

Private Land, Public Use

Landowners Sharing Conservation

By John N. Felsher



Rising Fawn Gardens Sunflower Field

Many landowners who made the commitment to permanently protect land also wish to share the beauty of that land with others: family, friends, and co-workers; clubs, such as Cancer Navigators or Cub Scouts; caving groups and others. Here are some stories of our landowners sharing their conservation.

Rising Fawn Gardens

Steve and Karen Persinger share with others the beauty of their conserved 570 acres located in Rising Fawn, Georgia. Their land sits on the banks of Lookout Creek very close to the famed Lookout Mountain, where it climbs up the side of the mountain. They have hoop houses for crops, an herb garden full of fragrant plants, and a peaceful yoga retreat with views of a large field and mountain wilderness. They call this beautiful and special place Rising Fawn Gardens.

“It’s a very natural surrounding that’s pretty undisturbed,” Karen says. “About 500 acres are just woodland. We have some fields cultivated for crops, including food plots for animals, but it’s primarily very native. Lookout Creek runs north to the Tennessee River. Lookout Mountain is part of our landscape. We put the land in an easement with the Georgia-Alabama Land Trust to ensure it was conserved for generations to come and its habitat would remain as diverse as it is now.”

The Persingers don’t just sit on their porch and admire the view. They constantly work to improve their innovative farm

uses and to be good stewards of their land. Karen explained, “Part of stewardship is sharing and making the property available, to some degree, to the public. We promote wellness and education here, but we also always try to protect the footprint of the property and preserve as much of the raw beauty and naturalness as we can.” The Persingers periodically host wildflower and nature walks where they identify different plants and species to participants. Through Rising Fawn Gardens’ social media platforms, they further offer virtual tours and photography, and teach people about herbs, wellness and the native plants and animals of Southern Appalachia. Sharing this space helps communities come together to learn about, share and enjoy the benefits of both nature and wellness.



Rising Fawn Gardens yoga retreat attendees

In addition, Rising Fawn Gardens also operates as a working farm. The Persingers grow berries as well as medicinal herbs such as turmeric and ginger—both herbs considered by many

to be helpful in promoting wellness.

“As part of our interest in wellness, we want to teach people about different plants,” Karen said. “Many of the plants are native to this area, but we also cultivate non-native herbs here. We process the turmeric and ginger to create spicy blends, ground turmeric, and herbal tea. We also do programming regarding the herbs that we grow.”

“We have two or three open farm days throughout the year that are free and open to the public,” Karen added. “We also have ‘you pick’ days where people can pick their own blueberries and elderberries. Our herb garden tours are held on the second Friday of every month from June through October. It gives us a lot of pleasure to see people come out and appreciate what being close to nature can be like. The satisfaction is knowing that it helps people. We all need nature in our lives and we all need places to go that help us replenish and fill our cups. We feel that across the board, nature seems to be the thing that people crave whether they know it or not.”



Rising Fawn Gardens turmeric greenhouse

People can reach the farm in about a 30-minute drive from downtown Chattanooga, Tennessee or Fort Payne, Alabama. For event schedules and more information, see risingfawngardens.com.

W. C. Bradley Farms

Years ago, most Americans grew up on farms. They raised their own meat, planted and harvested cash crops, and grew special items in their gardens. Now, when asked, “Where does your food come from?” most Americans would likely answer “the grocery store.”

The folks at W. C. Bradley Farms of Columbus, Georgia, want to change that perception. The property runs along the Chattahoochee River, which divides Georgia from Alabama. The owners put a 5,500 acre piece of the farm into a perpetual conservation easement in 2008.

“We have a lot of different projects going on at the farm,” advised Ashley Turner, a wildlife biologist on staff at W. C. Bradley Farms. “Some of the land is in timber. Some of it is in row crop agriculture. We also plant Longleaf pine for wildlife conservation. Recently, we ventured into certified organic farming, so we’re doing sustainable regenerative agriculture on the property. Not all operations are on land with an easement,

but some of the land is permanently protected.”

W. C. Bradley is not only focused on conservation, but also on sharing the benefits of nature. In one project, Bradley connects with River Road Elementary School in Columbus to read to the children in their classrooms and to attend career days. Near the end of the school year each spring, the W. C. Bradley folks invite all the fifth-grade students to the Sugar Hill area on their property.

