GEORGIA-ALABAMA Land Trust

CONSERVATIONIST

2019

CHILDREN IN THE WOODS

NATURAL TREASURES

HISTORY IN THE LANDSCAPE

THE GRATEFUL TREE
“The ultimate test of a man’s conscience may be his willingness to sacrifice something today for future generations whose words of thanks will not be heard.”

~Gaylord Nelson, founder of Earth Day
Features

FEATURE 6
Children in the Woods
A landowner uses his property to introduce children to nature

COVER STORY 10
Natural Treasures
How conservation easements can help save wild spaces

FEATURE 15
History in the Landscape
Two college friends join forces to conserve a large landscape

FEATURE 18
The Grateful Tree
One landowner’s mission to preserve the natural world that has brought richness to his life

Contents

3 From the Top
Conservation Landscapes

4 The Land Trust in Action

5 Upcoming Events

13 Announcing our 25th Year

14 On Board
Welcome to Our New Board Members

22 Steward’s Corner
Coyotes in Our Midst

24 Thank You
Our Mission

Protecting Land for Present & Future Generations

Over 400,000 acres of protected wildlife habitat, prime farming soils, productive forests, and freshwater/coastal ecosystems.

Georgia & Alabama Protected Lands
Conservation Landscapes

The land under protection by the Georgia-Alabama Land Trust now numbers over 400,000 acres, representing the wide variety of landscapes, habitats, and ecosystems that characterize this beautiful region. Last year's Conservationist highlighted our work protecting urban and suburban land from future development and fragmentation, with some easements as small as one acre. This year, our magazine features examples of our landscape-scale projects. They extend beyond boundaries and engage multiple landowners, all working together toward conserving land and water on a significant scale.

Our cover story, Natural Treasures, features two projects in the Southwestern Appalachian region. One is a wildlife management area of over 3,000 acres near the Tennessee River in Jackson County, Alabama, and the other is a 2,400-acre cave preserve in Dade County, Georgia extending across the side and valley of Lookout Mountain. In both cases, the Land Trust worked across boundaries and with private landowners, non-profits, donors, foundations, and government entities to help put these projects together to save these wild spaces.

But landscape-scale conservation can also happen simply through the joint efforts of private landowners. Two lifelong friends, Jim Jolly and Ray Moss, together with their families, have preserved thousands of acres of prime farmland and wildlife habitat in Hancock County through conservation easements with the Land Trust. And two of our other donors, Charles Thompson and Johnny Mack Morrow, are hoping their passionate connection to the land will inspire others to leave their property intact for future generations. Landscape-scale conservation efforts, though they often take years to come together, can be triggered by one individual’s decision to lead by example.

There is nothing more important than having clean and abundant water and functioning ecosystems providing for a stable climate and healthy land. Working across boundaries is a must for this to happen. Please join in this effort by supporting us in this critical work.

Katherine Eddins
The Land Trust in Action

Developing Efficiency

On May 7, 2019, our stewardship staff traveled to Warner Robbins, Georgia for drone training with Darian Yawn of Landmark Spatial Solutions, LLC. Each year, our land stewards are responsible for monitoring the Land Trust’s easement properties through Annual Site Visits (ASVs). Drones allow the land stewards to obtain high definition imagery of remote or inaccessible areas, to delineate forest stands and ecological features, and to review recent land management operations, such as timber harvests. With over 1,100 easements to monitor this year, our five drones are increasing our staff’s efficiency, and, most importantly, are helping to keep our land stewards safe.

Celebrating Community

The 6th Annual Duck Derby made a big splash on June 22, 2019, with nearly 500 rubber ducks racing down Terrapin Creek near Piedmont, Alabama. This annual waterside event, co-hosted by Terrapin Outdoor Center and Redneck Yacht Club, is a great way for our Land Trust friends and families to usher in the summer. A special shout-out goes to announcer Steve Stephens of WVOK 97.9, who kept the event lively throughout, and to our premier sponsors, Buck and Ellen Wiley and Wells Fargo. Thanks as well to gold sponsors Cornerstone Investment Partners, LLC and Terrapin Outdoor Center, and silver sponsors WM Grocery, Shell’s Downtown Bar & Grill, Modern Woodmen Fraternal Financial, and D-Vision III Concrete.

Fostering Collaboration

The Land Trust Alliance’s Leadership Advisory Council Retreat was held this May in Biloxi, Mississippi. This gathering of executive directors of leading land trusts meets once a year to foster discussion, cultivate connections, and inspire ideas for strengthening the land trust community. A reception was held beneath several 400-year-old live oaks protected by the Land Trust for the Mississippi Gulf Coastal Plain, which hosted the retreat. Pictured left to right are: Michele S. Byer, executive director of New Jersey Conservation Foundation; Tammyara Van Ryn, executive director, Land Trust Alliance Accreditation Commission; GALT’s Katherine Eddins; and Laurie Wayburn, President of Pacific Forest Trust, in San Francisco.
Upcoming Events

September 17-18, 2019
CONSERVATION EASEMENTS FOR FOREST LANDOWNERS AND THEIR ADVISORS
Merry Acres Inn & Event Center
Albany, GA

Co-sponsored by GALT and UGA’s Warnell School of Continuing Education, this 1 ½ day course features sustainable protection agreements for “working forest” land and conservation easement updates. Continuing Education credits, including Ethics.
Register online at http://conted.warnell.uga.edu/courses/consease2019
For more information, contact Ingvar Elle at 706-583-0566 or e-mail him at ingvar@uga.edu.

