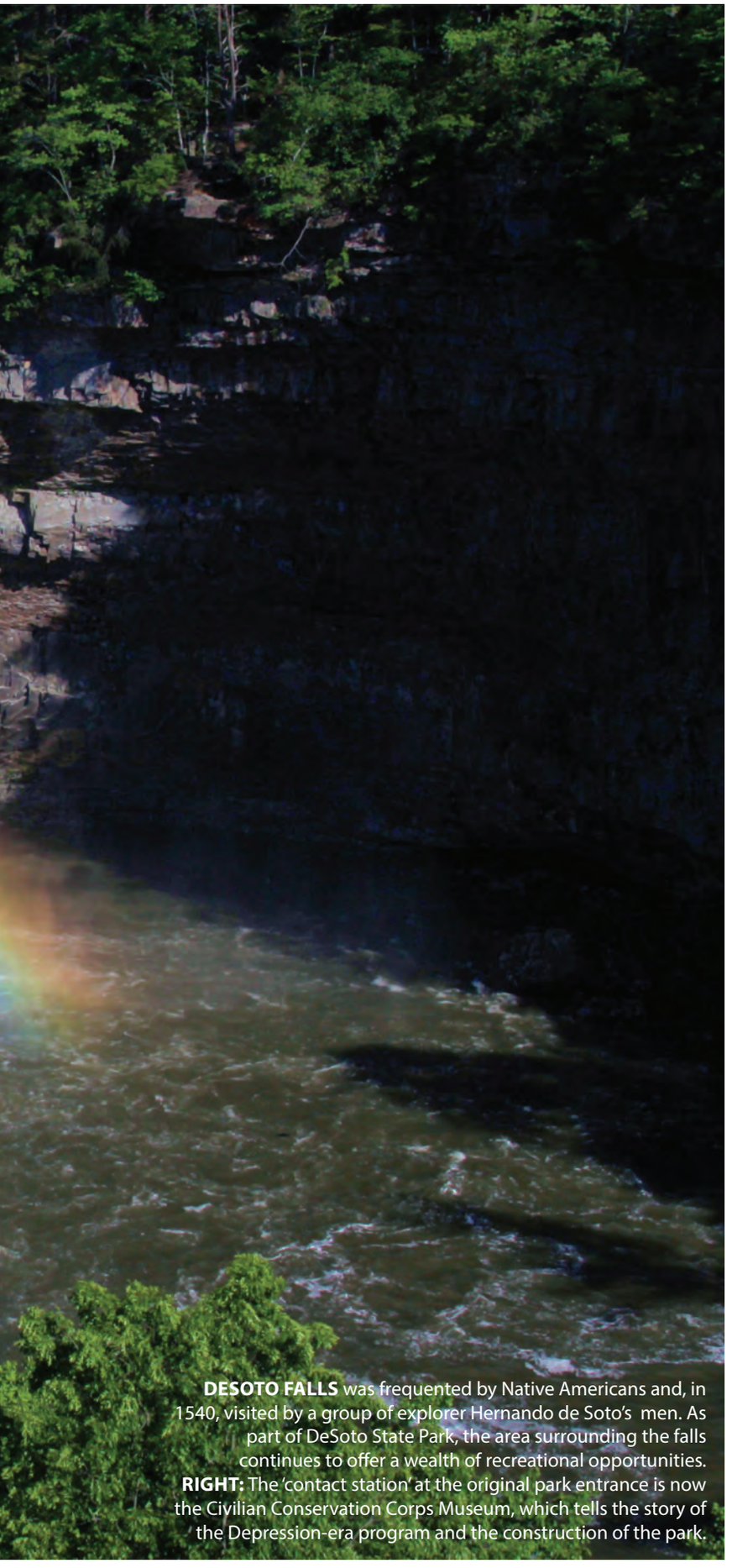


Photo by John Dersham



DESOTO FALLS was frequented by Native Americans and, in 1540, visited by a group of explorer Hernando de Soto's men. As part of DeSoto State Park, the area surrounding the falls continues to offer a wealth of recreational opportunities. **RIGHT:** The 'contact station' at the original park entrance is now the Civilian Conservation Corps Museum, which tells the story of the Depression-era program and the construction of the park.

