



THE SALT LINE

A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF
SOUTH ALABAMA LAND TRUST

Friends of Weeks Bay Reserve - Fall 2021 (Vol. 2, No. 3)



Greetings! Each time I write this column, I share information about exciting things happening at South Alabama Land Trust and the new properties we are helping protect. We are a small but dedicated staff that seeks to make the good work happen. We also, however, have very passionate and committed volunteers and partners who contribute their time and talents to help us fulfill our mission.

In late August, some of our SALT members enjoyed a guided tour of our Juniper Bog to see the white fringed orchids in bloom. Thanks to ongoing restoration work and prescribed burns on the property, volunteers and staff counted a record 1,693 orchids this year. It is a beautiful sight to see! This could not have happened without an enthusiastic group of volunteers who affectionately refer to themselves as "The Bog Trotters."

Other groups of volunteers, including GulfCorps, have been assisting with habitat restoration -- pulling and treating invasive species, trail maintenance and chain sawing. It takes serious dedication for these folks to brave the heat and bugs! Others have assisted with lawn and building maintenance, while others were in our office assisting with clerical work.

Many of you have attended our fundraising events - Bald Eagle Bash and Alabama Coastal BirdFest. These events are most certainly "all hands-on deck" and would not be possible with lots of volunteers! And last but not least, I would be remiss if I didn't mention the committed folks who serve on our Board of Directors and committees.

For the last 12-month period, SALT volunteers put in a total of 2,064 hours! According to the Independent Sector, the 2021 estimated national value of each volunteer hour is \$28.54. For SALT, that translates to \$58,907 worth of volunteer hours. Not only do volunteer hours help us accomplish our goals as an organization, but they can also be leveraged as matching funds when we apply for grants.

The bottom line is, we couldn't do the work we do without the support of our volunteers and partners. We are so grateful for each and every one of you, and we hope you are proud of the work you are doing to preserve this amazing place we call "home."



Connie Whitaker

Connie Whitaker



FROM THE
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Photo by David Head III

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The mission of the South Alabama Land Trust is to protect land and promote environmental education so current and future residents can enjoy clean water and the marine life, wildlife, and outdoor recreation that define our area.



Black Swallowtail

For 15 years, a small group of volunteers who call themselves **The Bog Trotters** has been proactively working to bring a once-ailing bog east of Fish River in Baldwin County back to good health. Their efforts have paid off 10-fold, as seen by the number of white fringed orchids that bloom every August.

The first count was done in 2006 when they counted 20 orchids. The volunteers have worked steadily since then to manage the habitat with prescribed burns and other restoration measures.

This year's count set an all-time record with 1,693 orchids. We'd say this group of dedicated volunteers has been incredibly successful!

Photos by Kathy Hicks

Who are The Bog Trotters?

Luke Bozeman
Jeffrey Davies
Sherry Frost
Steve Heath
Kathy Hicks
Michael Jordan
Duane Miller

