

# VISIONS

**NEWSLETTER OF THE NAI SOUTH CENTRAL REGION**

**ARKANSAS | KANSAS | LOUISIANA | MISSOURI | OKLAHOMA | TEXAS**

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## Deputy Director's Report

By Angel Ray

My Spring Equinox hike was lovely in its promises, noting the only greening bursting forth was that of Spring Beauties among the leafy detritus. Of course, there was also my good friend, *moss*, who accompanies me in all seasons. Some would be disappointed that the switch had not automatically flipped with the changing of seasons, yet I reveled in my ability to see from one hillside to another, unobstructed. I found myself stopping to admire the undulating landscape knowing that that secretly it is working its shoots up and outward from earth and limb.

In saying all of this, I challenge you to look again, to notice. To be inspired by your surroundings, whether it be outdoors or in. How might you inspire others to see beyond the surface? How might you look to the promises yet to come?

Often, I find inspiration in the works of poets, such as Jarod K. Anderson and his book, *Love Notes from the Hollow Tree*. Here are two excerpts to remind us of our kinship.

### **Kin**

If you've ever grabbed a stick from the ground and thought "oh, this is a good stick," then we're family.

*by Jarod K. Anderson*

### **Look Again**

See a bird and dismiss it.  
See a bird and learn its name.  
See a bird and study its behavior.  
See a bird and question the physics of flight.  
See a bird and trace its DNA back to the dinosaurs.  
Life can pass over us unnoticed or rich in poetry.

I know it isn't easy.  
It's hard to slow down.  
It's hard to make time for questions,  
Harder still to make room for answers.  
Some days, I'm too tired to look again,  
To look closer.  
And yet, each year I stumble into this fact.  
Curiosity is worth the effort.

*by Jarod K. Anderson*

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## South Central Region Board

Director: **Position Open**

Deputy Director: Angel Ray

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Scholarship & Professional

Development Chair: Jeanne Spencer

Awards Chair: **Position Open**

Elections Chair: Mary Gillis

Membership Chair: Jeanne Spencer

Arkansas Coordinator: **Position Open**

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IF INTERESTED IN A POSITION, PLEASE  
EMAIL:**

[naisouthcentral@gmail.com](mailto:naisouthcentral@gmail.com)

[www.naisouthcentral.com](http://www.naisouthcentral.com)

The South Central Newsletter will  
be getting a new format soon.  
Stay tuned!

# NAI's 2027 National Conference IS HEADING TO...



Want to be a part of it? Applications for the Conference Planning Committee are open through May 15<sup>th</sup>. This is your chance to help shape the attendee experience!

Apply now at:

[nai-us.org/2027](http://nai-us.org/2027)

# NAI South Central Region Awards

By Jeanne Spencer, Scholarship Chair

I want to acknowledge the hard work we all put in at each of our sites. We, as interpreters, are stewards of our places and responsible for the experiences at our sites alongside the preservation of those same spaces. Right now, more than ever, we the board, and NAI are here for you with support, friendship, and collaboration as a point of contact or a sympathetic ear. The awards we have are peer-nominated for those of you who have gone above and beyond in our line of work in many ways. If you have anyone you think should be nominated for their hard work, keep them in mind when we release the nomination forms for next year's conference!

## **Brian Barnette All-American Interpreter's Quiz**

Congratulations to everyone who participated in this year's quiz. Special thanks go to Jerrel for putting together all the questions and scoring each of the scoresheets!

## **Outstanding Interpretive Written Article Award**

How do you make the public care about a space and time they cannot see? Our awardee wrote a moving article taking her readers into the past at a first look of the history of the Indigenous people who lived there, the Europeans and the impact they had, and on to industrialization in the area that shaped modern history at this site. Congratulations to **Kate Fisher**, park interpreter at **Palo Pinto Mountains State Park** in Texas. Her nominator said, "Kate's writing clearly outlines the human history of PPMSP from the early Indigenous people, to families recreating on Tucker Lake. The underlying message that we, as visitors, are just more 'footprints' in the long timeline of people in the park, permeates through the article, and builds enthusiasm for the site's opening."

