

SMOKY MOUNTAIN TREASURES

Story by Katy Koontz • Photography by Colby McLemore
Additional reporting by Jessica Carr and Alexandria Rodriguez

MILLIONS OF EAGER VISITORS flock to the Smoky Mountains every year. (In fact, the park had more than 10 million visitors last year for the fourth time in its 80-year history and for the first time since 2000.) And while the wildlife, the historic buildings, the visitor centers, the campgrounds, the hiking trails, and the stunning views of layer upon layer of purple mountain ridges are indeed truly special, the surrounding communities are equally famous for the fabulous family fun they offer.

THE CLASSICS

The multitude of family attractions in the three main Tennessee gateway towns of Gatlinburg, Pigeon Forge, and Sevierville include some true classics that have been around for generations. Ober Gatlinburg is perhaps the biggest and best example, since the ski resort (which later expanded to include an amusement park

that operates in the summer) recently celebrated its 50th anniversary.

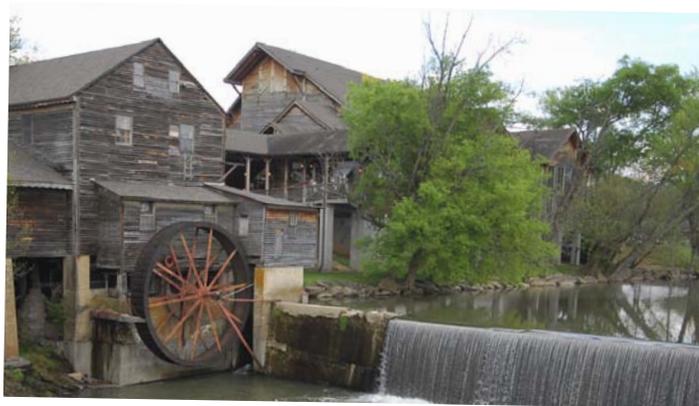
Other seasoned attractions include the funny (the Comedy Barn and Sweet Fanny Adams Theatre), the spooky (Gatlinburg's Mysterious Mansion), the zany (Hillbilly Golf), the starstruck (the recently relocated Elvis Museum), the historic (the Old Mill), and a few that offer some amazing views (the Space Needle and the Gatlinburg Sky Lift).

The area also has some classic restaurants, too, from the tony Peddler Steakhouse (where they famously carve the loin right at your table) all the way down to the folksy Frank Allen's Market (where you can still get a fried bologna sandwich at the lunch counter). Generations of kids have eaten breakfast at the Pancake Pantry and pressed their noses to the front window of the Smoky Mountain Candy Kitchen to watch the mesmerizing taffy-pulling machine in action.

NOTABLE NEWCOMERS

As great as those classics may be, some major newfangled attractions have put a whole new face on the Smokies over the past few years. Their huge, colorful, and imaginative facades all compete for attention on the Parkway in Pigeon Forge. It's impossible to miss the Titanic museum (contained in a half-size replica of the front half of the fateful ship), WonderWorks (the upside-down house that looks like it simply fell from the sky), Hollywood Wax Museum (with a ferocious King Kong, biplane in hand, hanging off the Empire State Building), and the hilarious hill-billy-style exterior of the Hatfield & McCoy Dinner Show.

Two more relatively new show-stopping attractions offer amazing views of both the Parkway and the mountains beyond—the Great Smoky Mountain Wheel (a cross between a 200-foot-tall Ferris wheel and a gondola, dominating



the Island in Pigeon Forge) and Wonders of Flight (a giant, colorful, tethered hot air balloon behind WonderWorks that takes you up 400 feet in the air).

DOLLYWOOD

Of course, no mention of area attractions is complete without describing Dollywood, the award-winning, 150-acre Pigeon Forge amusement park that opened in 1986 to showcase Dolly Parton's Smoky Mountain heritage. It's the most popular paying attraction in the state. In addition to the big rollercoasters and other crazy rides, Dollywood offers multiple music theaters, a Bald Eagle Sanctuary with a birds of prey demo show, and Craftsman's Valley (which is filled with Appalachian artisans who allow you to watch them work).

