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WORD FROM THE SMOKIES

Tree crew scales up park safety



Ken Gragg, tree crew supervisor for Great Smoky Mountains National Park, climbs a red maple tree slated for removal at Elkmont Campground. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY HOLLY KAYS/SMOKIES LIFE

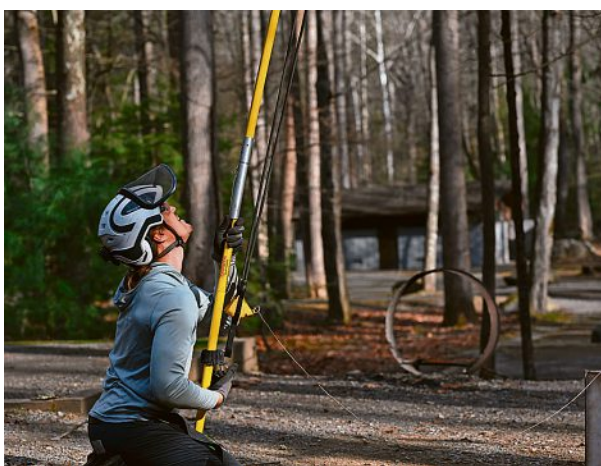
Holly Kays

Special to the Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

With spikes on his shoes, a helmet on his head, a rope on his harness, and a chainsaw on his belt, Ken Gragg starts to climb. He moves easily up the red maple tree, pausing as he reaches a Y in the trunk. Balancing on his spikes, he assesses his surroundings, draws his chainsaw, and cuts away the smaller half of the Y. It falls to the ground with a crackle and a thump, and Gragg continues climbing.

"A lot of people see trees getting cut, and it's a negative connotation," says Gragg, supervisor of the recently formed hazard tree crew at Great Smoky Mountains National Park. "But our main goal is just to keep the forest healthy and people as safe as possible."

See **PARK SAFETY**, Page 4A



Tree crew member Colyn Petty aims a slingshot toward a healthy tree limb that he will use to access a dead branch slated for removal.

Asheville improvement projects are underway

Sarah Honosky

Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE – It's been nearly a decade since an evaluation of city pools concluded that Walton Street pool had reached the end of its life.

A central fixture of the Southside neighborhood, it opened in 1948, nearly a decade after the surrounding park was established by the city and the Works Progress Administration.

It was founded as a sanctioned recreational space for the city's Black community during the years of Jim Crow segregation and was the sole municipal park available to Black people in Asheville.

The park and pool — which clinched both local landmark status and a place on the National Register of Historic Places in recent years — is "one of the very few landmarks of Black Asheville that remain standing today," according to its registration form.

Though the pool has been closed since summer 2021, a new vision for the area is now in the design phase. Renderings show a range of possibilities, like an outdoor gallery, skate space, fitness equipment, vendor spots or commemorative elements.

A city project page said it intends to "revitalize and preserve the historic character" of the pool with a reimagined use.

See **PROJECTS**, Page 8A

Iran proposes talks with U.S. for non-nuclear issues

Parisa Hafezi and Olivia Le Poidevin

REUTERS

GENEVA – The United States and Iran could reach a framework for a deal if Washington separates "nuclear and non-nuclear issues," a senior Iranian official told Reuters, adding that remaining gaps need to be narrowed during a third round of talks in Geneva.

The negotiations have been intense and serious, said the official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Iran's foreign ministry spokesperson said Tehran's right to nuclear energy for peaceful purposes must be recognized and sanctions should be lifted.

Iran and the United States are holding indirect talks in Geneva over their long-running nuclear dispute, to avert a conflict after President Donald Trump ordered a huge military buildup in the region.

Washington, which says Iran is seeking the capability to make a nuclear bomb, has long sought to link the talks to other issues including Iran's arsenal of missiles and its support for armed groups in the region.

Tehran, which says its nuclear program is peaceful, has agreed in principle to accept curbs to its nuclear activities in return for the lifting of sanctions but rejects tying the talks to other issues.

Mediator Oman held out hope that Iran and the United States would make more progress at talks on Feb. 26 after exchanging "positive and creative ideas," despite U.S. concerns about Tehran's ballistic missile program.

Omani Foreign Minister Sayyid Badr Albusaidi said negotiators had taken a pause after the third round of talks got underway the morning of Feb. 26, and that the negotiations would resume later in the day.

"We've been exchanging creative and positive ideas in Geneva today, and now both U.S. and Iranian negotiators have adjourned for a break. We'll resume later today. We hope to make more progress," he posted on X, without giving details.