September 24, 2019
CONSERVATION EASEMENTS: LEGAL, APPRAISAL, ACCOUNTING, AND ETHICAL ISSUES
9:00 a.m. – 2:30 p.m., including lunch
Trees Atlanta, Kendeda Center
Atlanta, GA

This course addresses the legal, appraisal, accounting, and ethical issues that can arise with the creation and management of conservation easements. Recent case law updates will be discussed.
Continuing Education credits, including Ethics.
For more information, contact Debra Pitt at 256-447-1006 or email her at dpitt@galandtrust.org.

September 26, 2019
CONSERVATION EASEMENTS: LEGAL, APPRAISAL, ACCOUNTING, AND ETHICAL ISSUES
11:45 a.m. – 5:00 p.m., including lunch, and followed by reception.
Sirote & Permutt, P.C.
Birmingham, AL

This is the Birmingham presentation of the easement course held in Atlanta on September 24 (description above). Continuing Education credits, including Ethics.
For more information, contact Pam Paulk at 205-835-0808, or email her at pampaulk@aiaalabama.com.

October 10, 2019
CONSERVATION EASEMENTS AND LAND TRUSTS:
RECENT LEGAL DEVELOPMENTS, ETHICS, AND PROFESSIONALISM
12:00 noon – 2:00 p.m., including lunch
W.C. Bradley Co.
Columbus, GA

Get ethics and professionalism hours and recent case law updates on conservation easements over a late lunch.
For more information, contact Debra Pitt at 256-447-1006 or email her at dpitt@galandtrust.org.

October 20, 2019
7TH ANNUAL RAYDAY
3:00 – 6:00 pm.
Serenbe Inn Meadow
Chattahoochee Hills, GA

The Ray C. Anderson Foundation sponsors this family-oriented day of discovery about sustainability. Food trucks, children's activities, and eco-education. Come meet our GALT representatives, make connections, and join in the conversation at this zero waste event.
Tickets are free but registration is required at https://www.raycandersonfoundation.org/rayday

November 7, 2019
GALT TOWER SHOOT
(Rain Date November 14)
W.C. Bradley Farms
Omaha, GA

Good food, a 5-Stand for warming up, “money birds,” and prize drawings, all in support of GALT’s conservation efforts.
For more information, contact Debra Pitt at 256-447-1006 or email her at dpitt@galandtrust.org.

Georgia-Alabama Land Trust has experienced staff members available to speak on a variety of conservation issues to enhance your meetings, conferences, or seminars. Their presentations can be customized to inform both public and private audiences. For more information, or if you would like to host, sponsor, or speak at a GALT event, please contact Debra Pitt at 256-447-1006 or dpitt@galandtrust.org.
An Alabama landowner makes it his mission to put children in touch with the natural world.
Nearly 90 years ago, the Morrow brothers wanted to increase the tillable acreage on their family farm near Red Bay in Franklin County, Alabama. Using a common practice for that time, they drained wetlands and cut trees so they could plow the fertile bottomland soil. They also disrupted the flow of natural creeks running through the area.

“My great-grandfather owned this rich, fertile land that had historically been row cropped,” explains Johnny Mack Morrow, current owner of the property. “My father and his brothers farmed this land, but back in the early 1930s, they destroyed the wetlands. Over the years, most of the land had gotten out of the family, but I inherited 46 acres from my parents.”

In the early 2000s, Mr. Morrow, more commonly called Johnny Mack, started buying back land around those 46 inherited acres to reclaim some of the original family farm. He also wanted to give something back to his community. In 2005, he put 271 acres of land into a conservation easement to preserve it for all eternity.

“I decided to put my assets where my mouth was and started buying land,” he says. “When I had opportunities to buy pieces of land around my property as they became available, I bought them. I reclaimed 22 acres of the wetlands that my father and uncles destroyed.”

Called Cypress Cove Farm, the tract off County Route 28 in northwest Alabama consists mostly of pine or mixed pine and hardwood forests. Three creeks still converge on the farm. The only naturally occurring bald cypress stand in Franklin County grows there. Experts age at least one tree as more than 150 years old, making it one of the oldest cypress trees in the area. The property is also rich in archeological resources and contains numerous Native American sites.

“I didn’t want anyone to come behind me and undo what I did, so I wanted to put the property into a perpetual easement,” clarifies Morrow, who served for 28 years as a Democratic member of the Alabama House of Representatives. “I’m a Christian who believes I’m on the Earth for a short period of time. I’m very thankful that God has given me these assets and I’m able to share them with the community. I don’t own this property. God owns it, but it’s my responsibility to take care of what God has entrusted to me and I intend to do that.”

Johnny Mack, who also taught business economics at a local community college, credits two written works for his decision to preserve the parcel and open the property to the public. “A few years ago, I read a book by Richard Louv called The Last Child in the Woods,” he recalls. The book gained international attention for its message about the need to combat “nature-deficit disorder” in today’s children by exposing them to the natural world.

“I decided that Richard Louv [author of The Last Child in the Woods] was right when he said in his book: ‘For the first time in the history of the world, we are raising a generation of children who have never had any contact with nature.’”

~Johnny Mack Morrow

“About the same time, I read an article by Tom Smith in the local newspaper. Tom wrote that the Franklin County Soil and Water Conservation District was looking for an outdoors classroom. I decided that Richard Louv was right when he said in his book: ‘For the first time in the history of the world, we are raising a generation of children who have never had any contact with nature.’” Morrow set out to do his part to make what Richard Louv said in his book untrue for the children in the Red Bay area.
Johnny Mack and his wife Martha, the first female optometrist to receive the Optometrist of the South award, live on part of the tract. The rest he opens up to the public free of charge. People visit the land daily to take self-guided hikes on five miles of nature trails, watch birds (Cypress Cove Farm is listed as Site 51 on the Alabama Birding Trails, www.alabamabirdingtrails.com), or participate in other outdoors activities. The property also contains a gristmill, blacksmith shop, ponds, and an outdoor pavilion that visitors can reserve. The Morrows only ask that they clean up when they leave.

