

National Parks on the Air — February 2016

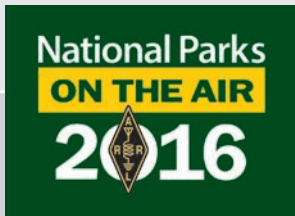


Photo contest announcement and tips for National Park photography.

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As you read this, NPOTA will have been under way for about 2 weeks. I hope that you have worked several NPOTA units by now, or have enjoyed being one of the first Activators for the event. Remember to keep an eye on the NPOTA Activation calendar at npota.arrl.org, and join the NPOTA Facebook group to get in on the conversation with other Chasers and Activators.

One of things this monthly column is for, is highlighting NPOTA activations throughout the year. We want to hear your stories and see your photos! To aid with that endeavor, we'll select one photo each month throughout NPOTA to feature in this column. Winning photos should be high-resolution (greater than 700k) and include a stunning scene from an NPOTA unit that features ham radio in action. Winners will get their photo published in QST and also receive some NPOTA swag. We'll begin the photo contest with the March issue. Photos must be received by January 15 to be considered for the March issue. E-mail photos to npota@arrl.org.

To provide some assistance with getting that great shot, we spoke with Chris Nicholson, a photographer and author of the new book, *Photographing National Parks*. Chris, who has been photographing National Parks for over 10 years, sat down with us and offered some tips.

What are three simple tips for framing and composing a photo in a National Park or monument?

1) Don't be afraid to "fill the frame." In other words, don't leave dead space in the photo around your main subject. Anything in the frame that does not contribute to it being a good photo should be thrown out. Crop, zoom in, move closer — whatever it takes to zero in on your subject. **2)** Pay attention to the background of your photo. This is probably the easiest way to make a picture better. We tend to see only what our mind is focused on, but the camera sees everything, including all the background clutter that ruins what could have been a good photo. So watch the background, and change your angle to make it better. **3)** Remember the "rule of thirds," which is the most fundamental guideline of sound composition. Imagine a tic-tac-toe grid on the photo. Each line represents a point one-third of the way from an edge of the frame. Put the subjects along one or more of those lines and you'll almost always improve your composition.



Chris Nicholson, photographer and author of *Photographing National Parks*, at Acadia National Park. [Steven Ryan, photo]

If hams want better photos than their phones can provide, can you recommend a few entry-level cameras that are light-weight and get the job done?

There are so many great entry-level and point-and-shoot cameras these days that you can find a viable photography tool at any price point. For professional-quality results, you can even get down to the \$400 – \$500 range, which is where major brands start to offer stripped-down models with a pro-quality sensor. The Canon G series is great, as are the Nikon Coolpix P7800 or P900. With any less-expensive model, one thing to ensure is that the camera has a powerful zoom so you can home in on distant subjects, such as wildlife. And look for optical zoom, not inferior digital zoom.

How can hams in the field take photos that effectively "tell the story" of operating radio equipment outdoors?

"Tell the story" is a great way of putting it. Don't just take a random picture of your setup. Seek a scene that's a great photo without the setup, then add your radio to the scene. Think of it like taking a portrait, but the portrait is of a radio instead of a person. If you have a tripod, you can use the camera's timer to make a self-portrait in the wilderness. If you don't have a tripod, you could do the same thing by placing the

camera on a rock, tree branch, etc. Just make sure it's stable before leaving it alone.

You travel a lot with sophisticated equipment. How do you recharge your batteries in the field?

If I'm photographing a park where I have ready access to a car, then I keep an inverter with me to plug into the lighter socket. Then whenever I'm driving, I'm recharging batteries. But if I'll be in the backcountry for a few days, I just bring additional fully charged batteries.

Any suggestions for gear bags, waterproof electronics storage, or other gear you consider essential?

This also depends on how long and how far you'll be carrying. If you're just parking the car and walking 100 yards, then whatever bags you use anywhere else will probably be fine. But if you're hiking off into the wilderness for even a mile, you'll want an ergonomic backpack. So many options are available these days. I particularly like ones that have a rainproof ground cloth that you can pull out of a hidden pocket. And whatever bag you use, it's a great idea to make sure you can attach a water containment system to it. For example, my Lowepro camera backpack has detachable

side pockets where I can put my CamelBak reservoir. Another thing I always tell people, and it's often overlooked, is to wear a very good pair of trail shoes. Not only will they keep you from possibly rolling an ankle, but they'll potentially keep you from falling or slipping and damaging all that expensive and precious gear on your back.

What are five things you always take with you into the field?

