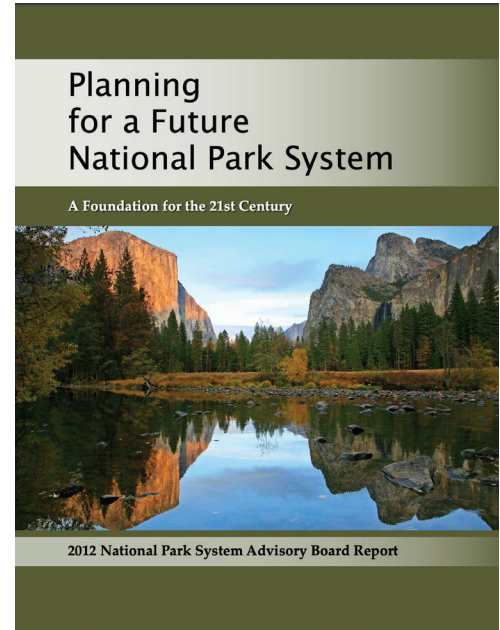
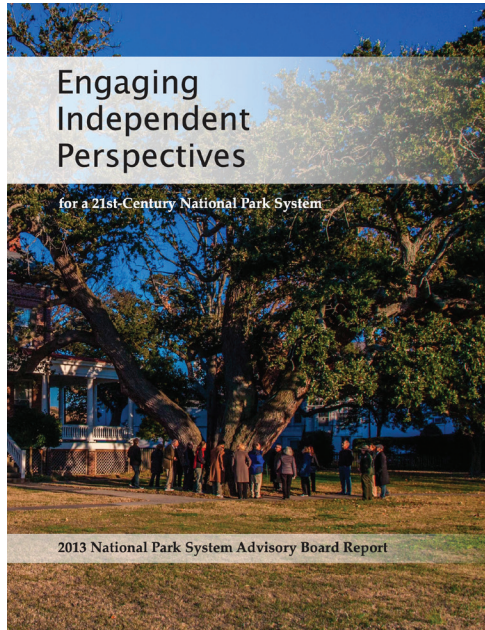
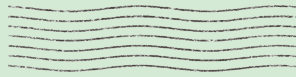




LETTER FROM WOODSTOCK



The Once and Future Advisory Board

Rolf Diamant

“What’s past is prologue,” wrote William Shakespeare. Let’s hope so, at least when it comes to appointing a new National Park System Advisory Board (NPSAB). It is currently dormant—and that is not a good thing for either the National Park Service (NPS) or the national park system.

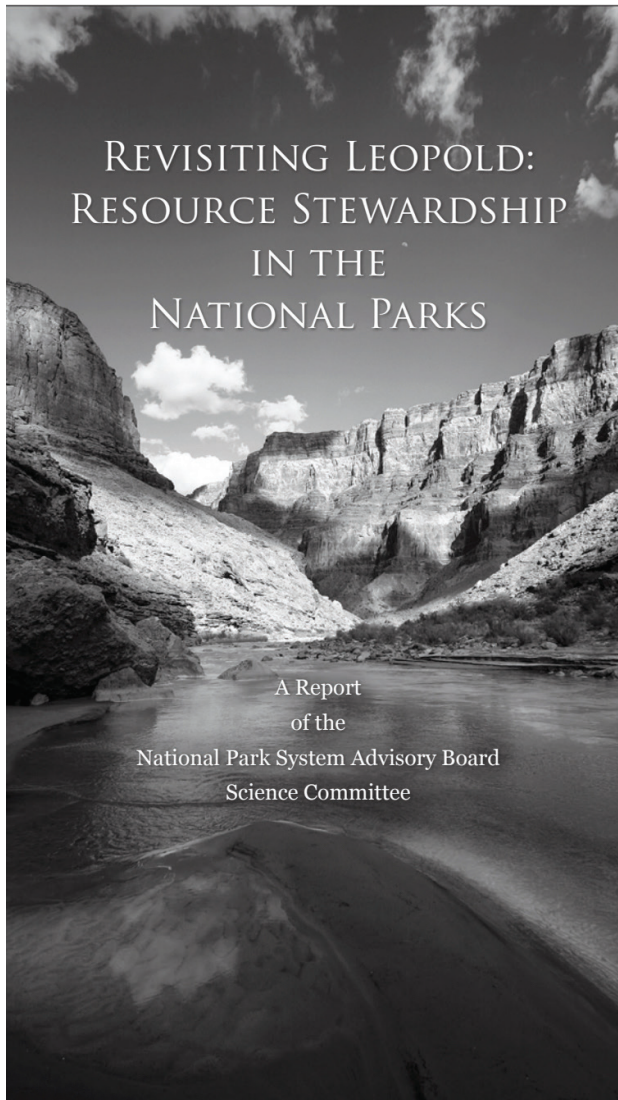
The last advisory board was cobbled together back in 2018 by Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke after nine members of the 12-person board, including its chairperson, former Alaska Governor Tony Knowles, resigned in protest.¹ The Knowles board was functioning the way NPSAB is intended to function: advising and collaborating closely with NPS on a wide range of issues, from landscape-scale ecosystem connectivity to social relevancy, that might otherwise get lost in the press of daily business. Not only had their recommendations for advancing science, climate

