Donors' efforts add 600 acres to Jones Gap State Park



Park Ranger Tim Lee leads a group of hikers and rangers through a section of the new addition to Jones Gap State Park. The addition adds 600 acres to the 3,346-acre park. KEN OSBURN/STAFF

'Tonic for the soul'

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Hiking boots crunched over last fall's leaves, and sweat beads formed on our temples as we criss-crossed our way single-file down a forested mountain along a makeshift path that's only been visited by a few select people over the past 70 years.

A creek rippled just out of sight and beckoned our small group of hikers to come ever closer. Wild rhododendrons with deep green leaves and large, light pink flowers were fully in bloom, and hemlocks mixed closely with hickory nut and chestnut oaks clued knowledgeable observers to our location in the Blue Ridge Escarpment.

The focus of this hike — a multi-layered waterfall that spilled over rocks for 225 feet — led us through this nearly untouched forest in a new section of state park land that on Friday was given by the international non-profit The Nature Conservancy as a sizeable addition to Jones Gap State Park.

A steep uphill grade along the river gorge led us directly to the base of the falls, which state park officials called a prized feature of this expansive new section that will be tacked on to

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Lillian C. Darby receives a gift of appreciation from Mark Robertson, state director of the South Carolina Chapter of The Nature Conservancy. The newly named Coleman Falls are named in honor of her parents, Jim and Jane Coleman. KEN OSBURN/STAFF

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THE LAND REVEALED

» Watch behind-the-scenes footage of a hike through the new section of Jones Gap State Park.
» View an online gallery of some of the best features in the Jones Gap State Park addition.

PARK

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Jones Gap State Park and soon will be open for all to enjoy.

Fallen trees obscured some views of the cascading water, but at its base the falls gave hints to its majesty as rare flowers unique to this section of the Blue Ridge Escarpment north of Greenville grew from the moist crevices of stream-soaked rocks.

In years to come, trails through this pristine forest will interlock these 300 acres to a second 300-acre tract donated last year by Naturaland Trust. Those 600 acres now join the huge 3,346 acres of Jones Gap State Park.

On the day that The Nature Conservancy handed over the deed to the land and put it into the state's care, state park rangers led guided tours through the woods for donors, volunteers and environmental enthusiasts to give a glimpse of what this new section could become.

And even on this muggy early summer day, as the sun filtered through the trees, you could pause, listen to a woodpecker knocking overhead and hear the brook's descent down the mountainside. It's "a tonic for the soul," said Phil Gaines, South Carolina's director of state parks.

"Places like this keep us grounded," Gaines said. "Places like this are special."

This tract of land has its own special story of conservationists' dogged determination to approach an expensive land purchase in the midst of a recession. The story hinged on more than 400 donors, mostly locals, who decided they wanted more state park land and gave funds in large and small amounts to make sure this property kept its untamed beauty for generations.

Underneath the surface, though, is a question of the extent of future funding for similar projects and a continuing drive to bridge the gap in protected lands to create an unbroken natural habitat along the Blue Wall north of Greenville.



A native rhododendron blooms in Jones Gap. KEN OSBURN/STAFF

The blueprint

On paper the project looked daunting. The price tag: $2 million.

Private land called the White tract, owned by an out-of-state family, was coming available, but for conservationists, the timing couldn't have been worse.

The Great Recession had already begun and funds previously available for such purchases had dried up.

"A lot of folks said we're not going to be able to do this," Gaines said. "But we have special people in South Carolina. Should we put off such a purchase? Absolutely not."

So conservationists across the state dug deep.

Through two rounds of fundraising, the Nature Conservancy was able to purchase 216 acres in two phases in 2009 and 2010. It then faced a deadline last June to raise the final $560,000 needed to purchase the remaining 85 acres and complete the project.

"We had to find new funding and so we ended up with a public campaign centered in the Greenville area to raise the private dollars needed to acquire this," said Mark Robertson, state director of The Nature Conservancy.

More than 400 donors

epped forward, cutting hecks for $10 and $20 in a grassroots effort that was helped along by a $150,000 matching contribution.

"It's a testimony, I think, one, to the community spirit, the community vision that exists in Greenville," Robertson said. "I think it's a real tribute to the spirit of Greenville and the recognition of how important these parks are to the community."

The blueprint included leverage. Naturaland Trust owned 305 acres that adjoined this property. It pledged to donate that land as an addition to the park in 2010 with the idea that the two properties would connect to form a huge new section.

A one-time grant of $250,000 from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund bolstered The Nature Conservancy's bid to purchase the land tract, Robertson said.

