



RUN FREE

LOG SOME SERENE MILES AT ONE OF THESE FIVE GEMS IN HONOR OF THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE'S 100TH BIRTHDAY.

BY NANCY HESLIN

Bring out the granola-filled birthday cake, stacked high with fire-safe candles...the National Park Service (NPS) turns the big 1-0-0 in August!

Technically, our country's oldest (and the world's first) national park, Yellowstone, was founded in 1872. But in 1916, President Woodrow Wilson created NPS to ensure protection of undeveloped land. Today, the federal agency oversees 59 national parks (plus an additional 352 national monuments and conservation areas).

To kick off the next hundred years, NPS and the National Parks Foundation have launched FindYourPark.com and the #FindYourPark social media campaign to focus everyone's interest on America's outdoor treasures. And that means runners too. After all, parks are superb places to sweat. As Superinten-



STEVE PIERCE

dent Kirsten Talken-Spaulling of Fredericksburg & Spotsylvania National Military Park in Virginia says: “Here’s a chance for runners to unplug from the electronic world and plug into the real world.”

Since 1916, there have been over 13.23 billion NPS visitors—for good reason. America’s national parks offer a diverse variety of nature and ecosystems in communities throughout the country. While big-name parks like the aforementioned Yellowstone may be on your bucket list, there are plenty of other gorgeous locations that are less crowded and better suited to a nice, long run. Here are our top picks for runner-friendly—and free—national parks where you can celebrate this important birthday with open trails and fresh air.

Cuyahoga Valley National Park

SIZE: 32,950 acres

LOCATION: Ohio

RUNNING MILES: 125

ELEVATION: From 590 feet at the Cuyahoga River to 1,164 feet at the Glaciated Allegheny Plateau

TYPES OF TRAILS: There’s something for all levels, with the mostly flat Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail as well as the challenging and rocky Virginia Kendall trails. Terrain comprises wetlands and fields; some trails have you crossing streams over stones or log bridges.

WHY HERE: The burning of the Cuyahoga River—an oil slick from industrial waste caught fire in June 1969 and caused \$100,000 in damage—brought about the creation of the Clean Water Act and the Environmental Protection Agency. There are 11 farms leased to local farmers who live on them, a winery and a weekly farmer’s market in the park.

WHEN TO RUN: Fall is the most popular time, with incredible scenery and cooler temperatures. You *can* run year-round, but winter may be below zero and summer sees temps in the 90s with high humidity.

BEST ROUTE: The park’s Pamela Barnes suggests the trail from Stanford House to Brandywine Falls and the Brandywine Gorge loop. “It will take you up and down hills and stairs, past a 65-foot waterfall, vernal pools, and sandstone and shale outcroppings.”

SAFETY TIPS: Ticks are prevalent so insect repellent with DEET is suggested. Do a body check after, especially if you venture onto narrower trails like the Buckeye. Poison ivy is everywhere, so make sure you know what it looks like—you can get a rash from the vines even when there are no leaves.

WILDLIFE: Deer, coyotes, muskrats, minks, raccoons, otters and blue herons abound—along with bald eagles and peregrine falcons.

INSIDE SCOOP: The weather can vary widely and change abruptly. Be prepared with layers. Thunderstorms can pop up quickly in the summer.

ETIQUETTE: If you run on the towpath, be aware of bicycles passing and stay to the right. It can be quite busy on summer and fall weekends.

WATER: Fountains are available along the towpath at Canal Exploration Center, Station Road Trailhead, Boston Store Visitor Center, Peninsula and Hunt House.

CELL SERVICE: It’s generally good, although around the park’s center, it seems to drain your battery searching, so some providers are better than others. You won’t have to travel too far to find service if you lose it.



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Fredericksburg & Spotsylvania National Military Park

SIZE: 8,000 acres

LOCATION: Central Virginia

RUNNING MILES: 20, with six maintained trails at least a mile in length. The longest, Lee Drive Trail, is 5 miles one-way.

ELEVATION: 50 to 400 feet

TYPES OF TRAILS: You get everything from short, groomed surfaces of recycled tires (like walking on a cloud) to wooded paths through the forest.

WHY HERE: Stride along this American battlefield, and you'll follow the footsteps of Civil War boots, which helped shape the country as we know it today.

WHEN TO RUN: Year-round running is possible with the right clothes, but summer can be humid.

BEST ROUTE: 2 miles one-way from Chatham Manor northwest past the gardens and through a field to the Belmont Ferry Farm Trail will take you to John Lee Pratt Park and St. Clair Brooks Memorial Park (look for the bald eagles). You can add a half-mile loop at the end of Brooks Park.

