

# THE TENNESSEAN

*Every day matters.*

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## 5,500 acres on the Cumberland Plateau will be preserved

*Deal saves state's 'Yellowstone'*



By JENNY UPCHURCH

BEERSHEBA SPRINGS, Tenn. — A multimillion-dollar land deal will preserve one of Tennessee's best-known scenic views, the cliff-hugging overlooks of the Cumberland Plateau's Savage Gulf.

"Every group, every community, every state has its Yellowstone. And the Savage Gulf, in many ways, is y'all's Yellowstone," said Rex Boner, vice president of the Conservation Fund, a national group that

with the Land Trust for Tennessee orchestrated obtaining nearly 5,500 acres on the Cumberland Plateau from a timber company and private landowners.

The \$6 million, 3,000-acre Savage Gulf property will be added this spring to the South Cumberland State Park and Natural Area, which has a million annual visitors. The deal also includes more than 2,400 acres that will preserve a portion of the South

Cumberland's Fiery Gizzard trail, ranked among the nation's best trails.

The purchase exhausts state funds for conservation, but private conservation groups say they plan to pursue more crucial acquisitions.

The Savage Gulf cuts 1,500 feet deep into the western edge of the Plateau, more than 80 miles southeast of Nashville. Sheer sandstone cliffs fringed in hemlocks, pines and hardwoods plunge to the gorge floor, where creeks spill over spectacular waterfalls and vanish into mysterious sinkholes.

The Gulf rivals a tropical rain forest in plant diversity, with more than a third of native Tennessee plants appearing there, including rarities such as lady's slipper orchids.

"The first two weeks in April, the Collins Gulf trail is just the Garden of Eden," said John Christof, South Cumberland's park manager.

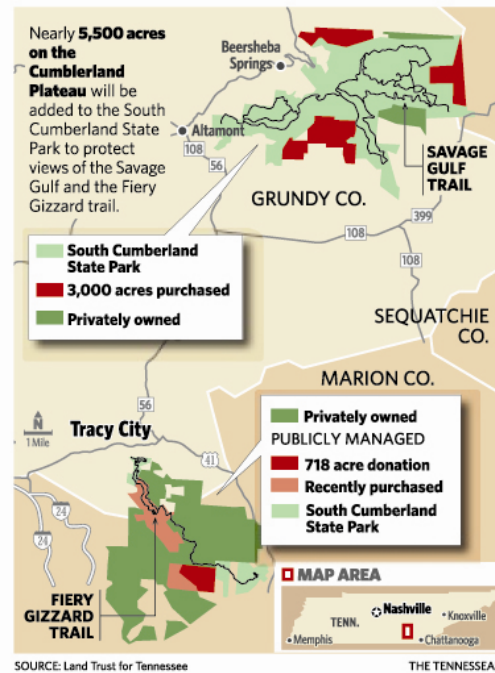
The Savage Gulf is also easy to get to: From the Stone Door ranger station near Beersheba Springs, a level one-mile trail leads to the Stone Door, a 10-foot-wide and 100-foot-deep crack in the cliff face with rock steps to the gorge floor. The first third of the one-mile trail to the Laurel Gulf overlook is paved and handicapped accessible.

"We have a lot of people asking for an easy place to hike for a wilderness experience," Christof said. "People come after church. You can go out in your church clothes and make the easy stroll."

### Views were at risk

Chet Simon and Terrell Barker of Dickson paused at an overlook last weekend before heading down to the gorge floor for an overnight backpack.

### SCENIC SPOTS PROTECTED



"The bluffs, it's beautiful to see," Simon said.

"And the sound, it's so quiet. You can't hear any cars," Barker said.

But since 1973, when Savage Gulf was first set aside, broad swaths along the fortress bluffs remained in private hands, vulnerable to being clear-cut for timber or transformed into home sites.

"We were trying to prevent development along the bluff," Christof said. Imagine, he said, park visitors gazing across the mile-wide gorge and seeing someone "mowing their grass across one of the most pristine wilderness views of the state."

