



THE SALT LINE

A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF
SOUTH ALABAMA LAND TRUST

Friends of Weeks Bay Reserve - Winter 2021 (Vol. 2, No. 4)



It's hard to believe another year is nearly behind us. I think all of us had hoped that COVID would be a thing of the past in 2021 and that life would return to normal. That didn't exactly happen, but for the most part it was business as usual for SALT. SALT has had another banner year in ensuring that, through our partnerships, we are well underway to protecting nearly 700 more acres of coastal habitat.

Some of you may have seen SALT featured on the September 25 Fox 10 Perspectives Program, hosted by Eric Reynolds. During that interview, there was a recurring theme – SALT's successes and good work depend on the partnerships we have throughout our community. It is encouraging to see environmental groups, organizations and private landowners working together to preserve Alabama's beautiful natural resources.

In addition to land conservation, a necessary component of preservation is providing environmental education programs and restoration opportunities to allow folks to become involved and invested. In 2022, SALT will launch a new program that focuses on teaching individuals how to create natural habitats in a number of different spaces – a backyard, a patio, even a condo balcony – anywhere that would be conducive to creating a habitat, large or small, that attracts pollinators, birds and wildlife using native plants. It's part of our overall program to encourage everyone to become environmental stewards. Look for more information on this exciting program after the first of the year.

In closing, I'd like to share a quote by Ryunosoke Satoro: "Individually we are one drop; but together we are an ocean". When it comes to protecting our beautiful Alabama coast, this is so true. SALT could not do what we do without the support of our environmental and corporate partners, private landowners, volunteers, members and donors. No matter how big or how small, those contributions are leaving a living legacy for which we are very thankful.

A circular portrait of Connie Whitaker, a woman with shoulder-length brown hair, 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 photograph of a coastal landscape. In the foreground, there are dark, textured rocks. In the middle ground, a wooden pier extends into the water. The background shows a sunset or sunrise over the ocean with a soft glow in the sky.

FROM THE
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(L) *Susan Hope Rouillier* - 2nd Place, Adult Flora

(R) *Hallie Zimlich* - 1st Place, Adult Flora

(C) *Stillwell Bacon* - Best in Show

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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.



Rodney Kilgore

If you've been to a Live at 5 concert in Fairhope, or to Bald Eagle Bash or Alabama Coastal BirdFest, or even Earth Day Mobile Bay, you're bound to have seen Rodney Kilgore, a member of the SALT Board of Directors. Not only does Rodney show up and help at every event where SALT is represented, but he also co-chaired Bald Eagle Bash for three years and has served as the Board's secretary for two years. A senior geologist/project manager with PPM Consultants, Rodney joined the SALT Board six years ago and is stepping down at the end of 2021.

Rodney has been instrumental in the SALT Photo Contest, serving as one of the judges for several years and helped develop the contest guidelines. A gifted nature photographer, Rodney's photos are often seen in SALT Line and on social media. He currently serves on the Steering Committee of the Eastern Shore Camera Club.

Thank you for your service, Rodney!



Photo by Stephen Savage

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT



A VERY SPECIAL ORNAMENT

Sometimes, things just fall in to place, and choosing the art for this year’s South Alabama Land Trust Christmas ornament was one of those times.

We’ve talked a lot about Longleaf pines this year. We wrote about the Longleaf ecosystem in an earlier *SALT Line*, volunteers planted Longleaf seedlings at Fish River Nature Preserve, and SALT received a grant (and the seedlings) from a company that grows and ships, worldwide, Longleaf pines.

When looking for inspiration for the 2021 ornament, one of the winning photos from our 2020 SALT Photo Contest popped up – a photo of the growing tip of a Longleaf pine. The photographer is 15-year-old Sophia Haines, a student at Bayside Academy. Sophia’s Longleaf won first place in the Flora category in the junior division.



Sophia Haines

When asked about the circumstances surrounding the photo, Sophia said, “I was hiking at Splinter Hill Bog and I came upon this young Longleaf pine. It was about a meter high, and I was mesmerized by the way it was

blooming and by how different it was from others.”

