



UPCOUNTRY

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2022

CONNECTED

Community support

Bert Carver's campaign to get fiber



STRONG
FOUNDATION

TRIMMING
THE TREE



By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

Rural broadband thrives in 2022

The commitment and professionalism of rural broadband providers creates lasting and substantive improvements, bringing essential services that bridge the gap in internet performance between rural and metropolitan areas. In many cases, NTCA members offer even more robust services than those available in larger cities.

In recent years, Congress has passed billions in funding for rural broadband. I was fortunate to attend a White House ceremony last year for the signing of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which included over \$60 billion for broadband projects.

NTCA has worked to ensure this funding goes to communities that need it most, as well as to providers, such as yours, with a long history of servicing their neighbors with the highest-quality broadband.

While broadband expansion is a priority, we've continued our focus on advocacy, including working with the Federal Communications Commission to ensure the long-term viability of the Universal Service Fund. It's a program that helps Americans in hard-to-serve areas keep pace with services found in more densely populated communities.

We've also expanded our Smart Rural Community program to highlight the great things robust broadband access brings to rural America — it's not just cities that are "smart!" Over 240 providers are part of the program. Visit smartruralcommunity.org for more information.

As we celebrate our wins from this year, we're looking forward to an even better 2023. 🍀

TO ALL WHO BRIDGE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Thank you

FOR ANOTHER SUCCESSFUL YEAR

Fast internet access is essential for rural communities to thrive in a fast-changing, highly connected world.



High-Speed Internet



Voice Communications



Videoconferencing



Telehealth



Business-level Data Tools



Online Education



Streaming Video & Music

Professionals in your community make this possible — working daily to help you lead a better life.

Thank you for all you do!

Business is booming

Apps help small business owners thrive

Running a small business is no easy task. There's a long list of things to keep track of, from inventory and sales to payroll and budgeting. It can get overwhelming staying ahead of the curve.

Thankfully, there's a wide array of apps geared toward making the life of a small business owner easier. Listed below are some of the best apps in 2022 for small businesses.

POINT OF SALE SYSTEMS

These systems allow small businesses to complete sales and ring up customers. According to NerdWallet, restaurants require POS systems that provide coordination and table management, while a retail store requires inventory management features.

Square — The POS offered by the financial tech company Square meets all these requirements and much more. Square is easy to use, offering transparent pricing, live support and compatibility with iPhone, iPad and Android devices. The first magnetic stripe credit card reader is free, and there is even a free plan available for small businesses that don't require advanced functions. While many payment processors have hidden monthly fees, Square doesn't charge by the month. Instead, you pay 2.6% + 10 cents for each credit card transaction for unlimited devices.

ACCOUNTING AND BUDGETING

Accounting software helps small businesses that may not be able to hire a full-time, in-house accountant. With these apps, you can track profit margins, revenues, expenses and budgets to understand the health of your business.

Intuit QuickBooks — Intuit QuickBooks is the industry standard and leader for small business accounting software in 2022, according to NerdWallet. It offers a multitude of service tiers, so it can easily be scaled to the size of the business it serves. It is accessible anywhere from QuickBooks online to the cloud-based version. Some of QuickBooks' best features include a full suite of reports, double-entry accounting, ease of accessibility and sharing with outside accountants, live service bookkeeping support and easy mobile access. Pricing is \$25 a month with other monthly payment tiers (\$50, \$80 and \$180 respectively).

PAYROLL

Paying employees on time is essential to operating a business. Extra help tracking hours and payments can allow small businesses owners to give attention to many other daily aspects of running their companies.



Patriot Payroll — While there are lots of payroll apps on the market, a majority of them are so high-priced that the cost outweighs the benefit of extra help for smaller companies. Patriot Payroll has an affordable price point — \$10 a month, plus \$4 an employee — while offering the same services and benefits as its more expensive counterparts. These services include a one-month free trial, HR support and coverage for up to 100 employees.

INVENTORY

Tracking inventory is a crucial part of staying ahead of the curve for any business. It is no easy task without help, which is why large corporations dedicate entire teams and extensive software programs just for inventory.

Sortly — With built-in barcode scanning that can track stock across multiple warehouses, Sortly has everything you need to manage inventory on the go. It offers both barcode and QR code scanning, giving you the flexibility to use what works best for your business. It even has an offline mode, so a signal interruption won't slow you down. Keep scanning incoming and outgoing items and seamlessly sync up once you're back online. 📱



The Great Electrification becomes the Great Connect

Greetings! We're so pleased to bring another issue of Upcountry Connected to the Upstate. This was a fun issue to work on.



JEFF WILSON (L)
Chief Executive Officer
WCFIBER

JIM LOVINGGOOD (R)
Chief Executive Officer
Blue Ridge Electric

Our cover features Bert Carver. When we heard his story of perseverance, we were both impressed and moved. Check out his story on page 12. It reminded us about our roots and exactly why we've started this process. Like electric cooperatives were born out of need, today, we carry that same spirit of service and innovation of the Upstate, so we can ultimately connect all of our service territory and some areas beyond.

