

# MOUNTAINS

## Aspiring naturalists join DLiA eco-adventure



**Word from the Smokies**  
Elly Wells  
Columnist

An oncology nurse from Houston. A Charleston-based executive director for a national nonprofit. A retired biology teacher with her daughter and two teenage granddaughters. In total, 15 hikers from diverse backgrounds were gathered together on a mid-April morning, carefully poking up a trail in the Greenbrier area of Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Making their way up Porters Creek to Fern Branch Falls, the hikers kept a watchful eye on their surroundings, stopping frequently to examine, identify or collect tiny insects, budding flowers, lichen, and the like. However, for this particular group, the scenic waterfall was more of a route marker than a destination. The main goal of this excursion was to see what could be discovered along the way.

Part of a three-day, two-night Great Smokies Eco-Adventure experience — organized annually by Discover Life in America, a nonprofit partner of the park — this hike was just one of several educational activities for eco-adventure participants this spring. Each outing was designed with discovery in mind, encouraging adventurers to explore biodiversity by digging deep into species identification and habitat exploration.

“I’ve hiked many trails before, but until I was with this group, I’d never slowed down to really see the details,” said participant Amanda Hollinger. “Getting familiar with the plants and creatures of the Smokies on an up-close level really shifted how I see the natural world.”

Each day begins at Camp Atagahi, a deluxe off-the-grid retreat provided by adventure outfitter A Walk in the Woods, where participants are surrounded by nature, tucked into a laurel-laden haven along Matthew Creek. Camp Atagahi was built with both sustainability and comfort in mind, featuring large, well-equipped tents on platforms, a full camp kitchen providing delicious meals, and a tidy bathhouse with hot showers. Notably, this outpost also serves as REI’s base camp for excursions in the area.

Designed to be fun, educational, and restorative for all participants, the Eco-Adventure program also serves as a



**Eco-Adventurer Lonnie Honsted descends the steps from a detour off the Porters Creek Trail in Great Smoky Mountains National Park.** KRISTINA HONSTED, PROVIDED BY DISCOVER LIFE IN AMERICA

fundraiser for DLiA, which works to discover, understand, and conserve biological diversity in Great Smoky Mountains National Park and beyond. The registration cost for each participant is a significant donation to DLiA’s programmatic work and mission — which includes managing the All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory, a catalogue of documented species in the park. While the ATBI had already identified 21,345 species in the park prior to this spring outing, that number makes up only a fraction of the 60,000-80,000 total species that are estimated to live within the Smokies.

The 2022 eco-adventure was timed to coincide with the spring ephemeral wildflower season, a short but showy bloom of native species occurring in

March, April, and early May. As temperatures begin to rise (but before deciduous trees fully leaf out), warming sunlight makes its way to the forest floor and encourages flowers to grow — an annual rebirth of the Smokies that delights pollinating insects, as well as humans exploring this first flush of spring.

As the adventurers walked through the delicate ephemeral blooms, they observed and catalogued their findings: bloodroot, trillium, bishop’s cap, little brown jug, common blue violet, wild geranium, pussytoes, thymeleaf bluet, foamflower, blue cohosh, showy orchis, Phlox, Solomon’s seal, dwarf-crested iris. Often, a stop along the way incited a gentle separation between wildflower enthusiasts and the “bug folks,” who were looking out — and up — for flying insects, rather than down at the forest floor.

DLiA Director of Science and Research Will Kuhn, a dedicated entomologist with a Ph.D. in ecology and evolutionary biology, guided participants through the process while sharing his keen delight for species discovery and identification. Always on the lookout for insects, he deftly captured each find in a small plastic tube mid-flight, provided a quick ID when able, offered a short show-and-tell for the group, then released them back to their own busy work.

For the insects he can’t readily identify, however, he usually has two options: If it’s conspicuous enough to be identifiable from a photo, Kuhn said, he’ll post a picture to the iNaturalist app and hope someone comes through with a proper ID.

“If it looks like something that will need further investigation,” he continued, “I’ll collect it, if I’m able to.”

Kuhn said he tends to focus a lot of his attention on insects because many are still understudied in the park. “That’s where lots of new discoveries are waiting to be made,” he said.

He and the other guides for the trip — DLiA Executive Director Todd Witcher and naturalist and interpreter Jaimie Matzko — stressed the importance of

measuring and understanding every species and how they interact together as an ecosystem.