## **Outstanding Interpretive Site Publication**

Almost every park system has a Junior Ranger or Explorer program that is a beloved part of the visitor experience. This publication got a much needed upgrade in 2025 and we want to honor them for it! Congratulations to **Texas State Parks & Wildlife** for their improvements made to their Junior Ranger Journal. They made improvements to the accessibility of the journal by offering a printed version, PDF version for screen readers, and a read-along video linked by a QR code for visitors with low vision or low reading comprehension. With 89 diverse parks, this journal connects visitors with the parks all across the state.

## **Outstanding Multimedia Award**

The goal of many of our sites is to have visitors leave with that "ah" moment that will keep their attention for many years to come. In this multimedia refresh, they showcase the history alongside the natural resources this park has in abundance. Congratulations to **Copper Breaks State Park** for this remodel and award. You'll have to make the trip to see more of the exhibits, but as the nominator said, "It uses a mix of multimedia, like a custom-built planetarium, realistic rock replicas, and interpretive panels, to spark curiosity. From ancient sea fossils to Kiowa star stories, every element of the exhibit reveals the unexpected richness of the land and inspires stewardship."

## **Outstanding Interpretive Special Event Award**

An event that brings visitors into a park and connects them to the resource is always one for the books. At this park, this special event has been used for over 15 years to draw people in and show the beauty and magic that exists in the natural things. *(Continued on next page)*

*(Outstanding Interpretive Special Event cont.)*

This park has utilized the story of the *Wizard of Oz* to draw parallels for people, but in 2025 they revisited their message and tweaked it. With a tornado in 2024 that took out thousands of trees, the rebuilding of a forest was the new focus of the park. Between clearing what they needed for trails and knowing the fight with invasive opportunistic plants was coming, they put a spin on their usual program to hopefully gain some passionate forest volunteers in the next year. With a turnout of over 250 people, I am happy to congratulate **Living Forest: The Wizard of Hobbs**.

### **Outstanding Interpretive Program Award**

Many natural spaces are not as accessible as we would like them to be, but many of our sites are working hard to bridge that gap to welcome these visitors who have not felt comfortable at our places before. This program bridges that gap by providing a sensory-friendly space that is welcoming to all sorts of neurodiverse audiences and connects these new visitors to nature. Her nominator says, "During her programs, Laney does not dilute the information she is giving, but rather, presents it in a way that meets her audience's needs. With the sensory boards, they have the opportunity to safely feel textures like grass, sand, rocks, and feathers. They get to listen to the sounds of wind, running water, frogs, and birds. They learn about the resources in their own way, meeting their individual learning styles." Congratulations to **Laney Kohout** and the **Sensory Friendly Hike Program**.

### **Excellence in Interpretive Support Award**

There are many phenomenal things I could say from the nominators about this person, but these two capture a lot of what they do. "In West Texas, one of the most important resources we strive to conserve is the dark

night sky. He has been an amazing partner in forwarding TPWD's dark sky efforts. While his main responsibility is to work with businesses, local governments, and organizations to educate and implement dark sky friendly initiatives, he has gone above and beyond as a partner of Texas State Parks. Through instruction, interpretation, events, and expertise, he is a prime example of what it means to support interpretation." And, "though he may not self-describe as one, he is an exceptional interpreter. The mystery of the night sky is a universal feeling, and the vastness of the universe makes it inherently difficult to comprehend. He expertly connects the distant stars to the lives of his audience of interpreters, which inspires them to share their revelations with the public." With his many hours of support, I am happy to congratulate **Stephen Hummel**.