"The 3,000 acres was ... the last big piece that was part of the master plan. That's why it was so exciting," said Chris Roberts of the Land Trust for Tennessee, a private conservation group. "It is the meat of the Savage Gulf."

The threat of development still hangs over the 17-mile Fiery Gizzard trail, Roberts said,



but the recent acquisition of more than 2,000 acres is a big step toward preserving the area.

It winds through centuries-old hemlocks, by waterfalls and gorges and spectacular rock formations. Backpacker magazine placed it among the top 25 backpacking experiences in the United States.

"If you're looking for wilderness immersion, the Fiery Gizzard is it," Christof said, although he notes that many people, including families and young children, can enjoy short but stunning stretches near the trailheads at Foster Falls and Grundy Forest.

But almost all of the 170,000 people a year who visit are unaware the trail is entirely on private land, Roberts said. Some was recently cleared for building, to the shock of hikers.

Now, he says, "at least some part of the trail is in public ownership."

### **Public funds dwindle**

The Fiery Gizzard parcels are valued at more than \$3 million. An anonymous private owner is donating an easement worth about \$1 million, and the Friends of the South Cumberland also contributed.

And U.S. Sen. Lamar Alexander helped direct federal highways money, meant to protect scenic routes, for the rest.

Alexander applauded the work to protect the two sites. "We need to do everything we can at the federal and state level with public and private support to ensure that these natural treasures are enjoyed for generations to come," Alexander said.

More land between the Foster Falls and Grundy Forest trailheads is for sale, and the Land Trust will continue to pursue acquiring them, Roberts said. But financing it will be harder because the Savage Gulf purchase exhausts the state's conservation land funds.

The state's land acquisition fund and the Tennessee Heritage Conservation Trust Fund provided \$5.5 million of the Savage Gulf's \$6 million purchase, with a private donor making up the difference.

Those funds are both empty. No new money was appropriated last year, and Jim Fyke, commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, doesn't expect any during this legislative session, in a tight budget year.

Boner stressed that preserving land isn't anti-development and can improve a local economy.

"Gatlinburg, Pigeon Forge — what if you didn't have the Smokies and the 10 million people who visit there? It's an economic issue and a quality-of-life issue."

A slow economy will pose a help and a hindrance, said Ralph Knoll, who directed the Conservation Fund's work in this acquisition.

"The cry for development has been silenced a little bit, and land prices are down a little bit. But at the same time, state and federal budgets are down," Knoll said. "The opportunities aren't going to go away. There may be more opportunities and we need to be more creative."

### **Additional Facts**

>> **South Cumberland State Park** includes 10 natural areas scattered among four counties: Franklin, Grundy, Marion and Sequatchie. The visitor center is between Monteagle and Tracy City on U.S. 41. Ranger stations also are at the Stone Door and Savage Gulf, and numerous trailheads lead to waterfalls, overlooks, meadows and forests. Contact the Visitor Center, 931-924-2980, or [click here](#) for information on trails, camping and other attractions.

>> **Land Trust for Tennessee** is a private, nonprofit group that works to preserve the state's natural and historic landscapes with projects statewide. Another of its Cumberland Plateau projects was completed a year ago: purchasing and preserving 3,000 acres of the Lost and Champion coves near Sewanee. Land Trust projects near Nashville include Metro's Bells Bend and Beaman parks, the Glen Leven Civil War historic site on Franklin Road and family farms in Williamson, Davidson and other Middle Tennessee counties. To see its projects and ongoing initiatives, go to [www.landtrusttn.org](http://www.landtrusttn.org) or call 615-244-5263.

>> **The Conservation Fund** is a national nonprofit group that has worked in Tennessee for 20 years, preserving more than 135,000 acres such as Radnor Lake in Nashville, the Bridgestone/Firestone Centennial Wilderness and the Wolf River. It is wrapping up acquisition of more than 9,000 acres to add to the Cherokee National Forest. Known as Rocky Fork, that area along the Tennessee-North Carolina border in Unicoi and Greene counties is a crucial habitat for black bears, grouse, deer and turkey. Learn more about the Conservation Fund at [www.conservationfund.org](http://www.conservationfund.org).