

CARETAKERS of our NATIONAL PARKS

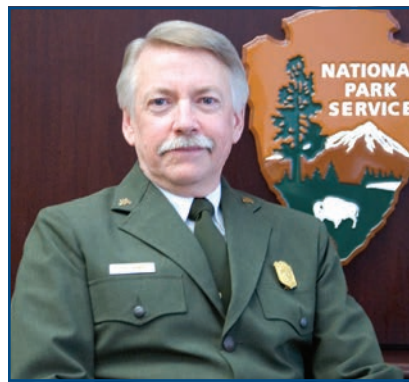
BY LISA DENSMORE BALLARD





Our national parks, monuments, seashores, rivers, and historic sites are maintained, preserved, and even personified by the 22,000 employees and 221,000 volunteers who work at these public places. Anyone who has visited a national park has probably met a park ranger (who can be identified by their distinctive hats), but there are many other people who manage these treasured destinations every day.

While it's impossible to profile every person who works for the National Park Service (NPS), we have a sampling of the many types of jobs – and the many types of people who hold them – at park units across the country.



JONATHAN JARVIS
Director, National Park Service
 Washington, DC

Responsibilities: Jarvis oversees more than 22,000 employees and more than 400 national parks that generate \$30 billion in economic benefits across the country each year.

Years in current position: 7

Years with the Park Service: 40+

Career path: Jarvis began his career with the National Park Service in 1976 as a seasonal interpreter in Washington, DC. Since then, his career has taken him from ranger to resource management specialist to park biologist to superintendent of parks such as Craters of the Moon, North Cascades, Wrangell-St. Elias, and Mount Rainier. Before being confirmed as the 18th director of the National Park Service in September 2009, Jarvis served as regional director of the Pacific West Region. Today, he manages the agency tasked with preserving America's most treasured landscapes and cultural icons.

What makes our national parks special: "Every day, I feel honored to steward some of the greatest, most important, most beautiful places in the United States.... Our national parks are a physical manifestation of who we are as Americans, and their care sends a message to future generations about our history and our aspirations as a nation."

Typical day: "Starts with morning briefings on media, issues, congressional activities, and events involving NPS. The rest of the day involves major problem solving around national parks and, this year, the 100th anniversary."

Biggest challenge: Having to deal with the angry politics of Washington.

Best part of the job: Getting to work with the extraordinary public servants in the National Park Service.

My favorite national park: All of them!



GUS MARTINEZ
Deputy Chief Ranger, Operations
Yosemite National Park

Responsibilities: Martinez supervises law enforcement, emergency medical programs, search and rescue operations, a medical clinic (in partnership with the U.S. Public Health Service), and the only fully staffed jail in a national park.

Years in current position: 1

Years with the Park Service: 30

Career path: The National Park Service hired Martinez in 1986 as a “generalist ranger” in Yosemite — which entailed putting out wildfires, doing trail maintenance work, and patrolling the backcountry — before hiring him as a full-time law enforcement ranger. Martinez worked in various capacities at other national parks, including Point Reyes National Seashore, Big Bend National Park, Padre Island National Seashore, and Glacier Bay National Park, before returning to Yosemite last year.

What makes my park special: “This park has wilderness values. The John Muir and Pacific Crest Trails both go through our high country. In Yosemite Valley, there’s Half Dome, El Capitan, and tremendous hanging waterfalls. It’s inspiring. You can challenge yourself climbing big walls, go backcountry skiing and winter camping. Then there’s the O’Shaughnessy Dam: it’s an engineering marvel and provides water and power to San Francisco. It’s a 100-year-old system surrounded by controversy, but it’s also part of California’s history.”

