Hiking near AMC Medawisla Lodge in Maine.

Parashant National Monument.

HIKING AND CAMPING

BY PATTI VERBANAS

Hiking and camping in the springtime can be an annual rite of passage: You emerge victorious after a long, cold winter to take on sun-kissed adventures in America's great wilderness. The National Park Service manages 419 parks covering 85 million acres with over 21,000 combined miles of trails. That's a lot to explore, so here are some highlights:

Discoveries >> Devils Postpile National Monument in California is home to the 101-foot high Rainbow Falls; Cumberland Gap National Historical Park in Tennessee has miles of scenic trails and caves to explore; Isle Royale National Park in Michigan is awash in remote scenic beauty; and Big Bend National Park in Texas sprawls under inky night skies, with rivers that carve temple-like canyons in ancient limestone.

Cool Factor >> Get cozy with dinosaur fossils and petroglyphs at Dinosaur National Monument in Colorado and Utah, and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in North Carolina and Tennessee explodes in color during peak lightning bug-flashing season in late May/mid-June.

Want Rugged? >> Truly immerse yourself in the wild with backcountry camping and hiking at parks such as Guadalupe Mountains National Park in Texas and Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore in Michigan.

Sky's the Limit >> For expansive skies, camp at a "Dark Sky Park," such as Chaco Culture National Historical Park in New Mexico, Great Basin National Park in Nevada, and Cedar Breaks National Monument in Utah.

Wildlife Spotting >> Marmots emerge around April in Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado; Acadia National Park in Maine is one of the premier bird-watching areas in the country, with a record 338 diverse bird species; and alligator mating season occurs in the spring in Big Cypress National Preserve and Everglades National Park in South Florida.

Kids >> The National Park Services' Every Kid Outdoors allows free admission to public lands for families of fourth graders. The Junior Ranger program teaches kids about protecting parks, and the Junior Ranger Angler program teaches them fishing, aquatic habitats, and fishing safety.

Nicky Pizzo, Appalachian Mountain Club Program Manager, recommends that those new to hiking get involved with a local hiking club, which has experts who can introduce you to trails and teach you outdoors skills. "Before venturing out, check the weather, choose a trail that is suited for your abilities, and prepare for the worst possible conditions," he says. "Dress in layers, bring waterproof and windproof gear, good hiking shoes, and a hat." Always let someone know where you are going, he adds, and bring: a map and compass; a quart or two of water; extra food; lighter or matches to build a fire; flashlight; first aid kit with a whistle; knife and duct tape; sunscreen, sunglasses, bug spray, and lip balm; tarp; and extra clothing.

Find a park at nps.gov/findapark.