Just a few years later, the Dollywood-owned Dixie Stampede dinner theater opened on the Parkway, next to Dollywood's downtown ticket office. And in 2001, Dollywood's Splash Country

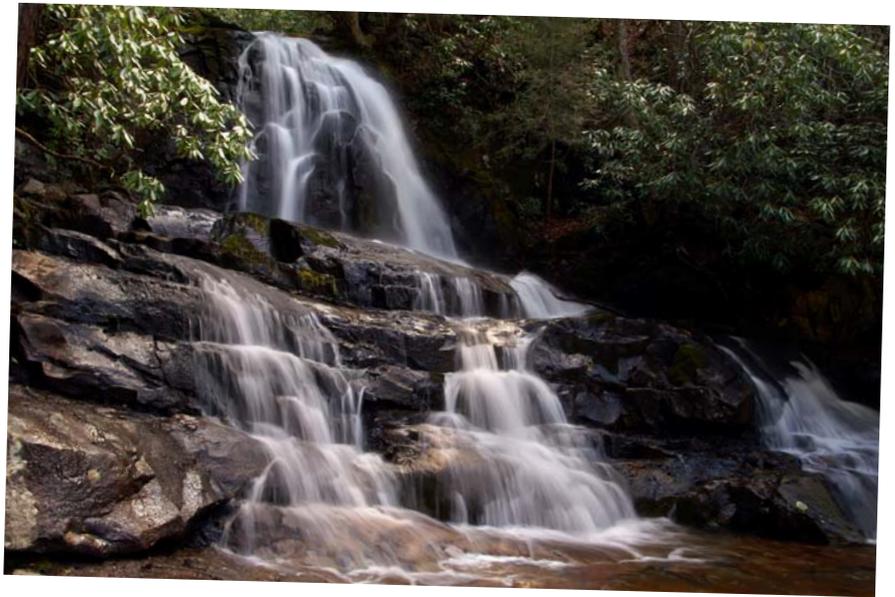
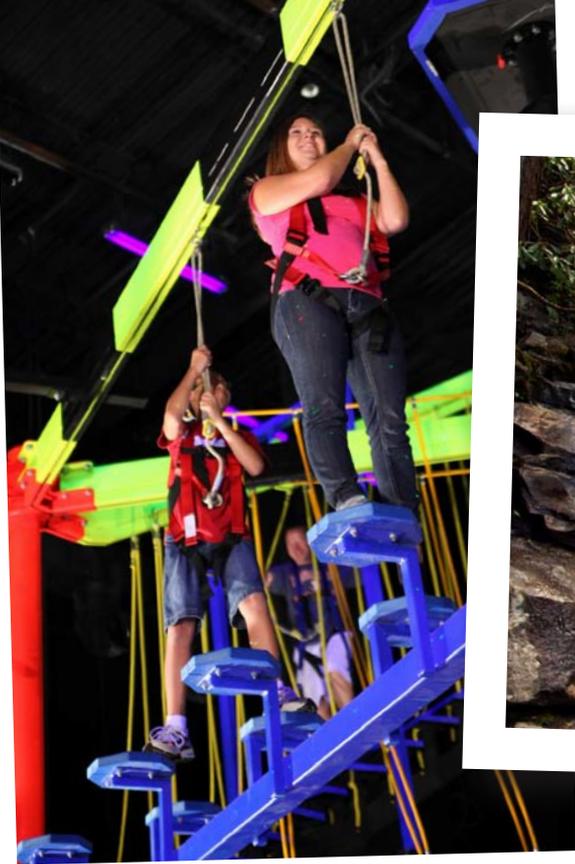
waterpark (home to the state's only water coaster, among other wet and wild rides) made its debut. In June, Dolly Parton announced the acquisition of the Lumberjack Feud Dinner Show and plans to update it for the 2016 season. Dollywood has also turned its well-mascaraed eye toward accommodations. First, it built about a hundred luxury rental cabins, ranging from one to eight bedrooms, on the land surrounding its two parks. And in July, the ritzy, 300-room DreamMore Resort welcomed its first guests.