### **Outstanding New Interpreter Award**

New interpreters are so special to each and every one of our sites. Their unbridled passion and tireless enthusiasm connects visitors with time and place over and over. This new interpreter, in just one single fiscal year, has increased their program offerings at their park by 600% and their number of park visitors connected to by 250%. Their nominator and other professional recommendations sing praises about their passion, commitment, and innovative approaches as reasons why this new interpreter should be honored this year. Their nominator says, "She displays a passion for her craft that is evident not only in how she conducts her programs, but also in her dedication to community outreach, innovation in finding new ways to connect with audiences, and in the programs that she has created and implemented on her own. In any given month, you'll find programs covering the night sky, guided hikes, art topics, outdoor cooking, paddling, and everything in between." Congratulations to **Jenna Lombard**.

## Master & Distinguished Frontline Interpreter Award

We all have mentors and giants in our world. The person receiving this award is a giant for many here. Here are a few things their mentees and colleagues have to say about them:

“She brings a rare combination of creativity, leadership, and heart to her work as an interpreter. With over a decade of experience in the field, she has built a reputation as a thoughtful mentor, a dynamic program developer, and an advocate for connecting people to parks through interpretation.”

“Her approachable demeanor, passion for interpretation, and commitment to excellence have earned her recognition from agency leadership and admiration from peers. She doesn’t just do interpretation - she lives it.”

“Over the years, it’s been wonderful to watch her mold the interpretive programming at the site from standard to spectacular. She could repeat the same tried-and-true programs - but she doesn’t, because that doesn’t serve her own enthusiasm for interpretation nor her park visitors.”

She is a mentor, leader, innovator, and expert interpreter. I could go on, but I would like to congratulate **Lauren Hartwick** with the Master & Distinguished Professional Interpreter Award.



## DO YOU KNOW A SHINING STAR OF INTERPRETATION?

The NAI Shining Star Award highlights the amazing interpretive work being done by members like you all across NAI. This award is meant to highlight winners’ efforts to the NAI interpretive community as well as supervisors and coworkers.

To nominate someone for the NAI Shining Star Award, email [shiningstar@nai-us.org](mailto:shiningstar@nai-us.org) with the following information:

- Contact information of the nominee (name, title, site, work address, work email, and work phone)
- Example(s) of how the nominee went above and beyond their routine duties
- Example(s) of how the nominee’s action made a positive impact on visitors, resources, or NAI

# Stories that Stretch Across the Land

By Lindsay Evans

There is something about our Natural Resources that invite us to slow down. To notice, to listen, and recognize that every place is layered with stories.

At the Kansas Conference this year, we gather around the theme “Stories of the Plains.” The plains do offer a powerful lesson, but our region consists of more than plains. This idea stretches beyond any one landscape. Stories move through all our spaces.

Each place holds its own rhythm, history, relationship with the land, people, and wildlife.

As interpreters, what we are really doing is the same anywhere. Which is to listen for the stories that came before us, and help others see themselves within them.

It is no surprise I did not have as much time as I wanted to sit in on the sessions of the conference, but I caught glimpses of stories as I moved between responsibilities.

We are often gathering pieces of stories in motion and since being home, taking time to rest and refocus in that space, I get to recognize the stories still unfolding around me. They are everywhere! In our plains, in the forests, the water, the wildlife, and the history and communities we serve.

Whether you join us at the conference or not, here is an invitation for you to notice what stories are you noticing in your landscape right now?

**"NEVER HOLD  
BACK  
OUT OF FEAR."**

What is the land teaching you?

What are your audiences responding to?

What feels worth sharing?

Never hold back out of fear. If you feel called to share something, do it!

These are the stories that connect us. Not because they are the same, but because they are rooted in place and carried with purpose, and they are still being told.





# Bunny Blocked

By Ken Forman

Karen and I use our yard as part of our living space. We often sit out under the trees and watch the sun rise. Or we'll find ourselves on a Leopold Bench <sup>1</sup>, throwing a ball for our dog, Darwin. We try to live by two mottos:

Skies before screens<sup>2</sup>

Be outside often<sup>3</sup>

We are grateful and happy to have many such opportunities, and work to take advantage of our situation as often as we can.

One thing we've done here at Sunset House<sup>4</sup> is to increase available habitat for wildlife. That means we landscape almost exclusively with Ozark natives.<sup>5</sup> The results speak for themselves. Wildlife frequents (or downright lives in) our yard. And since we spend time out in our own little part of the Homegrown National park<sup>6</sup>, we have the opportunity to observe the lifecycles happening around us.



