



# THE SALT LINE

A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF  
SOUTH ALABAMA LAND TRUST

Friends of Weeks Bay Reserve - Fall 2022



SALT had another exciting year of protecting land, inspiring the community, and providing environmental education! We worked with partners and landowners to conserve another 83 land parcels totaling more than 1,200 acres that are now protected forever.

Most recently, SALT hosted the 18th Annual Alabama Coastal BirdFest. We appreciate all of you who participated. Thankfully, Hurricane Ian did not rain on our parade too much and the four-day event was a great hit and a boost for our local economy. Thanks to the 34 environmental partners and local organizations that helped to make the Bird and Nature Expo the most successful ever! A special thanks to our host site and staff at the 5 Rivers Delta Resource Center. Their gorgeous campus provided the perfect backdrop to nature.

At the Bird and Nature Expo, SALT launched its Native Habitat Program. Hopefully, through this program, and the workshops and webinars offered by SALT, you will be moved to look at what is growing in your own yard with an eye on how you can make a difference to be better stewards and to plant natives species.

Stay tuned to SALT's social media and website to see when Zoom workshops led by Dr. Douglas Tallamy, author of *Bringing Nature Home – How You Can Sustain Wildlife with Native Plants* will be offered. We are also hosting ongoing book clubs at several locations to discuss the book. You can download the SALT Native Habitat Certification form from our website and get started on making your own yard native!

In this issue, you will see the winners of SALT's Photo Contest. It is always a pleasure to see the winning images. The photos embody why we do what we do at SALT to protect land for generations to come.

SALT has accomplished so much this year and with your continued support and love of our mission, those efforts will continue.

A circular portrait of Connie Whitaker, the Executive Director, smiling and wearing a light blue button-down shirt. The background of the portrait is a soft-focus outdoor setting.

*Connie Whitaker*

Connie Whitaker

A vertical landscape photograph showing a body of water with wooden pilings in the foreground, and a sunset or sunrise over a range of hills in the background.

FROM THE  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



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## Cover Photos (Front) Darrell Williams (Back) First Place Junior Flora - Elizabeth Ernest

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First Place Adult, People in Nature by Brent Eanes

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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.

# CURRENT LAND PROJECTS



South Alabama Land Trust (SALT) is proud to announce several land projects that have achieved protection status since our last SALT Line publication.

Dauphin Island has been at the forefront of staff actions recently. In a collaboration with The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) funded the

protection of a 9.4-acre parcel on Dauphin Island's southern coast. While owned by the Town of Dauphin Island (TODI), SALT holds the conservation easement. The area includes critical beach and dune habitats that support a diverse array of species such as shorebirds and nesting turtles, while the dunes offer protection to inland communities from storm surge and other severe weather-related events.

The ecological importance of Dauphin Island has inspired multiple organizations to protect this global birding hotspot. Through NFWF funding, Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuaries (DIBS) was able to purchase another 11 undeveloped land parcels with SALT as the conservation easement holder. These monumental undertakings could not be achieved without the teamwork of such dedicated organizations, staff, and volunteers who relentlessly dedicate their time to making this happen.

The SALT Line summer issue discussed SALT's role in the Brookley Park Project in Mobile County and the purchase of 40 acres in the Weeks Bay Watershed in Baldwin County. We're happy to announce that both have now closed and are officially protected! Additionally, we are working with Mobile County to place a conservation easement on almost 300-acres of forested wetland and uplands surrounding Halls Mill Creek. The Creek is a tributary of Dog River, which drains into Mobile Bay, so the protection of this land will help to ensure sustainable water quality and natural habitat.





## Monitoring Adventures

In addition to pursuing new land projects, SALT is committed to monitoring the properties we have been entrusted to protect. SALT's Land Coordinator makes annual trips to our conservation easements and owned parcels to ensure the specified conservation criteria are being upheld. To aid in these reports, the Land Coordinator uses various tools such as Global Positioning Systems (GPS), Geographic Information Systems (GIS), geographic photography software, drone footage, and a fiber optic camera that allows for monitoring wildlife burrows. The latter was used in the most recent report of a conservation easement in Elberta, Baldwin County. The 52-acre property is host to a population of gopher tortoises, but in contrast to the numerous burrows found, a tortoise had not been witnessed above ground during the annual monitoring visits. To confirm the presence of tortoises, the Land Coordinator feeds a fiber optic wire into the burrow where a small camera and light allows a view of any potential occupants. The Land Coordinator was able to successfully see and record footage of healthy gopher tortoises inside their burrows. Since the gopher tortoise is regarded as a keystone species, confirming their presence is a rewarding experience and highlights the critical work SALT is doing to protect our wild places.