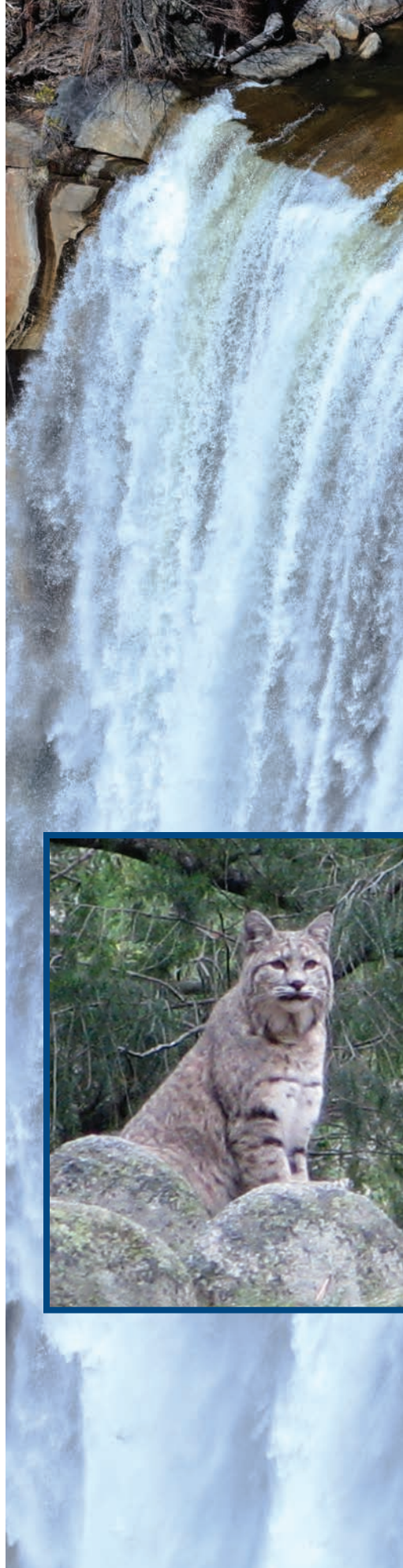
Typical day: Attending planning meetings and communicating across park departments. “I look at and hear complaints to determine trends, then I try figure out how to do things better and more securely. I still patrol now and again, and I’m still a fire officer, so I’m always ready. I make a point to keep up my skills and fitness, which also helps with credibility. It might be quiet in the morning but a long night if there’s a search.” Martinez also conducts outreach programs to underserved populations and talks with visiting students about how they can be good citizens and protect national parks and other special places.

Biggest challenge: “Managing the increase in visitations and traffic at current staffing levels and with limited funding. People are parking in meadows. Campgrounds are getting hammered. It bothers me that visitors get stuck in a line of traffic then have to wait three to four hours for a parking spot. People love coming, and most don’t complain, but we need to provide a better experience.”

Best part of the job: “Getting in the field! My role is to protect resources here, but I also enjoy talking to people — especially young people. I want to share my joy and love of the park and get them inspired.”

Advice for visitors: “Plan ahead. Make reservations at campgrounds as soon as they are available. If you’re visiting for the day, come before 9:00am and leave after 7:00pm to avoid the worst traffic. If you’re hiking, respect the elevation. Get a topographic map and look at the contours, not just your GPS. Most people get in trouble because they overextend themselves.”

Favorite national park: “That’s like picking a favorite child! Wherever I’m at. Yosemite right now.”





YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK

Location: California

Current Size: 748,000 acres

Annual Visitations: 4 million

History At-a-Glance: In 1864, President Abraham Lincoln signed into law legislation granting Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias to the state of California to protect the land "for public use, resort, and recreation." At the urging of John Muir and other conservationists, Yosemite National Park was established in 1890 – the country's second national park – and Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove were returned to the federal government in 1906 to become part of the park.



DR. STEPHEN POTTER

Regional Archeologist

National Capital Region (33 park units in Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, and the District of Columbia)

Responsibilities: The parks in and around our nation's capital are situated atop the remains of more than 13,000 years of human history, from prehistoric campsites to Civil War battlefields. Potter serves as chief scientific advisor to the NPS regional director on all matters related to archeology. "I look at a how people have used a piece of real estate over time. By the time the Europeans arrived here, the Native Americans in the eastern

woodlands were as complex socially and politically as people in Europe." He also designs and directs archeological surveys and excavations, supervises a lab and curatorial facility, ensures compliance with Federal historic preservation regulations, evaluates sites for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places, and assesses the effects of proposed park improvements.

Years in current position: 36

Years with the Park Service: 36

Career path: Potter joined the National Park Service after graduate school.

What makes my parks special: "People have inhabited the Potomac [River] Valley for thousands of years. The Potomac River floods, but it doesn't wipe the slate clean. Those deposits lay down a protective layer. Then the spot may get used again, leaving more archeological evidence.... People don't expect archeology to survive in such a built-up environment, but nothing is further from the truth."

