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Outdoor Photographer
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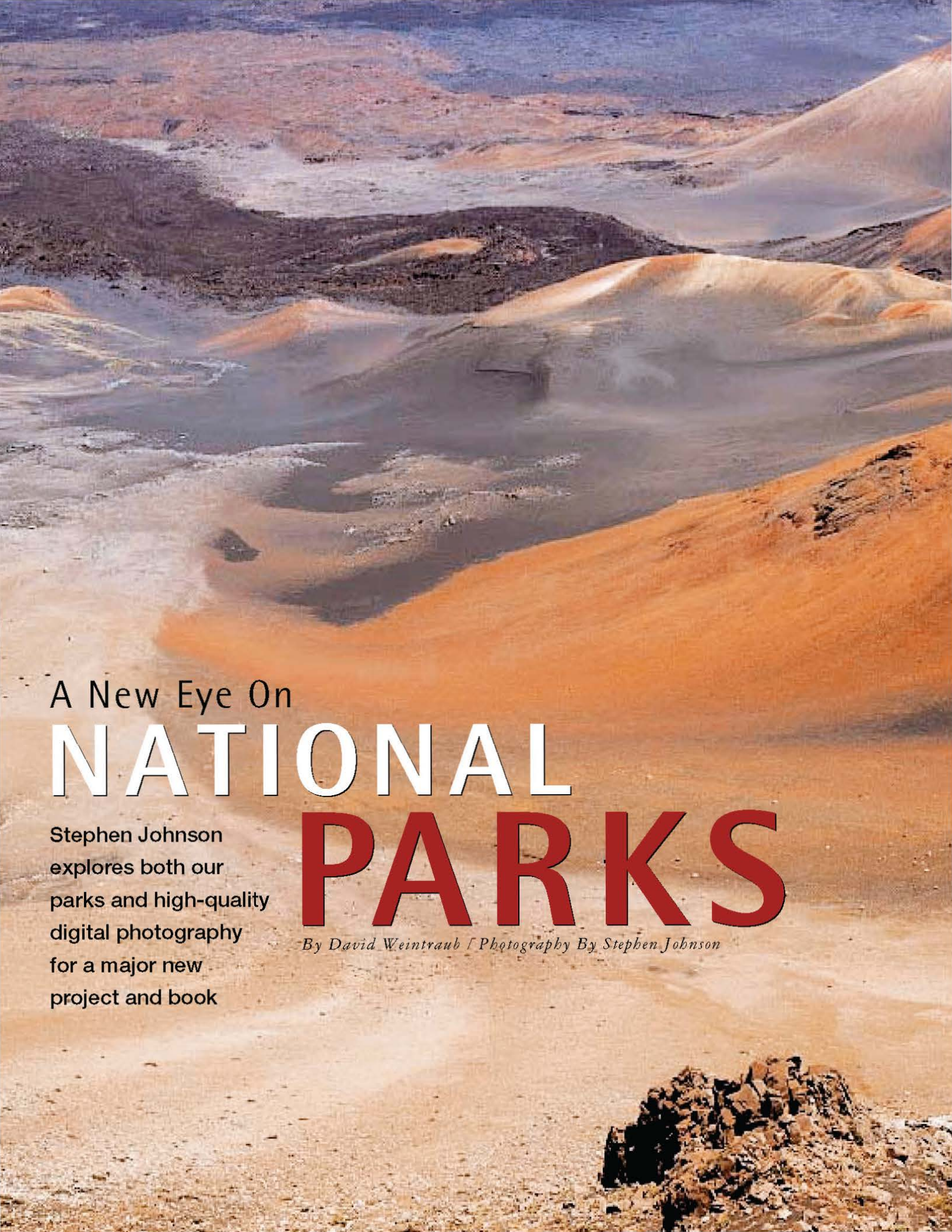
feature on Stephen Johnson

