

VISIONS

NEWSLETTER OF THE NAI SOUTH CENTRAL REGION

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Director's Report

By Ken Forman

We love our parks to death.

I recently visited Acadia National Park for the first time. In fact, it was my first visit anywhere in New England. The driving trip was beautiful with the leaves starting to turn. Blazes of color popping amongst the evergreens. We drove by miles and miles of Trix-covered hillsides.

We'd secured access passes to the national park weeks earlier. October 1st seemed like a good day to visit the park, but we didn't expect the US government to shut down on that same day.

When we arrived at the park the crowd seemed overwhelming. At least they seemed overwhelming to me. Don't get me wrong. I'm used to huge crowds. I expect huge crowds at popular national attractions like Acadia (or Grand Canyon, or Yellowstone, or Yosemite, or - or - or - you get the idea).

Volunteers and park staff were on duty despite the squabbles in DC and we made our way up Cadillac Mountain. Our hosts (Mainers who were used to sharing the park with guests) happily drove along with the bumper-to-bumper traffic winding up the mountain.

"If we don't find a parking space we'll circle around again. I'm sure someone will be pulling out," our host and driver said. I wasn't sure if the crowds were *because* of the government shut down, or in spite of it. We were fortunate; a space opened near the main trailhead. It was an easy thing to park, hop out, read the minimal interpretive signs and traverse the rocks and trails to the best view. And those views were absolutely spectacular. We enjoyed the expansive scenery before us - along with several hundred other people.

Signs, signs, signs, everywhere there were signs. Mostly telling people what not to do. I asked my friend if this level of visitation was normal or if he felt the shut down had some effect. Considering he's lived near the park for several years, visits many times a year, and had been to the park with guests three previous times in the last two weeks. I figured he'd have a pretty good handle on what was normal. His answer almost felt like a punch in the gut.

"Oh, this is a little light, but considering this is just after the main visitation season that seems about right." I was flabbergasted. That meant tens upon tens of thousands of visitors use this resource every year. Think of the impact.

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This is an issue facing many (most?) popular areas like Yellowstone, Yosemite, and yes, Acadia, and is not a new problem. Many NPS properties were established to guard against over or improper use. I assume the crowd control methods currently used (during normal governmental situations) are work-

-able solutions to the problem. I know NPS is always assessing ways to improve access while protecting their resources. It is a situation many interpreters are familiar with. We do what we can with what we have. But in this instance, I experienced the park and its accompanying crowds from a purely visitor's perspective.

And I felt uncomfortable; the ROI was way off. The impact my presence had on the resource was greater than the benefit I received by my visit. I try to consider benefit vs impact when visiting any resource. And I hope many more people follow a similar approach. For example, I won't ever visit the Galapagos Islands as a tourist even though I'd dearly love to. The ecosystem there is fragile enough that my visit's impact would be unacceptable for my personal benefit. Likewise, I'm unlikely to ever visit Yellowstone or any number of hyper-popular natural places.

It wouldn't be hard to *poo-poo* my unease by countering that the park was designed to receive all those crowds and they've been doing it for a long time. Any serious damage to the resource was done long ago. That thinking leads to prioritizing visitor numbers over resource protection.

Imagine what it would be like (and by "it" I mean any popular natural area like Acadia) if visitors seriously considered their impact on the resource they claim to *love*. Those very same resources that are being loved to death. And now is the time interpreters are most important.

Regardless of the squabbles in any marbled hall of government, we interpreters are the defenders of our resource. We know what is lost by inattention. When resources aren't carefully managed. With limited (or non-existent) funding and staffing, it all seems overwhelming. I know I feel it, and I'm certain I'm not alone in feeling displaced in some Cloud Cuckoo Land. To that I offer Maya Angelou's perspective, "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better." I think that applies to all.

Freeman Tildan Scholars are Virginia Beach-Bound!

By Jeanne spencer, Scholarship Chair

We are excited to announce Lacey Esau and Maddie Weaver will represent the South Central Region at the 2025 NAI Conference in Virginia Beach. They were selected as recipients of the 2025 Freeman Tilden Scholarship for their excellence in interpretation. The scholarship funds their registration, travel, and lodging for the conference, approximately \$3,000 in total. The Scholarship Committee is excited to offer these new interpreters the opportunity to learn and network from some of the best interpreters in the country. We look forward to hearing more about their experience in a future newsletter.

