

# Rocky Mountain Outdoors

the newsletter of Rocky Mountain Outdoor Writers & Photographers, Inc.

January – February 2019

## Holy Grail in the High Desert

Text & photos by Ian King



*Morning in the dunes*

You're headed due north on the high desert floor, flat as a pancake, the endless sagebrush passing by as if part of the background scenery in an endlessly looping cartoon strip. It's not just "desert dry" here in the high mountains; there's been a severe drought out this way recently, adding insult to injury, or for some species, for some flora, it's led to a new opportunity amongst the survival of the fittest, as the least well-adapted drop by the wayside, fodder for nature's Grim Reaper. It looks very much like death stalks the land, but there's life—stubborn, defiant life, no matter how dormant or slow-moving or desiccated it may appear to the untutored eye. New life, new growth, awaits hidden behind scaly bark or buried in the sand deep enough to find succor in the surprising dampness the water table, seeping close to the surface, still providentially offers up.

In the early morning half-light, the sun yet to rise from its resting place in the east, you're not expecting any surprises by now. Your car rumbles on, suppressing your emotions, dulling your senses. You're half-ready to go back to sleep if there's much more of this.

They're out in this godforsaken wilderness, some place, you know they are—but where? Up ahead, on the northern horizon, you can clearly make out the craggy outlines of the Sangre de Cristo range; the mountains are piled up, making what you suspect must be a most formidable barrier to farther progress north and even to the east. This road you're on, clipping along at sixty-five, just has to run smack into them at some point, and you wonder, every ten minutes or so, whether what you're looking for can really be somewhere between you and "The Blood of Christ,"

bearing nary a trace of crimson-red in the hazy dawn light, and looking, rather, a sickly, insipid, blue-grey, the color of your mood.

Almost an hour in and the road you're on abruptly diagonals to the northeast, disturbing your near-slumber and mildly alerting your senses to the possibility that some sort of change might be afoot, although you're none too optimistic about that. To your left, the Sangre range is much closer now; the blue-grey pallor is infused here and

*Cont. on pg. 8 See "Holy Grail..."*

### 2019 Conference Reminder

RMOWP's **2019 conference** takes place in **Estes Park** ([visitestespark.com](http://visitestespark.com)), **Colorado, September 9-12** (that's Monday afternoon through Thursday evening). Headquarters will be in the 800 Moraine Avenue Event Center, at Trout Haven Resorts ([trouthavenresorts.com](http://trouthavenresorts.com)), just outside the Beaver Meadows entrance to Rocky Mountain National Park ([nps.gov/romo](http://nps.gov/romo)).

There are lodging cabins available at Trout Haven Resorts, plus other lodging and camping possibilities nearby.

We're presently arranging for meals, guided trips into Rocky Mountain National Park (both high-elevation and not-quite-so-high elevation options), and other details.

Registration forms and more information will be included with an upcoming RMOWP newsletter.

# Timing

Text & photos by John Hanou



*Moonrise over San Juan Mission Cemetery, Farmington, New Mexico*

There are innumerable ways to time a photo.

Many photographers want to capture the "The Decisive Moment," coined by Henri Cartier-Bresson nearly a hundred years ago. While this is great, I've taken it in a slower way. The two accompanying photographs were more than three years in the making. I had visited these two sites a few years ago and knew a full moon in the background would make a fine shot. So, I had to time my visit to Farmington, NM and Del Norte, CO to capture the moonrise in the first and the moonset in the second shots shown above and below.

I also wrote an impromptu poem about my experience during Bill Horton's Visual Fluency RMOWP session. That's exactly what I did the week of September 24, 2018.

### Moonset/Moonrise

A cemetery wanting to be remembered  
An old church waiting in the wings  
Both waiting for the sun to rise or the sun to set  
Both waiting for me  
To capture the illustrious morning light or evening sun  
Of full moon, lonely church and cold cemetery  
All wanting to be remembered



*Moonset, St. John Church, Del Norte, Colorado*

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## Buck Knives Announces New Products

Buck Knives, a longtime supporter of RMOWP, has introduced a variety of new knives, including additions to its popular 112 Ranger line, all with three-inch clip point blades.

The new 12 Auto and 112 Auto Elite are automatic, with blades that are easily and powerfully deployed with the push of a button. The 112 Auto has a 420HC steel blade, brass bolsters and wood handle. It retails for \$175. The 112 Auto Elite features a black G10 handle with brushed nickel silver bolsters and an upgraded S30V steel blade. It weighs 6.1 ounces and has a list price of \$225. Both knives come with genuine leather sheaths.

Buck also announced a lightweight version of the Ranger called the 112 Ranger LT. Weighing just 2.5 ounces, the LT has a molded nylon handle and bolsters, as well as a 420HC steel blade. MSRP is \$34 and it comes with a black polyester sheath. The new 112 Ranger Pro has an upgraded satin-finish S30V clip blade and a rugged black G10 handle with brushed nickel silver bolsters. It retails for \$112 and comes with a leather sheath.



