



JULY/AUGUST

VOLUME 26, NO. 1

2006

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photo by Bill Lea, Nature Photographer,  
[www.Billlea.com](http://www.Billlea.com)

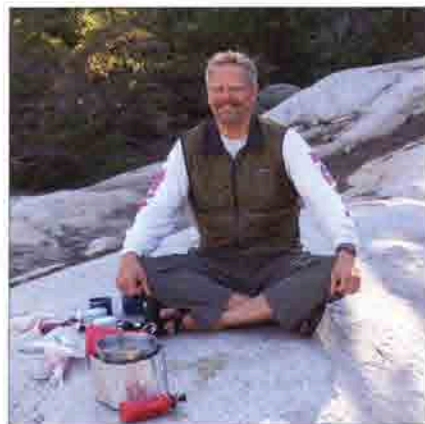


## BILL BECHER

Bill writes about and photographs adventures in the outdoors including paragliding, whitewater kayaking, mountain biking, spelunking, backcountry skiing, shark diving, rock and ice climbing. He has written for the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times* and numerous other publications. His work has won national awards, and he currently resides in Westlake Village, California. You can read about his Bearpaw Camp adventures on page 70.

## CRAIG MCCOLLUM

As a teen, Craig McCollum lived in Squaw Valley, where he skied and explored the Granite Chief and Desolation Wilderness Areas. By working at Lake Tahoe restaurants, Craig put himself through college and law school and then started a law and mediation practice in San Luis Obispo. Craig and his wife, Cheryl, still spend much of their spare time in the Sierra, where they enjoy hiking, climbing, backpacking, fishing, alpine and Nordic skiing, kayaking and biking. To read about his experience at the Muir Trail Ranch flip to page 58.