Meet Lacey Esau, Proud KSU Wildcat



What We've Heard

Dr. Sarah Jackson let us in on the secret to Lacey's success. Her passion for learning, combined with her willingness to take on new challenges, has led to significant achievements across academic, professional, and

community-based experiences. Her optimism and intention make her not only a standout student, but an evolving professional with a palpable passion for interpretation.

Inspired by Nature

Visitors to the Birding 101 programs inspire Lacey and she loves connecting birds to visitors' personal experiences and "creating moments of recognition." She hopes to build her toolbox of visitor engagement strategies so that her programs have greater effect on broad audiences.

Spotting Lacey in the Wild

You can find Lacey pursuing Park Management and Conservation at Kansas State University or roaming the grounds as a seasonal interpreter at Wyoming State Parks, delivering programs across five interpretive sites or caring for their special animal ambassadors.

Meet Maddi Weaver, Emerging Professional



Maddi holding Animal Ambassador Houdini the Corn Snake

What We've Heard

Maddi has embraced the world of interpretation with great enthusiasm over the last few years, particularly through her involvement with NAI, including becoming a Certified Interpretive Guide and serving on the Young Professionals Council. Her passion for connecting people with nature shines through her work as a leader who fosters creativity, teamwork, and a deep commitment to conservation education.

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Inspired by our Youth

“Interpretation for children must be designed specifically for children, and not simply a dilution of programs and information for adults,” states Tilden’s Sixth Principle. This thought inspires Maddi to grow her interpretive skills. With a background stemming from formal education, Maddi strives to build greater connections with nature and conservation in the youngest visitors, empowering them to be part of the larger world. She was able to attend the 2024 NAI St. Augustine Conference and brought back new ideas and skills for her site’s Summer Camp program.

Making Her Mark

NAI Young Professionals Council
Audubon Zoo, New Orleans, Louisiana

Monarch Journey Programs and Research 2025

By Laura Semken

This summer and fall Missouri Conservation Corps naturalist, Laura Semken, hosted seven Monarch Journey programs with 83 youth, 24 MU students, and 57 adults. These programs explored monarch life cycles and conservation efforts through habitat restoration. Opportunities to engage in environmental stewardship were also offered in the form of Monarch Watch’s Monarch tagging program where tags are gently placed on a migrating monarch to better understand the path, the length, and the timing of their journey to Mexico.

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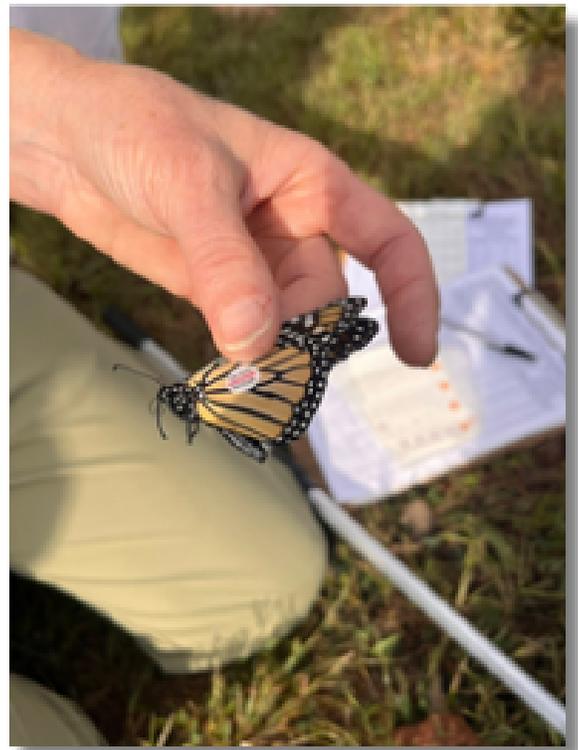
Girl Scouts in Boonville learned how to tag Monarchs at Mr. Miller’s Magic Meadow. The Girl Scouts caught so many that they ran out of tags!



