

Making Art in the Park

Shenandoah National Park's first artist-in-residence reflects on her experience.

By Cassandra Brown

Sponsored by a generous donation from the Shenandoah National Park Trust, the Shenandoah National Park last fall launched its first artist-in-residence program. Photographer Sandy Long, 52, from Greeley, Pennsylvania received the honor of working and living in the park for 12 days, capturing the essential beauty of wildlife and nature: "I explored the Park's peaks, trails, flora and fauna, capturing sunsets and sunrises, prowling through meadows and climbing up mountain paths during various times of day and ever-changing weather conditions," she says in an interview reflecting on the artist-in-residency.

How do you feel about being chosen as the Shenandoah National Park Artist-in-Residence for 2014?

I feel both honored and blessed to have been given the opportunity to serve as Shenandoah National Park's first visiting artist. There are many excellent artists whose love of the park has led them to capture its endless qualities in a variety of artistic mediums that can be shared in future residencies now that the program has been launched.

Why did you apply?

I applied for the residency because I have loved this park since first visiting it as a child with my parents and three sisters. My proposed project for the 12-day residency involved a daily photographic interface with Shenandoah National Park—from its grand landscapes and dreamy vistas, to its diverse wildlife and its most delicate and sometimes unobserved notitia—those essential details at the heart of our place-based relationships.



It proved to be a deeply satisfying and enriching experience.

What is your background in art photography?

It is the kind of work that engages me here in the Upper Delaware River region, as I photograph and write about the river corridor in Pennsylvania and New York.

Except for a college course in black and white darkroom photography, I am mostly self-taught and have partnered with a camera to explore my world since I was a young child pestering my parents for film and flashbulbs for the plastic camera they gave me. I also worked as a photojournalist in the Upper Delaware Region and have advanced along with the evolving technology.

The camera has always served as a portal to me, providing a deeper understanding of my life experience as a whole. I value

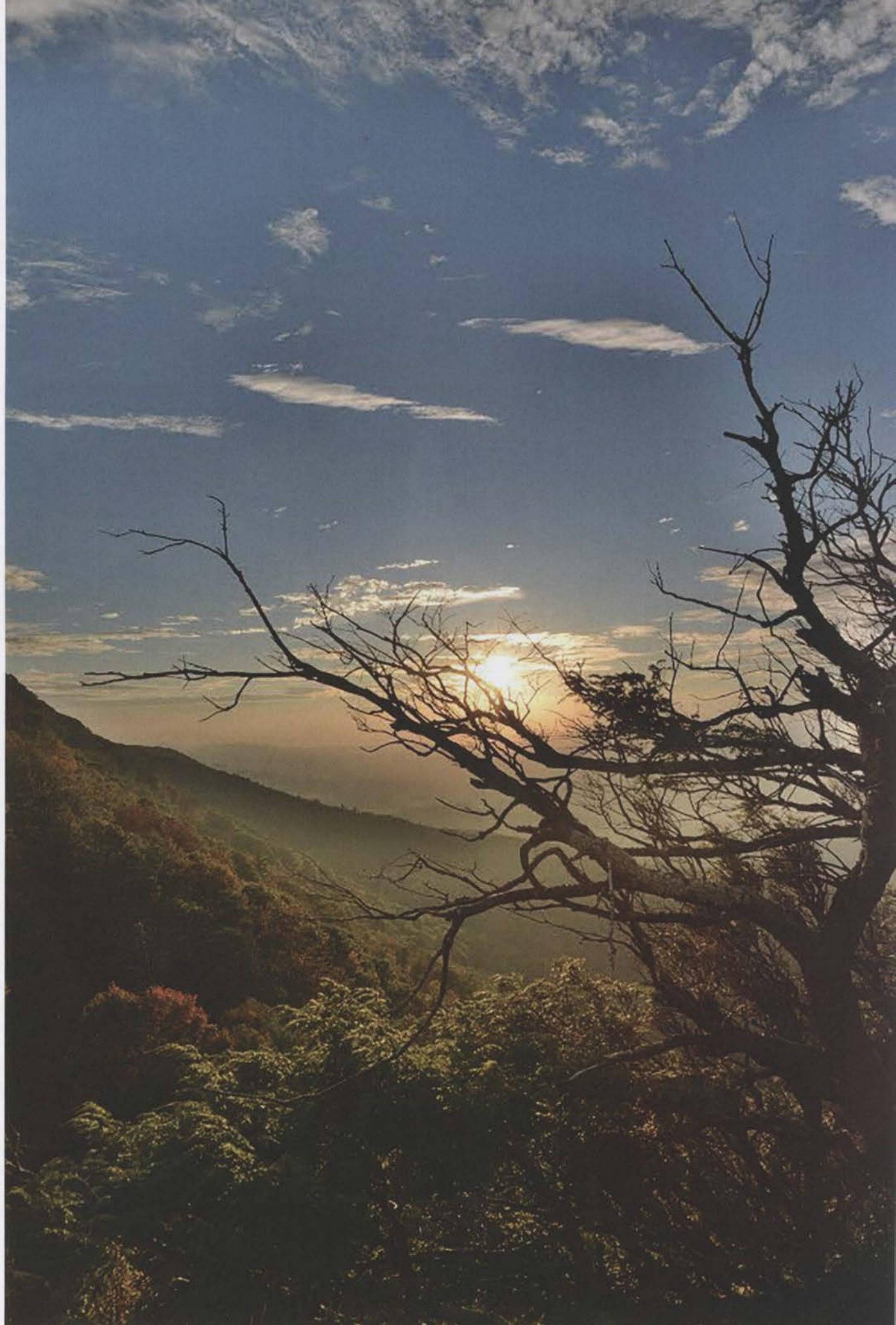
Above:
Sandy shooting at Little Stony Man