These additions to the 112 Ranger line all feature blades finished with Buck's advanced Edge2x™ technology that makes them sharper, hold an edge longer, and easier to re-sharpen. All are made in the U.S. and backed by Buck's Forever Warranty. For details see [www.buckknives.com](http://www.buckknives.com).

## Writer's Corner

## That That and Which-Hunts

By Virginia Parker Staat

*"Don't gobblefunk around with words."*~ Roald Dahl, *The BFG*

One of my most recent favorite reads was *Love Does* by Bob Goff. It was a fantastic book. I savored every line... so much so that I even read the acknowledgements, which were oddly placed at the back of the book rather than in the usual front matter. In the acknowledgements, Goff included a curious tribute to his friend and fellow author Donald Miller, "and to Don Miller, who taught me not to write *that* into my life..." In Goff's entire book, it is the one sentence that puzzles me.

Doing due diligence, I went to Miller's writing blog to determine why he made such a rash statement about using the word *that*. In a writing tip, Miller suggests using *that* as if it were a curse word. He writes, "Instead of saying 'I believe that we should...' try 'I believe we should...' The word 'that' makes the sentence weak. It loses some of its punch and makes the writer sound apologetic."

Ahem... perhaps some of my issue comes from an author offering a writing tip using the conjunction *it's* rather than the correct *its* as possessive. But then, as we have already determined, I am a bona fide grammar ninja.

Actually, using the word *that* is not only acceptable, it is an absolutely necessary word. As an example, we must use *that* if it is a demonstrative adjective or pronoun, such as "I want that puppy." *That* must also be used when a time element is linked to a verb, such as "She announced that March 15 would be her departure date." Using *that* is especially necessary in formal writing to eliminate confusion.

I admit there are times the word *that* can be deleted. The word is normally omitted if it directly follows a verb or precedes a simple relative clause. (Like in the first sentence of this paragraph, which could have easily included *that* after the verb *admit*.) The easiest way to determine if *that* is needed is to say the sentence out loud. If omitting *that* doesn't change the meaning, you are free to delete it. Perhaps Miller is advocating omitting these instances of *that*. That certainly could be his case.

Then we have the complex question of using *that that* in a sentence. It actually is grammatically correct if the first *that* introduces a clause and the second *that* refers to a specific thing, such as "I saw that that window was open." A sentence of this sort, however, would be called a logic distractor. I would encourage you to rewrite that sentence if at all possible.

We can get even deeper into the dilemma of using *that*. Let's look at the famous sentence: "I know that that 'that' that that person used is correct." This sentence also is grammatically correct. The first *that* begins an indirect

statement, the second is a demonstrative pronoun, the third is the actual word *that*, the fourth is a relative pronoun, and the fifth is another demonstrative pronoun.

I hope by now that you have come to understand that the good news is that using *that* is rarely wrong, albeit may be unnecessary.

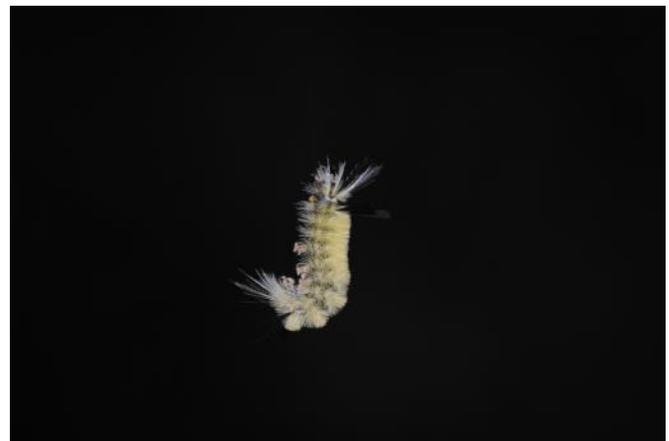
Just to muddle the waters further, *that* is often confused with the word *which*. *Which* is another one of those quirky little words in the English language. *Which* is the nondefining, nonrestrictive alternative to using *that*. The rule is fairly simple: Use *that* unless the sentence needs a comma, then use *which*. In other words, if the clause is not necessary to the sentence, insert *which*. But if the clause is not necessary, we writers need to determine why it is included in our work in the first place.

Which brings us to which-hunts. It tickles me to read Strunk and White's clever words on using *which* in their book *Elements of Style*. "The careful writer, watchful for small conveniences, goes which-hunting, removes the defining whiches, and by so doing improves his work."

I have probably bored you with yet another one of my pet grammar peeves. I apologize. I don't believe, however, that going to grammar-aholics is going to help. Unfortunately, that's a fact, which I fear is undeniable. And that's that.

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## Hanging by a Thread



© Patricia Umbricht

Patricia Umbricht, recipient of RMOWP's 2018 Scott-McKenna Memorial Scholarship, sent this photo of a banded tussock moth caterpillar suspended along a hiking trail at Lees-McRae College in North Carolina.

