NATIONAL TREASURES

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ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK

A CENTURY OF INSPIRATION 1915-2015

{KEN BURNS & DAYTON DUNCAN ON THE PARK SYSTEM'S BIRTH}

{SITES FROM ALL 50 STATES}

{GREAT GEAR TO CAMP IN STYLE}

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Contents

These are our parks — enjoy them!

BREANNAN LINSLEY, AP
Yangsook Chung and Manlim Choi at Rocky Mountain National Park.

This year, we're celebrating the 100th anniversary of Rocky Mountain National Park. Next year — on Aug. 25, 2016, to be precise — the National Park Service itself will turn 100.

Those centennials are just two more reasons to get out and enjoy, explore and just have fun at the parks we are so luck to have.

Congress established the first national park, Yellowstone, in Montana and Wyoming in 1872. The National Park Service was established in 1916 to oversee what was then 35 parks. The system has since grown into a system of more than 400 parks, recreation areas, corridors, historical sites, seashores, trails and landmarks that all have one thing in common: They belong to us as Americans. They are all ours!

We hope you'll use this fourth annual USA TODAY National Treasures special edition, published again in partnership with National Geographic Channels, to be inspired and to learn, firsthand, what an abundance of natural riches we possess.

— Dennis M. Lyons

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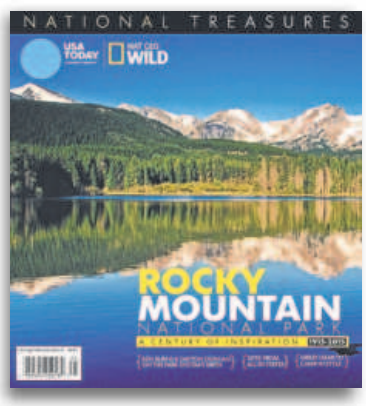

About the cover

Cover design: Ramon Padilla
Photo: Sprague Lake at Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado, by Universal Images Group

{ESSAY}

‘AN EMPIRE OF GRANDEUR’

BY DAYTON DUNCAN AND KEN BURNS, SPECIAL FOR USA TODAY

ABOVE: ©CORBIS; TOP: STACIE SCOTT, THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Stephen Mather championed the idea of a park service to protect treasures like the Grand Canyon.

One hundred years ago, only about a dozen national parks existed, all of them in the Far West. The departments of Agriculture, Interior and War each claimed some responsibility over them, but in truth, no one was in charge, and the parks suffered as a result.

Stephen Mather set out to change all that. An energetic businessman with what reporters called “an incandescent enthusiasm” and a special genius for promotion, Mather had already made a small fortune by portraying California’s Death Valley as an exotic location in advertising his company’s 20 Mule Team Borax brand laundry cleaner to American housewives.

In 1915, he called attention to something closer to his heart. He embarked on a campaign to convince Congress that the national parks needed both protection and promotion from a single agency of the federal government.

Mather, an admirer of John Muir, who had called national parks “places to play in and pray in,” knew from personal experience that time spent in nature could provide inspiration and solace to a person’s spirit and restore a person’s health — mental as well as physical. But now, he added two more arguments to advance his case.

On the one hand, he said, parks were “an economic asset of incalculable value.” They generated millions of tourism dollars that benefited the nation as a whole, and especially the states and communities where they were located. They were also, in his words, “vast schoolrooms of Americanism,” by which he meant that people who enjoyed their national parks would have greater pride in the nation that created them.

Throughout 1915, Mather traveled the country, covering nearly 35,000 miles, calling on Americans to see their parks as “an empire of grandeur” that had been neglected for too long. He led (and paid for) a lavish backcountry trip into the Sierra Nevada with influential media magnates and industrialists, taking every opportunity to preach his vision for the national parks: better protection, improved services for tourists, more parks and expansions of existing parks, all brought together in a unified system under a single government agency.

He attended the ceremonies dedicating the brand-new Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado, where another Muir acolyte, Enos Mills, had finally achieved his dream of setting aside the place he loved for future generations. In Arizona, he stood in awe at the rim of the Grand Canyon — at the time a national monument only loosely protected by the Forest Service — and implored of anyone who would listen, “Make this unbelievable wonder your next national park.”

All the while, Mather enlisted a diverse coalition into his greater cause — from schoolchildren to chambers of commerce, from railroads to the General Federation of Women’s Clubs. And ultimately, in August 1916, it all paid off when Congress created the National Park Service and Mather was named its first director.

A lot has happened in the intervening hundred years. As the Park Service prepares to celebrate its centennial, it now manages more than 400 special places, with at least one in every state. They are urban sites as well as majestic landscapes; shorelines and mountains as well as artists’ or inventors’ studios; historic places that commemorate our proudest moments as a people as well as reminders of darker episodes that a truly great nation must never ignore or forget.

In advance of its 100th birthday, the National Park Service and its partners, with first lady Michelle Obama and former first lady Laura Bush as co-chairs, have already launched an ambitious program of outreach — called “Find Your Park” — that is meant to encourage more Americans to visit some part of this legacy, this “empire of grandeur,” that has been passed on to us. With an increasingly urban, increasingly diverse population, it’s essential that all citizens understand that they are welcome in our parks, which, after all, belong to them.

In addition, they have announced an exciting initiative, “Every Kid in a Park,” with the grand ambition of getting every fourth-grader in America into some park during the upcoming school year by providing free passes to the children and their families and giving teachers lesson plans to turn the visits into learning experiences. Stephen Mather’s “vast schoolrooms of Americanism” will become *actual* schoolrooms.

As honorary park rangers, we hope you will support these efforts even before the centennial birthday party begins. We encourage you to “Find Your Park” this summer, whether it’s a grand portion of America’s great outdoors or some small piece of the mosaic of our history.

You won’t have to travel 35,000 miles, as Stephen Mather did a hundred years ago; there’s a park closer to you than you think.

Take your children along, as we have, regardless of what age they are. You will be the better for it, and the youngsters exposed to any national park today will be tomorrow’s guardians of “America’s best idea.”

Ken Burns and Dayton Duncan are the creators of the PBS documentary *The National Parks: America’s Best Idea*. The National Park Service named them honorary park rangers in 2009.

JOHN PAIN, AP

Hikers make their way through Stubblefield Canyon in Yosemite National Park. The national park concept traces its history to an 1864 law setting aside Yosemite for public use “for all time.”

Documentary

The six-disc set of ‘The National Parks: America’s Best Idea’ is available on Blu-ray and DVD at ShopPBS.org/nationalparks or by calling 800-752-9727. A companion book and CD soundtrack are also available at ShopPBS.org

AL GOLUB, GOLUB PHOTOGRAPHY

Filmmakers (and honorary rangers) Ken Burns and Dayton Duncan visit Yosemite in 2009.

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{THE TOP 10} **CALIFORNIA** YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK

BONE-DRY BUT STILL BEAUTIFUL

Even amid epic drought, this place is mesmerizing

Brett Kelman
USA TODAY

As the spring sun melted the final bits of snow, Barbara Ducey and her two sons huffed along the Panorama Trail, all of Yosemite beneath them. Normally, this trail wouldn't be open for weeks or months, but there they were, above the crowds

▶ **STORY CONTINUES ON 12**

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 761,268 acres
Visitors: 4,029,416 in 2014
Established: 1890
History: President Abraham Lincoln signed the Yosemite Grant Act in 1864, eight years before Yellowstone became the first national park. As a result, many preservationists credit Yosemite as the birthplace of the national park idea.
When visiting: The Yosemite Valley Visitor Center is on Northside Drive in Yosemite Village. The entrance fee, good for seven days, is $20 per vehicle or $10 for an individual. Visitor info: 209-372-0200.
Of note: The park's largest collection of giant sequoia trees, the Mariposa Grove, will close in June for the launch of a major restoration project that will last through 2016.

TRACIE CONE, AP

The sheer granite face of the 4,737-foot Half Dome may be the most famous sight in Yosemite National Park, which has no shortage of breathtaking scenery.

▶ CONTINUED FROM 9

and the cars, staring across the valley at the full height of Yosemite Falls.

It was simply too gorgeous to walk and look at the same time.

"We kept stopping every few feet because the view was always better and better," says Ducey, 61, who visited Yosemite in early April. "It was an area of Yosemite I'd never been to before. I wanted to do something different there, and this was it."

Yosemite National Park, about 1,200 square miles along the Sierra Nevada in central California, is one of the oldest, most popular and most indescribably majestic of all national parks. It's the kind of place where immense granite cliffs can make even the most powerful person feel insignificant, where even the most apathetic teenager can be persuaded to put down his iPhone to gape at a towering waterfall.

Because of its great beauty, approximately 4 millions of visitors come to Yosemite each year, mostly in the summer. The park fills with hikers, rafters, climbers and skiers. Many cram the park into a single day's visit, weaving through busy roads to visit the main attractions — Half Dome, El Capitan and the waterfalls. Others spend a few nights in the park, either roughing it at campsites or bedding down at one of several in-park hotels.

Regardless of why or how you visit Yosemite, the park is different this year. California's epic drought has accelerated the park's normal rhythm, changing what Yosemite has to offer travelers.

For example, because of scant snowfall, many of the park's backcountry trails, including Panorama, opened months earlier than normal. The park's rafting season began several months early, but it could end as early as this month, about the time it normally begins. Mosquitoes should be less relentless this summer. Wildflowers will not bloom as long.

Finally, Yosemite Falls, a 2,400-foot waterfall series that is one of the park's main attractions, will almost certainly run dry earlier than ever. Normally, the falls flow until mid-August, but this year they could be dry by June. Another popular spot, Bridalveil Fall, which normally flows all year, could also run dry.

But even if the falls run dry, Yosemite will still be stunning, says veteran park ranger Scott Gediman.

Gediman has worked for the National Park Service for 19 years, but sometimes Yosemite's beauty still leaves him speechless, he says.

"There is one particular spot near where we work called Cook's Meadow," Gediman says. "From there, you can look at Yosemite Falls, Half Dome, North Dome and Sentinel Rock. You are surrounded by 3,000-foot granite walls. The scale is something you have to experience personally. Photographs don't do it justice."

It is this beauty that attracts most visitors, Gediman says, but what is less visible is Yosemite's historical significance.

The park will celebrate its 125th anniversary on Oct. 1, hosting a large public ceremony in Yosemite Valley. Last year, the park celebrated the 150th anniversary of the Yosemite Grant Act, which set aside swaths of land for preservation, decades before the National Park Service even existed.

"What we are trying to convey with these anniversaries is that this is the birthplace of the national park idea," Gediman says. "Places like Yosemite, Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon represent not only a great place for a visit, but this American idea of preservation."

Few know the beauty of the park like Steve Bumgardner, a freelance filmmaker who has been shooting pictures and video in Yosemite for 10 years. Working under the nickname of "Yosemite Steve," Bumgardner has probed every corner of the park, capturing the most magnificent sights.

Although Bumgardner snaps most of his photos in the remote reaches of Yosemite, he also praises the beauty of the park's beaten path. Some of the most spectacular sites are right by the roadside, accessible to everyone.

"You can be moved to tears by the view from your driver's seat," he says. "It's unparalleled on the planet. There is nothing like it. It could be three national parks. ... It never gets old."

Becky Archibald feels the same way. The Vancouver, British Columbia, resident has taken a springtime trip to Yosemite every year from the past decade.

Archibald's parents, Native Americans from different tribes, met at the park's Ahwahnee Hotel in the late 1940s, and Archibald spent her childhood years living close to the park. She went back to the park, and the hotel, in April.

"It's such a great place of peace and serenity. A natural cathedral-like setting," Archibald says. "My father always called it God's country. It's a place unlike any other. When I was a girl, I thought the whole world was that beautiful."

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Source ERSI

JANET LOEHRKE, USA TODAY

With California's drought in its fourth year, Yosemite Falls could run dry months earlier than usual.

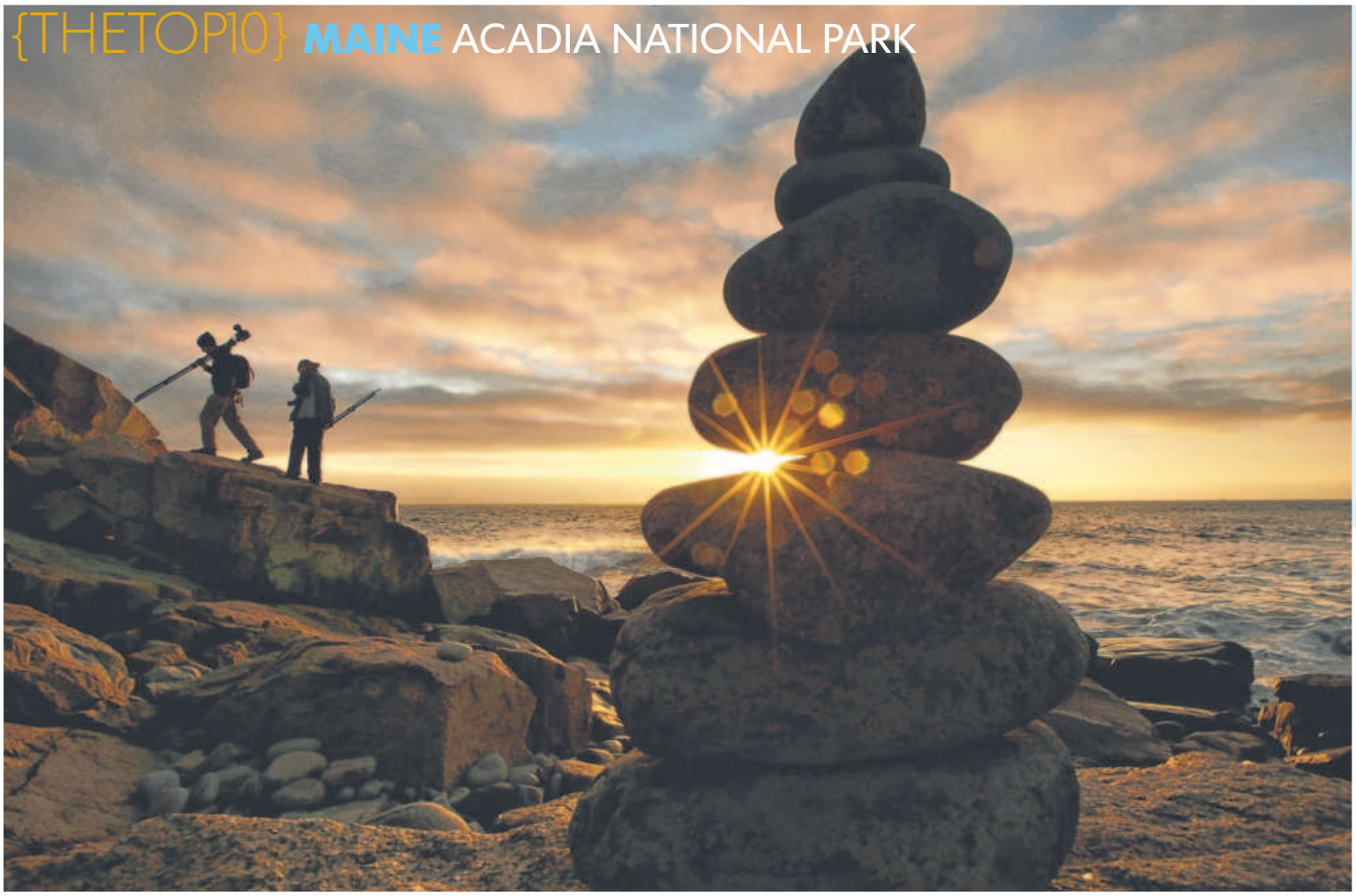
"It's unparalleled on the planet. There is nothing like it. It could be three national parks. ... It never gets old."

Steve Bumgardner, filmmaker

GARY KAZANJIAN, AP

The Tunnel View scenic overlook is a popular stop for the park's millions of annual visitors.

Kelman also reports for *The Desert Sun* of Palm Springs, Calif.



PHOTOS BY ROBERT F. BUKATY, AP

Professional photography guide Vincent Lawrence, left, helps a client find a position to shoot the dawn at Acadia National Park.

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 47,389 acres
Visitors: 2,563,129 in 2014
Established: 1919, as Lafayette National Park. Name changed to Acadia National Park in 1929.
History: Acadia is unique in that it was created from donated land, most notably 11,000 acres from John D. Rockefeller Jr., who also built about 45 miles of carriage roads in the park.
When visiting: The main visitor center is at 25 Visitor Center Road, Bar Harbor, Maine. The main phone number is 207-288-3338.
Of note: The rising sun touches the slopes of Cadillac Mountain in the park before anyplace else in the USA. At 1,530 feet, Cadillac is also the highest point on the North Atlantic seaboard.

Source ESRI
JANET LOEHRKE, USA TODAY

Mountains, and millions, meet sea in Maine

Acadia's breathtaking coast puts it in a league with parks many times its diminutive size

A wall of ice stretches the equivalent of four stories down to the high-tide line at Acadia's Otter Cliffs on a cold March night. The stars are blurred because this is a time-exposure image.

Dan D'Ambrosio
USA TODAY

Acadia National Park is the ninth-most-visited national park despite the fact that it is dwarfed in size by other top parks.

Acadia covers about 47,000 acres where the mountains meet the sea on the rocky Maine coast. By comparison, the top-drawing park, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, stretches over more than 521,000 acres in Tennessee and North Carolina. The largest of the top 10 parks, Grand Canyon National Park in Arizona, covers 1.2 million acres.

Acadia is best-known for its coastline, where waves crash into giant boulders and towering cliffs and nearby peaks boast expansive views of the Atlantic Ocean. Inland, Acadia offers tranquil freshwater lakes and ponds, woods and meadows, plus a 45-mile network of carriage roads that are ideal for bicyclists, hikers, horseback riders and cross-country skiers.

"Acadia is unique because it's where the mountains meet the sea," says Wanda Moran, an interpretive ranger at the park. "It is also unique because it was created entirely of donated land."

John D. Rockefeller Jr., the most prominent of the park's many patrons, donated about 11,000 acres and built the carriage roads — wide gravel paths connecting many of the park's scenic lakes and ponds — under an agreement with the park service.

Acadia also has about 130 miles of hiking trails, ranging from very easy to strenuous.

Bar Harbor, Maine, a tourist attraction in itself, is minutes away from Acadia's entrance. Tens of millions of people live within relatively easy driving distance of the park. Moran says the biggest challenge for Acadia is finding ways to accommodate its millions of guests "without threatening the visitor experience."

"The park roads weren't designed for so many people," Moran says. "One thing that has helped tremendously is the Island Explorer Shuttle Bus system. The buses help cut down on traffic on the roads."

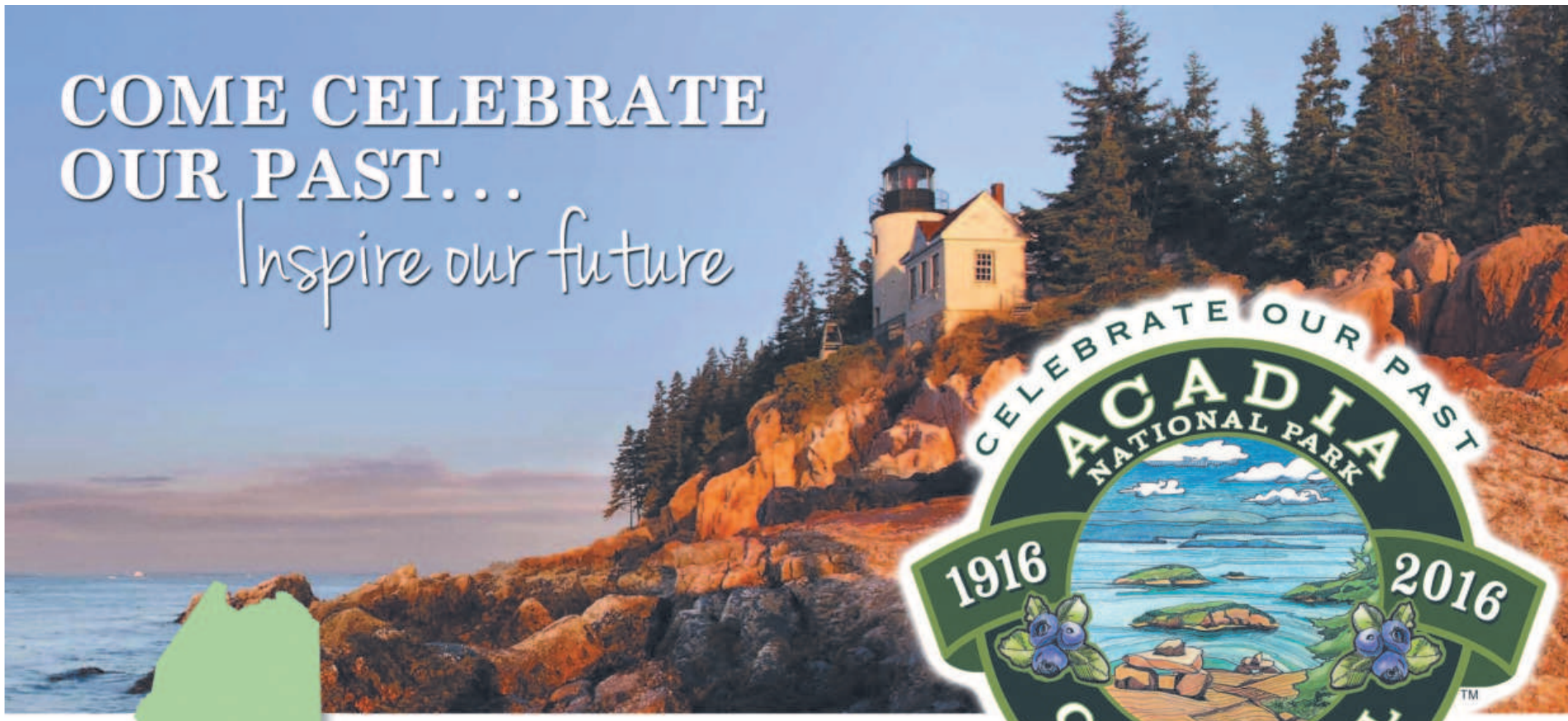
Bryon Saunders, owner of Great Maine Breakfast in Bar Harbor, said Acadia means "everything" to the town.

"If you ever came up here in the wintertime, you'd know that," Saunders says. "In the wintertime, it's a ghost town. Tourism to Bar Harbor is its lifeline."

Saunders says locals don't really visit the park because there are so many people there. Having those same people in town, however, is good for business.

"It's wall-to-wall people here in July and August," he says. "Everybody looks forward to them. Once everything gets filled up, you put your head down and work until you see daylight."

D'Ambrosio also reports for *The Burlington* (Vt.) *Free Press*



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The DownEast and Acadia region of the State of Maine invites you to come celebrate the 100 year Centennial of Acadia National Park. Set in the heart of our region, Acadia is a gem in our midst, anchored by Bar Harbor and surrounded by charming towns and villages from Bucksport to the west, Lubec to the east, and Grand Lake Stream to the north. Acadia is the only National Park in the Northeast, and our region is an outdoor playground for all. Explore the Atlantic Ocean along our four Scenic Byways, experience history at Roosevelt-Campobello International State Park, poke into eclectic shops, and enjoy seafood just steps from the nearby waters. Come celebrate, make memories, and experience this authentic and breathtaking place. The Centennial of Acadia National Park is our chance to renew the passion that the founders envisioned for the entire DownEast and Acadia Region!

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Moosehorn National Wildlife Refuge • Penobscot Narrows Bridge & Observatory
Roque Bluffs State Park • Quoddy Head State Park • Seal Cove Auto Museum
Schoodic Arts for All • Schoodic International Sculpture Trail • Schoodic Scenic Byway
St. Croix Island International Historic Site • Tides Institute and Museum of Art
Waponahki Museum and Resource Center • Woodlawn Museum and Black House

{THE TOP 10} IDAHO/MONTANA/WYOMING YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK

Dizzying diversity starts at doorstep

The most famous sight in the world's first national park: Yellowstone's "Old Faithful" geyser, whose predictable eruptions make it a visitor favorite. The park is mostly in Wyoming but also extends into Idaho and Montana.

MARK RALSTON, AFP/GETTY IMAGES

There are many ways to enter Yellowstone, all amazing. Then there's the interior.

Kristen Inbody
USA TODAY

A sweeping mountain view, eagles floating over a meandering river, elk wandering through an old Army fort — each entry into Yellowstone National Park makes a different first impression.

There's no wrong way to enter the world's first national park, but the entry can shape the experience.

From Livingston, Mont., visitors follow the Yellowstone River through the Paradise Valley to the town of Gardiner and then Mammoth Hot Springs, known for its thermal terracing and resident elk herd. Visitors enter through a grand stone arch.

From West Yellowstone, Mont., south of Bozeman, visitors are immediately in the park, following the Madison River and arriving near the geyser basins and Old Faithful. This West Gate is by far the most popular.

From Red Lodge, Mont., south of Billings, visitors travel the Beartooth Highway, a spectacular winding road through high alpine landscapes, to Cooke City and then into the Lamar Valley in Yellowstone's northeastern corner.

What the Lamar Valley lacks in geyser features, it makes up for in wildlife. Known as the American Serengeti, the valley draws wildlife watchers from around the world, particularly those who want to see wolves.

The park's south entrance is at its border with Grand Teton National Park. Moose Falls is just inside Yellowstone and marked with a tiny sign. It's worth a stop and a popular (if chilly) swimming hole for those in the know.

From Cody, Wyo., one follows the Buffalo Bill Scenic Byway — dubbed by Theodore Roosevelt the most scenic 52 miles in America — past rock formations, along the Shoshone River and through the Shoshone Forest to the park's southeast corner.

That's the approach Lisa Kun-

▶ STORY CONTINUES ON 20

MAXINE PARK, USA TODAY

The Yellowstone River flows through Hayden Valley. The ridge in the middle distance is the rim of Yellowstone's volcanic caldera.

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 2,219,791 acres
Visitors: 3,513,484 in 2014
Established: 1872
History: Established by Congress as the world's first national park. The Army oversaw Yellowstone until the National Park Service was created in 1916.
When visiting: For more information, call 307-344-7381 or visit nps.gov/yell. For lodging reservations in the park, contact Xanterra Parks & Resorts at 866-439-7381 or visit YellowstoneNationalParkLodges.com.
Of note: Scientists recently discovered that the magma beneath the Yellowstone supervolcano could fill the Grand Canyon nearly 14 times. For a sense of the park's volcanic nature, check out some of the 10,000 thermal features, from the iconic Old Faithful to the colorful Grand Prismatic Spring to the burbling mud pots. As you travel the park, look on the map for the outline of the caldera's rim.

