

# NationalParks

WINTER 2022  
\$2.95

THE MAGAZINE OF THE NATIONAL PARKS CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

## PARK INK

**INSIDE THE WORLD OF STAMP-  
CRAZY NATIONAL PARK  
TRAVELERS.**

**A SEQUOIA &  
KINGS CANYON  
SKETCHBOOK**

**SAVING PARK  
ORCHARDS**

**LEGACY OF THE  
BLACK PANTHER  
PARTY**



# National Parks

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This niche community is obsessed with national parks, and these folks have the stamps to prove it.

By Katherine DeGross

THE LUSH Zumwalt Meadow in Kings Canyon National Park is surrounded by immense granite walls.

ILLUSTRATION BY EVAN TURK

COVER:

AN OPEN PAGE in a national park passport book contains a haphazard assortment of stamps. The original passport was published in 1986; since then, more than 3.5 million copies have been sold.

COURTESY OF CHANDLER O'LEARY

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#### ON THE WEB

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# Your Land, Your Victory

**Sitting in the sun** on the White House grounds on Oct. 8, I absorbed the significance of the moment. A diverse group of conservation leaders, tribal leaders, community leaders and public servants — collectively representing millions of people across the country — we were at a ceremony restoring important protections to Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante national monuments in Utah and Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument off the coast of New England. “Bears Ears is a living landscape,” Interior Secretary Deb Haaland said that day. “This is a place that must be protected in perpetuity.”

These three monuments were granted protections between 1996 and 2016 — and deservedly so. The sites provide healing and sustain life. They preserve troves of ancient fossils and artifacts and hold centuries of human history, including sacred burial grounds.

But those protections were stripped away in 2017 and 2020, making way for drilling, mining and commercial fishing — uses that would have forever changed these places that hold so much importance to so many. We at NPCA couldn't let that stand. And neither could any of the people in attendance at that White House ceremony.

Together, we amplified the voices of millions of people who know that some places are just too important to give away. We organized communities, secured support from elected officials, hosted letter-writing parties, garnered media attention and conducted site tours. And together, we won back those protections, an effort we celebrated that day in October when President Joe Biden signed the three proclamations.

I am struck by what a profound moment in time we are in. Tribal leaders representing dozens of nations are at the forefront of this work. They have a voice. They are being heard and treated with respect. They led us to a victory for “every American and every child of the world” as Haaland so eloquently said at the ceremony. I wholeheartedly agree.

A warm thank you to each and every one of you who joined us in the fight to protect what is sacred and irreplaceable. Thanks to your work, this legacy will live on long after us.

With gratitude,  
Theresa Pierno





## Editor's Note



# Unexpected Gifts

**A few weeks ago**, a carefully sealed iPhone box arrived unexpectedly in the mail. “Did you buy a phone?” my son asked, eyebrow arched. I shook my head. Together, we unwrapped the box, and I lifted off the cover. I blinked, stunned. Inside was the Swiss Army knife my parents had given me when I was a child. It was a prized possession, with my name engraved on it and everything. But I’d lost the knife many years ago. How ...? Feeling a wash of emotion, I picked up the enclosed note: “I found this knife while hiking the Appalachian Trail,” it read. “It sat in a drawer for years. Hopefully it has finally made its way back to its rightful owner!”

The sender had included his business card, but instead of signing his name, he had simply written “—Stork GA→ME, '97.” I guess he figured out my job and knew I’d understand the national park reference. Sometimes things really do come full circle.

Around the same time the knife arrived, another ghost from my past resurfaced. Some background: Shortly after graduating from college, I worked at a New York City non-profit called City Volunteer Corps. I was one of about 25 field supervisors who led groups of young people doing community service projects — at health clinics, shelters, schools, gardens — across the city. I’d been working there around a year when funding suddenly dried up and the organization disbanded. The staff scattered, and I lost track of many of them.

Then a few weeks ago, Chuck Sams was nominated to serve as the director of the Park Service (p. 15). The agency has been leaderless for years, and Sams’ selection was very welcome news at NPCA. Meanwhile, for me, seeing the announcement felt a little like reuniting with my knife. Chuck Sams! The recognition was instant. Sams had been a fellow field supervisor, and I remembered him well. Even as a 20-something, Sams had a big presence. He was serious and passionate, and he had an unwavering belief in service. And now ... wow. It has been gratifying to see who Sams has become — and exciting to think about where he could go from here.

Life is strange. People pass through. Memories disappear then reemerge. And occasionally, packages arrive out of the blue. You can try to make sense of it all, but sometimes, the only thing to do is open those boxes and offer thanks to the universe for its wily ways and unexpected gifts.

Rona Marech  
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## WHO WE ARE

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

## WHAT WE DO

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

## EDITORIAL MISSION

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

## MAKE A DIFFERENCE

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

## HOW TO DONATE

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## AN AMERICAN STORY

I was so moved by a story in the Fall 2021 issue that I am writing to you for the first time. The National Park Service is our greatest national resource because it gives us access to and celebrates our natural and cultural histories. I thought of this while reading “Cabin Revival” — about Jun Fujita — which was a story from my region that I had not known. I applaud the persistence of Graham Lee in preserving the story of his great uncle. We need to listen carefully to one another’s stories and find places for them in our larger American story.

**CATHERINE YOUNG**

*Blue River, WI*

*The writer is a former interpretive ranger for the Park Service.*

### MAXED OUT

In a letter to National Parks magazine [Fall 2021], Dick Hewett wrote that there should be no limits on admission to the parks. He claims people would be turned off and that the parks would suffer.

Believe me, the parks are already suffering from the crowds pressing upon these treasures. And visitors are stressed by traffic jams, endless circling in search of a parking space, crowded trails, and the deterioration of infrastructure and natural areas. The Park Service, and the land itself, simply cannot keep up with current demands. The parks are stretched beyond their carrying capacity, and some kind of reservation system is essential. I believe

visitors will understand and cooperate, knowing it will improve their experience and the parks.

**JAMES L. BOONE**

*Portland, OR*

### TREASURES, NOT TROPHIES

I have always enjoyed reading National Parks magazine, particularly articles about protecting animal habitats. I was, therefore, deeply disappointed, and even angered, by the photo of the interior of a Bowlin Camps Lodge cabin [“Over the River and Through the Woods”] displaying the mounted heads or bodies of five once living creatures. Most people treasure seeing these animals alive in their natural

habitat. Others enjoy killing them and boasting about it. Shame on them.

**PAMELA OLSEN**

*Ada, MI*

### HONESTLY MOVED

The article by Ken Ilgunas about his summer at Lake Clark National Park and Preserve [“Out of the Wild”] brought tears to my eyes. His experience in that remote place and his humor, honesty and ability to convey the sense of place and how it related to his inner sense of place made the piece one of the most moving accounts I have read in your magazine. Also, the interview with James Floyd [“Protecting the Homeland”] was very thought pro-

**Send letters to** National Parks Magazine, 777 6th Street NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20001-3723. Or email [npmag@npsa.org](mailto:npmag@npsa.org). Include your name, city and state. Published letters may be edited for length and clarity.

voking in that I don't often think about the people who originally inhabited the national parks. I believe Native Americans should have more input and their voices should be respected, and I'm glad to see that Floyd is on NPCA's Board of Trustees.

**MARGARET WALKER**  
Chicago, IL

Today, I received my "Don't let this be your last issue" issue. I sat on my deck here in Hill Country Texas to read it from beginning to end. When I finished "Out of the Wild" by Ken Ilgunas, I made my decision to renew. This amazing story with wonderful photos, along with all your other stories and wonderful photos, has made me a life-long member!

**REBECCA MCCABE-BRUNS**  
Mico, TX

#### FOR THE LOVE OF MAPS

I enjoy your magazine, but I do have one suggestion prompted by my perusal of the Fall issue. It can be summed up in two words: more maps! There is only one map (p. 33) accompanying any of your articles. Maps are open-armed invitations to further a reader's knowledge, to dream of space and travel, to situate the words of a page on a globe. Please include more maps in your magazine!

**ERIC A. GORDON**  
Los Angeles, CA

#### A NEED TO ACT

Thank you for informing me about the 31,737 abandoned oil and gas wells within 30 miles of national park sites and explaining that there are two bills in Congress to address this dangerous situation. It would have been nice if you had published the titles of the bills and the bill numbers. In the future, when an article references a piece of legislation, please provide the name

and number so I can contact my members of Congress.

**PETER MILENKOWIC**  
Baldwin, MD

*The bills NPCA supports are H.R. 2415, Orphaned Well Cleanup and Jobs Act, led by Rep. Teresa Leger Fernandez, and S. 2177, Oil and Gas Bonding Reform and Orphaned Well Remediation Act, led by Sen. Michael Bennet. NPCA has a one-step action center for the Senate bill online at <https://parkb.it/S2177>.*

#### CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS

In the Fall issue, we mistakenly



© DAVID SWINDLER

wrote that the image in "Echoes" (pages 8 and 9) showed Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. The portion of the canyon pictured is in Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, which abuts the national monument.

We wrote that scuba divers strapped on oxygen tanks in the story "Coral Calamity." It is more accurate to say they use compressed air tanks.

We included a photo of a red-shafted Northern flicker in the travel story about Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument, "Over the River and Through the Woods." That subspecies is found in the western U.S. The subspecies that can be found in Maine is the yellow-shafted Northern flicker.

#### A NOTE TO OUR READERS

We are pleased to share that National Parks' Winter 2021 issue won first place in the full issue category of the 2021 Folio: Eddie & Ozzie Awards, which recognize editorial and design excellence. The magazine also received honorable mention for overall art direction. In addition, the magazine took bronze for overall travel coverage in the prestigious Lowell Thomas Travel Journalism Competition.

#### ANNOUNCING A NEW ARCHIVE

Beginning Jan. 1, 2022, readers will be able to view almost every issue of National Parks magazine, going back to 1942. This rich archive, which is available to the public for free, is the result of a collaboration with NPSHistory.com. Find the archive here: [npshistory.com/npca/magazine/](http://npshistory.com/npca/magazine/). Readers are invited to help complete the collection by emailing scans of missing issues to [info@npshistory.com](mailto:info@npshistory.com). National Parks magazine will continue to post articles and extended content on our own website, [npca.org/magazine](http://npca.org/magazine), which includes stories from 2010 onward.



NPCA





**On average, the Park Service manages nearly 70 million pounds of waste annually, including plastics that pollute lands and waterways and harm our fragile ocean ecosystems.**

*John Garder, NPCA's senior director of budget and appropriations, as quoted in an Environmental Health News article on proposed federal legislation that would curb plastic pollution in national parks by limiting the sale of single-use plastic products in park facilities.*

**It's not uncommon to find trail crews attending to busy restrooms or law enforcement helping with parking.**

*Senior Vice President of Government Affairs Kristen Brengel, testifying before the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources' national parks subcommittee on the impact overcrowding has had on a park system that employs 16% fewer staff than it did 20 years ago.*

**We cannot allow a Florida company to come in and profit at the expense of our state's biological resources.**

*Chris Clarke, California Desert program manager, commenting in the Los Angeles Times on a proposal by a South Florida company to build a high-speed electric train between Southern California and Las Vegas. The train promises to replace millions of passenger vehicle trips every year, but a set of 6-foot-high concrete walls that would run along the 170-mile track would directly threaten the migration of species such as bighorn sheep and mountain lions. NPCA and its allies are urging developers to include wildlife overpasses in their plans.*

PHOTO: MICROPLASTICS COLLECTED FROM THE CHESAPEAKE BAY WATERSHED, WHICH IS HOME TO DOZENS OF NATIONAL PARK SITES.



© WILL PARSON/CHESAPEAKE BAY PROGRAM





COURTESY OF RUTH VAN ORDEN

**SARAH VAN ORDEN** with her parents at Gettysburg National Military Park in Pennsylvania last summer.

## Creative Access

Some visitors with disabilities are venturing farther into parks with the help of specialized backpacks, family and friends.

**Going up the ladder** with her father was a precarious proposition. Sarah Van Orden had dreamed of seeing the Ancient Puebloan cliff dwellings in Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado since she was a kid, but perched high above the ground on wooden rungs, she felt her anxiety swell. Still, she trusted her dad. She had to: She was hitching a ride on his back.

“My dad is 57 and still carrying me,” she said in a recent phone call. “He has no fear.”

Van Orden has a syndrome known as Morquio A, a rare condition that

causes bone irregularities, dwarfism, and breathing and heart problems. At 24, she is 3 feet, 3 inches tall and weighs around 60 pounds. She can walk short distances — at Mount Rushmore, she managed to hike a 1.25-mile trail — but it’s exhausting, and she relies on a wheelchair much of the time. She loves to travel, though, and her enthusiasm often draws her toward out-of-the-way areas. That’s where her customized backpack comes in.

Van Orden and her parents, Tom and Ruth, had used different carrier packs over the years, mostly ones marketed for

children, which she eventually outgrew. But this summer, she was strapped into a pack specifically designed for people with physical disabilities, a product they’d recently purchased from the nonprofit organization We Carry Kevan. Using that pack or similar carriers, families with disabled members are finding ways to go deeper into parks and other outdoor spaces than wheelchair-accessible routes typically allow.

