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Hiker missing for eight days

What to know about Stephanie Womacks

Travis Jacque Rose
Greenville News
USA TODAY NETWORK

Hiker Stephanie Womacks, 52, has been missing for eight days. She was last seen at Table Rock State

Park on Wednesday, March 5.

Search efforts resumed on Tuesday, March 11, with multiple agencies continuing the search for Womacks at Table Rock State Park, according to the Pickens County Sheriff's Office.

The search efforts were canceled on Monday, March 10, due to rainy weather.

First responders used all available techniques and equipment; additional searchers are in the area today.

Next steps: Search for Womacks

Pickens County Emergency Management and the Sheriff's Office are coordinating to schedule additional search efforts over the coming days to ensure a thorough examination of the area, according to a press release.

Local authorities plan to deploy specialized units, including canine teams and aerial support, to cover challenging

terrain and expand the search radius. Community volunteers are also being organized to assist in areas with dense vegetation and limited visibility.

Womacks: Initial search

Deputies reported that a family member left Womacks alone to get supplies

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A child attending the annual Mountain Life Festival at the Mountain Farm Museum near Cherokee examines a wooden toy like the ones a boy his age may have played with 100 years earlier. PROVIDED BY NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Ranger-made goods adds a personal touch to park stores



Word from the Smokies
Holly Kays
Guest Columnist

Mike Meldrum could claim his current occupation as a third career — if he weren't so careful to avoid calling it a job.

"I want to have fun and feel like I'm doing something worthwhile with my time," said Meldrum, a former park ranger whose handiwork has raised \$37,000 in support of Great Smoky Mountains National Park during the last two years alone.

The coasters, arrowhead keepsakes, and heritage toys Meldrum makes in his garage are just some of the objects found in visitor centers around the park that were crafted by current or former park rangers. Meldrum, who retired from the National Park Service in 2016, donates his wares for sale at the Cades

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This photo of a black bear cub in a tree served as the inspiration for one of Mike Meldrum's commemorative arrowhead designs.

PROVIDED BY BILL LEA

BIRTHRIGHT CITIZENSHIP

Trump asks Supreme Court to let order proceed

Maureen Groppe
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump, in an emergency request Thursday, asked the Supreme Court to allow restrictions to birthright citizenship to take effect for some people as challenges to his executive order are litigated.

Multiple judges in separate cases across the U.S. blocked the order from going into effect, and appeals courts have declined to lift the holds.

The Justice Department asked the Supreme Court to limit the scope of the pauses to specific challengers and to allow the administration to develop guidance on how it would implement Trump's directive if it is upheld.

The first federal judge to issue an opinion, U.S. District Judge John Coughenour in Seattle, called Trump's order "blatantly unconstitutional."

However, Trump said he believes the Supreme Court justices will agree that he can take the step as part of his effort to bolster security along the U.S.-Mexico border. The president wants to end automatic citizenship for children born in the U.S. if neither of their parents is lawfully in the country.

Democratic state attorneys general, immigrant rights advocates and others challenging the order argue the Supreme Court made it clear in 1898 that the 14th Amendment's citizenship clause guarantees children born in the U.S. the right to automatic citizenship regardless of their parents' immigration status.

The Trump administration maintains the constitutional amendment was intended to help formerly enslaved people after the Emancipation Proclamation and doesn't cover children of people who entered the country without proper authorization.

The Justice Department argued that the holds put on Trump's policy are too broad and should not apply to "all 50 states and to millions of aliens across the country."

Last month, a three-judge panel of the San Francisco-based 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals — a trio of jurists appointed by former Presidents Jimmy Carter, George W. Bush and Trump — denied Trump's request that the hold on his order be largely lifted. Instead, the court set an expedited hearing schedule for the underlying issues to be debated in June.

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Alaska volcano could erupt soon, officials warn

Previous events ejected ash, impacted water, disrupted air travel

Marc Ramirez
USA TODAY

Fresh magma has intruded into the Earth's crust underneath Alaska's Mount Spurr, 75 miles west of Anchorage, increasing the likelihood of an eruption within the near future, government officials said on Wednesday.

The Alaska Volcano Observatory within the past week measured "significantly elevated" volcanic activity, with newly reactivated gas fissures, or fumaroles, seen at Mount Spurr's Crater Peak. Increased earthquake activity and ground deformation continue as well, according to the United States Geological Survey.

"We cannot assign an exact time-frame for when an eruption will occur, if it does, but the increased gas emissions recorded on March 7 suggest that an eruption may occur in the next few weeks to months," the USGS said in a news release.

