

ESCAPES



Mark Burns photographs

"Schwabacher's Landing — Morning Reflections," Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming.

Picture-perfect adventure

Mark Burns documents the beauty of nature in black-and-white photos taken during five-year quest to photograph all 59 national parks

By Melissa Ward Aguilar

As a photographer enchanted by light, Mark Burns has seen his share of unforgettable sunrises — the Grand Canyon, Yosemite, Denali.

But a dawn encounter in Grand Teton National Park stands out in his mind.

Burns had found a spot on an oxbow of the Snake River and set up his Nikon and tripod to get a shot of Mount Moran at morning's first light.

"I try to always arrive one hour before sunrise," he said. "It was the first week of June, and there was a chill in the air."

He photographed the spectacular sunrise, capturing the reflection of the Tetons in the river's still waters.

Then, at dawn, "I heard a crashing in the river," Burns said. "It was a cow moose and her calf. She looked at me and started stomping her front feet."

Burns stood behind his tripod with his hands in his pockets, trying not to make eye contact. The moose advanced — 7 feet tall and just 7 feet away. It looked like it was ready to charge. He took hold of the tripod and eased backward, trying to decide whether to make a run for his FJ Cruiser.

"She stomped and snorted. And then, suddenly, she turned and swam across the river," Burns said. "It was pretty scary. Moose kill way more people than bears in the Tetons."

That was just one of many close encounters with moose, brown bears, grizzlies, black bears, caribou and bison as he photographed the 59 national parks for his "National Parks Photography Project," now on exhibit at Houston Museum of Natural Science. In anticipation of the 100th anniversary of our National Park Service on Aug. 25, Burns spent three to five days in each park.

He photographed the parks over the course of five years, from 2010 to 2015, chasing weather, moon phases and light. Sometimes he camped, but he usually stayed in motels just outside the parks. His gear included a 4-by-5-inch Pentax field camera,



Craig Robbins

Mark Burns spent six hours waiting for just the right light while photographing the Grand Canyon.

three digital Nikon camera bodies, lenses — as well as crampons, snowshoes and tire chains. He put 168,000 miles on his Toyota during the course of the project.

Burns, 58, grew up in Houston. As a student at Eisenhower High School in Aldine Independent School District, he was already interested in photography. He worked as a sports

shooter and then a commercial photographer before turning to landscape and fine-art photography. He lived for years in Oak Forest before moving to The Woodlands.

Burns often works in large-format film photography with a restored Deardorff camera (à la Ansel Adams), as well as platinum printmaking and older photo

Mark Burns' landscape photography tips:

- ▶ Start early in the morning. Be there for the first light. "I often was finished shooting by 8:30 in the morning."
- ▶ If not sunrise, shoot during the last 30 minutes of light.
- ▶ For black-and-white photography, use filters: orange to darken the sky, make the picture more intense and get separation. A graduated, neutral-density filter will balance out the light and make the mountains stand out.
- ▶ Use a tripod and cable release.
- ▶ Find the composition. "I sometimes spend six or seven hours waiting for the clouds or the light." Look for diffused light, when the clouds move in front of the sun. "It's subtle, but that's what it's all about to me."

processes — such as wet-plate collodion.

For the National Parks project, he shot in black and white as a bridge to the early photographers — Adams, Carlton Watkins, William Henry Jackson — who first captured the beauty of the parks.

"I wanted each photo to represent what that park means to people. I went for iconic shots," Burns said. "The biggest compliment is when people say I've inspired them to go to a park. I want people to be aware of what we have available to us, and preserve these places. It's also important to look forward to the next 100 years of our national parks."

Burns had the opportunity to share the stage with filmmaker Ken Burns when his photography project exhibit opened at the George Bush Presidential Library and Museum earlier this year. Ken Burns (no relation), who produced "The National Parks: America's Best Idea," a six-part documentary on PBS, marveled that 100 years ago "we decided that part of our destiny would be saving these extraordinary places and setting aside a little bit so you could see and experience what it was like at the beginning of human habitation of this world."

That's the timeless quality Mark Burns captures with his black-and-white photography.