“The technology that allows access to recreation is constantly evolving,” Jeremy Buzzell, the branch chief for the National Park Service’s accessibility management program, said in an email. While data about disabled parkgoers is hard to come by, Buzzell noted that spikes in visitation, which some national parks experienced last year, inevitably correspond with an increase in the number of visitors with disabilities. And that’s who tends to lead the way when it comes to accessibility advancement. “People with disabilities are the real experts on making parks more accessible,” he said.

So far, the Van Ordens have notched 43 states and 19 national parks, from Canyonlands to Acadia — part of a quest to visit all 50 states and as many parks as possible. On their frequent road trips from their home in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, backpack carriers have been Sarah Van Orden’s ticket to rugged trails and waterfalls alongside her family. “I can get to the bottom of the canyon and the top of the mountain. That would not be physically possible for me otherwise,” she said.

We Carry Kevan was founded by Kevan Chandler, a writer and accessibility advocate who knows the ins and outs of adventuring while disabled, including the use of a carrier. In 2016, when he was 29, he and three friends traveled across Europe, and because of Chandler’s limited mobility due to spinal muscular atrophy, his friends took turns

carrying him in a Deuter Kid Comfort 3 backpack they had retrofitted with additional straps and supports. They had a blast on the trip, making connections with strangers and solving logistical puzzles. The pack, Chandler said, was “the tangible representation of working together and thinking outside the box.”

Back in the U.S., Chandler penned a memoir about the Europe trip and started the nonprofit, which has a staff of four, including his sister, who shares his spinal muscular atrophy diagnosis. The organization aims to encourage interdependence and foster creative thinking around accessibility. It also produces the carrier in partnership with Deuter, a German sports pack company that Chandler first reached out to after his trip abroad. Initial funding for the factory model came from the nonprofit’s board and pre-sales; the

pack, which can support someone who weighs up to 70 pounds, became available for purchase in 2019.

At \$375, the pack is comparable in price to other higher-end carriers; the nonprofit offers free packs to families who can’t afford them. So far, We Carry Kevan has sold close to 400 packs and distributed nearly 250 free packs around the world.

Some other companies that primarily make carriers designed with kids in mind also market their wares to disabled hikers. One of the three brothers who founded Piggyback Rider has a child who is disabled, and that’s part of why they knew early on that their carriers could assist users with mobility issues, said Ray Gibson, who works in customer service. The company offers discounts to buyers with disabilities.

Nathan Jones, co-founder of The Freeloader, said that his company’s pack — which can support up to 80 pounds — has been useful for disabled people (and their families), who make up about half of his customer base. “It’s our main driver of international sales,” he said.

Several pieces of legislation — including the Architectural Barriers Act of 1968 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 — require the Park Service to accommodate visitors with special needs, particularly in and around visitor centers and facilities such as bathrooms, water fountains and lodging. Through the Access Pass program, U.S. residents with permanent disabilities can apply for a free lifetime park pass, and wheelchair rentals are available in some parks — including over-sand models with inflatable tires at Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve in Colorado.

Still, many families say wheelchair icons on maps don’t necessarily tell the whole story, and finding the sort of

**CLIMBING THE LADDER** to reach Mesa Verde National Park’s cliff dwellings was an exercise in trust for Van Orden, who encouraged her dad to give her the “full experience.”



**ELLANOR AND SABRINA** Blanchett hike to the Lower Falls of the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone River in Yellowstone National Park.



COURTESY OF RUTH VAN ORDEN

©EMILY MORROW





COURTESY OF WE CARRY KEVAN

**KEVAN CHANDLER**, who founded a nonprofit organization that sells carriers for people with disabilities, drives his wheelchair with his friend Luke Thompson in tow.

nuanced information they need about terrain and elevation changes on trails can sometimes be frustrating. That's true even at a park such as Yellowstone, which is known for being well adapted for folks with mobility issues. Sabrina Blanchett found that out this summer, when she brought her daughter, Ellanor, who uses a wheelchair full time, to the park. "We'd use the chair to start but have to leave somebody with Ellanor and finish alone," she said. "There were rock pathways to get to the wooden boardwalks. Pushing a wheelchair on gravel is really difficult."

In recent years, the Park Service has upped its accessibility efforts. A year ago, the agency released a final report from its Accessibility Task Force, after a five-year initiative that expanded accessibility training for staff, required each park to add an "accessibility" tab to its website, and planned projects in

nine parks, resulting in additions like a new ramp at the National Mall in Washington, D.C. — slated for completion in 2023 — and a freshly paved 2,600-foot trail at Mammoth Cave in Kentucky.

But not all families want to stick to the smooth, curated routes. "Families and people with disabilities appreciate the flat surfaces and elevators, but we also want adventure just like anyone else," Kevan Chandler said. "One of my favorite things about going hiking with my friends is the struggle and challenge of it."

Blanchett hit the road this August, heading to Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks from her small town of Ponder, Texas. In addition to Ellanor, 8, she was traveling with her husband, Chris, and their daughters, Joslin, 11, and Margaux, 5. Ellanor has Aicardi syndrome, which affects brain development, and in her case has

caused blindness and epilepsy. In the past, Blanchett said, "we never thought hiking was an option. How do you do that with a kid who doesn't sit on her own, or walk or talk?" But for this trip, they obtained a carrier and researched some backcountry trails. Blanchett toted Ellanor on a 4-mile excursion and down switchbacks into a canyon. "We were finally able to do a family outdoor hike," she said.

After seeing a post about a carrier on Facebook, John and Colleen Foster got one for their daughter, Emmy, who is 13 and has Rett syndrome, an extremely rare neurological disorder that primarily affects girls and limits walking, hand use and speech, among other abilities. This summer, the Fosters loaded Emmy and her sisters, Ava, 15, and Olivia, 9, into their minivan and drove from their home in the Chicago area to South Dakota, where they visited Mount Rushmore, Badlands National Park and other sites nearby. On a few hikes, John carried Emmy in the pack, while the others trekked beside them. "She had the feeling of getting out there and hiking right along with her sisters," he said. "She was cracking up, slapping me on my head, loving it." He noticed they got more smiles and encouraging comments from strangers than they did when steering Emmy in a wheelchair back home. "There's definitely a camaraderie about having someone on your back," he said.

That is a big part of what propels Chandler: a deeply held belief in the power of shared outdoor experiences and of people helping people. "Really that's the vision for the world as a whole, isn't it? That our hearts would open up to people and that we would be open-handed and willing to invite each other into our own situations and into the world around us," he said. "So we're trying to encourage that in the best way possible."

—DORIAN FOX



# Angling for Cash

Glen Canyon National Recreation Area tries a novel approach to control brown trout.

**The pay-to-play** mentality has been flipped on its head along a 15.5-mile stretch of the Colorado River south of Glen Canyon Dam in Arizona. Rather than forking over money for the pleasure of hooking a fish, anglers in this sun-doused portion of Glen Canyon National Recreation Area are paid at least \$25 for every brown trout they catch.

All participants must be over 10 years old and own a current Arizona fishing license, but otherwise the rules are pretty simple: Reel in a brown over 6 inches in length and deposit the head and guts — along with a data card — into a secure freezer at the Navajo Bridge Interpretive Center. Each month, Glen Canyon staff members check the box and tally the fish. Then, their partners at Glen Canyon Conservancy remit payments to the anglers.

The incentive varies seasonally. If it's hot and fewer people are out, for example, the price per fish might increase. This fall, the pot was particularly sweet, with an additional \$300 offered for any brown trout caught with a Passive Integrated Transponder tag (a small tracking device used by researchers to garner information about the fish population). In its first year, the program, which began last November, meted out over \$20,000 for the harvest of more than 500 fish.

Distinguished by a wheat-colored belly and blue-limned bronze dots, brown trout are a nonnative fish most



©RAY REDSTONE

**AN ANGLER** holds a brown trout caught in the Colorado River near Lees Ferry in Glen Canyon National Recreation Area.

likely introduced into a tributary of the river in the 1920s. In recent years, they've become troublingly abundant due to multiple factors, including a wealth of food. The piscivorous browns, which can tip the scales at 30 pounds or more, compete with — and feed on — rainbow trout, itself an introduced species but one that is less predatory and is prized for sustaining Glen Canyon's recreational fishery. Browns could also migrate downstream, jeopardizing the survival of threatened species, such as Grand Canyon National Park's humpback chub.

To control brown trout numbers, Glen Canyon staff considered several methods, including electrofishing (stunning fish with an electric pulse), disrupting spawning beds and using chemicals, but they opted to give incentivized harvest a shot before trying one of the more heavy-handed tactics, said Ken Hyde, the park's chief of science and resource management. Ultimately, the fishing program, which aims to reduce the brown trout population — not eliminate it entirely — “made sense to everyone,” the longtime Park Service

employee said. “It's really our attempt to let anglers be one of the management tools out on the land.”

Matt Wheeler, a repeat beneficiary of the program, has no complaints. The 27-year-old project manager from Tuba City, Arizona, had never fished this portion of the Colorado River until a homeowner on one of his construction sites told him about the get-paid-to-fish opportunity. “At first I didn't believe him,” Wheeler said. After hitting the river for the inaugural weekend, he has returned dozens of times since, pulling in every fish he can, including several 20-inchers. Not only is his hobby lucrative, but the browns are “pretty good eating,” he said.

Hyde concedes that the program isn't yet as popular as the Park Service had hoped. “We would love to have about 200 fish turned in every month,” he said. That would be roughly four times what they've been seeing. But he remains optimistic. “It's a great recreational opportunity in a gorgeous canyon,” Hyde said. “So, we're giving it our best shot.”

—KATHERINE DEGROFF





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# Whole Again

**This fall**, with a few strokes of a pen, President Joe Biden reversed the actions of his predecessor and restored the boundaries and protection levels of three of the country's largest national monuments.

More than four years ago, Donald Trump initiated a review of 27 national monuments before announcing a few months later that he would shrink Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante national monuments in Utah by 85% and 50%, respectively. In 2020, he removed restrictions on commercial fishing within Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument, a sanctuary in the Atlantic Ocean for an extraordinary array of marine animals, including cod, sea turtles and whales. The Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition, NPCA and other allies challenged the legality of Trump's actions, and they celebrated Biden's move.

"It is an honor to share this victorious day at the White House with tribal leaders and so many other partners who worked for decades to protect these monuments, then fought fearlessly over the last several years to restore them," said NPCA President and CEO Theresa Pierno, who attended the signing ceremony.



COURTESY OF BEARS EARS INTER-TRIBAL COALITION

**VALLEY OF THE GODS** in Bears Ears National Monument, Utah (top). Above: Leadership of the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition, a group that was instrumental in the designation and restoration of Bears Ears National Monument. From left to right: Clark Tenakhongva of the Hopi Tribe; Shaun Chapoose of the Ute Indian Tribe; Jonathan Nez of the Navajo Nation; Malcolm Lehi of the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe; Manuel Heart of the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe; and Carleton Bowekaty of the Pueblo of Zuni.

Melissa Schwartz, the Department of the Interior's communications director, confirmed that Biden's proclamations effectively put an end to Trump's monument review. "There is no reviewing ongoing," she said.

—EDITORS



# A New Leader On the Horizon

**The National Park Service's** long wait for a new director may finally be over. This August, President Joe Biden nominated Charles "Chuck" Sams III for the position, which had been vacant throughout the Trump administration; Sams received a unanimous vote of approval from the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources in November. If confirmed (which hadn't happened by press time), Sams — an enrolled member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation — will become the first Native American to hold the job in the Park Service's history. He will oversee the agency's 423 park sites, as well as its 20,000 permanent, temporary and seasonal employees.

"As a descendent of the original guardians of our lands, Sams brings a unique and powerful perspective that can help our national parks continue to evolve in the places and stories they preserve and share," said NPCA President and CEO Theresa Pierno.

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CHARLES "CHUCK" SAMS III speaks at a hearing of the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources in October.

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## Revolution Revisited

The quest to create a national park site about the Black Panther Party.

**DeFremery Park shimmers** invitingly in the beaming sunlight of an October afternoon. While most of California has turned toasted shades of beige and brown after months without rain, the grass at this big city park in West Oakland is still green — and neighbors are making the most of it. A mom and her three kids roughhouse on the lawn, not far from where a few seniors sit chatting on folding chairs in a grove of stocky oak trees. Nearby, a group of men bow their heads in afternoon prayer.

Fredrika Newton sits on a bench in

the shade of a redwood, taking in the scene. “There was a lot of history that happened here,” she says quietly. “This park was basically ground zero for the Black Panther Party in Oakland.” As a member of the original chapter of the group (then known as the Black Panther Party for Self Defense), which her late husband Huey P. Newton co-founded in Oakland in 1966, Newton spent long hours working in DeFremery Park alongside her compatriots. They were trying, she says, to meet the needs of the city’s Black and poor communities.

**ARTIST DANA KING** and Fredrika Newton (at left), the widow of Huey P. Newton, flanked King’s sculpture of the famous activist at an unveiling in Oakland in the fall.

Party members distributed thousands of bags of food and clothes here; it’s where they held after-school programs, registered voters, staged rallies demanding the release of party members who’d been imprisoned, and protested police violence.

