

MOUNTAINS

Explore ‘gradient of spring’ in the park



Word from the Smokies
Hayley Benton
USA TODAY NETWORK

By the third week of April, spring is in full bloom throughout the picturesque valleys of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. In these lower elevations, trails burst with color — blue phlox, yellow trillium, fire pink, purple wakerobin — vibrant and vivid, like a palette of paints beneath a canopy canvas of white dogwood. Overhead, birds chirp and sing from bright-green budding branches. Insects hum through the underbrush. Down here in the hollow, the mountains are alive.

But up on the Appalachian Trail, in the higher elevations populated with spruce-fir forests or deciduous trees that have yet to stretch their leaves, early spring has just arrived. It may only be a 1,000-or-so-foot difference, but for a wildflower, it’s an entirely different world.

“As you move up the mountains, spring is happening at all different rates,” said Jaimie Matzko, biodiversity program specialist for Discover Life in America, a nonprofit partner of the national park. “Flowers are blooming in different places at different times. Birds are migrating to and from the region. Depending on your elevation, or even what side of the mountain you’re on — whether you’re facing north or south — you could really see anything. And that’s what makes this such an amazing time of year in the Smokies.”

It’s a change of the seasons — a gradient of spring — from the bare-branched, winter-weathered peaks to the bounty of blossoms below. And, for a nonprofit that focuses on the park’s biodiversity, it’s the perfect time to invite the public on an educational adventure, to learn more about what Discover Life in America does for Great Smoky Mountains National Park.



Participants in the 2022 Eco-Adventure spent a rainy morning at the National Park Service’s Twin Creeks Natural Science Center for a tour of the facility’s extensive, carefully maintained natural history collection. PROVIDED BY ELLY WELLS

Organized by DLiA, the three-day, two-night Great Smokies Eco-Adventure leads participants on guided, biodiversity-focused excursions in and around the national park, fostering deeper connections with nature through scientific exploration and examination. Adventurers spend their days alongside park scientists, cataloguing species on trails in the Smokies, and their nights glamorously camping, or “glamping,” at Camp Atagahi, a premier off-grid luxury camping facility owned and operated by partner organization A Walk in the Woods. In past years, groups have even discovered species previously undocumented within the park.

“Spring is an awakening,” Matzko said. “Things are new and fresh, and we tend to see much more activity, much more diversity of life — whether that’s flowers or insects or birds. And, with the

way that we’ve set up the Eco-Adventure itinerary this year, people are going to experience the different stages of spring across each of the three days.”

Now in its fourth year, the Great Smokies Eco-Adventure experience doubles as a fundraiser for DLiA, funding vital research in the national park. This year’s Eco-Adventure April 21-23 will focus on different phases of the spring season, as shown by wildflowers. This includes a deep dive into spring ephemerals — the first flowers to emerge and bloom after winter — which will still be visible during higher-elevation hikes, like those along the Appalachian Trail.

“The thing about spring ephemerals is they’re so fleeting,” Matzko explained. “There’s only a short window of time when it’s warm enough for these flowers to start blooming, before the trees have exploded with foliage, when enough



Fire pink is among the many colorful flowers in bloom throughout Great Smoky Mountains National Park in mid-to-late April.

PROVIDED BY EMMA OXFORD



Eco-Adventurers can expect to see wild blue phlox and many more wildflowers along the trail on the April 21-23 excursions. PROVIDED BY RALPH DAILY

sunlight is reaching the forest floor.”

Matzko said she’s excited to take participants hiking on the Appalachian Trail, which offers respite to migratory birds that aren’t seen in the lower elevations. The trail’s fame also makes it a special destination.

“There’s just something so iconic about the A.T.,” she explained. “People have written so many books on it, they’ve made movies, and I think it’s just kind of a neat thing for people to experience while they’re here. If we’re

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No preference

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presidential primary elections, it's not unusual to have a fractured... party during a primary election," McLennan said.

"No preference" votes made their mark in each of North Carolina's 100 counties, but Robeson County saw the state's biggest numbers with 37% choosing that option over Biden. Other counties posting high percentages included Tyrell, Alleghany and Martin.

McLennan noted that Robeson County tends to be unique and can swing more than other areas. He attributes this to the county's economic and cultural characteristics. Robeson County has a large minority population, including Lumbee Nation voters. It is also one of the poorest counties, he said.

A lack of choices

On Election Day, several voters expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of choices in the Democratic primary.

In Wilmington, Ethan Jones, 19, was one of those voters.

"I just don't really like the one option I've been given," Jones said, referring to Biden.

Voters can push back on the incumbent, McLennan said. Additionally, he said, many voters are dissatisfied about Biden's age, especially young voters.

Despite the over 88,000 who voted "no preference," Biden still clinched all 113 delegates. This is because in North Carolina, a candidate must receive at least 15% of the votes to be given a delegate. "No preference" claimed 13% of the vote, not quite hitting the threshold.

Nationally, "uncommitted" has won 20 delegates with 11 coming from Minnesota, seven from Hawaii and two from Michigan. Biden still holds the majority of Democratic delegates with 2,107.



