



OUTDOOR WRITERS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

OUTDOORS UNLIMITED

THE VOICE OF THE OUTDOORS

SUMMER 2025

YOUTH CONTEST WINNERS

p. 12



America's first National Park City,
author interview, OWAA history
project, press trip tips AND MORE.

OUTDOORS UNLIMITED

SUMMER 2025

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ON THE COVER

BY CAITLIN PETERS | *This photo, titled "Climbing" shows the climber's connection to nature in a way where he almost blends into the rock. Peters took first place in the college division of the 2025 OWAA youth photo contest with this image.*

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

9.5 out of 10!

Did you know that the session ratings for last year's conference averaged 9.5 on a scale of 10? This was a tremendous testimonial to the work of our team (volunteers, staff and members) to bring our attendees great content.

While that achievement is significant, we certainly don't rest on any laurels around here and hope to do even better at this year's conference in Chattanooga (Aug. 19-21).

However, rather than hear from me about the conference (again), I thought I'd turn this issue's column over to some past attendees to have them share their own thoughts on why you should join us in Tennessee:

"Thank you all again for a great event. This conference was so well-organized, fun and useful. Definitely hope to attend again in the future."
— Rose Cahalan, editor, Texas Monthly

"Thank you for an absolutely wonderful event! I had a great first OWAA, and what a kind and special community you have. Logistics were pulled off flawlessly, food was delicious and you were all so helpful and great!"
— Beth Santos, founder and CEO, Wanderful

"We found the wide variety of seminars, workshops and keynote speakers to be enlightening and beneficial for future activities. Of particular value was the new 'Speed Connections' session. We actually had more than 20 journalists stop by our table to speak with us — a welcome surprise!"
— Connie Spindler, Maryland Office of Tourism

"Thank you. We had an amazing time and can not wait for next year! It was literally life changing for us to guide and build our business."
— Jennifer Anderson, Wild & Scenic Idaho

"A conference like this is an investment of time and money, neither of

which a freelancer can afford to use carelessly. This was worth the investment! It offered great connections, writing ideas and experiences."
— Andrew Sharp, freelance writer

"After not being at an OWAA conference since 2018 and after many life changes since then, this one was 'a long, a long time comin',' and I know it'll bear fruit one way or another. By taking extra days of vacation and by connecting with the El Paso locals beyond the conference, this became more like a retreat of mind, body and soul."
— Joseph Dits, South Bend Tribune

"This is our go-to conference for connecting with outdoor media because their membership covers the vast array of outdoors activities — fishing, camping, paddling, hiking, RVing, hunting, birding, conservation, etc. I did intense due diligence in researching and deciding which outdoor journalism organization would be the best fit for our organization to be involved with and OWAA is by far the BEST. Plus, the members of this organization are unbelievably welcoming and friendly."
— Kay Maghan, public relations manager, Alabama's Beaches

"The speakers were wonderful, great session topics that focused on improving craft rather than solely on local outdoor topics, great networking opportunities, incredible people and fun outings!"
— Gentry Hale, student member

We very much hope to see you in Chattanooga this August — and to be sharing your own testimonial about it next year!

— *With more than 25 years of experience in the outdoor and travel industries, Chesak is the 17th executive director of OWAA.*



Outdoor Writers Association of America

Our mission: improve the professional skills of our members, set the highest ethical and communications standards, encourage public enjoyment and conservation of natural resources, and mentor the next generation of professional outdoor communicators.



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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Inspired



OWAA President Amy Kapp tells the story of America's trails as the editorial director of Rails to Trails Conservancy and the editor-in-chief of Rails to Trails magazine and the TrailBlog. While at RTC, she has helped edit and produce more than 15 trail guidebooks featuring different U.S. regions. Other professional experiences include serving as a communications strategist and content creator for various entities, including the National Recreation and Park Association, Parks & Recreation magazine and YouthBuild.

Amy Kapp
OWAA President

As my OWAA presidency comes to an end, I feel profoundly grateful to have had the opportunity to help steer the sails of our passionate and talented community for the past few years. What a huge privilege it was to be brought into the OWAA fold and trusted with this position. And as I prepare to leave OWAA in the very capable and talented hands of others, I'm thankful for the many opportunities I've had to collaborate and bond with so many of you—my inspirational colleagues, friends, teachers and mentors.

Now more than ever, I believe it's our collective call to action to pass on as much inspiration as we can to everyone in America to love and support the outdoors.

Inspiration is at the heart of what we do; it's at the heart of our movement. It was my family and their land in western Pennsylvania that inspired me to be a muddy kid in the outdoors. It was my grandmother's pursuit of multiple biology degrees in the late 1920s that served as an early motivator for me to embrace knowledge of the natural world and its benefits. And it's my colleagues, you, and your incredible work — turning passion into craft, and craft into passionate communication — that inspires me today as editor-in-chief of Rails to Trails magazine and a proud member of OWAA.

When my grandmother took me and my brothers on nature walks back in the day, she would show us cool things, like when she inflated a leaf from a plant like a balloon, and speak of the people that inspired her. One individual she spoke of was her college lab partner and close friend, Rachel Carson, whose 1962 book "Silent Spring" is credited with sparking the modern environmental movement.

Those great ladies certainly influenced my choice to pursue environmental management in graduate school, and while I'd find my own voice as an outdoor communicator, I know that my life and career were partially molded by those nature walks, by those trailblazers of science.

My husband, Chris — also a scientist — stumbled across Carson's 1952 National Book Award speech for her renowned work, "The Sea Around Us." I believe part of Carson's speech so beautifully sums up our own community and what we endeavor to do, and I leave you some excerpts now, in hopes you too, are inspired.

"The aim of science is to discover and illuminate truth. And that, I take it, is the aim of literature, whether biography or history or fiction; it seems to me, then, that there can be no separate literature of science.

"It is impossible to understand man without understanding his environment and the forces that have molded him physically and mentally.

"The winds, the sea, and the moving tides are what they are. If there is wonder and beauty and majesty in them, science will discover these qualities. If they are not there, science cannot create them. If there is poetry in my book about the sea, it is not because I deliberately put it there, but because no one could write truthfully about the sea and leave out the poetry."

May we all continue to communicate and inspire each other and the next generations.



OUTDOOR WRITERS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

Register today!



Individual media can:

- Network with top professionals
- Get exclusive access to newsmakers and stories critical to conservation and the outdoors
- Find new markets to sell your work
- Attend seminars to sharpen your professional skills
- Meet with America's best in outdoor communication
- Hear from editors and industry leaders

And much more!

Brands (such as gear companies, destinations, accommodations and service providers) have ample opportunities to connect with media as attendees, exhibitors and/or sponsors.

2025 CONFERENCE

Join OWAA in Chattanooga, Tennessee

AUGUST 19-21

owaa.org/conference



Bird's-eye view of Chattanooga, Tennessee. Photos courtesy of Chattanooga Tourism Co.

AMERICA'S FIRST NATIONAL PARK CITY

**Your outdoor media guide to exploring
Chattanooga's wild urban identity**

BY HOLLIE HOBBS | CHATTANOOGA TOURISM CO.

Not every city invites you to paddle a river, hike a mountain-top and tour an aquarium all before lunch. But then again, not every city is Chattanooga. Recently named the first National Park City in the United States — and only the third in the world — Chattanooga now carries a global distinction that reflects not just its scenic beauty, but its values.

For outdoor media, this isn't just a new title to note — it's a new lens through which to tell Chattanooga's story.

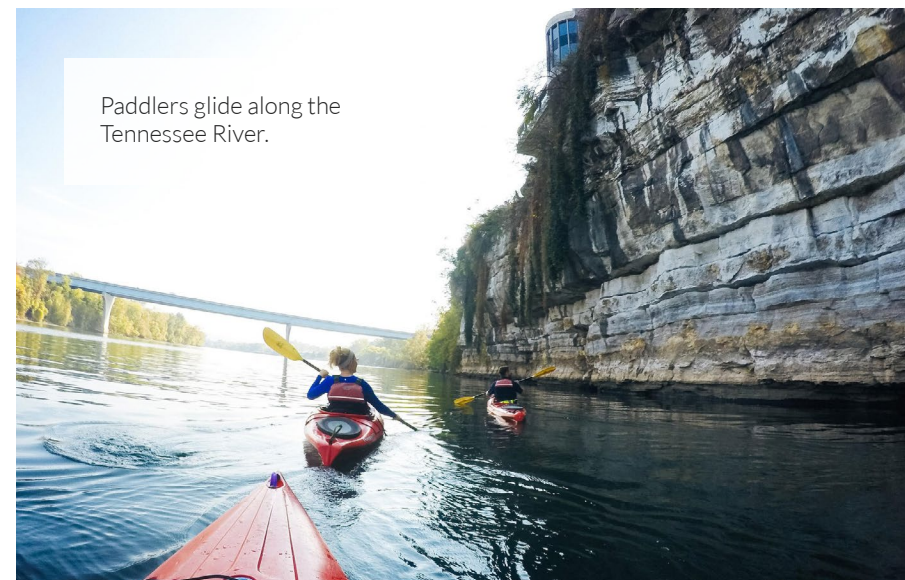
WHAT IS A NATIONAL PARK CITY?

The concept originated in London in 2019 with a bold but simple idea: Cities should be places where people and nature thrive together. A National Park City isn't defined by park gates or federal oversight. Instead, it's a grassroots commitment to long-term, community-driven change that puts nature, equity, sustainability and access at the heart of urban life.

Chattanooga's journey to this title was hard won. Once known as “the dirtiest city in America” (thanks to a 1969 broadcast by Walter Cronkite), Chattanooga transformed itself over the past five-plus decades through environmental leadership and citizen action. The result? A city where greenways thread through neighborhoods, where stormwater management is handled by rain gardens and bioswales, and where urban tree canopy restoration is backed by a \$6 million federal grant.

WHY IT MATTERS TO OUTDOOR MEDIA

For outdoor writers, photographers, environmental journalists and travel storytellers, Chattanooga's National Park City designation is a storytelling opportunity. This is a city where the outdoors isn't a side trip; it's the setting, the subject and sometimes even the solution. And the best way to understand this identity? Step outside and experience it.



Paddlers glide along the Tennessee River.



Scenic view of the Tennessee River.

EXPLORE THE NPC ETHOS: FIVE WAYS TO SEE IT FOR YOURSELF

Paddle the Tennessee River

Rent a paddleboard or kayak from L2 Outside (l2outside.com) or River Canyon Adventure (rivercanyonadventure.com) and immerse yourself in the city's watery heart. As you float past bluffs, bridges and shoreline trails, you'll see firsthand how access to the outdoors has shaped Chattanooga's resurgence. Tie your experience to the Tennessee River Blueway — a 46-mile

national water trail that winds through the city and surrounding region.

The River Blueway represents exactly what a National Park City values: accessible outdoor adventure that connects people to place and protects water quality through active stewardship.

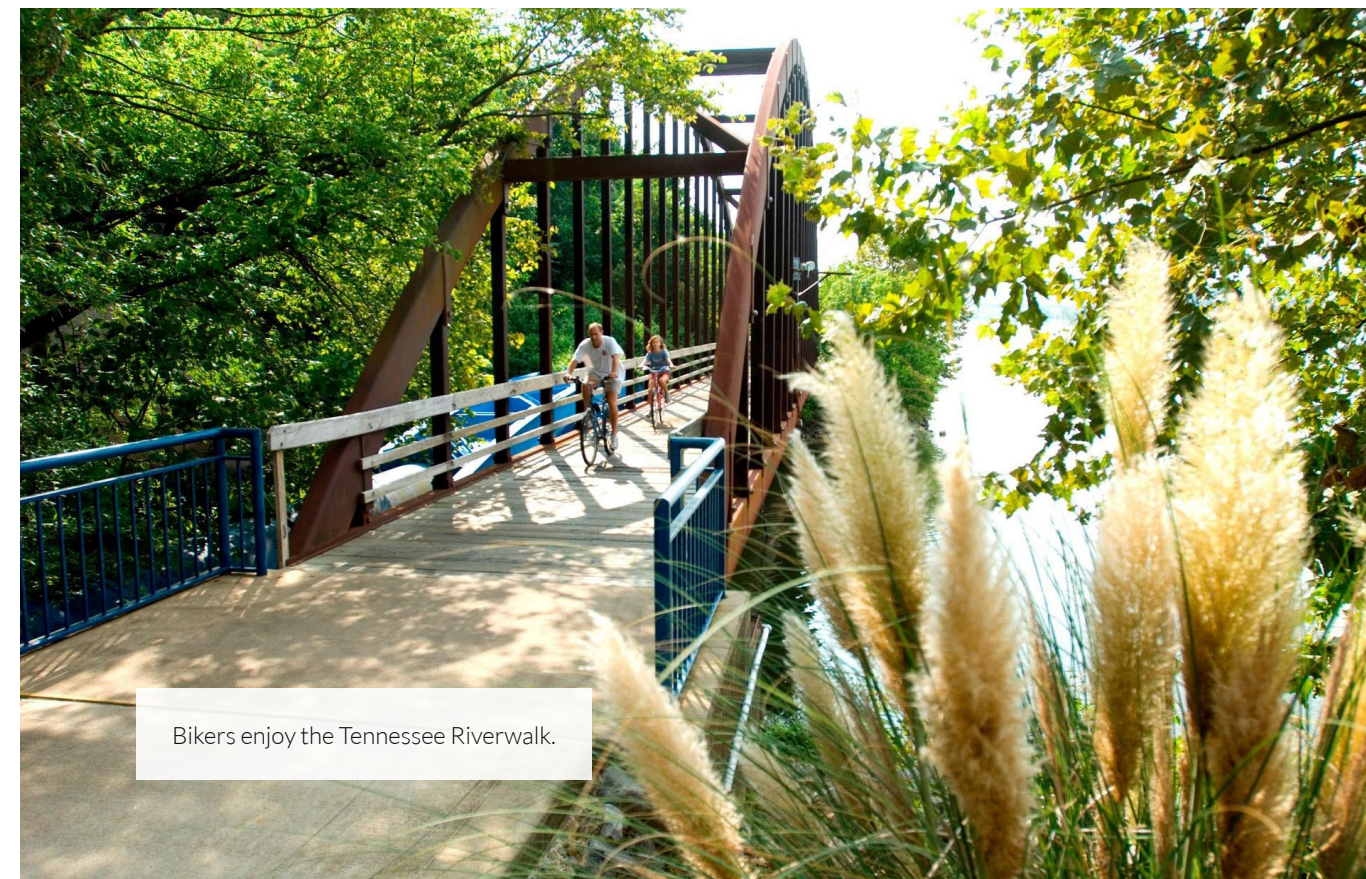
Bike the riverwalk and beyond

Hop on a Bike Chattanooga rental and cruise the 16-mile Tennessee Riverwalk. This greenway weaves through downtown, art districts and residential areas,

