

# 10 Park Partnerships

The Nature Conservancy helps the National Park Service grow and maintain some of the country's most iconic natural places.

BY **LISA BRAMEN**  
ESSAY BY **LYNN SCARLETT**

**COOL HIKE:** An ice cave at Sand Island in the Apostle Islands.

## 1

WISCONSIN

### Apostle Islands

NATIONAL LAKESHORE

In 1974, the Conservancy transferred 1,481 acres of Michigan Island to this park—a kayakers' and sailors' paradise of ice caves, cliffs and lighthouses on 21 islands in Lake Superior. The Conservancy now works with the park service to protect nesting habitat for endangered piping plovers, a small shorebird known for its whistling peeps.

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## 2

CALIFORNIA AND NEVADA

### Death Valley

NATIONAL PARK

**NATURAL ODDITY:** Rocks, moved by wind, leave trails in the lake bed of Racetrack Playa.

**SOMETIMES, PROTECTING A PARK MEANS** managing land far beyond its borders. The Amargosa River, fed by groundwater in Nevada, runs mostly underground into California, creating a string of oases in Death Valley wherever it surfaces. These aquatic habitats support rare pupfish and more endemic species than almost anywhere else in the country. Since 1973, the Conservancy has protected more than 18,000 acres of surrounding land to ensure the river's continued flow.





BY LYNN SCARLETT

Lynn Scarlett, a former deputy secretary at the U.S. Interior Department, is now the global managing director for public policy and the global climate strategy lead at The Nature Conservancy.

# Our Connection to the Parks

The U.S. national park system is made up of more than 400 sites ranging from small monuments like the National Mall in Washington, D.C., to the 13-million-acre Wrangell-St. Elias National Park in Alaska. Tallied together, these parks, monuments, waterways and sites encompass some 84 million acres and host more than 280 million visitors each year.

But the value of the national parks extends far beyond what can be measured in acres and visitors. Many parks protect critical watersheds, tree cover, wetlands and other natural systems that provide basic benefits to surrounding communities—including protection of water supplies, coastal storm surge protection and better air quality from forests, the lungs of the earth. National parks anchor habitats and networks of protected lands; they bring people together through shared experiences; and they connect past and future generations. Early park advocate John Muir put it this way: “When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world.”

I witnessed these connections many times during my nearly eight years at the Department of the Interior, where I worked before joining The Nature Conservancy. A few years ago, in Canyon De Chelly National Monument in Arizona, I found a link to a woman—she must have lived around 1,000 years ago—who left behind a bone bracelet etched with designs. I saw her bracelet amid thousands of pottery shards on a hill below a cliff

dwelling while visiting with Park Service archaeologists. I couldn’t help but wonder about this woman’s life and marvel at the ways that parks connect us to the past and to one another.

At the Conservancy, we are connected to the work of the National Park Service in many ways. We’ve helped protect landscapes that became national parkland, including Golden Gate National Recreation Area and Hawai’i Volcanoes National Park. We also team up with the Park Service across the country to share land-management knowledge, like helping with fire management and removal of invasive species. Another way we partner with the parks is by owning and managing lands that neighbor parkland, providing important buffers and links to other protected lands. For example, the Conservancy owns ranchland that borders Colorado’s Great Sand Dunes National Park, which we were instrumental in creating and where we now jointly manage bison herds. I remember the complex teamwork involved in creating this park and how essential it was for the Department of the Interior to collaborate with the Conservancy and others to achieve success.

The national parks, after all, are a story of many partnerships—with ranchers, firefighters, biologists, community leaders, First Nations peoples, and countless others whose lives and livelihoods are tightly linked to these lands and waters. They care for these places that define their communities—places that are often a reflection of our vision at The Nature

“The value of the national parks extends far beyond what can be measured in acres and visitors. Many parks protect critical natural systems.”

Conservancy to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends.

Just as my experience at Canyon De Chelly with the archaeologists connected me to the past, the national parks are also about connecting to the future. A founding principle of the National Park Service is to preserve landscapes for the enjoyment of future generations. From our children’s connection to this natural world will spring the next generation of scientists, artists, environmental engineers and citizen stewards. Chronicler of the West C.L. Rawlins observed that the best way to know a country “is not to hunker down and dig in, but like the pronghorn and bison and coyote, to stretch out and go.” Through collaborations with the National Park Service, the Conservancy will continue to help protect some of the best places in the country to “stretch out and go.”