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Let us know: e-mail [info@rmowp.org](mailto:info@rmowp.org)

Subject: E-mail RMO

Jack's Jaunts

## The Sound of Silence

By Jack Olson

Listen. Carefully. What do you hear? As I write this I can hear the motor in my refrigerator freezer humming. It does that from time to time. I live in an apartment building and there are all sorts of noises from the many functions of the building. You might call it "building noise." I can hear a little traffic on Broadway and someone putting trash in a dumpster in the alley. None of this is bothersome. A person gets used to some sounds, and they don't interfere with life going on, or even thinking.

I can remember back in the day when I was young but not too young to be left alone in our old house. I'd turn on the radio and listen to one of those mysteries, "Inner Sanctum" or "Suspense." Remember now, I'm an old timer. I'd be scared witless and then I'd hear our house creaking. I'd go around, turning on lights, peeking in closets and under beds, making lots of noise. The noise helped.

Fast forward to the 1970s and after. I started driving all over the West to visit those magnificent places I'd heard about and had seen in pictures. Thus began one of the most exciting times of my life.

Sometime in the 1970s I headed to Monument Valley.

We all watched the old John Ford Westerns where John Wayne and the cavalry came to the rescue of the settlers, a bugle blowing the charge.

Back then we didn't take

notice that as they rode for days and days they kept passing the same geologic mitten formations. I arrived at an overlook and was transported to that scene from my teenage years. I stood on the rim of a cliff and was in awe of the sprawling red rock vista, right where John Wayne had ridden to the rescue.

But then I noticed something. Or, rather, the absence of something. There was not one single sound. No bugle blaring. No people, no cars. No wind, no creatures. I had never experienced such a feeling. It was magical. Then it was weird. I became aware of the sound that's always in our ears, but nothing else. It was spooky and I finally started scuffing my boots on the ground and talking to John Wayne. I thought, "that'll never happen again."



*The Mittens & Merrick Butte in Monument Valley*

© Don Laine

But it did. This time, some years later, I was at Arches National Park in Utah. As usual, I got out there at sunrise. This was before the multitudes began to descend on the



*Arches National Park* © Jack Olson

park. I stopped at a canyon called Park Avenue, just inside the entrance. No people, no cars. I stood at the overlook and it was *deja vu*. No wind, no creatures. Si-

lence. It was overwhelming, but I had more experience in handling it this time. You could actually feel silence. I stood there, entranced, until the first car drove by and spoiled everything.

The third, and final, experience occurred in California. I had never seen the redwoods so I headed that way. I went to Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park, one of three California state parks associated with Redwood National Park. I took the Miner's Ridge Trail. I'll stop right now to tell you that this is one of my favorite trails in the U.S.

OK, back to the subject. Early morning. No cars, no people. I stepped off into these towering monuments to nature's best efforts. The trail was covered with a soft mixture of needles and plant matter. A layer of fog hung above. The redwoods rose into the fog and the tops disappeared. It was like a cathedral. I stopped with my jaw dropping. There was no wind and there were no creatures. Once again, I was standing still, deep in a magnificent tribute to silence.

I would lollygag along, then often stop and breathe in the experience. I must have slowly covered two miles, stopping just to feel the silence. You couldn't hear it but you could feel it. But then, something changed. It was almost, but not quite, silent. I couldn't put a name to it because there was no wind, but something soft and gentle had entered the experience.

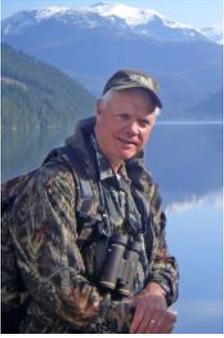
As I continued to walk quietly I could still hear this pleasant accompaniment to the redwood silence. I came to a high spot in the trail and looked ahead. I was staring, wide-eyed, at the Pacific Ocean.



*Redwoods at Jedediah Smith State Park, not far from Prairie Creek State Park* © Maryann Gaug

## WILDERNESS SURVIVAL TIPS

By Peter Kummerfeldt



Surviving a wilderness emergency begins with a recognition that somewhere, sometime you might have to spend an unplanned (not unexpected) night or two out in the backcountry. Unfortunately, the majority of people believe that it will always be someone else who is thrown from a horse; someone else who becomes the lone survivor of an aircraft accident; someone else whose

car slides off of the road and they end up having to survive in the car until rescued; someone else who gets lost after taking the wrong turn in the trail when returning from an evening photo shoot. That “someone else” is in fact each one of us! Survival experiences can occur anywhere and often occur when we least expect to find ourselves in trouble – when we are least prepared to cope!

There are many scenarios that could result in a person having to survive a night or two in the open. Becoming lost is often the catalyst that begins a chain of events that result in you having to practice your survival skills. Inclement weather may force you to hole-up for the night. Illness or injury may cause you to have to stay-put until rescue comes. You can find yourself stranded when bad weather prevents you from being picked up at the appointed time. Traveling on foot after dark is dangerous, and while the urge to be back in camp with your buddies or home with your family is very strong it is usually safer to bivouac for the night. Faced with any one of these situations you must now “survive” – it may only be a few hours until the sun comes up or the weather clears, or several days could elapse before the rescuers locate and rescue you.