“We people in the Red Bay area and throughout northwest Alabama consider the farm a public park, and I want them to do that,” Johnny Mack declares. Children fish in the pond and on Bear Creek. Families come out to spend time together at the pavilion, and some hold graduation parties, weddings, and other events there.

Although many individuals and groups use the property throughout the year, three programs for school-age children are among Morrow’s favorites. Every fall since 2013, fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade students have visited the farm to learn about patriotism. After the opening ceremonies, veterans from American Legion Post 120 Marion Self in Red Bay organize the students into eight “platoons.” The platoons march to different stations to hear a veteran talk and demonstrate some aspect of military life. Throughout the day, the students cycle through all eight stations, including a military museum on the land.

“We tell them that freedom is not free,” Johnny Mack emphasizes. “Since we started the program, hundreds of children have come to hear veterans talk, ride military vehicles, and see other military equipment. I do it because I feel that teaching patriotism to children is like what Richard Louv said about the last child in the woods. Who in this country teaches patriotism anymore?”

“Johnny Mack was at a veterans’ breakfast in Red Bay,” remembered Frankie Smith, commander of the Red Bay American Legion post and an Army veteran. “He asked us what we can do to educate the children about the military and patriotism. He invited some of us to his farm to see what we could do. The program grew from that. He educated a lot of kids who probably would never know anything about the military otherwise, because they don’t teach such things in school.”

Cypress Cove Farm also serves as an annual host site for trapping seminars for students conducted by the Alabama Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division, held in various locations across the state in the fall and winter. Instructors teach the students the history of trapping and how it helped the settlement of North America, the responsibilities of trapping, and how to set different traps to catch various animals. Finally, students get an opportunity to set traps themselves and check them the next day.

“The students are trained in proper trapping techniques that are utilized in wildlife management,” explained Mike Sievering, who heads the seminar program for the state. “Students are trained by mentors to use a variety of sets, both land and water. These sets are utilized in dealing with some nuisance species such as coyotes, raccoons, and beavers. Johnny Mack goes out of his way to support the educational program. His property is an excellent location to use as a training facility with a variety of wildlife habitats conducive to housing furbearing populations. We cannot ask for better hosts than Johnny Mack and his wife.”

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~Johnny Mack Morrow

Caption: “I don’t own this property. God owns it, but it’s my responsibility to take care of what God has entrusted to me and I intend to do that.”

~Johnny Mack Morrow
Nothing pulls at Johnny Mack’s heart more, however, than the students attending “Camp Courage: A Helen Keller Experience,” a program he helped create with the Helen Keller Birthplace Foundation. For three days, children with hearing or visual disabilities visit the Helen Keller Birthplace in Tuscumbia, Alabama to learn about the world through other senses.

“The Helen Keller Birthplace is an historical museum that has visitors coming from all over the world every day, but our main focus for the past six years has been on Camp Courage,” says Sue Pilkilton, executive director of the Helen Keller Birthplace. “Each year, we open up the camp to children from all over the United States. For part of that experience, we go to Cypress Cove Farm. The project began in 2013 with seven children, ages nine to 12 years old. In 2018, 21 children participated. We hope to have at least 25 to 30 children in 2019.”

For one day, campers visit Cypress Cove Farm for a touch of farm life. Like the veterans program, the children visit different stations that demonstrate various aspects of farm life, such as blacksmithing or storing grain, but in a way that these children can understand.

“We have teachers trained in communicating with children by signing into a child’s hand just like Anne Sullivan did for Helen Keller so the children can experience different things,” Pilkilton says. “For instance, they might lie in a bed of corn where they can feel the texture of the corn and make ‘corn angels,’ which are like snow angels. They might experience a blacksmith making horseshoes by dipping iron into a fire. The children can feel the heat from that fire. We’ll let the children touch chickens or have other experiences. At the end, the children get in a large military vehicle and Johnny Mack carries them through the birding trails. At one point, he stops to let the children wade in a cool spring.”

Many hundreds of students annually learn about patriotism and the military by visiting Johnny Mack’s farm. More than 100 trappers acquire skills that help keep animal populations in check. Children with disabilities not only experience sensations they would never know otherwise, but they also learn that someone cares about them.

“I can’t solve all the world’s problems,” says Johnny Mack Morrow, “but I have a responsibility and an obligation as a Christian, and as someone who believes in preserving the Good Earth, to pass it on to the next generation better than I found it.”
The Southwestern Appalachian region near Chattanooga is well known for its dramatic natural beauty, drawing visitors from many parts of the country. Its waterfalls, caves, and cliffs attract not just sightseers but hikers, bikers, horseback riders, cavers, hunters, and fishermen. The region is also treasured by ecologists, who consider it one of the most biodiverse and resilient in the temperate world. They count the number of different species found there at over 10,000, several of which are rare or endangered.

Keeping this landscape from overdevelopment is the goal of those intent on protecting its ecological health. It is also the goal of those who want to foster economic growth, tourism, and the outdoor recreation industry—but not at the expense of the area's natural assets. There is widespread recognition that smart growth means green growth.

