

OCONEE RIVER LAND TRUST *news*

Preserving natural areas in our region since 1993

Fall 2017

Conservation Rockers

By Denise H. Horton

Walter Rocker Jr., the newly elected mayor of Eatonton, has always cared about the land.

In the 1960s, with a degree in forestry from the University of Georgia, he and his brother, Glenn, established Little River Timber Corporation and began buying, selling and managing timber in the Eatonton area.

Over the past 50 years, the Rocker family has added land to existing family holdings held by the family for generations, providing places for recreation and family gatherings.

"We always focused on buying additional property in areas of growth," he explains. "Our thought was that the property might be sold for a subdivision, but if that didn't work out, we would continue managing it for timber."

In recent years, Rocker's son, Walter Rocker III, began to realize that some of the family property was located in areas the family didn't want developed into subdivisions. Instead, the family wanted the freedom to continue managing the timber and using the property for other purposes, including creating habitat that is ideal for quail and deer hunting.

Rocker III has a clear memory of when he first heard about conservation easements in 2013.

"I was sitting on the beach when a friend told me I had the perfect property to put into an easement," he recalls.

Although intrigued, establishing a conservation easement wasn't something the Rocker family rushed into.

"I researched it for over a year before establishing that first easement," says Rocker III, a real estate developer and general contractor who, with his wife and three children, live in a house that dates back to 1902 in Eatonton.

The Rockers' first conservation easement protects 160 acres in Newton County, including granite outcrops and bottomland hardwood forest that runs nearly a mile along Gum Creek. The easement allows the family to continue managing and harvesting the property's timberland, while protecting the important conservation values, including a heron rookery.

In the past four years, the Rockers have worked with the Oconee River Land Trust to establish a total of five conservation easements that have resulted in the protection of more than 900 acres.

Laura Hall, ORLT Land Steward, has joined the Rockers on several visits of their property.

"On one tour, they showed me the old homeplace, a beautiful old home deep in the forest, tucked behind large oaks at the end of a dirt road," she recalls. "We walked through tall river cane and came to the edge of an open herbaceous wetland. It was full of arrowhead and sedges- dragonflies were landing on the exposed granite outcrops that bordered this opening in the forest."

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Laura Hall

Landowners Walt Rocker Jr., Walt Rocker III, and ORLT Executive Director Steffney Thompson.



Dan Crescenzo

A luna moth caterpillar found on the Rockers' property.

DIRECTOR'S UPDATE

The humidity was high, but spirits were far higher at the August celebration of ORLT's founding board members.

The beautiful pastures, scattered oak trees, barns, magnificent horses and mules provided the perfect setting for the 75 friends and supporters of the Oconee River Land Trust who gathered on the evening of Aug. 13 at ORLT Chair Smith Wilson and Dianne Penny's lovely Clarke County farm. (See photos on page 3)



We simply wouldn't be here without the dreams and determination of Walter Cook, Terri DeMeo, Rob Fisher, Laurie Fowler, Joe Heikoff, Milton Hill, Dan Hope, Al Ike, Hans Neuhauser, and Madeline Van Dyck.

ORLT's early focus was helping the Oconee River Greenway in Athens become a reality. Since then, our focus has broadened to the protection of many types of greenspace, including natural hardwood forests, wetlands, working forests, agricultural land, and parks, recognizing the conservation benefits these lands bring to our community and to ourselves.

Each landscape brings something to the conservation table that is foundational to our lives and our future: natural plant and animal habitat, cleaner air, clearer water, soil protection, or outdoor recreation. The heart of ORLT's mission is the protection of land and water: Where land disturbances are limited, streams are buffered, and water quality is protected. Our very name harkens to our origins and to the strength of the connection between protected lands (of all kinds) and protected waters.

This year's crop of easements is just as varied. ORLT staff are working on projects from Elbert to Taliaferro Counties that will protect more than 8,000 acres when completed. We are very excited to work with this new round of landowners who are committed to keeping their land green and their streams clear.

