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Welcome to Friends of Jocassee Newsletter Winter 2024



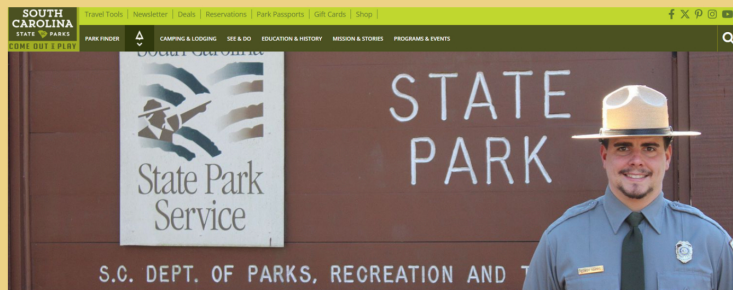
VIP Day at Devils Fork State Park and Lake Jocassee!

On September 14, 2024, we hosted our annual V.I.P. Day. (Volunteer, Improve, Protect), in partnership with SCDNR's Beach Sweep. This event focused on cleaning up the shorelines of Lake Jocassee after a busy summer season. Despite the windy and chilly morning, over 70 dedicated volunteers came together and collected more than 50 bags of trash from the shoreline and lake bottom.

Divers, kayakers, and boaters worked side by side to make a difference, while others lent a hand to our park rangers by building new picnic tables, refreshing flower beds, and cleaning up the roads and trails around the park. Together, this incredible group helped protect and improve Devils Fork State Park and Lake Jocassee for everyone to enjoy.

Friends of Jocassee extend our heartfelt thanks to everyone who participated. Your efforts make a lasting impact, and we can't wait to see you again in 2025!





Meet Friends of Jocassee Board Member Rowdy Harris!

We are fortunate to have Rowdy, the Devils Fork State Park (DFSP) Manager, on our Friends of Jocassee (FOJ) Board! He serves as a strong liaison between the SC Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism and FOJ.

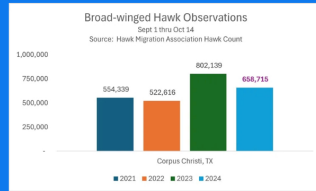
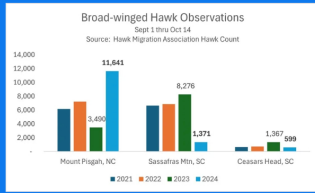
Rowdy was born and raised in South Carolina on an old family farm between Batesburg-Leesville and Saluda. He graduated from Lander University in 2006 with a B.S. in Environmental Science with minors in Chemistry and Biology. His career as a park ranger started in college, and after graduation, he moved to a full-time position. He has worked all around South Carolina with multiple stops in the upstate, including 10 months at Lake Hartwell, four and a half years at Kings Mountain, and the past three and a half years at DFSP. He met his wife, Naomi, at Kings Mountain in 2011. They have been married for 11 years and have two sons. Rowdy is a hardworking, dedicated (if not a little loud) advocate for DFSP and FOJ.

Rowdy has been involved with FOJ for over three years. He is grateful for the opportunity to work with like-minded people with different backgrounds, interests, and talents all focused on a common goal – to protect the Jocassee Gorges. If Rowdy could magically fix anything in the Jocassee Gorges, it would be improving the entrance road to access DFSP, the only public access to Lake Jocassee. As one of the most popular parks in SC, it is hard to ensure a positive experience for all who want to visit. In Rowdy's spare time, he enjoys hunting, fishing, BBQ, and watching college football.



Deepest Thanks for the DFSP Crew!





Where Did the Broad-winged Hawks Go During Hurricane Helene?

By Traci BeGole, FOJ Board member

It is with a heavy heart that we observe all of the destruction that Hurricane Helene brought to the Jocassee Gorges and surrounding areas of North and South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee and of course, Florida. Our first instinct is to help the people of these regions, and it has been inspiring to see the human spirit being so resilient. But what happens to our wildlife during such a storm? Do they get advanced warning and avoid the storm? Where do they go?

At Friends of Jocassee (FOJ), our mission is “Conservation of the Jocassee Gorges for All.” That includes having an awareness of our flora and fauna. At Devils Fork State Park, **Rowdy Harris, park manager**, estimates that there were probably over 1,000 trees that came down along with mountains of tree debris. The park was closed for 3 weeks and they had many out-of-state organizations helping them with tree removal. The Oconee Bell Trail will need trail restoration work and portions may need to be re-routed. Regardless, they are committed to complete this by March 1st before the Oconee Bell blooming season. Unfortunately, wildlife sightings at the park have been very limited since the storm, and the park staff is hoping they are avoiding the area because of the chainsaw noise.

