

MOUNTAINS

Eco-Adventure supports biodiversity research



Word from the Smokies
Hayley Benton

As days grow shorter in the Great Smoky Mountains, the colorful landscape hums with life. Creatures large and small scurry through the blanket of fallen leaves gathering nuts and berries, crafting intricate homes to wait out the winter, and preparing for the stillness of the season ahead.

"It's a great time to be out in the park," said Jaimie Matzko, biodiversity program specialist for Discover Life in America, a nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. "In spring, things are winding up, but fall is a winding down. All sorts of species are out and about, getting ready for the colder months. You end up seeing a lot of wildlife activity around this time."

These transitional seasons, she continued, are the perfect time to engage visitors in DLiA's work. Through its flagship project, the All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory, the Gatlinburg-based nonprofit aims to identify, catalog and observe the park's estimated 60,000-plus species. Currently, less than half of that approximate number has been officially identified by park scientists — and DLiA's first fall Great Smokies Eco-Adventure, held Oct. 27-29, presents a unique opportunity to join the search, combing the underbrush with park scientists to record sightings of even the tiniest, most often overlooked creatures.

"If you're out hiking on your own, you might pass by things on the trail that are really unique or interesting and not really know the importance of what you're seeing," Matzko said. "It's one of the great benefits of hiking with local naturalists. I think a lot of times people just view hiking as: 'I'm going to hike to a waterfall and then back to my car.' But I truly believe that, when you have a deeper understanding of the ecology — about all the different relationships between species out there — it also gives you a deeper appreciation for enjoying the natural world. It gives every hike more meaning."

And that's the precise purpose of DLiA's three-day, two-night Eco-Adventures: fostering deeper connections with nature by encouraging participants to find, identify and learn about species in their natural habitats. The new fall adventure is an expansion of the "glamping" (glamorous camping) program that DLiA has organized each spring for the last four years. Each Eco-Adventure experience includes off-the-grid lodging, gourmet food and drink, and guided hikes. It also doubles as a fundraiser for DLiA, supporting vital research on biodiversity in the national park.

"As E.O. Wilson said, 'It's the little things that run the world.' And that is very much DLiA's realm," said DLiA Executive Director Todd Witcher. A nodule on the underside of a leaf may not look all that interesting at first glance. "But once you learn what it is and what value it has to the environment, it suddenly also has value to you, too. We are always looking at things that most other people



Autumn leaves blanket a bridge along Alum Cave Trail in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. This October's Great Smokies Eco-Adventure, held Oct. 27-29, will be the first fall event of its kind hosted by DLiA. PROVIDED BY SMOKIES LIFE



Will Kuhn, director of science and research for Discover Life in America (DLiA), examines an insect specimen collected during a 2023 Great Smokies Eco-Adventure. PROVIDED BY DISCOVER LIFE IN AMERICA (DLIA)

are not — and also trying to bring attention to those things — because every part of an ecosystem is important. People love bears and elk, but those animals wouldn't be around if we didn't have the small things that pollinate plants and create food for the larger species."

This fall's adventure will invite participants to observe life from a variety of habitats found throughout the park, from the lush lower elevations of Greenbrier to the balsam-covered peaks along the Appalachian Trail. Adventurers spend their days exploring the wilds of the Smokies on expert-led nature hikes and their evenings and nights "glamping" at Camp Atagahi, a premiere

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Participants of a past Eco-Adventure gather around the table at Camp Atagahi after a day of educational exploration. This year, campers will be treated to harvest apple ginger cocktails (or mocktails) from sponsor Ole Smoky Distillery. PROVIDED BY DLIA



The colors of early autumn spread as far as the eye can see from the highest point in the Smokies known as Clingmans Dome or Kuwohi. This fall's Eco-Adventure includes a hike along the Appalachian Trail to look for species only found at higher elevations in the Smokies. PROVIDED BY SMOKIES LIFE

Fletcher man pronounced dead after head-on collision

Tiana Kennell
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE - A Henderson County man has died following a head-on collision on U.S. 74A.

First Sgt. Barry Burnette said on Sept. 10,

the North Carolina Highway Patrol was dispatched to a collision on U.S. 74A near Old Fort Road in Fairview.

The accident reportedly occurred at 5:10 p.m. when a Cadillac passenger vehicle traveling southeast toward Fairview struck a Kia SUV traveling northwest toward Asheville.

Burnette said the Kia was in the center turn lane attempting to turn left onto a side road when the Cadillac left its lane and collided head-on with the Kia.

The Cadillac was operated by Jared Maurice Hatch, 40, from Fletcher. The Kia was operated by Joseph Cruz, 73, from Fairview.

