

A walk in the woods

BY RILEY MORNINGSTAR
THE JOURNAL

CLEMSON — Chilly weather can prevent many from stepping outside unless they're running to and from the car, but the monthly tour of the Clemson Experimental Forest set for Saturday offers a reason to get out and explore.

James Wilkins, education and resource coordinator for the forest, is leading Saturday's tour that runs two hours beginning at 9 a.m.

The tour is usually limited to 20 people to create a more personal environment for discussion and questions. The tour typically averages 3 miles on forest roads or trails and is not a difficult hike, according to Wilkins.

"I do these tours on one Saturday a



SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

Above, a man and his dog explore the Clemson Experimental Forest's south forest. Below, home to Issaqueena Lake, several small streams and 17,500 acres, the Clemson Experimental Forest offers a variety of scenes throughout the seasons. Monthly tours with forest resource coordinator James Wilkins offer a close-up look at different areas.

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month, and we always go to a different spot," Wilkins said. "Sometimes I go to places that are kind of already popular and people already know about it, but, hopefully, I can still teach them about it and they can learn something they didn't know. I also try to get the lesser-known trails in the forest so that whether you know and love the forest or not, the area might be new and now you know how to get to it and know a little bit about it. We have a good time."

The Clemson Experimental Forest spans 17,500 acres and is used for education and research through its "resources for the benefit of society," the school's website said.

"These essential resources include clean air, clean water, pleasing aesthetic qualities, abundant wildlife, protection of species and habitat diversity, recreation opportunities, along with commodity products from the forest," the site said. "The forest

is managed strictly for perpetual sustained or improved yield of these products."

Wilkins said he believes the history surrounding the forest is rich, tracing its roots back to the 1930s from an idea of a professor to improve on neglected farmlands surrounding the Clemson area.

"There's so much (history). All of it is pretty much contiguous to Clemson University," he said. "I don't believe there's any other public institution that has more land that is contiguous, as we are, to the main campus. The experimental forest is, I think that contiguous nature of it and the proximity nature of it, is one thing (that makes it special). Its history is something else that I love about it."

The land had been in much worse shape decades ago, he said, but visitors today probably won't be able to tell.

"It's been a great

example of restoration and recovery from really degraded — at the time, all that land that is now forest land — the official designation of it was sub-marginal farmland," Wilkins said. "Marginal is not even good, so below marginal would be pretty bad. It was determined the best use, and a way to kind of fund itself, was to get timber on there so trees could grow and stabilize the soil and also provide a source of income for the management of the project in the annual timber sales and timber harvest that happens in a working forest.

"The forest has stayed strong and it's been a really special thing that Clemson has and has kind of been under the radar in many ways."

WANT TO GO?

What: Clemson Experimental Forest Tours

When: Saturday, 9-11 a.m.

Where: Directions sent upon registration

Tickets: calendar.clemson.edu/event or jhwilki@clemson.edu

The change in seasons allows for different scenery, so regular tour participants have a chance to experience something new even if they walk a similar route.

"When you get to share something that you love, I think that makes it even better," Wilkins said. "I love doing it... It's so great seasonally, too. It's very different, even the same area, in the spring versus in the winter, summer or fall. There's things of seasonal interest, so I always try to factor that in where I choose to go."

For those who can't make the January tour, there are also tours set for Feb. 29, March 21 and April 25.

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