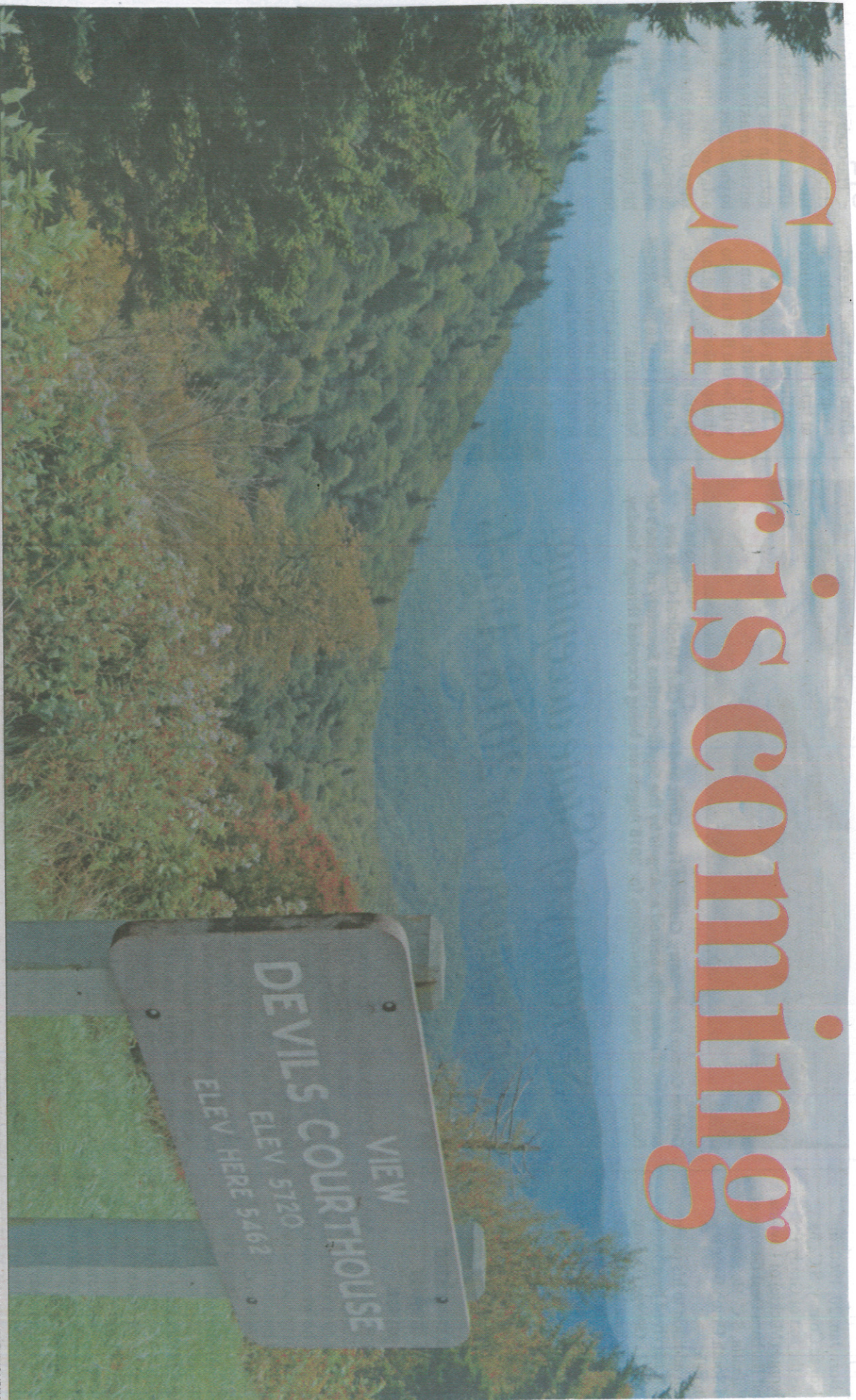


Color is coming.



Clemson University forest ecologist Don Hagan said the 2018 fall color season will be brighter than 2017, even with the risk that Hurricane Florence posed in the region. The higher elevations will change first, he said, and the colors will slowly move down the mountains.

SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

Ecologist predicts vibrant fall display

BY CAITLIN HERRINGTON
THE JOURNAL

While Hurricane Irma wreaked havoc on trees in the Upstate and western North Carolina last year, forcing leaves to fall ahead of their annual display, Hurricane Florence doesn't seem to have impacted the region as harshly.

Clemson University Forest Ecologist Don Hagan, who has been predicting fall foliage for six years, headed up to Devil's Courthouse in the Pisgah National Forest last week to assess the damage.

"We didn't see the direct impacts here along the southern Blue Ridge Parkway like we could have seen," Hagan said.

"Had we seen a little bit more wind and a little bit more rain, we could have seen leaves getting knocked off before they ever had a chance to turn — and we just fortunately didn't see that this year."

While Irma hit after a summer of drought, above-average rainfall and warm temperatures allowed the leaves to hang on through Florence's winds, Hagan said. The extended heat might delay the display into mid-October, he said, but it's always best to start looking early since autumn colors gradually change then seemingly disappear in the blink of an eye.

"There's not a whole lot of

color happening yet, but it's coming soon," Hagan said. "What a difference a year makes. Every year we come up here for my dendrology class, but I don't think in the time that we've been doing this, there's ever been as big a difference as we're seeing between 2018 and 2017."

Though he can't predict exactly when the shift in landscape hue will begin, Hagan said keeping track of the weather will be a helpful indicator. Lots of green was still prevalent in elevations about 5,000 feet during his scouting report, but a sudden cold snap could expedite the change.

"You get some cooler weather and those nice bluebird skies,

and the clear skies along with the cooler temperatures help bring out some of the brighter colors, and particularly the reds and the purples," he said. "If we can see that as we transition into fall, I think this could really line up to be a fantastic fall color season."

"If it's warm, moist and sunny, plants are going to hold onto the leaves as long as they can," he added. "So if we have a warm fall, like it seems like we're going to have, we could potentially have a later start to our fall color season and a longer fall color season."

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The southern Appalachian mountains are a special area that boasts a variety of trees ranging from evergreens in upper elevations to the oaks and maples that make New England a fall destination.

"The species that make New England famous for having such a beautiful fall color season, we have them here, too," he said. "You've just got to be up at this higher elevation to see them."

Between 4,500 and 5,000 feet in elevation will be the first areas to change colors, boasting a rainbow of colors due to the different tree species present in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

"Every tree kind of produces its own characteristic color leaves,"

Hagan said. "Birches, for example, are going to be yellow. Dogwoods are going to turn a purplish color. Sourwoods and fire cherries are going to turn red. Red oaks tend to turn red later in the year as well. Really, the more species you have present, the more diverse that palette of colors that you might see at a given point in time is going to be."

The colors are coming, Hagan said, and will likely be a welcome sight after a less-than-bold autumn last year. He advised making a trek to the higher elevations a day or two after a cold snap to catch the trees displaying their annual show — even if it takes a bit longer than expected for a cold snap to happen.

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 2018

R: 'Coming soon'