



# Jocassee Journal

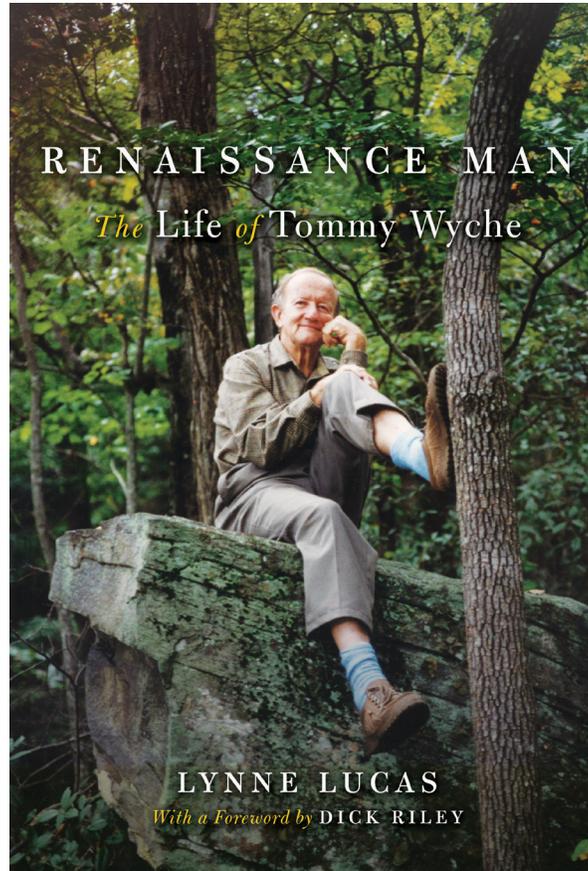
Information and News about the Jocassee Gorges



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Bob Hughes said in his eulogy to Tommy Wyche that Tommy will live on “in the trees, on our streets, in our buildings, in our arts, in our mountains, and in our water, Tommy will be there for us.”

## ‘Renaissance Man’

New book on Tommy Wyche chronicles conservation efforts that protected much of South Carolina’s Blue Ridge

He was known simply as “Tommy” and was, to a fault, unassuming.

Beneath that unassuming disposition were many aspects of Tommy Wyche that deserve a closer look, and the new book, “Renaissance Man: The Life of Tommy Wyche,” by Greenville author Lynne Lucas, does just that. Numerous Upstate South Carolinians remember this fascinating man, who died in 2015, as the visionary who initiated and then led the nearly half-century process of preserving more than 100,000 acres of the state’s majestic Blue Ridge Mountains.

All proceeds from the sale of this book will be donated to Naturaland Trust, a non-profit conservation organization formed by Tommy Wyche in 1973.

The range of Tommy Wyche’s accomplishments is

breathtaking. Much of the magic of present-day Greenville—its beautiful, progressive, energetic character—stems from plans outlined in meetings and collaborations involving Tommy over the course of several decades. And he did most of this “on the side.” Tommy’s daily work earned him a reputation as one of the state’s most respected attorneys and as a leader of one of its most prominent law firms.

The story of Tommy’s rich life as outlined in the new book is the story of an unconquerable spirit. With the help of Tommy’s colleagues, friends, city and state officials and family—plus a sprawling array of documents and stacks of public records—Lynne Lucas draws a detailed and engaging picture of a Greenville native son who combined a boundless imagination with a can-do approach to change the world for the better. 🌿

*(“Renaissance Man” is available for purchase at M. Judson Books in Greenville and Hub CityBooks in Spartanburg. For an excerpt from the book, see Page 6.)*

# Callery pear: It's everywhere!

Consider removing invasive tree  
and planting one that's native

By Dr. David Coyle

You may have noticed trees with white flowers and bright green leaves all around the Jocassee Gorges region during early spring. Most of these are Callery pear, an invasive species originally from China but brought to the U.S. around 1900. They were used to help the pear industry at the time, and that they did.

But one of these Callery pears became the Bradford pear – yes, THAT Bradford pear, the one commonly planted in yards and along roads throughout the Upstate. Once thought to be sterile, Bradford pears can produce viable seeds if pollinated by another pear species or cultivar. These seeds are eaten by birds and spread around wherever birds fly (which is, well, everywhere!).

Now we see Callery pears along roadsides, fence lines, in forests, in abandoned lots, and pretty much everywhere else. Callery pears have thorns, can grow singly or in dense



The thorns on Callery pears can injure livestock (and people) and are sharp enough to puncture tires. Callery pears often grow in dense thickets and crowd out native vegetation.



Callery pears are an invasive species originally from China that were brought to the United States around 1900. (Photos by Dr. David Coyle)

thickets, and crowd out native vegetation. The thorns can injure livestock (and people), and are sharp enough to puncture tires! Very few insects eat the leaves, which means that to every bird looking for a caterpillar to feed their young this spring, a Callery pear represents a space with nothing to eat.

