USA TODAY NEWS

MOUNTAINS

WORD FROM THE SMOKIES

Alum Cave Trail, heart of the park



Mike Hembree

On any given day, and particularly on weekends, the trailhead parking area for Alum Cave Trail is among the most crowded in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. At peak times, cars spill out of the parking area and line up on the sides of US 441, the main road bisecting the park from north to south.

It seems plenty of people like the trail so much that they are willing to walk along the road a considerable distance simply to get to the start of their actual trail experience. The Alum Cave love is easily understood.

For one, it's a popular starting point — and also a possible ending point — for a visit to the top of Mount Le Conte. Every year, thousands of hikers park one car at Newfound Gap and another at Alum Cave. They hike via the Boulevard Trail to LeConte Lodge near the top of the mountain, stay overnight, and hike down the shorter Alum Cave Trail the next day. Their car awaits for a drive to Gatlinburg and a highly anticipated meal.

Even without the fine experience of reaching the high shoulders of Mount Le Conte, the first half of the Alum Cave Trail is also a gem in its own right - a streamside trail with excellent views and a wide path conducive to group hiking. In many ways, it's the heart of the Smokies experience.

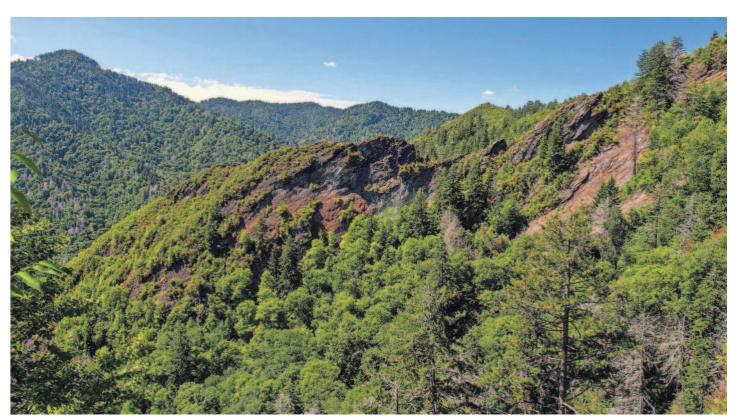
Tim Line, the retired manager of Le-Conte Lodge, could be termed an Alum Cave regular. Over decades of work at the lodge, he hiked the trail some 1,400 times — in the heat of midsummer and the snows of January and every combination of conditions in between.

He knows the quirks of the mountain better than most.

"You have to be ready for any type of weather you might encounter," said Line. "In summer, the trail is going to be pretty hot in the lower elevations. It does cool off, but then you might get in a thunderstorm before you get to the top of the mountain."

The weather can change dramatically in the winter, too.

'It can be sunny in the parking lot, and then when you hit the north slope of to be prepared."



Alum Cave Trail ascends the rocky outcropping known as Peregrine Peak, where surroundings transition from a dense forest to a high-elevation heath bald. Although peregrine falcons were once listed as federally endangered due to the harmful effects of pesticides including DDT, populations have recovered in many places thanks to the protection of nesting sites and re-releasing programs. There are two known nesting sites in the Smokies including one at Alum Cave Bluffs that has been monitored since 1997. PROVIDED BY GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS ASSOCIATION

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Tim Line

Retired manager of LeConte Lodge

the mountain, you might be in a snowstorm before you get to the top," said Line. "If you don't have the proper raingear with the temperature cooling off, you have to worry about hypothermia in all weather, not just the winter. You have

Two footbridges offer hikers entrance to the trail from the parking area. In summer months, it's almost immediately cooler as you move along Alum Cave Creek in the shade of beeches and other hardwoods and alongside masses of rhododendron, their growth accelerated by the Smokies' wealth of precip-

There are several creek crossings on footlogs on the way to Arch Rock. (These are relatively safe, but watch your step — and those of the kids.)

Here a huge rock outcropping provides the chance for hikers to "thread" a tunnel-like hole. You're helped along by stepping stones and a handrail, but the taller folks in your group will be leaning over to make it through. It's a fun experience for flatlanders.

Another trail footbridge shows the way to Huggins Hell, a mass of mountainside growth and undergrowth so thick that old-timers long ago deemed it worthy of the "hell" nickname. Don't

See TRAIL, Page 9A



After hiking the Appalachian Trail in 1976, Tim Line found a job in Great **Smoky Mountains National Park** working at LeConte Lodge. Line would ultimately stay on Mount Le Conte for nearly four decades. By his own count, he has completed the trek to LeConte Lodge along Alum Cave Trail about 1,400 times. PROVIDED BY DAVID BRILL





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Biden summit to address US hate-fueled violence

Zeke Miller

ASSOCIATED PRESS

WILMINGTON, Del. - President Joe Biden will host a White House summit next month aimed at combating a spate of hate-fueled violence in the U.S., as he works to deliver on his campaign pledge to "heal the soul of the nation."