SAFETY TIPS: Central Virginia is prone to ticks and disease-carrying insects, so wear repellent, especially on trails.

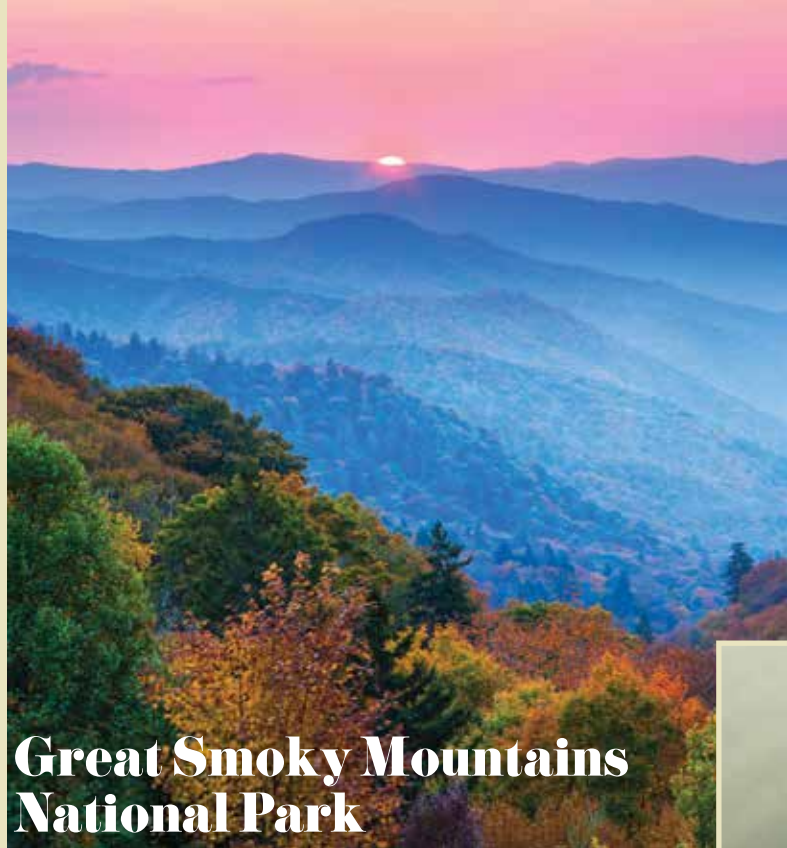
WILDLIFE: You might spy whitetail deer, foxes or turkeys.

INSIDE SCOOP: Superintendent Kirsten Talken-Spaulling says this is an ideal park for all levels of runners, particularly beginners, who don't want to go too far off the beaten path.

ETIQUETTE: Be respectful of other park users and don't run in the cemetery.

WATER: There are filler stations in the park and water for sale at all bookstores.

CELL SERVICE: Good



Great Smoky Mountains National Park

SIZE: 500,000 acres

LOCATION: North Carolina and Tennessee

RUNNING MILES: 848, including 70 miles of the Appalachian Trail

ELEVATION: 800 to 6,400 feet

TYPES OF TRAILS: Easy to strenuous; mostly on lightly crushed gravel. Pick up the excellent trail guide at the bookshop.

WHY HERE: While the Smokies don't have the name recognition other parks garner, its size allows it to be America's number-one most visited—double that of the Grand Canyon! It's also a UNESCO World Heritage Site, with as many trees (130 species) as in all of Europe.

WHEN TO RUN: This is a year-round park with four seasons, so when to go depends on your comfort level and preference. If you choose summer, escape the heat by hitting the higher elevation.

BEST ROUTE: You're sure not to get lost by signing up for a marked race. The inaugural Smoky Mountains 5K will be held Sept. 9.

SAFETY TIPS: Yellow-jacket wasps are aggressive in the fall, so carry medication if you're allergic. Also, do not run within 50 yards of elk or bears. If you come across either, stop and slowly back up to allow the animal to pass.

WILDLIFE: The park is home to 120 species of birds and 65 mammal species, including the 700-pound elk, coyotes, bobcats, white-tail deer, squirrels, woodchucks, raccoons, opossums, red and gray foxes, skunks and bats. The largest predator in the park, the black bear, is most commonly spotted in open areas such as Cades Cove.

INSIDE SCOOP: Autumn colors are stunning, but the park is most packed during fall as a result. The park's Dana Soehn suggests: "May or September has the lowest humidity, and if you avoid 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. peak periods, you'll find solitude."

