



Fiery Gizzard: Voices From the Wilderness

Mary Patten Priestley

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Fiery Gizzard, Voices from the Wilderness is a series of essays about a section of Tennessee's South Cumberland State Recreation Area that includes and surrounds the Big Fiery Gizzard Creek, its tributaries, and the waters that it feeds. The essays follow the natural and cultural history of the gorge and the people who have lived there. The Gizzard is a narrow canyon in the Cumberland Plateau, hemmed in by sandstone cliffs that were formed more than three hundred million years ago. Ecologically, it is a refugium, a place where northern plants, forced south during the most recent ice age, found a home. These, plus southern plants that have migrated northward into the protected gorge, have resulted in the extensive biodiversity of the Gizzard. For thousands of years, Woodland Indians hunted and camped here. Then European explorer-botanists came through, followed by settlers who arrived in the eighteenth century to farm. The discovery of coal in the 1850s brought prosperity for some, misery for others. Entrepreneurs built an experimental blast furnace and named it after the creek. During the Great Depression, a group of businessmen from neighboring Tracy City purchased 211 acres at the head of Big Fiery Gizzard Creek and donated it to the State of Tennessee for use as a Civilian Conservation Corps camp. That land plus two parcels owned by the Tennessee Valley Authority -- Foster Falls and Little Gizzard Creek small wild areas -- were the first properties in the Gizzard set aside for conservation and recreation. When the South Cumberland State Recreation Area was established in the 1970s, these lands were included. Conservation efforts continue today in this special place that is a favorite destination for many who live on or visit the South Cumberland Plateau.

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