The White House announced Friday that Biden will host the United We Stand Summit on Sept. 15, highlighting the "corrosive effects" of violence on public safety and democracy. Advocates pushed Biden to hold the event after 10 Black people were killed at a Buffalo, New York, supermarket in May, aiming as well to address a succession of hatedriven violence in cities including El Paso, Texas, Pittsburgh and Oak Creek,

"As President Biden said in Buffalo after the horrific mass shooting earlier this year, in the battle for the soul of our nation 'we must all enlist in this great



The White House announced Friday that President Joe Biden will host the United We Stand Summit on Sept. 15. EVAN VUCCI/AP FILE

cause of America," press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said in a statement. "The United We Stand Summit will present an important opportunity for Americans of all races, religions, regions, political affiliations, and walks of life to take up that cause together."

Biden will deliver a keynote speech at

the gathering, which the White House says will include civil rights groups, faith leaders, business executives, law enforcement, gun violence prevention advocates, former members of violent hate groups, the victims of extremist violence and cultural figures. The White House emphasized that it also intends to bring together Democrats and Republicans, as well as political leaders on the federal, state and local levels to unite against hate-motivated violence.

Biden, a Democrat, has frequently cited 2017's white supremacist protest in Charlottesville, Virginia, with bringing him out of political retirement to challenge then-President Donald Trump in 2020. He promised during that campaign to work to bridge political and social divides and to promote national unity, but fulfilling that cause remains a work in progress.

Sindy Benavides, the CEO of League of United Latin American Citizens, said the genesis of the summit came after

the Buffalo massacre, as her organization along with the Anti-Defamation League, the National Action Network and other groups wanted to press the Biden administration to more directly tackle extremist threats.

The White House did not outline the lineup of participants, saying it would come closer to the event. It also would not preview any specific policy announcements by Biden. Officials noted Biden last year signed the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act and released the nation's first National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism.

Benavides said Biden holding the summit would help galvanize the country to address the threats of hate-inspired violence but also said she hoped for "long-term solutions" to emerge from the summit.

"What's important to us is addressing mental health, gun control reform, addressing misinformation, disinformation and malinformation," she said.

Trail

Continued from Page 2A

venture here. Enjoy the view from the trail.

Soon you'll reach Inspiration Point, where the view is, well, inspiring. Across the divide below are Big Duckhawk Peak and Little Duckhawk Peak. The "little" one has a hole in its side, a rarity in these mountains.

Further along, one reaches Alum Cave Bluff, the spot where many day hikers rest for a spell before retracing their steps to the parking area. The bluff is less of a cave and more of an overhanging ledge. Nevertheless, it's an interesting stopping point and a natural place for a quick trailside snack. Before the Civil War, there was mining here for Epsom salts and other minerals.

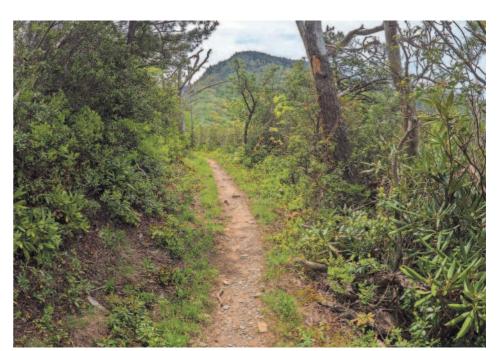
It's a steeper climb over 2.7 miles from here to the Le Conte summit. Casual hikers probably would enjoy the day with a turnaround at Alum Cave and a pleasant return hike along Alum Cave Creek to the parking area.

"The trail was definitely my commute to work because it was the shortest trail up and down the mountain," Line said. "I think a lot of people, including me, consider it the most scenic trail up the mountain. It has a lot to see from the bottom to the top, even though it's a little steeper than some of the other trails. It has more of the panoramic views than the other trails do."

Take some light snacks and plenty of water, stay on the trail to protect the trail corridor for the hikers to come, and enjoy the rolling waters and the views. This is one of the park's special places.

Editor's note: The proper spelling of Mount Le Conte includes a space after the article "Le," while the well-known LeConte Lodge does not.

Mike Hembree is a veteran journalist and the author of 14 books. He has visited 29 national parks and hopes to add many more to that list. Tim Line and his long tenure at LeConte Lodge were profiled by the author David Brill in the fall 2019 issue of Smokies Life, the biannual journal of Great Smoky Mountains Association. Learn more SmokiesInformation.org.



Alum Cave Trail begins just off US 441 about 20 miles from Oconaluftee Visitor Center near Cherokee, North Carolina. The trail leads hikers across Walker Camp Prong and Alum Cave Creek before meandering through an old-growth hardwood forest and then climbing to Arch Rock, the Alum Cave Bluffs, and beyond to the summit of Mount Le Conte.

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