patch of graffiti, high on a sandstone ledge. For a few minutes, his hammer blows echoed through the canyon, and then it was quiet again. For now, it seemed, Antelope Canyon was graffiti-free.

The park’s few marinas constitute islands of convenience in an otherwise unpopulated landscape of rock and water. Antelope Point, where we made a pit stop, claims to be home to the world’s largest floating restaurant, and the docks were filled with behemoth houseboats seemingly better proportioned for the high seas than a shrinking lake. Their names — “Sotally Tober” was one — gave an inkling of the party atmosphere many visitors seek when

they come to Glen Canyon.

With daylight running out, we continued on and looked for a campsite, eventually settling on a windswept expanse framed by jagged peaks. It was a peculiar and disorienting place: It felt wild and mineral, yet it was crisscrossed with tire tracks, and we could see the twinkling lights of the marina and the city of Page across the lake. After securing our tents with piles of rock, we ate a quick dinner (canned tuna and canned corn for me), pondered whether one could see Saturn’s rings with a naked eye, and retired for the night. I was sound asleep in a matter of minutes.

After the morning trek to Wahweap Window and a quick stop at the marina for gas and muffins, we set out for Padre Bay,

about an hour to the east. Anderson was interested in checking whether new graffiti had turned up in areas that had been cleaned recently. He also thought it would be interesting for us rookies to visit a site that looms large in GRIT history.

In 2006, a group of volunteers was working to erase graffiti that included a few Spanish words written in cursive. “Somebody was gonna take a hammer to it, and then another volunteer said, ‘Wait, wait!’” Anderson said. The phrase “Paso por aqui” (“passed by here”) was accompanied by an intriguing date: “Año 1776.” One of the volunteers quickly recognized that the inscription might be related to an 18th-century expedition from Santa Fe to California led by two Franciscan friars. Scientists later studied lichens on the rock, conducted chemical analyses of the patina and examined the calligraphy, and park officials concluded that the inscription was likely authentic.

We anchored in one of the larger coves of Padre Bay. The water was murky and covered in plant bits from a nearby stand of reeds, but I jumped in, eager to shed the sweat and, well, grit of the past couple of days. Anderson, Succarotte, Doucette and I then hiked up toward the Spanish graffiti. We followed a coyote through the narrow Gunsight Pass before scrambling past a sign warning potential graffiti artists of monetary and penitentiary consequences. The historical inscription, which was enclosed behind metal bars in 2016, was barely visible. I understood the need to protect this fragile artifact, but the cage made for an incongruous sight, and some people had climbed on top of it to scratch out more graffiti, including a swastika.

Back at the campsite, Austin had built a fire, and we sat around it as dusk turned to a star-filled night. The air was still, and we could hear the song of crickets and the occasional splash of fish jumping. Soon, what sounded like fireworks echoed on the canyon walls, and the occupants of a nearby houseboat treated us to an eclectic playlist that included “Macarena” and “Wheels on the Bus.”

On our last morning, the goal was to see whether the work of recent GRIT trips in the area had succeeded in deterring vandals. Feeling optimistic, we lugged only one set of tools on the climb up a steep dune. Once on top, we couldn’t find any new graffiti. And the spots that had been cleaned up months ago were nearly indistinguishable from the surrounding rock, the striations from scraping resembling those formed during the deposition of the layers of sand. Back in the boat, we cruised to a nearby cove to check on the status of another recent cleanup. Austin and Anderson used binoculars to confirm that that site, too, was still free of graffiti. Austin, who had helped clean some of the walls he was looking at, said he was relieved.

Of course, I had nothing to do with that earlier effort, yet I felt some sense of satisfaction in seeing that the work — including our own — apparently hadn’t been done in vain. Now all that was left for us to do was to enjoy one last ride on the lake. Anderson turned the boat around, accelerated, and we zoomed by ocher mesas and spires under a bright blue sky.

NICOLAS BRULLIARD is senior editor of National Parks magazine.

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Gettysburg National Military Park and Eisenhower National Historic Site. Courtesy: Gettysburg Foundation

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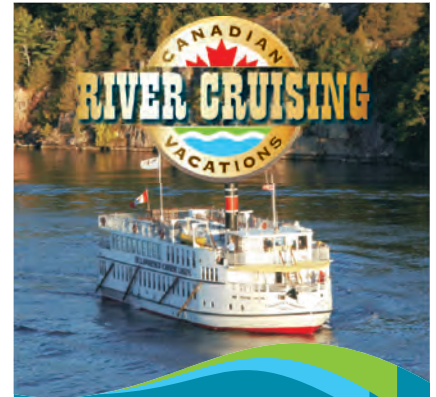
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ANNA KINGSLEY'S HOUSE is now part of Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve in northeast Florida.