Among the social and political forces that roiled the nation in the 1960s, few have been the subject of as intense debate as the Black Panther Party. How should the group be remembered? For its revolutionary politics or its community service? For its violent clashes with police, which claimed the lives of both party members and officers, or for

mobilizing thousands of people to fight bigotry, oppression and institutional neglect? While historians, former party members and everyday Americans who lived through this era disagree over the Black Panthers' legacy, few would deny the party's significance. And yet, here in DeFremery Park and throughout Oakland, traces of the party's history are hard to find: But for a few murals and the odd plaque or faded sign, there's very little to suggest that this city was once at the center of one of the 20th century's most consequential, and controversial, political movements.

Newton says it's long past time for that to change. So alongside fellow former party members and community organizers, and with backing from NPCA and government officials from around the Bay Area, she's working to establish a national park site in the East Bay that she hopes will shine a light on the Black Panthers' complex history. DeFremery Park is just one of over a dozen places that could someday be managed by the National Park Service. Organizers' wish list includes the childhood homes of influential party

members, storefronts that once housed offices, and sites where Black Panthers served free breakfast to school children and ran free medical clinics. It also includes the college campus where the founders met and first articulated their platform — calling for full employment, education, housing and self-determination for Black Americans, among other demands — and even the North Oakland intersection where the Panthers staged their first act of community service in 1967. (Wearing berets and armed with guns, party members stepped in as crossing guards to see students from a nearby elementary school safely across a busy street where several of their classmates had been struck by cars and injured.)

For Newton, who married Huey P. Newton in 1984 and is now in her early 70s, the effort to create a park dedicated to the Black Panther Party is just one aspect of a 25-year drive to bolster public memory of the group, its roots in Oakland and its influence on the movement for the liberation of Black and oppressed people worldwide. As president of the Dr. Huey P. Newton

Foundation, which she co-founded a few years after a drug dealer shot and killed her husband in 1989, Newton has published books and traveled around the world sharing the story of the movement her late husband helped build. The foundation also created a podcast and college curriculum and is in the process of digitizing and indexing the complete archives of the Black Panther Party's weekly newspaper. At the foundation's urging, the City of Oakland recently renamed three blocks in West Oakland in Huey Newton's honor. And in October, the community celebrated the installation of a statue of him at the intersection of Mandela Parkway and Dr. Huey P. Newton Way, near the spot where he died.

Newton says everyone she's spoken with about a Black Panther national park site has embraced the idea, but enthusiasm for memorializing Black Panther history is far from universal. In 2017, the Park Service awarded Ula Taylor, chair of African American studies at the University of California, Berkeley, a grant to fund a "Black Panther Party Research, Interpretation & Memory Project." But the agency withdrew the grant weeks later, after the president of the Fraternal Order of Police wrote a letter to former President Donald Trump condemning the Park Service's interest in the party, which he characterized as "an extremist separatist group that advocated the use of violence against our country" and a "violent and repugnant organization."

The Black Panthers bucked what many Americans understand as "the acceptable model of nonviolent civil rights engagement," says Alan Spears, senior director of cultural resources for NPCA. Rank-and-file party members openly carried guns in the name of self-defense and confronted what they saw as an abusive police presence. And a faction of the party's leadership called

**THE BLACK PANTHERS** opened free, full-service medical clinics across the country. Here, a woman is tested for sickle cell anemia, a genetic disease that more commonly affects African Americans.







**HUEY P. NEWTON** in an iconic 1967 photo.

for armed struggle against government oppression. “That’s a very uncomfortable history for some people to get next to,” says Spears. “There’s complication, violence and misunderstanding in this history. But that’s exactly the kind of complexity I think we want our national parks to embrace.”

Some of that popular misunderstanding of the group’s legacy was intentionally sown, historians say, and stems from a well-documented, frequently illegal and ultimately successful campaign by the federal government to destroy the party. Newton, who joined in the late 1960s, describes it as the “distortion, discredit, erasure and

bastardization” of the Black Panthers’ political goals and contributions.

The party was portrayed as a racist, anti-white organization, but that’s inaccurate, says Curtis J. Austin, a historian at Arizona State University and author of the 2006 book “Up Against the Wall: Violence in the Making and Unmaking of the Black Panther Party.” “They made it clear that they were going to work with anybody who was willing to help solve problems. If that meant working with Latinx people, with Native Americans, with poor whites and upper-class whites, that’s what they’d do.

“The Panthers were not racist. They weren’t anti-American,” says Austin.

“They were saying, ‘We just want to be included. We want better housing, good jobs.’ But because they insisted on not taking ‘no’ for an answer, they got painted as thugs, terrorists, hoodlums and people who hated whites.”

By late 1968, the FBI had added the Black Panther Party to its list of “black nationalist hate groups,” and Director J. Edgar Hoover instructed agents to “submit imaginative and hard-hitting counterintelligence measures aimed at crippling the BPP.” Around the same time, Hoover was widely quoted as saying that “the Black Panther Party, without question, represents the greatest threat to internal security of the country.” Over the next few years, agents carried out more than 200 operations against the Panthers. According to a 1976 Senate committee investigation of the FBI’s counterintelligence program, agents harassed and intimidated party members and would-be allies, infiltrated and bugged local chapters, fomented internal divisions, and planted lies in the press. (Austin estimates that 73% of newspaper articles about the Panthers from this era were penned or influenced by FBI agents.)

“You didn’t know who was an informant,” says Newton. “We lived under constant surveillance and threat of attack. I didn’t assume that I’d live a long life.” Police officers shot Chicago party members Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in 1969; they were among at least 10 Black Panthers who’d eventually be killed in confrontations with law enforcement. (An attorney for the Black Panthers counted 28 such fatalities, while the website Officer Down Memorial Page attributes the deaths of at least 15 law enforcement officers to the Black Panthers. It’s difficult to count the victims of this conflict accurately, since law enforcement and the Black Panthers both had political motivations for attributing violence to the other side.) “The Panther-police conflict

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## Trail Mix



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**REP. BARBARA LEE**, who was a volunteer with the Black Panther Party in Oakland as a young person, supports the creation of a Park Service site to recognize the history of the group.

... played directly into the narrative that had been established: that the party was a provocative, dangerous organization,” acknowledged The New York Times in a 2016 story about its own coverage. “As The Times focused on ... conflicts between the Panthers and the police, the party was organizing a slate of service programs for African-Americans in New York. But they went relatively unnoticed.”

The Senate Intelligence Committee’s

1976 report described the FBI’s counterintelligence techniques against groups such as the Black Panthers as “dangerous and unsavory” and found that the bureau’s activities “gave rise to the risk of death and often disregarded the personal rights and dignity of the victims.” Hobbled by such government interference, alienated from would-be supporters and weakened by internal divisions, the Black Panthers saw their influence and membership decline from their peak around 1970. The party sputtered out of existence in 1982.

This summer, Congresswoman Barbara Lee, who represents Oakland, formally requested that the Park Service launch a reconnaissance study of Panther history around the East Bay, an important step toward a possible national park designation. The study is set to take place in the first half of 2022. “Now is the time for the truth to be told about the Black Panther Party’s history. The party was ahead of its time.

Its programs to serve the needs of this community are still a model for efforts to provide decent housing, food security, and so much more,” Lee, who is among the many elected leaders formerly affiliated with the Black Panther Party, said in an email. “And we hear the Black Panther Party’s demand for justice echo today when we say the words ‘Black Lives Matter.’”

Back at DeFremery Park, I ask Newton what she hopes future visitors will take away from the Park Service’s telling of the story. “I want people to know that this was a movement based on love,” Newton says, casting her eyes around the park where she served her neighbors over 50 years ago. “I hope visitors come away knowing that there were young people who put their lives on the line for freedom, justice and equality, out of love. Out of pure love for their community.”

—JULIA BUSIEK

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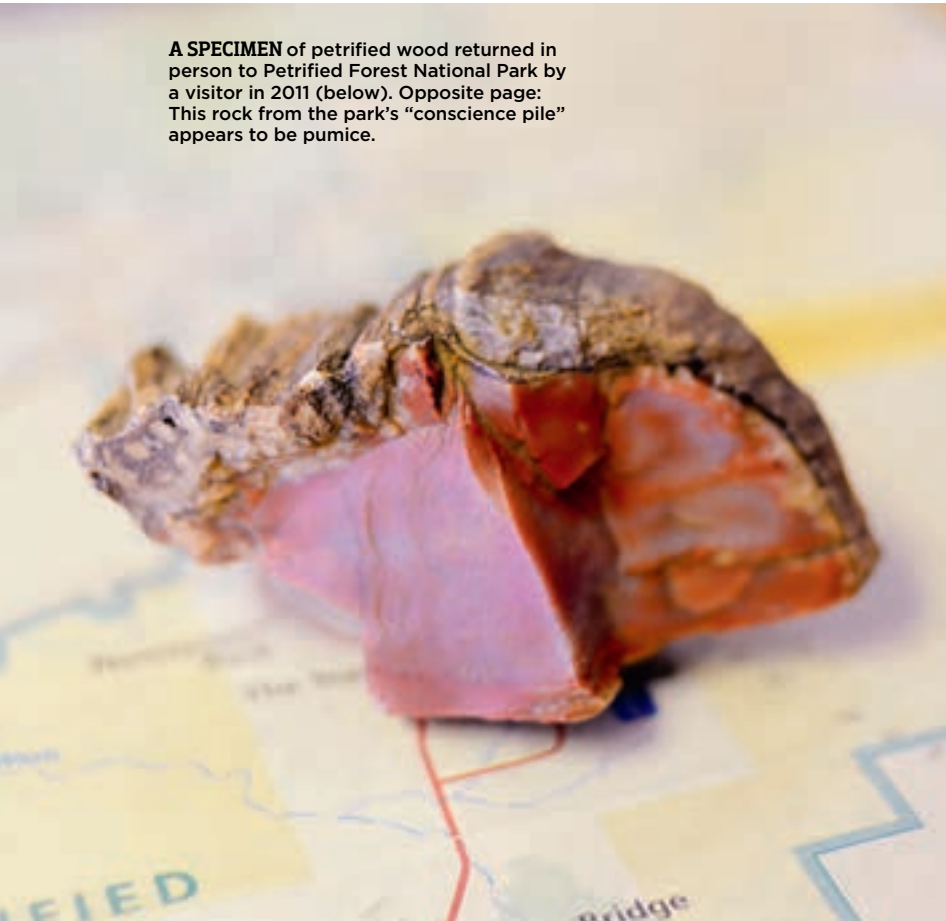
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**A SPECIMEN** of petrified wood returned in person to Petrified Forest National Park by a visitor in 2011 (below). Opposite page: This rock from the park's "conscience pile" appears to be pumice.



©RYAN THOMPSON

## Finders, Weepers

Every year, national parks receive dozens of rocks and artifacts returned by remorseful visitors. What are parks to do with the stuff?

**I**N AUGUST 1988, a woman named Tracie typed and mailed a letter to the superintendent of Petrified Forest National Park in Arizona. Enclosed were pieces of petrified wood that she and her father had pilfered from the park's Crystal Forest. After taking the rocks, Tracie wrote, they visited her sister in California, where her father was mauled by her sister's cat. His injuries would send the family to the emergency room, but not before Tracie's sister learned that she'd lost her job. The following morning, Tracie broke the toaster while warming some waffles. An ensuing family argument almost ended their visit altogether.

"We all decided to send these small pieces of nature back, before our bad luck streak escalated," Tracie wrote. "PLEASE return them to their rightful place."

It was just one of hundreds of such packages received by Petrified Forest and other national parks over the years, according to Gwenn Gallenstein, the museum curator for Flagstaff area national monuments. Gallenstein recently published an article about what she calls "remorseful returns" in the museum journal *Collections*. She first encountered the phenomenon in the early 1990s at the Museum of Northern Arizona, where people anonymously left artifacts outside the doors, and she later came across a box of returned objects and letters at Canyon de Chelly National Monument. The practice dates back at least to 1935, when a piece of fossilized wood was returned to Petrified Forest all the way from India. Potsherds are the most commonly returned items, but others range from the morbid — staff at a Utah park once discovered fragments of human skulls left in a box — to the banal. Grand Canyon National Park has received pinecones, twigs and old bottles scavenged from garbage dumps that some visitors thought might be historic. Other parks have had objects returned that staff identified as items purchased from a gift shop.

Only a portion of the returns come with a letter, but the letters reveal the many motivations people have for returning things. Some letters are penned by errant children at the behest of their parents. Others come from people who were cleaning out a family member's attic and discovered the artifacts. Some letter writers cite a religious awakening for exposing their wrongdoing.

Many letters invoke the idea of bad luck or a curse falling upon the people who took the items. Lava rock is mailed back to Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park for fear of the Hawaiian goddess Pele. Ancestral Puebloan potsherds are returned to appease what some letter

writers call “Indian spirits,” and bags of dirt are shipped back to Gettysburg National Military Park to lay Civil War ghosts to rest.

Removing artifacts and other objects from federal land is illegal and can lead to serious penalties. Under laws that include the Antiquities Act of 1906, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990, and the Paleontological Resources Preservation Act of 2009, people who steal or illegally trade fossils, artifacts or Native American remains can face thousands of dollars in fines and years in prison. At Petrified Forest, people caught removing rocks or other resources face a minimum \$325 fine.

