



**Workshop Report:
The Out of Chicago Great Smoky Mountains Conference**

April 27-May 1 2025

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What is an “Out of Chicago” Conference

- Out of Chicago is a company that does photography conferences
 - <https://www.outofchicago.com/>
- How is a photography conference different than a workshop?
 - More instructors: ~ 12 rather than 1 or 2
 - More participants: ~ 100
 - Combines field sessions with “classroom” sessions
 - Classroom sessions can be talks by individual instructors, panel talks, classes on techniques, image reviews
 - Field sessions happen around sunrise and sunset
 - Classroom sessions happen mid-day, and some evenings
- They also run an all online conference, Out of Chicago Live, in February

How does it work?

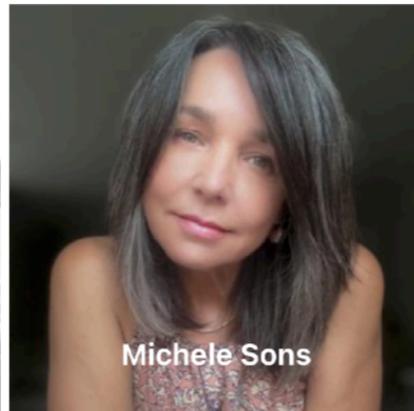
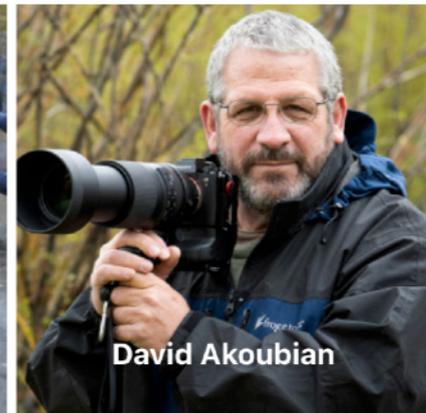
- The conferences typically run from Sunday evening to Thursday morning
- There are some online sessions prior to, and after, the in-person conference
- About three weeks prior to the start you are placed in a group of 10 other participants
- You stay with your group for the whole conference
- The instructors are divided into 6 pairs
- You cycle through the pairs of instructors during the week
- Every group has a different schedule of places they will visit
- Some, or all, meals are provided
- In some cases you book lodging separately, and in some cases its provided

A typical day (April)

- Gather together at a meetup spot around 5:30 AM (coffee and snacks provided)
- Carpool out to morning location, arriving around sunrise
- Work with assigned instructor pair till ~10:00 AM
- Return to main conference site for brunch 10:30-11:30
- Panel Discussion 11:30-12:30
- 12:45-1:45 PM Breakout sessions. Techniques and image critiques
- 1:45-anywhere from 3:00-5:00 PM break
- Sometime between 3:00-5:00 PM carpool to evening location, staying till sunset
- 7:30 -9:00 PM Dinner, generally back at main site, but sometimes at the field site

