Spring is in the air



The Oconee bell is native to the Jocassee Gorges and can only be seen at Devil's Fork State Park.

SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

Oconee bells in bloom

BY STEPHANIE JADRNICEK
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SALEM — When the Oconee bells begin to bloom, folks in the Upstate know spring has come.

This iconic wildflower of the Jocassee Gorges is so celebrated it has its own festival. BellFest 2016 takes place this Saturday at Devil's Fork State Park from 10 a.m.-2 p.m.

"Botanists believe that the Oconee bell's native habitat is not found outside of the Jocassee Gorges," Friends of Jocassee member Kay Wade said. "And Devil's Fork State Park is the only state park where the Oconee bell grows."

The Southern Blue Ridge Escarpment, also known as The Blue Wall, cups around the headwaters of Lake Jocassee forming the Jocassee Gorges — one of the most biologically diverse places in the world.

Until the mid-18th century, the Cherokee Native Americans called this land their home. In 1787, French botanist Andre Michaux set out to find and explore the headwaters of the Savannah River.

When he passed through Jocassee Valley in June of that year, he discovered many rare and beautiful plants. One of which was a low-growing evergreen ground cover with waxy green leaves sprawling up the banks of creeks that fed into the river.

Michaux took a small specimen of the plant, pressed it onto paper and noted in French that the plant was discovered "in the high mountains of the Carolinas."

About 52 years later, Asa Gray was looking through Michaux's collection of plant specimens in Paris. As a seasoned botanist, he was familiar with most of the plants except for a single unnamed dried leaf bearing a brief notation of its discovery in the Carolinas.

Gray gave the plant a description and named it "Shortia galacifolia" — combining the name of his fellow botanist Charles Short with the name of Galax, a plant Shortia closely resembles. When Gray returned to the U.S. to teach at Harvard University, he spent his time off searching the high mountains of the Carolinas for the native habitat of Shortia.

After nearly 100 years since Michaux first discovered Shortia, a 17-year-old boy named George Hyams found the plant while looking for herbs for his father and brought home a handful.

His father didn't recognize the plant and sent it to another botanist who then forwarded the plant to Gray. Gray immediately recognized his long lost Shortia.

He made the trip to North Carolina the following spring, but the early-blooming plant was no longer in flower by the time he arrived. The patch of Shortia he saw in North Carolina was small, only 20 feet by 30 feet.

It wasn't until nine years later that Shortia galacifolia was finally discovered in its native habitat in the Jocassee Gorges. Charles Sprague Sargeant, who found it, had accompanied Gray on his trip to North Carolina nine years earlier. Sargeant gave the plant its common name — Oconee bell — because by that time the area was known as Oconee County.

Kay said South Carolina Botanical Garden director Patrick McMillan offers an abbreviated version of this story:

"Found by a man who didn't name it. Named by a man who couldn't find it. Named for a man who never saw it. Finally rediscovered by a teenage boy."

The Oconee bell is one of the earliest wildflowers to bloom every year, beginning in early March.

"Much of the population of Oconee bell was lost when Lake Jocassee was filled, but thriving populations remain within the boundaries of Devils Fork State Park, where people come to observe and study the elusive wildflower," Kay said.

BellFest is hosted by Friends of Jocassee, a volunteer organization dedicated to preserving, protecting and promoting the natural and cultural resources of the Jocassee area. The event includes food, a silent auction, educational exhibits and music by local bluegrass band Three Creeks Over.

"The Oconee bells are in full bloom," Friends of Jocassee member Brooks Wade said. "We'll have guided interpretive walks along the Oconee Bell Trail at Devil's Fork State Park led by Upstate master naturalists."

Only one mile long, the trail is more of a meandering stroll than a hike. But folks only have to walk a few hundred yards to see the beautiful wildflower show.

Charlie Williams, a former librarian and scholar of Michaux, will be dressed in 1700s garb that Michaux would have worn on his walks through South Carolina. Impersonating Michaux, Williams will talk about Michaux's travels in the Upstate.

Several authors with ties to Jocassee Valley will attend the event. One is John Marsh, the great, great grandson of John Redfield who accompanied Gray when he finally saw Oconee bells.

New and renewing members of Friends of Jocassee will also enjoy a free boat tour to the best places on Lake Jocassee to see the Oconee bells in bloom.

"Spring is just beginning," Brooks said. "The maple trees are starting to bloom, the Oconee bells have started blooming. BellFest is the kick off for spring here on the lake."

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