BREAKING OUT

# New trails coming to Lake Conestee

## Natural surface trails open new areas of park to hikers

By Mike Foley
Staff Writer
mfoley@greenvilleonline.com

There will soon be 10,000 more reasons to visit Lake Conestee Nature Park.

While the 400-acre park at the southern terminus of the Greenville Hospital System's Swamp Rabbit Trail has been used by an increasing number of visitors, hikers and nature lovers will soon find an additional 10,000 feet of largely natural surface trails in the park. The nearly two miles of new trails will give the park nearly 10 miles of natural surface and paved trails.

Funded by a 2011 South Carolina Parks, Recreation and Tourism grant, the newest trails are actually several sections scattered throughout the park. When they're all finished, Dave Hargett, executive director of the Conestee Foundation said, he'll also rename the park's natural-surface trails.

"People have a proclivity for confusion," he said.

To forestall that, the new names will have animal designations suitable for the habitat where they're located and be associated with colors too. For example, an upland trail with white blazes will be renamed the Whitetail Trail. The former Lakebed Loop blazed with blue, will become the Heron Trail. A river connector trail through a beaver-rich area of the park will be known as the Flattail Trail.

Construction is wrapping upon trail construction and Hargett expects the new trails will be ready by mid-to-late March. Here's what is coming:

» **Whitetail Trail** — This 1-mile trail loops through the "Henderson Farm" area of the park. It has easy access to the park office headquarters on Fork Shoals Road and connects to the paved Swamp Rabbit Trail as well as Henderson Avenue and the Henderson Avenue trailhead.

It includes a traipse through woodlands and the park's only meadow. It meanders past a pair of century-old oaks atop a hill. Part of this section of trail was completed in May 2012, while the rest is under construction.

» **Flattrail Trail** — A 1-mile section of trail, this addition is a loop trail most easily accessed from the Swamp Rabbit Trail near Churchill Drive. It includes 3,800 feet of boardwalk and "bog bridges," which are slightly raised boardbridges over wet and muddy areas.

A parking area with room for six to seven vehicles is being built at Churchill Drive, which provides access to both the park and the Swamp Rabbit Trail.

The Flattrail Trail opens up the former Breazeale Farm for the first time, Hargett said. Lake Conestee Nature Park largely consists of the former lake bed and the existing Lake Conestee and the former Breazeale, Forrester and Henderson farms.

Hargett said at one point, about 700 acres of cotton farms were within sight of the Conestee Mill. Later, those cotton farms became dairy farms, Hargett explained while giving a visitor a foot tour through the rugged parcel.

"We have aerial photos from the 1940s and '50s and even until the 1960s showing the Breazeale Farm was used for dairy cattle," he said.

"The Breazeale Farm area is surprisingly remote," he said. "Once you get in here, you can't see anything from humans. There's lots of deer and turkey in here."

Even though this 81-acre former farm area is 1,000 feet from the Reedy River, it's still a "Piedmont river plain," Hargett said, and it's prone to flooding and standing water. Because of that, most of the "trail" through this area will by necessity be built as boardwalk.

The Swamp Rabbit Trail bisects the Breazeale Farm area and crosses Brushy Creek here, just south of Re-Wa's Mauldin Road Wastewater Treatment Plant. As the Nature Park has acquired land, built facilities and matured, this portion of the park had received relatively little attention.

"It's still like a wilderness to us," Hargett said. "We just haven't explored all of it yet."

While cutting through the parcel, Hargett pointed out rock piles that could be remnants of a stone fence, or the foundation of a house or barn. Pausing, Hargett pointed out thick, mature oaks and pines dotting the landscape.

"We still have pockets of 20- to 40-acre parcels here that are 'Do Not Disturb' land," he said. "We want to maintain those for wildlife. This is a nature park after all."

### PARK TRAILS

A new trail map for Lake Conestee Nature Park is being developed to show the new additions. For now, here is the best map for those who'd like to explore the park: conestepark.com /about/park-map

Dave Hargett, executive director of the Conestee Foundation, looks at boardwalk being installed at the park. MIKE FOLEY/STAFF

7D

Nature Park

and nature lovers



**The Swamp Rabbit Trail crosses Brushy Creek and intersects with a new section of trail being built at Lake Conestee Nature Park.** MIKE FOLEY/STAFF