Greenways are central to the National Park City framework.

linking diverse neighborhoods to the river. Continue west toward Stringers Ridge, where singletrack trails and city skyline views reward your pedaling.

Greenways are central to the National Park City framework. They offer sustainable transportation, boost public health and support biodiversity — all while giving residents and visitors a deeper relationship with the land.



Bikers enjoy the Tennessee Riverwalk.

Hike the trails

Whether it's the Sunset Rock Trail up Lookout Mountain or a lunchtime stroll through Coolidge Park under the Walnut Street Pedestrian Bridge, Chattanooga proves that nature is never out of reach. The city's walkability and trail access are unique among midsize U.S. cities.

This is what it means to "live within nature" — not next to it. Chattanooga's proximity to wild places makes nature a daily part of life, which is exactly the kind of integration National Park Cities aim for.

Go underground

Explore Chattanooga's lesser-seen wonders at Raccoon Mountain Caverns or Ruby Falls. These cave systems reveal ancient geology, rare ecosystems and conservation stories that are just as important underground as above.

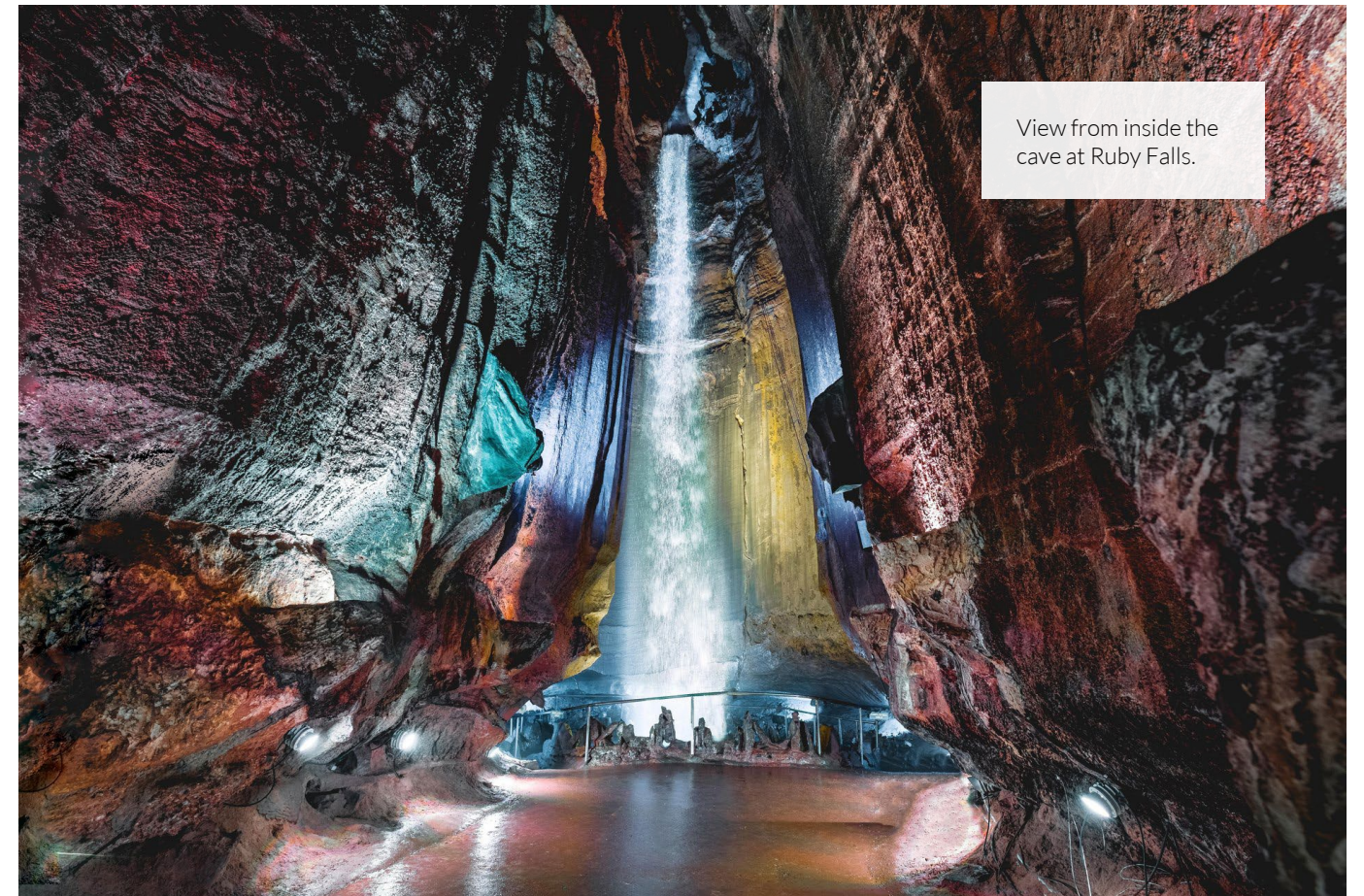
The National Park City idea extends to subterranean spaces. Chattanooga's karst landscape reminds us that stewardship doesn't stop at the surface—it tunnels deep into how we interact with the natural world.



The view from Sunset Rock at Lookout Mountain.



People gather at Miller Park in downtown Chattanooga.



View from inside the cave at Ruby Falls.

From green infrastructure to equitable canopy coverage, these efforts are the backbone of Chattanooga's National Park City status.

Explore the infrastructure of sustainability

Visit neighborhoods benefiting from Chattanooga's Take Root Initiative, which plants trees in underserved areas to reduce heat islands and improve air quality.

Or walk through Miller Park to see how stormwater is handled by permeable surfaces and native landscaping. If you're here for longer, schedule an

interview with the city's Office of Sustainability to learn more about the Climate Action Plan and Urban Forestry Master Plan.

From green infrastructure to equitable canopy coverage, these efforts are the backbone of Chattanooga's National Park City status. Writers covering climate, sustainability and environmental equity will find a model story in Chattanooga.

FINAL THOUGHTS: THIS CITY IS YOUR FIELD NOTEBOOK

Whether you're writing a gear review, a personal essay or a policy deep dive, Chattanooga is your open-air studio. Here, the city and the wild are not in conflict. They are collaborators.

Each park, trail and initiative is a prompt — asking you not just to explore, but to reflect on what cities can be when they intentionally live in balance with the natural world.

— *Hollie Hobbs is a marketing intern with Chattanooga Tourism Co. and a recent UTC graduate with a B.S. in health and human performance, focused in sports, outdoor recreation and tourism.*

WITH THE WINNERS OF OWAA'S YOUTH CONTESTS, the future looks bright for our upcoming generation of outdoor communicators. These contests drew entrants from across the nation. The top three winners in each contest took home cash prizes as well as OWAA Student memberships. The college writing contest was not judged this year due to insufficient entries.

NORM STRUNG YOUTH WRITING CONTEST



My first doe

1ST PLACE | HIGH SCHOOL CLARA VERMILLION

I woke up with excitement in my eyes that morning. My dad gently shook my shoulder at 5:45 a.m. and I was immediately aware that it was time to get my warm hunting gear on. I still recall that feeling of anticipation and enthusiasm as I put on my layers of camouflage in the dark. The group of hunters consisted of my dad, brother, uncle and me. We were on vacation at my grandfather's place in west Texas. The drive to the ranch was short and quiet, and I looked out the window as I held my warm to-go cup of coffee tight in my hands. The sky was dark at that time in the early morning, but it was that certain kind of darkness, unlike that of a night sky, that precedes a beautiful sunrise.

After arriving at the ranch and driving down the bumpy dirt road, we dropped off the other hunters at their various places. Finally, we parked the truck and briskly walked to our hunting spot. We were as quiet as possible so as not to scare off any deer in the area. The only sounds one could hear were the sounds of our dirty boots against the thin sticks that covered the road, the sprinkling of corn from an old Folgers coffee can onto the ground and the occasional gust of wind that would make the trees whisper. Finally, we both climbed up the ladder to the blind that sat above the ground and 75 yards from the deer feeder. We situated ourselves in the blind and opened the four windows that invited the cold morning breeze to fill the 15-square-foot area. My dad handed me his 6.5 Creedmoor and gave me instructions on what I should do if we saw a nice deer to shoot. I was always used to hunting alongside my dad when he would hold the gun, but this time he was trusting his daughter to properly aim, shoot and track down her own deer. My feelings about this hunt heightened to a new level of excitement and enthusiasm, now with a bit of nervousness. All we had to do was wait, but when hunting in the early morning, it is never boring to wait for deer. In fact, this morning, it was quite the opposite for me.

I distinctly remember the look of God's creation through the windows of that blind. It was no longer dark by that time. The sun was rising and the sky was bursting with beautiful warm

colors. I loved watching the mesquite treetops sway back and forth, with their deep roots unmoved. The cardinals and crested caracaras stood out among the dry-looking landscape. Bobwhite quail and Rio Grande turkeys spoke loudly among themselves in the distance. The sharp and chilly breeze still rushed through our blind windows, changing direction often, coming in one window at a time.

We watched and listened in silence as we were able to experience this different perspective of the outdoors that one would not be able to feel by simply looking out a window of their home. We were surrounded by it — the trees, the sky, the birds, the wind.

I have always appreciated hunting. It is not simply something that is enjoyable to take part in, but it also manages wildlife so that populations and crops can thrive. Resources and wildlife can be better preserved so that future generations can hunt, hike, camp and much more.

After waiting for an hour, the deer feeder, set off by a timer, shot corn all over the ground. Not long after that, three deer came from behind the trees in front of us and began eating the corn we had scattered. In their usual way, the deer were cautious, picking up their heads constantly to ensure their safety, flicking their tails and putting their heads down again to eat. Two of the deer were spikes and the other was a doe. My dad handed me his binoculars to take a look. As I peeped through, I immediately had my eyes set on the doe. She was a great size. Without words, I looked over at my dad as if asking his permission to shoot. He nodded his head. So, with my heart thumping in my chest, I readied the gun and waited for the perfect moment to pull the trigger.

— Clara Vermillion was born and raised in Nacogdoches, Texas. She has been enrolled at Regents Academy for 13 years and graduated in the spring of 2025.



Lay away

2ND PLACE | HIGH SCHOOL CATHERINE MCFARLANE

We spend our days in a dreamless sleep, cradled by the rhythmic rocking of the ship, the gentle sway of the waves lulling us into an unconscious rest. It's as if Mother Nature is tucking us in, nurturing us in our mother's absence, watching as we float on the surface of her endless sea. It's a strange sleep that doesn't refresh but suspends, a limbo between wakefulness and dreams. The ship becomes our whole world, a tiny island of existence. Out here, everything we once knew feels so far away, like it belongs to someone else — a different version of ourselves that we left behind on the shore.

Our landlocked lives stand opposed to life aboard a ship. We are used to constant motion. Used to the relentless go, go, go of modern life: every hour scheduled, every minute accounted for, every second consumed by urgency. But life aboard the ship moves at its own pace. We learn to wait and watch, to tend and heave, the rush replaced by the steady rhythm of the sea. There's no fighting it, no controlling it. We're at the mercy of this wind, these waves; we surrender.

