



Five sleepers for college national championship

SPORTS, 1B

SERVING ASHEVILLE SINCE 1870

CITIZEN TIMES

SATURDAY, JUNE 21, 2025 | CITIZEN-TIMES.COM

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK



Supervisory Preventive Search and Rescue Ranger Joshua Albritton descends the stairs at Alum Cave Bluffs as PSAR Ranger Cutter Wheeler checks in with a group of hikers. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY HOLLY KAYS/SMOKIES LIFE

Ranger crew works to stop emergencies before they start



Word from the Smokies
Holly Kays

It's not yet 9 a.m. on a weekday, but Alum Cave Trail is already bustling. With parking scarce, hikers might walk nearly a mile to reach the trailhead along Newfound Gap Road. • "I've probably already talked to 20 people," said Joshua Albritton, supervisory preventive search and rescue ranger for Great Smoky Mountains National Park, joining PSAR Ranger Cutter Wheeler at the trailhead around a quarter after nine.

For Albritton, the conversations had been routine — "Which way to the trailhead?" "How many miles to the top?" "How long will it take to hike?" — but for many of the people asking them, hiking Alum Cave is a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Albritton leads a crew of a dozen rangers and a roughly equal number of volunteers who form the park's Preventive Search and Rescue team, an elite group of first responders that works to address common mistakes or knowledge gaps before they snowball into emergencies — and respond to them if they do.

"The focus is making face-to-face contact with park visitors, sharing very basic information about how to hike safely, and also assisting with trip planning," Albritton said. "We find a lot of folks that are out on the trail don't have a destination in mind, or they don't really know how far that destination may be."

Formed in 2023 and fully staffed in 2024 using funds from the Park It Forward parking tag program, the PSAR team patrols high-use trails like Alum Cave as well as trailheads and visitor centers. Their 40-pound backpacks are filled with life-saving gear, much of which is funded through support from park partner Friends of the Smokies, positioning them to respond quickly and effectively when emergencies occur. Since 2023, the team has interacted with thousands of visitors and responded to hundreds of incidents.

"This is one of the best services we're providing through those parking tag funds," said Katie Liming, the park's chief of staff. "One of the things we heard people say is they wanted to see a bigger green-and-gray presence in the field, and the PSAR rangers are providing that."

Most Smokies visitors make it back to their car on time and uninjured, with mountaintop memories to last a lifetime. But others encounter unexpected obstacles. A weary stumble resulting in a broken ankle, wild weather that leaves them lost or stranded, exhaustion and dehydration when a hike turns out to be unexpectedly challenging.

Search and rescue missions resulting from situations like these are a near daily occurrence in the park, but repetition doesn't equal routine. Hiker location and medical status,

See RANGER CREW, Page 8A



For many hikers, a National Park Service uniform is a reassuring sight out on the trail.



PSAR rangers like Joshua Albritton (left) and Cutter Wheeler typically concentrate their patrols on the first couple miles of busy trails and trailheads, but about twice each month they spend a day interacting with visitors even deeper in the backcountry.

Asheville parking decks will close soon

Sarah Honosky
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE - Two downtown parking garages will be fully closed, one at a time, for several weeks, likely beginning in August. Though staff say impacts will be mitigated, a City Council member voiced concerns around closures happening during the fall, typically high tourism season for business owners.

Upcoming work will address "high priority" updates in the Rankin Avenue and Wall Street garages, focusing on structural repairs including waterproofing, joint seal replacements, and mechanical, electrical and drainage repairs.

It will result in each garage being closed for four to six weeks, or 10 weeks total. The alternative option, according to a staff report, was to perform the work while garages remained open and operating, with portions of the parking levels closed off throughout, which would take an estimated 10 months.

"It is really hard out there," council member Maggie Ullman said during a June 10 City Council meeting of conversations with downtown business owners.

See PARKING, Page 2A

Iran: No nuke talks without ceasefire

Airstrikes from Israel keep coming overnight

Francesca Chambers
USA TODAY

Iran's top diplomat said there could be no negotiations over Tehran's nuclear program while Israeli bombs continue to fall, making a ceasefire in the eight-day war a condition for renewed talks with the Trump administration.

Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi's statement came a day after President Donald Trump opened a possible two-week window for talks, turning down expectations of imminent U.S. airstrikes on Iran's nuclear facilities.

"There is no room for negotiations with the U.S. until Israeli aggression stops," Araghchi was quoted as saying June 20 on Iranian state TV.

See IRAN, Page 8A



Ranger crew

Continued from Page 1A

time of day, weather, and terrain combine to determine the blueprint for each rescue — no two SARs are alike.

An immediate threat to life or limb might justify a helicopter rescue, but only if the weather is compatible with safe flight. Can the patient walk? Using a stretcher requires a litter team, and possibly rope rigging if the terrain is technical. In one recent rescue, rangers called in a sawyer team to cut a path from the off-trail location where the patient was found.

