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Small S.C. mountain chain offers big panorama

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NINE TIMES — Sarah Hartman and Christie McGregor emerged from a wooded slope last spring to find a granite overlook rivaling anything they'd seen in the southern Appalachian mountains.

Neither could believe it.

Both are nature enthusiasts who'd been to the Appalachians many times, but Hartman and McGregor were standing atop a mountain they knew almost nothing about. Below them, the rolling Piedmont spread for miles.

"It was breathtaking," McGregor said. "I didn't realize this was here, right under my nose."

Hartman and McGregor, who work for the S.C. Nature Conservancy, had a first-hand encounter with the Nine Times range of Pickens County — a small collection of mountains that conservation groups are racing to protect.

The Nature Conservancy already owns 560 acres of the property, but is working to acquire another 1,700 acres before the land is sold, possibly for development.

This small mountain chain offers sweeping panoramas, rare wildflowers, elusive bears and cool, rocky streams. It's one of only four places in the state with a breeding population of northern ravens. And it's one of the few spots where wild yucca and cactus plants spring from unspoiled granite mountainsides.

But unless you're a scientist or a hunter from Pickens County, you probably haven't seen much of Nine Times.

Visitors to the southern Appalachians are usually in such a rush to see the fall colors at Table Rock State Park, Sassafras Mountain and the Jocassee Gorges that they never notice Nine Times. Names like Pink Mountain and Cedar Rock Mountain are virtually unknown to most South Carolinians.

"This has not been on the radar screen," said Dana Leavitt, an official with Upstate Forever. "If people could get to the top of Pink Mountain, it would warm their hearts that we have places like this."

'THE BEST VIEW'

Many people don't know much about Nine Times because of location, elevation and ownership.

The area adjoins the Jocassee Gorges mountain preserve, but is just south of S.C. 11, the traditional dividing line between the mountains and the Piedmont. The mountains north of S.C. 11 are taller — some approaching 3,500 feet — which has been a greater attraction to visitors than the mountains south of the highway. At Nine Times, no mountain is higher than about 1,800 feet.

Nine Times also has been owned privately for years by a real estate company affiliated with Duke Energy, the power giant that logged the area decades ago and held the land for possible use in generating electricity. So marked trails and public access points were virtually nonexistent.

That began to change two years ago when Upstate Forever struck a deal to buy about a quarter of the property from Crescent Resources for \$2.7 million.

The 560 acres now are a Nature Conservancy preserve and open to the public. An option held by Upstate Forever to buy the rest of the land from Crescent will expire in October. The state Conservation Bank, which helped with the 560-acre purchase, has no money now for such a project — and private donors also are stretched, Leavitt said.

Crescent, which filed for bankruptcy earlier this year, declined comment on the future of the rest of the property.

To Patrick McMillan, public ownership at Nine Times is more than worth it. The nationally known Clemson biologist says the area is one of the hidden jewels of South Carolina.

"You got the best view in the Piedmont right here," said McMillan, who has a public television show about nature

and the environment.

'ISN'T THIS BEAUTIFUL?'

On a return trip to Nine Times in late August, McGregor and Hartman listened intently as McMillan described the diversity of plants and animals south of S.C. 11. The area has at least 134 species of native S.C. wild flowers, but many other plants as well.

"Isn't this beautiful?" he asked, gesturing at a mat of moss, yucca and other vegetation growing from the stony face of Cedar Rock Mountain.

McMillan's tour was like a field biology and geology class combined.

For hours, he pointed out unusual plants, unspoiled rock formations and signs of animals. In the distance, McMillan noted the call of the northern raven; closer by, he found signs that a bobcat had recently crossed the Cedar Rock Mountain overlook, which attracts prey such as doves and rabbits.

Along the trail, a skunk ran across the path and a Cooper's Hawk flew through the trees. McMillan said the ripe muscadines falling to the forest floor had begun to attract bears from the higher mountains.

Little Eastatoee Creek was full of small brown fish that, during spawning season, turn into a beet-red mass that resembles a colored kickball floating in the water.

One of the most interesting things about the Nine Times area, McMillan said, is the variety of plants. To prove it, he counted 30 species in one 3-foot by 3-foot section of forest on Little Pink Mountain. He also spotted a patch of the rare Monkshood, a purplish flower, as well as a 65-foot-tall butternut tree, a rarity. Butternuts are suffering from a blight killing the hardwood trees throughout the mountains.

Not far away on a rock formation, McMillan showed McGregor and Hartman what he believes to be the rarest plant in South Carolina: a weedy, light-colored strand called the Granite Flatrock Beaksedge. Granite outcroppings provide sunny, open environments the plants need. The rare sedge also is also found at Stone Mountain, Ga.

"It's known in about 50 square feet of this state, and it's globally very, very rare," he said. "The only thing that could wipe it out is if ... it loses its habitat."

The mountains at Nine Times are actually known as monadnocks, isolated hills that in Pickens County are close enough to seem like a small mountain range. Paris Mountain near Greenville and Kings Mountain near Charlotte are other examples of monadnocks, McMillan said.

Whatever their name, McMillan, McGregor and Hartman said the views near Nine Times are perhaps the most impressive feature.

Hartman said she'd been told how pretty the area was, but had found that hard to envision until she saw it. She hopes conservationists can preserve the rest of the 2,200 acres before someone buys and develops the land.

"I'm blown away that we have the opportunity to preserve these very few places that have such uniqueness," Hartman said as she sat atop Cedar Rock Mountain. "It's sort of like a hidden treasure."

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