

The Decatur Daily

KEYS TO QUALITY LIVING

From arts to recreation to
higher education, Decatur
area has plenty to offer



INSIDE: Explore area's natural
wonders

THURSDAY: North Alabama
has deep ties to auto industry,
but new era has begun



OPPORTUNITY 2020

The Arts are Alive

Downtown Decatur is transforming into a burgeoning arts community

By Catherine Godbey
Staff Writer

For more than a decade, men and women in business suits — the ones responsible for funding studies on how to better the community and lobbying state senators and representatives for grants — talked of what Decatur could be. They envisioned a bustling downtown with community theater, local music and street art. They traveled to Savannah, Georgia; Paducah, Kentucky; and Greenville, South Carolina, and pointed to those cities' thriving arts communities as examples of what they dreamed of for Decatur. Slowly, the dreams of brick walkways, pocket parks, an arts festival and an arts college became realities.

No longer do Decatur residents talk about what was, now they talk about what is and what will be.

"I'm very upbeat about what is going on around here," said Mark Pettey, a composer and musician who grew up in Decatur and moved back to the River City in 2018. "I was nervous coming back, but was pleasantly surprised. The arts scene is still in the growing stage, but the arts community, which was a baby 10 years ago, is now a 7-year-old and running fast into the future."

Anchored by the historic Princess Theatre, the Carnegie Visual Arts Center and the Alabama Center for the Arts, downtown Decatur is transforming into a burgeoning arts community.

In the past 10 years, Decatur saw the reorganization of community theater groups, the establishment of an orchestra, the formation of a singer-songwriter series, the creation of a fine arts festival and the rise of a monthly street festival.

"The arts community in Decatur is vibrant and growing. There has been an enormous growth in opportunity for visual art and art



Decatur's Concerts by the River, a free summer concert series, features rock, pop, country, classical and jazz. A mainstay of the series is Reginald Jackson, right, who performed with Carson Archer last year. [DAN BUSEY/DECATUR DAILY]

in general in Decatur," said Kim Mitchell, director of the Carnegie Visual Arts Center.

Mitchell credited that growth to the city's focus on creating an arts-based economy.

"That change of mindset, by saying out loud that we wanted to have an arts-based economy, has caused opportunities," Mitchell said.

Those opportunities continue to grow as the arts scene in Decatur and surrounding north Alabama cities and towns expands.

Music

From rock bands to orchestras to summer concerts, the music scene in north Alabama offers a variety of offerings.

"What I remember from Decatur when I was young was that it was the oldest dry city in the United States," Pettey said. "As much as some people may not like to hear it, being dry severely

affects the economy and cultural arts scene in towns because, as sad as it is, many times bars are the only places you can hear local music."

Nowadays, the local music scene is thriving. In downtown Decatur, local music acts perform at The Brick, Moe's BBQ, Cross-Eyed Owl Brewing Company, Simp McGhee's and Josie's. On any given night, the sounds of Lamont Landers, who appeared on "America's Got Talent," and Tim Tucker, who has 20 songs on hold and whose single "Go Easy on Me" appeared on Showtime's "City on a Hill" last year, fill downtown spots.

During the summer, free music festivals, including Decatur's Concerts by the River, Athens' Singing on the Square, Moulton's Downtown Live and Somerville's Concerts in the Courthouse Square, entertain music-lovers with the sounds of gospel, bluegrass, country, pop, rock and

Americana.

In 2014, Viljar Weimann expanded Decatur's musical offerings by creating the city's first orchestra, Orchestra Sul Ponticello. In the past five years, the orchestra's members performed compositions by Bach, Mozart, Ravi, Beethoven, Vivaldi, Verdi, Prokofiev and Handel and selections with singers, from "Barber of Seville" to "La Boheme."

Along with Orchestra Sul Ponticello, the Decatur Youth Symphony brings classical music to life. Created in 1998 as a way to teach the violin to all third grade students in Decatur City Schools, the program expanded to include other string instruments and drum circles. The group performs a free winter and spring concert every year.

At the historic Princess Theatre, a push for more musical acts resulted in the creation of a

SEE ARTS, G3



About this section

Downtown Decatur is fulfilling a decadelong vision by transforming into a burgeoning arts community with music, theater and visual arts. Dream Weavers Children's Theatre was revived in 2017 and has grown rapidly as evidenced by the 124-member cast of the group's latest musical, "Frozen Jr.," featured on the cover.

Day 3 of Opportunity 2020 showcases what the Decatur area has to offer current residents and newcomers moving in to work in the auto industry or for other employers.

Shown on the cover, from left, are Marquis Johnson as Sven, William Farris as Hans, Lauren Lee as Anna, Madalyn Holladay as Elsa and Dallas Coffey as Olaf.

Cover photo by Dan Busey and design by Leah Daniels/THE DECATUR DAILY

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Started in 1998 as a way to teach the violin to all third-grade students in Decatur City Schools, Decatur Youth Symphony expanded to include chamber groups and drum circles. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]

ARTS

From Page G2

monthly singer-songwriter night and the welcoming of Drive by Tuckers, Steve Earle and the Glenn Miller Orchestra to the downtown performing arts space. Upcoming shows scheduled at the Princess this year include A Tribute to Percy Sledge by his son, Howell Sledge, country artist Brent Cobb, alternative rock and country band Son Volt and Grammy winner Bruce Hornsby.

“The thing that really slapped me in the face and made me go, wow, we have changed, is when I saw Bruce Hornsby was coming,” Pettey said. “There are a lot of arts spaces across north Alabama and Bruce Hornsby is coming here. He must have gotten the word that, ‘Yes, they like music there.’”

Other musical offerings: Athens Community Band, Huntsville Symphony Orchestra and Concerts in the Park in Huntsville.

Art

Installed along city streets and painted on downtown buildings, art in Decatur expands past the walls of local galleries and visual arts spaces and into the community.

“I always like to say the Carnegie is more than its four walls,” said Mitchell, who served as director of the Carnegie Visual Arts Center since 2011. “A lot of people would never think about stepping foot in the Carnegie so we want to bring the art to them, make it accessible.”

The Carnegie Carnival — Decatur’s version of Mardi Gras — plays an instrumental role in bringing art to the public through the costumes and floats created by the crews. More than 5,000 people attend Carnegie Carnival, an all-day celebration, which culminates with the main parade, each year.

Along with the parade, the arts center’s outreach programs include an exhibit at the Somerville Public Library, classes at the Mental Health Center, a dye garden and an

installation at the Huntsville International Airport.

The center, which houses five to six exhibits each year, also connected with the Arts and local art enthusiasts to create River Clay Fine Arts Festival in 2015. The two-day festival held at Decatur’s City Hall lawn features more than 60 artists from across the country each year, an exhibit space for student artists and an interactive station for children. This year’s festival will take place Oct. 17-18.

The Alabama Center for the Arts, a partnership of Calhoun Community College and Athens State University, added to Decatur’s arts’ scene when the \$8.5 million phase 1 opened in 2012. The center, which houses a main gallery and walking gallery, holds painting, drawing, graphic design and ceramics classes. Phase 2 of the Alabama Center for the Arts, costing \$13.5 million, opened in 2016 and features a black box theater, recital hall and recording studio. The center also is home to the Alabama Arts Hall of Fame.

“Not only does the center provide beautiful spaces for experiencing the arts, it also brings art-loving students of all ages to the city who add a certain vibrancy to our city center,” said Noel King, an arts enthusiast who grew up in Decatur and returned to his hometown in 2005.

From the Foundation for the Alabama Center for the Arts, a nonprofit organization, stemmed an Urban Art initiative in 2019. The initiative’s debut project featured an outdoor mural created by former Decatur resident Adam Stephenson on Second Avenue.

“I enjoy the mural every single time I walk or drive by it,” Mitchell said. “We look forward to having another mural start soon. We are working on proposals right now.”

Creations by local artists also appear on the walls of area restaurants and shops, including Local Color, Cross-Eyed Owl, The Cupboard, Josie’s, Moe’s BBQ and Whisk’d Café.