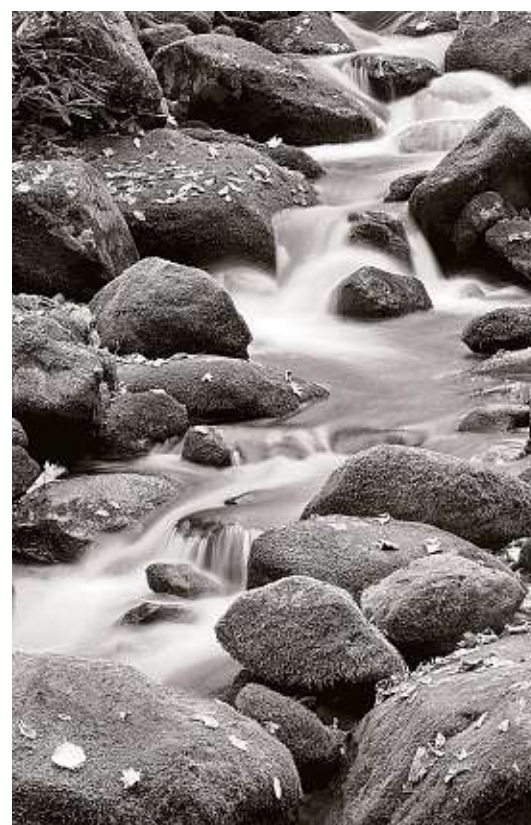
Over the course of the project, Burns came to cherish national parks. He shared his favorites.

ZEST



Mark Burns photographs

Clockwise, from above: “Bass Harbor Lighthouse Study #1,” Acadia National Park, Maine; “Roaring Fork Branch,” Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Tennessee; “Yosemite Valley — Tunnel View,” Yosemite National Park, California. On the cover: Detail from “Denali Vista,” Denali National Park, Alaska.



Yosemite National Park, California: “If you had to put just one photograph with the National Park Service, it would be Yosemite Valley,” Burns said. The famous granite Half Dome, the soaring El Capitan formation, Yosemite Falls and towering sequoias make it one of the most treasured parks. He shot Yosemite in late May, when the waterfalls are at their peak.

Burns recommends California’s **Lassen Volcanic National Park** in the Pacific Northwest for hiking and camping. It’s less crowded and has beautiful alpine lakes.

Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona: “The more I go, the more I like it — I’ve been there in each season,” Burns said. “It’s the coolest feeling sitting on a little outcropping on the South Rim, staring into the Grand Canyon, watching ravens float on the wind currents. You feel totally insignificant. You’re looking at millions of years of creation.”

For his photo, “Wotan’s Throne,” he spent six hours on the rim. “I had to hide from lightning a few times,” he said. “I thought, ‘I’m in the worst place I can possibly be, standing out on this rock.’ But then, the sun lit the rim for five minutes right at sunset.”

Burns recommends a stay at El Tovar, the park’s historic lodge built in 1905.

For his next project, he will spend even more time shooting the Grand



Craig Robbins

Photographer Mark Burns lives in The Woodlands.

Canyon in advance of its centennial in 2019.

Yellowstone National Park: To capture the perfect shot of Old Faithful, Burns visited the geyser seven mornings in a row, each time arriving before dawn. On a June morning, the temperature was 34 degrees, and steam vapors surrounded the geyser’s shooting waters. “It was totally still, no wind,” he said. Burns used a red filter to turn the sky dark and differentiate the water from the steam.

He also loved the wildlife he saw in Yellowstone. “I really came to love the

bison during this project. They are amazing creatures.”

Gates of the Arctic National Park, Alaska: To get his “Amber River Headwaters” photo, Burns chartered a bush plane to fly 170 miles deep in the wilderness above the Arctic Circle. “It was a stormy day, and the plane flew low, right over caribou and grizzlies. One grizzly stood up on his hind legs and checked the plane out as it flew overhead. In all of the Alaskan parks, there’s the wilderness element,” Burns said. “It’s so pristine, I left there a big believer in protecting the wilderness.”

‘The National Parks Photography Project’

Where: Houston Museum of Natural Science, 5555 Hermann Park Drive; 713-639-4629

When: Through Sept. 28

Admission: Included in museum admission. Adults, \$25; children and seniors, \$15

Information: thenationalparksphotographyproject.com

Alaska has eight national parks: Denali, Gates of the Arctic, Kobuk Valley, Lake Clark, Katmai, Kenai Fjords, Wrangell-St. Elias and Glacier Bay.

But the Amber River area in Gates of the Arctic, the northernmost national park, remains “the most remote wilderness I’ve ever been to,” he said. “The color, ice blue, is so pure. Everything is so quiet, listening to just the water and wind. Those are the memories I have.”

Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming: “This is your classic American mountain-man environment,” Burns said. “The Snake River adds to the majesty of the mountains.” And, of course, there are the moose.

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