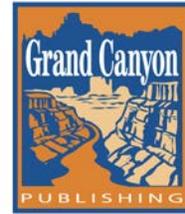


American Photo Tours

Post Office Box 8581
Mesa, Arizona 85214-8581
480-924-4943
AmericanPhotoTours.com



Capturing Images in National Parks *By Greg Smith*

The concept of National Parks as pristine reserves of the most beautiful parts of a country that would be designated by the government and protected from all commercial exploitation was essentially an American idea in the mid 19th Century, and the first natural landscape to be so designated as a national park was Yellowstone National Park in 1872. This park is situated



Copyright Greg Smith

Zabriski Point – Death Valley National Park

primarily in the state of Wyoming but extends into Idaho and Montana as well. Today, there are fifty-eight parks in the US system, and hundreds of national monuments, historic sites and nature reserves that provide sanctuary for the animals and plants that reside there, as well as stunning and often unique landscapes. The concept of national parks has been adopted by countries all over the world and today there are hundreds of park lands on six continents that serve to protect and preserve the natural

environments that are unique and precious in some one hundred countries around the world. For photographers there are a few guidelines that can help us capture these jewels of the world and not have to rely on Photo Shop to recreate what nature has afforded us in the wild.

Research

Before you head out in the world to visit national parks and other protected areas do your research. Find a good list of parks that are in your region of the country, or that are part of a world class list of the best parks anywhere in the world. Compare lists and determine initially which ones provide the subject matter you want to photograph. Are your interests more in the area of wildlife for instance? If so, then Yellowstone National Park is one of the best choices in the US, followed by Katmai National Park in Alaska, Everglades National Park in



Copyright Greg Smith

Prickly Pear Cactus – Zion NP



Copyright Greg Smith

Mountain Sheep – Zion NP

Florida and Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming/Montana/Idaho. There are many places to see wildlife in the park system, but these are some of the best sites with the largest and most visible wild animals that can be captured on film so to say.

If plants are your main subject of interest then Olympic National Park in Washington State, Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado, Acadia National Park in Maine (especially in October), and Smokey Mountains National Park in Tennessee/North Carolina are very good choices. Floral displays are a key element in most of the parks in the entire system, but this small group is known for the

accessible specimens that can be readily photographed, are plentiful and often have an exceptional range of indigenous species. The tropics, Hawaii for instance, has two outstanding parks that provide a wide range of plant species, Haleakala National Park on Maui and Hawaii Volcanoes National Park on Hawaii are two, as well as Virgin Islands National Park in the Caribbean Sea. For tundra images and the pygmy versions of ground plants try Denali National Park in Alaska. Wherever you go, know what you can expect to find when you arrive, especially during specific seasons and times of the year.



Copyright Greg Smith

Iceberg - Kenai Fjords National Park

Timing

As you consider the parks you want to visit, it is imperative that you consider the time of year and even the time of day you want to visit various sites and physical locations in the parks. Seasons vary greatly from park to park and while some, like Everglades National Park, Zion National Park and Arches National Park are both accessible and provide prime shooting locations all year. Others are far more seasonal and your visit can be quite disappointing if you do not do your homework.

Grand Canyon National Park's North Rim for instance is only open from May 15 to October 15, and any other time you will have to turn around as much as twenty miles from the actual rim, depending on snow. The South Rim remains open all year and is only obstructed for short times awaiting snow removal. The Canyon in winter is a delight for anyone making the effort, though you may be surprised to find that even after a heavy snow fall the snow level in the canyon only reaches about one thousand feet down from the rim. Glacier National Park in Montana has limited accessibility during the entire year, but the Going to the Sun Highway that transects the park is closed from October to July 1 of the following year. The summit of the Highway is one of the highlights of any visit to the park, and if you arrive in June you will be denied not only that experience, but will have to drive around the south end of the park, about one hundred miles to get to the other entrance. Make your reservations for July, August or early September if visiting this icon of high altitude parks.



Copyright Greg Smith

Storm Over Grand Canyon – Grand Canyon National Park



Copyright Greg Smith

Autumn Color – Near Acadia NP



Copyright Greg Smith

Waterfalls – Haleakala National Park

Acadia National Park in Maine is another locale with a long season where you can visit the beautiful rugged coast, the barrens of Cadillac Mountain, and the flora of this solitary New England national park. But the real highlight of the year occurs for about three weeks in October when the sugar maples and other deciduous trees are at their height of fall color. The blueberry barrens turn a deep red and the mosses and ferns add their own colors to the mix. It is quite busy at that time of year, but if you have an automobile, you can get over to the Schoodic Peninsula and visit the tip of that much quieter sliver of land to see the colors and get great surf shots as well. Great Smokey Mountains National Park has two high seasons that are similar to the Appalachian Mountain region. In late March through April, you will be treated to the spring flowering season and a lot of folks with similar intentions, so it is often rather heavily trafficked during that time. The second season is the autumn in September through October when the leaves are changing and the colors are at their peak. The crowds are at their most concentrated, but the show is really stunning. Plan ahead.