The agency said magma has likely been accumulating beneath the 11,070-foot summit for some months. The peak is clearly visible from Anchorage, the state's most populous city, and a significant eruption could severely disrupt air traffic.

Previous eruptions in 1953 and 1992 endured for several hours, producing ash clouds that carried downwind, prompting airport closures, impacting water supplies and raining up to a quarter-inch of ashfall throughout south-central Alaska.

Those events ejected plumes of volcanic ash as high as 45,000 feet into the atmosphere, disrupting air travel between the U.S. and Asia via the great circle routes that link places like New York and Tokyo along the Earth's curve.

The USGS agency said a similar event is likely this time but anticipates increases in seismic activity, gas emissions and surface heating will provide "days to weeks of additional warning" prior to any possible eruption.

"While we expect additional changes to monitoring data prior to an eruption, it is also possible that an eruption could occur with little or no additional warning," the agency said, noting that such an occurrence would prove "extremely hazardous" for people or nearby aircraft.

Additionally, the agency warned that elevated levels of carbon dioxide and sulfur dioxide may pose a hazard to those in low-lying areas around or downwind of the gas vents. The former is particularly dangerous as it is colorless and odorless, making it difficult to detect.

Last month, observatory officials categorized the volcano with a "yellow" advisory level after the mountain had displayed "unrest" for about 11 months.



President Donald Trump's executive order on birthright citizenship was blocked by several judges across the U.S., prompting him to request the Supreme Court to allow parts of the order to go into affect. ELIZABETH FRANTZ/REUTERS FILE

Order

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U.S. Circuit Judge Danielle Forest, appointed by Trump during his first term, wrote in a separate concurrence that the administration hadn't shown why earlier intervention was needed. She noted it's routine for executive actions to be challenged in court, "particularly where a new policy is a significant shift from prior understanding and practice."

"A controversy, yes. Even an impor-

tant controversy, yes," Forest wrote. "An emergency, not necessarily."

When issues of significant public importance and political controversy are decided hours after legal briefs are filed, she said, "we should not be surprised if the public questions whether we are politicians in disguise."

Appeals courts in Boston and in Richmond, Virginia, also rejected the administration's request to limit the holds.

The Justice Department described its emergency request to the Supreme Court as "modest relief" that would "correct the district courts' massive remedial foul."



Missing hiker Stephanie Womacks was last seen wearing a brown hoodie, jeans, and black tennis shoes.

PICKENS COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT

Womacks

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around 5 p.m. on Wednesday, March 5.

When the family member returned to the campsite an hour later, Womacks was missing.

Initial search efforts began on Wednesday, March 5, with 100 personnel conducting a grid search across the park.

On Thursday, March 6, an additional 74 responders joined the search, and on Friday, another 87 first responders combed the area.

On Friday, March 7, the search recovered several items belonging to Womacks in a mountainous Table Rock area, away from designated hiking trails.

According to the Pickens County Sheriff's Office, multiple agencies continued searching the Greenville Watershed and outward areas at Table Rock State Park in Pickens over the weekend.

On Saturday, March 8, 91 first responders participated in the search, scouring the terrain for Womacks.

The search continued on Sunday,

March 9, with 79 responders focusing on covering new areas and rechecking previously searched locations.

Despite extensive search efforts, including drones, search dogs, dive teams, and specialized units equipped with rappelling and climbing gear, Womacks' whereabouts remain unknown.

Advanced camera systems designed to explore caves and rugged terrains have also been deployed, along with helicopters to provide aerial support.

Womacks: What we know

Womacks was last seen wearing a brown hoodie, jeans, and black tennis shoes.

She is described as being five feet tall and weighing approximately 100 pounds.

Foul play is not suspected at this time; however, authorities continue to urge anyone with information to come forward as they continue their search efforts.

Womacks' family remains engaged with law enforcement and is fully cooperative in this operation, according to a press release from the Pickens County Sheriff's Office.

Multi-agency search and rescue operation

Agencies involved in search and rescue efforts for Womacks at Table Rock State Park include the Pickens County Sheriff's Office, Pickens County Emergency Services, and the Anderson County Sheriff's Office.

Additionally, Anderson County Emergency Management, Greenville County Sheriff's Office, Greenville County Emergency Response Team, Oconee County Sheriff's Office, Oconee County Emergency Services, Spartanburg Search and Rescue, and the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division have all contributed resources and personnel to aid in the operation.

Additionally, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, South Carolina State Park Service, South Carolina Taskforce 1 and 6, Greenville Water System, Foothills Search and Rescue, Carolina Search and Rescue, and Carolina Tactical K9 have also joined the coordinated effort.