Ethan Jones, 19, arrived at the MLK Center Tuesday morning to cast his first ballot. Jones said he will be voting "no preference" for the presidential primary. MOLLY WILHELM/STARNEWS

A vote to protest the war in Gaza

For some, the decision to vote "no preference" was an act of protest to take a stand against Biden and his stance on the war in Gaza.

One of those voters was Veronica Morson, a 22-year-old from Durham County. She has been to protests and city council meetings calling for an end to Palestinian suffering, and her "no preference" vote was just one part of her advocacy.

"The genocide in Palestine is extremely important to me," Morson said. "I wanted to make that clear by voting no preference...I feel like our government is still not taking the issue serious-

ly and is continuing to support genocide."

Morson, who doesn't regularly vote in primary elections, said the movement is actually what got her to the polls on Election Day.

"My no preference vote was solely in support of Palestine," Morson said. "It's also honestly the only reason I voted in the primaries."

Over 30,000 people have died in the war since Oct. 7 when Israeli forces invaded Gaza after a Hamas raid killed 1,200 people, according to USA TODAY.

Response from the White House has included a call from Vice President Kamala Harris on March 3 for a temporary six-week ceasefire to release hostages. The deal is still waiting for approval despite efforts to finalize it before the start of Ramadan on March 11. Biden has also called for an emergency port to be built in Gaza to help deliver aid to Palestinians who are experiencing intense hunger and disease.

Protestors say this isn't enough. They want an immediate ceasefire and for Biden to stop aiding a genocide. One movement, called Abandon Biden, calls for people to withhold votes for the current president in hopes that he would lose key swing states like Minnesota, Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Florida, Georgia, Arizona, Nevada and North Carolina and effectively lose the 2024 presidential election.

'A broken vehicle for change'

One group at the forefront of the North Carolina movement to protest Biden is the Party for Socialism and Liberation.

Palestinian Muslim Dana Alhasan, 34, is a member of the party and has participated in several protests.

Alhasan, although involved in the movement, did not vote in the Democratic primary. Instead, she voted for Claudia De la Cruz and her Vice President running mate Karina Garcia and

she encourages people to vote independently.

"The Democratic party is a broken vehicle for change," Alhasan said. "We should build an independent political party that doesn't support the war machine."

Coming to this stance was not just about the war in Gaza, she said. Her concerns run deeper than that.

"We have consistently asked and demanded the Democratic party not to invade Iraq, to not go into Afghanistan, to stop bombing Yemen, to stop the genocide in Palestine and consistently they ignore us and deny us," Alhasan said.

Alhasan also noted that the movement has increased outspoken public support for Palestine.

"So, seven years ago, I had a lot of people who would, you know, whisper in my ear that they support me but were too afraid to stand up for me," Alhasan said.

She feels like the public has become more vocal, saying the difference is so stark she would call it a "sea of change."

Looking toward November

In anticipation of the general election, "no preference" voter Morson said she feels conflicted about her plans.

"I feel like voting for Biden and voting for Trump would make me complicit in genocide," Morson said. "At the same time, I hate when people say they're not gonna vote."

Despite the protest efforts in the primary, McLennan said he still expects Biden to get 90-plus percent of Democrats voting for him in November. He cites polarization as the cause – when it comes down to it, Democrats would rather vote Biden than Trump.

McLennan said he wonders how long the movement will last.

"The real question is will that issue be as strong in November as it is in March?"

Camp

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disability groups. According to its website, the camp charges an average of \$66,000 for an 83-day outdoor experiential mental health treatment program.

The suit was filed a week after the death of a 12-year-old child at the camp in the Transylvania County community of Lake Toxaway. The camp has been temporarily shut down by state health regulators. Law enforcement and regulatory investigations are ongoing. The camp recently took legal action against the closure and the removal of campers. Camp staff said the child, who is from New York, was found dead the morning after they arrived.

Seigel, who then and now lives in Vermont, said in the suit that she was "gooned" – or taken by force – by a man and woman she didn't know and brought to the camp. While there, she was sexually assaulted by another camper "Jane Doe," something Seigel said she told staff about, though her assault was not appropriately addressed and not reported to her parents or law enforcement.

"Despite the façade of providing a safe and therapeutic residential treatment center for children, Trails Carolina has failed to screen and assess the children in its legal custody and creates an

environment where troubled children have and do sexually assault other children," she said in the suit.

On March 6, the camp and O'Kane responded in a filing in the federal court denying the allegations and saying Magistrate Judge W. Carleton Metcalf should dismiss all claims.

The camp and O'Kane noted that Seigel's parents "elected to enroll her in the Trails Carolina program."

Along with dismissing the case, Seigel should pay attorneys' costs, they said.

"These answering defendants expressly deny that there was any breach of a standard of care. These answering defendants further expressly deny that they caused any harm to plaintiff," they said.

The Citizen Times reached out March 13 to Trails Carolina Executive Director Graham Shannonhouse and O'Kane. Camp spokesperson Wendy D'Alessandro declined to details of the cases outside court proceedings, but said "Trails denies the allegations and is confident the truth and facts will come forward."

