



UPCOUNTRY

JULY/AUGUST 2024

CONNECTED



Finding peace

Equine therapy paves
path to wellness

SERVICE
IS GOLDEN

TRAVEL
WITH PETS



By Shirley Bloomfield, CEO
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

Serious security


NTCA members are committed to protecting you

Everyone should take cybersecurity seriously, managing passwords and being aware of all the possible threats to your personal information, finances and more. That's not meant to frighten you, because you do have help. NTCA member providers across the nation take your security as seriously as you do, and they work daily to secure the networks bringing you the critical internet-based services you need.

Recently, I had the opportunity to share more about NTCA's cybersecurity efforts for both consumers and broadband providers, including CyberShare: The Small Broadband Provider ISAC, through a meeting with U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency Director Jen Easterly.

CISA recently launched the Secure Our World program to raise awareness about cybersecurity best practices and empower the public to take proactive steps to protect themselves online. Resources available to the public include a public service announcement, tip sheets on topics like phishing, multifactor authentication and the importance of creating strong passwords and updating software. And there is even a bingo board to make this critical topic engaging for the youngest internet users.

Also, Cybersecurity Awareness Month each October highlights these important issues and emphasizes that you're also part of the team helping keep us all safe. While NTCA members work behind the scenes, you can help by recognizing phishing attempts, choosing strong passwords and more. Visit cisa.gov/secure-our-world for more.

Together, we'll help keep everyone safe and secure online. 

Password management

Essential tools to keep you safe

From work and school to games and streaming entertainment services, access relies on passwords. The U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency suggests you consider using a reliable tool to manage these key bits of information — password managers.

Memorizing complex passwords for multiple accounts is difficult, or impossible. So, sometimes passwords are too simple and easily hacked. Password managers, though, can help.



Adobe Stock graphic by Jemastock

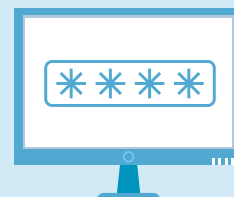


THE BASICS:

A password manager is a software tool that organizes all your passwords. Then, a single master code unlocks this vault — encouraging use of long, complex passwords.

FREE BUILT-IN MANAGERS:

Web browsers, including Safari, Chrome and Edge, have built-in password managers, and these can be accessed across devices like computers and phones. These may suffice for those with only basic needs, but they are limited. For instance, passwords in Apple's Safari aren't accessible on an Android phone running Google Chrome.



PAID TOOLS:

For more robust options, there is software like LastPass, 1Password and Bitwarden. These work across multiple types of devices and have additional features, such as the ability to generate passwords and integration into your favorite web browser.

TWO KEYS FOR SUCCESS:

Make your master password long, reliable and unique. Sixteen characters is recommended. Also, regularly review your stored passwords to remove passwords for accounts you no longer use.



From pages to pixels

E-books are changing the way we read

Readers today can find themselves facing a technological conundrum. While many book lovers treasure traditional books, electronic devices, designed to make reading more comfortable and accessible, are hard to ignore.

For some, there's nothing like the sensation of holding a book and feeling the paper as the pages turn. Printed books will always have emotional, if not monetary, value as collectibles. And they certainly aren't going anywhere.

These days there are countless options of things to download and read on our phones and tablets, but dedicated, handheld electronic book readers, often called e-readers, offer text and lighting customizations and many other conveniences to enhance the reading experience. Nonreflective, electronic-ink displays give them a paper-like look and make it easier to read outdoors compared with reading on a phone or tablet. And, dedicated e-readers present fewer distractions — you won't be interrupted by notifications, calls or texts.

Over the past few years, the price of e-readers has fallen while the hardware has improved. High-end features, such as backlit, high-resolution screens and waterproofing, are standard. If you don't have an e-book reader, there's never been a better time to invest in one.

E-READERS' EDGE

- **Portability:** E-readers are lightweight and can store thousands of books.
- **Customization:** Most allow you to adjust the font and size, background

lighting, etc. They can make reading accessible for individuals with visual impairment by providing text-to-speech and other customizations.

- **Searchability:** E-readers' built-in search functions mean you can easily find a favorite quote or passage in the book.
- **Built-in resources:** Dictionaries and thesauruses allow for immediate definitions.
- **Environmentally friendly and affordable:** No trees are harmed in e-book production, and they usually cost much less than traditional books.

WHICH ONE IS BEST?

