

Nomadic newshound

Taylor plans to visit all 59 national parks

BY TAYLOR WYLLIE

The sun was setting over the white sands. Light pinks, faded blues and hazy oranges cast a shimmering glow on the dunes.

Danielle Taylor stood in the center of it all soaking in the silent beauty of the White Sands National Monument in New Mexico. She felt content. Finally.

“Last year I was really not a happy person,” Taylor said.

Last year was 80-hour work weeks and backaches from sitting in a desk chair all day. Last year was telling herself she would pursue freelancing — eventually, meanwhile writing the same types of articles for the same publication for the same people day in and day out.

An editor at a magazine covering parks and recreation, she was burnt out from the daily grind that comes with full-time work at a publication.

“In some sense, I loved the job,” Taylor said. “I was writing about parks and recreation. I felt like I was supporting the field.”

But in other ways Taylor knew things had to change.

Last summer, at 29 years old, Taylor realized if ever there was a time to gamble with her career, now was it.

“I don’t have a boyfriend, I don’t have kids, I don’t have a mortgage,” Taylor said. “This is the perfect time in my life to take a risk like this.”

She moved her belongings to a family home in Pennsylvania.

With nothing holding her back, in the fall of 2015 Taylor decided for the next year (or two or three) she’d live out of her car and travel across the United States, visiting all 59 national parks and at least some of the other 352 public lands managed by the National Park Service, including the White Sands National Monument in New Mexico. She planned to sell stories about her journey and the parks she visited, using the park service’s Centennial in August as a news hook.



Danielle Taylor poses in Badlands National Park. Taylor is spending the next year visiting and writing about all the national parks in the U.S. Photo courtesy Danielle Taylor.

It was a way to live out a dream of exploring the outdoors and writing about it she’d harbored since she was a child growing up in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Taylor always loved words, her mother Sue Taylor said. She learned to read by the time she was 4 years old. She won her first writing contest with a poem she wrote in second grade. In middle school she’d read the local newspaper and point out punctuation errors — for fun.

Her father Bob Taylor often found his only daughter 12 to 15 feet up in a tree reading. She spent her summer nights beneath a tarp in her backyard, preferring the feel of the grass and sight of the stars to four concrete walls and a mattress.

Outside magazine, which Taylor subscribed to as a teenager, inspired her efforts to be an outdoor journalist. It was king of all jobs. She could write, recreate and travel. And get paid for it.

Always itching to be somewhere else, Taylor went out-of-state for school, attending the University of Maryland where as

a junior she participated in the Semester at Sea program. She visited about a dozen countries in three months.

She felt odd when she returned. At 22, she’d been across the world, but seen little of her own country.

Taylor graduated in 2009 with degrees in English and magazine journalism and human geography, a resume including four internships and strong grades and no job offers as the global economy destructed.

She decided to spend her savings on a cross-country road trip and loaded her dog, Paxton, an 80-pound retriever mix, into her dad’s old pickup truck.

She made it to Idaho, saw Yellowstone National Park and herds of wild bison for the first time and was about to head south when an emergency with a good friend forced her back home weeks before she’d planned to return.

For years, she tried to finish her road trip to the Southwest. But only two weeks of vacation time a year didn’t allow her the flexibility she needed.

This year she finally had the opportunity to finish that trip and see even more.

She’s paddled through the cypress swamps at Big Thicket National Preserve, hiked 750 feet into the Earth at Carlsbad Caverns National Park and stood alone on a trail near Guadalupe Mountain, watching a herd of mule deer roam nearby.

She works from the homes of friends, at coffee shops and even in her Subaru Outback. One time, while pulled over in a veterinary clinic parking lot in small-town Iowa, a police officer approached her after she’d tripped a silent alarm of some sort. He worried she was staking out the place. He now follows her adventures on her blog.

She’s written listicles for Alamo’s website about the parks. Blue Ridge Outdoors asked her to write a blog series on her national park travels for its website.

But she’s not limiting herself to national park stories. In early June, she biked and walked along a 240-mile-long trail in a Missouri state park for a story for Rails to Trails

WELCOME TO OWAA



Bob Baldwin became an avid bowhunter at 12 years old. He founded bowhuntinginfo.com in 1998. It was one of the earliest websites dedicated to archery. Baldwin's goal is to get closer to wildlife, something bowhunting allows. He also takes photographs and video of wild game. Baldwin loves telling stories around a campfire. He is collaborating with his huntin' buddy, Jay Ledbetter, to chronicle some of their hunting escapades through their website Bob N' Jay Adventures. There is a kernel of truth to all their stories — some of the things that happen when hunting with good buddies just can't be made up, but according to Baldwin, any embellishments are solely the responsibility of Ledbetter. Baldwin lives with his bride of 45 years in the state of Michigan.



Dacia Meneguzzo was born and raised in upper Michigan's rugged and beautiful Keweenaw Peninsula. Her love of the outdoors led her to study forestry at Michigan Technological University. A job with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service brought her to Minnesota. She earned a master's degree in natural resources science and management at the University of Minnesota where she is currently a doctoral candidate in the same program. While working as a research forester with the U.S. Forest Service, she created presentations and wrote a variety of reports, papers and scientific journal articles on forestry-related research and natural resource issues. She is an avid bowhunter and spends most of her vacation time hanging out in a tree. Her love of outdoor adventures, photography and writing prompted her to create www.daciaadventuress.com where she shares photos and blogs about her outdoor experiences.



Bobby Whitescarver is a watershed restoration scientist, farmer, award-winning writer and educator. He retired from the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service with 31 years of field experience. He and his wife run a commercial cow calf operation in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia with 120 brood cows. He is president of Whitescarver Natural Resources Management LLC, an environmental consulting firm, and is under contract with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation and the Bay Journal News Service. He teaches natural resource management at James Madison University and is a freelance writer. He has written for Virginia Wildlife Magazine, the Bay Journal and several newspapers throughout the country. He has a bachelor's degree in agronomy from Virginia Tech and a master's degree from James Madison University in public administration. In 2002, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation chose him as the Conservationist of the Year. He can be reached through his website at <http://www.gettingmoreontheground.com>.

magazine.

Amy Kapp, editor at Rails to Trails, said it's essential for people like Taylor to tell these parks' and trails' stories after actually experiencing them. It gives them needed insight on the culture of that particular area.

Taylor has written for Kapp multiple times.

"Danielle has already proven to me that she can be successful at the freelance life," Kapp said.

And the freelance life isn't easy, Kapp said. Reporters need drive, networking skills, the ability to hear the word "no" all while pitching new, creative stories. In Taylor's case she also needs the flexibility to live on the road: the capacity to face an unsteady income, showers at truck stops and strangers peering into her car windows while she sleeps.

While trying to figure out where to lay her head for the night during her trip at White Sands, Taylor met a fellow solo-female traveler. Before the sun set, the two new friends slid down the slick, bleach-white dunes on their sleds, whooping and laughing in the

otherwise quiet park.

It was the sort of night that Taylor said makes her really happy.

"It's kinda like when you're outside all day and you have to pee in the woods," Taylor said. "To me that always makes me happy — it's like I've actually been outside and exploring for so long, I can't just hold it until I'm back in civilization."

To follow Taylor's journey, head to her website www.adventureeditorial.com. ■



Taylor Wylie is an OWAA intern and student at the University of Montana, pursuing a degree in both journalism and environmental studies. She's reported and edited for the independent student newspaper, The Montana Kaimin, for two years and her work has appeared on Montana PBS, Montana Public Radio and in the Missoulian.