

Fall color paints the Upstate

BY CAITLIN HERRINGTON
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SENECA — It's hard to miss the change in scenery taking place outside this time of year. Even those who don't consider themselves "outdoorsy" will likely find themselves staring out the window awestruck by the landscape — and this is definitely the week to be staring. "The color is changing dramatically now every day," Jocassee Lake Tours co-owner and South Carolina master naturalist Kay Wade said. "It was green out there on Oct. 31, then Nov. 1 it was really, really colorful."

For the past nine years, she and her husband, Brooks, have watched the colors change in Devils Fork State Park and the surrounding Blue Ridge Escarpment, and they always bank on radiant color the first week of November.

"It's exploding with color on the lake right now," Brooks said. "It's degrees more intense than even two days ago. If you want to see the peak, it's right now."

For those who don't want to get out on the lake, there are plenty of scenic overlooks that allow leaf lookers to stay in the comfort of their cars and others that are a short walk away from a scenic drive.

The Wades recommend the views from the Wigington Overlook off S.C. Highway 130 or, for those who have a vehicle that can manage some off-roading, Jumping Off Rock. A quick stroll from the car also provides great views at Sassafras Mountain and Caesar's Head.

A fall color report is posted every Friday on the Caesar's Head State Park website, and the Nov. 1 report didn't note "brilliant color," but advised the few nights of frost last week were likely the catalyst for color. The higher ridges of Table Rock State Park are already bare, possibly due to the havoc wreaked by last fall's fires, according to the report.

So how long will the colors last? There's no time like the present to get out and admire, but the Wades said conditions are favorable for another week.

"As long as we have warm, sunny days and cool, crisp nights, we're going to have really good color for a long time," Kay said. "The only thing that would change that in the foreseeable future is going to be either a lot of wind and rain, or perhaps a really hard cold snap."

The Old Farmer's Almanac website shows Oconee County at moderate color on its fall foliage map, while counties in nearby western North Carolina have already peaked and begun to fade.

Ready to hit the road but don't know where to go?

NORTH GEORGIA AND WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA

With a full day of driving and snapping photos that'll make friends and family jealous, Upstate residents can easily see several spots in South and North Carolina.

Starting in Seneca, head west on U.S. Highway 76 to Long Creek and check out the autumn vista at Chattooga Belle Farm. For hikers, nearby Long Creek Falls offers a great view as it flows into the Chattooga River. Continue west on Highway 76 to Clayton, Ga., and grab lunch at Universal Joint or Clayton Pharmacy before heading north on U.S. 441 toward Franklin, N.C. There are plenty of lunch spots here, as well as the Crazy for Sweets shop for those with a sweet tooth.

The next stop is Wayah Bald, a clearing on the Appalachian Trail marked by a stone fire tower built in 1937. The overlook is only a five-minute walk away from the parking area on National Forest Road in Cartoogechaye, N.C. Head back down to Wayah Road and follow it until it intersects with U.S. Highway 74, and head east to continue to Cherokee, N.C., to check out Oconaluftee Island Park. Ready to head south? Take U.S. 441 South and U.S. 74 to S.C. 107 to visit the Oscar Wigington overlook. This road comes to an end on S.C. Highway 130, so take a right to head south and visit Devils Fork State Park just off Highway 11, or head home through Walhalla.

UPSTATE ROAD TRIP

Starting in Seneca, head north on S.C. Highway 130, take a left onto S.C. 133 and then right on Shady Grove Road to hit S.C. Highway 11. For those who have a vehicle with off-roading clearance, Jumping Off Rock is on Horsepasture Road just off U.S. 178. This gravel road has some very steep and washed-out areas and isn't suitable for all vehicles, but nearby Sassafras Mountain is open for visitors and much friendlier to cars. Table Rock State Park on Highway 11 offers great views even without a hike, and Caesar's Head State Park and Bald Rock offer mountaintop views without ever breaking a sweat. The latter two are located on U.S. Highway 276 North, and Bald Rock isn't well marked. Occasionally, fresh fruit vendors will be near the entrance to Bald Rock, and there may be other cars in the limited parking spot.

Bring a picnic lunch — and maybe grab some fresh fruit — to enjoy at the picnic areas around Caesar's Head and dine with a stunning view of all the autumnal glory the Blue Ridge Mountains have to offer.

Whether it's by foot or by car, there are several options to take in the stunning views of fall in the Upstate. The Wades have their favorite spots, but Brooks said there is never a bad one.

"Whatever you do," he said, "get outside. There's no bad view when it looks like this."