In 2004, business and government leaders in the greater Chattanooga area and nearby Georgia and Alabama joined in the effort to protect this region by forming the tri-state Thrive Regional Partnership, known as “Thrive 2055.” As part of its efforts, the Natural Treasures Alliance was born, a consortium of over 40 entities, including local governments, land conservancies and other non-governmental organizations, and outdoor recreation, tourism, and philanthropic groups.

Today, the Georgia-Alabama Land Trust is a proud member of the Natural Treasures Alliance, helping to conserve over 19,000 acres in the Thrive 2055 area, primarily through donated conservation easements on private land. While many of these easements are focused on protecting biodiversity or working farms, some have been instrumental in contributing to the public access and enjoyment of the area.
Another protection strategy used by the Land Trust is the purchase of key properties for later transfer to conservation partners. In these cases, the Land Trust ensures the land is permanently protected through a conservation easement or otherwise before transferring ownership to a partner who manages the land for habitat preservation, scientific research, or low-impact recreation.

One example is the Land Trust’s involvement in the protection of the lands surrounding Coon Gulf Cove off the Tennessee River in Northeast Alabama. Coon Gulf is now a wildlife management area open to the public, overseen by the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR). Another example is Johnson’s Crook, a horseshoe-like valley in the foothills of Lookout Mountain in Northwest Georgia, now part of the Southeastern Cave Conservancy’s Charles B. Henson Cave Preserve.

The Tennessee River Basin and its watershed is one of the most biologically diverse in North America and, as part of Alabama’s State Wildlife Action Plan, has been the focus of strategic conservation efforts by a variety of groups. For many years, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and the U.S. Forest Service through its Forest Legacy Program sought to protect lands surrounding the Tennessee River in the southern part of the Sequatchie Valley, which extends from Chattanooga into Northeast Alabama. One of their targets was Coon Gulf in Jackson County.

In 2007, Georgia-Alabama Land Trust and the Glawson family used a conservation easement to protect over 2,100 acres in Coon Gulf adjacent to TVA-protected lands. Several years later, the Land Trust and the owners realized what a wonderful asset this mature forested wilderness would be for public use and recreation, and encouraged the State’s Forever Wild Trust Program to acquire the family’s entire 3,225-acre parcel, which it did in 2010.

During this time, the Land Trust also identified a 120-acre gap in the now larger protected landscape, bordering land in the Forest Legacy Program: the Blue Hole tract, named for the stunning blue water in a deep pool on Coon Creek. With the help of an anonymous donor, the Land Trust acquired the Blue Hole tract and transferred it via bargain sale to Forever Wild in 2012, thus helping to complete an important missing piece of the Coon Gulf landscape-scale project. Today, visitors to the Coon Gulf-­Glawson Tract can enjoy hunting, fishing, boating, and wildlife observation as part of the Raccoon Creek Management Area, overseen by the ADCNR.

About 20 miles to the east in Northwest Georgia’s Dade County lies Johnson’s Crook, a scenic valley framed on three sides by Lookout Mountain’s sandstone cliffs and talus slopes. It contains one of the highest concentration of caves in the Southeast, including one of the deepest—Lost Canyon. The Crook sits atop a large aquifer recharge zone, and the Appalachian mixed mesophytic forests on its slopes host several rare and threatened species.

The Coon-Gulf Tract, a wildlife area managed by the State of Alabama, is now open to the public in part due to protection efforts by the Georgia-Alabama Land Trust.
In recognition of its ecological importance, this unique landform was designated a “site of statewide significance” by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources in 1992. A group of developers, however, envisioned it instead as a dense, Gatlinburg-type resort and second home development. They purchased approximately 2,800 acres of the Crook in 2004, and re-christened it “The Preserve at Rising Fawn.”

The developers managed to build several lakes and minimal infrastructure before the economic downturn of 2008 led to their undoing. Fortunately, the vast majority of the proposed twelve-phase development remained in its natural state. Many who had already bought land in the Preserve quickly found themselves in financial straits and unable to build, as the value of a one-acre lot plunged to a fraction of the purchase price. Banks began foreclosures and the developers declared bankruptcy, throwing the Preserve into chaos and splintered and unstable ownership.

Despite the hard economic times, a number of individuals and conservation groups immediately recognized the opportunity for landscape-scale conservation at Johnson’s Crook, including Land Trust staff, supporters, and board members. The Land Trust persuaded two local banks in 2012 to donate to it 435 acres of foreclosed lots, and worked with the Bankruptcy Trustee to acquire much of the other land.

With the help of numerous donors and volunteers (including lawyers, community members, title companies, and foundations), the Land Trust continued to make purchases of other lots in the Preserve, including those in tax arrears or foreclosure. Many people from places like New York, Florida, and California simply donated their tracts to the Land Trust; others transferred them at a bargain price. After years of consolidating lots, the Land Trust sold them to a conservation philanthropist, who donated conservation easements in them in 2016 and 2017 to prevent future development.
The Land Trust purchased a final group of lots in 2017-18 from banks and private landowners with the help of private donors. In late 2018, both the conservation philanthropist and the Land Trust donated all their holdings in Johnson's Crook to the Southeastern Cave Conservancy for the creation of a 2,400-acre cave preserve for resource protection, public recreation, and scientific purposes. The Charles B. Henson Cave Preserve honors the memory of Chuck Henson, a long-time recreational caver and early advocate of protecting the fragile systems of the Crook. The Land Trust retains a conservation easement in all of the Cave Preserve, ensuring protection of this unique landscape.

Georgia-Alabama Land Trust continues to add to the greater conservation efforts surrounding both Coon Gulf in Alabama and Johnson's Crook in Georgia through the easements it holds on nearby lands, thus continuing to expand the perimeters of these landscape-scale conservation efforts. Helping to save wild spaces, such as the natural treasures of Northeast Alabama and Northwest Georgia, remains one of the Land Trust’s core missions.

