

# 'Harbinger of spring'



## Rare flower main attraction at BellFest today at Devils Fork

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SALEM —

**D**evils Fork State Park is ready to officially welcome spring with the annual celebration of a flower that makes its home in the Jocassee Gorges and few other places.

The Oconee Bell was first found along the banks of the Keowee River in the late 1700s near where the Lake Jocassee dam is today, according to the Friends of Jocassee. The group started

BellFest in 2013 as a way to promote the lake and its unique surroundings, according to Brooks Wade of Jocassee Lake Tours, who will be on hand Saturday for boat tours to see more Bells.

"We really want it to be the first significant festival of spring in the Upstate," he said. "It's the harbinger of spring."

This year's festival, which takes place today at the state park at 161 Holcombe Circle in Salem, will be the biggest yet, according to Wade and his wife, Kay. It will include

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PHOTOS BY ZACK MAULDIN AND REX BROWN | THE JOURNAL  
**Home to a rare flower and the festival to celebrate it, Devils Fork State Park will welcome visitors to BellFest from 10 a.m.-4 p.m. today. The celebration of the rare flower is the official harbinger of spring, according to Brooks Wade of Jocassee Lake Tours.**



# BELLFEST: Scheduled to go on despite rainy morning forecast

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more than 35 vendors and exhibits, food, live music by Conservation Theory, the Blue Ridge Mountain Cloggers and, of course, guided tours on the Oconee Bell Trail.

"There will be a hike around the Oconee Bell Trail to see the flowers,

and there will be Up-state master naturalists posted in position along the trail to interpret the story of the Oconee Bell," said Kay Wade, a master naturalist. "There will be free boat tours for new and renewing members of Friends Of Jocassee that will take people up into the natural habitat of the Oconee Bells."

Despite a forecasted rainy morning, the festival is planned for 10 a.m.- 4 p.m., with guest speaker Kate Farrah at noon discussing the history of the Oconee Bells' discovery, rediscovery, re-rediscovery and sustainability moving forward.

"It was discovered in 1787 in Jocassee Valley, rediscovered in a Paris museum in 1839 and another discovery was recorded in the North Carolina mountains in 1877," Kay Wade said.

The short, bright white flower with a bright yellow center only grows natively in certain mountainous areas, she said, though scientists aren't sure exactly why it thrives in these areas.

"It's a pretty little flower that only grows natively in that one little section of North Carolina and in the Jocassee Gorges of North and South Carolina," Kay Wade said. "We're not really sure about what makes it thrive in some places and not others, but it seems to be limited in terms of latitude and elevation, and it seems to need, perhaps, a particular rock substrate. It also likes a lot of water."

The rarity of the flower makes this an ideal time for people to make the trek up

to Salem, said Oconee Parks, Recreation and Tourism director Phil Shirley.

"The cool thing about BellFest is this flower is so unique to our area. It only grows in those particular locations, so it gives us an opportunity to highlight that and showcase its history and heritage," Shirley said. "We hope for a really good turnout at Devils Fork State Park and

invite the public to come out to take a guided tour walk to see the flowers and to visit all the vendors."

The Oconee Bell Trail at Devils Fork State Park is the most popular location for the blooms, and Kay Wade said she can count on them to bloom in the middle of March every year.

But with the upgraded activities this year to match the growing popularity of the festival, she said the Friends of Jocassee group is looking to improve the pathway to help stabilize the Oconee Bell population.

"This year's silent auction is going to benefit preservation of the Oconee Bells," she said. "All the funds are going to go toward a new boardwalk for the Oconee Bell Trail."

While she said the flower isn't necessarily listed as endangered, its limited location means the delicate blooms need to be protected so they can continue to survive and thrive.

"Globally, it is extremely rare, but locally it's considered abundant," Kay Wade said.

"Every single plant matters, so when you get a place like the Oconee Bell Trail where people are starting to make a big, wide trail through the Bells, then that does endanger them a little at a time."

For more information on today's festival, visit [friendsofjocassee.org](http://friendsofjocassee.org).

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