



THE PELICAN POST

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2014 Weeks Bay Photo Contest
Best of Show by Stephanie Pluscht

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From the Executive Director . . .



I'm really proud of one of the Weeks Bay Foundation's most recent acquisitions, 124 acres surrounding a stretch of upper Fish River. It is precisely the kind of land the Foundation should be in the business of saving.

The property has about a mile of riverfront on Fish River and Corn Branch and dozens of acres of wetlands. It is home to creatures described as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act, and serves as a vital buffer zone protecting both Weeks Bay and Mobile Bay from agricultural runoff along the river. Most important, the land was threatened with imminent development.

In this case, the development was probably going to destroy the forests on the upland portions of the land and the wetlands in the river's floodplain. All 124 acres would likely have been logged and transformed into open farmland. For the health of the river and the bays downstream, that represented a worst-case scenario.

A quick glance at an aerial image of the property makes the threat clear. On the east bank of the river sits a huge peanut farm that covers hundreds of acres. The fields are nothing but loose, sandy soil, barely held in place by the peanut crop. The west bank is home to a sweet potato farm. Both farms have significant erosion problems, losing large amounts of mud from the fields every time it rains. Our new property sits in between the farms, a band of forest that surrounds the Fish River floodplain.



A sandy wash runs across one of the farms surrounding the Foundation's new property on Fish River. All the mud flows toward the river



The forested hillsides on the Foundation's new property are acting as a filter, catching the muddy runoff from the nearby farms before it hits Fish River

that the forested hillsides on the property are protecting the river. All the mud left on the hillsides is mud that didn't make it into the river, where it would smother aquatic creatures and kill aquatic plants. Mud flowing into our rivers is the single biggest environmental threat we face in Alabama. Our purchase of this property protects this vital buffer zone.

The property lies just southeast of the intersection of County Road 64 and Highway 181. There, Fish River is about 20 feet wide, and knee-deep. This portion of Fish River is a classic blackwater stream, like most small creeks and rivers on the coastal plain.

A visit to the mud-choked woods on the property illustrates how critical the forests and wetlands surrounding our rivers, creeks, and bays are, especially when dealing with the sandy soils of Mobile and Baldwin counties. The plumes of mud that stretch from the farmland into the woods, and the areas in the woods where the leaves and the forest floor have been buried by several inches of sand, both serve as evidence



Upper Fish River is knee deep and bears the delicate amber color characteristic of blackwater streams

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The Weeks Bay Foundation is a non-profit organization whose members work to protect the natural resources of coastal Alabama and to provide assistance and support for the Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve's goals and programs.

Layout & Design by
Kathy Hicks

Cover: The 2014 Weeks Bay Photo Contest Best of Show of a Great Blue Heron by Stephanie Pluscht



The river bottom is white sand, and the water carries an amber stain, like weak tea. The color comes from tannin in decaying leaves. In deeper pools, the color becomes much darker and richer, hence the term “blackwater.”

As a state, we have made a start at protecting the marshes of Mobile Bay and the Mobile-Tensaw Delta. And that is great. But we have not done a good enough job protecting the hundreds of blackwater streams in the area, streams like this portion of upper Fish River. Going forward, protecting the upper portions of our rivers is going to become more and more important, because it is those small rivers and creeks that feed the big rivers and the bay. A clean and healthy bay begins in these small waters.

So look for the Weeks Bay Foundation to work toward protecting places just like this. We’d love to have your help. Please use the membership envelope in this magazine, or visit us at weeksbay.org. Join our campaign to protect what we call “the edges,” the places where the land meets up with our rivers, streams, and bays. Help us protect what makes coastal Alabama special.

See you on the water,



The Weeks Bay Foundation bought this parcel specifically to protect Fish River from agricultural runoff

Weeks Bay Foundation Annual Fund

We hope you’ve noticed how busy the Weeks Bay Foundation has been this year. Thanks to your past investments in the Foundation, we protected a lot of incredible places. As this issue goes to press, we are closing on two more properties and negotiating for several others.