What does it take to survive? What does the word “survival” mean? Why do some people survive and yet others die in similar situations? What kind of preparation is needed for an “unplanned night out?” Beginning with this Survival Tips column, these questions and many more will be answered. The purpose of the column is to:

- “Heighten your awareness of potential life threatening hazards and thereby reduce the number of injuries and fatalities occurring in the backcountry.
- Motivate you to better clothe and equip yourself so that, when confronted with a night out, the situation does not become life threatening -- just inconvenient.
- Teach you practical survival skills, NOT primitive skills! While primitive skills have their place, few people will devote the necessary time to become proficient to the point that the procedures can be counted on in an emergency.

My point of departure will be the belief that no one is more concerned about your safety than you are, and that, while you would like to believe that there would always be someone to help you, many times there isn't. Don't depend on others – carry your own emergency equipment, learn how to shelter yourself, to build your own fire, to affect your own rescue. We would also like to believe that we will be unhurt as we begin our survival experience – often this is not the case and we find that normally simple tasks are infinitely more difficult to accomplish. (Try zipping up your jacket with one hand – your non-dominant hand!)

I welcome your questions and topic recommendations for future columns. I would also like to hear about your experiences – we can all learn from the “lessons-learned” by those who have “been there, done that, didn't like it” but survived nonetheless.

Send your queries and stories to [survival@rmowp.org](mailto:survival@rmowp.org).

## Ford Wins Cash Award

RMOWP member **Laurie Ford**, from Glenwood, New Mexico, was awarded Best of Show in the Grant County Art Guild's 33rd annual purchase prize contest. The contest, with the theme "The Enduring West," was open to all New Mexico artists, and the 44 entries included a variety of mediums ranging from oil paintings and acrylics to watercolors and drawings.

For the first time in its history, the contest last fall was also open to photographers, and Ford won Best of Show for “The Watering Hole,” her photograph of wild horses in the Sand Wash Basin in northwest Colorado.



*The Watering Hole* © Laurie Ford

Awards and cash prizes were presented in each category, with the top prize of \$1,500 going to Ford for Best of Show. An exhibit of the entries, which were all for sale, was held at the historic Hearst Church in Pinos Altos, New Mexico, just north of Silver City.

The Grant County Art Guild, established in 1968, sponsors several shows a year, including art by area students, and provides grants to local art teachers. See [www.gcag.org](http://www.gcag.org).

## Sand Wheelchairs at Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve

By Maryann Gaug

At our conference in September 2018, in Alamosa, Colorado, we spent a wonderful day at Great Sand Dunes National



*Transfer to the dunes chair is complete. With Russ at the helm, Jack's ready to go. © Maryann Gaug*

Park. Russ Bromby reserved a sand wheelchair for Jack Olson so that he could enjoy the guided ranger tour out on the sand along Medano Creek.

All went well for a while, then the lack of a head rest and a poor angle while listening to Ranger Patrick Myers sharing very interesting information with us, caused Jack's neck and back to start hurting. The Brombys also had trouble securing Jack in the wheelchair due to some apparently missing parts. Because

the ride on the sand is bumpy, security was of utmost importance.

RMOWP donated \$100 to Great Sand Dunes National Park via Friends of the Dunes, as is customary. When I wrote the check, I noted that the \$100 was to be used for the sand wheelchair fund. Barb Bromby and I also submitted suggestions for wheelchair repair and design.

Starting in October, I exchanged emails with Dirk Oden, secretary of Friends of the Dunes. After their planning meeting with the park people, Dirk said the sand wheelchairs are a priority project for 2019. He has inventoried the needs of the current wheelchairs (one adult and one child) and was arranging for repairs. He's also been obtaining quotes for one more wheelchair with a head rest. Both projects are to be completed before the busy summer season. Dirk thanked us for our helpful donation.

If you would like to donate money to Friends of the Dunes for the sand wheelchairs or any of their other projects, check out their website for more information.

[www.greatsanddunes.org](http://www.greatsanddunes.org).

Email: [info@greatsanddunes.org](mailto:info@greatsanddunes.org).

Their mailing address is:

Friends of the Dunes, Inc.  
PO Box 1437  
Alamosa, CO 81101-1437



*Jack being propelled through the sand by Maryann at Great Sand Dunes National Park & Preserve. © Russ Bromby*

### President's Column

## Winter's Way

Text & photo by Kent Taylor

*"Take refuge in your senses, open up to all the small miracles you rushed through... be excessively gentle with yourself, having learned a new respect for your heart, and the joy that dwells far within slow time."*

~ Sourced from the poem, "For One Who is Exhausted, A Blessing" by John O'Donohue



Winter comes with its own invitation: inward, downward, below ground, beneath the surface of things. The earth restores, refreshes, rests. Buried seeds wait their time.

Writers and photographers are often students of the seasons, feeling the tug of O'Donohue's words to *take refuge in the senses*, to notice the *small miracles*, to respect the *joy that dwells far within slow time*. All are part of the craft we share as communicators, explorers, artists and noticers.