Conservation easements can provide momentum for large-scale protection projects.

2020 IS OUR 25TH YEAR!

Next year we celebrate 25 years of the Georgia-Alabama Land Trust’s work, protecting land for present and future generations. Since our first easement, we have grown to more than 1,100 easements, and are protecting more than 400,000 acres in Georgia, Alabama, and other states in the Southeast.

In honor of our upcoming silver anniversary, please consider the ways that you can support the Land Trust:
- Join our Facebook Campaign, by giving $25 to support 25 Years of Conservation  
  GeorgiaAlabamaLandTrust
- Be a sponsor of one of our upcoming events
- Consider a major gift by donating at our Chattowah Stewardship Council level (over $2,500) or our Chattowah Conservation Council level (over $1,000)
- Conserve your land with us
- Consider a legacy gift in your will to the Georgia-Alabama Land Trust

We thank you for your many years of support!
Welcome to Our New Board Members

BRUCE CULPEPPER

Bruce Culpepper recently retired from his position as U.S. Chair and President of Shell Oil Company after a nearly forty-year career in the energy industry, serving both domestically and internationally. A Texas resident, he and his wife Marguerite also enjoy spending time on their farm property near Guntersville, Alabama, not far from the area where Bruce grew up. He is an avid outdoorsman and has a keen interest in land and water conservation, serving as a volunteer and board member for many local and national organizations. In addition to his new position on the board of directors of the Georgia-Alabama Land Trust, Bruce serves on the board of the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation, the Coastal Conservation Association’s Building Conservation Trust, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation, the Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation, and the U.S. Chamber of Congress. The University of Alabama named Bruce one of its alumni “Legends” in 2017.

TED MCCULLOUGH

Ted McCullough first joined Southern Company in 1987, where he has held various engineering leadership positions over the last thirty years. He currently serves as Southern Company’s Vice President of Hydroelectric Generation, Renewables, and Fossil Fleet Performance. A registered professional engineer, he holds degrees in electrical engineering and mathematics from Vanderbilt University, and a master’s degree in business administration from Auburn University. Ted grew up playing sports but was introduced to duck hunting as a college student. That experience turned him into an outdoor sportsman, giving him an appreciation for the natural landscape. Today, he enjoys hunting on his farm near the North Sauty Wildlife Refuge in Alabama and is a strong advocate for the preservation of wildlife habitats through land conservation.

THAD WATERS

Thad Watters is self-employed and a former part owner of Syntec Industries, Inc., where he served as Vice President of Sales. Since 2003, he has been a member of the board of directors of Heritage First Bank. He also serves on the board of Heritage First Bancshares, Inc. A graduate of Georgia Tech, Thad grew up hunting, fishing, camping, and hiking. His love of the outdoors led to an interest in land management, habitat management, and land conservation. In addition to his new position on the board of the Georgia-Alabama Land Trust, Thad is Chairman of the Georgia Alliance of the Boys & Girls Club for the State of Georgia and serves on the Executive Committee of the Boys & Girls Club of Northwest Georgia, where he is also past president. He is a board member of Cancer Navigators and former president of the Northwest Georgia Council of Boy Scouts of America.
History in the Landscape
Two college friends preserve their friendship through large-scale conservation efforts
By Betsy Crosby

Jim Jolly’s an optimistic fella. At least that’s the way the local farmers look at it.

He’ll gladly own up to it. With the help of property manager Vic Lester, he’s committed to turning the rolling hills of his property near Sparta, Georgia into one of the prettiest pecan orchards in the state.

Since it takes an average of ten years for pecan trees to become productive, his enthusiasm for the project has some locals shaking their heads. One farmer, in the process of leasing out his orchards and selling off his equipment, announced to Jim: “I’m 66, and I’m getting out of this business.”

“Well,” said Jim, “I’m 78, and I’m getting in.”

He did not grow up on a farm and, as a young graduate from Georgia Tech, he joined his father in running a commercial carpet mill in Dalton, Georgia. That business held his interest until 2016 when the mill was sold to a new owner.

It was time to take a second look at the property he had been steadily accumulating in the Sparta area since 1987 when he bought his first hunting acreage, Deerfield Properties, with his college roommate Ray Moss. Lifelong friends, Jim and Ray not only hunted together but worked together professionally for more than forty years at J&J Industries.

During that time, the two men steadily expanded Deerfield beyond its initial 880 acres, eventually finding themselves with sizable acreage not just well-suited for hunting deer and turkey, but also for growing pine trees. Yet Jim’s eyes lit up every time contiguous land came up for sale, much of it part of the former cotton plantation owned by 19th-century planter David Dickson (see box insert, p. 17). Soon, he and his entire family had parceled together enough additional acreage outside Deerfield to require him to take a long look at its highest and best use.

His conclusion: Pecans.

While the pecan market’s had a hard time in Georgia with Hurricane Michael and the scuffle over tariffs with China, Jim’s certain it will all sort itself out in time. The Albany area in South Georgia is where most of the state’s pecan industry is located, but he thinks that his neck of the woods in Hancock County, with its well-drained sandy soil, may eventually prove to be equally productive.

“This pecan business,” he says, “is a new lease on life for me. I was saying the other day, this is going to be one of the most beautiful pecan orchards in the whole state.” He acknowledges that South Georgia is flat, making those orchards easier to irrigate and harvest, yet he believes that the extra effort required to put his fields into production is well worth it. “We’re rolling here, but rolling’s a lot prettier than flat.”
As the pine trees within the Dickson plantation imprint reach the end of their thirty-year rotation, Jim plans to harvest them and replant with pecans. He planted his first trees in January 2018 and another 2,700 in January 2019. He hopes to plant at the same rate over the next five or six years.