RIPLEY'S RULES

Down the street in Gatlinburg, Ripley's is the major name in the attraction game. It all began with the Believe It or Not Odditorium, which has been displaying the incredulous for decades. (No matter how many odd artifacts Ripley's showcases, the shrunken head is probably still the most popular.) Six additional Ripley's attractions include the Guinness World

Records Museum, the Haunted Adventure (not for the squeamish), the Moving Theater (which makes you feel as if you've actually stepped inside the 70mm action film you're seeing), Davy Crockett's Mini Golf, and the Marvelous Mirror Maze and Candy Factory. (For the record, Ripley's has one more attraction in the Smokies—Old MacDonald's Farm Mini Golf in Sevierville, where pigs really do fly.)

The biggest and the best Ripley's has to offer, however, is its stunning Aquarium of the Smokies, sitting right in the middle of downtown Gatlinburg. Where else can you come nose-to-nose with a creature called the Foxface Rabbitfish? It's hard to say whether the 340-foot underwater tunnel, the million-gallon-plus Shark Lagoon, or the Penguin Playhouse is the highlight here—unless you like your aquatic adventures more up close and personal, in which case the Splash with the Stingrays program will allow you to actually get in the water with the rays.



ARTISANS AND ARTISTS

Mountain crafters are what brought the very first shoppers to Gatlinburg, and they've maintained a stronghold there ever since. The beauty of the Arts & Crafts Community (established in 1937) is that it encourages visitors to meet the craftspeople selling their goods and also watch them as they work. Be sure to peek in on third-generation broom makers David and Tammie Ogle, who tie brooms (as well as carve wooden canes and walking sticks) the old-fashioned way. The community, down the road a bit from the downtown area, also features some eclectic restaurants such as the Wild Plum Tea Room and an authentic British pub called the Fox & Parrot.

If you're more of a one-stop shopper, then Arrowcraft—the oldest giftshop in Gatlinburg—is a must. Owned by the Southern Highlands Craft Guild, this downtown shop sells crafts only from the top regional artisans. (Don't miss, too, the equally famous Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, right next door.)

Several Smoky Mountain painters have also become local legends. Vern Hippensteal's gallery isn't the only place where you

can find this painter's work—he also owns and operates the Vern Hippensteal Mountain View Inn (where you are welcome to buy framed prints right off the walls). Jim Gray (the creator of the bronze statue of a young Dolly Parton sitting in front of the Sevier County Courthouse) recently moved out of state, but his family still operates his gallery in a 100-year-old former church. Robert Tino (whose interview is featured later on in this special section) works out of his Sevierville home, an antebellum house he transformed into a studio and gallery about 25 years ago.

HUMAN TREASURES

As you might well expect, perhaps the biggest treasures of all are the people who have made the park and its family-friendly gateway communities what they are today. Some have lived there since before the Smokies was a park, some have worked in the tourism industry, while others have played a major role in the national park service. Some are artists and artisans, while others are public servants. What all of them have in common, however, is incredible

drive, vision, and passion for the Smoky Mountains and the surrounding area.

Cityview was fortunate enough to talk with six of these Smoky Mountain treasures, each of whom generously shared their time and thoughts with us for this special section. We asked each of them to share a treasured memory with us, and then we asked them for some of their top suggestions for what to see and do in the area. On the following pages, not only have we reported the highlights of those discussions, but we also dug back into our *Cityview* archives to offer some recommendations of our own from stories we've run since we started regularly covering the Smokies just over three years ago.

The result is an intriguing smorgasbord of top-notch sights and experiences that can help you make some special memories of your own on your next visit. So y'all listen up now, y'hear?

Katy Koontz, author of *Family Fun in the Smokies* as well as the *Smoky Mountain Travel Guide* app for smartphones, writes regularly about the Smokies for *Cityview*.

