

HIDDEN



TREASURES

Cane Creek Canyon Wildlife Preserve

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In the Little Mountains region of Colbert County, Jim and Faye Lacefield's family developed Cane Creek Canyon Nature Preserve, a 323-acre scenic natural area. For them it was a commitment to provide sanctuary for native plants and animals.

They purchased the first 40 acres with an unexpected inheritance. Over time, adjoining tracts containing Cane Creek and Devil's Hollow were added for a total of 413 acres certified under the TREASURE Forest program. Recreation and environmental education are the management objectives for the family.

Dr. James Lacefield teaches biology and earth science at the University of North Alabama, and has a special interest in paleobiology and paleoecology. He and his wife, Faye, also an educator, quickly recognized the area's unique natural history. They decided to preserve it and, perhaps more importantly, share it with schools, scouts, families, clubs, and others at no charge.

The rugged and varied topography provides a wide range of habitats and diverse natural communities. Canyons, waterfalls, rock shelters, and giant boulders create many special microhabitats and microclimates that allow a number of rare plant species to live here. A variety of soil types and environments are ideal to support an unusually diverse forest community.

Opportunities for visitors to this wildlife preserve rival any park or recreation area in the southeast.

Nearly ten miles of hiking trails provide routes to many scenic sites and overlooks. A four-wheel drive road permits access for elderly or handicapped visitors to many areas. Concrete bridges using rock and natural pigments blend into the environment, allowing hikers to cross streams.

Several well-maintained camping sites and picnicking spots are available.

Self-guided tree identification lists include common and scientific names of more than a hundred species of native trees and a few rare types.

Many rare and endangered plant species occur on the preserve. These include: Allegheny spurge, wild ginseng, several orchids, the giant columbo, two rare filmy ferns, and the little flood plain plant, Jamesianthus.

Thousands of native azaleas, including many natural hybrid forms are found here. Mountain laurel, yellow lady's slipper, showy orchids, trout lily, trailing arbutus, and a variety of other Appalachian species also appear that thrive in rich forest habitats and coves. One unusual type of wildflower community is found growing on giant boulders far above the forest floor. Many species in these special environments bloom weeks before their relatives growing below on the ground.

The first reported identification of French's Shooting Star, one of Alabama's rarest and most unusual wildflowers, was discovered here in 1988. The closest other colonies are located more than 300 miles away in the Boston Mountains of Arkansas. Small colonies are also found in Illinois, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, always growing in sandy soil weathered from sandstone

overhang above, in a protected strip where few other plants compete with it.

Each year many families, friends, and individuals enjoy camping, hiking, and picnicking on the preserve, taking full advantage of the Lacefield's gracious gift to the community. Garden and wildflower clubs, scout troops, and local schools and colleges are also frequent visitors. Since opening the not-for-profit Cane Creek Canyon Nature Preserve in 1986, they have averaged 700 visits per year!

Forest ownership is an excellent investment, but its dividends can be more than the type you put in the bank. For the Lacefields, seeing Cane Creek Preserve enjoyed by so many is reward enough. "It is both a personal and political statement that places such as this need to be preserved," says Dr. Lacefield. "The government can't do it all, so private landowners must take an active part."

Cane Creek Preserve is open year-round and the welcome mat is always out. 🌲

