

Chiricahua National Monument

Land of Standing Up Rocks



A Photo Essay By
Jim Witkowski

On The Road With Jim Presents

Chiricahua National Monument

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To see other portfolios, visit Jim's Website:
www.jimwitkowski.com

To read the stories behind Jim's pictures, visit On the Road With Jim at:
www.jimwitkowski.com/blog/

Introduction

Imagine that you're a clever and famous cinematographer and vlogger, and you have millions of followers on YouTube. You're inspired to make a time-lapse film set in southeastern Arizona, a video destined to go viral. You have summoned all of your genius and creativity to find the means to take your new and indestructible GoPro camera and travel back in time 30 million years ago. Once on the set, you mount the camera on an immovable tripod. After you frame the scene, you set the camera to snap a shot at noon of January 1st every 1500 years.

Last year, you finally finished shooting. You retrieved the camera, loaded the images into a video editor, grabbed a drink and snacks, and began watching the 14-hour film. Here's what you see.

The film opens during the dry and warm Oligocene sandy plain. The dinosaurs are long gone, and only large mammals flash by on the screen. A dome begins to bulge above a hidden magma chamber on center stage like a pimple on your cheek. The dome swells and then fractures, hurling lava, ash, large rocks, and hot gas thousands of feet into the air. The eruption emitted ten times more searing ash than Mount Saint Helen did in 1980. A pyroclastic flow races down the volcano's slopes, covering everything with a thick deposit

of steaming tuff. After the explosion, the emptied magma chamber collapses and forms a 14-mile diameter caldera that falling debris and ash partially fills. The rubble also covers the pyroclastic flow, which welds the layers together and prevents erosion.

Things get quiet after that, which allows the lava flows time to cool and begin to fracture. The fractures grow into faults, and the surrounding areas start stretching. The land on either side of the fractures starts sinking, and they form the San Simeon Valley on the east and the Sulphur Spring Valley to the west. In typical basin and range topography, the rocky centers rise and separate the valleys with parallel mountain ranges.

After the film's exciting first five-hour opening, the action stops. At least it seems like that. It takes a long time for ice, wind, and rain to chip the Chiricahua Mountains. Slowly the fractured columns of Rhyolite rise to the surface and then into the air. The erosion slowly sculpts the columns into the shape that we see today. After the long film ends, it freezes on the last frame. That final frame shows evidence of man living among the rocks.

Congratulations on your great movie; you deserve an Academy Award. Just don't slap anybody while you're on stage.

Faraway Ranch

Although Neil Erickson and Emma Peterson were Swedish emigrants, they didn't meet until they arrived at Fort Bowie in 1883. He was a Cavalry Sergeant, and she worked as a colonel's maid. After chasing Geranamo for four years, Neil took a liking to the area, so when Neil got discharged from the Army, they decided to settle southwest of the Fort. Before marrying, Emma bought a cabin and land from a local pioneer on the east side of the Chiricahua Mountains in Bonita Canyon. When they traveled to Tucson for the ceremony, they filed for a 160-acre homestead based on her land purchase.

Neil—a self-taught carpenter—built a small fort and other buildings as they tried to eek a living by farming. To get money to improve the ranch, he traveled to Bisbee, where he landed a carpentry job, leaving Emma and three kids to run the farm alone. He was finally able to move home again in 1903 when he was hired to be the Chiricahua National Forest's first park ranger.

The family constructed a two-story house to replace the log cabin during that period, and two years after the house's completion, the Forest Service transferred Erickson to Flagstaff. Neil and Emma left the ranch with his three children (Lillian, Louis, and Hildegard) in charge. The daughters took their

responsibilities to heart. Hildegard opened the homestead to guests on the weekends, which became so popular that Lillian quit her day job as a Fort Bowie teacher to help. When Hildegard married and moved on, she handed the reins to Lillian.

Lillian and her future husband, Ed Riggs—a childhood neighbor—deserve the lion's share of credit for the birth of the Chiricahua National Monument. They ran the guest ranch during its heyday and called it the Faraway Ranch because it was so far away from anything. They constructed some trails into the “Wonderland of Rocks,” as Lillian called it. Lillian and Ed lobbied to have the Chiricahuas preserved and protected. They invited the most influential guests and twisted their ears. When George W.P. Hunt—Governor of Arizona—visited in 1927—it was the Camel that stomped on the straws. Calvin Coolidge signed legislation creating the Chiricahua National Monument a year later. Ed and Lillian lived on the ranch until they died in 1950 and 1977.

