

Walking to the highest point in Guadalupe Mountains with a 5-year-old. Falling deeply for someone in Grand Canyon. Healing in Joshua Tree. Unfurling a pride flag in Badlands. Learning to love the wilderness in Yosemite.

These are your stories.

NPCA has been collecting national park tales since 2013, and to date, park enthusiasts have submitted nearly 1,500 entries. The “My Park Story” archive includes short pieces about love and discovery, recovery and growth, sadness and reflection, solitude and friendship, laughter and peace. Park fandom isn’t required to post — anyone can contribute — but of course, the theme running through almost every one of these is a profound appreciation for the National Park System.

You can binge on these stories, photographs and videos (and add your own) at npca.org/myparkstory, but you might want help cutting straight to some of the gems. That’s what we are here for. Every so often, the magazine staff feels the call to comb through this ever-expanding archive and hand-pick compelling entries to share with you. So without further ado, welcome to the second edition of the magazine’s curated collection. There are millions of ways to enjoy and love America’s national parks. Here are 18 of them.





↑ Badlands National Park, South Dakota

My wife, Jamie, and I love packing up our three pups and our girls and going camping. This photo is from our visit to Badlands. I was nervous about taking out our pride flag but did it anyway, and I am so happy I did. We want to show our girls our strength and that we can be ourselves wherever we are. —*Tamarah Abdullah-Malizio*

↓ Sequoia National Park, California

I love you most of all. —*Jay Glaser*



↑ Great Basin National Park, Nevada

When I told my husband I wanted to hike Wheeler Peak for my birthday, he was stunned. But, as always, he was there with me when we set off in the early morning light. The trail isn't easy. The ascent requires stamina, good footing, and lots of water and snacks. But I love that the peak never leaves your sight. It is a great motivator! Once at the top, I felt a true sense of accomplishment. When we got back to our camp that evening, I took a nice dose of ibuprofen and headed to bed. There will be other days to celebrate, I thought, but today, I hiked Wheeler Peak at age 65! —*Michele Sinagra*



↘ Shenandoah National Park, Virginia

My photo is from a day I spent fly fishing with a friend. We walked along the stream, happily casting where we had seen fish rising, and passing the time however we pleased. It was a great day because of the simplicity and ease of it. We were away from our bustling, noisy college campus, and our cellphones didn't have a signal. We had nothing to worry about and nowhere to be and only had to enjoy ourselves. —Ben

← Arches National Park, Utah

It was June 3, 2012. I laced up my hiking shoes and headed up the escarpment to Delicate Arch. About halfway up, three veterans who had just returned from the Middle East (all medics) started to pass me. They were half my age and twice as strong, but I thought to myself, "I'm going with them!" We chatted and shared stories, but then they picked up the pace and left this 65-year-old behind. Eventually, I caught up with them at the final, single-file portion of the trail. We walked around the last corner ... and there it was, Delicate Arch. I'll never forget the moment when one of them turned to me and asked, "You were in the service weren't you?" I answered that I was in Vietnam in 1970. Tears welled up in my eyes as we all hugged. Then I sat down for an hour to enjoy one of our nation's most prized possessions. Delicate Arch? No, our veterans! —Bill Hensel

© NEIL MCKAY/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



↑ Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado

Nature has been an integral part of my life since childhood. It wasn't until my internship at Rocky Mountain, however, that I truly became aware of how a vast, wild space could influence a human being. I stared in awe at the jagged peaks of the Rockies, observed elk during the rut, and sat quietly by icy waterfalls, listening to their soothing noise. I learned about the ecosystems and the park's flora and fauna, from the tiny alpine pika to the beaver, a keystone species. From day one, I fell in love. Because of my experience there, I have become a field biologist, a backpacker and an environmental educator. National parks have shaped my entire adult life, and I strive to do my part to both protect these places and to ensure they stay accessible to the public, so others can have the opportunity to experience what I did. —*Hannah*

↗ Yellowstone National Park, Idaho, Montana & Wyoming

The joy, beauty and serenity of the natural world, readily accessible, are wonderful. We went to Yellowstone because I wanted my son to explore and to see the beauty of our parks. And I know that we protect what we love and appreciate. Thank you, national parks. —*Dexter*



↑ Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado

Mick asked me to be her wife on June 4 at Sprague Lake, below the snowy caps of the breathtaking Rocky Mountains! Our best friends were there to cheer along as I said yes! —Katie Garber