TIMELESS *Treasure*

Built during the Depression on land that has drawn visitors for centuries, DeSoto State Park embraces a proud past while enhancing its scenic wonders with ever-expanding recreational opportunities and interpretive programs.

by OLIVIA GRIDER

KEN THOMAS WAXES PHILOSOPHICAL FAIRLY OFTEN, BUT HE always apologizes for it, as if these contemplative forays might be a sign of a character flaw.

Of late, with DeSoto State Park's 75th birthday looming and the opening of a museum dedicated to Civilian Conservation Corp members who built the park as part of President Roosevelt's New Deal, the park's superintendent has taken to asking himself: "If America had never experienced such a tragic time as the Great Depression, would DeSoto State Park ever have been born?"

It's not a question that can be answered since, of course, the Depression did happen, but Thomas says if one takes the optimistic view of life – the perspective that some good emerges even from really bad things – then DeSoto State Park could be seen as a pinprick of light shining through the dark fabric of an uncertain era.

"It dawned on me one day, how something so awesome, so loved, grew from such a terrible time in our country's history," Thomas says. "If some-



Photo by Brittney Hughes





LEFT TO RIGHT: The Talmadge Butler Boardwalk Trail is one of the easiest ways to view scenery at DeSoto State Park; Lost Falls, one of four medium-sized waterfalls inside the park; Catawba rhododendren in bloom along a hiking trail. Overlapping botanical regions result in an abundance of wildflowers on Lookout Mountain. *Photos by Brittney Hughes*

thing good came out of the Great Depression, it was DeSoto State Park."

Having visited the park numerous times over the years, I find it difficult to disagree.

As you enter from the south on DeSoto Parkway, rolling farmland gives way to a hardwood forest strewn with intriguing rock formations and burbling waterfalls. The setting feels enchanted. It's like stepping into the pages of a Grimms' fairy tale, minus the villain. Rustic, sandstone-and-wooden-beam structures add to the effect.

Like the town of Mentone just to the north, the area that is now DeSoto State Park seems to possess a magnetism that has drawn people for far longer than the modern-day town and park have existed.

Native Americans frequented both areas, and Hernando de Soto, whose 16th century exploration of the American Southeast was led by abducted natives, sent a group of men in 1540 to investigate rumors of gold in the hills and valleys of the Lookout Mountain region. They camped at DeSoto Falls (a magnificent waterfall that plunges over a 100-foot cliff) for at least two days, giving the falls and eventually the park their names. De Soto's historian noted the group found no gold, but "an area of lofty hills and stupendous rocks."

Folklore and some historians hold that Europeans visited the same area much earlier, as part of an expedition led by Prince Madoc of Wales around 1170. They maintain that the "Welsh Caves," manmade caves located near DeSoto Falls, were constructed using methods and materials unfamiliar to the tribes of the area when the caves were built.

Flash forward to the 20th century and a 1937 film documenting construction of DeSoto State Park shows people hiking on trails, swimming in Little River and picnicking, and notes the area had "long attracted visitors from other states."

These activities are still popular in the 3,000-acre park atop Lookout Mountain, along with sightseeing, mountain biking, bouldering, rappelling, rock climbing, kayaking, canoeing, camping, fishing and trail running. (See page 32 for details on enjoying these pastimes in the park.)

DeSoto was named one of America's top 10 state parks by Camping Life magazine. The majority of park visitors are from Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, Tennessee and Louisiana, with a surprising number hailing from the latter, Thomas says.