Addison caught her first monarch to tag at the Big Muddy National Wildlife Refuge



*A perfect day for tagging monarchs at Bonnie View Nature Sanctuary!
Photo credit: Melanie Cheney*



*A Monarch tagged and ready to release at Bonnie View Nature Sanctuary
Photo credit: Melanie Cheney*



*Laura Semken demonstrating Monarch tagging at Bonnie View Nature Sanctuary
Photo credit: Melanie Cheney*



Catching insects in Mr. Miller's Magic Meadow



Two of the programs were especially for families to engage with Monarch conservation. An interactive game called Monarch Migration allowed youth to roll dice and follow the path to Mexico. Along the way the “Monarchs” encountered “helpers” like a pollinator garden or “hazards” like loss of habitat. Youth were also invited to make a Monarch puppet. The most popular activity was getting to practice catching insects!



Catching insects takes concentration

Program locations included Laura Speed Elliott Middle School in Boonville, Mr. Miller’s Magic Meadow, Bonnie View Nature Sanctuary, MU Gustin Golf Course and the Big Muddy National Fish and Wildlife Refuge.

These programs were made possible with the cooperation of Shawn Spence, Lavern Miller, Melody Kleinsorge, Isaac Breuer, Bradey Jones, Kristin Gibson, Shawn Hawks, Missouri Master Naturalists Boone’s Lick Chapter, Andrew Dreas with the Big Muddy NFWR, and Columbia Parks and Recreation. Additional support came from the Missouri Department of Conservation.

In addition to the Monarch Journey programs, Laura partnered with the Big Muddy NFWR to design and conduct monarch life stage surveys to better under-

stand how milkweed and habitat is being utilized by monarchs at the refuge. Surveys were conducted at Overton Bottoms South beginning in Jun and continuing through mid-September. Over the course of 11 visits, 6 volunteers and 3 staff spent 80 hours surveying the milkweed plots.

First, eight milkweed plots were mapped in June. Each plot has at least 50 or more milkweed plants together. Next, volunteers began surveying the plants for eggs and larva. If adults were seen, that was documented as well. Then a spreadsheet was designed to document all of the data collected. The data was also sent to Journey North, a non-profit that maps sightings of all of the life stages of the monarch.

The following is a summary of the collected data and observations. The Overton Bottoms South Unit at the Big Muddy NFWR hosts eggs and caterpillars throughout the entire summer from June through September which means that both 2nd and 3rd generation Monarchs are utilizing the milkweed. In June, the milkweed patches were all similar in age and height. By the end of August, some of the milkweed plots senesced earlier than others. Having plots mature at different times allows the monarchs to continue laying eggs and the larva to continue feeding, so having milkweed that is still green in September is beneficial. In all, 359 eggs were found, and 192 larvae. The most eggs were found on August 25th at 130 eggs. Of the 192 larvae, there were 53 1st instar, 4 2nd instar, 43 3rd instar, 24 4th instar, and 23 5th instar. It is estimated that 90% of monarch eggs and caterpillars fall victim to predators and parasites, so the refuge data is fairly average for survival.

Another observation included that the plots

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along the road had noticeably more eggs on the milkweed than the plots further into the prairie. Roadside milkweed seems to be preferred among these 8 plots. Other data collected included finding out if monarch females had a preference for the direction in which they laid their eggs. Of 279 egg direction records, a slight preference for the southerly (SW-S-SE) direction was found. Eggs were found on average to be laid on the 4th leaf down from the top of the plant. The average plant height in the plots where monarch eggs and larvae were found in 4.9 feet. The observations and data will help refuge staff better understand how different milkweed plots are being used by monarchs and help inform future management decisions.