Still, the impulse to pocket treasures persists, and curators estimate that returned items account for only a fraction of what is taken. According to data extrapolated from a law enforcement experiment in the 1990s in which potsherds were deliberately left in piles near a trail, an average of one sherd per visitor walks out of Chaco Culture National Historical Park in New Mexico every year.

“If that’s an accurate data point, the loss to the park through the years is pretty astounding,” said Wendy Bustard, the park’s retired curator. “Sherds are not a renewable resource. Once they’re gone, they’re gone.”

Souvenir hunting can have a catastrophic impact. In 1957, South Dakota’s Fossil Cycad National Monument lost its status because so many people — including researchers — had walked off with the plant fossils that inspired the park’s designation in the first place.

While Gallenstein is glad these returns keep artifacts out of landfills, she said no park has a perfect solution for what to do with the stuff. Most items cannot be returned to the land without altering the natural

and historical record. When appropriate, parks repatriate human remains to the relevant tribes, but when it comes to other items, curators, busy with their daily demands, are equally likely to put returns on a shelf and forget them.

“It’s a false hope to think you can return something to a national park and that anything is really going to happen to it,” Gallenstein said. “You might think, ‘I’ve done my good deed for the day.’ But you’ve just created somebody else’s problem.”

Curators at Chaco Culture inherited many of those problems. Since 1983, Chaco’s staff processed more archaeological returns than any other park in Gallenstein’s study — north of 6,000 potsherds. People sending those sherds likely imagined them being returned to the park’s grounds. But archaeology is an exacting science.

“Once the sherds are removed from their actual location, the amount of archaeological information drops almost to zero,” Bustard explained. “Because provenience has been lost on these items, you can’t just return the material to anywhere in the park.”

For each returned potsherd, Bustard recorded as much information as she could and then accessioned the items into the park’s collection. Occasionally, the sherds are used for scientific analysis or an educational exhibit, but most just sit in boxes.

By now Matt Smith, the curator at Petrified Forest, can recognize the returns before he opens the packages. They often come in boxes whose edges are battered by their angular and weighty contents. They trickle

in throughout the year, but the pace quickens whenever the phenomenon appears in the news or on TV. (A large uptick followed the 2019 Netflix show

“Dead to Me,” which featured a storyline about a curse following someone who stole fossilized wood from the park.)

While the park is certainly not about to run out of petrified wood, the amount returned since the 1930s could be measured in tons. And Smith faces the same problem as Bustard: He can’t replace the pieces without knowing their original locations. Doing so would hamper research into how this unique landscape came to be.

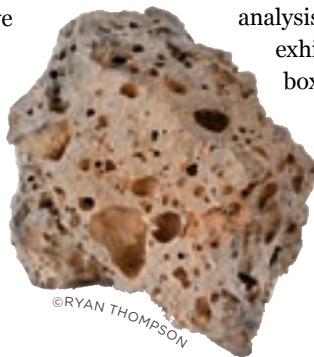
“We don’t want to throw bad evidence out there,” Smith said, “just like you wouldn’t want to contaminate a crime scene.”

Instead, the rocks are hauled out to an inglorious pickup-sized heap, known informally as the “conscience pile,” off a private service road in the park. The letters are temporarily stored in a banker’s box.

Smith relates to the urge to take mementos from a special place. As a child, he scoured the creek beds near his house in Florida for shark teeth and other fossils, a passion that propelled him to become a paleontologist. He didn’t know then that he needed a permit. Today, visible signage and vehicle checks compel Petrified Forest visitors not to take any rocks or other objects, but in this magical landscape, the temptations are great.

“There are hand-sized bits of loveliness that are just lying everywhere,” he said. “It’s remarkable and colorful, there’s a ton of variety, and it’s accessible.”

Still, Smith hopes people will reconsider their souvenir-taking. Stolen keepsakes make poor heirlooms. “You’re leaving a burden for the people who come after you, whether it’s your family or Park Service staff,” he said. “It’s a headache. But it’s a headache I understand, I guess.” **NP**



**JACOB BAYNHAM** is a freelance journalist based in Montana.





**BOBCATS WERE** reintroduced to Cumberland Island in Georgia in the 1980s.

The bobcat — along with the three others that Diefenbach released that day and 28 more that he'd turn loose over the next year — immediately seized control of an island that had long lacked apex predators. Their arrival rippled through the food web, shaping Cumberland as dramatically as wolves would later revitalize Yellowstone National Park. But while Yellowstone's wolves eventually dispersed across the American West, the Cumberland cats remained trapped on their island. Confined and — for some of them — inbred, they now face eventual extinction unless, that is, they receive reinforcements.

Cumberland Island — more than 36,000 acres of salt marsh, dunes and forests, most of which fall under the protection of Cumberland Island National Seashore — was long home to bobcats, which presumably swam across the narrow channel that separates the island from the mainland. In the 19th century, though, the cats were nearly wiped out by trappers and disease. After 1907, the year of the last recorded sighting, they vanished.

In the early 1980s, the National Park Service began to consider reintroducing the predators. With luck, the agency thought, bobcats would thin the white-tailed deer population overbrowsing the island's oak forests. (Although adult whitetails far outweigh bobcats, the fearless felines can take down much larger animals by deftly biting their throats.)

That argument didn't sit well with hunters. "Why let a bobcat eat a deer when there's people in the county going

## Isle of Cats

In the 1980s, an ambitious predator reintroduction helped restore an island ecosystem. But what does the future hold for the Cumberland bobcats?

**B**EFORE DAWN ON THE MORNING of Oct. 13, 1988, a boat skimmed toward Cumberland Island, a barrier isle off Georgia's southern coast, with its precious cargo. As the sky turned pink, Duane Diefenbach and his colleagues disembarked, lugged four cages onto the bed of a waiting truck, and drove into the island's oak forest. Upon reaching a secluded spot, they lowered the first crate and opened the door. Out peeked a bobcat, which briefly surveyed its surroundings and then dashed off — Cumberland Island's first wild cat in nearly a century.

NPS/AUDREY BOHL

hungry?” one local told a reporter. So the agency and its scientific collaborators adjusted their messaging, downplaying deer control and accentuating the inherent value of returning a native species to its historic haunts. “The emphasis shifted completely towards restoring the ecological integrity of the island, which was acceptable to many more people,” Diefenbach recalled.

Diefenbach, then a doctoral student at the University of Georgia, was tasked with scrounging up the cats. He wrangled them on the mainland in foothold traps and cages, held them in captivity for up to a month to ensure their good health, and outfitted them with radio collars. He and his colleagues released 14 cats in 1988 and 18 more the next year. The bobcats did not all take to their new home — one disoriented animal waded into the Atlantic and apparently drowned — but most survived and reproduced. In 1989, 10 kittens were born to four separate litters.

Diefenbach kept close tabs on the cats, recapturing them to assess their health and picking through their scat to study their diets. Bobcats seemed well suited to island life. They gained weight rapidly, feasting on rabbits, rats and feral pigs. They also killed a lot of deer — far more than bobcats elsewhere in the Southeast. By 1997, the voracious herds had declined, and oak seedlings were thriving in the sandy soil. Just as the Park Service had hoped, the bobcats had triggered a trophic cascade, an ecological chain reaction that was rejuvenating the island’s beleaguered forests. When, in the mid-1990s, the Park Service reintroduced wolves to Yellowstone, the carnivores famously catalyzed a cascade of their own, culling elk and permitting willow and aspen to regrow. But the Cumberland bobcats,

“If we do nothing, this population will be in trouble long term.”

though comparatively obscure, came first. “When we started this project, there were hardly any examples of trophic cascades,” Diefenbach said.

Over time, however, the bobcats’ future grew murky. Cumberland Island functioned as a cushy prison, the Atlantic Ocean its walls. Bobcats could neither break in nor out. In a 2021 study, Diefenbach and a colleague, Cassandra Miller-Butterworth, compared DNA from modern-day bobcat scat with blood samples collected in the 1980s. Over the years, they found, the gene pool had lost some of its diversity. In the absence of fresh blood from the mainland, some cats had mated with their own relatives. According to the study, without an influx of new animals, Cumberland’s bobcats have roughly a 20% chance of going extinct in the next two decades.

“I was actually pleasantly surprised at how well they’re doing — I thought they would be more inbred than they are,” Miller-Butterworth said. “But if we do nothing, this population will be in trouble long term. I don’t think it’s going to survive by itself without further intervention.”

But what sort of intervention? One option would be to refresh the population — which today numbers at most 24 — with an infusion of new cats. And it wouldn’t take much: Releasing one mainland bobcat every four years, Miller-Butterworth and Diefenbach have calculated, would likely provide enough genetic diversity to prevent extinction. Even better, said Miller-Butterworth, would be to trade new bobcats for existing ones, to ensure the island doesn’t become overcrowded. “Otherwise you’re just introducing more cats and increasing competition, and that might

actually have a negative impact on reproduction,” she said.

While the Cumberland bobcats resemble Yellowstone’s wolves in their ecological influence, they raise philosophical questions similar to those surrounding a different group of carnivores: the wolves of Isle Royale National Park in Michigan. Unlike the reintroduced Cumberland cats, Isle Royale’s wolves established on their own, likely arriving around 1948 via an ice bridge that formed across Lake Superior. For decades the wolves flourished, but gradually the population became inbred, particularly after an introduced virus ravaged their ranks. By 2016, just two animals remained. When, a couple of years later, the Park Service decided to relocate new wolves to Isle Royale, it angered some wilderness advocates who wanted the island left to its own devices. Although Cumberland’s bobcats aren’t perfectly analogous, a day may come when the Park Service must again weigh the autonomy of an ecosystem against the necessity of genetic rescue.

Whatever their ultimate fate, the Cumberland cats have already demonstrated an important point. As isolated feline populations around the world dwindle or blink out, reintroductions may become an ever more important conservation tool. The Cumberland Island bobcats show both that such reintroductions can succeed, and that wildlife managers may still need to keep a firm hand on the tiller. **NP**

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**BEN GOLDFARB** is the author of “Eager: The Surprising, Secret Life of Beavers and Why They Matter.”





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# A FRUITFUL MISSION

AS THE PARK SYSTEM'S FRUIT TREES REACH THE END OF THEIR LIFESPANS, STAFF ARE SCRAMBLING TO SAVE THEM. BY KATHERINE DEGROFF

**M**att Mohrman plans to keep a watchful eye on the young apple trees of Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore come spring. Should any of them blossom for the first time, he will move among them, pinching off each delicate, snowy whorl. His actions may be troubling to watch, but they will be necessary to achieve his goal. He wants these trees — trees he's cared for since they were spindly grafts just a few inches tall — to focus all their energy on growth rather than apple production. Perhaps in

another year or two they will be strong enough to bear fruit, carrying on the legacy of their forebears in this windswept corner of Michigan.

For almost a decade, Mohrman has served as the park's volunteer coordinator. Over time, his role has grown to include working with a historical architect to preserve the character of the landscape by — in part — ensuring the survival of the fruit trees planted by the area's settlers. Mostly, the work involves providing intensive care for century-old trees. More recently, however, Mohrman has helped prepare for the future

by establishing new trees, such as those he may soon strip of their flowers, to replace the ones that were lost.

"Thirty years is a good lifespan for a tree in a commercial orchard," Mohrman said. "That's not what we're going for. We want these trees to just become super healthy apple trees that will last another 100 or 150 years, hopefully."

His challenge is not unique. Over the years, scores of park staff — those charged with conserving their resources in perpetuity — have faced

the monumental job of managing the thousands of fruit trees they inherited. At one time found in more than 120 national park sites, these drupes and pomes owe their existence to presidents and homesteaders and entrepreneurs. Today, visitors can stroll beneath boughs of pear trees at Theodore Roosevelt's "summer White House" in New York, imagine early 20th-century farmers plucking bushels of apples at the Hensley Settlement at Cumberland Gap National Historical Park in Kentucky, or see how the Diné (Navajo) are reclaiming a piece of their heritage by sowing ancestral peaches in Canyon de Chelly National Monument in Arizona.

If a park's fruit trees lack historic integrity because they are less than 50 years old or come from a time after the park's period of significance, they might be removed or simply abandoned to their fate. For those deemed worth saving, the stakes are high. These fruit trees anchor critical landscapes, such as the battleground at Gettysburg National Military Park in Pennsylvania, and preserve varieties — including the Capitol Reef Red apple in Utah — that would cease to exist without successful propagation. They also shed light on certain agrarian practices that, with the evolution of commercial growing methods, could one day disappear.

Revitalizing aging trees takes an abundance of time and money, plus the commitment of skilled caretakers — a challenge for an agency that employs very few horticulturists. Parks can't always count on that rare trifecta, and many have seen their trees wither or die. For example, only a small fraction of the 30,000 fruit trees that once swathed the hillsides of an estate in what is now Blue Ridge Parkway survive today.

Thankfully, the news isn't all bleak. Below are the profiles of a few of the parks whose historic fruit trees are receiving some much-needed TLC from a small cadre of people toiling to restore these living artifacts to their former glory.

## People Power



The apple trees of Sleeping Bear Dunes are a physical reminder of the park's peopled past. In the mid-19th century, European settlers ventured to the pinkie finger of Michigan's Lower Peninsula, where



some proceeded to log the valuable hardwoods before turning to agriculture. They transformed the community of Port Oneida into a checkerboard of farms, planting cash crops, as well as family orchards to meet their baking, canning and cider needs.

