

The National News

4 July 2026

National parks in California, Missouri, Montana, Oregon, South Dakota, Washington and Wyoming

*The big
two five 0*

Washington watches

The nation's stone-faced first president peers from his perch on the Mount Rushmore National Memorial in South Dakota. Picture from 2021.

The big two five 0

SOURCES AND ADDITIONAL INFORMATION: Underlined words in this newsletter link to that.

For most of the Fourth of July newsletters I've created since 2009 — which are always illustrated with photos I shot on visits to some of our most beautiful and important national lands — the headline has been “Happy Fourth of July” in a font resembling the handwritten Declaration of Independence. The Declaration was adopted by the Continental Congress in Philadelphia and then read publicly for the first time there on July 4, 1776, making it our national birthday.

But I do not feel celebratory this year, even as the United States of America reaches its quarter-millennium, the big 2-5-0. We are in a sorry state, and Donald Trump is why.

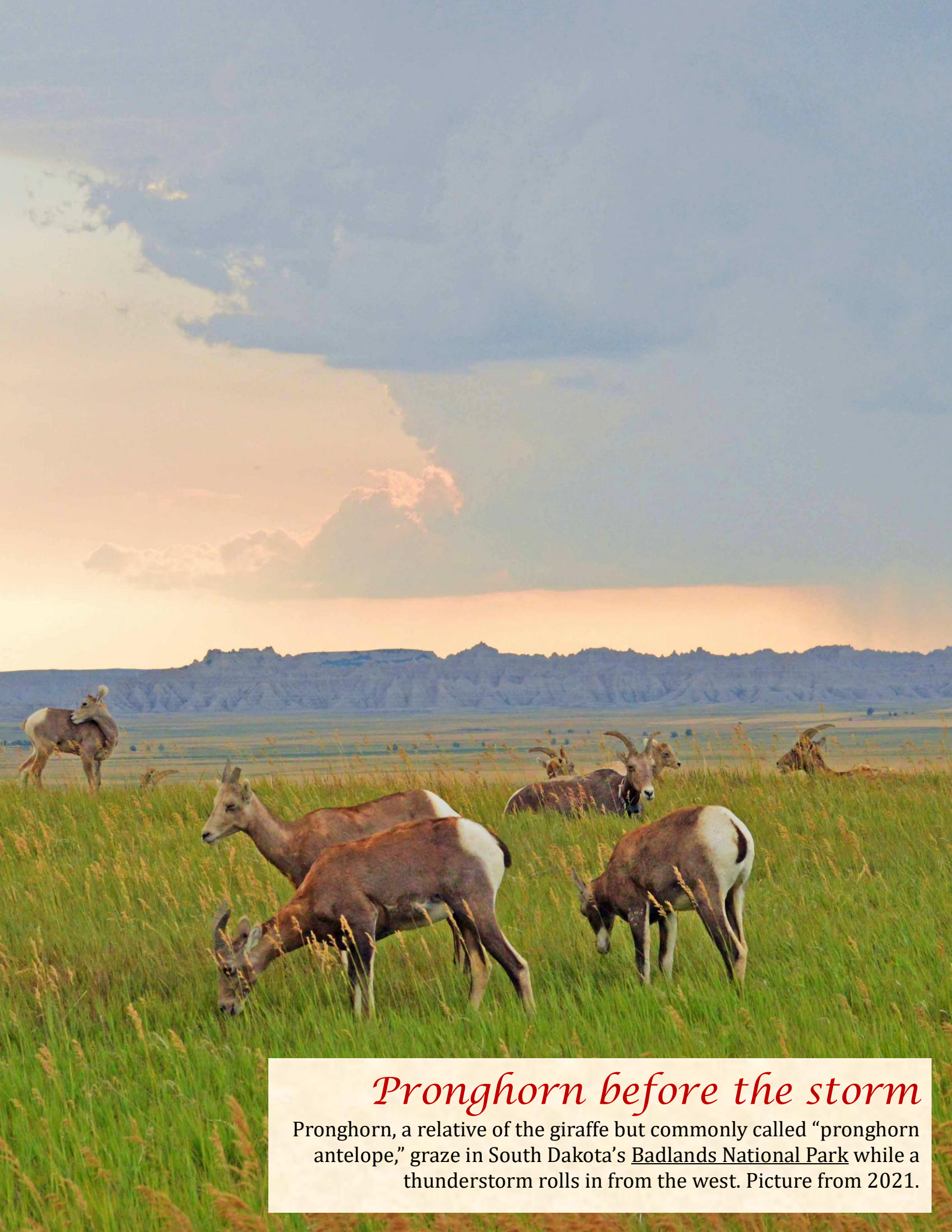
I'd been thinking since last year about what I would write for the 250th, and my initial idea was to include an early line saying, “it's tempting to blame our situation on Donald Trump. ...” Then I would segue into suggesting we've recovered from colossal blunders before and spend a paragraph or two on the Declaration's memorable — yet demonstrably hypocritical — statement that “all men are created equal” as an example. It took nearly a century and a war before the Constitution, ratified when the USA was a child of 12, was amended for the thirteenth time to ban slavery. That was a big step. But still, it was just a start toward addressing the racism that underpinned the practice and still flourishes today.

