

## **AHTS set to open Geneva Lake Trail**

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Break out cigars, hikers. Throw in balloons - green, of course. We have a new arrival among Alabama's trails.

Happy belated birthday, Geneva Lake Trail.

Alabama's newest hiking trail has its grand opening today, nearly three years after Hurricane Ivan halted work. The Alabama Hiking Trail Society will celebrate National Trails Day by holding the first official hike on the four-mile loop trail in Geneva State Forest.

The AHTS has waited long and, literally, weathered storms to get there. The group resumed work on the trail on Memorial Day weekend of 2006, but work started three years ago.

"We had already done a lot of the ground work in 2004," said Andalusia's Johnny Brewer, vice president in charge of trails for the AHTS. "Then, in the fall of 2004, we had Hurricane Ivan, and the Pinhoti Trail just got massacred."

Ivan forced the AHTS to halt work on the Geneva Lake Trail and others state trails and begin emergency work on the Pinhoti, which winds more than 100 miles from southern Talladega County north through Piedmont. The group cleared downed trees and limbs after Ivan passed through the area with sustained winds at 60 mph.

The AHTS and affiliated groups maintain the Pinhoti from Cleburne County Road 24 south to Alabama Hwy. 77 at Porter Gap.

"It was difficult, in some sections, to go more than 20 steps before there was another tree down," Brewer said. "It quite literally took us a year and a half, working up there five or six times a year, to get that trail, our section, to where you could even walk through it."

The Pinhoti is part of the Eastern Continental Trail, and the AHTS considers the Pinhoti "the premier trail in Alabama," Brewer said. That's why the organization dropped everything to clean it up after Ivan.

Still, the organization envisions an interconnecting trail system that allows people to hike from anywhere to anywhere in the state. Brewer likens the concept to an interstate highway system.

Work on the Geneva Lake Trail resumed nearly a year and a half after Ivan howled through Alabama.

"We knew that it would be quick work because the terrain is such that it's just easy trail work," Brewer said. "My goal was to have Trails Day there the very next year."

Goal achieved.

Geneva State Forest is a long-leaf pine nursery in the northwest corner of Geneva County, which borders Florida. The Geneva Lake Trail is 15-20 miles northwest from Geneva on Alabama 52, near Samson.

The trail circles a fishing lake, which is almost dry. When full, it covers nearly 100 acres.

"There are portions of the trail where it veers away from the lake to give you a more in-the-woods feeling," Brewer said. "But, the large majority of the hike, you will actually be able to see the water."

"Part of the trail is in pine forest. Part of it is in hardwood bottom land, swamp land and, basically, everything in between."

Long-leaf pines are known as habitat for the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker, which resides in Alabama and surrounding states.

Wildlife is abundant, benefiting from an extremely short January gun-hunting season in the area. Brewer reports seeing deer and turkeys nearly every time out.

"I have no idea whether or not there are alligators in the lake, although I suspect there are when it's full," Brewer said. "But I've never seen one there."

Tree species include pine, oak, maple and sweet gum.

About six-tenths of a mile in, the trail features a 50-foot bridge.

AHTS members built the bridge and consider it special. It's dedicated to late member George Ferguson, who had a way of making everyone on the group feel young.

Or old, depending on one's perspective.

Ferguson, retired military, was known to bike from his Enterprise home to see his girlfriend in Pensacola, Fla. Brewer said he had no idea how fit the older-looking gentleman was when they met.

"The first time I met George was at the trail where the hike is," Brewer said. "I'm ashamed to say that I was a little stereotypical. I looked at this guy, and I think, 'This guy is almost 80. What's he going to do?'"

"He just smoked us all. He was just constantly, non-stop, working on this trail. He was an amazing guy."