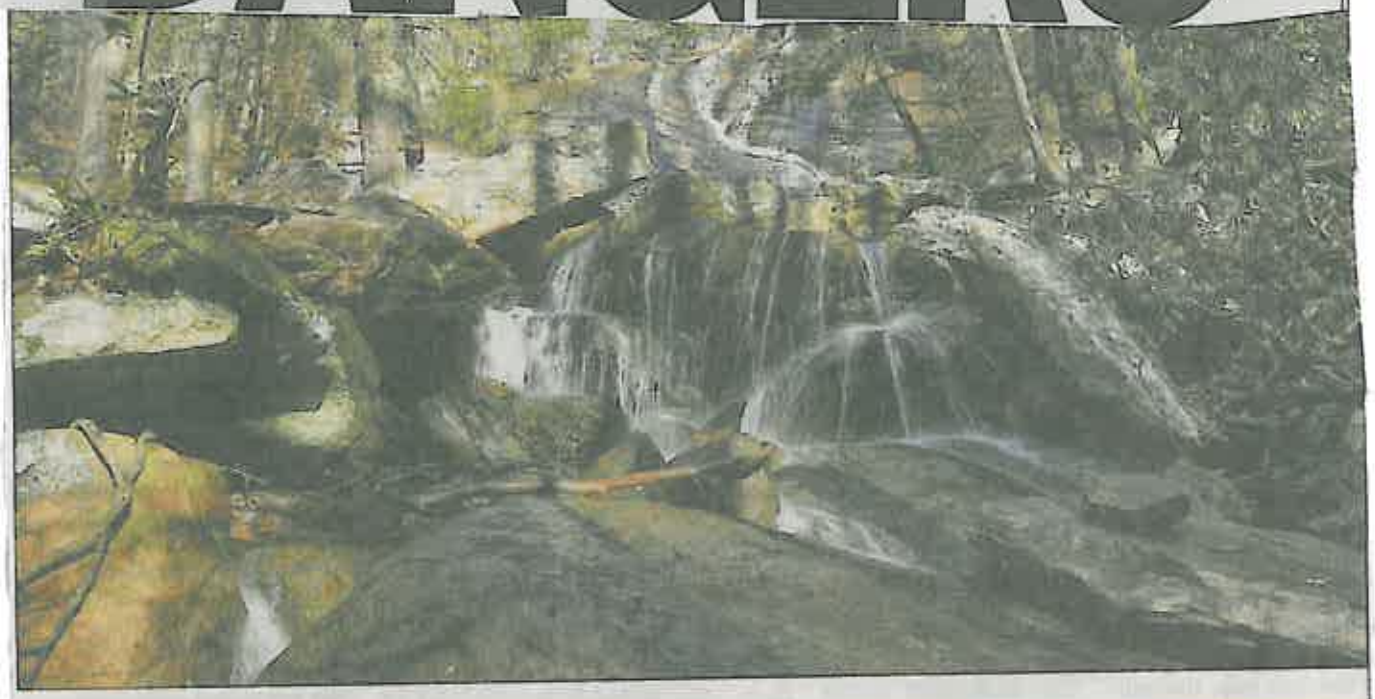
SCENIC DANGERS

Coroner, first responders say warning signs would cut down on waterfall deaths



By Nathaniel Cary
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A carved wooden cross in a flower-filled planter at the base of Wildcat Branch Falls is a reminder to all who trek there that the Upstate's most majestic natural wonders can also pose danger.

Carved into the memorial is the name of Billy Joe Gorham, who died in September when he slipped and fell nearly 100 feet down the upper section of Wildcat Branch Falls.

When visitors hike closer to the falls, though, there are no signs to warn of its dangers. Trail signs and yellow marks painted on trees lead only to the base of the falls and then in another direction.

No trail leads up the steep, wooded face of the falls. But hikers have created their own route up the precarious slope to pose for pictures or to step across boulders on the nar-

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FATAL FALLS

WILDCAT BRANCH FALLS
In the past decade, four people have died from injuries suffered in waterfall-related accidents.