That fund, established in 1965 and tied to offshore oil drilling revenues, has been sliced through congressional reallocation of funds through the years and by budget cutbacks most recently, Robertson said. Only once has it been funded to its recommended $900 million annual tally, according to the Trust for Public Lands, a national land-conservation nonprofit group.

"One of the challenges we've had is to get a dependable stream of funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund from Congress," Robertson said.

A bill before Congress now in its transportation act would bring the funding up to $700 million per year for the next two years, a measure The Nature Conservancy has supported in Washington, Robertson said.

Old Jones Gap meets new

Solomon Jones called himself "The Roadbuilder" and even put the moniker on his tomb. Jones first built a road through the gap across Caesars Head Mountain to Cedar Mountain, N.C., in the 1840s, and legend has it that he followed the path of a sow and used an ax to chop his way.

Jones' great-grandson Carl Cox wrote a book called "Solomon Jones: The Roadbuilder" about the man who was known as "a natural engineer of mountain roads."

Whether he used a sow or just traversed his own path many times to determine the road's eventual route, Jones didn't use surveyor's tools or dynamite when he built Old Jones Gap Road, which became the only route from Greenville to Transylvania County, N.C., until 1910.

Jones Gap now bears his name.

Later, the forest was timbered by the Saluda Land and Lumber Company and remained in private hands until conservationist Tommy Wyche formed Naturaland Trust in 1973 and began to work to protect Jones Gap.

The state began to acquire properties in the late-'70s and early '80s and officially opened Jones Gap State Park in 1989.

An old logging trail offers limited access to the new property, which stretches along the east and north border of the existing park.

Though the land is now in state park hands, it may be two years until the public has full access to it, said Tim Lee, a state park naturalist.

Trails still need to be mapped out, funded and built, he said. Orange surveyors. tape tied to some trees marks potential routes.

"It's a great piece of property with tremendous topography, some great streams, a lot of cool plants and animals and some really spectacular waterfalls," Gaines said. "And so our game plan in the next two years is to connect this property with Jones Gap proper."

A trail would branch off from existing Jones Gap trails to the new property, and eventually Gaines hopes to build a separate access to this site to reduce overcrowding at Jones Gap's limited parking areas.

Until a trail is built, Gaines said park rangers may lead guided hikes through the new property a few times each year.

"This park many days is at capacity, so the ability to expand their facilities and create more activities is a high priority because this parking lot will be full, the trails will be packed," Robertson said. "This is a well-loved and well-used place."

A forest matrix

Lee stopped and knelt as a circle of onlookers formed around him. A gleam came to his eyes as he used a stick to poke what he called "bear skat."

Lee said he could discuss the droppings for a half hour in great detail, but wouldn't.

The droppings illustrated an important point though, he said. Black bears use this land, either as home or as a pass-through to the mountains, and now state park rangers could begin to survey just how many bears are present, he said.

Connection between these natural lands is key, not just for humans but for plants and wildlife, Robertson said.

"In the face of extremes of weather with freezes and droughts, the connectedness of these conservation lands, and maintaining, if you will, a continuous cover of forest land is significant," Robertson said.

Streams loaded with native brook trout run through the new land. Granite outcrops pop among the trees, and wildflowers dot sunny areas.

Hemlocks typically found in higher elevations mix with pines and hickory oak trees in a mature forest in what Lee said is "a forest matrix" where tree species mix in ways found only in the escarpment because its sharp rise in elevation creates a distinctive forest temperament.

It has all the characteristics that the Blue Ridge Escarpment is known for, but its most spectacular features are its creeks and waterfalls, Gaines said.

On Friday, the previously unnamed waterfall was named Coleman Falls in honor of Lillian C. Darby and her parents, Jim and Jane Coleman, for what Kristen Austin, The Nature Conservancy's Southern Blue Ridge director, called a generous donation that helped purchase the land that includes the waterfall.

The mountain wilderness provides a connection to the land, Gaines said. At the end of a long work-week, there's nothing like putting on a pair of hiking boots and heading out into the wilderness, he said.

Or even just knowing it's there.

"Every time I drive to Greenville and up here to the mountains, it's indeed comforting for me to look up at the Blue Wall, even if I don't go in, but to know that it's there, and it's there not only for me and my enjoyment but for my children and my grandchildren and my great-grandchildren," Gaines said.

"We need those special places now more than ever."

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Phil Gaines, director the South Carolina State Park Service, speaks during Friday's ceremony marking a new 600-addition to Jones Gap State Park.
KEN OSBURN/STAFF