Still, when we snap out of sleep, we realize just how much time has passed and rush to capture all that we fear we missed. It's a habit. We grab our cameras and take pictures of sunsets, dolphins and the vast stretch of ocean before us, which continues for miles toward a place we don't know.

Imagine, for a second, we don't take these photos. If it cannot be posted or broadcast to our friends or followers, how will anyone know what we did — who we are? We don't only post this beauty we witness to make it communal, to pleasure the eyes of some stranger. No, we post because we, too, want to be remade in its image. We want the moment to count for us. So we take the photo, not because we need to remember but because we need proof of who we are now. We were here. We were witness to beauty. This is our testament.



My soul is the sun

3RD PLACE (TIE) | HIGH SCHOOL HOLLY ALCHIN

Sunlight scintillates off the crests of ripples on the surface of a crystal-blue lake. A placid breeze tiptoes through blades of tall grass that line its shore. A small child, around 4 or 5, is beckoned into the unknown by the whispers of the wild. She giggles in the way only an unburdened soul can. The trunks of sugar pines stretch tall into the sky and peer down as the young girl tumbles over roots that emerge from the pine-needle and packed-dirt forest floor. The girl's willowy hair trails just past her ears, messy and rumpled from her afternoon nap. Her undeniable spark for life and to explore exudes from her every cell.

This girl is who I transform into when I step outside: my childhood self; someone who holds a tenacity to explore the

It's a strange paradox, isn't it? We're surrounded by untouched beauty, yet there's a disquiet that it doesn't count unless it's photographed, posted, seen by others. We don't simply experience the sunset, these dolphins, this endless horizon; we're already imagining how they will look through the lens of the camera, on a screen, in a post. And so, we find ourselves suspended in this strange loop — sleeping through the moments, waking to capture them and then retreating into sleep, only to do it all over again.

But, even as we fight against it, still tethered to the frenetic speed of the land we left behind, the ship teaches us patience. The ship teaches us to wait, to observe.

The sun quickly descends behind the island, slipping lower each second.

Going.

Some turn away frantically, tearing through bags, pulling open zippers, fingers searching for the cold, familiar plastic.

Going.

We turn back, convinced it has only been a few seconds, not ready for the time to slip by without first freezing it in a frame.

Gone.

— Catherine McFarlane is an incoming senior at Polytechnic High School in Pasadena, California. Every year, she goes on a weeklong outdoor education trip with her school — a trip she always participates in but seldom enjoys. This past year, surprisingly, she found peace and meaning on her five-day sail aboard a brigantine out of San Pedro Harbor to the deserted Santa Rosa Islands, part of the Channel Islands off the coast of California.

natural world. I return to my untroubled younger self. I return to who I truly am. I return home. I shed the skin that has been weathered and exposed to outside influences and alterations.

From a young age, my family traveled to places abundant in wilderness, immersing me in nature. Each trip left me in a state of awe and with a yearning to absorb more knowledge about this frontier, unknown to me. Throughout my exploration of the outdoors, I discovered who I was. From how to be strong as the mountains, how to go with the flow like the ocean's waves and how to stand tall as sequoia trees, my behavior was built and carefully constructed, mirroring what I observed. Nature shaped who I am today, identical to how the wind shapes the rocks or

how the waxing and waning of the moon pulls the tide. This strong connection I have with nature has only strengthened as I grow older. The grass below my feet sees me when I am unapologetically myself.

This innate connection that humans hold with nature is visible when I see my reflection in the mirror. I see the moss that grows on fallen limbs coloring my eyes and the stars in my freckles that speckle my cheeks in the summer. I see wildflowers, poppies, asters and yarrow, in my friend’s unique beauty. Everywhere I turn, I see the resemblances.

Humans are nature, our nerve endings are the Milky Way, our fingerprints are the rings in tree stumps. Throughout life we are drawn out by the fresh mountain air or the tireless ocean wind. Once we have lived our time on planet Earth, our bodies return to the soil and the cycle restarts. We are made of the same mole-



Breaking the bounds

3RD PLACE (TIE) | HIGH SCHOOL NAZMA GEGUM

“Girls shouldn’t be out doing things like that. It’s not proper. It’s not right. It’s shameful.” His voice echoed in my head as I strapped on my snowboard, ready to defy the world I came from. Growing up in such a traditional culture, girls were expected to stay indoors and just help around the house, not drawing attention to themselves. My passion for snowboarding seemed like rebellion. To my uncle, it wasn’t just a sport, but an act of defiance.

My mom knew the battle I was fighting, even if she couldn’t openly support it. The night before my first trip to Crystal Mountain, she made excuses for me.

“She’s at a friend’s house, studying,” she lied to my uncle, hoping it would quiet him. But I wasn’t studying, I was preparing to face something bigger than snowboarding. I was confronting the cultural boundaries that had tried to keep me contained my whole life.

The first time I stood at the foot of the mountain, I wasn’t just afraid of falling or failing on the slopes. I was terrified of the consequences that would follow when my uncle found out where I had been. Each time I strapped on the board, it was not about learning to balance or to steer but about reclaiming my freedom, my identity and my right to experience joy on my own terms.

For girls like me, joy was something controlled, something earned only within the confines of expectation. Anything beyond that was seen as shameful. The idea of me, a girl, a hijabi, racing down the slopes, unrestricted by the household walls, was unimaginable to many in my family. It wasn’t “appropriate.” But the more I snowboarded, the more I realized I couldn’t live within those boundaries.

The freedom I found on the slopes wasn’t about physical liberation but was emotional too. Snowboarding gave me something that nobody could ever take away. It taught me that I didn’t have to be the quiet, obedient girl my uncle wanted me to be. I could be strong. I could take risks. I could fall and rise again, and find who I truly am.

cules that make up the waterfalls: serene and buzzing with life. I surrender to Mother Nature, as she draws me in and devours my soul, incorporating it into her own. My soul is you, Earth.

So to our younger selves that so many of us nature enthusiasts become when we go outside: The wind is calling your name, providing an escape from your troubles. I do hope that you find the ability to let go and succumb to what your soul desires. Go outside to frolic and immerse yourself in who you truly are.

— *Holly Alchin is passionate about nature and preserving its beauty. Next year in college, she will begin her four-year quest to obtain a degree in marine biology, after which she intends to work in the field of marine conservation.*

My uncle’s disappointment, angry at the choices I made, no longer defined me. Each turn on the mountain, each fall and each rise became a rejection of the life that had been planned for me — a life of confinement, where my only purpose was to become a household wife without a will of my own. I wasn’t that person. Snowboarding taught me I could carve my own path, even if it meant navigating through cultural tension and disapproval.

I’d struggled and fallen for hours before finally making it onto the chairlift at Crystal Mountain. I felt the weight of my world lifting. As I soared higher above the ground, I realized that this was my life. Not my uncle’s. Not my family’s expectations. Mine. And I was determined to live it fully, without the shame or fear that others tried to impose on me.

Coming down that mountain wasn’t just a descent — it was a liberation. A freedom I had never known before. I wasn’t just snowboarding. I was breaking free from a future that had been chosen for me. Snowboarding gave me the courage to embrace who I am, not who I was told I had to be. It gave me the strength to understand that my worth wasn’t found in whether or not I followed tradition, that my worth was in creating my identity, to live boldly, and to find joy in places where it wasn’t supposed to exist for someone like me.

By the time I reached the bottom of the mountain, I wasn’t just a snowboarder. I was someone who had broken free. The girl who once feared judgment had found her strength, not in the approval of others, but in the rush of the slopes, the wind against her face, and the choices she made for herself.

This was more than defiance; it was self-discovery. I had learned that true freedom isn’t given. It’s claimed, and I was ready to live boldly, far beyond.

— *Nazma Gegum loves the outdoors and loves to encourage other girls, especially in immigrant communities, to step outside and try things like camping and backpacking.*



Milky Way

1ST PLACE | HIGH SCHOOL SAGE BEAUREGARD

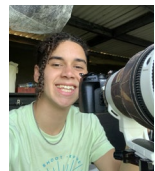


The story behind the photo

Beauregard took this photo at Jackson Lake, Grand Teton National Park, in August of 2024. After planning this photo for weeks, he arrived at the park after an eight-hour drive from Colorado. This was the only clear night, so he set up his tripod and camera on the rocky lakeside, beginning to capture photos.

He waited until the Milky Way was vertically aligned behind the mountain range to get the perfect photo, with its reflection in the water. Eventually, he captured this photo at around 1 a.m., making it one of the best photos he has ever taken.

— *Sage Beauregard is a freelance nature photographer based in New England. At 18 years old, with more than two years of experience, he captures beautiful scenery around the world. He enjoys shooting the night sky and specializes in astrophotography.*



Kiskadee and woodpecker

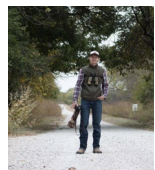
2ND PLACE | HIGH SCHOOL SIMON FONTENOT



The story behind the photo

Simon Fontenot took this photo during his first time shooting in a blind. He had been shooting with his mentor for four hours. It was the end of the day, and they were taking advantage of the last few minutes of sunlight. A sudden influx of activity appeared around the pond. The kiskadee was the first to land on this perch and when the golden-fronted woodpecker landed, the kiskadee turned around to fuss at the woodpecker until he could chase it away. It left Fontenot with a beautiful photograph that was an amazing end to his first of several such shoots.

— Simon Fontenot just finished his last semester of high school. He loves nature, especially wildlife, and photography, and he has won several youth nature photography contests with his work. He owns three geckos, two snakes, two dogs, two cats and a turtle. He plans to go to college to study visual arts or cinematography.



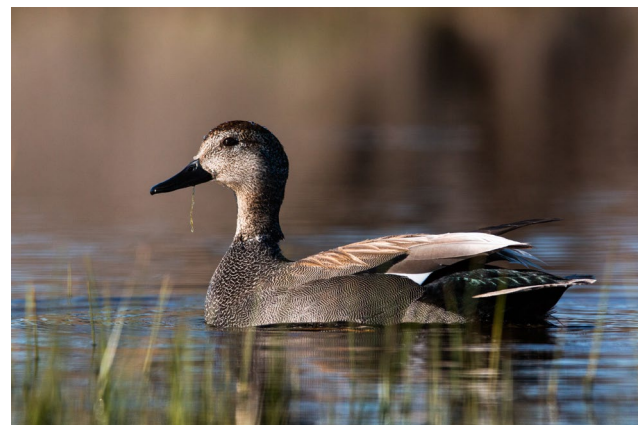
Gadwall

3RD PLACE (TIE) | HIGH SCHOOL CALEB HAWKINS

The story behind the photo

Every spring migration, Caleb Hawkins goes down to his home-made pondside hunting blind to photograph migrating waterfowl. Lying on some pallets on the ground, his goal one day was to get water-level photos of the waterfowl. That evening, he was waiting for some ducks to come in. There were several blue-winged teal that had landed and were hanging around where he was set up. Soon, a drake gadwall came in and landed next to Hawkins' blind, and it swam into the shallows where he took this shot.

— Caleb Hawkins is a young, award-winning outdoor photographer from a family farm in Douglas County, Kansas. Since he was a toddler, he's been drawn to watching and eventually photographing wildlife.



Bridging the divide

3RD PLACE (TIE) | HIGH SCHOOL KYAN HARPER



The story behind the photo

This image is an abstract attempt to revive the connection between humanity and nature. As a landscape photographer, inhabitant of the Oregon Coast, surfer, hiker, adventure seeker and nature lover, preserving our planet is among the most important things to Kyan Harper. He captures natural perspectives uniquely by combining themes like adventure, solitude or connection with a natural landscape. This involves lighting, technique and edit style, but he's found the most impactful way to do so is by adding human presence. To bridge the divide.

— Kyan Harper is a freelance photographer, surfer, snowboarder and adventure enthusiast. He grew up on the north Oregon coast and learned to love capturing the beauty it and the rest of the world hold. He started his photographic journey about three years ago and hasn't stopped since. He enjoys capturing landscapes but finds lifestyle and portraits thrilling as well.