Great Smoky Mountains Conference Instructors

INSTRUCTORS



Location

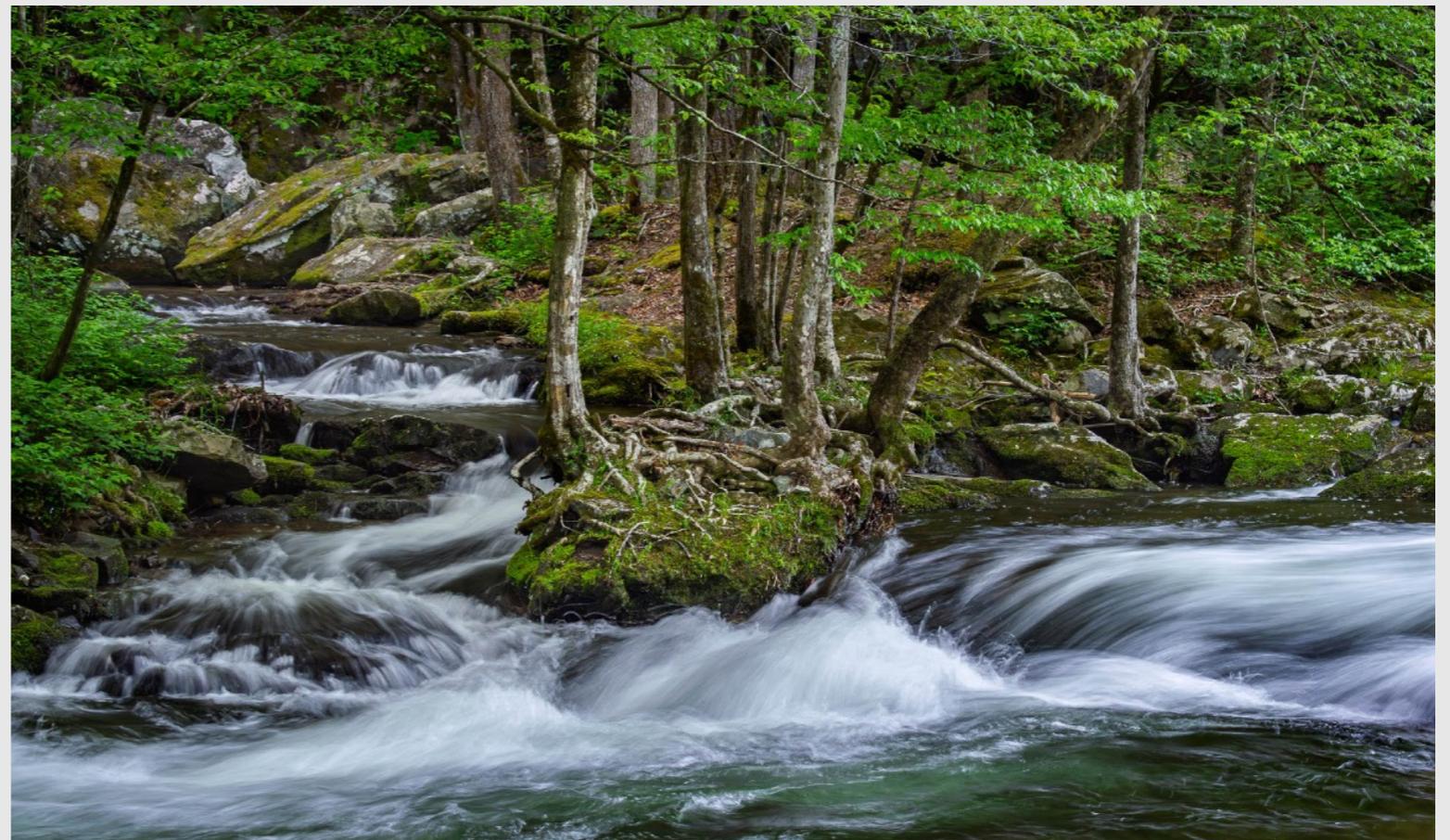
- The conference was held in Townsend, TN at a location with cabin rentals, and also nearby hotels
- Townsend is very near some park attractions such as Cade's Cove, Tremont, and the Foothills Parkway, but