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SEMI-WEEKLY

Park Review

Staff Of Only State Park West Of Asheville Reflects On First Year Of Existence

Steve Pagano, who was hired as superintendent of Gorges State Park on June 9, 1999, supplied *The Transylvania Times* with a Gorges State Park Year in Review. Here are some of the highlights from the review:

The State of North Carolina completed its purchase of 10,000 acres from Duke Energy Corporation on April 29, 1999. Gorges State Park will consist of 7,100 acres, and the North Carolina Wildlife Commission will manage the remaining 2,900 acres.

A dedication ceremony was held at Whitewater Falls when Gov. James B. Hunt proclaimed Friday, Sept. 3, 1999 as Gorges Celebration Day.

On Aug. 31, 1999, the park finalized the members of the Park Advisory Committee (PAC). The members are: Rick Pangle, Transylvania County Parks and Recreation; Larry Ragsdale, Brevard College; Tom Thomas, T.C. Henderson Elementary School; Bill Thomas, Sierra Club; Marla Cilley, local government; Libby Freeman, Brevard/Transylvania Chamber of Commerce; Judge Cecil Hill, senior citizen; Bob Hoxit, park user; and Erin Bronk, U.S. Forest Service district ranger. PAC held its first meeting Sept. 30, 1999 at the Transylvania County Administration Building.

Beginning in September, the park staff began utilizing inmate

labor one week each month for resource management projects. One project, which they have helped, includes the marking of the park boundary. There are approximately 36 miles of boundary line, which has to be located, cleared and marked.

On Jan. 24, 2000, Gorges State Park hired six temporary staff members for six months to work on boundary line management. A \$35,000 grant funded these positions. By June 6, 2000, 30 miles of boundary have been successfully located, cleared and marked.

On Dec. 13, 1999, renovations and construction of the new interim park office facility (formerly Rice Furniture of Sapphire) was begun by park staff. The office officially opened Jan. 15, 2000. Prior to that date, operations were held at the home of Superintendent Pagano. Additional office, mechanic and park staff were hired during December and January. Park staff and PAC members participate in various activities during spring 2000 including a tour of Gorges State Park on April 11, 2000.

The Environmental Assessment for the interim park development was completed May 23, 2000. The assessment will now be reviewed by all necessary parties for approval. Comments are due by Aug. 11, 2000. On June 30, 2000, Superintendent Pagano attended



As the first superintendent of the newly-created Gorges State Park, Steve Pagano has overseen the initial planning of the 7,100-acre park.

a meeting in Raleigh to discuss the development of interim park facilities and a time frame for completion. Interim facilities are planned to include parking areas, restroom facilities, picnic areas and trails into the park.

On May 26, 2000, the Department of Transportation (DOT) installed new "No Parking" and "No U Turns" signs near park property. However, illegal parking along N.C. 281 (Whitewater Road sec-

tion) is still a problem.

A Pulse Inventory Study began this month (July 2000). This intense Park and Animal study will last eight days and will utilize dozens of volunteers. Meanwhile, other park operations continue such as boundary line management, roadway and trail management, planning processes and day to day duties.

Environmental Studies And Inventories
The Environmental Studies

Fish Communities and Stream Habitat — Jason Robinson of North Carolina State University (NCSU) continued stream-monitoring projects in the Toxaway and Horsepasture river drainages. Numerous sample locations were identified and tested. He conducted both physical and biological assessments at various locations within both drainage areas. Fieldwork and sampling projects will be con-

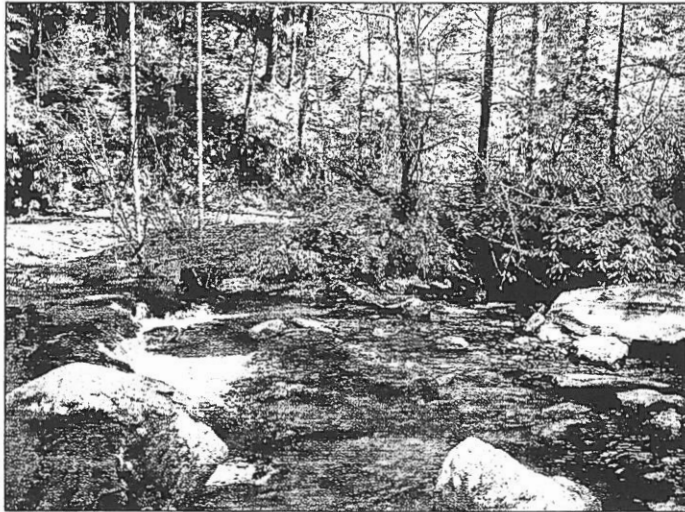
ulation density. Sealy will also educate park staff on how to safely capture and relocate rattlesnakes from visitor use areas. Sealy's research will provide scientific data for his thesis project and valuable information to park staff concerning proposed development.

Amphibians and Terrestrial Mollusks — Seth Lambiase of the Division of Parks and Recreation has continued his survey of amphibians and terrestrial mollusks throughout the Toxaway and Horsepasture drainage areas. Sampling methodologies have revealed an abundance and diversity of many salamander species. The rare Green Salamander has been observed within the park boundaries and along gamelands property. The project will continue throughout the year.

Bird Surveys — The Natural Heritage Trust Fund has recently funded a bird survey to take place in Gorges State Park. Harry LeGrande and John Finnegan, Natural Heritage program biologists, have conducted preliminary bird surveys throughout various habitats. John Gerwin, curator of birds for the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences, assisted them. They conducted the survey using the breeding bird survey methodology.