It’s a significant investment in the farming landscape and one he’s determined to see continue, rather than allow it to be turned into a granite quarry like the land bordering his property or the tract down the road that produces asphalt. To make sure, he oversaw the enrollment of both the acreage owned by his family and the acreage he owns jointly with Ray Moss, Deerfield Properties, into a conservation easement.

The terms of the easement, which bind all future owners as well, will allow them to continue to do what they are doing now: hunt, grow and harvest timber, and plant pecans. What it will prohibit, however, is any commercial development or mining activities on the various properties, preventing fragmentation of wildlife areas and helping to preserve prime farming soils as well as the high-priority habitats near the granite outcroppings found on these lands.

Ray Moss recalls that his first response to the proposal of a conservation easement was skepticism. “My initial reaction was ‘I don’t want to give up my rights.’ But I thought about it and realized that this is what I wanted to do with the property anyway.” As someone who has grown up hunting his whole life, he believes in the preservation of habitat. “It’s been in my blood for a long time. I began hunting small game and quail with my dad when I was seven years old.” It grieves him to see the lack of interest in hunting in the younger generation and hopes that his grandchildren will grow to appreciate the outdoors as much as he does.

Preservation of wildlife habitat was always a priority for both Ray and Jim from the time they first bought Deerfield. Though they recognized that the pine trees could be managed to help pay taxes and other costs, they made a point not to cut the hardwoods that produce forage and provide shelter for wildlife. “We just never cut them because we didn’t want to disturb what was there,” says Jim. “When the opportunity came along for us to consider an easement, it was nothing really different than what we’d been doing for thirty years. It just fit in. And what it did, as well, is it locked it in for the future so that other folks would treat it the same way.”

So, while Jim is off learning pecan farming on the job, Ray is happy to stay put doing what he does best. Their cabins, however, are in shouting distance of each other, in front of one of the many lakes that dot their adjoining lands. They still enjoy hunting together, but Jim’s found that there’s so much work to do when he visits his property from his home in Dalton, that a day spent in the deer stand is becoming a rare pleasure. Yet he gets excited when he thinks about the years ahead, when he can sit back and watch his orchard take root.

“My initial reaction was ‘I don’t want to give up my rights.’ But I thought about it and realized that this is what I wanted to do with the property anyway.”

~ Ray Moss
It's easy to envision the magnificence of the developing vista, as the property features a mature pecan grove that is 80 to 100 years old, near the site where the original home of Amanda America Dickson, the African-American daughter of plantation owner David Dickson, still stands. [See box insert.] Though the combined Jolly-Moss property holdings aren't nearly as large as Dickson's once were, Jim Jolly and Ray Moss find themselves turning heads today in Hancock County as Dickson did 130 years ago over their large-scale efforts to conserve prime soils and preserve connectivity and biodiversity.

According to Jim, in about four years, his trees will have grown enough to provide a transformation of the landscape, one that will be visible to the public as they drive by, adding to the conservation values of his property. “All along the road, and down the driveway on both sides,” he says. “It’s going to be beautiful.”

David Dickson’s Legacy

David Dickson, a 19th-century cotton planter, owned vast acreage in Hancock County near Sparta, with title to over 17,000 acres at the time of his death in 1885. He turned heads locally through his progressive farming methods, including crop rotation and the use of guano as fertilizer, but also through his unconventional personal life. His sexual exploitation of a house slave named Julia produced a daughter, Amanda America Dickson, who he acknowledged as his own. Upon his death, she inherited his estate, worth over a half-million dollars, making her the richest African-American woman in the United States. Although Dickson's white relatives sued to break the will, his legal efforts to protect Amanda's inheritance were ultimately successful. The home pictured above is the site of the house built by Dickson for his daughter before his death. Jim Jolly believes that the back of the house is part of the original building. He rents it out to a hunting group, and periodically hosts tours of the property for Dickson's slave descendants. Amanda America Dickson died in 1893, and the property was later sold outside the family.
The Grateful Tree

A water oak on 300 pristine acres of forests, fields, and streams symbolizes one man’s gratitude for the joys of family and nature.
You’ve no doubt heard the saying “Be grateful for what you have.” For Charles Thompson, gratitude is not just the key to happiness. It’s a way of life.

Thompson owns 300 acres of richly diverse land his parents purchased in 1948 in West Georgia near the Haralson County town of Tallapoosa. The terrain rises from creek-side bottomland to pastures rimmed by mesic hardwood forests. Stands of oak, hickory, and longleaf pine rise on gentle slopes to stunning views of nearby Tally Mountain and Alabama’s Talladega National Forest in the distance. Numerous rare, threatened, or unusual species of plants and aquatic life live among the untouched beauty of the fields, forests, springs, and streams. The site is archaeologically important in both Native American artifacts and rock structures that are evidence of early settlement.

For as long as he can remember, Thompson has been not just grateful for the property but fiercely protective of it. In his eyes, God has blessed it with what he calls “every aspect of beauty, joy, and visualization of creation,” including “magnificent trees that haven’t been touched in more than 100 years.” He still remembers how, as a child, he would go to battle with his father about the felling of a tree. “I would start screaming and squalling, and he would just say, ‘Well, son …’ But, he would usually leave the tree alone. So, a lot of what is here is here because I have been so adamant about preserving it. I am not a conservationist. I am a preservationist.”