Amazon Kindle is synonymous with e-reader for good reason. According to both Wired magazine and The New York Times' Wirecutter, the Kindle is the most affordable, best and easiest choice for reading electronic books.

- **Amazon Kindle:** With a 6-inch screen and a high pixel density for sharper text, the least expensive Kindle — around \$100 on Amazon — offers just about all the advantages of the more expensive e-readers. If you're planning on reading outdoors this summer, it's worth the extra charge, roughly \$50, to upgrade to the waterproof Kindle Paperwhite with its better lighting options.
- **Rakuten Kobo:** Japanese retailer Rakuten currently offers six Kindle-comparable e-readers ranging from \$110 to \$400. The Libra 2 has a physical page-turn button and Bluetooth

support, so you can connect headphones and listen to audiobooks.

- **Barnes & Noble Nook:** The book retailer's e-reader features a touch screen and page-turning button, as well as the ability to annotate and highlight text. The devices start around \$100. As an added perk, Nook owners can read the complete contents of any book for free while in stores for one hour per day. ☑

What will you read?

Once you've settled on an e-reader, where do you find the books? Amazon, Barnes & Noble and Kobo all sell tomes to download to their specific e-readers. But you could read for years without having to spend another dime. Sources of free e-books include:

- **OverDrive.com**, used by 43,000 libraries and schools worldwide, allows anyone with a library card to pull e-books, magazines and audio books.
- **Project Gutenberg**, a library of more than 70,000 free e-books to download or read online. Thousands of volunteers digitize and proofread the books available at gutenberg.org.
- **Mybookcave.com**
- **Planetebook.com**
- **ManyBooks.net**
- **OpenLibrary.org**
- **GetFreeEbooks.com**



Our valued customers

We are in the midst of summer — long days, time on the water, camping and porch-sitting. The Upstate has beautiful areas to recreate, including lakes, golf courses, hiking trails and mountains. Upcountry Fiber's service can be with you every step of the day.



JEFF WILSON (L)
Chief Executive Officer
WCFIBER

JIM LOVINGGOOD (R)
Chief Executive Officer
Blue Ridge Electric

Whether you're lounging by the pool, relaxing on your deck or setting out for a day of fishing at the dock, our commitment is to ensure you remain seamlessly connected, enjoying high-speed internet without compromise.

Summer is a season for relaxation, play and connection. We believe that your internet experience should enhance these moments, not complicate them. That's why we now offer a variety of WiFi solutions to extend the reach of your WiFi to cover all your outdoor spaces — making sure that your service isn't confined to the walls of your home.

Stream your favorite music as you dip your toes in the pool, or watch your favorite series under the stars on your patio. Spend summer evenings by the lake, sending off work emails with the same ease and speed as if you were sitting in your office. Our outdoor WiFi solutions are designed to make these scenarios a

reality, enabling you to transition from inside to outside without missing a beat.

Our commitment doesn't stop at just providing service. We aim to integrate it smoothly into your life. We've taken strides to ensure that setting up and maintaining your outdoor WiFi solutions are as straightforward and hassle-free as possible. We offer white-glove installation, 24/7 customer support and solutions designed to meet your unique needs. Our goal is to let you focus on enjoying your summer, not worrying about connectivity issues.

In addition, our WiFi enhancement tools, including weather-resistant WiFi extenders and boosters, ensure that every corner of your yard — from garden to gazebo — receives a strong reliable signal. We are dedicated to providing solutions that cater not only to your needs but also adapt to the unique layout of your outdoor spaces.

But our vision extends beyond just technological advancements. We understand that summer should be a time of joy, relaxation and making lasting memories. It's about more than just staying connected. It's about enhancing the way you live and interact with the world around you. Whether you're hosting a virtual family reunion, participating in a livestreamed yoga class on your deck or setting up an outdoor home cinema for friends and neighbors, our network is designed to support your lifestyle.

Upcountry Fiber is continually striving to push the boundaries of what our services can do for you. We invite you to take full advantage of the freedom our outdoor WiFi capabilities provide. Simply call us at 888-760-2111 to discuss the possibilities. After all, this summer you should be able to step outside, explore new spaces and know that your connections will remain strong wherever you are.

Thank you for choosing us as your trusted internet service provider. We look forward to supporting your adventures this summer and beyond. 📶

The Upcountry Connected is a bimonthly newsletter published by Upcountry Fiber, ©2024. It is distributed without charge to all its customers.



is a high-speed fiber internet provider to the five counties of Anderson, Greenville, Oconee, Pickens and Spartanburg. Founded by Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative and WCFIBER, Upcountry Fiber was created to bridge the digital divide across rural areas of South Carolina. Offering symmetrical internet speeds up to 10 Gbps over a fiber network, Upcountry Fiber offers the fastest and most reliable high-speed internet in the area.