We're working hard in the Clemson University Department of Forestry and Environmental Conservation to determine the impacts of Callery pear, and recently Clemson Extension partnered with the South Carolina Forestry Commission and the City of Clemson to conduct a "Bradford Pear Bounty" program, where we gave out free native trees to residents who cut down a Bradford pear in their yard (full program details are at <https://www.clemson.edu/extension/bradford-pear/>). We hope to repeat this program next year for residents in the Jocassee Gorges region.

In the meantime, if you have Callery pear on your property, please consider removing it (and if you do, be sure to use herbicide – because if you just cut it down, it'll grow right back!). 🌿

*(Dr. David Coyle is an assistant professor with the Forest Health and Invasive Species Extension program at Clemson University. Follow him on Twitter at @drdavecoyle. You can also read more about his work at [www.southernforesthealth.net](http://www.southernforesthealth.net).)*



Fire is laid on the ground at Devils Fork State Park during a prescribed burn at the park in early 2020. The area around the remote boat ramps was burned. (Photos by Zachary Setzer)



A safety meeting is held before the prescribed burn at Devils Fork State Park in February 2020. Each controlled burn requires specific weather conditions that must be closely monitored before and during the burn.

## Prescribed burning conducted at Devils Fork State Park

### Primary objective of burn was to prevent wildfire

By Zachary Setzer

On Feb. 27, 2020, Devils Fork State Park participated in its first ever prescribed burn.

For three years, Devils Fork State Park managers have partnered with the U.S. Forest Service and the S.C. Forest Commission to plan the prescribed burn, also known as controlled burn, in the section of the park known as the “remote day use boat ramps.” Each controlled burn requires specific weather conditions that cannot be predicted in advance, as well as our reliance on our partners for their availability to burn.

In the month of February, 12.88 inches of rain poured onto the park, which provided an optimistic burn window to safely put fire on the ground. The primary objective of the burn was to reduce fuel loads, such as plant litter, which would help prevent catastrophic wildfires like the Pinnacle Mountain Wildfire in 2016. Conducting

controlled burns also improves wildlife habitat and plant life. Extra precautions were implemented to protect the rare native flower known as the Oconee bell (*Shortia galacifolia*) that grows in the park and blooms annually during March. Devils Fork State Park will continue to partner with the U.S. Forest Service and S.C. Forestry Commission to plan future controlled burns to help keep the forest ecosystem healthy.

Since 1991, Devils Fork State Park has been the gateway to witness and enjoy the grandeur of Lake Jocassee. Those who have recently visited Devils Fork State Park may have wondered, “Did the park catch on fire?” The vision of Smokey the Bear may have then flooded the mind with his famous expression, “Only you can prevent wildfires.” If either of these things came to your mind during your recent visit, you would be correct. 

*Extra precautions were put in place to protect the rare native wildflower known as Oconee bell that grows in the park and blooms annually during March. Devils Fork State Park will continue to partner with the U.S. Forest Service and S.C. Forestry Commission to plan future controlled burns.*

*(Zachary Setzer is assistant manager of Devils Fork State Park in northern Oconee County, along the shores of Lake Jocassee.)*



A common loon was one of the surprise visitors to a lake at Table Rock State Park during a survey conducted by park naturalist Scott Stegenga.

## Upstate lakes provide stopovers for migrating waterfowl

Wide variety of ducks, other birds seen at Table Rock State Park

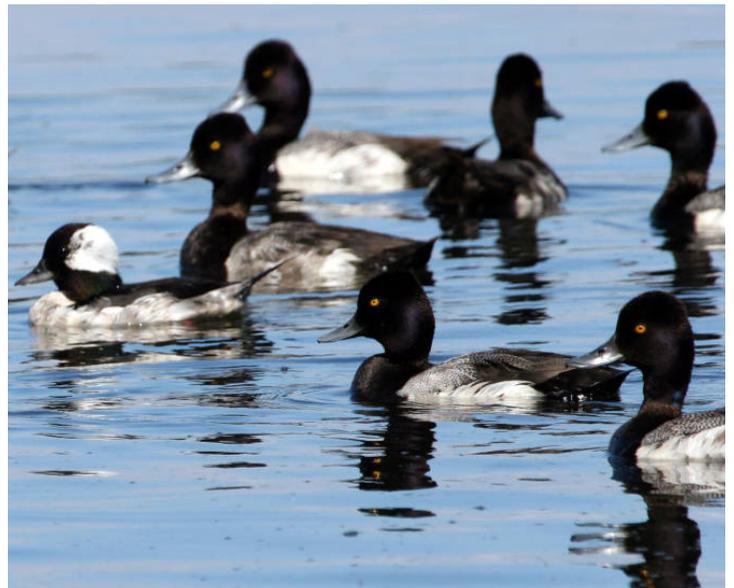
By Scott Stegenga

There are no natural Upstate lakes, but that is no concern to waterfowl. In winter, Lake Jocassee is the hotbed for loons, grebes, and gulls. As the weeks press towards spring, you never know what may show up on our inland bodies of water. From the middle of March through early May, migration calls a variety of ducks and other waterfowl to take their northern journey through the Upstate, stopping to rest and feed along the way. Even our smaller lakes can turn up pleasant surprises.

