

# Rocky Mountain Outdoors

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

March - April 2023

## Rocks, Wildlife, and Flowers Too

Photos and text by Don Laine

Spring is sprung, the grass is riz, I wonder where the flowers is?

Well, if you're talking about desert flowers, they're in southern New Mexico, or at least soon will be. And one of the best places to see and photograph them is City of Rocks State Park, located about halfway between the communities of Silver City and Deming.

Most park visitors come primarily for the rocks - a fantasy of huge, jumbled boulders - to climb over them, photograph them, camp among them, or just sit and gaze at them while listening to the wind. But each spring, usually in April and May, the park comes alive with color as cactus and wildflowers burst into



bloom. A well-tended Botanical Garden has neatly-labeled cacti, ocotillo, yucca, and other desert plants, and the park has 5.5 miles of hiking and mountain biking trails.

This geological wonder looks strangely out of place in the southern New Mexico desert, as if these stone skyscrapers were abandoned by some ancient race of giants, or perhaps created by the special effects wizards in

Hollywood for some other-worldly adventure. But no, these are the real thing: ash spewed from volcanos some 33 million years ago, hardened into rock, then sculpted by the forces of wind, water, and blowing sand into the fanciful and bizarre shapes we see today.

A visitor center has exhibits on geology, focusing on how these rocks were formed, as well as the archeology, plants, and animals of the park. There is camping, both nestled among the boulders and in the more open RV section with electric and water. Those who neglected to bring an RV or tent can find lodging in nearby Silver City or Deming.

Dozens of species of birds have been spotted in the park, including golden eagles, common poorwill, greater roadrunners, sparrows, scaled quail, cactus wrens, yellow warblers, black-throated sparrows, blue grosbeaks, eastern meadowlarks, curved-bill thrashers, and great horned owls. Mammals you're likely to see include cottontail rabbits, black-tailed jackrabbits, rock squirrels, porcupines, kit foxes, and coyotes. Also in the park are numerous lizards, mostly whiptails but some collared, plus



See Rocks on pg. 4...

# The Joy of Writing

By Richard Holmes  
December 2020

Sometimes I feel the need to expound on a subject. A long dormant thought surfaces that has been stirring around in my head. If I'm in the right frame of mind I can nurture that thought, coax it along, and put it in writing. I can express these thoughts more coherently when writing.

I find great satisfaction in writing. What a wonderful way to assemble and concentrate my thoughts. It focuses my mind. I can bore in on a subject and explore its ramifications.

I'm not skilled enough to extemporaneously write something well in one sitting, But if I make a start I can build on it. It's an additive process — build and refine. It usually takes several drafts before I feel I'm getting anywhere. This spreads over several days — or weeks. As long as new ideas on the subject keep popping up I don't feel I'm finished

Some people spend a lot of time thinking. I tend to. An enlightened thought finds its way onto a scrap of paper, the back of an envelope. I have so many scraps of paper that I've made a folder for them, a thought folder. Any random notion deemed worthy of retention is jotted down and pitched into it. This includes quotes, ideas, musings, observations. I can look back over thirty years of notes, sometimes finding a gem of an observation made years ago. Did I really think that? I know I would lose many of these thoughts if I didn't record them.

Life, among other things, is about doing something. To some it is meaningless activities. I fall into that trap from time to time, my mind going into screen-saver mode, but I try to keep life meaningful. I feel that time can easily slip away, evoking a feeling of nothing tangible getting done. This is annoying to me.

I'm freshest during the morning, before the detritus of the day permeates my mind. But I can only write when the mood strikes. It has to feel right, can't force it. If the inspiration isn't there, then I do something else.

I am not disciplined enough to set aside a certain time each day for writing, although most successful writers recommend it. My writing is more sporadic. It goes in

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## RMOWP 2023 CALENDAR

March 31 ~ Last day to renew your membership

April 18, 7pm ~ Zoom meeting

July 10 ~ Contest deadline

October 3-6 ~ Annual Conference in Los Alamos, New Mexico

spurts. I'm generally working with short pieces, essays with different mods and different themes.

Writing is a solo activity, at least for me. I need to be alone and have absolute quiet to compose my thoughts. I don't know how some people can think and formulate sentences with outside distractions.