"No one had done an archeological survey along the 184-mile Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. I had a hunch that humans had gravitated to the water here. When a tributary stream eroded a spot beside the Potomac River, I found stone arrowheads, pottery, and animal bones dating back to 1,500 AD. Three feet down, my team uncovered pits for dry food storage, flint, and evidence of wigwam poles circa 1,000 BC. Six feet down, we discovered a fire pit from 3,800 BC. Eight feet down, we unearthed an atlatl (spear thrower) from 8,500 BC. The site had been used off and on for more than 11,000 years. In addition, it showed changes in the environment based on flooding patterns and changes in flora based on pollen in soil samples."

Typical day: "Every day is different."

Biggest challenge: "The resources in 2016 are not the same as they were percentage-wise in 1980. The Park Service tries its best to promote the parks in a way that touches everyone. No one working for the Park Service is getting rich, but they care and have big hearts. The parks mean a lot to all of us."

Best part of the job: "Doing field work at new sites, then determining if what's there is significant enough to merit further research. Presenting to the public, especially young people."

Advice for visitors: "Consider lodging at Canal Quarters — a restored lock house on the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. It's a stay back in time."

Favorite national park: "The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historic Site. It's a narrow strip but so diverse in terms of its natural and cultural resources, landscapes, and historic sites. It's enjoyable to see by canoe or you can hike or bike on the towpath."





MISSOURI NATIONAL RECREATIONAL RIVER

Location: Border between South Dakota and Nebraska

Current Size: 350 acres (managed by the National Park Service)

Annual Visitations: 145,000

History At-a-Glance: This almost 100-mile stretch of the Missouri River was designated a national recreational river in two parts: the Lower 59-mile reach (from Gavins Point Dam to Ponca, Nebraska) in 1978 and the Upper 39-mile reach (from Fort Randal Dam to Running Water, South Dakota) – which also includes 20 miles of the lower Niobrara River and 8 miles of Verdigre Creek – in 1991.



DUGAN SMITH

Park Ranger

Missouri National Recreational River

Responsibilities: Smith specializes in interpretive and educational programs. This involves community outreach, organizing and hosting programming in the park, and supervising seasonal employees during the summer. He also coordinates volunteer work in the park, including League-led efforts such as river

clean-ups, aquatic invasives education (Clean Boats), and educational festivals.

Years in current position: 15

Years with the Park Service: 15

Career path: Smith grew up on a ranch near Pierre, South Dakota, as a member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe. He served 10 years in the U.S. Air Force and 14 years in the Air National Guard. After earning a degree in environmental studies, Smith worked in the tribe's Department of Environmental and Natural Resources. He later joined the National Park Service as an interpretive ranger at the Missouri National Recreational River.

What makes my park special: "The abundance of recreational opportunities. It's a national water trail. There's been lots of growth in canoeing and kayaking and less motor boating over the last five years. Birders come, too. It's one of the few places where there's a mix of eastern and western species. The river provides the habitat."

"Although only one-third of the Missouri River looks similar to how Lewis and Clark and native peoples saw it (the rest has been dammed and channelized), it has a unique place in American history. It was a gateway to the West, the interstate of that era. When you come here, you understand."

Typical day: "Each one is unique and enjoyable. I might set up an exhibit one day then do a program with kids the next. This fall, a big project is producing our first park film – one main segment plus five short ones for theaters and our mobile ranger stations. It's 'eye candy' and explains why [people should] come, including the local tribal history and the history, uses, and geology of the Missouri River."

Biggest challenge: "Not enough staff to do all that we need to do. Also, the geography of the river. There's no gate and no fee, so people might not know they're in a national park. It's tough to convince locals this isn't just a river and [explain] why there are regulations. There's a reason it looks pristine. It wouldn't be this way without the National Park Service."

Best part of the job: "The diversity of the work. One day I'm at my desk, the next I'm outdoors. I meet lots of people. I try to convince them of the importance of the river."

Advice for visitors: "For birders, the main spring migration is from mid-May through June. In the fall, millions of geese pass through here between the end of September and early October. The songbirds are quicker in October."

"Ask lots of questions. There are limited access points to the river – mainly overlooks, but no gates. The park is more of an idea. You've got to find it. It's spectacular once you do."

My favorite national park: "My own! Otherwise, Theodore Roosevelt National Park. I grew up in western South Dakota. I love the big, open country and the Missouri Breaks. It reminds me of home and western culture."



