

MOUNTAINS

Art on the Island returns to Marshall

Johnny Casey

Asheville Citizen Times | USA TODAY NETWORK

MARSHALL - When Madison County Arts Council board member Katie Graham started at the Arts Council more than 10 years ago, its traditional end-of-summer event was a small festival on Main Street in Marshall.

Once the Blannahassett Island stage came about, the festival took on a whole new identity though, and Art on the Island was born, Graham said.

"It's always been an opportunity for local artists to share their work, but it's gotten bigger and bigger over the years," Graham said.

The event will take place Sept. 23 on Blannahassett Island, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. This year's event marks the 11th annual Art on the Island.

Graham, the committee chair for the festival, said Art on the Island is "her main event" each year.

"I do other art shows and things like that, but I don't do that many myself, being an artist," Graham said. "So, this is kind of my personal passion project. I help do stuff at the Hand Made Market in November and put together some other things. Since I've been working with the Arts Council, this is kind of like my main focus."



Joe Bruneau will be one of the artist demonstrators at Art on the Island Festival Sept. 23.

COURTESY OF ART ON THE ISLAND

Erich Hubner, Madison County Arts Council's program director, called Art on the Island "a special festival in a special place."

"The dual emphasis on demonstrations and experiential activity gives this event a different feel," Hubner said in a

news release. "Even being on the Blannahassett Island is an experience in itself. As our artists say, 'We love being on island time.'"

Graham said the festival typically has at least 30 craft vendors, and this year will have two booths designated for demonstrators only.

"The more I've been involved with it, the more my vision was to make it different from every other arts show to set us apart from other art shows by offering activities and demonstrations, and getting the public and community involved in doing hands-on workshops and demonstrations," Graham said.

Art on the Island will also feature music from Junior Appalachian Musicians, as well as Ashley Heath and Leeda "Lyric" Jones. Food will be provided by Sweet Monkey Bakery and La Esperanza Immigrant Outreach, who will be serving up Guatemalan dishes.

"As in past years, attendees can enjoy the popular robot building workshop, a hands-on activity for young and old," a Madison County Arts Council press release said. "Art on the Island makes a real effort to have live-artist demonstrations in addition to sales booths. Live demonstrations include blacksmithing from Lyle Petersen, Kudzu Culture presenting kudzu products, Moon Girl

glass blowing, Joe Bruneau's basket making, and indigo fabric dyeing."

Madison County Arts Council Executive Director Laura Boosinger said the event helps showcase Madison County and Western North Carolina's artistic talent.

"This is a wonderful family-friendly outdoor event," Boosinger said.

"You know how competitive the craft world is in Asheville is out there," Graham said. "There are so many artists and so many craftspeople. I want this to be an opportunity for exceptional craftspeople, as well as somebody who's not going to have the opportunity to get accepted into The Big Crafty or the Southern Highland Craft Guild."

Art on the Island will mark maybe the busiest day of the calendar year in Madison County, as the Bascom Lamar Lunsford Festival and Madison Heritage Arts Festival will take place on Mars Hill University's campus the same day. Earlier that day, the Apple Butter Festival will take place at Bright Hope Laurel United Methoist Church as well.

"Last year was the best year there's ever been," she said. "We had such a good turnout. I hope people look forward to it that come as a visitor, and I really hope people look forward to it to make them some money."

Fall adventure supports biodiversity nonprofit



Word from the Smokies

Hayley Benton
USA TODAY NETWORK

As the lush green hues of summer fade, yielding to the crisp crimson colors of autumn, the Great Smoky Mountains undergo a breathtaking transformation.

Under the canopy, golden sunlight filters through a kaleidoscope of leaves, casting a warm, ethereal glow on the landscape. Small animals 'shuffle-crunch-snap' through the leaf litter, gathering fallen nuts and overripe berries in preparation for the long winter ahead.

This year, amid the commotion of critters and tucked into the mountains' marbled mosaic, one small group will discover all that's alive and active at the height of foliage season on the first fall Great Smokies Eco-Adventure.

Organized by Discover Life in America, a nonprofit partner of the park, each Great Smokies Eco-Adventure puts deeper connections with nature at the forefront — encouraging adventurers to explore biodiversity by finding, identifying, and learning about species in their natural habitats.