Other visual art offerings include High Cotton Arts

in Athens, the Huntsville Museum of Art and Frances Tate’s annual show, Celebrating Early Old Town with Art.

Theater

Eight years ago, after seven years of inactivity, Bank Street Players brought community theater back to Decatur, triggering a wave of theater opportunities for both adults and children.

“We do a disservice to the community when theater is not offered on a local level,” Carol Puckett, who spearheaded Bank Street’s



Dream Weavers Children’s Theatre reorganized in 2017 and has featured casts of more than 100 children and youth actors. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]

reorganization, said at the time.

Since 2012, Bank Street has preformed sold-out productions of “1776,” “Fiddler on the Roof,” “Oklahoma” and “Hairspray,” brought plays to local coffee houses, schools and arts centers and premiered Chuck Puckett’s “Humbug!”

The organization also spurred the re-formation of Dream Weavers Children’s Theatre, headed by Susan Thompson and Deanna Knox, in 2017. The growth happened rapidly

as evidenced by the 124-member cast of the group’s latest musical, “Frozen, Jr.”

“We are all working together to promote the arts in the community. There are opportunities for everyone, children, teenagers and adults,” Thompson said in 2017. “We want to do whatever we can to provide opportunities to make Decatur the best place it can be.”

Along with Bank Street and Dream Weavers, community theater groups Hartselle’s College Street

Players, Athens’ Footlights Community Theater and Decatur’s Curtain & Lights Theater Company. At the secondary education level, The Athenian Players of Athens State University and the drama department at Calhoun Community College stage plays at the Alabama Center for the Arts’ black box theater.

“It has been fun to watch the change occurring in Decatur’s arts scene,” King said. “Organizations, such as the Carnegie, have embraced change and found ways to expand their reach locally and regionally. The Princess Theatre is coming into its own offering types of entertainment not formerly experienced at the venue. River Clay has allowed area residents to experience the arts in all its forms. Theater groups that struggled and faded away in the past have found new life under new leadership and are thriving.”

As for the future, arts supporters and activists see the potential for further growth, from more individuals attending River Clay Fine Arts Center to more genres of music, including jazz and blues, to more opportunities for volunteers to connect with the arts.

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The debut project of the Foundation of the Alabama Center for the Arts’ Urban Art initiative featured an outdoor mural created by Decatur native Adam Stephenson on Second Avenue. [DAN BUSEY/DECATUR DAILY]



Bank Street Players’ past productions include “Guys and Dolls,” “Shrek,” “Oklahoma,” “Fiddler on the Roof” and “Hairspray.” [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]



Viljar Weimann, conductor, founded the Decatur-based Orchestra Sul Ponticello in 2014. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]



OPPORTUNITY 2020

FESTIVALS, PARADES, BALLOONS AND MORE

Things to do and places to see in the Tennessee Valley

By Catherine Godbey
Staff Writer

From festivals celebrating barbecue, Japanese culture, hot-air balloons and endangered birds to parades featuring pirate ships and jazz bands to street parties with classic cars, music and art, events across the Tennessee Valley will entertain lovers of food, music, nature, history and more.

Here's a roundup of area events and places that will amuse, educate and entertain.

JANUARY

Festival of the Cranes

The call of the wild — literally, the sound of thousands of cranes — has lured thousands of visitors to the Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge in Decatur for Festival of the Cranes. Created in celebration of the more than 10,000 sandhill cranes and the endangered whooping cranes that winter in north Alabama, the festival features music, art, puppetry, birding walks and more. More than 5,000 people attend the free festival each year.

FEBRUARY-MARCH

Carnegie Carnival

Held the Saturday before Fat Tuesday, the Carnegie Carnival — Decatur's Mardi Gras celebration — brings a festival to downtown streets. It includes floats decorated as pirate ships and speak-easies, costumed canines, jazz bands and participants throwing beads and MoonPies. The day-long event also has a children's parade, dog parade and the main parade, a 5K run, bluegrass music and an arts creation station. Leading up to Carnegie Carnival, nominees for Carnegie Carnival king, queen, prince, princess, sir bow-wow and lady barks-a-lot hold fundraising events, from a drag queen bingo to a litter cleanup to mystery dinners.

APRIL-OCTOBER

3rd Friday

Every third Friday of the month, from April to October, downtown Decatur transforms into a street festival with classic cars, musicians, line dancers, acrobats and artists. Started in 2009 as a way to attract people to downtown, 3rd Friday now brings in hundreds of visitors every month.

MAY

Daikin Festival

With happi coats, traditional music, kimonos, taiko drummers and yakisoba, the Daikin Festival celebrates Japanese culture. Described as a gift to the community, the festival provides guests with free admission, free food, free music, free happi coats and free tethered hot-air balloon rides, weather permitting. This year, the festival will take place May 1, 6:30-9:30 p.m., at Point Mallard Park.

Dragon Boat Festival

More than 1,000 paddlers compete in the Dragon Boat Festival at Point Mallard Park every year. The event, which raises money for the Decatur Morgan Hospital Foundation, attracts teams from area high schools, gyms, churches and businesses. An opening ceremony kicks off the races and features the dotting of the dragon's eye and a performance by the Daikin drummers.



More than 50 balloonists from around the country participate in the Alabama Jubilee. [DAN BUSEY/DECATUR DAILY]



The Dragon Boat Festival in Decatur features more than 60 teams and 1,000 paddlers every year in early May. [CHRIS SHIMEK/DECATUR DAILY]



Taiko drummers perform during the Daikin Festival. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]



The Festival of the Cranes at Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge celebrates the thousands of sandhill cranes and dozen or so endangered whooping cranes that winter in north Alabama. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]

Limestone County Sheriff's Rodeo

Dubbed the "Greatest Show on Dirt," the Limestone County Sheriff's Rodeo brings bucking broncos, bull riders, rodeo queens and cowgirls to Athens. Contests include bareback bronc riding, calf roping, break-away roping, steer wrestling, saddle bronc riding, a kid's calf scramble, barrel racing, chuck wagon races and bull riding.

Multicultural Indian Festival

Held at Oakville Indian Mounds in Lawrence County, the Multicultural Indian Festival brings the history of Native American tribes to life. Guests learn about games, flint-knapping, pottery making, blacksmithing, hide tanning and more. Performers typically include drum groups, flute musicians and traditional dancers. Children's activities include necklace making, atlatl throwing and stick-ball games.

Alabama Jubilee

Dozens of hot air balloons take to the air above Decatur during the Alabama Jubilee on the Saturday and Sunday of Memorial Day weekend. The free two-day festival features a Hare and Hound Race, key grab, balloon glow, tethered rides, antique tractor display, car show, arts and crafts, live music and fireworks.

JUNE-AUGUST

Kiddie Carnival

A staple of summertime in Athens, the Kiddie Carnival features rides, from a roller coaster to swings to a Ferris wheel, and games

for children. Open Thursday-Saturday during the summer, proceeds from the 50-cent per ride event go to the Athens Lions Club outreach programs.

JULY

Spirit of America

Fireworks light up the sky above Point Mallard Park in celebration of the Fourth of July. The free celebration also includes a children's bike parade, a golf tournament and the recognition of community servants and patriotic individuals.

SEPTEMBER

Battle for Decatur

More than 200 reenactors gather in Decatur on Labor Day weekend to bring to life the Battle for Decatur. The two-day event commemorates the four-day encounter between the North and the South in October 1864. Activities include mock battles, a Ladies' Tea, a military ball, a church service and Civil War camps with authentic equipment and dress. Admission is free.

Riverfest BBQ and Music Festival

Riverfest, the second oldest barbecue competition in Alabama, celebrates two of north Alabamians' loves — music and food. The two-day festival, which will celebrate 26 years in September, attracts dozens of professional and backyard barbecue teams to Decatur, along with local musicians. Along with music and barbecue, the festival features a children's area, carnival games, craft tent and more. Proceeds benefit Mosaic Mentoring of North Alabama.



