

First Day Hikes draw record crowds

On the first day of the 2016 centennial year, North Carolina's state parks welcomed 3,469 hikers for the annual First Day Hikes event, a record number that together traveled 8,228 miles on state park trails.

With brisk winter weather returning, visitors enjoyed 54 guided hikes. Once again, the largest crowd at 809 hikers was drawn to Eno River State Park, where a New Year's Day hike has been a tradition for more than 40 years. Raven Rock State Park drew the second largest crowd with 225 hikers.

For the first time ever, visitors were allowed to hike the three miles up the scenic entrance road to Chimney Rock. At Crowders Mountain, 150 hikers took up the challenge of walking over six miles into South Carolina to the Kings Mountain National Military Park. The hike at Merchants Millpond State Park drew participants from five North Carolina counties and from four locations in Virginia. A group of 50 girl scouts joined in exploration of the trails at William B. Umstead State Park.



Related events during the day drew 76 people to a "Polar Plunge" at Hanging Rock State Park and 110 runners to the inaugural First Day 5K at Haw River State Park.

This was the fifth year that First Day Hikes were held across the state parks system. The event was the first of a string of special celebrations planned throughout the state for the 2016 centennial year.

Fort Macon 2015 State Park of the Year

Fort Macon State Park in Carteret County has been named the 2015 North Carolina State Park of the Year and will hold that distinction throughout the year-long centennial celebration of the state parks system.

The park was chosen for its "exemplary contribution to the North Carolina state parks mission of stewardship, public service and education," and specifically recognized for initiatives in expanded recreation opportunities, volunteerism, interpretive programming and sustainability.

With attendance of more than 1.2 million during the year, the staff at Fort Macon found time to create the park's first nature and wellness trail, building more than 800 feet of boardwalk and raising over \$40,000 in private funding for the project. Rangers and volunteers provided 1,090 free interpretive programs and hosted 14 special events and demonstrations. With help from Friends of Fort Macon, a new 600-square-foot exhibit space was created, and the staff directed major renovations to the park's bathhouse and enhanced a sustainability program that reduced water usage by half.

Other nominees for 2015 that were designated Regional State Parks of the Year were Carolina Beach, Eno River and Mount Mitchell state parks, with Mount Mitchell earning a one-time, honorary title as North Carolina State Park of the Century, in recognition of its history as North Carolina's first state park.

The state parks system began choosing a Park of the Year in 2010 with nominations from each of its four districts. Each of 39 state parks and state recreation areas submits an annual report that is objectively scored on progress in recreation, natural resource protection, sustainability, public safety and environmental education. Final judging is by senior and peer administrators. To honor the State Park of the Year, a medallion is attached to a hiking staff that is passed to the current award recipient each year. Lake James State Park in Burke and McDowell counties was honored in 2014.

Continued Other Side



NC DIVISION OF PARKS AND RECREATION
NC DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES



State Parks featured on NC Travel Guide covers

The role of North Carolina's state parks as visitor attractions is being celebrated with twin, companion covers for the "Official 2016 North Carolina Travel Guide."

Visit North Carolina, which touts the state as a travel destination throughout the world, joined the centennial celebration of the state parks system with covers featuring Mount Mitchell State Park on the highest peak in the eastern U.S. and Jockey's Ridge State Park on the tallest living sand dune on the east coast. The magazine also offers features on Carolina Beach and Gorges state parks and Jordan Lake State Recreation Area.

"The cover images frame the content of the Travel Guide perfectly," said Wit Tuttell, executive director of Visit North Carolina. "They draw you in with North Carolina's enchanting beauty and natural diversity, then invite you to immerse yourself in a place that's rich in culture and craftsmanship and that radiates a spirit of adventure."

Mike Murphy, state parks director, said the magazine's focus reflects the close partnership between state parks and the tourism industry. "It's appropriate to have these two parks on the covers. Both were the result of grassroots efforts by the local communities and so there are many commonalities in these parks."

Chimney Rock gains 536 acres

Thanks to The Nature Conservancy, Chimney Rock State Park has grown. The conservancy recently transferred 536 acres to Chimney Rock State Park. The Nature Conservancy has been responsible for the initial protection of 3,574 acres of the 6,200-acre park.

The property, in several parcels, was transferred to the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation with the help of the state Parks and Recreation and Clean Water Management trust funds and the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund, according to Director Mike Murphy. By connecting existing parcels of state park land, the acquisitions will provide a land base for future trail development and protect high-quality natural areas.

The Conservancy first acquired property in the area in 1984, when Margaret Flinsch donated property at Bat Cave to the organization. Today, the Conservancy owns and manages the Bat Cave Preserve.

Documentary celebrates state parks in centennial year

After nearly a year of intense videography – and decades spent visiting state parks – Tom Earnhardt is unveiling a new, hour-long documentary celebrating the centennial celebration of North Carolina's state parks system. *Saving The Best* will air at 8 p.m. Jan. 27 on UNC-TV and will likely be shown several more times during 2016 on the program and at other venues.

Visits to state parks have long been a staple of Earnhardt's *Exploring North Carolina* segments on UNC-TV. That background and his commitment to a larger centennial project drew the interest of the State Employees' Credit Union, which financed the effort.

"This film is a terrific story about North Carolina; it's about who we are and where we came from. It's also about the people who make our parks run, probably the most dedicated people as servants in our parks system, an extraordinary group of stewards," Earnhardt said. "The goal of this program is to excite the people of North Carolina about the parks system and to educate them about the great efforts of those who work in the parks."

Earnhardt teamed with videographers and co-producers Mark Crews and Tucker Hayes to visit each of the 41 state parks at least once, often bringing out a new drone to capture stunning aerial footage of the parks' landscapes.

Earnhardt said that excerpts from *Saving The Best* will be adapted for educational purposes in the parks and school systems. And, the documentary will have a long shelf life since centennial events will be held at every state park during the year.



The Steward is an e-newsletter of the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation. To learn how to subscribe to the complete version and have news of the North Carolina state parks sent directly to your email inbox, scan the QR code here with a smartphone app or visit www.ncparks.gov, and click "News."

