BREAKING OUT

Get set for fall's colors at finest

State's mountains offer range of leaf-peeping trails

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Today is the first day of fall. While warm — actually, hot days will no doubt return — it's not too early to think about experiencing fall colors firsthand.

Luckily, South Carolina's mountains can fulfill your leaf-peeping dreams. You'd have to work hard to avoid gorgeous views any time you venture into the woods in our state parks, national forests or even local parks.

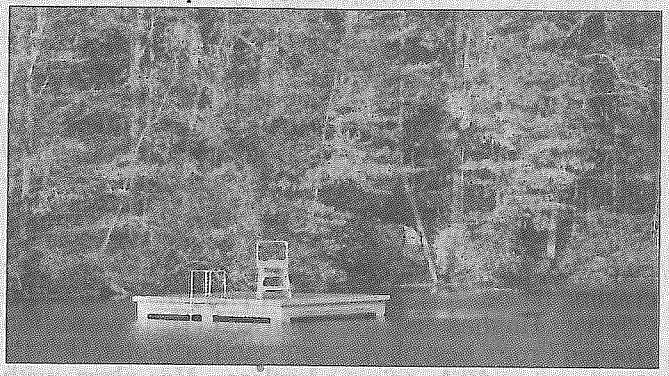
With higher elevations in easy walking distance, you can almost literally walk amidst the colors, immersing yourself in the sights and sounds of fall.

Here then are three tried-and-true fall color hikes, ranging from the very easy to the very difficult, but each offers ample glimpses of autumn's annual show.

EASY HIKE

Flat, scenic and family friendly describes the Lake Placid Trail at Paris Mountain State Park.

The 1.2-mile trail circles Lake Placid. Even at a slow saunter, the walk around the lake takes only about 30 minutes. But when the trees are in full color, you might take longer to pause and drink it all in.



STAFF

Paris Mountain's Lake Placid soon will reflect fall.

With clear views across the water, multi-hued trees are visible along the shores. When the light is right, the yellows, reds, oranges and browns reflect on the water's surface for a kaleidoscopic effect.

Take a camera on this walk, because you'll surely see sights worth capturing for posterity.

MODERATE HIKE

There is a reason why the Raven Cliff Falls Trail is one of the state park system's most-traveled trails. Any time of year, there is something to see at this Caesars Head State Park masterpiece.

The 420-foot waterfall is the main attraction, but in autumn when the plume is bracketed with seasonal colors, it's a little more spectacular.

The 2-mile, one-way hike to the observation platform is moderate, with no major climbs and no technical sections. People wearing flip-flops have hiked this trail, although that's clearly not recommended.

From the observation platform, you'll be treated to a wide expanse of nature's finest colors. And across the gorge, you'll see the exclamation point that is Raven Cliff Falls. Total hiking time on this trail for the round-trip is roughly 3 hours.

Since you're there, stop at the Mountain Bridge Wilderness Visitor's Center and walk a hundred feet to the overlook at Caesars Head. At 3,208 feet, you'll be glad you paused for this panoramic view of the South Carolina mountains.

DIFFICULT HIKE

If you don't mind working hard for one of the best views in the state, then the one-way, 3.6-mile Table Rock Trail is an apt choice.

This hike is strenuous as you'll ascend nearly 2,000 feet from Table Rock State Park's nature center to the top of Table Rock Mountain at 3,157 feet. But once you're there, on the granite summit, you'll have 75-mile views on a clear day.

Even if it's not completely clear, you will see an undulating blanket of fall colors beneath your feet.

While the view from atop is the main goal, along the way you'll be treated to the several smallish waterfalls on Carrick Creek in the early going, before you enter a thick forest.

Along the way, you'll be treated to fall colors from oak and hickory, mixed well with evergreen pines. By the hike's end, you'll be tired, but you can easily say you've experienced one of nature's finest displays, and earned it.

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GETTING THERE

■ Paris Mountain State Park – 2401 State Park Road, Greenville. Info: southcarolinaparks.com or call: 864-244-5565.

■ Caesars Head State Park – 8155 Geer Highway, Cleveland. Info: southcarolinaparks.com or call: 864-836-6115.

■ Table Rock State Park – Off State 11 at 158 E Ellison Lane, Pickens. Info: southcarolinaparks.com or call: 864-878-9813.