Thousands of people come to Carnegie Carnival in downtown Decatur on the Saturday before Fat Tuesday. [DAN BUSEY/DECATUR DAILY]

Trail of Tears motorcycle ride

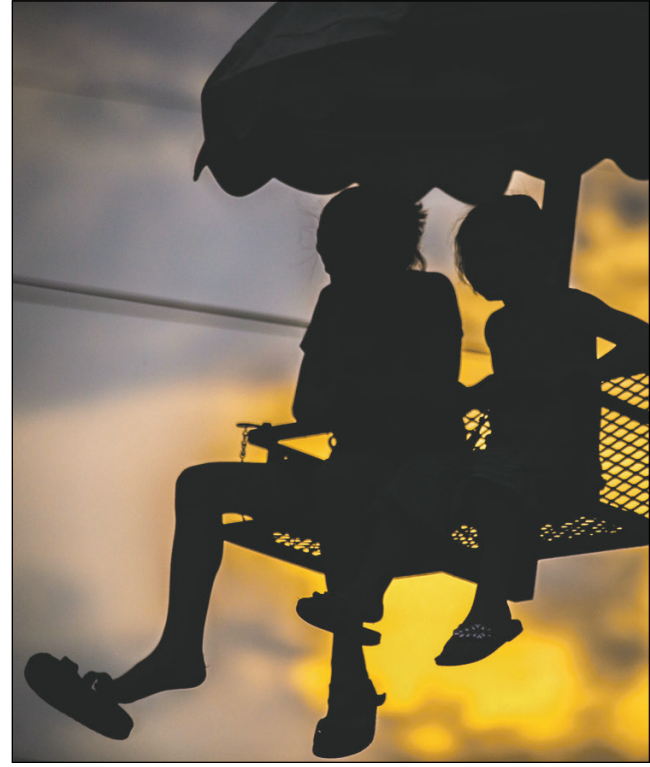
Hundreds of motorcyclists from across the Southeast unite to honor Native Americans during the Trail of Tears ride. The annual commemorative ride begins at the Alabama and Tennessee line on U.S. 72 in Bridgeport. Participants travel U.S. 72 to I-565 and head west, through Athens and Florence before arriving in Waterloo.

Racking Horse World Celebration

Dozens of the country's top racking horses vie for the title of world champion at the annual Racking Horse Breeders Association of America's World Celebration in Priceville. Under the guidance of children, adults, professionals and amateurs, horses compete in more than 180 classes. Other activities during the nine-day competition include a horse sale, barn decorating contest and stick horse race for children.

Eva Frontier Days

A down-home celebration, complete with greased pig-catching, frog jumping and pig-calling skills, highlights the



The Kiddie Carnival in Athens offers carnival rides, games and food every summer. [DAN BUSEY/DECATUR DAILY]

Eva Frontier Days in Eva every year. The weeklong community celebration includes a parade, antique tractors, car show, crafts, baking contest, hayride, community singing and music.

OCTOBER

Fiddlers Convention

Nicknamed the "Granddaddy of Midsouth Fiddlers Conventions," the Tennessee Valley Old

Time Fiddlers Convention attracts more than 15,000 music lovers and 200 musicians from 30 states to Athens State University every year. The three-day convention with competitions in buck dance, banjo, fiddle and old-time singing, culminates with a "fiddle off" between the junior, intermediate and senior division fiddle winners.



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The Battle for Decatur features a reenactment from the Civil War. [CHRIS SHIMEK/DECATUR DAILY]



Riverfest, which will celebrate 26 years this year, is the second oldest barbecue competition in Alabama. [CHRIS SHIMEK/DECATUR DAILY]



The Racking Horse World Celebration in Priceville determines the world champion. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]

FESTIVALS

From Page G4

River Clay Fine Arts Festival

Sculptors, painters, photographers, jewelers and carvers creating art from wood, fiber, clay, oil, glass and stone have descended on Decatur's City Hall lawn for the River Clay Fine Arts Festival for the past five years. Along with showcasing works by the selected artists, who typically come from more than a dozen states, the two-day festival organizes

music, children's activities, student art exhibits and artist demonstrations. This year's festival will be Oct. 17-18 at Decatur's City Hall Lawn.

Athens Grease Festival

With the motto, "You can eat healthy the other 364 days of the year" — 365 during a leap year — the Athens Grease Fest serves up a fried food celebration. Complete with a toga dress code and quirky games, including the frozen turkey toss, the festival marries the Greek

origin of the city's name with the South's love of fried food. Inventive foodies have served up fried banana pudding, Snickers, artichokes, cheese steak, candy corn, pies, meatballs and bologna.

Athens Storytelling Festival

Weaving together folk legends, tall tales and exaggerated truths, award-winning tellers entertain audiences from across north Alabama during the Athens Storytelling Festival. Along with the professional



Last year's River Clay Fine Arts Festival included a chalk competition featuring four artists. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]



The Athens Storytelling Festival features award-winning storytellers and musicians. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]

storytellers, the festival holds a competition for amateur storytellers.

NOVEMBER

Veterans Day

Parades and ceremonies in Lawrence, Limestone and Morgan counties take place in honor of Veterans Day every year. In Moulton, Athens, Hartselle and Priceville, bands, veterans and patriotic organizations march through downtown streets. The Combined Patriotic Organizations of Morgan County also holds a ceremony in Priceville at Veterans Park.

DECEMBER

Holiday Parades

More than a dozen parades, including one on the water, bring the holiday spirit to Morgan, Lawrence and Limestone counties every year. The parades in Decatur, Hartselle, Priceville, Athens, Courtland, Moulton, Trinity, Mount Hope, Elkmont, Hatton, Ardmore, Hillsboro and Town Creek feature marching bands, floats, Santa and more. In the Parade of Lights, boats adorned with Christmas lights and decorations float down the Tennessee River between Riverwalk Marina and Rhodes Ferry Park in Decatur.

Other notable events

February: Chocolate Walk in Athens
March: Decatur Pub Crawl, Poke Sallet Follies in Athens, Chili Challenge in Athens, 12-hour run at Delano Park.
April: Opening of the Morgan County-Decatur Farmers Market, Racking

Horse Spring Celebration in Priceville.

May: Start of Concerts by the River in Decatur and Singing on the Square in Athens.

June: Wet Dog Triathlon in Decatur and start of Fridays after Five in Athens.

August: Piney Chapel American Farm Heritage Days in Limestone County.

September: Hartselle Depot Days and Celebrating Early Old Town with Art in Decatur.

October: Breast cancer awareness events, including walks and a fashion show.

November: Cotton Cluster Dog Show in Priceville.

December: Holiday home tours in Decatur, Athens, Courtland, Mooresville and Eva, tree trails in Decatur, Athens, Moulton, Hartselle and Ardmore, Sippin' Cider in Athens and Cookie Walk in Hartselle.

Varying dates: Taste of the Valley in Decatur, Calhoun Community College's writers conference, which has featured U.S. poet laureates, Cotton Pickin' BBQ in Hartselle, Somerville Celebration with fireworks and music.

Historic places

Along with events, the area offers multiple historic places where visitors can learn about north Alabama's past.

Old State Bank in Decatur. The historic building's columns still show scars from the bullets fired during the Civil War. Built in 1833, the building served as a hospital, guardhouse, bank and dance hall and was one of three buildings, along with the Dancy-Polk House and the Burleson-Hinds-McEntire House, that survived the Civil War. The bank building is open to the public, Monday-Friday, 9:30 a.m.-noon and 1-4:30 p.m.

Pond Spring in Courtland. Built during the 1870s, Pond Spring served as the post-Civil War home of Gen. Joe Wheeler, a Confederate lieutenant general, U.S. congressman and Spanish-American War general. The 50-acre site includes 12 historic buildings and gardens. The main house serves as a museum with Wheeler's uniforms and weapons on display.

Donnell House in Athens. Robert Donnell, a Presbyterian minister who helped establish the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in Athens, built the house in the 1850s. During the Civil War, the Union Army quartered soldiers at the house. The house also served as the site of Athens Male College and the residence of several school principals. Every Christmas, the Donnell House foundation decorates the two-story home with trees and opens it to the public.

