

Kids gone wild

By Aida Rogers

Table Rock State Park is over 3,000 acres of beautiful terrain that includes challenging hiking trails, two lakes, a campground, mountain cabins and much more.

Televisions and computers can hypnotize children, it seems. But can they really compete with a gooey-on-the-inside, charred-on-the-outside roasted marshmallow, devoured in the glow of an evening campfire? Particularly after you've had the opportunity to – yikes! – touch a snake?

Scott Stegenga doesn't think so. He's the interpreter at Table Rock State Park, and for 15 and a half years he's been turning children on to the thrills that exist in South Carolina's Upcountry. "I like seeing their reaction to discovering something new," he says. "It could be a simple

thing, but to them, it's a big deal."

Wading in a cold-water stream, trying to catch crayfish and salamanders, and touching snakes prompt shrieks of excitement. "Maybe it's something they've been afraid to do, but when they have the opportunity, they realize it's not that bad after all."

Touching a snake is usually the scariest thing, Stegenga reports, adding that he lets anyone – child or adult – have a go at it after he's talked to them about the kinds that live in the Upstate park. A snake talk is frequently part of the activities

around evening campfires, where stories are told, games are played and songs are sung. While activities vary, one constant is roasting marshmallows. What camp experience is complete without that?

For Stegenga, a father of three, state parks offer prime family fun. The guided hikes at Table Rock – seven miles roundtrip with lunch – combine exercise, education and bonding. "It's not just the quality, but the quantity of time that parents and children spend together. They're with each other for several hours, sharing the experience and enjoying each others' company and seeing the neat resources we have in the state and the park here."

While Table Rock offers a mountainous terrain and a lake for swimming and boating, Sesquicentennial Park in Columbia provides an urban forest. Here, families can go on owl prowls, study bats and attend Nature at Night, an October program in which visitors learn about nocturnal creatures during an evening hike. When their flashlights beam on spiders, their eyes glow, says interpreter Stacey Howe. Searching for "animal eyeshine" is a game the children take home with them.

More happy sounds are heard along the coast, where state parks can be found at Myrtle Beach, Huntington Beach, Edisto Beach and Hunting Island. Touch tanks at Edisto allow visitors to get close-up views of sea creatures and the 19th-century lighthouse at Hunting Island can be climbed for a view of the Atlantic and the semi-tropical landscape. On Huntington Beach, where the birding is terrific, you can wander around the haunting ruins of Atalaya, the winter home of sculptor Anna Hyatt Huntington and her poet husband Archer.

At Myrtle Beach State Park, lucky children can wear shark and alligator costumes, win patches for programs in which they participate and paint fish, crabs and sea stars on T-shirts. "It's great to see how creative the kids are with each individual T-shirt," observes Interpretive Ranger Ann Wilson. Children, their parents and grandparents can enjoy the seining program, in which fish and crabs are netted in shallow waters. "The kids love it when they catch fish and get wet, but what do we do when we're finished? We throw them back."

Aside from the T-shirt painting activity, which requires materials, all the programs are free. "We're the best bargain in town, that's for sure,"



At Sesquicentennial State Park in Columbia, SC, children join a ranger to learn about the forest and its inhabitants.

Wilson says. "For \$11, two adults and two kids can come in to the park for the entire day, hit three or four programs and the fishing pier. And they're still learning."

Which is what it's all about, the interpreters agree. Get the children excited about the environment, and they'll be good stewards as adults. One day, they'll take their children to a state park. South Carolina has 46, all different, all affordable. And they'll be around when that hot new video game is long gone.

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South Carolina's coastal state parks, like Hunting Island State Park, offer patrons plenty of wildlife in a natural environment, topped off with spectacular ocean views.