From March 13 through April 2, a variety of species have been noted on Table Rock's two small lakes. Besides the more common buffleheads, pied-billed grebes, and Canada geese, there were at least 16 ring-necked ducks, six red-breasted mergansers, at least nine lesser scaup, possibly four greater scaup, a pair of American wigeons, a Bonaparte's gull, and the rare treat of a common loon! Other species that could easily show up before May are blue-winged teal, green-winged teal, hooded mergansers, and mallards to name a few. Like many birds, the breeding plumage of ducks is crisp and vibrant.

If you find yourself near a lake or pond, take a second look to see just what may be waiting to be discovered. You may be richly rewarded. ❁

*(Scott Stegenga has been the interpretive naturalist at Table Rock State Park for more than 30 years.)*



Bufflehead and greater scaup were also seen at Table Rock State Park in northern Pickens County.

# 'Round About Greenville and the Carolina Blue Ridge'

New book blends visions of author and photographer, recommends nature as a sanctuary

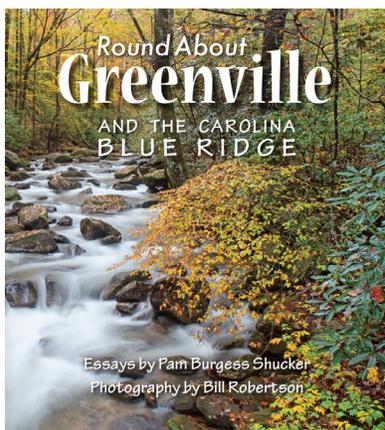
By Pam Burgess Shucker

During this difficult time of social/physical distancing and staying in relative isolation, wouldn't it be great to get a peek of the outdoors from your recliner or sofa?

That is possible! Round About Greenville and the Carolina Blue Ridge is a new book highlighting favorite peaceful retreats in beautiful surrounding Blue Ridge Mountains and foothills.

Two Greenville natives, Upstate Master Naturalist and former environmental writer and teacher, Pam Burgess Shucker, and well-known nature photographer, Bill Robertson, hike each week in this incredible mountain environment they choose to call home. On one spring excursion under gently swaying hemlock branches with a stream gurgling past, wildflowers and ferns peeking beside the trail, the idea for such a book sprung forth.

"We should combine our writing and photographs to introduce folks to the environmental diversity we enjoy each week," one suggested to the other. A book detailing their favorite locations for peaceful retreat in the nearby Carolina Blue Ridge Mountains and Piedmont emerged.



Upper Whitewater Falls is one of the many breathtaking photos by nature photographer Bill Robertson featured in "Round About Greenville and the Carolina Blue Ridge."

Bill's photographs, termed "restorative environments," hang in local hospitals and many other businesses and homes in the Upstate. Hospitals realized that soothing images of mountain streams, nature scenes, colorful flowers, and mountain vistas helped people recover faster than in a sterile hospital environment.

Time spent viewing nature, in reality or photographs, improves emotional health, something needed in these trying times.

Research studied 290 million people in 20 countries, including the US. The study concluded what nature-lovers already know: "... spending time in, or living close to, natural green spaces is associated with diverse and significant health benefits. It reduces the risk of type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, premature death, and preterm birth, and increases sleep duration. People living closer to nature also had reduced diastolic blood pressure, heart rate, and stress.

"People living near greenspace likely have more opportunities for physical activity and socializing.

Meanwhile, exposure to a diverse variety of bacteria present in natural areas may also have benefits for the immune system and reduce inflammation.

"Much of the research from Japan suggests that phytoncides -- organic compounds with antibacterial properties -- released by trees could explain the health-boosting properties..." --ScienceDaily, July 6, 2018

Exploring in person is best but dreaming of nature through photos and stories offers a healthy option!

*Round About Greenville and the Carolina Blue Ridge* includes 102 pages, 80 of Bill's restorative photographs, essays about nature, location directions, and a map to get into naturally spectacular areas in Upstate South Carolina, all for \$23.00. Available on Amazon, local stores, and from author and photographer:

pamshucker@gmail.com and brphoto@bellsouth.net. 

