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## Local campgrounds among state's Top 50

John Pilati  
Franklin Free Press

Three Franklin County campgrounds are among Alabama's top 50 in *Best Tent Camping: Alabama*, a new book by renowned outdoor enthusiast Joe Cuhaj.

Dismals Canyon Conservancy, Elliott Branch and Slick Rock campgrounds are featured in the guide.

From 2011 to 2012, Cuhaj and his wife Maggre pitched their tent in campgrounds across Alabama. The new publication rates each of the 50 selected sites in the following categories: Beauty, privacy, spaciousness, quiet, security and cleanliness. Contact and registration

information is listed, along with Cuhaj's description of what made each campground stand out.

A lifelong outdoorsman, Cuhaj has penned guides on Alabama's best hiking trails and paddling sites, so he was already familiar with Franklin County's unique outdoor recreational opportunities before he started researching his latest book.

"For hiking, canoeing and camping, it's hard to find as many options in Alabama as you have in Franklin County," Cuhaj said. "It's a good destination for everyone to come up and hike and canoe, and hopefully now they'll be camping."

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Joe Cuhaj's guide features three sites in Franklin County.

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Two of the three local sites, Elliott Branch and Slick Rock, are operated by the Bear Creek Development Authority. Cuhaj has canoed the Lower Bear Creek Canoe Trail, but it wasn't until his latest project that he realized the Elliott Branch Campground existed.

"I had no idea these campgrounds were there. But what stood out to me about Elliott Branch and Slick Rock is how clean the water is," Cuhaj said. "That's amazing for anywhere. And people love the fishing in the Bear Creek lakes, particularly in Cedar Creek Reservoir [where Slick Rock is located]."

"Even with a large number of campsites, Slick Rock offers plenty of elbow room. It had a good amount of quiet there. And what is really impressive is how little development there is on the reservoir. That certainly ties in to having some of the cleanest recreational water in the South."

For Shannon McKinney, BCDA Administrator, news that two BCDA campgrounds were listed among Alabama's best came as a pleasant surprise.

"We're not the biggest set of campgrounds in the state, so to be recognized that way speaks volumes for what we have to offer here," McKinney said.

Minimal development on its lakes has been the mindset of BCDA and its board for years.

"We've taken some financial hits through the years because of that, but that commitment was made as part of a land management plan created after a TVA survey showed most people wanted to get on the lakes and not see a lot of development," McKinney said. "So we use that as a guideline on how we manage the lakes. We want our visitors to feel they are on the backside of nowhere as they enjoy the waters."

Elliott Branch and Slick Rock received exemplary ratings (4 of 5 stars) from Cuhaj in all six categories.

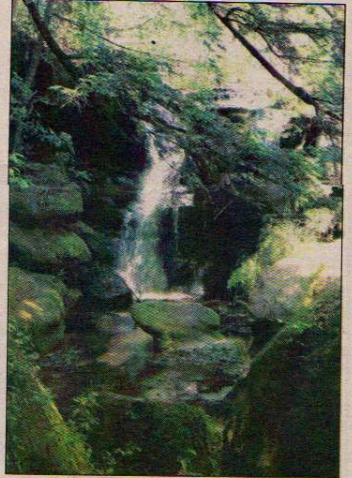
While researching his guide, Cuhaj did not reveal he was working on a book until he prepared to leave each campground. He spoke with fellow campers on what impressed them about each site, along with visiting with campground managers on his way out.

"We really wanted to absorb what was good about each site, what people enjoyed and what they didn't like," Cuhaj said. "Much of the book content comes from talking to people at the sites and listening to what was around us."

Cuhaj divided *Best Tent Camping: Alabama* into four regions: Gulf, River, Metro and Mountain. The Mountain Region includes northwest Alabama.

"Every time I'm in that region, particularly in northwest Alabama, it's more apparent it's the most ecologically and geologically diverse area in the state," he said.

Few Alabama camping sites embrace that diversity as much as Dismals Canyon Conservancy, a privately-owned facility on County Road 8 near Phil Campbell. Cuhaj rated the Dismals with



The Dismals received high marks for beauty, quiet and security, the maximum five stars in beauty, quiet and security, with exemplary four-star ratings in the other three categories.

"The Dismals is so unique. Perhaps the only other comparison would be Cane Creek Canyon Nature Preserve [in Tusculumbia]," Cuhaj said. "You can pitch your tent under rock shelters or camp near waterfalls. As with similar areas in the region, Dismals Canyon was once part of a vast ancient ocean. More than 300 million years ago it was lifted through geologic forces. Over millennia, the elements carved out the sandstone to form this beautiful canyon."

Visitors can enjoy a 1.5-mile hiking trail, which includes Weeping Bluff, Temple Cave, the Grotto and Secret Falls, the canyon's most unique features.

The site boasts 27 species of native trees, including an Alabama champion Eastern Canadian hemlock tree nearly 140 feet tall.

Nighttime hikes are offered for visitors to witness the dismalite, a rare insect larvae found in damp, humid climates like Dismals Canyon.

"It's really a great place, with amazing canyons and waterfalls," Cuhaj said. "There is limited campsite space, though, as to where you can camp and how many sites are available. I've been there in the past when it was packed out."

Sleeping Water, with its own rock shelter and waterfall, is the facility's most popular campsite.

A software programmer by day, Cuhaj spends his weekends camping, hiking and canoeing across Alabama. Through *Best Tent Camping: Alabama*, he hopes to offer readers a sampling of Alabama's natural beauty and perhaps an incentive to enjoy the outdoors themselves.

"I hope this guide will help readers make their trips more enjoyable as well as encourage people to sample the natural beauty of our state," Cuhaj said.

Published by Menasha Ridge Press, *Best Tent Camping: Alabama* can be purchased at [www.menasharidge.com](http://www.menasharidge.com) or through other online retailers.