As the New Year unfolds, I wish you well, dear friends, and some good outings afield. I look forward, as well, to what you find out there along Winter's Way. Warm regards, Kent.

## Postcards the Postcardly Way

Text & photo by Paul Hughes

I was honored that Virginia Staat asked me to say a few words about Postcardly for the RMOWP newsletter! I live in Seattle now but spent a good chunk of my childhood in Colorado, exploring the Rockies while fishing, skiing, hiking, etc. My family still makes it back most years to ski.

It sounds like some RMOWP members have already started using Postcardly, but here's a quick overview for those new to it: Postcardly lets you send your photos to



*Here's a photo of my 8-year-old dad this January as we're getting ready to head down "Lost Boy" in Vail, to take in some views of the Mount of the Holy Cross.*

family and friends on good old-fashioned paper postcards, 6" by 4.25", sent via US Mail. Photos run right to the edge on the front (full bleed), and you can include any message you want on the back.

We've had customers use Postcardly for just about everything—from sending cute grandkid pictures to grandmas who aren't on Facebook to missionaries who want to update their supporters back home. (We even had a customer who took pictures of a chessboard, to play a turn-by-turn chess game by mail with a friend who was serving time!)

You can send Postcardly postcards in one of two ways: via email or using the Postcardly app (currently available on iPhone, the Android app will be out before the end of January).

If you're sending via email, you'll start by creating a unique @postcardly.com email address for that recipient, linked to their physical mailing address. (You only have to do this once, at postcardly.com.) Then you just send an email to that address — for example, [dad@postcardly.com](mailto:dad@postcardly.com) or [thehughes@postcardly.com](mailto:thehughes@postcardly.com) — anytime you want to send them a postcard. You attach a photo the way you normally would in an email, then we print and mail your postcard with your attached photo on the front, and your words (from the body of your email) on the back.

If you send postcards via the Postcardly app, you just open the app, snap a picture (or grab from your camera roll), type in your message, and hit send.

Given the nature of RMOWP, I imagine many folks will want to send their higher-quality DSLR photos, possibly after doing some editing in Lightroom or the like. In that case, it's a safe bet to make your image 4.5" x 6.25" and assume that we'll trim 1/8" off all four sides, down to a final full-bleed size of 4.25" x 6". If you're shooting at a 3:2 ratio and send unedited, we trim 3/16 inch off the left and right sides of those images.

I'm excited for RMOWP members to try Postcardly! If you sign up at [postcardly.com](http://postcardly.com), you'll get your first three postcards free. I always recommend sending at least one to yourself to get a feel for what they're like.

If you have any questions, please feel free to email me directly at [paul@postcardly.net](mailto:paul@postcardly.net). Hope I get to run into some of you in the Rockies!

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## Membership Renewal Time is Here

By Maryann Gaug, RMOWP Treasurer

Happy and Healthy 2019!

I will email RMOWP membership renewal notices by mid-January. The email will include your directory information, your membership level, and instructions on how to pay via either snail mail or PayPal. The various payment options will be listed.

I am adding a line for an optional donation to the scholarship fund. You may include that in a CHECK with your snail mail membership renewal or snail mail a CHECK separately if you are renewing via PayPal. We do not have a donation option on PayPal.

If you have paid for multiple years of membership (or are a lifetime member), I will also email you stating that you are paid and include your directory information.

Please review your directory information carefully and email (or snail mail) any updates to me. Current information helps us keep you informed of upcoming events, make sure you receive the RMOWP newsletter, etc.

If you would like a membership card, please email me and I will send you one. We only send cards to current members who request them.

Members who do not renew their memberships by March 31, 2019 will be deleted from the membership directory on April 1, 2019.

If you have any questions (or need an extension), please call (970-389-1099) or email me ([treasurer@rmowp.org](mailto:treasurer@rmowp.org)).

Thanks in advance for renewing your membership. We appreciate each and every one of you. Hope to see you at our annual conference in Estes Park, Colorado in September!

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*"Holy Grail..." Cont. from pg. 1*

there with the dark-green of the pines molding its lower slopes, along with the first autumnal yellowing of the aspens, and the variegated hues of the mineralized rock strata. You can even make out the foothills to the range at this point, low-slung and oddly pale and featureless by comparison. Things are picking up a bit, you tentatively conclude, even though your primary quarry seems as elusive as ever. The truth of their existence still appears to be entirely fanciful—an ancient myth from the pioneering days, you half speculate?

Deer!

To the left, and about to dare a crossing right in front of you. Four or five skinny, nervous does nervously skip across the road, one after the other like soldiers on patrol in enemy territory or in a minefield. You bring your car to a slow halt to let them safely pass. Finally, a buck, still quite young he looks like, brings up the rearguard, showing rather more confident disapproval at your presence



*Aspens along Medano Creek at the base of the dunes.*

than the ladies in his harem have just done. He has a decent-looking rack, something you wouldn't want to have to tangle with, but everyone's cool and he takes his arrogant time getting out of your way. It's a treat to see these guys, even reassuring that there's some serious mammalian life in such a forbidding place as this. Even so, they're a somewhat passing fancy, one you've thrilled at a thousand times before. As beautiful as they are, deer are not what you've come this far for—at least not today, on this trip. Your grail is of an entirely different order of majesty, if you can ever find it.