LORI OBERHOFER
Wildlife Biologist
Everglades National Park

Responsibilities: Oberhofer oversees wildlife monitoring in the park, typically “indicator species” such as wading birds and alligators. She also monitors endangered species, including the Florida panther and the Cape Sable seaside sparrow.

“We need good data to help manage the park. Long ago, the Everglades were diked and dammed. Even today, lots of water in the park is managed, even though it’s a huge wilderness area. The big goal is getting it back to historic levels and flow ways. I keep an eye on wildlife to make sure restoration projects don’t affect them in a negative way.”

Years in current position: 1

Years with the Park Service: 16

Career path: Oberhofer earned her bachelor’s degree in animal husbandry from Southern Illinois University. While in graduate school at the University of Montana, Oberhofer volunteered for a study looking at wolf impacts on elk and deer in Glacier National Park. Subsequent seasonal jobs with NPS included the study of spoonbills in Florida. She also worked on projects in Wyoming, Guam, and Hawaii for the Department of the Interior and various universities.

What makes my park special: “The Everglades were set aside to preserve its diversity of plants and wildlife. Some, like the American crocodile, are at the northernmost point in their range. There are about 360 species of birds in the park. If you’re into birdwatching or [a] wildlife photographer, it’s a primo place.”

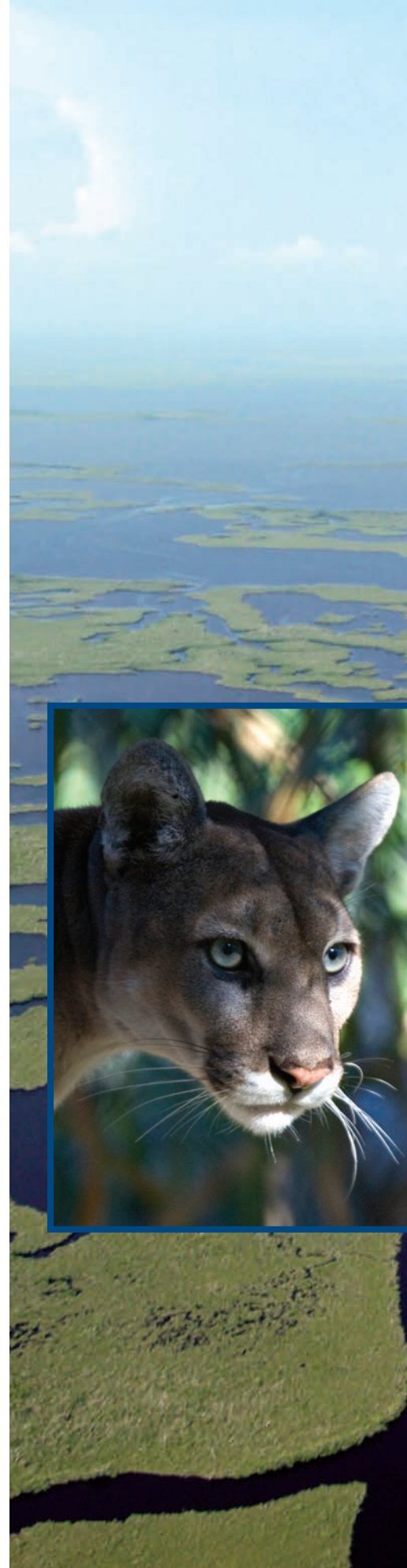
Typical day: “On field days, I fly a lot in airplanes and helicopters doing aerial surveys over places like Shark River Slough and Taylor Slough, which are rivers of grass. On office days, I work on data, budgets, personnel, scheduling, and collaboration with partners.”

Biggest challenge: Everglades National Park is 1.5 million acres. “The logistics are a challenge. There’s no way we can do it on our own. We work with Audubon of Florida, several universities, and the state of Florida. It’s challenging to get out there, whether in a helicopter, an airboat, or a canoe or kayak. The other challenges are government-wide: doing a lot more with diminished budgets. A lot of what I do is for the love of the park. I volunteer extra hours, often working on weekends, because I like what I do.”

Best part of the job: “Standing in water in the remote parts of the Everglades. The water is so clear I can look down and see little fish around my feet and a little flow going south.... The work we do really does help us manage the park better so we can protect and preserve it. I’m a small piece of it, but what we all do is important for future generations to see it and protect it.”