*(Greenville native Pam Burgess Shucker is a Master Naturalist who immerses herself into nature every chance she gets. She works to share her memorable outdoors experiences through writing, teaching and public speaking.)*

The new book is available from Amazon and a variety of local sources.

## An unprecedented land acquisition opportunity lay before South Carolina conservationists in 1996

*(The following is excerpted from Chapter 8 of “Renaissance Man: The Life of Tommy Wyche,” by Lynne Lucas.)*

A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

To the west of the Mountain Bridge area that Tommy originally targeted for preservation lies another 60,000 acres of wild land. Among areas with the nation’s highest rainfall outside of the Cascades, the rugged region is almost a temperate rainforest with an average rainfall in excess of 80 inches a year. The terrain is carved by the rivers of the southern Appalachian escarpment and splashed with numerous streams and waterfalls, including the six cataracts of Whitewater Falls, the tallest falls east of the Rockies.

Although Tommy spent the first decade of his long-range conservation quest concentrating on the 40,000 acres of the Mountain Bridge, close to Greenville, he also had an eye for that tract of wilderness that lay west, reaching toward the Sumter National Forest. That wild area came to be known as the Jocassee Gorges.

Embedded in the gorges is a turquoise jewel, Lake Jocassee, which was owned by Duke Power Company (which later evolved into Duke Energy Corp.) and managed by its subsidiary, Crescent Resources. For decades, Duke had been buying up land in the mountains, first from timber companies in the early 1900s, and later from individuals. Early in 1965, Duke Power announced it would invest \$700 million in facilities along the Keowee River and Little River in Pickens and Oconee counties to ensure the generation of hydroelectric power in an area that was bound to grow. The project included a lease between Duke Power and the South Carolina Wildlife and Marine Resources Department (later Department of Natural Resources), which opened 60,000 of those acres for public hunting.



Tommy Wyche poses by a map of the Jocassee Gorges area.



Tommy Wyche’s photo of Lake Jocassee from Jumping-Off Rock taken during

By the 1990s, as the areas surrounded by the lakes were growing more popular for recreation and homes, Tommy and other conservationists were not confident that Duke could hold out if an elite mountain developer offered an enticing price tag for this pristine property, including the acreage immediately surrounding Lake Jocassee.

Tommy had been communicating for some time with a North Carolina attorney, 20-some years his junior, who had become a conservation cohort. Mike Leonard was dedicated to preserving mountainous land on the northern side of the Carolinas’ shared border, while Tommy had concentrated his efforts on the southern side. In the spring of 1995, Tommy had arranged a meeting with Leonard, leaders of the North Carolina and South Carolina chapters of The Nature Conservancy, and other conservationists to discuss a number of projects of mutual interest. One of the topics discussed that day at the Wyche firm was the pursuit of easements on land that would connect the Poinsett Reservoir in Greenville County with North Carolina game lands along the Green River.

“While we were there, talking about these projects,” said Leonard, “the head of the South Carolina Nature Conservancy mentioned, in an offhanded sort of way, that someone from Duke Power had told him that Duke

# Jocassee Gorges'



g the peak of fall colors captures the incredible beauty of the Jocassee Gorges.

had made a decision to sell portions of the 50,000 acres of Duke Power land around Lake Jocassee.” Startled that this information had not been shared earlier, Tommy and Leonard looked at each other and sensed a seismic shift in focus.

Leonard said, “Well, gentlemen, it looks like our priorities have just changed.” Everything else at the meeting was immediately dropped and forgotten.

## Negotiations intensified

Among the buyers’ negotiators were John Frampton, chief of wildlife management for the DNR; Pat Noonan, founder of The Conservation Fund, a land conservation nonprofit based in Arlington, Virginia, and past president of The Nature Conservancy; and a representative from the Richard King Mellon Foundation of Pittsburgh, which committed \$10 million.

By the summer of 1997, the talks were following a predictable pattern: Representatives of the state of South Carolina, Duke, and Crescent would formulate a fair offer on one or more of the points in the transaction, then take the proposal to higher-ups in their organizations and stand by as the sluggish bureaucratic process inched forward. It was agonizingly slow. Among those whose comments

and consent were sought or required were the Board of the DNR, the South Carolina General Assembly, the Governor, Duke Power’s top executives, and Duke’s Board of Directors.

It wasn’t all smooth sailing. By August, the negotiations appeared to be at an impasse. Duke shot down a purchase offer of \$20 million. The power company wanted \$22.6 million in cash, plus a tax write-off of \$11 million. The seller and buyers remained far apart. The Duke contingent wanted a little over \$1,000 per acre, while the state and conservation groups were offering closer to \$625. There was also an issue with Duke’s reluctance to sell some of the prime lakefront tracts.

