

Kicking Up Their Heels

HORSEMEN AND WOMEN FIND LOTS TO LOVE AT CROFT STATE NATURAL AREA

By Mark Rapport

One of the meccas of horse riding and showing in South Carolina is a place where one might not expect it, a state park.

Croft State Natural Area hosts the well-attended Spartanburg Horseman's Association shows each month, attracting equestrians from around South Carolina, Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee and even Florida.

One of the largest of South Carolina's 46 state parks, Croft has for decades been popular among horse lovers for its robust facilities, which include 55 stable stalls, a show ring, 21 miles of trails and 55 campsites for human guests.

The 7,054-acre site was known as Camp Croft when it was an Army training camp in World War II. The federal government gave it to the

state in 1949, and with its lakes, trails, camping and picnic facilities, it has become a much-valued piece of green space in the booming Spartanburg-Greenville area.

One of Croft's big fans is Linda Wilson, who manages the S.C. Welcome Center on Interstate 85 near Blacksburg.

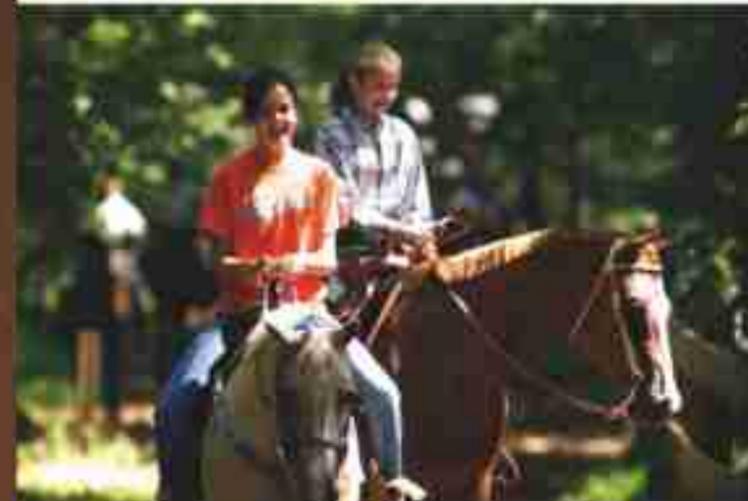
"It's a marvelous park, a great place to ride and show horses," says Wilson, who has four horses on her six-acre place near Gaffney. "It doesn't take that long to actually show your horse, so a lot of people spend time out riding the trails or just sitting around the campgrounds enjoying themselves."

Wilson said she had always wanted a horse and could no longer resist the urge after going on a trail ride during a work outing several years ago. She

and her husband sold their home in town and bought a place out in the country to indulge her passion for matters equestrian.

She's hardly alone. The State Park Service maintains trails and stables at a number of parks to serve a population that is passionate about outdoor activities.

"South Carolina residents enjoy scores of activities based in nature. Several obscure statistics demonstrate this point. In addition to having one of the highest occurrences of boat ownership, South Carolina also ranks among the top states in the country for per capita ownership of horses," says Chad Prosser, director of the S.C. Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism. "Our diverse state park



system provides ready venues for all of these pursuits."

Indeed, the horse is a force in South Carolina, with an estimated economic impact of \$478 million in 2004, according to an equine census conducted that year by the S.C. Department of Agriculture. Expenditures include veterinarian, feed and farrier services, riding lessons, training and boarding as well as equine sales.

The sport and hobby also has a positive impact on the bottom line at Croft State Natural Area. Park Manager Gerry Perry says horse lovers keep the facility, well, jumping.

"On nice weekends, our parking lot is full of horse trailers," says Perry, a veteran manager who himself cut many of the trails now enjoyed by riders on the big park.

"We've basically become a horse park. People come here, enjoy what we have to offer, tell their friends, and they all come back. We have a lot of repeat guests," he says.

Croft State Natural Area is located about 10 miles south of Spartanburg on Dairy Ridge Road off S.C. 56. The Spartanburg Horseman's Association is on the Web at www.shahorseshows.com.

