WATER OASIS
HIKE CANEY CREEK FALLS TRAIL TO SOAK IN THE UNFORGETTABLE SIDE-BY-SIDE WATERFALLS

STARSTRUCK
BIRMINGHAM ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY UNCOVERS THE BEAUTY OF THE NIGHT SKY

UP IN THE AIR
EXPLORE THE SKIES WITH PARAMOTORING
Being active and spending time outside can have many benefits: It’s healthy, it clears your mind, it exposes you to the wonder of Mother Nature, and it’s been proven to help with stress levels. And with Alabama’s plethora of trails and waterways and an incredibly diverse ecosystem, the 100 Alabama Miles Challenge is hoping to get even more people excited about spending time in the outdoors.

Brian Rushing, director of economic development initiatives at the Center for Economic Development at the University of Alabama, said the 100 Alabama Miles Challenge was based off a design that Missouri created in 2013.

Together with statewide entities, the Lakeshore Foundation, Blue Cross Blue Shield, AARP, the Alabama Obesity Task Force and the Alabama Trails Commission, the Center for Economic Development took the original template and created its own branding and message to make a program that was “uniquely Alabama,” Rushing said.

This coming year, 2020, will mark the third year for the 100 Alabama Miles Challenge.

The website is designed to encourage participants — either as individuals or as a team — to get outside and experience the parks, trails and waterways Alabama has to offer. People then log their miles, activity and location on the website and earn badges for their accomplishments.

“The program is designed to inspire Alabamians to get 100 miles of activity, whether they walk, hike, bike, swim, paddle, ride or roll,” Rushing said.

“This one is really nice because, essentially, there’s a reward mechanism in place to encourage people to some extent to compete with themselves,” said Greg Wingo, a 2019 challenge ambassador. But, he said, the program wants to keep the fun of the experiences in mind, too. “Because ultimately, if it’s not fun, then people are just not going to do it.”

The groups, he said, bring together like-minded people to log their miles. Participants in groups earn their badges individually, but their miles are cumulative. Everything is on the honor system, too.

A section of the website details the badges and trophies participants can earn and serves as a way to share more about the parks and trails within the state. State parks, such as DeSoto and Monte Sano, are available badges, as are Talladega and Bankhead national forests. Badges are also available for distance challenges, such as reaching 20, 50 and 100 miles.

And if you don’t know what you’re looking for or want to try something new, there’s a section to provide additional information about trails by activity and location.

The program serves a dual purpose for the state and Alabamians. The first is it caters to the local outdoors and helps people discover the experiences Alabama has to offer.

“While anyone can participate however they wish, we are using the program to also hopefully encourage and inspire people to get out and see this beautiful state that is very blessed with a lot of parks and nature preserves and trails and rivers,” Rushing said.

As one of the most biodiverse states in the country and one with a great trail system and parks, Wingo said, the challenge hopes to encourage Alabamians to enjoy what is in their backyard.

“When I go travel around the country or even around the world, I’m always talking about what we have here,” he said. “... I think we sit on a gold mine of just this great trail system set up within our state. We are just really, really fortunate with the amount of trails we have to offer per capita.”

The second big component is to help people live a more active and healthier lifestyle while encouraging economic growth throughout the state. Rushing said the public health component to the challenge is important, as is the promotion of instate tourism.

The challenge for the next year will officially start Jan. 1, 2020, although people can sign up at any time. A kickoff event is generally held in the spring, too.

Wingo said in the first year — which didn’t take up the entire 12 months, because they started a little late — participants logged just under 50,000 miles. In the coming years, they’re shooting for more participating and even more miles. In 2019, he believes the program can get to 10 times the amount of miles.

“I know that’s a hard goal to necessarily put a metric on, but it’s really about getting as many people to sort of hear about it, know what it is and be a part of it,” he said.

Learn more about the 100 Alabama Miles Challenge or sign up online at 100alabamamiles.org.
While it may not be a secret, the Cahaba River and all it offers to those seeking water recreation may seem somewhat of an enigma.

That's because public awareness, understanding and appreciation of the 191-mile-long waterway has long been limited primarily to those who live along its banks.

In 2012, the University of Alabama Center for Economic Development (UACED), The Nature Conservancy of Alabama and Cahaba River Society got together to form the Cahaba Blueway Initiative with the purpose of improving quality of life and economic development in Cahaba River communities, as well as supporting conservation through nature-based tourism. This group created the first program steering committee and secured two years of support from the National Park Service's Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program to begin planning the Cahaba Blueway.

They were later joined by the Freshwater Land Trust and the Cahaba Riverkeeper, with funding support for the Blueway implementation and inauguration provided by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Alabama, Shelby County, the city of Trussville, the city of Helena and the Alabama Black Belt Foundation.

Today, the partnership is working to educate the public and provide infrastructure and information for river access. According to Brian Rushing, director of Economic Development Initiatives at UACED, 31 watercraft access sites have been identified and about half now meet the project criteria of being durable and safe for both the public and the environment.

"Many have no formal infrastructure — you just slide your canoe in — but some do, and part of the program is to give communities tools to develop the infrastructure," Rushing said. "We developed infrastructure development and signage guidelines for communities' use, posted them on our website, which went live in April, and have erected sign sets designating those first 15 locations."

Rushing said moving forward, plans include working with communities to connect residents with the Cahaba River, presenting programs to enhance tourism and hospitality development, coordinating river paddle fests, and conducting small business workshops for outfitters and livery services.

"We're also creating Cahaba Blueway resource guides on water resistant paper that will provide information paddlers need about where to go to get on and what to expect," he said. "These will be available at information stations in public libraries, city halls, businesses, welcome centers and hotels."

