



UPCOUNTRY

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2023

CONNECTED

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Commitment to quality

THE VALUE OF FIBER

READY TO CRUISE



By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

Building the broadband workforce

Partnerships prepare for future growth

As we greet the new year, it's natural to look ahead to the next 12 months, which will again show our members supporting rural America by providing critical broadband internet service. It has been gratifying to see providers like yours working so furiously to build out broadband to communities still waiting for robust service while also serving existing customers. Yet, the work is never truly done.

Whether it is installations, upgrades or maintenance, there is certainly more than enough work to go around. That is why it is fitting that NTCA is stepping up to help broadband workers. Because retention and recruitment in rural markets is more challenging than urban areas, we are especially proud to work with some new partners to support the broadband providers we represent in creating a 21st century workforce.

We recently joined the White House's Talent Pipeline Challenge, a call to action for employers, education and training providers, and others to support equitable workforce development in critical infrastructure sectors like broadband. We have partnered with Northwood Technical College, the National Rural Education Association and the Communications Workers of America to expand training and job opportunities for rural America's broadband workforce.

These efforts seek to prepare for immediate growth in the broadband industry because of significant funding for network deployment in the Infrastructure Investment & Jobs Act, as well as future demand for high-tech jobs.

It's an exciting time to work in broadband, and you are fortunate to live somewhere served by a committed community-based provider. As connections grow, so will the number and skills of broadband workers. Stay tuned for more information soon from your provider about these initiatives.

Happy New Year. 🍀

A nourishing change

FCC embraces new broadband labels

Rural broadband providers have a deserved reputation for openness, but not every national company can say the same — shopping for service can be trying.

The Federal Communications Commission, however, intends to require internet providers to prominently display a “nutrition label” clearly detailing the specifics of each plan. The FCC passed a rule late last year clearing the way for this change, although implementation may take time and require additional input.

The intent is to eliminate hidden fees, confusion about data caps and uncertainty about speeds and generally to shine a bright light on what can be a confusing choice.

Each label will show key information — details wise consumers should consider now:

- Monthly price and contract length
- Whether that price will change after a certain period and, if so, what it will change to
- A complete list of monthly and one-time fees, as well as any early termination fee
- Whether the company participates in the Affordable Connectivity Program and a link to check if the consumer qualifies
- Typical download and upload speeds
- Data cap and price for exceeding that cap
- And more

The FCC must complete additional steps before implementing this change, and internet service providers will have time to update websites and other sales material. 🗨️

THE INFORMATION YOU NEED

The FCC is working to limit confusion about broadband services by creating a “nutrition label” providers must display to consumers. While implementation might take time, the example label provided by the FCC offers a guide to information shoppers might consider now when choosing a service.

Broadband Facts

Provider Name
Service Plan Name and/or Speed Tier
Fixed or Mobile Broadband Consumer Disclosure

Monthly Price [\$]

This Monthly Price [is/is not] an introductory rate. [If introductory rate is applicable, identify length of introductory period and the rate that will apply after introductory period concludes]

This Monthly Price [does not] require[s] a [x year/x month] contract. [only required if applicable; if so, provide link to terms of contract]

Additional Charges & Terms

Provider Monthly Fees <small>[Itemize each fee]</small>	[\$]
One-time Fees at the Time of Purchase <small>[Itemize each fee]</small>	[\$]
Early Termination Fee	[\$]
Government Taxes	Varies by Location

Discounts & Bundles
Click Here for available billing discounts and pricing options for broadband service bundled with other services like video, phone, and wireless service, and use of your own equipment like modems and routers. [Any links to such discounts and pricing options on the provider's website must be provided in this section.]

Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP)
The ACP is a government program to help lower the monthly cost of internet service. To learn more about the ACP, including to find out whether you qualify, visit affordableconnectivity.gov.

Participates in the ACP [Yes/No]

Speeds Provided with Plan

Typical Download Speed	[] Mbps
Typical Upload Speed	[] Mbps
Typical Latency	[] Ms

Data Included with Monthly Price [] GB

Charges for Additional Data Usage [\$/GB]

Network Management [Read our Policy](#)

Privacy [Read our Policy](#)

Customer Support
Contact Us: example.com/support/ / (555) 555-5555

Learn more about the terms used on this label by visiting the Federal Communications Commission's Consumer Resource Center.

fcc.gov/consumer

[Unique Plan Identifier Ex. F0005937974123ABC456EMC789]

GONE PHISHING

Don't get hooked by a ransomware attack



If you lost access to everything on your personal or work computer, how much would you pay to get it back? It's a question more people are asking themselves as ransomware attacks have continued to grow in number and severity.

About 21% of all cyberattacks in 2021 were ransomware attacks, according to IBM Security, costing individuals and businesses an estimated \$20 billion. From 2013 to 2020, the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center saw a 243% increase in ransomware reports. That growth comes thanks to services that offer ransomware-for-hire and the increased popularity of cryptocurrency, which make untraceable payments to these services easier than ever.

The FBI does not recommend victims of these attacks pay the ransom. Victims rarely see their data returned, and payment only encourages future attacks. Instead, the best protection against ransomware is to understand how it works, where it comes from and how to protect your data from the start.

WHAT IS RANSOMWARE?

Ransomware is a type of malware, or malicious software, which locks the victim

out of data on their computer until they pay for access to be restored. Most ransomware attacks target individuals, although attacks on large organizations with even bigger payouts have grown in popularity.