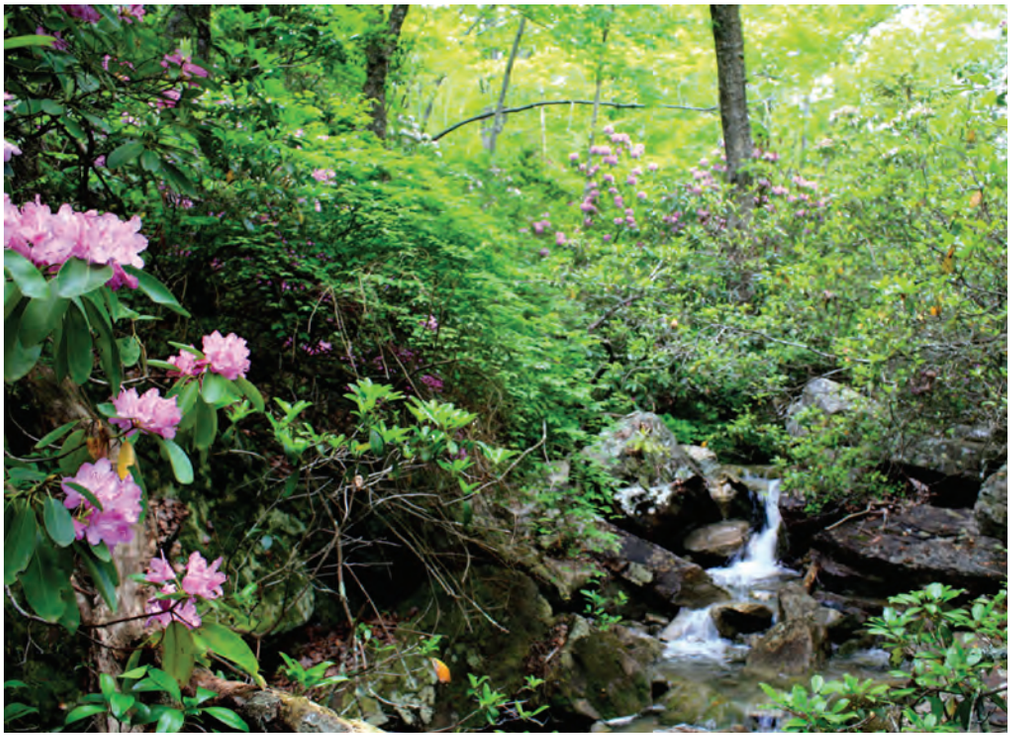
He surmises that when people from the Bayou State start heading for the mountains, northeast Alabama is one of first places where they see them. A lot of tourists from Louisiana never make it to the Smoky Mountains because they stop short here, he says.

Thomas can identify with them. After growing up in the flatlands of southwest Louisiana, he came to Alabama in 1989 to serve as the naturalist for Guntersville State Park. He became the naturalist at DeSoto State Park in 1991. "I wasn't used to elevation changes, I wasn't used to rocks and I wasn't used to mountain laurel and rhododendron," he says. "I basically fell in love with northeast Alabama – and with DeSoto State Park."

Twenty-five miles of hiking trails meander through the park, and waterfalls are a common destination for those who travel them. Thomas says he has put thought into the mystery of human attraction to waterfalls, but will spare me that tangent.

Four medium-sized waterfalls – Lodge Falls, Laurel Falls, Lost Falls and Indian Falls – and several smaller ones are accessible via trail. Some are near roadways, and others require a day hike. DeSoto Falls is located six miles north of the main park, off DeKalb County Road 89 along the route to Mentone.

ON A SUNDAY AFTERNOON IN JANUARY, my 11-year-old son and I set out in search of park visitors, hoping to find out what drew them here and what they like best. We start out on the Talmadge Butler Boardwalk Trail, which intersects and leads onto several others. Navigating the various paths is easy with a trail map, but, as usual,



we decide to wing it. And, as usual, even though we've walked trails in this area numerous times, we soon end up on a track we haven't taken before. We climb a hill and are deposited into the RV campground, which is just as well since we immediately spot a couple setting up camp.

Robert and Karen Olson are from Upstate New York and, in a reversal of the typical trend, they are on their way to Louisiana, where they do volunteer work at a children's camp for a couple of months each winter. This is their first visit to Alabama and DeSoto State Park. "It's very similar to the Adirondacks with the mountains and hardwoods – just warmer," Robert says of the area.

Karen has just returned from a trip to Laurel Falls on the Orange Trail. "I loved it," she says. "The park is really beautiful. We enjoy parks like this that are very rural and rustic."