Besides the obvious things, like cameras, lenses, and water I always have **1)** A tripod. My philosophy is that if a photo is good enough to shoot, then it's good enough to use a tripod for. **2)** A polarizing filter, because it's useful for improving the look of so many different types of scenes by just sort of "cleaning up" the light. **3)** A GPS unit, or a geotracker, that records where I am while shooting, so I can match up my photos with Google Earth in post-production. That helps me keep track of the names of the mountains, lakes, and other features that I'm photographing. **4)** A remote shutter release, for instances when I'm using long exposures. **5)** Finally, I always carry a wilderness survival kit. Just some basic survival supplies in a pack on my hip, even when on just a short hike. A significant majority of wilderness emergencies happen not to people out for 2-week backcountry trips, but to those who are out for short walks, precisely because the latter tend not to carry emergency supplies.

What are some of the hidden gems of the NPS system? What are a few of the places hams should consider visiting that aren't "first-tier" locations? What are some of your personal favorite places on this list?

Of those 434 units, 59 are designated as "National Parks," but only about half of those are what most people would consider "household names." That means half of our national parks, half of our top-tier protected lands, are relatively unknown to the general public. So there are lots of places to get off the beaten path. One of the great spots that are relative secrets is Theodore Roosevelt National Park in North Dakota. It has otherworldly rock formations, great river views, and is the only national park with a protected population of wild horses. Lassen Volcanic National Park, in California, is another great spot. Some of the old volcanic features — which really aren't that "old" — provide some surreal and beautiful landscapes. Redwood is a famous national park, but most people think of it as just a forest; the "secret" is that it also has some of the most beautiful and pristine coastline in the park system.

As for my favorites, that's hard to choose.



The cover of Chris Nicholson's new book, *Photographing National Parks*.

But three I always come back to are: **1)** Acadia National Park in Maine, because growing up in Connecticut, it was the easiest park for me to

get to, and thus is the one I know the best. **2)** Olympic National Park in Washington, because it's such an amazing place with three distinct ecosystems and landscapes — alpine, coastal, and rainforest. And **3)** Yellowstone, because there are so many different and stunning photography subjects there that I could never, ever get bored.

Can you think of any specific places that are isolated in the National Parks that would be worth a hike for ham radio operators to take gear and set up for a few hours?

In California's Kings Canyon National Park, you could hike into Paradise Valley and be surrounded by stunning mountain scenery. Want to know how beautiful it is? Ansel Adams was one of the key lobbyists for making it a park. That's about all you need to know. In Utah's Canyonlands National Park, you could hike out on Grand View

Point and be surrounded by miles of cascading canyons and rock formations. In Texas' Big Bend National Park, it's an overnight trip, but hiking out to the South Rim provides what many consider one of the best views in the whole park

system, looking a hundred miles from the Chisos Mountains over the Chihuahuan Desert. In South Carolina's Congaree National Park, you could hike through the floodplain forest to the river and, despite it being a small park, you could perhaps not see anyone else all day. In Yellowstone there's the Monument Geyser Basin, which hardly anyone goes to because you have to hike 3 miles round trip. Not a long walk at all, but the other geyser basins have parking lots. And if you really want to get off the map, have a bush plane drop you in the Arrigetch Peaks region of Alaska's Gates of the Arctic National Park & Preserve for a few days. Really, you can find wonderful out-of-the-way spots in just about any national park. A great tip for finding something unique? Ask a ranger.

"Don't just take a random picture of your setup. Seek a scene that's a great photo without the setup, then add your radio to the scene. Think of it like taking a portrait, but the portrait is of a radio instead of a person."

How have you been received by NPS staff and employees when bringing in a lot of equipment?

I have found NPS staff wonderful to work with. Most of them are there for the same fundamental reason as the rest of us — because they love and care about nature and the National Parks. They know these places like no one else does, and they are willing and eager to share what they know to help you enjoy your experience there. I have never had trouble with the camera equipment I bring, nor have I ever needed a permit, because the work I do falls under the non-commercial definition of what the National Park Service deems to be acceptable and responsible use of the environment.

Any comments or suggestions on navigating the NPS system in general?

I always suggest researching a park before going. Many of them are so large, and have so much to offer, that just showing up without knowing anything is a sure-fire way to miss some things you would have enjoyed. The park service websites are great sources of information, as is a website called National Parks Traveler (www.nationalparkstraveler.com).

Chimani.com is great, too — they make free national park guide apps for Android and iOS. Also, you can download PDFs of the official park maps for free from the park websites, and because these government-published maps are in the public domain, you could actually print a large copy at an office-services store to study or makes

notes on before your trip.

Anything else that you would recommend?

I'm a big proponent of spending a week or two in a park — in my case, it

produces the best photography. But there are also some great possible road trips where you could be in a few different parks in consecutive days. Utah is a good example — in one state you have Zion, Arches, Canyonlands, Bryce Canyon, and Capitol Reef. In the Northwest you could do the same with Crater Lake, Mount Rainier, Olympic, and North Cascades. There are a lot of options for getting creative and putting together a very dynamic trip.

More information on Chris Nicholson and his new book can be found at www.photographingnationalparks.com.