Advice for visitors: “The best way to experience the Everglades is to get out and do it. Check out the ranger projects, bike, hike, paddle, fish, tent, or RV camp. Come during the non-summer months when it’s cooler and less buggy. January through May is peak wading bird nesting time. It’s also the dry season, so the water is in pools, which collect more fish and gators. Hike the Anhinga Trail along Taylor Slough, where you’re guaranteed to see turtles, fish, gators, and other wildlife.”

Favorite national park: “Glacier National Park. I like the mountains, and it feels like home. That park to me is everything — scenic beauty, wildlife — and it was the first park I worked in.”





EVERGLADES NATIONAL PARK

Location: Florida

Current Size: 1.54 million acres (land and water)

Annual Visitations: 1.1 million

History At-a-Glance: South Florida was once a patchwork of ponds, marshes, and forests. In the early 1900s, developers started aggressively draining and dredging these areas for urban development and agriculture. In 1934, Congress authorized Everglades National Park – the first park created solely for the preservation of animals, plants, and the environment that sustains them. However, it took until 1947 to acquire the lands and funds necessary to establish the park.



WINONA PETERSON
Cultural Resources Program
Manager (Historian)
Gettysburg National Military Park
and Eisenhower National Historic Site

Responsibilities: Peterson preserves cultural resources at both sites, which means “rehabilitating the landscape to look like it did historically. I don’t just look at a building. I understand how that building interacted with a nearby

farmstead and crop.” Unlike an academic historian, who records and interprets the past by writing and teaching about it, Peterson’s work is hands-on, primarily related to the ongoing restoration of the Gettysburg site so visitors get a better sense of what it was like during the Civil War.

For example, using letters from soldiers and maps drawn in preparation for the Battle at Gettysburg, she determined where stone walls and trees stood, and then found the actual ones hidden in 150 years of overgrowth. “Osage-orange trees [also known as hedge apple] were commonly used as a hedge during the 19th century because cows wouldn’t crawl through it. A soldier wrote about Osage-orange trees in the context of the artillery needing to see what it was firing at. I determined where that was. We cleared away the woods and found Osage-orange trees. It gave me goose bumps. Then I had to figure out how it fit with the landscape from that time period.”

Years in current position: 21

Years with the Park Service: 35

Career path: Peterson grew up just 14 miles from Gettysburg on a small farm. She started working at Gettysburg National Military Park three days after her high school graduation as a summer job. After earning a degree in recreation from Penn State with an emphasis on history, she landed an internship at Everglades National Park then returned to her first passion at Gettysburg.

What makes my park special: “The story of not only the battle but of the nation is here. It’s a place for reflection, to think about things that happened, the sacrifices made and how it affected an entire country. We’ve added avenues to get around and monuments, but it’s still a powerful place where you remember the past and its implications for the future.”

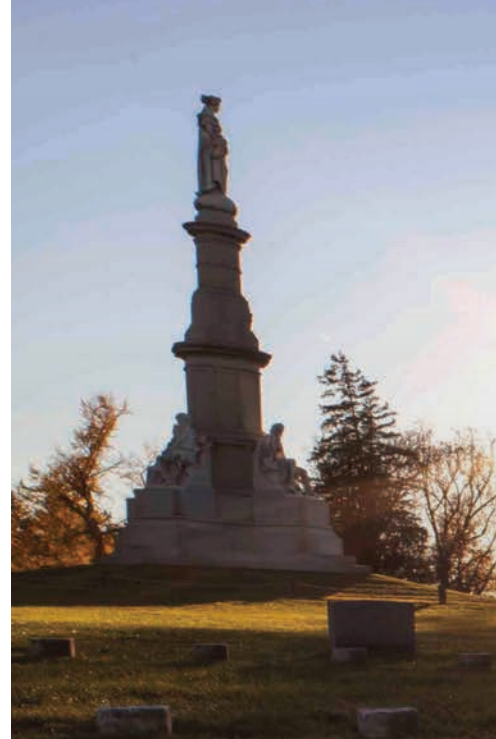
Typical day: “I’m the institutional knowledge of the park. No day goes as planned. I just try to stay ahead of the tsunami. The bulk of what I do is behind the scenes, such as determining whether a roof needs to be cedar shingles in order to fit with the national historic site regulations. The changes you see when you come here are a result of what I do.”

