

Wild, natural beauty abounds in national parks

Publisher's note: *This is one in a series of stories about the National Park Service, which is celebrating its 100th anniversary in 2016.*



Male elk engage in ritualized annual mating behavior during the rut in Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park. Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

By Carolyn E. Wright

I had visited Rocky Mountain National Park many times to hike, bike, and photograph the beautiful landscape. This time was different. With my new husband in tow, we were in search of the elk rut, also known as the mating season, when the males fight for a harem of cows and their calves. The bull elk also will bugle during this time to attract the females and to intimidate other bulls.



Carolyn E. Wright photographs elk in Denali National Park.
Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

We started our afternoon drive from Estes Park where we were staying in the famous Stanley Hotel, which was the inspiration for the movie "The Shining." We followed the main road through the park, stopping to enjoy several overlooks, as this was my husband's first visit to the park. It was getting late and I knew we had to get to the Poudre Lake area where the land is flat and water abundant. There, we should find our goal.



The layers of Canyonlands National Park in Utah. Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

We rounded the corner and saw herds of elk. I couldn't gather my camera equipment fast enough. Fortunately, we were rewarded with several young bulls fighting and other interactions. It's an incredible opportunity to witness nature at work.



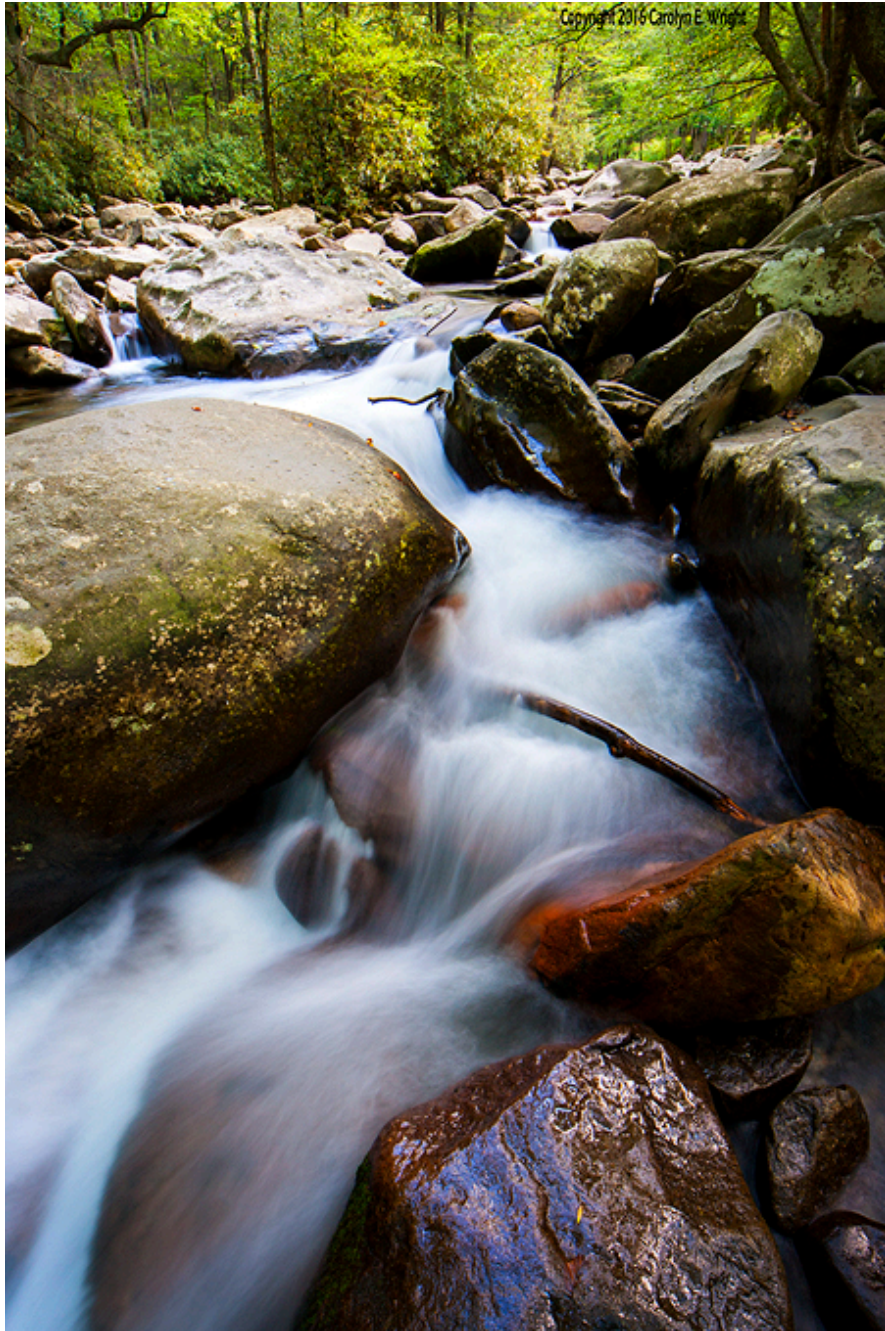
A grizzly finds its salmon dinner in Alaska's Lake Clark National Park and Preserve. Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

This is one of my many wonderful experiences at our national parks. These memories started as a youngster growing up in Tennessee, where my family and friends made several trips to nearby Smoky Mountain National Park. My family enjoyed the outdoors and camping, so I soon started to document the beauty with my camera.