As an avid birder, I naturally think about all the birds that call Jocassee home or are just migrating through the Jocassee Gorges in the fall. The **Broad-winged Hawk** is one of the region’s fascinating migration stories that Jocassee Gorges has the luck to witness each year. The Broad-winged Hawks are one of the largest migrating buteo hawk species and their path has been plotted to descend down the Atlantic Flyway and then toward Texas. The Broad-winged hawks do not like to cross big bodies of water like the Gulf of Mexico.

Many scientists and volunteers count the fall migration at multiple points on their way to their winter destination in South America and record these sightings at hawkcount.org. This is a raptor database offered by the Hawk Migration Association of North America. Based on this source of data, we can speculate on what happened to the Broad-winged Hawks during Hurricane Helene.

We can’t know for sure, but it is commonly thought that the birds that pass through Hawk Mountain Sanctuary in Pennsylvania continue their path to SC by way of the Jocassee Gorges. From there, again, we don’t know for sure, but we assume that they fly on to their Texas/Mexico routes.

Looking at data from the last 4 years, Sassafras Mountain sees the highest number of hawks during the last week of September which was exactly when Hurricane Helene hit (Sept 27th). Hawk Mountain in PA saw smaller but significant numbers (5,102) in mid-September, leading us to believe the hawks were here.

Our local experts have a couple of theories. **Ed Moorer, the Sassafras Site Coordinator on raptor migration**, remarks that “We were anticipating a good amount of Broad-winged Hawks to fly to us when the hurricane arrived. They must have roosted somewhere for the event and then continued their journey.” He has seen Broad-winged Hawks sit down in a forest and not move until the sun provides thermals to migrate. Southern sites in Texas had observations at a consistent level within a 4 year average so this is plausible. **Betsy Lewis, Jocassee Lake Tours Guide and Hawk Watch volunteer**, offered another hypothesis. She noted that the hawks had entered our area but many diverted north of Mount Pisgah, NC. This is also reflected in observation sightings from Hawkwatch. See the tables below.

Sassafras Mountain, SC data shows that in 2024 only 1,371 observations were counted compared to 8,276 in 2023. Conversely, the data shows that Mount Pisgah, NC saw 11,641 hawks in 2024, significantly more than in previous years. In fact, you could possibly deduce that birds pass by Sassafras or Pisgah depending on local wind conditions as the totals in 2023 seem to indicate that taken together, they account for a similar number of Broad-winged observations.

During and after the storm, Sassafras and Caesars Head were not accessible for observations so we will never know how many passed through our region. Further south, Corpus Christi, TX, which gets hundreds of thousands of Broad-winged in the second two weeks of October, had significant numbers of hawks within their 4 year average. Could our Jocassee Gorges hawks have flown there? Possibly.

We will never know for sure. However, without this hawkcount.org database, we would not be able to make assumptions on what happened to the Broad-winged Hawks this year. These citizen science efforts are critical to help us become aware, understand and interpret what is happening to our wildlife.

If you are interested in counting raptors at Sassafras Mountain, there will be plenty of opportunities next year. And, come join us at FOJ to conserve our beautiful area for all...people, flora and wildlife.



Annual Meeting and Jocassee Santa

On Saturday, November 23, 2024, Friends of Jocassee (FOJ) hosted their Annual Meeting and beloved Jocassee Santa event, bringing together members, supporters, and families to celebrate another year of conservation and community.

The day started with Jocassee Santa's arrival. Children, adults, and fur babies enjoyed holiday cheer and photo opportunities with Santa. The fun included kids' crafts, games, and, of course, hot chocolate, candy canes, and cookies. This heartwarming tradition unites everyone in the spirit of giving and environmental stewardship.

The meeting featured a compelling talk by guest speaker and FOJ founding member Heyward Douglass on his expedition to mingle with Alaska's wild and natural environment. Hot soup and rolls were provided by the staff of Eclectic Sun.

Attendees also received updates from FOJ Vice President Dan Polstra on the nonprofit's 2024 milestones, including progress on the ADA-accessible kayak launch project initiative, presentations of volunteer of the year (Kristina Henandez and her daughters Valerie and Anabel), and the induction of our new mascot Jocassee Brownie. The event reinforced FOJ's commitment to environmental stewardship while embracing the holiday spirit.



Friends of Jocassee (FOJ) Year in Review 2024

The Friends of Jocassee (FOJ) accomplished a lot this year! Take a look at this recap of 2024 and how FOJ educates, protects, and enhances the Jocassee Gorges. And see what we have in store for 2025!