“We call them spitters,” Mohrman said of the majority of the park’s apples. “They’re for baking, not for eating.”

Over the years, Mohrman has come to know many of his wards, so their decline hits close to home. “So many of them are absolutely on their last legs,” he said.

Since 2014, the park and its partners have been building a nursery of trees to replace those lost. When the young trees — genetic clones of their forebears by virtue of grafting — are big enough to transplant, work parties lug them to places that, according to 1930s aerial imagery, were once home to orchards.

This May, volunteers moved about a dozen saplings to the park’s two islands. Among those helping was Tom Adams, a natural resource specialist with Leelanau Conservation District and longtime park

volunteer. Adams, whom Mohrman calls one of the brains behind the outfit, grew up on a fruit farm and brings a wealth of grafting expertise to the endeavor.

Of course, the work doesn’t end upon planting. “It takes a pretty good effort to keep these trees growing out there,” Mohrman said. “They need water, pruning, weeding, mowing and all of that business.” And because the settlers didn’t use chemicals to control pests, the park doesn’t either. Mohrman or others must spray soapy water onto leaves to kill bugs or dribble vinegar into the mulch to ward off voles.

While the long-term goal is to develop orchards in the 3,400-acre historic district of Port Oneida, a more immediate concern is the propagation of the park’s bespoke varieties, relics from the so-called Golden Age of Pomology, when the U.S. boasted thousands of types of apples. To date, Mohrman, Adams and others have grafted more than 50 different varieties, but not all have survived.

One apple at particular risk is the Shiawassee Beauty, which was developed in 1870 and named for



©KAVEL RAFFERTY (MAP AND FRUIT ILLUSTRATIONS)



**ANCESTRAL PEACH SEEDS,**

which are still sown in Canyon de Chelly National Monument, produce trees that are more drought resistant and live longer, according to Reagan Wytsalucy, a member of the Navajo Nation and an assistant professor with Utah State University Extension. The area’s peach orchards were largely destroyed by the U.S. Army in the mid-1800s, but people like Wytsalucy and Sylvia Watchman (pictured left) are working to propagate these traditional strains. Opposite page: A 1990s inventory identified more than 120 national park sites with historic fruit trees. This map hints at the diversity of those parks.

©JULIEN MCROBERTS

a county in Michigan. There are only a handful of the trees left throughout the state and just two in the park. “To be able to graft it and keep it growing in the park is super important,” said Mohrman.

So far, the park has had little success perpetuating this variety, but that could soon change. In 2019, Adams grafted five new trees from scion wood (pencil-thin twigs representing the previous year’s growth) he collected from one of the park’s resident Shiawassee Beauties. The two surviving whips, at 6 inches tall, are still a long way from being planted, but Adams is hopeful they’ll make it. “The odds are good,” he said. “We’re taking pretty good care of them.”

**A Community’s Legacy**

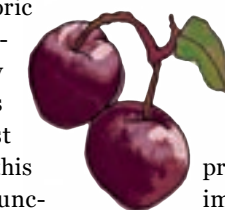
The outline of the 200-acre Fruita Rural Historic District within Capitol Reef National Park resembles an aging fruit tree, its trunk canted slightly to the east with two gently curved branches stretching west along Sulphur Creek and east along Fremont River. Because of its location at this confluence, Fruita was originally known as Junc-

tion. But that was before a small group of Latter-day Saints, who settled in the valley in the late 1800s, tucked perhaps a dozen orchards between the sheer cliffsides and the life-giving streams.

Here, in south-central Utah some 200 miles south of Salt Lake City, the homesteaders grew all manner of sweet-smelling, sun-ripened fruit, from cherry and apricot to peach and plum. The community’s green thumb led to the town’s name change in 1902.

Though Capitol Reef was designated a national monument in 1937 (and became a national park in 1971), much of Fruita remained in private hands until the early 1960s, when a paved road reached the community and the park acquired most of the remaining land. The orchards were cared for at least in part by a string of private individuals until the early 1970s, when the park hired staff to tend to the trees, including longtime orchard manager Kent Jackson.

“Utah, obviously, has a long history of fruit production, and maintaining that legacy is really important for the park,” said park horticulturist







NPS/CINDY JACOBY



©BRIAN VAN DER BRUG/LOS ANGELES TIMES

**APPLE BLOSSOMS** in Yosemite National Park serve as a reminder of the valley's long history of human presence, from the Southern and Central Miwok people who trace their creation story to this area to the 19th-century settlers who planted orchards here (left). Bottom: "An orchard is constant work, especially with these historic trees," said arborist Dave Goto, pictured here as he prepares to water Manzanar National Historic Site's aging pear trees.

Fritz Maslan. He's energized by Capitol Reef's role as a genetic bank for heirloom fruit varieties and views the popular and long-running U-pick operation, which allows visitors to harvest the bounty from June to October, as an indispensable aspect of the park experience. "Having people be able to come here to the park and pick fruit right off the tree and eat it right away," he said, "I think it's something that is often missing in our more fast-paced, modern lifestyle."

Over the last decade, the park has lost more than 130 trees a year, on average, due to various factors, and many of the remaining 2,000 trees "are nearing the end of their lifespan," Maslan said. As the staff work to stabilize the remaining trees, slowing the losses, they also are looking to the future.

The park's ambitious plan to restore its orchards includes a spring 2022 replanting of 260 peach whips in the now-fallow Guy Smith orchard. The process has involved extensive community outreach (especially important given the number of Fruita descendants who reside nearby) and entailed an exhaustive site selection and soil preparation process this fall.

Continuous growing, lack of fertilization from the livestock that used to graze the area, and drought conditions, which preclude sediment and nutrients from being deposited by routine floods, have all sapped the park's soils, Maslan said. Park staff had to till and grade the ground, mix in manure, dig an irrigation ditch, and plant a cover crop of orchard grass to prevent erosion and improve the health of the soil. Though the challenge is huge and the project lengthy, Maslan is enthusiastic about the work.

"This is part of a larger effort by the park to focus on the orchards as a defining characteristic of the park landscape and really bring them back into their full glory," he said.

### A Landscape Edit

Few people who visit John Muir National Historic Site have heard of John Strentzel, the physician and Polish immigrant who purchased his first 20 acres of land northeast of Oakland, California, in 1853. His legacy as landowner and gentleman farmer has been largely overshadowed by that of his son-in-law, the Scottish American naturalist John Muir.

"I always feel like Strentzel doesn't get enough credit," said Keith Park, the horticulturist and

arborist for several San Francisco Bay Area parks, including John Muir National Historic Site.

A man of science, Strentzel enjoyed experimenting. "He kind of dabbled," said Park. "He planted a little bit of everything." Not only did he grow a wild assortment of fruits, he also tinkered with a dizzying number of varieties, showing up at the county fair in 1861 with no fewer than 36 kinds of apples, 35 of pear, five of plum and four of quince.

In 1881, Muir took over operations from Strentzel, and by 1885, Strentzel's originally modest holding had spread across 2,300 acres. Muir pivoted away from rampant fruit experimentation and focused instead on the commercially marketable fruits, namely grapes and Bartlett pears, before passing management of the ranch to his sister and her husband a decade later.

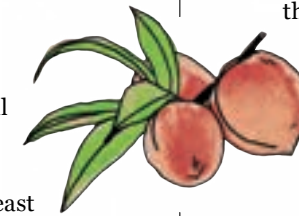
When Park arrived in 2009 to assume the maintenance of the park trees, he found a "museum of different fruit trees," most of which had been planted after the designation of the site in 1964. He figures the staff responsible for introducing these novel elements were paying homage to Strentzel's free-sowing style. One of Park's first priorities was stripping out the non-historic bits. "I called it editing the landscape," he said.

Basing his work on the park's cultural landscape plan, which evaluated what would have been at the park before Muir died in 1914, Park spent the first couple of years cutting down trees, including a few much-loved redwoods. His methods raised quite a few hackles in town and at home: "My own wife got upset," he said.

He also spent a great deal of time tweaking the appearance of the existing fruit trees. "I inherited these trees of a certain time period that would have had a certain shape, a shape they wouldn't have naturally," he said. Only after ruthlessly lopping off branches could he start fresh and, with vigilant pruning, achieve a historically accurate look.

"There's all these little nuances to orchards specifically, and landscapes in general, that dictate what we do and how we do it and why we do it," Park said. "I'm well aware that the average visitor sees a bunch of trees in a row and goes, 'Oh, orchard,' regardless of the shape they take."

Even if people aren't conscious of the work





**FARMWORKERS STAND** behind the fruits of their labor on North Manitou Island (now part of Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore) at the turn of the 20th century (below). “The amount and variety of apples that were grown was just amazing,” said Matt Mohrman, who helps tend to the park’s fruit trees. Right: Buckner Orchard in the North Cascades is an irresistible temptation for area wildlife and a challenge for its caretaker. Laurie Thompson relies on a complicated system of fences and gates to keep out elk and bear while allowing summer access to deer.



COURTESY OF THE LEELENAU HISTORICAL SOCIETY, MI

involved, however, Park believes landscapes are akin to a play’s set design: Both have the power to root you in an experience. If he’s done his job right, he said, strolling across the park’s grounds “should give you a sense that you’ve stepped back in time.”

### Farming on the Frontier



Viewed from above, the 100-year-old trees in Buckner Orchard stipple the valley floor like nubby Braille. It’s an incongruous sight in this secluded pocket of the North Cascades in Washington where evergreens dominate, mountains tower and the winding Stehekin River carves its way to the 50-mile squiggle of Lake Chelan.

These gnarled trees testify to the boundless grit of the Buckner family who purchased nearly 150 acres from the area’s original homesteader, William Buzard, in 1910. Though May and William Van Buckner wintered in California, their son Harry began living year-round at their “Rainbow Ranch” in 1915. Together, the family raised livestock, tended large gardens, churned ice cream and planted apples — roughly 50 acres of them. They grew Rome Beauties, Winesaps, Jonathans and Common Delicious (a now-rarer forerunner to the widespread Red Delicious).



NPS

Today, the Park Service manages 105 acres of the former homestead — including a 10-acre orchard — as part of the North Cascades National Park Service Complex. Inaccessible by car, the homestead and nearby community of Stehekin remain profoundly isolated. Still, some 200 people arrive here every fall to take part in the much-loved harvest festival.

Walking among the remaining 300-odd trees — half of which date to around 1920 — visitors may notice incisor marks crisscrossing ivory trunks where winter-lean elk have gnawed. Some trees creak with age or broken limbs, the latter a result of clambering bears and heavy snow. The trees’

survival is largely due to the efforts of one woman.

Laurie Thompson acts as a sort of Dr. Frankenstein to the ailing trees. She grafts pieces from healthy trees onto the injured ones. Some trees benefit from a single graft; others receive a crosshatch, woven like a basket. Here and there, a severely compromised trunk has been supported by the horticultural version of flying buttresses. Called inarch grafts, these woody braces arc from the ground to the tree trunk, providing support, even nutrients, as the grafts mature.

For 25 years, Thompson, who was originally hired to be on the trail crew, has rolled up her sleeves and dug in. “People call me the orchard manager,” she

said. “There’s not much managing besides doing it.” With funding and volunteer labor supplemented by the Buckner Homestead Heritage Foundation (whose president is the Buckners’ great-grandson), she grafts and prunes, contends with the occasional 100-year flood, including one that wiped out the oldest trees in 2003, fights black rot, battles an insidious soil disease that makes it nearly impossible to successfully replant trees, and re-digs and maintains the original, gravity-fed irrigation ditches.

Thompson also participates in a carefully choreographed dance with the park’s wildlife, arming trees with mesh to keep the voles at bay and install-





COURTESY OF LAURIE THOMPSON

**BUCKNER ORCHARD'S** annual harvest festival is “kind of that focus point for everybody coming together,” said Herb Sargo, president of the Buckner Homestead Heritage Foundation. He believes these apples serve as common ground in a community that is, too often, bitterly divided.

guish in the sun-seared valley.

Somehow, these trees beat the odds, surviving until the U.S. government marched in during World War II and established an incarceration camp for people of Japanese descent.

Individual fruit trees — a peach here, a cherry there — that flanked the barracks or coincided with planned firebreaks were allowed to remain, as were the lingering pear orchards. Those imprisoned at the camp took over the trees’ care, supplementing their meager diets with the resulting fruit. Goto knows one man who lived in the camp’s orphanage, which was situated beside the largest orchard. “He remembers sneaking in,” Goto said, “and stealing some of the fruit off the trees before it

was ready to harvest.”

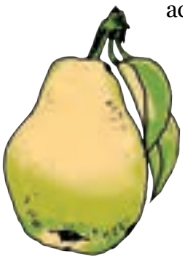
After the war ended and the camp closed, the trees were forgotten once again. The Park Service took ownership in 1997, but nothing much was done with the orchards. When Susan Dolan, the agency’s historical landscape architect, arrived in the late 2000s to map out a plan for the trees, “it was almost unrecognizable as an orchard,” Goto said. The trees were wild, having eked out an existence by sending taproots down to the water table.

Goto came on board in 2010 to help see Dolan’s orchard management plan through. Since then, he’s been stabilizing and pruning the trees, fending off fire blight (a bacteria-borne disease), and observing as they slowly come back into their own. Occasionally, he’s assisted by volunteers, including area students, who helped transplant 50 trees he’d grafted.