And, lo and behold, you do, mere seconds later, almost at the point you'd given up all hope. Just a couple of hundred yards ahead there's a small building and a barrier, and you can see the road continue on, on the other side of them. The road curves left in a great sweeping arc, an asphalt rainbow almost, teasingly promising a pot of something or other, perhaps, at its far end. You follow the road with your eyes, trying to focus against the desert backdrop. Suddenly you realize that the foothills you think you'd

spied just minutes before aren't true foothills, whatsoever. The sun's rays have just breached the mountain crests, and shadows are popping up everywhere, rendering clear what had been initially rather opaque phenomena. There's much more here than meets your untrained eye, a novice to the high desert landscape.

They're here, you realize, they *really* are here! Right in front of your nose, suddenly snapping into a sharp focus as if someone had just turned the lights on. Your first sentiment is "moonscape," but you know that's too much of a cliché. But there really is no escaping it: the massive pile of sand dunes approaching 800 feet high in places look weird and wonderful at the very same time. They look surrealistically out of place back-dropped by the Sangre range, but also seemingly totally at home in their majestic presence, as if this high mountain desert is the one and only venue they ought to have occupied. At least that's what Nature has determined in her evolutionary, geological wisdom, and who can argue with that? The dunes' overpowering bulk makes them look rooted here; like icebergs to a lesser degree, you've been informed, a good bit of them lying below the visible ground as well as above it.

Your first instinct, of course, is to utterly give in to the intoxicating primeval attraction they hold for you, and to plow straight into them as if you're a latter-day Lawrence of Arabia. Childhood memories flood back when you were playing in the dunes at Yarmouth on the Norfolk coast, sporting your newly-

acquired French Foreign Legion hat (a cool hat to keep a cool dude, cool), and totally convinced you're a derring-do soldier afraid of nothing in the strange vastness—sand, sand, as far your childish eye could see, held in place here and there in great banksides by the colonizing tufts of wind-swept dune grass. You realize that the Yarmouth dunes were mere pimples compared to what lies before you now, but the memory adds to the great pleasure of being in Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve.

They knew what they were doing when they developed Great Sand Dunes National Park in Colorado: they situated the visitor center with its expansive veranda and stone viewing plaza out back in the sweetest spot there is. Out there, looking west, you feel as if you're in an enormous outdoor, drive-in movie theatre, the smoothly-sculpted vastness of the dunes providing an IMAX movie screen of biblical proportions on which the natural light will dance as it morphs from dawn to high noon to dusk, and the reflections of the scuttling clouds will imprint their moving shadows as the wind drives them towards the Sangre

range, as if they were on some sort of meteorological conveyor belt. And you've learned that it's been that very same divine wind that has piled up the great dunes in the fetal curvature of the mountains over the eons, and that still continues, in the crawling slowness of geological time, to do so today. The dunes are a work-in-progress, you realize, and will continue to enchant for years to come as they morph and mold and evolve, one or two or three grains of sand at a time.

So, you spend endless hours encamped on the stone plaza, silent and gazing intently, exhibiting a patience you've rarely had before, waiting for that "perfect storm" moment when you hope to snap the picture of a lifetime. Quite soon, you're sure you've gotten it, but quickly realize that the great kaleidoscopic show hasn't stopped yet, hasn't ceased to promise something just that little bit extra, to come if only you tarried a little while longer. And it does: over and over until the disappearing sun finally extinguishes the light. You're trapped by expectation, a fear that you might just miss the most magical of moments. But you're masochistic in this way; you love your punishment—if that's what it truly is.

When you get back home and look at the thousand pictures you've taken, you have a moment of revelation, as much spiritual as it is photographic, a scientific manipulation of the visual spectrum. You realize that just about every picture you have of the dunes is unique, delightfully special in its own, once-in-a-lifetime, way. Even more, you grasp that there's a great likelihood that at least some of the shots you have are truly cosmic moments, that no one except *you* saw the dunes in that specific configuration at that specific time! It's a communion of a really special kind between the Trinity of you, your camera, and Mother Nature.