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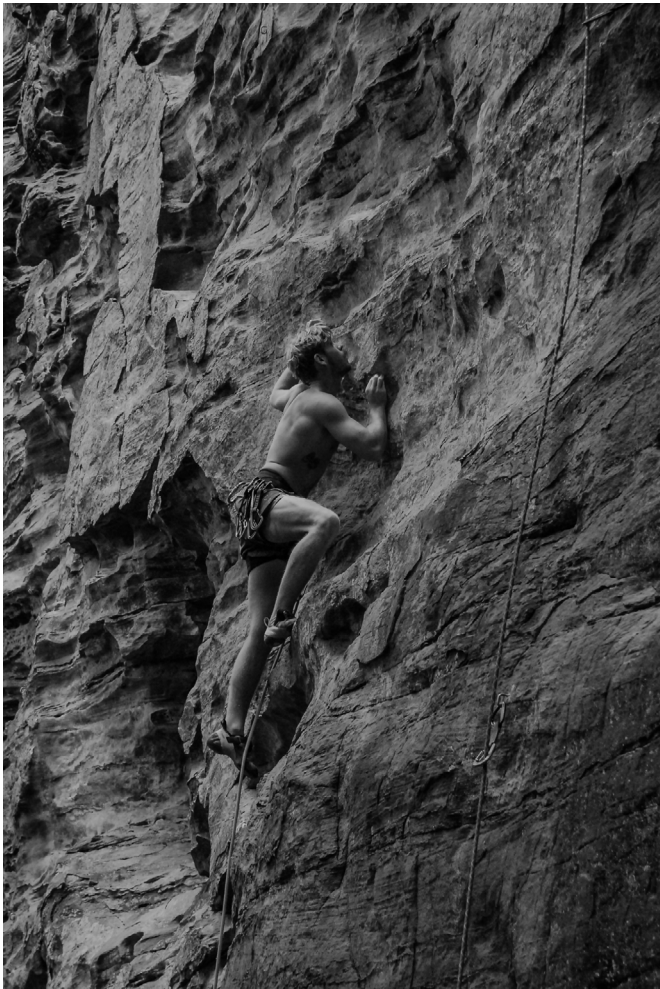
Involved

OWAA Legends



Climbing

1ST PLACE | COLLEGE CAITLIN PETERS



The story behind the photo

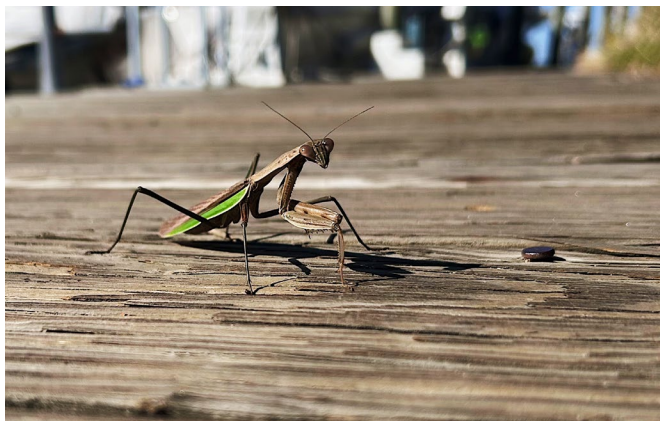
Caitlin Peters spends her time exploring a variety of hobbies that allow her to be outdoors as much as possible. The newest of these hobbies is rock climbing. She took a trip to the Red River Gorge in Kentucky and spent the weekend climbing with a friend, which is when she took this picture. As a photographer, she takes her camera everywhere and loves to use her skills to capture the outdoor recreation she participates in. This image shows the climber's connection to nature in a way where he almost blends into the rock.

— Caitlin Peters just finished her fourth year as a student at Grand Valley State University studying photography and sustainability. She has an immense passion for the outdoors. She started photographing when she was 16 and has taken her camera with her on every adventure to try and capture the beauty of nature. She's inspired by photographers like Ansel Adams and aims to use her work to promote outdoor recreation and conservation.



Mantis

2ND PLACE | COLLEGE ANNE MCAWARD



The story behind the photo

Anne McAward was working as a dockhand on Fire Island in New York. She had just finished wrangling lines on one of the more ostentatious boats, and as she was walking back, her boss narrowly missed stepping on an unassuming creature. A praying mantis. She took a class last semester on nature writing and photography and learned from her professors to get low, to see what the animal would see. She got down, low, on her belly and captured the picture with its big bug eyes staring right back at her.

— Anne McAward is a recent graduate who studied sustainability, minoring in geospatial sciences at Stony Brook University. She loves animals and is an amateur photographer with a passion for conservation and mapping, which she hopes to continue doing in the future.



Mushroom

3RD PLACE (TIE) | COLLEGE MARCOS SANSON



The story behind the photo

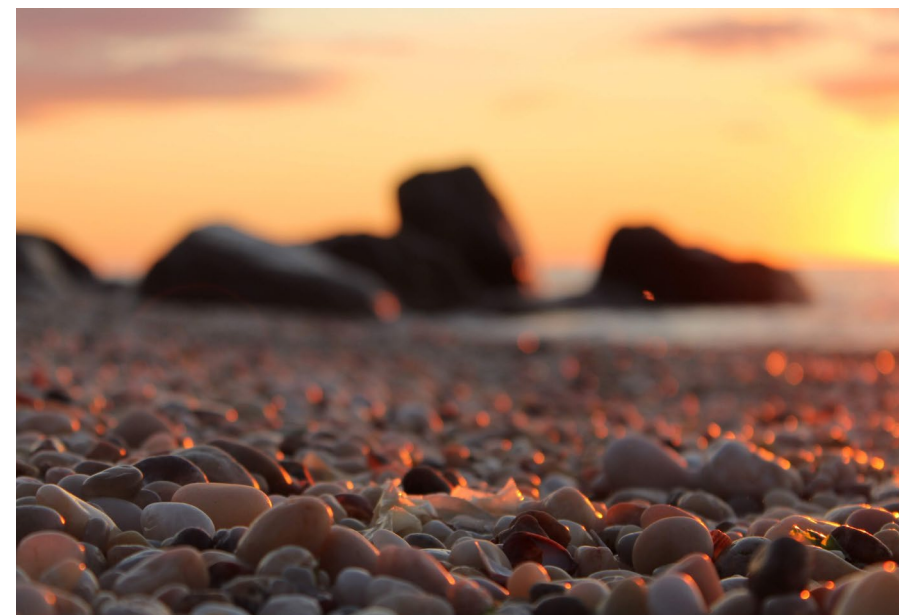
While walking the hiking trails at his college, Grand Valley State University, Marcos Sanson spotted this bright-orange mushroom tucked among the fallen leaves. The golden light of sunset filtered softly through the trees, making the mushroom's color stand out even more. He crouched down to get closer, trying to capture its texture and contrast against the forest floor. It was such a quiet, peaceful moment. This photo is a reminder of how much beauty is out there, waiting to be noticed if you take the time to look.

— Marcos Sanson is a computer science student with a passion for the outdoors and photography. While his studies focus on algorithms and technology, he loves stepping away to spend time in nature. It's where he can slow down and take in the beauty around him. As an Eagle Scout, the outdoors has always been a big part of his life. Photography gives Sanson a way to share those moments and hopefully inspire others to connect with nature, too.



Beach sunset

3RD PLACE (TIE) | COLLEGE VIKTORIA SKOBODZINSKI



The story behind the photo

One evening, Viktoria Skobodzinski headed to the beach to watch fireworks. She brought her camera, hoping for an eye-catching sunset, and placed her Tommy Bahama chair right into the rocky sand. While she was disappointed at first and decided to leave after an hour of gray skies, as she trudged back to her car, she witnessed a sorbet-colored sunset by the shoreline.

— Viktoria Skobodzinski recently completed an undergraduate degree in environmental studies and ecosystem and human impact at Stony Brook University. She is now pursuing a graduate degree there in marine conservation and policy. She loves to rock climb, hike and kayak.

10 TIPS TO MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR NEXT PRESS TRIP

What actually helps when you're traveling on assignment

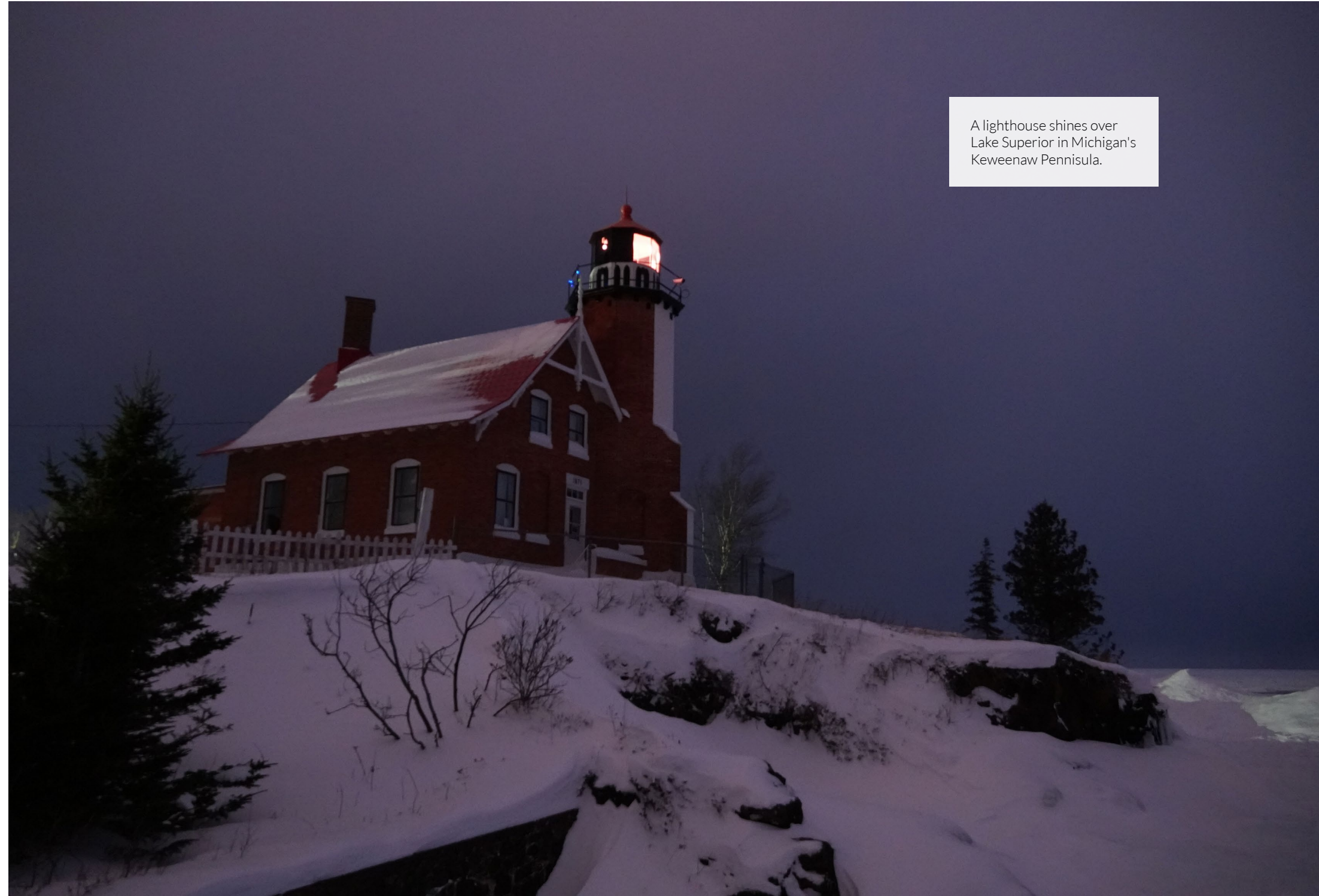
BY BRANDY JO HASTINGS | LONGWOOD, FLORIDA

This past February, eight OWAA members made the journey to Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula. Together with representatives from Visit Keweenaw and Pure Michigan, Amy Eckert, Nicky Omohundro, Michelle Marine, Rich and Marion Patterson, Gentry Hale, Paul Gordon and I experienced winter activities like snowshoeing, skiing and tubing. We even had the opportunity to explore a copper mine and enjoy the Finnish-inspired saunas. The press trip was also timed perfectly to allow our group of journalists to experience the excitement of their annual Jibba Jabba snowboarding event.

While there's no doubt we had a blast during our time there, the most important thing is that we all left with compelling new story ideas. OWAA shares multiple press trip opportunities with members throughout the year, and I encourage you to apply for ones that are relevant to your journalism focus.

Since I've worked for destination marketing organizations prior to my time as a freelance writer, I've had the unique opportunity to be both a host and a guest. I've experienced press trips from both sides, and I've learned quite a bit along the way. Here are a few of my tips for making the most of your next press trip.

A lighthouse shines over Lake Superior in Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula.



BE ON THE LOOKOUT FOR RELEVANT TRIPS

I first found out about the Visit Keweenaw press trip through OWAA's Members Only Facebook page. I also saw it listed in the OWAA email newsletter. When you see a press trip offered to OWAA members, take a look at the destination and experiences included in the trip to see if it aligns with your writing focus. Make the most of your time and apply for those that you feel could provide you with the best story ideas.

EXPLORE INDIVIDUAL PRESS TRIP OPPORTUNITIES

Feel free to reach out about individual opportunities as well. When you reach out to a destination, share information about yourself and links to previous stories you've written. Even if it's not a full trip, they can sometimes provide discounts, connections for interviews and images to accompany your stories. We have multiple destinations that are supporting members of OWAA and you can find their contact information in the Member Directory on owaa.org.

ASK WHAT'S INCLUDED

Don't be scared to ask exactly what is included in your press trip. Your host will usually have an itinerary prepared that lays this out clearly, but if they don't, ask the questions before you go so you're prepared. It's important to know ahead of time if there's anything that you'll need to pay for. If your host is reimbursing you for any expenses, it's important to understand that ahead of time too so that you can follow their processes for invoicing and reimbursement.

