



FEATURE

Sandstone Glades

OF LOOKOUT MOUNTAIN

Scout out rare plants and wondrous rock formations among the natural clearings dotting the plateau's porous cap.

story by MICHELLE REYNOLDS | photos by BOB FARLEY and MICHELLE REYNOLDS

LOOKOUT MOUNTAIN IS A GEOLOGICAL LAYER CAKE one can easily tour by car. Atop the mountain, cool springs and meandering streams converge with creeks and rivers, continually cutting through the mountain's sandstone cap as they go, forming rock shelters and ravines. Woodlands, waterfalls and craggy views of splendor beckon visitors. The quaint town of Mentone, Ala., DeSoto State Park,

Little River Canyon National Preserve and the area surrounding Noccalula Falls are natural and cultural treasures. Outdoor adventurers, motorists and the curious are drawn to Lookout Mountain and all the area has to offer.

I often visit the mountain as a drive-by native plant enthusiast, hopping out of the car at every point of interest to get a closer look. Botaniz-



ELF ORPINE, which is rare and only grows on sandstone and granite outcrops, turns vernal pools red in late winter and early spring. **OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** In spring, summer and fall, Curtiss' milkwort blooms on glade edges and in depressions where soil has accumulated; Nuttall's rayless goldenrod is not a goldenrod at all, but its blooms are magnificently golden in late summer and into fall; Hinds Road Outcrop in Gadsden is the most expansive sandstone outcrop in Alabama; Fairy wand blooms in sunny, open areas next to glades.

ing by car (best done as a passenger) on Lookout Mountain and the adjoining valleys is a favorite excursion of mine. The desire to learn about the region's flora and my childlike wonder for rock shelters, boulder fields and bluffs have led the way to a greater appreciation for Alabama's biodiversity.

Searching through the sculpted crags and scrubby forests, I find my favorite features – sandstone glades.

A glade is an open area where the bedrock is at or near the surface and where soils are so thin, trees and shrubs have difficulty growing. Yet it is in these places where many rare and unique plant communities thrive. Lookout Mountain's sandstone cap is dotted with many glades. From Gadsden, Ala., to Mentone, there's a lot of glade hopping to do, as the glades speckle the land like sunny islands in a sea of trees.

Little River Canyon and DeSoto State Park are where I like to start, and to get there, my husband and I travel the slow and pretty way from Birmingham, Ala. We take U.S. Highway 411 from Gadsden to Leesburg, Ala., then travel through the Shinbone Valley and past Yellow Creek Falls and Canyon Mouth Park.

After climbing the mountain, our first glimpse of a glade is at

Little River Falls. As others enjoy the view of the gorgeous waterfall, I turn away to look at the plants.

I love the rim of Little River Canyon and its sandstone glades. The glades are slightly sloped and pocked and very moon-like in appearance. On the rocks' surface, only lichens can take hold. In depressions and crevices, mosses grow with the lichens. A little soil accumulates, seeds settle and sprout and islands of vegetation are born. Rare plants that thrive on the rocky surfaces with thin soils might be relics of ancient prairies. These species could have migrated to open areas as they were pushed out by forest succession. Evolving over time, they adapted to deal with the harsh conditions and settled into the extremes the glades offer. Through hot, dry conditions in summer and cold, rainy winters, these plants thrive in a severe and hostile world now because of less competition from other plants. Still, the forest tries to succeed. But pines, oaks and other trees in this environment are often stunted and bonsai-like in form.

Along Alabama Highway 35 and after we turn onto County Road 89 on our way to DeSoto State Park, I see rocks jutting above the surfaces of pastures, yards and power-line clearings. Even at travel-

ing speed, I can make out the plants in this unique landscape.

After a hamburger at the Mountain Inn Restaurant (housed in the Civilian-Conservation-Corps-built lodge at DeSoto State Park) and a hike to one of the park's glades (see sidebar for details on how to get to the glades), it is time to start making our way to the other end of the mountain and head back home. Backtracking and hanging a right on Alabama Highway 176 (also known as Canyon Rim Drive), I am most interested in stopping at Little River Falls Boardwalk, Lynn Overlook and Wolf Creek Overlook so I can traverse the side trails above the canyon.

Even in the cut grass along roadsides, the glade plants thrive. In late summer and fall, the silk grasses send up yellow, aster-like blooms. I love the fall as leaves turn, weather cools and flowers of goldenrod species stand out against purple and white asters and white thoroughwort.

In only a few scattered depressions where soil is saturated by standing



water on top of bedrock, a pairing of sphagnum moss and the endangered carnivorous green pitcher plant grow together. The pitchers are beautiful, greenish-yellow with red veins, and in spring and summer magnificent, bright-yellow blooms accompany them. A friend of mine says the large flowers look like a "cross between a spaceship and a daffodil." The pitchers contain enzymes that help the plants digest insects that fall prey to the

tubular, sticky traps.

Leaving the canyon, we take Lookout Mountain Parkway to Noccalula Falls Park in Gadsden. I imagine the glades surrounding the falls in their former glory, a time before lawn mowers and line trimmers. Just up the hill from the park's Black Creek is the most expansive sandstone outcrop in Alabama. Located near a residential neighborhood and on private property, access can be tricky. This glade is the location of a special species of oak tree. First discovered in 1901 in this very glade, Boynton's oak is a small and beautiful tree. Of the nearly 40 species

the most glades in the shortest amount of time.