UpcountryFiber.com
888-760-2111
Email us at info@UpcountryFiber.com

Construction Updates & FAQs:
UpcountryFiber.com/Updates

24/7 Repair Line:
888-760-2111 – select option for repair

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Produced for Upcountry Fiber by:



On the Cover:



Wild Hearts Equine Therapy calms spirits. The program serves people with intellectual, emotional and physical challenges. See story Page 8.

Photo by Matt Ledger

Know what's below





Summer is officially here, and that means it's time to tackle backyard projects ideal for long weekends. If your to-do list involves any digging, the first step is to call South Carolina's 811 program.

State excavation laws require homeowners and contractors to call 811 before digging. Starting a digging project without first knowing where underground utility lines are buried can result in damage to expensive infrastructure and put lives at risk. SC-811 notifies all utilities based on the caller's address, allowing those stakeholders to safeguard their facilities.

Find out more at sc811.com.

FIVE STEPS TO DIG SAFELY:

- Call 811 for your lines to be marked.
- Wait the required amount of time — three full business days for normal requests, not counting the day of the call.
- Call 811 or 888-721-7877 to confirm all lines have been marked.
- Respect the marks and call for a re-marking if needed.
- Dig carefully around the painted lines and flags.

	ORANGE — Telephone or fiber cable
	YELLOW — Gas
	RED — Electric
	BLUE — Water
	GREEN — Sewer and drain lines



**Know what's below.
Call before you dig.**





PET-FRIENDLY ADVENTURES

Map out trips with furry friends

Story by KATHY DENES

Summer typically means travel time, whether scenic road trips or flights to vacation destinations. And more than ever before, beloved pets are tagging along for the ride.

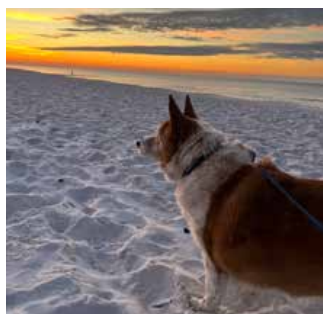
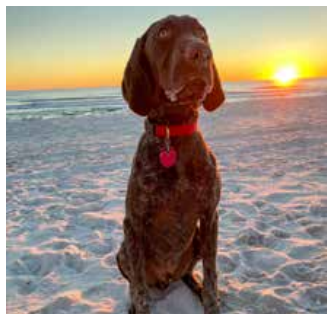
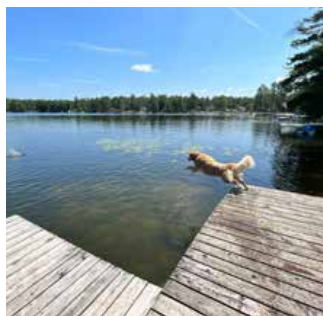
Pet-friendly travel is a hot topic. It's addressed by top vacation resources like Conde Naste Traveler, which has an online list of nationwide hotels and Airbnbs it deems best for accommodating pets, especially dogs. On travelandleisure.com, search "pets," and you'll unleash a wealth of helpful articles.

Even financial companies are weighing in. NerdWallet compiled a list of Best Hotels for Pets in 2024, based on factors like fees and amenities, and rated air travel options, topped by Alaska Airlines. But if you don't want to do the research yourself, there are travel agencies that specialize in planning and taking care of the details for you.

Hotels, resorts, parks and campgrounds usually post their pet policies, fees and amenities, as do airlines, trains and even cruise lines that allow passengers with paws. There are also numerous websites focused entirely on pet-friendly travel, across the nation and around the world. Just browse by city, state or destination at resources such as:

- bringfido.com
- petswelcome.com
- tripswithpets.com





EXPERT ADVICE

“Before deciding to bring your pet along on a trip, you need to ask yourself whether or not it’s in your pet’s best interest to do so,” says Dr. Rena Carlson, president of the American Veterinary Medical Association.

What’s a fun adventure for us might be overwhelming for our pets. “If you choose to include your pet, a pre-trip veterinary visit is a good idea, to make sure your pet is healthy and up to date on vaccinations and microchip registration, and to obtain a health certificate, which is required by law if you’re traveling to a different state with your pet,” Carlson says.

