

BREAKING OUT

Discover nature, hike and more with park events

State parks offer hundreds of special programs

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Want to see spring wildflowers peeking from the leaf litter?

Would you like to learn about bears?

What about taking a hike to the summit of some of South Carolina's tallest mountains?

You can do all of that and more at South Carolina's state parks. In fact, each state park plays host to numerous events

throughout the year. Most are low-cost and family friendly. Scott Stegenga is an interpretive ranger at Table Rock State Park and leads many of the park's special events.

"It's part of our job description to lead events," he said. "Once spring starts rolling around, we try and have one every couple of weeks."

What special events the park hosts is pretty much wide open. Stegenga just released a list of nearly a dozen events at Table Rock for spring that includes strenuous hikes, easy nature walks, a talk about bears, birdwatching and a weekend backpack-



A hike at Jones Gap State Park can lead visitors to beautiful Rainbow Falls. MIKE FOLEY/STAFF

ing trip.

"Most of these are educational," said Stegenga, who has worked for the South Carolina State Park Service for 22 years. "Some are recreational. The idea is to get people to enjoy the park for what it is."

Table Rock is one of the more unusual parks in the state system in that it features the majestic mountain, two lakes, easy nature trails, cabins and assorted other features. It's also a popular starting point for hikers on the Foothills Trail.

Yet, many people are

unaware of the Pickens County park, or others nearby.

At Paris Mountain State Park in Greenville, Cathy Taylor is the interpretive ranger and resident expert on virtually everything.

"Each park has certain focus areas," she said. "I tend to emphasize the natural history of this park. This land has been set aside for more than 100 years due to its water history.

"But another park might emphasize Native Americans."

Taylor said she may

repeat topics from time to time, but the subject matter still tends to vary.

"If I do a naturalist hike in the spring, it's different than in the fall," she said. "We count on nature to change for those."

Even though she's been at Paris Mountain for nearly 10 years, Taylor said she still discovers new things at the park. And visitors often identify park features she is unaware of. A few years back, a hiker told her about a chestnut tree thriving near a well-used trail. That's unusual since chestnuts were wiped out by blight years ago.

Another visitor told her about a Louisiana water thrush he heard near a park bridge. Sure enough, the wayward bird was visiting the park hundreds of miles from home.

"The park really comes alive for me when I'm out there with visitors," she said.

Some of the events at the state parks even allow access to areas off-limits to regular park-goers. One popular hike to "The Stool," the smaller mountain below Table Rock, requires bushwhacking off-trail during the descent, Stegenga said. Another hike to the summit of Table Rock for sunrise begins at 3 a.m. when the park is closed to visitors.