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Five great Upstate locations for a picnic

L. Woodrow Ross

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After a long winter, spring and summer turn the thoughts to being outside enjoying nature. One of the real pleasures of warm weather is going with the family on a picnic. Even better, picking a destination that offers more than just an opportunity to enjoy a meal outside with family and friends.

Here are five great picks for summer picnics that will offer a range of terrain and activities that will make your day a memorable occasion.

Jones Gap State Park

Number one on our list is Jones Gap State Park. This is a site in Greenville County that previously was home to the Cleveland fish hatchery. A small observation pool is still maintained and is stocked with trophy sized trout for viewing.

In the early days of Greenville County, Solomon Jones maintained an unpaved toll road across the mountains and part of that is now incorporated into the trail system.

For those seeking a quiet, restful day, there are tables near the ranger station for picnics. They are on the fringe of the beautiful Middle Saluda River and offer a wading spot for kids to look for salamanders and splash one another. A scenic footbridge arcs over the rushing water, offering a good spot for photos of the stream cascading over the rocks.

Public restrooms are available and a visitors' center offers information, brochures and some items for sale.

If you are more adventurous, the park offers more than 50 miles of hiking trails, camping and trout fishing. Trails rank easy, moderate and difficult. The Rainbow Falls Trail is the newest addition and offers a picturesque hike with some rock face features and a beautiful waterfall. What the falls lack in volume they make up for with the precipitous drop and offers a cool spot to take a break and eat lunch.

The Jones Gap Trail is moderate, but the Rim of the Gap Trail offers a difficult hike and spectacular views, but is not recommended for small children. In winter months, it is often closed due to ice creating hazardous conditions.

The park had 3,346 acres, but recent purchases and another pending addition will add another 600 acres.

Caesar's Head State Park

Caesar's Head State Park is the second choice for summer picnics. It is one of the highest points in South Carolina and usually has a nice breeze blowing. The view is spectacular and the plunging rock faces will take your breath away.

The park has picnic tables, hiking trails, primitive camping and a visitors' center. It is one of the picturesque places in upstate South Carolina. The view of surrounding mountains and the Table Rock reservoir make for some spectacular photos. Visit it for a summer picnic, but don't forget to return in the fall to see the beautiful foliage in full color.

The park encompasses 7,467 acres and the trail system connects with the nearby Jones Gaps State Park system. A moderate hike will take you to the upper reaches of some of the local trout streams.

Raven Cliff Falls

The third destination recommended is Raven Cliff Falls. It is a moderate hike of about 2.4 miles each way. It is one of the most beautiful falls in the upstate and an observation deck on the east side of the falls offers a delightful spot to rest and share a picnic lunch. The muted roar of the water and the wind in the trees make this a very peaceful spot to break bread.

For those willing to walk a little farther, a spur trail leads to the west side of the falls where a suspension bridge allows viewers to walk out over the top of the falls. It is an adventure, but the view does not compare with the one from the observation deck. Be sure to take a camera, for this is a spectacular waterfall.

These first three destinations make up a total of 10,000 acres in the Mountain Bridge Wilderness Area. More that 400 species of plants, including many rare and flowering varieties, add to the beauty of the area.

Bad Creek/Lower Whitewater Falls

Bad Creek/Lower Whitewater Falls is our fourth recommendation. Bad Creek reservoir was created as a pumping station to allow water to be used for power generation and then pumped back up during non-peak hours to be used again for generation during peak hours. The facility is open to the public and provides parking and access to lower Whitewater Falls. There is a spacious parking lot and restroom facilities at the parking area.

The hike to lower Whitewater Falls is easy to moderate and leads to an observation deck that offers a great view of this fall that carries a great volume of water. This falls offers some great photo opportunities. It is great in the summer, and plan to return in the fall to capture the splash of color that the turning leaves add to the landscape.

Lunch at the observation deck offers a chance to relax from the hike and enjoy one of nature's wonders. It is one of the Upstate's jewels, and we should appreciate Duke Energy making the access available.

On the hike into the falls, several footbridges cross the river and streams and offer a chance to wade, trout fish or just enjoy the scenery. During hunting season, the gates to a gravel road offer access to Musterground Campground, and you can tour the edge of the Bad Creek impoundment and enjoy some great vistas.

Keowee-Toxaway State Park

Keowee-Toxaway State Park is a fifth excellent destination. The park offers a picnic area, camping, primitive camping, fishing and hiking on the 1,000 acres located on the fringe of Lake Keowee and only a short drive from Lake Jocassee.

This is one of the more accessible destinations, and during the peak spring and summer seasons is quite busy, but is always a pleasant place to visit for a picnic or camping.

The terrain is rolling woodlands and many campsites are available near the water.

Wherever your choice might be, don't miss the chance to pack a picnic lunch and get outside this summer to enjoy some of the great destinations in the upstate. It is a great opportunity to create some great memories.



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