



Mountains bloom with color

IN FULL BLOOM: Pink wild honeysuckle, which is really a wild azalea, is in full bloom on Big Rock Mountain.

Charles Sowell/Staff

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The numbers on the Nine Times Tract are impressive, but the scenery is even better.

After Wadakoe Mountain, Nine Times has been called the most environmentally sensitive area in the region. *Upstate Forever* has borrowed the money to purchase about 560 acres and entered into an agreement to purchase the rest from Duke Energy.

The price will be more than \$10.5 million.

The 2,000-foot-high hill known as Big Rock Mountain alone would be worth it at twice the price.

It has been reported that Dr. Patrick McMillan of Clemson University found 134 species of native wildflowers in a 1,000-square-meter plot there.

For decades, only the turkey hunters got to see Big Rock Mountain as Dennis Chastain presented it this week: A rock-ribbed bastion of wildflowers rare and

common; salted with a plentitude of wildlife large and small; and peppered by views destined to leave jaws sagging.

The beginning of a hike to the top of Big Rock starts mundanely enough, following a well-worn access road beneath a power line.

That quickly changes when a young tom turkey flushes. Startling doesn't begin to cover the effect of a three-foot-tall bird leaping into flight yards away. Wild turkeys make their own wind when

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they take to the air and the backwash is pure wilderness.

Wild honeysuckle, actually a wild azalea, is the most impressive flower blooming on the mountain in mid-April; lush, velvety pink blossoms with vaguely unsettling stamens like tiny bird tongues tipped with anther sacs waiting to dab a visiting insect with pollen.

The business of nature in April is all about reproduction and flowers - showy and mundane.

Chastain knows the flowers well. He's written a book about mountain wildflowers and regularly leads tours of wilderness floral hotspots.

He's hunted and hiked in the Nine Times tract for more than 30 years.

It's like visiting with an old friend for him.

Higher on the mountain and deeper into the woods there's an eerie silence to the forest.

"No squirrels," Chastain said, explaining the quiet. "The mast crop last year was virtually wiped out in the mountains by a late frost. The squirrels were, too."

Prickly canes dotted with white blossoms and low shrubs equally fecund signaled a good berry crop to come.

"There will be a black bear banquet up here in June," Chastain said.

With each passing curve in the old logging road, Chastain finds new



ROOT BEER FLAVOR: Wild sassafras is the root used to flavor root beer and blooms with a green flower near the summit.

specie of wildflower: dwarf iris; trailing arbutus, once a popular medicinal plant; sassafras blossoms and root beer smells; the extremely rare early saxifrage; and the wonderfully named old field toadflax's purple blossoms.

Finally, at the top, views of mountains marching off to the western horizon and forest seemingly unending. Another rock face and civilization intrudes. Houses, lots of expensive houses, are lapping at the foot of Big Rock Mountain.



Photos by Charles Sowell/Staff

HANDFUL: Above, a lunar moth fills the palm of Dennis Chastain's hand on the trail to the top of Big Rock Mountain. At right, a dwarf iris dots the woods floor on the Nine Times tract.

"People think this is a done deal," Chastain said of plans to purchase the Nine Times tract. "But it can still go south on us.

"We're heading into a recession and the pool of state money is drying up for things like land purchases. People need to commit now."

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