Despite being a difficult trail, Alum Cave is popular even with novice hikers for its beauty and variety of destinations: the aptly named Arch Rock at 1.4 miles, the heath bald of Inspiration Point half a mile later, the famed Alum Cave Bluffs at 2.3 miles, and, for the hardest of hikers, the trail’s terminus at Mount Le Conte, five miles from the trailhead. It sees so many rescue calls that the park had metal anchors installed above Arch Rock, a natural formation that acts as a tunnel, a series of hand-hewn stone steps the only way through. The anchors allow first responders to quickly set up their ropes and safely transport patients under the rock.

“It’s quite the exercise,” said Wheeler. “And we do it about 30 times a year.”

Even a “simple” SAR might occupy five or six staff members for the better part of a day, and trickier operations can become infinitely more demanding. It’s not unheard of for rescuers to be awake for more than 24 hours as they bring an injured hiker to safety, or for an operation to involve well over 30 people and multiple agencies.

Yet, “this is the stuff we love,” Wheeler said. Arch Rock during a nighttime rescue is awe-inspiring, “the entire cave illuminated by headlamps, so it just looks like there’s light streaming out of both sides.” He thrives on the challenge, even when a rescue runs long, and he comes home dirty, exhausted, and sleep deprived.

“I feel like I love it even more then,” he said. “There’s something about pushing yourself all the way. There’s something



Supervisory PSAR Ranger Joshua Albritton stops to talk with a hiker still early in her hike up Alum Cave Trail. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY HOLLY KAYS/SMOKIES LIFE

about knowing your bed’s on the other side.”

However, many people who find themselves in need of rescue could have made it home on their own, if they’d only been a little better prepared. By catching them while they’re still early in the hike, PSAR rangers help people avoid potentially hazardous choices and leave the trail a bit more educated about how to plan a hike.

“A lot of people don’t spend time in the woods, and this may be their first hiking trip,” Wheeler said. “A lot of people are learning the process of hiking and how to prepare for being in the woods, so a lot of what we’re trying to teach is the 10 essentials and how to pack correctly and be prepared.” These basics include food, water and proper clothing.

Patrolling the trail as far as the bluffs, Wheeler and Albritton “camp” at each landmark — that is, they unbuckle their backpacks and stand along the trail, greeting every group that walks by. They meet parents with small children, athletic couples making their confident way up the mountain, a church group with about 20 teen boys in tow, an elderly couple struggling against health issues, a group of women in their 40s finishing a girls’ trip to LeConte Lodge. The rangers engage some folks with a simple hello. Other times, they ask a question

or two: “Do you need any help?” “Where are you headed today?” “Did everybody pack water?”

“You sort of take inventory,” Albritton said. “If there is a rescue call later in the day, maybe you’ve already seen that person and talked to that person. So you already have this picture in your mind.”

The park’s rugged terrain and nearly non-existent cell coverage mean that any mistake can be costly — and that any information available before the SAR team deploys is worth its weight in gold.

In the years to come, Albritton hopes to see his team contribute even more data to the cause. Since PSAR’s launch, he’s been working to standardize the statistics rangers collect on patrol, hoping to reveal where hikers most frequently need assistance and whether interventions such as new signage or targeted trail maintenance could help. While it’s too early to know if PSAR efforts are reducing SAR calls, anecdotes abound.

“A lot of times too we’re talking to people who may hike in the future,” Albritton said. “Are we helping them in 10 years when we have been continuously creating support for them, and now they’re prepared for the next hike? We don’t know if we’re helping limit rescues in a decade, but I think about that a lot.”

At the top of the bluff, Wheeler has



Supervisory PSAR Ranger Joshua Albritton takes notes after assisting a hiker at Arch Rock. These notes are used to create statistics to help make the PSAR team even more effective in the years to come.

his eye on the church group. Separated parties are a frequent cause of SAR calls, and with large groups the probability increases. A cloud of dust and cry of pain redirects his focus, and the rangers descend to find a preteen boy crying and covered in dust. After offering a hand and a few kind words, they determine that he’s not hurt — just scared — and resume their post watching the church group leaders count heads. The boys divide into two packs: one heading back to the trailhead and the other to Mount Le Conte. The Le Conte-bound hikers don’t have a map, so Albritton hands them one, offers a word of caution about the terrain ahead, and wishes them well.

“One of the best things about this park is we have so many people who are so caring,” Wheeler said. “They want to go help.”

Before your next hiking trip, make sure you’ve got a bag packed with the 10 essentials and have read up on basic hiking safety. Learn more at nps.gov/articles/10essentials.htm or nps.gov/grsm/planyourvisit/hikingsafety.htm.

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.

Iran

Continued from Page 1A

But the airstrikes kept coming. Israel said it hit Iranian missile facilities overnight, and Iranian news reports said a new fusillade of missiles had been fired toward Israel.