Every now and then, in the course of his work, he uncovers an artifact from the days of the incarceration camp. He’ll alert his supervisor to its existence, but leave the object where it lies, where he feels it belongs, beneath the bows of the trees that have borne witness to it all.

**KATHERINE DEGROFF** is associate editor of National Parks magazine.

ing and removing a series of fences to keep out some animals, namely bear and elk, while allowing access to others. “I don’t know what I would do if a new critter came along that wants to get in, too,” she said.



### Against All Odds

Originally part of a fruit colony 28,000 trees strong, Manzanar National Historic Site’s remaining 140-some warped and scarred pear trees are viewed by the park’s arborist, Dave Goto, as “witness trees.”

“They have actually seen a lot over their lifetime,” he said. “If they could tell a story, their stories would be pretty much priceless.”

The trees’ tale might start with “Back when we were young saplings ...” and then they’d proceed to tell you how they were planted in the rain shadow of the Sierra Nevada between 1910 and 1920, around the time that Inyo County emerged as an irrigated fruit paradise. By 1922 however, the city of Los Angeles, planning for its future water needs, began purchasing all the property in the area to secure more water rights. Having neither the use nor the time for fruit trees, the city razed the majority of Manzanar’s orchards and left the remaining 1,000 trees to lan-





**GENERAL SHERMAN TREE** in Sequoia is the largest tree in the world by volume.

AN ARTIST'S VIEW OF SEQUOIA & KINGS CANYON NATIONAL PARKS IN THE AGE OF EXTREME WILDFIRES. BY EVAN TURK

I traveled to Sequoia and Kings Canyon national parks in the brief interlude between two devastating wildfires.

In July, more than six months after the Castle Fire of 2020 had been contained, and before the KNP Complex Fire had swallowed thousands of acres, I brought my pencils, pastels and paper to this landscape of extremes nestled into the western slopes of the Sierra

Nevada. I wanted to capture this place, this land, these trees — and the recent fire and threat of other blazes lent my project an air of poignancy and urgency.

When I arrived in Sequoia, the park looked parched, and the grass was brittle. But as I climbed higher into the park, I felt like I was witnessing a second spring. The understory was lush and green from late snowmelt, with ferns, grasses and wildflowers covering the forest floor. I had visited the park before, but seeing the sequoias in the Giant Forest, where more than 2,000 of them stretch toward the sky, is still shocking; the immensity and age of these ancient trees are almost too much to comprehend. The trees can live for over 3,000 years, and they can grow to more than 300 feet — taller than a 26-story building. With their orange-hued bark, the giant sequoias stand out among the sugar pines, incense cedars, and white and red firs, glowing like candles.

Just to the north, at Kings Canyon, I drove high into the mountains and down into the park's namesake canyon, which was carved by glaciers over millions of years. I touched sequoias, dipped my toes in the icy, turquoise waters of Kings River and listened, mesmerized, as Roaring River Falls coursed through a rocky tunnel and crashed into the sparkling pool below. For two nights, I camped in the park, watching

from my campsite as stars and thunderclouds passed over the treetops and the canyon's granite walls.

Giant sequoias are exquisitely designed to live alongside wildfire. The heat of forest fires causes the small cones to release even smaller seeds, and mature trees are protected by spongy bark, which can be more than 18 inches thick at the base of the trunk. In addition, fires typically engulf the understory, burning away competition and leaving behind soil that is hospitable to seedlings.

But these are not typical times. The climate crisis has led to increasingly severe droughts and more extreme, untamable wildfires. It has become much more difficult for mature trees to withstand the blazes tearing through the West. Last year, the Castle Fire destroyed at least 10% — and possibly as much as 14% — of the giant sequoias in the Sierra Nevada. As I write this, the wildfire in and around Sequoia and Kings Canyon continues to burn, and the toll won't be known for months.

Sometimes I feel helpless, but the trees themselves offer a glimmer of hope. Many bear the scars of centuries of previous fires with pitch-black, sometimes oozing, wounds in their mighty trunks. But the trees persevere, and over the years, the bark often grows over the old wounds like scar tissue. Standing in the shadows of these ancient behemoths, I start to see time on their scale and can't help but feel we will make it through to the other side.

**EVAN TURK**, an award-winning illustrator, author and animator, lives in Riverside, California, with his husband and two cats. His work has been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, the *Chicago Tribune* and NPR. His recently published children's books include "The People's Painter," "A Thousand Glass Flowers" and "You Are Home: An Ode to the National Parks."

THE LAND OF THE GIANTS

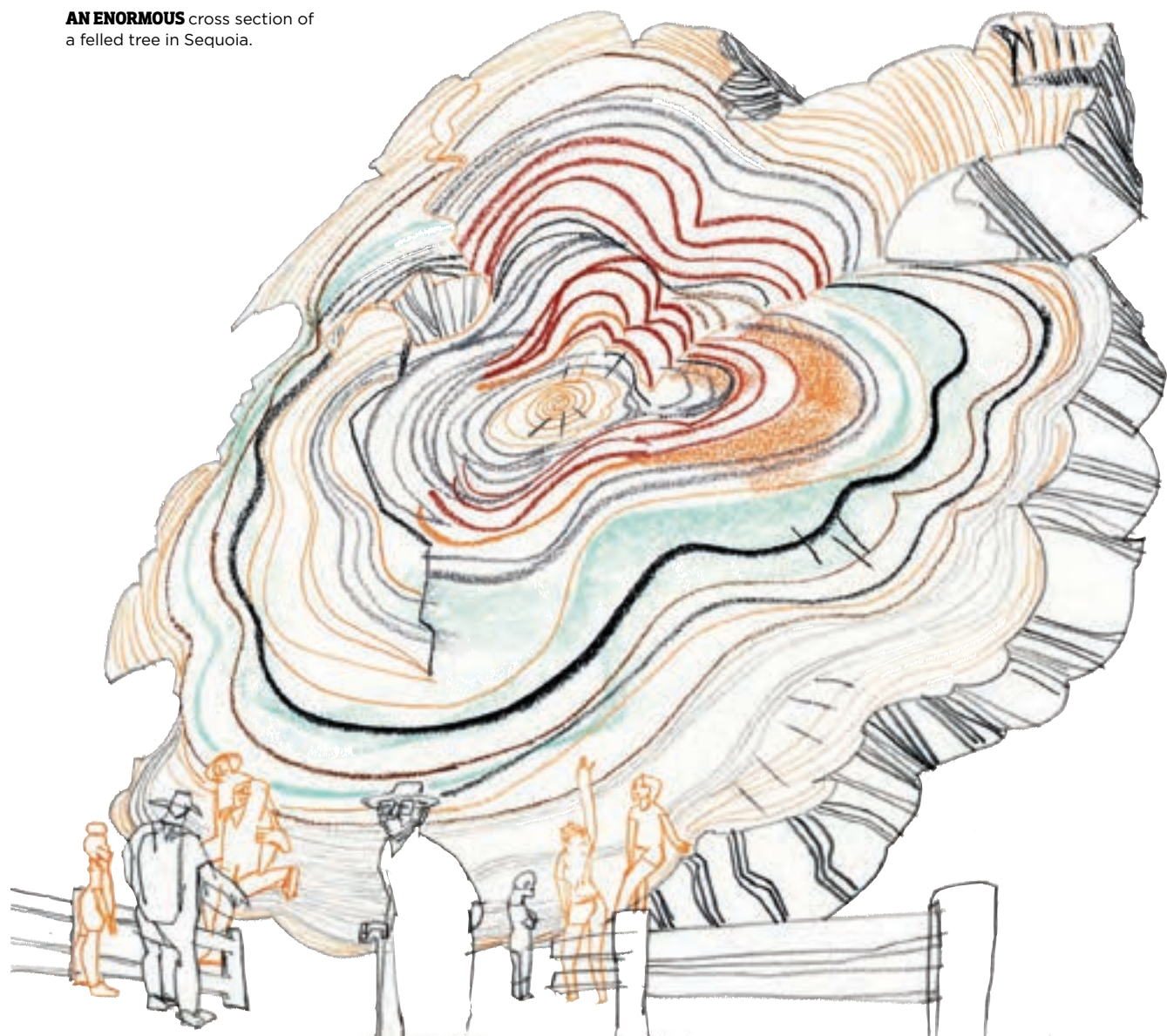




**FALLEN MONARCH** in Kings Canyon served as a refuge in the parks' early years. Employees camped inside, and cavalry kept their horses there. The felled tree also once allegedly served as a saloon. Park staff believe that Native Americans used downed sequoias like Fallen Monarch as shelter. Indigenous people — including the Mono (Monache), Yokuts, Owens Valley Paiute-Shoshone, Western Shoshone and Tūbatulabal — lived in the region for thousands of years before they were forcibly removed to make way for the park.



**AN ENORMOUS** cross section of a felled tree in Sequoia.



**GENERATIONS OF** humans, animals and plants have come and gone, and the giant sequoias live on, witnessing it all (right).







**GENERAL SHERMAN TREE** stands apart, but it is often ringed by throngs of tourists from around the world struggling to fit their companions and this living monument into a single photo. Scientists estimate that the tree is at least 2,000 years old, and possibly much older (above). Below: A young sequoia. It is mind-bending to think this little tree could still be around in 3,000 years.



**IN THE HIGHER** elevations of Sequoia, I saw scores of butterflies and bees flitting through meadows of prairie fire, lupine and rudbeckia (above). Right: I took a quick plunge into the frigid pool below Roaring River Falls in Kings Canyon, before making this drawing while drying off on the rocks.





## NPCA AT WORK

### SEQUOIA AND KINGS CANYON

national parks hold the dubious distinction of having some of the worst air quality in the park system, thanks to nearby agricultural and industrial activities, as well as vehicle emissions. NPCA and its allies have been working for years to improve the air here, but even small victories take time, and unfortunately, the recent spate of wildfires has exacerbated the problem. This fall, the KNP Complex fire consumed nearly 90,000 acres of Sequoia and Kings Canyon within a month. Not only did the lightning-sparked blaze force community evacuations, demand the efforts of more than 2,000 firefighting personnel and close the parks, the fire belched tons of smoke, ash and other particulates into the air while simultaneously destroying the trees that act as carbon sinks. “Most of the progress that’s been made to reduce man-made sources of pollution locally has been completely wiped out,” said Mark Rose, NPCA’s Sierra Nevada program manager. “It’s devastating.”

Even species evolutionarily designed to live with wildfire, such as the giant sequoias, aren’t equipped to survive them in the age of climate change, Rose said: “It’s just that fire has never behaved like this. It’s never been so hot; it’s never spread so fast.”

To address this new reality, NPCA has been active on several fronts: working to limit greenhouse gas emissions to combat climate change and pushing for more Park Service funding to help parks prevent future mega-



fires, through vegetative thinning and prescribed burns.

Program staff have collaborated with partners to close power plants, halt rampant oil and gas leasing on public land, and hold accountable the agencies responsible for protecting our air, such as the Environmental Protection Agency.

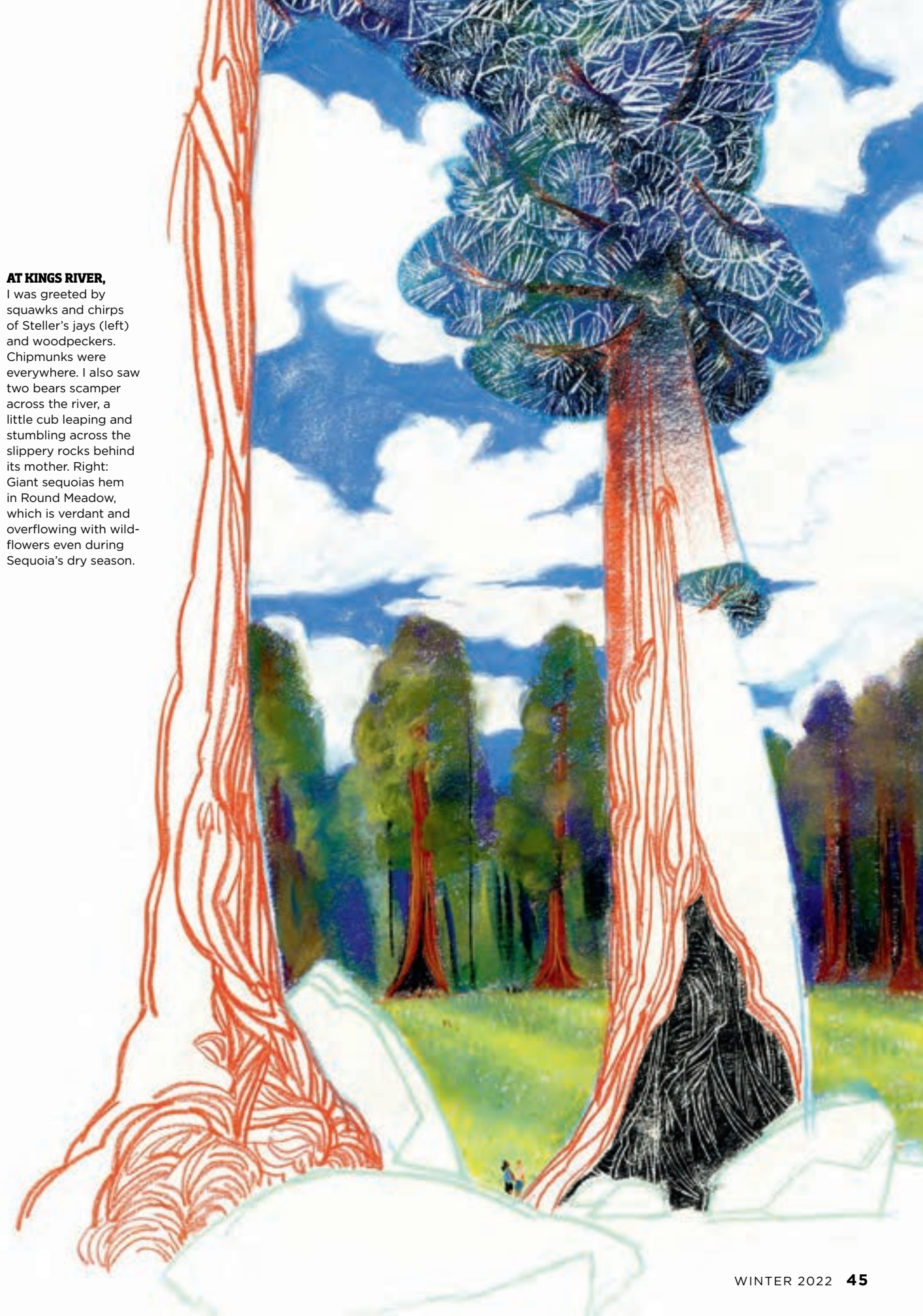
In January 2021, NPCA celebrated a long-sought decision by the California Air Resources Board to end agricultural burning in the San Joaquin Valley by 2025. And by the time the Winter issue hits homes, there may be more good news. As of November, the Biden administration and the state of California were getting close to unveiling ambitious new fuel efficiency standards, and a lawsuit NPCA and co-plaintiffs brought against the Bureau of Land Management was nearing resolution. An agreement could eventually result in a ban on new federal fracking leases on 1 million acres near Sequoia and Kings Canyon.