“River Road Elementary is our partner in education,” Turner commented. “Sugar Hill is on another part of our property, separate from the conservation easement. It’s perched on a bluff high up above the Chattahoochee River. We can see for miles north and south along the river. We always see bald eagles in the Sugar Hill area because they’re nesting there.”

On the designated day, children board buses to take a 45-minute drive, which crosses into Alabama for part of the trip. For many students, this marks the first time they left Georgia in their lives. Many of them never traveled that far away from home before.

Turner or one of her coworkers also boards the bus. “I meet them at the school and guide two or three school buses on the drive to the farm,” Turner said. “I love visiting the buses before we leave because I get to give the children a preview of where we’re going and what we’ll be doing. While on the bus, I tell them to look for things along the way like osprey nests, alligators, or whatever else they can see. I tell them what poison ivy and fire ants look like and things like that. It’s a wildlife education tour with a bit of adventure to get them excited.”

At the farm, school representatives divide the children into smaller groups. Each group rotates through different activities involving nature, wildlife, and farm life. For instance, one group might participate in wildlife scavenger hunt looking for animal skulls, antlers, feathers, turtle shells, and other hidden objects, while another group might observe a quail dog demonstration.



Scavenger Hunt at Sugar Hill

“The heart of the property has been traditionally for quail hunting and has well-maintained quail habitat,” Turner said. “The quail hunting world really deserves a lot of credit for much of the habitat conservation going on today. When we promote quail habitat, that helps everything else at the same time.”



Quail, photo by Dr. Ken Davis

I also try to give the kids a quick history of longleaf pines. It’s shocking how many people grow up in places like South Georgia and never hear how the whole South was covered in longleaf pines long ago. I always try to point out the different kinds of trees to the children.”

Many of the participating children previously experienced very little of the natural world in their lives. With so much focus on electronic recreation, some rarely go outside.

“Years ago, many children grew up hunting and fishing, but so many kids today don’t have that opportunity,” Turner lamented. “They don’t have any idea what’s outside their bedrooms. A common thing I hear from the kids is, ‘My grandfather did that.’ It’s rarely, ‘My parents used to do that.’”

Hopefully, this program will give children an appetite to learn more about the outdoors and an enduring appreciation for the wonders of nature.

William Hubbard on the Cahaba River

Most people want to leave a legacy, something people will remember. The legacy Bill Hubbard created will keep enriching people for generations and help endangered plants and native animals survive. Hubbard placed a conservation easement on his property with the Georgia-Alabama Land Trust and also donated more than 2,000 acres adjoining the Cahaba River near Centreville, Alabama to the University of West Alabama, retaining a life estate in the property.

Hubbard and the University of West Alabama are now working together to ensure the property is an ecology laboratory where UWA students, faculty and others can learn about and appreciate the unique biological richness that defines Bibb County, Alabama, which is located on the fall line/ transition zone between the Ridge and Valley and Coastal

Plains of Alabama. As this is printed, dorms are being constructed in the barn for overnight stays connected to UWA field trips and research at the UWA Cahaba Biodiversity Center. UWA Botanist, Dr. Brian Keener has identified more than 600 species of rare and unique native plants and is still finding more. According to Dr. Keener, the land is “an incredible example of exposed ridge and valley bearing a large population of Alabama Croton among many other rare species.” Specifically, Alabama Croton is a rare semi-evergreen shrub that grows only in Bibb and Tuscaloosa counties of central Alabama. The rich soils growing in the Cahaba and Black Warrior river watersheds create the necessary growing conditions for this rare plant. “The limestone habitat along the river and in intermittent places harbors the Alabama Croton,” Hubbard explained. “It’s one of the rarest shrubs in the United States, and I have the biggest stand in the world. It’s very common on the property, highlighting a really biologically diverse county.”



Alabama Croton, photo by Robin McDonald

The easement on the property protects a large amount of frontage on the Cahaba River, with the property situated about seven miles from the Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge. The longest essentially undeveloped and free-flowing river left in Alabama, the Cahaba flows through 194 miles of scenic and biologically diverse habitat, draining a watershed of more than 1,870 square miles in central Alabama. Accordingly, UWA will also utilize the property’s shoals and islands along the Cahaba to study its unique aquatic biology.



Bill Hubbard, photo by Robin McDonald



The Cahaba is the longest essentially undeveloped and free-flowing river left in Alabama.

Hubbard Property, photo by Robin McDonald