TED MILLER

Business Manager and Partner,
Dolly Parton Productions

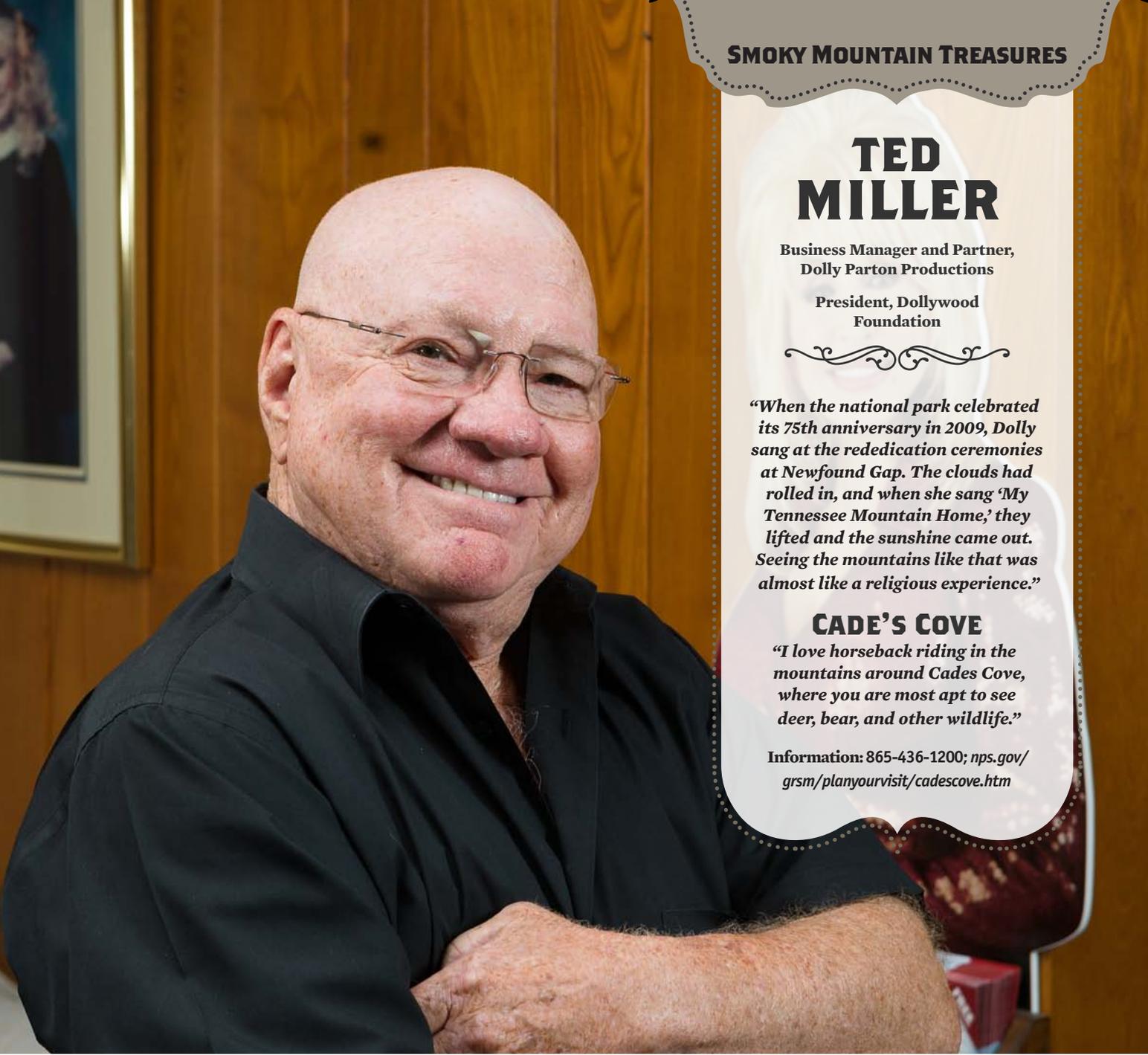
President, Dollywood
Foundation

“When the national park celebrated its 75th anniversary in 2009, Dolly sang at the rededication ceremonies at Newfound Gap. The clouds had rolled in, and when she sang ‘My Tennessee Mountain Home,’ they lifted and the sunshine came out. Seeing the mountains like that was almost like a religious experience.”

CADE’S COVE

“I love horseback riding in the mountains around Cades Cove, where you are most apt to see deer, bear, and other wildlife.”