-- Darrel Williams, SALT Land Coordinator



Photo by Darrel Williams using fiber optic camera  
in active gopher tortoise burrow

# THE IMPORTANCE OF NATIVE PLANTS

## Why choose native plants?

SALT has proudly launched its Native Habitat Program to encourage people to plant native species, but why are native plants so important? Colin Rye of Fairhope's Corner Copia Gardens explains that native plants serve as the foundation of the food web, channeling energy from the sun into insect and other animal herbivores, then indirectly to carnivorous animals. Species have been developing these relationships over millennia and cannot adapt quickly enough to keep up with rapidly changing landscapes that often favor non-native species that greatly reduce biodiversity.

Specialists, which depend on one or a few specific species, are most at risk. Monarch butterflies exemplify specialization; their caterpillars can only eat milkweed (*Asclepias*) and a limited number of related species. As milkweed has declined in our landscapes due to factors such as herbicide use and habitat loss, monarch populations have plummeted. Since the 1980s, the western population of migratory monarchs fell 99.9%, from an estimated 10 million to only 1,914 butterflies in 2021, leading to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) listing migratory monarchs as endangered this year. By planting native milkweed we can support not only the number of monarch caterpillars making it to adulthood but also their migration. Non-

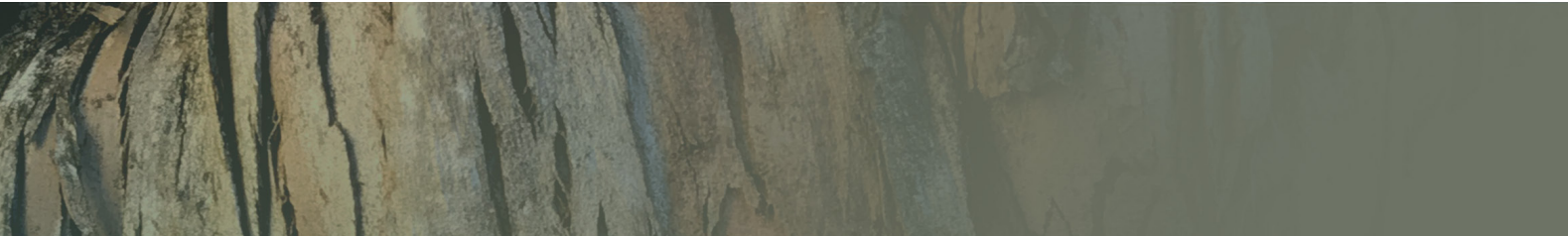
native tropical milkweed (*Asclepias curassavica*) often keeps its leaves in our mild Gulf Coast winters, disrupting the monarch migration and leading to buildup of diseases such as OE (*Ophryocystis elektroscirrha*). This is just one example showing that without native plants, ecosystems collapse.



Honorable Mention, Fauna by Lisa Comer

The good news is that native plants are becoming more available as their popularity grows. Today you can often find native species of milkweed such as butterflyweed (*A. tuberosa*), aquatic milkweed (*A. perennis*), and swamp milkweed (*A. incarnata*) at your local garden center.

Sometimes people ask, "What is the best thing to plant to support wildlife?" While there are many factors that go into such decisions, and no single plant does it all, Rye suggests certain plants that support more species than others. About 14% of plants support 90% of insect species. In ecology we call these keystone species. The number one keystone species here? Oaks! Oak trees (*Quercus*) host 380 species of butterfly and



moth caterpillars locally. Who knew our wildlife loved our majestic oaks as much as we southerners do?