further (~45 minutes) from some of the peaks like Newfound Gap
- After the conference my wife and I spent a couple of days in Gatlinburg, TN



Monday Morning: Tremont

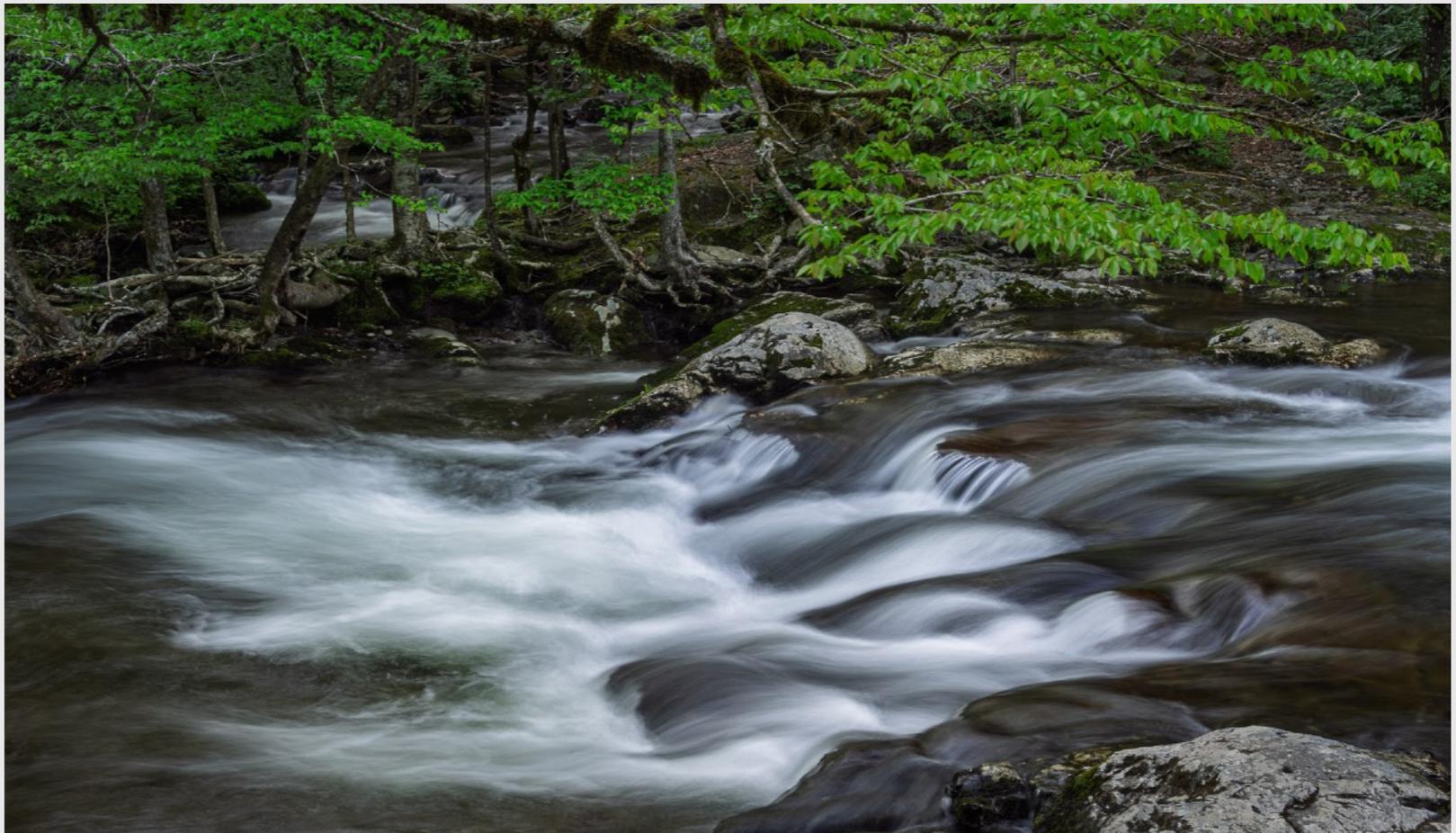
- Tremont is an area with a stream with many cascades
- Instructors: David Akoubian and Nye Simmons