Source ESRI

JANET LOEHRKE, USA TODAY

▶ CONTINUED FROM 17

kel of Greybull, Wyo., favors. She loves the road over Sylvan Pass: "You get amazing views of the lake, and on most days you can see the Teton Mountains."

Only the road across the top of the park, connecting Mammoth Hot Springs with Cooke City, is open year-round. The rest are closed from Nov. 1 to early May, depending on the weather.

The park has two loops forming a figure eight, which take visitors to the high points — Old Faithful, the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, Yellowstone Lake, Tower Falls and Mammoth Hot Springs.

Visitors should give themselves time to travel the loops to see the big landmarks and to get off the beaten path for a more wild experience. One could explore Yellowstone for a lifetime and still find new things to see.

Kunkel worked in the park for two summers in college, which gave her the opportunity to hike — a lot. She's logged more than 250 miles hiking in the park. She recommends that before people visit Yellowstone, they look at a park map and read a hiking guide to find the trail that's most appealing to them, and then hit it.

JIM URQUHART, AP

A grizzly bear roams near Beaver Lake. Yellowstone has 675-840 grizzlies, according to National Park Service estimates.

"A must is to get off the pavement," Kunkel says. "If you only see what Yellowstone has to offer from your car or the boardwalk, you're missing the point of how massive the Yellowstone ecosystem is. Even a 1-mile hike will put you into nature and away from the sounds of your fellow tourists, technology and civilization."

Her favorite hike was across the storied Specimen Ridge in Yellowstone's northeast corner.

"We covered 23 miles with a summit of Amethyst Mountain and swam, holding our packs above our heads, across a swollen, fast-moving Lamar River in one day," she says. "In the backcountry, we ran across nearly every animal — deer, antelope, bighorn sheep, bison, elk and a massive 500-pound sow grizzly bear. It was a crazy, strenuous experience that I will never forget."

The park changes by the season and the time of day. Those who don't mind crowds go sightseeing from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Those who want to see wildlife explore at daybreak and in the evening.

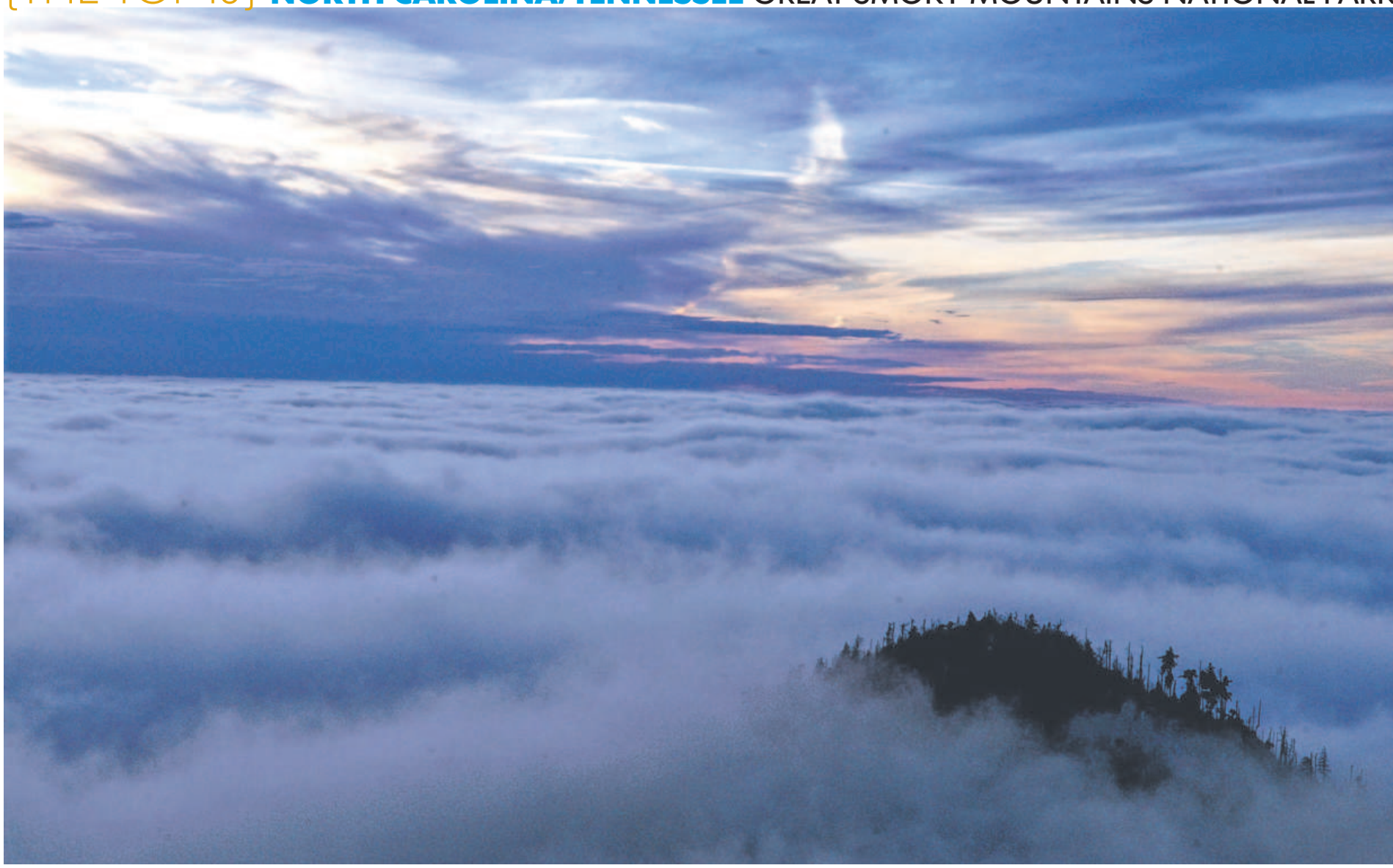
"If you go in the middle of the day in the middle of the summer you will spend most of your time in traffic," Kunkel says. "If you do find yourself in the park during peak tourist season, choose to wake up early and go see the sights on your list. Or go out late at night. Plus, at sunrise and sunset, the animals are more active than the heat of the day."

The off-peak "shoulder" seasons, May to early June and September to October, are charming. The weather is chancier, but spring means baby animals close to the road. Fall means bugling elk and clashing antlers.

"I've been to Yellowstone more times than I can keep track of, and the best time of year, hands down, is the spring. When the bears are fresh out of hibernation, snow is melting, things are starting to green up," she says. "You are guaranteed to see all the wildlife if you go in May or very early June. Visit Yellowstone in May or September. Go on off-peak travel to experience Yellowstone at a slow pace."

Inbody also reports for the *Great Falls* (Mont.) *Tribune*

{THE TOP 10} **NORTH CAROLINA/TENNESSEE** GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK



JOE HOWELL, AP

Mount Le Conte peeks through the blue fog that gives the Smoky Mountains their name. Le Conte is the third-highest peak in Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Appalachian heritage thrives in the Smokies

Source ERSI

JANET LOEHRKE, USA TODAY

The USA's most-visited national park keeps the settler spirit alive

Anita Wadhwani
USA TODAY

There's music in these mountains — beyond the crash of waterfalls and the early morning choruses of the hundreds of bird species that dwell in Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

The nation's most visited national park drew more than 10 million people last year and is best known for majestic views from some of the tallest peaks in the Eastern USA, the wild elk and bears that roam the land, and the miles of hiking trails crisscrossing

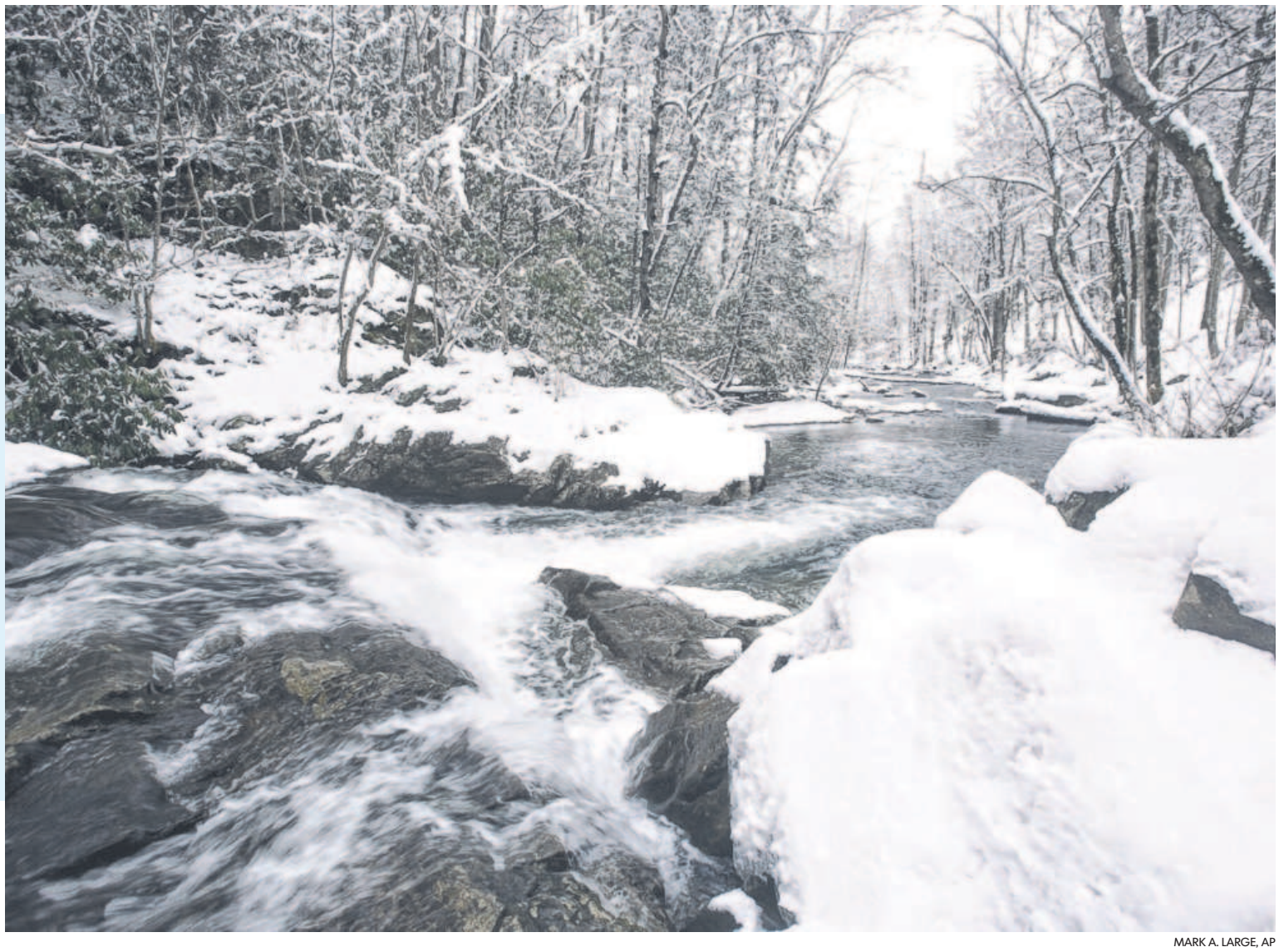
▶ **STORY CONTINUES ON 26**

AMY SMOTHERMAN BURGESS, AP

Scenic in all seasons and located just a few hours from such major cities as Atlanta, Charlotte and Nashville, the park entertains visitors year-round. At left, Faye Sykes of Clintwood, Va., takes photos last January.

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 521,086 acres
Visitors: 10,099,276 in 2014
Established: 1934
History: The park was established in part because loggers were rapidly cutting the primeval forests that remained. More than 1,200 residents had to leave their land once the park opened.
When visiting: The park has four visitor centers: the Cades Cove center near Townsend, Tenn.; the Oconaluftee center on U.S. 441, 2 miles north of Cherokee, N.C.; the Sugarland center 2 miles south of Gatlinburg, Tenn. on U.S. 441; and the Clingmans Dome center 7 miles off U.S. 441 in Tennessee. Visitor information: 865-436-1200.
Of note: The park is among the most biologically diverse areas in the eastern USA, with more than 17,000 species of plants, animals and invertebrates, but scientists believe an additional 30,000 to 80,000 species may live there.



MARK A. LARGE, AP

The Middle Prong of the Little River rushes past snow-covered banks in Great Smoky Mountain National Park last winter.

▶ CONTINUED FROM 23

half a million acres straddling the North Carolina-Tennessee border.

But the park is dedicated to more than preserving and protecting its vast natural resources. A key component of the park's mission is preserving the rich and distinctively American heritage of the southern Appalachian people who lived in the mountains before it became a national park.

The park has one of the largest collections of log homes, barns, churches and schools in the East, with more than 90 buildings that have been preserved or rehabilitated. Visitors can catch a glimpse of daily life for early Appalachian settlers by strolling through mountain farm exhibits or attending one of the numerous festivals that celebrate mountain culture.

At the annual Cosby in the Park festival, visitors can experience southern Appalachian culture in music, quilting displays, cornshuck dolls and crafts lessons, old-time toys, folk art and natural foods and medicinal plants at the park's Cosby Campground.

H. DARR BEISER, USA TODAY

Haze shrouds the ridges above Cades Cove, a broad, green valley that's among the most popular destinations in the park.

Junior ranger programs, offered year-round throughout the park, give children lessons in blacksmithing and milling.

A Women's Work Festival at the Mountain Farm Museum honors the often arduous daily lives led by southern Appalachian women in maintaining a household, with demonstrations of folkways and homemaking chores, including open-hearth cooking, spinning and sewing at the Oconaluftee Visitor Center each June.

The Mountain Life Festival each fall at the Mountain Farm Museum gives visitors a peek into the past, when soap, apple cider, sorghum molasses and hominy were made by hand.

Music serves as the touchstone for many of the park's cultural heritage events. One of the biggest celebrations of Appalachian musical events in the country takes place each September at the Sugarlands Visitors Center.

The Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont offers living history workshops and programs for children and adults on mountain music and the rich traditions of the southern Appalachian people. The University of Tennessee offers visitors classes in the park on history and culture, too.

The park also has ongoing efforts to ensure that descendents of families that settled the area have the ability to visit old home places and cemeteries, and hold annual reunions, says park spokeswoman Dana Soehn.

On a recent day at the Oconaluftee Visitor Center, nestled in the foothills of the mountains on the North Carolina side of the park, 66-year-old Randy Jones sat on the porch with a dozen other amateur musicians and struck up the twangy sounds of songs such as *Home Sweet Home* and *Red River Valley*.

As hikers, mountain bikers and others gathered to listen to the old-time mountain music — music with roots in the hardscrabble daily lives of the park's early settlers — Jones invited them to get carried away. "Clap, hoot and holler," he said, "whatever the spirit leads you to do."

Wadhwani also reports for *The Tennessean* of Nashville.

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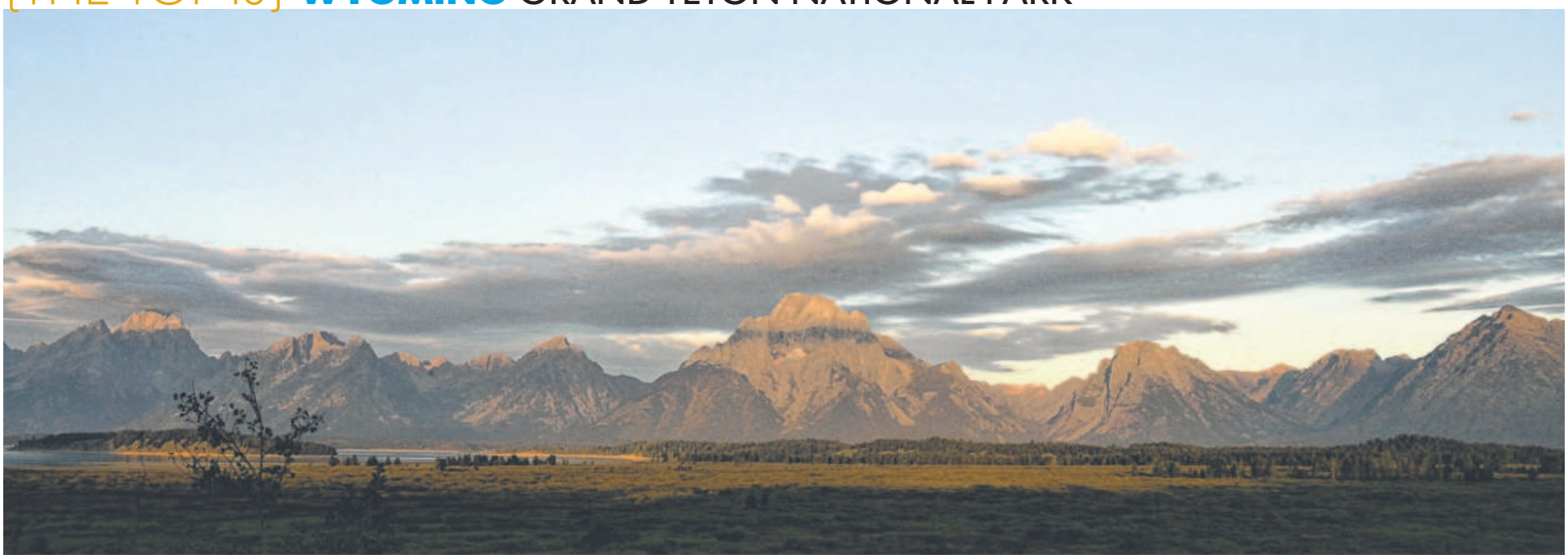
{THE TOP 10} **WYOMING** GRAND TETON NATIONAL PARK



TED S. WARREN, AP

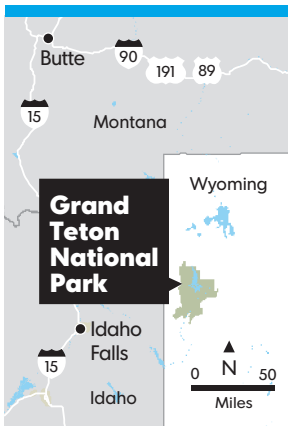
The rising sun begins to paint the mountains of the Teton Range, as seen from the Jackson Lake Lodge in Grand Teton National Park in northwest Wyoming.

Park the car, get out and just experience it

KAREN BLEIER AFP/GETTY IMAGES

A moose saunters across the Snake River, which starts out small in the Grand Teton-Yellowstone area before crossing into Idaho and becoming a major waterway.

Right next door to Yellowstone, craggy peaks and sagebrush flats offer more-accessible splendor



Source ESRI

JANET LOEHRKE, USA TODAY

Kristen Inbody
USA TODAY

Oh, what a waste is the "windshield tour" of Grand Teton National Park.

The park offers some of the world's most dramatic views, yet many visitors never get out of their cars to soak in the scenery.

"My favorite thing to do in the park is to get on a trail," says adventure photographer Andy Austin of Billings, Mont. "Hiking is a great way to get away from the crowds. The views of the Tetons are great no matter where you are, and so many people never leave the roads."

With craggy peaks soaring to 13,770 feet at the highest, the Tetons are a premier climbing destination. Park spokeswoman Jackie Skaggs recommends that visitors take the "eClimb" virtual tour on the park's website before coming.

"It's an armchair climb for people to get a sense of what it takes, the kind of decision-making involved and what it's like to actually be here," she says. "That's to pique the interest of people planning ahead."

The park's website can also help in planning how to use limited time in the park judiciously.

Whether you climb or not, the mountains are always spectacular scenery, Austin says.

"I've been a lot of places in the world, and the view of the Tetons gets me every time," he says. "There's one particular curve in the road when coming down from the north entrance and it's your first good view. Coming around that corner every time is a near spiritual experience for me."

For Mark Calhoun of Lander, Wyo., the best hiking spot is the Garnet Canyon Trail. "It is the beginning point for climbing the Grand Teton, which I did a few years back. The trail is steep and spectacular — and historical," he says, with an "unparalleled view of the entire park."

The park also holds treasured memories as the spot where Calhoun honeymooned 25 years ago. He remembers "driving over Togwotee Pass and getting a full view (of the park) and watching the sunset over the Tetons from Jackson Lake Lodge."

The view never gets old, says Skaggs, the park spokeswoman.

"It's a wonderful park to come to for the natural world people crave," she says. "We have a lot of cultural resources, old dude ranches and homesteads, beautiful artwork and Native American artifacts. We're a small, intimate, easily accessible park."

Grand Teton is a tenth the size of neighboring Yellowstone National Park. Entry into one park includes entry into the other.

"Yellowstone has a lot of ca-

▶ STORY CONTINUES ON 32

▶ CONTINUED FROM 30

chet, a lot of notoriety as the first national park, but Grand Teton in many ways is more enjoyable," she says. "It's easier to get around and do a lot in a short amount of time. It's friendly, welcoming and accessible."

The park is a photographer's dream. Austin has captured the Moulton Barn under a sky thick with stars and on a crisp morning as the sun's first rays lit the mountains. He's shot the Tetons mirrored in a glassy lake under a pastel sky and in black and white with storm clouds looming.

"For photographers of all skill levels, I highly recommend waking up extra early and getting out for sunrise. The mountain lights up this beautiful pink color, and it's truly breathtaking," he says.

Early one morning at Oxbow Bend, he found 30 photographers aiming for the perfect shot. He pushed on to Jenny Lake and found "not a soul," he says.

"Just as I thought it couldn't get more perfect, the elk started bugling all around me. A truly surreal feeling."

The wildlife watching is outstanding, with moose and grizzly bears often easier to spot than in Yellowstone.

"Last year I was nearing the end of my guiding season in the Tetons, and all summer long I still had not seen a big bull moose. My last trip guiding and I was leaving the visitor center in Moose, Wyo., and, sure enough, there was a big bull right next to the bridge," Austin says. "We stopped and watched for a long time, and we were able to be right on top of him from the bridge."

Just 4 miles south of Moose is the Laurance S. Rockefeller Preserve Center, which explores Rockefeller's preservation efforts. The land was a Rockefeller family retreat until transferred to the park service in 2007. Opened in 2008, the center is a launching point for a scenic drive, 8 miles of hiking trails, a 160-foot-deep lake for fishing or swimming, and wildlife-spotting opportunities.

The Craig Thomas Discovery and Visitor Center provides an orientation to the park, with pelts to feel and tracks to examine. Look for hidden treasures such as a critter in the rafters or tucked behind a pole. Skaggs says visitors can see a 3-D map of the park or listen to a ranger naturalist talk.

"It's a springboard to learning about the park before you get into the physical world of Grand Teton," she says.

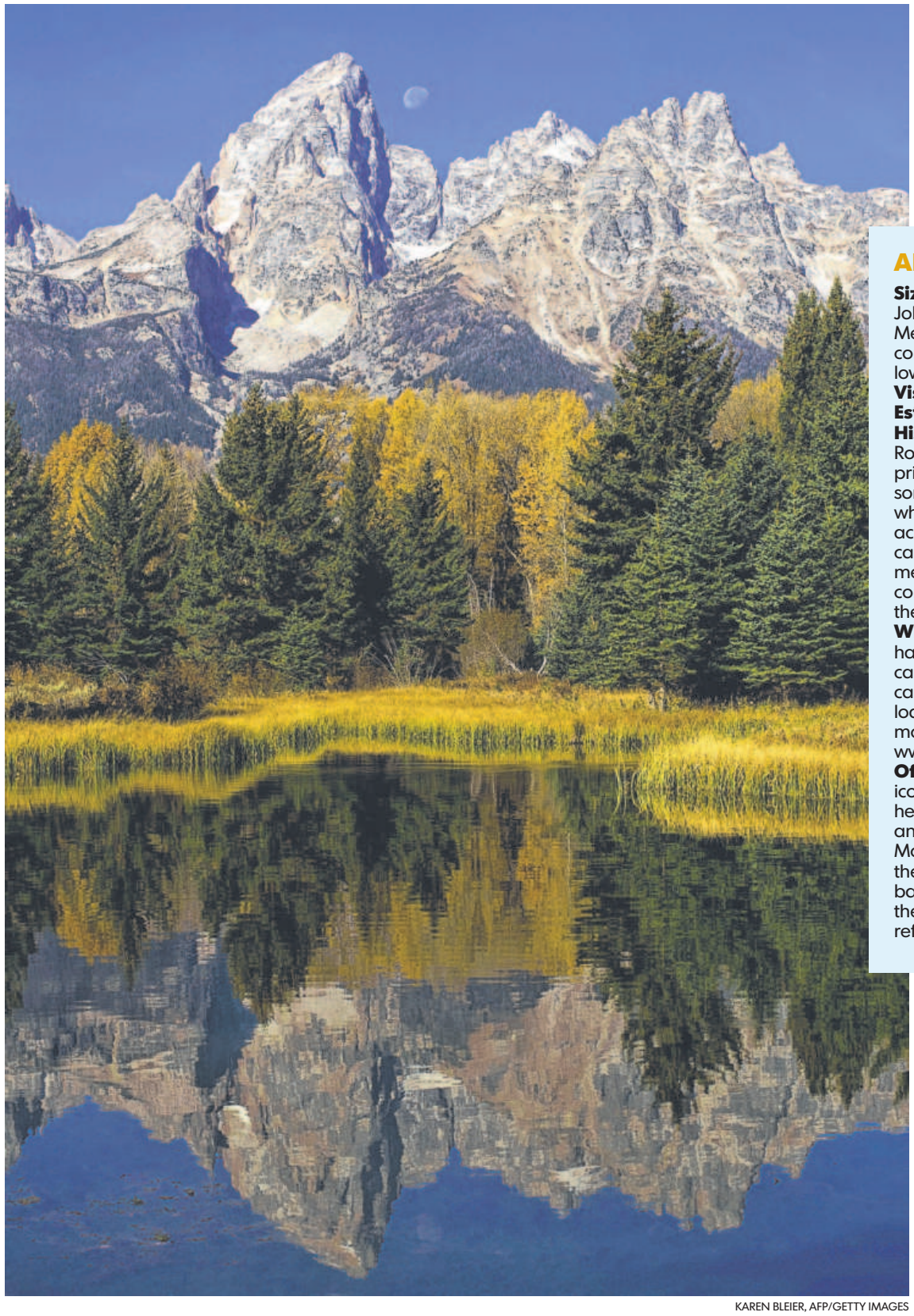
People come for the mountains, but Austin says the sagebrush flats, at 6,320 feet elevation, can be equally compelling. "That's often where you'll see the best wildlife. I saw 33 moose in the sagebrush flats in one morning."

The park has six campgrounds and lodging from high-end to rustic. Skaggs says.

