



Land Owner Spotlight: Permanently Protecting Forests Around Our Home

By Wayne Hughes and Glenn Galau

Glenn and my love for land and our desire to keep it from development are rooted in the experiences we had growing up. My father worked for the U.S. Forest Service, and we did a lot of camping. Spending time in the woods was relaxing for me, and to this day, it is where I go to recharge. Glenn lived near a limestone outcrop where he could get away to be by himself, hunting for fossils and enjoying the unique plants that grew there. Where we now live, we enjoy the forest for the same reasons.

When we began looking for a place to live in Athens, we wanted some land and not just a house. The first land we looked at had a beautiful stream and a diversity of habitats, and after looking into the other possibilities, we circled back around and bought the land we first visited. We bought a portion of the property 36 years ago, and gradually added to it until it amounted to 60 acres or so.

There is a rare sensory experience attached to living on a piece of land largely untouched for decades. Gradually you begin realizing that it needs to be held that way for others to appreciate. We don't know what the next century will bring the world although the broad possibilities are clear. Protecting the status quo

of as much land as possible seems like a good investment no matter the outcome. To ensure that our land continues to be protected for future generations, in 2022, we completed a conservation easement with Oconee River Land Trust.

Glenn and I enjoy observing nature around our home and in the woods and along the streams. We have wildlife cameras that help us see what's going on when we're not around. We've seen river otters, bobcats, and fox squirrels on these cams. I also enjoy cataloging some of the species that live here.

In 2005 I began a long-term study following the movements of box turtles on the property. The colorful, intricate patterns on their shells make box turtles easily identifiable as individuals over their many years of life, a span comparable to that of humans. So far, I've encountered, measured, and photographed 137 individual box turtles in 344 separate turtle encounters on the property. 66 of these are named turtles that I've seen more than once, and 71 are turtles that I've only seen once. In 2022 I documented 19 old friends and 21 new ones. That's an unusually high number of new turtles, and I suspect there's been a migration from the adjoining 280 acres which has been heavily timbered since January and will probably be at least partly subdivided for residential properties.

Last year I ran across the second turtle I found, back in 2006. He was within three feet of the same location as 15 years ago and had virtually the same markings. I've run across Sylvia, the fourth turtle I documented, 28 times, although I did not see her this year. She lives in the same two or three acres, except for early summer when she ventures out to nest.



Wayne Hughes with giant Beech tree on his property.

Laura Hall



Downy Lobelia (*Lobelia puberula*) is found on Wayne and Glenn's property.

Laura Hall

... continued on page 5

Upcoming Events

Turtle and Wildflower Walk
April 8, 2023



Early Bird(ing) Hike
April 29, 2023



May Member Hike
to be announced soon on our website!



**Member and Land Owner
Appreciation Picnic**
October 8, 2023

To learn more and to register, visit
www.oconeeriverlandtrust.org

DIRECTOR'S UPDATE

And here I had thought writing the first newsletter column for ORLT was difficult. It turns out that the last one is far more challenging! It's impossible for me to know where to start or how to convey the reality of my experience at ORLT and what it has meant to me. Maybe I'll just focus on all of the education that had to occur for me (and ORLT) to grow into full-fledged conservationists. I've learned so much during my time at ORLT— from how to read a topo map, to the correct pronunciation of Taliaferro, to how important a nicely written policy is, and finally to just how challenging it is to apply permanent words to impermanent land as we work to conserve our green world. But perhaps most importantly, I've also come to realize just how critical other people are to the vital work of permanently protecting land. I know that I would not have been able to grow into this amazing job and accomplish any of ORLT's mission without the help of others – from the first conservation easement to the 214th. I am grateful beyond measure for having had the opportunity to work with so many conservationists: dedicated and talented staff members, devoted board members, visionary landowners like the ones featured in this newsletter, and steadfast supporters. It's because of all these people that ORLT can look back to what it's accomplished over the last 30 years and ahead to the future with confidence, and I can venture out beyond ORLT to work with and train new conservationists. I am very grateful to have been a part of this wonderful crowd and ORLT's journey. ■

—*Steffney Thompson*
Executive Director



ORLT Celebrates 30 Year Anniversary

By ORLT Staff with reflections from Hans Neuhauser and Madeline Van Dyck

As Oconee River Land Trust celebrates its 30th Anniversary this year, we've spent time reflecting on where the organization started and how far it has come. From one volunteer director to a staff of six, and our first conservation easement to the 200+ properties we now protect, we have come a long way since 1993. Today, ORLT protects over 44,000 acres of forests, farms, and wetlands and 200 miles of streams and rivers across the state of Georgia. This land is vast and verdant and provides critical habitat, clean water, food, and enduring beauty that will be appreciated for generations to come.