A further benefit of writing is to pass on a legacy. This is important. I have acquired many handwritten letters passed down from ancestors, some written over a hundred years ago, some recent. Then it all stopped. I no longer get handwritten letters. This is quite a gap. These letters are priceless seemingly more so because people don't do this anymore. Some of these letters are many pages long, carefully written in longhand, expressing deep personal feelings, problems, secrets. If we want to pass on a legacy we've got to write. An email just won't cut it.

The digital age has brought an abrupt halt to handwritten letters, letters with incisive observations and well thought out sentences. Whatever writing there is now resides in a computer, on a hard drive subject to failure, a failure where all content can be lost. Was it backed up? Maybe. Was it printed to hard copy? Probably not. If we want to keep any writings for posterity we should print them out — our descendants will thank us for it. We now write in short bursts, texting or replying to email. An informative written letter to a friend has been supplanted by use of the internet. I wonder if this shrinks our attention span.

Writing engages the mind because it involves thinking, I feel that this thinking stretches and helps to organize my mind, forces me to concentrate. This stretching feels good. I have enlarged myself. Satisfaction is derived from completing a piece.

I find another joy in writing — writing about wilderness trips, journeys into the mountains, the prairies, and especially forays to the desert, into the canyons of Utah. These trips themselves inspire further writing — musings while staring into the night sky, sensing the flow of a river, watching the dying embers of a fire. I relive these trips as I read about them years later. Memories returned, friends recalled, moods relived. All because I wrote them down.



## Full Moon Hikes at White Sands National Park



*On nights when the moon is full expect to see your shadow because the moonlight will reflect off the sand for quite a bright night.  
(Photo courtesy National Park Service)*

Those of you who attended the 2021 RMOWP conference in Alamogordo, New Mexico, will remember the sunset stroll with a ranger at White Sands National Park, one of the conference highlights. Anyone traveling in that area around the time of the full moon may want to sign up for one of the guided full moon hikes.

Required tickets, available through [www.recreation.gov](http://www.recreation.gov), go on sale two months before the date of the tour and cost \$8 per person for those 16 and older and \$4 each for those 15 and younger. Participants must also pay the standard park entrance fee of \$25 per private vehicle.

Registered participants meet 30 minutes before the hike's scheduled start time at the Dune Life Nature Trail trailhead, 2.3 miles from the park's fee station. Allow 1 1/2 hours for the one-mile hike, which is considered moderate, going up and down sand dunes. All participants must stay with the group for the entire hike, and closed-toe shoes are required. Although flashlights and headlamps are permitted, their use during the hike as well as flash photography and tripods are not allowed.

### 2023 Full Moon Hike Schedule:

Tuesday, March 7: 6:15pm  
 Wednesday, April 5: 7:30pm  
 Thursday, May 4: 7:45pm  
 Saturday, June 3: 8:15pm  
 Sunday, July 2: 8:15pm  
 Tuesday, August 1: 8:15pm  
 Thursday, September 28: 7:00pm  
 Saturday, October 28: 6:30pm  
 Monday, November 27: 5:00pm

Additional information is available at [www.nps.gov/whsa/planyourvisit/full-moon-hike.htm](http://www.nps.gov/whsa/planyourvisit/full-moon-hike.htm).

## The Next Zoom

When: Tuesday, April 18 at 7pm

Coordinator Steve Cochrane will email those who've signed up, with the link to take part. **Bill and Kit Horton** will present "Postcards from Iceland" - see below.

If you wish to be included simply contact Steve at [steve@stevecochranephotography.com](mailto:steve@stevecochranephotography.com) and he will add you to his list.

### Postcards from Iceland

Join **Bill and Kit Horton** on a self-guided exploration of Iceland. You'll see breath-taking landscapes, glaciers, waterfalls, geothermal features, rocky seascapes, and some local animal life (both wild and not so wild).

In addition to natural features, you will see historic churches, lighthouses, and architecture both quirky and majestic. And, along the way, you will get a feel for the people, culture, food, and what it takes to get around on your own.

By the end, you'll be ready to plan your own visit to Iceland--even if only in your imagination.



*Hvalsneskirkja - a uniquely colorful church in Iceland.  
© William Horton*

*Rocks...from pg. 1*

desert box turtles, bullsnakes, and western diamondback and prairie rattlesnakes.