Fred Nation
Randy Roach
Alfred Schotz
Bill Summerour
Gena Todia
Rick Wallace



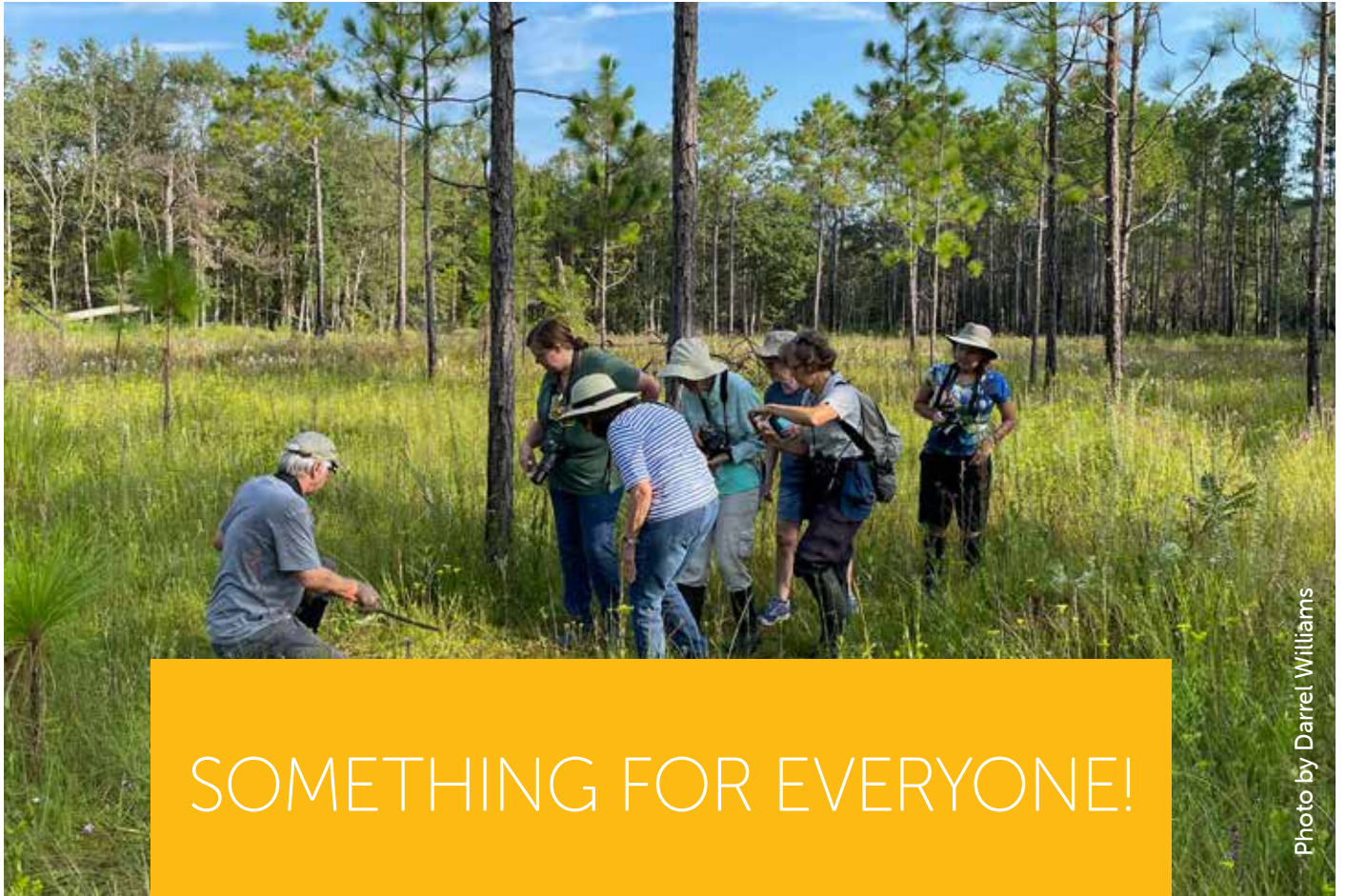


Photo by Darrel Williams

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE!

When SALT was formed as the Weeks Bay Reserve Foundation in 1990, the primary goal was protecting land in the Weeks Bay Watershed. Many people did much work behind the scenes to establish the 4,000+ acres of the Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, and the entire Alabama Gulf Coast is better because of it.

Today, SALT's footprint reaches well beyond Weeks Bay, and conserving land, especially around waterways, is still the primary mission. Bringing that mission closer to the people, however, has become part of what we do.

"It's important to create opportunities for folks to get out and enjoy our beautiful Alabama coast," Connie Whitaker, executive director said. "The beaches and parks are readily available to most everyone, but we can offer deeper experiences – experiences that help people better understand the what's and why's of conservation."

A recent outreach event offered SALT members a chance to tour a sensitive bog to see white orchids in full bloom. (As described on page 4). This was the first

time we had invited people to tour the bog due to the sensitive nature of the habitat.

"Seeing the white fringed orchids was a terrific experience," Amy Delaplaine, a SALT member, said. "Plus all the other wildflowers. I hadn't realized the significance of the Juniper bog. Didn't know how special it was. I'd never really heard of white fringed orchids, though I was impressed when I saw two yellow fringed orchids a few years ago at the Weeks Bay bog. I remember Al Schotz (Auburn University botanist) saying he had driven down from Auburn to see them. He said he had been impressed with another bog in the past that had 40 or 80 orchid plants—and here there were hundreds! The realization began to sink in about how special a treasure this is."