### **Beyond Birdseed**

To understand the impact that insects have on our bird populations, Carole Tebay, a Baldwin County Master Environmental Education (MEE) volunteer, breaks down the work of Dr. Douglas Tallamy, head of the Department of Entomology at the University of Delaware, who describes the vital link between birds and native trees. Most birds raise their young on insects, mainly caterpillars, which are rich in the fat and protein fast-growing baby birds need. As an example, Dr. Tallamy points to chickadees which forage for insects within just 164 feet of their nest and must find 390 to 570 caterpillars a day to raise a clutch of young chickadees. In the 16 days it takes for them to fledge, it can take 9,000 caterpillars to make one batch of chickadees. That's a lot of trips to the grocery store!

When a moth or butterfly lays its eggs, it is looking for a specific host plant for its young. Caterpillars and plants have evolved together over thousands of years. Most caterpillars are host plant specialists, meaning they can only eat certain plants. Over time they have adapted to the chemical defenses of those plants.

So, what does this mean for us and attracting birds to our yard? When we landscape our yards with plants that aren't native to our area, such as Indian hawthorn, Japanese maple, Chinese crepe myrtle, or

Asian centipede grass our local caterpillars can't eat them and our local birds must look for a better location to build their nests.

During his research, Dr. Tallamy and his students counted the number of caterpillar species in some of our most common native trees and plants. Trees were found to support the most caterpillar species, with oaks in the lead hosting hundreds of species of caterpillars. Some other standouts were cherry, willow, birch, maple, pine, hickory, blueberry, and beech.

Dr. Tallamy says "do the birds a favor by planting a native tree and you may find more of them calling your yard the perfect location. And, since we're gardening for insects the birds need, please put away the insecticide."

Books by Dr. Douglas Tallamy include Bringing Nature Home: How You Can Sustain Wildlife with Native Plants; The Living Landscape: Designing for Beauty and Biodiversity in the Home Garden, Nature's Best Hope: A New Approach to Conservation That Starts in Your Yard; The Nature of Oaks.

As examples of some key native host plants, Mary Calvin, a Baldwin County Master Gardener, has provided the following list: milkweed – host to the monarch, passionflower – host to gulf fritillaries, woolly Dutchman's pipevine – host to the pipevine swallowtail, New England aster – host to the pearl crescent, golden alexander – host to the black swallowtail, carrot, fennel, and parsley – host to eastern black swallowtail.

-- Darrel Williams, SALT Land Coordinator



First Place Adult, Habitat by Arthur Davis

## Pitcher Plant Bogs

The pitcher plant bogs of the southeastern United States are home to one of the most diverse ecosystems in North America. To emphasize the degree of biodiversity, the recently released Ben Raines documentary, *Carnivorous Kingdom*, illustrates the multitude of flowering plants, carnivorous plants, and interacting wildlife that are part of the bog community. The documentary features portions of SALT's protected wetlands and outlines the land management practices required to sustain these ecosystems.

Unfortunately, most fully functioning pitcher plant bogs are only found in pockets of well managed habitat sanctuaries, but it wasn't always this way. Prior to the colonization of the Americas, pitcher plant bogs were so numerous you could walk from Texas to Florida without ever having left one. These wetland areas nestled between upland and riparian forests were maintained by fire often supplied via lightning strikes to mature longleaf pines. With logging, development, and fire suppression came the demise of the longleaf pine ecosystem and the connected pitcher plant bogs that are now a rare site.

Although time has separated us from readily seeing these spectacular bog ecosystems, SALT is working to conserve what is left of these unique habitats. In some ways, the bogs that host these multitudes of species have never left. When a wetland parcel in south Alabama was mistakenly bulldozed, several threatened species of carnivorous plant species emerged from the soil. A seed bank of white-topped pitcher plants had been patiently waiting for decades upon decades to be exposed to the sunlight. On average, under natural conditions, fire would spread through the Alabamian vegetation once every three years. This fire return interval restricted hardwood trees from forming a canopy and therefore allowed ample light for the bog species to thrive. Although damaging to the land, the bulldozer artificially opened the canopy and rekindled an ecosystem that had literally been waiting in the shadows. On understanding the ecological value of the property, the landowner donated the parcel to SALT, and it is now protected.