If you want to make your head explode, treat yourself to a hike among the trees and ranch buildings. The absolute quiet is deafening. If you have tinnitus—as I do—it's the only sound you'll hear as you walk. It is one of the most peaceful places I've ever spent time in.



Peaceful Bonita Canyon



Riggs House



Stable



Guest House



Neil Erickson Headstone

Trails and Treasures

I love the park service's pamphlets given at the entrance booth. I collect them. In addition to a map, they show the things to see and do inside the park. When I first opened the one for Chiricahua National Monument and looked at all the trails, I thought it looked like a drunken pirate's treasure map. There are straight trails, trails that go in circles, ones that climb mountains, while others descend into canyons. Hikers can choose short loops or combine several of the trails into an all-day adventure.

To enjoy the park, visitors don't need to hike any trails. There are several parking areas where they can take in spectacular vistas. Heck, you don't even need to get out of the car. However, if you want a genuine Chiricahua experience, you should venture out and walk among the rocks. In the World of Rocks, most of the stone features are hidden from the parking lots. Though I often bellyache about hiking, even I found a trail that was short enough for me. It's the Grotto Trail. It's pretty level and less than a mile round trip. I completed my tramp in less than 90 minutes, including many photography stops where I shot these pictures.

Several months ago, I wrote a post for my blog on how pixies build trail markers out of stacked rocks—called cairns. Well, there aren't any cairns in this monument. Using rock stacks to

find your way through a park full of stacked rocks would be useless. That would be like wearing camouflage in a jungle. Instead, the park installed signposts at junctions and points along the way. It's easy to stay on track between the well-worn paths and numerous signs.

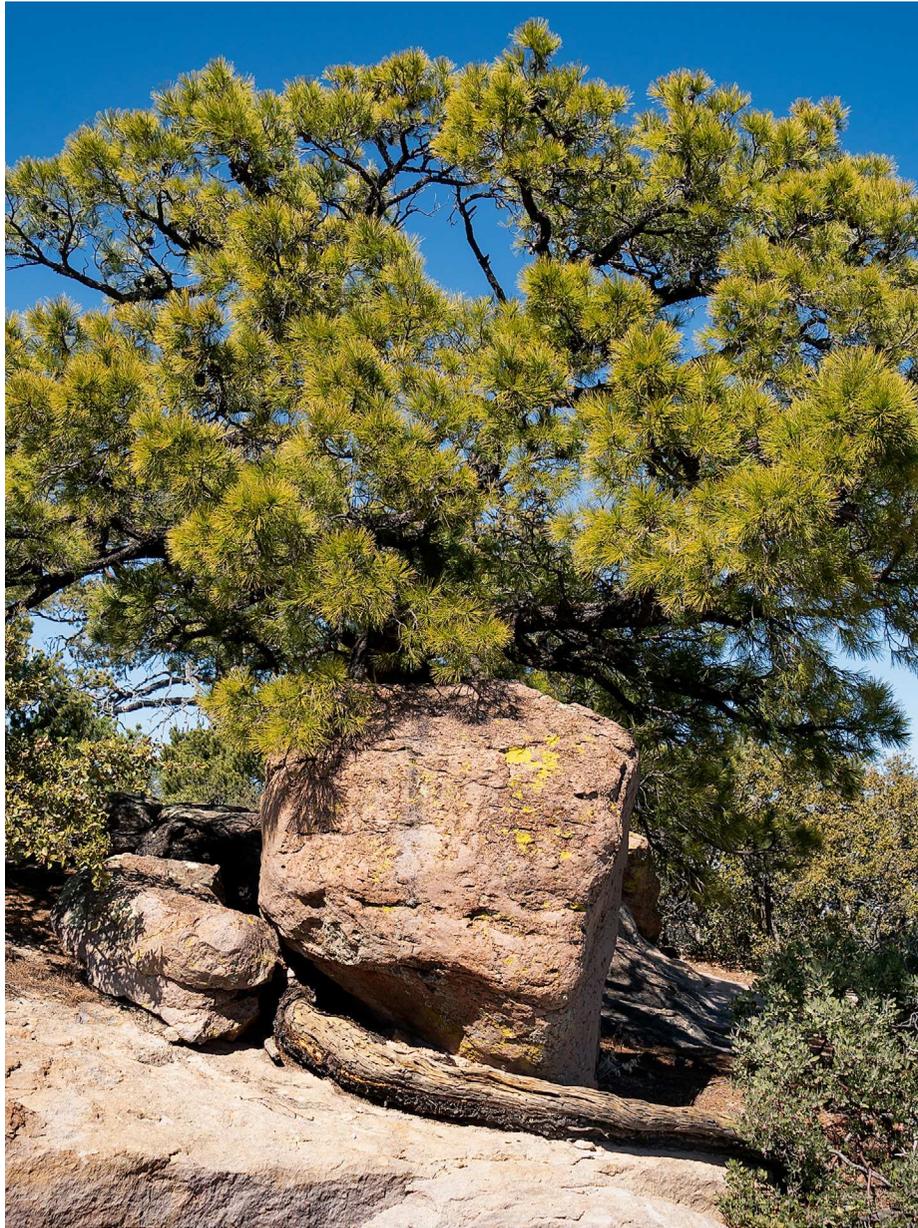
When Lillian and Ed Riggs had guests at the Faraway Ranch, they built a rudimentary trail up Bonita Canyon. It made it easier to hike or ride horses to where her guests could enjoy her Wonderland of Rocks. Their track was an excellent way to show Governor Hunt their unknown Arizona treasure. Because of their hard work and love for the Chiricahuas, their primary trail transformed the ranch into the national monument that we enjoy today.

