BREAKING OUT

Jones Gap begins to recover from fire

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From the parking lot at Jones Gap State Park, there's no evidence of the 350-acre wildfire that raged here for three days at the end of February.

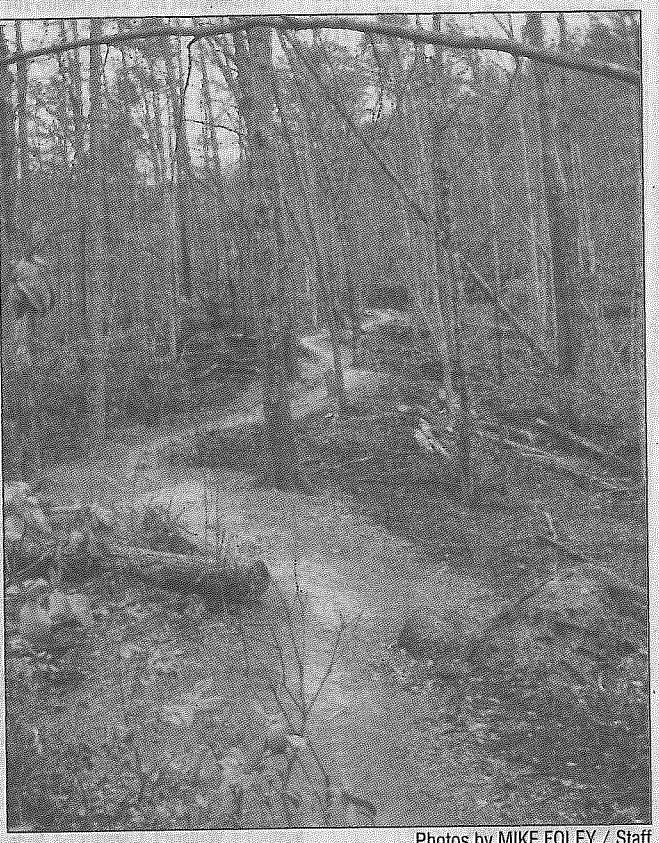
In fact, until a hiker crosses the footbridge on the Middle Saluda River and continues along the Rainbow Falls Trail, the senses don't detect the fire's aftermath.

First, there is the smell, like a day-old campfire. Then, there are the brown leaves of rhododendron and mountain laurel that didn't ignite but dried intact from the heat. As the trail ascends, the signs of the fire are unmistakable.

Tree trunks are blackened anywhere from 3- to 6-feet high. Leaf litter and underbrush have disappeared up here, leaving acre upon acre of solitary mature trees still standing strong. Hiking up the trail to Rainbow Falls, the path looks like a jagged white scar, snaking its way through the forest flesh.

Although crews spent three days fighting the fire caused by an improperly doused campfire, and the forest looks much worse for wear, the fire isn't all bad. In fact, spring wildflowers have already started to emerge, said Tim Lee, a naturalist for the Mountain Bridge Wilderness Area that includes Jones Gap State Park.

"On a lot of the acres, it didn't burn very hot," Lee said. "So, the plants that were still deep in the soil and filled with moisture fared well."



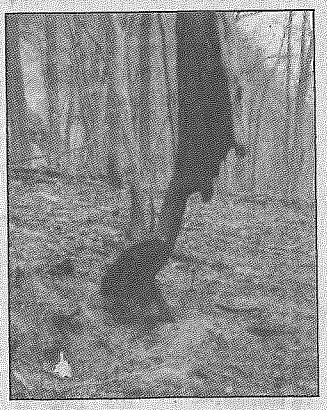
Photos by MIKE FOLEY / Staff

Rainbow Falls Trail at Jones Gap State Park snakes through an area scarred by February's wildfire.

Lee said he's already seen bloodroot and several types of violets in the burned areas, and he expects others to emerge.

"From a botanical point of view," he said, "it's going to be interesting to see what pokes through."

Plants that were suppressed by thick undergrowth now have a chance to compete. As for the mature trees, it's too early to know whether they were harmed by fire. Lee said pines have a thick bark that often allows them to survive all but the most intense fires. Other trees, like tulip poplars, have a thin bark and are very easily damaged by fire.



Walking the trail, it's easy to see other negative aspects of the fire. Silt fences are now anchored in place in several locations on the steep hillsides. The erosion barriers were installed to stabilize the now-unstable soil caused by a combination of the fire itself and bulldozers used to create firebreaks.

While this fire was the result of careless campers, fires have been used to manage and improve forests in the Upstate for eons. There is evidence to show Cherokee Indians burned undergrowth from forests to promote grazing areas for big game, said Dr. Walt McPhail, president of the Greenville Forestry and Wildlife Society.

"Fire is generally beneficial," he said. "The reason we don't do more of it today is because we have too many houses around."

McPhail owns 1,500 acres of forest near Abbeville, and he uses a system of burning 100 acres at a time, once every three years, to provide "forbes," or small succulent plants deer graze on in the spring. Prescribed fires don't harm mature trees.

He's amazed at how quickly the forest restores itself after a fire.

"I've seen four or five deer in an area that was on fire eight hours before," he said. "Wildlife thrives after a fire."

FIRE SAFETY

Building a campfire

- Use a previous fire site if possible.
- If there is no fire pit available, choose a level, shaded location away from logs, brush or decaying leaves and needles.
- Use a shovel to clear an area at least 10 feet in diameter. Scrape away grass, leaves or needles down to the soil.
- Scoop a depression for the fire in the center of the cleared and put a ring of rocks around it.
- Cut wood in short lengths, pile within cleared area and light the fire. The fire should be no larger than necessary.
- Never leave a fire unattended.
- Always keep a bucket of water and a shovel nearby.

Extinguishing a campfire

- Allow the wood to burn completely to ash, if possible.
- Pour lots of water on the fire. Drown all embers, not just red ones.
- Pour water until the hissing sound stops.
- Stir the campfire ashes and embers with a shovel.
- Scrape sticks and logs to remove any embers.
- Stir and make sure everything is wet and ash is cold to the touch.
- If you do not have water, use dirt. Mix enough dirt or sand with the embers. Continue adding and stirring until all material is cool. Do not bury the fire as it will continue to smolder and could catch roots on fire that will eventually get to the surface and start a wildfire.

Source: www.SmokeyBear.com