# CARNIVOROUS PLANTS





Photo courtesy of Environmental Studies Center

Since the donation, SALT has managed the property for invasive species and with prescribed fire. The transformation was spectacular. After the initial burn, white-topped pitcher plants popped up throughout the bog area, as did several other carnivorous plant species. The white-fringed orchid is another threatened species that is rarely seen in Alabama these days, but nevertheless, after a few burns, two of these majestic flowers appeared toward the end of the growing season. Ten years later 1700 white-fringed orchids were counted during the summer following the last burn.

A valid lesson from the bulldozer incident is that these precious ecosystems are more resilient than we realize. In *Carnivorous Kingdom*, Ben Raines underlines the types of habitats that may once have supported pitcher plants and other bog species. Landowners may well reside on a lost habitat waiting to be discovered.

Dr. Tracy H. Jay of the Environmental Studies Center (ESC) in Mobile County believes “education plays a vital role in the preservation and management of these precious ecosystems. Therefore, programs for youth, such as the Coastal Ecology programs at ESC are so important. A part of the Mobile County School System, the ESC is home to a three-acre bog with several species of native carnivorous plants including the white-fringed orchids. In the programs, students are taught about the ecology of the bog and its inhabitants. The students are also taught the importance of preserving the ecosystems. The ESC has partnered with SALT to help preserve the bog and is working to protect this property from any future development as well.”

We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children. ~ Native American Proverb

--Darrel Williams, SALT Land Coordinator

# ALABAMA COASTAL BIRDFEST

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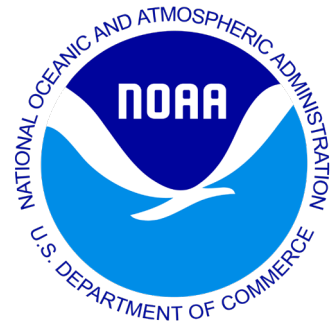
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The Alabama Coastal BirdFest is one of South Alabama Land Trust's annual fundraisers that brings in hundreds of participants from across the United States and locally. This year, 22 states were represented, with nearly 81% of the attendees from Alabama. The local support is not only noticeable by the attendees, but also by the partnerships and volunteer hours that go into organizing and executing the four-day, multiple location event.

BirdFest include trips, workshops, boat cruises, and kayak excursions that highlight birding hotspots from Dauphin Island to Gulf Shores, and locations in between. This year, we had a few "firsts" including an out of state trip to the Mississippi Sandhill Crane National Wildlife Refuge, an eBird profile for BirdFest specifically, and a nationally-acclaimed keynote speaker, Jon Dunn, one of the most well-respected birders in North America and chief consultant and author of much of National Geographic's Field Guide to the Birds of North America.

Additionally, a partnership with Blakeley State Park provided lower and upper Delta boat cruises, including three free boat trips at the family-friendly Bird and Nature Expo, which is always the Saturday of BirdFest. The Expo was hosted at a new location this year, 5 Rivers Delta Resource Center, a more central location to Mobile and Baldwin counties in the hopes of increasing participation. Mission Accomplished! We had nearly double the attendance from last year - more than 700 attendees!

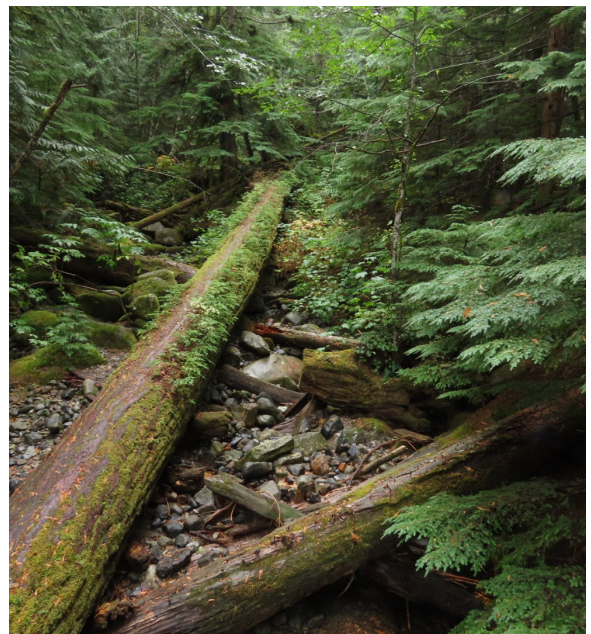
A sincere thank you to the guides, instructors, committee members, organizations, clubs, sponsors, and volunteers who helped with this year's success, especially to our friends at 5 Rivers Delta Resource Center for your hospitality and partnership.