In the past, these situations largely involved attackers demanding a ransom to unlock the data. Today, most are "double extortion" assaults in which attackers demand payment for returning the data and to prevent it from being stolen again.

WHAT CAUSES IT?

Ransomware can infect your computer in many of the same ways as any other virus:


- **Phishing emails** — These emails trick users into downloading a malicious attachment disguised as a harmless file or visiting a website that can download the ransomware through their browsers.
- **Software vulnerabilities** — Hackers can find holes in a piece of software's cybersecurity protection or buy information on these flaws to download the malware onto a device or network.
- **Stolen logins** — Whether they're obtained through phishing, purchased on the dark web or hacked by brute force,

stolen credentials give cybercriminals direct access to download malware onto a device.

- **Repurposed malware** — Some ransomware is actually malware developed for other attacks like stealing bank information, and it's reworked to encrypt and lock personal data.

HOW CAN I AVOID IT?

Since paying attackers is not a reliable way to deal with ransomware, the best defense is to protect yourself and your devices before an attack can begin:

- Keep backups of any important data to eliminate most of the leverage an attacker might have.
- Update your computer's software and operating system regularly to protect against the latest threats.
- Update your computer's cybersecurity tools to help response teams detect and react to new ransomware attacks faster.
- Always be aware of phishing, social engineering and other strategies that can lead to a ransomware attack. 

TO LEARN MORE, visit www.stopthinkconnect.org.



New year, same mission

Let's make more progress

Welcome to 2023! We started this magazine last year, and we couldn't be more pleased to continue offering you Upcountry Connected into 2023.



JEFF WILSON (L)
Chief Executive Officer
WCFIBER

JIM LOVINGGOOD (R)
Chief Executive Officer
Blue Ridge Electric

The new year is an opportunity to take stock of what we've accomplished and set new goals. In short, during 2022, we:

- Built 1,300 miles of fiber.
- Connected more than 8,000 customers.
- Provided access to faster internet for 12,000 additional homes.
- Averaged 100 miles of fiber construction a month — faster than any project ever to come into this area.

We see the need, and we are not slowing, despite some challenging conditions. While trenching through mountains, we often hit rock and are navigating through significant vegetation. And yet, we're reaching some of the most remote homes and connecting them to the world.

Virtual schooling is an option. Remote work is suddenly a possibility. Gaming is happening without lag. Business expansion in the Upstate just got easier.

In short, we're making progress. As we look toward a theme for 2023, we keep going back to that simple word: **PROGRESS.**

Progress is what fuels us. It motivates us — the satisfaction of seeing it and the drive to move forward.

We have heard from many customers who are elated to have service after years of living in areas without it. The relief, joy and the possibilities broadband present are life-changing. These stories are our "why." Our crews work in tough conditions and put in tiring days. But nothing replaces the joy on a customer's face when we are finally able to deliver high-speed fiber internet.

There's no doubt, it's a long process. We know many of you are still waiting. We see you, and we're working for you.

As you know, good things take time. Teddy Roosevelt said, "Nothing in the world is worth having or worth doing unless it means effort, pain, difficulty ... I have never in my life envied a human being who led an easy life. I have envied a great many people who led difficult lives and led them well."

We've reflected on those words several times in the past year. It's not unlike the Great Electrification, when we banded together to electrify the rural Upstate. We hear the calling again. We're not doing this because it's easy; we're doing it because it's right.

Together, we're changing lives. We couldn't do this without your interest and support. While the road ahead of us is long, we're not slowing down. This next year will be one of progress. More customers, more connections and a growing family. We are Upcountry Fiber, and YOU are our purpose. 📡



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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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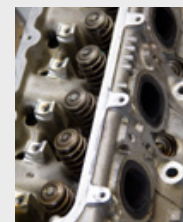
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In 2018, Aaron Yoder started his own repair shop in Westminster with Yoder Automotive. See story Page 12.

Photo by Matt Ledger

A new classic

Upcountry Fiber golf tournament raises \$125K for local nonprofits

Story by DREW WOOLLEY

Dozens of golfers gathered at The Cliffs at Keowee Vineyards last September for the inaugural Upcountry Fiber Charity Classic. Teams competed for prizes like a Yeti cooler, a Sunday golf club stand bag and boxes of Titleist Pro V1 golf balls, all while raising over \$125,000 for local charities.

Those funds, along with the support of dozens of sponsors who donated to or participated in the tournament, helped kick-start the Upcountry Fiber Foundation, the charitable arm of Upcountry Fiber. While Upcountry Fiber aims to bridge the digital divide by bringing high-speed internet to underserved communities in the region, the foundation will give back by providing funding to local nonprofits.

Upcountry Fiber was born in 2020 out of a partnership between Blue Ridge Electric Co-op and WCFIBER, a subsidiary of WCTEL. In fact, the Upcountry Fiber Charity Classic builds on the tradition of the Blue Ridge Fest, an annual event Blue Ridge Electric organized for 23 years until the pandemic in 2020. The event raised more than \$3 million in that time, bringing the community together around its love of classic cars, good music and family.

A total of 76 golfers came out to compete in the first-ever Upcountry Fiber Charity Classic, which showcased the beauty of Upstate South Carolina and the hospitality of its residents. Of all those participating, the OneTone team featuring Scott Loggins, Blake Hamm, Adam Duncan and Chris Grant came out on top.

