Nine Times Forest preserved

1,648 acres of mountain forest will be open to public

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The view from Big Rock Mountain in the Nine Times Forest will eventually be enjoyed by many more visitors thanks to the purchase of the forest. PROVIDED BY MAC STONE

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In a deal that took a decade to make, Upstate conservationists now own the 1,648-acre Nine Times Forest in Pickens County.

Naturaland Trust and Upstate Forever purchased the site from Crescent Communities for $3,543,780 with plans to turn the mountainous forest into a haven for hiking, fishing, bird watching and hunting.

The final piece, a $1,044,000 contribution from Duke Energy as part of the utility's Keowee-Toxaway Relicensing Agreement, allowed the conservation groups to close on the property before an end-of-year deadline.

"It was one of the largest contiguous pieces of unprotected forest properties remaining in the Upstate," said Frank Holleman, president of Naturaland Trust.

The site boasts three mountain peaks dotted with granite outcroppings and filled with pine and oak forests.

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Its multiple creeks, including the headwaters to Little Eastatoe Creek, provide habitat for trout, Holleman said.

The property is home to bear, and peregrine falcons fly overhead searching for food near their Jocassee Gorges home, he said.

The property will be conserved to keep it natural for future generations, Holleman said. It closes another gap in conservationists' goals to protect vast swaths of the Blue Ridge Escarpment from development.

The Nine Times Forest joins another 560 acres adjacent to another mountainous site owned and managed by The Nature Conservancy.

"It's been on the priority list for many years," said Brad Wyche, executive director of Upstate Forever. "We started working actively on Nine Times and the adjoining property almost 10 years ago. You have to be patient and persistent in this business."

Funding for the purchase came from four major sources. A portion came through a donation from North Carolina conservationists Fred and Alice Stanback.

The Stanbacks have been longtime supporters of conservation projects in the Blue Ridge Mountains, including nearby Stumphouse Mountain. Their contribution was made in honor of Tommy Wyche, the founder of Naturaland Trust.

"Our contribution not only helps protect the Nine Times property but also honors Tommy Wyche for his 40 years of providing vision and leadership in protecting tens of thousands of acres in the Blue Ridge Mountains along the North Carolina-South Carolina state line," Fred Stanback said in a statement.

Naturaland Trust received $400,000 through a highly competitive U.S. Forest Service Grant. Another $1.5 million came through the South Carolina Conservation Bank once funding to the bank was restored following the recession.

"Many of the major conservation accomplishments in the Upstate in recent years would not have happened without the conservation bank," Holleman said.

"That's true of the establishment of the Lake Conestee Nature Park. It's true of the protection of Stumphouse Mountain and it's true of the protection of the Nine Times property.

"I can't imagine how we could have assembled that much money within the time required to close this transaction without the conservation bank," he said.

Upstate Forever will assist Naturaland Trust to build a management plan for the forest, Wyche said. It will be put back into the state Department of Natural Resources wildlife management program to allow hunting, Holleman said.

The site already has old logging trails, the remains of the former Nine Times railroad line and Duke Energy access roads to transmission lines that run through the forest, he said.

Sustainable timbering for some portions of the property will be studied, he said.

Major parts of the management plan will include public access, and hiking trails will be mapped out, he said.

"It is one of the best conceivable teachers of the importance of our outdoors so we want as many people to experience it as possible," he said.