FOR MANY, THE WORD OUTDOORS CONJURES UP AN IMAGE OF A 20-SOMETHING WHITE GUY IN A KAYAK.

BUT ONE PIONEERING NONPROFIT IS ON A MISSION TO PROMOTE THE IDEA THAT NATURE IS ALSO FOR WOMEN OF COLOR—AND TO MAKE THE GREAT OUTDOORS A LITTLE BIT GREATER.

EIGHT WOMEN ARE standing in a circle at the bottom of Crowders Mountain in Gastonia, North Carolina—on a day that will soon reach a stifling 87 degrees—and at least one of them is concerned. “Full disclosure: I am not an outdoors person,” says Lisa Toppin, a vice president at a financial services company in nearby Charlotte.

“In fact, my husband laughed very hard at the idea of me coming out here—like the gut-clenching, crying sort of laughing. He kept calling it ‘the death march.’ Think of the person on the plane who’s white-knuckling it: That’s me if I have to be outside. People might say, ‘Hey, look at the salamander!’ But I don’t want to see him. He can do his own thing.” The group cracks up. Toppin adds, almost convincingly: “Still, I’m excited to be part of this.”

“This” is a 5.6-mile, four-and-a-half-hour round-trip hike that will wind up Crowders Trail all the way to the peak, a somewhat hairy ascent over gray gravel through a shady pine and oak forest. The crew is decked out in loose T-shirts, worn sneakers, and leggings—no yoga-babe Lululemon ensembles out here. The leader is Yanira Castro, a plucky woman with a big-sister vibe. She’s an envoy from Outdoor Afro (OA), an eight-year-old nonprofit.

BY MOLLY SIMMS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CORAL VON ZUMWALT
Like any naturalist group worth its desalination tablets, OA takes notices and experts camping, white-water rafting, kayaking, and skiing. But it also organizes excursions to urban festivals, sometime slave plantations, and D.C.’s National Museum of African American History and Culture, as well as overnight “blackpacking” jaunts. Because as its name suggests, its members are predominantly folks you’ve never seen in a North Face ad: black women. One adventure at a time, the organization is happily demolishing the idea that black ladies don’t do nature.

“Forget the time outside doesn’t have to be this extreme, stressful experience,” says OA’s founder, Rue Mapp. “Black people are not likely to engage in these activities—they require an investment.”

“Spending time outside doesn’t have to be this extreme, stressful experience,” says OA’s founder, Rue Mapp. “Black people are not likely to engage in these activities—they require an investment.”

“Their history tends to be buried, and we have to dig and dig and dig.”

“Owned by us,” interjects Leslie Scott, a gregarious health and wellness coach in a broad-brim hat. Appreciative murmurs bubble up as the group snaps pics of the sign. “It took the Brevards’ discontinuance two years to get the marker out here,” says Castro. “Our history tends to be buried, and we have to dig and dig and dig.”

Scott navigates the trail with a guiled walking stick while recounting a California childhood spent splashing around in lakes and rivers. “After I moved to San Diego, I didn’t get outside as much,” she says, “and I started feeling that loss. When I moved to Charlotte in 2004 left her feeling marooned. “I couldn’t find anybody to come along. We Jet Skied in the summer, all of it.”

But you make it sound fun.”

“Nature just does it for me,” Ward says.

Lisa Ward is a nature lover and Castro’s daughter Anyssa, Castro, Toppin, Ward (in green), Scott, Jason, Baker, and Clarke; Clarke gives Toppin a supportive squeeze near the pinnacle.

“People want to try fishing and other things, but they’re afraid they don’t know how,” says Castro. “That’s what Outdoor Afro brings to the table. Come hang with us. You don’t have gear? Someone will lend it to you. You need a ride? We’ll get you there. No sleeping bag? I got you. Come out for the first time, and we’ll do it together.”

“Black body swinging in Strange Fruit”: \[\text{image} \]
“I said, ‘I’d start a website to reconnect African Americans to the outdoors.’ After creating OA as a blog, she realized the potency of her message. “People around the country raised their digital hands and said, ‘I love nature, too, and here’s how.’”

Mapp’s community-building powers are on full display on the trail, where the combo of mugginess and exhaustion is like a magic solvent that breaks down barriers and dredges up serious ideas. Castro recalls a white coworker admitting he’d been “so intimidated” by her when they first met. “And I thought, Why was that? Have you never met anybody who said what they felt and looked like me?” Soon, they’re all trading stories on tensions and expectations.

“Every day I watch my black colleagues working: heads down, speaking when spoken to,” says Toppin, under a bee tree. “I was trying to get one woman promoted, and a higher-up said, ‘We need more of a point of view from her.’ The woman tells me, ‘I was taught to be seen and not heard. I’m deferring to the leadership.’ We worked through it, but a lot of those old messages still come through.”

As if sent by a Hollywood rom-com director, a shirtless black guy jogs around the bend toward the group. He’s square jawed and sunny hot with a body fat percentage in the single digits. All conversation stops. “Oh, hello,” say a few of the women in their silkiest Olivia Pope voices, and he nods back, “Ladies.” The second he lopes past, Toppin, knees high, pretends to run after him at full speed while the others shriek with laughter.

“We met on a mountain...” Jason jokes, rehearsing the speech she’ll give at her wedding to Running Buff Dude.

◆ IN THE HOMESTRETCH, the women splinter into pairs and trios: Clarke and soft-spoken IT professional Cheryl Baker are chatting while Toppin bounces among clusters, offering mixed nuts from an oversize ziplock bag. They’re hashing out everything from dating (“The online thing was not my scene,” laments one) to barbecue restaurants (“You haven’t been to Hawg Wild?” someone says with disbelief and a little concern). The last ten minutes to the top of Crowders Mountain features a set of railroad-tie steps so steep and precarious, they’re like Satan’s StairMaster. The midday sun is a heat lamp, and the ladies gaze up at the curling gnarlwood of wood with consternation. The giant sign that reads WARNING: SERIOUS INJURIES AND DEATHS HAVE OCCURRED BEYOND THIS POINT doesn’t seem super encouraging. But they came to climb, and climb they will—no one is not seeing this through.

The women take the stairs slowly, their T-shirts growing soggy by the minute. It’s eerily quiet—save for panting and birdsong—until someone shouts “Breathe!” Now they’re cheering one another on, a warm wave of encouragement. “Oh my goodness!” yells another, as a voice echoes back, “What the hell?” One starts singing the theme from Rocky, and now they’re all singing it, huffing and puffing to the beat. And then they’re at the top of the mountain, where eagles trace high arcs across the vista. With dappled light hitting their faces, eight sisters gasp at the horizon line, squinting at the 25-mile view. It looks better than they could have imagined. ◆