Your veterinarian can also provide vital information about the risk of parasites and other diseases that your pet may be exposed to at your destination, as well as possible preventive steps or treatments.

“Make sure to plan for their comfort in transit, whether by land or air, with regular breaks and by choosing the least stressful travel options,” Carlson says. “Confirm in advance that your destinations are pet-friendly, and try to maintain your pet’s routine as much as possible to help them feel secure. Your careful planning can ensure a safe and enjoyable trip for everyone involved.” 🗨️



For more great tips for traveling with your pet, check out:

- » pettravel.com
- » petfriendlytravel.com
- » avma.org

YOUR OWN MASSIVE BACKYARD

Whether taking your pooch along for a carriage ride in Charleston — child's ticket required if Fido won't fit in your lap — or entrusting it to doggie day care at Dollywood while you ride the Mystery Mine, the Southeast is loaded with places that welcome four-legged travel buddies. Here are a few destinations that receive high marks from people traveling with their pets:

- **Little River Canyon National Preserve** atop Lookout Mountain in North Alabama welcomes dogs parkwide, but they must be leashed.

- **Chattanooga** has inviting options, from downtown patio dining and parks to mountain trails and attractions.

- **Dinosaur World in Cave City** extends a Kentucky welcome to leashed dogs and provides water stations.

- **Barkwells, gated retreats in Asheville and Brevard, North Carolina**, have dog-centric cabin and cottage rentals, each with a fenced yard and a range of amenities to make it a haven for both pets and people.

- **For South Carolina excursions**, check sciway.net's pet travel guide for info on rentals, parks, beaches, eateries and more.

- **St. Augustine, Florida**, gets a nod from AAA for pet-friendly options, like strolls, visits to popular attractions and perhaps a stay at the historic Bayfront Marin House.

Life-changing STRIDES

Wild Hearts Equine Therapy offers path to peace, wellness

Story by JAMIE BIESIADA

Jet the horse has a habit of sneaking bites of grass as she walks. It's the job of her rider, 9-year-old A'Lilah Fairey, to keep her moving. The task has taught A'Lilah patience, one of many benefits she's taken from her Wild Hearts Equine Therapy sessions.

Sometimes it's kind of hard to ride on the horse, A'lilah says. But that's okay. Getting out and trying this has not only helped me with balance, but also with patience and gentleness.

That aligns perfectly with the goals her mother, Allite Franks, set with Wild Hearts — teaching A'Lilah to regulate her emotions and set positive, healthy boundaries. Working with Jet, an animal Allite describes as tender-hearted and sweet, has given A'Lilah confidence and helped her grow.

Allite lives and works at Wild Hearts at Hoppin' Horse Farm in Seneca. For Allite and A'Lilah, the farm represents peace. "There have just been so many things in the world that constantly change," Allite says. "When we get to this place, it is our one constant where we have so much to put into it and so much comes out of it. It's just one of the biggest blessings I could have ever landed upon for me and my daughter."

PASSION PROJECT

Wild Hearts CEO Jessica Fry began dreaming of owning an equine therapy center when she was 15 years old and read a book about a young girl with polio who found healing through horses.

In 2014, Jessica, her husband, Mike Ledford, and their three sons were living on 32 acres, where she boarded and trained horses. Her friend, Janine Hartley, moved



A'Lilah Fairey works on guiding Jet to a soft stop.



ABOVE: Jessica helps A'Lilah Fairey make a soft turn.

RIGHT: Jessica and Storm Scroggs encourage Goose to accept the bit.

to the area from Colorado and needed a place to board her horse. She picked Hoppin' Horse Farm.

Jessica and Janine soon realized they shared a passion for helping people and horses. Wild Hearts was born and earned nonprofit status in 2015. Today, the equine therapy center serves people with intellectual, emotional and physical challenges.

"This is truly a passion, an incredible passion, about helping horses and humans work with one another in the best way that they can using the best practices that we possibly can," Jessica says. "We hope to continue to do it forever."

Clients come to Wild Hearts from all walks of life. Some have been with the nonprofit since the beginning, and some stay a few weeks.

Providing a session comes at a cost of \$105, but Wild Hearts only charges \$40. The \$65 difference is subsidized by the program. Nearly 30 percent of Wild Hearts' 100 weekly clients pay a reduced rate based on need. Some receive partial scholarships and pay \$20, while others — including veterans — receive full scholarships and pay nothing. Wild Hearts Equine Therapy uses Upcountry



Fiber's broadband for its website, wildheartsequinetherapy.org. Donors can contribute tax-deductible to help the 501c3 nonprofit organization fund its scholarships and care for its animals. Boarding and providing routine care for just a single horse costs \$7,050 per year.

