Starting the new year on the right foot



SPECIAL TO THE JOURNA

Ring in the new year with a healthful dose of fresh air and waterfalls. This cascade can be seen along the Natural Bridge Trail at Keowee-Toxaway State Park.

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SENECA — Some folks will start their New Year's resolutions on the right foot by hitting a state park trail on Sunday.

Several South Carolina State Parks in the Upstate, including Oconee Station State Historic Site, Caesars Head State Park, Devils Fork State Park, Oconee State Park and Keowee-Toxaway State Park, are offering first-day hikes and other New Year's events.

At Devils Fork, visitors can choose from a First Day 5K, a First Day Hike/Guided Nature Walk and a Loon Lunge.

The 5K starts at 1 p.m. Sunday at the picnic area parking lot. Participants can walk, jog or run to ring in the new year. Everyone is encouraged to cruise at their own pace or try to beat a park ranger.

A $25 donation allows each participant access to the park and all activities. Registration is also available at go-greenevents.com for $30. The registration deadline is Saturday.

Folks who aren't interested in the 5K can join a ranger for a guided nature walk on either Oconee Bell Nature Trail or Bear Cove Nature Trail at Devils Fork.

Rangers recommend visitors dress appropriately for the weather and pack at least one bottle of water per person. Hikers can also bring binoculars or cameras.

The guided hike is free of charge, but it's best to reserve a spot by Saturday by calling (864) 944-2639. And for those brave souls who don't mind the cold, the Loon Lunge will take place after the 5K and guided hike have ended around 2:30 p.m. This polar bear plunge allows folks to splash into 2017 Lake Jocassee style.

Rangers encourage participants to bring a change of clothing, a towel, a swimsuit and a plentiful supply of courage. The cost is $10 a person.

IF YOU GO ...

Devils Fork State Park, 161 Holcombe Circle, Salem, (864) 944-2639
Oconee State Park, 624 State Park Road, Mountain Rest, (864) 638-2778
Oconee Station State Historic Site, 500 Oconee Station Road, Walhalla, (864) 638-0079
Caesars Head State Park, 8155 Geer Highway, Cleveland, (864) 836-6115
Keowee-Toxaway State Park, 108 Residence Drive, Sunset, (864) 868-2605

Meanwhile, those who prefer a slower-paced historical hike can visit Oconee State Park. This first-day hike begins at 1 p.m. and leaves from the park's office.

"We'll walk around our historical lake that was built from 1935-1942 by the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) and we'll see the historical bathhouse, cabins and other structures all built by the CCC," Oconee State Park assistant manager Everett Ernst said.

He said many visitors have ties to the CCC — a grandfather, great-grandfather or other relative who worked for this federally funded organization established by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933 to put thousands of Americans to work on projects with environmental benefits during the Great Depression.

"The CCC was one of the two ways for us to get out of the Great Depression," Ernst said. "For example, usually 60 to 70 percent of a CCC worker's paycheck had to go back home to their families so their families could spend money in their local towns."

Ernst said materials for the parks were bought in the local towns to help boost the local economies, and when workers had time off they'd spend money in the towns as well to spur an economic resurgence.

"A lot of those same practices the state parks still do today. We purchase from local businesses to keep that strong local economy," he said. "So we'll talk about how the CCC started something and how we're continuing to do that today."

The 1.5-mile hike meanders around the lake on flat, easy terrain. Ernst recommends wearing comfortable walking shoes and packing a water bottle and a camera.

For hardier hikers, a ranger at Oconee Station State Historic Site will guide visitors on the 3-mile round trip Station Cove Falls trail at 9 a.m. A fairly easy hike with a gentle slope, the trail winds through a mixed hardwood forest to a 60-foot waterfall.

Rangers recommend bringing good hiking shoes, appropriate clothing for the weather, water, snacks and a camera.

And for those who are looking for a little more of a challenge, Caesars Head State Park is offering a guided hike along the Raven Cliff Falls trail at 1 p.m. This 3.7- mile hike is rated moderate and features a view of the falls.

At Keowee-Toxaway State Park, park manager Kevin Blanton will guide visitors along a gentle 1.3-mile loop beginning at 2 p.m.

"We're going to hike the Natural Bridge Trail, which is a little more family-friendly," he said. "There are some interesting geological formations, a lot of rock outcroppings and there's also some small waterfalls we'll see along the way."

Blanton encourages visitors to dress for the weather, wear comfortable hiking shoes and bring some water and a camera.

"There's no better way to get started with those New Year's resolutions than with a hike at a state park," he said.

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