“The only way to protect and preserve the park’s biodiversity is to know exactly what it is we’re trying to protect,” said Witcher.

On the third day, a steady spring rain fell across the Smokies, but the adventurers continued to explore, keeping dry for a tour of past discoveries at the National Park Service’s Twin Creeks Science and Education Center, just outside Gatlinburg. Though this facility is not open to the public, DLiA is able to invite small groups to tour the extensive, carefully maintained natural history collection, containing thousands of plant, insect, amphibian, and mammal species collected over many decades — some even prior to the park’s official formation in 1934. The oldest plant record, *Clethra acuminata* (or mountain sweet pepper bush), was collected in 1891 along the banks of the Tuckaseegee River in Swain County.

Bringing strangers together over a common interest in naturalist exploration, the 2022 Great Smokies Eco-Adventure was a success in more ways than one. Days after the trip’s completion, Kuhn sent the group an email conveying some exciting news: One of the species found on day two, a tiny wasp (*Ichneumon devinctor*), was known to science but a completely new discovery within the boundaries of the park. Kuhn explained that this particular species is part of a large genus of wasps that parasitize caterpillars, helping to keep their populations in check. The discovery brought the park’s official count of known and identified species to 21,346.

Next year’s Great Smokies Eco-Adventure runs from April 30-May 2. For more information, visit [dliia.org](http://dliia.org).



*Elly Wells is the principal of Elly Wells Marketing and Project Management, an Asheville firm that works with two of the nonprofit partners to Great Smoky Mountains National Park: Discover Life in America and Great Smoky Mountains Association. Reach her at [elly@ellywells.com](mailto:elly@ellywells.com).*

  
**Dining Deals USA**  
**E5WEWNR**  
**BONUS CODE**

1) Register and enter codes at: [www.diningdealsusa.com](http://www.diningdealsusa.com)

2) Enter today’s code before Monday, May 16 at 11:59 p.m.

3) Redeem today’s bonus code for coupon redemptions that interest you. Coupons cover restaurants, travel, family fun, automotive, shopping and more!

\* Discounts vary by merchant, location and offer; subject to availability. Offers may change without notice. Total savings vary based on the number of discounts and coupons redeemed and value of offers.

**TODAY’S BONUS CODE**

### Citizen Times

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

#### Customer service

To view important information online related to your subscription, visit [aboutyoursubscription.citizen-times.com](http://aboutyoursubscription.citizen-times.com). You can also manage your subscription at [account.citizen-times.com](http://account.citizen-times.com). Contact the Citizen Times for questions or to report issues via email at [cizitentimes@gannett.com](mailto:cizitentimes@gannett.com) or 1-800-672-2472.

#### Operating hours are:

- Monday-Friday: 8:00 a.m.-7:00 p.m.
- Saturday: 7:00 a.m. -11:00 a.m. for technical support only
- Sunday & holidays: 7:00 a.m.-11:00 a.m.

#### Full access subscriptions

Subscribe and save today by visiting [citizen-times.com/subscribe](http://citizen-times.com/subscribe). Subscriptions below are billed per month and include access to [citizen-times.com](http://citizen-times.com), tablet and smartphone apps, and the e-Edition, a digital replica of the print edition.

- Delivery of the Sunday through Friday print editions up to \$68.00\*
- Delivery of the Sunday and Wednesday print editions up to \$32.00\*

\*Plus applicable taxes

#### Corrections and clarifications

Our goal is to promptly correct errors. Email us at [accuracy@asheville.gannett.com](mailto:accuracy@asheville.gannett.com) to report a mistake or call 828-232-5829. Describe the error, where you saw it, the date, page number, or the URL.

#### Contact us

Customer Service .....	1-800-672-2472
News Director .....	Jewell Walston   828-232-5829
Advertising .....	828-252-5611
Obituaries .....	828-232-5966

#### Postal information

The Citizen Times, USPS# 236-000, ISSN# 0336-0000, is published 6 days per week excluding Saturday, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Christmas Eve and New Year’s Eve by Gannett Media Corp, 14 O. Henry Ave., Asheville, NC 28802. Periodicals postage paid at Asheville, NC and additional mailing offices. **Postmaster:** Please send address changes to Customer Service, PO Box 5830, Augusta, GA 30916.