



# South Carolina Natural Resources

A Blog of the S.C. Department of Natural Resources

Mar 19

## Standing on the Moon

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*If wildflowers and rare plants are your bag, then early spring is a fantastic time to pay a visit to the SCDNR's Forty Acre Rock Heritage Preserve, but the spectacular views and varied hiking options make this a popular spot during any season.*

**Text and photos by David Lucas**



You could say that the SCDNR's Forty Acre Rock Heritage Preserve has a sort of split personality. The preserve's unique geography and related plant communities make it a key destination for amateur or professional botanists – mainly in the early spring. It's also a great destination for a fantastic view and pleasant day hike – one that can be moderate or strenuous, depending on your mood and physical stamina. Either way, there's plenty to see here, starting with the area's most well-known feature, the rock itself.





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My last trip to Forty Acre Rock” was in November of 2018, not long after the 159-acre “Ardrey Track,” was added to the preserve ([http://www.dnr.sc.gov/news/2018/nov/nov5\\_ardreytract.html](http://www.dnr.sc.gov/news/2018/nov/nov5_ardreytract.html)), ensuring the long-term protection of a section of nearby Flat Creek that is one of the few locations where the “Carolina heel-splitter” freshwater mussel exists in the wild. That’s a big win for this critically endangered species. Flat Creek is the only known location where viable reproduction seems to be taking place, which is why protection of the surrounding riparian habitat that keeps the rocky stream bottoms of Flat Creek relatively silt free is so important.



That’s all very cool, but on my visit, the day after Thanksgiving, my goal wasn’t checking out endangered mollusks or even rare plants, it was working off some of the approximately 12 million extra calories I had ingested the day before. I wasn’t alone. I got there around 10 a.m., and there were already a few cars in the parking lot.

Forty Acre Rock was known as a destination point for locals in Lancaster County and the surrounding area long before it became an SCDNR Heritage Preserve.



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ly 40 acres — it's closer to 14  
ing makes it a place to visit  
d to some vandalism and

graffiti over the years, a problem that property managers and SCDNR's Law Enforcement Division have been working to correct in recent years ([http://www.dnr.sc.gov/news/2016/feb/feb23\\_lawenforcement.html](http://www.dnr.sc.gov/news/2016/feb/feb23_lawenforcement.html)).



The large, flat granite outcropping, situated where the sandhills and piedmont geologic regions meet, is the result of million-of-years-old geologic processes, with time and erosion gradually exposing the hard surface of rock outcroppings that in most places would be buried deep underground. It's approximately half a mile through a typical mixed pine and hardwood forest from the preserve's upper parking lot to the open face of the rock. That's likely why this parking lot is frequently filled with locals taking advantage of a nice short hike with a great view at the end, or curious visitors who have heard about the site's uniqueness. Stepping out from the tree line onto the rock's gently sloping surface, you really do feel as if you might be on the surface of the moon, complete with craters.





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The craters are actually vernal pools, depressions in the rock where erosion and water forces have created miniature ecosystems. When the pools fill with water, the thin layer of soil at the bottom is capable of supporting some plant life – including some very distinct (and rare) wildflower communities. Some rare flowering plants found in the pools include elf orpine, piedmont sandwort and pool sprite. That makes early springtime -- late March through April and early May -- a popular time for hardcore amateur botanists to visit. If winter rains have been plentiful (like they certainly were this year) now is the season when these rare and diminutive beauties will begin to blossom. At the pools' outer edges, mosses and sedge grasses have begun the process of succession – a gradual takeover that may be interrupted during drier periods.

For a longer hike, pathways starting near the top of either the eastern or western edge of the rock will take you down a steep hill and into the floodplain where tiny streams and waterfalls eventually find their way into Flat Creek. From the upper parking lot to the overlook and down to the lower parking lot, you'll hike a distance of about two miles – give or take a few exploratory detours. You could also incorporate the 1.2 mile loop trail around the beaver pond and along some of Flat Creek's lower reaches, or you can connect with the trail over the "old" Highway 601 road bed and see where the old bridge crosses the creek. So if you're a lightweight in the hiking department, or a good and somewhat lazy planner, now's the time when you'll double back to the lower parking lot to take the "shuttle" car that your hiking companion (it's always good to have a partner) left there back to the upper lot. But if you're more the hardcore type, then you won't mind the somewhat steep climb all the way back up through the floodplain forest to the rock and the upper lot. Hey, it's great to blast those quads, right? The website [WildlifeSouth.com](http://www.wildlifesouth.com/Locations/SouthCarolina/Images-40AcreRock/40AcreRockMap.pdf) has a detailed trail map (<http://www.wildlifesouth.com/Locations/SouthCarolina/Images-40AcreRock/40AcreRockMap.pdf>), as well as some great photos of plants in the rock's vernal pools and depressions in full spring bloom.

So if you're looking for a hiking destination that offer a variety of landscape and levels of difficulty, check out Forty Acre Rock Heritage Preserve this spring or



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There's plenty of interesting...



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Every way you turn it seems ...





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