—Steffney Thompson
Executive Director



Austin Steele

Second Annual Oconee River Belles Benefit Concert

March 22, 2018

With Alison Brown headlining at The Foundry in Athens, this is sure to be a fun night! Details TBA.

Music Business Intern to Assist with Benefit Concert

Hannah McIntosh recently joined ORLT to assist with the Second Annual Oconee Rivers Belles Benefit Concert, which is set for March 22, 2018.

A native of Cumming, McIntosh is an entertainment and media studies major at UGA who is also pursuing a certificate in music business through the Terry College of Business. During her time with ORLT, she hopes to engage and connect with the community through music by promoting and assisting in the development of the benefit concert. This internship will also satisfy her professional goal of exploring different areas of the music business.

McIntosh's experience with non-profits includes work with the Coalition Against Childhood Cancer, UGA's Love Your Melon Campus Crew, and several others. Discovering new music, obsessing over dogs, and running for a cause are a few of her hobbies.

ORLT extends a warm welcome to McIntosh and a hearty thank-you to the MBUS program for connecting her with the Oconee River Belles Benefit Concert.



Upcoming Events



Rivers Alive

Sept. 30, 8 a.m.–noon

Athens' annual river and stream clean-up is just around the bend. Sign-up to volunteer at <https://athensclarkecounty.com/1381/Rivers-Alive>

Low Country Boil

Oct. 8, 4 p.m.–7 p.m.

Live music, fresh shrimp, locally catered vegetable sides, beer & wine, and good company await you. More info on the back page of the newsletter!

Beech Haven Restoration Day

Nov. 18, 9 a.m.–noon

Join us for a day of education and restoration on the Middle Oconee River. Volunteers will pick up litter, remove invasive species, and plant native plants to support ongoing restoration efforts at the site. Sign-up here: <https://givepul.se/dadji>

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Celebrating ORLT Founders

From Good Intentions To Big Accomplishments

By Carla Francis

Outreach and Development Coordinator

The Oconee River Land Trust was founded in 1993 as a complementary organization to Athens-Clarke County's Oconee Rivers Greenway Commission. As a nonprofit, the land trust could move quickly to purchase environmentally important land and then donate it to the county for greenway use.

Several of the founders had learned about the concept of land trusts from attending a "land trust tour," led by Hans Neuhauser, who headed the Coastal Georgia office of the Georgia Conservancy, and Rand Wentworth, who headed the Georgia office of the Trust for Public Land. This tour spurred the creation of land trusts across Georgia, including ORLT, which Neuhauser joined as a founding board member.

ORLT's first few years involved purchasing land that was then sold or donated to Athens-Clarke County for use as greenspace. Two examples include greenway land along Mulberry Street in Athens and the northernmost portion of Sandy Creek Park. Many of these purchases were made possible by a \$1.5 million RiverCare 2000 grant, written by founding member Al Ike and then-board member Steffney Thompson, with invaluable input from founding member Rob Fisher's landscape architecture firm.

- In 1998, ORLT used funds donated by Athens-based band REM to hire attorney Steffney Thompson as director.
- In 1999, founding treasurer Joe Heikoff increased the organization's capacity with a generous gift of stocks. Dan Hope, founding vice chair, bluntly stated, "Joe's donation kicked us in the seat of the pants to grow from a group of people talking around a table to an organization that could start protecting land."
- In 2000, founding member Walt Cook donated ORLT's first conservation easement. He protected his land to ensure that the natural beauty of the forest would not be diminished.

According to Neuhauser, "With the acceptance of our first conservation easement, ORLT realized what it was supposed to be doing."

Soon after, ORLT expanded outside of the Oconee River Watershed and into the nearby Alcovy River Watershed. From there, ORLT has grown to protect over 26,000 acres of land on 113 conservation easements across Georgia. It has evolved from holding board meetings wherever space was available to meeting in its own offices. Its staff has increased to five employees who steward protected land and protect new land.