Princess Theatre in Decatur. Originally built as a livery stable in 1887, the Princess Theatre was transformed into a silent film and vaudeville playhouse in 1919. The movie house closed in 1978, was renovated and reopened as a performing arts center. The Princess has hosted George Washington Carver, Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Tony Randall, Cloris Leachman, the Count Basie Orchestra, Arlo Guthrie, The Blind Boys of Alabama, St. Paul and the Broken Bones, the Secret Sisters and Roseanne Cash.

Mooresville: Mooresville, the Limestone County town "older than the state" as the 53 residents proudly claim, is home to a church where James Garfield preached in 1863, a post office built in 1840 and the Stagecoach Inn and Tavern built before 1825.

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Pets welcome here

Area has plenty to offer with Decatur's dog park, other public spaces, veterinarian access and pet supplies



Marshall, left, plays football with his owner, Joshua Brown, at Wilson Morgan Park's dog park. The dog park, which opened last year, has separate spaces for big dogs and smaller dogs. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]

By Calvin Cooley
For The Decatur Daily

Johnny and Evelyn Garcia have spent eight years walking their beagle, Yogi, through public parks, state parks and designated dog parks in three states.

"We were both born and raised in Florida, where foot traffic in any public space can be frightening for a dog," Johnny, a retired utility linesman, said. "I worked for nearly 30 years in Kentucky, and most of the places we lived in didn't have enough public green space for animals. Decatur is a very good mix of both of those places. It's nice and friendly and you don't feel overwhelmed when you're out with your pet."

The Garcia family relocated to north Alabama after Johnny's retirement in 2003 and lived in Roanoke, a small city in Piedmont County, until coming to Morgan County in 2016 to be closer to their grandchildren.

"When we moved here in the summer of 2016 we didn't see as many animals out in the parks," Evelyn said. "That really seemed to change in 2017, and then they opened the dog park in



Paxton Symonds, 6, and his younger brother, Bowen, 1, ride in their home's front yard across from Delano Park as their dog, Rosie, keeps an eye on them. Dog lovers have found Delano Park's walking path a great spot for pets. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]

Wilson Morgan (in summer 2019). We think that space is just fantastic. Wilson Morgan is a great park, and the addition of the dog park makes it much better."

The dog park at Wilson Morgan Park was made possible by a \$100,000 grant secured by state Sen. Arthur Orr, R-Decatur, and fundraising by local pet advocates. The park is divided into sections for small and large dogs.

"It's as nice as any other

facility we've seen, and we've seen a lot," Johnny Garcia said.

The Garcias also enjoy taking Yogi to Delano Park, Sparkman Park in Hartselle, the track that surrounds Athens Middle School and Athens Sportsplex.

"There are plenty of options for space to take your dog in this area," Evelyn said. "If we go by Wilson Morgan or Delano Park and it seems a bit

crowded, we just go on to the next place we enjoy."

In addition to ample outdoor space, Decatur and the surrounding areas offer plenty in the way of animal services, including veterinarian care and volunteer opportunities for those wishing to work with animals.

Decatur Animal Services offers volunteer opportunities to anyone age 16 or older, ranging from cleaning cat cages



Callie has found a purrrrr-fect home on Second Avenue Southeast in downtown Decatur. Second Read Books owner Melinda Jones holds Callie. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]



Visiting dogs run and play inside the dog park opened last year at Wilson Morgan Park in Decatur. [DAN BUSEY/DECATUR DAILY]

to dog walking to cat cuddling. The department, located on Beltline Road near Wilson Morgan Park, also handles pet adoptions and is on-call 24 hours per day to respond to reports of animal bites, injured strays or suspicion of vicious or rabid animals.

"We do the best we can to provide good service to the community," Animal Services manager Brian Lundberg said. "Volunteers play a big part in that, and we have opportunities for those interested in working with our department."

Like the Garcias, Allie Witner has enjoyed the space to take her dog, Tux, as well as the services provided by a couple of local veterinary clinics.

"We have one dog and two cats and they can be a lot sometimes," Witner said. "We have used Bryan Animal Clinic and Banfield in the PetSmart by Target. We've received excellent service at both places and would have zero issues in taking our pets back to either for any kind of care."

That's great news for Hans Corbett, a shift lead at Banfield.

"Our goal is to offer optimal preventive care at

an affordable price," Corbett said. "We have plans that are designed to cover all of the preventive care your animal could need, and we work to make sure the cost of the plans can fit in any budget."

Corbett said Banfield, like other animal hospitals, likes to stress the responsibility of taking on a pet to potential new owners.

"I always like to tell people that may be adopting a new cat or dog, or bringing a pet into the family, that they should look at a small animal like they would a child," Corbett said. "You can't just throw food at it and think it'll be OK. There's responsibility and cost, and we want to make sure every pet is taken care of."

Witner agreed.

"There is responsibility, but Decatur is a great place to raise a pet," she said. "There's plenty of space, good options for vet care and pet supplies, and people tend to talk more when you have a pet with you. We've made a number of friends in Decatur by simply walking our dog in public and we have yet to have a bad experience with anyone."

Dining Out

Enjoy a great meal or sweet treat at one of these Valley businesses

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Fri-Sat 11-1
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OPPORTUNITY 2020

Pedal, fish or meditate your way to a better lifestyle in Decatur

By Calvin Cooley
For The Decatur Daily

From world-class fishing on Wheeler Lake to coed softball at Wilson Morgan Park to Barre yoga in downtown Decatur, Morgan County and the surrounding area have plentiful options for adults looking to build or maintain an active lifestyle.

"I've fished Wheeler and the Tennessee my whole life," Decatur native Andy Shaw said. "I've hiked in the Bankhead Forest and camped in tents at Joe Wheeler. There are outdoor activities available in this area all year. That goes beyond the outdoors, too. If you're looking for something to do around here, you'll never be bored."

Alabama Mountain Lakes Tourist Association in Decatur is a one-stop shop for activities in north Alabama, with information on everything from craft beer and wine trails to 14 must-see waterfalls. Recommendations from the association can be found online at northalabama.org.

The area also features adult-only leagues in several sports.

Decatur Parks and Recreation offers adult leagues in basketball, coed volleyball and slow-pitch softball in the fall, spring and summer.

Orlandus King, coordinator for the leagues and complex manager at Wilson Morgan Park, said the adult-participation leagues have been growing in popularity in recent years.

"We have four leagues for spring and summer softball with about 400 or so players," King said. "The fall league is smaller, with seven teams playing

in the men's industrial league and nine playing in the coed league. We have two basketball leagues running right now, with eight teams in the men's industrial league and five in the church league. There's also volleyball. We have a lot of good options."

Fall softball leagues feature a nine-game season and a double-elimination tournament, with games being played Monday-Thursday at Wilson Morgan Park. Spring softball leagues feature 12-game seasons with a double-elimination tournament and are played Monday-Thursday at Wilson Morgan.

Adult basketball season begins in November and games are played at Fort Decatur Recreation Center. The season is 12 games long with a single-elimination tournament. Games are comprised of four six-minute quarters.

"Those games can get really competitive at times," King said. "Our officials do a great job of keeping it smooth and making sure things stay under control. That allows us to make sure everything is going well and everyone that participates is having a good time."

Volleyball leagues are played at the Aquadome, with 12-match seasons and a double-elimination tournament. Information on the leagues can be found online at decaturparks.com.

Additionally, there is no shortage of opportunity for those looking to focus on physical fitness.

"We offer a range of beginner and immediate classes here, as well as Barre classes for those who are interested," Pat Underwood, an instructor



A fisherman adjusts the location of his boat on Wheeler Lake at the U.S. 31 bridges in Decatur. Anglers prize the lake's largemouth bass, catfish and crappie. [DAN BUSEY/DECATUR DAILY]

at Breathe Yoga Barre on Second Avenue, said. "Yoga is a great way to work on flexibility and personal fitness, and we've really seen a spike in interest over the last few years, especially among those who are focused on preventive health and their long-term ability to stay mobile."

