

Breaking Out

ALONG THE TRAIL

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— Steve Pagano, Gorges park superintendent

GORG
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The 'other' half of the Gorges

New park will remain wild and remote

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SAPPHIRE, N.C. — From a vantage point in South Carolina, the temptation is to view Gorges State Park, North Carolina's share of the spectacular Jocassee Gorges region, as the "other" half of the land mass.

If that's the case, North Carolina certainly wasn't cheated when the "halves" were handed out.

When Gorges State Park opened last year, it immediately became the wildest holding in the North Carolina state park system. A year later, it remains wild and remote, and plans call for much of its acreage to remain in that condition.

The 10,000-acre area that includes Gorges was purchased from Duke Energy. About 7,000 acres of the steep mountainous region were set aside as Jocassee Gorges State Park (a name later abbreviated to Gorges State Park to avoid confusion with the Jocassee Gorges wilderness area in the South Carolina mountains). The other 3,000 acres make up land that is being managed by the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission.

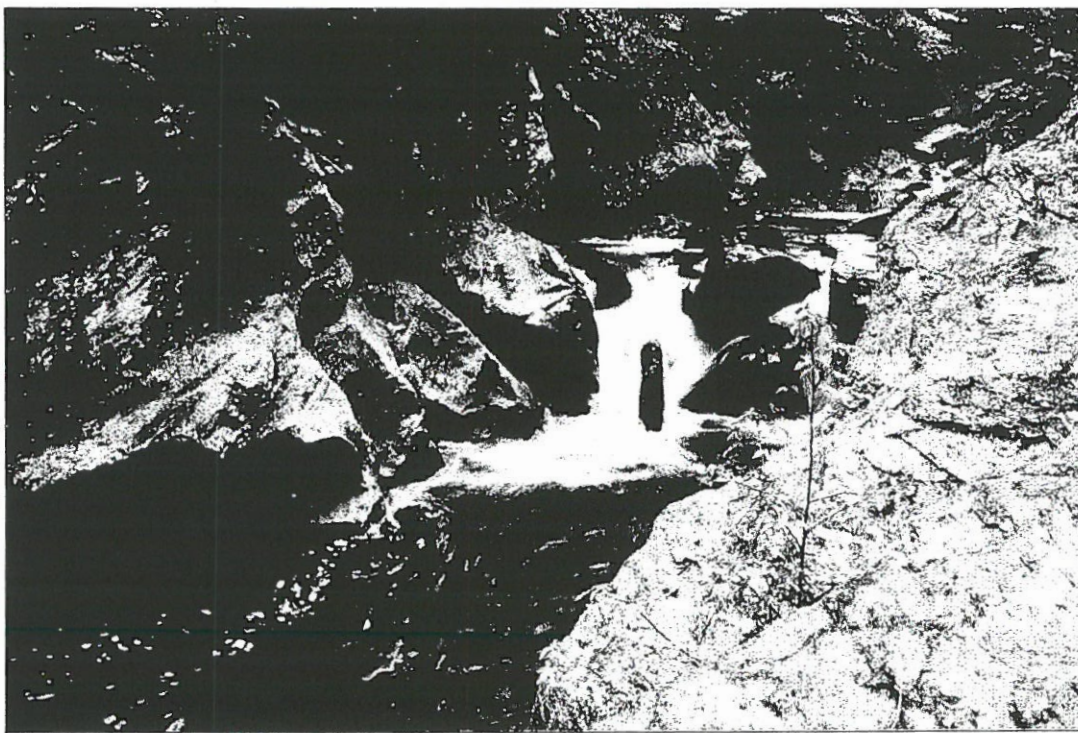
Gorges State Park shares the North Carolina-South Carolina state line with the Jocassee Gorges wilderness region of the Palmetto State, lands that also were purchased from Duke. Gorges State Park includes the upper reaches of Lake Jocassee, a Duke reservoir located mostly in South Carolina. The Foothills Trail also winds from South Carolina, around the northern tip of Lake Jocassee and through some of the most picturesque portions of the new park.

Perhaps the primary attraction at Gorges State Park is the fact that its treasures are so difficult to enjoy. This is not a park for the casual visitor who is used to wide trails, scenic roadways and restrooms. Gorges, in its present state, has none.

Very much in its infancy, the park doesn't even have a parking lot. A temporary parking area is being constructed off N.C. 281. It is expected to be open in March. In the meantime, visitors park along the highway.