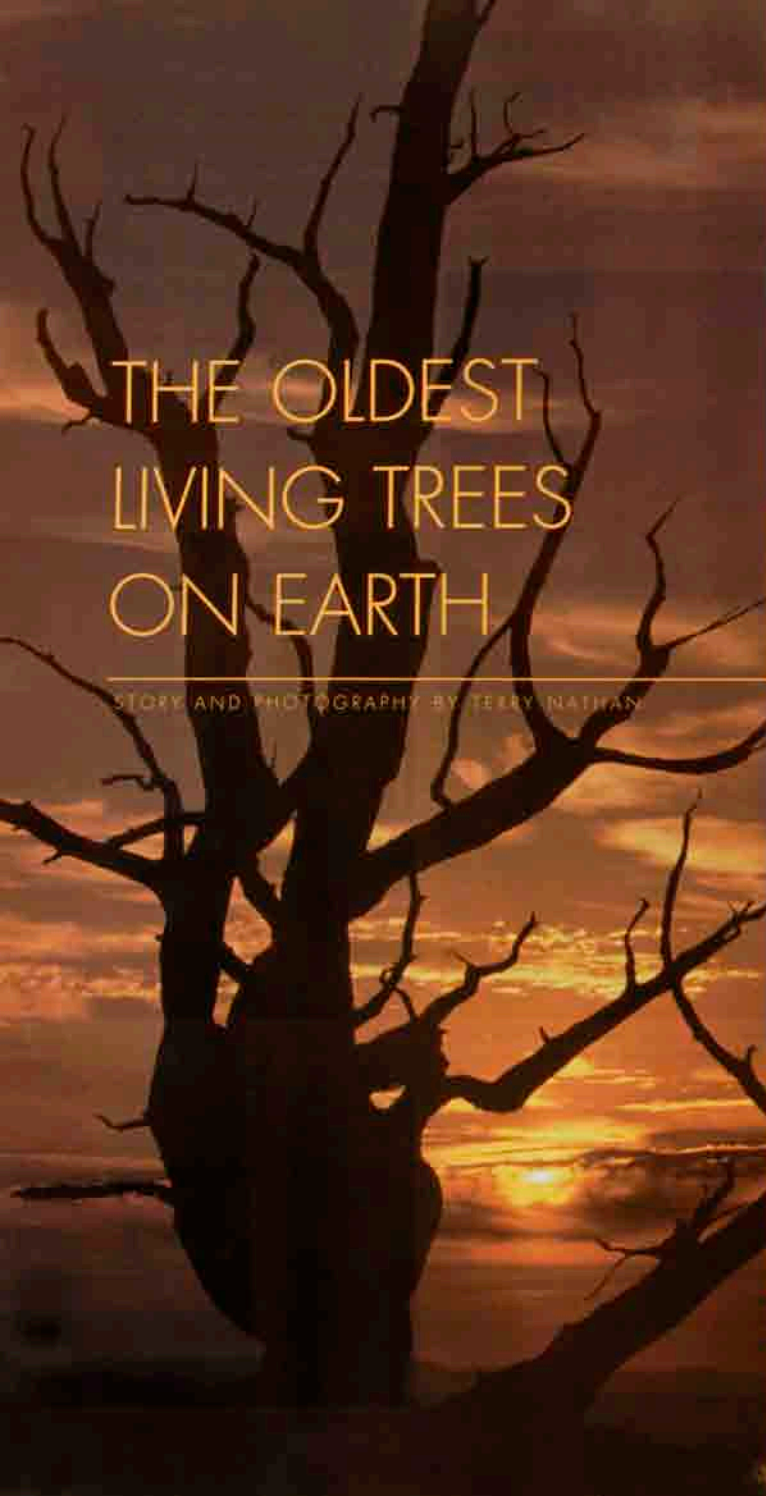
## TERRY NATHAN

Terry is a professor of atmospheric science at the University of California, Davis. He is also a commercial and fine art photographer and a contributor for *Nature Photographer*. Terry teaches photography at the Davis Art Center, the U.C. Davis Craft Center and at Sorensen's Resort. His photographs have appeared in a variety of media outlets throughout Northern California. Terry and his wife Laura currently reside in Davis and spend much of their free time hiking the Sierra and visiting national parks. His article and beautiful images of the ancient bristlecones is on page 74.

## ROSS HOOPER

Ross lives in the Sierra at Rainbow, near Donner Summit. He enjoys alpine and backcountry skiing, mountain biking, and *gardening* (stewarding 80 acres of forest). He has been a consultant in water resources management/planning, environmental remediation and water treatment. Ross has spoken on these topics at international conferences, such as the Stockholm International Water Symposium. He advocates integrating water resources and environmental management to create balanced solutions that address human and environmental needs. Read his viewpoint on Hetch Hetchy on page 38.





# THE OLDEST LIVING TREES ON EARTH

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY TERRY NATHAN



**(Far left) Silhouetted bristlecone at sunset (top center) Harsh wind-driven rain, snow and ice sculpted bristlecone (top right) Beautiful textures of weathered cones and wood grain patterns (bottom) Early light when twisted trunks and gnarled branches ignite against the stark landscape**

The upper reaches of the White Mountains of California are home to the oldest known living trees on Earth — the bristlecone pines. Individual trees living today began life more than 4,000 years ago, about 2,000 years before the rise of the Roman Empire.

The ancient bristlecone pines preside over a harsh timberline environment that has been sculpted by wind-driven rain, snow and ice. Located in the rain shadow of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, the region is starved for moisture, receiving less than 12" of precipitation annually, about 80% of which falls as snow. Gale force winds are common, summertime thunderstorms are often severe, and the alkaline soil is nutrient poor. Yet, the bristlecone pines endure, clinging to the earth in defiance of the elements.

The bristlecone pines' struggle with survival produces ghostly forms that have long inspired writers and artists. As John Muir wrote more than a century ago, "Whether young or old, sheltered or exposed to the wildest gales, this tree (bristlecone pine) is ever found irrepressibly and extravagantly picturesque, and offers a richer and more varied series of forms to the artist than any other conifer I know of." Indeed, from the abstract to the tangible and from the microcosm to the grand scenic, the bristlecone pines and their timberline environment contain the elemental building blocks for composition in the visual arts: stunning light, sweeping lines, varied textures and bold forms.

For photographers, the opportunities to spark one's creative spirit are unlimited. The landscape is an otherworld of sweeping vistas. In the early morning light, the bristlecone pines' twisted

trunks and gnarled branches appear to ignite against the stark landscape. By combining foreground elements such as rocks or driftwood with the surreal backdrop of the surrounding mountain slopes, dramatic near-far perspectives can be composed to entice the viewer on a visual journey among the timberline ancients.

The beautiful textures of the weathered cones and the extraordinary wood grain patterns offer many opportunities for intimate portraits and close-ups. The weathered cones are found on the ground below the trees. Owing to the different ages of the fallen cones, they have a broad range of shapes and hues, which produce striking quilt-like patterns of harmonious colors.

Because the ancient bristlecone pine trees often have only a narrow strip of tattered bark along the trunk, which serves as its life source, much of the wood grain is exposed and easily photographed. The wood grain, which is very dense and highly resistant to insect penetration, rot and disease, typically has elegant curves and dynamic lines, which create dramatic compositions.

The bristlecone pine's wood grain also holds keys to understanding the past. The annual growth rings, which are highly sensitive to changes in precipitation and temperature, provide a detailed historical record of the climate for the region. By cross-dating the annular rings of living trees with those of dead trees and scattered wood remnants, scientists are able to construct detailed chronologies of climate variability that date back nearly 9,000 years. This information is helping scientists to unravel the mysteries surrounding today's changing environment.

Whether scientist or artist or one who simply enjoys nature, walking among the ancient bristlecone pines and viewing first-hand their magnificent forms makes one realize, as John Muir did more than a century ago, "we all travel the milky way together, trees and men." 5H