HERITAGE FALLS
In 2011, a Greenville man died from a fall when he tried to save his dog after it slipped.

ISHI TRAIL WATERFALL
In 2004, a man died when he fell from a waterfall on the Ishi Trail in Jones Gap State Park.

PICKENS COUNTY WATERFALL
Last summer, a Liberty man died when he slipped and fell over a waterfall while fishing with relatives.

HIDDEN FALLS
A man died when he slipped while trying to cross Hidden Falls near Oconee State Park in 2009.

WHITEWATER FALLS
A man died in 2003 when he slipped while trying to cross the river above Whitewater Falls near Lake Jocassee.

Source: Oconee County coroner Karl Addis, Greenville County deputy coroner Kent Dill, Pickens County coroner Kandy Kelley, and The Greenville News archives.

OUR NATURAL BEAUTY

The upper falls at Wildcat Branch Falls, where numerous people have been injured or killed in accidents in recent years. MYKAL MCELDOWNEY/STAFF



River Falls Fire Chief David Embry talks about the danger of hiking too close to waterfalls in the Upstate at Wildcat Branch Falls. MYKAL MCELDOWNEY/STAFF

DECEPTIVE BEAUTY

At GreenvilleOnline.com, see video of Wildcat Branch Falls, the Upstate's most dangerous waterfall.

row river passage.

That's where danger looms, warned rescuers and coroners who have seen too many serious injuries and deaths at the popular waterfall.

"You've always got a sinking feeling before you ever get up here, because we've never had a call for a rescue and had a good result," said David Embry, fire chief at River Falls Fire Department, which is often the first responder to waterfall accidents in northern Greenville County. "It's not always fatal, but there's always serious injuries ... it's terrible every single time."

Most recently, Mark Jones, a 44-year-old Taylors man, died after he fell 80 to 100 feet from the top of the falls. His 5-year-old daughter tried to reach him to help but also fell and was seriously injured, said Embry and Greenville County Deputy Coroner Kent Dill.

Signs at the base of the falls that warn people of the dangers would cut down on the number of deaths and injuries they see, Dill and Embry said.

State park officials say they battle vandalism and thefts when they have posted warning signs at the base of Wildcat Branch Falls, but they are looking at options again to post new signs after two fatal accidents in the past year.

Posted signs that explain the dangers – like a list of "pool rules" – would give pause to people who choose to climb to the top of the waterfall, Dill said.

Embry said it certainly wouldn't hurt to have signs posted below the falls, though he worries hikers would simply ignore the warnings.

At issue is the role the state park service plays in protecting the public on hiking trails to some of the state's most spectacular outdoor sites while also protecting the natural beauty that makes the Upstate's waterfalls popular and accessible destinations.

Unpredictability

It can happen to anyone. Experienced hikers. Young. Old. It happened to one woman on a trail hike with an experienced guide in a group of hikers who did everything they could to prepare for safety.

Eric Thompson, a certified outings leader with the Bartram Group, a local chapter of the state Sierra Club, said the woman was on a mountain hike when she slipped on wet leaves and tumbled 75 feet over an embankment.

Fortunately, she was OK, he said, but it underscored the unpredictability of nature.

"That stuff happens so suddenly that you almost can't even anticipate it sometimes," Thompson said.

It's happened too often in the Upstate in recent years.

In the past decade, four people have died from injuries suffered in waterfall-related accidents, Dill said. In addition, a 74-year-old man died in 2011 when he tripped and fell a long distance while hiking on Glassy Mountain, Dill said.

[illegible] waterfall fa-

tality in Pickens County in 2012 and another several years ago at Twin Falls in Eastatoe, said Kandy Kelley, Pickens County coroner.

There have been at least two waterfall-related hiking deaths in the past decade in Oconee County, said Karl Addis, Oconee County coroner.

Wildcat Wayside Park is a popular pull-off spot in northern Greenville County with easy access off Scenic Highway 11 between Jones Gap State Park and Table Rock State Park. The roadside parking area fills up during summer as children splash in the pools of water that spill over rocks at the lower falls, which are visible from the road.