Sophia didn’t know her photo was the inspiration for the 2021 ornament until she saw it at the reception for the 2021 SALT Photo Contest, where she won 2nd and 3rd place in the Fauna category, junior division.

Winning is not new to the young photographer. The 2021 contest was her sixth or seventh, she said, and each year she’s been a winner.

Is nature photography in Sophia’s long-term career goals? Not exactly, although her skills will come in handy as either a marine biologist or aquatic veterinarian.

The ornaments can be purchased through the SALT website -- southalabamalandtrust.org/shop, or at Christmas Around the Corner in Fairhope, or the SALT offices at 11401 US 98.

The ornaments are also part of SALT’s year-end fund raising appeal. Donors whose gift is \$250 or greater will receive an ornament. To give online, please visit southalabamalandtrust.org/general-donation. -- DB

SPIDERS & SNAKES? NO PROBLEM!

As the land coordinator for SALT, one of my favorite duties is monitoring the properties we've committed to protect. To give some perspective, I began my career in England working in aerospace engineering, and I spent my free time traveling to remote parts of the world,



Owen's Bayou during a dry period

devoting my salary to wilderness exploration. My adventures inspired me to undertake a degree in natural science so I could spend more time studying nature and less time in the industrial world. After trekking many of the world's wildest jungles, I found myself in Fairhope, Alabama. I was taken aback by the homey feel of the area, but I was more blown away by how this pleasant town was surrounded by ecosystems that could challenge even the Amazon in biodiversity.

Monitoring SALT protected properties comes with a massive sense of satisfaction. Once a land parcel has been protected by SALT, either through ownership or conservation easement, the property is added to our annual monitoring list. Monitoring allows me to form a report emphasizing any signs of encroachment, presence of invasive species, significant natural occurrences, and the presence of noteworthy or threatened species. I occasionally monitor larger landscapes via drone, but typically, eyes on the ground are most effective.

In the summer months, I average three steps to every spider in my face, whilst slapping biting yellow flies off my back and hacking my way through thick brush with a machete. Regardless of the challenges, summertime monitoring comes with enormous reward. In this sub-tropical climate, the flora and fauna thrive in the hot, humid conditions, making it a great time to spot the most exciting wildlife and easily identify invasive plant species by their leaves, flowers, or fruits.

A property that particularly fascinates me is Owen's Bayou, a tributary to Wolf Bay. When monitoring this parcel, I'm armed with a GPS device, a camera, and chest high waders. The intriguing aspect of this property is that residential neighborhoods

and main roads, sit just moments away from a wetland wilderness. Each visit gives a different experience. During dry periods, I'm able to walk up to Owen's Bayou and see a defined stream with luscious vegetation along the surrounding riparian woodlands. In the wetter periods, only too common in the summer months, I can be wading chest deep through a completely saturated forest; it's a truly dynamic wetland that's uniquely stunning in each condition. I'm always in my element here, analyzing the species around me, taking mental notes and snapping shots of



Owen's Bayou during a wet period



Photos by Darrel Williams

I encountered one of the largest cottonmouths I'd seen to date. As I approached the eastern parcel boundary, waist deep in water, I was met by an enormous cottonmouth that was obviously surprised to see me. The snake

interesting finds.

It was wading through Owen's Bayou when

coiled up and stood its ground, opening its mouth and shaking its tail to warn me off. With deeper water to my left and thick vegetation to my right, the fastest way to dry land was forward. Being no stranger to these types of encounters, I broke off a stick and cautiously moved the snake toward the vegetation and out of my path. Once the snake felt safe in the vegetation, it disappeared out of sight. I often find this is the way with cottonmouths; people talk about their aggressive nature, but in reality, it's all a show to be left alone.

Ironically, I see moments like these as the highlights. It's always exciting to see wildlife up close in its natural habitat and it makes for an interesting monitoring report back in the office. -- DW

BIRDFEST PROCEEDS BENEFIT HABITATS



Photo by Colette Boehm

Birders and nature lovers from 17 states and throughout Alabama came to see and experience the beauty and awe of south Alabama's resident and migratory birds, and the diversity of plants, wildlife, and scenery during the 17th annual John L. Borom Alabama Coastal BirdFest.