from Stephen Johnson Photography

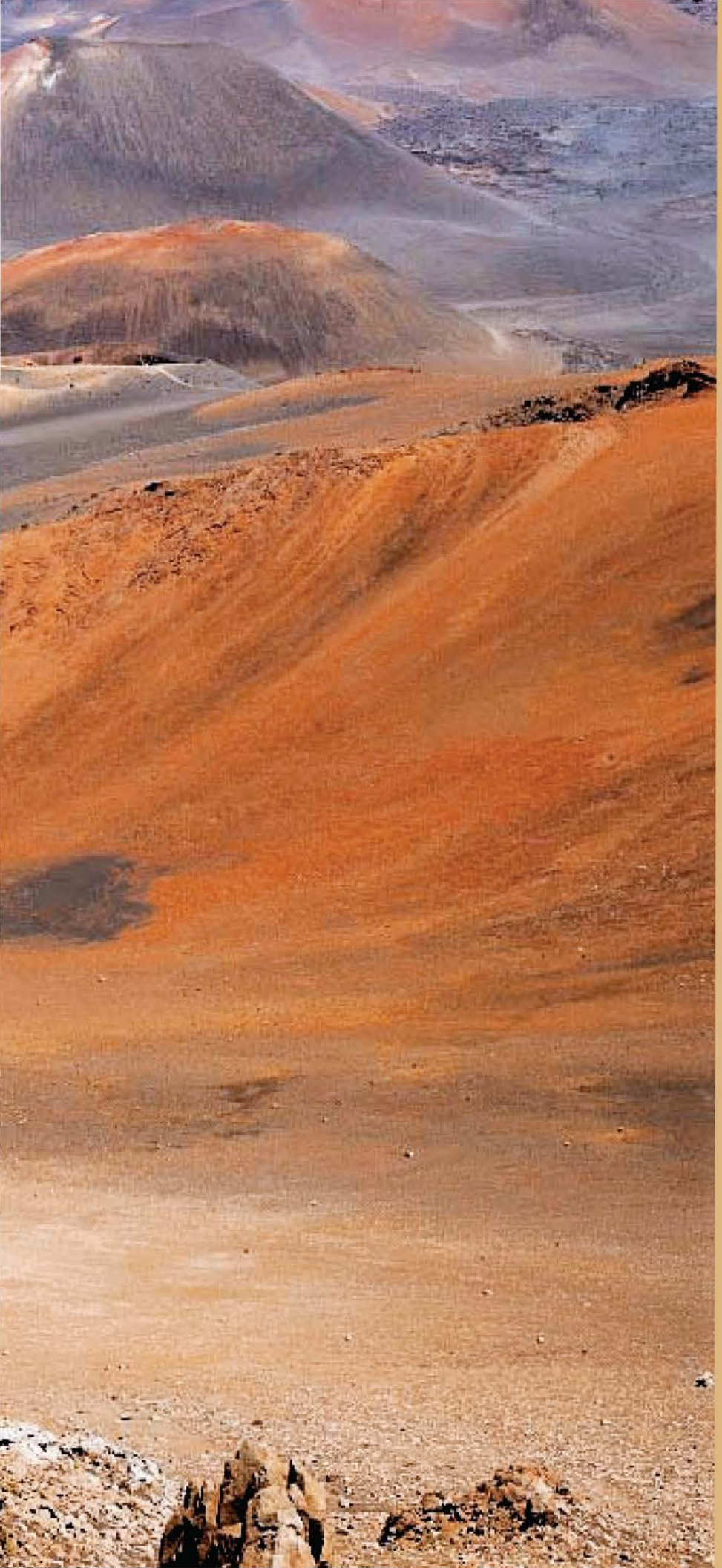


A New Eye On

NATIONAL PARKS

Stephen Johnson explores both our parks and high-quality digital photography for a major new project and book

By David Weintraub / Photography By Stephen Johnson



Growing up in California's Central Valley, photographer Stephen Johnson was first exposed to the beauty and grandeur of America's national parks during family outings to Yosemite. On Sunday afternoon picnics, he saw his first wild deer, his first bear and his first views of the majestic granite cliffs and faces that years later would become favored subjects for his lens.

