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Bellfest celebrates Oconee's rarest find

The

BY MIKAYLA KREUZBERGER
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SALEM — There's no need to travel to distant places to see rare beauty.

For a three-week period, the Jocassee Gorges offers its annual display of the Oconee Bell, which blooms no other place in the world, with the exception of a small flower colony in Japan.

The reclusive Oconee Bell is the center of attention Saturday as she makes her brief debut for flower and lake lovers during Bellfest at Devil's Fork State Park on Lake Jocassee.

Brooks Wade, a representative for Friends of Lake Jocassee, said Bellfest, a free event, is entirely focused on the surrounding environment of the Jocassee region.

Guests can walk the easy, one-mile Oconee Bell trail with master naturalists and woodland songbird experts.

In addition, Wade said, Devil's Fork will feature bluegrass music, food and local authors, as well as guided Lake Jocassee tours.

Wade and his wife, Kay, own Jocassee Lake Tours and will cruise around the southern end of Jocassee and point out Wright Creek Falls and the Jocassee dam.

"You can sign up for the boat tour at the Jocassee Lake Tour booth," Wade said.

Bellfest is an effort to promote the Jocassee Gorges region and support Devil's Fork State Park and Friends of Lake Jocassee.

Friends of Lake Jocassee (FOJ) is a new non-profit organization working to gain its 501(c)3 status, Wade said.

"Friends of Lake Jocassee morphed from a group of volunteers who participate in the annual Devil's Fork State Park cleanup," Wade said. "We decided to start Friends as an effort to not only support the park, but the entire Jocassee region, as well – Jocassee is a huge area."

Bellfest will be held from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m. Saturday at the Devil's Fork State Park picnic area. There is a standard $2 admission into the park and a fee for boat tours.

Devil's Fork is at 161 Holcombe Circle in Salem. Follow North Hwy. 11 and follow signs to Lake Jocassee.

FOJ membership information is available at the event.

Wade at (864) 280-5501.

The Oconee Bell



Oconee County has many unique treasures hidden in its landscape, and the Oconee Bell's exclusiveness to the county is what makes it such a gem for locals and experts alike.

French botanist André Michaux first discovered the Oconee Bell in 1788 near the Toxaway and Horse Pasture rivers, which made up the headwaters of the Keowee River, Kay Wade, a Friends of Jocassee spokesperson, said.

"Michaux was sent to the area by the French government to find plants for reforesting the French forests," Wade said. "He was a horticulturist and had an eye for translating what would grow well in French gardens."

Wade said Michaux most likely traveled to the Jocassee region by way of a well-traveled trade route between Fort Prince George in the Keowee River Valley (now covered by Lake Keowee) and Fort Loudon in Tennessee.

"It was a route that botanists were known to follow, as it was the most used route – it was a contentious period between whites and Native Americans, and it wasn't good to be caught off the trail," Wade said.

Michaux took samples and cataloged them, but never started an Oconee Bell population in Europe.

Of course, Michaux wasn't the first person to spot the Oconee Bell, as Cherokee natives of the region referred to the flowers as "shee-show," meaning, "two-colored plant of the gods." According to legend, the Oconee Bell led the Cherokee to the valley of the Lost Maiden, known as Jocassee.

Almost 100 years later, renowned American botanist Asa Gray came upon a cataloged Oconee Bell and gave it its scientific name, Shortia galacifolia.

Wade said Gray spent the rest of his life searching for the Oconee Bell, but his incorrect translation of regional maps took him to the highlands of the North Carolina mountains, and he never found it.

"Apparently, he even put out advertisements and flyers in search of the flower," Wade said. "All that was found outside of the Gorges was a small colony in Marion County, N.C."

Wade said it is believed that more than 60 percent of the Oconee Bell population was lost when Lake Jocassee was filled years ago.

Today, you can find traces of the Oconee Bell, a ground cover plant, near moist, wooded areas and creek banks in the Jocassee Gorges between mid-

Be on the lookout for small, white flowers with traces of yellow in the blooms, surrounded by glossy, green leaves with traces of red in the stem.

Devil's Fork State Park rangers have scheduled an Oconee Bell tour from 10 a.m. until noon Thursday.

For information about Devil's Fork State Park, contact (864) 944-2639.

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Wright Creek Falls on Lake Jocassee is a destination for guided boat tours Saturday during the Bellfest at Devil's Fork State Park, a festival that highlights the rare bloom of the Oconee Bell.



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The Jocassee Gorges and Lake Jocassee are home to one of the most rare flowers in the U.S., the Oconee Bell. Discovered in the late 1700s, the Bell is celebrated for its extraordinary and rare bloom in mid-March.