Public gyms, multiple CrossFit locations and the Dr. Bill Sims Bike Trail are just a few of the other options available in the area. Burningtree Country Club and the Point Mallard Golf Course offer excellent options for those looking for challenging but fair courses, and the Point Mallard Archery Park offers a controlled shooting area for adults

and adult-accompanied youths.

"You almost have to be trying to not be able to find something to do," said David Lee Ingram, 51, of Decatur, who plays coed softball in the adult league and takes a class at the downtown yoga studio. "The outdoor activities are excellent, and the other options are just as good. The area is a great fit for anyone who wants to stay active. I don't think I can speak any more highly of what we have to offer."

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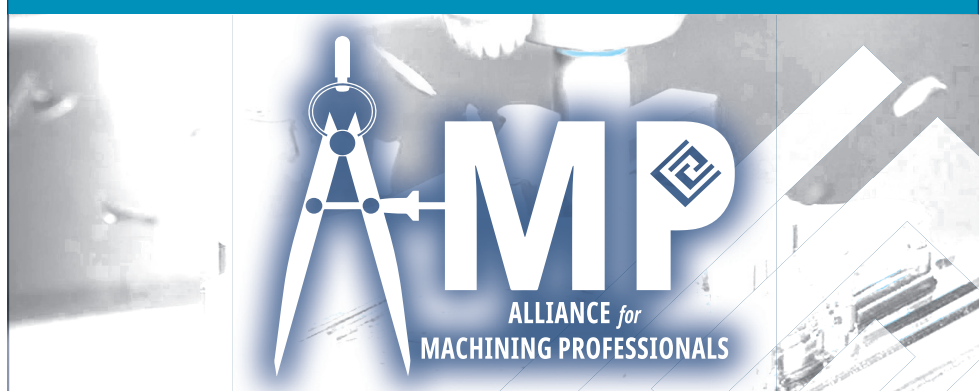


Decatur's outdoor options include an archery park at Point Mallard. Allen Lewter prepares his bow to make a 62-yard shot on the course. [DAN BUSEY/DECATUR DAILY]



Breathe Yoga Barre offers classes in downtown Decatur. [CRYSTAL VANDER WEIT/DECATUR DAILY FILE]

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Nurses work inside the nursery of the OB-GYN facility at Decatur Morgan Hospital. Renovations on the area were finished last year. [DAN BUSEY/DECATUR DAILY]

Convenient local hospitals also have connections

Affiliations with Huntsville Hospital provide additional resources and expertise

By Calvin Cooley
For The Decatur Daily

Residents of Limestone, Lawrence and Morgan counties have the best of all worlds when it comes to hospital care.

They enjoy the convenience and quick access to care provided by hospitals in Athens, Moulton and Decatur, but they also have the reassurance that additional resources and expertise are available through those hospitals' affiliation with Huntsville Hospital Health System, the second-largest in Alabama.

Decatur General and Parkway Medical Center were consolidated under the name Decatur Morgan Hospital by the Huntsville Hospital Health System in 2012. Huntsville Hospital also operates Athens-Limestone Hospital in Athens and Lawrence Medical Center in Moulton.

"I have friends in other places who have had to wait weeks to be seen by doctors," Morgan County resident J.R. Webb said. "I've never had that problem here. When it's really mattered, our medical questions have been addressed quickly and efficiently and affordably. You can't ask for much more."

Webb, who has used doctors and dentists in Decatur and Morgan County for the past 30 years, says the quality and affordability of local health care has made life better for him and his wife, Denise.

"By no means are we rich, but we've been able to handle the health problems we've faced without going broke and that's a testament to the system here," Webb said. "Dr. (Scott) Matthews and his staff and the staff at Clearview (Cancer Institute) have always made sure our family was taken care of. I think things have also been better since the two hospitals came together."

Decatur Morgan Hospital



Dr. Mishanta Reyes is one of a team of doctors at Decatur Morgan Hospital's department of Obstetrics and Gynecology. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]



Teresa Barnett demonstrates Decatur Morgan Hospital's new mammography machine inside the Breast Health Center. [DAN BUSEY/DECATUR DAILY]

features four campuses and services patients throughout Decatur, Hartselle, Priceville and the surrounding areas. The Decatur Morgan Hospital Foundation, established in 1983, works to provide funding for state-of-the-art technology, health care services and facility improvements. The foundation also offers scholarships and hosts several high-profile public events, including its annual Gala and the popular Dragon Boat Race.

Economically, the hospital employs approximately

1,300 doctors, nurses, technicians and staff. It is one of the largest employers in Morgan County.

Outside of the hospital system, Decatur is equipped with practitioners of nearly every medical field, dentists who provide affordable, quality care and urgent care clinics that provide walk-in services for those who may not have regular or family doctors.

"One thing that makes this area so attractive is the availability of health services," said Adam Hallmark, a Huntsville native

who recently moved his family to Decatur. "The pediatric care is very good, and we've always been able to get into a walk-in clinic during weekends or after regular office hours. Those things are important for families like ours. When issues pop up, we like knowing we can have them taken care of."

\$50 million investment

Decatur Morgan Hospital has benefited from a recent \$50 million investment the Huntsville Hospital system has made in its facilities.

One project included moving all of its OB-GYN services in Decatur to the Somerville Road campus. That effort was completed late last year.

"Everything for women's health care is in one location," said Marie Burgess, director of labor and delivery, who worked at the Decatur Morgan and Parkway campuses.

She said the renovated area has the newest equipment available, including a panda warmer system — used to monitor vitals and regulate the temperature of infants immediately after birth — and technology that allows doctors to monitor patients from their office or from home.

In addition to a modern nursery, the area has 11 labor and delivery rooms that are equipped with advanced technology and 49 employees to assure that every mother gets one-to-one care.

Two floors that were renovated as part of the Huntsville Hospital investment provide obstetrics and gynecological services, and a third floor is where patients come for appointments with a team of OB-GYN physicians that work for the hospital.

Another transformation funded by the Huntsville Hospital investment involves renovations to the emergency room at Decatur Morgan Hospital.

The project doubled emergency room space, increased the number of rooms in the emergency department from 22 to 35 and added a centralized nursing station that allows emergency officials to more closely monitor and respond to patients.

"This is like a mini hospital within a hospital," said Carrie Wynn, director of emergency services.

Decatur Morgan Hospital President Nat Richardson said the hospital added four psychiatric units equipped with video cameras. This change offers privacy for patients with mental issues who may need to be segregated, he said.

Some of the changes Decatur Morgan made in the emergency department came after a series of meetings with patients,

hospital board members and staff, local elected officials and community representatives, Richardson said.

"They said we needed a more effective emergency cycle at Decatur Morgan and we listened," he said.

3D mammography

Another recent addition to Decatur Morgan is an \$800,000, privately funded project that improved treatment and patient comfort at Decatur Morgan Hospital's Breast Health Center.

The project included a 3D mammography machine that helps doctors better detect lumps, tumors and other abnormalities during breast exams, said Noel Lovelace, president of the Decatur Morgan Hospital Foundation.

The foundation, Junior League of Morgan County and Power of Pink Walk that honors Decatur teacher Lee Lott raised money to purchase the 3D mammography machine and pay for renovations in the Breast Health Center.

Richardson, who has a medical background in radiology, said 3D mammography provides "deeper tissue details."

"This is the best you can get," he said.

