



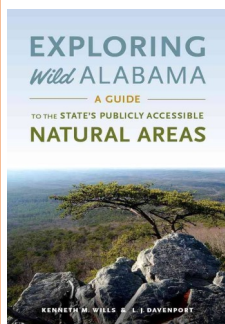
Highlighting Guides to the State's Outdoor Getaways in 2017, the Alabama Book Festival Goes into the Great Wide Open

At first glance, the natural habitat for a book might seem a cloistered, indoor space: a library or a study, a window nook with a nice view or a comfy bed with lots of pillows.

Yet books and the outdoors have always enjoyed a special relationship, one that shouldn't be surprising considering that pages are forest products. "Just as unseen worlds unfold to those who read a book," writes Priscilla Stuckey in *Kissed by a Fox, and Other Stories of Friendship in Nature* (2012), "so worlds hidden to hurried sight unfold to those who choose to spend more than a few moments cultivating their relationship with nature. Paying attention is the key...."

This year's 12th annual Alabama Book Festival will celebrate the relationship of reading and the natural world with a panel on outdoor books designed to encourage attendees to appreciate the beauty of the state's open spaces.

The festival will be held on Saturday, April 22, 2017, at Old Alabama Town at 301 Columbus Street in downtown Montgomery. Panels will run from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

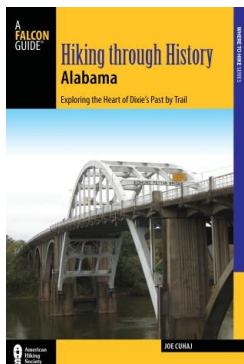


"Books get you *into* the outdoors," says L. J. Davenport, co-author of *Exploring Wild Alabama: A Guide to the State's Publicly Accessible Natural Areas* (University of Alabama Press). "They inspire you to get out there and enjoy and investigate nature for yourself."

Renee Simmons Raney agrees. Her book, *Hairy, Scary, But Mostly Merry Fairies! Curing Nature Deficiency through Folklore* (New South Books), aims to re-inspire in readers the childhood wonder that city life saps from us.

"Personally, I view books as bridges to outdoor adventure and nature discovery," Raney says. "Many of my travel destinations are guided by places that I've read about in fact or fiction. Whether it is a book that provides you with trail maps and stories, a book that teaches you to identify flora and fauna, a book that opens your imagination to tiny fairy worlds, or a Roget's Thesaurus to

inspire creativity in journaling, books are facilitators to exploring our natural world. However, balance is key. Sometimes I run amuck in the wild places: pack-less, book-less, and free to just 'see' what is there without preconceived notions or restricting analysis."



For Joe Cuhaj, taking books outside into nature doesn't just reconnect us with natural splendors. Reading outdoors can also connect us with human history.

"Once you know the history of an area you begin to experience it in a completely different light," says Cuhaj, the author of *Hiking Through History Alabama: Exploring the Heart of Dixie's Past by Trail* (FalconGuides). "As you walk down an old stage coach road you begin to appreciate the struggles of early settlers as they made a new life for themselves or how Native Americans and Mother Nature were in complete harmony."

"The best example of this is when I did a hike in Huntsville for the book. I had hiked the Smoke Rise Trail on numerous occasions but wasn't fully aware of its significance. It was just a nice walk in the woods."

"Before hiking the trail for research I met with members of the Alabama Chapter of the Trail of Tears Association. They retold us the story of the Trail of Tears but went in depth into how Native Americans were treated along this trail and that thousands lost their lives along the route. The next time we hiked the trail armed with that knowledge my wife and I found ourselves walking with tears in our eyes."

The three featured books on the panel approach the natural world along very different paths.

"Our book takes you to 150 publicly accessible Alabama natural areas," says Davenport, who worked with co-author Kenneth M. Willis. "We give you all the details—where, when, how, and (especially) why."

At 374 pages, *Exploring Wild Alabama* is the biggest of the trio, reaching from Russell Cave National Monument in Jackson County to Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge near the Gulf Shores coast.

Cuhaj's book breaks trails down by type, from Civil War

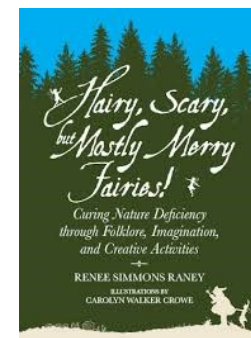
and Native American hikes to industrial ones. It also includes great practical advice on which trails are best for bringing along children and/or dogs.

"I always felt that a hiking guide had to be more than just a mile-by-mile description of a trail," the author says, explaining the rich history in the text. "I want to know what I'm going to experience, what I'm going to see, hear the interesting stories and history of not only the trail but the region the trail travels through."

Raney's book emphasizes lore over history and is meant to reconnect readers with the imagination so they become "comfortably fearless in wild places."

"I've walked with hikers who rarely look up from the trail," she says. "They can hike 100 miles and see nothing more than path where others have been. I've witnessed trekkers who step within yards of a reclining grizzly bear and never realize it! My fairy book is a catalyst to observation. Crawl in the moss. Wade in the stream. Feed a lightning bug to a toad and watch the toad's belly light up. Look at the space in between reality and fancy."

As different as their books are, the three authors have their own favorite places for outdoor reading. For Davenport, it's the amphitheater at the Walls of Jericho Trailhead near the Tennessee border, "communing with the spirit of Davy Crockett."



For Cuhaj, it's Monte Sano State Park, which "has so much unique history in one location—the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s, the old Monte Sano Hotel in the 1800s, the old sanitarium to heal yellow fever patients, the Von

Braun Observatory."

For Raney, meanwhile, the Pinhoti Trail section of the Talladega National Forest that links Pine Glen primitive recreation area to Sweetwater Lake is "the most enchanted trail" in Alabama: "Evidence of fairy magic can be found around each bend in the trail. Trees whisper ancient secrets, creatures scurry across the forest floor, and gossamer wings flit through sun shadows in the canopy. Fairy houses, both natural and human-formed, abound in the tangled roots near the path."