

Michael and Kerry LaBelle and their children stroll through Holmes Educational Forest near Hendersonville, N.C. PHOTOS BY CHARLES SOWELL/CONTRIBUTOR

# Talking trees a highlight of Holmes State Forest

## Accessible trails make the visit family-friendly

**By Charles Sowell**
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Holmes Educational State Forest, just across the state line in North Carolina, is one of those treats for the younger kids that ought not be missed this summer. Here's one reason: The trees talk.

Well, not really, but the talking trees trail can silence the crankiest youngster in pretty short order and soon have the kids clamoring to push the button that sets the prerecorded message off on its nature lesson.

Located at 1299 Crab Creek Road, near Hendersonville, N.C., about five miles from the ever-popular DuPont State Forest, this is a great place to give the littlest children a taste of the outdoors and introduce them to some of the amazing diversity to be found all along the Blue Wall separating the two states.

The forest has rugged terrain, numerous rock outcroppings and scenic vistas. Its website notes that it also offers a rich mixture of mountain hardwoods, rhododendron, flame azaleas and a variety of wildflowers. These features are accessible by a series of well-marked trails which are accented by exhibits and displays depicting the ecology of the managed forest, according to the website (www.ncesf.org/HESF/hesf_education.htm).

For the seven little ones of the LaBelle family, ranging in age from 8 months to 10 years, a walk through the forest was quite a treat. Visiting from Maryland for a church conference, dad Michael introduced his brood as he gathered them up after the obligatory bathroom break. There was wife Kerry; Johnathan, the youngest at 8 months; as well as Elliot, 2; Benjamin, 4; Bridget, 6; Emmill, 7; Andrea, 9; and Ethan, 10.

A few minutes later, the family scurried up up a well-maintained paved path and were quickly out of sight, the kids bounding like pent-up springs.

Moseying along behind and enjoying the incredible lushness of this near-rainforest environment, I made a mental note to come back for the early spring wildflower season bloom. It ought to be special in this protected place.

Catching up with the LaBelles just past the forest center display, I slowed to match the family's pace. They clustered around a specially marked tree and were raptly listening to a little speaker box give its lesson on a large yellow poplar.

Talk finished, the kids rushed off — oldest in the lead — with dad pushing the folded-up stroller and mom following with little Johnathan on her hip.

They rounded a corner on the trail and squeals of delight wafted through the woods. I could hear a silence and then the tinny sound of a speaker box. Lesson two.



Push the silver button and trees tell you all about themselves.

## HOW TO GET THERE

Take U.S. 276 north from Greenville all the way to Cedar Mountain, N.C., and turn right on Cascade Lake Road, at the fire department. Turn right again on Staton Road and follow it through the heart of DuPont State Forest. It becomes DuPont Road at the county line and dead-ends at Crab Creek Road. Turn right, and Holmes Educational State Forest will be on the right after about a mile.

## LEARN MORE

Find out more about North Carolina's educational forests at www.ncesf.org.



The LaBelles hear from a talking tree.