For a distant view of the rock formations, seen in contrast to the surrounding desert, drive or walk the 0.25-mile (one-way) dirt road up to Observation Point, in the southeast corner of the park. From this perspective, the formations look almost surreal.



Spring and fall are the most popular times at the park, with moderate temperatures, although spring can be windy. Summers are hot, often reaching the upper 90s and sometimes exceeding 100°, with nights dropping into the 50s. Winters have pleasant daytime temperatures, with highs usually in the 50s, and nights in the 20s and occasionally the teens.

For additional information see the New Mexico State Park website, <https://www.emnrd.nm.gov/spd/find-a-park/> or call the park office at 575-536-2800.



*President's Column*

## My Favorite Time

Photos & text by Virginia Parker Staat

It's springtime in Texas. David, Sam, and I were walking the Preserve trail this morning. As we walked, it looked like a flower fairy had gone before us and strewn the forest floor with yellow jessamine and bright pink redbud blossoms. Here at home, buds are bursting, bees are buzzing, and we have pairs of Carolina wrens, bluebirds, and chickadees all building nests in different boxes on the property.

Spring is my favorite time of year. It is a time of renewal, a time of birth, a time to observe. The bees squiggle between flower stamens, packing pollen on their tiny legs. Pastures are blanketed in wildflowers. Yesterday a male Rufus hummingbird joined the little female who overwintered in our yard. The baby squirrels are large enough now to begin peaking out of their nest in the woodpecker house. Every day — almost every second — there is something new to see.

It occurred to me that this is what RMOWP is about — observation of our natural world. We use our observation skills to frame photos or write descriptions. We can only capture what we see, however, when we immerse ourselves in our surroundings. In that moment, we become part of nature, part of the rhythm of life. It is a treasured moment and special gift to have this opportunity.

It takes all that is in us to truly observe nature. Virginia Alison said, "Brushing the clouds away from my eyes, I see clarity in the raindrop and beauty in the first ray of morning sun... Life is strange and wondrous." As springtime comes to your area, I hope you take the time to immerse yourself in some special place and turn that moment into a word or image that becomes as alive and wondrous as springtime itself.



*A Staat bee checking out cherry laurel blossoms.*



*Baby squirrels peeking out of woodpecker house.*



*Bees seeking nectar from a poppy.*



## Finding the Best National Parks for You

By Don Laine

The National Park Service recently released its 2022 visitation report, showing that America's 424 National Park Service properties continued to rebound toward pre-Covid levels. And it also indicated that shifts in visitation numbers show that people are getting the message to visit more of the lesser-known parks and time their visits to the off season.

Many parks with record visitation in 2022 are on what NPS Director Chuck Sams called "the road less traveled." In fact, the report showed that many parks that broke visitation records in 2022 were in the lower 50 percent of overall park visitation.

"So, where should I go this year?" you may ask.

There are numerous books, articles, and websites that claim to rate the parks, but don't believe them. It's pointless to create a "Best Of" list, because National Park Service properties vary widely, each offering its own unique experience.

The real question, however, is "Which parks are best for you?" Each has its own personality and opportunities, so to determine which ones you should visit you'll need to do your homework before heading out the door.

First, think about what kind of experience you're looking for. If you are a **looker**, your main motive in visiting a national park is to see that fantastic scenery first hand. This will usually involve hiking, or at least walking, which you'll also enjoy, but seeing the mountains, rock formations, lakes, streams, and all the rest is why you're really there. On the other hand, if you're a **doer**, while you want to see the scenery your primary motivation for visiting is to hike the trails, climb the rock formations, kayak the rivers, and enjoy whatever other activities are available.

The National Park Service has done an admirable job of making these parks wonderful places for both lookers and doers, and at most parks there are hiking trails, walking paths, scenic drives, viewpoints, visitor centers, and ranger programs. But some parks are best for sightseeing while others are ideal for hikers and outdoor activity fans. For example, Arches National Park near Moab, Utah, is an easy and fun place to see spectacular red rock arches, from the scenic drive or along a trail after a short walk. But right across the road at Canyonlands National Park you'll find a few nice viewpoints, but to really appreciate the park you'll need to hit the hiking trails or backcountry roads.