During the depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Work Progress Administration (WPA) sent unemployed people to work in the Chiricahuas. They transformed the Riggs' simple horse track into the maze of trails that tens of thousands of visitors tramp up and down on every year. Using the native stone, concrete, shovels, and sweat, they cleared paths, built stairways, overlooks, and erected direction signs. Although their hard work shows signs of aging, I still feel proud when I come across one of those WPA stamps they stamped into the concrete. Good job, grandma—grandpa.



Organ Pipe Formation

Pine on Rocks





Stoned Bunny



Aladen's Lamp



Tulip Rock

Beyond the Gate





Echo Canyon



Stacked Rock



Shamrock on Trail

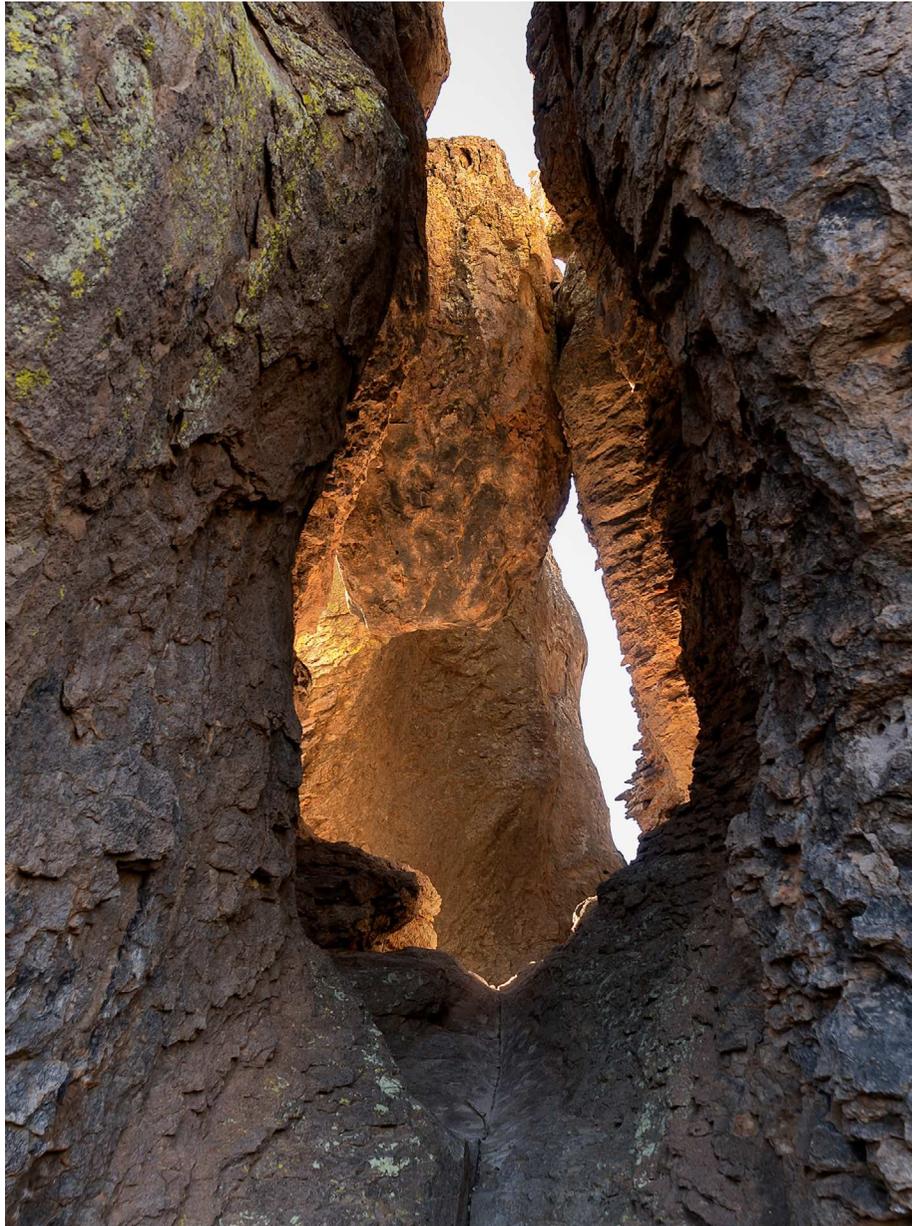


Diving Board



Grotto Formation

Grotto Entrance





Inside the Grotto

Thor's Golfball





Melting Butterstick

Outside the Lines

From the national parks I've visited, I've learned that their architects knew where all the best spots were. The evidence supporting my conclusion is that you'll usually find a visitor's center, campgrounds, or a lodge built smack in the middle of the prime locations. The best view is Mather Point, a short walk from the El Tovar Lodge at the Grand Canyon's south rim. You can watch Yellowstone's Old Faithfull geyser while enjoying a morning mimosa from the hotel's deck. The best waterfalls surround Yosemite Valley Lodge. The logic here was to make it easy for the general public to experience the park's best. Let the hard-core nature lovers tramp alone in the backcountry. I've visited many of those remote locations, but the best views were always center stage.

Beautiful countryside surrounds our parks. They're not a freak of nature. Think of them as the prettiest rose on the bush. Many other flowers are on that bush, but they're not as grand. For example, there are loads of Chinle Shale and petrified wood outside the Petrified Forest, but its boundaries contain the best specimens.

