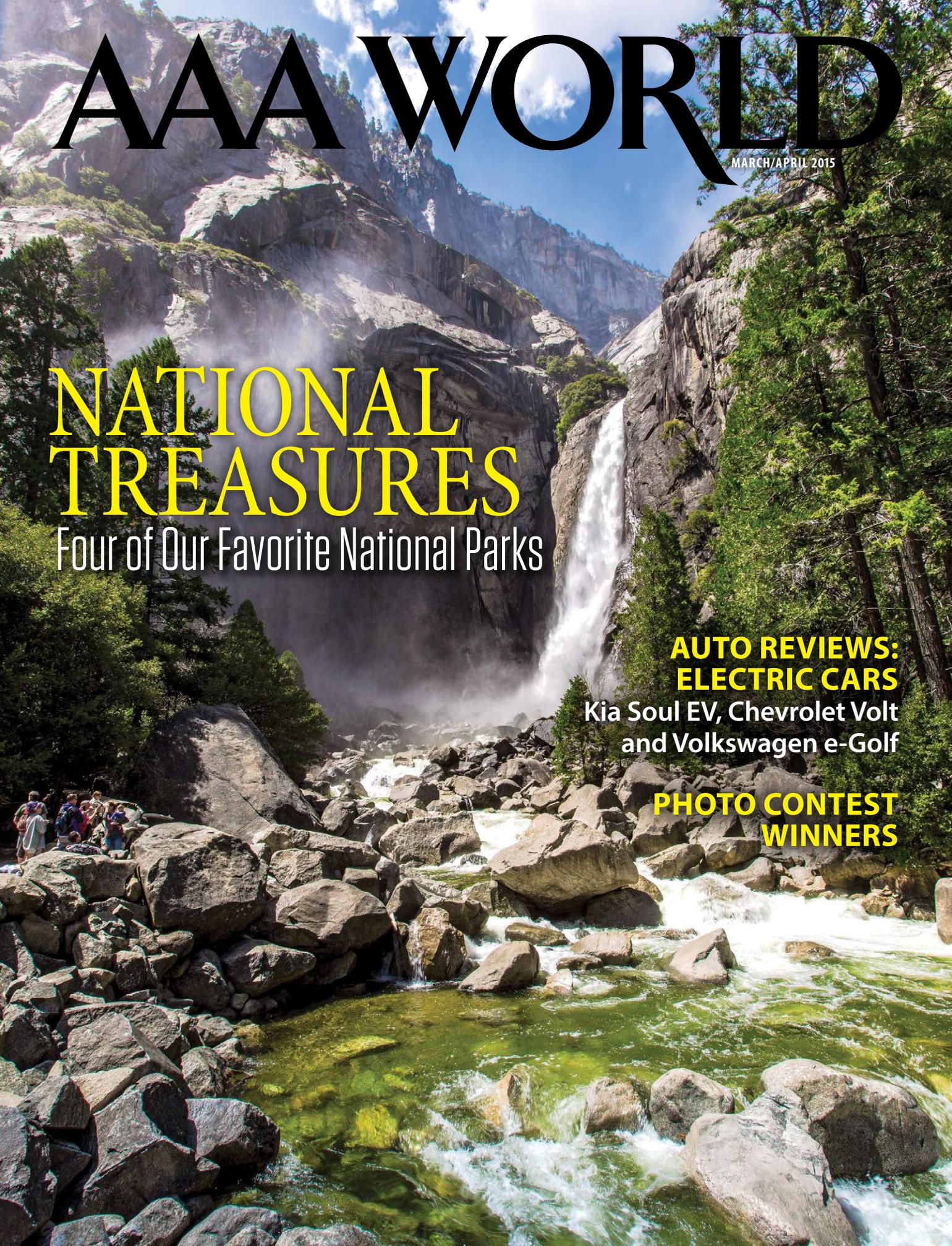


AAA WORLD



MARCH/APRIL 2015

NATIONAL TREASURES

Four of Our Favorite National Parks

**AUTO REVIEWS:
ELECTRIC CARS**

Kia Soul EV, Chevrolet Volt
and Volkswagen e-Golf

**PHOTO CONTEST
WINNERS**

SMOKY MOUNTAIN MAJESTY

Nature's glory is showcased in breathtaking and accessible ways for the record-number of visitors who explore Great Smoky Mountains National Park each year.

BY KATY KOONTZ

Cades Cove

Black bear cubs playfully overturn logs in search of grubs. Stately male elk throw their heads back and bugle to attract a mate. Herds of white-tailed deer graze in grassy fields. These are typical scenes in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the most-visited national park in the U.S.

Each year, some 9 million people visit the Smokies (half of which lies in Tennessee and the other half in North Carolina). They're attracted not only by the wildlife, but by the fall foliage, the spring wildflowers, and the iconic view of layer upon layer of purple mountain ridges, in between which water vapor settles—creating the “smoke” for which the mountain range is named.