Thank you to ORLT's founders, who decided 24 years ago that the Oconee River Watershed was worth protecting. Thank you for laying the foundation for what ORLT has become and for your continued involvement in its successes.

Your hard work has led to cleaner water, fresher air, and scenic open space for all Georgians to enjoy.



Elijah Gabriel



Kathy Parker

ORLT Founding Members (L-R) Walt Cook; Al Ike; Rob Fisher; Madeline Van Dyck, Founding Chair; Hans Neuhauser; and Dan Hope, Founding Vice Chair. (Not Pictured) Terry DeMeo, Founding Secretary; Joe Heikoff, Founding Treasurer; Laurie Fowler, Counsel; and Milton Hill.

To see photos of the event, visit <http://oconeeriverlandtrust.org/event-photos.htm>

Invasive Species and Their Effects on the Environment

By Debbie Cosgrove

Earlier this year, I joined fellow Memorial Park “Weed Warriors” Dorothy O’Niell and Gary Crider in meeting with Oconee River Land Trust staff on a protected property just outside of Athens.

ORLT member Dorothy O’Niell had invited me to the meeting after learning the staff wanted to learn methods for removing invasive exotic plants. ORLT member Gary Crider led the lesson, which included information about exterminating a variety of exotic species, the best times of year to work, and the Weed Warriors’ preferred removal tools.

The Weed Warriors have been passionate about removing the exotic plants from Memorial Park for seven years and through their volunteer efforts the park has almost been completely stripped of exotics in the area from below the zoo to Gran Ellen Road. To the amazement of all are the myriad wildflowers that were hidden under the carpet of English ivy. Great has been our reward to see such a site!

My own understanding of the omnipotent design of nature and how connected plants and animals are in our world began a couple of years ago when Linda Chafin, the conservation botanist at the State Botanical Garden of Georgia, invited me to a seminar featuring University of Delaware entomologist Doug Tallamy, author of the book *Bringing Nature Home*.

Tallamy explained that a native tree, such as a member of the oak family, can support more than 100 species of butterflies and moths. Because many species only lay their eggs on certain native trees, without them, these insects cannot reproduce.

Unfortunately, invasive exotic plants have no natural enemies and can outcompete our native plants. Tallamy gave the example of chickadees, which need more than 4,500 caterpillars to feed one brood of chicks. Native plants are needed to provide habitat for these insects because research has shown that exotic plants do not. Tallamy has greatly increased the number of bird species on his few acres in Delaware by getting rid of the exotic invasive plants and adding a few key native species.

The fact is we can make a huge difference by removing invasive exotic species.

Removing invasive exotic species has great rewards: saving trees, helping the ecosystem, exercise, comradeship, and being in tune with nature. Come join the movement! Gary Crider teaches classes on the best ways to remove invasive species at the State Botanical Garden of Georgia and through the OLLI@UGA program, which is open to those over the age of 50.

Debbie Cosgrove is a Weed Warrior and a new ORLT member.

Creating and Maintaining Food Plots with Native Species

By Dan Crescenzo
Stewardship Coordinator

Landowners often use food plots to attract wildlife. These forest openings are frequently maintained by annually harrowing or plowing the ground and planting grasses and other seed-producing forbs. Unfortunately, this method encourages erosion, thus increasing the amount of sediment that enters nearby streams and rivers.

Frequent plowing is not necessary for attracting wildlife. Birds, including quail and turkey, and larger animals such as deer are just as attracted to perennial food plots maintained by timely mowing.

Perennial food plots should be located in flat areas outside of riparian buffers and left fallow, allowing the seeds of existing native plants to grow and flourish. To increase species diversity—and the diversity and volume of insects favored by game birds—the plot can be supplemented with native grasses and wildflowers available at local nurseries.

