

Paddlers get easier access to South Fork River

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[Michael Barrett](#)

Soaking in the experience of riding down the South Fork River has often meant traipsing through briars and weeds to find a place to put in a kayak or canoe.

Many avid paddlers have used a little known fishing spot in Spencer Mountain as an access point, though not without nervous uncertainty.

"Before you always had to scramble to find a place to stash your car off the road somewhere, and hope you wouldn't get angry looks for parking on someone else's land or something," said Chuck Meakin, a kayaking enthusiast and Gastonia oncologist. "We'd put in wherever we could."

But taking advantage of one of Gaston County's most treasured natural resources just got a lot easier. The Catawba Lands Conservancy held a grand opening Thursday for its new Spencer Mountain River Access, which officials believe will open up the river to boatloads of new people.

"Now it's a designated area with signage," said Meakin, the director of the CaroMont Cancer Center at Gaston Memorial Hospital, and a Catawba Lands Conservancy board member.

The site is located at the approximate physical address of 282 Stanley Spencer Mountain Road, and is open seven days a week from dawn to dusk. A new trail leads to a 'launch structure' by the river, which provides an easy way to get a kayak or canoe into the water. A larger area has also been cleared for about 10 parking spaces, and signage helps to guide people into the area.

"It started off as a completely overgrown site ... covered with kudzu and stuff," said Rhea Kelley, outreach director for the Catawba Lands Conservancy. "It was used historically as a fishing access."

After the Conservancy realized people were also putting in kayaks there, it received a \$20,000 grant from the Community Foundation of Gaston County at the end of 2007 to build the river access. A design company assisted in laying out the new site, and Boy Scout troops and other volunteers pitched in to do the muscle work.

Paddlers who start their journey there can look for osprey, beavers and white-tailed deer as they cruise downstream along a 52-acre natural preserve. It's about a five-mile, two-hour journey to the R.Y. McAden River Access, just above the McAdenville dam off Willow Drive, where shuttle vehicles can be parked.

It's the first link in what the Conservancy hopes will eventually become a larger chain. A portage trail is being built around the McAdenville dam to allow people to safely tote their kayaks to the water on the other side.

"We hope to be able to create a 'blueway' system along the river," Kelley said. "We are already looking into options for other (access) sites."

Meakin said he likes the trend that is clearly developing.

"I think what we're seeing is a further utilization of the Catawba region's river system," he said. "I got out there before this entry site was opened, but I plan on using it more now."

You can reach Michael Barrett at 704-869-1826.