More important in terms of my original thesis, though, was that slavery's abolition was one example of many in which we've struggled to meet the demands put on us by the Constitution, which are “to form a more perfect union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence (sic), promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our posterity.”

My planned story simply couldn't meet the moment this Fourth's newsletter called for. It's because Trump is the first president to abandon the aspirations of the Declaration and proclaim, in effect, that the Constitution is an impediment to the kind of office he wants the presidency to be: an unaccountable combination of all three branches of government — executive, legislative and judicial.

Trump wants to be boss. He has never played in a sandbox that either his father or he didn't own. A “more perfect union” is whatever benefits him. If he succeeds, not only would he replace democracy with a dictatorship, but dictatorship by a uniquely unqualified national leader in terms of vision, integrity, intelligence and accountability.

It's true that Trump was re-elected after a first term of failure, and that's on us as American voters. But his incompetence, immaturity and corruption are even more obvious now. This administration needs to be tossed. And November's election is where we should start.



Pronghorn before the storm

Pronghorn, a relative of the giraffe but commonly called “pronghorn antelope,” graze in South Dakota’s Badlands National Park while a thunderstorm rolls in from the west. Picture from 2021.



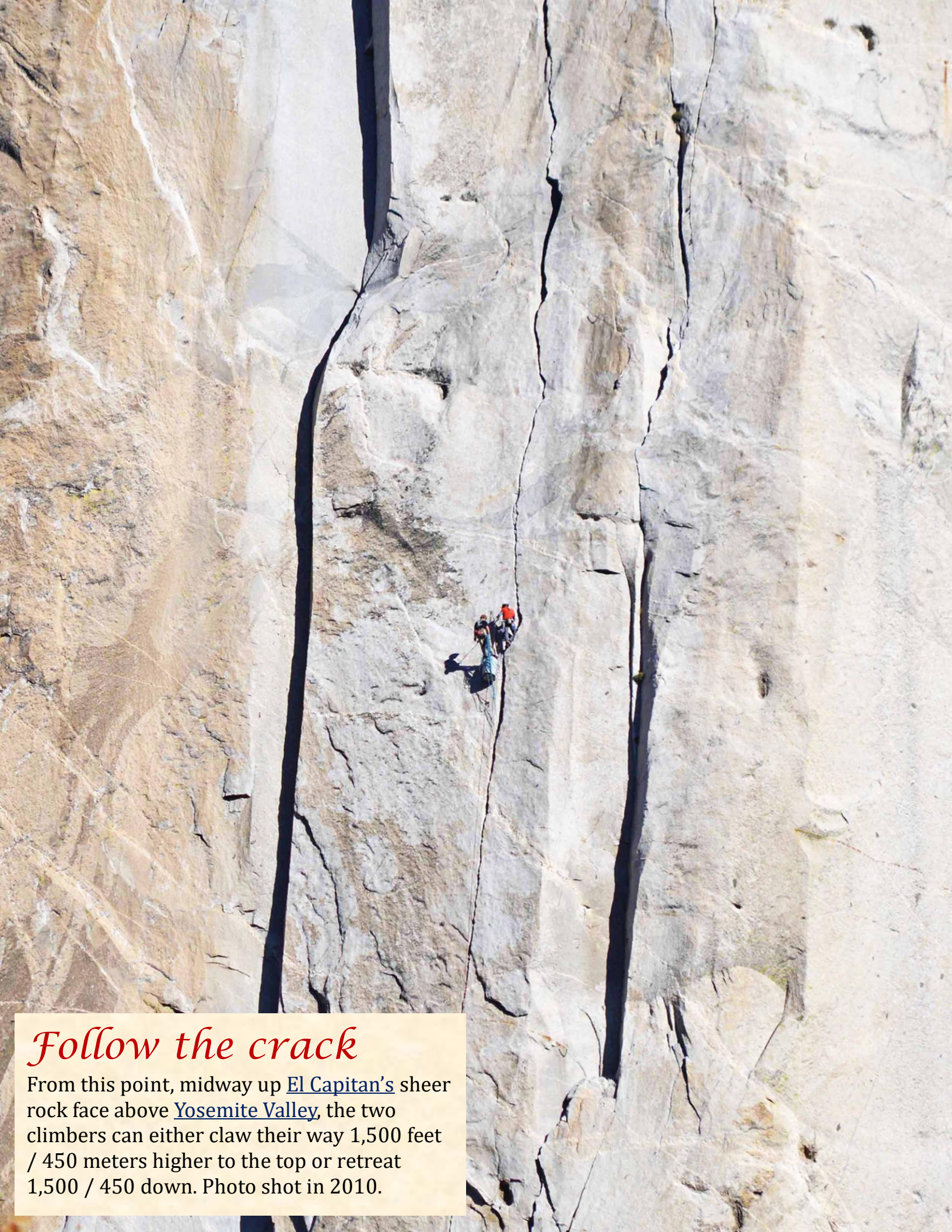
Westward Ho

Gateway Arch National Park in St. Louis marks the starting point of the 1804-06 Lewis and Clark Expedition to explore the Louisiana Purchase find a route to the Pacific Ocean in fulfillment of President Thomas Jefferson's ambition to make the new United States a continent-spanning nation. Photo from 2021.



Big old trees

The sequoias in Sequoia National Park in California's Sierra Nevada are the world's biggest — and some of its oldest — living things. Photo from 2010.



Follow the crack

From this point, midway up [El Capitan's](#) sheer rock face above [Yosemite Valley](#), the two climbers can either claw their way 1,500 feet / 450 meters higher to the top or retreat 1,500 / 450 down. Photo shot in 2010.



Mist Trail

Headed to the top of Nevada Fall, the upper of two falls on Yosemite's [most popular hike](#). We've already climbed to the top of Vernal Fall, which is where most of the mist is. Photo from 2006 by Gordon Meacham.



