

Whitney Blackfly Festival coming back in June]



By Mike Riley

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The Whitney Blackfly Festival is coming back this June to South Algonquin Township. Touted as Whitney's most buzzing music festival since 2016, 2023 brings the fifth iteration of this successful festival to Camp Bongopix in Whitney. The festival, which features six musical acts, will run from June 9 to 10 and tickets are \$15 per night. Bongo Bongo, who co-owns Camp Bongopix with Andrea Ruzzo, and South Algonquin Business Alliance chair Andrea Pollak comment on this exciting upcoming festival.

The Whitney Blackfly Festival in 2019 was the fourth iteration of the festival, and according to Bongo was their most epic and they had so much growth momentum.

‘The [COVID-19] pandemic sapped the energy out of our festival. But like blackflies that somehow survive the winter in dormancy, and then explode in June, we are back in 2023. We are definitely in the post-pandemic era now and it feels like we are starting with a blank slate even though 2023 will be our fifth Blackfly Festival. We’ve grown as event managers, as people, as a team and we are beyond excited to bring this unique and exciting musical festival experience back to South Algonquin,’ he says.

Created back in 2016 to celebrate musical talent, buzz the local economy and generate positive energy during South Algonquin's notorious bug season, the Whitney Blackfly Festival was Bongo's obsession with having a music festival that revolved around a celebration of blackflies, which he concedes is an absurd concept given that blackflies are indisputably annoying. According to Bongo, the Blackfly Festival flips the common narrative on its head.

‘Blackfly season is fun, we are going to embrace the outdoors despite the occasional swarming, this is a beautiful time of year, blackflies rock. People get pessimistic about Blackfly season. This festival aims to lift morale and bring people together in good spirits,’ he says.

Bongo and Andrea played at the festival between 2016 and 2019 as the costumed 'Whitney Blackfly Band.' Since the festival has grown, they are now in management roles so they won't have the opportunity to take the stage this year. However, Bongo says they'll be busking as costumed blackflies leading up to the festival, and as the weather becomes hospitable to blackflies, passersby may see a human sized insect belting out songs along the side of Hwy 60 leading up to the festival.

'This festival started off with us dressed in Blackfly costumes singing songs at a BYOB campfire party. In our first year, we had about 100 people. Steadily it grew year by year as the tradition continued. In 2023, we have 250 tickets for sale, per night, and each ticket is \$15 (plus service fee/HST). We have the option to extend the liquor licence area if there is enough demand,' he says.

The roster for this year's Whitney Blackfly Festival will be incredible, as Bongo and Andrea have hired six bands to perform 12 hours of live music over the evenings of June 9 and June 10 between 6 p.m. and midnight. Bongo says that the event is 19 year of age and older and each band/performer has some kind of unique connection to South Algonquin.

'We want the music to emulate the soul of South Algonquin. There is such an exciting musical vibe in this area. People here have a genuine love of music. If the person next to you can't play an instrument, then chances are that they can sing all the words to The Eagles. We discovered songs like 'Copperhead Road' by Steve Earle here. We fell in love with the sound of this regional flavour and we want the Blackfly Festival to capture the essence of the local music scene,' he says.

Bongo says that he feels that musically, South Algonquin is the Canadian rural version of Memphis.

'We are far enough in the woods that we are a hotbed for country and folk musicians. But then we have lots of rock and rollers from the city and there's a wonderful cross-pollination of traditional, folk, country, blues, rock and more. The 2023 talent lineup is a musical journey through all the sounds we've heard in South Algonquin,' he says.

Bongo says that June 9 is indie/alternative rock, outlaw country and then blues rock, with performances by Bon Evans (6 p.m. to 8 p.m.), Tyler Cochrane (8 p.m. to 10 p.m.), and the Wilno Blues Band (10 p.m. to midnight). The lineup for June 10 will see The Salt Cellars (6 p.m. to 8 p.m.), Johanna So (8 p.m. to 10 p.m.) and Kyle Felhaver (10 p.m. to midnight) take the stage. To buy tickets and to see the itinerary, please go to www.blackfly.rsvpify.com.

Pollak says that SABA (www.mysouthalgonquin.ca) has identified a need in the community for tourism experiences and they're excited to support Camp Bongopix's Blackfly Festival because it fills this urgent need in the community for fun and entertaining things to do, particularly at a time of year when there are traditionally fewer tourists in the area.

'We are enormously proud of the work Andrea and Bongo have done over the past few years to make their property accessible and to increase the variety of experiences for local residents and tourists at their property. They've built great following and their weekly music jams are really popular and uniquely South Algonquin. I love how they've brought together such an eclectic group of people for an event based around blackfly season. They really took the lemons into lemonade approach to this particular season, which is so often at the essence of community building. They are amazing operators and amazing musicians, and we couldn't be happier to support their efforts,' she says.

Bongo tells Bancroft This Week that the reactions from the community have been mind boggling and people he hasn't seen in two years will ask him about the next Blackfly Festival.

'We allow patrons to graffiti our bathroom walls at the tavern and there are several messages begging for more Blackfly [Festival]. People are already telling me which night they plan to attend. I get the impression that there are lots of people out there who want the Blackfly Festival to continue because they shared so many memories from previous festivals. The outdoor log cabin venue, the campfire, the electric talent, and intimate size, it is a really unique Canadian experience. The spirit of this festival is to generate positive energy during a season that will tempt you to be cynical,' he says. 'We want this to be a gathering for people who want to share a memory of peace and love and human togetherness.'