Suggestions

If you are heading to one or more parks that you have not visited before, and you have



Copyright Greg Smith

Deer and Bluebonnets – Olympic National Park

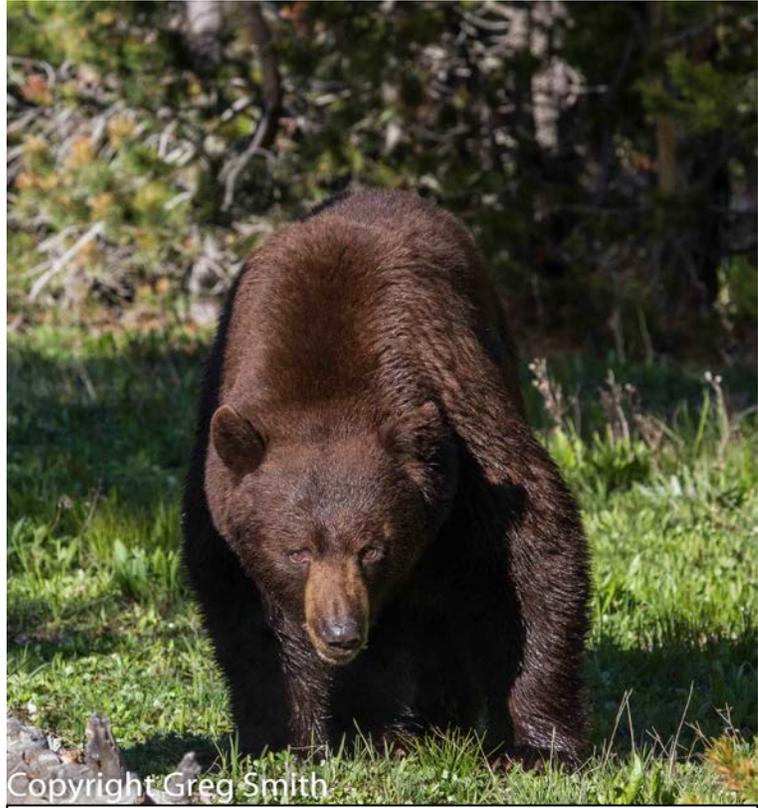
done your homework about the timing of your visit, and read up on the specific sites that you want to see, go with the intention of having a good time and, especially with



Copyright Greg Smith

Double Arch – Arches National Park

larger parks like Yosemite National park, Death Valley National Park, the largest park in the lower 48 states, or even Smokey Mountains National Park, narrow your focus and don't try to see everything. The beauty of these treasured places is everywhere, and no matter what the weather or the crowd levels, they must be appreciated slowly. Having traveled to national parks for over thirty-five years, my experience is that every trip I make into Yellowstone National Park for example, a park I have visited over twenty times, each visit is something special, and I see and experience new vistas and animal encounters every time I go. The same is true for Kenai Fjords National Park in Alaska, Olympic National Park in Washington and over forty other units of this world class collection of landscapes and environments that are part of my yearly tour business.



Copyright Greg Smith

Chocolate Black Bear – Yellowstone NP

Your first time in any park should be focused on the icons of the park itself. For Yellowstone it is the Upper and Lower Falls in the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone. Expect to see herds and small bands of buffalo, and even bears are fairly regular, but they will be far away as a rule, and hard to photograph. The landscape highlight will be the geothermal areas and they are worth the traffic congestion in summer – go early and late in the day to photograph them. Small unexpected critters, plants and anomalies will present themselves, but in most all cases it is far better to have a plan rather than just to wander. The parks are generally quite large and you can burn up a lot of daylight just getting lost or wandering without an idea of where you want to go.

One solution is to hire a guide to eliminate the guesswork and make sure you come away with what you have traveled so far to see. If not, rely on your research and the confidence you bring to this field. Bus tours are a last resort unless you are doing reconnaissance and expect to go back again on your own. The time on target as a photographer will be short indeed.

While traveling on your own, if you are sixty-two or older, buy a Senior Pass at any national park gate or visitor's center. They are only \$10.00 and are good for life as a pass to get into any federal site including parks, monuments, national forests and many historic sites. The bargain of a lifetime!

The following list includes some of my favorite parks for the sheer experience of being there and that also offer exceptional photographic opportunities. Good Luck!

Yellowstone National Park

Smokey Mountains National Park

Yosemite National Park
Olympic National Park
Grand Canyon National Park
Zion National Park
Kenai Fjords National Park

Bryce Canyon National Park
Capitol Reef National Park
Death Valley National Park
Arches National Park
Grand Teton National Park

All text and images ©Greg Smith 2016