Tackling air pollution benefits not only park ecosystems, staff and visitors but also all those who live and work in nearby communities. Learn more at [nPCA.org/regionalhaze](https://nPCA.org/regionalhaze).

—Katherine DeGross

### AT KINGS RIVER,

I was greeted by squawks and chirps of Steller’s jays (left) and woodpeckers. Chipmunks were everywhere. I also saw two bears scamper across the river, a little cub leaping and stumbling across the slippery rocks behind its mother. Right: Giant sequoias hem in Round Meadow, which is verdant and overflowing with wildflowers even during Sequoia’s dry season.



**SCIENTISTS** estimate that between 7,500 and 10,600 mature sequoias died in the 2020 fire.







**JENNIFER BAXTER LOOKED LIKE** a woman with something to celebrate. Resplendent in a madcap sort of way, she wore knee-high, star-spangled socks, a hat festooned with hundreds of sparkling rhinestones and a custom gray T-shirt, designed by her daughter, that posed the question, “Where in the World is Oma?”

On this hazy summer afternoon, Oma was at the counter of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Memorial gift shop in the heart of Washington, D.C., mere moments away from the culmination of a life’s dream.

In the cool quiet of the shop, Baxter merrily surveyed the park’s available stamps: one for Eisenhower (a recent addition to the park system), another for the National Cherry Blossom Festival and others for nearby sites, such as Belmont-Paul Women’s Equality National Monument. The 75-year-old former middle school math teacher thunked down each one with precision, pausing only when she lifted the stamp for Eisenhower. Then with a practiced stroke, she pressed that one down, too.

And just like that, Baxter joined the ranks of people who have visited — and gotten stamps from — all 423 national park sites. That impressive number winked from her glittery hat as she made a victory lap through the store with the aid of her wheeled walker and then exited to join her daughter and two teenage grandchildren, who had driven from Pennsylvania for the occasion. In their matching shirts, the foursome was hard to miss.

“If I could do a cartwheel, I’d do one,” Baxter said.

The zealous stamping community, which Baxter claims as her own, owes its existence to the 1986 creation of the park passport program. At that time, Eastern National, a nonprofit that operates park stores, produces publications and runs

park programs, created the original passport book — or “Old Bluey,” as Baxter affectionately refers to it — and proceeded to crank out a series of stamps. The idea was to give enthusiastic visitors an official way to catalog their journeys through the park system, and it soon caught on. As of this summer, Eastern National had sold 3.5 million passports.

Over time, the number of circulating stamps, otherwise known as cancellations, has ballooned to nearly 8,000. Not only does each park unit offer at least one (and often several), but there are now stamps for other sites, too, such as national heritage areas and wildlife refuges, plus a mind-boggling array of commemorative stamps. Most have a pleasingly minimalist appearance: the site name curling along the top, the city and state mirrored along the bottom and the date smack across the middle. Others feature designs that run the gamut from elaborate (a team of sled dogs for the Iditarod National Historic Trail) to spare (Abe Lincoln’s top hat at the former president’s museum). Baxter calls the more intricate kind “cartoon” stamps. “They jazz up my book,” she said.

If you’re after all of them — or just one in particular — you have to know where to look. That’s where the National Park Travelers Club comes in. Founded in 2004, the club has a dual purpose: to foster a community of park travelers and provide resources for those who covet park stamps. In most cases, the two groups are one and the same.

The club’s website allows users to track their park visits, tally stamps, contribute to message boards, and customize trips via a hyper-detailed Google Earth map and route planner. But it’s the members-only master database that makes the club a mecca for stamping aficionados. Members post



BY KATHERINE DEGROFF  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY REBECCA DROBIS



**JENNIFER BAXTER** celebrates visiting her 423rd park (and securing the associated stamps) with her 15-year-old grandson, Cameron Emerson, at the Dwight D. Eisenhower Memorial in Washington, D.C. Over the years, Baxter has taken Cameron and his sister Rachel on many of her park adventures.





**MELISSA KELLY** (left) and Amra Peterson cheer as three members of the National Park Travelers Club reach the club's platinum level, recognizing those who have visited all the park system's sites. The long-time friends go out of their way to customize their attire for conventions (top). Above left: Akku Kumar holds his passport book. Above right: There is an art to the perfect stamp. Many club members bemoan their earliest attempts when they failed to capture every element of every stamp.

**MIKE AND CHERYL CARVER OF LEWISVILLE, TEXAS, ARRIVED IN MATCHING GREEN SHIRTS (EMBLAZONED WITH THE RAMBLERS' MOTTO — "NOT ALL WHO WANDER ARE LOST").**

dated images of stamps they've secured and meticulous notes about their locations, which aren't always easy to find. One club member, Karen Messa, recounted a trip to Arlington National Cemetery where she'd been on the hunt for a 19th Amendment stamp and had to convince the ranger on duty that he was in possession of it. She told him a club member had gotten that very cancellation a short while before, so she was sure it was somewhere. "He pulls out a drawer," she said, "and it looks worse than any junk drawer — and pulls out two. 'You mean these?' he asked."

Though the spirit amongst members is more collaborative than cutthroat, with people generously exchanging their stamping and park knowledge, the club does offer lifetime achievement awards based on the number of parks folks have visited. The tiered system, bookmarked by bronze on one end and platinum on the other, recognizes those who have bagged 100 parks or more and is entirely based on the honor system, said Craig Bailey, club secretary and one of the founders. Once members have circumnavigated the entire park system and attained the platinum level, their status will never change, even if new parks are added.

Today, the club boasts over 2,600 dues-paying members, hailing from New England, the Deep South, the Pacific and the great heartland between. They travel with their partners, children, friends, other club members or solo. Most saw a passport book in a park — whether 25 years ago or this past summer — and got curious; they learned a little and started digging for more. "In my quest to find the stamps," said D.C. resident and club President Yvonne Manske, "I found the club."

Each year, the volunteer-run club organizes a convention in a different region of the country. This year's convention, which took place in the nation's capital, attracted nearly 300 members and spanned five days. Aside from the requisite club business, the agenda included raucous happy hours, dusky National Mall

tours, marathon bus rides, multiple ranger programs, countless Junior Ranger ceremonies, two cannon firings and a few steamy nature walks.

Though a trip to the Eisenhower memorial wasn't on the official slate of activities, word of a pre-convention meetup spread rapidly, and roughly 100 members, including Baxter, braved the July heat to get a stamp from the newly christened park. The gift shop staff had been forewarned about the gathering and were prepared with an extra park stamp: "We brought out a second copy because of the swarming masses," said the woman behind the desk.

Despite the occasional wail of sirens and the construction crane looming across the street, the atmosphere at the pocket park had the slightly frenetic feel of the first day of summer camp. It had been two years since the club's last gathering, owing to the pandemic, and the attendees were giddy.

Baxter wasn't the only club member to complete her park circuit that day. Mike and Cheryl Carver of Lewisville, Texas, arrived in matching green shirts (emblazoned with the ramblers' motto — "Not all who wander are lost") to get their final stamp and clinch the coveted platinum level honor. The couple attribute their initial interest in the club and the parks to Ken Burns' 2009 documentary, "The National Parks: America's Best Idea."

After watching the series, retirement became far less daunting to contemplate. "If you just sit around on a porch and watch the world go by," Mike said, "you get fat and die." So, in 2012, they left Xerox after a combined 65 years of service, bought a 40-foot, fifth-wheel RV and spent five years driving from national monument to national memorial to national lakeshore. They'd visited parks in the past but decided to start from scratch and obtain passport stamps at each. Their first stop was four hours from home at Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park.

They secured the familiar half dollar-sized circle of ink at



COURTESY OF CHANDLER O'LEARY

**THE NATIONAL PARK** passport is divided into geographic regions, allowing stamp collectors to organize their cancellations and document their travels.





**ARANGER** at Kenilworth Park and Aquatic Gardens in Washington, D.C., inspects Thomas Turner's Junior Ranger booklet. Many adult club members are ardent fans of the Junior Ranger program, which they say is a great way to learn about a park.

their penultimate park in May, having picked off 14 sites in a mad dash. With platinum within reach, they could only hope that Congress or the president wouldn't designate any new national parks before they finished. "The last two months," Mike said, "I woke up and had the fear: What did they add?"

Not everyone strives for platinum. The club has a laissez-faire philosophy, and members can be as intense or as leisurely in their approach to park visiting as their time, interest and finances permit. Some, such as Thomas Turner, a pipeline engineer from Texas, happily set their sights on a more manageable — though still impressive — 350 or 375 parks.

In the grassy expanse of Fort Washington Park during the first full day of the convention, Turner reflected on his four years in the club, the master database and his motivation. "I'm still trying to find my favorite park," he said. "That's why I keep going." Even so, Turner draws the line at traveling to Guam, a nearly eight-hour flight past Honolulu. "I'll just stop at Hawaii," he said. Heeding the siren call of lunch, he rejoined his convention group, which was on an all-day bus tour to five area sites, including Oxon Cove and Glen Echo parks.

As for the stamps, a few club members take them as they come (naturally, in the course of planned travel), while others pursue absolutely every stamp affiliated with national parks, tracking down the sesquicentennial one at Antietam National Battlefield in Maryland, the "I hiked the falls" one at Whiskeytown National Recreation Area in California and the 16 stamps signifying a park's position in the path of the 2017 total solar eclipse. Messa and her husband went so far as to drive 600 miles from their home in Gulfport, Mississippi, to Great Smoky Mountains National Park to experience the astronomical event — and get the stamp — arriving at the park before dawn.

"You don't just do one," said Messa, who started stamping in 1991. When you go to a park, she counseled a novice club member as they waited to get stamps at the stately home of Frederick Douglass in Washington. "You ask what they have in the back or behind the counter."

Bailey, the club secretary, said some stampers feel a compulsion to procure cancellations whose spelling or punctuation differs from one rubber iteration to the next. Sitting on a bus en route to Oxon Cove Park later that day, the school business manager and track-meet timer from Colorado shared how, occasionally, a park that once had "National Memorial" on its stamp might come out with a version that's been abbreviated to "National Mem" or even "NM." And all at once, a frisson of excitement ripples through the club. Even a minuscule change is sufficient cause for some to return to that

**AMRA PETERSON, KNOWN BY HER CLUB HANDLE PARKIE MCPARKFACE, SUMMED UP THE STAMPING COMMUNITY THIS WAY: "WE'RE REALLY NICE, BUT WE'RE REALLY WEIRD."**

park, passport page at the ready.

This appetite for ferreting out the rare as well as the common means many stampers have graduated from the thin blue passport of old to the explorer edition, which is a hefty, expandable tome that zips up and starts with nearly 200 sheets of removable pages. Even that isn't enough for some, whose booty must be divided into volumes by region.

While all you need to start stamping is a piece of paper, the most avid stampers treat the hobby as a perfectible art form. They worry about precisely capturing every element of a stamp (not dropping a flipper on a manatee at Everglades National Park, say, or suffering a smudge) and consult with friends about the exact brand and color of ink used by the Park Service (so that in the dire instance they encounter a dry ink pad, they'll be ready with their personal stash).