--Katherine Kuhn  
SALT Outreach and Volunteer Coordinator

# WEEKS BAY RESERVE

This October, staff attended the National Reserve System annual meeting in Seattle, WA. This was the first time we've met in person since 2019. As always it was good to see the familiar faces, catch up with old friends and make new ones. This was also the first time I have traveled to the Pacific Northwest. As you can imagine, for a nature nerd like myself, it was stunningly beautiful with the mountains, temperate rainforests, enormous trees, and exciting wildlife. But I found something there that I didn't expect...a rekindling of a spiritual connection with the land, air, and sea. In the meeting's opening plenary, we had the opportunity to hear from a tribal elder from one of the native Salish tribes. Patty (her given English name) told the story of her ancestral people who have been in Washington since time immemorial and their dependence on natural resources for survival. But there was more to it... see the resources aren't just a survival implement for them, they are part of their spirit. Many of their stories, passed down from generation to generation through rich oral tradition, honor the resources as gifts from the creator, from the annual celebrations of salmon returning from the sea to spawn in the freshwater rivers to the great cedars of the forests, used in canoe making and held in the highest reverence as the "tree of life". And they realize that it is their responsibility to be the voice for the natural world, for those things that do not have a voice.

We were honored to hear Patty play a traditional drum and sing a song in her native tongue. In English, the song translated to, "Listen to me, listen to me, oh my, oh my." The room was dead silent as she sang and drummed, and tears welled to my eyes. I imagined that is what our world is saying to us now... crying for us to listen...listen...oh my, oh my. The natural world is a part of us too, and we cannot live without it, physically or spiritually. But nature is struggling to survive with us. It is the culture of many of the native tribes to plan out for seven generations to come. And with her words, I realized it's not just about how I will leave the world for my children, but how we collectively will leave it for children hundreds of years out? The Reserve alongside our friends at South Alabama Land Trust work every day to protect and restore our local habitats and reconnect communities with the natural world. We ask that you join in and speak for those things that do not have a voice.



Photos by Dave Feliz

--Angela Underwood, Weeks Bay Reserve Manager

# PHOTOGRAPHY CONTEST



Every fall, photographers of all ages are invited to participate in SALT's Photography Contest. Each year we are amazed by the beautiful photos submitted that were taken within the last year in the Coastal Alabama region. The four categories voted on, in the junior and adult categories, are flora, fauna, habitat, and people in nature.

We were pleased to have judges Mark Watts, Rodney Kilgore, and Paul Dovie, the Alabama Coastal BirdFest featured photographer, select the winners in each category. The judges are incredible photographers themselves with a strong passion for nature photography.

This year's Best in Show was photographed by Allen Oaks. The photo is cleverly titled "Turned Tern" and exhibits a Royal Tern exiting its dive from the water in Point Clear, Alabama. Oaks explains how high-speed, mirrorless cameras, like the one he used to capture this shot, allow us to see everything that happens, even the tiniest moments that we cannot see with our own eyes.

Throughout our SALT Line magazines, social media, and promotional materials we use photos from the contest to display the beauty of our area and the important connection we have with our natural environment. Additionally, a winning photo from the previous year's photo contest is featured in our collectible Christmas ornament collection. This year's ornament features a photo of the Alabama state bird, the yellowhammer, or Northern Flicker, which was taken by Stillwell Bacon, last year's Best in Show. To view all winning photos, visit our website. To purchase a Christmas ornament, visit our online gift shop or visit us at the SALT office!

--Katherine Kuhn, SALT Outreach and Volunteer Coordinator

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## WHAT'S HAPPENING

**January 23**

Bringing Nature Home Book Club at  
Bill-E's Restaurant

**January 25**

Bringing Nature Home Book Club at  
Daphne Public Library

**February 17**

Zoom Lecture with Douglas Tallamy  
Native Habitat Program

**March 2**

Zoom Lectures with Douglas Tallamy  
Native Habitat Program

**April 29**

Bald Eagle Bash