Similar lawsuit

In a similar lawsuit filed in the same court in 2023 former camper Clara M. Mann alleged that she too suffered sexual abuse "because of the negligent, reckless, wanton, and tortious acts and omissions of defendant Trails Carolina."

Mann said that happened in 2019

when she was 14 years old and another child repeatedly assaulted and battered her.

In a filed response Trails Carolina denied it "breached any legal duty" or "duty of reasonable care" to Mann.

The suit was settled in Feb. 22. No details were made public.

Ongoing investigations, petition

Both the criminal and regulator investigations into the child's death are continuing, authorities said. On March 12, a Transylvania County Sheriff's spokesperson John Nicholson said deputies were still awaiting a toxicology test by the state medical examiner and diagnostics that were being performed by the FBI on seized computers.

On Feb. 27, the camp petitioned to contest the closure and removal of children. Those actions by the health department were without reasonable basis and are "detrimental to the health or safety of the children who were already in or intended to be in petitioner's care," Trails Carolina said in the filing to the N.C. Office of Administrative Hearings.

"In addition to precluding and disrupting the care and treatment of 15 to 20 highly dysregulated and emotionally unstable children, whose parents had invested heavily in researching, selecting and financing such care and treatment in the best interests of their children, the respondent's actions have caused the cessation of the petitioner's

operations, revenue and ability to employ several dozen therapists, counselors and other staff people," the camp said in the filing.

When health officials announced the Feb. 16 closure decision, they declined to go into details because of the investigations but said "it was determined that action needed to be taken to ensure the health and safety of the children."

"The death at Trails Carolina is tragic and concerning. We extend our deepest sympathies to the family and loved ones of the child who died, and commit to them that we are conducting a thorough investigation with our county partners and will take every appropriate step based on the outcome of our and other investigations," health officials said in the statement.

The next hearing is currently set for the week of June 3 in Waynesville, according to the case file. The Trails Carolina spokesperson D'Alessandro declined to say if the camp would seek to move the hearing to a date prior to the scheduled April reopening.

Joel Burgess has lived in WNC for more than 20 years, covering politics, government and other news. He's written award-winning stories on topics ranging from gerrymandering to police use of force. Got a tip? Contact Burgess at jburgess@citizentimes.com, 828-713-1095 or on Twitter @AVLReporter. Please help support this type of journalism with a subscription to the Citizen Times.

Benton

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planning to go up to the higher elevations to look for spring ephemerals anyway, why not take them to the A.T.?"

Fields full of flowers are beautiful in their own right, "reflecting a little bit of God's creation," said Wildflower Reporter Tom Harrington, a volunteer who compiles wildflower sightings for the park.

"But after you waited all winter, with everything looking drab, it's a fun thing to see these small bits of color popping up," he said. "It's something cheerful to look forward to. You can be walking on a trail where the whole ground is covered with brown leaves, but then you notice bloodroot coming up, with a bloom that's just as white as snow. It's just so vivid against the brown background."

And every now and then, he continued, "you have surprises that you don't expect to see. It's just amazing to be out on a trail and suddenly find a rare little wildflower blooming" – like the rosebud orchid, for example. "It's usually not more than 8 to 10 inches tall, growing right in the middle of a bunch of

weeds, but it's so delicate and beautiful. It's just exciting to be out in the wild, trying to locate beautiful and rare wildflowers, and then actually find them."

According to Harrington, there are more than 1,500 species of blooming plants in the park – only about 100 of which he can confidently identify from memory alone. For the rest, he relies on a plethora of books and guides, such as "Wildflowers of the Smokies" and "Great Smoky Mountains Wildflowers."

He recommends Eco-Adventurers bring those books along for the trip, though DLIA's expert guides, including Matzko, will be there to assist adventurers with identification of both flora and fauna. In addition to wildflowers and birds, with the help of entomologist and Eco-Adventure guide Will Kuhn, the group will observe insects, too. Kuhn's "special talent" is an ability to "get pretty much anyone interested in learning more about bugs," Matzko said – even people who start the journey fearing them.

After the day's adventure, participants will return to accommodations that, while wild and off-grid, offer spacious platform tents equipped with cushy mattresses, bathrooms with running water and hot showers and meals

prepared on-site with local produce. It's a rare chance to go camping without leaving "creature comforts" behind, Matzko said.

"It's amazing how many people really enjoy wildflowers, even if they weren't so sure about it going in," Harrington said. "But they shouldn't be surprised – wildflowers are universal. We're just blessed to have places like the Smoky Mountains to be able to see them."

Learn more about the 2024 Great Smokies Eco-Adventure, slated for April 21-23, at dlia.org/event/spring-adventure-2024. Registration is open through April 1. Proceeds support DLIA's efforts to identify, catalog and observe the park's estimated 60,000-plus species through its flagship project, the All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory. Only 21,669 have been identified so far, meaning that every outing is an opportunity for discovery.

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The rosebud orchid, one of the more elusive species in the national park, is a rare but special surprise to observe along trails in spring. Even keen observers often miss the flower, as it sprouts up from what is often mistaken for a patch of weeds.

PROVIDED BY ANTHONY A. SIMMONS