

# Yosemite – a place for everyone

**Publisher's note:** *This is one in a series of stories about the National Park Service, which is celebrating its 100th anniversary in 2016. All articles may be found via the Home Page, select Special Projects, then National Park Service 100th.*



The grandeur of Yosemite is captivating no matter the season. Photo/Yosemite Hospitality

**By Joann Eisenbrandt**

I grew up loving Yosemite.

I first went there in the 1950s, well before 4 million people visited it each year. It was the best place of my childhood. Every summer, my father, mother and I spent my father's vacation camping there. We set up our campsite in Camp 14, alongside the Merced River and just across a big meadow from

Camp Curry. You could walk out from amongst the closely spaced pines of the campground and stand in the meadow in waist-high grass and look up at the chiseled face of Glacier Point. Or walk across the roadway and through Camp Curry's grizzled old apple orchard and parking lot to the popular ice cream vendor's window just around the corner from the Camp Curry cafeteria.

Every evening, just before dark, we'd put on our light sweaters and stand in the meadow to watch the Fire Fall. A massive fire built atop Glacier Point 3,200 feet above was pushed over its steep face. "Let the fire fall," the echoing call went out as it cascaded down the black and gray granite in a swoosh of blazing embers. The Fire Fall was permanently discontinued in 1968.

During the hot summer days, my mother and I would climb down the sandy banks to the cool Merced River and float downstream on large Army-green air mattresses. They smelled strongly of hot rubber, so we covered them with colorful beach towels. I always fought getting out of the river, even though my mother never failed to remind me what a long hike back upstream it would be. Guided horseback rides from the nearby stables came down a well-trodden path that followed the river's edge. It was a narrow strip of powdery hot dirt full of stones churned up by years of pounding hooves and punctuated by often-steaming mounds of equine droppings.

My parents loved hiking and climbing and had done a lot of it in Yosemite before I was born. They were fearless. They'd scaled the rope ladder up the back side of Half Dome and gone up the steep trail that twisted from the valley floor to the very top of Glacier Point. They'd scrambled over the massive boulders beneath the bridge below Yosemite Falls all the way up to where the waterfall hit the riverbed. I still have my father's Kodak camera and the crisp black and white photos of their adventures that it recorded.



Half Dome from Glacier Point. Photo/George Thomson

I hiked up the 4-mile trail from the valley floor to the top of Glacier Point with my parents. The start of the trail is flanked by monstrous boulders, big as buildings, flung there carelessly by the glaciers that carved out Yosemite eons ago. It was so steep for me that there were many times when my father had to literally push me up to the next plateau. The view from the top was breathtaking. I still compare it to looking over the rim of the Grand Canyon. You can't imagine what it is like from photos. You have to be there.

We also left Happy Isles and made it all the way up the 7-mile Mist Trail to Vernal and Nevada Falls. It is called the Mist Trail because the mist that rises up as the two falls plunge precipitously down to the rock-strewn riverbed below covers the twisting trail of carved rock steps in a shroud of wet fog and makes it terrifyingly slick. My parents told me that when they hiked the trail years before it was even worse. I found that hard to believe.

In the early 1970s, I moved to Oakhurst in the southern Sierra just outside Yosemite's southern entrance and was reintroduced to the park as an adult. I reconnected with places from my childhood like Wawona, the Ahwahnee, and Camp Curry. In March 2016, a trademark dispute between Delaware North, Yosemite's outgoing concessionaire, and the National Park Service brought ownership of those iconic names into question. Delaware North had trademarked them and other park names and wanted the NPS to buy them back for an estimated \$51 million. The Park Service disputed the amount, and decided to change the names of these places, at least temporarily, when the new park concessionaire, Aramark, took over.

New place names don't change the fact that enduring memories of Yosemite stretch back for generations. I certainly have my family memories, and I was lucky to share the even-earlier memories of Eleanor Crooks.

I first met Crooks in the late 1970s when she was already in her 80s. She lived in Ahwahnee, in the Sierra foothills outside Yosemite on a hilltop overlooking a sweeping pine and oak-filled valley. I was writing an article about Wawona for a local lifestyle magazine. She welcomed me warmly into her home. She was relatively petite, but had a lively presence, with the sparkle of youth still in her eyes.

Crooks was the daughter of William Sell. Sell was the first telegraph operator in Yosemite. At the request of Henry Washburn, one of three brothers who owned the Wawona Hotel, Sell built and ran the Ahwahnee Tavern, a rest stop for travelers going into the Yosemite Valley in the late 1890s and early 1900s.





No matter what it's called, there is something magical about this lodge at Yosemite. Photo/Yosemite Hospitality

Crooks offered me tea and we sat down at a small table in her sunny kitchen to talk. She told me about her years growing up at Ahwahnee Tavern. In 1903, when she was about 7, President Theodore Roosevelt stopped there on his way to meet John Muir in Yosemite. Crooks remembered it as if it were just the other day. She described the chief of state as impatient, yet friendly. She recalled her mother's dismay when one of Roosevelt's aides ate all the carefully prepared cookies while the president was out back washing up with the ordinary folks.

Despite all their elaborate preparations, Roosevelt didn't stay the night, but instead rode on the same day, preferring to camp outdoors with Muir in the Mariposa Grove of giant sequoias just inside the park's southern entrance.

Crooks took horse-drawn stage rides from Ahwahnee into Wawona in what she called a "mud wagon." These open wagons had that name, she told me, because in wet weather, by the time the passengers arrived at the hotel, they were often so covered with mud as to be almost unrecognizable. "Toward evening," she remembered, "we arrived at the hotel, with the fountain in the center as it is now. The stage drivers drove up to the steps of the hotel with a great deal of pride. The porters, who were all older men, took the passengers down, dusted them off, and then conducted them up the steps into the lobby."

"On the porch," she continued, "the women associated with the hotel would be sitting in their fancy clothes awaiting the arrival of the tourists." After dinner, there would be singing and sometimes a dance in the dance hall. The next morning, the guests would tour the Big Trees and then continue on down into Yosemite Valley itself.

John Muir was an advocate for the creation of national parks well before his 1903 trip to Yosemite with President Roosevelt. In 1890, Yosemite National Park was established, but was under the control of the state of California. Muir was unhappy with the protection the state was giving Yosemite's unique ecology and began publicizing the need to better protect it. Muir's 1903 Yosemite trip with Roosevelt convinced the president to remove the park from state control and make it a protected National Park in 1906.

Many things have changed in Yosemite since then. When I first lived in Oakhurst, a day pass was \$5 and an annual pass was \$15. Park rangers often let locals they knew pass through for free with only a friendly wave. A seven-day Yosemite vehicle pass is now \$30 in summer and an annual park pass costs \$60.



Those older than 62 can purchase a lifetime pass for just \$10. The most important things, however, have stayed the same.