They add, though, that with the campground amenities they hardly feel like they're camping. They were pleasantly surprised to find hookups for water, sewer, electricity and even cable TV in the RV campground.

Outside the Country Store and Nature Center, we meet Karen Somers, from Huntsville, Ala., who is spending the weekend near DeSoto State Park with her husband and children, ages 3 and 5.

Somers has been to the park once before and says she hopes to visit more often. "It's only an hour and a half from Huntsville, so it's a great weekend escape," she says. "I love being close enough to hike in the Appalachians. The best thing about the park is that it's low-key, peaceful, quiet and not crowded."

Somers and her family visited DeSoto Falls yesterday and hiked to the Welsh Caves. Only her husband entered the caves since the path to the entrance is narrow and runs along a cliff. (But the hike itself was nice, and the Talmadge Butler Boardwalk Trail is great for kids, she adds.)

"It's a gorgeous place," Somers says of DeSoto Falls. "It's a huge, magnificent waterfall."

Thomas has seen DeSoto Falls from the bluff, from below the cliff and from the air. "All three views are impressive, but the best is from the bottom," he says. "It makes you feel small, but in a good way. There's also the adventure of getting there."

In addition to viewing the falls and hiking, visitors often kayak, canoe, picnic, swim and fish near DeSoto Falls, which has been lauded as one of the most picturesque areas in Alabama. An old hydro-electric dam above the falls creates about two miles of still water for these activities. The park recently began renting kayaks and canoes at this location and offering rappelling classes near the falls.

Mountain biking is another activity that has blossomed in recent years. The park's 25 miles of hiking trails include 11 miles of easy-to-strenuous mountain-biking paths, and there are plans to add more.

Thomas credits local mountain bikers for partnering with the park and telling officials which existing trails would make good bike paths and where bike trails could be added. They then



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helped adapt and build the trails. "They want a challenge," Thomas says of the mountain bikers' goals for the trails. "They don't want easy."

For those interested in hiking and backpacking, the DeSoto Scout Trail is a recently revitalized, 16-mile scenic journey that follows the West Fork of Little River. Beginning at Comer Scout Reservation 2.3 miles north of DeSoto State Park, the DeSoto Scout Trail traverses the park and travels into Little River Canyon National Preserve.

The trail was built prior to the 1970s, and the Civilian Conservation Corps constructed parts of it. After languishing more than a decade without being fully open, the trail was restored and reintroduced in 2011 by DeSoto State Park, Little River Canyon National Preserve, area Boy Scout troops and other partners.

"It's been a big success," says Brittney Hughes, naturalist for DeSoto State Park.

THE BEAUTY OF THE PARK IS COMPLEmented by one of the oldest and most comprehensive interpretive programs in Alabama. An abundance of guided hikes, adventure excursions, presentations, classes, workshops and other events interpret not only the natural surroundings but also the area's rich history and culture.

Ranging from pottery-making workshops and hikes showcasing waterfalls and flowering plants to presentations on local legends and wildlife, programs are as entertaining as they are informative. (My kids still talk about the Creepy Critters Show we attended around Halloween five years ago. The event featured species native and nonnative to the area, and my children petted live snakes, spiders and a baby crocodile – and were sufficiently "grossed out" by a mummified cat – during the high-energy presentation.)

Thomas attributes the quality and quantity of programs at DeSoto State Park to motivated staff members and well-established partnerships with nearby Little River Canyon National Preserve – founded in 1992 to protect one of the most extensive canyon systems in the eastern United States – and Jacksonville State University, which operates the Little River Canyon Center and Field School. DeSoto State Park, the national preserve and Little River Canyon Field School provide programs for each other and share information and guest speakers.

"I think the success of all this is due to the fact that from the inception of the national preserve and the field school, it got off on the right foot, and continues to grow and evolve," Thomas says.

DeSoto's interpretive program began in the 1970s, and Hughes says Thomas expanded it significantly when he became park naturalist in the early '90s.