Biggest challenge: “The number of people who are professionals in cultural resources in the National Park Service has shrunk dramatically. When my colleague retired in 2012, the position was not filled but the tasks still have to happen. It’s all important, and I want it all to be done right.”

Best part of job: “The variety. I’m a multi-tasker, and I want to make a difference. I learn something new every day.”

Advice for visitors: “Be mindful of how your experience here impacts others. The monuments are fragile, even though they are made of stone and bronze.”

Favorite national park: “Theodore Roosevelt National Park. You can see why Native Americans attach legends to the land. The whole conservation ethic is personified in that landscape. And I got to see a bison!”



GETTYSBURG NATIONAL MILITARY PARK

Location: Pennsylvania

Current Size: 6,000 acres (battlefield); 17 acres (cemetery)

Annual Visitations: 1.1 million

History At-a-Glance: Gettysburg residents asked the state to purchase a portion of the battlefield to create a cemetery for Union soldiers. The cemetery grounds were dedicated in November 1863, during which President Abraham Lincoln eulogized the Union soldiers and asked Americans to renew their devotion “to the cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion.” In 1864, the Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association was formed to preserve portions of the battlefield. That land was transferred to the federal government in 1895 and designated a national military park. Park administration was transferred to the National Park Service in 1933.

EISENHOWER NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

Location: Pennsylvania

Current Size: 189 acres

Annual Visitations: 54,000

History At-a-Glance: Dwight and Mamie Eisenhower bought this farm in 1950 – two years before “Ike” ran for president. Although they did not take up permanent residence on the farm until 1961, Eisenhower brought Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev here to discuss a summit on U.S. presence in Berlin. The Eisenhowers donated the house and farm to the National Park Service in 1967 with lifetime living rights. Ike died two years later and Mamie lived here until her death in 1979. The site opened to the public in 1980.



SALEM MARITIME NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

Location: Massachusetts

Current Size: 9 acres

Annual Visitations: 750,000 (includes the visitor center in downtown Salem plus 150,000 to the harbor and 50,000 on the ship)

History At-a-Glance: Established in 1938, Salem Maritime was our country's first national historic site, established to promote the maritime history of New England and preserve part of Salem's historic waterfront. The site offers a range of historic structures, including a home built in 1675, the last of 13 Custom Houses in Salem (where Nathaniel Hawthorne was inspired to write *The Scarlet Letter*), and three historic wharves that are among the rarest remaining from the "age of sails."



JOHN NEWMAN

Deckhand

Salem Maritime National Historic Site

Responsibilities: Newman works as rigger, first mate, and volunteer coordinator for the *Friendship of Salem*, replica of a 171-foot East Indiaman "tall ship" built in 1797 to carry cargo from Massachusetts to the Far East. The original ship was captured by the British during the War of 1812.

"Safety is a big part of my job. There are a whole lot of things hanging from the rig (mast), such as line, wood, moving parts. There's also a lot to be secured at deck level. It's a totally different environment for visitors. The ship is always moving. It's moored but floating. She has long curves, and the deck is not flat."

Newman also helps sail the *Friendship of Salem* to tall-ship festivals. "The ship belongs to everyone. She could not run without a corps of volunteers — dedicated folks who are fully invested. They often arrive with no skills. Part of our mission is to train people in maritime trades to perpetuate these skills."

Years in current position: 16

Years with the Park Service: 20

Career path: Newman says he was "a sailor from the cradle." He worked as a school teacher, social worker, U.S. Coast Guard captain, and seasonal interpreter at the Salem Maritime National Historic Site before becoming a deckhand. "I always wanted to sail on a square rigger. It's one of those iconic things sailors want to do because of their size, history, and the teamwork."

What makes my park special: "I tell people to come to Salem for the witch story but stay for the maritime story. It's bigger and more important in U.S. history. It's what got the U.S. running as a world power. Salem was in the thick of it before and after the Revolutionary War. It was the richest port per capita in the country for 20 years. Salem Maritime became a park unit during the Great Depression to tell our economic story."

Typical day: "Open the ship. Run up the flag. Do a safety check — everything in its place. Repair or replace whatever needs it. Work with volunteers."

Biggest challenge: "The slow decision-making process within the National Park Service can be frustrating. On a ship, things happen quickly, but the overall historic fabric of the park moves slowly. I remind myself that we're not in battle dealing with an enemy. Everything needs real consideration because some decisions are irrevocable with consequences."

