

SC State Parks celebrate 10th anniversary of First Day Hikes



First Day Hike participants will be treated to views of Lake Keowee as they traverse the Natural Bridge Nature Trail at Keowee-Toxaway State Park. The park is one of 40 with ranger-led hikes on Saturday to celebrate the new year.

PHOTOS SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

SENECA — Many people sit down on New Year's Eve and come up with resolutions for the new year. Some might make a fitness goal, vow to get outdoors more often or plan to spend more time with family.

Starting off the new year with a First Day Hike is a great way to meet all three goals at once.

First Day Hikes were started by Massachusetts State Parks in 1992, and South Carolina State Parks launched them in 2012.

"When they first started in Massachusetts, it was literally a way to try and draw people in during a time of year when people didn't traditionally visit," S.C. State Parks director Paul McCormack said. "As they took off nationally, it became obvious that people were looking for a way to jumpstart the year to get outside, spend time with family. ... A lot of people have been off over the holidays enjoying themselves and relaxing, and this is a great way to kind of reset and enjoy nature to start your new year."

South Carolina State Parks is set to host more than 40 ranger-led hikes on Saturday to celebrate the program's 10th year.

Some will be led by park educators and focus on history or

ing some of these places is one of the highlights of our jobs," he said. "It's so much fun when you run into a family that's doing our Ultimate Outsider challenge and it's a couple of kids or an older couple whose kids have flown the coop and they're just so excited because they're seeing places in their state ... they've never seen before. It's great to be able to be a part of sharing that with people."

The response has been huge, and McCormack said even though high turnout is good for the parks, the inspiration behind the event is pure.

"We just want people to come out and enjoy the park, start the new year off right, but we want to make sure that they know that these are their parks," he said. "If this is the first time you've heard about it ... and it inspires you to visit all 47 state parks, I think that's a great thing."

The guided hikes are free with park admission, and all participants get an official First Day Hike sticker to mark the occasion.



A winding stroll on Lake Hartwell's Nature Trail is a great option for people looking for a milder hike. Rangers will lead an hour-and-a-half hike along the 1-mile wooded trail on Saturday morning.

natural features, and some parks will incorporate 5K races or a "plunge," where participants jump into the lake or ocean on New Year's Day.

"Our rangers participate in that of their own accord — we don't force anybody to jump into the ocean," McCormack said with a laugh. "Many people come out with all ages, because the hikes we offer around the state range from a half mile to 3 miles. You can have older couples who maybe don't have the ability to hike a 3-mile hike still go to their local park and do a little walk,

and then families with small children — I've seen families pushing strollers on hikes. It's a great family activity that everybody enjoys."

McCormack has participated in a First Day Hike every year since 2012 and said the coolest thing is seeing anywhere from 15 to 100 people come out for a hike.

"South Carolina has some phenomenal state parks and resources that belong to the citizens of South Carolina, and educating people about it and giving them an opportunity to start touring the state and see-

Keowee-Toxaway State Park is set to host a ranger-led hike from 2-3 p.m. on Saturday.

Hikers should meet at the Jocassee Gorges Visitor Center for the 1.4-mile hike along the Natural Bridge Nature Trail.

The trail is "uneven and mod-

erately strenuous," according to the park website, and hiking boots and walking sticks are recommended.

Admission is free. The visitor's center is within the park at 108 Residence Drive in Sunset.

For people looking for a milder hike, rangers at Lake Hartwell State Park are leading a tour of the 1-mile Nature Trail, which winds through the woods and offers glimpses of the lake and the Blue Ridge Foothills.

Hikers should meet at 10:30 a.m. at the Nature Trail trailhead within the park at 19138-A S.C. Highway 11 in Fair Play. Admission is \$3 per person.

OTHER HIKING OPTIONS

For people who can't make the guided tours or would rather wander the trails solo, other area parks will also be open on New Year's Day.

Devils Fork State Park, 161 Holcombe Circle, Salem. \$8 per person.

Oconee State Park, 624 State Park Road, Mountain Rest. \$5 per person.

Oconee Station State Historic Site, 500 Oconee Station Road, Walhalla. Free admission.

Table Rock State Park, 158 Ellison Lane, Pickens. \$6 per person.