The Long White at Wawona. Photo/Yosemite Hospitality

I visited the park hundreds of times, and found that you don't have to go down into the valley itself to find wonderful places. Wawona is just eight miles or so inside the southern entrance. My favorite place in the park, it was first settled in 1856 by Galen Clark, who had come west to make a fortune in the California gold fields. He built an overnight lodging facility called Clark's Station which he later sold to the Washburn brothers. Henry Washburn's wife named it "Wawona," an Indian word for big trees.

All the historic buildings at Wawona have names: the Main Hotel, the Long White, Clark's Cottage, Washburn Cottage and Hill's Studio among them. The past that Eleanor Crooks lived is still there. The bubbling fountain full of lily pads and the circular driveway leading up to the Main Hotel's long covered porch are reminders of that quieter time. The nine-hole golf course, established in 1918, still stretches out

along the meadow across the road from the hotel. You can relax on the expansive green lawn alongside the Long White which houses the pro golf shop on the bottom floor. I liked to lie on my back in the cool grass, looking up at the massive redwoods towering above me. I can still hear the clicking of the metal golf cleats on the stone paths leading up to the golf shop and the muted laughter and splashing of those in the white-fenced swimming pool set into the lawn just above.

Down the road from the Wawona Hotel is the Pioneer History Center, accessed via a covered bridge over the Merced River. Beyond it are the Wawona stables. I loved riding, but I was poor. The trail guides worked for the Yosemite Park and Curry Company in summer, but were wranglers in nearby valley communities the rest of the year. In a move that would set modern-day risk managers' teeth on edge, they let me muck out the stalls, rub down the horses, fill the water trough and do other chores in return for free trail rides. The best rides were the night rides under a full moon. The heat of the summer day had been replaced with the refreshing coolness of a high-elevation evening. The trail winds from the stables alongside the Merced River, past the back of the hotel and up the hillside. The crisp night air carried the sounds of glasses clinking and the soft laughter of visitors sitting on the hotel's inviting covered deck.

We would cross the highway, ford a small stream, then come back toward the hotel along the far side of the meadow and the golf course. Through the trees in the moonlight, you could see the herd of mule deer that make Wawona their home grazing contentedly on the lush green of the golf course. They barely looked up as we passed.

The actual community of Wawona is private land totally surrounded by Yosemite National Park. It has its own post office, several grocery stores and The Redwoods, a privately owned rustic resort near the end of North Chilnualna Road, a sharp right turn just beyond the Wawona Hotel. The food there



was hearty, fresh and fabulous. I hear it still is. Just a ways up the road is the parking lot for the trail to the top of Chilnualna Falls. It's a quick hike to the lower falls, but all the way to the top is a steep, twisting trail through lots of gnarly brush that does its best to reach out and grab you. It's an effort, but worth it.

Another great "outside the valley" experience is the Mariposa Grove of giant sequoias. To get there, you take a right immediately after you enter the park from Highway 41. Centuries-old monarchs like the Grizzly Giant, the California Tunnel Tree and the Fallen Monarch make the trees that dot Wawona's verdant lawn seem like sticks. One winter, I took a guided snowshoe hike with a small group from the Grove's parking lot up to the Mariposa Grove Museum and back. I had imagined it as effortlessly gliding across the snow and certainly easier than my one failed attempt at downhill skiing at Badger Pass in a blizzard. Snowshoeing, it turned out, was more labor-intensive than I'd expected. What I remember most, apart from how badly my legs hurt, was the intensely bright blue sky, the shards of snow dropping down without warning from the branches stories above us and the absolute stillness.

The Mariposa Grove is undergoing a renovation now so full access to these wonders of nature won't be available until spring 2017.

The Yosemite of 2016 is still the same spectacularly beautiful place I remember. There are 800 miles of trails in Yosemite and while the valley, Yosemite Falls and Glacier Point are always going to be crowded, there are many places that are not. If you can avoid arriving mid-day in summer or on weekends or holidays and enjoy the park during the shoulder seasons instead, the crowds will be less. Under the Merced River Plan, a comprehensive plan adopted in 2014 to protect the Merced River's Wild and Scenic status, reduce congestion in the park and enhance the visitor experience, changes are starting to be made. Meadows and riparian habitat are being

restored, species like the red-legged frog are being reintroduced, riverbanks protected and traffic circulation patterns and parking sites reconfigured.

The best thing you can do to protect the park and have a memorable experience, Yosemite's public information officer Scott Gediman told me is, "Once you get to Yosemite, just park your vehicle and leave it. Ride a bike, hike, walk, or take the shuttles." There's a "hikers' bus" to take you from convenient locations on the Valley floor to more remote hiking or climbing destinations and then bring you back. YARTS, the Yosemite Area Regional Transportation System, offers public transport to Yosemite from Merced, Mammoth Lakes, Sonora, and just recently from Fresno, including the Fresno airport.

Once you wind your way north up and out of the valley, through Crane Flat to White Wolf, Glen Aulin, Tuolumne Meadows, Lembert Dome or Tenaya Lake, you find a different Yosemite—what I think of as the hardcore camper/hiker/climber's paradise; Yosemite without frills or most urban amenities. The scenery there is starker, with bent, stunted trees from the high-elevation winter winds and giant slabs of granite butting right up to the road with boulders of all sizes strewn about atop them.

Beyond that is the park's Tioga Pass exit. From there, the Tioga Road plummets from 11,000 feet to Highway 120 below. The Tioga Road closes each year after the first serious snowfall and doesn't open again until late May or early June. One year, I drove from Oakhurst through Yosemite to Tahoe on the very first day the Tioga Road reopened after its long winter nap. The road was clear, the sky was blue, but the air had a bite to it. The still-melting snowpack created hundreds of streams splashing down enthusiastically from every high place; even down the steep banks and granite outcroppings alongside the road. Tuolumne Meadows was lush and wet, still covered with small patches of snow. In summer, there is a store made of thick canvas walls erected around a metal shell. It comes down

when Tioga Pass closes each year. All that was there that day was the empty platform and a parking lot devoid of cars.

Across the road from the store is a meadow dotted with boulders—another legacy of an ancient glacier's trek. In summer, it's a great place to sit and eat lunch. On this day, dozens of ground squirrels sat perched atop the rocks. They had abandoned their burrows to enjoy a day in the warm sun, scampering back and forth, enjoying their privacy while it lasted.

To me, Yosemite is more than the best-known and often busiest national park. It's an old friend. While the fact that it has become entangled in 21st century politics bothers me, it doesn't change what makes Yosemite so special.

In July, there was hope of movement in the trademarked names dispute. Delaware North, the NPS and the park's current concessionaire, Aramark, were working together to try to arrange a mediation schedule and hopefully avoid playing the dispute out all the way in the legal arena. Aramark is involved in the mediation but is not a party to the lawsuit. They asked the court to put off the next step in the legal process to allow them time to set this into motion.

A joint status report on Aug. 18 indicated that attempts at mediation failed. It told the court that the parties had "... engaged in preliminary settlement discussions and have extensively discussed the possibility of non-binding mediation, but have not reached agreement on mediation at this time. The parties do not believe that settlement is likely at this time." Yosemite PIO Scott Gediman was asked to comment on the change, but told *Lake Tahoe News*, "Yosemite National Park does not comment on pending litigation."