"The American national park system is, in many ways, a symbol of our preservation of the land," says Johnson. "Since I grew up so near Yosemite, it became a park that personified natural wonderland."

The national parks and landscape photography are inextricably intertwined, according to Johnson. For example, it was the Yosemite photographs of Carleton Watkins, seen by President Lincoln, that helped spur the passage of the Yosemite Act in 1864.

Until recently, however, that relationship was centered around silver-based film. Johnson is a devotee of digital capture, so it seemed like "the most natural thing in the world" for him to do a digital photography project on the national parks. The name for the project came to him instantly: "With A New Eye."

First, he had a big challenge to overcome—wrestling with the ghosts of landscape photographers past. How do you see "with a new eye" when the shade of Ansel Adams is hovering over your shoulder in Yosemite Meadow? The national parks have been photographed by every important nature photographer, and a real legacy of work already exists.

"First, you try not to repeat somebody else's work," says Johnson. "You can't help but be aware of it, and at the same time, you're trying to take in the place on your own terms. I go to these places to try and see the wonder and vast space that I take in with my eyes, and try to find simple scenes that really do have an intrinsic beauty, that speak to where my heart feels comfortable, and let it ride on that."

Johnson says he makes stronger photographs when he disregards what he thinks he's supposed to photograph and concentrates on what he's

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actually seeing. There are so many iconic images of each park, which everyone wants to take, that it almost seems like you have to take them. That, of course, often leads to simply repeating another's vision and not looking with your own eyes. What Johnson actually sees in these locations and the "conventional wisdom" of what a photographer is supposed to see in these locations can be two entirely different things.

So one of Johnson's basic goals naturally related to his own sense of beauty and the kinds of subjects he wanted to photograph, new views that would hopefully excite other people about the parks in different ways. Another goal was to wipe clean the romantic patina that has overlaid the public's vision of our national parks for more than 100 years, a vision molded in part by painters such as Albert Bierstadt and photographers influenced by him. Bierstadt and his compatriots painted dramatic visions of the West with swirling clouds and bold sunset colors that would have made a Velvia shooter proud.

"I ended up being far less interested in the traditional romantic, early-morning light and late-afternoon light, and became far more interested in a direct look at what these parks are in a more straightforward light," says Johnson. "I began to think there was something quite compelling about seeing the parks in a direct way."

In part, he feels the colorful, edge-of-day approach was dictated by slide film, including its limited tonal range, which made other times of the day look very harsh. "In a way, we've taken the limitations of silver-based film and made them into stylistic attributes of a photo, including heavy saturation, distorted color, less tonal range, grain or black-and-white," he says.

Johnson's digital camera has a high dynamic range—nine to 11 stops versus film's five to seven—and accurate color rendition, which allows him to continue down a path he had been on since the late '70s with film, "of trying to be perfectly straight with the color and finding the romance and beauty in what was there, rather than in warm light."

Recording landscapes in a straightforward manner with his digital camera produces "a great beauty and eloquence, beyond what I've known in photography up to this point," he says. "I think we've come to know the world through a souped-up photographic reality, and we often get disappointed when we see the real world that isn't that. There's something inherently tragic in that disparity."

The use of high-saturation, daylight-balanced films like Velvia at sunrise or sunset can distort reality. The public is used to seeing photos that exaggerate the golden light because of this, even though the films aren't rendering the light the way our eyes actually see it. Our eyes adapt to the warmer light of the setting sun, for example, and see more natural colors than high-saturation daylight films. This is one reason why scientists, as a group, don't use Velvia for "accurate" photos of the world.

Adds Johnson, "I believe we have an ethical duty to only

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show people what was in front of the camera, or if we change it somehow, to let the viewer know they're looking at an altered version of that reality."