This year, we celebrate land and also the people who have supported our mission over the years— landowners, board members, founders, donors, and countless community supporters have all played a part in ORLT's accomplishments. Of particular note are those individuals who had a shared vision several decades ago, as the environmental movement gained momentum, to create a land trust to protect the land they loved here in Georgia. On page 3, founding board members (who amazingly to this day, continue to serve on ORLT's board) offer Reflections on ORLT's Origin and on page 6, check out a timeline of ORLT's milestones through the years. ■

30th Anniversary Celebration

We invite members, land owners, and supporters of ORLT to join us in celebrating 30 years of protecting land in Georgia! This event will be hosted by Smith and Dianne Penny Wilson on October 8th on their protected property. Join us for music, mule wagon rides, walks on an ORLT easement, homemade ice cream, and cake. Stay tuned for more details! ■



Kathy Parker

Oconee River Land Trust

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Kathy Parker, Vice-Chair
Madeline Van Dyck, Treasurer
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■
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Land Steward

Reflections on ORLT's origin



Kathy Parker

From left to right, ORLT's founding board members: Walt Cook, Al Ike, Rob Fisher, Hans Neuhauser, Madeline Van Dyck, and Dan Hope (not pictured Terry DeMeo, Joseph Heikoff, Laurie Fowler, Milton Hill)

Excerpt from Madeline Van Dyck's Memories of 30 Years

[Madeline traces her love of land to her childhood traveling the world with her family due to her father's military career.] [M]y entire childhood, at least the times between duty stations, was spent dreaming out the windows as we crossed oceans and countries discovering scenery and societies beyond my imagination. And all the while were those majestic prairies and rivers and forests and mountains in between.

As the grandeur of this earth repeatedly flashed past me it would be the grounding for my permanent love of the land. My deep love of the land found expression in one of my favorite poets, Kahlil Gibran, a Lebanese sage, whose writings have always touched me deeply: "We live only to discover beauty. All else is a form of waiting".

Shortly after becoming the chair of the Athens Chapter of the Georgia Conservancy, a group of like-minded Athenians took off one day for Chattanooga, Tennessee to attend the Trust for Public Land's annual meeting. We were five strong: a Professor of Forestry, a UGA Vice President, a landscape architect, a Professor of Leisure Services, and myself, with nothing special in mind except that this organization was the closest thing to The Nature Conservancy's mission within easy reach of us. Janisse Ray would be our keynote.

It was becoming evident that not only were land trusts thriving nationwide but they were proliferating. As is the goal of conferences of this nature, the speakers and plenaries hit their intended mark with us. There were compelling opportunities through government programs and congressional legislation that incentivized both land trusts and land owners alike to be players too. By empowering interested citizens to protect their own natural and cultural gems in perpetuity, everyone won. Heading home after a full day, we were on fire with inspiration, the sentiment was "If not us, who?" And from my vantage it was in the cab of that car that I remember seeing the first twinkling in our collective eyes that created the original board that ultimately led to the birth of ORLT. ■



ORLT in the Beginning

by Hans Neuhauser



It all started over a couple of beers. In 1992, Rand Wentworth, the Georgia Director for the Trust for Public Land (and later the President of the Land Trust Alliance) and I (then Vice President of the Georgia Conservancy) were speculating about the absence of land trusts in Georgia. We decided that the absence wasn't due to hostility but to lack of knowledge. Few people in the state knew what a land trust was or what one could do for land conservation. Rand and I planned to

remedy that deficiency by holding a series of programs around Georgia to introduce community leaders to land trusts. Programs were held in Athens, Atlanta, Brunswick, Rome and Savannah.

Our presentation in Athens was sponsored by the Athens Chapter of the Georgia Conservancy and held at the UGA State Botanical Garden. Madeline Van Dyck, co-chair of the Athens Chapter and others subsequently decided to start a land trust that would focus on the conservation of the Oconee River watershed. She recruited me and others to serve on the initial board. On May 26, 1993, the Land Conservation Trust of the Oconee, Inc. (later re-named the Oconee River Land Trust) was incorporated by Laurie Fowler, Counsel. The initial board of directors were: Madeline Van Dyck (chair), Dan Hope, Terry DeMeo, Joe Heikoff, Laurie Fowler, Al Ike, Hans Neuhauser, Rob Fisher, Milton Hill and Walt Cook. Each board member contributed strengths that, together, set the new land trust on the road to the successes we celebrate today. ■

Snapshots from the Field: ORLT's 2022 Projects

Photos by Dan Crescenzo and Laura Hall



Thompson to leave land trust

By Roger Nielsen



Executive Director Steffney Thompson, a key person in the Oconee River Land Trust's success, is leaving the 30-year-old organization to establish a land conservation clinic at the University of Georgia.