For me, the Wawona Hotel will always be the Wawona Hotel. Camp Curry will always be Camp Curry. I hope to get back to Yosemite sometime soon. I know that the things I could do when

I was younger may no longer be options and that I will have to find a new set of special places there. But whether you choose to climb the rope ladder up the back of Half Dome, take a rugged backcountry hike from Tuolumne Meadows, hang off the face of Cathedral Peak, or just dangle your feet in the frothy waters of the Merced River, Yosemite graciously accommodates you. That's exactly what a National Park should be—a place not just for some, but for everyone.

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## **Bay Area seashore exudes national treasure**

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Northern elephant seals sun themselves on the beach near Chimney Rock. Photo/Jessie Marchesseau

**By Jessie Marchesseau**

POINT REYES NATIONAL SEASHORE – As a native Montanan, I grew up nowhere near a seashore. I was a teenager before ever even laying eyes on the ocean. Though I have since visited it numerous times, I don't think it will ever cease to be a wonder to me: how so much beauty, life, power and even destruction can be combined into this one body, living, yet not living.

This summer, in observance of the 100th anniversary of our National Parks System, my husband and I decided to seize the opportunity of a recent three-day weekend to explore one of our nearby, and perhaps lesser-known, national treasures.

Just a few hours' drive from Lake Tahoe we took in the sandy beaches, beautiful yet violent ocean waves, rolling coastal

prairies and diverse wildlife of Point Reyes National Seashore.

One of just 10 national seashores within the National Parks System, Point Reyes is the only national seashore in California. In fact, it's the only one on the West Coast, the other nine lying along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts.



The dairy building on the Historic Pierce Point Ranch was once the center of a thriving dairy business. It remains preserved within the Tule Elk Reserve at Point Reyes National Seashore. Photo/Jessie Marchesseau

These seaside preserves comprise a relatively small portion of the more than 400 sites which make up the National Parks System. And at just 70,000 acres, Point Reyes may seem almost tiny next to a 750,000 acre park like Yosemite. But the 80 miles of undeveloped coastline encompassed by Point Reyes National Seashore offers visitors an experience every bit as intriguing, delightful and awe-inspiring as one would expect

from a national park.

Whitewater waves more than 6-feet high crashed onto the shores at Point Reyes Beach while we enjoyed a picnic lunch on the sand, onshore winds ruffling our hair. A washed up log was a makeshift picnic table as our niece and nephew crawled in and out of a driftwood "fort," our three dogs digging holes in the sand and hunting for crab carcasses at our feet.

As dog owners, we always enjoy our adventures a little bit more with furry family members at our sides, and Point Reyes proved to be pleasantly dog-friendly, at least as far as national parks are concerned. It offers three dog-friendly beaches accessible by car or foot, even more if you choose to boat in. Printable maps clearly depicting dog-friendly locations are available online, and the park ranger I chatted with at the Bear Mountain Visitor Center was more than happy to highlight the locations on my free park map where I could explore with my four-legged friends. They do ask you to keep dogs on leashes, clean up after them and stick to the designated areas. But with miles of seashore designated dog-friendly, we had plenty of room.





Point Reyes Beach is just one of the beaches in Point Reyes National Seashore which allows dogs. Photo/Jessie Marchesseau

Most of the beaches at Point Reyes are not swimming beaches. Dangerous, often pounding surf and rip currents deem much of the water unsafe for venturing in. Moderate temperatures and steady winds typical of Northern California beaches don't exactly beckon for bikinis and board shorts anyhow. But the sand is soft, and the views outstanding.

Piling back in the car, our next stop was Elephant Seal Outlook. The northern elephant seal is perhaps the most iconic of the 80 species of mammals known to reside within the boundaries of the national seashore, which also includes the water and land a quarter mile off shore. From the outlook, we peered down on two dozen elephant seals sunning themselves on the beach below and even a few pups frolicking in the water. The cooler temperatures and gusty winds were clearly not affecting their afternoon.

The following day we ventured to the north end of the park in search of the only animal which may rival the seal in its



iconic status within Point Reyes: the tule elk. Once nearly extinct, tule elk at Point Reyes now number more than 400. At the far northern end of Point Reyes National Seashore, spanning a small peninsula called Tomales Point, is the Tule Elk Reserve.

Growing up in the Rocky Mountains, I know elk can be somewhat elusive animals, but upon reaching the reserve, we spotted three bull elk and one cow almost immediately. Continuing on to the designated parking area, we set out on a short hike in search of more. This proved not only a welcome opportunity to stretch our legs, but a chance to stroll through fields of wildflowers, pink, purple, yellow and white, and admire the picturesque coastline below, passing birds, butterflies and caterpillars along the way.

We were soon rewarded with the view of a small herd of elk, stopping to quietly observe as the majestic animals grazed contentedly on a grassy hillside. Returning, we had thought our luck pretty good on the day's elk-viewing excursion. But driving out of the reserve we came upon yet another herd, this time all cows and calves, dozens of them so near to the road I felt I could walk out among them without an elk so much as noticing. I did not, however, and only invaded their privacy with my camera lens.

Our weekend coastal adventure was rounded out with a stop at pet-friendly Kehoe Beach and visits to a few historical locations within the park including the Historic Lifeboat Station, Point Reyes Lighthouse and the Historic Pierce Point Ranch, all glimpses into the colorful past life of Point Reyes.

In the end, I was glad we chose this as our national park trip of the summer. To have a place like Point Reyes National Seashore celebrating and preserving this awe-inspiring aspect of our earth right out our back doors is an amenity well worth taking advantage of. The size and location perfect for a quick

weekend trip, the overall experience both relaxing and invigorating. Perhaps my favorite part though, was being able to enjoy it with family, both two-legged, and four.

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## Mount Rushmore – more than 4 stone faces

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Mount Rushmore illuminates the night sky of South Dakota.

Photo/Kathryn Reed

## **By Kathryn Reed**

MOUNT RUSHMORE NATIONAL MEMORIAL, S.D. – I've never lived in South Dakota, but it's still my home. And nothing will ever change that fact.

My parents were high school sweethearts living in Rapid City. My three sisters were born there. Even though no one on my mom's side still resides in the state, this hasn't stopped us from having regular family reunions in the Black Hills.

Those hills are also home to an incredibly famous rock – Mount Rushmore.

I don't know how many times I've seen The Faces – that's what locals call Rushmore. (My lineage makes me a local, at least in my heart.) I don't recall a time of ever not seeing The Faces when I've been in the state. It's almost like a calling; I have to go there.

A friend asked me "why?" before I went back there earlier this month. I didn't have an answer. Now I do. It's about family, it's about patriotism, it's about tradition.

So many memorials are erected out of tragedy, or are about war and death.