It's an audacious challenge, especially when you look at our rocky, mountainous areas. Hitting rock while trenching is not unheard of; rather, it's common. But, that isn't stopping us. This project will ultimately span 1,800 miles and include 6,000 miles of fiber optic cable. To put that in perspective, 6,000 miles is the equivalent of stringing the fiber from Washington state to Florida and back.

We often get asked about our process for building out our service territory. In short, it takes a lot of labor and a lot of money.

It's important to note that rural electric cooperatives could only electrify rural America with the assistance of the Rural Electrification Act, which provided low-interest loans to make such a massive undertaking feasible.

We're in the same position again today. It is a substantial investment to bring high-speed fiber internet to all areas of our service territory – and even beyond. Simply put, we cannot do this without the partnership and assistance of federal and state funding and grants. Fortunately, our government at all levels understands the predicament this country faces and is stepping up with multiple grant programs that will help bridge the digital divide.

We are actively seeking funding and have already received \$825,000 at this point for our project in addition to our direct investments. We can only build as fast as our financing and any additional money from grants allow.

Many areas within our project qualify for federal and state funding. As much as we do not want to wait, we simply can't afford not to wait for these funds. Waiting could mean that our investment is matched, and that will leave us millions of dollars to continue to build.

We understand it is disheartening to see some areas built out as others – even those across the street – are still waiting. Know this: We WILL get to you. As grant funds are dispersed, we will mobilize our build-out quickly.

If you go into any rural electric cooperative office, it's not uncommon to see this African proverb on a wall: "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

And that's just what we're doing. We are partnering and going far through the mountains, the trees, the hills and the brush. We're going far, and we're coming to you. The end result will be one of the most connected areas in the country.

For those who are tired of waiting, we see you. We are committed to you. We won't leave you behind.

We pledge to keep you updated on the grant process, the status of our funding and other related progress. We plan to bring you along in our process. After all, we are in this together.

Jeff Wilson *Jim Lovingsgood*

The Upcountry Connected is a bimonthly newsletter published by Upcountry Fiber, ©2022. 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 1 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:



Bert Carver started a signature campaign, going door-to-door to convince neighbors to sign up for Upcountry Fiber.

See story Page 12.

Photo by Matt Ledger

Saving time this season

The holidays are just around the corner. Your to-do list is longer than your kids' wish list. Sign up for SmartHub at wctel.smarthub.coop and make paying your bill online quicker than a sleigh ride with reindeer.

SmartHub users can also receive text alerts on planned maintenance outages and updates on weather-related outages.



Learning how to stream

The streaming boom is here. According to broadbandsearch.net, the number of "cord cutter" households in America grew from 24.9 million in 2017 to 55.1 million this year.

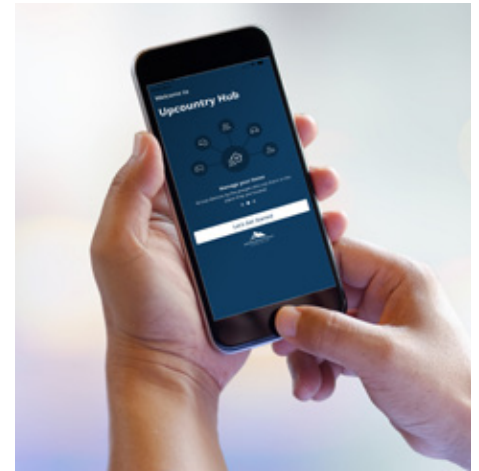


Simply put, streaming is the delivery of any media content to your smart TV, computer or mobile device through the internet. Content ranges from YouTube videos, movies and music videos to television shows and live TV.

Streaming can be less expensive than cable or satellite TV, and streamers have access to a virtually endless library of shows, movies and even live TV. When you switch to streaming you can tailor your TV experience to your personal tastes.

Lightning-fast internet from Upcountry Fiber gives you the speed you need to start streaming. Getting set up is easy — all you need is a high-speed internet connection, a streaming device or smart TV and the streaming service — or services — of your choice.

Upcountry Fiber has partnered with MyBundle to help you determine what streaming platforms and apps fit your family's needs at UpcountryFiber.com/streaming. Mybundle.tv will then show platform options based on the channels you like, from the best match to the greatest value and even a build-my-bundle option.



Download our new app



The Upcountry Hub app is a one-stop broadband resource, available for your smartphone on the Apple App Store and Google Play.

