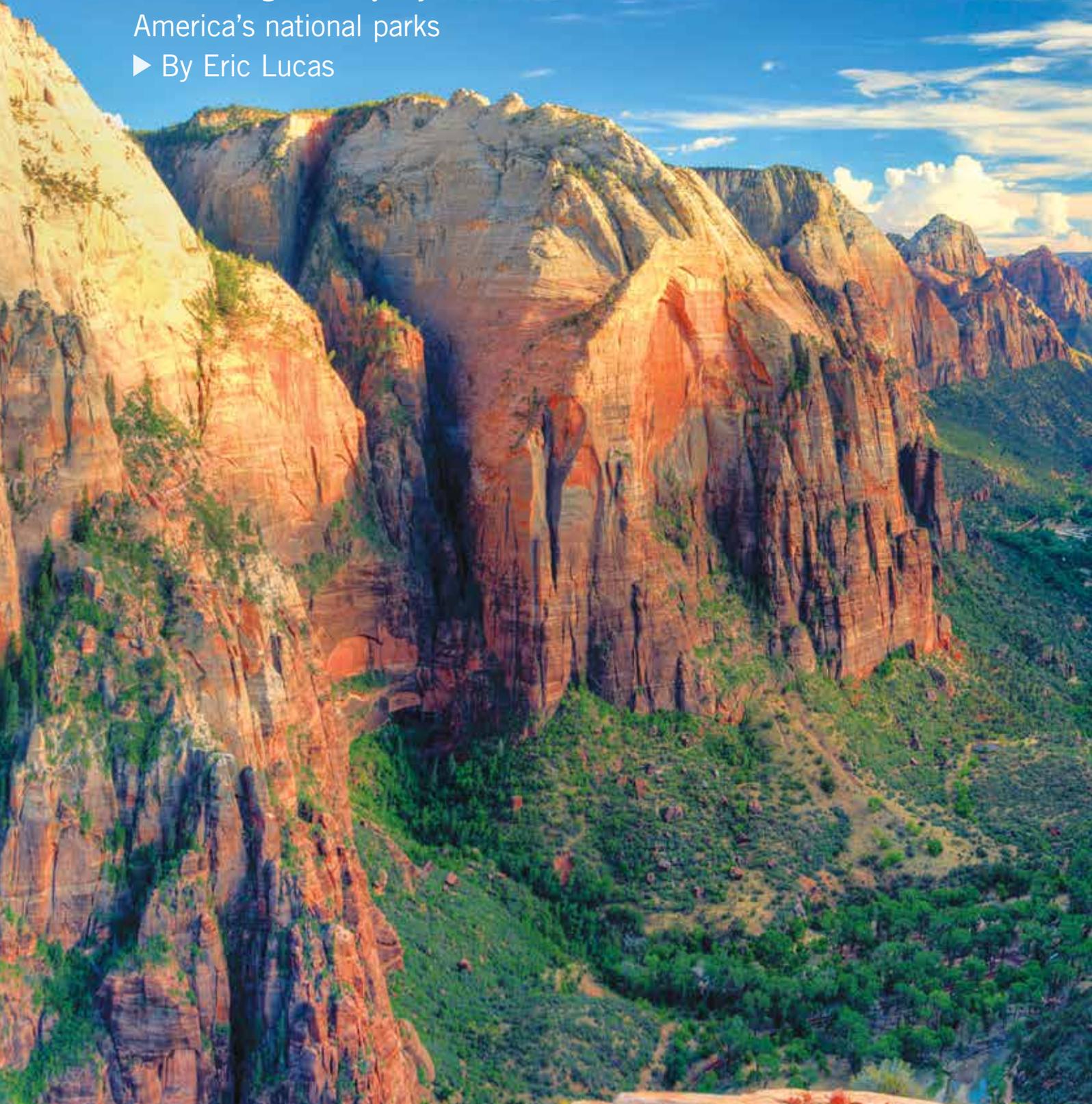


NATURAL TREASURES

Discovering the majesty of
America's national parks

► By Eric Lucas





The Virgin River winds through rugged Zion Canyon in Utah's Zion National Park.