Thompson joined ORLT in its infancy, beginning as a volunteer shortly after the land trust was founded, then serving as land conservation coordinator for four years and, in January 2003, becoming Executive Director.

"Steffney has been the constant that enabled us to thrive," said Ken Jarrett, chair of the ORLT Board of Directors. "She is extremely competent and knowledgeable about the business of the land trust."

Thompson's involvement with ORLT grew organically, said founding board member Madeline Van Dyck. "It was the most natural of steps to have someone of her caliber join us as a volunteer and then become someone who keeps all of us calm and productive and driven."

Thompson worked with founding board member emeritus Walt Cook to obtain ORLT's first conservation easement to protect Cook's

property on the Middle Oconee River. In the subsequent 20 years, she was instrumental in helping ORLT conserve over 43,000 acres of land and increase the land trust's endowment to over \$2.3 million.

Founding board member Dan Hope remembered how grateful board members were when Thompson accepted the Executive Director position. "Steffney brought focus and organization as we continued to learn how to be a land trust. Her attention to detail and calm reasoning was especially helpful."

Besides negotiating and writing over 200 conservation easements, Thompson's job included hiring and supervising a staff of up to six full- and part-time employees, administering the ORLT budget, helping to develop and coordinate fundraising efforts, managing legal issues, and ensuring compliance with state and federal nonprofit requirements.

Thompson said she will cherish her memories of working with the landowners, staff and board members to help ORLT conserve an amazing amount of beautiful land. She also was an expert at writing the technical conservation easements that protected that land. "I loved figuring out the best way to approach protecting a property," she said.

Starting in March of this year, Thompson began working with the UGA School of Law and Odum College of Ecology to create a clinic that will acquaint law students with land conservation principles and ecology students with land protection laws. ■

Landowners ... continued from page 1

There are dozens of others I've found many times, and I've come to immediately recognize a few when I see them.

Box turtles are poster children for the consequences of habitat fragmentation. Most of them live on a few acres that they never leave, but habitat fragmentation disturbs that existence. Box turtles fall prey as adults to human introduced threats such as dogs, lawn mowers, vehicles

and other motorized machinery, and everything loves to eat baby box turtles.

Providing for these endearing identifiable, and long-lived animals has become a major part of our mission, especially after we're gone. Protecting our property with a conservation easement has been a necessary part of that. ■

Girl Scout Troop Helps Clean-up Beech Haven Stream

In February, Girl Scout Troop 12092 and ORLT staff picked up litter along a stream and secured an eroding slope at Beech Haven. ORLT holds a conservation easement on this in-town property that will one day be open to the public. These junior girl scouts definitely earned their Animal Habitat Badge! They were fearless as they climbed boulders and waded in the water to pick-up trash. ■



Theresa Pippin

Notes from the Field

By Laura Hall

In March, I met the Savage family who recently purchased 39 acres in Oglethorpe County protected by a conservation easement held by ORLT. They asked me to come out and explain what activities are allowed on the easement. This mesic hardwood forest has streams and large boulders. extensive fern glades cover the slopes above the streams, and some small canebrakes with *Arundinaria gigantea* grow along the streams.



Laura Hall

Jason and Catherine Savage, with Catherine's dad, Mack Hayes who lives in Oconee County.

Catherine and Jason, who grew up near here, were eager to show me their plans for restoring the blown-out culvert along the smaller stream, and for replacing the main stream crossing with a bridge. Their solution is a great one, as with the large rain events that are occurring more often, many culverts are not able to withstand these water levels and pressure, and end up downstream. A bridge is best for larger streams, as it will not disrupt the aquatic habitat, nor create erosion with unstable soil. We are happy to have the Savages as new landowners. ■



Madeline Sparks

Members joined ORLT for a hike on a conservation easement near the Apalachee River on March 15.

