



Trees along the Palmetto Trail near Table Rock State Park are still charred on Wednesday from the fire that spread through the park in November. The fire began as a campfire on Nov. 9 and wasn't contained until Dec. 5 amid historic drought conditions

PHOTOS BY BART BOATWRIGHT/STAFF

Back to life after devastating wildfire

Table Rock, Pinnacle Mountain showing signs of spring

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For three weeks, one of the largest wildfires in recent history in South Carolina scorched the upper reaches of Table Rock State Park, bringing in firefighters from as far away as Utah and sending smoke to settle into downtown Greenville.

Today, the charred remains of trees are present at the base of Pinnacle Mountain, where the most-intense battles to contain the wildfire unfolded last fall — yet, in these earliest of days of spring, signs of yellow and purple and green are emerging.

Daisies. Violets. Ferns.

The wildfire burned 10,623 acres and cost more than \$5 million.



South Carolina Forest Protection Chief Darryl Jones shows a simulation of the Pinnacle Mountain fire during a media tour at Table Rock State Park on Wednesday. The wildfire burned 10,623 acres.

Aftermath of wildfire video report

Let Bart Boatwright take you on the media tour of how Table Rock is thriving after last year's Pinnacle Mountain wildfire at [Greenville Online.com](http://GreenvilleOnline.com).

Wildfire

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But in the end, nature managed to do what it does and get what it needs, said Darryl Jones, the South Carolina Forestry Commission's chief of forest protection.

"Ecologically, there are a lot of positives that will come out of this," Jones said.

Wednesday, Jones was part of a host of forest and wildlife experts who presented a walk-through of how the fire unfolded from its beginning as a campfire on Nov. 9 until its containment on Dec. 5 amid historic drought conditions.

One message arose time and again: Every now and then, the woods need to burn.

It's become more difficult as forests become more populated with humans, and large-scale conflagrations of old that used to happen naturally are prevented because of the danger, said Kristen Aus-

tin, Southern Blue Ridge program director for The Nature Conservancy of South Carolina.

The conservancy is trying to bring partners together to increase controlled burning. The state burns only about half of the acreage it should burn each year to balance the ecosystem, Austin said.

The problem, she said, is that about 80 percent of forested land statewide is in private hands, though in the mountainous area of the Upstate it's closer to 50 percent because of conservation efforts.

"We need to bring fire back to the mountains in a controlled way to really bring the forest back into balance," Austin said. "We're looking at an out-of-whack environment."

Last fall's wildfire has created an environmental research opportunity, as scientists can study how a forest recovers from a large-scale fire, said Joe Lemeris, a resource management biologist for the state Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism.

In the case of Pinnacle Mountain, the lack of fires has caused plants to grow on

the mountainside that typically are supposed to be by the creekside. Those plants have been "knocked back," Lemeris said.

Evidence of the wildfire can be hard to see in some places where firefighters burned sections on purpose to remove fuel, he said.

Trees held their leaves particularly longer this past fall, so the forest floor is covered in leaves that fell after the fires. The leaves help with erosion control and provide nutrients, he said, and the tree canopy has cleared to let in more light, which will spawn new grasses and wildlife drawn to new food sources.

The wildfire has unlocked potential even in the higher elevations where trees were completely topped, said Poll Knowland, manager of Table Rock State Park.

For 19 years, Knowland said, he has been in search of the ruffed grouse to no avail.

But recently, he said, one of the birds emerged from a pile of ashes and flew away.

"Where he came from, I don't have a clue," Knowland said. "But I can guarantee you — the bears are back, the deer are back, everything is back, and they're thriving."

The wildfire was an extensive natural event that required nighttime flights to measure hot spots with infrared technology and the U.S. National Guard to use Chinook helicopters to dump water. The state is currently awaiting federal money to aid in the cost, which could take another year, Jones said. The state House approved a budget proviso last week that would appropriate \$1.25 million for a federal match.

But the wildfire didn't result in any deaths or damage to homes, which were threatened but protected by controlled burns and techniques to guard against approaching flames, such as clearing flammable materials from the perimeter and cleaning roofs and gutters.

More information on the "Firewise" techniques can be found online at the state Forestry Commission website.

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