Information: 865-436-1200; nps.gov/grsm/planyourvisit/cadescove.htm



BIKING IN CADE’S COVE

“The 11-mile loop road is closed to automobiles on Wednesday and Saturday mornings until 10 a.m. through the last Wednesday in September. ... You can even rent a bike ... at the Cades Cove Campground. ... In addition to the ubiquitous deer, you may also cross paths with coyotes, ground hogs, turkeys, raccoons, and maybe even a bear. On your way, you’ll peddle past old log cabin homes, barns, and churches dating from the 18th and 19th centuries, all open for exploring.” [From “Smoky Mountain Sporting Life,” September/October 2014]

Information: 865-436-1200; nps.gov/grsm

KENNY MAPLES

Chairman, Tennessee Hospitality
& Tourism Association



“Some of my fondest memories are of fishing in the national park. When you get on that river and all you can hear is the water flowing and you’re concentrating on trying to feel that fish bite, it really takes everything else away.”

OLD MILL POTTERY HOUSE CAFÉ & GRILLE, PIGEON FORGE

“The café is in the Old Mill historic district—I love the heritage that area represents. And their potter’s burger with bleu cheese and bacon is incredible.”

Information: 865-453-6002;
oldmillsquare.com/cafe.htm



FLY FISHING

WITH HELP FROM LITTLE RIVER OUTFITTERS, TOWNSEND

“The Smokies is one of the best places in the country for trout fishing, thanks to its more than 800 miles of fishable trout streams. Whether you’re a newbie needing to learn fly-casting basics or an experienced old hand, Little River Outfitters in Townsend is a fine place to start. ... In addition to rods, reels, lures, and other fishing equipment, the store sports the largest selection of fly tying supplies you’re likely to find anywhere.” [From “Smoky Mountain Sporting Life,” September/October 2014]

Information: 877-448-3474; littleriveroutfitters.com

RUTH MILLER

Longtime area tour guide who remembers Dolly Parton singing in the church choir



“My most vivid memory of the Smokies is meeting two of the seven Walker sisters when I was 7 years old. When the national park was established, the government let them live their life out on their land. Every magazine in the country wrote about them.”

GREENBRIER RESTAURANT, GATLINBURG

“This is an interesting restaurant that serves great steaks. It’s in an old log cabin that lots of folks say is haunted.”

Information: 865-436-6318;
greenbrierrestaurant.com



ARROWCRAFT AND ARROWMONT, GATLINBURG

“The [Pi Beta Phi Women’s Fraternity] began recruiting locals to produce their crafts for sale (and teach their artisan techniques to the local children.) One thing led to another, and the Arrowcraft Shop opened for business in 1926. ... Today, [it is] one of the finest crafts shops in the Appalachians, selling ceramics, wood carvings, glass-works, metalworks, weaving, painting, and other crafts. And Arrowmont ... is one of the most sought-after crafting schools on the globe.” [From “Crafting in the Smokies,” July/August 2014]

Information: 865-436-4604; arrowcraft.org

MARTHA COLE WHALEY

Age 105, original proprietor
of the Greystone Hotel (one
of Gatlinburg's first hotels)



"I remember when Teddy Roosevelt came to the park for the dedication in 1940 when he was president. We all went out to the street to see him drive by—and he waved to us. We got real close to him and we thought that was wonderful!"

NEWFOUND GAP

"There's a platform where Roosevelt spoke, and the view is about the best I've ever seen. I still love going up there."

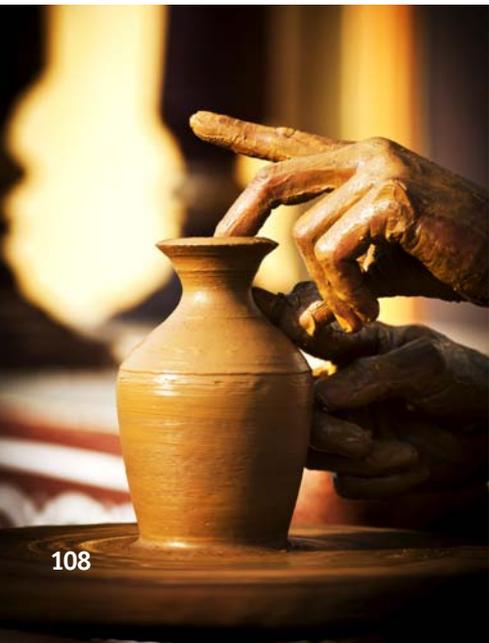
Information: 865-436-1200;
nps.gov/grsm/planyourvisit/nfg.htm