Scores of shots you've taken record, moment by episodic moment, the kaleidoscopic dance of the dunes as the wind casts gyrating cloud-shadows across the surface of the great sand piles, crimped like decorative pie crusts here and there, egg-washed smooth and ready for the oven. Mashed together in sequence, you apprehend that the shots are the individual frames of a slow-motion movie capturing nature doing its own signature thing, unmolested and free in a joyous way. And you suddenly appreciate in a moment of epiphanic delight that the beauty and the glory of *all* life on earth is only fully on show when it is truly at liberty, beyond the grasp of anthropogenic constraint and exploitation. At least that's what you hope for. You crop many of these shots into wide-angled panoramas, enhancing the grandeur that's really there as much as you can. You try, in this limited way, to make the world your oyster. Then there's a collection of other photos where you've zoomed in a bit, say half way or so to the dunes' actual surface. There's still majesty, all right, the great dunes commanding everything, putting all else in view into a

diminutive comparison. But in the vastness, a few small black dots pop up, some scattered haphazardly like buckshot, some in a neat single file like foraging ants on a mission. They remind you of specks of soot, perhaps, marooned on a snowdrift. In any case, the dots look hopelessly outsized on the broad canvas they speckle. You know they're people and that they're moving, but you also know that it'll be a good while before they'll get to where they're headed, if indeed they ever do. Sisyphians all, you



*A surprising splash of purple amongst the dune grasses.*

suspect, in their attempts to reach the summit of the dune they're scrambling up, fooled by the smoothness that once suggested ease of passage. Gaspingly, they must know better by now as they sink and sweat into the almost tractionless sand.

Closer still, the uniform vastness gives way to at least a glimmer of unexpected variability. First, you become aware that the dunes are colored, betraying the childish stereotype you've always had about the pigmentation of sand. There's yellow, all right, and in abundance, but in many different hues, some propagated by mineral chemistry, some by the cloud-scattered sunlight. But the yellows morph even further into a full palette of artists' paints: burnt orange, violet, creamy white, blue—even grey to near-black at times.

But there's more: the almost incongruous greens and yellow-greens of colonizing flora, looking like thin rafts of algae left behind by the raging river that once passed by for a brief time at the foot of the dunes just last spring. It's the struggle for existence at its Darwinian best, you theorize, although it seems almost pathetically desperate in the apparently tenuous foothold such life appears to have now in the drought-stricken aftermath of the vernal flooding. Nonetheless, bushy tufts of new generations of sagebrush are taking hold, looking like upside down goatee beards on the chins of the dunes' smooth skin. The bushes huddle together in close formation, as if they believe they have strength in numbers, all for one and one for all. On their communities' perimeters, collective bushiness abruptly

gives way to the fragile singularities of newly-born, thin blades of yellow-green dune grass, poking through the sand and looking like they're out of place, strangers in a strange land. The blades of grass are wispy-looking and flop and flounder at the behest of the wind, like drunks staggering in place. Or, perhaps, they remind you of a balding head hanging on grimly to the last few strands of straggly hair that fitfully remain in place somehow. Whatever, it's life on the margins, and you marvel at that, too.

And then, as if God is playing cheap tricks on you, the desert really surprises you, throws you for a bit of a loop. You blink, not sure you're not having an hallucination, or being fooled by some sort of mirage. Like a defiant finger sticking up from the desert floor, and proudly standing tall in its own space, as if fearing contagion from the sagebrush and the dune grass, a bright purple

splendor—an imperial purple or that of an ecumenical religion, perhaps?—pops out at you like a jack-in-the-box, close to insolent in that impish way. Suddenly life at the margins seems much more promising than you'd at first assumed. You circle the proud purple plant, taking in every possible perspective; you lie on the sand framing it in your camera against the dunes and the Sangre range in the distance. It's like you've found life on Mars! It's like you've discovered a lone last sentinel, standing guard in the great desert, but looking out for what? It's listening to the universe, you surmise, trying to detect signs of life out there in the great cosmic vastness. But, you realize, the blazing bush is that very signal itself, and it thrills you.

But even still, the magic show is not quite over yet. You zoom in further, tight and close, turning the microscopic into the macro. On a grass-tufted sandbank there's evidence of more life still, although indirectly so as all you witness are the delicate signs of its former passing, abstract patterns pitting the sand like trace elements of life left behind in the darkness of night by anonymous paws, feet, even writing bellies or swishing tails, or a probing proboscis or two. Fauna are here, although not in sight. They're undoubtedly hidden now, buried in some sort of shade or burrowed deep enough to find a cool dampness, the elixir of life. And on a neighboring dune, arcing like a great smooth breast against the cobalt-blue canopy of sky above it, you see the hoof prints of homo sapiens and wonder deliciously for a fleeting second if Neil Armstrong hasn't been here before you, and you think you see him hop-

ping about in a lunar weightlessness and are almost sure you hear him croaking "One small step for mankind..." but it's no good, you throw your arms out expecting to take flight only to feel the weight of your body and the give of the soft sand keeping you firmly stuck on terra firma and subject to the inexorable drag of gravity. Besides, you know you're not alone out here in Great Sand Dunes National Park—those sooty dots you saw before, there's plenty more where they came, pockmarking Nature's sculpting with human acne.



*Footsteps in the sand... leading... where?*

You scale the rise ahead of you, wondering where the human tracks might lead. But on the other side they disappear and there's literally nothing but sand—except, that is, for a lone banana at the peak of its yellowed ripeness lying there on the desert floor. Astronaut food, perhaps, after all? Or have you just stepped into a Magritte canvas, encountered the surreal? You whisper to yourself, half in jest: *Ceci*

*n'est pas une banane!* You're tempted to appreciate the carelessness of *Homo* as a nice aesthetic touch, and do so for a moment. But then you remember Magritte's admonition: *Such is the Treachery of Images*, and you're forced to concede that the yellowed fruit is not really a banana at all, at least not in this setting, this particular ecological niche. It is, rather, blightingly exotic, alien in an invasive, insulting way. It is nothing more than arrogant human negligence as excrement, blighting Nature's pristine table.