Right:
Sunset, Little Stony Man

this to the extent that I have given cameras to others and am now mentoring youth in Pennsylvania's coal region as they explore their world with camera and pen in a youth-led journalism project that publishes Coal Cracker newspaper (www.facebook.com/coalcrackerkids).

The value of the arts in our lives cannot be underestimated. In all of their forms, the arts give us a vehicle with which to explore the brief span of our lives, and to express something about that experience.

Sometimes that expression can help to protect or preserve what we love, as a result of the bond that develops between a person and a place they connect with and the





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activism that can ensue. While for many of us, such places are our homes. There are millions of people who deeply love one or more of America's National Parks or other public lands, and who, as a result, devote time and resources on behalf of those special places.

What did you capture during your 12-day residency?

I had the very gratifying experience of photographing the SNP's special attributes and wild beauty while producing a body of images that, hopefully, will help to raise awareness of the importance of protecting and sustaining the priceless natural resources found there.

I also led a public walk/talk, "Photography and the Senses" at Big Meadows, assisted by the delightful Ranger Mike Punches. Participants from age 12 to 90 explored with cameras while considering how our other senses, in addition to sight, can make one a better photographer by deepening our connection with the subject.

It is especially fitting that the 50th Anniversary of the Wilderness Act transpired on September 3, 2014. The residency required incorporation of this important milestone, which we acknowledged during our walk on National Public Lands Day.

We discussed the significance of the park's nearly 200,000 acres of protected land. In addition to enhancing our own well being, protecting such land serves the well being of all life forms that depend upon intact habitats and clean water for their survival.

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Wilderness also funds something deep within us that is easily depleted in today's fast-paced world—and necessary to our survival. The artist recognizes and responds to this equation as he or she explores experience and returns with their offering in the form of art.

It is difficult to describe the profound qualities of the residency, from the slow and mesmerizing miles of Skyline Drive and its breathtaking overlooks, to the heart-pounding climbs and astonishing peaks. The mist-clad mornings obscured those longer views but brought into focus the exquisiteness of lichen and moss on massive rocks and art-



fully angled trees where birds perched while sharing their delicate songs.

What is your favorite hiking trail, pull off or location in SNP?

I like them all! Truthfully, every overlook, every trail, every mountaintop vista, every sweeping valley view, every mile of the meandering Skyline Drive holds the potential, at any time to deliver a magical, mystifying, transformative experience.

I find that simply being outside exploring the world with a camera can lead to amazing and memorable moments and encounters —like the timber rattlesnake making its way across the road, or the raven silhouetted against the dusky sky of the valley, or the spider capturing its prey in dew-draped strands studded with pearls of life-sustaining water on a misty morning in Big Meadows. Natural wonders abound and our senses and spirits are nourished by such experiences.

The natural world is available to all of us, in myriad and simple ways, should we choose to open to the possibilities by taking a walk, paddling a lake or river, or soaking up the sunrise or sunset from somewhere special to us. ■



Above: Misty morning along Skyline Drive.

Left: A view from Sandy Bottom Overlook.

ABOUT THE ARTIST



Sandy Long is co-founder, along with Krista Gromalski, of Heron's

Eye Communications (www.HeronsEye.com), a marketing, publishing and project management firm supporting strong community partnerships that foster a healthy environment, desirable quality of life and sustainable local economy.

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