Middle Saluda Passage opens exposes waterfall vistas,

By Mike Foley
Staff Writer
mfoley@greenvilleonline.com



One of the lower tiers of a 150-foot unnamed waterfall in Jones Gap State Park found during the relocation of the Hospital Rock Trail. PHOTOS BY MIKE FOLEY/STAFF

The newest section of the Palmetto Trail opened to the public Saturday.

In itself, that's news given that the 13.9-mile Middle Saluda Passage pushes the eventual completion of the 425-mile cross-state trail ever closer. But this section is unique for several reasons.

First, it's the first section of the trail rated "strenuous" for its abrupt changes in elevation. That means there is a lot of uphill, and as you might expect, downhill, too. Most sections of the trail are rated "easy," making them ideal for families and casual hikers.

Second, it largely fixes some problem areas on existing trails in Jones Gap State Park such as erosion or sets of sharp switchbacks. In fact, the vast majority of the trail duplicates trails in Jones Gap State Park and near it.

And last, in searching for new ways to reroute some of the Jones Gap trails, a towering waterfall was discovered. It's certainly possible the waterfall was "rediscovered," as the property that encompasses Jones Gap was long a playground for Greenville residents before it became an official state park in 1989.

But park officials didn't know about it. Finding the "no-name falls" is a perfect example of the adventure available when you visit a state park. Most adventures are less dramatic. It could be simply discovering the wonders of the outdoors by peering into a clear mountain stream, spying wildlife or smelling colorful wildflowers.

Or, it could be this thundering, multi-tiered, 150-foot waterfall hidden in a valley. In fact, the waterfall was so little known — and remains that way for now — that Palmetto Conservation Foundation's Upstate trail coordinator Jim Majors doesn't know what stream feeds the waterfall.

"I thought it was Rocky Branch," Majors said with a shrug as he stood on a rock ledge near where the rerouted Hospital Rock Trail passes the falls. "But (park interpreter) Tim Lee said it wasn't."

So, it's an unnamed tributary of Rocky Branch feeding an unnamed falls. Good enough.

A week ago, given the high amounts of rains that have pelted Greenville County lately, the falls roared as it dropped and dropped again over nearly countless staircases of rock.

It could be that come the height of summer, it might be nothing more than a dribble. Hikers can see that for themselves if they venture out onto the Hospital Rock

New section of Palmetto Trail links Jones Gap and Caesars Head state parks



Jim Majors, trails coordinator for the Palmetto Conservation Foundation, stands at the base of a 150-foot unnamed waterfall in Jones Gap State Park found during the relocation of the Hospital Rock Trail.

PALMETTO TRAIL MAPS

» For maps of the Palmetto Trail, as well as information on guided hikes and other trips, visit the Palmetto Conservation Foundation's website at: www.palmettoconservation.org



This Palmetto Trail sign is used along the Middle Saluda Passage. Normally, a yellow, lower-case "i" marks the Palmetto Trail throughout the state. But since Upstate trails are blazed with other colors, this helps avoid confusion.
MIKE FOLEY/STAFF

Trail and travel a little more than three-fourths of a mile on the newly rerouted trail.

One last unique aspect of the Middle Saluda Passage is that it's the first section of the Palmetto Trail that isn't blazed with the traditional, yellow lower case "i" that marks the Trail elsewhere throughout the state. To avoid confusion with other blazes, it's marked with small Palmetto Trail signs.

The Palmetto Conservation Foundation held a private opening of the trail Friday, then opened it to the public Saturday. At press time, a map of the new section of the trail was still being designed and placed on the foundation's website.

Majors said that because the new section of trail is long and difficult, it has three trailheads — the YMCA's Camp Greenville, Jones Gap and Caesars Head state parks — to invite more day hikers.

Volunteers and donors were instrumental in the trail construction, Majors said.

He cited contributions from Palmetto Conservation Foundation, Sierra Club-Bartram Group and HOG Day volunteers, among others. Donations from Duke Energy, REI, the Graham Foundation and the Daniel-Mickel Foundation were also invaluable.