BE OPEN ABOUT FOOD

Let your hosts know ahead of time if you have any dietary restrictions, allergies or special needs. They're committed to making sure you have a great experience when you visit their destination, but they don't know about any specific needs you may have unless you tell them. Our hosts in Keweenaw were great and inquired about these types of things ahead of time to make sure everyone was well taken care of. Luckily this area is well known for its seafood, and there was so much great food to keep this pescatarian girl happy.



RESEARCH AND MAKE A LIST OF STORY IDEAS BEFORE YOU GO

Research the destination before you go to see what things you want to learn more about during your visit. If you have a specific story goal for the trip, share that with your destination hosts so they can make sure you get the content you need. On this particular trip, OWAA member Gentry Hale had a story she was working on about ski resorts. By sharing that with

Visit Keweenaw ahead of time, they were able to make sure she got time on the slopes so she could include the experience in her story for National Geographic.

WRITE DOWN IDEAS

Even with all of the research ahead of time, you're always going to find plenty of new and interesting facts once you're there. While some like to take digital notes on their phones, I'm a little old school and carry a small notebook with

me to write down new story ideas at the end of the day. Either way is fine, but just make sure you're keeping track of new story ideas while you're traveling. You'll probably have a packed itinerary and see so much during your trip that it can sometimes be hard to recall all of those great ideas once you get back home. Also, make sure you write down ALL of your story ideas — even the silly, far-fetched ones. I've learned that writing down all of the ideas that pop into my head can sometimes help me think up new angles later.

ASK QUESTIONS

As you're experiencing all the destination has to offer, your hosts and tour guides will provide you with a lot of great information. We're journalists though, and sometimes we like to dig a little deeper as we try to uncover fun new angles. Their goal is the same as yours, and they want to help you find a great story to tell about their destination. It also makes them excited to see you excited and engaged. So ask the questions. They want to help provide you with all of the information you need. If they don't have the answers, they'll help find them for you.

GET CONTACTS

Get contact information for story contacts. Once you get back home and get to work, you'll often have more questions that arise as you're writing your stories. Sometimes you'll need to fact-check and get clarification on certain things you learned during your visit. I like to grab business cards when I can, or at a minimum, get the names of my tour guides and contacts from each activity. Our host Jesse from Visit Keweenaw also followed up with us all after we returned home and sent us names and contact information of everyone we met during our trip. I've already used that list for follow-up questions for a story, and it's great to have that information easily accessible.

GET TO KNOW OTHER OUTDOOR MEDIA IN YOUR GROUP

When you're on a group press trip, you have an added perk of getting to know other journalists who are traveling with you. Some of the best conversations can



happen over dinner or drinks, on a bus or even in a sauna. I feel like we had a great group of OWAA members in attendance and we were able to help inspire and learn from each other. Make sure to connect on social media and stay in touch after the trip, too.

SHARE THE STORIES

This is the part that makes it all worthwhile for the destination and their partners. It's of course exciting for us when we see our finished masterpiece published, but it's equally exciting for them. Stay connected with your host and share any and all stories that mention their destination. Sometimes those mentions in stories will continue happening months (and even years) later. No matter when it happens, continue to share any stories they're included in. They'll be very appreciative and are always thankful to have those to share with their stakeholders. Share your stories with your new OWAA friends as well. I thoroughly enjoyed reading Marion and Rich Patterson's story in the Cedar Rapids Gazette the other day and look forward to seeing all of the other great stories about the Keweenaw Peninsula that are created by my new OWAA friends.



Thank you to Visit Keweenaw for hosting our OWAA members. If you didn't have an opportunity to join us on this trip but have an interest in learning more about the Keweenaw Peninsula, contact:

Jesse Wiederhold
Public Relations/Events Coordinator
Visit Keweenaw
jesse@visitkeweenaw.com

— Brandy Jo Hastings is a freelance writer focused on travel, outdoors, lifestyle, sustainability and gear. She was recognized as one of Tallahassee Woman Magazine's Women to Watch.

THE ATMEX EXPERIENCE

WRITERS GATHER IN OAXACA, MEXICO

BY DAVID ZOBY | CASPER, WYOMING

On our way to Llano Grande, the van blew a tire. Pulled over on the side of a gravel road in the Sierra Norte Mountains, the driver checked his spare. It was flat too. It was totally dark except for the two headlight beams cutting into the obscure. We were a group of travel writers: one photographer, two bloggers, an agent representing the city of Puebla and an indigenous guide, Jonatan Cruz Ceballos, who grew up in these mountains.

As a guest to the annual Adventure Travel Mexico, or ATMEX, I was returning to the state of Oaxaca after a 10-year hiatus. The first time I came here, I was here with a friend who owned a bar in Pittsburgh. He wanted to import Oaxacan cheeses for his business. He also wanted to introduce artisanal mezcal to his American clients. We spent a week hitting the markets and the palenques where the mezcal was produced. I was charmed by the street art, the special Oaxaca hot chocolate sold on the corners in the morning, the museums and ancient churches. But this trip with ATMEX was much different.

Photos by David Zoby

View of the mountains in Oaxaca, Mexico.



ABOVE: An Oaxaca guide educates visitors on local flora.



RIGHT ABOVE AND BELOW: Local Oaxaca cuisine and harvest.

When I arrived in town, I had only enough time to reorder my backpack and grab a few bottles of water. I met the other writers. Immediately, we loaded up in a van and hit the road. Climbing the switchbacks into the Sierras, we stopped once to look at the sun setting over the Oaxacan valley. “Atardecer,” Spanish for “sunset,” is possibly the most beautiful word I know. In the charming village of Benito Juárez, we sat down to playudas with the mayor of the community and some of his associates. We drank poleo tea and talked about the village’s unique community service system where all citizens must rotate into year-long, unpaid positions. Democracy is a highly valued concept in this mountain villages. Outside, kids pounded up and down a basketball court under floodlights. Basketball, it turns out, is the preferred sport up here. Situated on the slopes, it occurred to me that these towns might not have a flat area large enough to build a soccer pitch. Even the crops are sown on irregular, slanted bights of land.

Eight communities make up these Pueblas Mancomunados: Benito Juárez, La Neveria, Latuvi, Llano Grande, San Miguel Atmatlan, Lachatoa, Yavesia, and Cajimoloyas, their names themselves ringing like birdsong. They are connected by a web of trails and paths collectively called the Rutas de la Naturalezas. Each stopover offers a restaurant, cabanas,



The local guide shows the lay of the land in the area of Oaxaca, Mexico.

educational opportunities and enough hiking trails to wear yourself out. My cabana was cozy, looked out over miles of pine forests and had a fireplace.

The next day, we set out from another town along the route. We were exploring and hiking trails that were thousands of years old and once carried Zapotec people from the Oaxacan Valley to their trading partners in the east. We were making about 12 kilometers/7.5 miles a day. Jonatan turned out to be an expert on the forests, the history and religion of the area. He taught us a few Zapotec phrases. At each stop, we unburdened ourselves from our backpacks, checked into our cabins and followed Jonatan to a local person’s house where we learned about cooking, traditional medicine and ancient drinks, such as pulque.

The flat tire was just a little glitch in a wonderful week. We had gelled as a group, and the temporary pause gave us the opportunity to step outside of the van and gaze up through tree branches at a blanket of stars and planets. Another truck came for us, and soon we were sipping hot chocolate and poleo tea in a comfortable house in the tiny village of Llano Grande.

The next morning we had to be up at 5 a.m. to catch the sunrise over the Sierra Norte.

It could be said that ATMEX is a sister association to the OWAA; their motto is “The Voice of the Industry.” Like OWAA, they hold an annual conference once a year in a highly desirable location. For example, previous conferences were held in Chetumal, Loreto and Guanajuato. The Oaxaca event, held for three days in the city, provided ample opportunity to network with other travel writers and explore the marketplace. There were also interesting keynote speakers with topics ranging from sustainable tourism to the conservation efforts to restore marine turtles.

ATMEX is on a similar path as OWAA. You can find them at atmex.org or follow them on IG @adventuretravelmexico.

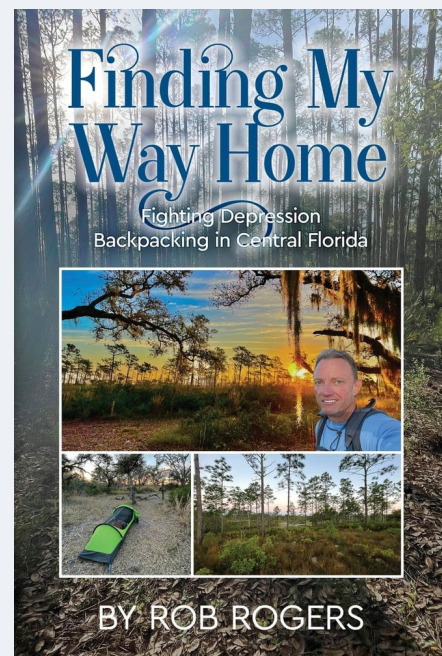
— David Zoby is a freelance writer from Wyoming, with features appearing in many of the glossy outdoor magazines.

BELOW: Learning about the local culture in Oaxaca, Mexico.



FIVE TIPS FOR OUTDOOR MEDIA

1. Learn a few phrases. Even though my Spanish is weak, I was able to greet people, thank them and say a few things in their language. This goes a long way when you’re working in a foreign country.
2. Make a business card. For the first time in my life, I made a business card with my information and my social media contacts. When you are in remote places, this can be a way to make sure you keep your contacts.
3. Try everything. When learning about cultures and foodways, it’s important to plunge in and show enthusiasm.
4. Give yourself options. I packed shorts and T-shirts for the bigger hikes. In the Sierra Norte, the mornings require long pants and jackets. Hours later, the temperatures soar. I always made sure I had light clothes I could change into during the hikes.
5. Work with pros. Expediciones Sierra Norte (sierranorte.org.mx) organized the routes and arranged the visits to homes where I was able to take cooking classes and learn about medicinal plants. They provide indigenous guides who come from these communities.



Finding My Way Home: Fighting Depression Backpacking in Central Florida

Author: Rob Rogers

Publisher: Barringer Publishing

Contact: rlrator@gmail.com and robrogerswriter.com

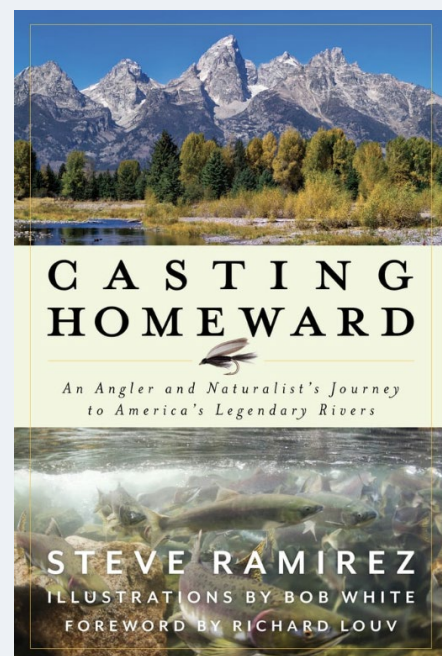
Book format: Softcover and e-book

Number of pages: 284

Released: November 2024

In his first book, Rob Rogers, a lawyer and self-described desk jockey, describes how his rediscovery of backpacking in middle age fostered a love affair with the Central Florida wilderness while helping him cope with mental illness. When the recurrence of severe depression for the first time in 25 years forced him to take a medical sabbatical, Rogers found that the peace he found solo backpacking in local state parks and forests allowed him to come to terms with past trauma and the evolution of his disease.

Rogers' essays have been published on floridahikes.com and in The Florida Writer and Still Point Arts Quarterly, and he also writes a blog called Central Florida Backpack.



Casting Homeward: An Angler and Naturalist's Journey to America's Legendary Rivers

Author: Steve Ramirez

Publisher: Lyons Press

Book format: Hardback

Number of pages: 280

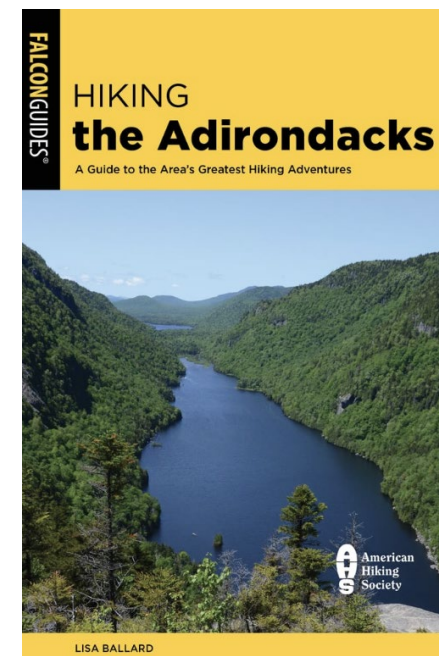
Released: September 2024

In "Casting Homeward," writer, naturalist and educator Steve Ramirez takes readers on a physical and philosophical journey to some of the most legendary rivers and wild landscapes in America. Imbued with fly-fishing throughout, this journey will seek to explore what makes certain places feel magical and meaningful. How do we define "iconic" when considering wild places that have seemingly held the ability to restore our souls and fill them with feelings of peace, belonging, awe and gratitude?