No visit would be complete without stopping at Jackson, a town of nearly 10,000, south of the park. It's a good place to book a float down the Snake River, a horse ride into the national forest or a fishing trip — or just to shop and dine. Don't miss the antler arches in the town square or the nearby National Elk Refuge.

"There's a host of activities, from hiking and mountain climbing to floating and boating to camping and fishing, and nearby Grand Teton there are cultural and urban experiences in Jackson, such as the Grand Teton Music Festival, ... art galleries, shopping and gourmet restaurants," Skaggs says. "You can have it all in Grand Teton National Park."

Inbody also reports for the *Great Falls* (Mont.) *Tribune*



KAREN BLEIER, AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Still waters at Schwabacher Landing reflect Grand Teton, the highest peak in the Teton Range at 13,775 feet.

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 310,000 acres; the John D. Rockefeller Jr. Memorial Parkway, which connects the park to Yellowstone, is 23,777 acres
Visitors: 2,791,392 in 2014
Established: 1929
History: Oil heir John D. Rockefeller Jr. bought private land in the Jackson Hole Valley to expand what was then a 96,000-acre park. His land became a national monument in the 1940s and combined with the park in the 1950s.
When visiting: The park has five front-country campgrounds, rustic cabins, dude ranches and lodges. For a list of accomodation otions, go to www.nps.gov/grte.
Of note: To re-create iconic photos of the park, head to Antelope Flats and the Moulton Barns at Mormon Row, or watch the sun rise at Schwabacher Landing, where the jagged peaks are reflected in still water.

{THE TOP 10} ARIZONA GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK

DAVID WALLACE, THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

At Pima Point, visitors can get right up to the edge of the Grand Canyon. This popular overlook is on the canyon's more accessible South Rim, which gets 90% of visitors to the park.

Dennis Wagner
USA TODAY

In a bunkhouse at Phantom Ranch, on the floor of the Grand Canyon, Laura Beutelman answers a phone call. She's just completed another day of trail work, and someone is asking how best to appreciate one of the world's seven natural wonders.

"If you can find your own little spot — just sitting and watching everything happen around you, listening to river, the birds, the wind — almost all of your cares go away," says Beutelman, 25, a volunteer with the Arizona Conservation Corps. "It's part of the magic of this place."

In fact, the experience at Grand Canyon National Park is all about perspectives. As first-time visitors approach the canyon rim, they are captured by the grandeur, plus a sense that the void is sucking them over the edge.

Those who venture beneath the overlooks discover a whole new sensation: immersion into a geological time warp that affects each individual differently. Some feel a

PHOTOS BY DAVID WALLACE, THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Over 4.5 million people a year come to Grand Canyon National Park to be awed by the scenery, carved out of the earth by water and wind over millions of years.

Source ESRI

JANET LOEHRKE, USA TODAY

The view from Mohave Point. The canyon is more than a mile deep in some areas.

spiritual envelopment. Some, listening to breezes swoosh against 2-billion-year-old rock layers, encounter new perspectives on life.

The dimensions are stunning: 277 zigzagging miles carved by the Colorado River, more than a mile deep and up to 18 miles wide. Because of twists and side canyons, a full-circuit around the perimeter would cover more than 2,600 miles — greater than the air distance from New York to LA.

Scott Thybony, a freelance author who has guided raft trips and treks through the canyon for four decades, once said the spectacle remains unique even after hundreds of visits: "Every time I go, it's different, it's new. The inhuman scale of it is hard to get a handle on. You need to hike into it, take a mule train down the trail, float the river, fly over it."

Each year, more than 4.5 million people from all over the world accept that invitation. They take pictures of multicolored cliffs sculpted by water and wind over the eons. They leave with an indelible life experience that includes that stomach-flipping sensation on the brink.

Frequent visitors talk about the solitude and space, a transformative timelessness.

Bryan Struble, a National Park trail maintenance worker and photographer, recommends a hike at least partway into the chasm. "There's always a different experience," he says. "When you're touching the resource with your hands, smelling it, wind in your face, and a thunderstorm comes through. ... Find your serenity."

Grand Canyon National Park covers 1,900 square miles, an area larger than Rhode Island. The more accessible South Rim (80 miles from Flagstaff, Ariz., and 228 miles from Phoenix) is open year-round and attracts 90% of visitors. The remote North Rim (266 miles from Las Vegas) closes in the winter.

The place is safe enough that children, seniors and people with disabilities can enjoy the splendor, yet dangerous enough that, each year, careless visitors die from falls, heat stroke and dehydration.

For first-timers, the big question is how to get the best out of this overwhelming attraction. You can hike trails atop the rim, backpack into the abyss for a camping experience, join a multiday rafting adventure on the Colorado, ride a mule to rustic cabins or get the bird's-eye view from a helicopter.

The mesmerizing panorama cannot be captured in postcards or conjured in poetry. Yet casual tourists find much more to do than gawk. Each day, rangers offer free interpretive classes and treks.

National Park entry fees will increase on June 1 to $30 from $25 for a seven-day vehicle permit, and to $15 from $12 for those arriving by train, raft or on foot. (Other fees, such as backpacking permits, also have increased.) Tours and overnight accommodations, including Grand Canyon lodges and campgrounds, fill up in peak seasons and on weekends.

Wagner also reports for *The Arizona Republic* of Phoenix

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 1.2 million acres
Visitors: 4,756,771 in 2014
Established: 1919
History: The oldest human artifacts date back nearly 12,000 years. In 1893, President Benjamin Harrison proclaimed the canyon a preserve. President Theodore Roosevelt established it as a national monument in 1908 with the words: "Do nothing to mar its grandeur, sublimity and loveliness. You cannot improve on it. But what you can do is to keep it for your children, your children's children, and all who come after you." Finally, in 1919, Congress established the national park.
When visiting: Plan ahead, stay awhile and spend some solitary time on the rim and in the abyss. Going to the Grand Canyon is not like visiting a museum. It's a vast destination best experienced with reservations and an itinerary. A great place to start is at nps.gov/grca.
Of note: One-armed explorer John Wesley Powell first navigated the Colorado River through the 277-mile canyon in wooden boats in 1869.

{THE TOP 10} **WASHINGTON** OLYMPIC NATIONAL PARK

Do you want to go to the beach, the mountains or the forest? Yes!

At the northwest tip of the continental USA lies a wonderland of Olympic proportions

Source ERSI
JANET LOEHRKE, USA TODAY

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 922,650 acres
Visitors: 3,243,872 in 2014
Established: 1938
History: In 1909, President Theodore Roosevelt created Mount Olympus National Monument. In 1938, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed legislation creating the national park. In 1976, it became an International Biosphere Reserve. In 1981, it was designated a World Heritage Site, and in 1988, Congress designated 95% of the park as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System.
When visiting: U.S. Highway 101, which goes around the Olympic Peninsula, offers access to all park destinations. For information, call 360-565-3130.
Of note: Removal of two dams on the Elwha River is the second-largest ecosystem restoration project in the National Park System.

Tracy Loew
USA TODAY

Olympic National Park's nearly 1 million acres include something for everyone.

The park, in the northwest corner of Washington state, boasts 73 miles of Pacific coastline.

Its valleys contain some of the largest remaining ancient forests in the country.

And in the center are the Olympic Mountains, topped with massive, ancient glaciers.

"You've got mountains, glaciers, waterfalls, lakes, ocean beaches and rainforests — all within the boundaries of one national park," says Lauren Shaw, 28, of Edmonds, Wash., who hikes and backpacks in the park. "There are so many options — you can do a short day trip or spend days, even weeks wandering through the wilderness of the park."

Visitors can explore tide pools or wildflower meadows, hike, raft or ski, or search for plants and animals unique to the park, such as the Olympic marmot.

They can explore more than 650 archaeological sites — tracing prehistoric inhabitants through American Indian tribes to Euro-American settlement.

And they can stay at a resort, a hotel or one of more than 900 campsites in the park.

"It's not like some parks, where you drive in and see one thing," says park spokeswoman Barb Maynes, who has worked there for a quarter-century. "There are many, many things here."

With so many options, here are a few places to begin:

▶ For a short visit, take a two-hour scenic loop drive through the Quinault rainforest. There are lots of places along the way to stop and take a short hike or view waterfalls and wildlife.

▶ Hurricane Ridge is a popular destination for winter recreation, with snowshoeing, snowboarding, tubing and cross-country and downhill skiing.

▶ Lake Crescent, about 18 miles west of Port Angeles, is easily accessible and an ideal base for exploring. The lake is known for its brilliant blue waters and offers a number of water sports.

The park also is home to the largest dam removal project in history. The removal of Elwha and Glines Canyon dams on the Elwha River began in 2011. This is the first summer that both dams are completely gone, revealing an entirely new landscape. "Salmon have returned to the Elwha River and have been up within the national park for the first time in 100 years," Maynes says.

Also new this year are three projects aimed at making the park more accessible, Maynes says.

This summer, a wheelchair-accessible visitor overlook will open for viewing the restoration in progress from the dam removal project. "It's a 200-foot-deep canyon," Maynes says. "It's a really beautiful site."

The Log Cabin Resort on Lake Crescent is finishing an accessible dock that will allow people in wheelchairs to get into canoes and boats, Maynes says.

And near the resort, the Spruce Railroad Trail is being made wheelchair accessible.

Shaw says her favorite experience in the park was backpacking the High Divide-Seven Lakes Basin Loop.

"Few things can beat hiking up a hillside painted with wildflowers or pitching a tent on a ridge with a front-row seat of Mount Olympus," Shaw says. "It's hard to have a bad day in the Olympics."

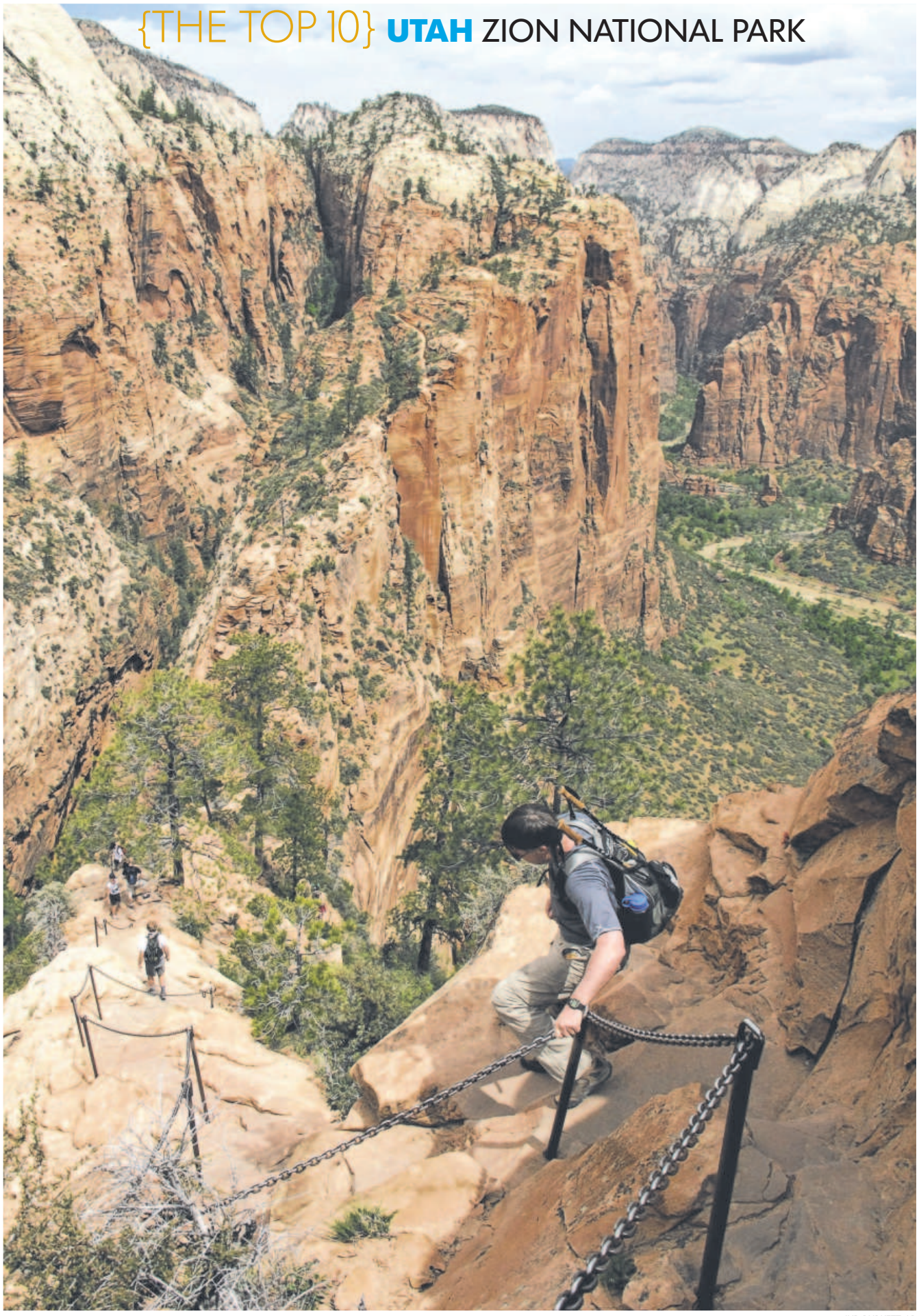
LILY LANDES

The Hoh Rainforest in Washington's Olympic National Park is one of the finest remaining examples of temperate rainforest in the USA. The forest gets 140-170 inches of precipitation a year.

NPS.GOV

Olympic's Pacific coastline — which is separated from the rest of the park — is 73 miles long but mostly just a few miles wide.

Loew also reports for the Salem, Ore., *Statesman Journal*



JUD BURKETT, AP

Hikers descend the Angels Landing trail amid the towering sandstone cliffs of Zion National Park in Utah.

Water makes this desert transcendent

Falls, floods and the Virgin River continue to revise the Zion map

Brian Passey
USA TODAY

Mention Zion National Park, and many people think of soaring sandstone cliffs, not necessarily the river that carved them.

Amy Schmutz, of Durham, N.C., says she used to think of red rock and desert when picturing the landscape of southern Utah. That changed when she visited Zion with a group of college friends in April.

"The fact that so many of Zion's hikes include water features such as waterfalls, pools and rivers surprised me with a new dimension that I didn't expect and certainly enjoyed," she says.

Among the trails she trekked was the Riverside Walk, a paved, mile-long path that follows the Virgin River, which carved Zion Canyon, to the beginning of the Narrows, where the canyon becomes so narrow

▶ STORY CONTINUES ON 40

DAVID BECKER, GETTY IMAGES

The main entrance is on the southern side of the park, at the town of Springdale.

TRENT NELSON, AP

Water takes hundreds of years to filter down through the layers of sandstone. When it emerges, hardy desert plants drink it up.

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 148,733 acres
Visitors: 3,189,696 in 2014
Established: 1909
History: President William Howard Taft created Mukuntuweap National Monument in 1909. In 1918, its name was changed to Zion National Monument, and the next year Congress established it as a national park. The western Kolob section of the park was first protected as Zion National Monument in 1937 and later incorporated into the park in 1956.
When visiting: The main section of the park is accessible via Utah Route 9 from the south and the east, while the Kolob Canyons section is accessible via Interstate 15 from the west. The main visitor center is at the south entrance near Springdale. For information, call 435-772-3256. The park is open 24 hours a day, every day of the year.
Of note: In 1997, with park visitation at 2.4 million and increasing, a shuttle system was established to reduce traffic and parking problems, protect vegetation and restore some tranquility to Zion Canyon. Private vehicles are allowed on Zion Canyon Scenic Drive only during the offseason or when staying at Zion Lodge.

▶ CONTINUED FROM 38

that there is no longer a bank on either side of the river.

Schmutz says there was an intriguing beauty to walking along the river at the base of the cliffs rather than climbing upward.

"It helped me appreciate the height and grandeur of the red rock surrounding me," she says.

Photographer David J. West has his own gallery in Zion's gateway town, Springdale. Many of his photographs of Zion feature the Virgin River or popular photo spots like the Subway, a permit-only section of the park where a stream flows through a tunnel-like canyon.

West says Zion's water speaks to him, especially because water is often so rare in the desert.

"To slow down and listen to what the water is saying, in a place like Zion National Park, on a deeper level, is enlightening," he said. "It always amazes me when I stop and look up at these 2,000-foot cliffs and to think this little river had so much to do with the shape and depth of the canyon."

In addition to carving the landscape, the Virgin River and its smaller tributaries also bring life to the canyon. Popular trails like Emerald Pools and Weeping Rock even have references to the water in their name.

"Water is precious in the desert, and Zion is full of it," says Aly Baltrus, chief of interpretation for the park. "It literally pops out of springs in the rock and cascades down."

Water filters down through layer after layer of sandstone for hundreds of years before it emerges from the sides of the cliffs. As it emerges, the water provides life for Weeping Rock's signature "hanging gardens" — verdant gatherings of lush plant life that cling to the colorful rock.

Baltrus notes that the water brings animal life, too. Hikers might enjoy the colorful columbine that grows in another set of hanging gardens along the Emerald Pools Trail while listening to a chorus of frogs.

Schmutz and her friends also hiked the Emerald Pools Trail, which takes hikers past a series of three pools, each higher than the next, connected by small streams and ribbon-like waterfalls.

"One of the things I loved about the Emerald Pools hike were the water features that served as rewards along the way," Schmutz says. "Each waterfall or pool seemed to appear just when I felt ready for a little rest."

However, the water in Zion is not always so tranquil. It can be an awesome force.

A massive storm in 2010 transformed the often placid Virgin River into a raging torrent that once again changed the landscape, this time overnight. During that storm West captured many photographs of temporary, rain-fed waterfalls pouring off clifftops.

"I notice people seem to be drawn to the beauty of water in the desert," he says. "The dynamic nature of water flowing through these beautiful and mysterious desert landscapes make Zion National Park very unique among other national parks."

However, like many places across the nation, southern Utah is facing drought conditions that have changed the appearance of some of these features in Zion. Baltrus says the Virgin River has been considerably lower this spring. Locations like the Emerald Pools and Weeping Rock, however, are not affected much by the drought because their primary water sources are springs.

Passey also reports for *The Spectrum* of St. George, Utah

{THE TOP 10} **COLORADO** ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK

BRENNAN LINSLEY, AP

Visitors stop at an overlook off Trail Ridge Road in Rocky Mountain National Park. It's the highest paved road in the USA, rising to nearly 11,500 feet above sea level.

You can do this park by car, but you don't have to

Stop, get out, look around, *walk* around: 'Nowhere else where you can see so much'

Trevor Hughes
USA TODAY

ESTES PARK, COLO. Asking visitors why they love Rocky Mountain National Park is liable to produce some befuddled looks.

Is it the snow-capped mountains? The roaring rivers and babbling brooks? The majestic elk and bighorn sheep? Or maybe just the chance to drive at more than 2 miles above sea level and throw snowballs in mid- summer?

"There's nowhere else where you can see so much," says Jessica Blank, a nurse from Kentucky. "I wanted to come and see somewhere wild and mountainous."

Like many visitors, Blank found herself drawn to the wide range of options at the park, which is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year. This spring, Blank spent two nights camping in a remote area of the park, watching one day as a magpie taunted a coyote.

"It's incredible, the things you can see," she says.

America acquired the land on which the park sits as part of the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, and visitors have long appreciated its towering peaks and abundant wildlife. Silver prospectors sought

▶ STORY CONTINUES ON 44

Source ERSI

JANET LOEHRKE, USA TODAY

▶ CONTINUED FROM 42

their fortune in Lulu City, and farmers tapped the Colorado River for irrigation, diverting water across the Continental Divide to nurture crops near Denver.

Rocky, as the park is known locally, officially became a national park on Jan. 26, 1915, with the signature of President Woodrow Wilson, following years of lobbying by naturalist and lodge owner Enos Mills. At the time, many private buildings dotted the new park's landscape, and roads were primitive.

As with many Western parks, the Great Depression spurred major changes as the Civilian Conservation Corps erected lodges and built roads and trails. While there had been a road across the Continental Divide, it wasn't designed for automobiles in the way the purpose-built Trail Ridge Road was.

Trail Ridge, the highest paved road in the country, takes drivers on a 4,000-foot climb to nearly 11,500 feet above sea level, connecting Estes Park with Grand Lake. Opened in 1932, the highway to the sky winds through meadows and pine forests before breaking out through wind-twisted trees known as krummholz onto windswept tundra, providing 360-degree views of the surrounding mountains and valleys.

The road is a popular day trip for summer visitors, who can easily drive from Denver to the park's eastern edge, up and across the Continental Divide for lunch in Grand Lake before returning as the sun sets behind the Rockies. Unlike many national parks, Rocky was never served by a railroad, which park officials say helped make it one of the nation's first auto-focused national parks.

"It was designed to be accessible almost right from the beginning," says park superintendent Vaughn Baker. "(Visitors) can do it from their car, and they certainly don't have to get out. It's a good introduction to wilderness. We hope the next step is to get out of the car, and maybe it's a short walk out to the tundra or to a lake."

Of course, accessible doesn't equal tamed. Visitors often have to wend their way through elk herds at the park's entrance, and bighorn sheep unexpectedly hop off ledges onto the road in front of cars. In short, this park that last year got 3.4 million visitors is still dominated by Mother Nature.

"What better way to connect with kids than for them to see wildlife?" Baker says.

The park's grandeur makes us all feel small. Longs Peak towers to 14,259 feet, all of which can be conquered by well-prepared hikers willing to start their trek in the pre-dawn darkness. They clamber through the boulder field and then the Keyhole before making the final ascent to the massive flat-topped peak. Longs is no easy hike, yet it draws thousands of trekkers and climbers every year from around the world.

The intimidating Longs is far from the park's only hike. Visitors can take easy walks along brooks that were snow just a few hours before, or hike alongside the very first miles of the Colorado River as it begins its long path to Mexico. You can even walk to abandoned gold mines or the now-defunct Lulu City.

Baker says the park's beauty comes from its combination of accessibility and wilderness. With an easy drive, visitors can look down upon valleys and meadows where few feet have trod.

The park's 100th anniversary is an opportunity for people to get re-acquainted with Rocky, which has long been a draw for families on vacation, Baker says. Hotels, lodges and campgrounds surround the park, and there's also camping and lodging inside its boundaries.

"People have made connections to this special place over generations," he says. "It's that classic Rocky Mountain experience."

Jackie Keller of Omaha rediscovered that classic experience on a recent weekend. Keller grew up in the Midwest but used to visit Rocky as a kid. She brought her husband, Pat, for his first visit while they were in the area with family.

"It's been a long time since I've seen the mountains," Keller said as she and Pat snapped photos of the snow-covered peaks looming above them. "I'll drive nine hours to be in this beauty for a long weekend."

Pat Keller listened quietly as his wife described her childhood visits to the park, and as she decided, right then and there, to lobby to move their annual family reunion west from Nebraska.

"I've never seen anything like it in my life," he said as he watched high clouds blow past snow-capped peaks. "It's mesmerizing."

ANN SCHONLAU, ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK

Snow is a year-round sight in the park locals call "Rocky." Above, summertime at Emerald Lake

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 265,770 acres
Visitors: 3,434,751 in 2014
Established: 1915
History: For thousands of years, Native Americans used trails to cross the Continental Divide in the area of Rocky Mountain National Park. Those trails have become roads connecting the east and west sides of the park along Trail Ridge Road, which is closed each year by snowfall. The road reopens around Memorial Day after weeks of work by snowplow drivers carving through 30-foot-tall drifts.
When visiting: The Beaver Meadows Visitor Center, one of several around the park, is on U.S. Route 36, 3 miles west of Estes Park, Colo. Visitor information: 970-586-1206. Trail Ridge Road information recording: 970-586-1222 (24 hours a day, updated as conditions change).
Of note: The park was once home to a privately run ski area called Hidden Valley, and while the lifts and lodge have been removed, the slope is open for sledding and back-country skiing late into spring.

{THE TOP 10} OHIO CUYAHOGA VALLEY NATIONAL PARK

Gem hides in plain sight in urbanized Ohio

Visitors find 'middle of nowhere ... in the middle of everything'

Susanne Cervenka
USA TODAY

PHOTOS BY TOM JONES

Blue Hen Falls, accessible via a short hike, is one the park's most popular spots with families.

Try to pin down one thing that makes Cuyahoga Valley National Park a favorite, and the consensus will be ... that that can't be done.

The nearly 33,000-acre park is tucked away — some might say hidden — between the Cleveland and Akron metro areas in northeastern Ohio. Yet it boasts a variety of experiences that reflect how the local area, and the country as a whole, developed.

"The biggest comment we get from visitors is, 'I had no idea you had this much to offer,' " says Mary Pat Doorley, a public affairs officer with the park. "You can have a biking experience, a train experience, eat fresh, locally grown farm food, and look and see some of the wildlife that has come back. It's the history of our country."

Among the top features of the park is the Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad, which was built in the late 1800s to move people and goods. For $3, visitors can ride in historic train cars to see much of the 20-mile-long park.

Visitors can also learn about the development of the Ohio & Erie Canal, which runs through the park, and how it affected the way products move throughout America, Doorley says. On weekends, the park staff dons period costumes and shows how boats moved through the canal's locks.

The revival of the Cuyahoga River, which infamously caught fire in 1969 and helped spur major federal environmental legislation, brought back much of the natural wildlife, including bald eagles and river otters, Doorley says.

Doorley has seen a change in the kind of visitors the park sees since it was elevated to national park status in 2000 after a quarter-century as a national recreation area: "If you had talked to me 10 years ago, I would have said we were pretty much a day-use park frequented by the local residents."

Park officials believe that is starting to shift, based on the number of out-of-state license plates in its visitors center parking lots. They hope to confirm that hunch with a more detailed visitors survey this summer.

Yet the park still gets strong support locally, Doorley says. It has about 6,000 volunteers, one of the largest volunteer networks in the National Park Service.

Nima Zaaeed, a science teacher with the public schools in Lakewood, Ohio, takes a class of about 15 students each year to Cuyahoga Valley as part of a summer field ecology program.

The main goals of the trip: to find evidence of geological changes over thousands of years, learn about the different layers of earth and conduct soil sampling to see variations between different types of tree habitats.

Of the nine different sites they visit with the program, students regularly pick Cuyahoga Valley National Park as their favorite spot, or at least the runner up, Zaaeed says. And it's not hard for her to understand why.

"It's the perfect combination of history and beauty and geology," she says. "You get a little bit of everything."

Her favorite part is Ritchie Ledges, a high point that allows her to view the beauty of nature left to unfurl without human interference.

Guy Cipriano of Bay Village, Ohio, says he and his wife, Dena, visit the park at least once or twice a week to run and bike the Towpath Trail, an 85-mile trail that runs from Cleveland to Tuscarawas County.