Mammals — Lisa Gatens from the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences,

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With its recreational opportunities and beauty, the Gorges State Park is and will continue to be a major draw for tourists. In its first year of existence, work has been ongoing to ready the park for its visitors. That work has included the clearing and marking of the 36-mile boundary that surrounds the park, left.

And Inventories

The Environmental Studies and Inventories of the Jocassee region, which includes the Gorges State Park, are as follows:

Geology — The North Carolina Geological Survey has completed preliminary survey work and analysis at the Grassy Ridge area of the park. On April 12, 2000, Carl Merschat, Rick Wooten and Mark Carter conducted field analysis to determine if there were geologic features or conditions present that could have an effect on proposed development. Field reviews did not identify any unique geologic features in or near proposed development. NCGS field work and mapping will continue through November 2001 and provide a broad perspective of the geologic history of the area.

Rare Plant Survey — Mike Ivey and Dan Pittillo of Western Carolina University have continued their fieldwork investigating occurrences of rare vascular plants in the Toxaway and Horsepasture watersheds. They have been able to update 30 rare plant records and added eight new rare plant population records of their own. They have also conducted thorough plant surveys at the proposed interim development areas and found no rare plant species at these areas. The rare plant survey permit continues through November of this year.

drainage areas. Fieldwork and sampling projects will be concluded by the end of summer. Robinson will spend the remaining time throughout the year identifying each individual species collected. The completed project is expected to offer a valuable reference to aquatic habitats within Gorges State Park.

Natural Community Mapping

— Ross Phillips and Tom Wentworth of the NCSU Botany Department have completed their mapping project to predict Natural Community sites within Gorges State Park. They are now attempting to correlate natural community sites with aerial photographs and color infrared images. The group is also field-testing for accuracy vegetation plots predicted in the earlier mapping projects. The completed project will allow park staff the ability to relocate individual natural communities and track them over time. The project is expected to be completed this year.

Rattlesnake Research — John Sealy of Appalachian State University will continue his timber rattlesnake research throughout the summer and early fall. His research will concentrate on identified gestation sites along Grassy Ridge. The project will consist of implanting telemetry devices in male timber rattlesnakes in hopes of identifying their range and pop-

from the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences, mammal collections, has continued the sampling of small mammals found throughout the park. Her attempts to locate and trap Eastern wood rats have been unsuccessful. The Eastern wood rat was originally trapped in the Toxaway River gorge in 1963. Gatens has also begun a bat survey within the park. Her goal is to locate and identify as many species as possible. Seth Lambiasi of the Division of Parks and Recreation is assisting with this project, which is expected to be completed by the end of the summer.

Contact Information

To learn more about the park, contact Gorges State Park, P.O. Box 100, Sapphire, N.C. 28774; phone (828) 966-9099; or e-mail gorg@citcom.net.

*Photos
By Times
Staff*



Park Ranger Mike Lambert, above, was hired to assist Pagano with the park's development.



DESTINATION: Gorges State Park



Gorge's park offers many mountain views like this.

Gorges State Park is state's newest

Gorges State Park, North Carolina's newest state park and its first one west of Asheville, encompasses almost 7,000 acres of biodiverse forest land.

Two major rivers run through the park — Toxaway River and Bear Wallow Creek — and the park borders the western edge of Lake Jocassee.

The park is located in Sapphire, just inside Transylvania County, off N.C. 281 between Cashiers and Brevard and meets the North Carolina/South Carolina state line.

While there is currently no official parking area or entrance to the park, traditional hiking trails are still open and cars can be parked along N.C. 281.

The park is situated in the Jocassee Gorges area, made up of the park itself, gamelands, and 3,000 acres of game lands, overseen by the Wildlife Resources Commission.

Personnel of the park includes park superintendent Steve Pagano, another park ranger, Mike Lambert, and an office manager.

Gorges State Park has some of the most ecologically important land in the Eastern Hemisphere, containing rare species such as Oconee bells, green salamanders and Carolina star moss, said Wayne McDewitt, Gov. Jim Hunt's

chief of staff at the park opening in September 1999. Oconee bells, endemic to the Carolinas, are nearly all found within 10 miles of Lake Jocassee.

The park is rare not only in some of the plant and animal species it contains, but also in that it is the first state park in many years to be acquired, staffed and planned from scratch. Most state parks take over existing facilities, Pagano said.

The planning process is not a rapid one, however. Since the park was officially brought into existence in September, its boundaries are being marked using prison labor. Prisoners spend one week a month marking boundaries, Pagano said.

Some of the boundary points involve some creativity to find as, along with being indicated by numbers, they are described as being at "the old oak stump" or "the pile of stones by the waterfall."

A nine-member park advisory committee, formed from a cross section of area citizens, meets monthly. The committee is currently working on interim development for the park,

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such as parking and restrooms.

Natural and cultural heritage inventories are being conducted for the park by various groups and the results of these will largely affect where permanent facilities are built.

A public planning process will let people participate in long-range plans for the park, including facility development and management.

"Everything is going almost smoother than we could have hoped," Pagano said.

Park personnel expect to remain in their temporary office for three to five years while the results from the environmental studies come in and the park's master plan is developed and then put into action, Pagano said.

The office is located near where the park's future entrance will be at the intersection of N.C. 64 and 281. It is open Monday-Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Minimal development is planned for the park — a visitor's center, parking, restrooms and some additional campsites and trails, McDewitt said.

"There's going to be an environmental impact. The object is to minimize the adverse effects of it," Pagano said. Development in the park should have a very small footprint on its 7,090 acres.

For more information on Gorges State Park, call the park office at (828) 966-9099, e-mail gorg@citcom.net or visit the North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation website at www.ncparks.net.