

RALEIGH, N.C. — South Mountains State Park in Burke county has been named North Carolina's State Park of the Year by the Division of Parks and Recreation. It was selected from three regional nominees that included Jordan Lake and Fort Fisher state recreation areas.

The park was chosen for its "exemplary contribution to the North Carolina state parks mission of stewardship, public service and education," as well as exemplary leadership, service and educational programming throughout the year. It was specifically recognized for work that went above and beyond in fighting the Chestnut Knob fire. To fight the fire, 97 park staff worked over 3,700 hours over the course of three weeks. The fire caused the park to be closed for two months.

The community offered overwhelming support to park staff and volunteers during the fire, providing \$40,000 worth of food and supplies and feeding an average of 100 firefighters each day. Volunteers also contributed thousands of hours supporting firefighting efforts throughout the incident.

Park staff also provided training and completed major maintenance projects in-house last year. The park offered 400 programs to 14,000 participants as well, including programming staff developed that interprets the effects of wildfire and promotes the benefits of prescribed burns.

"The staff at South Mountains State Park set a new standard for what it means to go above and beyond the call of duty last year," said Mike Murphy, state parks director. "Their selfless commitment to minimizing damage to the park and creating new educational opportunities from their challenges were exemplary. We are so proud of this park and particularly its outstanding staff, who continue to set the bar higher for excellence in our parks."

The state parks system began choosing a Park of the Year in 2010 with nominations from each district. Each of the 38 state parks and recreation areas submit an annual report that is judged on progress in recreation, natural resource protection, sustainability, efficiency, public safety and environmental education. Final judging is completed by division administrators. To honor the Park of the Year, a medallion is attached to a hiking staff that is passed to the award recipient each year. In addition, the Park of the Year displays a commemorative plaque in its visitor center. All parks were honored in 2016 in celebration of the division's Centennial year.

South Mountains State Park was established in 1975 with just over 5,500 acres and is operated under the direction of Superintendent Jonathan Griffith. The park has since grown to 20,871 acres to become the largest in the system. In 2017, it recorded 296,773 visitors. South Mountains also won the Park of the Year award in the award's inaugural year in 2010.

About North Carolina State Parks:

North Carolina State Parks manages more than 235,000 acres of iconic landscape within North Carolina's state parks, state recreation areas and state natural areas. It administers the N.C Parks and Recreation Trust Fund, including its local grants program, as well as a state trails program, North Carolina Natural and Scenic Rivers and more, all with a mission dedicated to conservation, recreation and education. The state parks system welcomes more than 19 million visitors annually.

About the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources:

The N.C. Department of Natural and Cultural Resources (NCDNCR) is the state agency with a vision to be the leader in using the state's natural and cultural resources to build the social, cultural, educational and economic future of North Carolina. NCDNCR's mission is to improve the quality of life in our state by creating opportunities to experience excellence in the arts, history, libraries and

nature in North Carolina by stimulating learning, inspiring creativity, preserving the state's history, conserving the state's natural heritage, encouraging recreation and cultural tourism, and promoting economic development.

NCDNCR includes 27 historic sites, seven history museums, two art museums, two science museums, three aquariums and Jennette's Pier, 39 state parks and recreation areas, the N.C. Zoo, the nation's first state-supported Symphony Orchestra, the State Library, the State Archives, the N.C. Arts Council, State Preservation Office and the Office of State Archaeology, along with the Division of Land and Water Stewardship. For more information, please call (919) 807-7300 or visit www.ncdcr.gov.

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