With the success of its first major fund-raising event, the foundation will begin considering applications for grants in early 2023. Funding is available to local nonprofits serving the community. For more information, or to apply for funding, visit upcountryfiber.com/foundation.



Dozens of golfers eagerly await the first tee times.



ABOVE LEFT: Golfers competed for a variety of prizes during the inaugural Upcountry Fiber Foundation charity golf tournament.

ABOVE RIGHT: The winning team, OneTone, includes, from left, Scott Loggins, Blake Hamm, Adam Duncan and Chris Grant.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Participants in the golf tournament included, from left, Electricom Senior Director of South Atlantic Operations JJ Hudson, WCFIBER CEO Jeff Wilson, BREC CEO Jim Lovinggood and Electricom President and CEO Rajive Beri.

What is the Upcountry Fiber Foundation?

The Upcountry Fiber Foundation (UFF) is a separate 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that serves as the philanthropic arm of Upcountry Fiber. Founded in spring 2022 by Upcountry Fiber's two governing organizations, Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative and WCFIBER, UFF established a permanent endowment that will enrich the lives of residents in the Upcountry Fiber and Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative service territories. UFF will proudly offer financial support to philanthropic organizations serving the community in the interests of education, youth, culture, arts, health and human services.

Brighten the winter

Plan now to cruise this year



Story by ANNE BRALY

When the days are cold, sun-down seems to arrive in the middle of the afternoon and skies are gray, there's no better time to turn daydreams of warm breezes, blue water and sand into reality. You might even save a little money while you're at it.

Cruising the Caribbean is a temptation thousands of people can't resist, and planning now can make a difference. "All of the major cruise lines have returned their fleets to full deployment," says Wes Rowland, president of cruiseexperts.com. "Cruising is back."

As a result, more cruise lovers are going to be on the water, and finding a deal for the best rooms and views is getting harder. There's so much to decide — dates, itineraries, cruise lines, room types and more. One of the first considerations is the port of origin. Fortunately, Southerners have options. In

Florida, you'll find ports in Tampa, Port Canaveral and Miami. Or, you can set sail from Charleston, South Carolina, or New Orleans. Even Galveston, Texas, can be a short, affordable flight away.

"It helps if you can find an experienced and trusted travel professional who can help you navigate the variables of a cruise purchase, understand your needs and expectations, help interpret value and give good guidance so you can make an informed decision in your best interest," Wes says.

The best cruise deals are not only about getting the lowest price. Cruise lines now offer attractive options, including amenities that once cost extra. Check out some of the top cruise sites online and you'll find that cruises now include more in the up-front price, such as beverage packages, tips, free specialty dining and Wi-Fi.

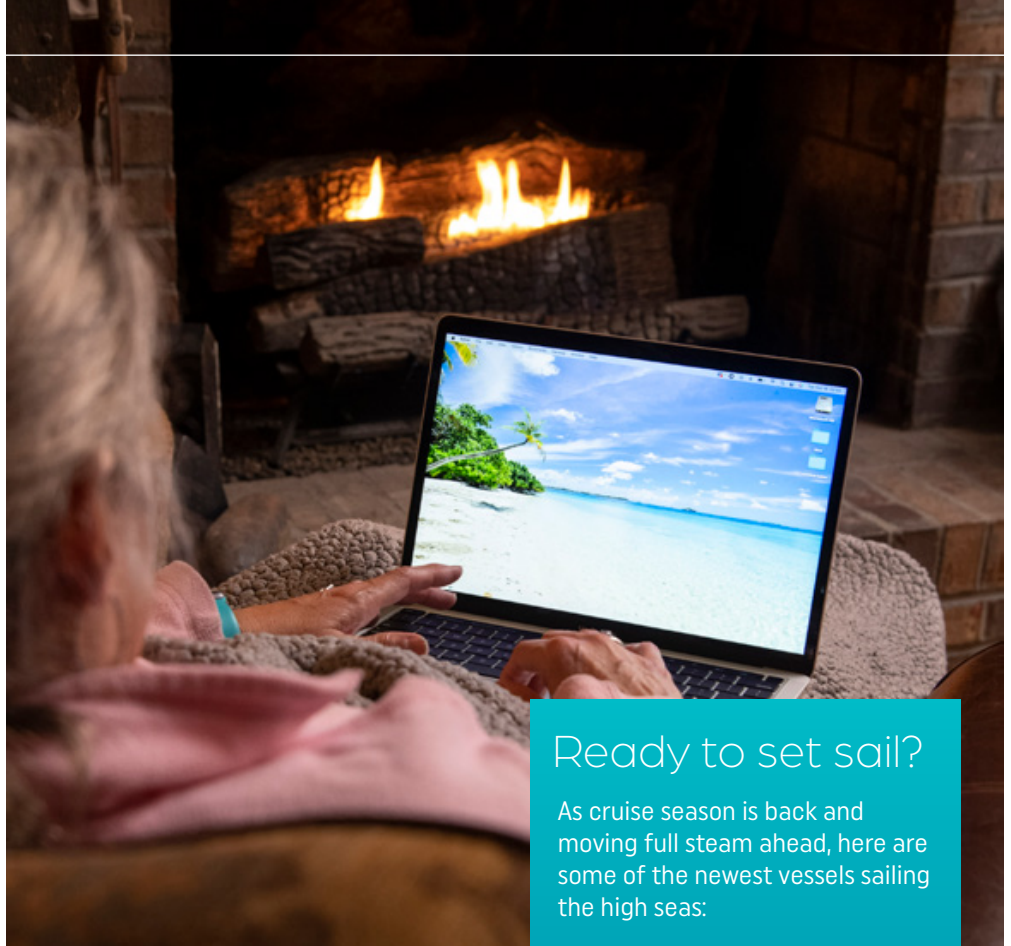
"It's a better value for the guest," Wes says. "Cruise lines took advantage of the unplanned downtime during the pandemic to retire the oldest ships from their fleets. With new ships coming on line, consumers have better choices of fabulous, amenity-packed ships than ever."