An even bigger blow came when the Mellon Foundation withdrew its offer to donate \$10 million to the cause. The foundation balked at Duke’s request to count one-third of the land as a gift to the state so the company would receive a tax write-off. The standstill may have been discouraging, but it didn’t last long. John Frampton, chief negotiator for DNR, remembers that the negotiators quickly got back to work, trying to find a solution. 🍃

*(Lynne Lucas has lived in Upstate South Carolina and hiked its trails for more than 40 years. She was a journalist for 25 years with The Greenville News. Since 2003, Lynne has owned and operated an eco-friendly landscape design, consultation and installation business, WildEarth Landscaping LLC. She is married and lives in Greenville, close to its lively downtown, where she regularly benefits from the impact of Tommy’s decades of commitment.)*



Tommy and Harriet Wyche were all smiles at the announcement of the Jocassee Gorges acquisition held overlooking Lake Jocassee in Fall 1998.



# Lake Life

The author Danny Markus can be found on Lake Keowee on his family's houseboat "Sol Mate." He says to be sure and wave if you see them on the lake!

## A waterfront view is not a matter of life or death—it's much more important than that!

By Danny Markus

A funny thing happened when I arrived in Moscow, Moscow, Idaho, that is. It was 1990 and I had just started my studies at the University of Idaho, College of Forestry. By the grace of God, I landed an amazing graduate assistantship. I was to be the first-ever Latah County Parks & Recreation manager and would be provided a stipend plus free housing at Robinson Lake Park. Living on a lake was going to be a dream come true!

There was the sign, all right, "Robinson Lake Park." But as I turned off the ignition, stepped out of my car and looked around, something was missing. The Lake! It seems that the lake was silting in every few years and the county decided to stop the dredging needed to maintain it. Granted, my new home did offer fabulous mountain views, but a waterfront view would have to wait.

Since then, I've been wonderfully blessed and have lived in some very special places -- from the breathtaking mountains of the Hindu Kush in Afghanistan to the sublime sunsets on Lake Havasu in Arizona. And now, here I am, along with

*'We most definitely love living on the lake! The beauty, peace, serenity, calm, inspiration, there's a lot to love...'*

Stacy, my amazing wife and soul mate, living on beautiful Lake Keowee. Stacy's parents, Jim and Darlene Keelor, have lived on Lake Keowee for many years, so it was an easy decision for us to retire here. We most definitely love living on the lake! The beauty, peace, serenity, calm, inspiration, there's a lot to love, and having the lake out our back door makes it easy.

It's also fun to explore and when we get the urge, you'll find us out on "Sol Mate," our cute little houseboat. Four years ago, it took an arduous 7,000-mile (round-trip) drive to pick up the boat where it was made in Western Canada and trailer it back to the East Coast. Whew! But it was well worth the effort. Be sure to wave "hello" if you should happen to spot us, out on the water.

Not only is Lake Keowee itself a world-class natural/recreational resource, in close proximity we've got waterfalls galore to ooh and aah over, plus miles and miles of scenic and easy (or challenging) trails to hike. So I implore you, get out there and be a respectful and active participant in "Lake Life." You'll love it too! 

*(Markus is a former Arizona park ranger who recently thru-biked the 77-mile Foothills Trail in 35 ½ hours.)*

# Eastatoee Valley historical marker unveiled in Jocassee

Pickens County's 24th historical marker chronicles 13,000 years of history

The Pickens County Historical Society has unveiled the county's newest historical marker that celebrates Eastatoee Valley and the people who have dwelt in the area for thousands of years.

"This marker is extraordinarily significant," said Wayne Kelley, Pickens County Historical Society (PCHS) senior vice president. The marker is located in northern Pickens County on Cleo Chapman Highway at Shooting Tree Ridge Road, adjacent to the Eastatoee Valley entrance of Jocassee Gorges.

Dennis Chastain, PCHS Blue Wall vice president, said the society worked on the marker for more than two years.

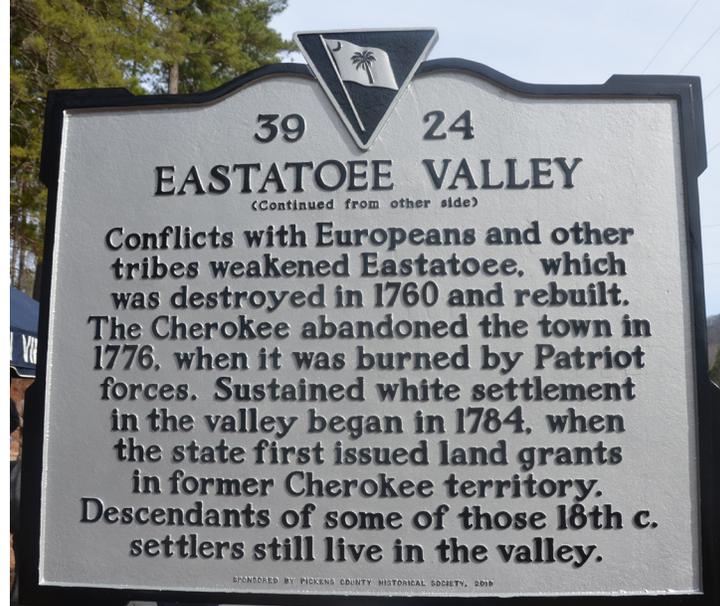
"The centuries of the Native American habitation of the valley still amazes me," Chastain said. "Then there are significant events of the modern era. It really would take four historical markers to begin to tell the whole story. All in good time." The Eastatoee Valley marker is the 24th State Historical Marker erected in Pickens County.