A recently upgraded half-mile trail leads hikers to the base of the upper falls.

It's difficult to track the number of visitors to Wildcat Wayside, but the park is considered part of the Mountain Bridge Wilderness Area that is managed by the state park service, said Marion Edmunds, a spokesman for South Carolina state parks.

The Mountain Bridge had nearly 284,000 visitors in the past fiscal year, and the number of incidents is a fraction compared to the number of visitors, Edmunds said.

Still, "It's important to us to make it as safe an experience as we can," Edmunds said. "We want to get that accident number down as close to zero as we can."

Asked by GreenvilleOnline.com why there were no warning signs or barriers at Wildcat Branch Falls, Edmunds said they have installed signs in the past, but each time the signs have been stolen or vandalized.

"And that really comes because it's a trail and a park area by itself," Edmunds said. "We have problems everywhere, but it doesn't happen as often when we have trails at Table Rock where you have a number of rangers and public there all the time."

The park service plans to install signs along the trail again and is designing signs now that would be both durable and safe from vandalism and theft, Edmunds said.

A deadly slip

Wildcat Branch Falls has seen the most accidents in recent years, but it's not alone.

In 2011, a Greenville man died when he fell from Heritage Falls when he tried to save his dog after it slipped.

In 2004, a man died when he fell from a waterfall on the Ishi Trail in Jones Gap State Park, Dill said.

Last summer, a Liberty man died when he slipped and fell over a waterfall in Pickens County while fishing with relatives, Kelley said.

A man died when he slipped while trying to cross Hidden Falls near Oconee State Park in 2009, and another man died in 2003 when he slipped while trying to cross the river above Whitewater Falls near Lake Jocassee, according to Addis and *The Greenville News* archives.

There's a tendency to get closer to the edge of waterfalls to pose for photos or to throw something from the top of the falls, Dill said.

Areas around waterfalls are usually shady and damp, even on the banks of the river, due to dense forest that's not meant to be open to the public, he said.

"Oftentimes those areas look as though they would be relatively safe to walk or stand on when, in essence, they could be very, very slippery," Dill said.

When someone falls from Wildcat Branch Falls, it's a 100-foot drop to the bottom, Embry said.

Difficult rescues

When River Falls receives a rescue call, the team mobilizes on site, gets set up and begins to carry gear up the trail, Embry said.

Four wheelers, vehicles or helicopters aren't options on the terrain, so the team hauls oxygen, stretchers and first-aid gear by hand.

Once they locate patients, they assess injuries, stabilize them and begin to carry them out.

The process can take more than an hour at Wildcat Branch Falls because injuries are so severe that they have to stabilize patients to keep from injuring them worse on the trek back to the road, Embry said.

Embry called Wildcat Branch Falls "by far" their worst location. They respond two or three times a year, usually in the heat of summer.

"There are pools of water at the base of the falls," he said. "Most of the people who fall hit rocks and end up in the pools of water at the base of the falls."

Firefighters at the all-volunteer station remember seven fatalities at the waterfall over several decades, Embry said.

They train every year specifically on how to respond to waterfall rescues – with multiple fractures and head trauma that often results from a fall, he said.

"It's a great place to come with your family. It's a great place to hike," he said. "But stay off the falls."

State parks exist to connect the public to nature, but parks and trails and mountains and streams don't have constant supervision, regulation and protection like our built environment, Edmunds said.

That makes it all the more important for hikers to use a high level of caution, he said.

The park service designs trails to minimize risk, he said. It has put signs in some places to warn visitors to stay on the trail, and Edmunds said he doesn't know of a single trail that leads hikers to climb or step across the top of a waterfall.

■ **Contact** reporter Nathaniel Cary at 864-298-4272, connect on Facebook or follow @nathanielcary on Twitter.



A memorial sits at the entrance to Wildcat Branch Falls. MYKAL MCELDOWNEY/STAFF

"You've always got a sinking feeling before you ever get up here, because we've never had a call for a rescue and had a good result."

DAVID EMBRY, fire chief at River Falls Fire Department