## 3

TEXAS

### Guadalupe Mountains

NATIONAL PARK

**DESERT SANCTUARY:** Guadalupe Mountains National Park protects habitat for more than 400 species of animals.

The highest point in Texas—Guadalupe Peak—and its surrounding desert were once at the bottom of a prehistoric sea. That makes this a prime place for spotting fossils from the Permian geologic period, some 265 million years ago. A 2011 donation from the Conservancy added 177 acres of massive, brilliant white gypsum dunes to the park.



ILLUSTRATION: © MICHAEL HOEWELER. OPPOSITE PAGE: © TIM FITZHARRIS/MINDEN PICTURES



# 4

COLORADO

## Great Sand Dunes

NATIONAL PARK AND PRESERVE

**CRESTING AT 750 FEET, THESE** waves of sand form the tallest dunes in North America. They depend on a cycle of replenishment: Wind blows sand from a dry lake bed toward the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, where creeks carry it back down to the open landscape to be swept back up again. For decades this delicate process was jeopardized by plans to divert water from nearby Baca Ranch. In 2004, the Conservancy brokered a \$35 million deal to incorporate the ranch into the Great Sand Dunes National Monument, nearly quadrupling its size and upgrading it to a national park.



**FROM THE TOP:** It can take more than an hour just to climb the tallest peak at Great Sand Dunes' first ridge, but the descent makes it well worth the effort. The park and nearby preserve also host forests and mountain trails.

PHOTO: © NICK HALL. ILLUSTRATION: © STEVE SANFORD. OPPOSITE PAGE: PHOTO: © FRANS LANTING. ILLUSTRATION: © STEVE SANFORD

# 6

HAWAII

## Hawai'i Volcanoes

NATIONAL PARK

**RED HOT:** Surface lava flows from Kilauea Volcano, located on the island of Hawai'i. This park also celebrates its centennial in 2016.

In 2003, the Conservancy and the Park Service jointly purchased the 116,000-acre Kahuku Ranch, a sprawling tract on Hawai'i Island that includes grasslands, a forested crater, dozens of endangered plant and bird species unique to the island, and one of the most active portions of the Mauna Loa volcano. The land was transferred to the Park Service, increasing the size of Volcanoes National Park by 50 percent.



# 7

CALIFORNIA

## Golden Gate

NATIONAL RECREATIONAL AREA



**JUST A FEW MINUTES** from downtown San Francisco, the Marin Headlands' windswept bluffs and valleys offer superb hiking and biking, while providing a home to dozens of endangered or threatened species. What many visitors don't realize is that this land was the focus of an epic conservation battle in the 1960s, when a developer kicked off plans to build a new city. In the face of high-profile protests, the developer sold the land to the Conservancy, which transferred it in 1975 to the Park Service to become part of the new Golden Gate National Recreation Area.



# 5

CALIFORNIA

## Channel Islands

NATIONAL PARK

**Back in the 1990s,** the dwarf Santa Cruz Island fox became easy prey for invasive golden eagles. A program of the Conservancy, the Park Service and other partners relocated the predators, reintroduced native bald eagles and bred foxes to repopulate the island. In little more than a decade after being listed as an endangered species, the fox has made the fastest recovery of any endangered mammal.





**BIG REVEAL:** Hikers should consult tide tables before visiting Point of Arches at Shi Shi Beach in Olympic National Park. Catch it at the right time to explore tidal pools.

# 8

WASHINGTON

## Olympic

NATIONAL PARK

Recent Conservancy purchases are protecting temperate rainforests and creating a conservation corridor between the park's wilderness and the rugged Olympic coast. In the late 1970s, the Conservancy sold Point of Arches, a coastal landmark known for its otherworldly sea stacks, to the government for addition to the park. Proceeds from the sale helped fund other Conservancy land acquisitions.