©YODERPHOTOGRAPHY/LAWMY STOCK PHOTO



↗ Glacier National Park, Montana

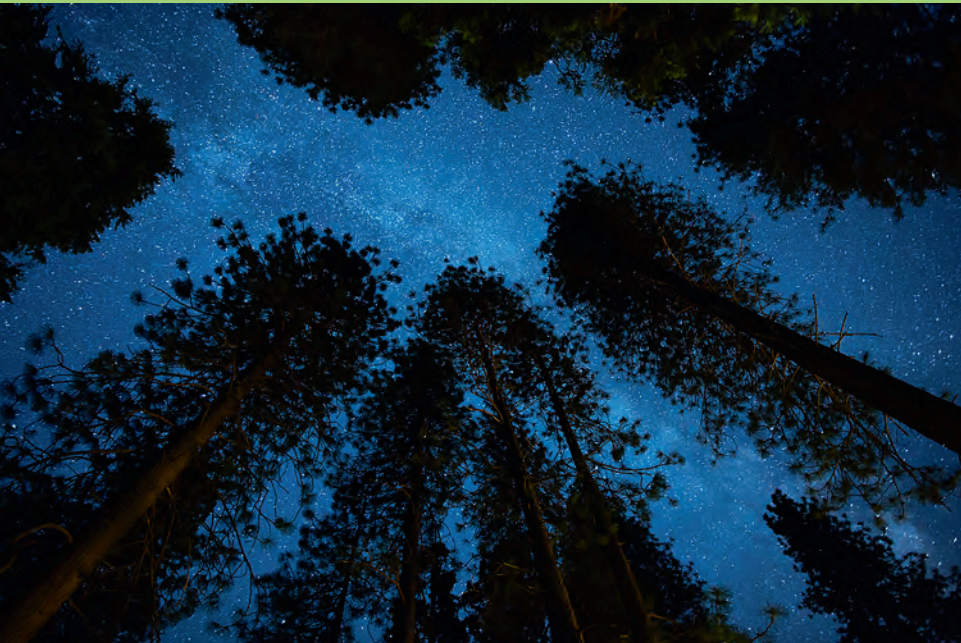
Around 1962, when I was 14 years old, my family visited Glacier for the first time. My parents, sister and I were temporarily living near the park in Polson, and when my grandparents came for a visit, all of us piled into the car and headed north to Glacier.

The day was stifling hot, and we were crammed into a car with no air conditioning. Road crews were repairing Going-to-the-Sun Road, so we had to stop often. And yet, the scenery was more beautiful than anything any of us had ever seen.

By the end of the day, we were all very tired. As we

drove toward the park exit, we had to pull over because of deer on the road. We opened all the doors for the welcome breeze. Everyone, except my grandparents, got out of the car. While we were snapping pictures, a deer saw my grandfather sitting in the car, smoking a cigar. The deer walked over, stepped in with both front legs and grabbed that cigar from my grandfather's mouth! My grandfather complained about his cigar being stolen for many years after that.

Of course, cigars are not good for deer (or my grandfather), but it sure made for a memorable day at the park. —Cassandra Martin



← Yosemite National Park, California

Here are few things about me — or perhaps, things that I used to believe were true about me:

- I like sitting outdoors — if I'm in a lounge chair and a pool is nearby.
- I like spiders and ants — if they are dead or so far away that I can't see them.
- I like hiking — for 10 minutes until I reach my local ice cream shop.

Given this background, I thought going deep into Yosemite's wilderness would be a total nightmare. I was wrong. Recently, I spent nine days backpacking in the park with eight other girls and two educators. Together, we waded in the crystal-clear lakes. We tripped from the weight of our backpacks — and hoisted each other back up again. We huddled together for warmth, told bad muffin jokes along the trails, and watched the mesmerizing night skies for shooting stars. Through it all, I found beauty and happiness in the simplest of things. As we hiked from May Lake to Sunrise Lakes and then to Glen Aulin, the rolling rivers and towering mountains never failed to take my breath away. In the wilderness, I discovered a new level of self-confidence and self-acceptance. As more and more dirt piled onto my face, I felt more confident about my appearance than ever before. I also realized that I took many things for granted. Being a teenager in the 21st century, I thought the first thing I would miss was my phone. Instead, I missed things like music, my family, my bed and my mother's cooking. Hiking in Yosemite was eye-opening and life-changing. There, in the backcountry, I found my new happy place. Never again will I doubt what wilderness can offer me. —Jennifer