Gray Squirrel

The Eastern Bluebirds fledged the season's first brood and juveniles are learning how to be the savage hunters they are. The Carolina Wrens fledged their first brood last week and have moved out of the woodpile. Young Grey Squirrels play, butterflies<sup>7</sup> flutter by, and the Ruby-throated Hummingbirds are just starting to arrive.

It also means the Eastern Cottontails are having their litters.

Darwin discourages free-roaming cats and dogs from entering the yard. And although he



Carolina Wren



Eastern Bluebird



Eastern Cottontail

Ruby-throated  
Hummingbird



For the past couple of weeks, we've been **bunny blocked** because the nest is about 8 feet from the fire ring. We won't have a fire<sup>9</sup> until they've weaned and moved on. It's part of the concession, the pact we make with the rest of the residents here in our part of the world. It'll be a little less convenient for a little while, but *baby bunnies!*

As you continue on your path with your career and your life, a little inconvenience can lead to something much more rewarding. Choosing the easiest or simplest path may get one from A to Zed. And sometimes that is the only real path. But choosing convenience *automatically* just because we're used to that path means we are also choosing to ignore the potential joy just off from everyone else's foot prints.

I choose baby bunnies.

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1 A simple bench design credited to Aldo Leopold and his son. Simple and easy plans can be found online. Search "Leopold Bench Plans."

2 This means we **must** step outside to see the sky **before** any screen (e.g., phone, tablet, TV) can be used.

3 No actual footnote. Just seemed appropriate to have one here.

4 Our house has a mostly clear western view - something rare in the middle of the Ozarks.

5 We do maintain a separate container garden of decorative, non-native stuff like daisies, impatiens, and geraniums.

6 See [homegrownnationalpark.org](http://homegrownnationalpark.org) for details.

7 Tiger Swallowtails, Monarchs, Blue Hairstreaks, Red Admirals, and more.

8 No, there are no cute pictures. I chose not to add stress to an already stressful situation.

9 ...nor use the plant shelf over them, nor allow Darwin to snuffle there, etc.

half-heartedly chases the adult rabbits across the yard, it's clear (to even the rabbit) that he's no threat. Bunnies like to make cozy nests in semi-protected places where the kits can be left alone throughout the day, as is their custom. These nests are often well-hidden and since the kits are born without scent, their presence is usually a surprise.

Last week, I was staging some small firewood near the firepit. I needed to move a couple large blocks and discovered, tucked down in a little corner, a bunny nest.

They're easy enough to identify when you see them; they appear like an apple-sized ball of fur that looks as soft and cozy as it's possible to look. I checked and sure enough, a couple of golf-ball sized, brown furballs with appropriately-sized ears were nestled within.

Without any fuss, and with care, I returned everything as gently and quietly as I could. We packed things up and moved to a different part of the yard.

# Beyond the Recipe: Interpreting History Through Food

By Jeanne Spencer, M.A., CIG

Food has always been more than something we eat; it can evoke strong emotional connections, nostalgia, and a sense of time or place. Food comforts, sparks love, creates revulsion, transports us back in time, or enhances an experience. Think of the many ways we connect food and celebrations or as a way of seeking comfort when grieving, such as a meal following a funeral service.

*Foodways* refers to the cultural, social, and economic practices related to food production, preparation, and consumption. This includes everything from ingredients and cooking methods to the social and economic forces that influence what communities grow, prepare, and share. And for interpreters, foodways can open powerful doors to connection.



Food has the remarkable ability to bring people together and create a strong sense of connection. When we offer hands-on chances to smell spices, explore ingredients, or see unfamiliar cooking practices, we give visitors approachable ways to explore culture and history on their own terms.

