

State Parks...from Page 1A



Visitors from many states and Georgia counties flocked to Vogel State Park over the weekend for some fun in the sun, filling the park with cars and people. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

distancing practices “while enjoying trails, fishing docks and other open spaces.”

And at least by press time Monday, DNR State Parks’ website was saying that, “because parks near the metro area ... are typically busier, we are asking visitors to take this opportunity to explore lesser known parks and historic sites” around Georgia.

This guidance encouraging visitors to “explore lesser known parks” runs counter to the White House’s “15 Days to Slow the Spread” campaign, billed as “The President’s Coronavirus Guidelines for America,” which President Donald Trump re-upped Sunday through April 30.

In the campaign, the president explicitly tells people to “avoid discretionary travel,” which is exactly the kind of travel people undertake when heading to state parks for outdoor leisure.

When reached for comment Monday, Department of Natural Resources Public and Governmental Affairs Director Josh Hildebrandt said DNR welcomed all public feedback and would be taking a closer look at language appearing to encourage discretionary travel.

“We’re not saying that we’re not in agreement with the president and the White House on this one,” Hildebrandt said. “Certainly, the Governor’s Office is in constant communication with the White House.”

Added Hildebrandt, “More of where our heart was on that and the idea that we had was saying, ‘Just these couple parks that are right close to Atlanta are being used in such a high degree, what’s that next ring of parks that’s a little bit further out?’”

“We might need to re-look at our statement on that, but we’re not, at least intentionally, meaning to advise people go and travel more, go travel further, or go travel at a large distance away from where

you currently are.

“I think it was more so that we could advise people that might not know about some of the other parks that we have across the state to look at it.”

DNR State Parks has said that staff and volunteers are increasing the number of times public areas are cleaned, including “bathrooms, door handles, railings and other high traffic areas in accordance with public health guidelines.”

But with overflowing park attendance, at least at Vogel over the weekend, the question remains as to whether or not staff and volunteers can reasonably be expected to handle the extra cleaning responsibilities.

DNR has restricted access to visitor centers, museums, golf pro shops and nature centers within parks to comply with Gov. Brian Kemp’s directive to reduce gatherings to 10 or fewer people “while maintaining social distance.”

Still, an Atlanta-area park came under coronavirus scrutiny last week after a park employee in Douglas County tested positive for the highly transmissible COVID-19.

“The employee worked only inside the Visitor Center and was last at the park on March 20,” DNR State Parks said on March 27. “It is not known how the employee contracted the virus.”

“Staff members that had contact with the employee are now at home under public health recommended self-isolation protocols.”

“The Visitor Center at Sweetwater Creek will be closed until it can be properly cleaned and sanitized. Sweetwater Creek State Park continues to be open and operational.”

It’s clear that the governor is taking the virus threat seriously. After all, he’s declared a first-of-its-kind public health state of emergency in Georgia, shut down all schools, closed or altered the operations of many businesses around the state, issued shelter-in-place orders

for vulnerable constituents, and more.

But when it comes to state parks, Gov. Kemp and DNR have chosen to keep them open, thereby inviting people to travel to and from communities with apparently varying levels of COVID-19 exposure – Union and Towns counties still had no confirmed cases by press time Monday – all while the president, health officials nationwide, and the governor himself have been urging people to follow Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines, which include avoiding “discretionary travel, shopping trips and social visits.”

“Fortunately, many Georgians are heeding these directives and following the advice of public health officials to stay safe and healthy,” Gov. Kemp and DNR Commissioner Mark Williams said in a joint statement Sunday. “However, as we deal with the effects of coronavirus with school and business closures, people are eager for a change in scenery after days at home.”

“They are traveling to nearby counties, heading outdoors for fresh air and maximizing family time. Some are going to vacation homes, and others are hitting the lake, hiking trails or campgrounds. We, too, enjoy exploring Georgia, but we urge people to stay mindful of social distancing, follow best practices and avoid large crowds.”

“The Department of Natural Resources will enforce the executive order limiting large gatherings with officials patrolling bodies of water and campgrounds. They are monitoring coves where people tend to congregate and, if necessary, using bullhorns to tell people to comply with the order.”

“Officials will approach people in violation of the order and demand compliance for the wellbeing of our citizens and state. Local officials are also working hard to ensure compliance with local directives, which vary by city and county across our state.”

Enforcing social distancing definitely seems appropriate given the CDC and others’ health recommendations. But again, if people “are traveling to nearby counties, heading outdoors for fresh air and maximizing family time,” as Gov. Kemp and Commissioner Williams pointed out Sunday, how are they also following the president and CDC’s coronavirus guidelines?

For regularly updated information regarding Georgia DNR State Parks & Historic Sites, including altered operations, visit <https://gastateparks.org/Alerts>.

Georgia Forestry, Towns join UCFD to battle blaze



No one was hurt in the March 27 house fire off Trackrock Church Road. Photo/Facebook

News Special North Georgia News

Union County Fire Department responded to a structure fire in the area of Trackrock Church Road at approximately 6 p.m. on Friday, March 27.

The home was fully involved upon arrival of the first units. Fire Stations 1, 2, 3 and

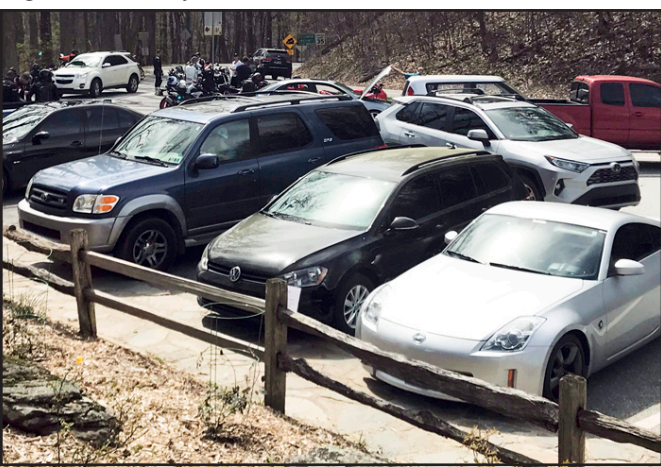
4, as well as the Towns County Fire Department, responded.

The fire also moved into the woods, and Georgia Forestry was called to contain the woods fire.

Firefighters were on the scene for several hours. The house was a total loss, but there were no injuries. The cause of

the fire was unknown at press time.

All firefighters of all stations and departments did an excellent job. The Union County Fire Department would like to thank Towns County Fire & Rescue and the Georgia Forestry Commission for their assistance.



The parking area at the Walasi-Yi Interpretive Center was a popular rest spot for motorists passing through Union County over the weekend. Photo by Shawn Jarrard