

Jessica Nelms/Staff

Kendall Weeks gets set to join his brother, Hunter, in the tent during a trip to Devils Fork Park this week.

Big fun on a small budget

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SALEM — Taking their young sons on a camping trip to Devils Fork State Park in Oconee County was a no-brainer for Tina and Justin Weeks, young parents from Pickens County trying get the most out of a short family vacation on a tight budget.

The Weeks secured several kayaks on top of their truck and packed their fishing poles to explore as much of Lake Jocassee as possible. They pitched their tent and enjoyed several days of paradise at a price no other resort could match.

"We did the whole trip for $150," said Justin Weeks. "That includes a tank of gas, two nights at the park and groceries. You can't beat that."

The Weeks are among a growing number of South Carolina residents staying close to home for their family summer vacation to save money during difficult economic times.

As a result, state and county parks are staying busy, and Oconee is no exception.

Phil Shirley, director of Oconee County Parks, Recreation and Tourism (PRT), said that despite the weak economy, attendance at the three county parks — South Cove, High Falls and Chau Ram — has remained steady from a year ago.

See **BUDGET**, Page 7A



Jessica Nelms/Staff

Debbie and John Bandy, and their best friend, Goldie, drove from Tampa Bay, Fla. to spend a week exploring Lake Jocassee and its surroundings. Despite the long trip, the couple got a big bang for their bucks by staying at Devils Fork Park in Oconee County.

BUDGET

Continued from Page 1A

Through May 31, the three parks have brought in $230,000 in total revenue from use of campsites and parking fees. During the same period last year, park revenues totaled $212,000, but did not include parking fees, which went into effect in February.

Shirley said the parks' campsites are operating at 70 to 80 percent capacity on weekends, but slack off during the week. Although in the past park employees saw regional visitors using the parks, Shirley said employees have seen a shift to more local residents using the campsites.

"By local we mean people from Anderson, Pickens and Oconee," Shirley said.

Oconee park officials charge $15 for campsites without water and power and $20 for campsites with those amenities. Out of county visitors pay an additional $5.

At the moment, campsites are available on a first-come, first-served basis. Shirley said PRT is in the process of upgrading its technology to accept reservations through debit and credit cards. However, he said a number of campsites will remain available on a first-come, first-served basis.

Justin Weeks said the family camping trip to Devils Fork State Park covered just 40 miles from their Dacusville home in Pickens County.

"You can make a whole family trip for a week for under $200," he said.

Debbie and John Bandy spent much more on gas traveling from Tampa Bay, Fla., but they said it allowed them to bring their dog Goldie along and was cheaper than flying. Also, their Lexington RV proved to be their hotel room for the trip.

Shirley said he expects more visitors at the local parks in June with school out and families looking to get away for the summer.