Thomas started the park's "campfire talks," hour-long programs held on Friday and Saturday nights and usually led by JSU professors. Thomas invited the instructors, and they now lead many other programs in the park as well. "I saw these professors in classrooms teaching, and all of a sudden they were turned loose on the canyon and DeSoto State Park," he says. "They were like little kids, and they made it fun. They were passionate about something and willing to share it with people. You can't help but be infected by their passion when you're around them."

A more recent partnership with nonprofit One



THE PARK OFFERS A PLETHORA OF PROGRAMS, with the most popular focusing on snakes, edible and medicinal plants and music. **OPPOSITE:** The Civilian Conservation Corps Museum tells the story of the CCC visually by showcasing items used by its members.

World Adventure Company is providing visitors with rappelling, kayaking, canoeing and rock-climbing experiences.

Hughes, a self-professed "plant geek and history geek," became park naturalist in 2005 and has added to the programming. She coordinates all programs and leads some, including the new pine-needle-basketry and food-canning classes.

Thomas says Hughes' specialty is combining event-planning and nature-interpretation skills to build programs around themes. One example is "Spookapoolooza," a series of late-October events that includes a campfire talk featuring local ghost stories, a pumpkin-carving contest, a kids' class for making masks from natural materials and the aforementioned critter show.

The most popular programs at the park revolve around snakes, edible or medicinal native plants and music.

Whether or not they are afraid of them, snakes fascinate people, Hughes says.

Hiking guides point out edible and medicinal plants (which can be picked for educational use during these events; picking plants in state and federal parks is otherwise illegal), and classes teach how Native Americans and pioneers used area plants. "People are really interested in going back to how you can do things yourself," Hughes says.

The park hosts "jams" in which several musicians play traditional tunes and instruments. In one program that always draws a full house, Jimmy Triplett plays Appalachian fiddle and gives a presentation on the history of the instrument.

WITH A SMALL STAFF, THE PARK ALSO relies on volunteers as partners.

Area Boy Scouts recently built a primitive campsite, and one scout, Austin Evans, partnered with the Atlanta Botanical Gardens and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to construct a demonstration area for the endangered green pitcher plant. The carnivorous plant grows inside the park, but not in easily accessible areas. Now several plants thrive in a raised bed outside the Country Store, and a large sign provides information.

"This gives us a way to not only tell people about the plight of the green pitcher plant, but actually show it to them," Thomas says. Like many endangered species, the plant is at risk because of habitat loss. "If people knew some of the situations with all endangered species, they might live their lives differently," Thomas adds.

Hughes explains that DeSoto's campground hosts are volunteers who assist and keep track of guests and help with other tasks such as building projects, running the Country Store and caring for animals in the Nature Center.

As if on cue, two volunteers drop into park headquarters and ask Hughes whether the animals need to be fed and if the steps on the trail near Indian Falls have been repaired.

Students in the agricultural class at nearby Fort Payne High School perform landscaping projects (they recently removed invasive Chinese privet from an area near the park entrance and are converting it into a native-plant space with a handicap-accessible trail) and provide labor for other undertakings, such as clearing and maintaining trails.

PROJECTS ON THE HORIZON INCLUDE A primitive pioneer cabin for those interested in experiential tourism. Available for overnight stays

beginning in late spring, the rustic, no-frills (not even running water) log cabin will have a pioneer feel, giving occupants a glimpse of what it's like to live without modern conveniences. The cabin will be located in the primitive camping area, so restrooms will be accessible.

The camping program DeSoto State Park has been teaching in partnership with Little River Canyon National Preserve for two years is expanding to other state parks throughout Alabama.

The day-long, "Camping 101" workshop provides instruction on setting up tents, starting fires, hiking safety and other basics. DeSoto staff members are teaching all Alabama State Parks naturalists to present the program.



Those who graduate receive a card entitling them to free use of a four-person camping kit at any of seven state parks. The kit includes a tent, stove, sleeping bags and basic equipment. "It's a confidence builder," Thomas says of the workshop. "There are a lot of people who want to try this, they just lack the knowledge and confidence, and we want to give it to them."

Graduates can try out their new skills at DeSoto's backcountry campsites. Few Alabama state parks contain such sites, but DeSoto has two and plans for a third, Thomas says.