For example, Norwegian's 2023 schedule includes a seven-night cruise of the Western Caribbean, April 9-16, 2023, in a suite with a balcony for \$899 per person with double occupancy. The offer includes unlimited bar, a specialty dining experience, excursions and Wi-Fi.

CONSIDER 'SHOULDER SEASON'

Supply and demand determine rates, so if your travel dates are flexible take advantage of what budget cruisers consider the Holy Grail of deals — shoulder season. This window between the peak

blues



With cruises booking up for spring, planning now will help you find the adventure and pricing you want. So brighten the winter gloom with dreams of the sea.

and off-seasons, from late September through mid-November, offers the best deals and smaller crowds. “Sometimes it’s just the perception of when it’s better or worse to travel. You need to know what your priorities are,” Wes says.

TIPS FOR BUYING A CRUISE

If you choose to go it alone, do your homework. There’s no guarantee you’ll find the lowest rate, but these tips from cruiseexpert.com will help you be smarter about buying your vacation:

- Final deposits are due three months before the cruise. Usually, that’s the last date a cruise can be canceled without a penalty. This is when you can snag a good deal as cruise lines slash rates to try to fill empty cabins.
- Book for fall or spring when most families with school-age children cannot travel. There’s typically more

availability, and lower pricing, during these times.

- If you’re willing to risk it, book a Caribbean cruise during hurricane season when prices are much lower. Just be sure to invest in travel insurance and make sure your prepaid deposits and other expenses are covered.
- Aggregate sites — independent websites offering trips on multiple cruise lines — allow you to check out many options at once. Sites include cruisecritic.com, gotosea.com, cruises.com and cheapcruises.com.
- If you’re new to cruising and want to see if it’s right for you, try taking a short, two- to three-night cruise first. Royal Caribbean’s recently refurbished Freedom of the Seas is one option. It makes short cruises between Miami and the Bahamas. [📧](#)

Ready to set sail?

As cruise season is back and moving full steam ahead, here are some of the newest vessels sailing the high seas:

- ▶ Royal Caribbean's Odyssey of the Seas embarked on its first cruise in 2021 and is the first Quantum Ultra-Class Ship in North America offering bumper cars, glow-in-the-dark laser tag and virtual reality games. Passengers can kick back and relax beside the newly designed, resort-style pool. This ship is a game-changer for the cruise industry.
- ▶ Princess Cruises' Enchanted Princess launched in 2019 and offers a touch more sophistication than ships geared toward the teenage set. Dining options are excellent on all the cruise line's Medallion Class vessels, the category to which the Enchanted Princess belongs.
- ▶ MSC Cruises' Virtuosa set sail in 2019. There's a humanoid robot bartender in the Starship Club. The ship has the longest LED dome at sea, and it towers over a promenade of retail shops and restaurants. There are five pools that range from a waterpark for the kids to a quieter place to relax for adults.

BIG BENEFIT

HIGH-SPEED INTERNET HELPS HOME SALES, RENTALS

Story by JOHN CLAYTON

The sale of the home didn't come down to hardwood floors, a potential media room or stunning views. Instead, it was decided by the availability of a high-speed internet connection.

"Literally, this morning, a real estate agent texted me and asked if Upcountry Fiber had service to a certain address," Upcountry Fiber Area District Manager Max Crawford says. "Our service was the difference whether he sold the house or not. Luckily, we did have service at that address, so that shows you how extremely important high-speed internet access is. Not only does it raise the value of your house, it also just lets you live where you want to live."

According to a study by the Fiber Broadband Association, a home's access to fiber internet may increase the property's value by about 3.1%. So, on a \$200,000 home, high-speed internet can increase a house's value by around \$6,000.

There is no doubt in Max's mind that the buyer his real estate agent friend texted about would have walked away from the deal had Upcountry Fiber services not been available. "Internet is quickly becoming just as important as power and water in a lot of situations," he says. "It's being called the 'fifth utility' for a reason."

A SELLING POINT FOR AGENTS

As her middle name suggests, local Realtor Reah Land Smith is an expert in real estate. She jokes that she certainly has sold plenty of dirt and works with scores of clients relocating to the Upstate.

They are able to work remotely, take classes and have the same online entertainment options they did in larger cities — if they have the internet connectivity they need.

"Nobody wants to be in a data desert where you're not able to work or do what you need to do," Reah says. "It's a requirement of literally everyone now." She is the 2023 president-elect for South Carolina Realtors, and her term will begin in 2024.





Realtor Reah Smith helps buyers relocating from downtown Greenville and even digital nomads looking to spend time in a rural area.