See **IRAN**, Page 4A



Park safety

Continued from Page 1A

Gragg's team is in week two of four assessing and cutting hazard trees at Elkmont Campground, with 211 sites the park's largest camping area. The red maple was slated for removal due to its proximity to the bathrooms and the area of rot setting in near its base, creating a risk of failure later.

Gragg cuts away branches as he climbs, his footing sure in the spikes and his safety ensured by the rope attached to his harness. The branches gone, he removes the tapering trunk in the tree's crown, one section at a time. Finally, all that remains is the main stem. Gragg returns to the ground, holding taut a rope he's tied around the top of the remaining trunk, guiding it in the direction he wants it to fall. His colleague Colyn Petty makes the final cuts, carefully calculating each tap of the axe and slice of the chainsaw. Within an hour of Gragg's ascent, the tree is on the ground.

"If we can prune a tree so that it's safer and leave it, that's our goal," Gragg says. "But with the age of the forest here, a lot of the trees have reached their average lifespan, and the pressure especially comes from invasive species that are killing a lot of trees."

Creating the crew

Before forming the hazard tree crew, the park removed dangerous trees primarily by contracting with local companies. But those services are more expensive than in-house labor, with slower response times and less ability to conduct thorough hazard assessments of critical areas like campgrounds.

When the Park It Forward parking tag program was implemented in 2023, the park began planning to use some of the funds to form a hazard tree crew. Gragg was hired as the crew's supervisor at the beginning of 2024 and selected a team of four to start work that December. Contracted crews still do some tree work—along roads, utility lines, and the park boundary—but the Smokies crew does the rest.

"The goal was to have a professional arborist crew that can do all aspects of hazard tree work and also assess trees that need to be taken throughout the Smokies," said Gragg. "So the educational background I was looking for is an arborist certification and also the skill set of climbing—so no fear of heights—and then equipment operation. It's a wide skill set that the four people on the crew have."

The crew's formation comes at an apt time in the life of the park. Most of the land that now forms Great Smoky Mountains National Park was logged in the early 1900s, and since then the forest has been regenerating. Now, many of the trees that first sprang up on the newly logged land are reaching the end of their lifespan.

"If you were to clearcut this forest, a lot of what would grow up would be black locust," Gragg explained. "And black locust has a lifespan, typically thirty to forty years, but they can live to 100. And then they fall over, and that's the cycle of the forest."

Other tree species that might pop up on newly cleared land, including red maples like the one Gragg cut down at



A big brown bat clings to the roof of a cave. In the wintertime, bats leave the tree roosts they use during the warmer months to migrate south or hibernate in caves, giving tree crews a window to work without disturbing them.

PROVIDED BY ANN FROSCHAUER/U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Elkmont, have similarly short lifespans. Though the longer-lived trees that typically follow as a forest matures can live for much longer—before it died in 2016, a white oak tree in New Jersey was believed to be the nation's oldest, at 600 years old—their longevity depends on a variety of factors. Soil quality, rainfall, competition from other trees, and orientation to the sun all play a role. Increasingly, so do invasive species.

"We have the hemlock wooly adelgid that's been taking out the hemlocks, and then also the emerald ash borer that's been taking out the ash trees," Gragg said. "So a lot of different factors for hazard trees have culminated in the need for a hazard tree crew."

The crew has stayed busy over the past year, taking down more than 1,300 hazard trees in 2025 alone. Completing that work with contracted crews would have cost over \$1.3 million, more than what the park is paying to maintain the five-person team and specialized equipment.

"Financially it's a win, and for the safety of the public and the staff, it's a win as well," said Gragg. "If somebody calls about a hazard tree endangering the visitor center or a walkway that's heavily populated, we can run out there and grab it instead of needing to call a contractor in and wait several days for them to arrive."

Hazards high up

Injuries from falling trees are rare, but they do happen. Between 2007 and 2024, four people died from falling trees in Great Smoky Mountains National

Park. Nature is unpredictable, and even healthy trees can fail without warning. To help reduce this risk, Gragg and his crew assess, monitor, and respond to hazardous trees. Their top priority: removing such trees from the park's ten campgrounds to reduce the risk and make them safer for visitors.

"That's where people are sleeping," said Gragg. "If a windstorm comes through, they're not typically going to get up and pack up camp and leave the campground."

In the Smokies, the winter months offer a welcome break from the hectic pace of spring, summer, and fall, when visitation is high and the park is most ecologically active. But for the tree crew, it's the busiest time of the year. This is due both to the fact that it's safer to fell trees when facilities are closed or more lightly used and to something known as the "bat window."