Thompson cherishes all living things on the property, such as a patch of Mayapple with rare pink flowers, the tiny shiners that reappear when rains refills creek beds, and the deer he feeds each morning. One tree, however, is especially meaningful to him. It is a water oak on a ridge in one of the forests. He calls it The Grateful Tree. It’s become a living symbol of Thompson’s gratitude for the beauty and heritage of his land, the love and respect he feels for the generations of family who nurtured it, and his determination to preserve every inch of a tract he values as a treasure, because large, pristine acreage like his is so rare.

He named the tree many years ago when his father, who was suffering from complications from a work-related accident, was diagnosed with lymphoma. While his father was in treatment at Emory Hospital in Atlanta, Thompson would make the 60-mile trip to stay with him, then dash home, change clothes, and do the chores. He had cared for his grandmother and mother, who both died before his father’s diagnosis, and the strain of caring for them and then his dad wore heavily on him.

Finally, one day after coming home from Emory, he said to himself, “I just don’t know if I can do this anymore.” Emotionally and physically drained, he took his dog Razor Lee for a walk in a forest near the house and sat by the water oak. “I leaned back and said, ‘Thank goodness for this tree. Thank goodness for Razor Lee. Thank goodness for the little stream down here. Thank goodness for the birds.’ An hour later, I was still saying thank goodness. When I got up, I said, ‘Well, hey! I can do this.’ The tree became the source of my strength to get through all the stuff that was going on.’ He still goes there as often as he can and sits on a swing hanging from a branch where he reflects on the things he is grateful for, silently saying to himself “thank goodness” for the joys in his life.

He celebrated one of those joys on October 31, 2012 when he put 261.5 acres of the property in a conservation easement with the Georgia-Alabama Land Trust, Inc. The terms of his easement, which spell out his wishes for the property, will keep it from being mined, logged, or developed. The easement is a reflection of Thompson’s emotional attachment to the land, which goes beyond family ties to a deeply personal place. He is convinced he was here before, living among people of distant cultures. “My attachment, my love for this place, it’s got to be something divine. I couldn’t have just been dropped here.” He believes he has been put here now for a purpose. “I have to preserve this place. That is my mission.”

“The Grateful Tree”—Pen and ink drawing by Charles Thompson.
The Grateful Tree (continued)

An artist, poet, and writer, Thompson credits his mother for helping him develop his philosophy about life. He had just earned a Master’s in Art Education from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro when he learned that both she and his grandmother had been diagnosed with cancer. “Being an only child and loving them deeply, I saw no alternative but to come back and help with their care.”

His grandmother lived about six months, but his mother survived another seven years. He spent those years trying to take her mind off her pain by gardening and canning with her. One year they put up 500 quarts of vegetables, wild fruit and berries, and poke salad. He still keeps a jar of her poke salad in his kitchen.

As a child, he and his mother frequently went on walks to collect what she called “pretty things”—especially leaves, moss, and rocks. “We would spread the pretty things out on a table and talk about them. There is no doubt in my mind but that she instilled in me that idea of beauty in those little pieces of things that we would gather. That’s who I am today, that’s what this stuff here is all about,” he says, gesturing at pottery and paintings he created and has displayed among the living room study’s book-lined walls. Thompson added the room plus several others to what was a milking barn where he, his mother, and grandmother once milked a herd of 30-plus cows. It is now his home, and the former milking room is his art gallery.

Charles Thompson believes he has been put here now for a purpose. “I have to preserve this place. That is my mission.”

Charles Thompson on the swing beneath The Grateful Tree. “The tree became the source of my strength to get through all of the stuff that was going on,” he recalls. Photo by Tom Oder.
When he’s not in his gallery or writing, he enjoys driving his tractor across the natural canvas of the diverse landscape, visiting favorite spots that remind him of why it is so important to preserve what he calls his “worship place.” Besides The Grateful Tree, these include a pasture of waist-high sedge of the kind his grandmother used for making brooms; adjacent springs that converge into a stream in an upland forest; and a 100-plus-year-old American beech he calls The God Tree. He also likes to visit places where previous inhabitants left their mark, such as a huge rock outcropping with smoke residue on its underside that Thompson imagines was once used by a Native American shaman leading spiritual ceremonies. Other sites include large “nutting” rocks marked by stone tools Native Americans used to crack nuts; a rock wall of mysterious origin and purpose; and traces of a flume that diverted water for panning gold, a reminder that Tallapoosa was founded as a gold mining town.

One other place is especially dear to him. It’s just down the hill from the renovated dairy barn and an artsy, multi-colored bottle forest that sparkles like a cathedral’s stained-glass windows when the sun’s angles are just right. It’s his pet cemetery.

He’s taken in more than 30 dogs and cats through the years, all strays who knew they’d found a kind and gentle soul. Each are buried or memorialized here, including ones who wandered away, their names etched into several long rows of marble markers in a woodland clearing. “They were my family,” he says softly.

A few steps away is another open area where tan beech leaves and green pine needles hang in silent contrast against the steel gray sky of a chilly, late autumn afternoon. He points to a small pile of rocks that mark where he will spend eternity. He hopes that will be in a mausoleum, where, he says, “My soul will have room to dance. I want to be buried above ground…. Everything I love is above ground.”
On a morning commute into Atlanta, sitting in bumper-to-bumper traffic, what we see out of our car window may seem like the antithesis of conservation. The high rises, parking decks, and apartment complexes that characterize our urban centers stand in stark contrast to the vast undisturbed wilderness of places like the Smokey Mountains, the Sonoran Desert, or the Amazon rainforest, leading many of us to think of developed landscapes as irreparably damaged areas, permanently detached from nature and natural processes.