Ramirez travels from the songbird-filled hardwoods of New England to the jack-pine Northwoods where wolves still sing in the night, and from the Yellowstone Valley where bison feed next to tumbling trout streams to Bristol Bay where brown bears compete with anglers for salmon, steelhead and leopard-spotted rainbow trout. Each of the book's chosen regions has been considered an iconic destination for anyone who yearns for the wild places that are distinctly American.

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Hiking the Adirondacks: A Guide to the Area's Greatest Hiking Adventures

Author: Lisa Ballard

Publisher: Falcon Guides

Book format: Softcover

Number of pages: 360

Released: June 2023

This book features the best day hikes and weekend backpacking trips in the mountain wilderness of northeastern New York state. From 360-degree mountaintop views to dramatic waterfalls and pristine ponds, it takes readers to 47 of the most scenic locations, some well known and others off the beaten path.

Lisa Ballard is a third-generation Adirondack native. Born in Saranac Lake, New York — in the High Peaks region of the Adirondack Park — she has hiked, paddled, fished and skied in the Adirondacks her entire life. Though now a resident of Montana, she travels back to the Adirondacks each summer to visit her family, explore the backcountry and enjoy her second home on Chateaugay Lake.



True Companions: Life in the Field and Home with Our Hunting Dogs

Author: Chris Madson

Publisher: Stackpole Books

Book format: Hardback

Number of pages: 160

Released: October 2023

This collection of essays celebrates the field dogs Chris Madson has lived with, and loved, over a lifetime. There are stories of choosing pups and the trials of the early years; stories of time in wild places across North America in pursuit of pheasants, sharp-tails, prairie chickens, blue grouse, bobwhite and Gambel's quail; and stories of the bond that comes from spending years with these special companions. Madson writes with affection and humor as he remembers with a smile and a lump in the throat what these dogs have meant to him — in the field, at home and in his heart.

Chris Madson holds an M.S. in wildlife ecology from University of Wisconsin. He has been editor of Kansas Wildlife and Wyoming Wildlife. A freelance writer and photographer, he is published in Audubon, Outdoor Life, National Wildlife, Nature Conservancy magazine, High Country News, DU, Wing & Shot, Pheasants Forever and Sporting Classics, to name some of the many publications that carry his work regularly. He lives in Cheyenne, Wyoming.

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HISTORY PROJECT

A LOOK INTO OWAA'S PAST

Part V

BY PHIL BLOOM | FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

You can't say OWAA members and their cohorts don't have a sense of humor ... or adventure.

Over the years, some members engaged in memorable pranks and stunts, usually to the delight of their colleagues but at least once to the chagrin of J. Hammond Brown.

In 1949, OWAA had its conference at North Bay, Ontario, where Brown got what is best described as a royal surprise courtesy of jolly pranksters Ed L. Taylor and Charles Gillham.

Both had writing obligations to fulfill — Taylor for Associated Press and Gillham for Field & Stream. OWAA archival material includes a letter from Taylor explaining what happened after both he and Gillham enjoyed a Canadian National Airways cocktail party perhaps a bit too much.

"And that's how all the trouble started," Taylor said.

They ended up at the telegraph office, where Taylor battled a pesky keyboard to scratch out his story from notes written on the back of a wine napkin. Once finished, Taylor and Gillham planned on returning to the CNA party for a couple of night-caps.

"As we were leaving the wire office, one of the operators mentioned that the next day would be celebrated as the King's birthday," Taylor said.

"I looked at Charley and he looked at me — an idea blossomed in tandem — the King's Birthday. Why not send a cable over to London and congratulate his royal highness. So back to the typewriters we went. In our salutation to his highness, we ran into a sticky-wicket — neither of us could spell 'auspicious.'"

They settled on "joyous" instead, signed Ham Brown's name and sent it.

Taylor and Gillham slept in the next day before they went fishing on the Ottawa River.

"We had visions of lolling on the deck of somebody's lush yacht as we viewed the

verdant forest and the sky-blue waters," Taylor said.

The yacht turned out to be a tug boat from a local pulpwood mill. The boat broke down, leaving Taylor and Gillham late for the evening banquet, where their birthday telegram took on a second life.

As the banquet was set to begin, three black limousines arrived with Ontario consular officials escorted by a pair of Royal Mounties in full regalia. The entourage swept into the banquet hall, surrounded the startled Brown, shook his hand and told him how grateful King George VI was for the friendly birthday greetings from OWAA.

As Brown adroitly rearranged seating at the head table for the Ontario dignitaries, Taylor and Gillham slinked away to the hotel bar.

"Later that night Ham ferreted us out and told us we had taken one hell of a chance and nearly committed international complications and that our State Department was mad as hell because we hadn't cleared this operation with them," Taylor said.

"He stated further that should we have any more machinations in mind, 'Clear it with me first, damn it. Thanks, and get to bed, you clowns.'"

Brown was on the receiving end of another stunt three years later — albeit not as mischievous as the Taylor-Gillham caper. It was a handshake between Brown and Joe Adams at Pier Five in Miami when Adams arrived after a 15-day, 2,000-mile trip from his home in Long Island in a 16-foot runabout powered by a 25-horsepower outboard motor.



ABOVE: In 1952, Joe Adams piloted his 16-foot boat from Long Island to Miami for an OWAA conference. Upon arrival, he was greeted at the pier by Ham Brown.

Along the way, Adams endured several challenges — a rough water crossing in Delaware, getting stuck in a mudbank in North Carolina, encountering a cottonmouth in South Carolina and being sideswiped by a 30-foot cabin cruiser on the return trip home to Long Island.

"But it really was damn exciting fun," said Adams, a professional photographer, "every bit of it."

More than once, OWAA conference attendees were subjected to pranks.

Exhibit A was the joke then-OWAA President Tom Opre played on Interior Secretary James Watt, keynote speaker at the 1981 conference in Louisville. Critics considered Watt a fox guarding the henhouse for some of his policies, so Opre presented him with a mounted red fox.

Watt responded with humor and reportedly displayed the mounted fox in his office once he returned to Washington, D.C.

"In front of a bunch of avid hunters, there is no way I am going to admit to being a fox. Besides, it is obvious that I am a disaster as a fur-bearing animal," said Watt, noting his receding hairline. "Eagle seems much more appropriate — bald eagle for sure."

Exhibit B occurred in 1956 when OWAA met in State College, Pennsylvania, where Winchester-sponsored showman shooter Herb Parsons put on an exhibition in marksmanship with an aromatic and juicy finish. Parsons, who annually averaged 130 performances, was well known for his shooting skills. He knew from experience that an audience would start in a safe location but inch closer and closer to him with each trick shot. Expecting it to happen again, he prepared for the moment by loading a grapefruit with cheap perfume. When the attendees were close enough, Parsons tossed the doctored grapefruit skyward, blew it to smithereens and doused everyone with a mix of perfume and grapefruit.

Exhibit C came 10 years earlier when the conference was in Chattanooga. Georgia Game & Fish Commission director Charlie Elliott knew attendees were being offered a fishing trip on the Jacks River in northwest Georgia near the host city.

Elliott used his position to procure hundreds of brood stock rainbow trout from a federal hatchery and had them released in Jacks River.

"We scattered the group of OWAA

fishermen along the river and they had the time of their lives," Elliott said.

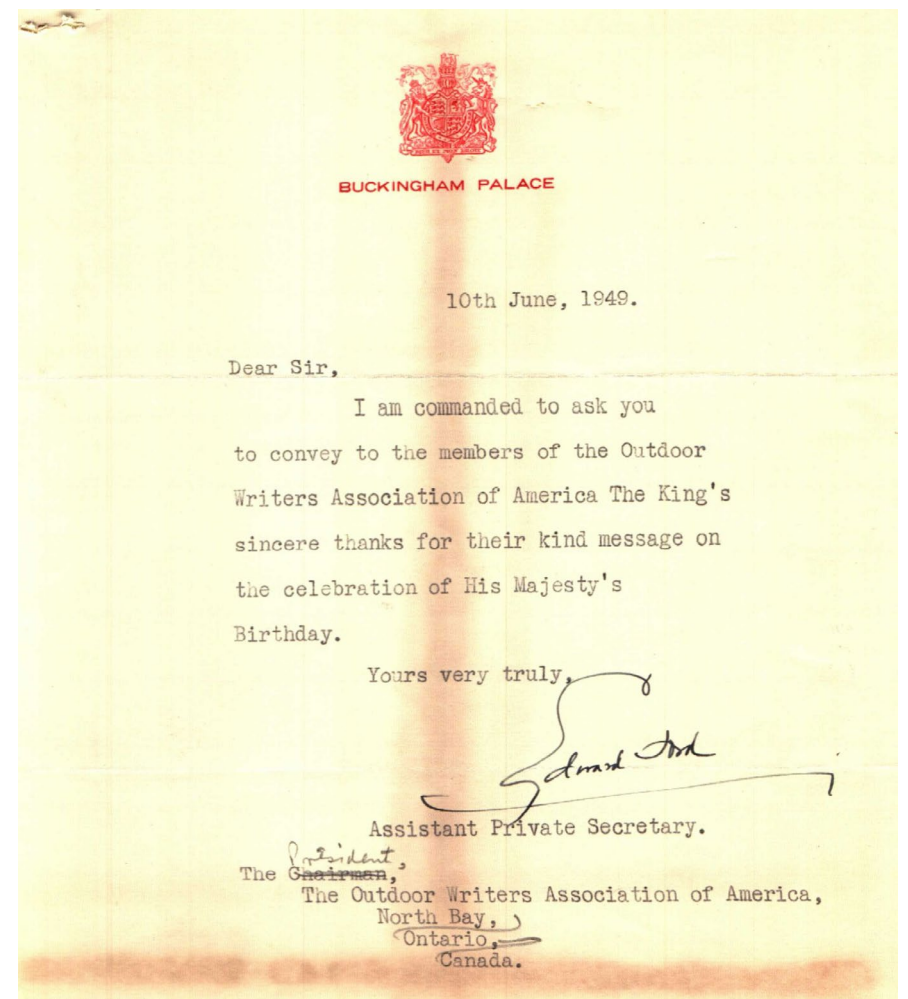
Attendees were delirious over the plentiful catches of 30- to 36-inch fish they believed were "wild trout." One proclaimed Jacks River the best fishing waters in America and described how "the old mossbacks hang under the banks and won't take a fly unless it is fished deep and exactly right."

Elliott got the last laugh, later saying, "The state got good press out of that she-nanigan."

If anyone in OWAA circles recognized a public relations opportunity more than Elliott, it may have been Thayne Smith.

Nearing retirement in 1987 as public relations director for Lowrance Electronics, Smith helped concoct Operation Deep-scan, a project aimed at using his company's marine sonar to find the Loch Ness monster in Scotland.

BELOW: Buckingham Palace sent a thank-you note, and an official delegation to deliver it, in response to a birthday telegram two OWAA pranksters sent to the king of England under Ham Brown's signature.



In a letter to OWAA Executive Director Sylvia Bashline ahead of the expedition, Smith said, "I now have 42 writers and eight staff people going to Scotland ...

"Most (not all) are OWAA members. In addition, we will have at least 30 journalists from Europe with us, and Heaven knows how many — including foreign correspondents and television crews from 15 countries — stationed in London and Paris.

"One thing is certain. Maybe two things. I'm already over budget, so it's good that I'm stepping down at Lowrance in November. I don't believe in Nessie, but it's sure fun looking for her."

What may have begun as a farce turned Smith from a skeptic to wondering if there is something big in the Scottish lake.

"I think, personally, there's more than one 'thing' down there," he told the Tulsa,

Oklahoma, newspaper. “Perhaps it’s a large fish, maybe a tremendous eel.”

Twenty sonar-equipped boats lined up side by side for multiple sweeps of the 23-mile-long lake. They didn’t find Nessie, but the Lowrance equipment captured three sizeable blips that experts were unable to define. The inability to provide certainty to the centuries-old mystery of the Loch Ness monster rankled at least one British journalist out of the 300 media members in attendance.

“You mean you can’t tell us what these squiggles actually are?” the journalist reportedly asked. “Then why the bloody hell did we come all this way?”

Some speculation was the three blips might indicate a family of large — but unexplained — aquatic creatures.

OWAA member Glenn Titus also covered the event and wrote: “Operation Deepscan is over and the crowds of scientists, media and curious are gone. The myth of the Loch Ness Monster has been reinforced in the minds of millions around the globe.”

The two-week project was reported to cost its multiple sponsors, including the British Tourism Department and the Loch Ness Society, about \$1.6 million.