“How do you function in a home without water or power?” she says. “It’s the same if you’re isolated off the grid without a strong data connection and fast, high-speed fiber. So, it’s very important.”

Reah says high-speed internet isn’t the only factor for buyers, but it is an important one. She has no shortage of selling points in the Seneca area. Lake Hartwell and Lake Keowee have waterfront views. Also, Clemson University is a bustling social, entertainment and educational hub. “A lot of my buyer clients are going to shop multiple markets,” Reah says. “If they have already ruled out Florida, they want something a little different. More like we offer here.”

But buyers might also consider areas in the region with mountain lakes or lakes managed by the Tennessee Valley Authority. Also, Tennessee’s tax system is different than that of South Carolina, which might also be a consideration for buyers.

However, Oconee County and the surrounding areas benefit from the arrival of Upcountry Fiber, made possible through a partnership between Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative and WCFIBER. With 1 Gbps internet speeds and other services from Upcountry Fiber increasingly available, Reah and other real estate agents have critical new selling points to discuss with buyers.

“Now that a lot of folks have been given the option to be a hybrid worker or a fully remote worker, they question why they live in the city centers and are looking at alternatives elsewhere,” Reah says. “There are folks out there — the digital nomads, as we call them — that are looking to spend maybe a month in a short-term rental in a place that maybe they can’t afford to live but they’re able to go for a month. I’m hearing of companies offering incentive programs for a lease option.”

‘A BIG PART OF OUR BUYING DECISION’

David Beckett and his family spent a year living in an RV after arriving from Parker, Colorado. He worked remotely as a security specialist, and they looked for a permanent home. He needed speeds of 1 Gbps or more but couldn’t always find them.

“It was a big part of our buying

decision,” David says of internet connectivity. “We actually didn’t buy one of the homes we considered because of it.” Minus the RV, David’s story is not uncommon for remote workers.

“They need fast internet speeds to do their jobs,” Reah says. She and other real estate agents make sure they have an understanding of their clients’ needs, while also making sure the clients know they cannot assume connections exist in every area of the region.

“The assumption is high-speed internet is here. So, there is an education process for my buyer clients,” Reah says. “Oftentimes, the assumption is it is here because they’re coming from Silicon Valley, the greater Chicago area or the Northeast where there’s different utility capability than what we’ve traditionally had. So that becomes an education piece.”



Network technician Drayton Epps connects a new customer.



Network technician Drayton Epps secures an Optical Network Terminal, which connects internet service to a home.



A crew runs conduit for fiber optic lines and a required pedestal box.

8 apps for every pet owner



Story by DREW WOOLLEY

New pets are always popular gifts around the holidays. But the new year is when the responsibility for all that feeding, walking and those never-ending bathroom breaks can really set in. Fortunately, technology is here to help you stay on top of all of your new best friend's needs, from training and wellness to games and socialization. Check out these apps to see how they can make pet care simpler, whether you're a new pet owner or an amateur zookeeper.



Puppr — Every new dog owner could use some help with training. With Puppr, you have access to training videos, over 100 lessons,

live chats with trainers, progress tracking and more. Celebrity dog trainer Sara Carson leads the programs, and your pup will be able to keep up with her “super collies” in no time.



Cat Training Tips — If you're looking to establish ground rules with a new feline friend, the more streamlined Cat Training

Tips app is a good reference for practical tips on common issues like litter box training and scratching.



Pet First Aid — Every pet owner worries about what to do in an emergency situation. The Pet First Aid app from the American Red

Cross has you covered. It offers step-by-step instructions for situations like your pet being attacked by another animal or eating something toxic. You can even learn how to give your pet CPR, check for warning signs and look up the closest veterinary hospital.



11pets — Keeping up with your pet's medical needs on top of your own can be a challenge, which is why it helps to have an app like

11pets to keep everything covered. Store your furry friend's medical history, medication and vet schedules, or track their weight and nutrition to make sure they're on the healthy path.



Cat Fishing 2 — Humans aren't the only ones who enjoy a good mobile game. Cat Fishing 2 from Friskies is designed specifically for

cats, and you can download it to your phone or tablet. Start it up, place your device on the floor and let your cat kill time swiping at colorful fish on the screen.



BarkHappy — If you're looking for dog-friendly people and places in your area, BarkHappy is the app for you. Use the interactive

map to find hotels, restaurants, bars and more where your dog will be welcome. You can also send out the call if your pup goes missing or find nearby dogs with whom to set up a play date.



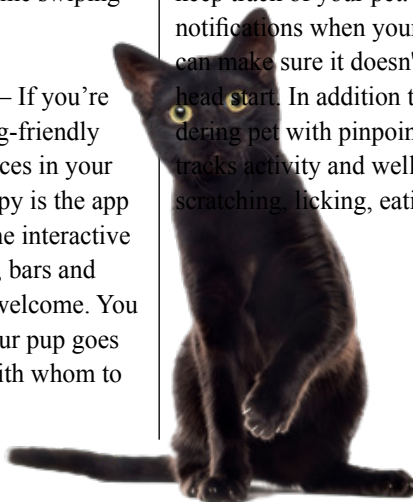
Rover — Rover is the top pet sitting app with over 200,000 caretakers in the U.S. and Canada. Rover's team handles the vetting,

and over 95% of reviewed services on the app have earned a five-star rating. Despite the name, Rover offers services for all kinds of pets, not just dogs. The app is also great for pet lovers looking for new job opportunities.