Johnson became involved with digital capture after working on several major film-based projects, including exhibits and books on Mono Lake (*At Mono Lake*) and California's Central Valley (*The Great Central Valley: California's Heartland*). The Central Valley project, done with fellow photographer Robert Dawson, marked Johnson's first foray into the digital realm.

Several months after the publication of *The Great Central Valley* in July, 1993, Johnson was approached by Michael Collette, an inventor and designer, who had just made a prototype of a high-resolution digital camera by inserting the technology of a desktop scanner into a traditional 4x5 view camera film

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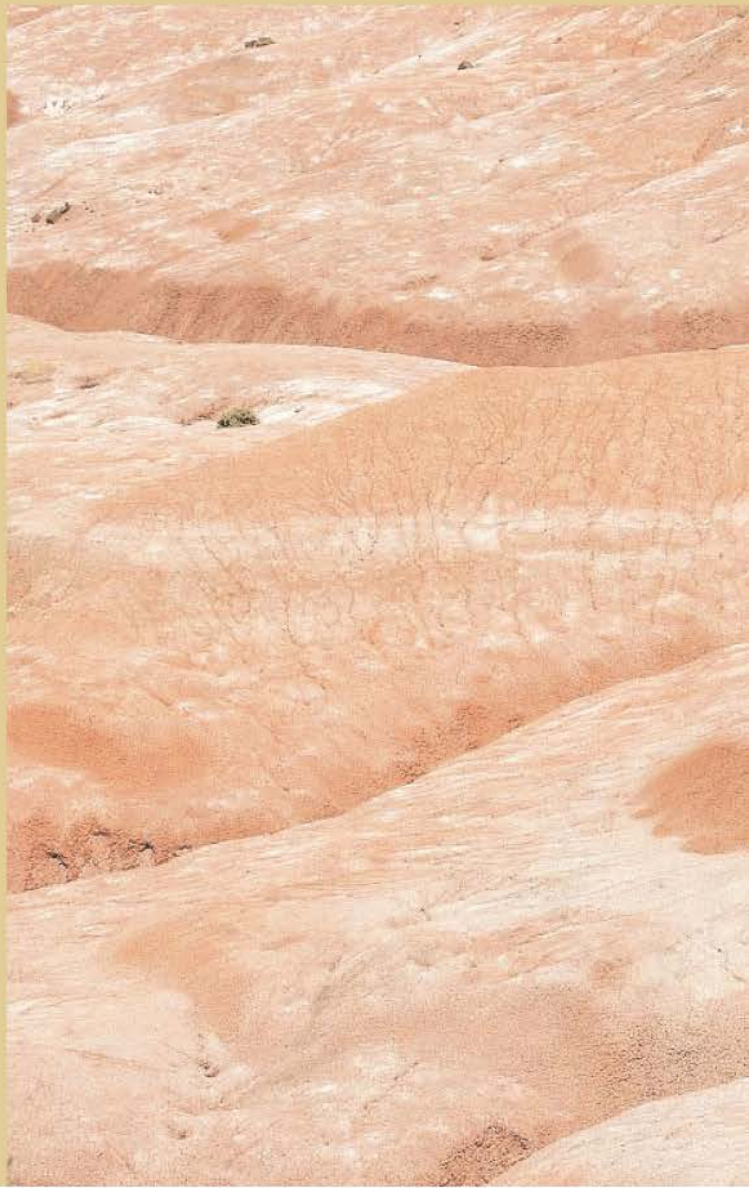

Tips For Shooting In The National Parks

1 **Look down more.** The more obvious views are up and wide. Look down to find more intimate scenes.

2 **Simplify.** Distill the scene down to its most essential elements.

3 **Watch the histogram.** Make sure you haven't blown out highlights, but still give the photograph as much exposure as possible for the rendition you have in mind.

4 **The subject is light.** You're not photographing objects, you're photographing light. Keep looking and remembering that light is your only subject matter.

5 **Be willing to walk.** The view from the car and parking lot might be great, but more unique views are likely to be found a bit more off the beaten track.