Tremont

Tremont



Mid-Day Monday

- 11:30-12:30 Panel Discussion: Smoky Mountain Photography Challenges and Opportunities with David Akoubian, Nye Simmons, Tony Sweet, Chrissi Donadi
- 12:45-1:45
- Breakout Sessions
 - Choosing the Right Lens with Franka Gabler
 - Using Masks in Lightroom Classic with John Putnam
 - Designing a Photograph with Michael Frye
 - Introduction to working with Luminosity Masks in Photoshop Controlling Tone, Color & Dodging and Burning with Joe Rossbach
 - Image Review Streams and Cascades with Dusty Dodridge

Monday Evening: Newfound Gap

- Newfound Gap is high in the mountains, with views to the east and west
- We ended up at Morton Overlook, which faces the sunset
- Brought a boxed dinner with us
- Instructors: Michael Frye and Michelle Sons

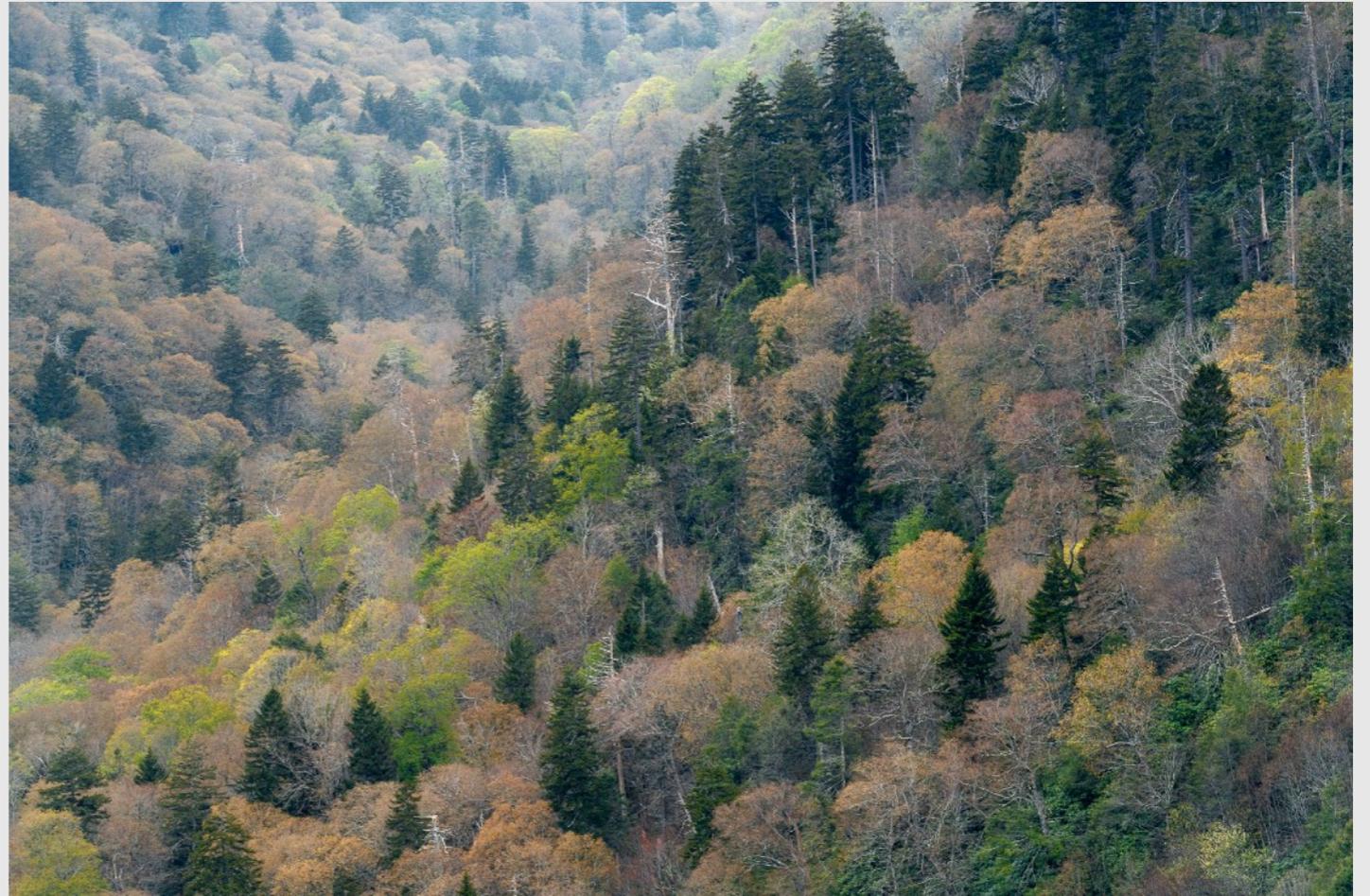


Morton

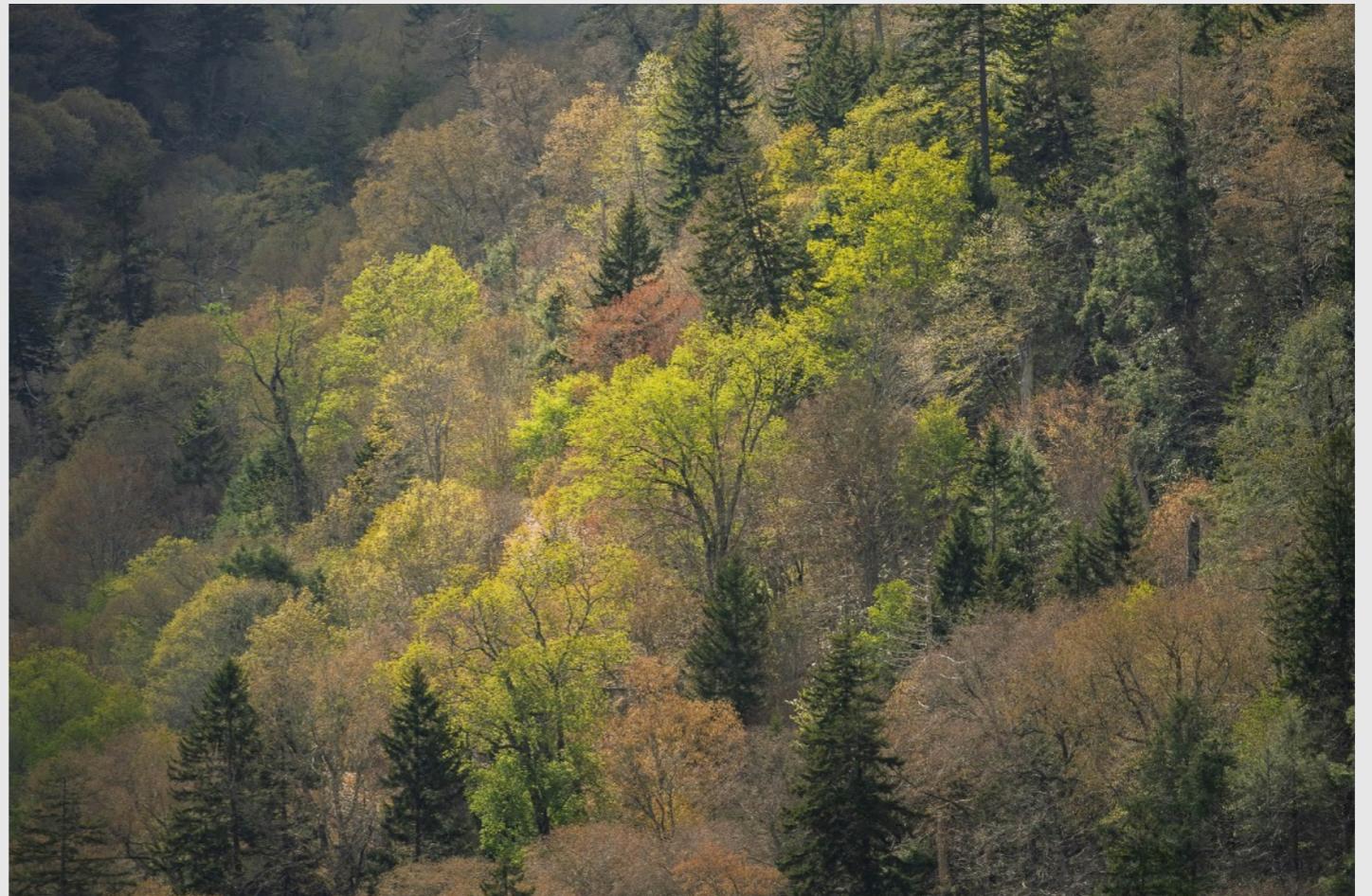
Overlook



Morton



Overlook



Morton Overlook



Morton



Overlook



Tuesday Morning and Afternoon: Cade's Cove

- Cade's Cove is a valley surrounded by mountains on all sides.
- We were there for both the morning and afternoon



Cade's Cove Photography

- Cade's Cove is known for its beautiful trees, abundant wildlife and very common fog
- Foggy vistas are what Cade's Cove is known for
- Our morning instructors were focused on special techniques
 - Tony Sweet (IR photography), Stephanie Johnson (ICM)
- Our afternoon instructors were more general
 - Chrissie Donadi and Franka Gabler
- And all day long, we were cursed... with very pleasant weather

No Fog!!