Mount Rushmore is about celebrating the accomplishment of four iconic presidents – George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Teddy Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln. It's a message of inspiration, fortitude and solidarity. It's about being proud of their life's work and what it meant for the greater good of the United States.

It's also about a sculptor – Gutzon Borglum – creating a masterpiece one chisel at a time, one precisely placed stick of dynamite at a time. (Ninety percent of the rock was removed

with dynamite.) Borglum died before his creation was completed. His son, Lincoln, finished the work. This marks the 75th anniversary of Mount Rushmore National Memorial's completion.

It has grown into a destination for travelers throughout the world; with more than 3 million visitors a year.



A path allows visitors to see The Faces at different angles. Photo/Kathryn Reed

One of my favorite memories is 10 years ago when the reunion was over Fourth of July. To see the fireworks light up The Faces, well, it was emotional. It sent chills through my body.

Our family tradition is to go in the early evening to see the transition from day to night. The lighting ceremony keeps evolving, but the awe of the event never fades. The spotlight on those four faces is breathtaking, just as it is to walk in through the Avenue of Flags and have them make a frame of sorts around The Faces.



Calmness washes over me when I see Mount Rushmore. I'm home, I'm with family and the future seems bright when looking at our past.

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# Pinnacles Park – A peak experience

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



Pinnacles National Park is a geological wonder. Photo/Susan Wood

**By Susan Wood**

PINNACLES NATIONAL PARK – Whatever your penchant for an ideal national park, Pinnacles ranks as the most recently inducted.

It was established as a national monument by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1908, and 105 years later, President Obama signed it into law as a park.

“Where?” people ask.

What Pinnacles lacks in fame, it makes up for in grand-scale features.



Condors are gradually becoming more prominent in the park.  
Photo/National Park Service

### **A bird's-eye view**

First, it might be a blessing it isn't well known considering the endangered California condor calls it home. The nesting grounds represent one of a few release sites in the United States and Mexico. Loss of habitat, shootings and poisoning from lead bullets almost did them in when they made the list in 1967. The population has dwindled down to 435 – make that 436 as No. 828 was born in the last few weeks – with 167 in



captivity.

The condor is one of the largest birds in North America, with a wingspan of  $9\frac{1}{2}$  feet. It soars on thermal updrafts at 55 mph, at altitudes of 15,000 feet. When you see one, it is a spectacle to behold.

The Park Service has established an aggressive program to monitor their progress.



Winter rains bring spring flowers. Photo/Susan Wood

“We want to get a general sense of where the birds are,” program park worker Arianna said, while holding a transmitter at a picnic table stationed at the Bear Gulch day use area. Bear Gulch is ground zero for condors, as the social birds can often be spotted in the afternoon flying over High Peaks and swooping down into the valley. The park workers set up a spyglass station to help spot them between the campground and Bench trailhead.

The birds wear radio transmitters that workers track a few

times a day. If a bird doesn't move after eight hours, workers know to go find it because something's wrong.

This is not an easy task. They tend to fly in remote areas and weigh 20 pounds, making it a challenge to carry them out. They nest at night and feed on dead carcasses during the day.

It's a big deal when a new chick enters the flock. Park workers even announced No. 828 on a sandwich board sign at the general store.

That's not all to announce. Pinnacles' terrain, wildlife and lack of light at night make programs unique. There's stargazing, life with bats – which hang out in the Balconies Cave – and in spring, wildflowers that pop out of the ground as far as the eye can see. There are larkspur, mariposa lilies and poppies everywhere.



An array of wildflowers fill the landscape. Photo/Susan Wood

This is especially true this year, as park workers celebrate

Mother Nature bestowing a lot of water last winter that fell on the 26,606-acre park that is split between San Benito and Monterey counties.

*Sunset* magazine rated Pinnacles Campground – which used to be private before it melded into the national park – one of the top 50 in the West. Large meadows give the appearance of a wide-open expanse and plenty of shade from trees form canopies to provide relief from the sun. Many songbirds find refuge in these trees. It's highly recommended to close one's eyes and allow for a pure sensory experience as the birds compete with the gentle winds. For a more stark auditory experience, wild turkeys that roam the land can be heard at all hours.

It's hard to imagine what would happen if they tangled with the also-roaming javelinas.

Granted, it's easy to just hang out at the campground to see how the day unfolds. But there are rewards for hikers wanting to venture out.

### **At ground level**

The terrain at Pinnacles National Park represents a magnificent landscape of rock formations.

The Earth has moved in this region, creating a moving experience for those who take in its beauty. After all, the park is situated very close to the long San Andreas Fault that slices through 600 miles of California. Millions of years ago fault lines divided volcanic and sedimentary rocks that developed an uplifting of land forming steep cliffs. Signs along the Bench Trail from the campground to Bear Gulch highlight the extraordinary geology.





Spring is an ideal time to visit – before it gets too hot.  
Photo/Susan Wood

Erosion from water and wind make the spires and towers seen today. The High Peaks loop from the Bear Gulch area was calculated at only 5 miles, but the spires appear from the parking lot to be a two-day backpack away.

The trek is well worth the effort. Views dominant the hike, with a short scamper on the top of the ridge to the tippy-top of Hawkins Peak at 2,720 feet, providing that top-of-the-world experience.

The return from the Condor Gulch Trail may not be for the faint of heart, but it's definitely suggested for the adventurous spirit. There's a reason this place is a rock climber's paradise. Hiking becomes more like bouldering – with the safety of iron bars and chopped out steps to keep the trekker balanced in some precarious spots.

The scenery is more spectacular at every turn.

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### Notes:

- Pinnacles National Park is located in the Central Valley off Highway 25, 35 miles from Hollister.
- Camping is \$23 for tent sites, \$36 for RV sites with electrical hookups. Reserve **online**.

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# Grandeur of Denali doesn't disappoint

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The road to Denali leads to a world of outdoor wonder.  
Photo/Jacob W. Frank/NPS

**By Kim Wyatt**

DENALI NATIONAL PARK & PRESERVE – After almost four hours on the bus, the driver pulled to the side of the road and opened the door.

“Little Stony Creek.”

We heaved our backpacks over our shoulders and stepped off. The bus receded in the distance. We stood in a massive valley, surrounded by broad-shouldered peaks, rolling tundra and absolute silence.

All my problems rolled away with the bus. Across the valley floor, I saw two boulders tumbling down a green slope. I pulled out my binoculars: They weren't boulders; they were baby grizzly bears, playing. In one swift motion mama bear stood, growing twice in size, nose in air.

“*S hit*,” I said. “We’ve got to go.”

My hiking companion and I headed up a creek bed and were soon in a small canyon, out of any range I hoped the adult grizzly would find threatening. The hike itself was typical of my experience in Alaska: periods of tundra and rocky streambeds punctuated by river crossings and something I rarely encountered in Tahoe, fear. Of animals, wet feet, the elements. Even in mid-summer, the weather was ever-changing—it looked as if the turbulent sky might rupture any minute. And around seemingly every corner were enormous piles of what looked like regurgitated berry pie: grizzly scat. So we’d sing louder to keep them away, maybe every song I remember from the '70s. By the time we reached camp I had just exhausted my Tony Orlando and Dawn repertoire.