"We're told to protect visitors from the park but also to protect the park from visitors. When Congress created the Park Service, it did so for the enjoyment of the people but also to conserve and protect resources, which can create tension."

Best part of the job: "Introducing lots of international visitors and people from all over the U.S. of all socioeconomic groups to the ship."

Advice for visitors: "Give Salem eight hours, not two. It's small, but there is a lot to see. Walk the streets and then get out on the water. Rent a boat or take an excursion. Salem Harbor is an extension of the Atlantic Ocean. Think about the fact that the ocean here extends to Europe."

Favorite national park: "Grand Canyon National Park. I first went there with my kids long before I worked for the National Park Service. It so exceeded my expectations that I've gone back seven times. It's a natural wonder!"



CHRISTINE HOYER
Backcountry Management Specialist
(Ranger)
Great Smokey Mountains National Park

Responsibilities: Hoyer manages the entire backcountry program in Great Smokey Mountains National Park, including permitting, recreational use, and partnerships with trail organizations. She provides information to visitors before they arrive, looks at use patterns, manages Leave No Trace initiatives at the park, and trains volunteers. (The average backcountry workforce in the park includes 320 volunteers.)

Years in current position: 3

Years with the Park Service: 8

Career path: As a college student, Hoyer volunteered on the Appalachian Trail Conservancy's trail crew and became crew leader on a section of the trail that runs through Great Smokey Mountains National Park. She had an early post-college career in psychology then earned a graduate degree in wilderness management. She joined the National Park Service as a trail volunteer manager in Great Smokey Mountains National Park, then worked as the park-wide volunteer manager before taking on her current role.

"This is my dream gig! Great Smokey Mountains National Park has 848 miles of maintained trails and 104 backcountry shelters and campsites. I thought trail crew leader was 'it.' I wanted to be outdoors. I got paid. I wore the green and gray. I didn't see the bigger role at first, but now all of my passions converge."

What makes my park special: "Whether you want historic sites or nature, a short day hike or an overnighter, waterfalls — it's all here. Each part of the park has a different character."

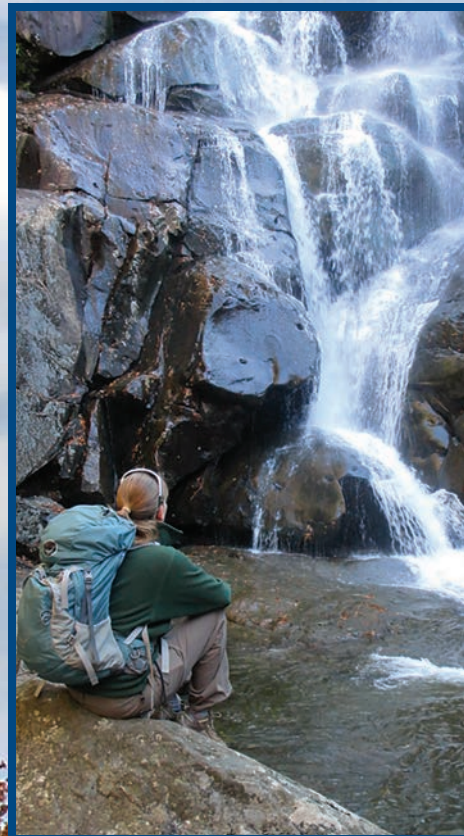
Typical day: "To be atypical. I might have the best plan, then there's a bear closure."

Biggest challenge: "The backcountry here already had high use and it's even greater for the 100th anniversary of the National Park Service. We're trying to connect to more people, but more people have more impact. We need to get out the right information so that visitors can have a sense of discovery but also allow the next 10 million visitors to have the same experience. And there's never enough time to get everything done that I want to accomplish!"

Best part of the job: "I like being directly linked to both sides of the NPS mission — the preservation of resources and the enjoyment and education of visitors."

Advice for visitors: "Plan what you want to do before you come. There's more here than you can see in one visit. I've been here eight years and still haven't done it all. The Smokeys are big enough that if I blindfolded you in Cades Cove then took it off at Cataloochee, you would think it's a different park."

Favorite national park: "Great Smokey Mountains National Park — home is where the heart is! After that, Theodore Roosevelt National Park. It's separated from the rest of the world. I love that. The lesser-known parks are higher on my list than the 'big jewels'."





