NATURALIST CHEERS UPSTATE BEAUTY



Randy Sims helps his son Phil bring in a fighting bass out of the Chauga River last year.



FOR THE JOURNAL

Randy Sims, left, enjoys an "angler-kind of day" with friends Kelly and Paul Westerwood on the Chauga River last year.

BY JESSICA SIBLEY
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — Call him "Mr. Outdoors."

The guy always has a smile on his face, but that's because more than likely, he's just returned from one of the many outdoor adventures he treats himself to every day.

He doesn't have to travel far. In fact, his adventures seldom carry him beyond the borders of Oconee and Pickens counties.

"Look, I've lived here for about nine years," naturalist Randy Sims said. "I hear so many people complain about never leaving Oconee when they had the chance. It makes my skin crawl. So many people just overlook the fact that we live in a drop dead gorgeous place with scads of opportunities for us to be one with nature."

Sims understands that not everyone holds a special place in their hearts for the environment and staying active, but to that — he has a simple mantra.

"It's funny because many of the people you hear complaining about this or that are precisely the ones that don't get outside and literally smell the roses," he said. "I'm a 68-year-old guy who feels like he's 38 — well, most times. If you spend just an hour outside everyday, I can guarantee that your outlook on life will be brighter. I guess I just don't understand why people wouldn't want to explore what we have around us."

Sims is a retired financial analyst and moved from southern California in early 2002.

While there, he extended his knowledge of fauna and flora on the West Coast before his mother, of Lavonia, Ga., became sick and died in 2003.

"She had some friends that lived in Keowee Key and we visited with them before she got too weak," he recalled. "I instantly fell in love with the encroaching beauty that seems to make its way into every corner of this county."

For Sims, the natural wildlife and waterways impress him the most.

As an angler, hiker, kayaker and overall Oconee enthusiast, Sims enjoys heading down to the Chattooga River, where nearly 10 miles of exhilarating rapids and sections of glass-like, flat water greet fisherman and river lovers alike.

"The easiest way to access the section that I enjoy is by taking Highway 290, which you can hit just north of Seneca," he said. "A good mix of fishing-friendly and kayaking enjoyment is in the Narrows. A lot of people seem to know about it, but that's because it offers a little bit of everything for everyone. There is a small trail when you hit Whetstone Road off of Highway 28 past Walhalla that will bring you to it. For those who don't want to tackle the path, there is a nice parking area and access point parallel to Cassidy Bridge Road on Hwy 290. If you hike up and down that section about a half mile in either direction, get ready to catch some beautiful trout!"

Sims also spends many hours on the banks of Lake Jocassee, where he has hooked various trout species such as rainbow, brown and brook, large and small mouth bass, bluegill, big catfish and even redeye bass.

"Jocassee is a phenomenal place for families, boaters, picnickers and folks looking for wildlife," he said. "I've seen bald eagles, bobcats, deer, beavers and numerous species of duck. Not to mention the plant life around our lakes. Compared to areas like Florida where the temperatures are so hot, Arizona where land is so dry and the Northeast where a blooming season is so limited, we really do live in one of the greatest areas for natural wonders. I wish I could tell people this every day."

For fishing, whether it's fly fishing or otherwise, Sims praises the Chauga River above the rest, although he admits to have lots of luck on lakes Hartwell, Jocassee and Keowee with crappie and bass.

For kayaking and tubing, the top section of the Chattooga River past Long Creek on Highway 76 is a favorite of his, as well.

"You can tube, canoe and kayak down this calm section of the river," he said. "Not to mention, the folks at Wild Water Ltd. put on a great guided rafting adventure if you're willing to spend a little money for a day trip," he added. "I've found that a really good resource for fishing and water enjoyment can be found at www.SCDNR.com. If you can get to these places, you don't have to spend any money to enjoy the very rich resources we have all around us. Get out and explore, people!"

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On the banks of the Chattooga River, kayakers and fishermen spend their days playing in the natural recreation wonderland that Oconee presents.