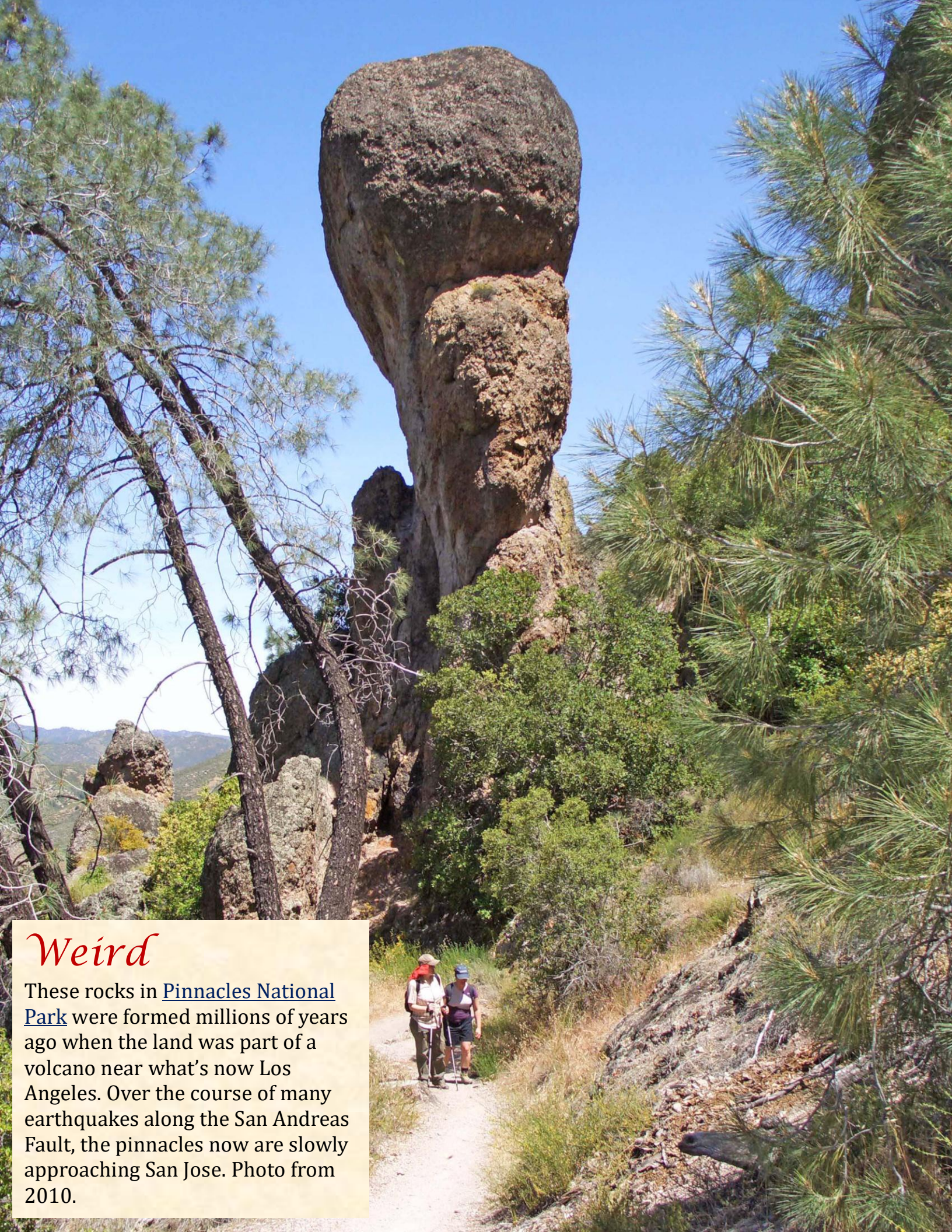
Skyline tour

The Skyline Trail in [Mount Rainier National Park](#) fits within an elevation band of 5,000 feet / 1,524 meters and 7,000 ft / 2,134 m above sea level. But the mountain on whose slopes it lies is the fourth highest in the contiguous United States at 14,411 ft / 4,392 m. Its 28 named glaciers are the source of five major rivers in Washington State. Photo from 2013.



Point Reyes Light

The lighthouse at [Point Reyes National Seashore](#) was built in 1870 and was in service for 105 years before its replacement by an automatic light. The coastal area of Marin County in which it sits became a national seashore in 1972 but the last 12 dairy ranches within its boundaries were abandoned last April. Photo from 2017.