GREAT SMOKEY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK

Location: North Carolina and Tennessee

Current Size: 522,000 acres (including more than 850 miles of backcountry trails)

Annual Visitations: 10.7 million

History At-a-Glance: In 1926, President Calvin Coolidge signed a bill to establish Great Smokey Mountains National Park – as soon as land was acquired. The Tennessee and North Carolina legislatures each appropriated \$2 million for land purchases, and an additional \$1 million was raised by individuals and groups. However this was just half the estimated funds needed. Philanthropist John D. Rockefeller Jr. covered the other \$5 million. Then began the difficult process of purchasing land, from small family farms to large timber tracts. By 1934, Tennessee and North Carolina had transferred 300,000 acres to the federal government for the park, and Congress authorized development of public facilities. Great Smokey Mountains National Park was formally dedicated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1940.





DAN WENK
Superintendent
Yellowstone National Park

Responsibilities: “Ensure the mission of the National Park Service — preserving resources balanced with visitor use and enjoyment — is followed in Yellowstone and make sure Yellowstone has the staff, financial resources, and facilities appropriate for the task. It’s like being chairman of a multi-faceted corporation whose stockholders are the American public.

Each day, I try to figure out ways to pass it

on to future generations and not screw it up. But it’s the best job! I work at the world’s first national park. Yellowstone is at the forefront of issues related to natural and cultural resources. It’s an opportunity to make a difference in what conservation will look like and how parks are managed into the future.”

Years in current position: 6

Years with the Park Service: 41

Career path: Wenk joined the National Park Service as a landscape architect in the agency’s national planning, design, and construction management office in Denver, Colorado, which is called the Denver Service Center. Later he served as park landscape architect at Yellowstone National Park, superintendent of Mount Rushmore National Memorial, director of the Denver Service Center, and deputy director of NPS operations in Washington, DC, before returning to Yellowstone National Park as superintendent.

What makes my park special: Yellowstone was our first national park, established in 1872 to protect its geysers (which account for about half the world’s active geysers). As western land development increased, the park also became a sanctuary for the largest concentration of wildlife in the lower 48 states. It forms the core of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. “The bison herds in the Lamar Valley are similar to [what you would find in] the early 1800s in the West. You can watch how natural systems function, such as prey-predator relationships when a pack of wolves takes down an elk. And there are 5- to 10-pound, 25-inch fish. I don’t know anywhere else like it on this scale.”

Typical day: Wenk says there’s no such thing as a typical day. His work day could include “budgets, visitor safety, reports, meetings with our affiliated native tribes and Friends organizations, concession contracts, law enforcement....”

Biggest challenge: “Wildlife doesn’t respect boundaries. They migrate in and out of the park.” The challenge is finding common ground among groups with different priorities. “We as a society have to be willing to make the kinds of decisions that will protect places like Yellowstone and the public lands around it.”

Best part of the job: “Experiencing the park, especially watching visitors’ reactions. I love sitting on the brink of the Upper Falls and seeing how it captivates them.”

Advice for visitors: “Think about what experience you want before you get here. In winter, there are more opportunities to be alone and be emotionally renewed. In spring, you can see the birth of bison calves and bear cubs. In summer, you have to be a careful planner due to the crowds. It might take 45 minutes to drive 14 miles due to an “animal jam.” In fall, the weather is best — cool, crisp days — and with the migrations from the high country to lower elevations, there’s so much to see with fewer crowds. You can experience Yellowstone on Yellowstone’s terms.”

Favorite national park: “Yellowstone National Park. It holds a special place in the hearts and minds of people — not just here but all over the world.”





YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK

Location: Idaho, Montana, Wyoming

Current Size: 2.2 million acres
(primarily in Wyoming)

Annual Visitations: 4.1 million

History At-a-Glance: In 1872, Yellowstone became the world's first national park. The first park superintendent job was unpaid, and no funds were set aside by Congress to protect the park's wildlife and natural features. When funds were later authorized "to protect, preserve, and improve" the park, those efforts were insufficient to stop poachers, squatters, and vandals from ravaging the park. In 1886, the U.S. Army took over supervision of the park. However, other national parks established in the following decades were managed separately, highlighting the need for consistent – and effective – management of the national park system. The National Park Service was created in 1916 to do just that.