South Alabama Land Trust's major events/fundraisers, netting approximately \$45,000 this year for habitat restoration and protection. With 45 trips, workshops, and evening events to choose from over a four-day period, and a free Bird & Conservation Expo on the final day, there was plenty to keep everyone busy.

"As an ecotourism event, BirdFest involves local guides, rental companies, boat tour operators, workshop presenters, hotels, caterers, restaurants, and more, so the economic impact for Baldwin and Mobile counties is definitely notable," Connie Whitaker, executive director of SALT said. "Our long-time BirdFest partners, such as 5 Rivers Delta Resource Center, Dauphin Island Sea Lab, Mobile Environmental Studies Center, Gulf State Park, and the Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge, have so much to offer locals as well as people who travel here for the festival. It's wonderful for people to see and experience the places we, as a land trust, are working to protect."

The October event is one of



Photo by Colette Boehm



Bird Banding at Fort Morgan
Photo by Eric Silkowski

Alabama Coastal BirdFest was founded in 2003 by Dr. John L. Borom of Fairhope



Mississippi Kite - Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge
Photo by Eli Burkhart

as an event for Mobile Bay Audubon Society. In 2019, BirdFest was transferred to SALT.

"In addition to being a fund raiser," Whitaker said, "BirdFest is a great opportunity to get hundreds of people outside enjoying the beauty of the wildlife and scenery in south Alabama." -- DB

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PARALLEL MISSIONS MAKE FOR STRONG PARTNERSHIPS



Photo by Claire Hamilton
1st Place - Junior Fauna

Through its mission to protect land and promote environmental education in coastal Alabama, SALT has built valuable partnerships that leverage both its work and that of other organizations and agencies. One of the most significant examples of that is SALT's work with the Alabama Department of Conservation & Natural Resources (ADCNR) State Lands Division.

"What the State Lands Division does is very broad," said Division Director Patti McCurdy. "We manage a variety of state-owned land, both for the benefit of the state, as well as for future generations." She explained that the best management practices vary, depending on the mission of the state agency that owns the land.

Among the most visible are those lands held by the ADCNR and the state's Forever Wild Land Trust. Much of this land, McCurdy noted, is managed for both conservation and recreation.



Patti McCurdy

"We've really shown that we can very successfully manage land where we are protecting the sensitive habitat but doing so in a manner that doesn't require closing off the land to the public. We can still provide many recreational opportunities.

"At the same time, we are providing an economic impact, specifically a boost to the areas where the land is located, because of the public usage," McCurdy said. "You really do need a healthy economy within the state for the state to have the means to then turn around and protect the natural resources."

SALT provides an important partnership for conservation,

she noted. With its mission to preserve land, along with an understanding of the processes State Lands must follow, SALT can be a facilitator throughout the sometimes-arduous process of land acquisition.

"They may help a landowner who has an interest in conserving land for future generations to connect with our department to pursue that interest," she explained. "In addition to having a relationship with the landowner, sometimes SALT will actually acquire title and hold the land until our process finishes up and we can acquire it.

"That support can be critical because SALT can also help us demonstrate the public support that is necessary for an acquisition to get the grant funding that might be needed."

She also noted that because State Lands' mission is obviously statewide, having a local voice for conservation, particularly in an area as ecologically significant as south Alabama, is a great advantage. ADCNR Commissioner Chris Blankenship echoed that sentiment. "Our work in preserving and protecting our natural areas is enhanced by working hand-in-hand with organizations like SALT," he said. "They offer opportunities for local supporters and landowners to contribute, through donations, volunteering and educational programs specific to the area they live in and love. It's a real benefit to have local efforts supporting our statewide mission. The efforts of SALT have proven to be extremely valuable and are very much appreciated." -- CB