With the Upcountry Hub app you can:

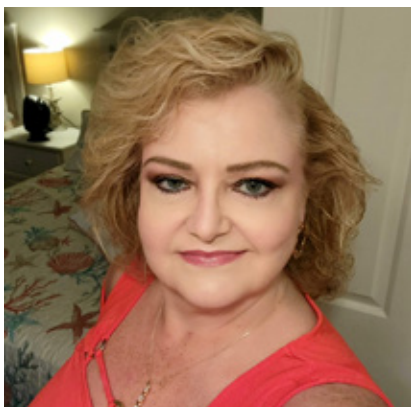
- Control every aspect of your connected home.
- Set parental controls.
- Prioritize network traffic.
- Create a guest network.
- View all devices on the network.



Happy holidays!

The employees of Upcountry Fiber are grateful for our customers, and we hope you enjoy a holiday season filled with family and friends. Our offices will be closed on the following dates:

- **Thanksgiving: Thursday, Nov. 24, and Friday, Nov. 25**
- **Christmas: Friday, Dec. 23, and Monday, Dec. 26**
- **New Year's Day: Monday, Jan. 2**



The Upcountry difference

For many years, Upcountry customer Donna Reed wasn't able to get fast and reliable internet service because of where her family lives. And the service the Reeds could get was pricey.

"Then Upcountry Fiber showed up and boy, did they show up!" Donna says. "We can all stream TV shows and my son can play video games without lagging. How I wish we could've gotten it sooner."

Don't get your tinsel in a tangle

Story by ANNE BRALY

Decorating the Christmas tree is a beloved holiday tradition, but before you can hang the ornaments, take photos of the grandkids beneath its boughs or open presents beside it, you've got to find one.

Visiting a Christmas tree farm can put you in the spirit of the season as you make family memories while supporting a local business. And you'll bring home the absolute freshest trees, wreaths and greenery possible, so everything will last much longer.

"The whole idea of starting a family tradition is about creating a fun environment that the whole family can participate in," says Greg Shell, who, along with his wife, Weeta, established Shell's Christmas Tree Farm in 1988 on their property in Tuscumbia, Alabama. "It gives people a chance to slow down and spend time together creating special memories."



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©Serdily Hirsy/Adobe Stock

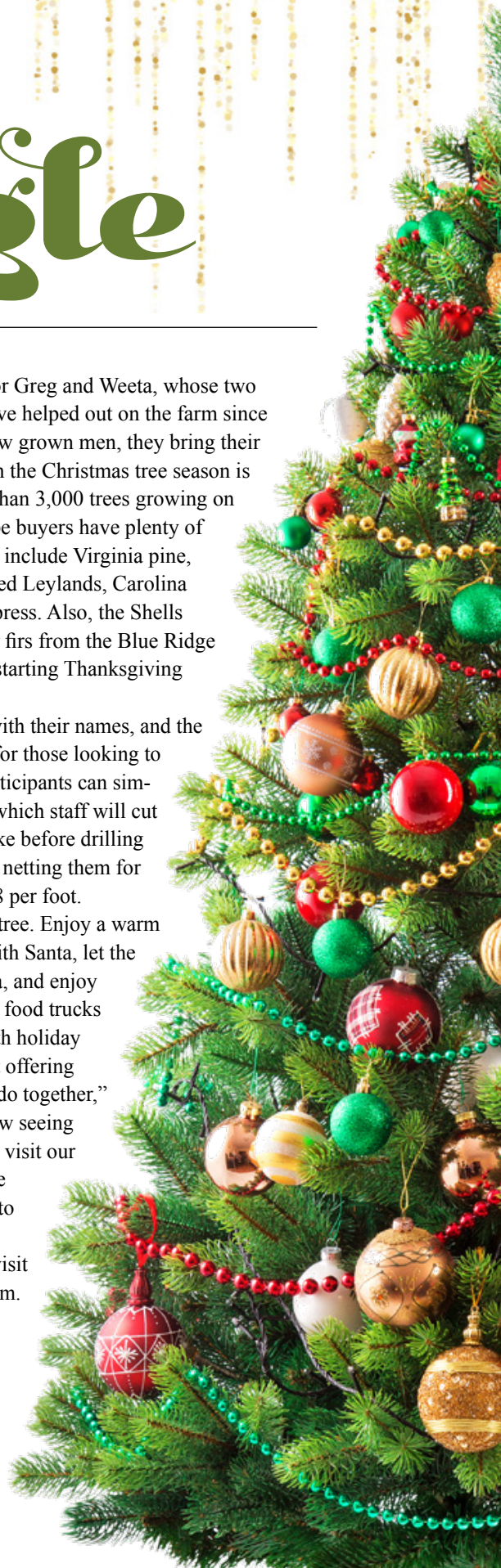
It's a family business for Greg and Weeta, whose two sons, Aaron and Chad, have helped out on the farm since they were 8 years old. Now grown men, they bring their own families to help when the Christmas tree season is in full swing. With more than 3,000 trees growing on the 44-acre farm, would-be buyers have plenty of options. Available species include Virginia pine, Leyland cypress, variegated Leylands, Carolina sapphires and blue ice cypress. Also, the Shells bring in freshly cut Fraser firs from the Blue Ridge Mountains and sell them starting Thanksgiving Day.