Burnette said the two occupants in the Kia, including Cruz and a juvenile passenger, were transported to Mission Hospital with non-life-threatening injuries.

Hatch was pronounced dead at the scene.

Burnette said the investigation is ongoing and charges have not yet been filed.

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MOUNTAINS

I-40 East section to be closed Sept. 13-16

Todd Runkle
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

A 4-mile stretch of Interstate 40 East is set to close this weekend, weather permitting, to allow contract crews to work on bridges between I-26 and Hendersonville Road, according to a news release from N.C. Department of Transportation.

For real-time travel information, visit DriveNC.gov or follow NCDOT on social media.

Where will I-40 East be closed?

I-40 East will be closed from the I-240 East/I-26 West interchange (Exit 46B) to Hendersonville Road (Exit 50).

When will I-40 East be closed? When will I-40 East reopen?

The section of I-40 will be closed all

weekend beginning 8 p.m. Friday, Sept. 13. The road will be reopened Monday, Sept. 16, at 6 a.m.

What detours are there during the I-40 East closure?

The main detour for this closure will utilize I-240 East, with digital signs in the area posted to notify motorists of the route, according to the news release. The ramp from I-26 West to I-40 East will be closed with message boards alerting motorists to continue to I-240 East. The Brevard Road onramp to I-40 East will also be closed with traffic de-toured to utilize the I-240 East detour route.

Why is I-40 East closed?

The I-40 East weekend closure will allow crews from DBA Harrison Construction Co. of Asheville to work on the eastbound bridges over Hominy Creek



I-40 sign CITIZEN TIMES

and Hominy Creek Road. Planned operations this weekend include hydro-demolition of old concrete and paving of the area approaching bridges., NCDOT said in the news release.

The operation is part of a \$27.9 million interstate rehabilitation project including roadway resurfacing and bridge overlays. The project will also address

spalling concrete on bridge substructure components including the piers, and bring improvements to the riding surface of the four I-40 bridges over Hominy Creek and two bridges over the French Broad River. Crews aim to complete construction in the spring of 2026.

Going forward, the associated 2024 traffic plan includes phases of nighttime lane closures for asphalt resurfacing, installation of new guardrail, concrete drainage construction and pavement markers. Alternative options would have brought regular daytime closures, creating more traffic disruptions, and extended the total length of the contract.

Iris Seaton, Carolinas Connect, contributed.

Todd Runkle is the Carolinas Connect editor and also a content coach for the Asheville Citizen Times, part of the USA TODAY Network. Reach him at trunkle@gannett.com.



At night, Eco-Adventurers are invited to share stories around the campfire and participate in short walks in the moonlight, identifying bat species by sonar using special equipment and discovering creatures that fluoresce under UV light. PROVIDED BY DLIA

Support

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off-the-grid luxury camping facility owned and operated by partner organization A Walk in the Woods.

Evening activities include a night walk to learn about nocturnal life in the mountains and time around the campfire with new friends. All hikes and programs are led by DLIA staff Will Kuhn, science and research director and entomologist, and Matzko, a recipient of REI Adventures' "Top Guide of North America" award.

Eco-Adventures have proven to be popular with those who love the outdoors: avid naturalists, solo travelers, camping couples and families with teens. Limited to just 15 participants per season, the small group setting provides

ample time for individuals to ask questions and learn from and chat with the expert guides.

While participants in the spring adventures get to see the Smokies "waking up," fall adventurers will have the chance to observe "the fruits of the spring," Witcher said. "Things that we've seen blooming or starting to flower earlier this year are now propagating themselves for the next generation."

As a small nonprofit, fundraising efforts like these are immensely important to DLIA's continued work. "We realized that, if we were going to organize events to raise funds, we wanted them to be educational — to bring attention to the understudied and underappreciated things we see along the trail," Matzko explained. "Eco-Adventures are a great way for people who love the Smokies to get to know the park in a totally different way."

Tickets for the fall 2024 Great Smokies Eco-Adventure are \$950 per person, which includes all food (including vegan and gluten-free options) and libations — including a special harvest apple ginger cocktail (or mocktail) from this year's sponsor, Ole Smoky Distillery — as well as glamping accommodations, entertainment and transportation during the event. Tickets are limited, so those interested are encouraged to reserve their spots soon, as trips often sell out. Registration closes on Oct. 1 or when all tickets are sold. For more information, visit dlia.org/event/fall-adventure-2024.

Hayley Benton is the content manager for Elly Wells Marketing and Project Management, an Asheville firm working with two of the nonprofit partners to Great Smoky Mountains National Park: Discover Life in America and Smokies Life, which provides this column. Reach her at hayley@ellywells.com.

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