Time is ripe to see the rare



TRAVEL OCONEE

KEN SLOAN

Just about everyone I talk to has heard of the famous Oconee Bell, but very few have actually seen one and even fewer have seen it in bloom.

Now is your chance to see it for yourself. The blooming season for this incredibly rare specimen is just around the corner.

The Oconee Bell is a rare wildflower that was first documented by French botanist Andrew Michaux in 1788 near the Horse Pasture and Toxaway rivers. Later, Asa Gray, an American botanist, rediscovered it and named it Shortia Galacifolia. However, long before Michaux and Gray showed up on the scene, our Native American ancestors, the Cherokee, had already discovered the plant and considered it to be a lucky omen of the rain gods since it grew close to the waters edge. They called it "Shee-Show", meaning "two-colored plant of the gods."

According to Cherokee legend, it was the Oconee Bell that led them to the valley of the Lost Maiden, otherwise known as Jocassee.

I often see and enjoy clusters of it growing amongst the shady areas of rivers, creeks and streams along many of the trails that I hike. My all-time favorite place to see them is at Devils Fork State Park on their aptly named Oconee Bell Trail.

Every year during the blooming season, the park rangers at Devils Fork host a guided tour of the trail. They will walk along the one-mile trail through the pre-spring forest and share the story of the plant that has been the quest of botanists for over 200 years.

Oconee Bell

This year, the tour is scheduled for Thursday, March 14, from 10 a.m. until noon. Then Saturday, March 16 from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m., the Friends of Jocassee will be hosting its first annual BellFest. The event will feature Oconee Bell trail tours, nature tours, lake tours cultural and educational displays and more. Admission to both events are free but there is a nominal parking fee.

The Oconee Bell is so rare that you will not find it anywhere else in the world, other than right here in the Jocassee Gorges region. So, I encourage you to take advantage of its blooming season, get outdoors, experience it for yourself and enjoy what National Geographic refers to as the "Destination of a Lifetime", or what we refer to as "home".

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