"We won't raise our prices," Jessica says. "We live in an area of disparity. We want to be able to serve everybody."

MATCHING HORSES WITH HUMANS

Many clients become volunteers, including Storm Scroggs, a disabled combat veteran. During his sessions, Storm works with Goose. When Goose first arrived, Storm says, he was often scared and "hypervigilant." But now he's calm, even goofy, with facial expressions that give everyone a smile.

Storm hopes more combat veterans will turn to programs like Wild Hearts.

"They're amazing," he says of the horses. "They just have a certain way — they bond with you, and they feel your emotions and your energy."

Clients connect with the horses in many ways. For some, it's learning skills and horsemanship. For others, it's getting in the saddle as soon as possible, helping the riders get stronger and more flexible. Trained facilitators run each session and volunteers help.

All 36 horses in the program are rescues. Once they come to Hoppin' Horse Farm, they stay for life, even if they're not part of the therapy program. Jessica is passionate about the animals' well-being. In fact, horses only work twice a day for 30- to 50-minute sessions.

"It's a lot of emotional imbalance that they have to deal with, and that can be a heavy load," Jessica says. "We're very protective of them, making sure that they are safe, emotionally and physically. And then we do the same with our clients."

In cases of clients with emotional needs, the horses pick the humans they want to work with. Horses display interest in a variety of ways, Jessica says, whether it's following a person around or playing with their hair. Wild Hearts matches horses with intellectually or physically challenged clients.

For instance, there's Scoutie, who is built kind of like a big sofa, Jessica says. She can always help physically challenged clients and connects well with them to help them stay stable and safe.

Jessica's dream for Wild Hearts is to create a one-stop shop for families in need of care, with physical, occupational and emotional therapists on-site. She recently onboarded an occupational therapist, and a counselor has expressed interest in setting up an office on the farm. "We're stoked about the future," Jessica says. "I think it's going to be amazing." 🐾

Wild Hearts Equine Therapy Center

598 Wild Hearts Way, Seneca

864-991-9163

wildheartsequinetherapy.org

facebook.com/wildheartsequinetherapy



Planting ideas

FARMER FROBERG USES SOCIAL MEDIA TO PROVIDE LESSONS, LAUGHS

Story by MELANIE JONES

Wearing a plaid shirt and a gray Froberg's Farm cap, Tyler Froberg shares a cool fact about a favorite fruit with youthful viewers. "Every strawberry in the world is picked by hand," he tells eager young minds. "And it takes half an hour to pick one row."

Most fruit and vegetables are harvested by machines, which helps the fourth-generation farmer talk about farming as a STEAM — science, technology, engineering, arts and math — career option he promotes in a video for Lego's education branch, known as Rebuilding the World with Agriculture.

Tyler has made a few videos for Lego, promoting school-based projects like building a strawberry-picking machine that won't destroy the delicate fruit. But his screentime isn't

limited to collaborations with Lego. As Farmer Froberg, Tyler has more than 780,000 social media followers learning about gardening, farming and life on a fruit and vegetable agritourism farm.

TEACHING THROUGH VIDEOS

When he first got out of the Army, Tyler worked on the family farm in Alvin, Texas. "I decided that I had my GI Bill, so I should probably go to college," he says.

After earning a degree in agriculture, he worked for a year as an agriculture science teacher. "I loved it, and when you love something, you tend to be good at it, and when you tend to be good at it, you get recognition for it," he says.

"I think I achieved something that I never thought I would through social media."

— Tyler Froberg
@farmer.froberg



Tyler Froberg, known to his 780,000 followers as Farmer Froberg, took to social media so he could educate people about farming and gardening.



LEFT: Tyler, right, and his uncle, Alfred Froberg, show off watermelons grown at Froberg's Farm.

BELOW: Tyler enjoys making social media videos with his sons, or, as he calls them online, "Little Farmer Frobergs." Tyler and his son, Dustin, have fun sharing gardening lessons.



A nonprofit recognized Tyler as the person it needed to run a program teaching farm skills to fellow veterans. "When I was there, though, I missed the spark that you got with young people, whether it was seeing a seed germinate or seeing an animal being born," he says. "While I was teaching adults, I didn't see the same spark."

Around that time, TikTok became popular, and Tyler got an idea. "I should make little videos, like ag lessons," he says. "I'm still a teacher, and maybe that will scratch that itch. And so, I did."

