

Volunteers Making a Difference

TRAIL MASTERS HELP FRANK JACKSON STATE PARK WITH MAINTENANCE AND IMPROVEMENTS

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Several of Alabama's 22 state parks depend upon the generosity of volunteers to help keep the parks running smoothly. From maintenance to improvements, various volunteer groups are a tremendous help to Alabama State Parks. For example, Jeff Reed of Alexander City, Ala., has worked tirelessly to expand many of the parks' horse riding trails, and the Birmingham Urban Mountain Pedalers (BUMP) have been extending and improving the bike trails at Oak Mountain State Park for years.

TRAIL MASTERS

One South Alabama park in particular has a unique relationship with a local volunteer group. The Lake Frank Jackson Trail Masters have embraced Frank Jackson State Park in Opp, Ala. as an outlet for their community service. Some of the many park improvements the group has been involved with include constructing and maintaining some of the walking trails, installing wildlife signs and various park beautification projects.

The Trail Masters were organized around the idea of creating another walking trail at Frank Jackson, but they have become an integral part of the park's development in the past few years. The group's president, Ken Short, considers the park an asset to the community and a place his organization takes pride in helping to maintain and improve.

"We feel blessed to have Frank Jackson State Park in our back yard," Short said. "We want everyone in the state to enjoy what we get to year round."

SCARECROWS IN THE PARK

While community service is a focus of the group, the most popular event the Trail Masters host is Scarecrows in the Park.

Each October since 2008, when the air takes on the crispness of fall, you will find more than 300 scarecrows lining the park's approximately 3 miles of walking trails. From local favorites like the family jug band to newer creations like the gravity-defying tooth fairy, each display is cre-

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ated and installed by local businesses and other organizations.

This family friendly event is a big draw for Frank Jackson State Park and brings in thousands of visitors each year. This year the event will be extended through Thanksgiving to accommodate those who missed it during the previous month. The trails are free, but park entrance fees apply.

The trails are an easy walk that weaves between the scarecrow displays while the air is accented by the smell of dried maple leaves and pine needles that blanket the forest floor. In 2010, a highlight of the scarecrow trail was the Wizard of Oz display complete with the Tin Man, Dorothy, Cowardly Lion, Scarecrow (of course) and Toto, too.

Visitors can take a guided golf cart tour or walk the trails themselves. For those who choose to walk the event, there are several park benches conveniently placed near the trails, some of which offer great views of Lake Frank Jackson. However, you may end up sharing your seat with a few resident scarecrows, but on a fall day they make good company.

Short promises there will be plenty to see while on the trails this year. "Last year the event showcased 368 scarecrows," he said. "I don't have a final count yet, but my wife alone has made more than 50 this year."

If you'd like to attend Scarecrows in the Park you can take a self-guided tour during regular park hours, but a guided golf cart tour is recommended to get the scoop on who's who among the local scarecrow artists. Guided tours are free, but large groups are encouraged to schedule a time by calling Ken Short at 334-493-7248. The park is open from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily.

IN THE WORKS

Since organizing in 2003 with 15 members, the Trail Masters have grown to nearly 100 members today. Comprised mostly of retirees from Opp and the surrounding areas, the Trail Masters are each required to complete 20 hours of community service with much of that taking place inside the park.

According to Frank Jackson State Park Manager Donald Thornton, the Trail Masters are an indispensable asset to the park. "There is someone from the Trail Masters working here just about every day." Thorn-

ton said. "Without them it would be hard to maintain the grounds as well as they are now. Their help is greatly appreciated."


For example, last year the Trail Masters secured the funding needed to build a bridge that connects the playground area to the campground. The bridge eliminated a long walk for kids and parents, some of which took place on the busy campground road. In addition to the shortcut, the section of Lake Frank Jackson the bridge spans serves as a wetland viewing area previously inaccessible to park guests.

"The Trail Masters were crucial to this project," said State Parks Forester Don Burdette. "We couldn't have built it without them. That bridge is a perfect example of what a successful public-private partnership can accomplish."

Short, who is in his second year as president of the group, says there is a lot more work to do at the park and that he and the rest of the Trail Masters are looking forward to getting their hands dirty making Frank Jackson a great place to visit.

"We have several more projects in the works, but we are currently putting the finishing touches on the new gazebo. It should be available for weddings and family reunions soon," Short said. "It takes a lot of time to do all of this, but it's worth it when you can give back to your community in a positive way."

GET INVOLVED

You don't have to be a member of an organization to get involved at your local or regional Alabama State Park. The State's Volunteer In Parks Program (VIP) offers many opportunities for individuals to make a difference at their favorite park. From campground host or activities director to taking part in a support group that maintains park facilities, the VIP Program has an opening for you. Visit www.alapark.com for more information on becoming a park volunteer. 

See the Scarecrows

Where: Frank Jackson State Park

When: October and November

Times: 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily

Adults: \$2

Children and Seniors: \$1

FRANK JACKSON STATE PARK

The new walking bridge spanning a section of Lake Frank Jackson makes the trip between the playground and campground safer and easier for visitors moving between the two areas. The bridge project was realized through a partnership between the ADCNR, Former Alabama Speaker of the House Seth Hammett, Sen. Jimmy Holley (District 31), and the Trail Masters.



Trail Masters President Ken Short, in front of Seth Hammett, announces the bridge project during a 2010 press conference.

LOCATION

100 Jerry Adams Dr.
Opp, Ala. 36467

CONTACT

334-493-6988

HOURS OF OPERATION

7 a.m. until sundown

RECREATION

Boating, fishing, swimming, hiking, playground, camping and picnicking.

CAMPING

32 RV campsites, three are handicap accessible. You may tent camp the RV sites as well.

FISHING

The lake is specially stocked with bass, bream, crappie, and catfish.

PAVILION RENTAL

\$40 per day.