

Published Monday, May 16, 2011

# Wicklund working to get state park up and running

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Chattahoochee Bend State Park Manager Trint Wicklund is in a rather unique position.

"I'm probably one of the few that have ever actually been the manager of a park that wasn't open yet," said Wicklund last week at the visitor's center in the park, which should be opening in the next month or two.

He and his family — wife Christine, a third-grade teacher in the Meriwether County School System, and daughter Taylor, 7, have been living on-site since November, when they moved from John Tanner State Park in Carrollton.

Getting a new state park up and running is no small feat, and Wicklund has been pretty busy.

"Right now, I spend a lot of time ordering supplies," he said. He's also been interviewing and hiring staff.

That's when he hasn't been on the road, subbing for other park managers as they go on vacation.

With the Georgia State Parks and Historic Sites division short staffed because of budget constraints and the recession, Wicklund has really been able to help out. "I've put many miles on my truck," he said. "I'm very familiar with South Georgia now, and I-75."

Wicklund's journey to becoming the manager of a state park began with a classified ad in the Columbus newspaper one Sunday.

His degree is in parks and recreation management, but he hadn't gotten a job in that field since graduating college.

"There was an ad in there for a park ranger... it just seemed like a neat job," he said.

All rangers with the state Department of Natural Resources have to be certified law enforcement officers, and that is often a precondition to hiring. But since Wicklund had a preferred degree, "they were willing to send me to be trained."

He'd always liked the idea of being able to work outdoors, in nature, "somewhere away from the hustle and bustle of daily life, traffic, and that kind of thing," Wicklund said.

His first job was as a law enforcement ranger at Franklin D. Roosevelt State Park in Pine Mountain. The job was strictly law enforcement, including checking fishing and game licenses, and looking for other violations —

basically acting as the police officer for the park.

About a year and a half later, he applied for the assistant manager position at FDR, and got it. After a few years, he moved to Sprewell Bluff State Park (now an “outdoor recreation area”) where he was manager, and then, to Tanner in Carroll County.

For the past several years, whoever was the manager at Tanner also oversaw Chattahoochee Bend, as Tanner is the closest state park.

“That way, if there were any issues that needed a ranger to come out here, that was the shortest drive,” Wicklund said.

As the recession, and the budget crises, ground on, the state began to look for options to reduce the cost of operating the state park system.

“The state could see that they weren’t going to have the money to operate all the state parks that we have at the level that the department expects, and the taxpayers expect,” he said.

There were some discussions with Carroll County and “they asked Carroll County, if things continued to go downhill, if Carroll would be able to potentially manage Tanner,” Wicklund said. And that’s what happened.

Tanner, which features two lakes with a very popular swimming beach, a campground, a motel, miniature golf, and picnic facilities, is now operated by Carroll County, as John Tanner Park.

When that transfer was complete, and his new home ready, the Wicklunds were able to move to Chattahoochee Bend in west Coweta.

All of the basic design elements of the park were already determined when Wicklund arrived, but he has had “a pretty good bit of input” into operational issues, he said.

One issue in particular was the location of the main gate for the park.

It had originally been planned for near the visitor’s center. That would have left the vast flat rock area, long known as a teenage party hangout as well as a trash dump, unprotected.

“I was able to talk with them to get them to understand, the farther out we put that gate, the more of the park we’re protecting,” Wicklund said. The gates will be locked from 10 p.m. to 7 a.m.

Gearing up to open a brand new park is, of course, exciting.

“I think it is going to be fun. It has been so far,” Wicklund said. “There have been some new and different challenges, I guess you would say. I’m really excited.”

He said that, from what he has heard so far, he expects a good turnout of guests from Coweta County.

Wicklund said he thinks camping will be the number one attraction, followed by hiking, fishing, and picnicking.

Future park development will be “a work in progress,” Wicklund said. “And of course the amount of use that we get will determine what direction we go in the future.”

There is plenty of room on the nearly 3,000-acre park for developing future amenities, such as additional camping, cottages, and the like.

But for the moment, “I’m ready to get the gates open so people can start coming out and enjoy the park,” Wicklund said.

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