30 Years: A Timeline of ORLT

Highlight of ORLT's accomplishments and milestones over the last three decades:

- 1993** ORLT incorporated
- 1995** Michael Stipe of REM serves on ORLT board
- 1997** ORLT helps ACC win \$1.5 million award to fund acquisition along Athens Greenway
- 1999** Steffney Thompson hired as first staff person
- 2000** 1st Conservation Easement (CE): Walt Cook protects 41 acres
- 2004** 10th CE, ORLT protects 1,000+ acres
- 2007** ORLT receives Alec Little Environmental Award
- 2012** Tallassee Forest CE: 310 acre CE owned by Clarke County
- 2013** ORLT protects 5,000+ acres
- 2014** ORLT protects 10,000+ acres
- 2016** 100th CE, ORLT protects 25,000+ acres
- 2019** ORLT protects 40,000+ acres and sponsors \$3.5 million SPLOST project for Tallassee Forest Nature Preserve
- 2020** ORLT's 200th CE

Managing Granite Outcrops with Fire: A Meeting with Malcolm Hodges, Retired TNC Director of Stewardship

By Daniel Crescenzo

As Stewardship Director, I am responsible for ensuring that the conservation easements Oconee River Land Trust holds are being followed. This means preventing soil and vegetation-disturbing activities inside riparian buffers and special natural areas, including granite outcrop habitats. I've known for a while the importance of fire for encouraging species diversity in upland forests in the Georgia Piedmont, but I only recently considered: Should granite outcrop habitats be burned so that they remain healthy and retain their species diversity?

This question led me to insightful conversations with Buck Marchinton of DNR's Wildlife Resources Division, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Biologist Mincy Moffett, Jr., Eric Brown, the Nature Conservancy's Stewardship and Fire Manager, and Malcolm Hodges, retired Director of Stewardship for the conservancy. These conversations culminated in a meeting with Malcolm at the Nature Conservancy's Camp Meeting Rock Preserve.

As Malcolm and I toured the preserve, with its large granite outcrop and rich assortment of habitats and species, I got to see firsthand how decisions about how to use fire around outcrops were guided by natural history – where fires would have been historically likely to start, and their historical frequency, for instance – and the need to preserve species and habitat diversity.

I learned that fires should be started in neighboring forests every 2-3 years and then allowed to burn toward the outcrop, but should never be started on an outcrop, in outcrop edge habitat, or in a vegetation island surrounded by exposed granite. This is because even small amounts of fuel are poisonous to the biofilm (algae and lichens) on

the outcrop, and historically, fires would have more often started off of the outcrop and seldom reached vegetation islands.

Fires should also be set under the right soil moisture and weather conditions and drop fires should be utilized as needed to moderate intensity of fire as it approaches the outcrop. Drop fires are small fires started in the path of the main advancing fire in order to reduce fuel load for the main fire before it arrives. While the fire gives grasses, herbaceous species, and fire-resistant woody species



Dan Crescenzo

Ephemeral flow of water over granite outcrop after a recent rain.



Malcolm Hodges

Dan and Malcolm met at Camp Meeting Rock Preserve to discuss fire on granite outcrops.

a competitive advantage over species that aren't fire-adapted and encourages species diversity, it is important to keep fire intensity lower in the outcrop edge habitats to avoid damaging these species. This approach also makes plowed firebreaks, which are disruptive to fragile plant communities around granite outcrops, unnecessary.

By burning the oak-hickory-pine and pine-dominated forests around the outcrop, and allowing the fires to burn up to the outcrop edge, fire tolerant species of grasses and wildflowers are able to thrive. By not burning the island of vegetation in the middle of the outcrop, fire intolerant species such as Eastern red cedar, pawpaw, and witch hazel are able to thrive. And by not starting fires on the outcrop itself, the biofilm on the exposed rock is able to remain healthy and rare species in the vernal pools, such as snorkelwort (*Gratiola amphiantha*) and black-spored quillwort (*Isoetes melanospora*), are able to flourish. The result is that each assemblage of diverse species has a place to grow, and the overall habitat and species diversity and resilience of ecosystems on the land is preserved. ■

NOW HIRING!

With the departure of Steffney Thompson, ORLT is seeking an Executive Director. Qualified candidates are invited to apply for the position. Description and application details can be found on our website at www.oconeeriverlandtrust.org.



Oconee River Land Trust

675 Pulaski Street, Suite 2300
Athens, GA 30601

“The mission of the Oconee River Land Trust is to conserve natural lands, protect water quality, preserve wildlife habitat, and enhance the quality of our lives and those of future generations.”

***Yes, I want to help protect green space in our region
Please enroll me as a member of the Oconee River Land Trust.***

Name _____

Address _____

Phone _____ Email _____

Membership Levels:

- Student (\$30)
- Land Steward (\$50)
- Family (\$100)
- Land Protector (\$150)
- Land Conservator (\$500)
- Trustee of the Land (\$1,000+)

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Mail this form (or join online at oconeeriverlandtrust.org) with your charitable contribution to:

The Oconee River Land Trust, 675 Pulaski Street, Suite 2300, Athens, GA 30601

Planning for the future?

If you are interested in **Legacy Giving**, contact ORLT at 706-552-3138 or oconeeriverlandtrust@gmail.com.