Cipriano says he applauds the decision to preserve the land, which he believes otherwise would have been built up into suburbs. "It gives you a sense of being in the middle of nowhere when you are in the middle of everything," he says.

Cervenka also reports for the *Asbury Park* (N.J.) *Press*

Source ESRI

JANET LOEHRKE, USA TODAY

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: About 32,950 acres
Visitors: 2,189,849 in 2014
Established: Cuyahoga Valley became a national park in 2000, but it had been a national recreation area since 1974.
History: The area first became a recreation destination for residents in nearby cities in the 1870s. Efforts to develop the area as a park began in the 1910s and 1920s.
When visiting: The park is not gated and has multiple entrances. Boston Store Visitor Center at 1550 Boston Mills Road in Peninsula is the main visitors center. For information: 330-657-2752.
Of note: Local advocates wanting to preserve Cuyahoga Valley initially were met with resistance from the National Park Service. In 1973, the park service director said, "I will tell you one thing. (The Cuyahoga Valley) will be a park over my dead body."

{ESSAY}

JULIE JACOBSON, AP

Old Faithful is an awe-inspiring sight, and yet people choose to watch it through a tiny screen when it's right in front of them.

"Without enough wilderness America will change. Democracy, with its myriad personalities and increasing sophistication, must be fibered and vitalized by regular contact with outdoor growths – animals, trees, sun warmth and free skies — or it will dwindle and pale."

—Walt Whitman

National treasures ... or lost treasures?

When we view nature's majesty as just another backdrop for a selfie, we aren't *seeing* it at all

Chris Albert
Special for USA TODAY and NatGeo WILD

It was three years ago when I first saw it. We were waiting with a crowd of about 100 people, all with cameras poised at the ready. Some had cellphones, some had incredibly expensive-looking long-lens outfits. And, of course, there were the family camcorders too.

We were all standing there, in virtual silence, just waiting for it to happen. Some had waited an hour. Some had just arrived. But we were all waiting for the same thing. And then it began. Slowly at first, and then with a power and awe that is hard to describe, water driven by pressure deep beneath the surface burst into the air.

We were in Yellowstone National Park, at its most famous geyser, Old Faithful.

Of course, there is science to explain exactly how the geyser works, but at that moment, no one really seemed to care about that. We were all just taking in nature's beauty. People of all ages and races, united for the three-plus minutes of this eruption.

That is when it dawned on me — witnessing this incredible convergence of technology and nature, and the irony behind it.

After all, in this age of video games and Facebook, we spend more time looking down then looking up. But it is this same technology that we can't seem to use enough when in nature. That day in Yellowstone, I was struck by how few people actually put down their cameras and just took in the scene.

Do we lose something in our quest to preserve it forever? And is our digital world compromising our appreciation for our natural wonders?

These questions are clearly pretty rudimentary. But the point is that in order to inspire the next generation to appreciate and — even more important — to want to protect our national parks, we need to break through their digital distractions with a new view of why the parks are important, and why people should care.

If we succeed, we protect and preserve our national treasures. If we fail, we risk losing them.

{MIDWEST}

MICHIGAN ISLE ROYALE NATIONAL PARK

Paradise for lovers of peace and quiet

John Wisely
USA TODAY

The more than two-dozen Lake Superior shipwrecks that surround Isle Royale testify to the island's rugged isolation. But for those willing to cross the waters of North America's largest lake, the 50-mile long island group offers a variety of natural wonders.

Woods and waters, wolves and moose, sunsets, star-gazing and the Northern Lights draw people to Isle Royale National Park from all over the Midwest and Canada.

"The seclusion is what I'm after, and it's the best place I've found," says Rusty Easton, 58, of Waterloo, Iowa, who has visited 14 times and plans to return again this summer. "It's just the peace of mind. Not having to listen to a TV, not having to listen to cars or people talking all the time. It just really clears your head."

Isle Royale is 17 miles from the nearest Lake Superior shoreline in Minnesota and more than 50 miles from the rest of Michigan. Visitors mostly come by ferry. Seaplanes offer a smoother trip, albeit a more expensive one.

Isle Royale is the least-visited national park in the lower 48 states, a product of its remoteness, says Liz Velencia, chief of interpretation. "It's because you can't drive here," she says.

But she says those who visit are likely to return because of what they find there. "I think people are always impressed by how quiet it is everywhere and how clear the water is," she says. "It's hard to describe how it smells. It smells really fresh."

Isle Royale marks its 75th anniversary this year, with some celebrations planned in August.

Electricity in the park comes from generators which have to be fed with fuel transported across the lake. This year, the park plans to convert to solar energy, which will make it quieter still.

Wisely also reports for the *Detroit Free Press*

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 132,018 acres
Visitors: 14,560 in 2014
Established: 1940
History: Formed by a lava flow more than a billion years ago, Isle Royale is now the largest island in Lake Superior. The United States secured ownership of it through the Treaty of Paris that ended the Revolutionary War. It's part of Michigan, despite being closer to Ontario and Minnesota. The park celebrates its 75th anniversary this year.
When visiting: Make ferry or seaplane reservations before arriving to avoid being shut out of a ride to the park. Bring comfortable shoes; there are no paved roads, bikes or cars.
Of note: The study of wolves and moose on Isle Royale is the longest-running large mammal predator-prey study on Earth.

ELLEN CREAGER, DETROIT FREE PRESS

Visitors to Isle Royale National Park in Lake Superior usually don't have to worry about crowds spoiling the serenity.

SOUTH DAKOTA MINUTEMAN MISSILE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

SARAH KOLBERG, AP

The crews that would fire America's ballistic nuclear missiles in the event of war with the Soviet Union were stationed deep underground behind heavy blast doors and reinforced concrete. *Left:* This Minuteman silo in North Dakota is similar to the one at the national historic site in South Dakota.

It (thankfully) wasn't the end of the world

Jonathan Ellis
USA TODAY

With the Cold War receding deeper into history, the Minuteman Missile National Historic Site in South Dakota preserves a time marked by a nuclear standoff between two superpowers.

For some of America's servicemembers, the ever-present threat of war with the Soviet Union kept them deep underground in nuclear missile launch centers. The power to destroy the world was at their fingertips.

The Minuteman site includes one of 150 missile silos that were spread across western South Dakota in an area bigger than Maryland. The site also includes a launch control center. Each center controlled 10 missiles.

Nationwide, more than 1,000 missiles were on station, mainly in the sparsely populated areas of the Great Plains.

Today, both the silo and launch control center are available to the public, although tours of the silo are limited to six people per tour. Tours are currently free.

Each launch control center included facilities for six security personnel, a cook and a facility manager, says Alison Shoup, the site's acting chief of resource interpretation and education. Each eight-man team would spend three days on duty before rotating back to Ellsworth Air Force Base in western South Dakota.

2004 PHOTO BY BILL CISSELL AP

Visitors can see the tight subterranean quarters where the missileers waited for orders.

Below them were two missileers who were on hand to launch their Minuteman missiles if the grim order ever came. The missileers worked 24-hour shifts. They were separated from the world above them by 31 feet and an 8-ton blast door.

This year, a new $3.6 million visitor center replaces temporary trailers that had been serving as a visitor center. The money came from the Air Force; Shoup says that's what the Air Force would have spent to decommission the site. Its grand opening is scheduled for Sept. 26.

With the new visitor center comes new exhibits that explain the Cold War and the Minuteman missile's place in that history. "Those are going to be fantastic," Shoup says.

Ellis also reports for the (Sioux Falls, S.D.) *Argus Leader*

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 10.25 acres on three sites
Visitors: 84,000 in 2014
Established: 1999
History: Minuteman Missile National Historic Site was an operational launch center during the Cold War, and the park is the first dedicated to that era. Minuteman missiles, and later the Minuteman II, were stationed across the Plains as part of the U.S. nuclear strike force. The site was operational from 1963 to 1993 before being transferred by the Air Force to the National Park Service.
When visiting: The park is open 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday during the winter, spring and fall. It's open seven days a week after Memorial Day. Because of construction, there could be parking constraints this year. Visior information: 605-433-5552.
Of note: The park sits on three sites off Interstate 90: The Delta-09 missile silo is off Exit 116; the Delta-01 launch control facility is off Exit 127; and the new visitor center is located at Exit 131, just 4 miles from the northeast entrance of Badlands National Park.

{MIDWEST}

INDIANA GEORGE ROGERS CLARK NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

The George Rogers Clark Memorial is the largest monument on a battlefield in the USA.

Battle was the key that unlocked West

Tim Evans
USA TODAY

VINCENNES, IND. The George Rogers Clark National Historical Park makes a big statement about a little-known battle in the Revolutionary War.

The park's defining feature is the grand Clark Memorial, designed in a style reminiscent of the Lincoln and Jefferson memorials in Washington, D.C. The domed rotunda soars 85 feet into the air, surrounded by Doric columns topped by the inscription "The Conquest of the West — George Rogers Clark and The Frontiersmen of the American Revolution."

The memorial marks the site of the 1779 siege of Fort Sackville, in which a group of frontiersmen and French settlers led by Clark captured the British fort that served as a gateway to the west. It was a small military victory, but it helped set the stage for something much larger — the westward expansion of the USA, says park superintendent Frank Doughman.

"It is a Revolutionary War site, which is unusual in the Midwest, just being that," Doughman says. "But on top of that its a site that's kind of forgotten in history but is immensely important."

In case you were wondering, George Rogers Clark is not the Clark from the Lewis and Clark expedition. That was his younger brother, William Clark.

The 26-acre park, adjacent to the Vincennes downtown district, includes picnic and outdoor spaces, as well as a visitor center and statues and monuments spread across the grounds.

But it is the Clark Memorial that stands out at this site. Inside are seven murals, each 28 feet tall and 16 feet wide, depicting the Sackville siege, Clark's other military victories, the Louisiana Purchase and westward expansion.

The murals circle a larger-than-life bronze statue of the young Clark, who was only 25 at the time of the 1779 battle.

Special events are hosted at the park throughout the year, including a rendezvous and battle re-enactment on Memorial Day weekend that attracts 20,000 visitors. Other historic sites nearby help broaden the story of Western expansion and early life in what is now Indiana.

Evans also reports for *The Indianapolis Star*

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 26 acres
Visitors: 125,218 in 2014
Established: 1966
History: The site of a Revolutionary War battle that helped open the door to Western expansion was established as a state park in 1939 and taken over by the National Park Service in 1966.
When visiting: Watch a short movie on Clark's Western campaign, tour the memorial and enjoy special seasonal events. For more information call 812-882-1776. The park visitor center is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., daily and the memorial is open from 9 a.m. to 4:45 p.m. The park is closed on federal holidays except Memorial Day, July Fourth and Labor Day. Check out several other historic sites nearby, including the Indiana Territorial Capital; Grouseland, the former home of William Henry Harrison, governor of the Indiana Territory and later president of the United States; and the Red Skelton Museum and Education Center.
Of note: Built in 1930, the majestic Clark Memorial overlooking the Wabash River is the largest monument on a battlefield site in the USA.

MINNESOTA VOYAGEURS NATIONAL PARK

Visitors can't really call this a road trip

Kirsti Marohn
USA TODAY

Imagine a national park with no roads, where the only way to get to your campsite is by boat.

Voyageurs National Park, a series of connected lakes and rivers along Minnesota's border with Canada, offers a wilderness experience, but you don't have to give up *all* creature comforts.

The park is named for the French-Canadian fur traders who traveled in birch bark canoes. The modes of transportation are a little more modern now. Unlike in Minnesota's nearby Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, motorboats and houseboats are allowed in Voyageurs, along with canoes and kayaks.

"For me, Voyageurs National Park encapsulates everything that's iconic Minnesotan: the big water, the walleye fishing, the family houseboat trip, the kayak trip, the loons, the wolves," says Christina Hausman, executive director of the Voyageurs National Park Association.

Among national parks, Voyageurs stands out because you can't drive through it, Hausman says. "You have to get out of your car to experience it."

The park is celebrating its 40th anniversary with a new reservation system for campsites, which reduces the chances of getting stranded if all campsites are full.

That's good news for kayakers like Linda Pascoe of Maple Grove, Minn., who takes annual trips to Voyageurs with a group from the Twin Cities. Because the campsites are scattered around the lakes, kayakers were at a disadvantage in grabbing good spots. "We're just never going to beat out the motorboat," she says.

Spencer Smith, 25, of St. Paul started coming to Voyageurs with his parents when he was a year old. Now he brings his friends to experience what he calls real camping.

"Camping is getting away, getting completely immersed in the wilderness," he says.

Marohn also reports for the *St. Cloud* (Minn.) *Times*

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 218,200 acres
Visitors: 239,160 in 2014
Established: 1975
History: Voyageurs is a collection of interconnected waterways along Minnesota's border with Canada. It's named for the French-Canadian fur traders who traveled through the lakes and rivers in birch bark canoes.
When visiting: 360 Minnesota Highway 11, International Falls. Visitor information: 218-286-5258.
Of note: Voyageurs is a water-based park, so you'll need to leave your car behind and travel by boat, kayak, canoe or, in the winter, snowmobile.

CARL BRESKE, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Voyageurs National Park in Minnesota is a series of interconnected waterways. Leave the car behind; the park has no roads.

{MIDWEST} **WISCONSIN** APOSTLE ISLANDS NATIONAL LAKESHORE

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Layers of sandstone laid down over millennia are visible at Keyhole Arch, a popular site at Apostle Islands National Lakeshore.

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: Land: 42,160 acres across 21 islands and 12 miles of the Bayfield Peninsula. Water: 27,232 acres.
Visitors: 290,059 in 2014
Established: 1970
History: At various times, the islands on Lake Superior have been home to Native Americans, fur-traders, farmers, loggers, fishermen and lighthouse keepers. The islands are believed to have been named by Jesuit missionaries, who drew the first maps of the area in the early 18th century.
When visiting: The headquarters visitor center is one block off Wisconsin Route 13 in Bayfield. The visitor center and fishery exhibit at Little Sand Bay is accessible by road or lake access, 13 miles north of Bayfield. For information call (715) 779-3397. Bring your sea legs. Though the Apostle Islands feature points of interest along the mainland, there is more to experience on the park's 21 islands. The islands are accessible by tour boat, private vessels and kayaks.
Of note: Apostle Islands National Lakeshore has the most lighthouses — eight, on six islands — of any National Park Service unit.

In winter or summer, on land or lake: 'Awesome'

Doug Schneider
USA TODAY

BAYFIELD, WIS. Even for veteran national parks visitor Dan Moore, Apostle Islands National Lakeshore stands out.

"There are only four national lakeshores, and the other three are primarily mainland," says Moore, 37, a De Pere, Wis., photographer who has visited more than 100 sites in the National Park Service system. "There can be thousands of people there, but it's not difficult to get to an area where you're by yourself."

The park's 21 islands and 12 miles of Lake Superior shoreline offer a study in contrasts.

In winter, people often trek for miles to explore the park's Mainland Sea Caves, which are accessible only if the lake is frozen over. The caves were accessible for nine days this past winter; a year earlier, they were accessible for roughly two months and were visited by 138,000 people.

"There's so much to see — and then there's even more to see — so we just kept going," says Mike Voigt, 40, of Little Chute, Wis. "We probably walked 6 or 7 miles. The kids loved it because they could crawl into all the nooks and crannies."

During the rest of the year, the islands and their lighthouses become the main attraction, and visitors arrive from nearby Bayfield by private craft, water taxi, kayak or excursion boat.

"The beauty of nature there is just awesome," says Abrams, Wis., resident Bonnie McSwain, 61, who visited last winter with two friends. "Other places I've been were nothing compared to the Apostles."

While most of the park is open this summer, visitors may find that a handful of lighthouses, and some adjacent docks, are closed for upgrades:

- The Michigan Island Lightstation and a nearby dock will be closed until Aug. 15. The grounds will be open after Aug. 15, but some exhibits might not be ready.
- The east and west landings for Devils Island Light — first used in 1857 — may be closed until July 15.
- Outer Island Light, built in 1874 as the most remote of the Apostles' lighthouses, will close from July 1 through Nov. 1. Dock closures may also occur.
- La Pointe Light on Long Island will close from July 15 through Nov. 1. Dock closures may also occur.

Money raised from sea caves visitors helps pay for temporary employees and equipment to prepare the site for next winter.

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

When Lake Superior freezes hard enough, the park's spectacular Mainland Sea Caves become accessible — but only to those willing to undergo a 2-mile trek across the ice in freezing temperatures. The caves were accessible for just nine days last winter, but for two months a year earlier.

Schneider also reports for the *Green Bay* (Wis.) *Press-Gazette*

{MIDWEST}

IOWA EFFIGY MOUNDS NATIONAL MONUMENT

Mysterious mounds survive centuries

Joel Aschbrenner
USA TODAY

One of the first decisions hikers at Effigy Mounds National Monument face is north or south?

Either way, visitors will encounter panoramic views of the upper Mississippi River Valley and the mysterious landmarks that give the northeast Iowa monument its name.

Effigy Mounds encompasses more than 200 Native Americans mounds. While Native American earthworks are found throughout the eastern USA, Effigy Mounds stands out for its mounds built in the shape of animals, including bears and birds, monument superintendent Jim Nepsted says.

The mounds range from 750 to 2,500 years old. Their exact purpose isn't known, but some may be burial mounds. Others appear ceremonial, Nepsted says.

Most of the mounds are only a few feet high but are easy to spot. One bird-shaped mound has a wing span of about 150 feet.

"I think a lot of (visitors) go away impressed that the American Indians living here 1,000, 2,000 years ago left us these structures that are still visible today," Nepsted says.

For first-time visitors, Nepsted recommends the Fire Point Loop, a 2-mile trail on the north side of the monument. Soon after leaving the visitors center, hikers encounter conical mounds before continuing to a bluff high above the river. "There is an absolutely spectacular overlook where you can look both north and south along the Mississippi River Valley," he says.

Jon Stravers, a bird researcher and musician who visits the Effigy Mounds dozens of times a year to monitor hawk and warbler populations, says hiking among the ancient mounds can be a spiritual experience.

He recommends the more rugged southern end of the monument, which involves a 4 mile round-trip hike. "It's a little more difficult to get there — it's a steep hike — but when you get to the south unit, it's a wilderness experience," he says. "It's hard to imagine you're in Iowa."

Aschbrenner also reports for *The Des Moines Register*

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 2,500 acres
Visitors: 77,812 in 2014
Established: 1949
History: The monument is one of the largest collections of pre-European mounds in the United States.
When visiting: Info at 563-873-3491, extension 202.
Of note: Some mounds are shaped like animals, such as bears and birds.

2010 PHOTO BY JUSTIN HAYWORTH, THE DES MOINES REGISTER, VIA AP

Paul and Sue Schramm hike at Effigy Mounds National Monument, on the bank of the Mississippi River in northeast Iowa.

MISSOURI OZARKS NATIONAL SCENIC RIVERWAYS

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

The Ozark National Scenic Riverways follows Missouri's Jacks Fork River and Current River.

Scenic rivers' attraction is clear

Stephen Herzog
USA TODAY

The history, and the people, of the Jacks Fork and Current rivers are a bit rugged, but that water is crystal clear.

The rivers, which make up the Ozarks National Scenic Riverways, meander across southeast Missouri for more than 200 miles.

"There are several large springs that pump 200 million gallons a day," says Dena Matteson, public information officer for the park. "And interwoven in that is a really unique landscape and cultural history."

Matteson says the land was settled by the Scotch and Irish in the 1800s. She described theirs as a hard-scrabble lifestyle. "You can trace the roots of a lot of the locals to those original settlers," she says. "It's a different area to live in. They're a really hardy people with a lot of cultural pride."

The land hasn't been developed much in the intervening 200 years. "It's an isolated area for the most part," Matteson says. "It's hard to get in and out of. The people settled in around these hills and hallows, digging out an existence in the area."

But a result of that isolation is the high quality of the water.

Matteson says people are surprised at how clean the water is, especially those who have floated in other rivers. "There are big springs, the most beautiful springs in the area," she says. "You can stand next to them in the clean water. It's a beautiful, picturesque setting."

She says the limestone landforms and waterfalls also add to the beauty of the area. "You won't believe it until you walk to the edge," she says.

Canoeing is one of the most popular activities in the park, along with kayaking and rafting. Behind the shores there are caves, trails and the historic Alley Mill. The caves include Round Spring Caverns, which offers ranger-led tours in the summer.

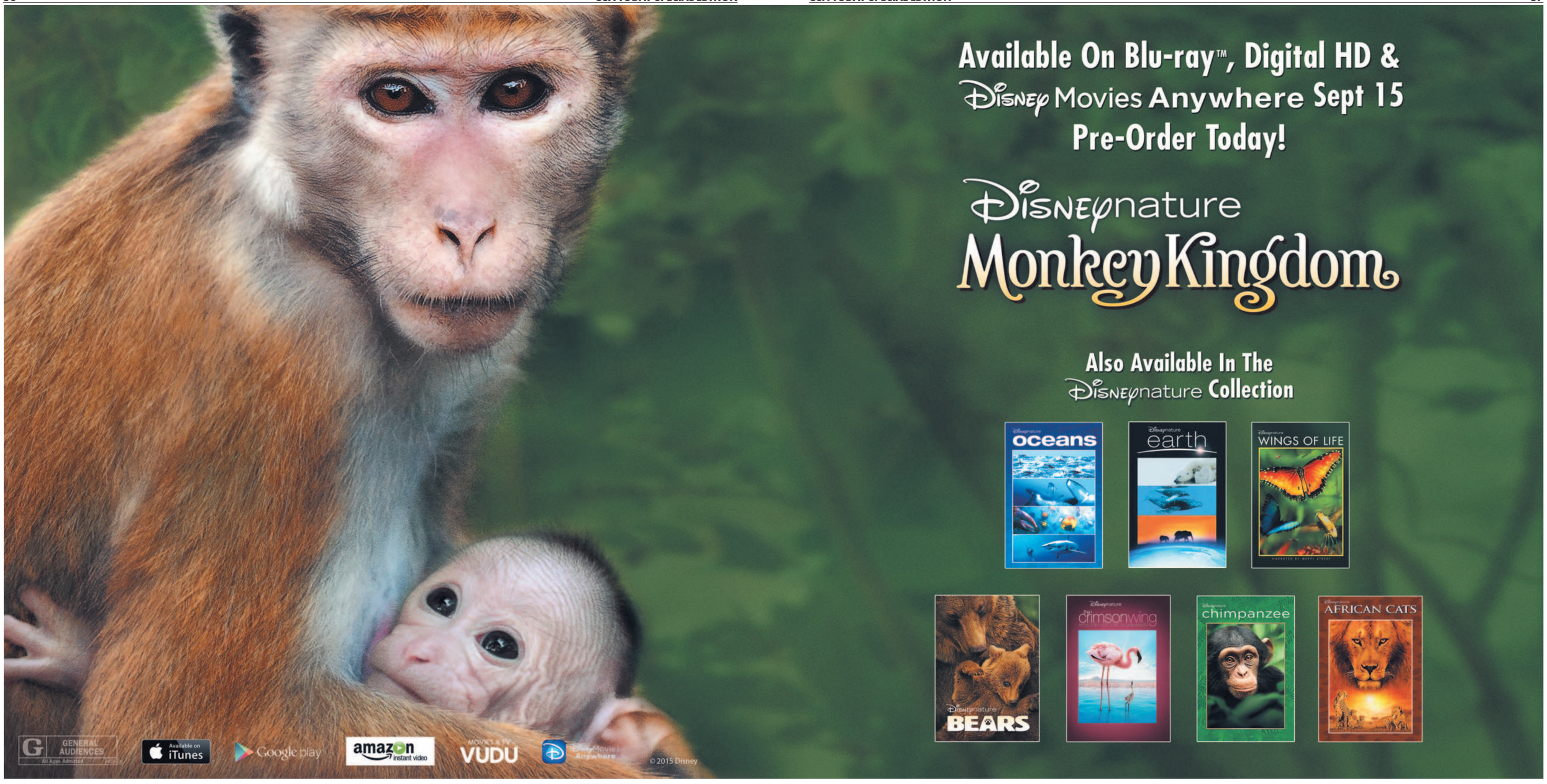
Matteson said it's an unusually large piece of public land.

"It's an unusual benefit," she said. "Most people would never be able to head out into the landscape for miles and not be trespassing. It's a unique way to live."

Herzog also reports for the *Springfield* (Mo.) *News-Leader*

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 80,000 acres
Visitors: 1,296,437 in 2014
Established: 1964
History: The Jacks Fork and Current rivers became a recreational destination around 1912 when outdoorsmen founded the Shannon County Hunting and Fishing Club. They built cabins and promoted the idea of a state park, which was established in 1925. Four decades later, it was made part of the national park system.
When visiting: The park is open year-round and has multiple visitor centers. For more information, call the park headquarters at 573-323-4236.
Of note: Visitors should keep an especially close eye on the weather, as traveling the rivers can be dangerous in certain conditions. Heavy rain can cause flooding in the area and can cause the rivers to run faster.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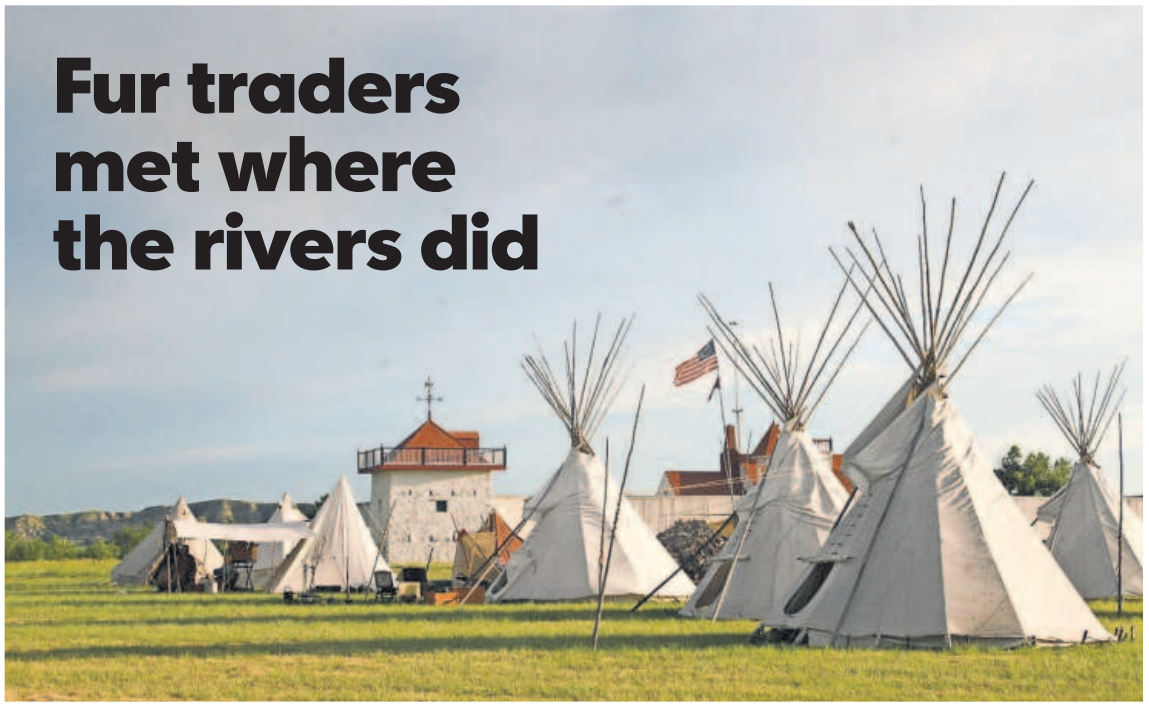
{MIDWEST}

NORTH DAKOTA FORT UNION TRADING POST NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

Fur traders met where the rivers did



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

The site includes a replica of Fort Union as it appeared in 1851, around the height of the fur trade.