GREAT SMOKY ARTS & CRAFTS COMMUNITY, GATLINBURG

"The Great Smoky Arts & Crafts Community [is home to] more than 120 shops and studios belonging to weavers, basket makers, broom makers, painters, potters, candle makers, quilters, silversmiths, leather workers, sculptors, and other craftspeople where you can watch the artisans at work. Established in 1937, this community is the largest group of independent artisans in North America. The eight-mile loop drive through the community has even been designated a Tennessee Heritage Arts & Crafts Trail." [From "Crafting in the Smokies," July/August 2014]

Information: 800-588-1817; gatlinburgcrafts.com



ROBERT TINO

Landscape artist and
owner of Robert A. Tino
Gallery in Sevierville

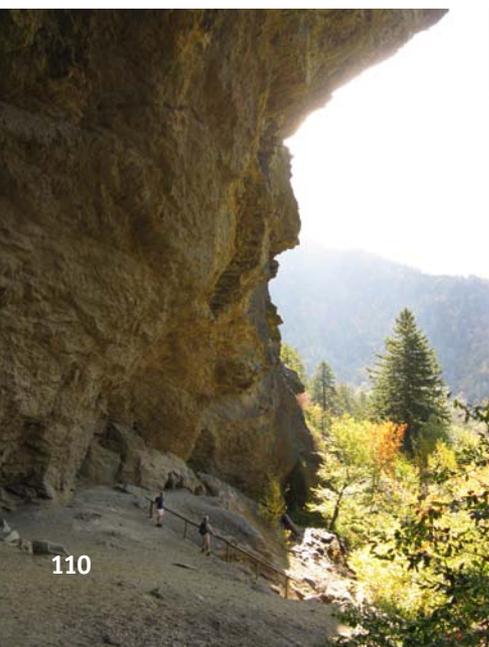


“When I was in high school, a bunch of us used to go after school to swim in the river at Greenbrier in the national park. We would get inner tubes from old truck tires, blow them up, and float down the river. Everyone needs to try it!”

LECONTE LODGE

“I’ve always liked hiking up to the lodge at Mount LeConte, staying overnight, and watching the sunrises and sunsets.”

Information: 865-429-5704;
lecontelodge.com



ALUM CAVE TRAIL

“Alum Cave Bluff is ... [an] overhang (not a true cave) [that] was once mined for several minerals, including alum, Epsom salt, and saltpeter. ... (The hike to Alum Cave Bluff and back is five miles. ...; the trail continues past the bluffs to Mount Le Conte.) ... On the way to the bluff...you’ll get to hike through Arch Rock, a large natural arch made of slate, on a stairway fashioned out of the stone.” [From “Frosty Fun in the Smokies,” January/February 2013]

Information: 865-436-1200; nps.gov/grsm

KIM DELOZIER

Retired chief wildlife biologist for the national park; now manager of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation's conservation program