The Chiricahua National Monument follows this pattern. It is only a tiny corner of the Chiricahua Mountains, and the range is only one of the Sky Islands that make up the Coronado National Forest. You must drive a two-lane road below the

Dos Cabezas Mountain range in the north, or the Chiricahua Mountains if you're coming from Douglas in the south. You go by miles of open range covered in yellow grass and dotted with black cattle as you move through the Sulfur Springs Valley. If you have a sharp eye, you may spot a herd of pronghorn antelope, deer, or elk if you're lucky. Because this is a remote part of Arizona, there is little traffic, and the drive is relaxing.

In this chapter, I wanted to show the area that surrounds the Chiricahua National Monument. The cattle ranches that the same family has worked for a century. The mountains leading to the park. The wilderness areas on the east side. All of these areas outside the park are beautiful on their own. For a photographer like me, it's all eye candy.

As a city-slicker, I envy the folks that live where the air is clear, winters are crisp, and summers are mild. They get to stare at these beautiful mountains each day. The only sounds they hear in the daytime are the bellow of distant cattle, the wind whistling past their ears, and the occasional hawk screech. They enjoy the crackling fire at night accompanied by a duet of coyote howls and great horned owls. Out here, cowboys are still a thing; neighbors are distant. It's an idyllic life—until you need to go to Costco. But isn't that why most of the ranches out here have landing strips?



Cochise Head



Ranch Landing Field



Snow on the Chirichuas



Chiricahua Wilderness Area



Dos Cabezas

for Jeff

Chiricahua National Monument

Several years ago, I published a magazine about Utah State Route 12, and I was eager for people to know about it. I showed it to a friend and fellow photographer one evening. He flipped through it and stated, “You need to make more samplers like this.” I promised myself that I would visit new places and show my pictures in book form. In 2022, my wife and I saw the Chiricahua National Forest for the first time. This book is a collection of my images and thoughts of that trip.