It's one of the driest places on our planet, a spot so low in the earth and so famed for intense heat that its very name derives from the area's climatological intensity. Death Valley National Park, two hours west of Las Vegas, holds the world record for the highest temperature ever recorded—134 degrees F on July 10, 1913, at Furnace Creek.

Yet the most conspicuous force here is water.

In fact, the lowest place in the park—which is also the lowest place in all of North America, is named for the substance that enables all life to exist. Badwater Basin, located 282 feet below sea level and 20 minutes drive south of the aptly named Furnace Creek, is at its very lowest point not occupied by stone or sand or dust or dirt. It is occupied by water. Not a lot, usually; and not potable, clearly, thus its name.

Still, this 30-foot-long shallow pond of alkaline seepage is home to a small garden of water plants such as pickleweed—which looks appropriately named—and snails the size of thumbnails. The snails and plants alike are halophytic—salt-tolerant.

Both the place and its water have an ethereal beauty utterly unexpected by those who come here. With cameras in hand, they sport awestruck expressions. If the National Park Service could collect a dollar for each time a new arrival at Badwater exclaimed, “This is not what I expected!” the park's annual budget would

surely be paid for by the receipts.

Next to the alkaline pond, I see what looks like a frozen lake but is actually a broad flat of depositional salts that stretches westward toward the distant and dark Panamint Range. The flats look much like ice, and on this pleasant autumn morning, kids are skidding and skating across the slick parts worn smooth by thousands of people walking in the area. I overhear a British Commonwealth accent from a dad shepherding two youngsters across the flat.

“You've come a long way to Death Valley. New Zealand?” I ask.

“Nope, we're Aussies,” he tells me, grinning as he watches his children play.

“Then this must seem familiar to you,” I propose.

“Oh, there's nothing like this in Australia. Sure, we have desert. But this ...” Just then his older boy runs up and points to the cliff east of the salt flat. There, about 28 stories up, the park service has affixed a sign indicating “Sea Level.”

It's surreal on many levels to be looking up at what would be the ocean's surface if we were located just 260 miles west on the California coast, to watch kids gliding across a unique form of dry “ice,” to marvel at a life-filled pond of water that marks the lowest crease in the hottest American desert.

Water is a primary factor in defining this place. It provides





At left: A panoramic view of Death Valley's Badwater Basin in California—the lowest spot in North America. Above: The 306-foot-long Landscape Arch in Arches National Park in Utah. Right: Mount McKinley, the highest mountain peak in North America, is an awe-inspiring attraction for those visiting Denali National Park in Alaska.



humans the relative altitude to measure the basin's depth; it shapes the land and nurtures the hardy creatures within it. Death Valley is in reality very much alive. In fact, the 1849 pioneers who named it were being a bit unfair—only one of their party perished; the rest simply thought it was a forbidding locale.

However, America's 59 national parks (part of a National Park System that has a total of 401 "units" that range from national monuments to the White House) are all places where unexpected discoveries enhance the conspicuous grandeur of the landscapes.

► POWER OF WATER

The importance of water is a universal theme in our National Park System. From the Gates of the Arctic to the Everglades, water beautifies our parks, provides home and sustenance for their creatures, and shapes their surfaces.

Water isn't the only possible rubric, but it is especially suited for the vast and powerful Western parks so well known around the world. They are "land-scapes" ... but virtually all formed by water. Including Death Valley.

Preston Chiaro, president of the Death Valley Conservancy, frets over the fact that so many perceive the park he loves as a sterile environment.

"It's burgeoning with life. Not that long ago—10,000 years—this was an immense inland lake," he points out. "To stretch a metaphor, you just have to take time to smell the roses."

For a greater understanding of the power of water, consider Utah's 13 parks that preserve and present famous landscapes. In Arches National Park near Moab, with more than 2,000 stone arches in its more than 76,000 acres, one of the most famous, most visited and most photographed features is named Landscape

Arch. It's not far from another famous landmark, Delicate Arch—the irony being that the latter doesn't look delicate at all, while the 306-foot-long arch named for the landscape seems fragile indeed (and did, in fact, shed pieces in 1995).