For the eighth day in a row, the concussion of missile and interceptors echoed over Tel Aviv on June 20. Israeli officials said they were working to intercept the ballistic missiles.

While taking a pummeling from Israel, Iran has managed several times to pierce its enemy’s “Iron Dome” defensive shield, striking neighborhoods, hospitals and a research institute.

The number of casualties was unclear. Iran said June 16 that 240 people had been killed in Israeli attacks. At least 24 Israelis reportedly have been killed by Iranian fire.

Back to the future?

As Trump delays a decision on bombing Iran’s nuclear sites, giving time for European nations to pursue diplomacy, two numbers loom over any future nuclear accord: 3.67% and 90%.

The first number was the uranium enrichment level Iran had reached, as verified by the United Nations’ nuclear watchdog, around the time Trump, in his first term, pulled the United States out of the Obama-era nuclear deal, known as JCPOA, between Iran and world powers.

Since Trump scrapped the deal in May 2018, Iran’s enrichment level has closed in on 90%, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency. That level, according to the IAEA and other nuclear watchdogs, puts Iran on the cusp of turning enriched uranium into a nuclear weapon.

The JCPOA’s critics, many of them decadeslong Iran hawks such as former national security adviser John Bolton



Emergency personnel work inside a damaged building June 20 after Iran’s missile strike in Haifa, Israel. FLORION GOGA/REUTERS

and Sens. Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio (now U.S. secretary of state), have long said that the accord did nothing to address Iran’s ballistic missile program and its regional militia proxies.

But the enrichment controls were working, according to the IAEA. This raises questions about what kind of new deal could potentially emerge, and whether it will be an improvement on what Trump abandoned in 2018.

Europe pushes Iran to rejoin talks

On June 19, European diplomats sat down with Iran’s foreign minister in a last-ditch effort to restart U.S.-Iran nuclear talks.

Presidential envoy Steve Witkoff and Rubio met at the White House the same day with U.K. Foreign Secretary David Lammy, who is now in Geneva for the European talks with Araghchi.

“A window now exists within the next two weeks to achieve a diplomatic solution,” Lammy stated in a post on X. Maenwhile, Rubio has been burning

up the phones with his European counterparts, including French Foreign Minister Jean-Noël Barrot.

Working with the Trump administration’s blessing, the Europeans called “for a return to the diplomatic track and to continue negotiations on Iran’s nuclear program,” the French foreign ministry said.

Trump opened a two-week window beginning June 19 for talks to end Iran’s nuclear program, under the threat of the U.S. joining Israel’s airstrikes.

Iran says Israel sabotaged talks

Araghchi said his government was preparing a “very promising” proposal for the Trump administration in talks over its nuclear program when Israel attacked on June 13.

Araghchi on June 20 called Israel’s attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities and other targets grave war crimes, speaking at the United Nations in Geneva ahead of talks with European diplomats.

Iranian and U.S. negotiators had been set to meet June 15. Araghchi said Israel betrayed diplomacy by striking before that planned round of U.S.-Iran talks.

Trump has said repeatedly Iran should have accepted a U.S. offer. The details of Washington’s offer aren’t publicly known, except for a single condition: a complete end to nuclear enrichment, which Iran says it can’t accept.

“They had to sign a document, and I think they wished they signed it,” Trump said June 18. “It was a fair deal, and now it’s a harder thing to sign.”

‘Coercive diplomacy’

Daniel Shapiro, former U.S. ambassador to Israel, said the Pentagon has for years been refining plans for strikes on Iran that Trump can tap into if he decides to give the go-ahead.

“He’s clearly ordered the forces into the theater that would support the strike if and when he makes that decision,” said Shapiro, who was deputy assistant secretary of defense for the Middle East at the end of the Biden administration.

U.S. airstrikes could also prompt retaliation. Tehran’s response could include attacks on U.S. military bases in Persian Gulf countries or Iraq and Syria, the targeting of regional energy facilities, and blocking oil and gas shipments from crossing the Strait of Hormuz, Shapiro said.

The conflict is now in a phase of “coercive diplomacy,” where Trump is signaling that he’s preparing for military strikes, he said.

“There’s potentially one last opportunity for Iran to come to a negotiating table, whether it’s with the U.S. or through some other partners, and make the concession that they wouldn’t make in the talks that were being held before the hostility started,” Shapiro, a fellow at the Atlantic Council, told USA TODAY.

Contributing: Kim Hjelmgaard, USA TODAY

Obituaries

TODAY'S DEATH NOTICES						
Name	Age Town, State	Passed	Arrangements	Service Time	Service Location	Interment
Hyatt, Bobby “Casey” Eugene	94 Leicester, NC	Jun 17	Wells Funeral Home-Canton	Jun 21 12:00pm	Chapel of Wells Funeral Home	-

**Additional information in display obituaries
Obituaries appear in print and online at citizen-times.com/obituaries*