resiliency, and educational partnerships in the national parks been ignored by Zinke, but the secretary denied them even the basic respect and courtesy of a face-to-face meeting.

A year has now passed since a *Federal Register* notice was published seeking nominations to serve on a reconstituted and, one hopes, revitalized advisory board. As of January 2023, two years of the Biden Administration have passed without a new Board in place. When I attempted to reach out to the NPS staff director (who coordinates board business) to get an update on the nominations, my inquiry was shunted to a public affairs spokesperson who replied that “nominations to the Board are still under review and we do not have news to share at this time on when appointments will be made.” Not encouraging.

WHY THE ADVISORY BOARD IS IMPORTANT

As Ronald Foresta astutely observed in his book *America's National Parks and Their Keepers*, “neither the national parks nor their keepers stand apart from our times; they are very much subject to the problems and dilemmas of modern American life.” Authorized by the Historic Sites Act of 1935, the advisory board’s remit has expanded far beyond its statutory responsibility for recommending national historic and national natural landmarks. Over the decades it has provided advice to NPS directors on a wide spectrum of policy issues. As the national park system has grown larger and more complex NPSAB has become increasingly useful in addressing the “problems and dilemmas of modern American life.”²



This expanded role for NPSAB was firmly established by NPS Director Robert Stanton when he tasked the board and its chair, the esteemed historian John Hope Franklin, to produce a comprehensive report on the challenges facing the agency in the new century. The

Though frequently working in the background, the board has been in the vanguard of new thinking and practice.

result was the landmark 2001 report *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century*.³ Though frequently working in the background, the board has been in the vanguard of new thinking and practice, even on occasion serving as a kind of moral compass for NPS as it grapples with continuous change. NPSAB has also assisted NPS directors and other staff, sometimes isolated in bureaucratic cocoons, to build wider networks of valuable outside contacts and relationships, particularly with leading scientists, scholars, and public intellectuals.⁴ These networks grew during both Republican and Democratic Administrations—at least until the Trump years.

For example, in 2006, in the second George W. Bush Administration, the NPSAB Education Committee convened a “scholar’s forum” at Independence National Historical Park’s National Constitution Center.⁵ The symposium, broadcast live on C-SPAN, brought together the country’s leading historians to discuss the essential role of the national park system in reversing a national decline in historical literacy and civic engagement. Even under Interior Secretary Gale Norton, who kept NPS under a tight ideological leash, NPSAB committees, in effect, provided a safe port in a politicized storm, where agency staff and outside experts worked together under the protective mantle of the advisory board to make meaningful progress on issues critical to NPS’s future.⁶ Sometimes, ideas advanced by the Board are ahead of their time. In December 2022, Congress finally codified a standardized system for national heritage areas as a component of the greater national park system, a recommendation made in 2006 by the advisory board in their report *Charting a Future for National Heritage Areas*.⁷