Ah, a million bucks for a fishing expedition. How about that much for a single fishing lure?

That’s what Mac McBurney was pitching to OWAA members at the 2006 conference in Lake Charles, Louisiana. The designer of MacDaddy Fishing Lures in California showed up with a handful of jeweled lures valued at \$10,000, which explained the company’s motto — “We Put Bling On Your String.”

McBurney’s show stopper, though, was his Million Dollar Lure — a 12-inch-long lure featuring more than three pounds of gold, platinum and almost 4,800 diamonds and rubies.

“Some people just say I’m crazy and the others think I’m crazy like a fox,” McBurney told OWAA’s Brett Prettyman, who wrote about the gaudy gadget for the Salt Lake Tribune.

Prettyman was one of the conference attendees who got to fish one of McBurney’s less pricey \$10,000 lures.

“Actually, ‘fished’ is the wrong word,” Prettyman wrote. “I cast the lure several times but reeled it in way too fast to pick up any fish for fear it would snag on the rocky bottom. Other, more daring anglers caught fish — not sure what they were — with the lures.” McBurney told Prettyman he planned to make 25 of the million-dollar lures and struck a deal with the Make-A-Wish Foundation that if it sold a lure, he’d donate 5% to the foundation.

“I’m offering something nobody else in the world has,” McBurney said. “We are in a league of our own; nothing else even comes close. We are so over the top, it’s unreal.”

As any good practical joker knows, for any prank to succeed, it has to be just that — a little unreal.

— *Phil Bloom is two-time president of OWAA and a lifelong resident of Fort Wayne, Indiana.*

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GOLDEN
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planned giving | stewardship





OWAA

SNAPSHOT

2025 member survey results

332 Million

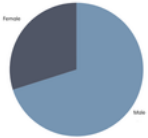
Annual collective audience reach

DEMOGRAPHICS

Male | 68%

Female | 29%

(Prefer not to answer 3%)



LOCATION

TOP STATES

1 Minnesota


2 Virginia

3 Oregon

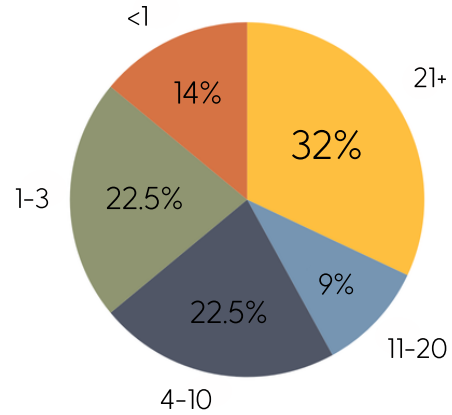
4 Texas

5 Pennsylvania

6 Michigan



YEARS OF MEMBERSHIP



TOP REASONS FOR JOINING OWAA

- Networking
- Craft improvement
- Professional development
- Community

TOP 3 MEMBER BENEFITS UTILIZED

- Outdoors Unlimited Magazine
- Excellence in Craft Contest
- Annual Conference

PROFESSIONAL MEDIA 600+ AREAS COVERED

TOP 5 GENERAL OUTDOOR MEDIA AREAS

- Travel | 70%
- Hiking | 51%
- Camping and backpacking | 47%
- Photography/videography | 34%
- Cooking (indoors/outdoors) | 33%

TOP 5 ENVIRONMENTAL MEDIA AREAS

- Wildlife conservation | 75%
- Natural resources | 66%
- Environment | 61%
- Natural history | 48%
- Ecology | 45%

TOP 4 HUNTING, FISHING & FIREARMS MEDIA AREAS

- Freshwater fishing | 51%
- Upland bird hunting | 36%
- Fly-fishing | 35%
- Big-game hunting | 34%

TOP 3 WATERSPORTS & BOATING MEDIA AREAS

- Canoeing | 38%
- Recreational kayaking | 35%
- Rafting | 15%

TOP 3 SNOW SPORTS MEDIA AREAS

- Snowshoeing | 23%
- Cross-country skiing | 22%
- Downhill skiing/boarding | 16%

TOP 2 CYCLING MEDIA AREAS

- General cycling (family, rail-trail, etc.) | 24%
- Mountain biking | 12%

Roadkill and disease threaten Placerita Canyon's Mule Deer

BY JAYME SUN THOMAS | NEWHALL, CALIFORNIA

IN THE DIVERSE ECOSYSTEMS OF PLACERITA CANYON — WHERE OAK WOODLANDS, CHAPARRAL AND RIPARIAN WETLANDS MEET THE SOUTHERN EDGES OF THE SAN GABRIEL MOUNTAINS — MULE DEER ARE DYING AT AN ALARMING RATE. TWO KEY FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO THEIR DECLINE: ROAD COLLISIONS AND CHRONIC WASTING DISEASE.

Placerita Canyon in the Angeles National Forest is part of a vital ecological corridor that links the northern San Fernando Valley, Ventura County, Antelope Valley, Santa Clarita Valley and northern Los Angeles County. These mountains, which sit atop the San Andreas Fault Zone, support a diversity of wildlife. From California condors and mountain yellow-legged frogs to bighorn sheep, spotted owls and salamanders, the region is teeming with both threatened and non-threatened species.

Closer to home, the canyon supports peregrine falcons, black bears, coyotes, bobcats and the elusive mountain lion. And, of course, there are the mule deer — icons of this landscape — that graze on native shrubs and browse the canyon's dense woodlands and hillsides.

But today, their survival is in jeopardy.

A road through their home

One of the most visible threats to mule deer in the canyon is vehicular traffic. Placerita Canyon Road winds out of the Santa Clarita suburbs and into the foothills and woodlands with no street lighting and few residential interruptions. It's scenic, yes — but perilous for wildlife.

On any given day, vehicle drivers strike and kill two to three mule deer along this stretch. Speed limit signage is sparse and many drivers ignore posted limits, especially at night when visibility is low and headlights provide the only warning.

I witnessed the tragic result myself. Just outside the entrance to Placerita Canyon State Park, I found a lifeless fawn lying in the road — still, beautiful and heart-breakingly peaceful. I wept. The young deer, with her brown-and-white spotted coat and signature large ears, would never grow to maturity in these mountains. The

image will never leave my mind. It's a morning I'll never forget.

It's clear that many of these deaths are preventable. Better signage, speed enforcement and public awareness could go a long way toward protecting the deer that call this canyon home.

The rise of chronic wasting disease

Even more concerning is the recent arrival of chronic wasting disease (CWD), often referred to as “zombie deer disease.” This contagious, always-fatal neurological illness affects deer, elk, moose and reindeer. CWD causes drastic weight loss, stumbling, excessive salivation and behavioral changes — such as loss of fear of humans — that may also increase the risk of vehicle collisions.

Originally identified in Colorado in 1967, CWD has now spread to 36 U.S. states as well as five Canadian provinces. On May 6, 2024, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife confirmed the state's first two CWD cases: one in Madera County and another in Inyo County, near Bishop.

Locally, several mule deer carcasses —many with no signs of predation or trauma — were noted by California Department of Fish and Wildlife staff to be found near Placerita Canyon trails. Park Superintendent Russ Kimura suspects that CWD may be the cause, as the deer appeared young and otherwise healthy.

Staff also documented that hikers discovered bones and partial remains on both the Canyon and Waterfall Trails, raising alarm that this fatal disease may now be circulating in the region.

The prions that cause CWD are spread through infected urine, feces, blood and saliva. They can remain in the soil and on plants for years. Scavengers like coyotes

and crows can further spread the disease through their waste, contaminating wider areas of the habitat.

So far, researchers have not found CWD in humans — but as we've learned from diseases like COVID-19 and avian flu, animal-to-human transmission is not out of the question. A greater investment in research, vaccines and public education is essential to protecting both animal populations and public health.

What we stand to lose

The San Gabriel Mountains and Placerita Canyon hold rich biodiversity, ecological history and beauty worth protecting. But without action, we risk losing one of their most iconic species to both steel and sickness. Whether you're a wildlife lover, hiker, hunter or neighbor, the mule deer's future depends on all of us. Slow down, stay informed and help protect the species we are lucky to still share these canyons with.

— Jayme Sun Thomas is a wildlife and nature photographer and docent naturalist at Placerita Canyon State Park.



In 2024, researchers estimated California's mule and blacktail deer population to be roughly 475,000 before hunting season. This estimate has fluctuated between 400,000 and 700,000 over the past 30 years according to the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. Researchers with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife use a computer model that incorporates harvest data and survey data to estimate the deer population annually.

Outdoor gear spotlight

EDITOR PICKS

BY SUZANNE DOWNING | ALBERTON, MONTANA

The outdoor gear featured in this section is field-tested gear that performs and gear I recommend. I've also added PR contacts. The contacts listed are people I've had positive experiences working with, and these gear representatives are looking to connect with more outdoor writers. So, if you're interested in field-testing any of the items in this article, or you have an assignment or gear roundup coming up that might be a good fit, send these reps a note. Reach out and start building relationships.

TROT DOG FEEDER AND WATER BOWL SET

If you're heading into the field with a dog — whether it's a hike, hunt or back-country road trip — this Trot bowl set is handy to have. It's lightweight and folds flat, so it won't bulk up your pack. The lids are airtight and great for pre-packing meals or sealing leftovers when your pup's too distracted to finish. The nonslip base keeps the bowls from skidding across rocks or truck beds. And the bowl for dog food has a slow-feeder feature that can help with slower eating and better digestion. It's the first rugged travel set I've used that doesn't feel like a cheap camping gimmick. The set includes two stainless steel, rustproof bowls for food and water (one puzzle slow feeder, one standard water bowl), two airtight, no-leak lids and a quick-drying silicone mat to keep bowls in place. (MSRP: small \$127, medium \$129 and large \$139)

PR Contact: Julia Haney
juliahaneypr@gmail.com



BOTE WULF AERO 11'4" NATIVE DUNE INFLATABLE PADDLEBOARD

If you cover outdoor gear or have a need to get on the water in the field, this WULF Aero SUP is a good choice to field-test to consider for media coverage. The board is lightweight, beginner friendly and fairly wallet friendly compared to most SUPs on the market of the same quality. It has Bote's MAGNEPOD™ Magnetic Accessory compatibility so you

can use it with a MAGNEPOD-compatible mug or cup on the water. MAGNEPOD is a magnet system that keeps your mug/cup in place so you can take your drink on the go. This set comes with everything you need to hit the water — paddleboard, aluminum SUP paddle, coiled leash, removeable center fin, repair kit, hand pump and fabric backpack. (MSRP: \$399)



RUX MODULAR GEAR STORAGE ESSENTIALS THREE-PIECE SET

As an outdoor media pro, you need gear storage. And the people we write for who are also getting outdoors need gear storage. This modular, collapsible storage system is good for separating your wet gear from dry clothes, protecting tech from trail grit and stashing lunch far from your boots. The combinations are up to you. It's weatherproof and made with welded seams. It's also a collapsible build so you can haul gear and fold it down flat if needed. The fabric is durable nylon, specifically 840D TPU-coated waterproof nylon — a strong and thick fabric (the "D" stands for "denier," a measure of fiber thickness). 840D is tough and resistant to tears and abrasions. It's also TPU-coated, meaning the fabric is coated with thermoplastic polyurethane, which makes it waterproof, flexible and more durable. It's an investment piece, but it's built for longevity and designed to keep your gear dry in rain or snow or even if your bag takes a tumble in a stream. It's also tough enough to survive consistent tossing into the back of trucks or being scraped on rocks or dragged through brush, so it's ideal for unpredictable field conditions. (MSRP: \$399)

PR Contact: McClain Moran
mcclain@purpleorangepr.com

BIOLITE FIREPIT+ SMOKELESS PORTABLE FIRE PIT AND GRILL

Whether you're recording content, prepping camp meals or just decompressing after a day in the field, this smokeless, portable fire pit and grill is a nice addition to your base camp without turning your surroundings into a smoke cloud. You can use it with standard firewood or charcoal and it packs down easily with folding legs. If you're a gear tester, this one photographs well, so have some fun with it. It has smokeless tech — Biolite's patented combustion design — that keeps smoke out of your face and your gear. You can also use the smart control (optional) if you're techy to adjust the airflow with a Bluetooth app and run the fan for up to 30 hours. It also has a USB outlet, so you can top off your cell phone battery while you cook. (MSRP: \$299)

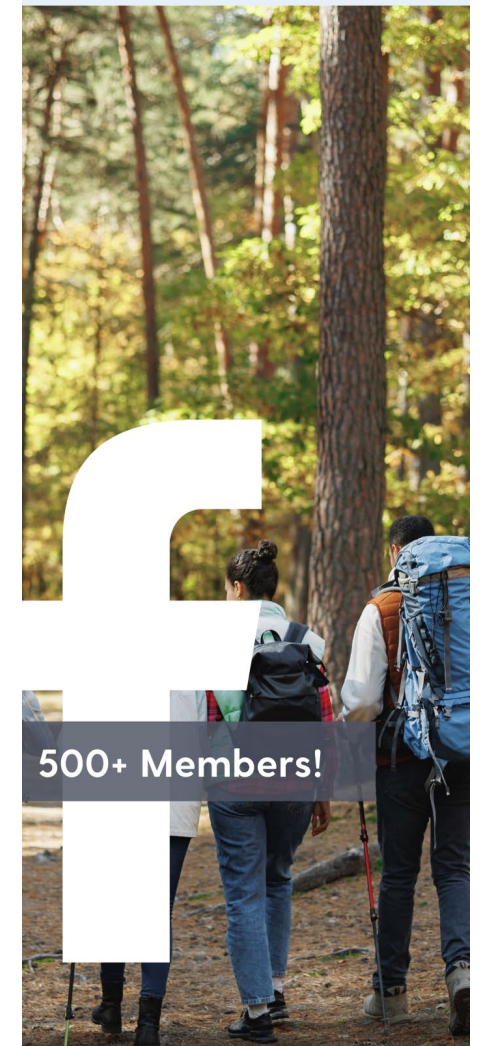


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- Friday brag
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- AND MORE

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ASK AN AUTHOR

Q & A WITH AMY GRISAK

BY SUZANNE DOWNING | ALBERTON, MONTANA

When Amy Grisak set out to write “100 Things To Do in Bozeman Before You Die,” she didn’t rely on Google reviews or second-hand lists. She dug in the old-fashioned way — boots on the ground, fork in hand and notebook at the ready. Whether it was hiking familiar trails, discovering new local gems or squeezing stories from friends, Grisak’s book is rooted in real experience, and it shows.

