

Oconee Bells in Bloom

Flower festival takes over Jocassee this weekend

BY ROBERT BENSON
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SALEM — Shortia galacifolia, the early-blooming wildflower better known as the Oconee Bell, will be on display Saturday during the annual BellFest celebration at Devils Fork State Park.

"It's rare in the world but abundant in the Jocassee Gorges," Friends of Jocassee president Sherrie Whitten said. "That's why we like to protect it, and that's why the park was created."

Oconee Bells were named for the county where they were found and the shape of their flowers. French botanist Andre Michaux chronicled the Oconee Bell in 1787 near the location of today's Lake Jocassee dam. The flowers can be found in bloom all around Lake Jocassee, including on a 1-mile nature



Wright Creek Falls on Lake Jocassee is a destination for guided boat tours.

BELLFEST 2020

Saturday from 10 a.m.-3 p.m. at Devils Fork State Park. Park admission is \$8 for adults, \$5 for S.C. seniors (age 65 and older), \$4 for children ages 6-15 and ages 5 and under are free.

trail near the BellFest site, and will be available for sale from the Native Plant Society's booth at the park.

"It is illegal to pick one up out of the ground," said Dan Whitten, Sherrie's husband and the parliamentarian for Friends of Jocassee. "It's a federally endangered species. Our Friends of Jocassee goal is to protect and promote and preserve, so we're trying to tell people exactly the status of this plant so that it can be properly enjoyed by all."

While much of BellFest — including the entertainment — remains the same as last year, this year's guest speaker will be Tim Lee, an interpretive ranger for the Mountain Bridge Wilderness Area in Cleveland.

"He's quite knowledgeable and is writing a book about Shortia," Sherrie Whitten said.

While Saturday's weather is expected to be in the 50s, the Whittens are excited about the festival and the fact that the flowers are currently in bloom.

"BellFest promotes Friends of Jocassee's mission to preserve, protect and promote natural and cultural resources of the Jocassee area and the recreational opportunities it provides," according to the group's website.

There will be food trucks, craft vendors, nature walks, live music and a silent auction to benefit the work of the Friends of Jocassee.

A LAKE LIKE NO OTHER

Jocassee was formed in 1970 as part of Duke Energy's Keowee-Toxaway project. The Whitewater and Toxaway rivers were dammed to form Lake Jocassee.

The 7,565-acre Lake Jocassee was filled by 1973.

"We lost 60 percent or more of the Oconee Bells when the lake was filled up, but they are still abundant in the streams surrounding the lake," Dan said.

Devils Fork State Park is the only public access to Lake Jocassee, created in 1991, when the state park service and Duke Energy collaborated "to protect Oconee Bells."

"The Jocassee area is just a remarkable jewel in the state of South Carolina that we want people to enjoy and keep as it is in its natural state," Dan said. "The more people that can enjoy it — as it is right now — the better. We don't want to lose this precious resource — we want to protect it. But we want people to come and enjoy it."

In the 1990s, Duke Energy sold most of the lakefront land to South Carolina and North Carolina — the company took some of the lakefront land and put it in a conservation easement.

By that time, only 33 houses had been built on the lake, and there would be no more.

Whitten said the purpose of Devils Fork State Park is to provide a place for "people who enjoy nature to get out and exercise and have that spirit of renewal in their lives to overcome stress ... and just enjoy nature."



PHOTOS SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

The Jocassee Gorges and Lake Jocassee are home to one of the most rare flowers in the U.S., the Oconee Bell. Discovered in the late 1700s, the Bell is celebrated for its extraordinary and rare bloom in mid-March.