That sort of arrangement would not have been uncommon in the early-19th-century American South. But Anna was not just any planter's wife: She was an African woman, and just a few years earlier, she had been enslaved herself. Born Anta Madjiguène Ndiaye into a royal family of today's Senegal, she suffered unspeakable hardship, from her capture as a child to the brutal Middle Passage across the Atlantic and years of servitude at the mercy of a man nearly 30 years her senior who impregnated her when she was just 13 years old. But thanks to her resiliency and exceptional capacity for adaptation — as well as relatively flexible rules around racial relations in Spanish-controlled Florida — Anna Kingsley attained a prominent position in the New World.

"Although I'm sure that's not the life that she predicted or that she imagined, in some ways, she did kind of live the same type of life that she was born and trained into," said Peri Frances-Betsch, one of her descendants. "If you just look at the broad strokes and take out, you know, a sizable amount of the trauma."

These days, visitors can tour the Kingsley Plantation at Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve, a national park site located some 25 miles outside of Jacksonville. In addition to Zephaniah's residence, the plantation includes Anna's house and the remains of the slave quarters, arranged in a half circle perhaps inspired by the structure of the African villages familiar to Anna. But her legacy extends well beyond Timucuan. Many of Anna's descendants have left their own mark as scholars, successful businesspeople and park advocates. And as her story has become more fully known through Schafer's extensive research, her relatives in Florida, the Dominican Republic and

Senegal not only learned more about her but also about each other. "It did work out that way, and it has been a great pleasure for me," Schafer said.

Schafer, then a new history professor at the fledgling University of North Florida, first visited the plantation in 1975 upon the suggestion of a friend. The little he heard that day about Anna and Zephaniah Kingsley was enough to spark a lifelong pursuit. "I was just stunned by what an intriguing story it was, how important a story it was," he said.

Over the next several decades, he chased historical documents and bits of oral history from North America to Senegal and the Caribbean by way of Great Britain and Denmark. He first published a biography of Anna in 2003 and followed that up with a biography of Zephaniah 10 years later. Along the way, he met her relatives in Senegal, many of whom were thrilled to discover she had survived and — to some degree — thrived in America.

Anta was her father's favorite and was a "happy and pampered child," according to oral history that Schafer recorded after corresponding with descendants of the Ndiaye family. As the daughter of the future ruler of the Kingdom of Jolof, she could have expected an arranged marriage to an older notable and a life within a polygamous household. But in early 1806, shortly after she turned 13, she was abducted by slave hunters.

It's unclear whether Zephaniah, a regular traveler to Africa, first laid eyes on Anta on Gorée, an island near the West African coast where captives waited before their perilous journey to America, but he formally purchased her in Havana later that year and brought her, along with two other enslaved women, to his Laurel Grove plantation, south of today's Jacksonville. She was pregnant with their son George when she arrived and would bear three more of their children.

Anta was one of several enslaved

women Zephaniah considered his co-wives, but he seemed especially fond of her and considered her his principal wife. In March 1811, he signed manumission papers for the woman he called Anna, recognizing "the truth and fidelity with which she has served me," releasing her — and their young children — from slavery.

Anna moved to her own farm across the river, taking with her the 12 enslaved people she owned by then. But before long, the area was under attack by militias, Seminoles and marauders during the short-lived and confusing Patriot War, the result of a challenge to Spanish rule in Florida. Anna set fire to the Laurel Grove plantation and her own farm to prevent them from being taken over by the rebels. She "worked like a heroine," a Spanish officer wrote in his report, and later received a 350-acre land grant in compensation and as a reward for her bravery.

Soon, the Kingsleys moved to Fort George Island, where Anna would stay more than two decades — the longest

stretch in her itinerant life. She helped beautify the plantation by designing a palm-tree-lined avenue that visitors use to this day. Her children received a high-quality education. "Tutors have attended them from infancy; the girls have been taught music and dancing, the modern languages and polite literature," a traveler reported. Anna also struck up a friendship with Susan L'Engle, another planter's wife who was white. According to a book written by L'Engle's great-granddaughter, the two often "went off together to the princess' rooms and talked and drank cold tea together."

But after the United States annexed Florida in 1821, local authorities placed increasingly harsh restrictions on free Black people. In the late 1830s, Zephaniah decided to relocate Anna, his two sons and some of their enslaved workers to the Dominican Republic, then under of the control of Haiti, where slavery had been abolished. The Fort George plantation was sold to Zephaniah's nephew in 1839.

