Why are the National Parks Important for Kids? *By Benjamin Kelsey*

National Parks are full of gifts for children. They are spaces where the history of our country gets preserved so we can learn about it in the future. They protect many animal and floral species that could not survive if our cities and fields for growing food keep expanding. They are the best playgrounds to explore, relax, imagine, and connect with the outdoors. I have been very fortunate to visit several national parks and have many others on my wish list.

I became a Junior Park Ranger in Montezuma Castle in Arizona. This is a monument that guards Native American history by preserving a really cool group of caves carved into a limestone wall. There are hundreds of birds that nest in holes on this wall and you can spend a very long time watching them come and go in search of food. It is amazing to see how Native Americans built these homes in the stone and survived the hot desert around them. Limestone helps keep the temperature of the caves cool.

Another amazing place is Acadia National Park in Maine. We spent several days hiking on trails covered with moss and lichen, and looking for interesting mushrooms. There is an island that you can walk to following a rocky trail, there, you can see many fun shells, jelly fish, and birds, but if you spend too much time, the rocky trail disappears in the water and you will be trapped until the tide goes out again. I also enjoyed watching the sun rising on Cadillac Mountain. It is the first place in the US where the sun shines. We had to be there at 4 am, it was dark as night and very cold. There were other people and their dogs and we were all quiet waiting for the first rays of sun.

Another favorite park of mine is the Smokey Mountains in Tennessee. We spent a couple of weeks visiting the park and explored many trails with cliffs and waterfalls. I saw a mama bear with her three cubs. She crossed the path right in front of us and two of her cubs followed; we had to wait for the third one who was far behind and had to climb a tree to smell the family and follow them. A park ranger was keeping everyone safe, especially the bears. I like how much rangers and signs teach people to not leave garbage, and definitely not feed the animals, so they don’t learn that humans mean food. Speaking of food, my favorite memory at the Smokey Mountains is seating on top of a very high mountain rock and eating our snack of beef jerky while watching the valley.

I hope that all children get to experience the gifts of National Parks and that the grown-ups keep helping protect the parks and teach how great they are. I also hope to explore Utah’s National Parks some day!