A key part of SALT's outreach events is having guides who share their in-depth knowledge so participants can walk away having had a richer, more enjoyable experience.

"We are so fortunate to have people such as Fred

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BUILDING A BACKYARD HABITAT

Reclaiming wildlife habitat doesn't have to be a time-consuming reforestation or large-scale endeavor. Effective efforts can be made right outside your own door.

Gardening for wildlife, whether in residential or commercial settings, can help re-establish native plant communities and preserve water quality throughout the watershed by using sustainable gardening practices. In addition, recent studies show that eco-friendly gardening practices not only can reduce utility and maintenance costs but also increase property values.

In the coastal communities of South Alabama, the options are many because of the vast biodiversity of both native plant and animal life and the multitude of migrating birds and butterflies.

"When you create a bird habitat, you feed all the critters," explained Mark Wetzel, an educator at 5 Rivers Delta

Resource Center. "Exactly which birds, butterflies and other creatures will show up varies widely from season to season here, in our extremely biodiverse region."

The first step for any backyard effort is to determine the type of habitat that



Photo courtesy of www.watershed.pro

will work best at your location and what native plants will do well based on the amount of sun and shade your garden gets. Sun-loving plants will thrive in some areas, whereas wetland plants need low areas that hold moisture. Gardeners can also mix seasonal plants in their design to provide a space that changes with seasons and is welcoming to wildlife year-round.

SALT will be offering “lunch and learns,” both in person and online, about creating backyard habitats throughout the year.

“Land preservation and habitat management can come in many forms,” Darrel Williams, SALT Land Coordinator said. “Managing what’s right outside our back doors, for the benefit of wildlife that is too often displaced, is one way for everyone to participate.”

“The goal of 5 Rivers’ backyard habitat is to create an area comparable to a residential backyard, with a symphony of native blooms coordinated throughout the year,” Mark said, “to feed the wide variety of wildlife that call Alabama home or a seasonal rest-stop during migration.” The 5 Rivers garden includes educational material to help individual property owners learn about the habitat options. “Including educational plaques next to each of the plants, our hope is that the concept is mimicked, increasing the overall abundance of native food sources, one yard at a time.”

The National Wildlife Federation suggests these simple ways to start a sustainable backyard habitat:



- Decide on the type of habitat garden based on your setting.
- Observe the amount of sun and shade your intended garden habitat receives during the day.
- Prepare your site for planting.
- Decide on a focal point for each garden bed or section of your yard.
- Balance the “natural look” with some definition.
- Select plants that provide year-round diversity.
- Plant similar species of plants in groupings.
- Provide a backdrop of texture and structure.
- Sustain your wildlife garden and the ecosystem with Sustainable Practices.
- Practice neighbor-friendly gardening. -- CB

30 YEARS 30 SUPPORTERS

South Alabama Land Trust has thrived for 30 years thanks to hundreds of supporters -- from volunteers to members and donors to landowners. As part of our anniversary celebration, we are telling stories of 30 individuals who have put their stamp on local conservation through their time, talent or treasure. We hope that in reading their stories you will meet an assortment of like-minded people who enjoy the abundance of natural resources—the land, the water, and the wildlife—in south Alabama, and who are doing their part to protect what we have today, and for the tomorrows of those who come behind us.

RICK AND SUSIE WALLACE

She's a biologist and master gardener. He's a fisheries guy-turned-volunteer. Together, they have supported the work of SALT for more than a dozen years.



Photo by Colette Boehm

Rick and Susie Wallace have lived in Baldwin County since 1983 and have a home overlooking Fish River. Their property is a beautiful example of landscaping for sustainability, using native plants. They both recognize the importance of preserving land throughout watersheds and are committed to doing their part.

"I sort of tag along," Susie said, noting that Rick has taken a more active role with SALT. "But my background is in biology and I'm very supportive of the organization." Rick recalled that his knowledge of the Foundation was limited when he was asked to join the board all those years ago.