There is no vehicle access to the park area. The only roads are relatively primitive former logging roads, roads built by Duke to access remote areas and wide dirt paths carved by some of the region's early settlers.

Visitors currently use the park roads as walking trails. They lead deep within the interior of an area blessed with



Tumbling down: Step Around Falls cascades among the giant boulders on the upper reaches of the Toxaway River.



Eye-catching: The Lower Bear Wallow Falls in the heart of the Gorges State Park.

some of the most rugged mountain scenery of any park along the East Coast. The journey, though, can be long, strenuous and tiring — and dangerous.

What is there to see in the interior, once you get there?

■ A wild and clear mountain river, the Toxaway, cutting through a gorge dominated by ancient boulders, massive trees, mountain laurel and rhododendron.

■ Stunningly beautiful waterfalls, dropping to placid pools.

■ Views of mountain ranges far into the distance.

■ Wild turkey, deer, black bear.

"We're getting a lot of hikers who want to walk in undeveloped areas, and we've got them," said park superintendent Steve Pagano. "You can walk here for long distances and see nothing but the woods and very few other people. And it's quiet out here. You don't even hear jets flying over."

The state bought the Gorges property in April 1999, put Pagano on the job in August and opened a temporary park office adjacent to the Sapphire post office in December. Pagano, state offi-

cial and a community advisory committee are working on both short-term and long-range plans for the park.

The park's permanent facilities will include a visitors center along one of the area's high ridges. A three-to-five-year interim plan calls for temporary parking areas, picnic facilities and some primary trail work.

Pagano said a nature trail of about one mile in length will be built, probably near the park entrance off N.C. 281. The park's other trails will be long, steep and difficult.

"We have very steep terrain and very few flat areas," he said. "Everything here is up and down. The trails will be strenuous. They won't be family-friendly. But we're going to do our best to get folks into some of the remote areas."

Hikes of several miles lead to waterfalls that only the more adventurous will see. "When you get there, you know you're looking at something that only few people have seen," Pagano said.

Some of the area's best waterfalls can be reached only by bushwhacking along stream beds after already rugged access trails end, Pag-



Nice view: Overlooking Gorges State Park land from atop Grassy Ridge.

ano said. Other than the portion of the Foothills Trail that runs through the park, none of the hiking areas in the park is marked.

"To really see the interior of the park and get a true feel for it, this won't be for beginners," he said. "In five years, we'll have some marked trails. But, right now, this place is so rugged, you shouldn't go too far in without a map and compass and knowledge of how to use them."

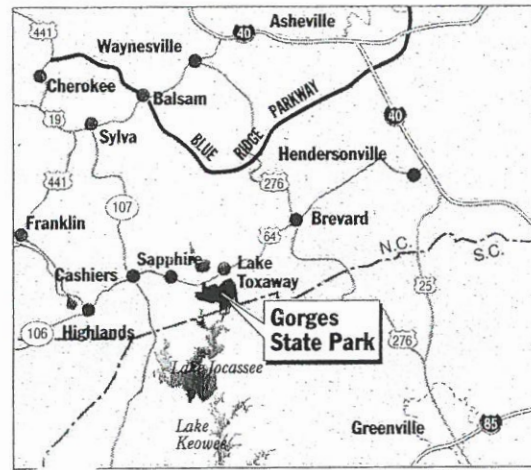
Pagano recommends that visitors who plan to venture any significant distance into the park stop by or contact the park office on U.S. Highway 64 for assistance. The office is open Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. and sometimes is staffed on weekends.

The park will be a work in progress for many years to come as trails open up some

of the remote backcountry to visitation.

Even then, the beauty of Wintergreen Falls, Step Around Falls, Lower Bear

Wallow Falls and the Toxaway gorge will be difficult to access.



SUZIE RIDDLE / Staff

GOING GORGES

Park office: At the intersection of U.S. Highway 64 and N.C. Highway 281 in Sapphire, N.C.

Park telephone: 828-966-9099

North Carolina state parks Web site: www.ncsparks.net

Hiking: Allowed on park roads and trails, including the Foothills Trail

Horses and mountain bikes: Allowed on Auger Hole Road from Frozen Creek Road to Turkey Pen Gap

Camping: Backpack camping allowed only at campsites along the Foothills Trail. No recreational vehicle or camper facilities

Lake Jocassee access: Available through Devils Fork State Park in South Carolina

Tips: Stay on road and trail areas and avoid cliff faces and slippery areas near streams and waterfalls. Begin hikes in time to return to park boundaries before dark. Dress for rough conditions and weather extremes

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