Once established, perennial food plots can be maintained by a single mowing in late February or early March every year or so. Mowing in late winter keeps woody vegetation down and ensures that ground-nesting birds are not disturbed. Allowing food plots to grow up along the edges creates a transitional habitat that provides shelter from predators and nesting opportunities for ground-nesting birds.

Fire is another important tool for managing native perennial food plots. In addition to increasing species diversity, controlled burns trigger a flush of new growth in grasses and forbes, which is particularly attractive to deer, and increase the populations of insects for quail and turkey. Fires should be set at different times and at different frequencies depending on the landowner’s management goals, and only under the right weather conditions.

Thus, food plots maintained by timely mowing and fire are a win-win for landowners who are concerned with attracting wildlife and with protecting Georgia’s waterways.

- For a list of nurseries that offer native plant species, visit <http://botgarden.uga.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Directory-of-Native-Plant-Nurseries.pdf>
- The Georgia Forestry Commission can provide landowners with personnel who are qualified to conduct controlled burns. The commission’s website also lists programs that can help pay for controlled burns and other management activities. For more information, visit <http://www.gatrees.org/forest-management/private-forest-management/landowner-programs/other-landowner-programs/>



Tall Timbers Research Station

Land Protected by ORLT Along Georgia Rivers in 2016



Aerial photo of Middle Oconee River.

Tommy Jordan, Southern Resource Mapping, LLC

2016 was a good year for protecting rivers in our state with conserved land:

- 2 miles along the Middle and North Oconee Rivers
- 1.5 miles along the Flint River
- 1 mile along the South Fork of the Broad River
- 2 miles along the Ocmulgee River

There are now 7.5 total miles protected along the Middle and North Oconee Rivers!

Thousands of Students Visit Conserved Land

In May, 2,000 students from the Jefferson City School System visited the “BioSTEAM Outdoor Learning Center,” a 175-acre wetland protected by a conservation easement held by ORLT. The property was donated to the school system in 2016 by the “Jeffco Boys,” a group of hunters and outdoorsmen who had owned the property for nearly 50 years.

During the month, students in kindergarten through seventh grade participated in “Wetlands Field Trips.” Pete Griffin, a wildlife interpretive specialist with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, brought a variety of birds and reptiles to teach the students about vertebrates.

The school system plans to increase field trip opportunities in the future and incorporate more aspects of the wetlands into the curriculum for a variety of learning purposes, including providing additional exploration and first-hand experiences to students.



Students visiting the wetlands along the Middle Oconee River.

Jefferson City Schools

Canoochee Bogs Nears \$58,000 Fundraising Goal

The first 50 acres of the Canoochee Bogs will soon be protected thanks to a \$27,000 grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Coastal Program, \$7,200 from the Georgia Native Plant Society, a recent \$2,000 donation from the Georgia Botanical Society, and donations from native plant organizations spanning the East Coast.

When this project is completed, carnivorous pitcher plants, flashy orchids, and endemic Georgia species will be permanently protected by a conservation easement. The easement will allow the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, a project partner, to continue managing the habitat. Additional organizations, such as the Georgia Native Plant Society, the Georgia Plant Conservation Alliance, and the Georgia Botanical Society will be able to continue their efforts to propagate and encourage the survival of these rare species.

In May, ORLT friends and supporters were personally introduced to the charismatic carnivorous plants, rare orchids, and the Georgia-endemic plants that populate the bogs.

The educational tour began with a dinner in Dublin where the tour group was introduced to project partners.

The next morning, Georgia Department of Natural Resources botanist Lisa Kruse led the tour. Kruse coordinates conservation work at the bogs.

Thank you to the generous organizations and individuals who are helping to push this special project to completion! To contribute to the final push to protect these special 50 acres, visit www.oconeeriverlandtrust.org or mail a check to 675 Pulaski St., Suite 2300, Athens, GA 30601, made out to Oconee River Land Trust with "Canoochee Bogs" on the "for" line.