That water vapor is more than just pretty to look at; it's the reason Great Smoky Mountains National Park is

positively pulsing with life. With an estimated 100,000 species of plants and animals, this is the most biologically diverse national park in the continental U.S. But the bear, elk and deer don't deserve all the attention; the smaller critters here are well worth a look as well. For example, the Smokies is considered the salamander capital of the world because more species of salamander (31 total) live here than anywhere else on the planet, and some species (including the Jordan's red-cheeked salamander) live only here. The park's salamanders range from the adorable two- to three-inch pygmy salamander to the two-foot-long prehistoric-looking hellbender. (You can find salamanders throughout the park, but a few stellar spots include the nature trails at Sugarlands Visitor Center, the

Chimneys picnic area and the Juneey Whank Falls Trail.)

The Smokies is also one of just two places on the globe (the other being in Southeast Asia) where you can see synchronous fireflies that flash in unison during their two-week mating season each June. The display is most pronounced in the Elkmont section of the park.

The first time I saw these famous flashers, I was in total awe. Once the woods became totally dark—about 10 p.m.—the fireflies would flash in eight to ten short bursts, and then the woods would go totally black for about six seconds. I gasped at the stunning effect. Then the tiny pinpoints of light would begin to appear again for the next round of eight or ten flashes,



PHOTO BY COLBYS PHOTOGRAPHY.COM

Oliver Cabin in Cades Cove

followed by total darkness. As the night wore on, the effect grew even more dramatic. Then about midnight, the flashes began to become less and less synchronized—until the next show on the following night.

In the 26 years that I've lived in east Tennessee, I've had quite a few encounters with other Smoky Mountain fauna. During one summer hike, I was totally surrounded by butterflies swirling in the air like confetti at a parade. In a high alpine meadow on a mountaintop devoid of trees (a feature known as a "bald" for obvious reasons), I watched hawks circling in the sky, riding thermals and showing off their aeronautic skills. And one year, the week before Thanksgiving, I witnessed half a dozen wild turkeys traipsing through a thick blanket of crunchy fallen leaves on the forest floor right next to one of the park's visitors' centers.

One of the best places to see wildlife in the park is in 6,800-acre Cades Cove, where you can drive on an 11-mile loop road that winds through both open fields and forestland. Deer and bear are common sights here, and my daughter and I were once privileged to see a pair of bucks with velvet-covered antlers run across the road and up into the woods, bedding down just 10 yards away behind a huge fallen tree.

The fauna in Cades Cove shares the spotlight with some stellar examples of the park's iconic historic structures: log homes, barns, farm buildings, gristmills and churches that stood on this land in the 1930s, when the national park was established and those who lived inside the newly drawn boundaries were forced to move elsewhere. Instead of getting rid of these structures, the National Park Service decided to preserve many of them as examples of the area's rich

Appalachian heritage.

All together, the National Park Service maintains more than 100 such structures, in Cades Cove as well as in several other areas of the park, all open for exploring. As a result, the park contains the finest and most complete collection of historic log buildings in the Eastern U.S. It's little wonder why the Smokies has been named a United Nations World Heritage Site.

My favorite historic structure here is the Little Greenbrier School, a one-room split-log building dating from 1882. I love to sit on one of the wooden benches inside, gazing at the long painted blackboard at the front of the room, and imagine what it was like to attend school here. Some of the students walked as far as nine miles each way, and they usually attended for only three to five years—just long enough to learn how to read, write and do some basic math. Equally



Grotto Falls

PHOTO BY COLBYSPHOTOGRAPHY.COM

Best of the Smokies

BEST SCENIC DRIVE WITH A FRACTION OF THE TOURIST TRAFFIC:

The Foothills Parkway West, an 18-mile road along the eastern edge of the park, offers stunning ridgeline views out both sides of your car windows.

MOST FUN NATURE TRAIL FOR DISCOVERING SURPRISES:

Sugarlands Valley Self-Guiding Nature Trail, a half-mile paved and level pathway (perfect for strollers), winds past the remains of some old homesteads and also sports the paw prints of a black bear that ambled across the concrete before the mixture hardened.

BEST WATERFALL HIKE: Just more than a mile into the Trillium Gap Trail, the trail passes directly behind 25-foot Grotto Falls, offering hikers a unique view of the falls.

WHERE YOU CAN BE IN TWO STATES AT THE SAME TIME:

Straddling the state line between Tennessee and North Carolina in the parking lot at Newfound Gap is a favorite pastime for park visitors (and loads of fun for kids).

BEST PLACE TO SEE SPRING WILDFLOWERS: Cove Hardwood Self-Guiding Nature Trail in the Chimneys picnic area is especially famous for its large white trillium.

BEST SWIMMING HOLE: The Townsend Y (or Wye), right inside the Townsend entrance to the park, is the locals' favorite place for swimming (and even snorkeling).