In the wintertime, bats either migrate to warmer climates or hibernate in protected areas like caves or abandoned mines. But in the summer, they often roost in trees. To protect them, the National Park Service is required to assess whether bats are present before cutting any trees in the warmer months. Those restrictions are lifted each year between December and April, so that's when the tree crew does most of its cutting.

"We come into the campground annually, assess it, mitigate hazards, and for a campground as big as Elkmont it takes us several weeks," said Gragg. "And when we're done with Elkmont, we'll move to Cades Cove, Cosby, Smokemont—all the campgrounds throughout the Smokies."

The job starts with an assessment. Crew members survey each campground, using their trained eyes to look for dead branches, signs of rot or instability, and proximity to buildings or other areas where people are likely to be. Then they analyze their observations and make a plan.

Outside of the bat window, the team spends more of its time responding to individual hazard tree reports than systematically working through larger areas like Elkmont Campground. In the warmer months, the team often partners with the park's wildlife crew to determine whether bats are present in target trees.

The tree crew has several tools at its disposal when deciding how to deal with a hazard tree. They can use a tool known as an ascender to quickly climb through the air on a suspended rope, strap on spikes to scale a tree slated for complete removal, or use a bucket truck to get up high and make cuts without climbing the tree itself.

Crew members appreciate the bucket truck, but they love the climbing. It's a job that requires complete focus, subduing the chaos and stress of daily life to create a paradoxical calm.

"I'm ecstatic that I get to do the job that I do in the Smokies," Gragg said.

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

Ballistic missiles a 'big problem'

Secretary of State Marco Rubio said Feb. 25 that Iran's refusal to discuss its ballistic missile program was a "big problem" that would have to be addressed eventually, as the missiles were "designed solely to strike America" and pose a threat to regional stability.

"If you can't even make progress on the nuclear program, it's going to be hard to make progress on the ballistic missiles as well," Rubio told reporters in the Caribbean island of St. Kitts.

Iranian foreign ministry spokesperson Esmail Baghaei told Press TV on Feb. 26 that the negotiations would focus solely on nuclear topics and the lifting of sanctions, and said Tehran goes into them with "seriousness and flexibility."

U.S. special envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner have been negotiating indirectly with Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi. The two countries renewed negotiations this month.

Trump briefly laid out his case for a possible attack on Iran in his State of the Union speech on Feb. 24, underlining that while he preferred a diplomatic solution, he would not allow Tehran to obtain a nuclear weapon.

Trump threatened to intervene but ultimately held back in January when Iranian security forces cracked down on



Omani Foreign Minister Badr Albusaidi, right, meets with U.S. special envoys Jared Kushner, left, and Steve Witkoff on Feb. 26 in Geneva.

OMAN NEWS AGENCY/HANDOUT VIA REUTERS

protests, killing thousands of people in Iran's worst domestic unrest since the era of its 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Since then, Trump has deployed fighter jets and aircraft carrier strike groups in the region, hoping to pressure Iran into concessions.

Several countries have begun withdrawing dependents of diplomatic personnel and nonessential staff from some locations in the Middle East, or advising citizens to avoid travel to Iran.

Pressure inside and outside Iran

The large U.S. deployment has raised fears of a wider regional conflict. In June 2025, the U.S. joined Israel in hitting Iranian nuclear sites. Iran has threatened to retaliate fiercely if attacked again.

The USS Gerald R. Ford, the biggest U.S. aircraft carrier, left port near the Greek island of Crete on Feb. 26 bound for shores near Haifa in northern Israel, where it is expected to arrive

Feb. 27.

The U.S. has also sent around a dozen F-22 fighter jets to Israel – the first time Washington has deployed combat aircraft to the country for potential wartime operations, a U.S. official said.

The Trump administration has not formally announced the deployment. The Pentagon declined to comment.

Trump said on Feb. 19 that Iran must make a deal in 10 to 15 days, warning that "really bad things" would otherwise happen.

Araqchi said on Feb. 24 that Iran aimed to achieve a fair, swift deal but reiterated that it would not forgo its right to peaceful nuclear technology. Washington views nuclear enrichment inside Iran as a potential pathway to nuclear weapons.

"A deal is within reach, but only if diplomacy is given priority," Araqchi said in a statement on X.

But the sides remain sharply divided – even over the scope and sequencing of relief from U.S. sanctions – a senior Iranian official told Reuters.

Within Iran, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei faces the gravest crisis of his 36-year tenure, with an economy buckling under tightened sanctions and renewed protests following the major unrest and crackdown in January.

President Masoud Pezeshkian said on Feb. 26 that Khamenei has banned weapons of mass destruction, which "clearly means Tehran won't develop nuclear weapons," reiterating a fatwa issued in the early 2000s.