Jonathan Ellis
USA TODAY

Sometimes you have to go out of your way to step back in time.

That's the case with Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site. The site, which straddles the North Dakota-Montana border, is well off the beaten path, north of Interstate 94, roughly 25 miles southwest of Williston, N.D., and 25 miles north of Sidney, Mont.

And though it's located in the heart of North Dakota's 21st-century oil boom, the buildings and rolling hills look much as they did nearly 200 years ago.

"You can really do that whole step-back-in-time thing," park ranger Lisa Sanden says.

Built in 1828 near the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers by John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company, Fort Union was not a military installation, but a post designed to promote commerce. Indians and European and American trappers would exchange furs for manufactured goods such as pots and pans, knives, firearms and other items. In turn, the furs supplied demand among American and European clothing manufacturers.

The facility generated as much as $100,000 a year in sales, and through its doors passed the furs of beavers, bears, bison and other animals of the Upper Midwest and northern Rockies. In bison alone, the post might see 25,000 to 50,000 hides a year, Sanden says. "For the fur traders, there was great demand for buffalo robes," she says.

For decades, Fort Union was a gateway into Indian country, and many of the enduring images and knowledge of the early American West came from expeditions that traveled to the fort. Famed naturalist and painter John James Audubon used the fort, as did mountain man Jim Bridger.

Eventually, the success of white settlement in the region required a military fort. The Army established Fort Buford nearby, and in 1867, the Army purchased and dismantled Fort Union. The park was established 101 years later.

Leif Halvorson of Sidney first went to the fort as an elementary student. Today, the father of three takes his family there, and Halvorson volunteers as a role player, portraying a trapper.

The Lewis and Clark expedition passed through the area, and the explorers suggested as early as 1803 that a fort be established at the site because of its significance to the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers, Halvorson says.

"It's just really cool that that much history has taken place in the area," he says.

Ellis also reports for the (Sioux Falls, S.D.) *Argus Leader*

ABOUT THE SITE

Size: 444 acres
Visitors: 14,000 in 2014
Established: 1966
History: Established in 1828 by the American Fur Company, Fort Union Trading Post was a hub of commerce for Indians, white fur trappers and European and American traders. The fort remained active for nearly 40 years before rapid white settlement following the Civil War ended its usefulness. The fort and its features changed over the years, but today it has been rebuilt to resemble its look in 1851, at the height of the fur trade.
When visiting: Fort Union is open year round and is free. Hours from Memorial Day to Labor Day are 8 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. daily. Winter hours are 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. For information: 701-572-9083.
Of note: Fort Union is just down the road from Fort Buford, a military post the Army established in 1866 to exert control over the increasingly settled area. Today, Fort Buford is operated by the State Historical Society of North Dakota, and the two attractions share visitors.

KANSAS FORT LARNED NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

1800s come to life in middle of Kansas

Stephen Herzog
USA TODAY

He's been a scout and a clerk at the quartermaster's building. His wife has been a cook and washerwoman.

For more than 50 years, Mark Berry has played those parts at Fort Larned National Historic Site. He is one of many volunteers who take on the 19th-century roles during demonstrations.

The fort was established in 1859 to protect the mail and, later, to protect traffic on the Santa Fe Trail, mostly from Native Americans.

George Elmore, chief ranger at the park, says people are often surprised at how well the fort has been maintained for all these years. "They can't believe these are the same walls," he says.

Elmore and Berry both say the park is a must-see for U.S. history buffs. "If you have any interest at all in the Santa Fe Trail, westward expansion, the U.S. military, Indians, the early history of Kansas," Berry says, "it's a great place to find out about how people lived and how the country was settled."

Elmore says the park hosts many events, particularly on holidays such as Memorial Day and Independence Day, that bring the fort to life in true 19th-century fashion.

He says visitors love the chance to step back in time, to stand on the same ground once trod by George Armstrong Custer and the 7th Cavalry.

Berry says it's worth the special trip, even if it is, like most things in Kansas, "in the middle of nowhere." Actually, it's in central Kansas, about 150 miles northwest of Wichita.

That would be a relatively easy commute for Berry, who lives about 250 miles away but makes the trip two or three times a year. "I've always been interested in history," he says. "It's a special place and a lot of history took place there, for sure."

Herzog also reports for the *Springfield* (Mo.) *News-Leader*

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 718 acres
Visitors: 24,607 in 2014
Established: 1966
History: The fort opened in 1859 and was in use for less than two decades before railroads made it unnecessary. It was preserved for about 100 years before it was designated a National Historic Site.
When visiting: For information, call 620-285-6911.
Of note: Fort Larned is located along the Santa Fe National Historic Trail and is just 4 miles east of the Santa Fe Trail Center, a museum and library.

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

The Old Commissary, built in 1866, is the oldest original building at Fort Larned.

{MIDWEST}

ILLINOIS PULLMAN NATIONAL MONUMENT

Utopian dream now history in Chicago

Tim Evans
USA TODAY

CHICAGO The National Park Service is the new kid on the block at a historic industrial community that tells what President Obama called "rich, layered stories" of industrialization, opportunity and discrimination, as well as the U.S. labor and civil rights movements.

Those observations came in a proclamation establishing Pullman National Monument, one of the newest and smallest additions to the National Park Service, at the site of the formerly privately owned town of Pullman, Ill.

Now part of Chicago, Pullman was the first planned industrial city in the USA. Envisioned by industrialist George Pullman as an urban "utopia," the town was built in the early 1880s around his Pullman Palace Car Co. factory, which made rail cars. The surrounding properties — homes, businesses, parks and other amenities — were all owned by the company.

Pullman hoped it would foster a happy and reliable workforce while alleviating the social ills of tenements, taverns and brothels.

But it wasn't without problems, including labor disputes, dissatisfaction with Pullman's tight controls over his workers' lives, and legal challenges that ultimately forced the company to sell its property in the early 1900s.

The Park Service's footprint at the site is a little under one-quarter of an acre, which includes the Pullman factory's administration building and clock tower.

Evans also reports for *The Indianapolis Star*

ABOUT THE SITE

Size: 0.23 acres
Established: 2015
History: Pullman, Ill., was the USA's first planned urban industrial community.
When visiting: Check out related sites, including the Historic Pullman Foundation visitor center — 773-785-8901 — the National A. Philip Randolph Pullman Porter Museum, and the Pullman State Historical Site.
Of note: It's one of the smallest National Park Service units. "You can get a sense of Pullman in an hour or so," says Sue Bennett, chief of visitor services. Or, she adds, you can spend a day immersed in history.

HISTORIC PULLMAN FOUNDATION

The National Park Service is renovating the former administration building of the Pullman factory for use as a visitor center.

NEBRASKA SCOTTS BLUFF NATIONAL MONUMENT

2004 PHOTO BY MARK DUNCAN AP

Rising 800 feet from the Nebraska prairie, Scotts Bluff has long been a landmark for travelers.

Track the pioneers — literally

Joel Aschbrenner
USA TODAY

From atop the landform known as Scotts Bluff, visitors can see faint depressions in the prairie — ruts made by covered wagons traveling the Oregon Trail more than 150 years ago.

Then, as now, the bluff in western Nebraska serves as a milemarker for travelers. It signals the end of the flat, featureless Plains and the beginning of more rugged mountain terrain.

"Once you go over Scotts Bluff, there were the Rocky Mountains out in the distance," says Tom Schaff, chief ranger of Scotts Bluff National Monument.

The sandstone bluff, which rises 800 feet above the North Platte River, marks a bottleneck where several pioneer routes converged, Schaff says. From the 1840s to the 1870s, westward travelers on the Oregon, California, Mormon and Pony Express trails passed Scotts Bluff.

Today, visitors can get a taste of pioneer life. Re-enactors at the national monument give demonstrations during summer weekends about life on the trail, from packing covered wagons to pioneer medicine.

Ranger Jerry Lucas plays a fur trapper and mountain guide. He teaches young visitors about duties of children on the Oregon Trail, which included caring for animals, watching siblings and gathering dried buffalo dung for campfires. "They're usually pretty shocked," he says.

Visitors can drive to the top of the bluff on a road built in the 1930s by Civilian Conservation Corps workers. It's believed to be the oldest paved road in the Nebraska, and its three vehicle tunnels are the only ones in the state.

The summit is the best place around the town of Scottsbluff, Neb., to watch fireworks in July and look at the Christmas lights in December, Lucas says.

On clear days, landmarks far in the distance are visible from atop the bluff. Chimney Rock, a sandstone spire carved by erosion, stands 23 miles to the east. Laramie Peak, in southern Wyoming, is 112 miles to the west.

"I live here by choice, not by chance," Lucas says. "I think this is one of the most scenic regions in the entire Midwest."

Aschbrenner also reports for *The Des Moines Register*

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 3,003 acres
Visitors: 119,159 in 2014
Established: 1919
History: Scotts Bluff served as a landmark for Indians and later for settlers traveling westward. The sandstone outcropping gets its name from Hiram Scott, a fur trapper who is said to have died near the bluffs.
When visiting: Open every day except Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day. The Oregon Trail Museum and Visitor Center can be reached at 308-436-9700 and is open from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. June-August and 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. September-May.
Of note: Made of soft sandstone, the top of the bluff has eroded nearly 20 inches since 1937, due to both foot traffic and natural erosion, according to park staff.

{SOUTH} SOUTH CAROLINA KINGS MOUNTAIN NATIONAL MILITARY PARK

PHOTOS BY HEIDI HEILBRUNN, THE GREENVILLE NEWS

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 3,950 acres
Visitors: 251,093 in 2014
Established: 1931
History: At a 1930 speech celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Kings Mountain, President Herbert Hoover announced plans to create a park to preserve the battlefield. The Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail, which traces the route taken by the patriots who fought at Kings Mountain (and which ends at the park), was established in 1980.
When visiting: North Carolina Exit 2 off of Interstate 85 is the quickest route to the park. Call the park for directions and more information: 864-936-7921. Operating hours: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily; closed Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Presidents Day and Columbus Day.
Of note: The park is home to the 1815 William Chronicle Marker, the second-oldest war memorial in the USA.

The 83-foot-tall Kings Mountain Monument commemorates the patriots' victory in October 1780.

March to independence became sprint in S.C.

Battle at Kings Mtn. set the stage for final surrender by British

Ron Barnett
USA TODAY

BLACKSBURG, S.C. Many Americans grow up with the idea that all the important sites of the American Revolution are in the Northeast — in places like Lexington and Concord, Bunker Hill and Valley Forge, says John Slaughter, superintendent of the Southern Campaign of the American Revolution Parks Group.

But more battles were fought in South Carolina than in any other state, he says.

And here, at Kings Mountain National Military Park, visitors can witness the scene of the clash that marked the beginning of the end of Britain's hold over its American colonies, he says

Ranger Lamar Tate leads visitors on a walking tour at Kings Mountain National Military Park near Blacksburg, S.C.

"The Revolutionary War was won right here in our backyard," Slaughter says.

Visitors can take a self-guided tour down a 1.5-mile trail to see the spot where loyalists to the crown charged down the mountain with their bayonets gleaming, and where British Maj. Patrick Ferguson fell from his horse at the summit, shot dead by sharpshooting Overmountain Men.

Visitors coming to the park from the north can also trace the 331-mile trail that those 900 backwoods patriots took to face a loyalist militia.

Kings Mountain, along with the Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail, Cowpens National Battlefield and Ninety-Six National Historic Site, have been grouped together by the National Park Service to emphasize South Carolina's pivotal role in the war, according to Slaughter.

The Battle of Kings Mountain, on Oct. 7, 1780, was important **in** firing up the spirits of the patriots, who went on to defeat a larger force of British 29 miles away in Cowpens. That loss in turn led to Lord Cornwallis' retreat to Yorktown, Virginia, where his surrender effectively ended the war and ensured American independence.

"It's a fascinating experience for a history buff and especially an ardent student of the Revolutionary War," says Jud Hair, 65, of Clemson. "The sites are so compact and unspoiled by development that it's easy to visualize exactly what happened there."

The Overmountain trail runs from Abingdon, Va., through Tennessee and into North Carolina before ending here just inside the South Carolina border. Almost 90 of the 331 miles are walkable, and a Commemorative Motor Route marked with the trail logo follows state highways the rest of the way.

Barnett also reports for *The Greenville* (S.C.) *News*

{SOUTH}

KENTUCKY BIG SOUTH FORK NATIONAL RIVER AND RECREATION AREA

Solitude, and a great time, too

Chris Kenning
USA TODAY

Outdoor enthusiasts recognize Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area as a hidden gem — 125,000 acres of wilderness, river gorges, arches, sandstone cliffs and historic sites, including an abandoned coal camp.

Located on the Cumberland Plateau in both Kentucky and Tennessee, the Big South Fork of the Cumberland River, plus its tributaries of Clear Fork, North White Oak and New River, offer 90 miles of scenic whitewater rafting and canoeing.

Backpackers can hike more than 420 miles of trails, in some cases going for days without seeing any other people. To some, its off-the-beaten-track profile is a big part of the draw.

"It's every bit as beautiful as the Smoky Mountains, but without the overuse," says Dania Egedi, general manager of Sheltowee Trace Outfitters, which operates in the rugged, undeveloped area.

Big South Fork is the fifth-largest National Park Service unit in the eastern USA and one of only two national river and recreation Areas. (The other is on the Mississippi River in Minnesota.)

Coal mining and timber were once big in the northern part of what's now the park. But those industries had declined by the 1960s, and Congress created the national river and recreation area in 1974. The park service began operating it in 1991.

That history can be seen in Blue Heron, a former coal mining town from the 1930s to the 1960s, where now frame-only "ghost structures" mark where homes, a company store, a one-room school, church and a bath house once stood — each with histories and photographs.

Visitors can also ride the Big South Fork Scenic Railway to the site, which departs from the town of Stearns, a former company town 14 miles away.

Niki Nicholas, the park's superintendent, says many visitors come for tent and RV camping at five campgrounds. There's also the Charit Creek Lodge, a rustic, backcountry lodge made up of historic cabins that can only be accessed by trail.

Also popular are rock climbing, horseback riding and mountain biking. On the rivers, paddling routes range from beginner to skilled.

"It's less well known, so you have a sense of solitude you rarely see in the eastern U.S.," she says.

Kenning also reports for *The Courier-Journal* of Louisville

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 125,000 acres
Visitors: 599,906 in 2014
Established: 1974
History: The area was visited by hunters and gatherers more than 10,000 years ago and was later home to Native American populations. European settlers began arriving in the late 1700s. Coal and timber industries flourished.
When visiting: Big South Fork is open year round, though one of the campgrounds is closed during winter. For information, call 423-286-7275.
Of note: While popular with river rafters, hikers and mountain bikers, the Big South Fork also is home to Historic Rugby, a Victorian settlement, and Blue Heron, an abandoned coal mining town and interpretive site.

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

A rock formation in the off-the-beaten-path Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area.

NORTH CAROLINA BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY

MONTY COMBS, GRANDFATHER MOUNTAIN, VIA AP

Fall foliage is an especially big draw on the Blue Ridge Parkway. Above, a visitor takes a photo in October 2013 near Linville, N.C.

Scenery really goes a long way (469 mi.)

Jon Ostendorff
Special for USA TODAY

Officials at the Blue Ridge Parkway have predicted a busy tourist season this spring and summer, especially with lower gas prices.

The 469-mile parkway — the USA's longest linear park — offers a window on the Appalachian region as it meanders through southwestern Virginia's pastoral rolling hills and climbs into the steep mountains of North Carolina, where overlooks offer breathtaking views.

Ally Fortune of Roseville, Calif., stopped at the visitor center near Asheville with friends for suggestions about nearby trails. It was her first time visiting. "It's gorgeous. I love it," she says. "It's very green, and l love all the trees."

Bill Slaski of New Jersey stopped at an overlook north of the visitor center. He did the entire parkway back in the 1970s. "This is the best scenery I've seen in this country," he says.

Getting off the parkway and into local communities is one of the joys about traveling through this national park.

Stop at the Booker T. Washington National Monument near Roanoke, Va., where the noted educator and leader was born a slave. Visit the Carl Sandburg Home National Historic Site near Asheville, N.C., to learn more about the author/poet's life.

The Blue Ridge Music Center in Galax, Va., has a summer concert series planned. Small towns that dot the road offer a great experience in Appalachian culture. And the drive is beautiful drive no matter the season.

The road is in good shape for the spring and summer, but visitors should check the National Park Service's real-time parkway road map before heading out. It will offer the latest on closures. The website is nps.gov/maps/blri/road-closures.

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 469 miles long
Visitors: 13,941,749 in 2014
Established: 1935
History: The parkway was created as part of New Deal efforts to provide jobs during the Great Depression. Work began in 1935 and was completed in 1983.
When visiting: The parkway starts at Shenandoah National Park in Virginia and ends at Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Cherokee, N.C. The headquarters is at Asheville, N.C. For info: 828-298-0398.
Of note: The parkway has 300 scenic overlooks.

{SOUTH}

MISSISSIPPI NATCHEZ NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

Park, community all but inseparable

Therese Apel
USA TODAY

Natchez National Historical Park brings to visitors the rich cultural history of Natchez, Miss., and the antebellum South.

The entire historic district of Natchez, which turns 300 years old in January, falls within the boundaries of the park.

"That doesn't mean every building is a part of the national park, but it includes our entire downtown historic district, which makes our park kind of unique," Natchez Mayor Butch Brown says. "We love the national park and have worked hard for it."

The National Park Service will play a big role in the upcoming yearlong tricentennial celebrations, says Debbie Hudson, CEO of the Natchez/Adams County Chamber of Commerce. Fort Rosalie, an 18th-century outpost built by the French that has previously not been open to the public, will open in August 2016.

The William Johnson House was the home of free African-American barber and bathhouse and bookstore owner William Johnson, whose diary was published in 1951. Melrose Plantation, the estate of lawyer and state senator John T. McMurran in the mid-1800s, is said to be "perfect" in design. Both landmarks are open for guided tours.

It's hard to separate Natchez the city from the park, Brown says. The park service works hand in hand with the city on promotions, event planning and tourism.

"The cool thing about our tricentennial is that it's (also) the 100-year anniversary for the National Park Service, and there's a really important synergy between the two because of what we're planning," tricentennial director Jennifer Combs says.

Dignitaries from France, Spain, Canada and Britain will attend the opening of Fort Rosalie during the tricentennial, Brown says. "All of that happens because of the interest and participation of the National Park Service," he says.

Apel also reports for *The Clarion-Ledger* of Jackson, Miss.

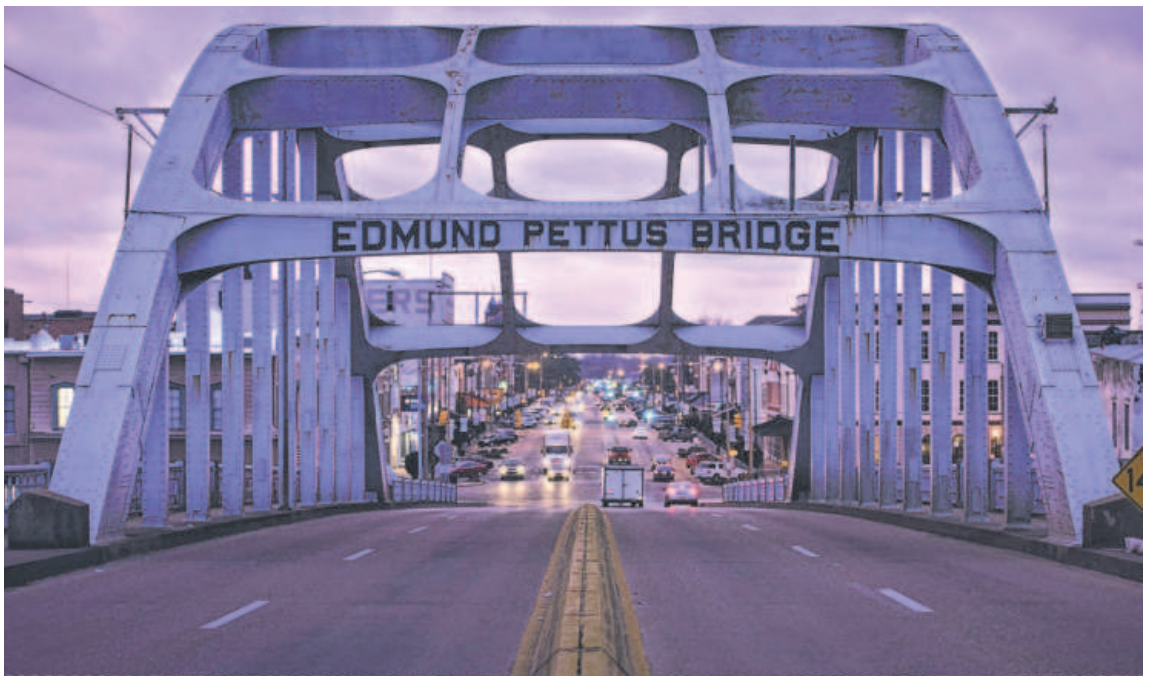
ABOUT THE PARK

Size: The National Park Service owns 80 acres
Visitors: 215,257 in 2014
Authorized: 1988
History: The flags of France, Britain, Spain, the U.S. and the Confederacy have flown over Natchez.
When visiting: For info, call 601-446-5790.
Of note: Natchez was the first capital of Mississippi.

2004 PHOTO BY MOLLY DEMPSEY, THE NATCHEZ DEMOCRAT, VIA AP

The home of William Johnson, a free black businessman in the early 1800s, is among the landmarks in the historical park.

ALABAMA SELMA TO MONTGOMERY NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAIL



BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI, AFP/GETTY IMAGES

The attack on peaceful marchers at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965 had far-reaching effects.

50 years later, 54 sacred miles

Marty Roney
USA TODAY

SELMA, ALA. It runs through the heart of Alabama's Black Belt and the nation's consciousness.

The Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail winds 54 miles through three counties, the route taken by marchers who 50 years ago risked their lives to claim the right to vote.

The trail begins in Selma at Brown Chapel AME Church, which served as headquarters for the movement, and ends at the Alabama Capitol on Dexter Avenue in Montgomery. The majority of the trail follows U.S. 80 as it winds through Dallas, Lowndes and Montgomery counties.

Two intepretive centers — one in Selma and one in Lowndes County — tell visitors the story of the struggle. The Selma center is at the intersection of Broad Street and Water Avenue, at the foot of the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

The Lowndes Interpretive Center, the "headquarters" center of the trail, is built on the location of one of the tent cities where black farmworkers lived after being forced off white landowners' property in retaliation for trying to register to vote.

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: Trail is 54 miles long
Visitors: 16,000 (estimated) in 2014
Established: 1996
History: The trail follows the route of civil rights marchers from Selma to Montgomery in a demonstration for the right to vote. Police attacked the unarmed marchers, triggering outrage that led directly to passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.
When visiting: The trail is open year-round. The two interpretive centers, one in Selma and one in Lowndes County, are open Monday through Saturday except on New Year's Day, Thanksgiving and Christmas.
Of note: In March, more than 120,000 people attended the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the "Bloody Sunday" attack.

Farther east on U.S. 80 is the memorial for Viola Liuzzo, a Detroit woman who was murdered by Klansman while ferrying marchers back to Selma after the completion of the march.

The first attempt at the march ended at the Edmund Pettus Bridge on March 7, 1965. After marchers crossed the span over the Alabama River, they were attacked by police with clubs and tear gas. The attack became known as "Bloody Sunday," and photos and footage of the brutality horrified the country.

On March 21, 1965, Martin Luther King led a new march, this time under federal protection. Four days later, 25,000 people reached the Alabama Capitol.

The Alabama marches were credited with being the driving factor in the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

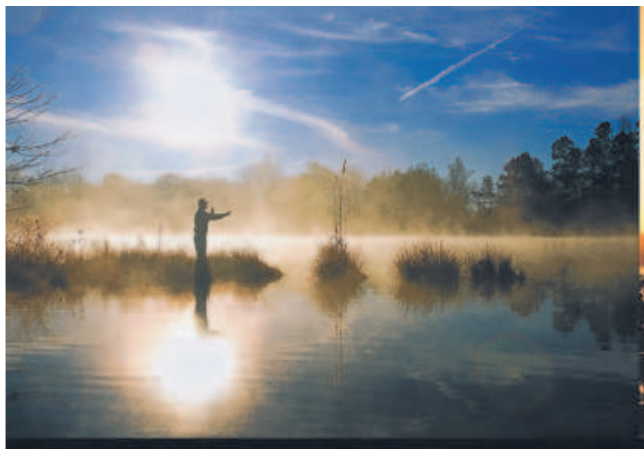
Im March, Selma marked the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday. More than 120,000 people took part in the two-day commemoration. President Obama addressed a crowd of about 40,000 at the Pettus bridge.

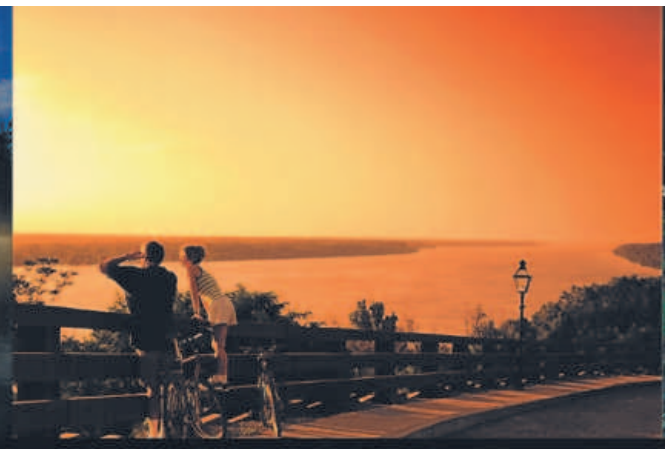
Mayor George Evans was still all smiles weeks after the anniversary's observation.