In the first two months, several of his videos got a respectable number of views. "I had a video hit 10,000 views, and then I had a video hit 250,000 views, and I was like, 'Huh, there might be something to this.'"

Tyler has posted a few poems, tried growing square watermelons and loofahs, and succeeded in growing star-shaped zucchini. He's even zipped layers of jackets to the tune of "Stand by Me" — which got over 5 million views the first time he posted it. But his favorite videos to make are any with his sons in them. "We just laugh and have fun," he says, talking about "Little Frobergs" Dusty, Carson Lee and Tommy "Tomcat."

"I'm not one of those content creator parents that are like, 'No, no, no. You have to say that this way,'" he says. "It's only been three years, and so, it's still kind of new for us. They get excited to go out and film with me." Tyler's wife, Kristi, known on social media as "Momma Froberg," also gets the occasional guest spot.

STAGES TO SUCCESS

Tyler's made plenty of silly videos. His personal favorite involves being a rubber duck farmer. "There were these rubber ducks everywhere, and it was just a lot of fun," he says.

Despite his following on social media, Tyler doesn't consider himself an influencer. "Influencers are putting on makeup trying to influence you to use this certain brand or product, or there are ag influencers who create content for people in the ag industry. They work with brands and influence followers to use certain brands or products, and I don't feel like I do that."

Tyler says there are a few stages every content creator goes through. The first step is embarrassment. "You don't want anybody you know to know that you're creating content," he says.

"Then comes, 'So you're still doing that thing?'" he says. "That's when you see your mom and she's like, 'Oh, you're still making the little videos. It's so cute.'"

The third phase is thinking content creation is a waste of time. "You're starting to take it more seriously," he says, "but you're not getting a lot out of it yet."

Then there's the final step — success. "For me, I got invited to give a commencement speech at a college graduation, and walking out on stage and realizing, 'oh wait, I think I did it.' I'm still not 100% sure, but I think I achieved something that I never thought I would through social media."

What about those strawberry-picking machines?

"I would like to think that Lego went as far as they could with that and got hundreds of thousands of submissions for strawberry-picking machines, but I don't know that to be true," he says. But he planted the seed of an idea. Now it's time to see what grows. 🌱

CHECK IT OUT!

Tyler Froberg's videos are available on Instagram and TikTok at [farmer.froberg](https://www.instagram.com/farmer.froberg). His YouTube and Facebook accounts are under the name Farmer Froberg. For more on his family's farm, go to frobergfarm.com.

FINDING FIBER

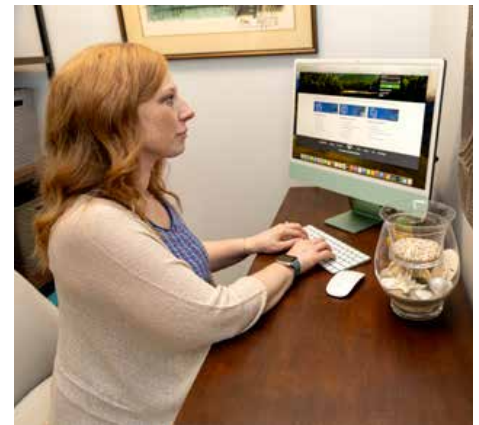
Internet access makes a big difference for Westminster family

Story by JOHN CLAYTON



LEFT: The Lynch family, from left, Brianna, Bella, Beckham and Benji, can now enjoy high-speed internet at their home.

BELOW: Upcountry Fiber keeps Brianna connected to friends and family.



Photos by Matt Ledger

Before Upcountry Fiber came around, a geographical quirk created some communication obstacles for the Lynch family of Westminster — parents Benji and Brianna, their daughter, Bella, and son, Beckham.

Cell signals were sketchy at best, and the internet? Well, that was a pipe dream.

“The part of Lake Hartwell we’re on is a cove that has a big granite top under the cove that acts like a big magnet,” Benji says. “It distorts cellphones and any kind of signal, so being able to have something streamed mainline and have it guaranteed is worth its weight in gold.”

A PRODUCTIVE PARTNERSHIP

When Upcountry Fiber was formed in 2020 through a partnership between Blue Ridge Electric and WCFIBER, Upcountry Fiber announced high-speed fiber internet service to the Upstate.

In this case, that includes territories all the way to Lake Hartwell, which serves as the Georgia-South Carolina state line. Benji and his family are a short drive from Toccoa, Georgia.