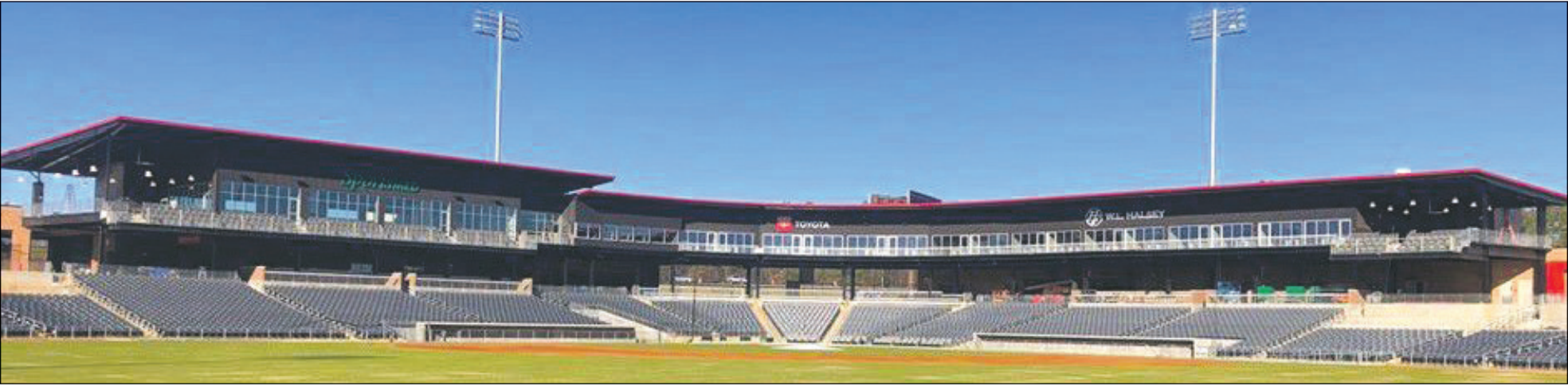
According to the Mayo Clinic, a 3D mammogram is an imaging test that combines multiple breast X-rays to create a three-dimensional picture of the breast and can be used to investigate the cause of breast problems, such as a breast mass or breast pain.

Lovelace said the cost of the machine was about \$350,000 and additional money was used for renovations and to move ultrasound and stereotactic biopsy services to the same area in the hospital.

A stereotactic breast biopsy is a procedure that uses mammography to precisely identify and biopsy an abnormality within the breast, she said.

"We've had all of these services, but they were in different areas of the hospital," Lovelace said. "Now, instead of having patients go to the surgeons, the surgeons come to where the patients are."

OPPORTUNITY 2020



The Rocket City Trash Pandas will play in Toyota Field in Madison starting April 15. [ROCKET CITY TRASH PANDAS/COURTESY]

Trash Pandas newest spectator sport

By Matthew Speakman
Sports Writer

The Rocket City Trash Pandas will join the growing list of spectator sports offered by north Alabama when the team has its home opener on April 15.

Its venue will be Toyota Field, a \$47 million baseball stadium off of Interstate 565 in Madison. The team will be the first minor league baseball team in north Alabama since the Huntsville Stars stopped playing at Joe Davis Stadium in 2014.

“We are putting all of our emphasis into the game day experience,” said Lindsey Knupp, vice president of marketing, promotions and entertainment for the Trash Pandas. “That’s what it’s all about with minor league baseball.”

The Trash Pandas are a part of the Los Angeles Angels’ farm system, competing in the Double-A Southern League. That league features the Birmingham Barons, the Chattanooga Lookouts and the Montgomery Biscuits.

The team is trying to

become the face of north Alabama sports, adopting the name “Rocket City” instead of Huntsville or Madison to encompass other cities near Huntsville, including Decatur and Hartselle.

The stadium is a 20-minute drive from downtown Decatur, and about a 30-minute drive from Athens and Hartselle.

“We’ve had people getting mini (ticket) plans from people who live even 45 minutes away from the stadium,” Knupp said. “I think that fan base is there, and it’s spread out more than just our immediate Huntsville or Madison area.”

It is also trying to generate interest in the sport by using its stadium to host local high school baseball games before the season actually starts. The prep baseball season starts this month and lasts until May.

Austin, Decatur and Hartselle will all play series at Toyota Field before the Trash Pandas take over. Decatur will face Grissom on March 28.

Hartselle will play Bob

Jones followed by a game between Austin and James Clemens on April 6. That date is the official opening of the stadium. Admission to the high school games will be \$6.

“The high school games will give us the opportunity to showcase the different areas of the stadium,” Knupp said. “The fans can finally see those areas for the first time, get excited about them and come back for a Trash Pandas game.”

Single-game ticket prices will be \$14 in advance for reserved seats. Those will increase to \$16 the day of the game. Standing-room-only tickets will be \$8.

The baseball team joins the Huntsville Havoc as pro sports teams in the Huntsville area. The Havoc are a part of the Southern Professional Hockey League. They play their games in the Von Braun Center in downtown Huntsville.

The Havoc continues their season through April 4 before the postseason starts. They are the defending SPHL champions. Havoc tickets can range from \$9 to



The Trash Pandas’ stadium, Toyota Field, will hold 7,500 fans. [ROCKET CITY TRASH PANDAS/COURTESY]

around \$30 depending on the game and promotion.

Outside of professional teams, Calhoun Community College also fields softball and baseball programs as well as a men’s and women’s golf team. All four teams began their seasons earlier this month.

“We try to get fairly good support from the community,” Calhoun Athletic Director Nancy Keenum said. “Every year we want to step it up on the field. That’s

the intent from day one.”

Keenum added that Calhoun makes connections with the Decatur community by hosting games for youth leagues and high school teams.

“We have family days on a Saturday where we try to invite the younger leagues to the games,” Keenum said. “Anytime we have someone who wants to bring their youth, middle school or high school teams to the game, we always ask them to come.”

Calhoun’s seasons will continue through May for all four teams. High school spectator sports, including baseball, softball and soccer, will also wrap up in May.

Then, the Trash Pandas will take center stage for the Summer. The Southern League’s schedule lasts until the first week of September.

—matthew.speakman@decaturdaily.com or 256-340-2460. Twitter @DD_MSpeakman.

AMANDA G. SCOTT, CPA Revenue Commissioner - Morgan County, Alabama



The Revenue Commissioner is elected by the people of Morgan County for a six year term and is responsible for the mapping, appraising, assessing, and collecting of ad valorem taxes as levied by the government. The office collects approximately 68 million dollars annually.

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TAX SALE

Each May, tax delinquent property is auctioned off to the highest bidder in front of the Morgan County Courthouse in Decatur, Alabama. Tax sale property is advertised during the month of April. The tax sale will be May 2020 at 10:00 a.m. Go to our website, www.morgancountyrevenue.com, to view a list of delinquent properties.

HOW TO CONTACT US

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Participants in a Wild Wednesday hike walk through the woods in Bankhead National Forest, which covers 181,230 acres in Lawrence, Winston and Franklin counties. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]



Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge Ranger Daphne Moland shows off a snake last August. [CHRIS SHIMEK/THE DECATUR DAILY]

Natural Wonders

There’s plenty to explore in north Alabama



Keith Bozeman kayaks in a portion of the Flint Creek canoe and kayak trail, which is part of the Alabama Scenic River Trail system. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]

By Catherine Godbey
Staff Writer

From colorful, blooming flowers in the spring to lush green trees in the summer to reds, oranges and yellows of leaves in the fall to the sight of endangered birds in the winter, north Alabama offers experiences for nature lovers throughout the year.

“There are so many beautiful areas to explore in north Alabama,” said Don Bowling, a nature enthusiast. “You don’t have to go anywhere. It’s amazing what is in our own backyard.”

For outdoor adventures, check out these forests, creeks, tree-lined paths and waterfalls in Morgan, Lawrence and Limestone counties.

Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge

Where: Morgan County
Cost: Free
With more than 34,000 acres in Morgan, Limestone and Madison counties, the Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge serves as home to 115 fish species, 74 species of reptiles and amphibians, 47 mammal species and 288 species of songbirds.

Teresa Adams, a supervisory ranger with four decades of experience at the refuge, knows the ins and outs of what many call the “hidden gem” of Decatur.