Shoppers receive tags with their names, and the Shells provide bow saws for those looking to cut their own trees. Or participants can simply tie their tags to trees, which staff will cut and then measure and shake before drilling holes in their bottoms and netting them for transport. Prices start at \$8 per foot.

But don't stop with the tree. Enjoy a warm cup of apple cider, visit with Santa, let the kids play in their own area, and enjoy the bonfire. There are also food trucks and a huge room filled with holiday greenery. "We're all about offering something for families to do together," Greg says. "And we're now seeing fourth-generation families visit our farm. It's pretty cool to see families want to continue to the next generation."

For more information, visit shellschristmastreefarm.com.

Get in the holiday spirit — visit a Christmas tree farm. You'll have a chance to make family memories, possibly sample tasty treats and return home with a fresh, beautiful tree.





TREE FARMS ACROSS THE SOUTH

Sycamore Springs Christmas Tree Farm, Jamestown, Tennessee — White and Scotch pines, Norway spruce and Leyland cypress. Search the Gingerbread Trail through the forest for the runaway gingerbread men, explore the Tree Treasure Maze to find the real treasure of Christmas. Browse in The Treehouse gift shop and enjoy homemade cookies, hot chocolate and apple cider. Full details are online at sycamorespringsfarmtn.com.

Roberts Family Farm, Guston, Kentucky — White pine, Fraser fir and balsam fir, plus local crafts and Momma Rob's Bakery. Learn more at robertsfamilyfarmky.com.

Lebanon Christmas Tree Farm, Ridgeville, South Carolina — Leyland cypress, Carolina sapphire, spruce pine and Virginia pine. Also, hayrides, a barrel train ride for the kiddies and more. There's also an on-site restaurant, The Farmer's Daughter. Learn more at lebanonchristmastree.com.

Thornhill Farm Christmas Trees, Pisgah, Alabama — Leyland cypress and white pines. Enjoy hot chocolate or warm cider while they cut, shake and bag your chosen tree for you. Online: thornhillchristmastrees.com.

Green Cedar Tree Farm, Nicholasville, Kentucky — Freshly cut Fraser firs and blue spruce trees from the Blue Ridge Mountains available on Saturday, Nov. 26, for the farm's annual Green Cedar Christmas, a festival with free hot cocoa, lessons in making holiday wreaths, farm animal encounters and live Christmas music. Also, find the perfect spot to get your family picture taken for your photo Christmas cards. Any trees left over will be sold on a first-come, first-served basis. Details online at greencedarfarm.com.

Turkey Creek Christmas Tree Farm, McCormick, South Carolina — White pine, Virginia pine, Leyland cypress, Eastern red cedar, blue ice cypress and Carolina sapphire. Play area for the kids. Check out the farm's Facebook page for the latest offerings. Learn more at turkeycreekchristmastreefarm.com. 📱

Tips for a fresh tree

Naturally, a newly cut tree is going to be fresher than one that's been on a lot for a while, but it still needs some TLC. Here are some tips to help your tree last the season:

- 🌲 Start with a healthy, vibrant tree. You're going to get that from a tree farm, but be sure to trim any lower or dead branches.
- 🌲 Make a clean, straight cut across the bottom. Most tree farms will do this for you and drill a hole in the bottom if you have the kind of tree stand that needs one.
- 🌲 Water, water, water. Get the tree in water as soon as you come home and continue to water every day.
- 🌲 Keep the tree cool and away from any heat source that will dry it out.
- 🌲 Use LED lights. They don't get as hot, though they won't give the traditional light you may desire.
- 🌲 After Christmas, recycle your Christmas tree. Many towns offer a free service that turns them into mulch.

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The Upcountry Fiber Foundation was founded to give back to the community through charity, including education donations.

Photo by Foundry Film

A spirit of giving

**UPCOUNTRY
FIBER
FOUNDATION
PROVIDES
PHILANTHROPIC
COMMUNITY
SUPPORT**



Story by PATRICK SMITH

For nearly a century, people across rural South Carolina have depended on reliable services from Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative and West Carolina Telephone Cooperative.

Decades ago, locals banded together to bring electricity and telephone services to rural farms larger providers once bypassed. They gave their time and energy to a cause they believed in because they understood the importance of their way of life on the farm.

The same spirit lives on. Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative and WCFIBER, a West Carolina Tel subsidiary, formed Upcountry Fiber; a partnership to provide high-speed fiber internet service to customers. In support of philanthropic giving and to ensure community-minded organizations are financially secure, Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative and WCFIBER recently created the Upcountry Fiber Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

“We want the Upcountry Fiber Foundation to last for generations,” says Daja Davidson, Upcountry Fiber and Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative marketing specialist. “Giving has been a founding principle of both organizations since their inceptions, and we plan to continue to give so we can serve the philanthropic needs of the community.”