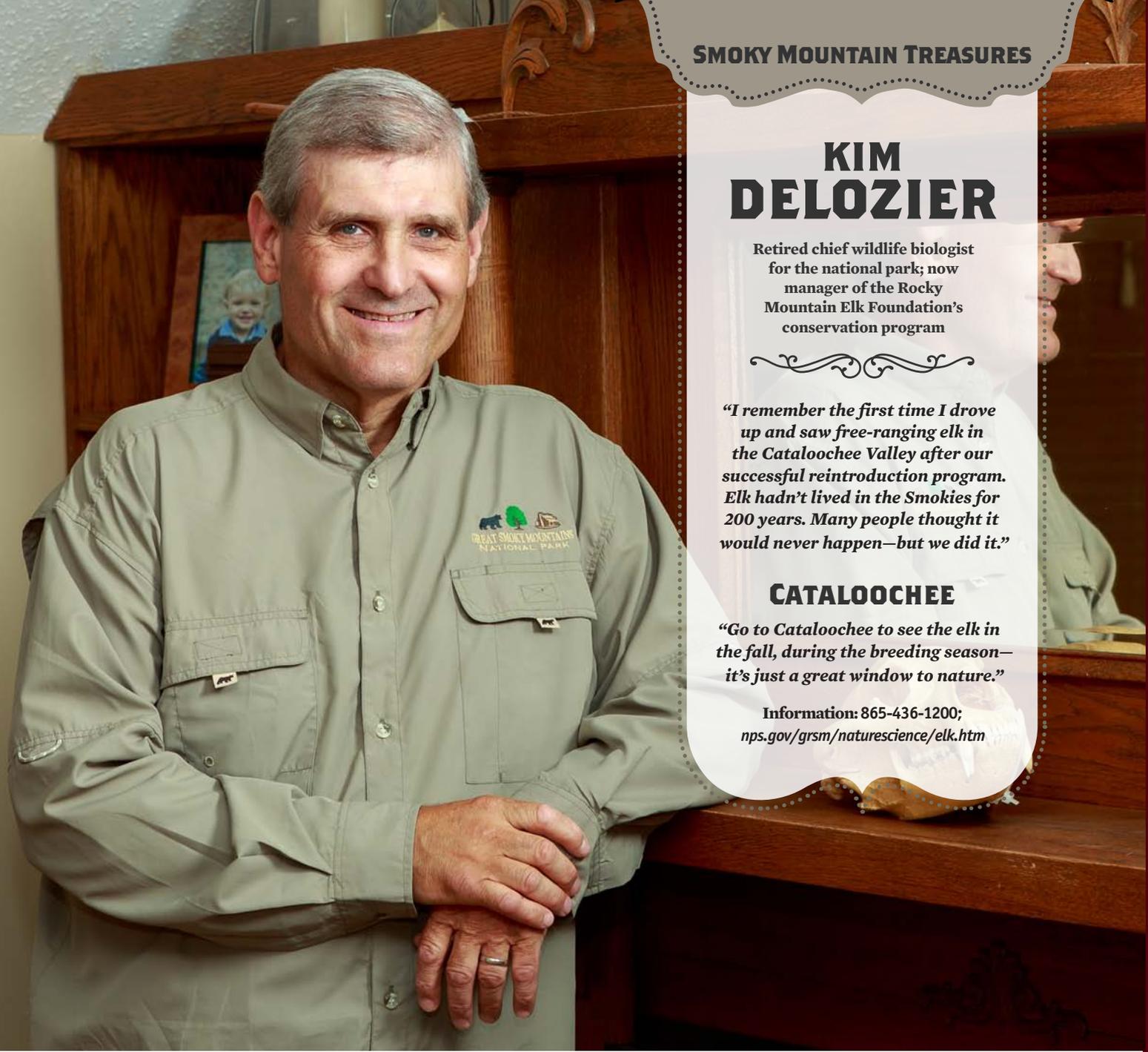


"I remember the first time I drove up and saw free-ranging elk in the Cataloochee Valley after our successful reintroduction program. Elk hadn't lived in the Smokies for 200 years. Many people thought it would never happen—but we did it."

CATALOOCHEE

"Go to Cataloochee to see the elk in the fall, during the breeding season—it's just a great window to nature."

Information: 865-436-1200;
nps.gov/grsm/naturescience/elk.htm



FOOTHILLS PARKWAY WEST

"This 18-mile scenic drive is officially part of the national park but it lies just outside the park's main boundaries, along its western edge. ... The road follows a ridgeline, which offers a distinct advantage over most other scenic drives in the park because you can enjoy marvelous views looking out of either side of the car windows. At about the halfway point ... [follow] the signs across the road to the Look Rock observation tower ... at the end of a half-mile trail." [From "Smokies Hidden Gems," March/April 2015]