AUTHENTICITY AND EXPERIENCE

Q. When writing “100 Things To Do in Bozeman Before You Die,” how important was it for you to personally visit, experience or try each of the recommendations (like food, etc.)? And, how did you handle any recommendations that you weren’t able to personally participate in?

A. I already knew and had experienced many of the places, but Bozeman is such a vibrant, growing area that I was happy to follow up on friends’ recommendations for places to eat and activities to try. For many of the ones that I couldn’t do firsthand, I relied upon friends’ experiences to fill me in on the details.

Q. How did you fund the upfront costs associated with researching and creating the book (e.g., food comps, ticket comps, out-of-pocket travel, etc.)?

A. To help cover costs, I wrote a few articles for various publications highlighting some of these Bozeman-centric experiences. My husband attended graduate school in Bozeman, so we know a lot of folks there, but I mostly stayed with my friend Pandora. A few exceptions included a lovely comped stay at one hotel, plus a night in the teepee at Headwaters State Park for only \$30.

WORKING WITH A PRESS AGENCY

Q. You worked with Reedy Press. What three tips would you give to other authors looking to publish with a press company?

Were there any aspects of working with them that surprised you, and what is something that would you do differently if you were to go through the process again?

A. The biggest surprise of working with Reedy Press is how much I adore them! They are organized, efficient and always there if you need anything. That’s a good question about what I would do differently. I would change nothing as far as Reedy Press goes because they have the process down seamlessly, although one aspect I would do differently is strictly adhering to the word count. I squeezed as much information as possible into so many entries that I had to condense quite a bit. I learned my lesson, though!

CREATIVE PROCESS AND CHALLENGES

Q. Can you walk us through your process for curating and narrowing down the list of the 100 things? What were the two biggest challenges you faced while writing the book, and how did you overcome them?

A. The process started with the places I knew; then, I spoke with friends to discover what was new and exciting in town. I also contacted the convention and visitors bureau and any tourist-related organizations I could find. But it was time spent down there that helped me narrow the choices. Some places were no longer “up to snuff,” so to speak, while newer ones far outshined them and deserved a place in the book. I also often followed the advice of the people I interviewed

because they had a different perspective of out-of-the-way places, so it was fun to explore those leads.

The cost was definitely a factor. Bozeman is upscale, and even the simplest meal is pricey. I can’t say I overcame that difficulty very well because I wanted to try everything! Sometimes this meant ordering a very basic dish to go, but at least it was a way for me to try the food.

Yet, along those lines, I would say my second most challenging aspect of the book was eliminating places, mostly restaurants. We could have written “100 Places to Eat in Bozeman” without a problem! Thankfully, I was able to include many of them in sidebars.

BALANCING PERSONAL VOICE AND PRACTICALITY

Q. Travel and guidebooks often walk the line between being informative and personal. What are three ways you balanced your own voice and storytelling with the need to create a practical, actionable guide for readers?

A. If I relied upon my druthers, visiting Bozeman would encompass history (including Sunset Hills Cemetery), hiking and eating. Still, from my decades of showing friends around Montana, I knew people want to experience what the area offers on a different level. Even while researching the book, people asked me for suggestions, so it was a good opportunity to share some of the activities and gauge peoples’ reactions.

Another way was to imagine taking my aunt, who has vastly different tastes than mine, there for a weekend. What

would I show her? Where would I take her to shop and eat? Lastly, I needed to balance the options to include indoor and outdoor activities. As much as we all live for the outdoors, particularly in an area as beautiful as Bozeman, there are days when it’s nice to be out of the elements.

EVOLVING RECOMMENDATIONS

Q. Given that Bozeman is constantly growing and changing, how did you approach including places or experiences that might be newer or evolving? Were there any activities you hesitated to include because of uncertainty about their longevity or accessibility? How frequently will this book be updated?

A. I didn’t add anything brand new precisely because of the potential success issue. Surprisingly, though, a community fixture for decades, the Children’s Museum, closed unexpectedly. We were already in the editing process when I learned about it. I knew homeschool families who renewed their membership for the year the week prior, so it caught everyone off guard. Thankfully, we were able to add another organization.

I’m not sure how often they’ll update the book, but I’m sure there will be significant changes within even a few years.

TIPS AND TRICKS

Q. Anything else you can add for other authors? Tips and tricks, etc.?

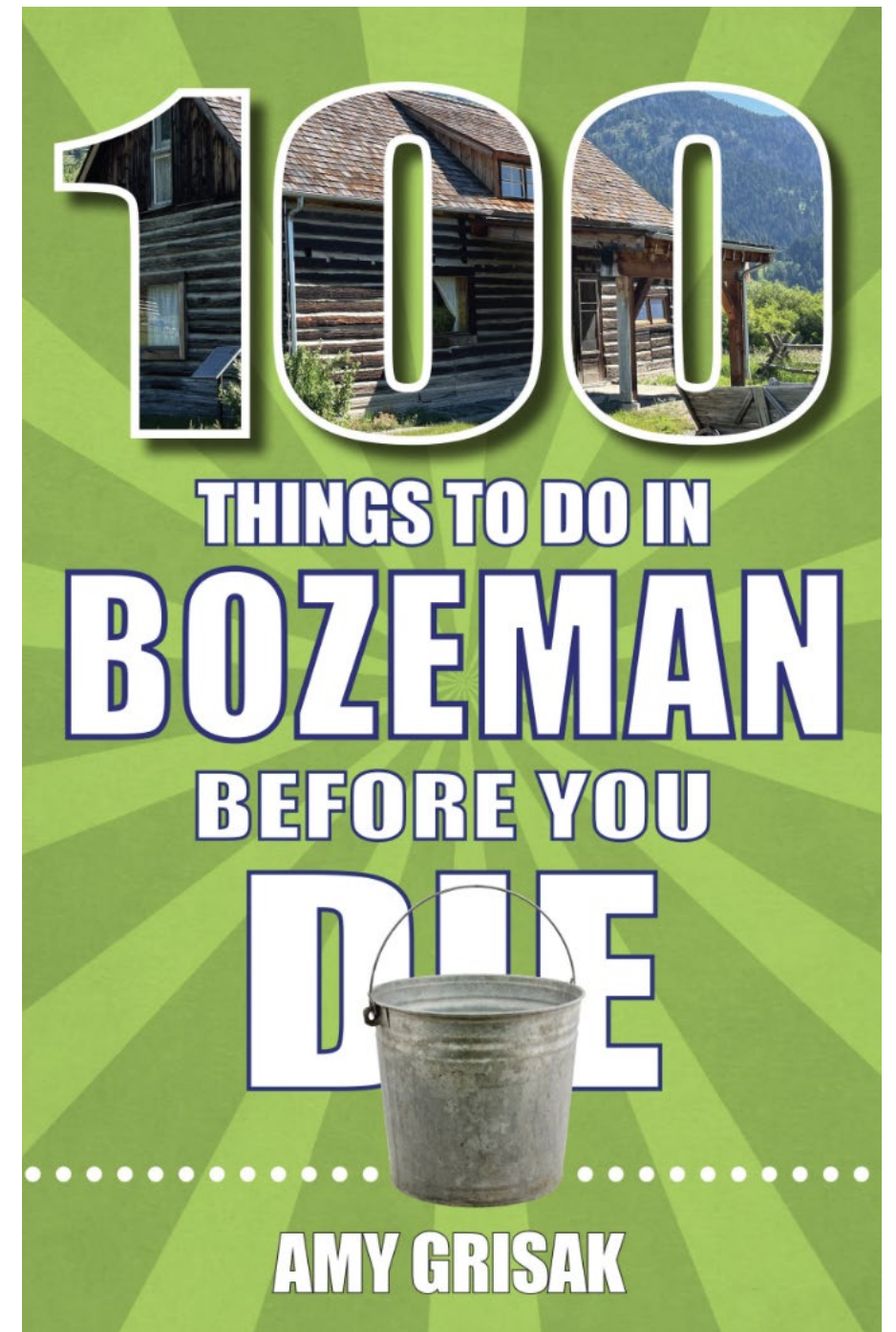
A. As for tips and tricks, my recommendation is to talk with as many people as possible just for a different perspective.

Reedy Press contact:
Alex McPherson
amcpherson@reedypress.com

— Suzanne Downing is a freelance journalist and the publications editor for *Outdoors Unlimited*.



Meet the author: Amy Grisak is an award-winning writer and the author of “Nature Guide to Glacier and Waterton Lakes National Parks” and “Found Photos of Yellowstone: Yellowstone’s History in Tourist and Employee Photos.” In her writing, she shares what she loves about her home state. When she is not chasing a deadline, Grisak is exploring the trails and rivers of beautiful Montana with her friends and family.





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Meet a member



NAME: Annika Hipple

RESIDENCE: Shoreline, WA

OWAA MEMBER SINCE: 2022

Annika Hipple is a freelance writer and photographer who has covered outdoor-related topics for Lonely Planet, BBC Travel, Atlas Obscura, Sierra, Northwest Travel & Life, Bats and many other publications. A dual citizen of the U.S. and Sweden, she was raised in the Boston and Stockholm areas and now lives in Seattle, Washington. Her recent outdoor adventures include an 11-day wilderness rafting expedition through remote British Columbia and Alaska, a six-day sea kayaking trip off northern Vancouver Island and small-ship expedition cruises in Hawaii and Antarctica.

annikahipple.com

WHAT ARE YOUR AREAS OF OUTDOOR COMMUNICATION?

I write about outdoor adventure, wildlife, conservation and sustainability for publications, nonprofit organizations and other clients. I also do a lot of outdoor and conservation photography and I'm working on making this a larger part of my business.

WHAT DREW YOU TO THE FIELD?

I have a B.A. in environmental studies and an M.A. in Latin American studies with an environmental focus. After grad school, I had initially planned to go into the nonprofit world but began doing freelance writing work while looking for a full-time job. Eventually I managed to focus my writing more and more on topics I care about, so I stuck with freelancing and never did get that full-time job.

WHAT ENTICED YOU TO JOIN OWAA?

I have known Chez Chesak for a long time through my involvement with the Adventure Travel Trade Association and became aware of OWAA when he became the executive director. After learning more about the organization through his Facebook posts, I decided to join when a new member discount was offered.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE OUTDOOR ACTIVITY?

Anything that gets me into or onto the water. During my childhood summers in Sweden, we spent a lot of time swimming in the Baltic Sea and some of the country's nearly 100,000 lakes. During a college semester abroad in Ecuador, I had my first

opportunity to snorkel (in the Galapagos Islands), and that quickly became another favorite activity, which I indulge in every chance I get.

WHAT ARE YOU CURRENTLY WORKING ON?

In addition to writing outdoor stories for various publications, I am working on adding more well-funded nonprofit conservation organizations to my client list, as well as expanding my efforts to market my photography.

WHAT HAVE YOU GAINED FROM THE ORGANIZATION?

For various reasons I haven't yet been as actively involved as I'd like, but I have gained contacts within the outdoor industry and had some interesting press trip opportunities come my way. I have enjoyed connecting with other members online and hope to attend an OWAA conference soon.

WHAT IS ONE PIECE OF ADVICE YOU'D GIVE TO SOMEONE THINKING OF JOINING OWAA?

If you write about the outdoors and are looking to join a community of highly qualified communicators with similar interests, don't hesitate. Once you join, be as active a participant as you can and attend online and in-person events as your budget and schedule allow.