Chastain said that since the first time he drove through Eastatoee Valley, he has always thought of it as "a little piece of heaven right here on Earth."

Abundant evidence shows that people have dwelt in the valley for thousands of years, according to Chastain.

*"The centuries of the Native American habitation of the valley still amazes me. It really would take four historical markers to tell the whole story."*

*--Dennis Chastain*



Native American and Colonial history are chronicled in the Eastatoee Valley historical marker, which is located on Cleo Chapman Highway at the entrance to Jocassee Gorges.

"There are still descendants of the very earliest European settlers still living in the valley," Chastain said.

The marker not only highlights the valley's importance to colonial settlers and the Cherokee, but to the Clovis people.

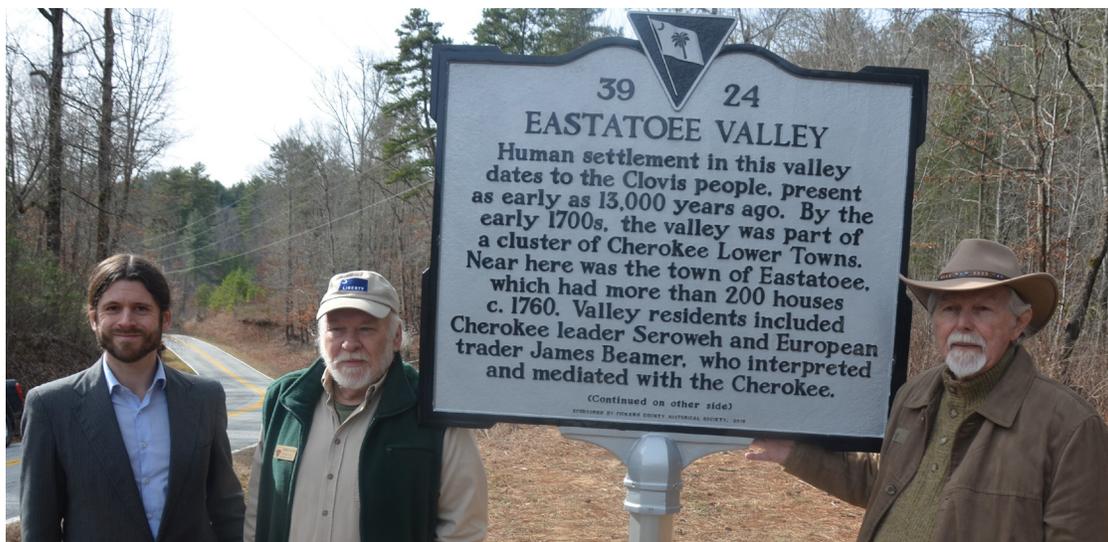
"Clovis artifacts are the oldest Indian artifacts in North America," said Chastain. "All Native Americans in North America, South America and Central America descended from the Clovis people, and they were here in the Eastatoee Valley 13,000 years ago. That is amazing."

One of the earliest traders in the in the Upcountry was James Beamer. His trading post was once located across the highway from where the new marker stands, Chastain said.

"This was true wilderness and 100 percent Indian country," he said.

Beamer advocated to the British government on behalf of the Cherokee for decades, according to Chastain. That resulted in the colonial governor's decision to construct a fort for the Cherokee.

"For the Cherokee, that sealed the deal," Chastain said. "I have often said that if the Cherokee had aligned with the French, instead of the British, we'd all be having croissants for breakfast instead of grits. It changed the course of events in North America." 



Standing beside the historical marker are (from left) Edwin Breeden, S.C. Historical Marker Program director; Dennis Chastain, Pickens County Historical Society (PCHS) Blue Wall vice president; and Ken Nabors, PCHS president. (SCDNR photos by Greg Lucas).