And then there's the last act: sunset. You shuffle through what seems like a million shots of golden-yellow, then purple-red, streaks slowly filling up the darkening sky. It's a movie you've seen so many times before; how can it be so fascinating, so intoxicating? But it is, every single time. It's more than an all-time favorite movie; it's literally a primeval fascination, like fire, like the dunes themselves, that speaks to the very depths of your emotional and spiritual being, that pre-historical ape-man unsettled by the pending disappearance of the Sun and fearful that this time it might just not come back up again on the morrow. So you worship it, bid it a fond adieu, let it warm you just one last time before supper and sleep.

You tilt your camera, deepening the reds, bronzing the golds, as if you're trying to extract every last bit of warmth the dropping orb might still be putting out. Almost there, almost there, the horizon seeming to reach up and swallow it. The Sun lingers on in desperation, becoming gloopy and misshapen as the light bends with earth's gravitational warping. A last flare, like a car's oncoming headlights on

full beam, dazzles you. Then it's gone—*Plop!* Like a smooth blood-red pebble into a pitch-black pond. God has just turned the lights off.

The dunes have retreated now to an amorphous expanse, greying into a fuzzy featureless backdrop, quickly disappearing. They're once again the seemingly minor footnote at the base of the glooming Sangre range, just like they were at dawn that very morning. It's a little sad to lose the show, but it's getting distinctly chilly now, time to get some sustenance before turning in. But at least you know if you



come back on the morrow, Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve will surely do you the favor of an incredible encore, and the magnificent movie will start all over again.

### 2019 RMOWP Calendar

- May 30 ~ Scholarship application deadline
- June 10 ~ Contest submission deadline
- June 16-19 ~ Annual Photo Workshop in Rocky Mountain National Park
- September 9-12 ~ Annual Conference—Estes Park, Colorado, and Rocky Mountain National Park

See [www.rmowp.org](http://www.rmowp.org) for details.

### RMOWP Welcomes New Member

**David Debonis** of Centennial, Colorado, recently joined RMOWP's ranks as a student member. He tells us that he is a freelance writer and photographer and a writing consultant at the University of Colorado's Denver Writing Center. David's interests include memoir/narrative adventure and travel writing, camping, hiking, climbing, skiing, hunting, trail-running, and off-roading. Welcome, David!



*"Kayaking in the Gulf" © Beto Gutierrez  
3rd Place ~ People in Nature, 2018 Contest*



"Lazuli Bunting" © Frank Zurey  
2nd Place ~ Image from Last Conference,  
2018 Contest

## Postcards from Conference 2018

Anyone remember the Oscar-nominated 1990 movie "Postcards from the Edge," starring Meryl Street, Shirley MacLaine, and Dennis Quaid? No? Well, no matter. Surely those who participated in the 2018 RMOWP conference last September in southern Colorado will remember Peter Anderson's excellent workshop, *A Certain Slant of Light: The Poetry of Postcards.*"

The workshop focused on the finite, rectangular space available on a postcard, and how we as writers can get our messages out there in this small medium. As part of the workshop, participants took part in an exercise in which they described – on a postcard – an experience they had in a favorite place. Several of those postcards were published in the last newsletter.

Here are a few more:

Alone. Atop my Jeep. Waiting for moonrise. A chill breeze slumps from Virga. A few icy drops sprinkle my arm. Their tap taps the only sound. Clouds crown the Sangres. They'll hide the moon. I fold my tripod and close my eyes. And deposit this quiet moment in the First National Bank of Tranquility. ~ *William Horton*

I've never been in this place before. But in places similar. A mere passenger in a car arriving at a destination. I looked up. The sky rapidly changed from an ocean blue to grey elephant. And now black as coal. It would surely rain and rain hard. And then I saw one little fluffy white cloud, and I wondered what it might be thinking as it watched the others. The only white cloud in this very large space. Little, frail, stuck in one place. Not able to get larger, no wind to be pushed in the direction of the other clouds. No darkness in my cloud – how could I ever begin to make a drop of water, let alone a mere mist. And then I cried. ~ *Diane McKinley*

108 degrees in the shade, and shady only under the biggest Fremont cottonwoods along the river. Out there, out from under the tree, my tree, the air is so hot flies are fried by bolts of sunlight in a blazing inferno. Sunflowers, not happier than the pea plants next to them, wish for fall only three long months away. Will it ever be cool again? When the trees can rest, stop draining the river, drop leaves in golden showers and give the water back to the beaver and dace and cockleburrs. It's a dog-day afternoon, and there will be another and another. ~ *Bob Luce*



"Through the Arches" © William Horton  
Honorable Mention ~ Black & White,  
2018 Contest

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