Whistle — You probably know an adventurous dog who likes to explore every chance it gets. With the

Whistle app and accompanying GPS tracker, it's never been easier to keep track of your pet. The app sends you notifications when your pet gets out so you can make sure it doesn't get too much of a head start. In addition to finding your wandering pet with pinpoint accuracy, the app tracks activity and wellness indicators like scratching, licking, eating and drinking. 🗨️



SIT, STAY, BINGE



Your furry friends might fetch the remote for these programs

With more TV shows streaming every day, there is more entertainment than anyone can keep up with. But did you know your pet might enjoy a good binge as much as you?

Programming for pets is on the rise but it's not a new idea. In 2012, the dog food brand Bakers began running a 60-second commercial targeted right at their canine consumers, complete with barking dogs to get their attention and high-pitched sounds human viewers couldn't hear.

If you're worried that your pets might get bored while you're away at work, or you just can't give them your full attention 24/7, consider some of this programming that can help stimulate, relax and even train your pet throughout the day.

DOGTV

When it comes to man's best friend, there's a dedicated streaming service to keep your dog happy and occupied. Available on major streaming devices like Roku, Chromecast and Apple TV, DOGTV offers a variety of programming.

Some programs offer playful sequences to prevent boredom and provide mental stimulation, while others offer calming scenes to keep pooches relaxed. Training programs help dogs get used to common

noises like doorbells and car sounds. There are even a few shows available for their humans.

SQUIRREL!

Think your furry friends might be getting bored while you're away from home? Many cats and dogs respond to videos of birds, squirrels and fish. Cats, in particular, are visual animals, making them more likely to be entertained and mentally enriched by watching the quick movements of prey across a screen.

Because dogs rely more on their sense of smell, breeds with better eyesight are more likely to show interest in the TV. They tend to respond to images of other dogs running or socializing and might try to interact as they would in real life by barking or sniffing. Fortunately, no matter what grabs your pets' attention, there are plenty of videos available on sites like YouTube designed to keep them occupied for hours while you're out.

FOR THE BIRDS

Birds can be extremely smart and emotionally sensitive animals, making it especially challenging to keep them occupied. Many birds have a natural interest in new sounds and colors, making the TV a

good way to keep them engaged throughout the day.

If you're trying to expand your feathered friend's vocabulary, some programming might even help to train them while you're out. Repetition is key for helping any bird pick up a new word or phrase, and there are numerous videos available that will repeat common phrases for hours on end. Hit play and run, keeping your bird mentally engaged while you're away.

FUN AND GAMES

If your cat likes to curl up next to you during a gaming session, consider adding "Stray" to your list. When BlueTwelve Studio released its cat-themed adventure game last year, it was an instant hit with cat owners. But it turns out the game was just as interesting to their feline friends.

Videos and photos of players' cats being entranced by the digital kitty on screen became so popular that PlayStation even put out the call for submissions for a charity event with the hashtag #StrayReactions. The best ones went into a digital photo book presented to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals along with a \$25,000 donation. That's a win for everyone. 🐾

Career overhaul

Fine tuning the automotive repair experience

Story by JOHN CLAYTON

A few years back, Aaron Yoder began taking Fridays off from his job to work for himself as a mechanic. It wasn't long before it became clear that opening a business of his own was the path he needed to take.

"When I was at my job, my heart was really at my own shop," Aaron recalls. "I wanted to be here the other four days of the week, and it all happened pretty quick."

By May 2018, Yoder's Automotive in Westminster was a reality, and Aaron put into practice his philosophy of helping customers through stressful situations. "Business is about taking care of people. This is almost as important as the product or service you provide," he says. "Sometimes people are already anxious because their car broke down, so you need to let them know that you're going to be taking care of them. If you do that, they can kind of relax a little bit."

That part of the automotive repair business has been pretty much the same since Auburns, Cords and Studebakers traveled the roadways. But other aspects of the industry have changed, including the need for reliable, high-speed internet.

LANE CHANGE

When Upcountry Fiber arrived in Westminster through a partnership with Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative, Aaron jumped at the opportunity to improve his internet service. Today he's an enthusiastic Upcountry Fiber business internet and phone customer.

"If we don't have internet, we're basically shut down," he says. "We order all of our parts through online portals. Our invoicing and our point-of-sale system and service manuals are on the cloud."

"Probably, second to electricity, it is our biggest need. Just about everything is done on the internet."

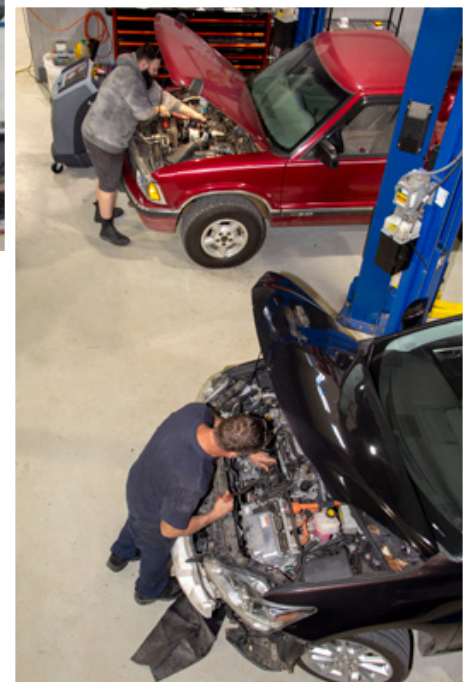


LEFT: Aaron Yoder uses a tablet to check on the daily shipment of automotive parts.