# Researcher looks at forest restoration in Jocassee Gorges

## Study examines ways to identify ideal areas for using prescribed fire to maintain oak and pine forests

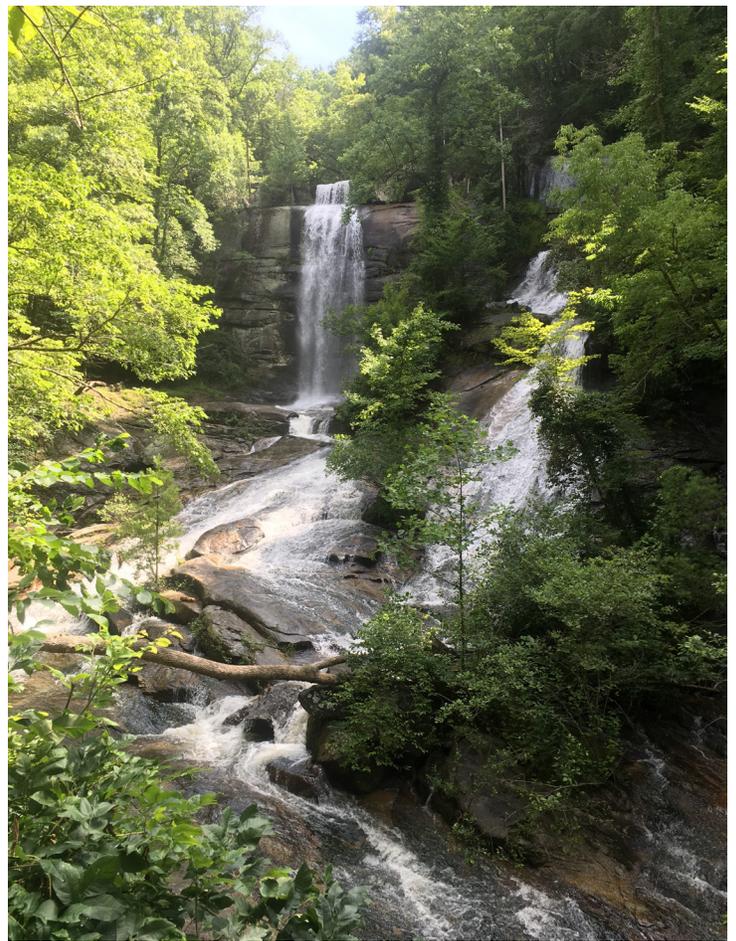
By Keith Phelps

Since July of 2019, I have had the rare experience of researching in Jocassee Gorges for my Master of Science in Forest Resources at Clemson University. Our study is funded by the South Carolina DNR and the Foothills Community Foundation, and is guided by the incredible knowledge of Mark Hall and his dedicated staff at Jocassee Gorges.

We are researching ways to identify high priority areas for ecological restoration activities, including prescribed fire, to promote forest habitats that depend on fire. We use habitat surveys and the computer mapping program ESRI ArcGIS to identify ideal areas for restoring these fire-dependent forests, along with their logistical challenges, in the entire Jocassee Gorges complex. Our aim is to help inform management restoration decisions to ensure these unique fire-dependent forests remain into the future.

Prior to European settlement, the Southern Blue Ridge Mountains were a landscape that experienced frequent fire due to Native American burning practices and periodic lightning strikes. These frequent fires helped to maintain “park-like” open forests on southern and western facing ridges that were dominated by: oaks, hickories, chestnut (before chestnut blight), and southern pines like shortleaf and pitch. These forests also had incredibly diverse plant communities including grasses, asters and blueberries.

However, as land use policies changed, indigenous communities were removed, and fire suppression policies were implemented in the early 20th century, the Southern Blue Ridge Mountains have experienced drastic changes to their ecology. We are now facing poor recruitment of oak and pine trees as fire-dependent forests are changing to favor moisture-loving trees and shrubs



Jocassee Gorges contains many natural wonders like Twin Falls. Phelps is helping to identify high priority areas for ecological restoration activities, including prescribed fire.

such as red maple, tulip poplar, mountain laurel and rhododendron. Without prescribed fire, we risk losing future generations of towering oak and pine trees and threatened fire-adapted plants like turkey beard (*Xerophyllum asphodeloides*).



Without prescribed fire, many fire-adapted plants like turkey beard may cease to exist. (Photos by Keith Phelps)

In addition, identifying areas for prescribed fire and forest restoration ensures habitat for bobwhite quail and black bear will be maintained, as they use fire-dependent forests to forage on acorns, berries and grass seed. In our fieldwork, I have become enamored with Jocassee, and its rare plants and waterfalls. As I lived in the Midwest before coming to South Carolina, I feel every day in Jocassee brings new opportunities to experience something unexpected. As I wait for the summer 2020 field season to begin, I am thankful to work on a project that assists in the conservation of Jocassee Gorges’ unique forests for: hunters, backpackers, biologists and weekend explorers!

If you would like more information on the project, please contact me at: [kpphelp@g.clemson.edu](mailto:kpphelp@g.clemson.edu). 



Alison Rauch crosses the finish line.