I rarely thought about dying when backpacking in Yosemite or Desolation Wilderness. But I did in Alaska.

It's the scope of Denali National Park & Preserve that gets you. At 6 million acres, it's the third largest national park in the U.S. (the top two are also in Alaska). It contains the



highest portion of the magnificent Alaska Range, glaciers and massive rivers spilling into grand valleys. Conservationist Charles Sheldon and dog musher Harry Karstens first wintered in Denali in 1907. Deeply moved by their experience, they lobbied Congress to establish Denali as a national park to conserve wildlife. In 1917, Mount McKinley National Park was created; the park name was changed in 1980 to include the native Athabaskan word "Denali," meaning "the high one." I wanted my whole life to see this massive peak, but clouds had obscured previous attempts. At 20,310 feet, Denali creates its own weather, and doesn't show itself easily.



Kim Wyatt backpacks through the wilderness of Denali National Park & Preserve. Photo/Provided

Except for a lottery held twice a year, cars are not allowed on the road inside the park. If you plan to backpack, before being issued a permit you must watch a video on Denali's humbling weather, the Golden Triangle—your tent, cooking area and bear canister must be at least 100 yards from each

other—how to cross a wide, braided river and, finally, advice on bear, wolf and moose encounters. (For example, never run from a grizzly or a wolf. But if charged by a moose in open terrain, run in a zigzag pattern. It's a lot to remember, how to run/not run.)

Then you can apply for your permit. Denali National Park & Preserve is made up of 87 units, and you have to choose your unit before you apply. There are quotas and limits to the number of people allowed in each one to avoid the kind of scene you have at popular trails in other parks. And then you take a converted school bus to the trailhead. When you're done hiking, you come out and wait for the bus.

Only four people were allowed in our unit. We never saw the other two.

You must apply for your permit in person. Because Denali is not exactly on the beaten path—it's about a five-hour drive from Anchorage, where I lived—you should be ready to roll. We'd been warned to have three or four options, as the most popular hikes might already be at their limit. All of our choices were booked, so we took a ranger's recommendation of Stony Creek, one of her favorites, a hike with varied scenery, and if we were lucky, a superlative view of Denali on a rare clear day. (Weather is something else you need to worry about in Denali. Cloud cover necessitates knowing how to use a map and compass.)

I'd lived and worked in Yosemite for a decade before I moved to Alaska and I felt confident about my trail skills. The problem—or the beauty—in Denali is once you get off the bus, there are no trails. There are no signs. The rivers are wider than highways and there are grizzly bears and wolves and moose that you should run/not run from. And walking on taiga and tundra, rather than granite, is not as easy as it sounds. Alpine tundra is low and scrubby, but brushy tundra is soft: two steps forward, one step back.



After dinner, the clouds hunkered down and we lost any view we might have had, so we retreated to the tent. A few hours later, I woke to the sound of footsteps in front of the tent. My heart seized: Would I stupidly die in grizzly country? But the steps were light, and multiplied until they sounded like castanets. Rain on rocks, perhaps. I peered out the tent's avalanche chute to see caribou, one after another, walking single file past the tent in twilight. It turned out that we were sleeping on a caribou migration route. I opened the tent door and watched them pass until falling back to sleep.

In the morning, the tent glowed bright yellow. The sun was out! I jumped from my bag and hopped outside and there was Denali in all its glory. My jaw dropped.

An ecstatic current ran through me. While the world around me awoke, the massif held my gaze—a form of communication beyond the corporeal plane. The intimacies of the park were more captivating than its scope: Up close with grizzlies and caribou. Birds and berries. Just me and a grand slam view of Denali in full sun. Places like this change you; they settle your soul.

Why is it important to preserve these wild spaces? Although conservation of species and habitat is crucial, humans need these wild spaces, too. We need the places where we can escape from the pressures of modern life and reconnect to our best selves. Writer Wallace Stegner had it right when he said, "National parks are the best idea we ever had. Absolutely American, absolutely democratic, they reflect us at our best rather than our worst."

A few years ago, a close friend with cancer asked me to take her to Yosemite National Park before she died. Walking near the Ahwahnee Meadow, she said incredulously, "This belongs to all of us." I'd never thought of it that way, but, yes, it does. And the more time we spend in our parks, the more likely we are to care for them. Saving our wild landscapes is saving

ourselves.

*Kim Wyatt is the publisher of the independent press **Bona Fide Books**, which published “Permanent Vacation: Twenty Writers on Work and Life in Our National Parks”. She worked in Yosemite National Park for 13 years.*

**Note:** Information on backpacking in Denali National Park & Preserve may be found **here**.

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## Winter casts magical spell on 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.*



Sometimes it's better to find Plan B when a bison is on the trail. Photo/National Park Service

**By Susan Wood**

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK – For me, the real stand down involving the national parks occurred long before Yosemite's former concessionaire Delaware North decided to play hardball with iconic park names they trademarked.

It was a face-to-face encounter almost 20 years ago with three bison standing at the other side of the bridge on my cross country ski journey to Fairy Falls in the 2.5 million-acre Yellowstone National Park.

Reflecting back, it was a memorable time. For years, Yellowstone has been ground zero for controversial land-use issues. These include the reintroduction of wolves and its effect on nearby ranchers; the balance between recreation and environment regarding pollution from snowmobiles; the management of fire prompted by one of the nation's worst blazes in 1988; the study of geothermal activity in the land

of more than 9,000 geysers; and the protection of a large free-ranging herd of bison from slaughter.

Considering Yellowstone represents a “survival of the fittest” hotbed, I was not about to challenge a 1,400-pound animal that can run 35 mph.



Cross country skiing in most national parks is a special experience, especially so in Yellowstone. Photo/National Park Service

I took a snow shuttle there (part of the beauty in visiting in winter), so there was no vehicle to save me. If I insisted on continuing on the trail, my only other option if it charged would have been jumping into the icy cold Firehole River on long skis. I made the wise move and changed course to Lone Star Geyser from the Old Faithful Snow Lodge, my home base.

I was astounded by the solitude. Although the geyser erupted prior to my approach (it goes off every three hours), I stood in awe. The large mound resembled something out of “Close



Encounters of the Third Kind.”

Yellowstone’s charm lies in its massive, scenic landscape and wildlife encounters – from the serene to the raw reality of nature. It’s accentuated in winter. That’s why the Park Service manages a fleet of snow coaches with top hatches to spring up for photo ops. The commuter van on treads appears like something out of the military, grinding through some of the most challenging terrain in the park.

It’s the vehicle of choice for visitors and wildlife enthusiasts entering the park from the town of West Yellowstone, deemed the snowmobile capital of the United States. I passed on a snowmobile rental given the sub-zero degree temperatures Yellowstone is known for. Park Service employees have a saying of Yellowstone’s seasons – winter, winter, winter, summer.