IN ADDITION TO 2014 BEING THE YEAR of Alabama parks in honor of the 75th birthday of the state parks system, DeSoto State Park will celebrate the same milestone in May.

Completion of the Civilian Conservation Corps Museum in 2013 was spurred by the anniversary and the realization the CCC story was being lost because most school history classes don't focus on it, Thomas says.

The CCC was a public-works project with two main goals: conserving natural resources and creating jobs during the Great Depression. Men chosen for the program had to be single, but with dependents at home. They earned $38 per month and had to send $25 to their families.

While the idea for the museum existed for a long time, grants the Alabama Tourism Department and Alabama Historical Commission awarded in late 2011 made it possible. The CCC story also was told in fourth- and 10th-grade classrooms thanks to the grants.

CCC members quarried stone inside the park and used it to build park structures. "It's kind of neat because the park grew from Mother Nature," Thomas says. "They did a tremendous job. The stuff they built is still here and still in good shape."

Thomas says the goal for the museum was to explain the role the Civilian Conservation Corps played in the nation and in the founding of DeSoto State Park, and to be personal about it. The latter was achieved through pictures, film and items used by those who built the park.

"I can tell you their story all day long, but if I can put pictures and materials with it, it tells it so much better," Thomas says. "We're trying to tell the story visually."

Located at the park's original entrance, the museum is housed in a tiny structure that was once the "contact station." Athough small, the building brims with well-organized exhibits.

Displays are designed for visitors to view like a timeline. As you move around the main room, the story begins with descriptions of the Great Depression and President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, then explains why the CCC was formed. The narrative becomes more specific, eventually focusing on CCC work at DeSoto State Park. "We didn't need to instantly say, 'the CCC built this place,'" Hughes says. "We needed to explain what the CCC was."

Thomas says knowing the CCC story gives visitors a deeper understanding and appreciation of DeSoto State Park and the nation's history.

"On a real basic level, there's no way for us to go back to our past," he says. "But that doesn't mean we shouldn't study it, for our future."



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IF YOU GO

Check out upcoming programs and events at DeSoto State Park on page 67, at alpark.com/events or by subscribing to the park's e-mail newsletters at alapark.com/desotoresort.

Lodging

Mountain chalets, log cabins, motel rooms and rustic cabins can be rented at the park. ***More at alapark.com/desotoresort. Call 1-800-568-8840 to make a reservation.***



Camping

The park offers improved and primitive campgrounds and backcountry campsites. Sites in the improved campground can accommodate large camping units, and tents also are welcome. Picnic tables and grills are located at each site, along with hookups for water, sewer, electricity and cable TV. The primitive campground is comprised of 21 individual wooded campsites and three large group sites. Each site contains a fire pit and enough room for two tents. Restrooms, picnic tables, a picnic shelter and a water faucet are centrally located. Campers can access showers at the improved campground. DeSoto's two backcountry campsites feature 8-foot-by-10-foot, trail-side shelters. ***More at alapark.com/desotoresort/camping***

ACTIVITIES IN THE PARK INCLUDE:

Hiking and Sightseeing

See waterfalls, spring wildflowers and fall colors. Four medium-sized waterfalls and many smaller, seasonal waterfalls lie along DeSoto State Park's 25 miles of hiking trails. Because of overlapping botanical regions in northeast Alabama, Lookout Mountain is home to as many as 900 flowering plants. The majority of wildflowers bloom in DeSoto State Park in late April and May, and the Talmadge Butler Boardwalk Trail offers the easiest access to them. Guided wildflower hikes are led each year on the first Saturday in May. DeSoto State Park and the surrounding area are known for their spectacular fall foliage. Colors typically peak between Oct. 1 and mid-November.