"I immediately became involved when I really understood what was going on. As landowners on the river," he continued, "we really recognize how important conserving land around the river is to water quality, fishing, boating, quality of life and seafood." Susie also noted the importance of estuary water quality, as it serves as a nursery and habitat for so many aquatic species.



Photo by Kathy Hicks



When he joined the board, Rick stepped into other roles, including supporting fundraising efforts and playing an active part in the management of SALT's Juniper Bog, which is just a short drive from their home. Although he retired from the board in 2019, he continues to play a key role on the organization's Land Acquisition Committee.

"You could support other organizations with the same ideals and the same goals," Rick noted, "but you know, I like SALT because it's local. It's really local. It's right here."

The couple, both originally from the Midwest, have enjoyed sharing their coastal home with out-of-state visitors. "They come visit," Susie remarked, "and realize what a beautiful place we live. Our northern friends have really enjoyed coming to visit and taking advantage of everything here."

Rick and Susie take advantage of the area themselves through boating, fishing and swimming, along with enjoying local seafood. While they travel often to visit their two sons, they are happy to call their place on Fish River home. -- CB

BUDDY RUSSELL

It doesn't take long to understand why Louis G. (Buddy) Russell is a longtime supporter of South Alabama Land Trust. A native Mobilian, Buddy and his wife Mickie bought a summer home on Mobile Bay in Point Clear 20 years ago. After their three children had left home for college, and the Russells were spending more and more time "over the Bay," the summer home became their permanent home. That was 16 or 17 years ago.

While it's a beautiful home like so many on the Bay, the real beauty comes in the fact that it's the primary gathering place for their adult children and spouses and six grandchildren. "It's been a great place for the family to gather on a regular basis," Buddy said.

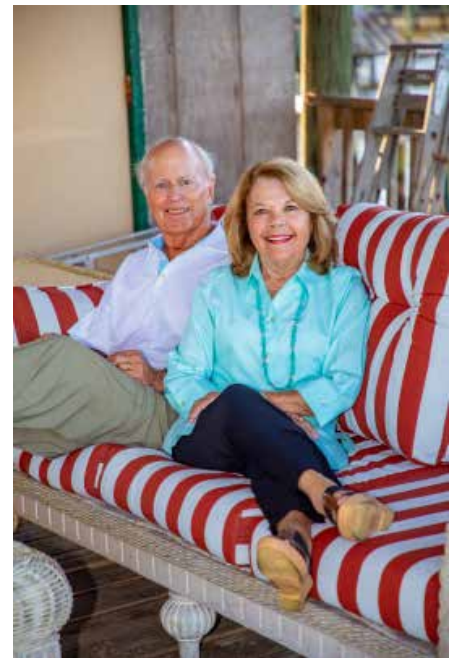


Photo by Stephen Savage

A CPA (certified public accountant) for about 50 years, Buddy first got involved with the then Weeks Bay Reserve Foundation through founder Skipper Tonsmeire.

"I had worked with the Foundation for years," Buddy said. "I started out doing the audit and tax work for the organization. Then, as it grew, I was

continued on page 11

HOW PROTECTING ONE SPECIES MAKES A DIFFERENCE

The number of gopher tortoises in the United States has been reduced by around 80 percent over the past 100 years. On the surface, it may not seem like anything about which to get excited. But when you take into consideration that gopher tortoises support over 350 other species, you begin to understand their relevance and importance to the larger ecosystem.

The gopher tortoise once flourished in savannah-like landscapes that dominated the southeastern coastal plain, creating extensive burrows in the sandy soils with specially adapted feet for digging. A gopher tortoise will dig multiple burrows, averaging 15 ft. in length and 10 ft. in depth, allowing ample opportunity to escape predators or retreat from wildfire and weather extremes. These medium sized tortoises spend 80 percent of their life within their burrows.

As the tortoise digs, an apron-shaped mound is formed at the burrow entrance. This mound often doubles as a nesting site. The female lays five to six ping-pong sized eggs before burying them; from here on, no maternal care is given. 80-110 days later, the juvenile gopher tortoise will hatch and begin a solitary lifestyle until maturity. A young gopher tortoise can exhibit a more colorful shell than the adults, often with yellow and orange markings, but these brighter colors fade with age. Most adult shells range from tan to grey. Males reach maturity at 9-12 years old, and females between 10 and 21. The mating season runs from March to October.