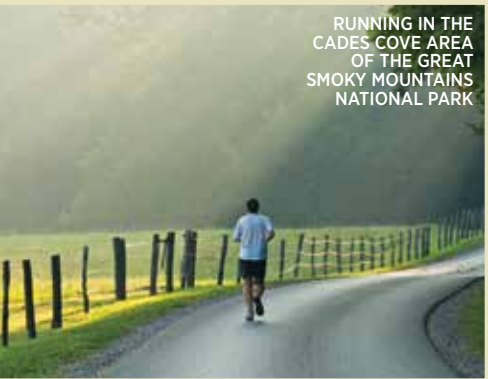
ETIQUETTE: Trails near the waterfall have lots of people, so slow down, or opt for the two commuter trails (4-milers) that touch each side of the park.

WATER: Bring your own.

CELL SERVICE: Spotty



RUNNING IN THE CADES COVE AREA OF THE GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK



North Cascades National Park



PATHWAY AROUND DIABLO LAKE AT SUNRISE

SIZE: 684,303 acres

LOCATION: Northwest Washington State

RUNNING MILES: 400 total

ELEVATION: Called the “American Alps,” this park stretches from 605 feet (Goodell Creek) all the way to 9,200 (Goode Mountain).

TYPES OF TRAILS: From rocky, woody valley bottoms to steep ridges, the thigh-burning gradients are more challenging than the mostly unpaved paths.

WHY HERE: This is home to the Desolation Peak Trail (and its 4,400-foot elevation gain), where in 1956, writer Jack Kerouac came “to lie in the grass and look at the clouds”—fodder for his novel *Desolation Angels*.

WHEN TO RUN: Midweek running is better as the park is less busy. Trails that follow the valley bottoms may be snow-free during the winter, but those that climb subalpine can hold an icy pack well into July. The summer months into September are generally warm and dry on the west side of the mountain range but can be quite hot and dusty on the east side. Spring tends to be wet on the west side but dry on the east. Check the forecast and gear up appropriately!

BEST ROUTE: Cascade Pass (3.7 miles one-way) and Copper Ridge loop (32 miles) offer jaw-dropping views of the jagged peaks and deep valleys of the North Cascades and are generally well-maintained.

SAFETY TIPS: The trails may be more narrow and steep than you are ready for—and runners may encounter downed trees or washed-out bridges. It is best not to travel alone—running with at least one other person helps ensure your safety in case of accident or injury—and make sure to have a support plan with check-in times.

WILDLIFE: 75 mammal species include black bears, deer, mountain lions, mountain goats, bobcats, and even marmots and pikas. Although sightings are extremely rare, the North Cascades are also considered potential habitat for grizzly bears, moose and wolves.

INSIDE SCOOP: “Expect the unexpected!” says ranger Cori Oakes. “Do your research on your intended route, and build some extra time into your itinerary. Runners that have attempted off-trail routes have typically had epic adventures, so it really is best in this terrain to stick to the designated trails!”

ETIQUETTE: Over 90 percent of the park complex is open to animals, so step out of the trail to allow horses and mules to proceed. Don’t make any sudden movements or noises that may startle them. Also, uphill travelers have the right of way. You may need to slow to a walk while finding an appropriate place to pass.

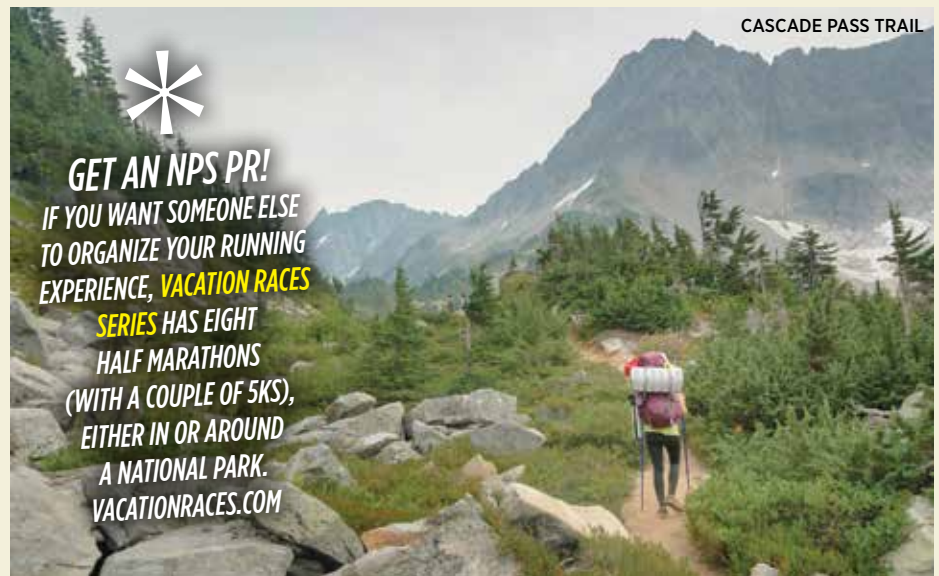
WATER: Drinking fountains and water faucets can be found at visitor centers.

