BellFest features rare flower, great views

BY GAVIN OLIVER
THE JOURNAL

SALEM — Oconee County is set to celebrate its uniqueness in plant form this weekend at Devil's Fork State Park.

The Shortia galacifolia wildflower, more commonly known as the Oconee Bell, will be showcased at the third annual BellFest on Saturday.

The park is surrounded by — and is the only access point to — Lake Jocassee. The lake meets the Blue Ridge Escarpment, whose hills are dubbed the "Blue Wall," and the shape of the steeply sloped region of forests is caused by a torrent of rivers known as the Jocassee Gorges.

Though the namesake of the festival is the rare flower, it also gives exposure to the flowers' distinct home.

"Our golden light is to make people realize how extraordinary Lake Jocassee and the Jocassee Gorges are," said Brooks Wade of Jocassee Lake Tours. "That's our job, and so the BellFest brings more and more people in to see just what it is that we love so much and why we love it."

In December 2012, the Jocassee Gorges were named one of "50 of the World's Last Great Places — Destinations of a Lifetime" in a special edition of National Geographic magazine.

Wade, a geology aficionado who completed the Clemson Upstate Master Naturalist Program, views a trip to the Jocassee Gorges in the same light as a visit to the Grand Canyon.

"If the Grand Canyon was having a nice festival on a weekend, you'd probably want to go because it's in the Grand Canyon," Wade said. "And around here, if we're having a nice festival on Lake Jocassee, well, that's our Grand Canyon.

"For a near outdoor setting,

IF YOU GO

What: BellFest
When: Saturday, 10 a.m.-2 p.m.
Where: Devil's Fork State Park, 161 Holcombe Circle, Salem
Weather: High 69°F, low 51°F
Cost: $5 adults, $3.25 seniors and children 5-15, under 5 get in free



there's just no place like it in the eastern United States."

Wade works at Jocassee Lake Tours with his wife, Kay, a native of North Carolina —one of three places where Oconee Bells are native. She also completed the naturalist program and is adept in the story of the discovery of Oconee Bells.

Oconee Bells were tricky to tab, and their discovery and name designation in Oconee County are the result of a winding course of events.

In 1836, 49 years after French botanist Andre Michaux spotted a diminutive evergreen groundcover with waxy green leaves in Jocassee Valley and took a specimen of it, fellow botanist Dr. Asa Gray — distinguished in his profession and regarded as one of the most important botanists of the 19th century — sifted through Michaux's collection of plant specimens in France. Gray recognized all but one, the aforementioned single, dried leaf that was unnamed and only described by Michaux as discovered "in the high mountains of the Carolinas."

Gray named it Shortia galacifolia and returned to the U.S. to continue his teaching of natural

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The Shortia galacifolia, better known as the Oconee Bell, will be in full bloom and on display Saturday for the third annual BellFest at Devil's Fork State Park. Park manager Kevin Evans said the park expects around 200 attendees.

BELLFEST: 'A full-family operation'

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history at Harvard, spending spare time exploring the high mountains of the Carolinas for the elusive Shortia.

However, the botanist was unintentionally beat to the punch when a young boy, George Hyams, stumbled upon Shortia while pursuing herbs for his father.

The plant made its way from Hyams' father to a botanist who delivered it to Gray. Determined to see the living plant himself, Gray made a trip to the Blue Ridge Mountains, but he missed the blooming window after reaching North Carolina the following spring. He found only a small patch of Shortia with seemingly no more left — anywhere.

That is, until Charles Sprague Sargeant, who was on the trip to North Carolina with Gray 11 years earlier, discovered the flower in the Jocassee Gorges in 1886 and dubbed it the "Oconee Bell."

The flower will be in full bloom along the Oconee Bell Trail this weekend, which can be toured at leisure Saturday during the festival.

Devil's Fork State Park manager Kevin Evans said last year's festival brought in 200 people, and he expects the same this year — if not more.

"We expect the weather to hold out until Saturday," Evans said. "And the great thing about the day is that it's at your own pace.

"Interpreters will be stationed on the trail from 10 a.m.-noon to explain the flora and fauna around the area.

"There will also be music from Conservation Theory and the (Young Appalachian Musicians) group all day and exhibitors with knowledge of the area and the Oconee Bell flower."

BellFest will take place from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. with music, clogging, food, a silent auction and more.

"All the activities that are a part of BellFest are very entertaining," Wade said. "This festival is designed to be a full-family operation — we have something to do for every age. It's just a wonderful thing."

Evans said the cost for BellFest is $5 for adults, $3.25 for seniors and children ages 5-15 and kids under age 5 get in free. For more information on BellFest, visit www.friendsofjocassee.org/news.html.