"We cherish our history, in Alabama and in Selma," he says. "To have played such an active role in two pivotal periods in our nation's history is unique to this region.

"History lives in Selma."

Roney also reports for the *Montgomery* (Ala.) *Advertiser*





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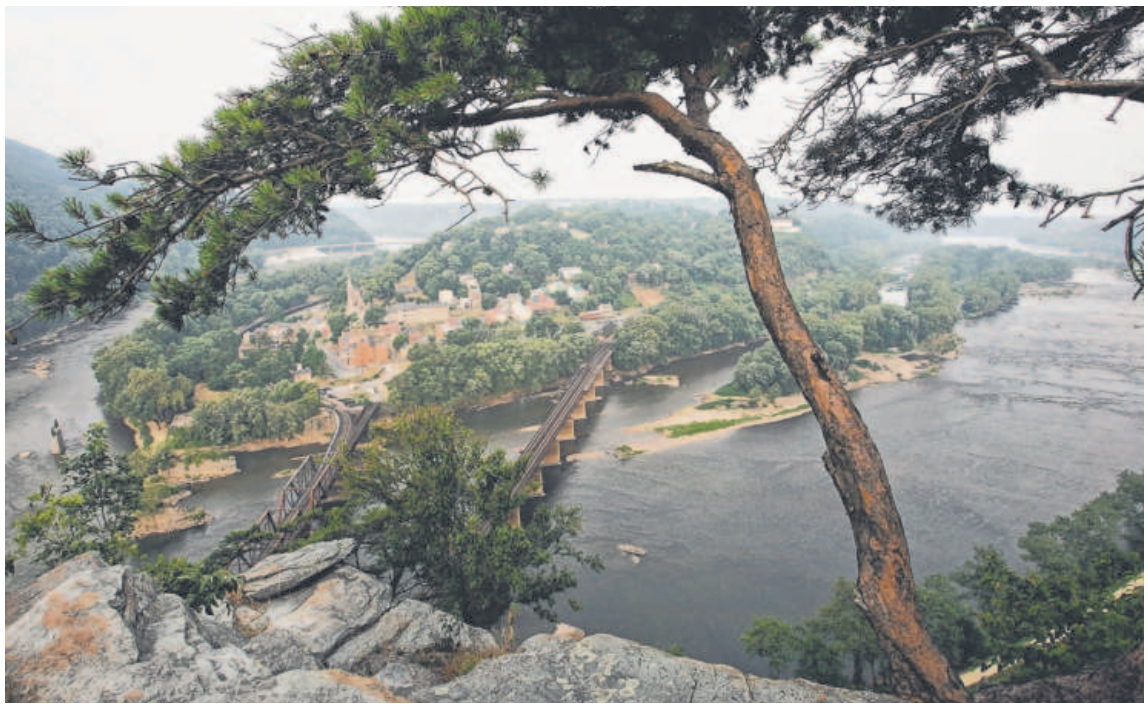
{SOUTH}

WEST VIRGINIA HARPERS FERRY NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK



JOE RAEDLE, GETTY IMAGES

The town of Harpers Ferry, W.Va., flanked by the Shenandoah, left, and Potomac rivers. This view is from Maryland Heights, across the Potomac. At upper left, across the Shenandoah, is Virginia.

At the confluence of history

Doug Schneider
USA TODAY

It changed hands eight times during the Civil War and now touches parts of three states, so perhaps it's no surprise that Harpers Ferry National Historical Park offers a great deal of variety.

History buffs can explore Civil War skirmish lines or attend a living-history workshop within the park's roughly 4,000 acres in West Virginia, Maryland and Virginia. Hikers can try more than 20 miles of trails that range from casual riverside strolls to 8-mile mountain adventures. Those who enjoy baking can take classes to learn how breads, pies and Christmas treats were made in the 1800s.

And then there is the scenic beauty of the park at the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers.

"I've been there twice in the last three years, and I absolutely loved it," says Rahkia Nance, 32, who lives in the Washington, D.C., suburb of Alexandria, Va. "The physical beauty is such a stark contrast from the suburbs."

Adds Dan Moore, 37, a De Pere, Wis., photographer who has visited more than 100 National Park Service sites, "It's one of those parks that combines natural areas with historical areas with an array of things to do."

Harpers Ferry has played multiple roles in American history:

- Native Americans, settlers, railroads and canal workers used the gap in the Blue Ridge Mountains for travel and transport.
- The U.S. Armory and Arsenal, established in 1799, turned the area into an industrial center that produced more than 600,000 muskets, rifles and pistols.
- The 1859 raid on the arsenal by abolitionist John Brown — and Brown's capture, trial and execution — was a flashpoint on slavery, the issue that was tearing the country apart.
- Harpers Ferry was considered vital strategic ground by both sides in the Civil War because of its location and railroads.
- In 1867, Baptist missionaries established Storer College, one of the USA's first integrated schools. It was founded primarily to educate former slaves but was open to students of any race and gender.

This spring, an area around the park's Maryland Heights cliff face was closed to visitors as peregrine falcons attempted to nest there. Visitors can check the park's website for updates.

Schneider also reports for the *Green Bay* (Wis.) *Press-Gazette*

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: Almost 4,000 acres
Visitors: 261,202 in 2014
Established: 1944 (as national monument), 1963 (as national historical park).
History: Harpers Ferry witnessed the first successful application of interchangeable manufacture, the arrival of the first successful American railroad, John Brown's attack on slavery, the largest surrender of Union troops in the Civil War, and one of the earliest integrated schools in the USA.
When visiting: The park is accessible via U.S. Highway 340. For visitor information, call 304-535-6029.
Of note: The National League of Colored Women visited John Brown Fort in July 1896, the first known pilgrimage to the site.

VIRGINIA SHENANDOAH NATIONAL PARK

The most striking Skyline in the East

Jon Ostendorff
Special for USA TODAY

Shenandoah National Park's Skyline Drive offers views of Appalachian farmland and rolling Virginia hills just a short drive from the nation's capital.

President Franklin Roosevelt dedicated the park in 1936 as a place for both recreation and re-creation, says Susan Sherman, president of Shenandoah National Park Trust, a group with about 1,000 members. "Nearly 80 years later, Shenandoah continues to deliver on that promise," she says.

Shenandoah is the only major national park in the Mid-Atlantic region. People have to travel north to Acadia National Park or south to Great Smoky Mountains National Park for a similar experience, Sherman says.

Visitors this summer will find renovated bathrooms, including showers and laundry facilities at Big Meadows campground, says Karen Beck-Herzog, the park's public affairs officer.

New programs this summer include a TRACK trail program, aimed at getting kids away from electronic devices and onto trails, she says. Kids will hike and later log their adventure online at kidsinparks.com to earn prizes.

The park has also revamped its Junior Ranger program to allow children to complete it in one day. "When you engage with a child at that age, it sticks with them, and also sometimes they drive the parents (to do more)," she says.

Skyline Drive remains a top attraction. The 105-mile road winds along the Blue Ridge Mountains with views of the Shenandoah Valley agricultural area and farms fields of the Piedmont.

The park is about 200,000 acres, with 80,000 designated as wilderness. It has about 500 miles of trails, 200 miles of which are horseback riding trails. The Appalachian Trail makes up 101 of the trail miles inside the park. And 480 miles' worth of park trails are dog-friendly.

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 200,000 acres
Visitors: 1,255,321 in 2014
Established: 1936
History: The Civilian Conservation Corps built the park under the New Deal program during the Great Depression.
When visiting: The park headquarters is in Luray, Va. For info: 540-999-3500.
Of note: Just 75 miles from Washington, the park is perfectly situated for a day trip or overnight from D.C.

BEN KLAUS, GETTY IMAGES

Fog-filled valleys and fall colors make for stunning views from Shenandoah National Park's Skyline Drive later on in the year.

{SOUTH}

FLORIDA GULF ISLANDS NATIONAL SEASHORE

NPS.GOV

Unlike at other Florida beaches, there are no condos or high-rise hotels at the Gulf Islands park.

Sun, sand, surf and serenity

Laura Ruane
USA TODAY

Sugar-white sand and seaside serenity are two big reasons Gulf Islands National Seashore is so popular that readers of USA TODAY and 10Best this year ranked it as Florida's best beach.

"There's no place else in Florida where you have more than 20 miles of undeveloped beach," park superintendent Dan Brown says.

About 80% of the park is submerged lands teeming with marine life, but also includes mainland destinations and a ribbon of islands stretching 160 miles from Cat Island, Miss., to Destin, Fla.

It's a great place for swimming, fishing, hiking, beachcombing, bird-watching, boating and bicycling. Lifeguards are on duty at designated beaches from Memorial Day through Labor Day.

The seashore also is rich in history, particularly military history. Naval Live Oaks Preserve outside Pensacola was the USA's first tree farm, established by President John Quincy Adams in 1828 to ensure a supply of wood for ship-building.

Among the seashore's military landmarks: Fort Pickens, one of only four Southern forts that Confederates never occupied during the Civil War, and Fort Barrancas, which overlooks the mouth of Pensacola Bay — a site so strategic that British, Spanish and American forces all built or rebuilt forts there when they gained control of the area.

Pensacola-based marketer and freelance writer Louis Cooper, 43, recommends a day trip to Santa Rosa Island's Opal Beach, a stretch of shoreline renamed after Hurricane Opal in 1995.

That storm wrecked a big picnic pavilion, which the National Park Service replaced with a smaller facility, while also adding drinking water, restrooms and outdoor showers. It's a comfortable place to watch the sea oats sway, and to look for shorebirds, fish and sea turtles.

"It's picturesque and serene," Cooper says, "No hotels or condos. There's nothing bigger than a bathhouse on the horizon."

Ruane also reports for *The News-Press* of Fort Myers, Fla.

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: Over 137,000 acres
Visitors: 4,455,240 in 2014
Established: 1971
History: Portions of today's national seashore went in and out of public ownership for about 50 years as preservationists and developers battled before the park was finally established with local voters' support.
When visiting: Fort Pickens has the most popular visitor center, which can be reached at 850-934-2635.
Of note: The sand on the seashore's beaches is quartz eroded from granite in the Appalachian Mountains and carried to the sea by rivers and creeks.

GEORGIA ANDERSONVILLE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

Site of horrors now dedicated to POWs

Rick Neale
USA TODAY

Ravaged by starvation, disease and vermin, more than 32,000 Union Army prisoners were crammed into a 26.5-acre wooden stockade in the summer of 1864 near Andersonville, Ga.

Camp Sumter was one of the largest Confederate military prisons of the Civil War. In total, during 14 months of operation, more than 45,000 people were confined there in crude tents in the oppressive heat of the Deep South.

Overcrowding, lack of sanitation, scurvy, gangrene and dysentery took a terrible toll. A ghastly 12,920 troops and civilians died.

"This location is essentially the single deadliest location of the entire Civil War, as far as fatalities go," says Stephanie Steinhorst, acting chief of education and interpretation at Andersonville National Historic Site.

The only National Park Service unit that serves as a memorial to all U.S. prisoners of war, it has three major attractions: the infamous prison, Anderson National Cemetery, and the National Prisoner of War Museum.

Anderson National Cemetery contains about 19,000 headstones, Steinhorst says, and the graveyard hosts about 150 burials per year. On Sept. 19, officials will conduct a "Funeral for Thirteen Thousand" for deceased prisoners who never received one.

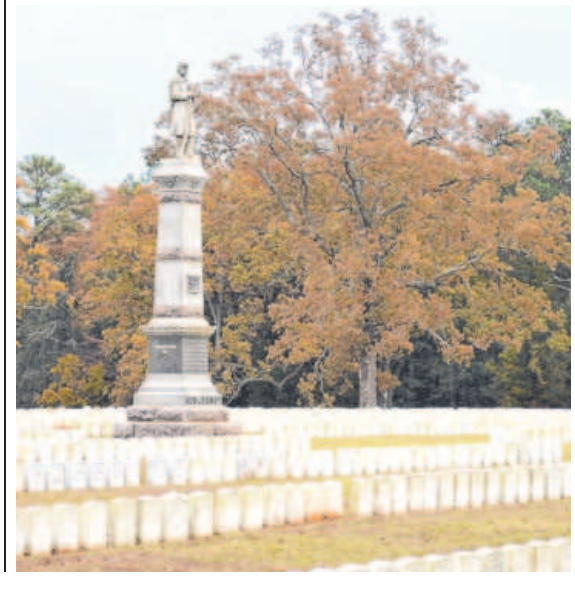
"It was a horrible prison. Every single one of them was — there were over 159 of them. But the suffering here was just ... Nobody was prepared for what happened," says Cynthia StormCaller, curator of the Drummer Boy Civil War Museum in nearby Andersonville.

"It was just horrendous," she says. "It's a very large part of American history. This country, we're so young. And for a war like this to happen, it just changed this whole nation."

Neale also reports for *Florida Today*

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 514 acres
Visitors: 127,189 in 2014
Established: 1970
History: The Confederacy's most notorious military prison was at Andersonville. Its burial site became Andersonville National Cemetery in 1865. The National Prisoner of War Museum was dedicated in 1998.
When visiting: For information, call 229-924-0343.
Of note: Events this year wrap up the park's commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Civil War.



The New Jersey Monument in Andersonville National Cemetery honors men from that state who died at the Confederate prison at Andersonville. After the war, the prison's commander was executed for murder.

C. BARR, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

{SOUTH}

ARKANSAS FORT SMITH NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

Fort thrived when Ark. was 'the West'

Marty Roney
USA TODAY

FORT SMITH, ARK. Established on Christmas Day 1817, Fort Smith served as frontier outpost, a stop on the Trail of Tears and a federal prison and court.

The fort was built by soldiers of the Army's Rifle Regiment, hardened veterans of the War of 1812, says Billy Higgins, of the history department at the University of Arkansas at Fort Smith. The fort was named for the regiment's commander, Thomas A. Smith.

"At the time, Fort Smith was the frontier," Higgins says. "The Arkansas River was the border between American and Spanish territory. It was part of a line of forts from St. Louis to Natchitoches, Louisiana."

Along with history, visitors can take advantage of nature viewing at the site. The Rivertrail goes to Belle Point, which overlooks the confluence of the Arkansas and Poteau rivers, and along the Arkansas River itself. Fort Smith is also a bird sanctuary.

At the site itself, the visitor center is made up of former barracks, a courthouse and jail buildings and includes exhibits covering the history of the fort. A reconstructed gallows is also on the grounds.

The fort's history is intertwined with Native American history. When President Andrew Jackson ordered Indians removed from the East and South, the forced migration to what is now Oklahoma became known as the Trail of Tears. One migration route passed through Fort Smith

In the late 1800s, the fort served as a federal prison and courthouse. It was famously portrayed in the 1969 John Wayne movie *True Grit*. The prison developed a reputation for deplorable conditions. It's nickname was "Hell on the Border."

Roney also reports for the *Montgomery* (Ala.) *Advertiser*

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 37 acres
Visitors: 88,790 in 2014
Established: 1964
History: Fort Smith was established in 1817 on what was then considered the frontier, and remained in operation as a court and prison until 1896.
When visiting: For information, call 479-783-3961.
Of note: Fort Smith's gallows were designed to hang up to 12 people at once, though the most executed there at one time was six.

FORT SMITH NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

The courthouse at Fort Smith had jurisdiction over crimes involving whites in the Indian Territory, what is now Oklahoma.

LOUISIANA POVERTY POINT NATIONAL MONUMENT

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE PHOTOS

Dirt and stone used to build the mounds are believed to have been brought from 800 miles away.

The world treasures these hills

Vickie Welborn
USA TODAY

The archaeological site known as Poverty Point was one of those places Dean Lambert and his wife always wanted to visit but had never made time for.

Finally, on a Saturday in April, they decided it was time to make the nearly four-hour drive from their home in Many, La., to see "this most interesting and rather mysterious place." They were not disappointed.

"It gave us both a better understanding of the unique history of our area. How this culture that occupied this area 3,500 years ago could lay out this complex site with the mounds, the curving earthworks, the plaza, and then develop the sophisticated tools and weapons to sustain their existence, is truly amazing. We are so glad we visited," Lambert says.

Poverty Point was first a Louisiana state park. The federal government designated it a national historic landmark in 1962 and a national monument in 1988.

The highest honor came in 2014 when UNESCO made it a World Heritage Site. There are only three other archaeological sites in the USA with that distinction, according to a new website (povertypoint.us) that proudly details its place in history.

"This is the first time we've taken a property out of the state park system and promoted it individually," says Jacques Berry, communications director for the Louisiana lieutenant governor.

Artifacts from the site.

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 402 acres
Visitors: 10,000 in 2014
Established: 1972
History: The immense mounds were built by hand about 3,000 years ago.
When visiting: For information, call 888-926-5492 or visit povertypoint.us.
Of note: The 43-acre plaza in the center of the ridges was possibly a meeting place, or was used for astronomical observation.

The site has drawn an average of 10,000 visitors a year. But state officials expected interest to build following UNESCO's announcement in October, and that's what has happened, Berry says.

Poverty Point is a collection of earthen mounds built by Native Americans about 3,000 years ago. Two million cubic yards of earth was shaped into a massive 72-foot-tall mound, with concentric half-circles and other earthwork.

Archaeologists determined that the dirt and tons of stone came from up to 800 miles away, leading to speculation that the area was a residential, trade and ceremonial center.

Located on the Mississippi Delta, the property is flat upon arrival. Seeing a large steep hill to the left quickly alerted Lambert that it was not a natural land formation. He was hooked.

The visitor center, though on the small side, contains "intriguing treasures," Lambert said.

"I was really amazed not only of the amount of artifacts, but how unique and rare some of them were. ... The display of weapons and tools that these archaic people used were worth the trip in itself," Lambert says.

Welborn also reports for The Times of *Shreveport, La.*

{SOUTH} **OKLAHOMA** OKLAHOMA CITY NATIONAL MEMORIAL & MUSEUM

PHOTOS BY SHANE BEVEL FOR USA TODAY

The memorial includes 168 chairs, one for each person killed when anti-government terrorists bombed the Oklahoma City federal building on April 19, 1995.

From a dark day, a place for hope

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 3.3 acres
Visitors: The outdoor memorial had 500,000 visitors in 2014, while the museum had 250,000.
Established: Memorial dedicated on April 19, 2000; museum, on Feb. 19, 2001.
History: The memorial stands on the site of the Murrah building. The adjacent museum is housed in the former Journal Record Building, which was damaged in the blast.
When visiting: The memorial grounds are free. The interpretive museum charges for admission. Information: 405-235-3313 or 888-542-HOPE.
Of note: The site is an affiliate of the National Park Service but is owned by an independent organization.

Trevor Hughes
USA TODAY

OKLAHOMA CITY With silence and solemnity, visitors marked the 20th anniversary of the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building here. But every day, the site of the terrorist attack that killed 168 people remains a place for mourning and memory.

Opened five years after the April 19, 1995, truck-bomb explosion that destroyed the building, the Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum serves as a site for quiet contemplation as visitors silently walk the grassy ground surrounding a reflecting pool. Arrayed on the grass are 168 stylized chairs, one for each victim, their names inscribed. Executive director Kari Watkins says the site is best experienced by first walking through the museum to learn about the victims before stepping outside onto the actual blast site.

Bronze gates at either end of a reflecting pool represent 9:01 CT, a minute before the bomb exploded, and 9:03 CT, a minute after.

"It's a very powerful place," Watkins says.

While many national parks preserve natural beauty and wilderness, the Oklahoma City National Memorial remembers both the bombing victims and America's loss of innocence. Back then, it was hard for many Americans to understand how someone could hate his government so much that he would attack innocents.

"Twenty years ago, terrorism was not part of our vernacular ... part of our daily lives," Watkins says. "We want people of all ages to understand the story, the loss of innocence."

Although the Oklahoma City memorial is an affiliate of the national park system, it is owned, operated and maintained by the Oklahoma City National Memorial Foundation. National Park Service rangers staff the memorial, however, offering interpretation and information to visitors.

Dara House cried when she visited the memorial on a rainy day in early May, mist hanging over the site and the survivor tree. The tree, House says, is one of the most striking parts of the memorial. It's a towering elm that stands across from what used to be the Murrah building's parking lot. It was seriously damaged but still stands, blooming each spring.

House, a nurse, was 19 in 1995. She says the touching accounts from survivors and victims makes the memorial a special place.

Watkins says the memorial and museum help visitors understand that while the attack was directed at the American government, that same government ultimately treated the bombers fairly.

"The system worked, and that's an important lesson. Even though they tried to destroy the government, the government gave them a fair trial," she says. "This is part of how democracy works."

Melissa Swigart, an Oklahoma native who was in eighth grade in 1995, says hope is an important part of the site, and something everyone who visits can see. "So much is going on in our world right now, and it's nice to be reminded that even when things are bad, America can unite and shine light on even the darkest of days."

{SOUTH} **TEXAS** BIG BEND NATIONAL PARK

ERIK WALKER, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

A near-total lack of light pollution makes Big Bend National Park in Texas one of the best stargazing spots in the USA. Above: the night sky over Casa Grande peak.

The stars at night really *are* big and bright

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 801,163 acres
Visitors: 314,102 in 2014
Established: 1944
History: Encouraged by conservationists and others who loved the Big Bend country, the state of Texas acquired the land in the 1930s, and a national park designation followed.
When visiting: Big Bend National Park is isolated, away from cities and public transportation, so trips should be well-planned. It has five visitor centers: Panther Junction, Chisos Basin, Castolon, Persimmon Gap and Rio Grande Village. Call 432-477-2251.
Of note: In 1964, astronauts went to Big Bend to study volcanic geology so that they could identify the geologic structures and processes that they might see on the moon.

Big Bend's appeal: 'Remote and wild'

Vickie Welborn
USA TODAY

Greg Robertson had no idea the Rio Grande is so shallow in some places that one could wade across from Texas to Mexico.

But he and wife Debbie weren't trying to escape from the country — just from everyday life. They succeeded with a vacation at Big Bend National Park, which borders the river for 118 miles.

Greg Robertson found the expansive park in southwest Texas unique in landscape, with its rock formations in a variety of shapes and a spectrum of colors. And he was taken by the mountains and canyons — "more than one would think would be in that part of Texas. Chisos Mountains are 7,800 feet high," he says.

It's the location that's the biggest draw for tourists. "We're very remote and wild. We have the darkest night skies in the country when the air quality is just right," says David Eklowitz, chief of interpretation at the park.

MICHAEL GRACZYK, AP

Rafters emerge from Heath Canyon, carved by the Rio Grande. Big Bend abuts the river, and the Mexican border, for 118 miles.

Big Bend boasts more species of birds, bats, cacti, reptiles, butterflies, ants and scorpions than any other national park. The adventurous will find three developed campgrounds, more than 100 miles of paved roads, 150 miles of dirt roads and 200 miles of hiking trails.

The Rio Grande and the 245 additional miles of wild and scenic rivers offer plenty of opportunities for rafting, kayaking and canoeing.

Though the Robertsons didn't go rafting, they saw others who did. "I was so surprised with the Rio being so narrow," Debbie Robertson says.

The Mansfield, La., couple saw few other visitors during their time at Big Bend. But that could be because the park is spread across more than 800,000 acres. The Robertsons chose to stay in Alpine, Texas, because of its central location, which allowed them relatively quick access to other places near Big Bend.

In addition to the sights and recreation, Big Bend is immersed in the history of Spanish and Mexican settlers and Comanche Indians. Ruins of the homesteads of the earlier settlers in the area are still visible, Robertson says.

"The history is incredible," Elkowitz confirms.

Welborn also reports for The Times of Shreveport, La.

{WEST}

NEW MEXICO CARLSBAD CAVERNS NATIONAL PARK

SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN, AP

Limestone formations created by eons of trickling water decorate the 350,000-square foot Big Room at Carlsbad Caverns.

Soak up the sun at this park, and you'll miss the best part

Dennis Wagner
USA TODAY

If you explored the full extent of Lechugilla Cave in Carlsbad Caverns National Park, you'd cover 136 miles and descend more than 1,600 feet.

Now multiply that experience by 117 subterranean passages, and you begin to appreciate the dreamlike world under New Mexico, the Land of Enchantment.

The labyrinth is a monument to hydrogeological history, a haven for bats and a wonderment of stalagmites and stalactites.

Carlsbad Mayor Dale Janway says he's wandered into the caverns dozens of times — pretty much whenever friends or family come to visit. "Each time you go through, you see something different. Even the drive up is unbelievably beautiful high desert."

While the formations are spectacular, Janway recommends guided tours that include moments of total darkness in places like the Left Hand Tunnel or Kings Palace. "It's really a spiritual experience," he says.

Rangers encourage tourists to plan ahead because of the dizzying array of sightseeing options.

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE VIA AP

Brazilian free-tailed bats swarm out of the caves.

The park entrance fee of $10 for visitors 16 and older is good for three days. (Children 15 and under are free.) Make reservations for guided tours, which are often full, and be sure to check out fees, age limits and other requirements: Some treks feature ladder descents or narrow tunnel passages, and may last over five hours.

Wagner also reports for *The Arizona Republic* of Phoenix

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 46,766 acres
Visitors: 397,309 in 2014
Established: 1934
History: About 250 million years ago, when southern New Mexico was covered by an inland sea, more than 300 limestone caves formed in a fossil reef — a place now known as the Guadalupe Mountains. Humans did not discover the labyrinth until 1898, when a cowpoke named Jim White began exploring as a teenager.
When visiting: There are no hotels or campgrounds within the park. The nearest accommodations are in White City (7 miles) and Carlsbad (20 miles). For information: 575-785-2232.
Of note: At dusk from May through October, hundreds of thousands of bats swarm from the cave on their nightly hunt for insects. The time changes as the season progresses, so check the schedule at the visitor center or by calling 575-785-3012.

NEVADA TULE SPRINGS FOSSIL BEDS NATIONAL MONUMENT

Ice age ghosts fill ground at Vegas' edge

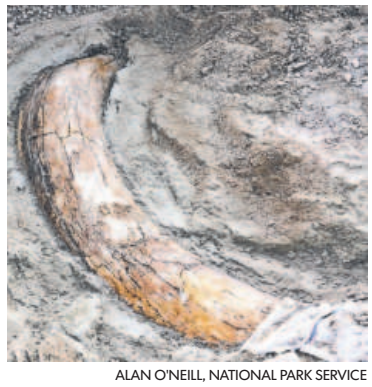
Anjeanette Damon
USA TODAY

Now is a special time to visit Tule Springs Fossil Beds, the newest national monument.