6 **Shoot RAW files.** Shoot RAW files if your camera allows for it, and at the lowest ISO possible. RAW files will preserve most of what the sensor can see, and the lower ISO will prevent the introduction of unnecessary noise.

7 **Use a tripod.** Put your camera on a tripod whenever possible. It will steady your camera, and allow you the leisure to study the scene in the viewfinder and make it as strong as possible.

8 **Extend the range.** If the brightness range of the scene is beyond what the camera can handle, shoot an underexposure and overexposure from the metered shot and then combine them in Photoshop afterward.

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"I BELIEVE WE HAVE AN ETHICAL DUTY TO ONLY SHOW PEOPLE WHAT WAS IN FRONT OF THE CAMERA, OR IF WE CHANGE IT SOMEHOW, TO LET THE VIEWER KNOW THEY'RE LOOKING AT AN ALTERED VERSION OF THAT REALITY."

holder. (Originally licensed to Dicomed, the scanning insert is now manufactured by Collette's company, Better Light.)

Instead of scanning film, Johnson says, the contraption scanned the light coming through a view camera lens. In January 1994, Johnson and Collette put the new and improved camera to the test.

The duo visited "every clichéd tourist spot" they could think of in San Francisco, shooting 4x5 film and making digital images of the same scenes. "What I saw at the end of that day completely amazed me," Johnson says. "The digital files were color-accurate with open shadows, luminous and detailed beyond anything the film could begin to approach. What I saw that day was, in my own mind, the death of film as a photographic medium."

With financial support from Adobe, Johnson and assistant Darin Steinberg hit the road in August 1994 and started making photographs. Johnson estimates he visited 40 to 50 national parks in the next eight years. He wanted the whole geographic range of the parks, so he "went to Maine and Florida, California and Washington, Alaska and Hawaii." He also traveled to places with which he wasn't familiar, such as Big Bend National Park, Texas, and the Great Smoky Mountains of Tennessee.

Project sponsors, in addition to Adobe, include Apple Computer, Better Light, Day Star (1996-98), Dicomed (1996-98), the Digital Pond, FWB, Iris Graphics, NEC-Mitsubishi, Newer Technology, Radius (1996-98), Ricoh and Sinar Bron.

When it came time to shoot, Johnson, like most of his landscape photography colleagues, was up at dawn and photographing until the light completely faded. Unlike other photographers, however, he still had hours of computer work ahead, off-loading images from the camera's attached hard drive and backing them. The camera's 66-second exposure

time, though an improvement over the original four minutes, makes motion—either camera or subject—a critical concern. One of Johnson's journal entries says it all: "The wind won today.''

Beyond the technical aspects of digital capture are the more interesting aesthetic ones, says Johnson, the most important of which is seeing the scene he's photographing as a two-dimensional entity on a monitor rather than as a three-dimensional scene in the camera. Judging composition on the screen allows Johnson to see the flattening of perspective and other effects inherent in photography's translation of the real world into a flat object. "Seeing the photograph as a discrete, unique, creative thing does a great deal to making you understand, on site, what that translation has actually meant, and whether or not it's what you intended for it to be," he says.

"I'm essentially finishing the photograph before I walk away from the scene. Most everything I have to do later, in Photoshop or in printing, is just to try to be faithful to what I did, on site, at that moment. There's very little interpretation that goes into the printing, other than compensating for the failures of the printer. The photograph is done on-site."

This bridging the gap between the photography and the print is a fundamental change in photography, says Johnson, and one he heartily approves. Digital capture allows him to interpret the image when he's most involved with his subject, and when he can most affect the outcome of the photograph, when he's still there.

Adds Johnson, "It's a big difference. And that may be the most profound visual difference." **OP**

David Gardner

*Visit **Stephen Johnson** on the Web at www.sjphoto.com. For information about Johnson's digital photography and printing workshops, go to www.sjphoto.com/workshops.html.*