LIVING THE MISSION

Established as a permanent endowment to enrich the lives of residents in the service territories of both organizations, the foundation serves the community in the interests of education, youth, culture, arts, health and human services. “We’re committed to creating a stronger connection between the organizations that link people and businesses with areas of need,” Davidson says. “It’s exciting to think about the future and everyone who will be positively impacted through giving.”

As its mission statement reads, the Upcountry Fiber Foundation works “to advance philanthropic initiatives through responsible giving, while driving sustainable impact in Upstate communities.”

Guiding the foundation are board members from each organization, along with both CEOs. They include: Jeff Wilson, CEO of WCFIBER; Jim Lovinggood, CEO of Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative; William Elrod; Spencer Dalton; Len Talley; Jimmy Lee Dodgens; Aimee Gray; Eric McCall; Robert Hester; and Mike Thomas.

BLUE RIDGE FEST

For more than 20 years, the money from Blue Ridge Fest, a large, employee-coordinated music festival and car show, provided financial support to 12 area charities. Sidelined by the pandemic, and with the start of the Upcountry Fiber Foundation, the 2019 event became the final curtain call. During its run, Blue Ridge Fest raised nearly \$3 million and consistently brought in thousands of people, hundreds of cars and hundreds of sponsors.

Beneficiaries included A Call to Action, Anderson Free Clinic, Anderson Interfaith Ministries, Center for Developmental Services, Collins Children’s Home, The Dream Center of Pickens County, Feed a Hungry Child, Hospice of the Upstate, Golden Corner Food Pantry, Grace’s Closet and Pickens County Meals on Wheels.

“We’re thankful for such a great event for 23 years,” Davidson says. “With the money raised from prior events, we helped to decrease food insecurity, support education and faith-based services, health



Photo by Matt Ledger

care and more. Now, we’re excited to support our community through the new foundation.”

NEW APPROACH

The new fundraising approach will feature various donor-supported events. “With this foundation, we want to extend our giving beyond a one-time event, like Blue Ridge Fest,” Davidson says. “We plan to spread our giving over a full calendar year.”

In September 2022, the foundation hosted the Upcountry Fiber Charity Classic, its first fundraising event, at The Cliffs at Keowee Vineyards Golf Course. The event brought local businesses and residents together to raise money and awareness for South Carolina charities. “It was incredible to see such a warm reception for the foundation,” Davidson says. “As a completely donor-supported fundraiser, this helped us to start filling the pot with seed money and prepare the foundation for its giving in 2023.”

Broadband is often a driver of economic development, and each day Upcountry Fiber employees work to close the digital divide where little to no access to high-speed internet exists. “We’re proud to be able to offer fiber to so many who currently have no access to it,” says Jeff Wilson, WCFIBER CEO.

As the community improves through broadband, WCFIBER and Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative are also proud to

The Cliffs at Keowee Vineyards hosted golfers who participated in the 2022 Upcountry Fiber Charity Classic.


continue serving those in need through charitable giving.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

While the foundation is raising money now, applications and information on how to apply for assistance will be available in early 2023.

Giving helps provide for local causes, and it brings attention to some of the most serious issues facing the Upcountry area. Additionally, it harnesses the potential of people and communities.

The power of giving is practically limitless. For example, for many who struggle with poverty, securing three meals a day is difficult. Because many food charities take supplier donations and can make purchases in bulk, by giving about 50 cents a day, or \$180 a year, a donor can provide a family with the security of knowing they’ll no longer worry about their next meal. A small gift from one person can make an incredible impact.

“Charitable giving helps individuals and communities become sustainable,” Davidson says. “We have a history of giving back. Now, as we look to the future and expand our reach, the Upcountry Fiber Foundation is our way of leaving a lasting legacy across these great communities from our organizations.” 

Your *connected* gift guide

6 gift ideas that make the most of your high-speed internet

The holiday shopping season is here, and there has never been a better time to find the perfect gadget that takes advantage of your high-speed internet connection. From tools that make working from home look good to devices to unwind with, high-speed service will help these gifts shine for the techie in your life.

1. Google Nest Hub, \$50

Give the gift of better mornings with the Google

Nest Hub. Designed for the bedside, it can track sleep quality, update you on the weather and your calendar, stream music and video and control any smart home appliances you might have. It even has a built-in light sensor to make sure the screen is never too bright. Let's see an alarm clock do that.



2. Sonos Roam, \$180

The Roam is the perfect portable speaker for anyone on the move. Stream music, podcasts and more with great audio quality and take them from one room to the next with ease. Roam's Wi-Fi support automatically joins any other Sonos speakers around the house and also works as a smart speaker, connecting to Amazon's Alexa or Google Assistant.



3. Kindle Paperwhite, \$140

For the bookworm in the family, the Kindle Paperwhite is still the best e-reader around. The glare-free display is just like reading on real paper, while the 2021 model adds a warm light option to make reading at night easier on the eyes. Purchase new books or download old favorites in seconds without ever leaving your



favorite reading chair.