Ice blue iris at the Foundation’s recent acquisition on Mobile Bay

Your donations went toward a spectacular and totally undeveloped portion of Mobile Bay shoreline. You also helped us acquire about a mile of riverfront along upper Fish River and Corn Branch, one of the river’s main tributaries. (See Ben Raines’ article on the previous page.) We expect to close any day now on 73 acres of pitcher plant bog and swamps along County Road 1, south of the Grand Hotel. The maritime forests on that property rank among the most important migratory bird habitat in the nation. In 2014, we also added our largest conservation easement to date to the list of places in coastal Alabama now protected forever.

But there is still more to do. Our rivers and bays need our help, and time is short. As the year ends, we’d like to ask for your help once again. Please consider making an investment in the Foundation with a donation to our Annual Fund, above and beyond your membership dues. We’ll put the money to good use. Our focus remains protecting wildlife and essential habitats, particularly what we call “the edges,” the places where water and land meet.

We need your help to continue with our protection work. Invest in our effort to save this incredible place we call home. Your donations are greatly appreciated, and with a donation of \$250 or more to our Annual Fund, we will send you our 2014 Christmas ornament!



Why We Save Land

by Ryan Wedell, Foundation AmeriCorps VISTA

Realizing we are a part of the environment we live in is an important step. Our economy, health, and recreation are all linked to the natural world, and we can't easily separate ourselves from it. We protect land because we're a part of the ecosystem. Not an outsider looking in, but a major player who both affects and depends on the environment. We also have to recognize that the environment as a whole is a system, with many parts, each one affecting others. While not much is independent in our ecosystem, some parts are more fundamental than others. With that in mind, the Weeks Bay Foundation works to protect the truly important parts. It's not realistic to protect everything, but if we have a good understanding of our environment, we can make sure the more fundamental parts remain intact.



Photo by by Jason Gillikin

How do we decide what's important? In an area like the Alabama gulf coast the answer isn't surprising. It's all about keeping our coastal rivers, estuaries, and bays as pristine as possible. Just think about the money coming in and out of our fisheries along with the recreational opportunities such a diverse and beautiful area provides us. Commercial or recreational, our coast and what it provides to us is invaluable.

So we protect the boundaries and buffer zones. One example of that is the riparian zone, which is the area of interface between a river and land. Land use is

inevitable, but it has its costs. Runoff increases and carries a heavy load of fertilizer. Erosion is a problem that many people can relate to here and is directly affected by shoreline vegetation which can hold onto and sustain a shoreline. Algae blooms are often the result of too many nutrients in the water, such as from fertilizers. With too many nutrients, microscopic organisms are able to reproduce quicker than normal and take up all the free oxygen in the water, leaving larger animals starved for oxygen. For this reason algae blooms are often followed by fish kills. A healthy shoreline with native vegetation will be able to mitigate some of these problems. Roots to hold everything together can prevent erosion, and plants can take up some of the excess nutrients from runoff, decreasing the nutrient load.

We are also sure to protect estuaries whenever we can. Estuaries are the areas where rivers meet the sea. Fresh and saltwater mix creating an area that is vital to the life cycle of many plants and animals. Going out into Weeks Bay or up the delta you can see the wide variety of marine animals, birds, and plants that call estuaries home for part or all of the year. Estuaries can also help us in more direct ways by decreasing the impact of flooding and pollution, such as an oil spill. Both of which have occurred recently for the Alabama coast.



Photo by by Jason Gillikin

So with knowledge of how what we do affects the environment, and how the environment affects us, we can focus our conservation efforts. That's why we buy and conserve land that is valuable and worthwhile. It comes from not only an understanding that we are in a give and take relationship with our surroundings, but the dynamics of that relationship as well.



2014 John L. Borom Alabama Coastal BirdFest

by D. Fran Morley, BirdFest Nestkeeper

The 2014 Alabama Coastal BirdFest welcomed nearly 400 registrants from 21 states (plus two birders from England) for 35 trips and evening events, and experienced record crowds for the family friendly Bird & Conservation Expo. This year, the Expo shared the Faulkner State Community College campus grounds in Fairhope with two other events—the Grand Fest of Art and the Festival of Books—which helped bring a new, larger, and more diverse crowd to the Expo!

