Great ideas for the great outdoors

ASHEVILLE CITIZEN-TIMES

Whether you hike the Great Smoky Mountains or take the family to one of the region's many recreation areas, it's time to enjoy the splendor of blooming wildflowers, rushing creeks and native critters.

"We had a few days off this weekend so we came to Deep Creek to fish and camp," said Asheville native Elliot Mills, a visitor to the Deep Creek Recreation Area near Bryson City, N.C. Located about 64 miles west of Asheville via Interstate 40 and U.S. 75, it's a wonderland for families who like to stroll the easy trail along the river, serious hikers who head into the steep trails, and fishermen who wade the fast-moving water after native trout.

"There's tubing here and fly-fishing," Mills said. "There are lots of trails to hike on, and there are areas for tenting and RVs," he said.

A 20-year-old college student who works part-time at the Asheville YMCA, Mills is a lifelong fan of the outdoors. "I ran cross-country and track for four years, and I like to be out running in the woods. I like fly-fishing, road biking, and I think I've tried pretty much any outside sport here once or twice. I love to run or do anything in the woods," he said.

"The Davidson River is a fun place to fish or hike; so is the Laurel River and the hiking around Hot Springs," said Mills, who enjoys areas that have multiple offerings. "I like the French Broad River and whitewater rafting and kayaking too," he said.

Grab the family or friends and head to one of the places below or create your own outdoor getaway. When camping or hiking, do your homework first and be aware of any costs, restrictions or potential safety issues. Be prepared for outdoor activities with hats, sunglasses, sunscreen, maps, camera, appropriate clothing and shoes, lots of water, a first-aid kit, some common sense and a few healthy snacks.

Western North Carolina Nature Center, 75 Gashes Creek Road, Asheville. A living museum of the wildlife and nature of the Southern Appalachian Mountains for families and children, plus a summer camp series for kids. Open seven days a week 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Admission is $8, seniors $7, ages 3-15 are $4. Call 298-5600 or visit www.wildwnc.org.

The UNCA Botanical Gardens at Asheville, 151 W.T. Weaver Boulevard, Asheville. A 10-acre forest featuring nature walks with thousands of labeled plants and trees native to the Southern Appalachians. Open dawn to dusk, it's free, although donations are encouraged. Call 252-5190 or visit www.ashevillebotanicalgardens.org.

North Carolina Arboretum, 100 Frederick Law Olmsted Way, Asheville. A 434-acre tract with 65 acres of gardens and 10 miles of hiking and mountain biking. See the bonsai exhibit or view photographer Tim Barnwell's work in the gallery through May 31. Open 8 a.m.-9 p.m., $8 per car, memberships available. Call 665-2492 or visit www.ncarboretum.org.

Lake Powhatan Recreation Area, 375 Wesley Branch Road, Asheville. Located within the Bent Creek Research Forest, there are miles of hiking and mountain bike trails, camping, the lake, fishing pier and swimming. Open through Oct. 31, many free places to park, fees for camping and day parking at the lake. Call 800-280-2267 or visit www.cradleofforestry.com.

North Mills River Recreation Area, Mills River Road, Mills River. Year-round camping, hiking, fishing, picnic area. Fees for camping and day parking. Call 890-3284 or visit www.cradleofforestry.com or www.recreation.gov.

Sycamore Flats Recreation Area and the **Davidson River Campground,** Pisgah Forest, just inside the entrance to Pisgah National Forest. Hiking, camping, riverside picnics and fishing close to Looking Glass Falls and the Fish Hatchery. Many free places to park, fee for camping. Call 862-5960 or visit www.cradleofforestry.com or www.recreation.gov.

Deep Creek, Bryson City, N.C., in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Hiking, camping, mountain biking, fishing and more. Easy access for families, free parking, bathrooms, campgrounds and hiking access for all levels, can be very crowded at peak times. Fee for camping. Call 877-444-6777 ,or visit www.nps.gov/grsm/planyourvisit/deepcreek.htm.

Hot Springs. Walk through the quaint town to the river, hike the Appalachian Trail, ride a mountain bike along the French Broad River to Paint Rock, fish in the Laurel River, visit Max Patch Bald, kayak the French Broad. Call 622-7591 or visit www.townofhotsprings.org.