Every spring she directs visitors to the flowering dogwoods outside the visitors’ center. In the fall, she recommends exploring Truck Trail bordered by stately hickory and oak trees along the Tennessee River. In the winter, she points guests down the path to the observation building, where waterfowl and wading birds, including thousands of sandhill cranes and more than a dozen endangered whooping cranes, gather. “Nowhere else in the

country can you walk 200 yards to a heated building with scopes and view the tallest and one of the most endangered birds in North America,” Adams said. “This truly is a special place and a special experience.”

For a fall adventure, Adams recommended exploring Truck Trail road bordered by stately hickory and oak trees along the Tennessee River. The trail is accessible at the end of Old River Road Southeast. While the majority of refuge roads are closed to car traffic, hikers and bicyclists can still access the paths.

Atkeson Cypress Trail: The half-mile trail accessible at the visitor center snakes through a cypress swamp and wooded area.

Flint Creek Trail: With a canopy of maples, poplars and sweetgums, the 1 ½-mile Flint Creek Trail north of Alabama 67 offers a prime viewing spot for chipmunks, squirrels, woodpeckers, wrens, northern cardinals and warblers.

For more trail recommendations, stop by the visitor center for a hiking and biking brochure.

Bankhead National Forest

Where: Lawrence County
Cost: Free in most areas, \$3 per car at Brushy Lake and Sispey recreation areas
An outdoor playground for nature enthusiasts, Bankhead National Forest covers 181,230 acres in Lawrence, Winston and Franklin counties, offering trails to hike, waterfalls to visit, caves to explore and creeks to paddle.

“Sometimes you’ve just got to stop and look up. We are here to appreciate this beautiful place,” said Janice Barrett with Wild South, an environmental conservation organization. “There are so many special things to see.” If hiking with children,

Barrett recommended visiting the Sipsey Wilderness trail, which features waterfalls and sandstone bluffs, the wheelchair-accessible Brushy Lake trail with views of the lake and wildflowers, or Caney Creek Falls, a two-mile round-trip that ends at a waterfall.

For views of canyons and waterfalls, hike the 4.8-mile Borden Creek trail. Alabama Mountain Lakes included Kinlock Falls in the Bankhead and Turkey Foot Falls near the Sipsey River picnic grounds on its “Magical Waterfalls of North Alabama” list. northalabama.org/trails/waterfalls.

To see the colors of fall firsthand, Barrett recommended heading to the Brushy Lake Recreation Area on Mount Olive Road and the Sispey Recreation Area on Lawrence County 6.

During the summer, Wild South leads family-friendly hikes on Wednesdays.

“It is so important to expose children to the outdoors and get them to explore and appreciate nature. They are our next generations of conservationists. The only way for them to learn about the outdoors is to get out there in it,” Barrett said. “The more we understand, value and cherish these wild places, the harder we will fight to protect them.” For more trail recommendations, visit the Wild South office, 552 Lawrence St., Moulton.

Wonders of the water

Where: Morgan, Limestone, Lawrence and Walker counties
Cost: Free

Going by the moniker “Southern Paddler” on Facebook, Decatur’s Dan Truitt explores the wonders of north Alabama’s nature by kayak.

“I go as often as I can. I either do research and see where other people have



Hikers in Bankhead National Forest visit Kinlock Shelter, a sandstone rock shelter in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountain chain that Native Americans inhabited 10,000 years ago.



Brett Smith asks Wild South’s Janice Barrett, right, about a nut during a Wild Wednesday hike last summer in Bankhead National Forest. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]

kayaked, or I pull up Google maps to see where the road is close to the water. If I think I may be able to get in there, I’ll give it a go,” Truitt said.

North Alabama offers multiple waterways to explore.

In Morgan County, Truitt recommended Flint Creek, accessible at the U.S. 31 boat ramp near Hartselle, at Osprey Point on Alabama 67, off Old River Road or Bethel Road, and Cotaco Creek, accessible at the boat ramp on Sharp Ford Road in Somerville.

In Limestone County, Limestone Bay, accessible off Arrowhead Landing Ramp in Mooresville, offers views of birds, including geese and the occasional bald eagle, and deer in the late fall. Also explore the Alabama portion of the Elk River, which winds 22 miles from Veto, Tennessee, at the state line to Elk River Mills Road in Athens. Aided by the Elk River’s



Dogwoods in bloom outside the visitors’ center at the Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge. [CATHERINE GODBEY/DECATUR DAILY]

downstream current, kayakers and canoers can relax and enjoy the scenery along the Limestone County waterway. For uninterrupted views of the tree line, paddle the 10-mile section from Veto to Easter Ferry Road.

Other recommendations include the Tennessee River

from Lake Guntersville to Wheeler Lake, Sipsey River and Brushy Creek in Bankhead Forest, the Sipsey Fork River in Walker County and the Flint River in Madison County.

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OPPORTUNITY 2020



Students walk on Calhoun Community College's campus in Decatur. The largest two-year college in Alabama, Calhoun also has a campus in Huntsville and shares the Alabama Center for the Arts facilities with Athens State in downtown Decatur. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]

2 schools offer all 4 years of college

Calhoun, Athens State provide college education at affordable prices

By Calvin Cooley
For The Decatur Daily

With approximately 20 million Americans enrolling in public and private colleges and universities annually, higher education is increasingly becoming a key for those hoping to advance their professional careers.

Locally, higher education options are plentiful, with Calhoun Community College and Athens State University offering hundreds of programs for students interested in pursuing two- or four-year degrees and professional certifications.

As the largest two-year college in the state, Calhoun boasts approximately 10,000 credit students, the majority of whom choose to pursue general studies, advanced manufacturing and registered nursing. The college has been recognized as one of the country's "Top 150 Community Colleges" by the Aspen Institute and is the sixth largest higher education institution in Alabama.

For the fall 2018 semester, Calhoun serviced more than 2,500 non-credit students in programs ranging from healthcare to CDL certifications. Adult Education Services at Calhoun also awarded 191 GEDs.

"The school offers anything a prospective student, young or old, could want," Mark Sawyer, a graduate of Calhoun and Athens State, said. "It's a top-notch education at a good price, and the school caters to every possible demographic. We're lucky to have Calhoun and ASU in our area."

Calhoun's Dual Enrollment program enrolls more than 1,000 high school students annually, and Alabama Commission on Higher Education data shows that Calhoun is the college of choice for students from the area. According to data released for the fall 2016 semester, 45 percent of students



Students graduate from Athens State University's College of Business in May. Athens State is Alabama's only upper-division institution and provides junior and senior level courses as well as graduate programs. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]

from Limestone County who chose to attend college chose Calhoun. Those numbers are also high for Morgan County (42 percent) and Lawrence County (31 percent). Favorite transfer destinations of students moving on from Calhoun are the University of Alabama in Huntsville (25 percent), Athens State University (24 percent), Auburn University (12 percent) and the University of Alabama (11 percent).

Financially, Calhoun is among the best values in Alabama. For the fall 2019 semester, an in-state student enrolled in 12 credit hours paid \$1,954 in tuition and fees. Out of state tuition and fees for the same amount of credit hours cost \$3,526.

"A full-time student who doesn't have to pay for room and board can get an associate's degree for less than what some students pay to go to bigger in-state schools for one semester," Sawyer said. "I think a lot of people overlook what the community college system offers, which is a shame. Calhoun can open countless doors for people that enroll."

Athens State focus: degree completion

Less than 20 miles north, Athens State University

offers a unique focus on upperclassmen and degree completion.

The university offers more than 50 major courses of study, ranging from education to criminal justice to drama and theater arts. An upper-division, transfer completion college, Athens State also offers more than 40 minor options and graduate programs in global logistics and supply chain management, religious studies and career and technical education.

"Athens State University is proud to have strong roots in the Athens-Limestone County area," said Sarah McAbee, vice president for Enrollment and Student Support Services. "We prepare the area's workforce who will make significant impacts in various industries, including business, education, healthcare, manufacturing, arts, sciences and defense, among others."

McAbee said Athens State's unique two-year model is convenient for a wide range of students. Athens State is Alabama's only upper-division institution and provides junior and senior level courses as well as graduate programs.