BELOW: Yoder's Automotive technicians complete repairs on two vehicles.

Aaron sees similarities between his business philosophy of taking care of people and the way Upcountry Fiber is quickly building a reputation for looking after its customers. "I know if I have a problem, I can call and talk to local service guys, and they will be out here to take care of it," he says. "I like to support local companies. If there's a good alternative, I'm going to take it, and I'm happy with Upcountry Fiber. It's fast internet, and it's steady. I haven't had any glitches."

With a local service provider, Aaron says he receives the type of service he expects to provide for his customers. As a mechanic, and now, as a business owner, Aaron knows it isn't possible to please everybody, but that hasn't stopped him from trying. "There are a ton of repair shops," he says. "Anybody can fix your car, so we try to have really good communication with the customer before we spend their money." 📱



Photography by Matt Ledger

Yoder's Automotive

304 West Pond Fork Road,
Westminster

864-482-8348

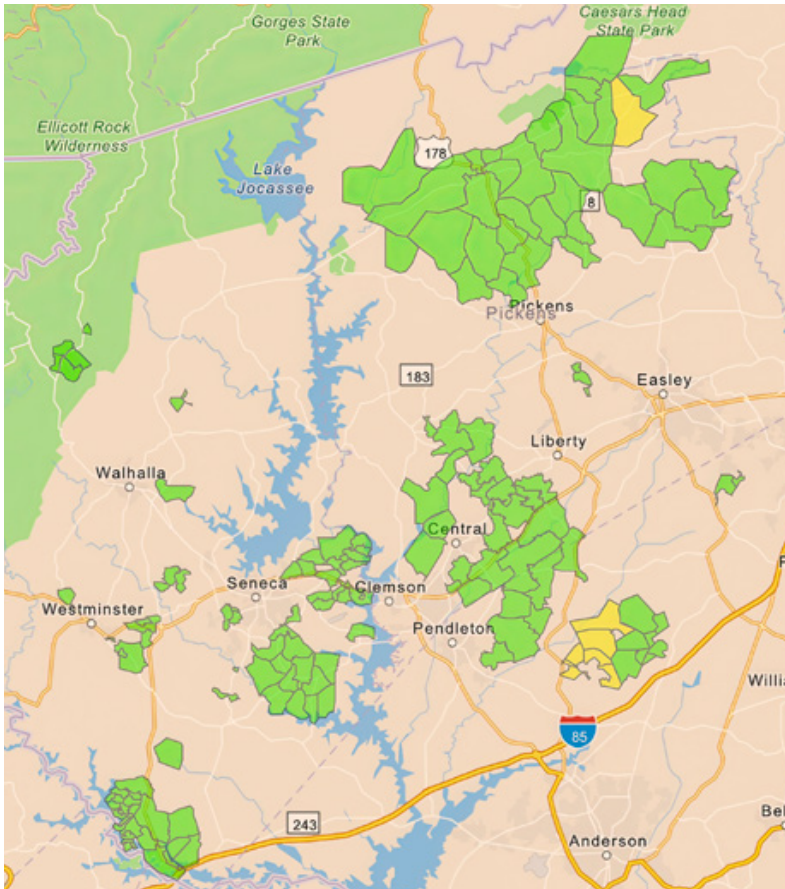
Email: yodersauto@gmail.com

Open Monday-Friday
from 7 a.m.-4 p.m.

yodersautomotive.com

BUILDING BROADBAND in the Upstate

Since launching in 2021, Upcountry Fiber has, on average, deployed more than 100 miles of fiber each month. We are committed to expanding the reach of our high-speed internet to the 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 services are available in the green areas shown on our network map. The yellow represents places where crews are working or have recently completed work.

▶▶ To learn more about Upcountry Fiber, and to register your interest in signing up for service, go to upcountryfiber.com.



The Network Operations Center for Upcountry Fiber is located at the WCTEL office in Abbeville. The team that manages the system includes, from left: Network Operations Manager Troy Mack, Team Lead Richie Stone, Contractor Julian White, Tech I Jared Lopez, Tech I Timothy Cann, Tech I Chase Charing and Director of Business Solutions/ Network Operations Chuck Nash.

EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT



The Bolding family includes, from left, Gabe, Lillie, Gill, Aleesha, and Annie.

GABE BOLDING is the manager of fiber optic operations for Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative, working primarily out of the Pickens office. A 17-year BREC employee, Gabe has extensive experience in inventory management, supply chain and fleet tracking and project management of installations.

Gabe and his wife, Aleesha, married in 2005 and have three children: Lillie, 13; Annie, 8; and Gill, 5. The family has a golden retriever named Boots. A man of faith, Gabe earned a master's degree in apologetics. "I believe strongly in serving our neighbors and am a lay pastor at our church, Crosspoint Church in Clemson," Gabe says.

He was raised on his grandparents' farm, and still actively works the land. "I love the outdoors and like to hunt, trout fish and play golf," he says.