*Pictured: Jeanne Spencer*

When developing a food-centered program, begin with your interpretive plan -one with a clear, central theme, defined audience, tangible and intangibles, and a cohesive structure. Find creative ways to engage your audience while carrying out your plan, avoiding “cook and tell.” **Who** is your audience? **What** emotions or insights do you want them to walk away with? **How** will you inspire curiosity, create connections, and invite visitors to see the resource or site in a new way?

Dig deep! Food reveals a wealth of information about a culture, region, or settlement. Select items that represent different sectors. There is a large gap between everyday foods of migrating families and the upper class. Consider primary and secondary sources.

Use those senses! Select ingredients with different textures, tastes, or smells. Encourage guests to feel, smell, or take a guess as to what it is or its purpose. I often select recipes with

*(Continued on next page)*

multiple ingredients or steps so that many can participate.

If food productions is restricted by health and safety regulations, the following ideas may inspire you:

- Make a non-food product such as lotion or hair tonic
- Create family or personal recipe books from an assortment provided
- Launch an oral history project with each participant collecting a recipe from someone they know
- Expand your scent and touch boxes to include a variety of food or spices

Last, consider this idea shared by John Rosinbum in *Teaching with Food History*. He asked high school students to find one picture of a dish as a restaurant (or any picture of food, in case they didn't have one), then write a paragraph that connected their dish to a historical concept or figure they had studied during the year.

Food is a powerful cultural resource and when used well, you can create deep connections and engagement for visitors and staff. Thoughtful planning and a dash of adventure may lead to a program that draws new audiences and connects across generations.



The advertisement features a purple-to-orange gradient background. In the top left, there is a white scalloped-edged shape. The logo for the South Central Region (NWR) is prominently displayed, with 'SOUTH CENTRAL REGION' in orange and 'NWR' in black. A yellow starburst icon is positioned to the right of the logo. The main title 'Scholarship Program' is written in large, white, sans-serif font. Below it, the text 'Attend Conferences at No Cost!' is in a smaller white font. A blue button with white text reads 'Coming this summer! naisouthcentral.com'. On the right side, two young women are smiling. The woman on the left wears a grey sweatshirt with the NWR logo and the word 'SECTION' visible. The woman on the right wears a black blazer over a teal top.

# State News

## Oklahoma

Hello! I'm excited to be stepping into the role of Oklahoma Coordinator for the South Central Region, so I thought I'd take a moment to introduce myself. I'm Chris Young (she/her), a born and raised Oklahoman, and I've had a passion for all things nature since a very young age. I have 15 years of experience in informal education at the Tulsa Zoo. My current role is Education Manager, and I am the point of contact for any fee-based program. I also oversee all camps and classes offered through the zoo.

For fun and a "brain break," I teach adjunct Floral Design to adult learners at a local technical school - this is often the highlight of my week! You can't go wrong when working with flowers - ever! I love to learn, and more importantly, I love to share what I learn. I feel well-rounded in my experiences and education, but plants are a passion for me. Be warned - any opportunity I have to talk to you about a plant, I will! I'm that annoying person, which is why NAI and informal education/interpretation is first and foremost in most interactions I have with people. It's about helping people, of any age, race, gender, status, or stage in their journey, to recognize their inner curiosity. By doing so, I can help them understand and connect with our natural world through relaxed conversation and shared discovery. Informal interpretation does not have to be rigid and filled with strict facts, rules, or guidelines. True discovery happens in the simplest way, at the most unexpected times.

Recently, I led a group of kindergarten students on a journey to learn about snakes. They were a lively group to say the least. Before our session was over, we were slithering on the floor like snakes and using our tongues to see if we could smell things like our snake friends do. We learned a ton and used up some pretty aggressive energy. Those kiddos left excited and eager to share with anyone walking down the hall that we indeed cannot smell with our tongues, but snakes can! If you've never seen 25 6-year-olds walking in a straight down the hall flicking their tongues at anyone that walks by - I highly recommend it! This is, for me, what informal education and interpretation means at its very core.

As I become more comfortable in my new role, I'll be excited to have an opportunity to get to meet you, share your stories, and learn from you. Please don't hesitate to reach out if I can help in any way.