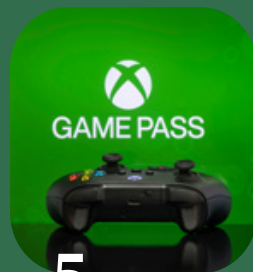
4. Logitech C920S Webcam, \$74

More people are working from home than ever before, so help the remote workers in your life look good while being productive. This Logitech webcam will offer a big upgrade over any built-in camera. It's also ideal for the livestreamers, offering great video quality at an affordable price.



5. Xbox Game Pass, \$9.99/month

If you're giving or receiving an Xbox Series X, Game Pass is a no-brainer. Essentially Netflix for games, the service offers hundreds of games on demand, from the biggest Xbox exclusives available on launch day to creative indies from your favorite developers. Download games in minutes with a fiber connection and discover something new.



6. Apple AirTag, \$30

Know someone who's always losing their keys? These tiny Bluetooth trackers are here to help. Attach them to your keys or anything else you're prone to misplacing, and the AirTag will leverage the network of nearby Apple devices to locate it — in some cases, within inches. For the Android user, the Tile Mate is just as handy. ☑



Tasty app-etizers

6 digital tools to level up your kitchen skills

Even the most experienced home cooks can use a little inspiration now and then. Fortunately, it's never been easier to find. The wide variety of cooking apps and websites available today make it easy to plan meals and even eat healthier. Whether you're looking to ditch the stacks of faded recipes, make something new or find video instructions to walk you through every step, these tools will bring a little extra flavor to your kitchen.



SideChef — If you're just starting out in the kitchen, SideChef is great for learning the basics. A cooking novice created the app for beginners, and it does away with fancy culinary terminology and instead offers dynamic guidance through recipes, providing step-by-step photos, hands-free voice commands and built-in timers. There are over 18,000 interactive smart recipes to try out, so pick your favorite and get cooking.



Food Network Kitchen — Craving something you just saw on the Food Network? The Food Network Kitchen features recipes from fan-favorite personalities and food writers, along with prep time, cook time and difficulty level. Any fan of the network will feel right at home in the app, which lets you search more than 80,000 recipes for categories like grilling, baking, kid-friendly and dairy-free.



Cookpad — For those looking for a more social cooking experience, Cookpad offers a community of home chefs around the world. Discover new ideas, share photos, ask questions and exchange advice. You can even take part in cooking challenges or online cooking classes. And since Cookpad's user base is global, there are plenty of international recipes to satisfy an adventurous palate.



Forks — From vegan lifestyle site Forks Over Knives, the Forks app offers over 600 recipes for anyone sticking to a plant-based diet. What the app lacks in quantity it makes up for in quality, convenience and ease of use. There are new recipes each week, and you can export your favorites to have a ready-made shopping list for your next grocery trip.



Mealime — Meal planning can be a headache, but Mealime makes it easy. The app curates recipe suggestions based on your preferences to help you find healthy new favorites. They're all guaranteed to take 30 minutes or less to cook, but you can also import recipes from the web to add more options.



Cook with Amber — Teenage cook Amber Kelley has been encouraging kids to get in the kitchen since 2012. Today, college keeps her pretty busy. But her YouTube channel, Cook with Amber, still features years' worth of videos that walk kids through their own healthy and delicious kitchen adventures so you can make dinner and memories together. 📺



A man on a mission

Bert Carver canvasses the area to connect neighbors

Story by LAZ DENES



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Bert Carver, right, speaks with neighbors who are eager to be connected to fiber broadband. Justin Ward works in the information technology department of the Oconee County Sheriff's Department, and his wife, Rachel, is a nurse practitioner.

Carver, right, convinces neighbor Brad Rogers to sign the campaign for service with Upcountry Fiber.

Bert Carver looks at a few photos sent by his granddaughters.



Bert Carver was on a mission early this year. For days, he drove the roads surrounding his home on the outskirts of Walhalla, South Carolina, and knocked on doors seeking signatures from neighbors who, like him, were eager for the arrival of Upcountry Fiber.

Tired of dreadfully slow internet connectivity, which often ground down to near dial-up speeds, Bert called his friend, Len Talley. Len is a board member of Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative which, in partnership with WCFIBER, began rolling out lightning-fast, reliable Upcountry Fiber service in 2021.

Community demand plays a key role in determining where the Upcountry Fiber network will expand next. Len said if Bert could collect 90 signatures from the 115 residences in his area — including homes along Willow Lane, Playground Road and Picket Post Road — Upcountry Fiber would be coming their way in relatively short order. It wasn't long before Bert accomplished the mission, gathering 93 signatures. And in the ensuing months,

more than 200 additional residents in the surrounding area expressed interest in Upcountry Fiber.

"I don't use the internet much, but my granddaughters work remotely. And my great-grandkids like to play video games and watch movies. That's not possible with the internet we have," Bert says.