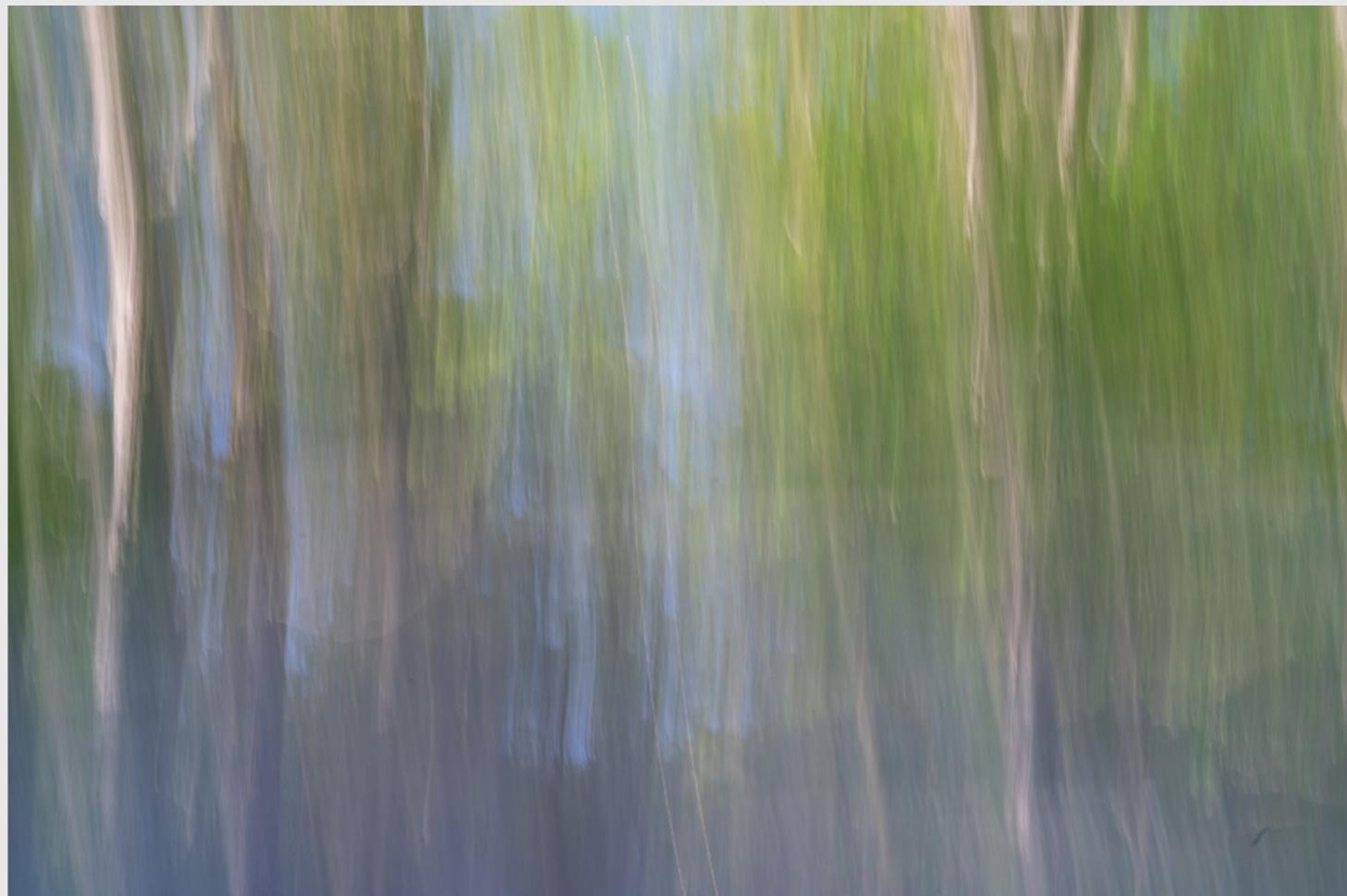
Cade's Cove



Cade's Cove



Cade's Cove



Cade's Cove

with fog

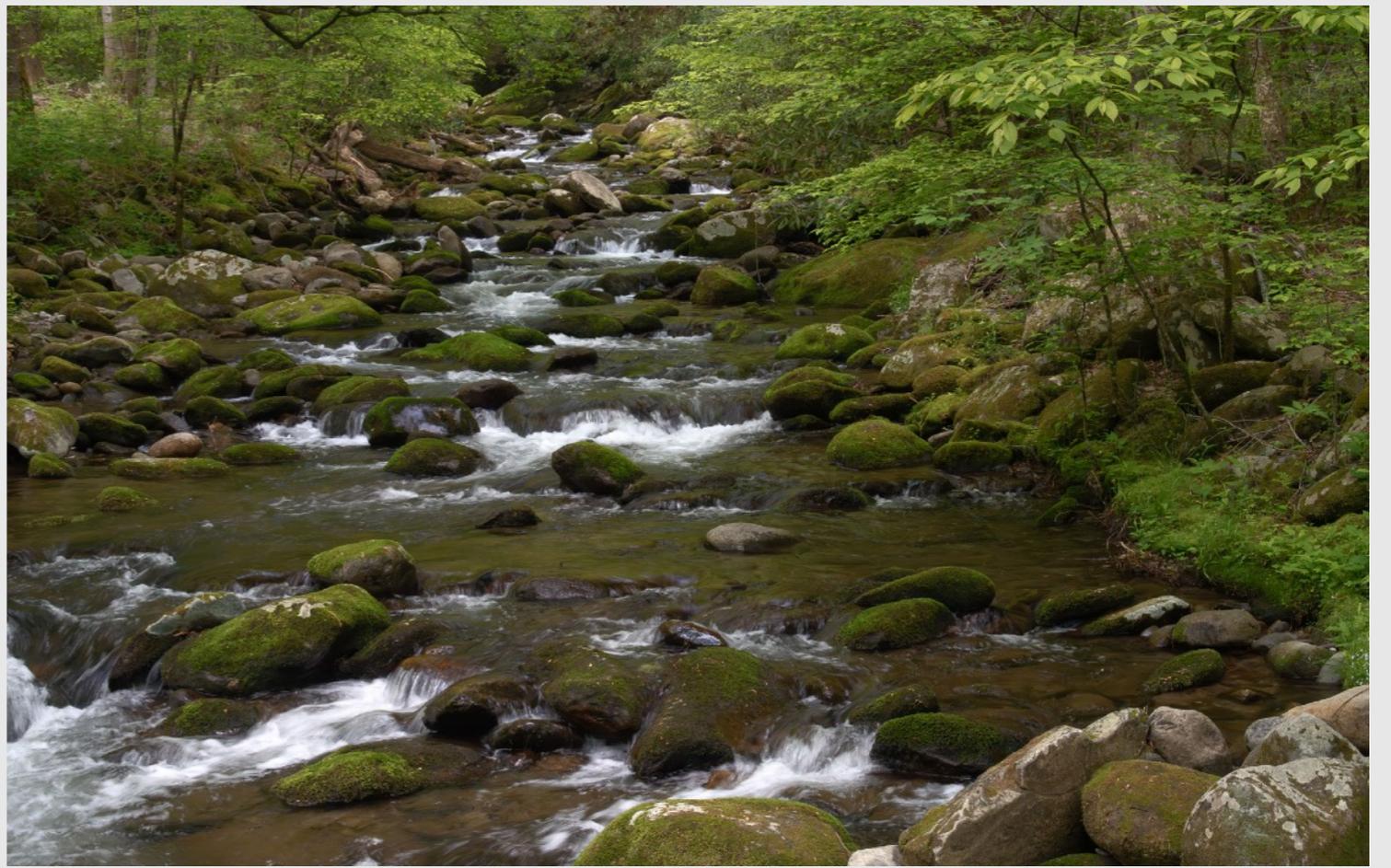
(by a different
participant at a
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Wednesday Morning: Roaring Forks

- Roaring Forks is a road that runs along a stream, similar to Tremont, but with easier access to get close to the water
- It is just outside Gatlinburg
- Instructors: Joe Rossbach and Kurt Budlinger