From the Little River Falls parking lot, take the paved path to the overlook. Step onto the rock platform and peer over the rustic fence to the rock slope. Tucked into the crevices and in the shallow depressions is an assemblage of sandstone-glade plant species. This location is excellent in late summer. When other glades are dry and crisp, these plants are green from the spray of the falls.

Across the river, take Canyon Rim Drive (Alabama Highway 176) to Little River Falls Boardwalk, Lynn Overlook and Wolf Creek Overlook.

At the first overlook, there is a boardwalk to the bluff. To the left of the boardwalk, you might see Menges' fameflower and slender ladies' tresses blooming in summer. Across the road are upland rose gentian and yellow-fringed orchids.

The drive into the parking lot for Lynn Overlook traverses a large glade. Here visitors can view one of the best examples of the glade ecosystem, and it is the easiest glade to access. An interpretive sign with pictures guides the way to identifying the glade's plants. The most spectacular display of the rare Little River Canyon onion is in late May. And in late summer, visitors could see long-leaved sunflowers along with woodland tickseed and Nuttall's rayless goldenrod. Summer blooms may last until fall if there is enough rainfall.

The next stop is Wolf Creek Overlook. This is the best place to view the canyon overall and is the perfect vantage point for photographs. Gaining a sense of the power of Little River, you can view 400 feet of geological layers, all the way down to the floor of the canyon. Peer over the edge to see plants thriving in the cracks and crevices of the mountain's sandstone cap.



Little River Canyon Center: Located at 4322 Little River Trail NE (off of Alabama Highway 35 near the bridge at Little River Falls) is Little River Canyon Center. During your visit to the Canyon Center, watch the NASA-funded HD film about the natural history of the canyon, then take the half-mile Path to Learning behind the center to see the sandstone glade. On this easy self-guided hike, visitors also can walk into an early-19th-century Cherokee cabin, look for wildlife and learn about geology and water resources along the way.

Little River Canyon National Preserve: Beginning at Little River Falls off Alabama Highway 35, there are several places that will allow you to view

Visiting the Glades

A wonderland to scientists and nature enthusiasts alike, the biologic wonders of Lookout Mountain are studied and taught onsite by a variety of educators through partnerships forged by Jacksonville State University Field Schools, Little River Canyon Center, DeSoto State Park, the National Park Service and outdoor-adventure and cultural-arts organizations.

To learn more about the plants, animals, natural history, art and cultural heritage of Lookout Mountain, visitors can attend a wide variety of programs presented by JSU Field Schools at the Canyon Center as well as in and around Little River Canyon. DeSoto State Park offers campfire talks, classes, demonstrations, guided interpretive or fitness hikes, workshops and more. For upcoming events, see page 62, alapark.com/events/61 and click Field School Programs at jsu.edu/epic/canyoncenter.

If you choose to visit the glades on your own, here's how to find them.

DeSoto State Park: There are two locations in the park to get an up-close look at sandstone glades.

The easiest glade to reach is in the improved campground, between campsites 69 and 71, with parking available at the bathhouse. Or, if you would like to hike to the glade, begin at the trailhead parking lot near the Country Store. Take the orange trail to the glade in the campground. You can continue your hike on to Laurel Falls and Lost Falls, where you'll be able to view plants on top of rocks surrounding the waterfalls.

The second location is a beautiful, open glade above the West Fork of Little River and just past the Civilian Conservation Corps sandstone-and-timber shelter. Park at the pool parking lot

of oak trees found in Alabama, Boynton's oak is the only one endemic to Alabama, meaning the tree cannot be found growing naturally outside of the state. This place is amazing, so I hope efforts of the city of Gadsden, private landowners and conservation entities will soon protect and preserve the glade and surrounding land.

The combination of plants growing in Lookout Mountain's sandstone glades is spectacular all year long. In the winter, the mosses are green and the lichens gray, and as spring approaches, the tiny, succulent leaves of elf orpine turn the vernal pools red. Spring brings the white, dainty blooms of sandwort, clusters of pink Little River Canyon onion, yellow and white sunnybells and pale purple common toadflax. Through late summer and into fall, mosses turn brown and a burst of yellow and purple erupts when the woodland tickseed, Nuttall's rayless goldenrod, long-leaved sunflowers and blazing star bloom in a spectacular show of colors that lasts through October. The scene is beautiful against the silver lichens, rushfoil and grasses.

Exotic species, soil accumulation, fire suppression and the ever-encroaching forest of broadleaf trees are ongoing threats to glade systems. Urbanization, development and quarrying also are troublesome. Because of their pavement-like surfaces, glades are often used as dumps, parking areas, logging decks,



GREEN PITCHER PLANTS are endangered, but you can get an up-close look at them at DeSoto State Park's demonstration bog—and possibly in a Lookout Mountain glade. Half the known patches of this species in the world are located inside Little River Canyon National Preserve. The plant's flower (top) has been described as a "cross between a spaceship and a daffodil."

OPPOSITE: Don't let the dainty sweet flower of dwarf sundew fool you: these carnivorous plants are sticky traps for insects.

bonfire pits and off-road vehicle playgrounds. These places should be recognized as special and unique treasures to cherish and protect.

So go ahead, take a drive atop Lookout Mountain, find the glades, explore and see these wonders for yourself. And if you are lucky enough to live on Lookout Mountain, protect and enjoy these special places. 🌿

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