Regardless of the cold, I knew I was in for a special treat upon my first day. It’s not every day one can catch a wolf gnawing on a dead elk. But that’s the cycle of life at Yellowstone. Hours later, I came within 15 feet of an elk while I was on a quick, introductory 5-mile ski along a cluster of geysers from the lodge near Old Faithful. I suppose I was off in my own little world, but it was plain to see that I didn’t notice him until I was in his zone. The recommended distance from an elk is 25 feet. I veered way out, so I could keep an eye on the animal without getting any closer. I wouldn’t have witnessed a spontaneous eruption from a dormant geyser if I hadn’t taken the alternate route.

Author Thomas Wolfe once characterized the park as “the one place where miracles not only happen; they happen all the time.” I believe it.

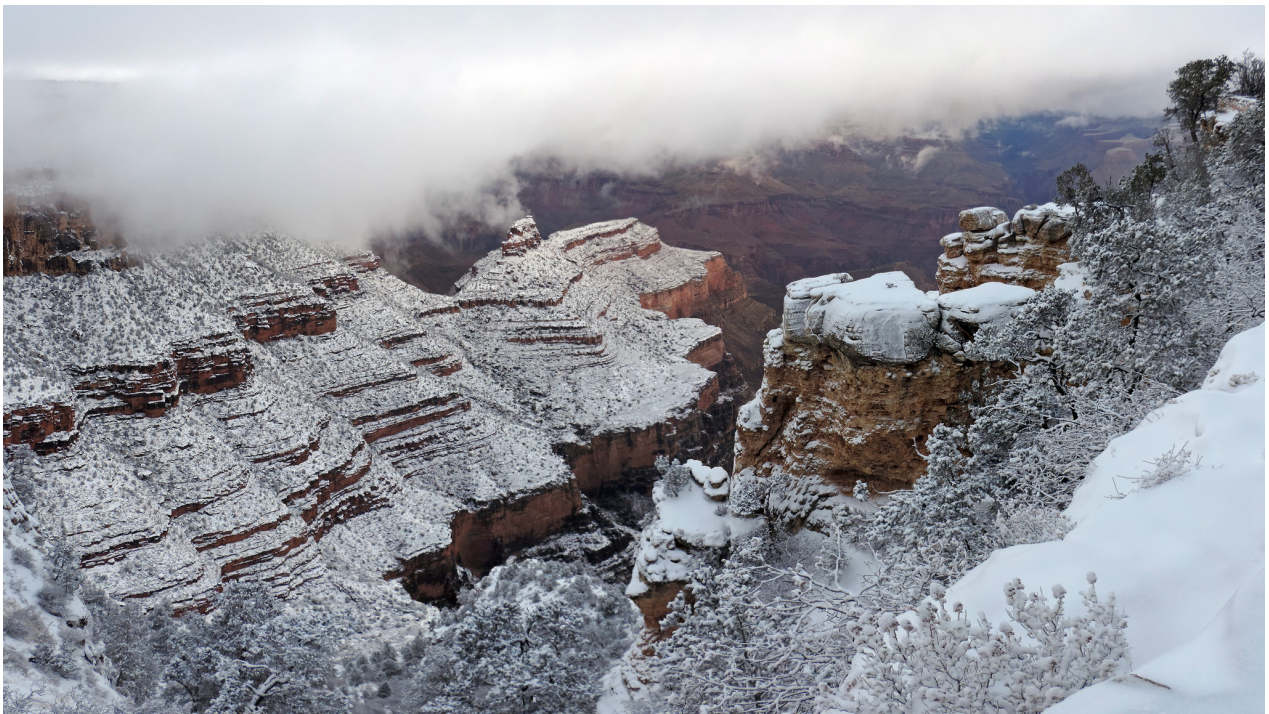
Yellowstone is the oldest national park in the United States; established in 1872.

On Day 2 of my cross country ski adventure, I captured the

grace and elegance of white trumpeter swans on Yellowstone Lake, just south of the Continental Divide. Rick, our guide, was full of stories. Some I didn't want to hear. He drove the snowcoach 30 miles that day, so he had plenty of opportunities to share things like the claw marks of a grizzly bear on a tree next to the trail. I felt mortal at the thought of a possible encounter.

The falls in the West Thumb region plunge with such force they freeze on the back splash, much like Multnomah Falls on the Columbia River Gorge east of Portland – but to a larger scale. As for grand, there is such a thing in the Wyoming Park. The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, as they call it, provides spectacular views of a gash in the Earth 1,000 feet deep and 4,000 feet wide.

The feast for my eyes reminded me of another cross country vacation two years prior.



Crowds are not a problem during winter at the Grand Canyon.  
Photo/National Park Service

**The other Grand Canyon experience**

Arizona is known as a sweltering hot desert state. Many a movie scene and vacation photos have shown sunburns and shorts at the South Rim of one of the nation's most popular national parks. It was established in 1919.

However, it's a different world on the North Rim – and an even more unique one in winter. Amid the pinion pines and uncrowded terrain marks the Grand Canyon's North Rim in the winter months. Like Yellowstone, visitors are brought in via snowcat to Kaibab Lodge, an old, rustic lodge complete with a large wood fireplace and the allure of musicians sitting around it. The cabins tucked in the woodsy setting of the Kaibab National Forest were even more rustic – like something out of a youth summer camp.

But what seemed like the minimalist approach in the sleeping quarters went rather upscale in the lodge's "living room," kitchen and trail provisions. The chef, who I heard honed his cooking skills in prison, but I didn't care, whipped up quite a spread for the holidays that might almost rival one at the Ahwahnee Hotel (and I will still call it that).

I chose New Year's to partake in this experience in 1995. Here I have the fondest memory of cross country skiing all day along the sweeping landscape of the North Kaibab Trail. No matter what side of the Canyon a visitor stands on, it's difficult to get tired of the view – whether it's from Cape Royal or Bright Angel Point. The snowcat took a group of us out to the rim where we skied the perimeter. From there, I opted to ski back and I'm glad for doing so. I got in a good 15 miles that day, burning off the calories from the best toasted peanut butter and honey sandwich I've ever had.

My timing on the long ski day was a bit tight. I crested the last ridge back to the lodge as I contemplated pulling out my head lamp when much to my delight my eyes rewarded me immensely. There the lodge stood in the distance, lit up with Christmas lights like part of a Thomas Kincaid painting. It

was heart and body warming to see.



Views of Half Dome and other iconic Yosemite landmarks are even more delightful in the snow.  
Photo/National Park Service

### **The Trans-Sierra trip of a lifetime**

To backpack and snowcamp Yosemite is to follow in the footsteps of such a notable pioneer as John Muir, but with a few more provisions than a loaf of bread and cup for water. Muir, the iconic Sierra Nevada ecologist before there was such a thing, never grew weary of the granite-dominated, glacier formed national park established in 1890.