Harbor seals chill on glacier ice in Kenai Fjords National Park in Alaska. Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

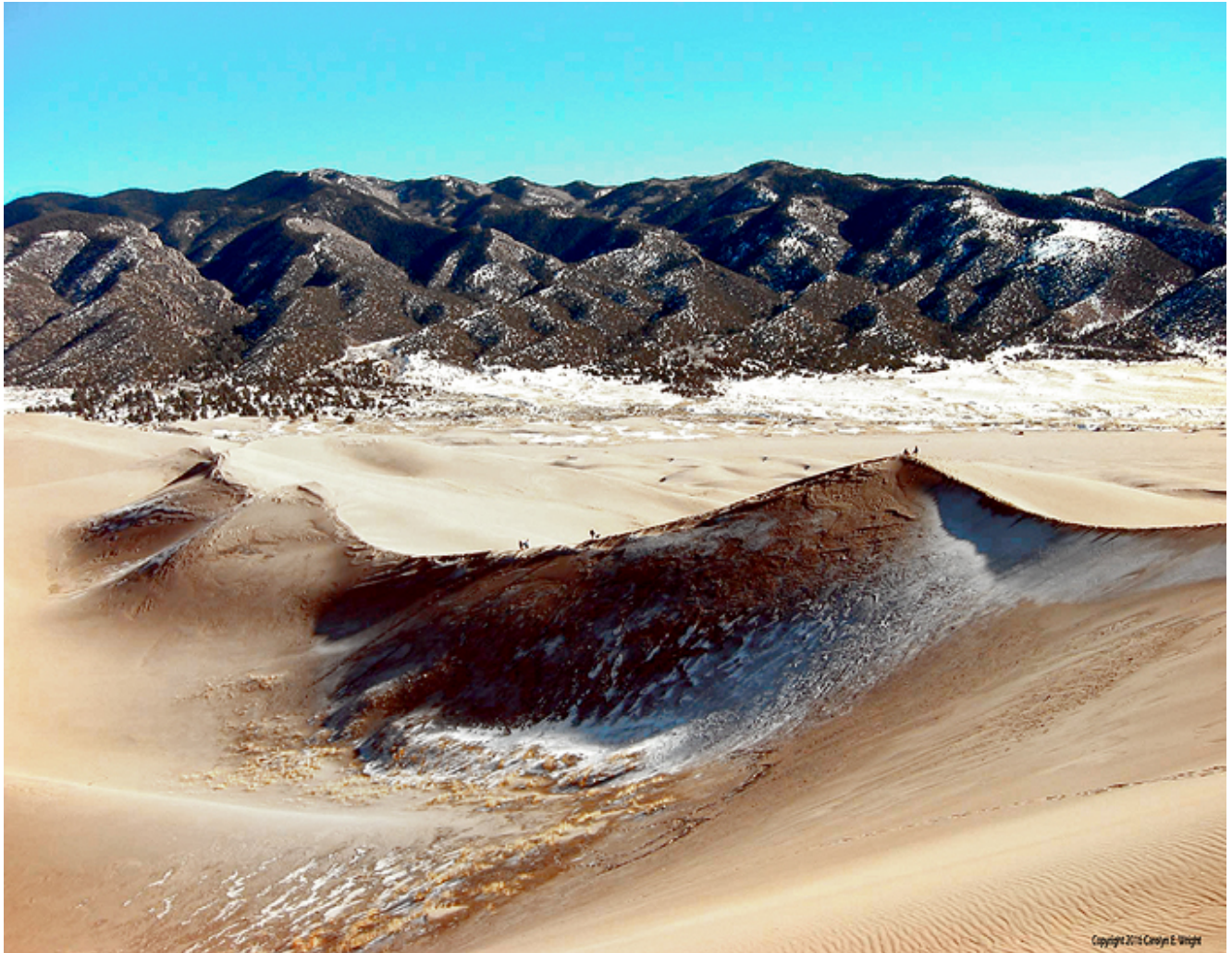
I later added the goal of visiting every national park to my bucket list. While I could spend lots of time and money traveling all over the world, it is much easier and cheaper to enjoy the incredible diversity and beauty of our park system. I don't have to worry about language barriers, passports, or currency exchanges. I also had to travel for work, so it was easy to add a weekend visiting a nearby park to my business trip.



Smoky Mountains Creek flows through Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Tennessee. Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

We have 59 national parks, plus many more national monuments and recreation areas. I've been to 33 national parks (some of them several times), from the Everglades in Florida, to Denali in Alaska, Acadia in Maine, and Sequoia in California. Each park has unique and varied features. Rocky Mountain National Park is my overall favorite because of its combination of extreme mountains and wildlife. Kenai Fjords (sea life,

including whales, otters, and sea lions) and Lake Clark (coastal brown bears, aka grizzlies) offer the closest access to animals. Great Sand Dunes provided the most fun, running and rolling down the dunes. Yellowstone presents the most diversity of landscape and animals.



Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve in Colorado is full of contrasting terrain. Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

My experiences during my visits have ranged from elation to fear. During a backpacking trip in the Smoky Mountains, a wasp stung me, we had to cross a fast running creek seven times, and we got lost for several hours. I've watched a mother bear nurse her cub within feet of me in Lake Clark. I've seen the rare blossoming of fields of wildflowers in Death Valley. The Denali mountain provided the most spectacular view, but it is

one of the most difficult areas to hike because there are no trails in the park. I fought hypothermia during a backpack trip there. An alligator approached us in the Everglades. I hiked to the bottom and back up the steep Grand Canyon. Deer ate berries next to me in Olympic.



A sow nurses her cub at Lake Clark National Park and Preserve.
Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

All of our national parks bestow a plethora of scenic opportunities and a sense of grounding at a low price. Great thanks to President Theodore Roosevelt who started the National Park Service and to those who continue to preserve these national gems.