In a few years, there probably will be a visitor center. Rangers will lead tours through the Big Dig and other park gems. Visitors might be able to sit in on excavation projects, watching as the bones of a mammoth, a saber-toothed cats or a giant sloth emerge from the Las Vegas Wash.

But now is the chance to be an explorer at Tule Springs, to wander unimpeded through the water- and wind-carved badlands that during the ice age were home to enormous animals.

"This is a very raw national monument," says Lynn Davis, who runs the Nevada chapter of the National Park Conservation Association. "It's brand new. You're seeing the national monument in its undeveloped state."



ALAN O'NEILL, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

A mammoth tusk emerges from the ground during an excavation at the site.

The monument is "littered" with fossils protruding from the ground. Seven-foot mammoth tusks and teeth as big as a human head have been found. Digging or collecting fossils without authorization is a violation of federal law, but if you come across a significant find, give it a GPS tag and report it to park managers so it can be further studied.

The landscape is the picture of desert desolation — but it isn't remote. It sits just 20 miles from the north end of the Las Vegas Strip. In fact, you can take a city bus to the edge of the monument, where you can explore the trenches of the Big Dig archaeological study area or hike the terrain.

Davis says the site's beauty can't be seen from the car.

"I'd say 80% of the monument is in a badlands kinds of landscape," she says. "If you're driving near it, you don't necessarily see that aspect of it. You get out of your car and you walk in that wash, and that's really where the magic of it is."

Housing developments crawl right up to the park boundary, and many areas of what's now the park were once overrun with off-road vehicles. That prompted a coalition of preservationists to push for Tule Springs to be designated as a national monument.

"What people might want to know is the very eastern part of this landscape was rescued," Davis says. "It had been traversed by a lot of (off-highway vehicles), a lot of trucks and motorcycles. People had no idea what was in the area."

Damon also reports for the *Reno Gazette-Journal*

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 22,650 acres
Visitors: This is its first year
Established: Dec. 19, 2014
History: In 1933, quarry workers discovered a pile of mammoth bones, sparking decades of research at the site. In 1979, Tule Springs was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. In 2014, it became the newest unit of the National Park Service.
When visiting: The monument is just 20 miles north of the Las Vegas Strip, situated along U.S. Highway 95 north of Aliante and Centennial Hills. The new park has no parking area or visitor center. Visitors can park on nearby streets or take regional bus route No. 119.
Of Note: Fossils are buried just beneath the soil, including mammoth, camels, bison, ground sloths and dire wolf.

{WEST}

ALASKA GLACIER BAY NATIONAL PARK AND PRESERVE

GENE SLOAN, USA TODAY

Glacier Bay is popular with cruise ships, whose passengers hope to see icebergs break off.

Immense wilderness beckons

Malak Monir
USA TODAY

There is something fascinating about seeing nature untamed. The opportunity to walk through pure, undeveloped land that has not seen the effects of human tampering are few and far between, as the trappings of modern civilization gain more and more ground.

They aren't gaining at Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve in Alaska, though. One of the immense park's greatest assets, superintendent Philip Hooge says, is its sprawling scenery, mostly free of any trails, encouraging visitors to explore as they will. "It's a huge, wild place," Hooge says. "(Visitors enjoy) just being surrounded by wild, undeveloped area."

It should come as no surprise that the park has remained so pristine. Access is a challenge: The only road to the park is through the small town of Gustavus, which can be reached by ferry from Juneau, or by plane.

Most visitors arrive by cruise ship or tour boat. Alaska Airlines serves the small-town airport in the summer, and small charter planes are available year-round.

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 3,283,000 acres
Visitors: 500,727 in 2014
Established: 1925
History: The land that now makes up the national park was once the ancestral homeland of the Huna Tlingit people, who were displaced by an advancing glacier 250 years ago.
When visiting: The park's visitor center is open daily between late May and early September. It can be reached at 907-697-2661.
Of note: The best way to tour Glacier Bay is by boat. Boating permits are required to enter the bay in June, July and August. Permits can be reserved up to 60 days ahead of time and are valid for seven days.

The park's location does present it with some unique advantages. Whereas at other parks, visitors are limited in how far they can travel, Hooge says the bay itself, whose fingers reach miles inland, makes it possible for people to take their adventures farther.

"That was one of the reasons the park was established," he says. "The bay kind of acted like a walkway."

Hooge also points out that the park's main attraction is its most obvious: "People come to Glacier Bay to see glaciers."

There are an estimated 1,045 glaciers in Glacier Bay Park, and they cover about 27% of the park. Seven of those are active tidewater glaciers that calve icebergs into the sea, an unpredictable event that is unaffected by weather and can sometimes occur multiple times within a one-hour visit, or not at all, the park's website says.

The park features many opportunities for outdoor adventure, including several camping sites, a few hiking trails, and plenty of places to go kayaking through the bay. Birdwatching and sport fishing are also popular pastimes.

Visitors are required to go through an orientation session at the park's ranger station, to be informed of safety concerns. Hooge also urges travelers to bring flexible clothing, particularly since the park sees a lot of rainfall, about 150 inches of rain a year.

"As long as you're ready for a little rain, you'll be great," he says.

OREGON CRATER LAKE NATIONAL PARK

A spectacular scar of ancient eruption

Tracy Loew
USA TODAY

Oregon has only one national park, but it's a stunner.

In the southwest corner of the state, Crater Lake National Park boasts views from a 33-mile cliff-top loop around its namesake Crater Lake, which was formed by an ancient volcanic eruption.

At 1,943 feet deep, the lake is the deepest in the USA and one of the 10 deepest in the world. Fed only by rain and melting snow, it's also one of the cleanest.

Visitors can dive or swim in the lake, or take a guided boat tour around it.

"It's the coldest water I've ever been in, but just amazing to think: This is a volcano that exploded, and I'm swimming in it right now," says Colleen Coleman-Jayne, 31, a science teacher from Portland.

The park also recently began offering a guided trolley tour around the rim.

"It's a great way to not have to be behind the wheel and enjoy the scenery and learn more about the park," says Marsha McCabe, chief of interpretation for the park.

The rest of the park offers old-growth forest, trout and salmon fishing, and hiking, including 33 miles of the Pacific Crest Trail.

Most tourists come during the short summer season, but the park is open year-round and offers snowshoeing, cross-country skiing and camping.

Coleman-Jayne says she visited one July when there still was snow on the trails.

"It was fun to be up there in your shorts and actually get to play in some snow," she says.

Park rangers also lead hikes in the snow.

"It's a great place anytime of the year," McCabe said. "In the wintertime the snow is spectacular. In the summertime, everything is spectacular."

Loew also reports for the (Salem, Ore.) ***Statesman Journal***

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 183,224 acres
Visitors: 535,508 in 2014
Established: 1902
History: For centuries, Native Americans used it as a place for vision quests and prayer. It was first seen by whites in 1853.
When visiting: The park is always open, but some roads and facilities are closed in winter. Visitor info: 541-594-2211.
Of note: The park is one of the snowiest inhabited areas in the USA, averaging 44 feet of snow a year.

ALISHA ROEMELING, AP

Crater Lake was created by the eruption and collapse of Mount Mazama 7,000 years ago. Wizard Island rises from the lake.

{WEST}

HAWAII HAWAI'I VOLCANOES NATIONAL PARK

Lava flows always put on good shows

Rick Neale
USA TODAY

Spectacular even by the standards of Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park, the ongoing eruption at Kilauea has shattered records and drawn big crowds this spring.

In late April, the lava lake at the summit of Kilauea rose to unprecedented levels. Visitors have been treated to fiery nighttime displays of fumes and molten rock.

"It is really, really amazing," says Jessica Ferracane, public affairs specialist for the park. "It's been making international headlines. Our visitation has soared."

"It's pretty spectacular and amazing. It's nice to see that (the Hawaiian volcano goddess) Pele is definitely home and putting on such a big show," Ferracane says.

Hawaii Volcanoes National Park encompasses ecological zones ranging from ocean coastline to alpine wilderness. More than 150 miles of hiking trails wind through these regions, ranging from sea level to 13,667 feet in elevation.

"One of my favorite places is not somewhere that a lot of people go," says Elizabeth Fien, executive director of the nonprofit Friends of Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park. "It's where the 1974 flow is. There are 10- and 15-foot lava trees near Keanakakoi Crater. To me, its one of the most incredible places in the park."

Lava trees are rock formations created when fast-flowing lava engulfs a tree. Some lava cools and hardens around the trunk, while the rest flows away. "To me, it's like Stonehenge," Fien says.

Her group's volunteers have helped remove invasive plant species from park forests since 1997. They also raise money to help the critically endangered nene — or Hawaiian goose — and honuea, or hawksbill sea turtle.

"It is so diverse. There's ocean. There's rainforest. There's the Kau Desert. There's lava. I mean, there's not many places in the world quite like our park," Fien says.

Neale also reports for *Florida Today*

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 333,086 acres
Visitors: 1,693,005 in 2014
Established: 1916
History: Hawaii natives believed Pele, the volcano goddess, kept her ancestral home in Halemaumau Crater atop Kilauea. The volcano has been erupting since 1983, adding about 500 acres of new land and destroying 187 structures.
When visiting: The park is on the southeastern side of the Big Island of Hawaii. The Kilauea Visitor Center is open daily from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Call 808-985-6000.
Of note: For lava viewing updates, call 808-985-6011 or 808-961-8093.

2011 U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY PHOTO VIA AP

Kilauea in Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park may be the most active volcano on Earth. The current eruption began in 1983.

IDAHO NEZ PERCE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

An overlook at Nez Perce National Historical Park in Idaho gives a sweeping view of White Bird Battlefield, where Nez Perce warriors routed a U.S. Cavalry force in June 1877.

Scattered sites tell whole story

Brian Passey
USA TODAY

Plan on a lot of driving if you want to see all of Nez Perce National Historical Park. It covers parts of four Northwest states.

This year is a good time to give it a try, as the park is celebrating its 50th anniversary with a variety of special events throughout its 38 sites, which are spread across the ancestral homeland of the Nez Perce people in Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington.

Most of the sites are associated with the 1877 Nez Perce War and the flight of Chief Joseph and his band. Park headquarters, including a visitor center and museum, are located in Spalding, Idaho, on the present-day Nez Perce Indian Reservation.

"We preserve a continuum of at least 11,000 years of Nez Perce culture and interpret the story through consultation with tribal consultants," says Scott Eckberg, Idaho unit manager for the park.

Eckberg says the park was established to present Nez Perce history through the tribe's perspective, including its friendly interactions with the Lewis and Clark expedition in 1805-06.

In addition to learning about history, visitors to the park can tour scenic areas like the walking trails near the Clearwater River in Spalding and Heart of the Monster, near Kamiah, Idaho, which is the location of the Nez Perce creation story.

"The park offers opportunities to explore, not only here at the visitor center and museum but also at the outlying sites," Eckberg says.

Many of the interpretive sites are located in four counties of north-central Idaho along U.S. Routes 12 and 95.

Jacob Haeberle of St. Anthony, Idaho, visited many of the park's sites while preparing his master's thesis on the Nez Perce War. The student in him appreciated the artifacts, archaeology and historic sites, like White Bird Battlefield, where the U.S. Cavalry was defeated with heavy losses during the first battle of the Nez Perce War.

But Haeberle also enjoyed the park's scenery. "It is just a beautiful location," he says. "It feels like a special place."

Passey also reports for *The Spectrum* of St. George, Utah

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 2,334 acres (owned by the National Park Service; additional land owned by other agencies and entities)
Visitors: 221,439 in 2014
Established: 1965
History: Congress established Nez Perce National Historic Park in 1965. The visitor center and museum in Spalding, Idaho, opened in 1983. The park expanded to 38 sites in 1992.
When visiting: The park includes 38 sites in four states, but the main visitor center is at 39063 U.S. Highway 95 in Spalding, Idaho, about 11 miles east of Lewiston. Visitor information: 208-843-7009. The visitor center is open every day except New Year's Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas.
Of note: Only nine of the park's 38 sites are owned by the National Park Service. The NPS works cooperatively with other federal agencies and local communities that own the remaining 29 sites.

{EAST}

PENNSYLVANIA VALLEY FORGE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

MATT ROURKE, AP

Valley Forge, in southeast Pennsylvania, where Washington's army endured the winter of 1777-78.

The Revolution's cold crucible

William H. McMichael
USA TODAY

It wasn't the coldest winter ever, or the snowiest. But alternating freezing temperatures and thaws produced dank, muddy conditions that were at once miserable and conducive to sickness.

Not one soldier was felled by enemy bullets at Valley Forge during the third winter of the eight-year Revolutionary War. But of the 12,000 who arrived at the site on Dec. 19, 1777, many of them hungry and lacking proper clothing, nearly 2,000 would die of influenza, typhoid and dysentery.

Yet the army persevered. And under the leadership of Gen. George Washington, who wintered over with them, the cause survived. More than 17,000 soldiers left the encampment on June 19, 1778, a unified, confident fighting force that would ultimately prevail and win independence from Great Britain.

No trace of the ordeal remains today at pastoral Valley Forge National Historical Park — although visitors can walk through the stone house that served as the headquarters for Washington and his staff. It's left to the imagination, along with a few reconstructed huts and seasonal re-enactors, to picture what took place on the rolling fields where the army spent the winter of 177-78 and trained under former Prussian officer Friedrich Steuben, known to history as Baron von Steuben.

When the troops arrived, the first tasks were building log huts and gathering wood for fires. But the site then was all farmland.

"All of the trees that you see here today wouldn't have been here," says Stephanie Loeb, a park ranger and visual information specialist. "So they had to go out for several miles."

The ground was all mud. "Imagine driving a wagon through that," Loeb says. "The supply train was broken. It was so difficult to get the necessary food and essentials here."

"We have a lot of visitors who like to come here over the winter, because that's when the story happened," Loeb says. Yet many view the spring and summer as similarly historic, since this is when Steuben's training took place. The park is busiest from June to August.

For many visitors, the attraction of Valley Forge lies not in its history but in the 26 miles of trails enjoyed by hikers, runners and bicyclists. Some of these run along the north side of the park, across the now-reclaimed and scenic Schuylkill River, which Washington's troops crossed to complete their military training before marching back to war.

McMichael also reports for *The News Journal* in Wilmington, Del.

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 3,500 acres
Visitors: 1,990,881 in 2014
Established: 1976
History: Valley Forge became Pennsylvania's first state park in 1893, was designated a national hstoric landmark in 1961 and given to the U.S. government in 1976 as a bicentennial gift.
When visiting: Open daily, 7 a.m. to sunset. Call ahead at 610-783-1000 to learn when interpretative, period-dressed rangers and volunteers will be working at the Muhlenberg Brigade huts and Washington's Headquarters — the actual house Washington used during his army's stay that winter.
Of note: Most of the park's annual visitors are area residents who walk, run or bike its 26 miles of trails.

DELAWARE FIRST STATE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

The First will be last (in the park system)

William H. McMichael
USA TODAY

Scraps of paper and jotted reminders are scattered around Ethan McKinley's office, a bit like the scattered little empire he inherited just months ago when he became the superintendent of Delaware's first and only unit of the National Park Service.

First State National Historical Park was established last December. Its seven sites are spread across the state and not yet unified, but interest is mounting.

"We're already getting requests from visitors to give them itineraries," says McKinley, who operates in a room on the second floor of one of the new park's showpieces — the circa-1732 New Castle Court House. "What can they see in a one-day or two-day visit? In a weekend?"

Itineraries are just one item to be developed. At the lush Woodlawn tract, which graces the northernmost part of the state and just a bit of Pennsylvania, trails must be mapped and marked. Other sites are well-established and run by partner organizations with whom the National Park System has management agreements. McKinley wants to blend their stories into a narrative that connects Delaware's earliest days as a Dutch and Swedish colony through independence and statehood — much as the British colonial story is told at Williamsburg in Virginia.

"Our partners are doing a fantastic job at telling the stories of the individual sites," McKinley says. "What we hope to do is create a comprehensive network, or line of stories, that weave the sites together. ... It's an exciting place to be right now."

McMichael also reports for *The News Journal* of Wilmington, Del.

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 1,100 acres
Visitors: N/A (park still being set up during 2014)
Established: 2014
History: First State National Monument has seven elements: the New Castle Court House; The Green in Dover; Wilmington's Old Swedes Church; Fort Christinathe John Dickinson Plantation near Dover; and the Ryves Holt House, the state's oldest known home, in Lewes.
When visiting: Visitor information: 302-544-6363.
Of note: The historical park is the 400th unit of the National Park Service. Delaware is the "First State" — but it was the last to join the national park system.

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Delaware's heritage is reflected in the British, Dutch, Swedish and American flags flying outside the New Castle Court House.

{EAST}

CONNECTICUT NEW ENGLAND NATIONAL SCENIC TRAIL

State doesn't seem so small when you're backpacking it

Matthew Daneman
Special for USA TODAY

The New England National Scenic Trail has views of Long Island Sound, of rugged ridgetops and of picturesque small towns.

What the trail lacks at times along its 215 miles are sufficient places to camp overnight. So when David Peters set up a pair of lean-tos with sleeping pallets on his 2 acres of land bordering the trail in Durham, Conn., he created an in-demand destination.

"I have hikers come in all year and stay the night, stay the day," says Peters, 54. "I had three guys sleeping out there this winter, when it was 4 degrees out."

Established in 2009, the trail is one of 11 National Scenic Trails around the country. It reaches from Long Island Sound across Connecticut and Massachusetts to the New Hampshire border.

The trail is maintained by volunteers — the Connecticut Forest & Park Association in that state and the Berkshire chapter of the Appalachian Mountain Club in Massachusetts.

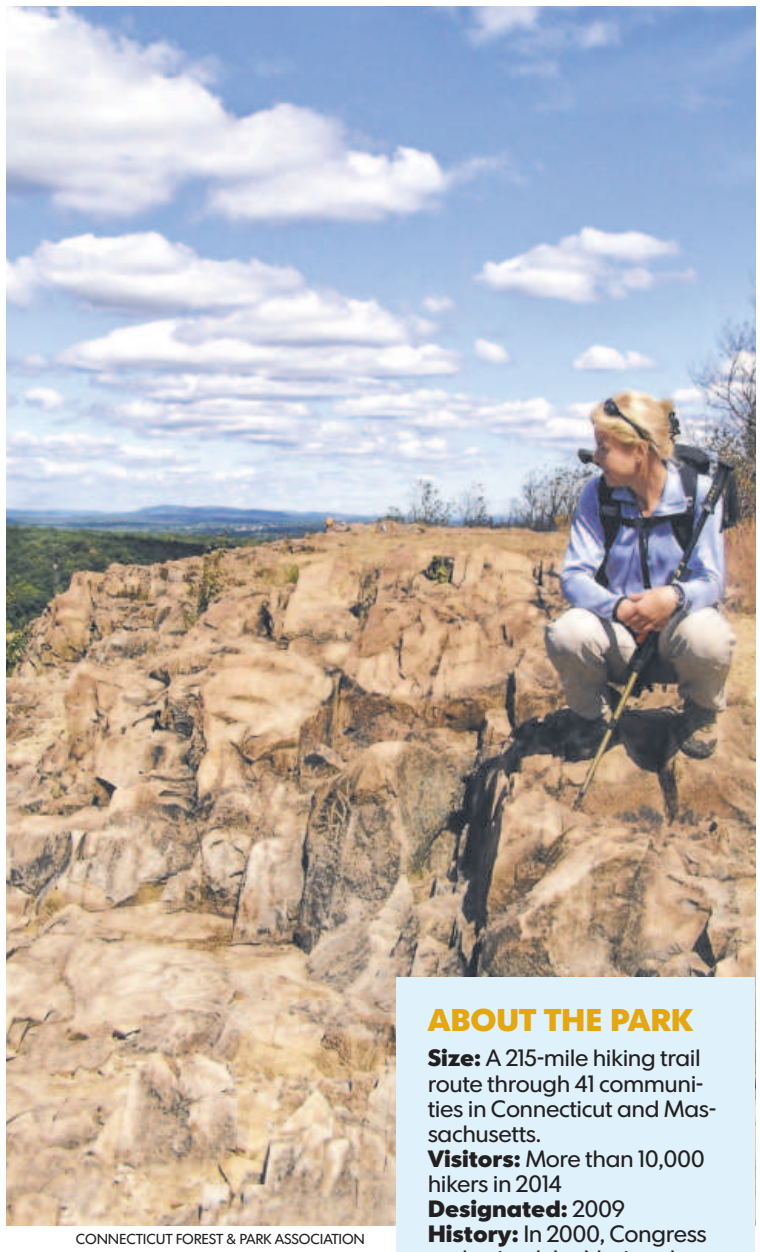
Primarily an unpaved path, the trail is used for everything from hiking and running to, in winter, snow shoeing and cross-country skiing, says Eric Hammerling, executive director of the Connecticut Forest & Park Association.

"I love walking on the trail," particularly at Talcott Mountain State Park northwest of Hartford, he says. "A real priority for me is to get my kids outdoors, away from computers and TV, and be connected to the outdoor world."

Much of the trail actually goes through private property, which has meant setting up and maintaining numerous handshake agreements with landowners to keep their property open to trail users, Hammerling says.

Landowners like Peters, who has done his own fair share of hiking and backpacking. He keeps his shelters stocked with water, snacks and reading material.

"I'm always on the trail. It's free and legal to walk to New Hampshire," he says with a laugh. "That just boggles my mind."



CONNECTICUT FOREST & PARK ASSOCIATION

Metacomet Trail in central Connecticut is part of the 215-mile-long, two-state New England National Scenic Trail.

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: A 215-mile hiking trail route through 41 communities in Connecticut and Massachusetts.
Visitors: More than 10,000 hikers in 2014
Designated: 2009
History: In 2000, Congress authorized the National Park Service in 2009 to research and designate a new trail. The New England trail is made up primarily of the pre-existing Mattabesett, Metacomet, and Metacomet-Monadnock trails.
When visiting: More than 100 public roads cross the trail at various points, many of them with parking areas. Info: newenglandtrail.org.
Of note: Most of the trail is on private property.

NEW YORK LOWER EAST SIDE TENEMENT MUSEUM

Immigrants' stories echo through time

Matthew Daneman
Special for USA TODAY

There are no pine tree vistas or bucolic hiking trails, no potential for seeing a moose.

Instead, one of the chief attractions at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum National Historic Site is a 14-year-old girl.

Victoria Confino, a Sephardic Jewish immigrant from what is today Greece, lived in the former apartment building from 1913 to 1916. Today, when people come to the site that documents immigrant life in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they meet Victoria Confino as portrayed by a member of the 15-person educator pool that does costumed interpretations there — essentially serving as a hybrid between historic reenactor and tour guide, answering questions and talking in the first person about their lives.

"It's neither a play nor is it a classroom," says Jessica Underwood Varman, who oversees the costumed interpretation program at the Manhattan museum. "It falls somewhere in between."

According to the museum, roughly 7,000 people lived in the building between 1863 and 1935. It spent more than 50 years abandoned. "It was kind of a time capsule," Varman says. The first restored apartment opened in 1992; today there are six.

The costumed interpreters all portray people who lived at 97 Orchard St. at some time in its past. "We call it the game of infinite details," Varman says. "There's always something more to learn about the daily life of these individuals."

Meanwhile, they field questions from the worldly to the philosophical, Varman said: " 'Where do you go to the bathroom? How do you bathe? How does your stove work?' All the way to 'How do you feel about America?' "

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: One building
Visitors: 200,000 in 2014
Established: 1992
History: The building at 97 Orchard St. was built in 1863 and was occupied until 1935.
When visiting: Museum visitors can see restored apartments and businesses and interact with costumed interpreters, or take guided walking tours of the Lower East Side to see how immigrants shaped it. Tickets start at $25 for adults, $20 for students and seniors. For info: 212-982-8420.
Of note: From 1863 to 1935, the building housed an estimated 7,000 immigrants from 20 different nations.

BATTMAN STUDIOS/LOWER EAST SIDE TENEMENT MUSEUM

An apartment as it would have appeared when 97 Orchard St. was occupied. It's now the Lower East Side Tenement Museum.

{EAST}

MARYLAND GLEN ECHO PARK

This park's for doing rather than seeing

Adam Sylvain
Special for USA TODAY

At Glen Echo Park, you won't find volcanoes or geysers, canyons or mountains. What you will find is a mecca for art and cultural exchange, attracting thousands eager to learn a new skill or craft.

The park is home to 14 resident artists and hosts classes in visual and performing arts, as well as ranger-led nature programs. This summer, the Glen Echo Park Aquarium makes its debut. The interactive exhibit will feature wildlife indigenous to the Chesapeake Bay estuary.

What sets Glen Echo apart from other National Park Service sites is its participatory nature. Rather than passively observing landscapes or monuments, visitors become beginner artists, dancers and musicians, cutting their teeth under local pros.

In the early 20th century, Glwn Echo was a popular "trolley park," drawing visitors from nearby Washington, D.C., for carnival rides and games. The park peaked in the World War II years. The big band-era Spanish Ballroom is a main draw for anyone who craves a nostalgic dance experience.

History buffs can learn about the civil rights protests there in 1960, when Glen Echo functioned as a segregated amusement park. Nature lovers are also not to be forgotten. The watershed property occupies an environmentally rich area, perfect for a midday picnic followed by an art gallery walk and evening dance class.

The sum of this diverse environment is an attraction unique to the national Park system.

"There's not another park or place quite like it," says Katey Boerner, executive director of Glen Echo Park Partnership for Arts and Culture.

ABOUT THE PARK:

Size: 9 acres
Visitors: 349,746 in 2014
Established: 1971
History: Glen Echo operated as the region's preeminent amusement park from 1898 to 1968. The federal government bought the land in 1970, with public arts and culture programming beginning in 1971.
When visiting: Open from 6 a.m. to 1 a.m. daily. For information: 301-634-2222 or glenechopark.org.
Of note: Park programming is managed by a nonprofit group, the Glen Echo Park Partnership for Arts and Culture.

BETH J. HARPAZ, AP

A former amusement park, Glen Echo provides a wide variety of art and cultural programs, making it a unique national park.

NEW JERSEY MORRISTOWN NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

2001 PHOTO BY MIKE DERER, AP

A costumed ranger inside a home used by one of Washington's generals in the winter of 1779-80.

1779-80 was a game-changer

Susanne Cervenka
USA TODAY

Gen. George Washington and his Continental Army entered Morristown, N.J., in December 1779, at the start of what's still one of the coldest winters on record.