On this Sierra Club guided trip set in mid-April 1996 over my birthday, 12 days before Earth Day and Muir's birthday I knew why Muir had such feelings. I threw a 40-pound pack on my back filled with my life for four days and set out on cross country skis from Lee Vining on the east slope of Yosemite while following Tioga Pass Road most of the way.

The first night was a treat. As an introduction to the wilderness, we stayed in the comfort of cabin quarters at Tioga Lodge. The staff even baked a cake for me. Given the preservative-laced stir-up meals on the agenda for the next two nights, I devoured that cake and the entree.

Snowcamping can be a test in patience and logistics.

It takes good prior planning and a Plan B for the unexpected. When your skis decide to stick to the snow because the terrain and temperature changes, it's good to have wax. When you need to climb on crusty slopes, you'd better untangle your skins (a course layer applied to the bottoms of backcountry skis for gripping). When your metal tent anchors freeze deep in the snow overnight, you'd better learn to use long string as a simple trick. And the list goes on and on.

What tries you, though, rewards you with some of the most stunning views of this magnificent spectacle of a national park.

I had a precursor to magnificent views in skiing out and camping at Glacier Point in winter from Badger Pass on another trip and that was enough for me to feel the allure. Try a 180-degree view of Yosemite Valley with Half Dome dead ahead as the sun dipped below the horizon and cast ever-changing shadows on the famous rock monolith.

This Trans Sierra trip provided the type of untouched scenic beauty so pure it can take your breath away – coupled with midday sunny spring skiing conditions where sunscreen rules.

Rewards abound with the appreciation of the simple pleasures. Take the beautiful virgin snow collar that rims a river and its rocks. Take the unbelievable, rarely-seen back side of Half Dome as you descend from the northeast into Yosemite Valley. Take the classic looks on visitors' faces when you walk with full ski gear into the Village without a snow patch to be found. Take the never-take-it-for-granted reward of getting the largest cheeseburger on the menu with French fries and a milkshake at the café because you probably lost 20 pounds reducing your food intake and burning it all off on that day. Take the end of the white-knuckled shuttle plane trip back to Lee Vining in which your seat involves a backpack and you scoff at the pilot handing you a seatbelt.

Then, take the thought of having a real bed for the first time in four days.

Now that my friend is living – living the Sierra Nevada in a winter dream.

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## **Battlefields      a      hallowed reminder of the past**

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



The single bloodiest day in U.S. history was the Battle of Antietam on Sept. 17, 1862.

**By Linda Fine Conaboy**

Little did I know on that pleasant and tranquil day in the fall of 2003 I was headed for a moving and intense experience—an event more weighty than I had bargained for. That was the day my friends and I visited Antietam National Battlefield, the site of the bloodiest single day of the Civil War—some say the bloodiest day in all of American history.

At that time in my life, I knew little about the Civil War, had only vaguely heard of this battlefield called Antietam and really didn't think it made much of a difference in my life.

As my friend drove, I quickly scanned the brochures we received from the man at the entry, and making a decision to drive instead of walk the route because of a time constriction, we headed off, our real anticipation being the Appalachian Trail where we were to hook up with other friends for a few days of hiking.

However, the brochures (which I still have) were absorbing. We learned that Antietam, in Sharpsburg, Md., on bright and sunny Sept. 17, 1862—maybe somewhat like the day we were there—provided the setting for the destruction of nearly 25,000 souls—they were either killed, wounded, captured or simply ended up missing.

Mostly young men and maybe a few women, died on the slopes of Sharpsburg ridge, an area consisting then of mainly farms, fruit trees and bridges.

As we drove, our anticipation of the place heightened. Out our car windows, we marveled at the farm buildings, still there after all these years—oh, that these structures could talk, think of the story they would tell. Surprisingly, one of these buildings is still privately owned and occupied.

Imagine, living in a building that was privy to so much death. I've always wondered if this has an effect on the current residents of that building. As a journalist, I would very much like to interview them and ask if their day-to-day lives are in any way tinged by the killing and all the spilled blood. Blood that has since vanished, but nevertheless is still there somewhere, maybe in some way fertilizing the healthy trees that mark this battlefield today.





Burnside's Bridge at Antietam National Battlefield in Maryland.

A review of the history of this battle states that Gen. Robert E. Lee's Confederate forces stretched across the angle formed by the junction of the Potomac River and Antietam Creek. Gen. George McClellan, the Union leader, intended to attack both of the Confederate flanks and then assault the middle of Lee's line.

According to the brochure, "There was no cohesion, no unified command, no definite objective, and at the climax of the battle Gen. George McClellan, leader of the Union forces, was unwilling to commit his reserves in the center. Antietam was in fact, a soldier's battle, waged by separate units with little direction from above."

History tells us that this gory battle was fought for nothing and it was determined to be a draw.

Forgetting for a while that the Appalachian Trail awaited, we pulled the car over to the side of the road and stood on a bridge crossing Antietam Creek, a beautiful and simple bridge that still stands just the way it did in 1862.

We walked up the dirt road away from the bridge called Bloody Lane. Viewing brochure pictures of all those people sprawled on the ground on Bloody Lane with their arms and legs akimbo, thoughts of death hit me like a hammer. Here we were, traipsing along in the warm sunshine, on sacred ground.

On this trip with my friends, my first since my husband died a few months earlier, death here and death at home seemed to be stalking.

It seemed unworldly that we could be walking along a road that was the scene of so much human destruction—and as a parallel to the thoughts Antietam evoked, it was amazing to me that I could be walking along this road without my husband of so many years. The poignant feelings evoked by this surreal event somehow served to bring to climax all of those despondent emotions I had about the passing of Tom. In some unimaginable way, they put it all into perspective in one simple moment of clarity.

This is why Antietam will forever be a place of beauty to me as well as a place of ultimate sadness.

I have the same feelings when I visit Valley Forge National Park. The feelings that are evoked thinking about all of those young, courageous and innocent people who fell for their cause, sometimes to no avail, are heartbreaking.





The headquarters of George Washington at the Valley Forge encampment. Photo/RevolutionaryPA.com

In summer, the rolling hills and lowlands of Valley Forge are grassy and beautiful, but on Dec. 19, 1777, when the Continental Army staggered in, weary from long marches, the prospect of wintering there was bleak.

Housing consisted of roughly built, drafty wooden huts—replicas of which are now strewn about the grounds, reconstructed as nearly as possible, on their original sites. The huts served as home to the troops as they froze and starved their way through that vicious winter, waiting for marching instructions from their commander, Gen. George Washington, although marching in the snow would be a difficult proposition as few of them had shoes.

Washington, however, did not live in the drafty huts with the men. His home, formerly the Isaac Potts house, still standing today, appears to be much more storm worthy and capable of warding off the cold. In fact, a recent tour of the Potts home indicates there were real beds, with perhaps down comforters for warmth, fireplaces and utilitarian but useful furniture.