Overall

- Revalidated Friends of Jocassee mission and outreach imperatives. Adopted new Mission Statement: "Conservation of the Jocassee Gorges for all."
- Purchased Directors and Officers insurance for all board members.
- Established committee structure to deliver on imperatives and developed marketing, membership, governance and fundraising goals.
- Implemented in Google workspace for FOJ Board members to organize events, communications and administrative activities for efficient operations.
- Granted former board members Mike Atkins and Kevin Evans emeritus status members.
- Welcomed new executive board member Traci BeGole.
- Dedicated a memorial bench for our past president, Nathan Pinner, using funds generated through donations.

- Focused on increasing membership with new campaigns; created new membership brochures and FOJ banners.
- Increased awareness of FOJ through participation in newly formed SC Lake Associations meetings, published article in Friends of Lake Keowee Society's magazine (KEOWEE), and partnered with Friends of Gorges to support Mountain Monarch Festival (cancelled due to Hurricane Helene).
- Planned and hosted our FOJ Annual Meeting on November 23rd with Heyward Douglas as guest speaker.

Educate

- Awarded two \$1,000 **Educational Scholarships** for outdoor education to **James M. Brown Elementary and Blue Ridge Elementary**.
- Updated signs on the **Oconee Bell Trail** for interpretative use.
- Hosted 11th Annual **BellFest** event on March 16th with the highest attendance to date of approximately 750 attendees.
 - 30 Vendors and exhibitors, 2 food trucks, 3 local bands, and guest speaker Rick Huffman.
 - Added Oconee Bell Trail shuttle to much favorable feedback.

Protect

- Maintained wood duck boxes around Lake Jocassee.
- Assisted Boy Scout troop in gaining volunteer hours for Philmont Scout Ranch, New Mexico.
- Facilitated 4 **Adopt a Highway** events quarterly, resulting in over 50 bags of trash collected over 4 miles of roadways.
- Coordinated **PUP - Perk Up the Park** at **Keowee Toxaway State Park** on May 13th. Litter pickup of 18 bags of trash and light park projects completed.
- Successfully hosted 13th annual **V.I.P. Day** on September 14th at Devils Fork State Park (DFSP) and Lake Jocassee with over 70 divers, kayaks, land, trail and road volunteers resulting in the collection of 50 bags of trash; assisted with construction of 5 picnic tables for the state park.
- Rescheduled **Native Plant Workday** for next year (initially scheduled for October 14th, which was cancelled due to Hurricane Helene.)

Enhance Experiences

- Held 2 **Campground Crawls** handing out lemonade and popsicles to DFSP campers and boat launch users while creating awareness about our FOJ mission.
- Hosted **Fishing with Friends Trout Tournament** on April 27th with 24 participants.
- Planned and gained sponsors for annual **Paddle Splash** race on October 5th, which was cancelled due to Hurricane Helene.
- Hosted our very own **Jocassee Santa** on November 23rd with photos, crafts, and refreshments at DFSP Day Use area.

Initial FOJ Plans for 2025

Overall

- Continued efforts to **communicate** with our membership through newsletters, website and social media outreach.
- Plans for purchasing storage containers for FOJ Inventory and DFSP.
- Recruiting of new board members.
- Renewed focus on **fundraising** with new events such as an **FOJ Golf Tournament** to help raise funds for specific projects as well as to make up for the cancellation of this year's Paddle Splash event - one our largest fundraisers.
- We plan on providing a full calendar of events much like prior years and adding a few additional opportunities to show your support for FOJ.

Educate

- Will continue to provide **Education Scholarships** to local elementary schools to increase wildlife education and advocacy.
- Plan on participating in **Friends of Gorges Mountain Monarch Festival** to bring awareness of their migration journey across Lake Jocassee.
- Developing quarterly **Lunch and Learn** programs to educate members about various scientific studies within

the Jocassee Gorges.

Protect

- Developing a plan to support the **MOTUS Wildlife Tracking Research** project with Birds Canada, Audubon and American Bird Conservancy.
- Proposed workday in February to help clean up extensive park damage at DFSP on the **Oconee Bell Trail**.
- Setting up a new wood duck box location to encourage more nesting success.

Enhance

- Working with Earth Design to consider a design proposal for an **ADA Accessible launch site** at Day Use area. Campaign entitled "Jocassee Access for All."
- Will continue funding **Campsite Impact Pads** for DSFP as time permits.



Friends of Jocassee (FOJ) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, tax-deductible public charity.

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