

# MOUNTAINS

## Meet the ranger who works to prevent search and rescue



**Frances Figart**  
Columnist

Visitors to Great Smoky Mountains National Park topped 12.5 million in 2019. This year, despite the park having been completely closed March 24 through May 9 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the sheer volume of people is once again exerting great strain on all the park's systems – including emergency response.

Given the constraints the virus places on its staff and resources, the park is encouraging people to postpone challenging hikes or trying new activities during this time when first responders, parks, and communities all continue to concentrate on responding to the pandemic.

"We generally respond to about 100 search and rescues each year, many of which could be avoided with visitors planning and making responsible decisions," says Chief Ranger Lisa Hendy. "During the ongoing health crisis, it's critical that people make wise choices to keep our rangers and first responders out of harm's way."

Hendy focuses on Preventive Search and Rescue (PSAR), which she describes as "a parkwide effort to reduce visitor injury rates, specifically in the backcountry."

Growing up in Chattanooga, Hendy discovered Cades Cove as a point of departure for backpacking trips while getting her B.S. in Recreation/Park Management from Auburn University. She was trained in Search and Rescue (SAR) at Yosemite, Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, Arches, and Big Bend national parks.

Compared to those western parks, Hendy said the Smokies offers "proximity to wonderful partners who can assist you in your efforts. Here, we have five counties and several cooperating municipalities to lean on for help. The assistance from those resources is critical to our operations."



**Search and rescue teams, like the one shown here, respond to about 100 search and rescues each year, many of which could be avoided with visitors planning and making responsible decisions.** COURTESY OF DAVID BRILL

As an example, one year ago, in July of 2019, Kevin Mark Lynch was found by searchers in the southeast area of the park near the Cataloochee Divide Trail. He was alert and responsive after having spent four nights lost in the backcountry of Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

"During that incident we had responders from all over Tennessee and North Carolina and beyond," said Hendy. "Additionally, the volunteers that came from the various agencies were wonderful. I cannot say enough about the assistance and community support."

PSAR is usually thought of as three concurrent efforts in education, enforcement and engineering."

Education is the most common and effective means of PSAR. "Ideally we reach the visitor with information that helps them make quality choices for themselves to assess their risk in the environment and prevent injury," Hendy said.

Enforcement is the actual policing of

the regulations. "This is usually the least effective approach," said Hendy, "as it is reactive and requires an officer to happen to be standing at whatever location is in question when a violation occurs."

Engineering may be trail maintenance that makes broken ankles less prevalent, for example, or stonework walls that serve as a safety barrier. Hendy pointed out that "engineering solutions may be very costly or have impacts to wilderness character that are undesirable."

During these summer months, one of the biggest challenges for rangers is the volume of people enjoying the park. Based on their experience in developed areas, the public arrives with an expectation that help will arrive very rapidly once a person calls 911. But while modern communications allow us to call for help almost instantly, the steep terrain and personnel challenges put a limit on rangers' ability to respond.

"If you are deep in the backcountry of the Smokies, you probably went there to



**"During the ongoing health crisis, it's critical that people make wise choices to keep our rangers and first responders out of harm's way," says Chief Ranger Lisa Hendy.**

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escape developed areas," said Hendy. "The consequence is those emergency response services are also remote and will take time to assemble. The public needs to mitigate their own risks and manage their expectations for how rapidly we will be able to get to them."

Hendy's objective is twofold: Increase the park's capacity to respond to incidents by training more people while simultaneously working to reduce the number of SAR calls received.

"That is the point of PSAR," she said. "Save someone's vacation by preventing their injury while simultaneously allowing for better service to those who do become injured by bettering our responses."

How you can prevent the need for rescues:

1. Tell someone where you are going and when you will be back.
2. Plan your trip: look at a map and assess the elevation change and the length of trip against your abilities.
3. Check the weather before you go.
4. Visit the backcountry office or the visitor center for current conditions.
5. Most rescues are orthopedic injuries, so wearing good quality footwear appropriate to the terrain and the weather is essential.

*Frances Figart is the editor of Smokies Life magazine and the Creative Services Director for the 34,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Reach her at frances@gsmassoc.org.*

### BRIEFS

#### Study: Charlotte losing tree canopy in part to development

CHARLOTTE – The tree canopy that shades much of Charlotte is in decline, according to a study which said the current coverage is threatened.

A study by the University of Vermont says Charlotte lost 8% of its tree canopy between 2012 and 2018, The Charlotte Observer reported Friday. The study was done in collaboration with the nonprofit group TreesCharlotte.

According to the study, North Carolina's largest city still had 45% of tree canopy in 2018, but it is threatened. The city gained about 2,200 acres of canopy through replantings, but the study also found Charlotte lost nearly 10,000 acres, much of it in large tracts of forest cleared for development.

A study by the school commissioned by the city in 2014 characterized Charlotte's tree canopy at 47% and holding steady despite surging development.

The findings make Charlotte's goal of 50% tree canopy by 2050 more difficult to reach, city officials have acknowledged last year will be hard to meet. While the loss of trees is immediate, it takes years for newly planted saplings

to grow enough to add to the canopy.

Researchers said a more effective strategy would be to preserve trees.

#### North Carolina barbecue spot closed over tax debt reopens

GOLDSBORO – An iconic North Carolina restaurant has reopened its doors more than a year after it was shut down due to its tax debt.

Wilber's Barbecue in Goldsboro welcomed customers once again on Wednesday, news outlets reported. Since opening in 1962, the restaurant has developed a reputation as an important stop for politicians, locals and barbecue-seeking tourists.

It closed in March 2019 due to a tax liability totaling more than \$70,000, according to the Wayne County Clerk of Court. That's when Willis Underwood, a businessman in Goldsboro, formed Goldpit Partners, a group of the restaurant's fans. They purchased Wilber's last year and worked to restore it.

"This has been a labor of love, and an opportunity to save this legendary institution that lives large in all of our memories," Underwood said in a news release reported by The News & Observer.

The restaurant is currently operating four days a week, and offers only take-out options.

"As soon as safely possible, we look forward to fully opening and welcoming customers inside," Underwood told WRAL-TV.

#### Police: 2 men charged with enough fentanyl to kill 20,000

ELIZABETH CITY – Authorities in northeastern North Carolina say that two men have been charged with possessing enough fentanyl to kill more than 20,000 people.

The Virginian-Pilot reported that the men from Elizabeth City were arrested last week.

The Pasquotank County Sheriff's Office said in a press release that Ronald Dashiell Jr. and Brandon Dashiell face charges of possession and trafficking illegal drugs. It's unclear if they've hired attorneys.

Pasquotank County Sheriff Tommy S. Wooten II said the FBI is helping with the investigation and that the case will go to the U.S. Attorney.

Police said they found 55 grams of fentanyl in a motel room and \$6,000 in

cash.

Fentanyl is a synthetic painkiller that is 50 to 100 times more potent than morphine. Two milligrams can kill someone. Dealers often mix fentanyl with heroin and cocaine to augment the drugs' effects.

Local authorities say that overdoses have been on the rise in the region.

#### Police looking for mother after baby found alive in trash

WILMINGTON – Police in the North Carolina city of Wilmington are investigating after a newborn baby was found alive in a trash can.

WECT reports that police found the infant on Thursday afternoon.

Police said a woman was walking her dog when she heard the sound of a baby crying. It was coming from inside a nearby trash can in a church parking lot.

The baby was inside a black trash bag. The woman rescued the baby and found someone to call 911.

Doctors at a local hospital say the baby is healthy. The mother has not been located.

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