BREAKING OUT

Visitors have new entry into Jocassee Gorges

Center at Keowee-Toxaway State Park offers introduction to nature preserve

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There was a time when stepping foot into the Jocassee Gorges area was a step into the wilderness.

While the land was a working forest, owned by Duke Energy's Crescent Resources and tamed so-to-speak by logging roads and chainsaws, it was still wild. The rugged landscape was filled with spectacular vistas, roaring waterfalls, the state's highest mountains, and home to bears, bobcats and even a rare cougar or two, whether anyone wanted to admit their existence or not.

Plans for a visitors center were hatched back in 1997 when the state bought 33,000 acres of the Gorges area from Duke with combined state, federal and private funds. But for the last dozen years, visitors had to glean information on the area from a variety of sources or just set off on their own, which only added to the adventure.

The adventure is still there, but now it's more accessible with the opening of the Jocassee Gorges Visitors Center located at Keowee-Toxaway State Natural Area off State 11.

"We want to help people any way we can," said Kevin Blanton, park manager at Keowee-Toxaway. "We just want to help introduce people to the area and serve as a source of information."

Blanton is tasked with staffing the visitors center, which is a tough task since he has just three full-time employees to oversee Keowee-Toxaway's 1,000 acres. Now with the center to staff, he can only open it for limited hours for a while.

"We're looking for any kind of volunteers, campground hosts," Blanton said, "any kind of help, really."

Blanton expects interest to gradually increase as the Jocassee Gorges becomes just a bit more user-friendly. In fact, the now 43,500-acre Jocassee Gorges is the centerpoint of a huge swath of public lands stretching across Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina.

Here in South Carolina, public lands now spread west from Jones Gap State Park in northern Greenville County to the Chattooga River at the Georgia state line.

The Gorges section is largely owned and managed by the S.C. Department of Natural Resources. Also a part of the South Carolina public lands are Caesars Head, Devils Fork, Jones Gap, Keowee-Toxaway, Oconee and Table Rock state parks and Sumter National Forest.

If you can imagine doing it in the outdoors, you can pretty much do it in this spread of wilderness.

Just steps outside the visitors center – which is the former Holly Springs Baptist Church (circa 1890) — are three trails at Keowee-Toxaway. The 4.2-mile Raven Rock Hiking Trail; the 1.5-mile Natural Bridge Nature Trail; and the 0.3-mile Cherokee Interpretive Trail that connects an interpretive center to four outdoor exhibit kiosks.

From trails, to beaches, to waterfalls, to overlooks, to nature preserves, outdoor adventures are close by and range in difficulty from easy to hard-core.

Rep. David Hiott, a member of the state's House of Representatives who was at the center's grand opening, called the Jocassee Gorges the "get-away place."

"This is one of those places where you can come up into the mountains and get away from the day's problems," Hiott said. "This is the get-away place for a lot of people to enjoy themselves and refresh themselves."



SCDNR

The newly renovated interior of the Jocassee Gorges Visitors Center belies the building's age.

WANT MORE?

The Jocassee Gorges Visitor Center hours are from 11 a.m.-noon and from 4-5 p.m., every day. The park's phone number is: 864-868-2605. Here are some links to the various public lands in the Upstate:

- S.C. State Parks: www.southcarolinaparks.com
- Jocassee Gorges: www.dnr.sc.gov/managed/wild/jocassee/
- Sumter National Forest: www.fs.fed.us/r8/fms/sumter/



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The Jocassee Gorges area takes in some 43,500 acres — nearly 10 square miles — of wilderness in three states.



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The former Holly Springs Baptist Church has found new use as the Jocassee Gorges Visitors Center located at Keowee-Toxaway Natural Area.