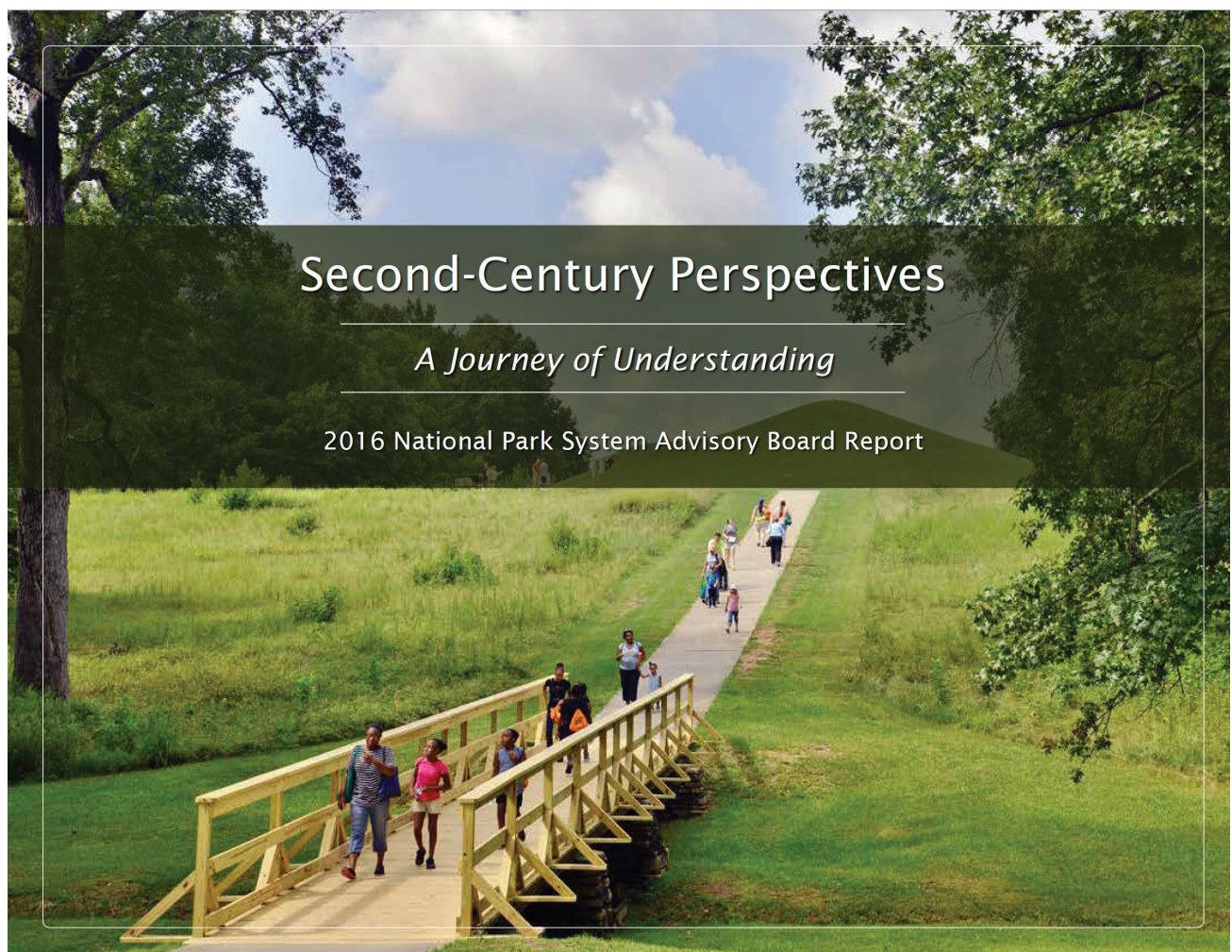
Jonathan Jarvis clearly had been paying close attention to this evolution of the advisory board, and when he became NPS director in 2009 he mobilized the full resources of a new NPSAB chaired by Governor Knowles to advance a broad agenda in the run-up to the NPS 2016 Centennial.⁸ In an agency with a well-established culture often resistant to change, Jarvis understood that the advisory board could serve as a singularly effective instrument in helping move NPS in new directions. Jarvis asked the advisory board to recommend actions that “strengthened NPS work as resource steward and educator, to articulate more effectively the values of its mission, and to shape an organizational culture and workforce for leadership in the 21st century.”⁹