Arches and natural bridges are formed partly by water—not just wind, as many once supposed upon seeing these distinctive formations, often topping dry stone plateaus in desert climates such as Utah's. Freezing and thawing, over eons, are the key carving agents for what are called weathered arches. Natural bridges, which overlie streambeds, are almost completely water-carved, even though the gullies they cross may be dry most of the time.

In Southern Utah's Zion National Park, a temple of canyons, arches, spires, cliffs and colors—it's water that has eroded the 2,000-foot-deep vales within battlements of the Navajo Sandstone formation. Here, my family and I drive from the park's eastern entrance through a famous work of early 20th century engineering, the Zion–Mount Carmel Tunnel, a 1.1-mile bore in the walls of Pine Creek Canyon that was the longest such highway tunnel in



COURTESY: NPS

the country when it first opened in 1930.

Dropping down a dizzying series of switchbacks out of the tunnel, we reach a pull-off spot beside Pine Creek and hike up a short way to discover that, today at least, it is indeed a creek, with a thread of light turquoise water meandering downward. Loose debris on its banks indicates higher water coursed through the area just a few days earlier—evidence that cloudbursts continue to shape this magnificent landscape. We all doff our shoes and socks and soak tired feet in the pools while experiencing the sunny, 90-degree day.

Top: Participants show their artistic flair during Winterfest 2014 in Alaska's Denali National Park. Left: The Zion–Mount Carmel Tunnel in Zion National Park in Utah remains a modern marvel. Bottom left: Steam rises as hot lava from the ongoing eruption on Kīlauea reaches the ocean in Volcanoes National Park on Hawai'i Island.

► MUIR'S LEGACY

This impressive tunnel was built to link Zion, Bryce and Grand Canyon national parks. In 1909, President William Taft created the Mukuntuweap National Monument, which included Zion Canyon. The name is a Native American word meaning “Straight Canyon.” However, during the next decade, the monument was renamed Zion, enlarged and redesignated as Zion National Park.

Despite the fame of America's parks, their supporters still work to raise national consciousness about these treasures and the need to experience and preserve these wild places.

“Most Americans think there are about a half-dozen national parks—Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, Great Smoky Mountains, Yosemite, Glacier Bay, Zion or Death Valley, and maybe a couple more they can't remember the names of,” laments Neil Mulholland, president and CEO of the National Parks Foundation, a non-profit group that serves as a partner to the government's National Park Service. “But there are 59 landscape parks, and across the board there are no better places in the country for experiential travel than these—all of them.

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JON CORNFORTH





“These parks are Americans’ birthright,” Mulholland continues. “We own them—we all need to visit them, learn about them, care for them and pass them along to the next generation.”

That latter thought was the key message delivered to Americans by a famous parks advocate, naturalist-explorer John Muir. His forays into the sequoia-clad lands of Yosemite and the southern Sierra Nevada, detailed in countless magazine articles, were

Grand Canyon National Park in Arizona is one of the nation’s most popular destinations, with 4.6 million visitors each year.

instrumental in expansion of a system that had begun with Yellowstone National Park in 1872. He lived in the Yosemite Valley for four years, and though he journeyed throughout western North America, the valley remained his spiritual center across a half century of conservation activism.



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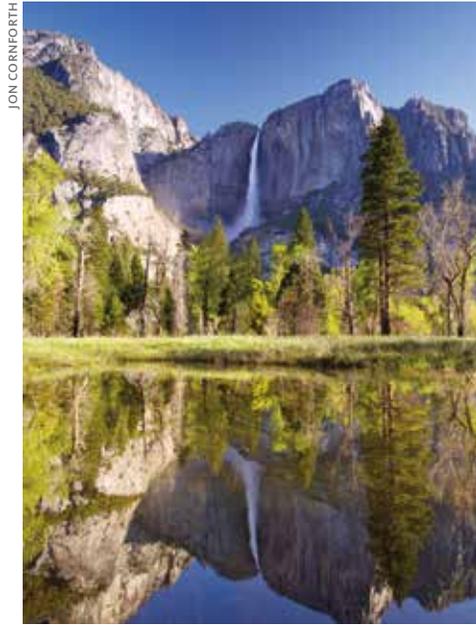
“Everyone needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul,” Muir wrote in his book, *The Yosemite*.

