

# Nine Times lucky

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## Newest nature preserve opens in the Upstate

By Charles Sowell

Staff Writer

The Nature Conservancy took the tarp off its newest addition at the grand opening of the 560-acre, \$2.7-million, Nine Times Preserve.

The biological hotspot, located in Pickens County, is considered one of the finest additions to the Nature Conservancy's national holdings, said Mark Robertson, executive director the Nature Conservancy of South Carolina.

"Preserving this slice of the Nine Times Tract took the concerted efforts of state and local officials as well as the generosity of our donors," said Robertson. "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."

There remains about 1,650 acres of the original tract to be purchase from Duke Energy, said Robertson. When the tract came on the market last year it totaled 2,200 acres.

Upstate Forever's Dana Leavitt and Brad Wyche took the unprecedented step of borrowing the money to purchase the tract when it came on the market, Robertson said.

"It has taken that kind of willingness to take risks to preserve this slice of our mountain heritage," Robertson said. "It took courage, too, on the part of state local state lawmakers to stick by us and assure funding would be available last fall."

Nine Times got its name because the old Appalachian Timber Company Railroad line crossed Eastatoe Creek nine times to get to the area, said Kristen Austin, Southern Blue Ridge coordinator for the Nature Conservancy.

Historically the area, which centers around a low range of mountains located to the East of Iocassee Gorges, has been used for timbering, hunting and fishing, she said. The Nine Times Preserve will continue the traditional uses of hunting and fishing, but will no longer be logged.

Nine Times has remained a biological hotspot through all of this by virtue of the ruggedness of the terrain and good fortune.

The Nature Conservancy purchased the land from Upstate Forever, which acquired the property from Crescent Resources at the end of last year. Upstate Forever also secured an option to purchase the balance of the property, approximately 1,700 acres.

The two organizations are already working on a plan to raise the funds needed to exercise the option and acquire the rest of the property.

Overall, the land contains five mountains and supports seven distinct forest types, and is home to an abundance of fish and wildlife, including reptiles, amphibians and black bear.

A recent inventory of the property identified 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.

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

Contact Charles Sowell at 679-1208 or [csowell@thespartanburgjournal.com](mailto:csowell@thespartanburgjournal.com).