# 9

KANSAS

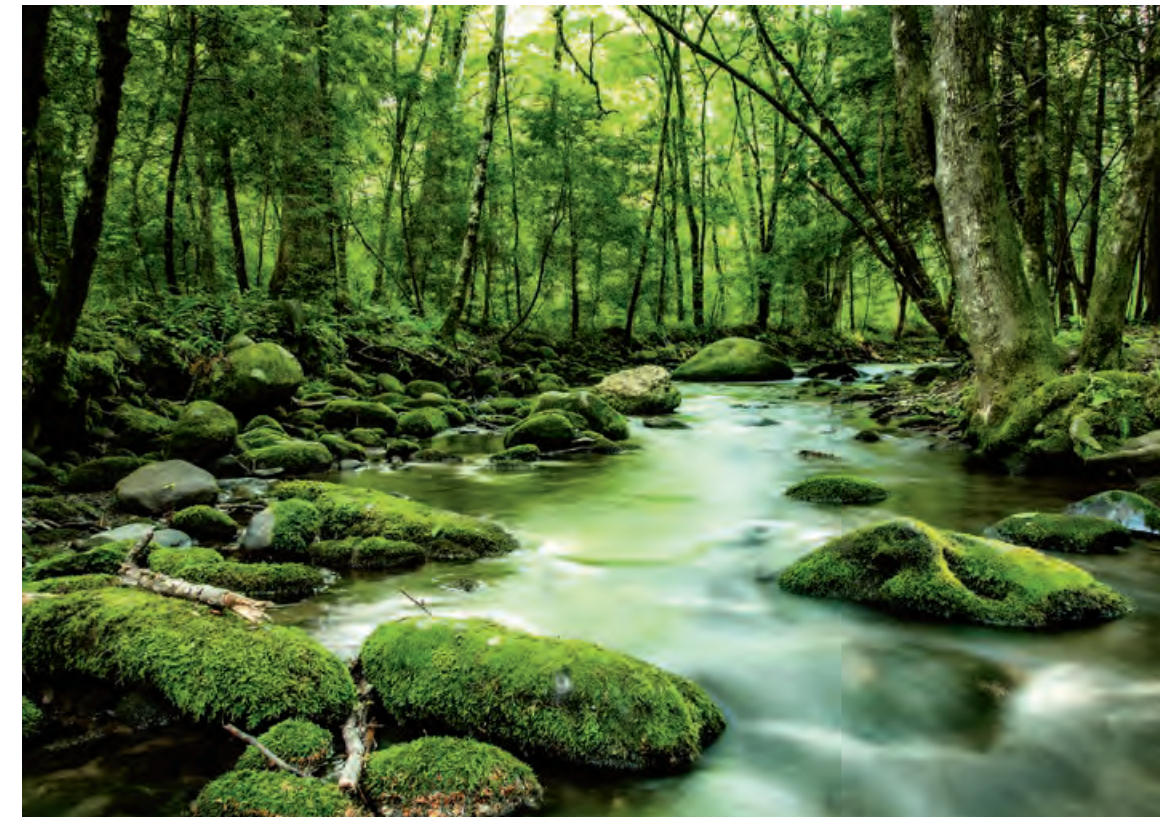
## Tallgrass Prairie

NATIONAL PRESERVE



**Grassy plains covered** a substantial portion of North America until agriculture eliminated all but a small fraction—along with the bison that once roamed them. Now, more than a century after American bison nearly went extinct, the majestic animals are making a comeback, and one herd grazes the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve. This 10,894-acre preserve in the Flint Hills, the only tallgrass prairie in the national park system, was established in 1996 as a public-private partnership. In 2005, the Conservancy became the primary owner of this rare expanse of tallgrass prairie, which it now co-manages with the National Park Service.

ILLUSTRATION: © STEVE SANFORD. PHOTO: © MICHAEL SCHERTZ/TANDEMSTOCK. OPPOSITE PAGE: © CLANE GESSEL



**FOREST ESCAPE:** The Smokies' high elevation and shady canopy create the Southeast's coolest summertime getaway.

# 10

TENNESSEE AND NORTH CAROLINA

## Great Smoky Mountains

NATIONAL PARK

**With more than 800** square miles of Appalachian mountains, hundreds of miles of backcountry hiking, mature hardwood forests that turn fiery shades in autumn and amazing biological diversity, it's no wonder this is one of the most visited national park sites. But along with the more than 10 million people who come here each year, a few unwelcome guests sneak in. The Conservancy recently partnered with the park on a public awareness campaign to prevent the introduction of invasive insects on firewood, and it is now helping conduct prescribed burns to clear the buildup of leaf litter on the forest floors and restore plant diversity in fire-dependent ecosystems. •