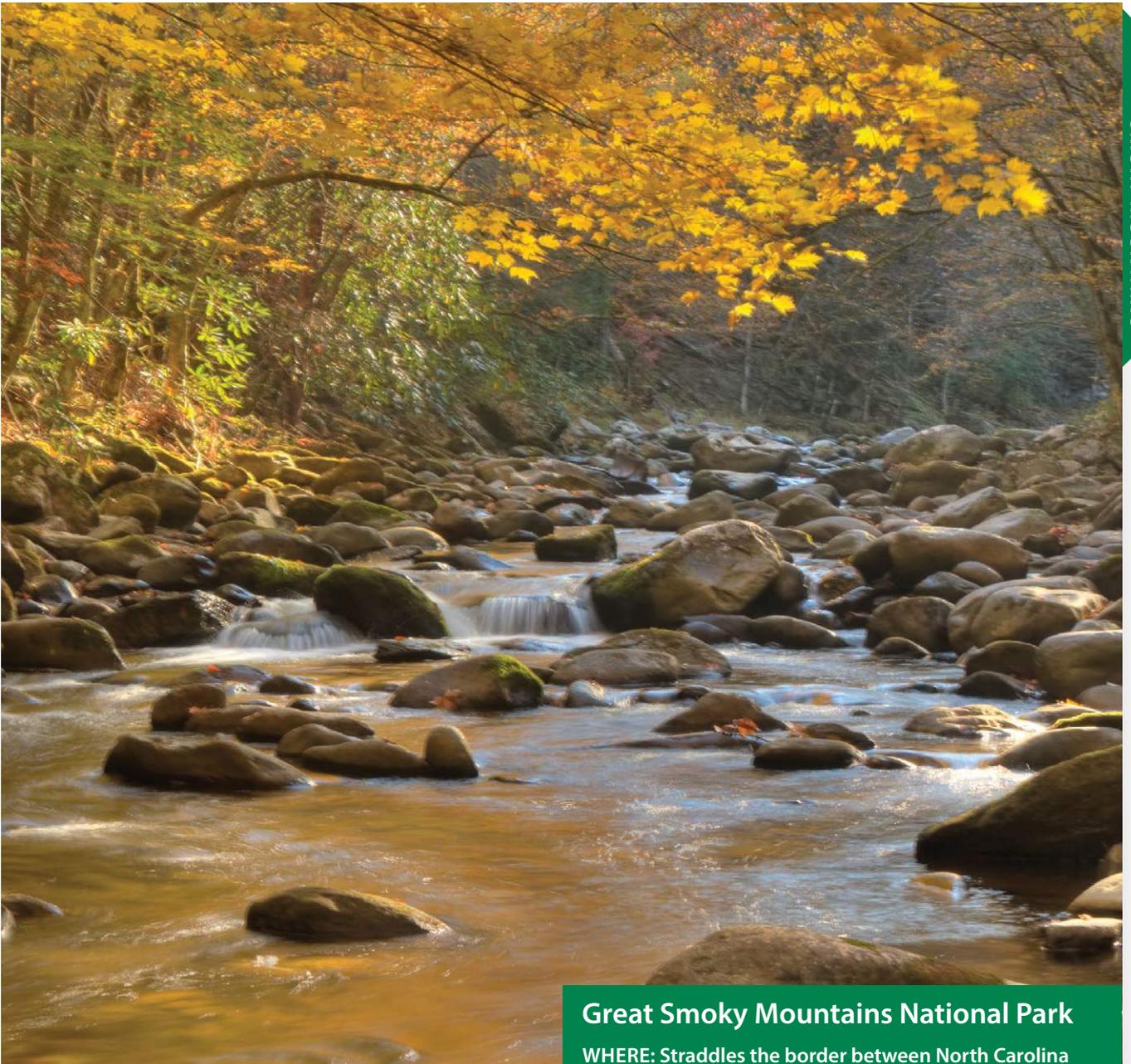


PHOTO BY COLBYS PHOTOGRAPHY.COM

One of many picturesque streams in the national park

fascinating is the small cemetery next to the school, which belonged to a Primitive Baptist church that used the log building for their services on Sunday mornings.

There's one final selling point about the park that truly makes it stand out: It's free. Because of agreements made with the states of Tennessee and North Carolina when the park was being established, visitors will never be charged an entry fee. So you're free to admire the vistas, tackle the hiking trails, explore the educational programs and spot all the wildlife you want, and it won't cost you a thing. It's the best value the National Park Service has to offer! ■

Great Smoky Mountains National Park

WHERE: Straddles the border between North Carolina and Tennessee

TYPE: National Park

ESTABLISHED: 1934, dedicated 1940

SIZE: More than 500,000 acres

ANNUAL VISITORS: 9.4 million

LODGING IN THE PARK: 10 developed family campgrounds; LeConte Lodge, comprising 10 simple cabins and lodges at the top of Mount LeConte (elevation: 6,400 feet), accessible only by hikes of 5.5 to 8 miles. There are many lodging options outside the park.

TRIVIA: The Great Smoky Mountains are among the oldest mountains in the world, formed as early as 300 million years ago.

[nps.gov/grsm](https://www.nps.gov/grsm)