Of the favorable longleaf pine savannahs that once stretched across the southeast, only a fraction now remains. Human activity and population growth have led to habitat destruction, division of land, and degradation, also causing the loss of gopher tortoises. As we stated earlier, the magnitude of this ecological problem is bigger than the gopher tortoise alone. Considered a keystone species, the tortoise's burrows and aprons support over 350 other species, including burrowing owls, mice, rabbits, and gopher frogs.

SALT is enthusiastically working on projects to alter the



Photo by Kathy Hicks



Photo by Darrel Williams

declining trend in gopher tortoise population. The Koontz family, who own land in Elberta, chose to place their 56-acre property under a conservation easement held by SALT. In this situation, the family retains ownership of the property, but the property is subject to certain conservation-minded restrictions that help protect native habitats and often qualify the owner for financial incentives.

The Koontz property is especially important to both SALT and the areas that surround the property

because it contains an open pine savannah with a healthy gopher tortoise population. Other SALT-owned properties also show promise for both longleaf pine savannahs and the gopher tortoise. The 124-acre Wiese Nature Preserve in Daphne is already home to a population of gopher tortoises, and the 60-acre Fish River Preserve shows great potential for gopher tortoise habitat. By treating invasive species, conducting prescribed burns, and restoring native plants, we can achieve a successful reintroduction of the gopher tortoise and its habitat. – DW

Buddy Russell - continued from page 9

asked to join the board as financial chairman, and I've served in that position ever since."

"In addition to his service, Buddy has generously supported SALT, along with his partners, through Russell, Thompson, Butler, and Houston LLP, a CPA firm that Buddy and company founded 25 years ago. In 2020, they merged the local firm with Carr Riggs & Ingram – CPAs and Advisors.

Buddy said he believes it is important to give to local conservation organizations because, unlike the national organizations, "we know what the needs are and where they are."

"Local people need to support the local environment," he continued. "I think people see the need for conservation today. They see the development and

the rapid changes, and they're seeing we need to do something to protect our marshes and our wetlands and our rivers and bays. The problems aren't going to fix themselves, and if we don't do it now, it's going to be too late. We're going to be in a real mess. We're going to lose the very thing that attracts people to this area."

When he isn't working or spending time with family, Buddy stays in shape by jogging, walking and cycling. He's been active his entire life, including as a member of a Mobile swim team through high school, and playing tennis. He was even recruited to join the University of Alabama swim team.

"That only lasted about three weeks," he said with a chuckle. "I was getting up at 5am for swim practice, and all my pledge mates were out running around and having fun. So I gave it up for the collegiate life." -- DB

BETWEEN EVERY TWO PINE TREES

**From the Weeks Bay Reserve
Angela Underwood, Interim Manager**

As naturalist and ecological thinker John Muir once said, "Between every two pine trees there is a door leading to a new way of life."

One of my favorite things about working at the Reserve is the opportunity to step out of my office and discover new things while observing along the trails and boardwalks we maintain. Since stepping into the interim manager role at the Reserve, I haven't had time to explore our properties as much as I'd like. So, I was thrilled, recently, to tag along on an uncharacteristically cool August day with our Stewardship Coordinator, Eric Brunden, and SALT Land Coordinator Darrel Williams, to monitor the Damson Tract adjacent to the Reserve Visitor Center.



Photos by Angela Underwood

Like most of the pinelands in the southeast, this tract of land was once turpented as part of the naval stores industry. The "cat face" scars, left on pine stumps from the extraction of sap or resin from pine tree, are evidence of this process. Turpentiners would have burned the area yearly to help protect their trees from wildfire. Today, we carefully plan and execute prescribed burns on this tract of land to restore it to a more ecologically diverse pine flatwoods habitat.