## Hiker makes ‘life-changing’ charity walks

She’s already looking forward to 2021

By Alison Rauch

Leaves crunching under your feet, the sounds of a creek running along the trail or a deer running in the woods – these are a few of the things you may experience while hiking along the Foothills Trail.

My interest in hiking began when I adopted my lab/pit mix in 2014. At the time I was living in Rock Hill just outside of Charlotte and needed a place to let my active dog burn off energy. We found the Anne Springs Close Greenway and immediately fell in love. When I moved to Greer in 2016, I quickly learned Rock Hill and the Upstate are very different in terms of terrain, and that I would need to work on my endurance. I began seeking hikes with waterfalls, and boy does the Foothills Trail have plenty of them!

From Upper Whitewater Falls, Virginia Hawkins Falls and Raven Cliff Falls, I got my first taste of hiking in the Upstate. I also frequent the South Carolina State Parks for their well-maintained and highly-blazed trails. Jones Gap, Caesars Head and Table Rock are just a few of my favorites that feature Foothills Trail hikes. Shortly after moving to the Upstate, I saw a billboard promoting the Trailblaze Challenge – a one day, 28.3-mile hike along the Foothills Trail to benefit Make-A-Wish South Carolina. Mind you, the longest distance I’d ever hiked in a day was probably 12 miles. I’m always up for a challenge and knowing it benefitted a good cause helped in my decision.

For four months leading up to the big day, I got to

experience the beauty of hiking in South Carolina. The native fauna, lush green trees, suspension bridges and abundance of breathtaking views really surprised me. In Fall 2017, I completed my first Trailblaze Challenge starting at Upper Whitewater Falls and ending at Oconee State Park. The trail was somewhat downhill with great views of the Chattooga River.

In Fall 2019, I completed my second Trailblaze Challenge from Cane Brake to Table Rock State Park. This hike involved climbing Sassafras Mountain, the highest point in South Carolina, and a staircase conveniently and aptly named “Heartbreak Ridge.”



**The Sassafras Mountain Overlook in northern Pickens County, the highest point in South Carolina at 3,553 feet, was a great place for Alison Rauch to relax during her visit to the mountains.**

While challenging, the rewards of these hikes have completely outweighed the sore muscles and occasional blisters. I have a new appreciation of hiking long distances, met new hiking friends, seen wildlife in their natural habitat and helped grant wishes for kids with life-threatening medical conditions through Make-A-Wish South Carolina. There is another Trailblaze Challenge that, once completed, would cross off the entire 77 miles of Foothills Trail.

I’m looking forward to taking that challenge in 2021. If I can do this hike, you certainly can too. Make-A-Wish holds these hikes every May and October. I promise you it will be a life changing experience in more ways than one. 🌿

*(Alison Rauch is Public Information Coordinator for Greer Commission of Public Works.)*



# Jocassee Journal

Information and News about the Jocassee Gorges

S.C. Department of Natural Resources  
Director, Robert H. Boyles Jr.  
Editor: Greg Lucas

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For information on subscribing to the Jocassee Journal contact:  
Greg Lucas, SCDNR

311 Natural Resources Drive  
Clemson, SC 29631-3253

Phone: (864) 380-5201  
e-mail: LucasG@dnr.sc.gov

website:

<https://www2.dnr.sc.gov/ManagedLands/ManagedLand/ManagedLand/53>

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# Sassafras Mountain Overlook wins accessibility award

## Highest point in South Carolina presented award in nation's capital

The Sassafras Mountain Overlook has been honored by the Coalition for Recreational Trails as recipient of its Tom Petri Annual Achievement Award in recognition of outstanding use of Recreational Trails Program funds. This national award, which honors Tom Petri, a former member of Congress from Wisconsin and longtime champion of the Recreational Trails Program, was presented at a special Capitol Hill ceremony in Washington, D.C.

At 3,553 feet, Sassafras Mountain soars at the border with North Carolina, and offers scenic views of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The Sassafras Mountain Overlook project included a mobility-impaired trail and ramp, along with a paved road that travels to the mountain top, allowing access for people of all abilities.

The Sassafras Mountain Overlook opened April 22, 2019, on Earth Day.

The accessibility projects on Sassafras Mountain Overlook were funded in part by the Recreational Trails Program, an assistance program of the U.S. Department



The Sassafras Mountain Overlook has been honored by the Coalition for Recreational Trails for outstanding use of Recreational Trails Program funds. (SCDNR photo by Danielle Kent)

of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration. In South Carolina, the Recreational Trails Program is administered by S.C. State Parks.

The S.C. Department of Natural Resources, which owns and manages Sassafras Mountain Overlook, plans to pave the mobility-impaired trail in the near future, making it even more accessible. The trail was built according to Americans with Disabilities Act standards, but some visitors have complained that the crusher-run surface is difficult to push wheelchairs on. 