"My neighbors were like me — they were discouraged with their internet service. A lot of them work from home, and they wanted to do all the things you can do with faster internet."

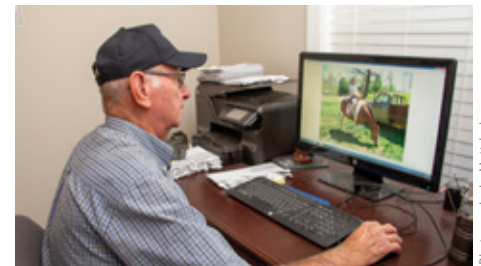
Gabe Bolding, manager of fiber optic operations for Blue Ridge Electric, says most of Oconee County was without fast, reliable internet.

Speed tests showed typical download speeds of 6 Mbps to as low as .1 Mbps, and typical upload speeds of .6 Mbps down to .1 Mbps.

Decisions on when and where to



Gabe Bolding



Photography by Matt Ledger

launch new fiber builds are based on four criteria — proximity to the existing Upcountry Fiber network, customer density, registered interest and need. "Before Bert's campaign, there wasn't a lot of interest in this sparsely populated area," Gabe says. "But, once he started going door to door, we saw a jump in interest. Then interest grew outside of where Bert was working. So, we had the need, interest and enough density to make the easy decision to extend our fiber lines into this area."

Thanks largely to Bert Carver's efforts, Upcountry Fiber plans to complete the project by the end of the year, weather permitting, or during the first quarter of 2023. 📍

Building broadband in the Blue Ridge

Upcountry Fiber will span the digital divide, providing high-speed internet access to underserved areas. The company combines the expertise of Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative and WCFIBER. The new service launched in 2021 and continues to grow rapidly.

▶▶ **REGISTRATION PAGE LINK:**
UpcountryFiber.com/updates

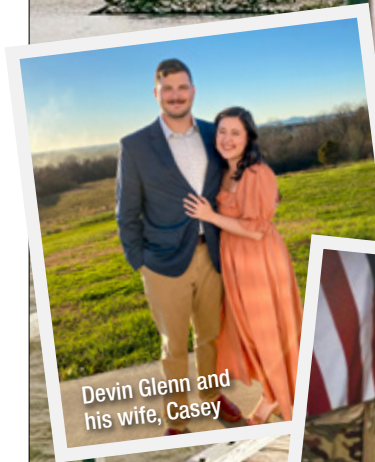


Drayton Epps installs equipment needed to connect a customer to fast internet service

Fiber construction projects underway or completed:

- ▶ North Pickens has over 200 miles of fiber added and completed by the end of October.
- ▶ Central Pickens County (mileage update on client proof)
- ▶ Central Anderson County (mileage update on client proof)
- ▶ Port Bass (mileage update on client proof)
- ▶ Friendship (mileage update on client proof)
- ▶ Six Mile (mileage update on client proof)

Employee Spotlight



Devin Glenn and his wife, Casey



DEVIN GLENN is a construction technician who is from Fair Play. He manages service connections and outdoor plant engineering, and coordinates with contractors. Before coming to work for Upcountry Fiber in February, Devin worked as a contractor. “I am currently working on an associate degree in business operations management at Tri-County Technical College,” he says.

Devin joined the U.S. Army in 2016, serving with the 10th Mountain Division as a fire support specialist and forward observer for artillery units. The following year, he was deployed to Iraq. “I ran some fiber in Iraq while I was deployed in 2017 for communications during our operations,” he says.

After completing his four-year enlistment, Devin joined the National Guard in 2020. He’s now with Detachment 4 HHB 1-134 Field Artillery Regiment. The unit has carried out several missions in Washington, D.C.

Devin and his wife, Casey, were together for five years before marrying in November 2020. In his free time, Devin enjoys hunting and working on weapons. His favorite movie is “Saving Private Ryan,” and he enjoys the “Game of Thrones” series on HBO. 🗨️

A tasty tradition

Celebrate the season with sweet holiday treats

Baking is a time-honored tradition in so many households this time of year. Kids love sprinkles, and holiday hosts appreciate having sweets on hand for unexpected guests and tasty gifts for neighbors and friends.

There are a few important tips that can make your holiday baking a stress-free experience and perhaps a little more rewarding for those who will be enjoying the results of your efforts. Many of us have had baking disasters that weren't funny at the time but made for entertaining stories later. That doesn't need to be the case, though, if you:

▶ **Organize** — Make lists of all the things

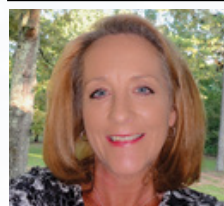
you want to bake and the ingredients you'll need. Do this a couple of days ahead of time so you can decide what will need to be frozen and used in coming weeks, such as cookie dough.

▶ **Check your pantry for the essentials** — Make sure you have plenty of sugar, flour, butter, eggs and the all-important extracts of the holiday season: vanilla, almond and, oh, yes, peppermint. There's nothing more aggravating than getting halfway through a recipe only to open the sugar bag and discover it's nearly empty. Don't forget cooking spray and parchment paper, too. You'll be needing them.