▲ Dwarf Pitcher Plant (*Sarracenia minor*)
◀ Orange-Fringed Orchid (*Platanthera ciliaris*)

Photos by Hew Joiner



OLLI Class Teaches Students About Private Land Conservation

Members of UGA's Osher Lifelong Learning Institute recently attended an ORLT-taught class about private land conservation, followed by a walking tour of Nick and Jane Bath's conservation easement-protected land. Attendees walked through hardwood forest and along the Apalachee River in Morgan County, where remnants of a dam and bridge are located from historic Snows Mill. The Baths shared why they partnered with the Oconee River Land Trust to protect their land with a conservation easement.



Landowner Nick Bath talking to Gary Crider.

Birding With the Ocmulgee Audubon Society



Bill Flatau

In April, the Ocmulgee Audubon Society and ORLT hosted a bird walk on a scenic conservation easement just minutes from downtown Macon. Sixty-three bird species—and a large alligator—were identified on the property, which primarily contains ponds and forested wetlands. Species of interest included nesting osprey and seven species of duck. The species list was submitted to eBird, an online checklist program, which is run by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society.

Conservation Rockers

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Deciding to establish a conservation easement requires balancing multiple factors, according to Rucker III.

"The first step is deciding if it has qualities that justify its conservation," he says. "If it's just property with upland pines that have been planted, that doesn't make sense to put it in an easement, but property that contains wetlands or hardwoods or that has historic significance may justify preserving."

And, because their property is a significant part of their business, the family also has to determine that the possible charitable, estate, and property tax savings that can come with an easement justifies the limits placed on the ways the property can be used.

"We feel lucky to work with so many families who have dual goals of continuing to work their lands, while ensuring that sensitive ecological areas are protected," Hall notes.

Walter Rucker III describes his dad as the perfect example of someone who combines environmentalism and capitalism.

"Foresters and hunters are the best conservationists," he says. "My dad and my uncle are both really good at managing their property, including trees that they plan to harvest."

The Rockers are very excited about a 2017 conservation easement on the edge of Greensboro that will protect farmland, wetlands, and a beaver swamp.

Rucker III says, "We're thrilled that it can continue as a working farm while having the perpetual protections afforded by a conservation easement."



White Indigo (*Baptisia alba*).

Dan Crescenzo

Burney-Harris-Lyons Students at Tallassee Forest

Students from Burney-Harris-Lyons Middle School are benefitting from having Tallassee Forest, located just across Tallassee Road from the school, as an outdoor educational resource.

Students who participate in "21st Century," a STEM-related after-school enrichment program, visit the forest to learn about the local environment, wildlife, land protection, geographic information systems, and other topics that correlate with their curriculum. School partners, such as ORLT, Athens-Clarke County, and other community organizations, have come together to interpret the forest's natural and cultural resources for the students.

Tallassee Forest, a 300-acre natural forest with a diversity of important habitats along the Middle Oconee River, is owned by ACC and protected with a conservation easement by ORLT.

The county is currently leading a master planning process that will result in a park that protects the property's conservation features and provides opportunities for hiking and learning.

Features will include miles of wooded trails, an eco-centric children's play area, and cultural interpretations of the land as a former Native American site and, later, agricultural land. Once the plan is approved, developing and opening the park to the general public becomes a matter of funding.



"21st Century" STEM (science-technology-engineering-math) students at Tallassee Forest.

Karen Porter

**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:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student (\$10) | <input type="checkbox"/> Land Protector (\$100) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Land Saver (\$30) | <input type="checkbox"/> Land Conservator (\$500) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Land Steward (\$50) | <input type="checkbox"/> Trustee of the Land (\$1,000+) |

Thank you for your support!

Mail this form (or join on-line at oconeeriverlandtrust.org) with your tax-deductible 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 **Steffney Thompson** at **706-552-3138** or **steffney99@gmail.com**. Our tax identification number is 58-2108824.



THE 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."*



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SUNDAY
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