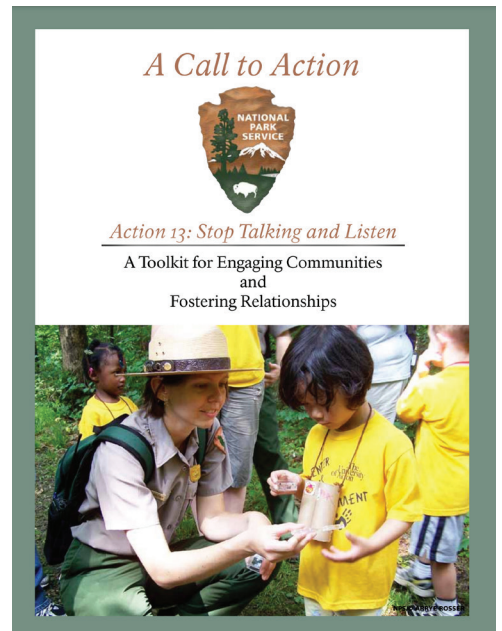
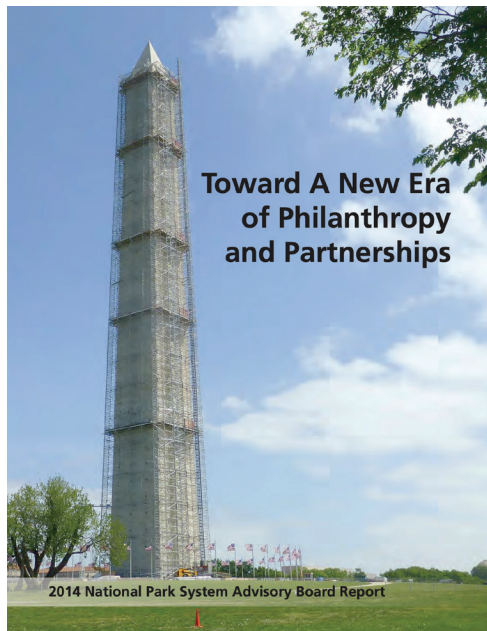
In contrast to the careers of Governor Knowles and his fellow Board colleagues in public service, science,

conservation, history, and education, the credentials of Zinke’s eventual replacements were mainly in business development, such as commercial real estate and the alcoholic beverage industry.¹⁰ Zinke also amended the board’s charter to prioritize hunting, fishing and recreational shooting activities in those national parks where they are allowed.¹¹ The amended charter, furthermore, appeared to place the board more firmly under the control of the secretary of interior and the Administration’s political minders; and was no doubt intended to constrain past practice of NPS directors who used NPSAB as a sounding board and incubator for new ideas and policies.

A REVEALING WEBPAGE

A visit to the NPSAB webpage (<https://www.nps.gov/resources/advisoryboard.htm>) is illuminating. It is a tale of two advisory boards—whose legacies could not





be more starkly different. This official webpage documents how the Knowles board (2010–2017) provided detailed guidance to Director Jarvis on a broad agenda of initiatives, repositioning NPS for its second century of operation. The products and recommendations of the board included:

- A new national park system plan to represent the nation’s diverse resources and people;
- The touchstone report *Revisiting Leopold: Resource Stewardship in the National Parks*;
- Significantly expanding educational collaborations and NPS’s role as a national educator;
- New programs for leadership development and workforce innovation;
- Strategies for building stronger community relationships and greater inclusion;
- An agenda to enhance NPS’s role in urban America; and
- Improving opportunities for non-profit partnerships and greater philanthropic support

Wrapping up what turned out to be their final report, *Second-Century Perspectives, A Journey of Understanding* (2016), the Knowles board declared that “national parks and NPS programs should play a larger role in lives of all Americans,” and re-affirmed their fidelity to the belief first articulated by John Hope Franklin

that “by caring for the parks and conveying the park ethic, we care for ourselves and act on behalf of the future. The larger purpose of this mission is to build a citizenry that is committed to conserving its heritage and its home on earth.”¹²

In contrast, the board appointed by Zinke, nominally in operation 2018–2022, posted a small number of documents on a single subject—campgrounds—in preparation for a board meeting that ended up being canceled. Perhaps enough said.