When Washington left in June 1780, there were blue skies ahead: Washington knew that that the French would be coming to his army's aid, a turning point that would lead to victory over the British in the Revolutionary War.

"This news changes the game for him," says Vanessa Smiley, chief of interpretation for Morristown National Historical Park.

Morristown was the first site to be given the national historical park designation; today, there are about 50 national historical parks.

Morristown offers visitors a rich experience not just historically, but also a culturally and naturally, Smiley says.

At the Washington's Headquarters Museum and Ford Mansion, visitors can see where Washington stayed during the winter encampment. It is also home to more than 500,000 pieces of archived materials related to the founding of the United States, the largest collection outside of the Smithsonian Institution.

Most of the Continental Army camped at Jockey Hollow and the New Jersey Brigade Encampment, which are about 3 miles south of the headquarters. There, visitors can hike or ride horses on more than 27 miles of trails.

Also part of the park is Fort Nonsense, an outpost that not only allowed soldiers to defend Morristown, but also gave them a clear view toward New York City, which was held by the British, Smiley says. Today, visitors to Fort Nonsense may be able to see New York's One World Trade Center and Empire State Building.

John J. Lucas Jr. grew up outside Morristown and knew as a child that he was a distant relative of the family that owned Ford Mansion. But it wasn't until he visited Morristown as an adult that the site's importance hit him.

"Some people go to these parks and have absolutely no clue what happened and why it happened. I went there and started volunteering because of the history of it."

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 1,711 acres
Visitors: 264,363 in 2014
Established: 1933
History: George Washington and the Continental Army encamped in Morristown from December 1779 to June 1980 during one of the coldest winters on record.
When visiting: Morristown National Historic Park encompasses several locations, including the Washington's Headquarters Museum and Ford Mansion; Jockey Hollow Visitor Center and the Wick House; and Fort Nonsense. The Wick House itself will be closed this summer for rehabilitation, but the grounds and Jockey Hollow will remain open. For information, call 973-539-2016, extension 210
Of note: Morristown was the site of the first mass vaccination. Continental Army soldiers were inoculated for smallpox.

Cervenka also reports for the *Asbury Park* (N.J.) *Press*

{EAST}

VERMONT MARSH-BILLINGS-ROCKEFELLER NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

U.S. conservation grew from this soil

Dan D'Ambrosio
USA TODAY

Vermont's only national park, Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park in Woodstock, is named for staunch conservationists who each owned the 500-acre property before it was ultimately donated to the National Park Service in 1992.

The original owner, George Perkins Marsh, was born on the property in 1801. Marsh traveled widely as U.S. ambassador to Italy and, later, to Turkey, where he saw the devastation caused by overgrazing and deforestation.

The same thing was happening in Marsh's native Vermont, which was 80% deforested by the mid-19th century, largely for sheep grazing. In 1864, Marsh published *Man and Nature*, a book that became the "fountainhead" of the conservation movement, says Tim Maguire, the park's chief of visitor services and interpretation.

"Marsh was the first to articulate the cause and effect of poor land use and what that meant for human civilization," Maguire says. "That's why his book is a benchmark."

In 1869, Frederick Billings, who made a fortune in the California gold rush, bought the property and built a Victorian mansion that many of today's park visitors tour. The mansion includes an extensive collection of paintings from the Hudson River School.

Mary French Rockefeller, Billings' granddaughter, inherited the property in the 1950s. She and her husband, Laurance S. Rockefeller, lived there off and on. They donated it to the National Park Service in 1992 but kept the right to live there for the rest of their lives. Mary French Rockefeller died in 1997. Her husband gave up the life tenancy in 1998. He died in 2004.

D'Ambrosio also reports for *The Burlington* (Vt.) *Free Press*

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 500 acres
Visitors: 39,086 in 2014
Established: 1998
History: The park is named for former owners George Perkins Marsh, Frederick Billings, and Mary French Rockefeller and Laurence S. Rockefeller.
When visiting: For information, call 802-457-3368.
Of note: The park's 400 paintings and prints include Hudson River School landscapes depicting national parks, such as Golden Gate, Grand Teton and Yosemite.

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Wooded hillsides speak to the focus on conservation at Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park in Vermont.

RHODE ISLAND TOURO SYNAGOGUE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

COURTESY OF TOURO SYNAGOGUE

Built in 1763, Touro Synagogue in Newport, R.I., is the oldest standing synagogue in the USA.

Religious freedom, to the letter

Susanne Cervenka
USA TODAY

George Washington promised the congregation of Touro Synagogue religious tolerence in a short but impactful letter sent 225 years ago — a letter John F. Kennedy called "one of the oldest symbols of liberty."

About 10,000 to 15,000 visitors a year now come to Touro Synagogue in Newport, R.I., whose history is intertwined with the American ideal of religious freedom that began in Rhode Island.

"It is not just a Jewish story. It is definitely an American history story," says Meryle Cawley, coordinator of membership and visitor services for the Touro Synagogue Foundation. "It is how we fit into the ideals of time and place in Newport."

Touro Synagogue is the oldest standing synagogue in the United States, dedicated in 1763. It also still serves as the house of worship for Congregation Jeshuat Israel, the second oldest Jewish congregation in the USA. That requires a careful balance between maintaining the congregation's religious schedule and allowing tours and exhibits, Cawley says.

Tours are not offered when the congregation has religious services or special events. However, the synagogue has an award-winning garden that can be used for prayer when tours are ongoing.

Although it was named a national historic site in 1946, it is an independently owned affiliate of the National Park Service. The Touro Synagogue Foundation operates and maintains the site.

Tours and exhibits explain the history of the synagogue and its congregation, but also tell about Rhode Island and its role in establishing religious liberty in the USA, Cawley says. Each August, the foundation and congregation celebrate religious freedom by reading Washington's 1790 letter, "To the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island."

Cervenka also reports for the *Asbury Park* (N.J) *Press*

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: Less than an acre
Visitors: About 10,000 in 2014, not including those who came to worship.
Established: 1946
History: Touro Synagogue is home to Congregation Jeshuat Israel, which was founded in Rhode Island between 1658 and 1670 after its members left Barbados seeking greater religious tolerance and economic opportunities.
When visiting: Touro Synagogue still serves an active congregation. The tour schedule may vary due to Jewish holidays, ceremonies and special events. It is not open Saturdays. Visitor information: 401-847-4794, extension 207.
Of note: Touro Synagogue underwent major renovations in 2006 to restore it to what historians believe it looked like in 1790.

{EAST}

NEW HAMPSHIRE SAINT-GAUDENS NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

Indelible American images took shape at this home

Malak Monir
USA TODAY

Renowned sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens rose to prominence on the back of his sculpture of Civil War Adm. David Farragut, in New York's Madison Square. He is also known for Boston's Robert Gould Shaw Memorial, and the "double eagle" $20 gold coin, minted from 1907 to 1933.

The Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site preserves and maintains the artist's home, studio and gardens in Cornish, N.H. The site features galleries of the artist's works, and casts of his monuments decorate the grounds.

"The park has the largest collection of Saint-Gaudens artwork in the world," says Rick Kendall, the park superintendent. "The artwork is center stage for most of our visitors."

"It's very well-known to the people of Vermont and New Hampshire as a very nice place to go, and at any time of year. That's special," says Bonnie Tocher Clause, who lives in Vermont about a half-hour from the park. Clause has visited four times and intends to return this summer. "It's a wonderful museum."

Casts of some of Augustus Saint-Gaudens' most famous sculptures can be found at his former home in Cornish, N.H., which is now Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site. Seen here is his 1898 work *Amor Caritas (Angel of Charity)*, the original of which is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Saint-Gaudens first rented the Cornish home on the suggestion of Charles Beaman, a New York attorney who owned the property, Kendall says. At the time, the sculptor was working on the statue *Abraham Lincoln: The Man*, now known as the "Standing Lincoln." Beaman persuaded him to come to New Hampshire with the promise that he would find many "Lincoln-shaped men" thee who could serve as potential models.

"He was also looking for peace and quiet, a place where he could work uninterrupted," Kendall says, adding that Saint-Gaudens' fame was such that he faced constant interruptions by streams of well-wishers in New York.

ABOUT THE SITE

Size: 375 acres
Visitors: 37,785 in 2014
Established: 1965
History: The estate was sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens' summer home until he and his family relocated there permanently. (The family "fell in love with New Hampshire," says park superintendent Rick Kendall.) The park grounds were once maintained by the Saint-Gaudens Memorial, founded by the artist's wife, Augusta, after his death to preserve the property.
When visiting: Park grounds are open dawn to dusk daily, year-round. For additional information, call 603-675-2175.
Of note: For its 50th anniversary this year, the park will be installing a bronze cast of Saint-Gaudens' sculpture "Standing Lincoln." The original, which stands in Chicago's Lincoln Park, was the first major sculpture that Saint-Gaudens completed while in New Hampshire.

MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

City's past, future equally important

Malak Monir
USA TODAY

Lowell, Mass., is steeped in history. From the canals that powered the city through the Industrial Revolution to the textile mills that were the center of its 19th-century economy, reminders of the old city remain.

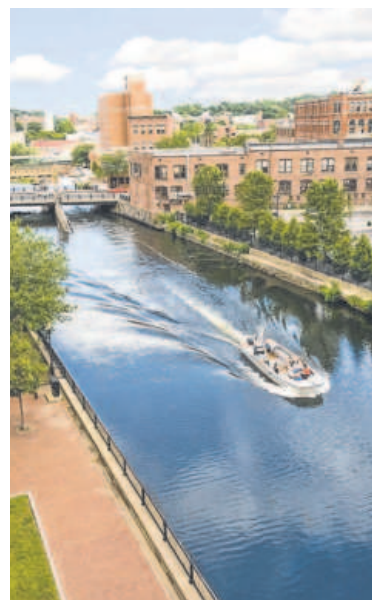
But Lowell National Historical Park isn't just about remembering the past. It's also about the future. Over its nearly 40-year history, the park has collaborated with the city and the private sector to renovate at least 450 individual buildings in historic areas across the city.

"The purpose of this park was to tell the story of the Industrial Revolution and to revitalize the city," says Celeste Bernardo, the park superintendent.

The fruits of those collaborative efforts are apparent throughout the city. Recently restored walkways over the canals and the golden shine of the weather vane atop the Boott Mill Clock Tower, one of the city's most recognizable sights, are just some examples.

Bernardo says canal tours and trolley rides are some of the biggest draws for tourists, while local residents appreciate the weekend family programming.

"People love the trolleys," she says. "We have locals who bring their kids just to ride the trolley."



JIM HIGGINS, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Boat tours of Lowell's canals are among the top attractions for tourists, park officials say.

ABOUT THE PARK

Size: 141 acres
Visitors: 514,524 in 2014
Established: 1978
History: Lowell was a major industrial center in the 1800s. The national historical park is unique in that its legislative mandate includes supporting the preservation and protection of historical and cultural sites in the city.
When visiting: The park is in downtown Lowell. Visitors can start at the visitor center — open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily — and then make their way through the park's various exhibits. More info at 978-970-5000.
Of note: Boat and trolley tours are offered regularly through some of the city's most historically significant areas.

Other big attractions are exhibits, such as a reproduction of a weaving room, where visitors can watch the cotton-making process employed in Lowell's numerous textile mills, and a boarding house exhibit that shows the conditions of the living quarters for the city's female and immigrant workers.

"Lowell has always been an immigrant city," Bernardo says. At the time the park was established, more than 90% of the city's population identified as white, whereas in the 2010 Census, only about 60% did so. "We wanted to think about the relevance of our park."

As a result, the park has looked for opportunities to partner with various nonprofits in the city to develop programs and organize events that would appeal to the community at large.

"It's a matter of expanding our theme," Bernardo says. "We are a community-based park."

{EAST} **DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA** THEODORE ROOSEVELT ISLAND

PHOTOS BY JACK GRUBER, USA TODAY

Although not as well-known, or as visited, as some of D.C.'s other landmarks, the memorial on Theodore Roosevelt Island is noteworthy for its verdant backdrop.

'Living memorial' befits an active president

Potomac island's ecosystem was restored as a tribute to conservationist Roosevelt

Adam Sylvain
Special for USA TODAY

Theodore Roosevelt Island provides visitors canopied trails and sweeping views of the Georgetown waterfront. On the weekends, kayaks and paddleboards encircle the Potomac River island.

"The trails are key for people looking for a place to walk around and see green," park ranger Emily Zivot says.

Set between the clustered high-rises of Arlington, Va., and the busy streets of Washington, Roosevelt Island provides a "living memorial," where nature lovers explore a diverse habitat that supports myriad plant and animal varieties, including more than 200 bird species.

Roosevelt Island enjoys its share of regular visitors, including joggers on its 1.5-mile circuit trail, but it buzzes in spring when tourists descend on the Tidal Basin for glimpses of the ephemeral cherry blossoms. After several shoulder-to-shoulder hours, many find the island a welcome escape.

"It's nice to get out here and find some open space," says Hannah Beazley, who visited with her husband and young son for the first time in April. "It's really beautiful."

The island was purchased in 1931 by the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Foundation with the goal of creating a national memorial. The Civilian Conservation Corps led an effort to clear the island of non-native vegetation and plant more than 20,000 native trees and shrubs. The restored woodland habitat mirrors those that existed in the Potomac region for centuries in a fitting tribute to the conservationist Roosevelt.

The lone interruption in the otherwise primeval landscape is found at the central clearing, where an oval stone plaza is punctuated by a 17-foot bronze statue of Roosevelt, erected in 1967, along with four 21-foot high granite tablets inscribed with some of Roosevelt's writings.

JACK GRUBER USAT

"Teddy" Roosevelt was president from 1901 to 1909. The island is one of six National Park Service units dedicated in his name.

"It was the first living memorial in the National Park system, which is fitting because Roosevelt was such an active man," Zivot says. "He was a big advocate for the National Park service."

No one has more national park sites dedicated in his name than Roosevelt — six in total. Roosevelt established six national parks during his presidency and also created the U.S. Forest Service.

ABOUT THE PARK:

Size: 88.5 acres
Visitors: 146,500 in 2014
Established: 1932
History: Native Americans used the island as a seasonal fishing village. During the Civil War, it was a training site for the Union Army, including the 1st U.S. Colored Troops. In the 1930s, it was redeveloped as a park in honor of President Theodore Roosevelt, an avid conservationist and outdoorsman.
When visiting: Parking is limited, but the Rosslyn Metro station is a 10-minute walk from the entrance to the island, which is open year round from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. Call 703-289-2500.
Of note: Though the island looks like a natural forest, it had been clear-cut, trampled, and even bombed by 1931. Nearly every tree seen there now was planted in the 1930s and 1940s.

HAPPY CAMPERS:

NEW GEAR GOES OUT OF THE BOX AND INTO THE WOODS

We create memories amid the ruckus of roughing it. Those memories make camping seem whimsical upon reflection. Last year's marshmallows still sweetening the roasting sticks. The rip in your tent where the dog charged through it. That burn hole in your fleece from ash-flinging firewood. Memories are wrapped in every one of those natural disasters — and while outdoor gear is designed to take a beating, eventually you start wishing on the backcountry stars for something new. **Kris Millgate** takes a look at the latest equipment worth talking about around the campfire.

TATIANA DON

{SLEEP}

Winnebago Travato: $85,800
This deluxe compact motorhome is built for couples who want to do more than lounge around. The standout features on this ride are the add-ons: Kayaks mount on the roof, and bikes bolt to the back. Tire pump included.

▶ STORY CONTINUES ON 100

Sierra Designs Backcountry Bed Elite: $489.95

No need to wear socks on your cold hands. This sleeping bag has insulated pockets for your arms, and on hot nights, you can stick your feet out the bottom. And here's the best part: no zipper. Sleep on your back, your belly or your side. A perfect fit for the tossing-and-turning type.

{SLEEP}

▶ CONTINUED FROM 98

Easton Rimrock 3-Person: $299.99

Two long poles would do on this tent, but two more short poles on the sides do even better. The extra support makes the tent walls pull tight, so the zipper zings open easily. Comes with extra fabric swatches and a repair kit for when the dog charges through it.

Keystone Impact: $32,999

Today's "toy hauler" trailers put those of a decade ago to shame. Gone is the garage-like feel of a camper with a four-wheeler or motorcycle simply parked inside it. In this trailer, a wall separates the "toys" area from the living space, and there's even an outside shower for weekend mechanics.

{SLEEP}

UCO Tetra: $49.99

This multipurpose light is the size of a standard flashlight, but it also serves as a lantern and a USB charger for your devices. There's a wire handle and a globe at one end for lantern use. Collapse the handle, and it's a flashlight with a focused beam.

Fishpond Yellowstone Wader/Duffel Bag: $159.95

This bag makes the list for creativity. Keep your waders or wet clothes in the bottom compartment and your dry clothes in the top. A divider keeps the two from mingling, and mesh sides keep the bottom from getting funky. Made of recycled fishing nets. Includes a rod holder, so pack that, too.

{EAT}

Camp Chef Deluxe Oven: $303

Enjoy hot muffins for breakfast with this portable oven. It runs on propane, bakes evenly and includes a two-burner stovetop. This is gourmet cooking for the car camping crowd.

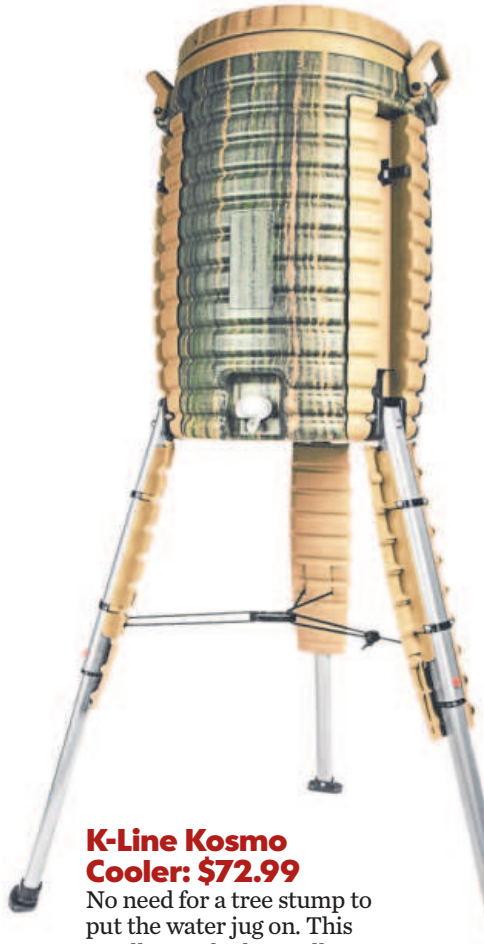
GSI Outdoors Pinnacle Camper: $129.95

Using paper plates eliminates the need to wash dishes, but it adds to camp garbage. This nesting dish and pot set takes little space and comes with its own sink, which is the soft-sided case everything stacks inside of. Wash that marshmallow-covered roasting stick while you're at it.

▶ STORY CONTINUES ON 102

{EAT}

▶ CONTINUED FROM 101



K-Line Kosmo Cooler: $72.99

No need for a tree stump to put the water jug on. This 5-gallon tank's legs collapse for easy carrying, then extend to keep the spouts out of the dirt. Three spouts quickly accommodate your thirsty campground crew. Now that's a water cooler to gather around.

Alps Eclipse Table: $44.99

This easy-to-assemble, canvas-top table opens with a surprise: a checkerboard surface with checkers in an attached zipper pocket. Eat like a king, then rally for a round of "king me" before bed.

Alps Chiller Chair: $129.99

This chair makes checkers even cooler. The mesh seat back and bottom allow the breeze to pass through. The removable cooler does even more cooling — but leave it attached, since it's also a cup holder and mini tabletop. This is no cheap seat in a sack. No chair worth chilling in ever is.

Brite-Blade BSTLSK-100: $150

This blade makes the camp kitchen list for its dual-purpose action. Use it to cut dinner vegies, then find your way to the bathroom with it. Magentic LED and red night vision lights included. Also comes with a sharpening stone and a flint stone for making fire. With so many uses for your knife, you'll rarely need the belt clip, but it comes with that, too.

▶ STORY CONTINUES ON 105

{PLAY}

▶ CONTINUED FROM 102

Irish Setter Women's VaprTrek (with insulation): $159.99

Ladies, no more boy boots for you. These boots actually fit feminine feet. The sole is sturdy but comfortable to the step. With waterproofing and Scent Ban technology, these boots are great for hiking or hunting.

Patagonia Synchilla Snap Fleece: $99 men's/women's, $59 child's

This true-to-size pullover has a raised collar with four snaps to keep the breeze out and the warmth in. The breast pocket is large enough to hold lip balm or matches without being bulky. Sized for everyone in the family and holds up well against ash-flinging firewood.

Lowa Men's Renegade Pro GTX Mid: $250

This men's boot tracks over any surface with confidence. The soles find sure footing on slick rock or in mud, offering firm ankle support. Durability doesn't compromise comfort, and the long-lasting design handles pack weight well.

▶ STORY CONTINUES ON 107

STUDIO2

{PLAY}

▶ CONTINUED FROM 105

Zippo 4-in-1 Woodsman: $79.95

The sturdy Woodsman is a tool for all tasks in camp. It's an ax, a saw, a stake puller and a hammer. It's easy to put together, and that's a good thing — no man worth his handiwork reads the instructions anyway.

Tenkara Sato: $215

Family-friendly Tenkara rods are of basic construction, from the telescoping rod to the short line tied on the tip. The only reason you're not casting with it is that one of the kids already has a fish on and won't give it up.

Brite-Strike APALS: $50

Hands-free headlamps changed the outdoor experience quite a few years back. Now LED lights are going to change the campground again. If you're not due for a new tent with lighted poles, light your old tent with these adhesive LED lights. The on-off switch extends the 80-hour light life. No more glow sticks necessary.

{CAMPING KNOW-HOW}

Heading into the wild? Follow these directions

Kris Millgate

I'm an outdoor journalist. I work and play outside often enough to say I also live outside. My life and my livelihood depend on my ability to survive in the woods, so I pay attention to what works. Whether you're heading out with a full trailer, with a packed car or with just the stuff you can carry on your back, camping's not as rough as it sounds.

COURTESY OF KRIS MILLGATE/TIGHTLINEMEDIA.COM

ANTONIS LIOKOURAS, GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

Bringing a camper makes a trip a cinch. For a more rugged experience, try car camping — or ditch the wheels and backpack it.

EXTRA WHEELS

The first time I slept in a trailer, I felt like a traitor to my tent. Then the heater kicked in, my kids slept in and I had a fancy feast for breakfast. Being a traitor has its benefits.

"We bought a motor home two years ago, and we love it," says Jim Mac, director of communication for Keystone RV. "We tow our jeep behind us. We take our dogs with us. It's really all the things I liked when I tent camped, only a lot more comfortable."

Things to consider:

▶ This is the **easiest kind of camping** when it comes to packing. Once your trailer is stocked, all you have to do is make sure you haven't outgrown the clothes still in there from last season and add a few perishables.

▶ Hard-side camping is **not cheap**. You'll spend at least $10,000 on a new, small trailer. High rollers in luxury motor homes easily push a second mortgage with their rides.

▶ Your **water supply** is limited only by the size of the large tank in the trailer's underbelly. And not even by that if you're in a campground with hookups.

▶ **Fifth wheels** are easier to back up than pull-behind trailers, but they require more horsepower to pull and take up your whole pickup bed for hitching.

▶ **Pull-behind trailers** weigh less and cost less. They're harder to back up, but you have the whole truck bed for bikes and the dog's crate.

BASIC WHEELS

I've tented my whole life, but I haven't packed up camp in the middle of the night since I was little. Long gone are the days of broken zippers and rain running through weak seams. Improved tent technology is evident in the happy medium of car camping.

"I don't have the means to buy a trailer nor do I have the vehicle to pull something like that. I've got a smaller, younger family and car camping just works for us," says Steve McGrath, marketing director of Camp Chef. "Advances in cooking and sleeping outside have come a long ways. You don't have to rough it anymore to enjoy the outdoors." Consider:

▶ If you **don't want the responsibility, or the maintenance,** that comes with a house on wheels, car camping with a tent is for you. Trunk space is a limiting factor, but weight is not.

▶ Keep a **5-gallon water jug** in camp so you don't have to find a spigot every time you need to wash your hands.

▶ You can have **hot meals** with all the works. A two-to-three burner stove or even a portable oven with a stovetop is a realistic option for car camping.

▶ Camping in bear country? Keep your **food and toiletries in the car** not the tent. Even toothpaste smells good enough to eat to a bear.

▶ Camp in an area with **multiple view sheds**. Set up a spotting scope and keep binoculars nearby for wildlife watching.

SCHLENZ, GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

NO WHEELS

I like the challenge of surviving on what I can carry. If self-sufficiency is what drives you, leave the wheels behind and go under your own power.

"Innovation makes backpacking more comfortable, more attractive and ultimately more approachable for people," says Michael Meyer, Granite Gear senior director of design and development. "The outdoors will draw you in and, hopefully, the backpack and gear you take with you will not interrupt that draw."

Some things to think about:

▶ **Pack light.** If you don't need it, you don't want it. Carry no more than 30% of your body weight on your back as a beginner.

▶ If you don't mind sleeping roofless, save yourself the weight and don't pack a tent. If the thought of bugs crawling across your face keeps you up at night, tent it. Just know that **backpacking tents are not for comfort**. They're for cover.

▶ A **good sleeping bag** is mandatory with or without a tent. Pay attention to the bag's temperature rating, and strap a light, roll-up mat to your pack.

▶ Lose the water weight. Carry a well-made **water filter** and make sure you know how to properly use it so you don't get sick.

▶ Pack **flip-flops.** Your feet will thank you when the boots come off after a day on the trail.

▶ Set camp close to water and **pack a fishing rod.** There's usually a simple way to attach it to your pack, and it's lightweight entertainment.

ABOUT KRIS MILLGATE

The quiet cast of a fly line cures writer's block for outdoor journalist Kris Millgate. Many of her multimedia production ideas come from the time she spends in her Idaho base camp. She investigates outdoor and environment issues for TV and web with cross publication in newspapers and magazines.

Millgate graduated from the University of Utah with a degree in broadcast journalism in 1997 then worked for one TV station or another around the country for a decade. Shemade the move to multimedia as a freelancer in 2006 with her production company, Tight Line Media.

Millgate won first place for Outdoor Ethics with OWAA in 2009 and the President's Choice in 2011 and 2012. The Idaho Press Club honored her with Best Documentary in 2010 and 2013 and Idaho Fish and Game honored her with Outstanding Service for Wildlife Conservation in 2013.

She placed in National Geographic's Top 10 film competition in 2014 and two of her films toured the country with the Wild and Scenic Film Festival in 2013 and 2014.