

Torreya Challenge Trail Booster Shot 2023

By Howard J. Hayes and Dawn Griffin

Torreya State Park is located along the high bluffs of the Apalachicola River halfway between Bristol and Chattahoochee. It was acquired in 1935 making it one of the original Florida state parks. During the Great Depression the Civilian Conservation Corps developed its first facilities. The park plays a critical role in preserving unique plant and animal species and natural communities that are of regional importance. The high plateaus, extremely steep bluffs and deep steep head ravines harbor a variety of rare and endemic plants and animals. Several of the species are more common further north and not seen elsewhere in Florida. The park was named for the rare Florida tree, *Torreya taxifolia*, which was named for the American botanist, John Torrey. Currently, the park contains 13,737 acres and is designated for public outdoor recreation and conservation of the property.

The Apalachee Chapter has been involved in building and maintaining the hiking trails within the park since the mid-1980's. The park provides approximately 15 miles of trails which allow hikers to enjoy the natural communities. Several spur trails connect to the Main Loop Trail which allow hikers to select shorter distances. The six-mile Torreya Challenge Trail is considered arduous and is located in a remote area of the park. The trails connect to three secluded primitive camping areas. The steep trails are occasionally used by backpackers who are training for their planned AT hikes.

In 2018, Hurricane Michael crashed into the park with Category 5 winds. Like other areas of Florida's panhandle, much of the beautiful, dense tree canopy disappeared. Light reaching the forest floor stimulated a thick growth of vines, brambles, and shrubs. The trails became an obstacle course requiring climbing over and under tree trunks. After many years of dedication, our Section Leader, Jerry Herting, had to give it up and then the pandemic delayed much needed maintenance.

From January 20 to 23, 2023, members of the Apalachee Chapter (and a few wonderful FTA folks from other chapters) came out in force to bring the Torreya Challenge Trail up to acceptable standards. A total of 33 volunteers participated in the event, some for a day and some camping over the weekend. The plan was for two and a half days of solid hard trail maintenance. Park staff provided great assistance facilitating this work weekend.

On Saturday, six work crews tackled different sections of the loop trail and a connector trail with mowers, brush cutters, chainsaws, loppers and paint. As the name suggests, the Torreya Challenge Trail is especially challenging to maintain. Crews used secret unimproved roads to access remote areas of the trail. Teams with ropes were used to pull the mowers up the steep slopes and control the mowers going downslope. A wooden bridge that was smashed by a fallen tree was dismantled in preparation for new construction.

Many volunteered to prepare the morning and evening meals over the weekend. This included some of the most delicious and hearty meals needed to fuel the trail workers.

Although the landscape has changed since Hurricane Michael, the park continues to provide the public with exceptional scenic vistas, hiking opportunities, as well as attractive camping and picnicking areas. The park is still in recovery following Hurricane Michael. Thanks to the wonderful group of volunteers, by the end of the weekend we can say that the Torreya Challenge Trail can be easily used by backcountry hikers. Because of Sunday's rain, we did not have time to work on some of the other trails in the park; however, it was an opportunity for impromptu tool maintenance training under the park's pavilion.

You are invited to join us on future trail maintenance days. Look to the Apalachee Chapter Meetup site for maintenance days at one of the most important and unique parks in the state.

Special Shout Out to Mike Tucker and the Friends of Torreya State Park who have spent many hours working in all types of weather and conditions to make the trails accessible.

Great news! The 15 miles of hiking trail has a new Section Leader, Nichole Tuszynski. Nichole grew up in Bristol and has fond memories of hiking in Torreya State Park with her grandfather. She is very excited to have the opportunity to maintain this amazing trail for the enjoyment of others.

Check out: <https://floridastateparks.org/parks-and-trails/torreya-state-park>