

OWAA's annual conference: Knoxville, Tennessee, June 26-28, 2015

A first-timers guide to conference

BY DANIELLE TAYLOR

I have sort of a weird habit when I travel. Every time I visit a new place, I send my folks a postcard (they're usually taking care of my dog anyway), and I also mail one to myself. It's a fun and cheap way to preserve a little visual memory from my trip, as well as a snippet of my thoughts at the time.

Last year when I arrived in McAllen, Texas, for my first OWAA conference, I found a McAllen postcard in my hotel room. After a whirlwind few days of education sessions, networking events, dinners, product demos and one highly entertaining photo scavenger hunt critique session, I finally got around to jotting down a few lines while waiting to board my flight home. My main thought? I really missed out on most of the benefits OWAA offered me in my first few years as a passive member.

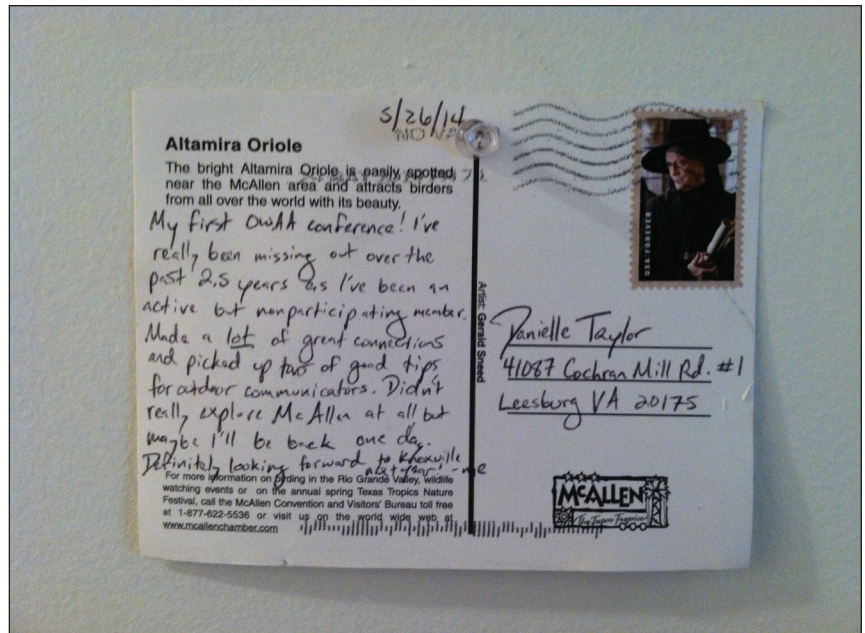
The association offers a ton of perks all year long, but the annual conference is really where it all comes together. If you're going to conference for the first time this year, or are considering attending next year's event, here are a few tips to make the most of your experience:

- If you haven't already set your travel plans, check out the **pre-and post-conference trips** tab on the OWAA Conference webpage (<http://owaa.org/2015conference/pre-post-conference-trips>) first. In addition to the jam-packed conference schedule, OWAA has also organized several outdoor excursions to introduce members to the greater Knoxville area and give attendees an opportunity to experience some of its outdoor attractions. You'll likely want to arrive early or stay late to fish the South Holston River, photograph elk in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, bird-watch at Douglas Dam or raft the Pigeon Forge River.

- Once you're ready to book your flight and hotel, **visit the travel and lodging tab on the conference website for discounted rates** (<http://owaa.org/2015conference/travel-lodging>).

- No matter how long you've been working in this field, **don't miss the "Becoming an Outdoors Communicator" workshop** (<http://owaa.org/2015conference/agenda/boc-workshop>). It's a great introduction to some realms of outdoor communications you may not have considered tapping into, such as radio, visual art and books.

- **Be sure to attend the Green Ribbon Meeting**, as it's here that you'll get a thorough introduction to the conference as well as a chance to connect with a mentor who can help guide you through the next few days. First-time attendees wear a green ribbon on their nametag throughout the conference, and this meeting also introduces you to other newbies you can buddy up with.



Danielle Taylor sent herself a postcard from McAllen, Texas, reminding herself of what she learned at conference last year. Photo by Danielle Taylor.