Gerry Whitson, for his part, isn't a purist. "A stamp's a stamp," he said, adding with a chuckle, "They're too serious for me." With his air of bonhomie and stubbly beard, Whitson has a hint of Santa Claus about him — if Santa lived in Kentucky, owned a Tesla and rode a motorcycle rather than a sleigh. He embarked on his second act after 25 years as technology manager for UPS Airlines and "fell into the club" when the Iron Butt Association, a motorcycle group he belongs to, promoted a tour of the national parks in 2018. As of the 2021 convention he'd visited 395 parks (putting him five shy of the titanium level) and probably would have completed the 423-park circuit the previous year had the pandemic not kept him from the Alaska sites. Not one to while away the day, Whitson travels four or more months a year and credits his speedy progression through the club's tiers to his nature: "I'm a goal-oriented person," he said.

Amra Peterson, known by her club handle Parkie McParkface,



**AKKU KUMAR**, whose first park visit was at Grand Canyon National Park, stops at a lotus pond at Kenilworth Park and Aquatic Gardens. When not collecting stamps or attending classes, Kumar might be found scuba diving, skydiving or racking up flight time for his pilot's license.

summed up the stamping community this way: "We're really nice, but we're really weird." She and longtime friend Melissa Kelly were "anti-campers and anti-hikers" until about 10 years ago when they discovered the beauty of national parks, Peterson said. Now the Salt Lake City natives — both in their early 40s — coordinate their outfits, often customizing at least one of the elements, for the convention every year. This year, while seated at a picnic bench overlooking the dinner plate-sized lotus blossoms of Kenilworth Park and Aquatic Gardens, they wore denim jackets (Kelly's blue, Peterson's white) embellished with dozens of stitched-on park patches. Kelly, who calls stamping addictive, said that when they go to a convention, they tell their friends, "We're going to be with our people."

That circle of like-minded people got a little larger this summer with the addition of 18-year-old Akku Kumar. "No one I



GETTYSBURG  
JULY 1863  
150<sup>th</sup>  
1863

Civil War Defenses of Washington  
JUL 31 2021  
DC



**MIKE CARVER** shows off the passport page that contains the stamp of the Eisenhower memorial, the final stop on a 423-park circuit that he and his wife, Cheryl (right), completed this summer.

“Every park has a story,” said Baxter, “and the stamps are a good way to get you to places that you might have possibly overlooked.”

Back at Eisenhower on her big day, Baxter glowed as she received hugs, high-fives and attagirls from her friends and fielded requests for photos. “She’s like our celebrity. Can you tell?” asked Sharon Aubuchon, a stamper since 2012.

While her fellow club members huddled in the slivers of shade afforded by the memorial’s stone columns and friezes,

know likes them the way I do,” the Texas A&M freshman said of his newfound interest in parks. Kumar, who is working on his pilot’s license and harbors a dream of one day making it to space, said that he got into stamping in June when he and his girlfriend, Erin Wagner, visited Assateague Island National Seashore along the Eastern Shore. Kumar met a man in the park who had a passport book and maybe 200 stamps, and it triggered his competitive side. He immediately thought, “I can beat that guy.” Within a month, Kumar had tallied more than 40 parks, joined the National Park Travelers Club and driven his lime green Honda Civic from Pennsylvania to D.C. for his first convention. (Later in the summer, his grand total would leap up to 165 national parks.)

Wagner is supportive of Kumar’s hobby — to a point. When they traveled to join her family for vacation, she said, Kumar mapped out a tortuous route that involved squeezing in as many parks as possible. “Sometimes he would get on my nerves,” Wagner said. “It’s important to get a lunch break.”

On the plus side, Wagner readily acknowledges that Kumar’s passion has introduced her to many hidden gems. For example, the story of Maggie L. Walker, the first Black woman to found a bank, was unknown to her, Wagner said, before Kumar added that Virginia national historic site to his list.

This, say club members, is one of the best things about stamping.

Baxter rattled off a few of the lesser-known sites that surprised her — Arkansas Post National Memorial, Thomas Stone and Mary McLeod Bethune Council House national historic sites — and reminisced about passionate rangers, helpful visitors and eye-opening museums. “I talked to a Freedom Rider,” she said. “Come on! How many people can say that?!”

Running through the timeline of her life, as demarcated by park adventures, Baxter explained that she took her first park trip when she was 4, but that 45 more years passed before she discovered the passport program while on vacation with her sister along the Outer Banks of North Carolina. In the visitor center of Wright Brothers National Memorial on a spit of land between the Atlantic Ocean and the Albemarle Sound, she happened upon Old Bluey and nabbed her inaugural stamp. It’s only in the last 10 years that her part-time hobby took on a life of its own. “I realized I was running out of time, so to speak,” she said. “I really sped up. I retired. I saved some money, which I’ve spent every dime of, but it was so worth it.”

Baxter smiled and looked around. “It’s taken me 70 years to complete my journey,” she said. “It’s just been a wonderful lifetime experience.”

**KATHERINE DEGROFF** is associate editor of National Parks magazine.

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HARMONIC CONVERGENCE participants moved through Casa Rinconada, the largest kiva at Chaco Culture National Historical Park, in August of 1987. The kiva was closed to visitors 10 years later.



©AP PHOTO/DAVID BRESLAUER

## Out with the Old, In with the New

A generation ago, thousands of people gathered in a remote corner of New Mexico to usher in a gentler, kinder age. Did it work?

**T**HE SUN ROSE bright and clear on our last day in hell. Its rays warmed the faces of scores of people camped in the desert way out west of Santa Fe to greet the arrival of the New Age. As the horizon brightened, someone in the crowd banged a gong, and the drummers picked up their tempo. Chants, flutes, rattles, bells and the occasional shriek echoed off the canyon walls. "Tears stream down my face; I feel like my heart is opening," wrote one worshipper named Yakmiella Britton afterward. "The dawn of August 16, 1987, is here."

Britton was among a few thousand people who'd made their way to Chaco Culture National Historical Park in northern New Mexico 34 years ago to join in a collective spiritual event known as the Harmonic Convergence. They — and tens of thousands of others around the world — answered the call of an author and self-described visionary named José Argüelles, who urged people to gather at sacred sites for two days of prayer, dance and meditation that would elevate Earth's consciousness and facilitate our eventual communion with a galactic intelligence.

Argüelles reckoned that Aug. 16 and 17, 1987, marked a confluence of several portentous astrological events: It was the end of the final "hell cycle" of the ancient Aztec calendar, and the start of the final 25-year phase of the



5,125-year Mayan calendar. As Argüelles wrote in a 1987 book, the long cycle's end, scheduled for 2012, would present participants with the opportunity to transform themselves into "cosmic resonators" and see to it that "the Armageddon script is short-circuited, yet the possibility of a New Heaven and New Earth is fully present."

Got all that?

For a little help with translation, I called up Adrian Ivakhiv, a scholar of environmental thought and culture at the University of Vermont who has researched the Harmonic Convergence and its cultural roots. In Argüelles' writings, Ivakhiv hears crisp echoes of Cold War anxieties and the fracturing of the 1960s counterculture. "By the 1980s, New Age spirituality emerges as this individualized version of what used to be a more radical social movement," Ivakhiv said. The threat of nuclear annihilation still loomed large, and global warming was just starting to make headlines. In response, Ivakhiv said, the New Age movement expanded to fit "people who were looking to the future, to a more ascended, cosmic status for humans — and on the other hand, those who were more interested in what's around here, and how people have lived in tune with nature for millennia."

Among the dozens of gatherings staged at "power points" worldwide that weekend, including at the pyramids of Giza in Egypt, Uluru in Australia and Haleakalā National Park on Maui, Chaco Canyon occupied a spiritual sweet spot for skygazers and Earth worshippers alike. The park preserves dozens of intricate stone structures built between 850 and 1150 by the Chacoans, a people that 20 modern-day tribes claim as their ancestors. Many of these buildings are aligned to the cardinal directions and solar cycles. "There's a powerful energy at Chaco," said Charles Bensinger, a videographer and author who helped

organize the 1987 gathering. "The Harmonic Convergence was a way for people to commune with the spirits and to reassert their deep, natural connections with Gaia."

In the weeks leading up to the gathering, Bensinger and a dozen fellow Argüelles adherents set up shop in a conference room in Santa Fe and turned their focus to the earthly details of this cosmic gathering. The park is 70 miles



**JOSÉ ARGÜELLES** a few years before he died in 2011.

from the nearest small town, and at the time, it sat at the intersection of three rough dirt roads, with limited parking and a single small campground bereft of shade and potable water. So Bensinger's group met with staff from the National Park Service and the Bureau of Land Management to establish a campsite outside the canyon that would accommodate thousands of people. They rented port-a-potties, tents and shuttle buses; they arranged for waste management, first responders, guest check-in and traffic control. "We thought we were

divinely destined to pilot this ship, to set it off on a voyage of planetary transformation, and make sure everyone got on board and got to their destination," Bensinger said.

Meanwhile, descendants of Chaco Canyon's ancient architects were, at best, nonplussed by their ancestral land's role in this drama: The chair of the Hopi Tribe told the Los Angeles Times that the tribe was "officially distancing itself from the event." Park staff too might have wished the universe had elected a less remote and delicate point in which to concentrate its power. Nevertheless, then-Superintendent Tom Vaughan took up the challenges of ensuring public safety, protecting the park's fragile environment and archaeological sites, and upholding the First Amendment. "Others might have looked down their noses at the crystal gazers and feather wavers and so on, but these people have a constitutional right to their own spiritual needs," said Vaughan recently. (Still, to be on the safe side, Vaughan's supervisor also ordered in five SWAT teams for the weekend.)

Starting on Aug. 15, a steady stream of cars started turning off the highway and rolling into camp. The weekend's ceremonial center was the great kiva Casa Rinconada, a circular, open-air chamber sunk into the floor of Chaco Canyon. People from various faith traditions staged all kinds of ceremonies within and around the structure throughout the weekend. "It was a powerful thing, meditating with people inside the kiva," Bensinger recalled. "You could almost feel the vortex of energy swirling around, descending deep into the earth and up into the heavens."

After three days of vigorous spiritual exercise, the Convergents dispersed. Only time would tell if they'd managed to stave off Armageddon, but in dozens of letters to the organizers in the weeks after the event, attendees reported an



array of more immediate side effects. “My psychic sense is much more acute and accurate,” wrote one participant. “I now sense the meaning of life on this planet in a continuum-evolutionary,” said another. (Bensinger published these letters in his 1988 book, “Chaco Journey: Remembrance and Awakening.”)

If the gathering at Chaco Canyon left a lasting impression on its participants, they would also leave their own mark on the park. The event inaugurated an era of intense interest in Chaco Canyon among New Age practitioners. To this day, park staff occasionally collect and catalog crystals, handcrafts and other offerings left by worshippers, said Wendy Bustard, Chaco’s longtime curator, who retired in 2020. And throughout the decade following the Harmonic Convergence, New Agers frequently staged smaller ceremonies, drums and all, within Casa Rinconada.

The ongoing use of the ancient kiva for these rituals didn’t always sit well with park staff, other visitors

“You could almost feel the vortex of energy swirling around, descending deep into the earth and up into the heavens.”

or representatives of the 26 tribes — including Pueblo Nations, Hopi, Navajo, Ute and Apache — the Park Service has formally consulted about Chaco Canyon since 1990. Bustard said the uptick in foot traffic and the occasional burying of offerings risked damaging the archaeological integrity of the kiva. What’s more, several of the Pueblo and tribal representatives she worked with “just found it maddening that Anglos with no ritual knowledge of this landscape were using these sites to make up religious rites,” she said.

“The language is ours,” said the late Peter Pino, administrator for the Zia Pueblo, in an interview in 1997. “The songs and traditions and dances are ours. When people appropriate them, it’s exploitation of intellectual and

cultural property.” The same year, the Park Service closed Casa Rinconada to all visitors, taking into account the wishes of many Indigenous people who trace their lineages back to the culture that produced the extraordinary structure a thousand years ago.

In 2011, just a year shy of the transition he foretold, Argüelles died at age 72. His followers are left to wonder whether their efforts in 1987 found their target. More than three decades later, the coronavirus has killed 5 million people worldwide, and Cold War angst over nuclear annihilation has given way to contemporary dread about the climate crisis. And no reasonable person could scroll through Twitter and conclude that ours is a particularly enlightened or harmonious age. “Gee whiz, we had all these great visions of a near future we thought we were ushering the planet into. Violence, poverty, inequity and all these things would vanish miraculously,” Bensinger said. “All that didn’t happen, obviously. So were we deluding ourselves?”

And yet, for Bensinger and his fellow Convergencers, schlepping out to the desert to participate in what was probably history’s first global meditation festival was nothing if not an act of faith — a faith Bensinger hasn’t lost even if the view through the windshield looks grim. “It’s hard for me to say anything specific about how the Harmonic Convergence is impacting our present reality,” he mused. “But I’m sure it’s playing a role somehow.” **NP**

**ATTENDEES** watched the sun rise on Aug. 17, 1987, at a site near Chaco Canyon.



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**JULIA BUSIEK** has worked at national parks in Colorado, Hawaii, Washington and California. She lives in Oakland.





## That Was Then



YOSEMITE HISTORIC PHOTO COLLECTION

**MABEL THORNS AND JOHN WOOD** in Yosemite National Park, 1935. The rink, which was built in a bid to attract the 1932 Winter Olympics to the park, was later relocated.