Emanuel Kingsley, a descendant of

PERI FRANCES-BETSCH AND EMANUEL KINGSLEY, two descendants of Anna and Zephaniah Kingsley, on the plantation grounds during the Kingsley Heritage Celebration in 2006.



A Destiny Like No Other

Anna Kingsley was an African princess before being enslaved and later becoming a slaveholder. The Park Service and her descendants have worked to preserve her story.

WHENEVER ZEPHANIAH KINGSLEY JR., a prominent slave trader, left his plantation on Florida's Fort George Island, he delegated supervision of the cotton-and-citrus-growing operation to his young wife Anna. In addition to regular duties that included managing food preparation and treating illnesses and injuries, Anna would direct the work of her husband's dozens of enslaved workers and the few who were her own property. "She had authority over all in the plantation when Zephaniah was not there," said Daniel Schafer, a historian. "She would have been a superior figure."

BACKSTORY

Anna and Zephaniah who grew up in the Dominican Republic, said he was told at a young age that Anna wore long white dresses, carried a pouch with money around her wrist and was attended by young servants. “The family always knew and stressed that she was a princess,” he said.

After Zephaniah died in 1843, his sister contested his will in court on the basis that he left much of his wealth to

his Black family. Anna felt compelled to move back to Florida and defend what was theirs, and remarkably, the judge ruled in her favor. “I wonder if that had anything to do with her being like, ‘Oh, you’re going to take my money, my land from me? You clearly don’t know who it is that you’re dealing with,’” Frances-Betsch said.

As late as 1860, Anna still owned four humans, aged about 9 to 17. “I would love

to have had somebody who was in the room with her who asked her, ... ‘Why didn’t you free those people?’” Frances-Betsch said. Anna possibly left Florida after the state seceded, and following the Civil War she lived her final years in the house of one of her daughters. She died in 1870 and was likely buried in a small family plot.

In the late 1990s, Emanuel Kingsley, then a teenager working as an intern at Timucuan, came up with the idea of gathering up Kingsley descendants at the park. What started in 1998 as a family reunion organized by Kathy Tilford, a ranger at the park, later became a public event honoring the complex legacies of Anna, enslaved and enslaver, and Zephaniah, a promoter of slavery who believed enslaved workers should have a realistic path toward freedom. “In politics, in society, we’re losing that ability of just being able to be nuanced, to see the grays and not the blacks and whites,” Emanuel Kingsley said. The Kingsley Heritage Celebration was held annually until this year, when the commemoration slated for February, which was going to include the recitation of some 300 known names of people once enslaved on Fort George Island, was postponed by the park without explanation.

Frances-Betsch said communing with the spirit of those who toiled at Kingsley Plantation is something she does privately. She stands in each one of the slave quarters’ remaining structures and retraces a long list of her ancestors, from her parents all the way to Anna and Zephaniah. She apologizes to all the enslaved who lived there, and she also uses these occasions to honor them, thank them and draw strength from them. “Whatever those people experienced, they lived to tell the tale,” she said. “So whatever you’re going through, you can really get over it.”

NICOLAS BRULLIARD is senior editor of National Parks magazine.

A One-Woman Crusade

During the Jim Crow era, Black people didn’t have access to most public beaches. So starting in 1935, Abraham Lincoln Lewis — Florida’s first Black millionaire and the husband of Mary Kingsley Sammis, the great-granddaughter of Anna and Zephaniah — had the Black-owned insurance company he co-founded buy land on Amelia Island and offer lots for sale to its executives and shareholders and the larger Black community. Soon, American Beach, advertised as a place for “recreation and relaxation without humiliation,” was a bustling resort town with hotels, restaurants and nightclubs. American Beach’s fortunes turned in 1964, when a hurricane caused major damage and the Civil Rights Act outlawed segregation in public places, giving Black vacationers access to many beaches that had been closed to them.

A trained opera singer, MaVynee Betsch was a passionate environmental advocate who found her life’s calling in trying to save the endangered beach community that her great-grandfather had helped found. She donated almost all her money to conservation causes, spoke out against developers’ plans and gave countless historical tours. “If you got within 5 feet of MaVynee, you were going to walk away with a history lesson about American Beach,” said her niece Peri Frances-Betsch, herself a cultural heritage tour guide and a member of NPCA’s Sun Coast Regional Council. The determination of the woman then known as the Beach Lady paid off. In 2002, the National Park Service added American Beach to the National Register of Historic Places, and in 2004, the year before her death, ownership of a large sand dune located in the center of the community was transferred to Timucuan.



THE BEACH LADY, MaVynee Betsch, spearheaded the effort to preserve American Beach.

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GIANT GREEN ANEMONES thrive in a Kalaloch Beach tidepool at Olympic National Park.

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Leslie assisting with the October
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