When Gabe is home he likes to stream movies, including "Sherlock Holmes," "Secondhand Lions," "The Godfather" and the recent James Bond movies starring Daniel Craig. His kids absolutely love "Bluey." His enjoys the Chick-fil-A app and the navigation tool Waze, which helps with traveling to BREC projects. 🗨️

AIR FRYERS

can solve dinnertime dilemmas

The savior of simple dishes and leftover pizza

Air fryers have crisped their way into America's heart. Ranging from models with one knob and a basket to others with lots of bells and whistles, they've become as common in the American kitchen as toasters and coffeepots.

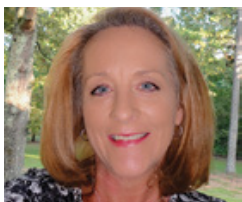
So how do you know which air fryer is the best fit for you?

You'll become a champion of the air fryer with the Ninja. Priced around \$150, it has a large basket and multiple settings that allow for dehydrating, reheating, baking and, oh yes, air frying. If you plan to do a good bit of cooking in your air fryer, this may be the model for you.

But if you're cooking for one, or just want to see if an air fryer is right for you, then a less-expensive option like Dash's air fryer — \$49.95 at online retailers — might be better. With just one setting and a compact size, it's perfect for one baked potato, a handful of French fries or a chicken thigh or two. It comes in multiple colors to add a little pizzazz to your kitchen counter.

It goes without saying that air frying is a healthier alternative to deep frying. Think of an air fryer as multiple appliances in one. It cooks quickly like a microwave, toasts like a toaster oven and fries like a deep fryer.

These kitchen wonders work magic on vegetables, proteins and baked goods because they're basically small convection ovens. They have a fan-and-exhaust system that blows hot air across your food for even cooking and browning. It works just as well whether you're making breaded onion rings from the freezer, roasting fresh broccoli or frying up some wings. Baking powder in the rub helps make air fryer wings crispy.



FOOD EDITOR
ANNE P. BRALY
IS A NATIVE OF
CHATTANOOGA, TENNESSEE.

Photography by MARK GILLILAND | Food Styling by RHONDA GILLILAND



AIR FRYER CHICKEN WINGS

- 12 chicken wings, whole
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper (optional)
- 1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1 cup Buffalo hot sauce

Cut the wings into pieces so you have 24 wings. Preheat the air fryer to 380 F. Spray the fryer basket after preheating. Place the wings in a large bowl and add olive oil, garlic powder, baking powder, salt, cayenne pepper and

black pepper. Toss wings until fully covered. Place the wings in a single layer — as many as will fit without overlapping — on the air fryer basket.

Air fry the wings at 380 F for 20 minutes, flipping them every 5 minutes. Increase the temperature to 400 F and cook an additional 2 minutes for extra crispy skin. Use a digital meat thermometer to ensure the internal temperature is 165 F.

Carefully remove the wings from the air fryer, cover with Buffalo sauce and serve with your favorite sides.



CRISPY AIR FRYER POTATOES

- 1 pound small Yukon Gold potatoes, halved
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon Italian seasoning
- 1 teaspoon Cajun seasoning (optional)
- Kosher salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- Lemon wedge, for serving
- Freshly chopped parsley, for garnish

In a large bowl, toss potatoes with oil, garlic powder, Italian seasoning and Cajun seasoning, if using. Season with salt and pepper.

Place potatoes in basket of air fryer and cook at 400 F for 10 minutes. Shake basket and stir potatoes, and then cook until potatoes are golden and tender, 8 to 10 minutes more. Squeeze lemon juice over cooked potatoes and garnish with parsley before serving.

AIR FRYER EGG ROLLS

- 1 tablespoon sesame oil
- 1/2 pound ground pork or ground chicken
- 4 cups coleslaw mix
- 1/2 cup matchstick-cut carrots
- 1/4 teaspoon ground ginger
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 3 green onions, sliced
- 2 teaspoons soy sauce
- 2 teaspoons rice or white vinegar
- 1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1/4 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1/8 teaspoon Chinese 5-spice seasoning
- 12 egg roll wrappers
- Nonstick cooking spray
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- Sweet chili sauce, duck sauce or hot mustard sauce, for dipping

Heat sesame oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Add the pork and cook until crumbled and cooked through, about 4 minutes. Add the coleslaw mix, carrots, ginger and garlic. Cook 2-3 minutes or until the cabbage has wilted.

Remove from the heat; stir in the green onions, soy sauce, vinegar, pepper, salt and 5-spice seasoning. Transfer to a plate and let cool slightly.

Place 1 egg roll wrapper flat on a work surface with the points of the wrapper facing up and down (like a diamond). Place about 1/3 cup of the pork/chicken mixture in the middle of the wrapper. Dip your fingers in water and dampen the edges of the wrapper. Fold the left and then right points of the wrapper in toward the center. Fold the bottom point over the center just like you would a burrito, rolling the wrapper toward the remaining point to form a tight cylinder. Press edges to seal. Place on a plate and cover with a dry towel. Repeat the process with remaining wrappers and pork/chicken mixture.

Preheat the air fryer to 375 F and spray the air fryer basket with cooking spray. Brush the tops of the egg rolls with olive oil. Working in batches, place the egg rolls in the basket and cook 7 minutes. Flip the egg rolls over and brush with more oil. Cook for an additional 2 minutes. Serve with your favorite dipping sauce. 📺



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Now introducing Upcountry Hub, the ultimate app that allows you to control your internet from the ease of your phone or tablet.

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- ✓ Wish you could control your kids' access to WiFi?

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PROTECT

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