However, within the guise of concrete and metal are unique and often thriving ecosystems that may play an increasingly important role in global biodiversity conservation. Just like humans, wild plants and animals can be highly adaptable and resilient, maintaining their presence in the face of rapidly changing environments, and, in many cases, even flourishing in the new habitats and ecological niches created by human development.

The suitability of a given habitat for a wildlife species is primarily based on the availability of four essential elements: food for nourishment; water for hydration; cover from weather and predators; and enough space to locate the previous three elements and a mate. Humans mostly rely on the same things, which is why many of our large cities were built on level, fertile valleys near the confluence of major rivers—areas that would otherwise provide high-quality wildlife habitat. Urban areas usually lack natural food sources, but wildlife can obtain plenty of nutrients from our gardens, ornamental trees and bushes, supplemental feed like birdseed, and our own high-calorie garbage. Additionally, developments and habitat modifications that make an area more habitable for us can also increase livability for some wildlife species in a way that can’t be matched in natural wildlands.

Species especially common in human communities—such as raccoons, pigeons, crows, squirrels, and mice—are often called “human associates.” They exploit human food sources, use our structures for nesting habitat, and take advantage of the release from apex predators that human presence provides (house cats notwithstanding). This is how a woodland species like the grey squirrel can do so well in the middle of Manhattan parks, and why cliff swallows, if they were named today, would likely be called “bridge swallows.”

Although less directly associated with human presence, highly adaptable species such as white-tailed deer, coyotes, black bears, red foxes, and red-tailed hawks have taken advantage of our presence and altered landscapes as well. These animals often

Regional Stewardship Manager Mike Heneghan helps us understand how coyotes play a beneficial role in an urban wildlife habitat.
remain on the fringes where human-created food sources are protected by nearby forest cover, living in and exploiting edge habitat along the wildland-urban interface and occupying forested patches near residential communities. Though the sighting of these creatures is less common, they are likely to elicit far more emotions than the more common human associated species, whether it be excitement, awe, or fear. Their presence and management can often lead to political polarization.

In 2015, Dr. Chris Mowry, Associate Professor of Biology at Berry College, and Dr. Larry Wilson, a Lecturer in Biology at Emory University, established the Atlanta Coyote Project to address some of the questions arising from growing coyote populations in Georgia. Through the use of citizen-reported sightings and camera traps, the project aims to better understand the distribution of coyotes occupying the Atlanta Metropolitan Area, and determine how coyote presence influences ecosystem function and species richness, particularly in human-dominated landscapes.

“The project provides an educational resource for the public as coyotes become permanent fixtures in the Southeastern United States.” Dr. Mowry says, “Our efforts have not only discovered that coyotes are fairly ubiquitous across the landscape, but there is also a corresponding rich tapestry of other forms of biodiversity in many locations. The presence of a top predator like the coyote can actually promote higher levels of biodiversity by keeping other species in check.”

Countering the claims that coyote presence has a negative impact on native wildlife, Dr. Mowry’s use of camera traps at a known coyote den near Roswell, Georgia identified 14 different mammal species, two reptile species, and 22 bird species. “By looking simply at species richness, we have found relatively high levels of biodiversity, including coyotes, red and gray foxes, bobcats, raccoons, North American river otters, white-tailed deer, and great horned owls.”

This work has led to partnerships with other regional conservation organizations, such as the Chattahoochee Nature Center, Fernbank Science Center, and Trees Atlanta. The project also caught the attention of personnel from Lincoln Park Zoo’s Urban Wildlife institute in Chicago, who contacted Dr. Mowry about joining a consortium of other organizations in major cities throughout the country. This consortium, called the Urban Wildlife Information Network, works to better understand wildlife communities through large-scale standardized biodiversity surveys.

Dr. Mowry sees the project as having a multitude of benefits, ranging from increasing our scientific understanding of urban wildlife and connectivity in urban environments to fostering appreciation and reducing negative interactions between humans and their wild neighbors. Citizen science is a major component of the project (over 1,600 geotagged coyote sightings have been logged since the project began), and the researchers have emphasized engagement through public lectures and events like Atlanta’s Lantern Parade. “Our participation is the first by a city in the Southeast,” he says. “It will contribute to our understanding and management of urban wildlife, thereby providing a wonderful educational opportunity for the Greater Atlanta community, helping to prevent and manage potential human-wildlife conflict.”

Conservation does not need to be an all-or-nothing game, and urban and suburban areas should not be considered a lost cause. The protection of urban and suburban greenspace, particularly in riparian areas, can help preserve habitat that provides a permanent home to reptiles, amphibians, and small mammals. It can also link important habitat cores for larger species and maintain stopover sites for migrating birds. By overlooking urban areas in our conservation efforts, we risk further fragmenting larger natural landscapes and, perhaps as important, may squander an opportunity to connect the citizens of our most populated areas with the natural world of which we are all a part.
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We appreciate your support. Thank you!

Wood stork in flight in Tattnall County, Georgia. Wood storks are federally-listed as threatened and are considered endangered in the State of Georgia. Photo by Drew Ruttinger.
A conservation easement is a voluntary legal agreement between a landowner and a private land trust or government agency that permanently limits uses of the land in order to protect its conservation values.

Conservation easements typically allow landowners to continue to own and use their land for farming, growing trees, hunting, and recreation. They can also sell the land or pass it on to heirs.

Conservation easements are used as a tool to help safeguard our states’ natural heritage and at-risk species by protecting high-priority habitats and waters on private lands.

The donation of a conservation easement may reduce estate, income, and property taxes for the landowner.