WORK TO DO

It is past time for Interior Secretary Deb Haaland to restore the advisory board’s original charter and appoint a new NPSAB comprised of a forward-thinking group of outstanding professional and citizen leaders.

I suggest that NPS Director Charles F. Sams assign a new board the following tasks:

- Help facilitate access to the best thinking on climate change. NPS needs all the help it can get as it navigates our global climate emergency. Advisory board working committees can marshal enormous talent inside and outside the agency to provide invaluable guidance and feedback to the NPS Climate Change Response Program.

The board may be particularly helpful revisiting the definition and practical application of the “non-impairment” standard in today’s world as NPS adapts to an uncertain future of continuous change.

There is urgent work to do that must be tackled by a capable and serious National Park System Advisory Board.

- Advise NPS on further “co-stewardship” opportunities with Indian Tribes and Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians. The board can be a useful partner in furthering the goals of Director Sams’ recent co-stewardship policy memorandum and work more broadly for

the overall improvement of Native American representation in national parks.¹³

- Help NPS advance civic literacy and evidence-based interpretative and education programming in response to the rising tide of disinformation and conspiratorial thinking that undermines public trust in science, citizen engagement, and democratic institutions.

There is urgent work to do that must be tackled by a capable and serious National Park System Advisory Board. Let’s hope the past will indeed be prologue for all that needs to be done. Fortunately, new members stepping onto the board can draw on the productive legacies of those who served before them, picking up where John Hope Franklin, Tony Knowles, and their dedicated colleagues left off.



ENDNOTES

1. Rolf Diamant, “Requiem for an Advisory Board,” *The George Wright Forum*, 35(1): 5–11, (2018).
2. Ronald A. Foresta, *America’s National Parks and Their Keepers* (New York: RFF Press, 1984).
3. *Rethinking the National Parks for the 21st Century*, 2001 National Park System Advisory Board Report (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2001).
<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/policy/upload/Rethinking-the-National-Parks-for-the-21st-Century-2001.pdf>
4. Of course, in some cases an NPS director might not see NPSAB as an asset, or might even be intimidated by the board. In the early 2000s, the author was a park superintendent who on occasion provided help to several of NPSAB’s committees. In this context I was asked by NPSAB Staff Director Loran Fraser and NPSAB Education Committee Chair Dr. Daniel Ritchie to prepare a draft white paper for the advisory board to consider on civic engagement in the national parks, which I did. Ritchie liked the draft paper; NPS Director Fran Mainella did not. Civic engagement was not an interest of the director’s, but more importantly she was likely fearful that her superiors in Interior might judge the text to be insufficiently deferential to the current Administration (quoting Abraham Lincoln rather than President Bush.) Director Mainella demanded to know who had written the draft. I was subsequently informed by Fraser and my direct boss, Northeast Regional Director Marie Rust, that the director was extremely upset and planned to summon me to Washington to express her displeasure in person. I told them that the director had my phone number and could call me any time. I never did receive a call from Director Mainella and the matter was dropped. I continued working with the advisory board for many years to come.
5. See *Scholars Forum: The National Park Service and Civic Reflection*, edited by Rolf Diamant, Laura Feller and David Larsen, Conservation and Stewardship Publication no. 13 (Washington, DC: NPS 2006).
<https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1412/upload/Scholars-Forum-508.pdf>
6. There were, as often the case, individuals who played key roles. In the case of the Scholars Forum, much credit is due Loran Fraser, NPSAB staff director and Dr. Daniel Ritchie, chair of the NPSAB Education

Committee. Ritchie was the well-connected chancellor of the University of Denver and commanded the respect of fellow Coloradan Gale Norton, and of the Bush Administration as a whole. Richie championed civic engagement and a new culture of evaluation. He worked closely with a handful of stalwart NPS employees, including Julia Washburn, Patti Reilly, and Nora Mitchell, to lay the groundwork for wide-ranging NPS educational reforms. Unsung heroes all. Many of these reforms were later enacted by Washburn (who was subsequently appointed by Director Jarvis as associate director for interpretation, education and volunteers) working closely with the educator Dr. Milton Chen, who succeeded Ritchie as chair of the NPSAB Education Committee on the Knowles board.