BirdFest thanks its 2014 sponsors and supporters: the Alabama Department of Conversation and Natural Resources/State Lands Division, Alabama Coastal Heritage Trust, Birmingham Audubon Society, the Curtis and Edith Munson Foundation, Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuaries, Dauphin Island Sea Lab, Eastern Shore Children's Clinic, Gulf Shores & Orange Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau, Hampton Inn–Nature on the Bay, Legacy–Partners in Environmental Education, the Mapp Family Foundation, Mobile Bay Audubon Society, Mobile Bay National Estuary Program, Pelican Coast Conservancy, Phillips 66, South Alabama British Car Club, TRS–The Registration System, and the cities of Daphne, Fairhope, Foley, and Spanish Fort.

Save the date! The 12th annual Alabama Coastal BirdFest will be October 1-3, 2015. Visit AlabamaCoastalBirdFest.com or [Facebook.com/groups/AlabamaCoastalBirdFest](https://www.facebook.com/groups/AlabamaCoastalBirdFest) to learn more.



Photos by D. Fran Morley and Kathy Hicks

2014 WEEKS BAY PHOTO CONTEST

Stephanie Pluscht won “best of show” in the Weeks Bay Foundation’s annual photo contest for 2014 with an image of a great blue heron with a croaker speared on its bill.

Judged by **Bill Starling**, an award-winning photojournalist with the USA Medical Center, the contest seeks to draw attention to the natural landscape of coastal Alabama. Starling praised the composition of Pluscht’s image, along with the golden early morning light. The super sharp focus of the bird and the fish capture this life and death moment in superb detail, from the ripples emanating from water drops falling from the fish to the sun glint seen in the croaker’s pupil.

Junior Fauna



1st Place: Sloan Bryant



2nd Place: Cameron Ann Herzog



3rd Place: Cameron Ann Herzog

Junior Flora



Junior Best of Show

1st Place: Sloan Bryant



2nd Place: Cameron Ann Herzog



3rd Place: Sloan Bryant

Junior Habitat



1st Place: Sloan Bryant



2nd Place: Cameron Ann Herzog



3rd Place: Cameron Ann Herzog

Honorable Mentions



Open Fauna: Angie Carn



Open Fauna: Beth Tattersall



Open Habitat: Harry Surline

The photo contest has both open and junior divisions, with 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and honorable mention winners in flora, fauna, and habitat categories. The winning photos are on display at the 5 Rivers Delta Resource Center until the end of the year, with the winning photographers celebrated at a reception.

All of the photos entered in the contest become part of the Weeks Bay Foundation's photo collection, which is available for use by conservation groups and other entities looking for great images of our area. Thanks and congratulations to all of our contestants.

Keep your cameras handy. Next year's contest is just around the corner!

Open Fauna



Open Best of Show

1st Place: Stephanie Pluscht



2nd Place: Lisa Comer



3rd Place: Karen Chiasson

Open Flora



1st Place: Beth Tattersall



2nd Place: Stephanie Pluscht



3rd Place: Dianne Herzog

Open Habitat



1st Place: Angie Carn



2nd Place: Stephanie Pluscht



3rd Place: Harry Surline



Open Habitat: Stephanie Pluscht



Open Flora: Lisa Comer



Junior Flora:
Cameron Ann Herzog



Open Flora: Lisa Comer



Kids Fishing Day

by Ryan Wedell, Foundation AmeriCorps VISTA

If you noticed your friends, neighbors, or family frying up more catfish than usual lately, you might have the Weeks Bay Foundation's annual Kids Fishing Day to blame. More than 400 kids showed up in late September to help take care of our overstocked waters by angling for some catfish at the Safe Harbor pond near our office. Despite growing up in a beautiful area like ours, some youth may not get many opportunities to enjoy what nature has to offer. We organize Kids Fishing Day as an easy way to get them interested in the outdoors.

And we had a great turnout. Kids with varying experience from all over Baldwin County showed up. Some to fish for the first time, and others to hone their existing skills. The first catch of the day came about two minutes after the start and kicked off a surge of bites and landings for the next few hours.

Thanks to help from Daphne Utilities, the Fairhope High School Fishing Club, the Mapp Family Foundation, Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources/State Lands and Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries divisions, and staff from the Weeks Bay Reserve, everything went smoothly. The junior anglers enjoyed hot dogs and drinks after they landed their catfish, and we hope everyone went home content with their catch of the day.