Historians estimate that somewhere between 10,000 and 12,000 men bivouacked at Valley Forge a post about 20 miles from Philadelphia, with about 2,500 of them dying from disease and exposure, not once fighting a battle during that winter, except the battle for survival.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on your outlook, with winter setting in, the prospect of confronting the enemy greatly diminished and never came to fruition. Washington's army left Valley Forge on June 19, 1778.

Just as the battlefield at Antietam evokes wonder and heartache at the heroism people endure, display and confront during war, Valley Forge is a monument to the human condition, available in living color to anyone willing and able to make the trip to experience it.

I think it takes visits like these, to our national parks and other sites of extreme and natural beauty (although some are not beautiful, but just as interesting), to add the grounding so necessary to living our everyday lives. I think we all come away better people for allowing ourselves to be drawn into the history of what these places preserve.

I recommend you immerse yourself in as many of the national parks, national monuments, wilderness areas, ghost towns—anywhere you can experience our past, unfettered by the bounds of everyday life. They're available and some are not too far home; you owe it to yourself.

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## **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.

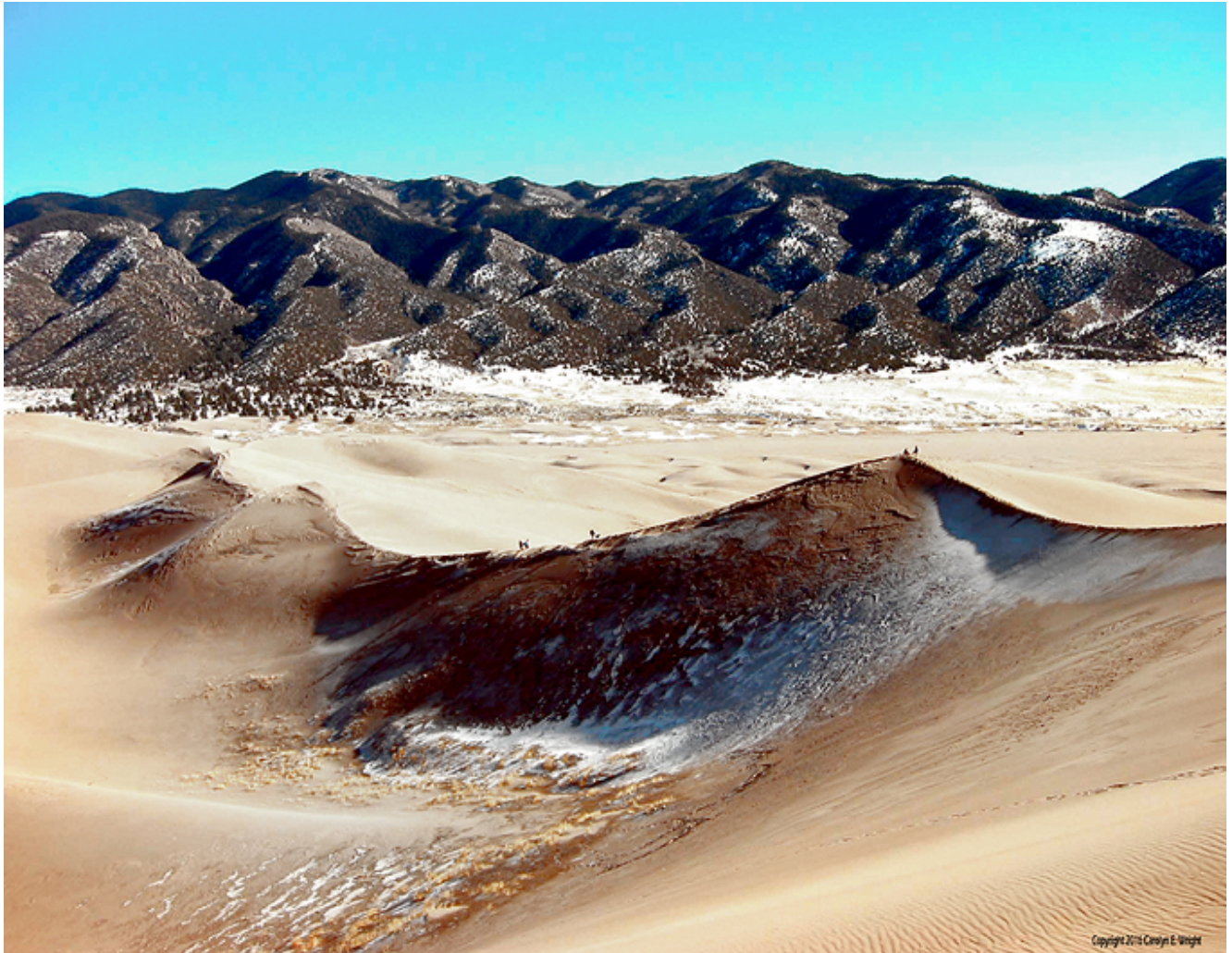


Smoky Mountains Creek flows through Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Tennessee. Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

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.

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# Opinion: The National Park Service's importance



Half Dome is one of Yosemite's iconic features. The California treasure became a national park in 1890. Photo/LTN file

Whether it's the grandeur of Mother Nature, or history encapsulated in monuments and battlefields, or wildlife roaming free the National Park Service is there to remind us of our past and future.

It is easy to understand how the Park Service is about our past, especially when looking east toward the National Mall or south to battlefields or west to the USS Arizona.

Our future is reflected in the Park Service because how we treat these treasures says a lot about us as a citizenry. Do we sit by and let national treasures like the Ahwahnee Hotel and Curry Village in Yosemite National Park change names because of a poorly written contract or do we write our members of Congress to tell them we are disgusted by what is happening? Will our actions change the future even if they don't alter the circumstances a couple hundred miles from here?

Do we say it's OK for funding for the Park Service to continually be eroded or do we demand these treasures be preserved?

Do we support the Park Service by visiting some of the 409 areas it represents? Do we share memories to encourage others to visit these special places? Or perhaps we buy an annual pass even if we never visit a park.

This agency that turns 100 years old in August continues to evolve, grow and be part of all of our lives. The service is in every state, District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands.

It's not just about the 59 national parks. The agency encompasses monuments, battlefields, military parks, historical parks, historic sites, lakeshores, seashores, recreation areas, scenic rivers and trails, and the White House.

Fourteen national parks existed before the Park Service came into being. Yellowstone in 1872 became the first national park – not just in the United States, but also in the world. Twenty-one monuments also existed prior to 1916. President Woodrow Wilson signed the act creating the National Park Service, which to this day is overseen by the Interior Department.

*Lake Tahoe News*, starting Jan. 25, is going to take readers on a trek to a few of these wonders. Writers are embracing locales that have touched them in memorable ways. The first story is from Carolyn Wright who has visited 33 of the national parks. Hers is as much a photo essay as it is a travelogue about some of those parks.

We hope through our series of monthly stories we connect you to places that perhaps you've never been to or we trigger fond memories.

Enjoy the journey.

– *Kathryn Reed, LTN publisher*