Muir’s pleas to Congress led to the 1890 designation of Yosemite, General Grant and Sequoia as national parks, and he inspired figures ranging from Theodore Roosevelt to Ralph Waldo Emerson and Gifford Pinchot (father of the U.S. Forest Service). Muir also explored the North Pacific coast, including Glacier Bay, and popularized the beauty of Alaska to the outside world.

► PLACES OF IMAGINATION

Today we think of John Muir as the key founding father of American conservation, the seminal figure whose explorations of and writings about the West led to the growth of the parks system. However, visiting national parks suggests it’s not just that these remarkable places are found, popularized and preserved by exceptional people—but that remarkable places catalyze and create exceptional people.

The list of such people is vast and diverse. Mark Twain, for example, on seeing the volcanic activity on Hawai‘i Island in 1866, exclaimed: “Here was room for the imagination to work!”



Yosemite National Park in California has inspired generations with its beauty and grandeur.

As in Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve, Grand Canyon National Park, Yosemite, Zion and so many more—Twain’s declaration remains true today. Drive the full length of Chain of Craters Road in Hawai‘i Volcanoes National Park and you eventually arrive at the Pacific shoreline, which is famously growing as a consequence of Kilauea’s lava flows.

The volcano has added 500 acres to Hawai‘i Island since 1983, and standing atop the burlled knobs of cooled lava from recent flows that not long ago were spilling toward the azure ocean, it is not

hard at all to imagine the goddess Pele at work shaping the earth.

Imagination rules the day 3,000 miles north at the entrance to Alaska’s Denali National Park and Preserve, located between Anchorage and Fairbanks, where I watch a group of determined kids (and “coaching” parents) carve snow blocks. It’s a balmy February day at 25 degrees F with the sun shining like a diamond in the blue sky. The annual Denali Winterfest includes a snow-carving competition for children, and more than half a dozen are

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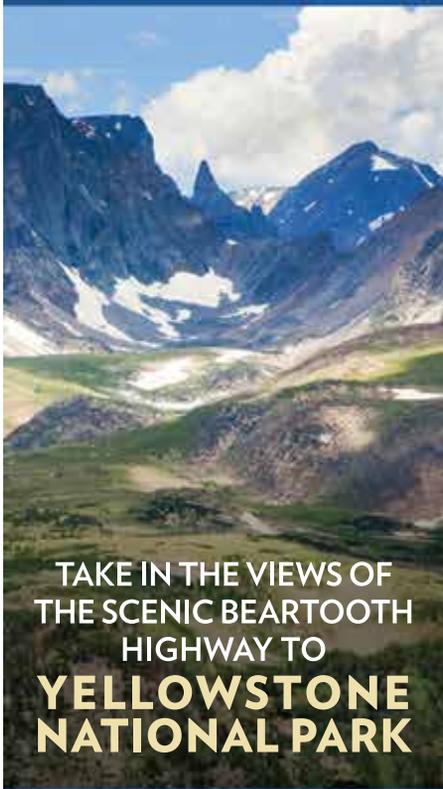
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hard at work with trowels, hacksaws, screwdrivers and other implements. I pause by a 9-year-old boy just starting work on a 3-foot-by-3-foot block.

“Have a blueprint here?” I ask.

“It’s going to be a throne,” his father explains, son hard at work outlining the shape of his creation.

Off I go with a small group for a splendid hike through the trees, farther into the park, to a historic way-station cabin where the park’s key feature, 20,236-foot Mount McKinley—standing 65 miles away—is first visible to us along this trail. Park employees are serving hot cider and s’mores to visitors, who arrive on foot, snowshoes and skis. The sun’s warmth blesses the south-facing porch of the spruce cabin; we all greet two golden retrievers delirious with the joy of a stroll in the snow on a sunny winter day and the chance to meet new people. It’s a charmingly intimate scene in a place better known as the home of North America’s biggest mountain—biggest to be seen in the world, if you measure its 18,000-foot *visible* mass.