Flora of Weeks Bay Reserve - Dahoon Holly

by Fred Nation

Baldwin County is holly country, with ten native species, and seven of these are found within the borders and management areas of Weeks Bay Reserve. As a group, hollies are handsome broadleaf shrubs or small-to-medium-sized trees, with berries that ripen in winter. All of our species are dioecious, which means that male and female reproductive structures develop on separate plants, and the berries are all produced by the female plants.

One of our prettiest and most useful native hollies is *Ilex cassine*, Dahoon Holly. The attractive oval, evergreen leaves and red berries are easy to spot in winter along Fish and Magnolia rivers, and in the swamp on the road to the Tonsmeire Weeks Bay Resource Center, which passes under the Fish River Bridge.

Dahoon Holly is often planted in coastal habitat restoration projects. The clean, green winter foliage and bright red berries which ripen during the December are often collected as an attractive addition to our holiday decorations. A quick check on the internet reveals that the berries provide valuable winter forage for a variety of bird species, including eastern bluebird, northern cardinal, dark-eyed junco, American robin, northern bobwhite, tufted titmouse, wild turkey, tree swallow, and even woodpeckers.

The wood of the hollies, including *Ilex cassine*, is very white, close-grained, and easy to work. It is often used for inlays, print blocks, and stock for ornamental carvings. As lumber it tends to shrink, and is seldom



available in sizes suitable for cabinetry. Another interesting use is medicinal, with the old herbals listing both Dahoon and American Holly leaves as effective for fevers, including malaria. The red berries are suggested as a treatment for colic. It should be noted that some references point out that all parts of the hollies are toxic or unwholesome for humans, so they should not be ingested.

The Dahoon Holly is a popular hedge plant in area landscapes, readily available as beautiful, well-grown shrubs at the spring and fall plant sales. Pick several up and plant them. You will love to watch them grow and the birds will thank you every winter!

Menhaden: Foodchain Dynamo

by Ben Raines, Foundation Executive Director

One of the most important components in the Gulf of Mexico food chain is swarming in Weeks Bay right now.

The water is literally alive with menhaden, also known as pogies. Drive over the Fish River Bridge, or venture out in a boat when the wind is still, and the fish are all around you, flicking the water with the tails. Fishermen call it flipping, and it is as distinctive a sign of the menhaden's presence as the mullet's great belly flopping leaps. Look for tiny disturbances, a little water flipped into the air and then a gently spreading ring on the surface. You will see them by the dozens if not hundreds, evidence of the giant menhaden schools in Weeks Bay and Mobile Bay right now.



Photo by Ben Raines

Menhaden, along with shrimp, form the base of the entire Gulf of Mexico food chain. The fish are filter feeders, forever swimming, mouths agape, as they sieve plankton from the water. Feeding on the tiny floating plants and animals known as plankton, menhaden are the engine that drives the Gulf system, transforming plankton into their oily, energy-rich flesh. It is impossible to overstate their importance to the ecosystem, for everything eats menhaden. Speckled trout, redfish, flounder, king mackerel, bull sharks, you name it, if it swims it likely eats menhaden. They are one of the linchpins in the aquatic food chain, creating the energy that fuels the whole system.



Photo by Ben Raines

As a species, menhaden represent the single largest harvest in the Gulf of Mexico at about 1 billion pounds a year. The next largest harvest is shrimp, which averages around 100 million pounds annually, or about a tenth as large as the menhaden harvest. What happens to one billion pounds of menhaden? A lot of things. Menhaden are ground up and turned into cat food, fertilizer, and a host of other products, including cosmetics. Ground menhaden are a common ingredient in lipstick, for instance. They are also a primary source of the Omega 3 oils people eat.

If you are lucky enough to get on the water and see that telltale flipping, know that you are watching the Gulf ecosystem in action. Those menhaden fattening up in Weeks Bay, Fish River, Dog River, or Mobile Bay will soon head offshore to spawn and fulfill their ultimate destiny, becoming dinner for some other toothsome creature.



Oops!

We forgot to mention one of our favorite sponsors for the Weeks Bay Foundation Pelican Paddle Canoe and Kayak Race. The Fairhope Boat Company has helped with the organization of the race since its inception, but they also provided 30 kayaks this year so folks who don't own boats could race. In addition, they provided a bunch of prizes. If you're looking to get on the water, pay them a visit at 702 N Section Street in Fairhope and thank them for sponsoring the Pelican Paddle!