"We have a generous transfer credit policy and a very affordable price point," she said. "We

offer programs online, on campus and in hybrid models to meet the needs of a diverse student population."

Undergraduate in-state tuition at Athens State for the 2019-2020 year is also a good value, with a full-time student paying \$3,084 in tuition and fees for 12 credit hours. Traditional graduate tuition is \$289 per hour for in-state students and \$500 per hour for out-of-state students.

"Individuals leave our institution with the knowledge, skills and overall preparation to become leaders within the community and greatly improve its quality of life," McAbee said. "Athens state also recruits, relocates and employs a diverse group of highly qualified and respected faculty and staff who make positive contributions to the area."

Educational partners

McAbee also highlighted the strong working relationship between Calhoun and Athens State.

"Athens State and Calhoun work very well together as evidenced by our joint project in Decatur," she said. "The Alabama Center for the Arts is the state's premier location for arts education and is a joint effort of Calhoun Community College

and Athens State University. We also provide many 2-plus-2 pathways for the community college student to matriculate and complete a quality bachelor's degree at an affordable price point close to home. Alabama Commission on Higher Education transfer data shows that in 2017-18 (the last year with complete data) Athens State was the number one four-year transfer destination of 429 of Calhoun's transferring students."

Athens State President Philip Way came to the institution last summer and said he was drawn by its mission to help students complete their degrees.

"We're an institution here that can help students finish up their education," Way said. "It excites me personally."

He said Athens State can benefit several types of students. The university's Adult Degree Program is designed for people who have been out of school for a while and want to return for a degree, he said, and students with an associate's degree from a community college can transfer to Athens State for their junior and senior years.

"More and more, professions are looking for people with master's degrees, and we've got a number

of master's programs that can help people not only achieve their personal goals but help society get the kind of labor force it needs," Way said.

Online graduate programs are offered in global logistics and supply chain management, religious studies and career and technical education.

Regionally, higher education opportunities are also available in the forms of the University of Alabama in Huntsville, the University of North Alabama in Florence, Oakwood University and Alabama A&M University in Huntsville, Drake State Community and Technical College in Huntsville and Northwest-Shoals Community College in Muscle Shoals.

"Some of the larger schools in the region are also great options for prospective students," said Sawyer, who now works as a military contracts specialist. "You pay more for UAH or UNA, but they also offer a different experience. The four-year experience is great for some, just like the two-year experience is great for others. There's no question that you can find everything you're looking for in higher education north of Birmingham and south of the Tennessee line."



OPPORTUNITY 2020



Balloons decorate the Spirit Field during the Alabama Jubilee. [DAN BUSEY/DECATUR DAILY]

Quality living

The amount and variety of recreation opportunities, cultural and historical events and venues, parks, waterways and wildlife adds great quality to life in the city of Decatur and surrounding areas.



Austin Miller reels in a fish while spending time at the Flint Creek fishing pier. [DAN BUSEY/DECATUR DAILY]



Fireworks are reflected in the waters of the Tennessee River during the Fourth of July show. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]



A soldier lies wounded in front of other reenactors as they fire on the enemy during the reenactment of the Battle of Decatur. [CHRIS SHIMEK/DECATUR DAILY]



Stacy Stubbs overlooks Wilson Morgan Park during a summer evening after getting off work. [DAN BUSEY/DECATUR DAILY]



Zack Bryant dives into the pool at Point Mallard Water Park on Labor Day. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]



Jack Allen Recreation Complex provides multiple fields for soccer tournaments and recreation play. Teams in the Open Cup, a state and national sanctioned soccer tournament, competed at Jack Allen last year. The park is situated on 80 acres off of Modaus Road Southwest. [PHOTOS BY CHRIS SHIMEK/DECATUR DAILY]

Youth sports, scouting, dance and karate all available in Decatur area

By Calvin Cooley
For The Decatur Daily

Like in most Alabama cities, a drive through the parks of Decatur will highlight children and teens playing on baseball fields, tennis courts and playgrounds.

A deeper look at what Decatur has to offer in the way of youth sports and recreation activities will show international-level soccer facilities, community-oriented parent involvement and a Parks and Recreation Department that emphasizes providing for local youths.

“A lot goes into providing opportunities for the kids in this area,” said Decatur resident Lee Markley. “There’s no telling how many people it takes to keep the sports leagues running, or how many parents are out here working with Boy and Girls Scouts and dance academies. The effort put forth to provide these opportunities is pretty incredible.”

Decatur Parks and Recreation helps facilitate youth leagues in baseball, basketball, football, soccer and softball. The city also boasts a swim team, as well as tennis and golf facilities that offer high-level training for those who are interested.

“We’ve seen a spike in youth league interest recently,” said Orlandus King of Decatur Parks and Recreation. “This year alone we’ve nearly doubled the size of our youth basketball league. We have 345 kids playing this year. That’s 42 teams with 84 coaches. That’s all a testament to the people we have helping us here.”

King said Parks and Recreation runs basketball leagues and provides facilities for other sports, which are run by local parents.

“The fact that the

parents are putting in so much work is incredible,” Markley said. “It would be easy for them to try to push the responsibility onto the city, but they want to see their kids having fun and being active. A lot of work goes into running those leagues and they’re doing it at a high level here.”

One of the crown jewels of youth athletics in Decatur can be found on 80 acres off of Modaus Road Southwest.

The Jack Allen Recreation Complex, opened in 2006, features 14 soccer fields and regularly plays host to local, state, regional and national soccer tournaments. The complex has been the site of numerous collegiate and international matches.

“Jack Allen may be the nicest soccer complex in the southeastern United States,” Mark Tonkin, a Huntsville soccer coach, said. “I’ve helped organize and traveled to tournaments in eight states and Canada, and Jack Allen is the best facility we’ve played at. You just don’t see facilities like this everywhere.”

The fields at Jack Allen are laser-graded, and maintenance of them has been a priority with Decatur Parks and Recreation. The complex also hosts lacrosse and 7-on-7 football competitions. The complex was built when former Decatur Parks and Recreation Director Jeff Dunlap realized it could benefit Decatur from both a sports and economic standpoint. The facility has been a driving force for local tourism since 2006.

Outside of organized leagues, Decatur has much to offer kids, teens and families.

Boy and Girl Scout troops look to build character and promote citizenship, personal fitness and leadership



Teams from Russellville and Marietta, Ga., compete in the U-17 boys final of the Labor Day Cup at Jack Allen Soccer Complex last year.

for kids in the area, Webster’s and River City Karate offer martial arts training and youth acrobatics, and a number of award-winning dance studios provide classes ranging from beginner ballet to advanced jazz with competition teams.

Popular attractions like the water park at Point Mallard and Funland Skate Castles provide non-competitive entertainment at reasonable prices.

“It’s just a great place to raise a family,” Emily South, an Austin High graduate and mother of two, said. “The parks are great, the sports leagues are great and we’re never short on anything to do. I’ve lived in Decatur my entire life and the area just keeps getting better for family and children.”



Harlie Tyler, 4, enjoys the Point Mallard aquatics park last year. The Decatur park opens on Memorial Day weekend and closes for the season on Labor Day.



OPPORTUNITY 2020



Like to swim? The Point Mallard Aquatic Center in Decatur has a wave pool, water slides, diving boards, lazy river feature and more. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]

Stay active in Morgan County

With trails, sports fields and the Point Mallard Aquatic Center, Decatur and Morgan County offer plenty of ways for residents to stay active.



Runners, walkers and cyclists share gravel trails at Point Mallard Park in Decatur. [CHRIS SHIMEK/DECATUR DAILY]



The Dr. Bill Sims Bike Trail, also known as the Decatur Bike Trail, covers almost 15 miles, much of it dedicated bicycle/walking paths. A cyclist can travel from one end of Decatur to another staying mostly off of roads. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]



Youth baseball remains popular locally, and North Park in Priceville is one of many facilities used for games. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]



Delano Park in the heart of Decatur is another place for running, walking or reading informational signs about nature and city history. [CHRIS SHIMEK/DECATUR DAILY]



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