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Conservation groups secure Nine Times Preserve in Pickens, eye 1,700 more acres

By David Williams. Independent-Mail and Kristen Austin/Special to Anderson Independent-Mail
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PICKENS — Calling it the last large tract in the Upstate and an endangered resource, Pickens County outdoor writer Dennis Chastain praised Wednesday's announcement by Upstate Forever and the South Carolina chapter of The Nature Conservancy about the establishment of a new nature preserve.

The Nine Times Preserve is a 560 acre tract in northern Pickens County where the Southern Blue Ridge Mountains meet the Piedmont. The Nature Conservancy has purchased the land from conservation partner Upstate Forever, which acquired the property from Crescent Resources at the end of 2007.

"Large tracts are almost nonexistent," Chastain said.

The well-known outdoor writer and outdoor enthusiast who lives at the base of Table Rock, said he has hiked and fished in the Nine Times area for more than 30 years.

"During turkey season I kept a list for a book on wildflowers and documented more than 30 rare and uncommon plants on the property," Chastain said.

The conservation groups hope the Nine Times Preserve will be added to another 1,700 acres which is near the Jocassee Gorges Wilderness Area.

Upstate Forever also secured an option to purchase the balance of the property, roughly 1,700 acres, and the two organizations are already working with their conservation partners on a plan to raise the money.

Chastain said the groups hope to raise \$8 million, and the window of opportunity is small.

"The 1,700 acres is just as special as the Nine Times area," Chastain said. "They've got to raise the money before the property goes on the auction block."

The Nine Times property and additional acres contain five mountains and supports seven distinct forest types. The land is home to an abundance of fish and wildlife, including reptiles, amphibians and black bear.

A recent inventory of the property identified the presence of a high concentration of state-level rare species and species of federal concern, including the peregrine falcon, a bird that was only recently removed from the Endangered Species List. A botanical survey at the site revealed 134 native wildflower species.

"We are thrilled to have the opportunity to partner with Upstate Forever to conserve one of the largest

unprotected forest blocks in the South Carolina Blue Ridge,” said Mark Robertson, executive director of The Nature Conservancy of South Carolina. “The South Carolina Conservation Bank provided a generous grant of \$1.5 million, and Fred and Alice Stanback, two of our nation’s greatest conservation benefactors, made a very generous gift. Protecting this property would never have happened without them. Many other private individuals and foundations also contributed to the project, and we are grateful for their commitment.”

Dana Leavitt, Land Trust Director of Upstate Forever, said, “This is the first time that our organization has ever borrowed money in order to acquire land. But we had to do it. We had to get the property off the market to give our great team time to raise the funds needed to pay off the debt and secure this tract for public use and enjoyment forever. Nine Times won’t truly be protected unless we’re able to acquire the other 1,700 acres, so we have a lot of work left to do.”

“The Nine Times Tract in Pickens County has an important place in the history and culture of South Carolina and has been enjoyed by many people for many years,” said Marvin Davant, executive director of the South Carolina Conservation Bank. “It is a very special and critical link to conserving an area of iconic places in the scenic highway area of the Southern Blue Ridge Escarpment. The Conservation Bank is very pleased that it could be a partner in this effort to keep a wonderful part of our past for the future of South Carolina.”

“The preservation of this property is a key example of why land conservation is indeed a statewide issue, and why we’ve pushed so hard for additional funding for the Conservation Land Bank,” Gov. Mark Sanford said. “I want to thank everyone who was involved in this project, because protecting places like the Nine Times property is incredibly important to preserving our state’s quality of life for this and future generations.”

State Sen. Larry Martin, R-Pickens, said, “This is a great day for conservation in South Carolina with the protection of this magnificent tract. It’s only a 15 minute drive from downtown Pickens and will remain open to the citizens of South Carolina for hiking, hunting, and environmental education.”

State Representative David Hiott, R-Pickens, whose district includes the Nine Times Preserve, said, “This is the last big piece of property left in Pickens County, and I’m delighted that a key part of it has been preserved. The citizens of Pickens County and the state of South Carolina will benefit for many years to come from this historic transaction. I look forward to working with The Nature Conservancy and Upstate Forever and our state agencies in raising the funds needed to protect the remaining land.”

The Nature Conservancy will own and manage the property as a nature preserve, according to Kristen Austin, Southern Blue Ridge project director with The Nature Conservancy. Public use and public access will be a key part of the property’s management. The site will remain in a wildlife management area administered by the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources and will be open to the public for hunting during designated seasons. Although the land will be open to hunting this fall, The Nature Conservancy will be working to prepare the site for further public use and officially will open the preserve in spring 2009.

The Nature Conservancy has worked in South Carolina since 1969 to protect and preserve the state’s most important natural resources. With the support of more than 9,000 members and the guidance of a volunteer board of directors, the Conservancy has safeguarded more than 315,000 acres of natural areas across the state. The organization works to save priority landscapes, rivers and coastal areas; stop looming threats to

these landscapes; and steward and restore the health of these places so they last into the future.

Upstate Forever is a membership-based nonprofit organization working on conservation and land use issues in the Upstate region of South Carolina through three basic programs: Clean Air and Water, Sustainable Communities, and Land Trust. Under its Land Trust Program, the organization has received 54 conservation easements, protecting more than 10,000 acres of important lands in the region and has worked closely with other groups and agencies to protect several additional properties.

The South Carolina Conservation Bank was created in 2002 by the General Assembly to pay for a critical need for preservation and public access to wildlife habitats, outstanding natural areas, historical sites, wetlands, woodlands, farmland, open space, and urban parks as an essential element to the orderly development of the state. To date, the Conservation Bank has conserved 152,701 acres of important lands statewide at an average cost to the bank of \$529 per acre. The Conservation Bank is funded by a portion of the state's deed recording fee.

Visit nature.org/southcarolina, www.upstateforever.org, or sccbanc.sc.gov for more information.



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