"Instead of focusing on the hike's destination, these experiences center around the discoveries made along the way," said DLiA Executive Director Todd Witcher. "Each day is a new adventure to explore the Smokies and its incredible biodiversity. And while the focus of the trip is to provide an in-depth experience for nature enthusiasts, we have a lot of fun too."

The new fall adventure, held Oct. 29-31, is an expansion of the "glamping" (glamorous camping) program that DLiA has organized each spring for the last three years. Each eco-adventure experience includes off-the-grid lodging, gourmet food and drink, and guided nature hikes. It also doubles as a fundraiser for DLiA, supporting vital research on biodiversity in the national park.

"Spring is nature waking up. Spring is about growth and new birth," said Jaimie Matzko, biodiversity program specialist for DLiA. "In the fall, it's a totally different world. There's so much activity. Sure, we love seeing beautiful fall



The Great Smokies Eco-Adventure, held Oct. 29-31, 2023, includes off-the-grid lodging, gourmet food and drink, and guided nature hikes. It also doubles as a fundraiser for DLiA, supporting vital research on biodiversity in the national park. PROVIDED BY JAIMIE MATZKO

colors — it's the most popular time to visit the park for a reason — but it's also such a great time to enjoy one of nature's greatest transitions, to watch as each species gets ready for this slower time of year."

Eco-adventures have proven to be popular with those who love the outdoors: avid naturalists, solo travelers, camping couples, and families with teens. Limited to just 15 participants per season, the small group setting provides ample time for individuals to ask questions, learn from, and chat with the expert guides.

Adventurers spend their days exploring the wilds of the Smokies on expert-led nature hikes and their evenings and nights "glamping" at Camp Atagahi, a premiere off-the-grid luxury camping facility owned and operated by partner organization A Walk in the Woods. Evening activities include a night walk to learn about nocturnal life in the mountains and time around the campfire with

new friends. All hikes and programs are led by DLiA staff: Will Kuhn, science and research director and entomologist; and Matzko, a recipient of REI Adventures' "Top Guide of North America" award.

Serving as REI Co-op's Signature Camp for excursions in the area, Camp Atagahi is tucked into the woods along a babbling creek near Cosby, Tennessee, just east of Gatlinburg and bordering Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Here, eco-adventurers stay in spacious tents atop wooden platforms outfitted with cozy camping cots for each guest. Though participants are invited to "unplug" at this off-grid outpost, they won't be roughing it.

"Since the last day of the trip is on Halloween, the fall Eco-Adventure will be the perfect time to connect with some of the park's more stereotypically 'spooky' creatures," Matzko said. Bats, for example, "are out hunting at dusk, flying around and using echolocation —

so we'll be breaking out our new bat detector to record and identify different species through sonar. We'll also go out after dark to look for millipedes and other creatures with UV flashlights, which let us see plants and animals in a totally different way. Millipedes, spider eyes, certain mushrooms, salamanders — you'd be surprised how many species fluoresce in the dark!"

Later in the evening, between sips of cocoa and illuminated by the glow of the campfire, participants can call to the barred owls in the treetops.

"After we've eaten dinner, we're hanging around the fire before bed — it's a great time to get people outside of their comfort zones a bit," Matzko said. "I'll do my best owl call, encourage others to try themselves, and it's always kind of fun to see if we can get anything to answer back. Sometimes the owls start calling before we even get a chance to all say 'hello.'"

All proceeds from the Great Smokies Eco-Adventure help support DLiA, a Gatlinburg-based nonprofit that aims to identify, catalog, and observe the park's estimated 60,000-plus species through its flagship project, the All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory. Currently, less than half of that approximate number, 21,669, has been officially identified by park scientists, opening up opportunities for discovery on each and every outing.

Tickets for the fall 2023 Great Smokies Eco-Adventure are \$950 per person, which includes all food (including vegan and gluten-free options) and libations, glamping accommodations, entertainment, and transportation during the event. Tickets are limited, so those interested are encouraged to reserve their spots soon, as trips often sell out.

Registration closes on Oct. 9 or when all tickets are sold. For more information about the event, visit dliA.org/event/fall-smokies-eco-adventure.

Hayley Benton is the content manager for Elly Wells Marketing and Project Management, an Asheville firm working with two of the nonprofit partners to Great Smoky Mountains National Park: Discover Life in America and Great Smoky Mountains Association, which provides this column. Reach her at hayley@ellywells.com.

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