Hiking and backpacking enthusiasts will want to check out the DeSoto Scout Trail, which follows the West Fork of Little River for 16 miles, beginning north of DeSoto State Park and continuing into Little River Canyon National Preserve to the south. Inside DeSoto State Park, the trail is marked as the Yellow Trail, which you can access across the road from the Talmadge Butler Boardwalk Trail (follow the sign for Indian Falls). Outside the park, brown-and-white DST signs mark the trail. The easiest place to access the backcountry trailhead from the park is to take the road leading to the rental cabins. ***More at alapark.com/desotoresort/waterfalls & trails***



Swimming

Swim or wade in Little River where it runs through the main park or in the swimming area above DeSoto Falls. The park's Olympic-size pool is open Memorial Day through Labor Day. ***$3 per swimmer; Complementary access for lodge guests and free swimming, 5-6 p.m.; More at alapark.com/desotoresort/Swimming***



Kayaking and Canoeing

Launch your own boat or rent a kayak or canoe in the area above the dam at DeSoto Falls. Head upriver on a flat-water paddle trip for up to two miles, enjoying beautiful scenery along the way. ***Kayaks $10 per hour; Canoes $15 per hour; More information, 256-634-8370***

Mountain Biking

The park offers 11 miles of mountain-biking trails, with terrain varying from easy to strenuous. Popular routes include the:

Family Bike Loop
2.5 miles; Easy to moderate; Access by the Lost Falls trailhead

Never-Never Land Loop
3.8 miles; Moderate to mIdly strenuous; Access by Lost Falls trailhead

CCC Quarry Loop
Roughly 5 miles; Moderate to strenuous; Access by the Country Store

Gillam Loop
3.5 miles; Moderate; Access by the Gillam Loop trailhead or the lodge, via the Chalet Trail

More at alapark.com/desotoresort/mountain bike trails

Fishing

Little River is most suited for fly fishing, which is often is associated with trout, but Ken Thomas, park superintendent and fly-fishing enthusiast, is trying to break the stereotype. While the area boasts many of the same settings as a trout stream, "don't expect trout in DeSoto State Park or Little River Canyon," he says. In late spring and summer, however, you'll find red-eye bass and a variety of sunfish. "It's probably some of the best fly fishing you'll find anywhere," Thomas says. ***More at alapark.com/desotoresort/fishing***

Rock Climbing and Rappelling

Adventure excursions are offered by DeSoto State Park in conjunction with One World Adventure Company. ***Learn more by checking out the park's upcoming events and oneworldadventureco.com/adventure-packages.***

GPS Quest and Geocaching

DeSoto's GPS Quest is a game of hide-and-seek using a GPS unit to find points of interest throughout the park. ***More at alapark.com/desotoresort/gpsquest/ and alapark.com/desotoresort/geocaching***

CHECK OUT THESE PLACES AND AMENITIES:



Nature Center

Featuring mounted and live animals, the Nature Center showcases mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians that can be found atop Lookout Mountain. Information on the park and area history can be found here as well. ***Located next to the Country Store & Information Center, the Nature Center is open seven days a week, 9 a.m.-5 p.m., during spring, summer and fall.***

Civilian Conservation Corps Museum

This museum tells the story of an often-overlooked part of U.S. history – the Civilian Conservation Corp program enacted by President Franklin Roosevelt during the Great Depression as a way to provide jobs and conserve natural resources. DeSoto State Park was built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the mid-1930s to early 1940s. ***Located at the original entrance to the park on County Road 618. Call 256-997-5025 for appointment.***

The Picnic Area

This space across from the Country Store features three picnic shelters, a large playground, ball fields and a volleyball court. ***More at alapark.com/desotoresort/picnicarea***



Mountain Inn Restaurant

Located in the lodge built by the Civilian Conservation Corps, this unique restaurant overlooks the West Fork of Little River. ***More at alapark.com/desotoresort/Restaurant***

VISIT THE FAVORITE PLACES OF THOSE WHO KNOW THE PARK BEST

Indian Falls and the area of Little River just beyond it are favorite spots for Ken Thomas, superintendent of DeSoto State Park. Across the street from the Talmadge Butler Boardwark Trail, you'll see a sign pointing the way to Indian Falls.

"If I need a breather, I go to the CCC shelter," says Brittney Hughes, park naturalist. "It's one of my favorite places that's easy to get to." The trailside shelter off the Yellow Trail near the northern border of the park is on a bluff overlooking the river. The quickest way to get there is from the Aqua Trail that begins by the pool parking lot.







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