

PRESERVING PARADISE

A Look at Park-led Conservation Initiatives

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At the core of the Oconee County Parks, Recreation, and Tourism (PRT) mission lies a dedication to conservation, where our parks play a pivotal role in supporting a myriad of activities that not only protect our natural resources but also enrich our local ecosystem. In this article, we'll explore the various conservation efforts undertaken at the three county parks to preserve the natural beauty of Oconee County.

SOUTH COVE COUNTY PARK

South Cove County Park, located on Lake Keowee, led the way for the other parks through diligent conservation efforts. In addition to creating a sustainable and thriving habitat for local wildlife, these projects also enhance the visitor experience for the human population that visits.

South Cove's efforts toward shoreline restoration, which involves measures to reduce erosion and improve water quality by planting native vegetation and stabilizing the shoreline began in 2015. This initiative helps maintain the health of the lake ecosystem and protects the environment above the waterline as well. In the years since restoration began, a robust ecosystem of riparian plants has been established, creating valuable habitat for wildlife. In total, South Cove has protected 1345 feet of shoreline so far. These naturalized areas provide valuable shelter, food, and nesting materials for wildlife.



In addition to shoreline restoration, South Cove features a pollinator garden that attracts and supports native pollinators such as bees and butterflies. Native plants are the cornerstone of wildlife habitat enhancement, and the beautiful wildflower meadow can be viewed from the back porch of South Cove's County Park office. This garden serves as nursery to many monarch butterfly caterpillars each spring and as a location for monarch tagging in the fall. Thanks to a special camera, visitors can view the activity inside a bluebird house in the garden on a screen in the office and watch the fledging process from nest building to baby bluebirds' first flights.

HIGH FALLS COUNTY PARK

Also located on Lake Keowee, High Falls County Park has a special focus on pollinator gardens and native plant landscaping. Thanks to a 2022 Keowee-Toxaway Duke Energy Habitat Enhancement Program Grant, the park added a monarch waystation pollinator garden, serving as a critical resting point for migrating monarch butterflies. Numerous bluebird houses are located within the park, which are cleaned and monitored annually by FOLKS volunteers. Rewilding woodlands native trees and shrubs throughout the park has assisted in creating a more sustainable, resilient landscape that can support both day use activities as well as provide habitat to wildlife. In the last year alone, 37 trees have been planted by rangers to restore forest understory and replace trees that had been removed due to damage over the years. The park's commitment to native plant landscaping further ensures that local wildlife thrives by providing the critical building blocks of their ecosystem.



This year, High Falls County Park was awarded a grant for shoreline habitat enhancement addressing 500 feet of shoreline in critical need of stabilization. This initiative will help protect and restore the local aquatic environment while providing essential habitat for wildlife, so that the success of South Cove's stabilization projected may be replicated. This habitat enhancement project will be a prime example of bioengineered shoreline stabilization and will be a valuable learning tool for shoreline stewards around Lake Keowee.

CHAU RAM COUNTY PARK

Chau Ram County Park is located in Westminster, South Carolina, on the banks of the beautiful Chauga River. At the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Chau Ram makes mountain ecology explorable by even novice hikers. The park has frequent sightings of river otters, particularly in winter, where the charismatic mammals nurture their young in the rapids of the Chauga River. Chau Ram is a prime site for experiencing spring ephemeral wildflowers like trillium, trout lily, and bloodroot. The landscape around the park office was designed to showcase the native plants found in the area and mimic the ecology of an acidic cove forest.



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One of the most significant achievements at Chau Ram is the establishment of a conservation easement through Naturaland Trust, protecting 232 acres of the park and an additional mile of Chauga River frontage. This commitment to preserving land and water resources ensures that future generations can continue to enjoy the park's natural beauty. This acreage consists of low-lying flood plains—areas critical for absorbing the volatile, flood-prone waters of the Chauga. Without dedicated greenspace like this, local communities would be devastated by flood waters. These heavily forested areas surrounding the Chauga act like a sponge, able to absorb the excess water and reduce damage in areas downstream.

HOW YOU CAN PARTICIPATE

Each of the three county parks provides multiple ways for individuals to engage in conservation initiatives. Visitors can take part in monarch tagging at South Cove and High Falls, fostering a deeper connection with nature and contributing to vital research on migration patterns. Classes and current events held at the parks are listed through Eventbrite (<http://bit.ly/HighFallsPrograms> and <https://bit.ly/SouthCovePrograms>) and Facebook (www.facebook.com/HighFallsOconee).

Another significant opportunity lies in the annual Christmas Bird Count, a longstanding tradition dating back to 1900. Running from December 14 to January 5 each season, this early-winter bird census offers a chance to participate in compiling essential research data. To join this effort, you can explore the Audubon Society at www.audubon.org, which provides details on how to get involved in bird counts at High Falls and South Cove, or an area near you.

For those with a passion for documenting biodiversity, the iNaturalist app is a powerful tool. Through the efforts of many different participants, over 1,000 observations in our three parks have been recorded. By joining

the app, you can snap photos of various organisms, from fungi to wildlife, and receive assistance in their identification. Your contributions become part of a global citizen scientist community, thus furthering our understanding of the natural world.

Beyond these engaging activities, you can play a pivotal role in conservation by reaching out to your local representative and expressing your support for conservation initiatives within your county parks. Your advocacy can have a profound impact on the continued success and growth of these vital programs, ensuring the preservation and protection of Oconee County's treasures for the benefit of current and future generations. ❀



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