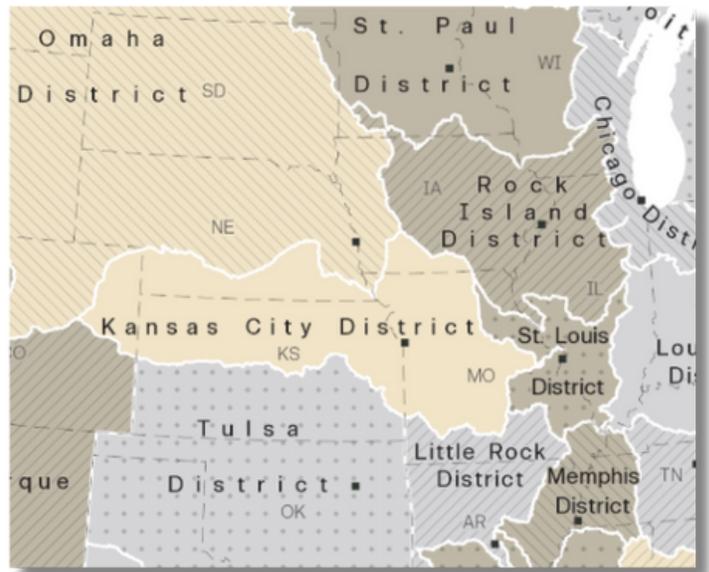
All in all, volunteers had fun diving into the prairie and getting covered in plant material. Wading through mature flowers and grasses, finding deer beds, hearing birds sing from giant sunflowers is calm and invigorating all at once. One volunteer asked, “How was your day?” The reply was a satisfied sigh with one sentence: “I am so glad to be here.”



Evie Davis and Laura Semken conducting Monarch Life Stage surveys at Overton Bottoms South

Missouri Watersheds

By Ryan C. Braaten



Missouri is a complex state for the US Army Corps of Engineers as we are broken up by watersheds and not state borders. These watersheds create districts, and multiple districts make up a division.

Missouri has three divisions:

- Northwestern (NWD)
- Mississippi Valley (MVD)
- Southwestern (SWD)

Missouri has six districts:

- Omaha (NWD)
- Kansas City (NWD)
- Rock Island (MVD)
- St. Louis (MVD)
- Memphis (MVD)
- Little Rock (SWD)

[US Army Corps of Engineer Locations](#)

Can Insects and Fruit Predict the Weather?

By Lindsay Evans

Have you ever heard about the different ways to predict the weather patterns for winter? You may have heard about cutting open the seed of a persimmon to look for the fork, knife, or spoon. Or maybe you look for the colors on a woolly bear caterpillar. Are there any other legends that come to mind for you? These interpretations can add some fun to our programming and community!

Here is what I have learned.

Persimmon Seeds

The knife means it'll be so bitter cold as if "cutting" right through you. A fork represents a mild winter with light snow, and a spoon may indicate heavy snow to shovel away.



This persimmon is from Pleasanton, Kansas. Do you think my persimmon seed reflects weather patterns for my local area, or a broader area? Is it like a fortune cookie where I stick with the first one I open, or do I get to keep going until I get one that I like?

I haven't made anything with my persimmons

yet, but I am hoping this year will be the year.

Woolly Bear Caterpillars

Woolly bear caterpillars are on the move and you may notice they have different color patterns. Folklore suggests these also can predict winter weather patterns as well!



We would love to see pictures of your persimmons, caterpillars, and other prediction methods! Send them to naisouthcentral@gmail.com or add them to our discussions on Facebook for 2026 winter predictions!

Old-Fashioned Persimmon Pudding

- 2 cups persimmon pulp
(fresh or thawed from frozen)
- 1 ½ cups sugar
- 3 cups milk
- ½ cup butter, melted
- 2 eggs
- 1 tsp vanilla
- 2 heaping tsp baking powder
- 1 level tsp baking soda
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- ½ tsp cinnamon
- pinch of ground cloves
- pinch of salt

In a large bowl, mix the persimmon pulp, sugar, milk, butter, eggs, and vanilla. Sift in the baking powder, baking soda, flour, cinnamon, cloves, and salt. Stir well to combine. Pour the batter into a greased 13x9 baking pan. Bake at 325 degrees for one hour. Cool and cut into squares, or simply scoop out of the pan. Can be served warm or cold, with a splash of half-and-half or whipped cream if desired.