▶ **Make sure you have plenty of room in your refrigerator** — Some baked goods need to be chilled. This is a good time to throw out what's been in the fridge a little too long or to use up any leftovers.

▶ **Ponder presentation** — Check your closets and cabinets for decorative cookie tins. You'll need them for more than just cookies, they're also great for caramel corn, fudge, brownies and bars. A colorful holiday tin is so much more festive than a zip-top bag with a stick-on bow.

Now, get baking. It's almost Christmas!



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HOLIDAY CARAMEL CORN

One word of caution: be sure to weed out all of the unpopped kernels so there are no unexpectedly hard bites in this delicious, sweet-salty snack.

- 3 quarts popped popcorn (about 2 bags microwave popcorn, popped)
- 1/2 cup (1 stick) butter (no substitute)
- 1 cup brown sugar, firmly packed
- 1/4 cup dark corn syrup
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 2 cups mixed nuts

Heat oven to 250 F.

Place popped popcorn into a large, 4-inch-deep buttered baking pan, and place it in the oven to keep warm. In a large saucepan, melt the butter over

low heat. Stir in brown sugar, corn syrup and salt. Bring to a soft boil, stirring constantly. Boil without stirring for 5 minutes. Remove from heat, and quickly stir in the baking soda and vanilla.

Remove popcorn from the oven. Slowly pour syrup mixture over popcorn, and add nuts, mixing well. This may prove a bit difficult at first, as the caramel mixture hardens quickly once removed from the heat. But as you stir it while it's baking in the oven, it will soften and get much easier to stir.

Butter a large cookie sheet, and turn the popcorn mixture into the pan. Bake for 45 minutes to 1 hour, stirring every 15 minutes. You don't want the popcorn to get overly browned. Remove from the oven and cool completely. Break apart. Store in tightly covered tins.



CRANBERRY ORANGE HOLIDAY NUT BREAD

- 2 cups flour
- 1 cup sugar
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 3/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/4 cup butter, softened
- 1 tablespoon grated orange peel
- 3/4 cup orange juice
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 2 large eggs
- 1 cup fresh or frozen cranberries
- 6 ounces chopped pecans

Preheat the oven to 350 F. Grease the bottom of a 9-by-5-inch loaf pan and set aside.

In a large bowl, mix the flour, sugar, baking powder, salt and baking soda. Stir in the butter until the mixture is crumbly. Stir

in the orange peel, orange juice, vanilla and eggs, just until the batter comes together. Be careful not to overmix. Fold in the fresh cranberries and nuts.

Transfer the batter to the prepared baking pan. Bake until a wooden toothpick inserted in the middle comes out clean: about 50 minutes to 1 hour. Cool in the pan for 5 minutes before loosening the sides of the loaf from the pan. Transfer the loaf to a rack to cool completely before slicing. Let cool completely and wrap with plastic wrap.



PEANUT BUTTER STARS

A classic holiday cookie. These freeze well, so make plenty to enjoy throughout the season.

- 1/2 cup shortening
- 1/2 cup peanut butter
- 3/4 cup granulated sugar
- 1/2 cup packed brown sugar

- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/8 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 egg
- 2 tablespoons milk
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 1 3/4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1/4 cup granulated sugar
- Chocolate kisses or stars

Preheat the oven to 350 F.

In a large mixing bowl, beat shortening and peanut butter with an electric mixer on medium-high speed for 30 seconds. Add 1/2 cup of the granulated sugar, along with the brown sugar, baking powder and baking soda. Beat until combined, scraping sides of bowl occasionally. Beat in egg, milk and vanilla until combined. Beat in as much of the flour as you can with the mixer. Stir in any remaining flour.

Shape dough into 1-inch balls. Roll balls in 1/4 cup granulated sugar. Place 2 inches apart on an ungreased cookie sheet.

Bake for 10-12 minutes or until edges are firm and bottoms are lightly browned.

Immediately press a chocolate star or kiss into the center of each cookie. Transfer to a wire rack and let cool. Store in airtight containers. Makes 54 cookies. 📄



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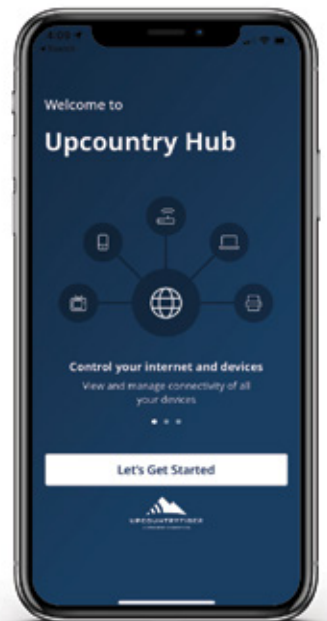
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