Chota waterproof mukluks from Fairhope Boat Company

22nd Annual Weeks Bay Volunteers Native Plant Sale



The Volunteers are pleased to report that thousands of native trees, shrubs, and perennials were placed in the hands of local and not so local homeowners. As always, proceeds from the plant sale will help support the Reserve and fund numerous programs and projects throughout the year.

Grasses in Classes program restores shoreline with help from Congressman Bradley Byrne



Congressman Bradley Byrne helped students from North Baldwin Center for Technology plant salt marsh grasses for a Grasses in Classes living shoreline restoration project at Weeks Bay Reserve. Salt marshes and other coastal wetlands are disappearing due to filling, construction of sea walls, and erosion. By demonstrating better alternatives to bulkheads, we are helping the public protect our estuary.

WINTER 2014-15 CALENDAR

December

- 2 **Citizens Advisory Committee Meeting for the Weeks Bay Watershed Project.** Tonsmeire Weeks Bay Resource Center, 6:30 p.m.
- 9 **Guest Lecture Series “A Musical Slideshow of Nature Photography”** presented by **Sherry Stimpson Frost.** 5 Rivers Delta Resource Center, 7:00 p.m. Bring a friend.
- 10  **Weeks Bay Holiday Open House.** Light snacks and drinks will be served at the Tonsmeire Weeks Bay Resource Center, 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.
- 10 **Weeks Bay Advisory Committee Meeting.** Tonsmeire Weeks Bay Resource Center, 2:00 p.m.
- 25-26 **Christmas Holiday.***

** The Visitor Center will be closed. All trails and boardwalks will remain open for your walking and sightseeing pleasure.*

January

- 1 **New Year’s Day Holiday.***
- 13 **Weeks Bay Volunteers Annual Meeting.** Lunch to follow. Tonsmeire Weeks Bay Resource Center, 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.
- 13 **Guest Lecture Series “Gaillard Island”** presented by **Roger Clay.** 5 Rivers Delta Resource Center, 7:00 p.m. Bring a friend.
- 19 **Martin Luther King, Jr. / Robert E. Lee Birthday.***

February

- 10 **Guest Lecture Series “Birds and Pesticides”** presented by **Elaine Snyder.** 5 Rivers Delta Resource Center, 7:00 p.m. Bring a friend.
- 16 **George Washington / Thomas Jefferson Birthday.***
- 17 **Mardi Gras Day.***

Become a part of the Weeks Bay Foundation!

Giving Levels

Legacy Circle	\$5,000 and up
Sustainer	\$1,000 - \$4,999
Steward	\$500 - \$999
Supporter	\$250 - \$499
Friend	\$100 - \$249
Member	\$35 - \$99

Join us by returning the enclosed envelope or look for the link on our home page at www.weeksbay.org.

Donate to the Foundation through the Combined Federal Campaign, Code 37621



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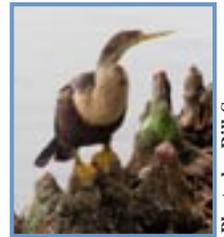


Photo by Bill Summerour

Anhinga
Anhinga anhinga

"The farther one gets into the wilderness, the greater is the attraction of its lonely freedom."
- Theodore Roosevelt

2014 Christmas Ornament



This year, the Weeks Bay Christmas ornament features the cardinal flower, *Lobelia cardinalis*, a showy, brilliantly red member of the lobelia family. The cardinal flower is a common wildflower seen in our area, but typically only near water. For the most part, you find it in shady spots on the banks of streams and rivers. Fish and Magnolia rivers are home to good populations, which bloom prolifically for a few weeks in the middle of September. The common name is a reference to the bright red robes worn by Roman Catholic cardinals. The ornaments are beautiful this year, with the bright red flowers set off against a green background framed in gold.

The ornament may be purchased at the Foundation office, the Reserve's Visitor Center, and Fairhope Pharmacy's Christmas 'Round the Corner shop. It can also be purchased online at weeksbay.org by clicking on the Gift Shop link.

The ornaments make great gifts, especially when given along with a one-year membership in the Foundation for a donation of \$50. We'll even send a card along with the ornament announcing your gift. Christmas is the perfect time to give someone the gift of conservation.