As we walked through the forest, there was something new to discover every few steps...spiders, carnivorous sundews and pitcher plants, sunflowers, fleeting glimpses of unidentified snakes, all of which confirmed that our land management and prescribed burning are heading in the right direction. While we were delighted with



these discoveries, they paled in comparison to our most exciting find of the day – a patch of yellow fringed orchids! This particular species, *Platanthera ciliaris*, often grows in acidic, wet soils of pine flatwoods on the Gulf Coast. In fact, its natural range is extensive

through the eastern and southern United States, but like so many of our native plant species, it is becoming increasingly rare due to habitat change.

Our initial estimate of this population of orchids was 50-75 individual plants. Upon further investigation, but by no means a complete survey of this large tract of land, we found hundreds of plants. Not only are the plants a site to behold with their bright, yellowish-orange flowers possessing distinctive fringed lips, but the number of butterflies feasting on the nectar was truly a treat to witness. Darrel summed it up perfectly, in the way only an Englishman could: "It truly is a proper pine forest...you can't help but be happy looking at it".

We invite you to visit the Reserve to explore this wonderful tract of land along our nature trail. Be sure to stop in and let us know what interesting things you discover.

Outreach events - continued from page 5

Nation, Michael Jordan, and Bob Andrews, who not only know the area well, but who also know plants, birds, wildlife, and waterways," Connie said. "The feedback after a full moon paddle with Bob, or the orchid tour with Michael, or a nature walk at Fish River Nature Preserve with Fred tells us we are giving people what they want."

"Ultimately," Connie added, "when people experience nature at this more personal level, they want to protect it, they want to support our efforts. Conserving and protecting this amazing place takes a village. The more people we connect with, the better we will all be." - DB

OUR SUPPORTERS

JUNE 1, 2021 - AUGUST 31, 2021

ANNUAL MEMBERS

Conservator \$1,000

Steve and Lynn Funchess
Monroe and Katherine Jones

Steward \$500

Frances and Tunstall Inge

Advocate \$250

Mike and Renee Booker
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Betty Suddeth
Elizabeth Walker
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Angela Waltman
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Quarterly Members

Mac and Michelle Tonsmeire

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Sybil and White Smith Foundation

\$1,000 – \$2,999

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\$500 – \$999

Bob and Mary Bender
Ben and Miranda Schrubbe
Jay and Gena Todia
Ike and Stephanie Williams

\$250 – \$499

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Ran & Nancy Nisbett
Dale and Cindy Penny
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John Craig Shaw
Beth Turner

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\$1,000 - \$2,499

Nan H. Altmayer Charitable Trust

UP TO \$99

Amy Delaplaine
Bill and Robyn Fallin
Laura Kramer
Ginny Russell

TRIBUTE GIFTS

In Memory of Dr. James P. Hannahan
John Banaszak
Mr. and Mrs. Edward Hudson
Maudie and Bill Huff
Earle and Elizabeth Long
Laura McLeod
Maudie and Bill Huff

In Memory of Henry Wise V
Johnny Wise

In Honor of Brinkley Hutchings
Leigh Ann Delaney

In Honor of Ann Silvernail
Catherine Kiser

In Honor of Skipper Tonsmeire
Geoffrey and Suzanne Doggett

In Honor of Darrel Williams
Scott and Candace Kirkpatrick



BIRDFEST

OSPREY - \$10,000

The Curtis and Edith Munson
Foundation

REDDISH EGRET - \$5,000

Alabama Coastal Heritage Trust

BROWN PELICAN - \$2,500

Baldwin County Sewer Service

**GREAT BLUE HERON -
\$1,200**

Alabama Power
Mobile Bay Audubon Society
Volkert, Inc.

**AMERICAN OYSTER
CATCHER- \$500**

Happy Harbor Marina
Jubilee Suites on Mobile Bay

SCARLET TANAGER- \$250

Town of Dauphin Island



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WHAT'S HAPPENING

October 6-9

Alabama Coastal BirdFest

Date TBD

Backyard Habitat Tour (SALT members only)

November - Date TBD

Volunteer Restoration Day

Fish River Nature Preserve

November 1

SALT Photo Contest closes

November 17- Location TBD

Full Moon Paddle

November - Date & Locations TBD

Mobile and Baldwin

Workshop - Adding a Living Shoreline to Waterfront Property