7. “Charting a Future for National Heritage Areas: A Report by the National Park System Advisory Board” (2006), <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1412/national-heritage-areas.htm>. Key roles were played by National Coordinator for Heritage Areas Brenda Barrett, Loran Fraser, and a handful of interested colleagues who worked alongside members of the advisory board, then chaired by Douglas Wheeler, California’s former Secretary of Resources.
8. Many of the members of this advisory board, including Governor Knowles, recruited by Director Jarvis and appointed by Secretary of Interior Ken Salazar, came from the National Parks Second Century Commission—a rare example of long-term commitment and continuity of strategic vision. See <https://www.npsca.org/resources/1900-national-parks-second-century-commission-report> (2009).
9. *A Call to Action Preparing for a Second Century of Stewardship and Engagement* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 2014). <https://www.nps.gov/calltoaction/index.html>
10. Kurt Repanshek, “New National Park System Advisory Board to Meet Wednesday,” *National Parks Traveler*, (December 2, 2018).
11. Kurt Repanshek, “Interior Secretary Tilts Role of National Park System Advisory Board,” *National Parks Traveler*, (September 10, 2018).
12. It should be noted that in addition to Jarvis and Fraser, NPS Deputy Director Denis Galvin played an outsized catalytic role in the direction and accomplishments of recent boards up until the Trump Administration. Both Fraser and Galvin were recognized for their NPS contributions with the George Meléndez Wright Award for Excellence, the George Wright Society’s highest honor.
13. See Secretary of Interior Order no. 3403: “Joint Secretarial Order on Fulfilling the Trust Responsibility to Indian Tribes in the Stewardship of Federal Lands and Waters.” See <https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/elips/documents/so-3403-joint-secretarial-order-on-fulfilling-the-trust-responsibility-to-indian-tribes-in-the-stewardship-of-federal-lands-and-waters.pdf> and NPS Director’s Policy Memorandum 22-03, https://www.nps.gov/subjects/policy/upload/PM_22-03.pdf.

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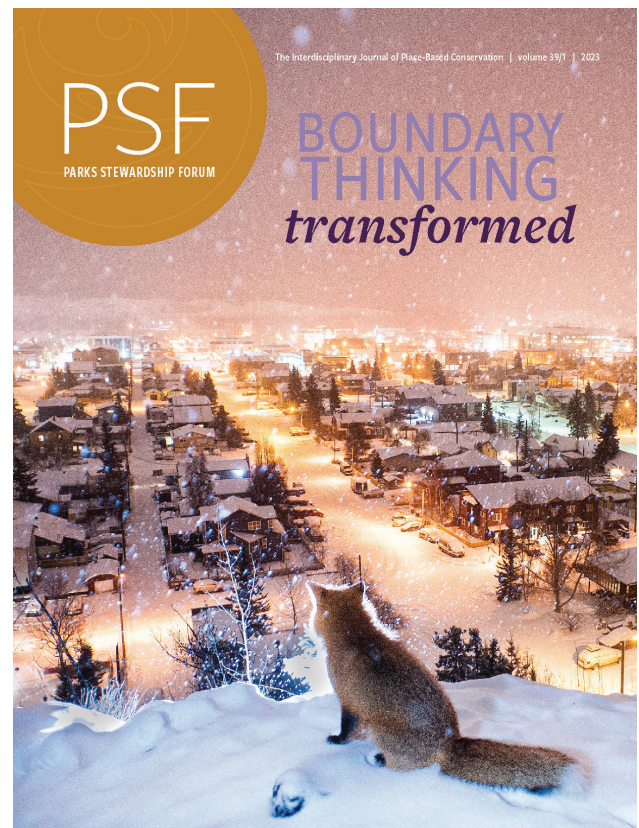
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A red fox on the clay cliffs above the city of Whitehorse, Yukon Territory.
PETER MATHER