CELL SERVICE: Poor at best

ONLY FOOTPRINTS

Whenever you travel to raw wilderness, it’s crucial to minimize the impact you leave. Here are a few tips to remain a respectful runner.

- ▶ Don’t throw trash into toilets—that just means a ranger will have to pick it out!
- ▶ Pack trash in a resealable plastic bag that you can carry in your small pack or stuff sack.
- ▶ Dispose of human waste appropriately. This prevents water pollution, the spread of disease and the chances of negatively affecting the experience of other trail users.
- ▶ Deposit your waste in cat holes (a minimum of 6 inches deep and 4 inches in diameter) at least 200 feet from water, the trail and campsites. Use a plastic bag to carry out toilet paper, tampons and pads.



CASCADE PASS TRAIL

RUN FREE



Epic Challenge

Autumn Ray spent the last six years putting in grueling training hours to qualify for the 2016 Olympic Trials Marathon in February. But when she failed to nab the standard time, the woman who grew up in Libby, Mont., asked herself, now what?

The emergency medicine physician based in Tucson, Ariz., decided to set a new goal: run all 59 national parks over the next four years, before she hits 40.

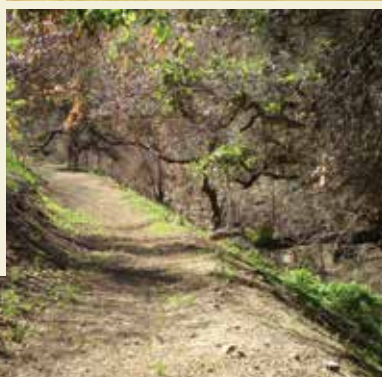
"I initially said I would do this by the time I am 50, but when you work in an ER, you get daily reminders that there are no guarantees you will make it to 50 or that something else won't get in the way. So I decided not to wait."

This year, Ray will do an initial five-month trip that will allow her to run most of the parks in the continental U.S. (she figures 45 out of 59 by August) before picking off the farther ones in Hawaii, Alaska, the Virgin Islands and American Samoa.

"I wanted to find out what was unique about each of them and experience it firsthand. Being in the parks is a very sensual experience. You have to hear the birds and feel the rocks and see the sunset and smell the flowers and even taste the water in the hot springs. I simply feel like I can be my truest self out in nature, and that's what keeps me going back," she explains.

Averaging 10 miles a day means she'll cover about 1,600 total. The woman who grew up without a TV (and still does not own one) calculates she'll go through five or six pairs of shoes. "I rotate through four pairs of shoes at a time: two trail and two road. I don't usually put more than 300 miles on a pair."

Follow Ray's journey on her blog, notesfromateardrop.blogspot.com. "I'm surprised at the ways it has connected me with perfect strangers. I just hope I can keep that up in a way that people stay engaged."



Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area

SIZE: 156,700 acres

LOCATION: Southern California

RUNNING MILES: 500

ELEVATION: Sea level to Sandstone Peak, the park's highest, reaching 3,111 feet

TYPES OF TRAILS: You'll find well-groomed fire roads and trails that can be rutted.

WHY HERE: Delights abound! You can check out a still-operating film set at Paramount Ranch, soak your feet in the Pacific Ocean and learn about Native American culture—all within view of the Los Angeles skyline.

WHEN TO RUN: This park boasts an exceptional Mediterranean climate year-round, although summer can get hot during the day.

BEST ROUTE: Cheeseboro and Las Virgenes canyons both have a network of trails taking you through a beautiful valley, oak savanna and up and down the surrounding hills.

SAFETY TIPS: Stay on the path in order to avoid off-trail hazards like poison oak, ticks and rattlesnakes.

WILDLIFE: Bobcats, coyotes and dolphins live here. Mountain lions do too, but sightings are rare.

INSIDE SCOOP: Ranger Michael Liang says, "If you're just getting started, we have nice flat, shaded trails, and if you're looking for a brutal hill workout, we have plenty of elevation."

ETIQUETTE: Many trails are open to equestrian riders, so be sure to defer to them as needed and give a friendly hello.

WATER: Most trails have water fountains, but check the "Places to Go" section on the park's website.

CELL SERVICE: Not so good in the canyons, but certainly better than many national parks on ridges and in open spaces. 