Back at the park entrance two hours later, the snow carving is complete, and as park employees announce the winners, it turns out I had misunderstood the throne-carving youngster’s actual plan, which was to fashion an Alaska icon much storied in song, tale and art. “For realism,” declares the announcer, “the prize goes right behind me here to this utterly accurate-looking outhouse.”

When the prize-giving is done, kids wander over to sit in this “throne” of Alaska. Prize-winning art—from national park water.

► UNEXPECTED JOYS

For me, though, the pinnacle of unexpectedness comes when visiting Montana’s Glacier National Park, which bestrides the Continental Divide up to the Alberta, B.C., border and is part of the “Crown of the Continent.” Our group of winter day-trippers has skied up the Going-to-the-Sun Road, now layered deep in snow, along Lake McDonald, stopping at a bridge across McDonald Creek. Even in midwin-

BY THE NUMBERS: U.S. NATIONAL PARKS

59

Total national parks
(*National Park Service units: 401)

273 million

Total park visitors in 2013

14.3 million

Most visitors to NPS unit
(Golden Gate National Recreation Area)

52 million acres

National parks total area

32 million acres

Alaska parks, 60 percent of total

2,500

Approx. number of national parks worldwide

Most visitors:

9.3 million

Great Smoky Mountains

4.6 million

Grand Canyon

3.7 million

Yosemite

3.2 million

Yellowstone

3.1 million

Olympic

*Includes battlefields, historic sites, monuments, parks, preserves and other areas.

ter, free-flowing passages of open water meander past shore ice and gravel bars. Our guide points out a park denizen on a rock beside the water whose mastery of this environment is mind-boggling.

“The water ouzel—the bird also known as the American dipper—lives here year-round,” explains Dave Streeter, a naturalist with Glacier Adventure Guides. “Its prey is tiny fish and underwater insects, such as nymphs and stoneflies. So it swims for its supper ... yes, underwater, in winter.

“The ouzel’s feathers have a special oil that makes it completely waterproof; no matter that the water is 36 degrees F, it can dive in and stay under for up to 30 seconds. The bird’s eyes have a special membrane to help it see below the surface,

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and it can actually walk underwater, submerged on the streambed.”

Even watching this bird, which looks stocky, dark gray and visually unexceptional, I cannot fathom how it goes about its business—in icy streams in the deep cold of winter.

“Astounding, isn’t it?” Streeter declares. “I’ve been guiding here more than 30 years, and I never cease marveling at the park and its creatures.”

Just then—zloop!—the dipper dives in and disappears beneath the platinum water. The ouzel is part of the stream, and the park, and the land, and our country and continent, and Streeter’s declaration reflects one of John Muir’s observations: “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe,” he mused in 1911.

Though I never see the dipper re-emerge above the water in Glacier, I’m sure it has. In the process, this seemingly delicate bird has become one more link in a series of discoveries about the parks that we all share. Whether as massive as Denali, or dainty as a dipper, the layers of understanding here are deep. ▲

Eric Lucas has visited more than 60 national parks around the world.

Alaska Airlines serves gateway cities for most of the 59 U.S. national parks, from Florida to Alaska and Hawai’i. For special deals related to various national parks, go to alaskaair.com/parks for details beginning April 8.

►Las Vegas is the gateway to Death Valley. For park information, visit nps.gov/deva. Lodging in the park is available at the historic Inn at Furnace Creek—complete with a spring-fed pool and oasis. For information, visit furnacecreekresort.com.

►Fairbanks and Anchorage are gateways to Denali National Park. For more on Denali, visit nps.gov/dena; for lodging, transportation and activity information, consult explorefairbanks.com or anchorage.net.

►Salt Lake City is a gateway to many of Utah’s national parks, including Arches, Bryce, Canyonlands and Zion. For information, visit nps.gov/state/ut or discovermoab.com.