Generally, the larger and more visited parks, such as Grand Canyon, Glacier, and Yellowstone, offer a greater variety of experiences—something for everyone—while smaller parks, such as Carlsbad Caverns and Badlands, are more specialized. At the huge Glacier National Park in northern Montana, you'll have numerous possibilities for hiking and boating, but also wonderful scenery that can be experienced from the scenic drive in your own car or on a guided tour, or even a boat trip on one of the park's crystal clear lakes.

### SO - HOW TO CHOOSE?

1. Determine when you want to make this trip, and decide if you want it to be one of looking or doing, or a combination of both.
2. Consider your physical abilities, remembering that many parks, especially in the Western United States, are at fairly high elevations that will tax the stamina of even the most gung-ho go-getters, especially if they're accustomed to sea level.
3. Do your homework to narrow down your list of possible parks to a half dozen, the ones that most interest you.
4. Go online to the park websites to see photos of the parks, and decide which parks grab you as a must-go-to. Or visit your local library or streaming service and check out some national park videos, such as the top series—Ken Burns' programs for PBS, "The National Parks: America's Best Idea."
5. Check individual park websites for current conditions such as construction or road closures.

Now, make your reservations, pack your bags, and hit the road.

ENJOY!

## Dues are (almost) Overdue

Treasurer Maryann Gaug will be calling anyone who has not renewed their membership by the middle of March. Anyone not renewing will be dropped from the membership database effective April 1, 2023. Please renew soon!



*"Puffin eating capelin" © William Horton - another sample of what you will see during the next zoom meeting "Postcards from Iceland" with Kit and Bill Horton. Don't miss it! (Details on pg. 3.)*

Writer's Corner

## Clarity from Clutter

By Virginia Parker Staat

*Four basic premises of writing: clarity, brevity, simplicity, and humanity.*

~ William Zinsser



Virginia with her beloved Roxanne.

We've been cleaning the attic this winter, a task that quickly became overwhelming. David and I have lived in this house for 32 years. Over time, our attic became the repository for boxes of old tax records and check stubs and semi-important papers. Because we only had a vague idea of the contents of all those storage boxes, we have had to sift through each one. To say the least, it

has been a trip down memory lane.

I discovered one box containing old college papers, creative writings, and assignments. As I read some of my professors' notes, one word became most prominent: Clarity. Clarity is the backbone of good writing. With clarity, there is no ambiguity. With clarity our message shines through. How we write with clarity is a topic worthy of consideration by all writers.

When I began researching clarity for this article, I found a myriad of titles on the Internet, including *Seven Musts for Lucid Prose*, and *Eight Tips on Achieving Clarity in Your Writing*, and *Nine Tips for Simplifying Your Message*. (I didn't even bother reading *Clarity in Writing — the 44 Important Writing Principles*. It was obvious from the title that clarity was not that author's strong suit.)

Clarity in writing is basically a quest for simplicity. It is sharpening vague language. It is weeding unnecessary words. It is eliminating cliches and idioms and clutter. It is

simplifying structure. It is using the active voice. It is incorporating proper grammar and punctuation. It is knowing your audience so that you can better connect with them.

Clarity may appear to be a tall order for a writer. In reality, however, it is just a series of rational steps. In *Writing Tools*, author Roy Peter Clark explains how to build any piece of good writing, "the writer conceives an idea, collects things to support it, discovers what the work is really about, attempts a first draft, and revises in a quest for greater clarity."

Clarity is most often achieved in our editing and revising. William Zinsser, author of *On Writing Well*, believes we must become masters of the art of clarity. He writes, "Good writing has an aliveness that keeps the reader reading from one paragraph to the next, and it's not a question of gimmicks to 'personalize' the author. It's a question of using the English language in a way that will achieve the greatest clarity and strength." He continues, "Writing is hard work. A clear sentence is no accident. Very few sentences come out right the first time, or even the third time."

The shredder company's truck arrives on Tuesday to dispose of eleven boxes of unnecessary papers. Our attic decluttering is, indeed, a fitting analogy for attaining clarity in writing. As Kidder and Todd said in their book *Good Prose: The Art of Nonfiction*, "Clarity isn't an exciting virtue, but it is a virtue always."



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

Subject: E-mail RMO

Thanks!

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