

MOUNTAINS

Grassy balds are the place to be during pandemic



Word from the Smokies
Frances Figart
Columnist

Mysterious and haunting, Southern Appalachian grassy balds have long fascinated scientists and hikers alike. How many balds are there in the Smokies? How did they evolve? How do they support rare plants? Can balds be found in other parts of the world?

Great Smoky Mountains National Park forester Jesse Webster gets these questions so regularly that he has created a program about grassy balds of the Smokies entitled “Balds: Ecological Enigma and Conservation Dilemma.”

“A bald is a great place to be during these times when we are keeping our distance from other hikers,” he said. “Our park manages two balds—Andrews and Gregory—and late summer, early fall is an exciting time to visit them.”

Grassland remnants of the last ice age more than 10,000 years ago, balds are mountain summits that offered many benefits for both humans and animals. Research suggests they were once kept clear of vegetation by megafauna—grazing by early big animals like mastodons or woolly mammoth, and later bison, elk, and deer.

“Even later, early European settlers brought their cattle and sheep to the balds for choice grazing in summer, keeping them from turning back into forests,” Webster said. “Over time, with-



Vegetation specialists Dan Bryson and Corey Mullins point out some of the azaleas on Gregory Bald. COURTESY OF NPS

out the continued grazing of these large animals, the natural process of forest succession would turn these open areas back into dense woods and the unique assemblage of plant species would be lost.”

Today Great Smoky Mountains National Park currently manages Andrews and Gregory balds as part of its mission to provide for the future enjoyment of generations to come. Working with the park’s mule team to haul equipment up several thousand feet, the NPS vegetation crew works long hours every season to keep the balds clear of encroaching woody vegetation. Webster and other foresters use weed eaters and large brush mowers to clear both balds, mimicking the cycle of grazing and thus pre-

serving ancient cultural traditions as well as rare plants that escaped glaciation and are important “indicator species” of these high mountain fields.

People come to the Smokies from all over the world to see some of the rare plant species that still exist on the balds, such as dwarf willow, various types of goldenrod, and a dazzling array of azaleas. The two balds offer different kinds of hiking experiences depending on your fitness and time commitment: Andrews Bald covers two acres and visitors can access it via a fairly easy one-mile ascent; Gregory Bald encompasses 16 acres and it takes a five-mile up-hill hike to get there.

Webster said sometimes when he is working up on Gregory Bald he looks

down at Cades Cove, which stretches out over the landscape below, and feels deeply thankful for the Smokies and for the founders who had the forethought to preserve it.

“I’m most interested in how unique these balds are, how mysterious they are,” he said. “I’m amazed by the species diversity, the ecological interdependence of these unique species, and how forests are always changing.”

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.

Asheville issues report on police reaction to George Floyd protests

Joel Burgess Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE – City Attorney Brad Branham has issued a report on local police reaction to protests after the killing of George Floyd, detailing who gave orders and who was not consulted in actions that included the use of “sting balls” and the widely condemned destruction of demonstrators’ medic tent.

Presented by Branham at a Sept. 8 City Council meeting, the report gives police accounts of the first use of non-lethal munitions against protesters on the Jeff Bowen Bridge and the widely criticized destruction of a protester medic tent. Branham based the report on interviews he did with top elected officials and staff in City Hall and APD, specifically Mayor Esther Manheimer and all council members, City Manager Debra Campbell, Chief David Zack and APD command staff.

“We’re not drawing any final conclusions in this particular phase of the evaluation about the appropriateness of any actions taken,” the city attorney said. “We are trying to determine how decisions were made, who made those decisions, who was involved in that process and what those individuals knew.”

Such conclusions and any disciplinary actions would happen with a second phase, an internal police review.

Some council members criticized the report, saying it gave the impression that the city was accepting only the police version of events.

Fifty-seven people were arrested and a dozen injured from May 29 to June 6, the period that was the focus of the report. Twelve of the people known to be injured were police, though one protester Cassidy Doyle told the Citizen Times her face and eye were damaged by some sort of projectile. One official complaint was filed.

Original plans were to hire a consulting firm for \$83,000 to conduct an inquiry into police handling of the protests. But facing backlash from members of the public commenting at a July 14 meeting over the price and the firm’s link to law enforcement, the council pushed aside the idea. The council is now conducting its own investigation with the help of Branham and the council’s public safety committee.

Protests were peaceful until May 31 when police reported demonstrators entering Interstate 240 north of downtown. Protesters including some children later entered the interstate again, this time to the west by walking onto the Jeff Bowen Bridge, the report said. Police said the marchers went past a line of officers with bicycles and that demonstrators were warned before chemical and other non-lethal munitions were used.

But protesters and a Citizen Times staff member present said they did not hear a warning. A video showed one man being hit with what appeared to be a tear gas canister. Others reported being hit with rubber bullets.

Zack told the Citizen Times rubber bullets had been used. But in the report police told Branham they don’t have rubber bullets but do use sting balls, “hand thrown devices which deploy rubber projectiles in multiple directions.”

The unit deployed to the bridge had helmets, shields and other “hard gear.” A commander on the ground called Zack and got confirmation to use tear gas, the report said.

Council members and the city manager weren’t involved in such tactical decisions, Branham said, though the chief gave updates to Campbell who in turn gave updates to council members.

Police also made the decision to call for help from other agencies, though the city manager and mayor were included in the decision to bring in the National Guard.

On June 2, Zack authorized the destruction of the medic tent after police experienced projectiles being thrown at them. Those included water bottles like those found at the tent, the chief said. Facing criticism from the mayor, Zack later apologized for the way police dealt with the tent and people there.

“There does seem to be efforts especially around what’s said about what happened at the medic tent to rationalize the actions of these officers. And I don’t feel that that’s the place that we should be going with this.”

Brian Haynes
Chair of the council’s public safety committee

The strongest critic of the report was Brian Haynes, chair of the council’s public safety committee.

“It seems to me that we call this report factual, and that we’re going to make no effort to say whether or not any of these actions were appropriate,” Haynes said. “There does seem to be efforts especially around what’s said about what happened at the medic tent to rationalize the actions of these officers. And I don’t feel that that’s the place that we should be going with this.”

Some other council members said they should create a process to gather accounts from protesters and that some already appear to differ with police accounts.

Councilwoman Julie Mayfield said the fact that there was only one complaint was likely due to people being afraid to come forward.

“I don’t know how to do it but we have to have a safe way now for people to complain formally, about their experiences, related to police conduct that night,” said Mayfield, a Democratic candidate for NC Senate who will leave council this year. She is running for the 49th District against Republican Bob Penland.

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