Upcountry Fiber also began rolling out its fiber optic cable to reach underserved residents and businesses throughout the area — from Anderson and Oconee to Spartanburg. For Benji and his family, it was just in time.

As e-learning became a norm, the family regularly had to drive to libraries and restaurants so Bella and Beckham could use open WiFi. “Chick-fil-A was their favorite,” Benji laughs.

The arrival of Upcountry Fiber changed that for the Lynches and their entire lakeside community, which went from no service to symmetrical speeds of up to 10 Gig, making uploading and downloading data quick and easy. “Everybody in my quaint little neighborhood is with Upcountry Fiber,” Benji says.

Bella, who is now a freshman and playing soccer at Toccoa Falls College, credits Upcountry Fiber for helping her make it through the final years of high school without going on nightly road trips in search of WiFi to do her homework. Now, younger brother Beckham can do the same from the comforts of home.

FROM WORK TIME TO PLAY TIME

Benji, an assistant manager at McNeely’s Store and Rental in West Union, says the improved services provided by Upcountry Fiber help keep his family members connected to all their varied interests.

In addition to his work duties, Benji is co-founder and co-head coach of The Crew, a USSSA 10-under baseball team. His son is named for retired Premier League soccer star David Beckham, but Beckham excels at baseball and plays on the travel team.

Benji says the improved connectivity at home allows him to keep his players and their parents engaged and informed about schedules, fundraisers and other activities and events.

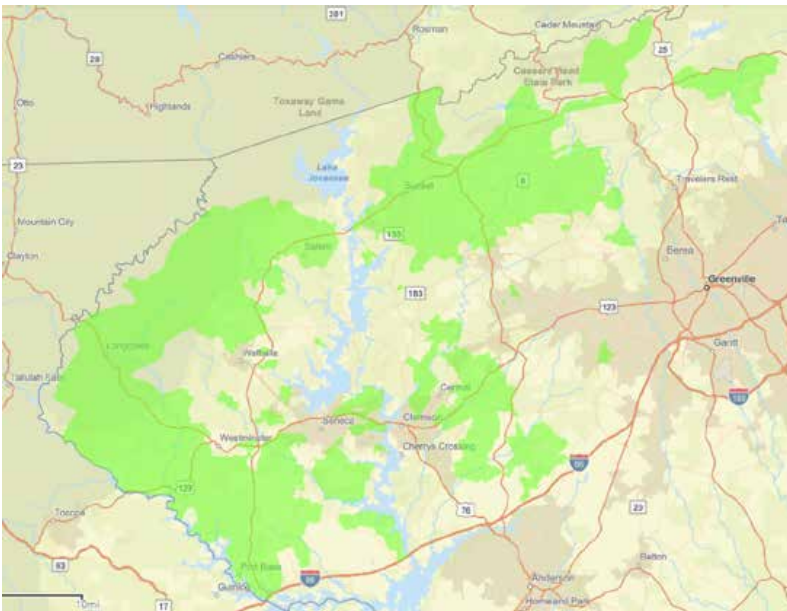
“That’s definitely a benefit of having Upcountry Fiber,” he says. “I’m actually able to concentrate during the evenings because I have full-function internet. I’m not worried about getting all that stuff done during my lunch break.” 📶

Connecting the Upstate to BROADBAND

In 2023, Upcountry Fiber connected 1,400 miles of fiber optic cable, giving 9,266 more residences and businesses access to high-speed broadband.

Upcountry Fiber's network currently has an excellent net promoter score of 85. This survey measures customer loyalty, satisfaction and enthusiasm for a company. Upcountry Fiber's score places it in the top percentile of broadband providers nationwide.

We are committed to expanding the reach of our high-speed internet to underserved and unserved areas. The collaboration of teams at Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative and WCFIBER will continue as we deploy this vital utility to our neighbors and businesses.



Upcountry Fiber service is available in the green areas shown on our network map. Fiber crews are currently working in other parts of our service area to further expand broadband availability.



TO LEARN MORE about Upcountry Fiber, and to register your interest in signing up for service, go to upcountryfiber.com.

EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT

E.J. Reece

FIBER TECHNICIAN



E.J. and Caitlyn Reece enjoy time playing with their children, Stella-Cait and Case.

E.J. Reece has worked as a fiber technician, based at the Pickens office, for the past year. He wears many hats, with duties ranging from field inspections and splicing to troubleshooting and repairs. For the previous five years, E.J. worked as a power lineman with Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative.

