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Carter Caves hosting adventure weekend

By Tim Preston
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Andy Niekamp is one of many experts who will be at Carter Caves State Resort Park this weekend with a singular goal of helping others pursue opportunities to enjoy themselves outdoors.

"You won't find another event like this very easily or very close. Winter Adventure Weekend is a really outstanding regional event," said Niekamp, a resident of Dayton who has hiked the Appalachian Trail three times and is a volunteer for the weekend.

"In 2009 when they had to cancel Crawlathon, a lot of people thought that Winter Adventure Weekend would be somehow lesser, but it has blossomed into a larger event. And, Carter Caves is the perfect place for it," he said, citing the park's caves, rock walls for climbing, trails for hiking, water for boating and trails for mountain bikes among outstanding natural resources.

In many ways, the weekend event is a perfect introduction for people who want to reconnect with the outdoors, Niekamp said, because an abundance of people who qualify as experts in their field will be readily available.

"The experts dress like everybody else and they mingle around. Everybody gets a chance to mingle with the experts," he said. "The people in that area are extremely lucky to have this right in their back yard."

Niekamp said he feels an obligation to share his experience with others who want to walk a similar path.

"Among outdoor experts, there is an unwritten rule that says, 'Once you achieve you have a duty to inspire others,'" he said.

Volunteer Brian Saul agreed with Niekamp, noting he encountered an opposite "elitist" attitude from outdoor enthusiasts when he first started researching activities, including caving. After he experienced encouragement during a cave visit, however, Saul said he was clear about his own attitude.

"We were excited that someone helped us. You do kind of feel that obligation," he said.

Saul noted the weekend does not have the attendance numbers recorded during the previous Crawlathon weekends, although it has allowed guests access to a broader range of activities and interests.

"It really made us put on our thinking caps (when cave access was denied because of concerns about white-nose syndrome in bat populations) and we realized there are a lot of other things to do out there," Saul said. "We are all optimistic that Crawlathon will come back, and when it does it will have even broader appeal."

Preregistration remains open until Tuesday, and guests can still sign up for any trips and activities that are not filled. Saul said it is a good idea to bring certain basic equipment, regardless of interest and intent.

"You can't go wrong with a helmet, knee pads and lights. You'll find use for those ... especially the helmet," he said. "This is a very friendly event for first timers."

Saul strongly advises anyone considering joining the winter adventurers to consult winteradventureweekend.com and learn about individual events and requirements.

Winter Adventure Weekend will begin with open registration at the lodge shortly after noon Friday and continue through Sunday, with activities including a high line, firearms instruction, photography workshops, rock and tree climbing workshops, field trips, rope climbing, presentations, exhibits and competitions.

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