

Nine Times tract is a must-see for nature lovers

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Many long-time residents of northern Pickens County who drive through the Nine Times tract regularly don't have a clue about the gem in their midst.

It is the hunters and the biologists who "ooh and aah" when they see it, said Dennis Chastain, a lifelong resident of the area, hunter and outdoor writer.

Packed onto the 560 acres recently purchased by the Nature Conservancy for just under \$3 million are dozens of rare and endangered species.

This is a place where ecological micro systems can mimic everything from Southeastern coastal maritime forest to Smoky Mountain coves.

This is the end of the road for the Southern Appalachian Mountains, the place where Blue Ridge meets Piedmont hills in a jigsaw of environments that vary with altitude and exposure to the sun.

The Nature Conservancy and other purchase sponsors plan to build a trail system on their slice of the 2,200-acre property. It will remain in the state's Game Management system but as a

protected enclave forever free from the threat of development.

Homes and subdivisions lap at the property boundary on several sides and Chastain, a prime mover in the effort to preserve the entire tract, admits the 560-acre recent designation as protected land makes the remaining property all the more attractive.

There is a deadline for Upstate Forever to find an estimated \$8 million to buy the rest of the property.

"This is the first time that our organization has ever borrowed money in order to acquire land," said Dana Leavitt, land trust director of Upstate Forever. "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."

A tour starts with the richly blue blossoms of Monkshood dotting the banks of Preston McDaniel Highway. With its distinctive silhouette, the plant is rare in this area, said Chastain, and is poisonous in all of its parts.

"On the northern end of the property you'll find the same trees as you'd find

in a Smoky Mountain cove," Chastain said. "Go a few miles to the southern end and you can walk through coastal maritime forest species."

Part of the reason is the tract's unique position at the end of the Appalachian chain and part is due to a rare combination of elements that give it "circumneutral or basic soil," Chastain said.

Spared the normally acidic soil of the region, many unusual species flourish.

The woods are eerily silent. Chastain blames the drought, which has decimated acorn crops for two years.

"Normally you'd be surrounded by squirrels barking and feeding," he said. "Now the squirrels are just gone."

State Department of Natural Resources biologists say the boom and bust cycle of mast crops (mostly oak) are normal and help to control squirrel populations. This year, however, the animals that can smell acorns (deer and bear) pulverize the ground around oaks that have a few acorns in an increasingly frantic search for food.



Charles Sowell/Staff

TREE DECIMATED: A black bear did this damage to a black gum tree to feed on the fruit.

DATELINE SOUTH CAROLINA



Charles Sowell/Staff

DEADLY BEAUTY: The distinctive Monkshood is poisonous in all of its parts.

> "Bears are feeding mostly on black gum," Chastain said, pointing out a large gum that had been "lapped" by a feeding bear.

"Lapping" is when the bear bites off limbs (some of them quite large) as he climbs the tree. Limb and fruit fall into a pile at the base of the tree. Once done the bear climbs down and gorges on the fruit.

It is rough on the tree, Chastain admits, but is an efficient method of feeding for the omnivorous bears.

The Nature Conservancy's Kristen D. Austin, South Carolina Southern Blue Ridge Project director, will be handling work on development of the Nine Times Tract trail.

"Work will go on through the winter and we hope to have some trails open for the public early next year," she said.

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