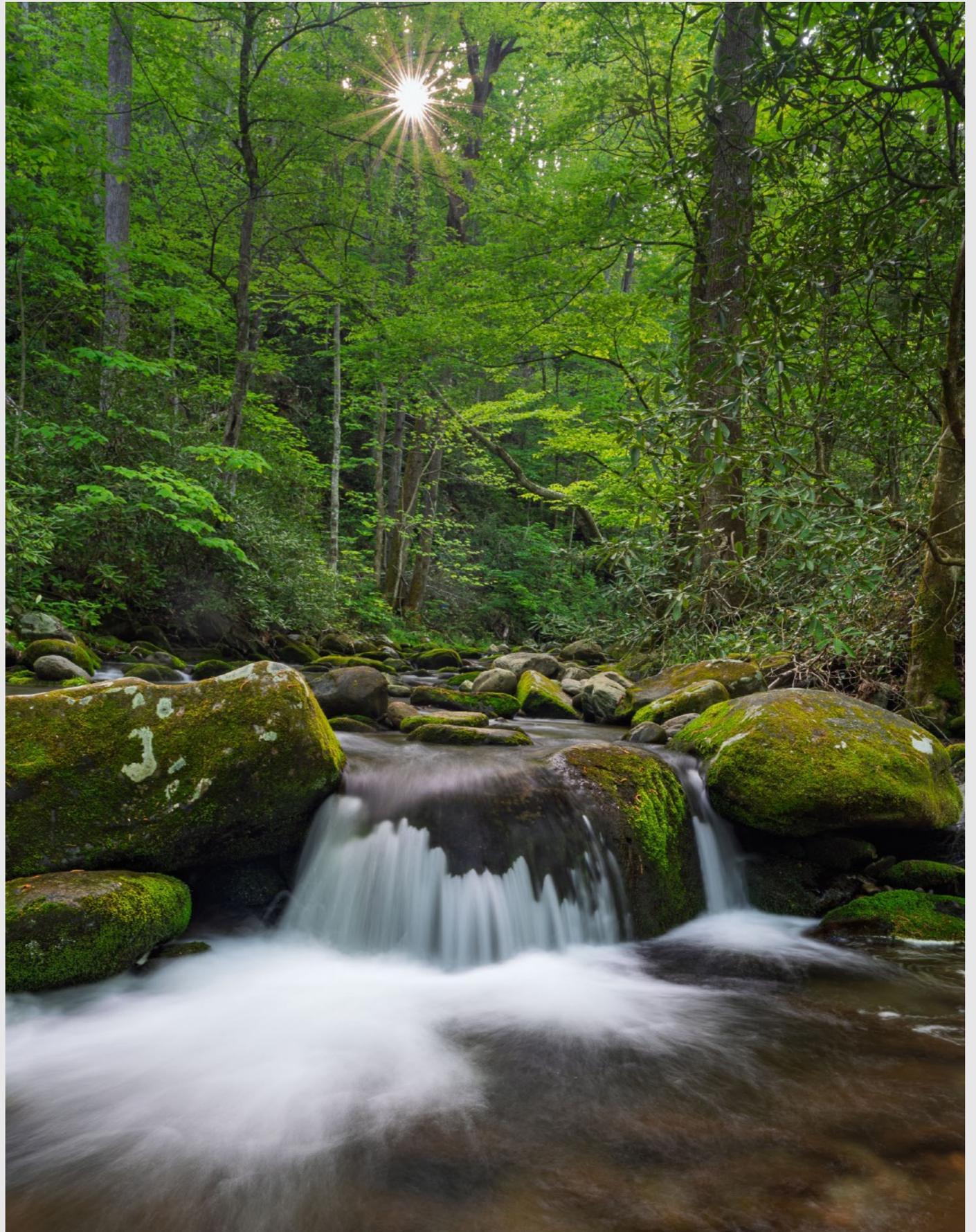




Roaring Forks

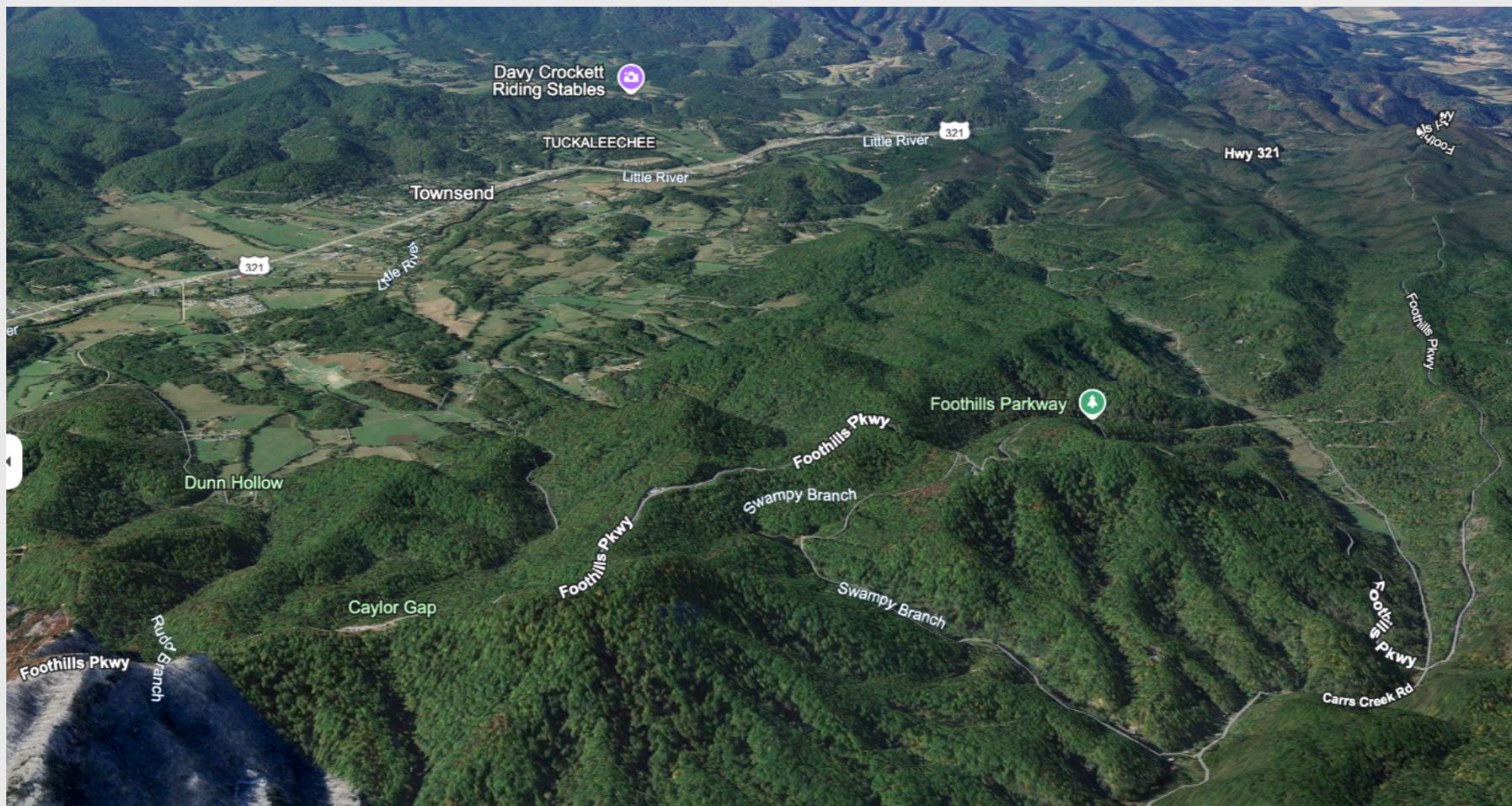


Roaring Forks



Wednesday Evening: Foothills Parkway

- Foothills parkway is a road similar to Skyline Drive running near Townsend
- It has great view of the valleys and ridges to the south
- Instructors: Dusty Doddridge and John Putnam
- And once again... very pleasant weather



Foothills Parkway



Thursday Morning

- Final presentation and hotel checkout
- But...it finally rained
- So, after the rain stopped, my wife and I headed back to Foothills Parkway around noon to look for fog

**Foothills
Parkway
Thursday**



After the conference

- We went over to Gatlinburg and stayed for two more days of hiking
- Out of Chicago plans their locations based on driving, not hiking
- But there are many beautiful locations in the park that are only accessible by hiking
- Highly recommend the Alum Cave hike which has many spectacular waterfalls and cascades

Alum caves
trail



Last morning

- Up at 5:00 AM and back up to Newfound Gap
- Road was foggy the whole way up...but we finally got above the fog



Out of Chicago Conferences: Pros

- Pro
 - Very well organized
 - Top notch instructors with a ~5:1 student to instructor ratio
 - A wide variety of teaching styles
 - Attendees were a really good group of people
 - Good mixture of presentations and field work
 - Excellent online platform for before and after the workshop

Out of Chicago Conferences: Cons

- Con
 - Rigid schedule that can't adapt to weather
 - All locations were within 1/4 mile of parking spots
 - You may like some teaching styles better than others
 - Exhausting!
 - Not a lot of time to process your images and close the loop with instructors

Smokies as a Photo Destination

- Terrific location
- Wide variety of subjects
 - Streams, cascades and waterfalls
 - Mountains and forests
 - Lots of wildlife
- Drivable from DC
 - But its easier to do it in two days
- I'd recommend staying in Townsend rather than Gatlinbug

Upcoming Out of Chicago Conferences

- Chicago Botanical Gardens August 2025
- Olympic National Park: October 2025
- Out of Chicago Live: online conference in February 2026
- Merritt Island, Florida (birds and wildlife focused) March 2026
- Longwood Gardens, August 2026
- Grand Tetons, October 2026