The **Association of Missouri Interpreters** (AMI) conducted their 2025 Annual Conference “Spark the Flame” in Springfield on September 6-9, 2025. 83 interpreters from around the state enjoyed 2 days of interpretative sessions and a full day of local field sessions. By starting on Sunday, the conference attracted more students who also provided poster sessions. The highlight of the conference was the awards to honor the following interpreters:

Undergrad Scholarship Winners

Amy Carr (History), Missouri Southern State University

Emma Casel (Natural Resource Science & Management/History), University of Missouri Columbia

Josiah Gordinier (Conservation & Wildlife Management), College of the Ozarks

2025 AMI Awards

Leah Eden, Alison Bleich, Warren Rose, and Sara Caywood, 2025 Outstanding Interpretive Media, “Tale of the Trout, Shepherd of the Hills Fish Hatchery”

Anna Skalicky, 2025 Outstanding New Interpreter; Outstanding Interpretive Effort

Barb Cerutti, Outstanding Interpretive Volunteer

Cyndi Cogbill, Outstanding Interpretive Volunteer

Kaylee Holt, Outstanding Concurrent Session, “It Starts with a Spark”

Two Missouri interpreters gave outstanding presentations at the **Interpretive Naturalists Section’s Virtual Conference** on August 13-14, 2025.

Gale Rublee gave a presentation about the amazing story of how an abandoned mine in Hannibal is now the largest wintering population of endangered Indiana Bats in North America. You can view her presentation [here](#).

Ginger Miller gave a presentation about locally sourcing wild edibles. You can view her presentation [here](#).

If you would like to learn more about the Interpretive Naturalist Section, contact John Miller at interpretivenaturalist@gmail.com or visit their website [here](#).

The **Southwest Missouri Herpetological Society** (SWMHS) hosted the 2025 Midwest Herpetological Symposium on October 3-5, 2025, in Springfield. In addition to State Herpetologist, Jeff Biggler as keynote speaker, there were multiple presentations by researchers at Missouri State University, College of the Ozarks, and Galloway Village Veterinary. The highlight was when the two Young Herpetologist Scholarship winners, **Kate Blau** (NC) and **Lillian Hinds** (IN), gave their presentations. To learn more about SWMHS, contact John Miller at swmoherpsociety@gmail.com



2026 Conference Updates

Kansas is excited and eagerly working on the conference planning. Registration will be available soon.
We will be hosted at:

DoubleTree by Hilton
200 McDonald Drive
Lawrence, Kansas 66044

Access to the discounted room rates will be February 21st-26th

You can book your hotel by visiting our website naisouthcentral.com and click on the 2026 conference tab.

Follow along for more updates on our website, emails, or Facebook page.

Call for proposals due December 1st! You can submit on the [2026 conference tab](#) link on our website.

Please email naisouthcentral@gmail.com if you have any questions, want to be a vendor, be added to the volunteer list, sponsor, or donate auction items. We need you to make this conference successful!

Financial Assistance Available for Regional Conference Registration

Thanks to the generous support of members of the South Central Region, financial assistance is now available to help offset registration fees for the 2026 Regional Conference in Lawrence, Kansas, February 23-25, 2026.

Deadline to apply: **December 15, 2025**

Apply now and be part of the region's growing community of interpreters!

Please review the criteria carefully before applying.

- Multiple awards may be granted, depending on available funds
- Stipends are open to current NAI South Central Region members of all levels
- Applicants must demonstrate financial need and service to the field of interpretation
- Members may receive only one scholarship, professional development, or financial aid award within a 12-month period
- Membership must be valid at the time of application

[Click Here to Apply!](#)

EXTRA!! EXTRA!! EXTRA!!

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The Passing of a Conservation Legend

Tom Aley

Thomas John Aley, 87, of Protem, Missouri, died on October 20, 2025. Bill O'Donnell shares the following news:

It is with a heavy heart that we share the passing of Tom Aley, a pioneering hydrogeologist, distinguished caver, and lifelong advocate for karst resources and natural resource conservation.

Tom founded the Ozark Underground Laboratory in 1973, transforming a



remote corner of the Ozarks into a globally respected center for cave hydrology, dye tracing, and environmental education and conservation.

Tom's work extended globally to every continent with the exception of Antarctica. If you knew Tom, you would know he was convinced that the limiting factor to having not worked in Antarctica was that all the water was tied up in the ice.

Tom's legacy lives on through his wife, Cathy Aley, the Ozarks Underground Laboratory and Tumbling Creek Cave Foundation, Tumbling Creek Cave, the natural resources he worked tirelessly to protect, and those who had the fortune of working beside him. The OUL and TCCF will continue to honor his legacy and unwavering commitment to the natural world and data based scientific investigations.

Rest easy my friend!

To see more about the life and career of Tom Aley:

[Karst in the Ozarks](#)

[Tom Aley's Amazing Career](#)