Weekend unofficial start of SC spring tourism

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CHARLESTON — This weekend marks the unofficial start of the spring tourism season in South Carolina, a year in which tourism officials expect the $15 billion industry will return to levels of before the Great Recession.

There are a number of new events and tourism attractions around the state this year in addition to the yearly events that have become traditions for both South Carolinians and out-of-state visitors.

The Southeastern Wildlife Exposition opened its three-day run in Charleston on Friday. More than 500 artists and exhibitors are attending the event that each year brings about 40,000 visitors to venues around the city.

The expo, now in its 30th year – which started in 1983 with about 100 exhibitors and 5,000 attendees – attracts visitors to see everything from sporting dog competitions to displays of wildlife and exhibits of wildlife art.

In Myrtle Beach, the weekend brings the Myrtle Beach Marathon. That event last year drew about 8,000 runners to a number of different races held in conjunction with the marathon.

Taylor Damonte, the director of the Brittain Center for Resort Tourism at Coastal Carolina University, reports the center's weekly survey of area accommodations shows occupancy could be close to 80 percent with the combination of the marathon, Valentine's Day and Presidents Day weekend. That would be up almost 11 percent from the same weekend a year ago.

There are a number of new attractions and events across the state.

The first Bulls Bay Nature Festival, From the Forest to the Sea, will be held at conservation centers, wildlife refuges and parks near Awendaw northeast of Charleston on March 23. It's to raise awareness of the state's coast and will feature everything from a fishing derby to crabbing and cast netting.

This spring in Greenville, Greenville B-Cycle is starting a bike sharing program. The plans call for six bike stations and 28 bikes that can be shared by residents and visitors.

In April, the Clemson Blues Festival will be held in various venues in Clemson and Central. Not far away, in Pendleton, the Bart Garrison Agriculture Museum of South Carolina is scheduled to open in June. The museum will include five distinct exhibit areas and a changing exhibit focusing on South Carolina's agriculture heritage.

In Lake City, the last two weeks in April bring Artfields, a new arts show featuring art from around the Southeast with cash prize of $100,000. The event will also feature concerts, chef and artist cooking demonstrations and artist workshops.

At Carowinds on the state line just south of Charlotte, ground was broken recently on The Grove, a new event venue that will be able to hold 15,000 people. In addition, the amusement park is opening 'Dinosaurs Alive!' this spring. That attraction will feature 32 animatronic dinosaurs in a wooded 5-acre site.

Myrtle Beach this summer celebrates the 75th anniversary of the community's incorporation.

Officials are making plans to have an air show along the shoreline including the Air Force Thunderbirds and other flying teams. The show is being planned for June 28 through June 30. The celebration will also include music by the U.S. Army Band.



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Visitors crowd Market Street in downtown Charleston, S.C., on Friday. The Southeastern Wildlife Exposition is being staged in Charleston this weekend, which serves as the unofficial start to the spring tourism season.