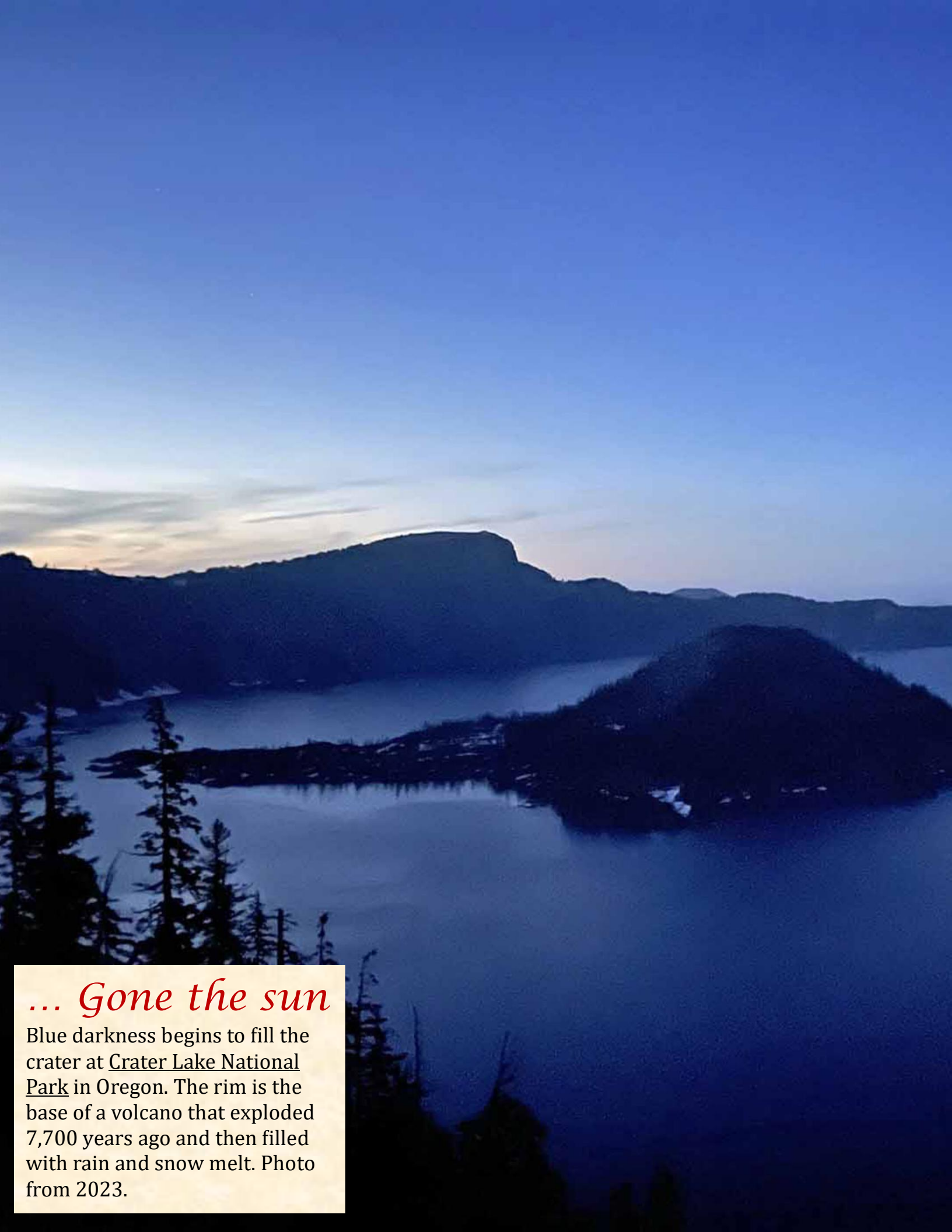
Weird

These rocks in [Pinnacles National Park](#) were formed millions of years ago when the land was part of a volcano near what's now Los Angeles. Over the course of many earthquakes along the San Andreas Fault, the pinnacles now are slowly approaching San Jose. Photo from 2010.



Unperturbed

Traffic stops and cameras come out to allow one of Yellowstone National Park's estimated 5,000 to 6,000 bison to cross the road. Photo from 2021.



... Gone the sun

Blue darkness begins to fill the crater at Crater Lake National Park in Oregon. The rim is the base of a volcano that exploded 7,700 years ago and then filled with rain and snow melt. Photo from 2023.