↑ Yellowstone National Park, Idaho, Montana & Wyoming

My wife and I met in 1972 at Montana State University. We had both worked summers at national parks: She was a naturalist at Grand Teton, and I was in a maintenance shop in Yellowstone. We were married the next year and played hooky from MSU to spend our first anniversary in Yellowstone's Lamar Valley. We had a picnic with the bison. Absolutely amazing. That day, I promised my lovely lady that we would return for our 25th anniversary, but life and kids have a way of changing plans. This year — 2022 — we hope to spend our 49th anniversary in Lamar Valley with the buffalo ... and maybe some wolves. Wouldn't that be wonderful? —Michael Schmotzer

©YODERPHOTOGRAPHY/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



← Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona

My husband was 35 when he died of cancer, and I was 32. A month after his passing, I found solace in a national park road trip with our dog. We visited eight parks in all. The beauty of creation saved me, as it can for anyone who takes the time to dwell in nature with an open heart. I forever will be a grateful supporter of our national parks.

—Victoria Windsor

→ Joshua Tree National Park, California

When I first arrived in the town of Joshua Tree, I was reeling from a bitter divorce, vitamin D deficient and chilled to the bone from 13-plus years of living under the “gray ceiling” of the Pacific Northwest. I had been to Joshua Tree once before. That experience had stayed with me. In fact, whenever I visited any desert, the open space, the silence, the night sky, the warmth ... it all lingered in my soul. I kept my desert memories tucked away for days when I needed them most. And eventually, a day came when the memories were not enough. I needed to be there. I needed to touch the desert. I needed to sit with myself in the stillness. I needed to cry out loud in the open. I needed to heal. Joshua Tree National Park seemed to be the perfect place for this. Even the Joshua trees themselves seemed to be beckoning to me with their open, arm-like branches. The park was the open door I needed to walk through to get back to me. It was my laboratory, my playground, my refuge, my sanctuary. There, I went face to face with my fears and my scars. I sat with my journal and let the pain flow out onto the paper. I tested my physical abilities, too; climbing boulders is one of my favorite things to do in the park. The park helped me feel like a kid again. I often caught myself laughing out loud while hiking. Just sitting with my back against the granite was comforting — little compares to being held by several million years of geologic history. This place helped me see that national parks can be whatever we need them to be. They are ours. They are here for us. For those of us who do a deeper dive, these places can become part of our fabric. They have the potential to build us back up. They can help make us whole again. —Shane Farnor





↑ Yosemite National Park, California

On top of (half) the world! This group of misfit city slickers trusted me to cheerlead them up Half Dome, one of the most demanding and incredible national park hikes, in a single day. It was grueling, rewarding and inspiring, and now we all have timeless memories together — and they have a story to tell their friends and families. Thanks, Yosemite, for being one of the coolest places on earth for individuals of all types. —*Josh Morris*



↑ Crater Lake National Park, Oregon

In 2019, we completed a trip touring many beautiful national forests in Oregon as well as Crater Lake National Park. My 15-year-old son was thrilled to be able to jump off a cliff into America's deepest lake. He convinced his mother to jump as well!

—*Susan Lehrer*



← Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona

The first park we ever visited together was Grand Canyon. We had only been dating a few months, but it had always been at the top of my bucket list, so Roberto surprised me with a trip. Not only did we fall in love with the park, but we fell in love with each other. Later, we made it our goal to visit every national park in the country and since 2017, we have visited 62 of the 63 parks. In April, we got married in Joshua Tree. The National Park System has forever changed our outlook on life and nature, and we'll be forever grateful to this place for bringing us together. —Andrew Ross



↓ Appalachian National Scenic Trail, Georgia to Maine

Hiked the Appalachian Trail and liked it!! Onward to the Pacific Crest Trail! —Thomas

↑ Guadalupe Mountains National Park, Texas

What does it mean to be standing at the highest point in Texas? To a 5-year-old, it is a HUGE deal. This was my son's toughest hike to date, but a challenge he greeted with great excitement: The Adventure Boys were back in action.

At 3:30 a.m., he awoke with ease at the mere mention of our hike. He had been waiting for this day for weeks. On our drive from El Paso, the monsoon dumped a year's worth of precipitation on us, but we hit the trailhead ready for a great day. We hiked and made up silly songs and talked about the important things like Hot Wheels, corn dogs and farts. I worried about how long his energy would last, but to my delight, he was committed to going all the way to the top of Texas. We hiked through rain and fog and fought the slippery trail, but eventually we made it. We were rewarded with an amazing view of a beautiful sunny day above the cloud line.

The entire hike took nearly six-and-a-half hours. I am proud of him for his eagerness to explore. And our father-son bond is strengthened on each outing. There are no better teaching moments than the ones that nature provides. This is why we go on adventures. —Jason Brewer