2021 PHOTO CONTEST WINNERS BEST IN SHOW - STILLWELL BACON

JUNIOR CELLPHONE

- 1st place – Jayce Adams
- 2nd place – Garrek Snell
- 3rd place – Dena Rowe

JUNIOR PEOPLE IN NATURE

- 1st place – Luke Ferguson
- 2nd place – Samuel Carpenter
- 3rd place – Anna Grace Spitzer

JUNIOR HABITAT

- 1st place – Samuel Carpenter
- 2nd place – Aiden Seward
- 3rd place – Judge Kincaid Morris

JUNIOR FLORA

- 1st place – Caroline Ernest
- 2nd place – Judge Kincaid Morris
- 3rd place – Allysa Bullock

JUNIOR FAUNA

- 1st place – Claire Hamilton
- 2nd place – Sophia Haines
- 3rd place – Sophia Haines

ADULT CELLPHONE

- 1st place – Marlee Mims
- 2nd place – Kelli Green
- 3rd place – Marlene Johnt

ADULT PEOPLE IN NATURE

- 1st place – Benjamin Rollings
- 2nd place – Heather Elliott
- 3rd place – Laurie Schaerer

ADULT HABITAT

- 1st place – Hallie Zimlich
- 2nd place – Andrea Crenshaw
- 3rd place – Caitlin Madison

ADULT FLORA

- 1st place – Jenna Crovo
- 2nd place – Susan Hope Rouillier
- 3rd place – Hallie Zimlich

ADULT FAUNA

- 1st place – Sean Grizzle
- 2nd place – Karen Chiasson
- 3rd place – Gwen Ainsworth

IF THEY SEE IT, THEY CAN BE IT.

By Angela Underwood
Weeks Bay Reserve Acting Manager

I watched a news program recently that showcased a female African American photographer taking pictures of girls dressed up as famous women – from Audrey Hepburn to Serena Williams. The young girls expressed how powerful it was to see someone like them succeed. The newscaster commented, “If they see it, they can be it.”

Growing up I wanted to be a nurse because my mom was a nurse. I kept that idea of being a medical worker through my childhood and much of my college career. I wanted to help people. By happenstance, I met a great professor who studied pitcher plant bogs as well as other southeastern ecosystems, and I was hooked. She helped open my eyes to a world I had never imagined. Since those days at Auburn, I haven’t lost my curiosity for what the natural world offers and my wanting to share my passion with others.

As environmentalists, do we help people? Not in the traditional way a surgeon might, but I’d venture to say that giving children and adults the opportunity and space to see the beauty of the outdoors, to feel the cool water of the bay, to hold baby crabs



the size of their pinky finger, to just explore and breathe...I think we do help others. Research abounds on the importance of being outside -- from mental health benefits to physical development to learning gains in children. Not to mention recreational and emotional benefits for all ages.

The height of the pandemic made it hard for us to come together for nature exploration. I didn’t realize how much I missed community





until these past few months when it all came back to somewhat normal.

Since opening back up, we've been fortunate to talk with visitors coming to the center, educate adults while they took in the beauty of Weeks Bay during Alabama Coastal BirdFest excursions, and hear school children exclaim excitedly as they came across lizards and snakes and spiders on nature walks with their classmates.

These shared nature experiences have helped revive me personally, and they continue to push me to learn more. It's my hope that children and adults alike become more comfortable being in nature. Our work is definitely not glamorous, but I hope that in my and my colleagues' efforts, a child may see their selves in one of us and be inspired to one day share their own passion for the outdoors. "If they see it, they can be it".

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WHAT'S HAPPENING

December 15

Braided River Brewing Bingo

January 17

Taco Mama Spirit Night (Daphne)

February

Eagles' Nest Paddle - Meaher State Park -Date TBD

March

Backyard Habitat Open House - Corner Copia Date TBD

March 16

Braided River Brewing Bingo

VOLUNTEER DAYS

January TBD

Build Wood Duck Boxes

Prescribed Burn Prep

February TBD

Install Wood Duck Boxes throughout Mobile-Tensaw Delta
Prescribed Burn Prep

Photo by Mariene Johnt
2nd Place - Adult Cell Phone