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Smokies

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Cove Visitor Center and the Great Smokies Welcome Center in Townsend, both in Tennessee. More recently, visitors to the Oconaluftee Visitor Center in North Carolina have been able to purchase brooms and blacksmithed goods current rangers and volunteers make during cultural demonstrations.

"Visitors really like the fact that these rangers are giving back to the park, and it's just well made, so the quality's there, and they like that too," said Smokies Life Retail Director Dawn Roark.

Meldrum spent his first career working in robotics for the automaker Chrysler, but he "fell in love" with the Smokies following a 1973 trip to Cades Cove with his wife. A post-retirement move to the Smokies was an easy decision, and they relocated to Wears Valley, Tennessee, in 1998.

His second career launched just a couple years later. Smokies Life hired Meldrum to run the Cable Mill in Cades Cove, and that led to a "dream job" as a Cades Cove ranger for the National Park Service. He held that position for 16 years until his second retirement in 2016, and his collaboration with the stores began during that time.

Back then, Meldrum and his colleagues would sometimes reach out to visitors by setting up tables filled with sensory items like animal furs and wooden toys that children would have played with in the early 1900s. They'd stand behind the tables, answering visitors' questions and explaining the significance the displayed items held for the Smokies' past and present. The toys

proved especially popular.

"The kids would want to buy them, but there was no place to buy," he said. "I thought, 'I can make some. They're not hard.'"

Meldrum had long enjoyed woodworking, and when he moved to Tennessee he'd made sure to buy a house with a garage large enough to hold a little shop. He began looking for scrap lumber that he could use to make toys and then started donating his handiwork for sale in the Cades Cove Visitor Center.

The pieces sold well, and after retiring he expanded his repertoire, purchasing a laser engraver that allows him to marry his love of woodworking with his background in robotics. Meldrum currently works part-time as a tour guide at the Great Smoky Mountains Heritage Center in Townsend, and he uses his earnings to buy materials for laser-engraved coasters and arrowheads, all made with bamboo. Each product bears intricate designs depicting park places and wildlife.

To create these designs, he often works with a photographer whose work he will use as the basis for the design. He uses software to clean up the background and convert the photo to a format that the laser can understand. Then, it's time to start engraving. Once he's done, Meldrum donates his creations to the stores in Cades Cove and Townsend, both operated by Smokies Life, so that every cent earned from the sale can go toward supporting the park.

"National parks are pretty special places, and I feel that the work I do and the money that I spend is well worth it because it helps to educate people," he said. "I'm leaving a legacy behind."

Meldrum isn't the only ranger whose handiwork is helping park shoppers un-



Several types of brooms made during cultural demonstrations like this one are now sold at the Oconaluftee Visitor Center near Cherokee.

PROVIDED BY NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

derstand the Smokies' cultural heritage. In November 2024, Oconaluftee Visitor Center began selling the brooms, dinner bells, and hooks made by rangers and volunteers who give cultural demonstrations in the park.

"The rangers noticed that when they were demonstrating these things, that people were asking if they could purchase them," said Roark. "They were going with that idea and saying, 'Maybe there is a way we can make these demonstrations pay for themselves.'"

The park asked Smokies Life if it would be willing to partner toward that effort, and now the organization purchases these crafts and offers them for

sale in the Oconaluftee store. The park service puts its earnings toward covering the cost of future demonstrations, and any further profit made when the items sell supports the mission of Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

"It's a good way for those programs to pay for themselves without having to use other funds, so that frees the money up for something else that would really benefit from it," Roark said. "Plus, it's good to have some homemade items to sell in the store that are indicative of times past."

Though cultural demonstrations have mostly been on hiatus for the winter, shoppers are already showing interest. Since the items first appeared in the Oconaluftee store around Thanksgiving, brooms and blacksmithed items have yielded a profit of about \$1,300.

Smokies Life uses this money to support educational, historical, and scientific programs throughout the park. From producing publications such as the popular Field Guides of the Smokies series and the Smokies Guide newspaper to funding a variety of NPS positions in the Smokies, the organization is involved with a diversity of Smokies-centric projects.

"When visitors buy my things, the cashier tells them a retired ranger makes them," Meldrum said. "They tell me people will go get a second one because they know all the money goes straight to a good purpose."

Holly Kays is the lead writer for the 29,000-member Smokies Life, a non-profit dedicated to supporting the scientific, historical, and interpretive activities of Great Smoky Mountains National Park by providing educational products and services such as this column. Learn more at SmokiesLife.org or reach the author at hollyk@smokieslife.org.