The following are five popular Cahaba Blueway access sections, extending from the upper reaches of the river just east of Birmingham down into the Black Belt Region, where the river enters the Alabama River west of Selma. Driving directions and other trip planning information for each are available at cahabablueway.org.
GRANTS MILL (IRONDALe CAHABA RIVERWALK) TO MOUNTAIN BROOK CAHABA RIVER WALK

The most popular route on the river, both accesses are less than 1 mile from Interstate 459, have parking for 10-15 cars and require carrying canoes/kayaks about 150 yards and down a set of stone steps to the water.

Both are popular swim areas (no lifeguard) and offer picnic tables. Grants Mill has a half-mile loop trail and Mountain Brook Cahaba River Walk has a quarter-mile loop trail.

The river segment is 7.7 miles, with the option to take out at Old Overton at 6.9 miles.

Paddling is easy, with a mix of deeper water and multiple shoals. Low water can make many of these shoals difficult to float, so this section is best paddled between December and June when the water is consistently higher.

Recommended minimum flow is 100 cubic feet per second at the USGS Cahaba River Gauge near Mountain Brook.

HELENA AMPHITHEATER PARK TO SHELBY ROAD 52

Take-out at Shelby Road 52 is privately owned. Access to this site is by appointment only with Canoe the Cahaba at 205-874-5623.

Helena access is at Helena Amphitheater Park, with parking for about 15 cars, restrooms, picnic tables and hiking trails. Water access is a natural put-in at Buck Creek about 20 yards from the parking area.

This popular paddling route takes you from the city of Helena on Buck Creek for about 2 miles until you enter the Cahaba River, and then for about another 3.5 miles to Shelby Road 52.

Minimum recommended flow for Buck Creek is when water pours evenly across the road at other than Helena Dam, and for the Cahaba River, it is 200 cubic feet per second at the USGS gauge in Helena.

This trip takes you through a number of scenic, easy-to-paddle shoals on Buck Creek, one of which is home to a stand of Cahaba lilies that bloom in early to mid-May. You will also float past a number of beautiful rock formations and under five train trestles.

CAHABA RIVER NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE TO PRATT’S FERRY

There are two designated Cahaba Blueway accesses in the Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge: Canoe Beach and Coffee Creek. Both are great natural access points, and the water is only 20 yards from small parking areas along the refuge’s main gravel road (River Terrace). A third access is a boat ramp a short distance from the main entrance to the refuge.

Paddlers can take a short 0.7-mile ride from Canoe Beach to Coffee Creek, or venture further down the river to Pratt’s Ferry, a 5.7-mile float.

The take-out at Pratt’s Ferry is owned by The Nature Conservancy of Alabama. Parking and water access here are open during daylight hours. The parking area holds 10 cars and is 120 yards from the water. Loading and unloading boats behind the locked gate is by appointment only via email at alpreserveaccess@tnc.org.

The Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge features abundant birds and other wildlife as well as the Cahaba lily, which blooms each May. The world’s largest stand of Cahaba lilies is at Hargrove Shoals. A 0.7-mile downstream from the Coffee Creek access. Many opt to do an easy round-trip paddle to Hargrove Shoals from Coffee Creek. The river is wide here, and the current usually slows.

The section between Canoe Beach and Pratt’s Ferry is natural and scenic, with many bluffs and rock formations along the river and shoals and rock ledges within the river.

Those who want to extend their trip can continue another 8.1 miles past Pratt’s Ferry to Centreville’s new paddling access behind Bibb County High School.

PERRY LAKES TO SPROTT

Perry Lakes Park features two water accesses: Round Lake, where people can explore an oxbow lake shrouded in Spanish moss, and the Cahaba River at The Nature Conservancy’s adjacent Barton’s Beach Preserve. Parking is available at Perry Lakes park, and paddlers need to carry their boats half a mile to the river at Barton’s Beach.

Also, at Perry Lakes Park are restrooms, picnic areas, an event pavilion, lakeside boardwalk, birding tower and miles of hiking trails. Auburn Rural Studio designed and built the improvements in the park, which have been featured in numerous national and international architectural publications.

Those who hail their canoe or kayak the half mile to Barton’s Beach on the Cahaba River will be rewarded with a scenic and seldom-traveled 2.7-mile section of the river as it slowly meanders through the heart of Perry County. There are few signs of human activity along this section, so paddlers can catch a glimpse of what primeval Alabama was like.

ELAM HOLLEY SR. PARK TO OLD CAHAWBA ARCHAEOLOGICAL PARK

Elam Holley Sr. Park lies just off of Alabama 22, about 8 miles west of Selma, and has a small meadow parking area adjacent to a sandy beach where you can launch your canoe or kayak.

This section of river flows through the white chalk bedrock of the Alabama Black Belt, forming white bluffs along the meandering river. This formation dates from the Cretaceous period and bears fossils of marine creatures that lived in the shallow sea that covered this part of Alabama 80-100 million years ago.

There are two options for take-out at Old Cahawba Archaeological Park: Clear Creek and Vine Street. The paddle to Clear Creek is 6.3 miles and to Vine Street is 9.7 miles.

The Clear Creek access is a quarter mile from the parking area at the Old Cahawba Archaeological Park. The archaeological park provides shuttle service and other assistance for a fee. To schedule, call 334-872-8058.

To reach the Vine Street Access you paddle into the Alabama River for a quarter mile and turn right into the first slough.

Old Cahawba is the site of Alabama’s first state capital (1819-26) and the park houses many remains of historic buildings and cemeteries. A visitor center (open noon to 5 p.m. Thursday through Monday) and interpretive signs make self-guided tours easy.