- Be friendly and don't hesitate to **introduce yourself to everyone**. Just like you, others are there to meet like-minded people, make new connections and find new opportunities. You'll likely have information to share that will help out your fellow members and they'll have the same for you. So step out of your comfort zone and join that hotel breakfast table of folks wearing conference badges, strike up a conversation with the person sitting next to you in a craft improvement session and introduce yourself to any speakers you particularly enjoyed.

- **Try to attend as many hospitality suites as possible**, as they're great opportunities to network with other members and sponsors. Also, there's no additional cost and the food is great, so why miss out?

- **Consider entering the photo scavenger hunt**. The experience of looking for shots that fit the bill for each individual quest gives you a different perspective on conference. Even if you don't participate, check out the comical photo critique session at the end to see the entries and pick up some photo composition tips from a few of the association's top photographers.

- Throughout the conference, **stay tuned in to OWAA and the other members you meet on social media**. Share photos and updates on Facebook and Twitter and connect with people you meet on LinkedIn. By tapping in to others' feeds, you can get insight on portions of the conference you miss. Don't forget to use the hashtag #OWAA2015 in your posts, and use it to search for others' posts while you're in Knoxville.

- **Roughly plan out which sessions you want to attend**, and

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Check-in early

Conference starts Friday, but there's plenty to do Thursday

When planning your arrival in Knoxville, Tennessee, think about showing up for conference on Thursday. You can get registered, sit in on a workshop and enjoy a hospitality suite.

Here's what's happening at OWAA's conference on Thursday:

Registration opens at 1 p.m.

Henley Concourse, Knoxville Convention Center

Beat the rush and check-in on Thursday. Your badge, the conference program, digital press material and more are available at the registration desk in the Henley Concourse at the Knoxville Convention Center. Your badge is required for entrance into all conference events.

Becoming an Outdoor Communicators Workshop

3 – 6 p.m. Room 301B, Knoxville Convention Center

This free, three-hour workshop will feature some of OWAA's most prolific and best-known communicators presenting on their specialties from outdoor publishing to outdoor television shows and everything in between. Please join **Pat Wray** and fellow OWAA members for this popular staple of the OWAA conference. Speaker presentations will be followed by an informal question and answer session.

President's Hospitality

8:30 – 11:30 p.m. Dogwood Room, Holiday Inn World's Fair Park

Celebrate with us as we toast OWAA President **Mark Freeman** for his ser-

vice over the past year. Drinks and light snacks will be provided.

Pre- and post-conference trips

And for even more fun, check out our lineup of pre-conference activities: <http://owaa.org/2015conference/pre-post-conference-trips/>. ■

Supporting Group deadlines

June 3 – Deadline to reserve hospitality suites

June 12 – Deadline to submit digital press material, reserve 3-day displays and all demo booths and provide certificates of liability insurance.

note some back-up options in case any of your first choices aren't what you expected (<http://owaa.org/2015conference/agenda>).

■ If you do any freelance writing, **don't miss "Meet the Editors,"** to learn about several publications specific to this field and meet several assigning editors who are interested in publishing your work.

■ **It's worth waking up early for Demo Day and Shooting Day,** as this is your chance to test out some of the latest products for the outdoor industry. You'll also probably leave with a hefty bag of swag, so be sure to leave room in your suitcase when you pack.

■ **Consider attending the section meeting specific for your type of media** to discuss specific challenges you're facing and share ideas for new ways to maximize your outreach.

■ To learn about any major OWAA news you may have missed and vote on membership-wide decisions to help the association move forward and serve you best, **definitely attend the annual membership meeting.**

■ **Bring more business cards than you think you'll need.** They don't take up a lot of space in your luggage and you'll need them as you make a ton of great contacts to help you with your work in this field.

■ Once you're home, **follow up with the connections you made** to solidify those contacts and open the door to future opportunities.

My postcard collection decorates my home's stairwell, and the one from McAllen is on eye level at the top of the steps. Every time I see it, I'm reminded to pitch an article idea to an editor I met at last year's conference, follow up with a writer I met for an assignment, or just check in with a friend I made there. Unfortunately, I have a family conflict and can't make it to Knoxville this year, but I can't wait for the 2016 conference in Billings, Montana. I hope to see you there. ■



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