"I had the opportunity to switch to the fiber department, and it's been wonderful," E.J. says. "I look forward to many, many years working for Blue Ridge alongside everyone from Upcountry Fiber."

E.J. and his wife, Caitlyn, have been married for nine years. They have two wonderful kids, 4-year-old Case and 2-year-old Stella-Cait.

The family enjoys camping and exploring the great outdoors. E.J. enjoys photography and loves to watch reruns of "Seinfeld." An avid runner, he uses the activity-tracking app Strava to record his adventures. 📱

Sensational SUMMER SALADS

Among summer's many charms are vegetables and fruit blooming with flavor, and it doesn't take a lot of effort to turn them into delicious salads.

These recipes cover all the salad bases. From crisp leafy tossed salads to sturdy mixes that can sit out for a couple hours while the kids play in the yard and you visit with friends. Keep it easy and choose a make-ahead recipe featuring hearty pastas, grains and beans that can work as a side dish or a full meal, or throw together fruit or vegetable combinations that hit sweet or savory notes.

Summer salads are versatile, so feel free to swap out lettuces, and use a variety of fruits instead of just one kind. After all, it's summertime, and the living — and cooking — should be easy.



**Food Editor
Anne P. Braly
is a native of
Chattanooga,
Tennessee.**

Photography by **Mark Gilliland**
Food Styling by **Rhonda Gilliland**



BLUEBERRY PEACH SALAD

- 1 pint fresh blueberries
- 2 peaches, diced (leaving the skin on adds texture, vitamins and color)
- 2 cucumbers, sliced
- 1/2 cup crumbled feta cheese
- 3 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- 1 tablespoon honey
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 tablespoon finely chopped basil
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

In a large serving bowl combine the blueberries, peaches, cucumbers and feta.

In a jar with a lid or measuring cup combine the lemon juice, Dijon, honey, olive oil, basil, salt and pepper. Whisk together until well combined.

Pour the vinaigrette over the salad and gently mix everything together. Taste for seasoning and garnish with extra basil. Serve or cover and refrigerate the salad until ready to serve.



SUMMER CORN SALAD

- 3 cups corn kernels (approximately 4 ears)
- 1 cup cherry tomatoes, quartered
- 1 cup cucumbers, diced
- 1 cup crumbled feta cheese
- 1/4 cup red onion, diced
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 3 tablespoons rice vinegar
- 1 tablespoon fresh parsley
- Fresh basil ribbons
- Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil and add the corn. Cook for 3 to 4 minutes or until the kernels turn bright yellow. Drain the corn and cool completely. Use a sharp knife to remove the kernels from the corn cob, scraping the cobs to get all the "milk" from the cobs.

In a large bowl, combine the corn kernels, cherry tomatoes, cucumbers, feta cheese and red onion. Drizzle the olive oil and vinegar over the salad.

Season generously with salt and pepper, to taste, and toss well to combine. At this point, the salad may be made ahead. Just before serving, sprinkle with fresh herbs, and toss to combine.



SUMMER SHRIMP SALAD

- 2 pounds shrimp, peeled and deveined
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped red onion
- 1 rib celery, finely chopped

Dressing:

- 1 cup mayonnaise
- 1 lemon, zested and juiced
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh dill
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 1/4 teaspoon kosher salt
- Pinch of freshly ground black pepper

Bring a pot of water to a boil. Add the shrimp and boil for 2 to 3 minutes, until cooked through and pink. Plunge the cooked shrimp in an ice water bath to cool.

Meanwhile, make the dressing: Stir together the mayonnaise, lemon juice and zest, dill, mustard, garlic, salt and pepper.

In a mixing bowl, stir together the cooled shrimp, red onion, celery and dressing, until creamy. Serve plain or nestled on butter lettuce leaves garnished with fronds of fresh dill, if desired. 🥗



MAIN DISH TORTELLINI SALAD

Grilled chicken heightens the flavor of this salad.

- 2 (10-ounce) packages cheese tortellini, prepared according to package instructions
- 2 cups shredded chicken
- 1 cup halved cherry tomatoes
- 8 ounces fresh mozzarella pearls
- 1 cup roasted red bell peppers, chopped into 1/2-inch pieces
- 1 cup basil pesto (store-bought or homemade)
- 1 1/2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- Fresh basil ribbons, for garnish

In a large bowl, combine the tortellini, shredded chicken, cherry tomatoes, mozzarella, roasted peppers, pesto and olive oil. Cover and refrigerate. Can be prepared up to a day ahead. When ready to serve, top with fresh basil.



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