

By David Rainer, Staff Writer

ESCAPE to Joe Wheeler

**FROM FISHING
TO GOLF,
JOE WHEELER
HAS IT ALL!**

When Eric Fleming and family roll into Joe Wheeler State Park it's like coming home – a second home anyway. The 39-year-old Fleming's connection to Joe Wheeler has been life-long, and he insists there's no place like home.

“My parents brought me up here as a baby,” said Fleming of Kennedy, Ala. “We started staying in the cabins when I was a kid, and we loved the accommodations, being right on the water. It's quiet and peaceful. It's very reasonably priced for what you get. There are boat landings all around.”



“Sometimes we’d just go for a weekend and sometimes we’d go for the whole week. It really is like a second home to us. Fishing is obviously one of the main draws. At Wheeler Lake, you can catch bream, crappie, largemouths, smallmouths and even catfish. We’d fish for everything throughout the year. Although we live close to the Warrior River and Lake Tuscaloosa, no other fishing compares to Wheeler.” Fleming said his sons have grown up just like him with a connection to Wheeler.

“They like to fish, but there’s also walking trails, a beach across the river,” he said. “When they were smaller, there were playgrounds. There’s just a full complement of things to do on vacation. It’s all right there at Wheeler. Then as far as just getting away for a vacation, you can go up to Wheeler and it’s almost like you’re by yourself. It’s 125 miles to the state park from my house, but the drive is worth it. We love Wheeler State Park.”

BY VEHICLE OR BY BOAT

The original cabins at Joe Wheeler are located on the Tennessee River, while the resort and lodge are located on First Creek, just a short walk or boat ride from Wheeler Lake. For those who love the water, ample opportunities await.

Visitors to the park, located only minutes from Decatur near Rogersville, have the option of arriving by land vehicle or by boat.

There’s no doubt in Park Superintendent Tim Haney’s mind that – despite the modern amenities offered in the newer section of the park – the lure of the water brings people to Joe Wheeler.

“Probably the biggest attraction is the Tennessee River itself,” Haney said. “Wheeler Lake is 82 miles long, so you’ve got room to do just about anything you want. People bring their jet-skis, ski boats and fishing boat owners. It’s real popular with sail boat owners because once you come out of the mouth of the creek, the river is a mile-and-a-half wide.

“Part of the park is right on the main Tennessee River. You can basically leave here and go anywhere in the world. We have a large marina area. We have 244



slips, plus our transit slips. We built a new, large covered dock with 70-foot slips. They have sewer pump-outs right there and power. We have a waiting list of about 100 people for the new covered dock. It was a good thing for the park, economically, and a good place for people to dock their boats.”

Each October, the park gets visitors from all over the nation and a few other countries as a part of the Great Loop Rendezvous, a group of avid boaters who travel the many waterways available in the United States.

“We’ll have from 80 to 100 yachts that will rendezvous here and then go on a great loop, around the Great Lakes and then through the Gulf and come back here,” Haney said. “Or they’ll go through the canal in Florida and back up and come back into the Great Lakes. Some of them stay with us for a week, and some will stay for a month and enjoy the fall colors.”

The park offers 64 transit slips for the travelers, which accommodates plenty of visiting boats. The slips are right in front of the hotel, which gives visitors access to cable television, the swimming pool and restaurant only yards away.

“They can step out of their boats and get whatever they need right here at Wheeler,” Haney said.

RENOWNED FISHING

Wheeler also boasts world-class fishing for several species. The lake is renowned for its bass, both largemouth and smallmouth, not to mention the outstanding catfishing. Alabama’s state record blue catfish of 111 pounds came from Wheeler. The Big Cat Quest held its championship on Wheeler last fall, and it took almost 140 pounds (five fish) on the final day to win.

“The guys in the tournament really know how to catch the big catfish,” Haney said. “But, even the weekend anglers are subject to catching a 70- or 80-pound catfish. Or, if you just want to catch some catfish to eat, you’re subject to catch a lot of catfish.”

The peak time for smallmouth fishing is in October, according to Haney, although there is plenty of action of some kind on the lake year-round. For someone looking for a trophy smallmouth, Wheeler is one of the prime spots.

“They catch a lot of smallmouth below the dam on live bait, and there are a lot of fish in the main lake that are schooling around the shad,” he said. “They’re a little easier to catch than the rest of the year. The best for the big fish, I’d say, is in March before the spawn. You stand a



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better chance to catch that 6-pound-plus smallmouth then. I've seen them up to 8-13 (pounds-ounces) caught out of the lake here. There aren't many places in the world where you can catch a smallmouth like that.

"As for largemouths, you probably won't catch as many big fish as you would in Guntersville, but there are just tons of fish in this lake. If you want to bring a kid to catch bass, there are just numbers of fish in this lake."

REST AND RELAXATION

Of course, not all people pursue. For some, it's time for relaxation, which Wheeler offers, as well. Visitors can spend a leisurely day of fishing off the bank for those who prefer not to use a boat. The park marina sells bait and shore anglers can catch bass, bream and catfish. For those a little more adventurous, the portion of the park on the south side of the river offers fishing access below the dam where striped bass, hybrid bass and catfish are plentiful.

The park also offers rental boats – pontoon boats, fishing boats and pedal boats. An 18-hole golf course within walking distance of the lodge, hiking and biking trails and tennis courts are avail-

able for those who prefer activities away from the water. Plenty of camping sites, improved and primitive, are available.

There are 75 hotel rooms associated with the lodge, which underwent a major renovation in 1999 and are currently being updated again. Six of those rooms are junior suites with kitchenettes and two are the large suites, one with two queen beds and a living room and the other with a king-size bed.

Adjacent to the modern lodge, 10 luxury cottages have been built for those who prefer the comfort of home. Several cottages are three bedroom-three bath, some are three bedroom-two bath and two are two bedroom-one bath. Demand for the cottages has been high, especially on weekends, holidays and during the summer school break.

"Occupancy has been really high and people really enjoy them," Haney said. "With the three bedroom-three bath, everybody has their own bathroom. The two that are two bedroom-one bath have a more intimate setting, with a more honeymoon cabin feel. They have a sleeping loft with a private bedroom downstairs."

All of the cottages have wood-burning fireplaces that can be seen from the living room and bedroom to give visitors that cozy, cabin feeling.


"Because of the fireplaces, the cottages are popular in the wintertime, especially around Thanksgiving and Christmas," Haney said. "We encourage people who get a little stir crazy in the winter to come out and enjoy the cottages or we have some cabins with fireplaces on the south side of the river."

Haney said when the cottages were designed, park officials told the architect they did not want a cookie-cutter group of facilities. They wanted each cottage to have a different appeal.

"We wanted them to look like your lake house, not your typical cabin," Haney said. "We wanted them to be different, and each one is uniquely different with local art work. They're just plush accommodations. It's rustic, but modern. You've got a big-screen TV, but you can also get away from those distractions by enjoying the full porch where you can see the creek and enjoy the scenery in a tranquil setting."

For those who are operating on a tight budget, the park also has 27 cabins located on the south side of the river.

"If you want something economical for the family for the weekends, we've got the cabins on the south side," Haney said. "We have cabins that sleep up to 15, some that sleep eight. And, we've got a group lodge on Elk River that sleeps 30.

"But if you want something plush, something like you would rent in the Smokies or at the beach, then we have the cottages." 

For More Information

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