



Schramm Family Protects “Wild and Beautiful” Land Along the North Oconee River

By Theresa Pippin

In March, the Oconee River Land Trust organized a hike on George and Sara Schramm’s permanently conserved property in Jackson County, bringing together nearly 40 people, including the owners, members, neighbors, and friends. After several stormy days that left the river running high, hikers met on a warm, sunny day and enjoyed seeing signs of spring: clusters of toadshade trilliums in the woods, light green leaves of buckeyes emerging, and sweet white rue anemones along the river bank. The hike weaved through open pasture and along the North Oconee River, after which participants gathered on a platform built of reclaimed wood for a happy hour. Everyone in attendance can surely agree with the Schramms, who say it “feels good to know this land will always be wild and beautiful.”

As road cyclists, George and Sara Schramm biked along Chandler Bridge Road in Jackson County for years. Coasting downhill towards the North Oconee River crossing, the couple enjoyed the beautiful, pastoral views along the way. When they saw 59 acres of this land was up for sale in 2017, they jumped on the opportunity to purchase it. Soon after

purchasing the property, the Schramms worked with ORLT to place a conservation easement on it to ensure its long-term protection.

As owners of land adjacent to the river, George explains their goal as landowners is “to ensure (they) are good stewards of a slice of watershed and hope that perhaps others along the watershed will see the value of protecting this wonderful resource.” The family’s intent to protect this tract of land, and to have a place to explore and discover, was in large part inspired by Sara’s upbringing along the Iowa River. From a very young age, Sara wandered those river banks in her backyard to fish and collect natural treasures— she was a self-described “river-rat.” With the purchase of this property, the Schramms hoped to give their sons Louie and Konrad the opportunity to connect to the river and the land in this way.

The property consists of bottomland hardwood forests that border the river and wetlands, with mesic hardwood forest on the slopes leading down to the river. Open fields on the property, previously farmed by the late Millard Braswell, are now used for hay. Sara explains that Mr. Braswell, a meticulous

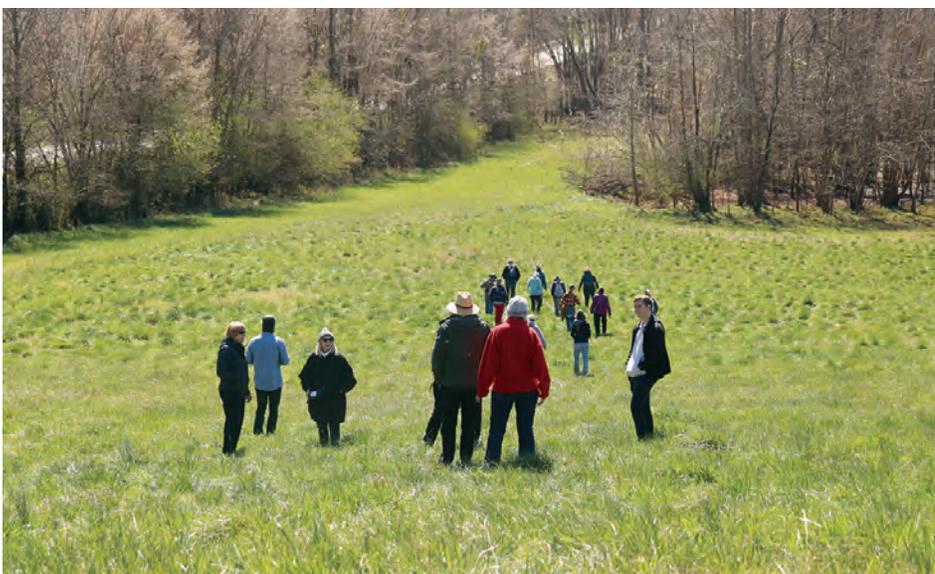


Laura Hall

George and Sara Schramm on their property in Jackson County

cattle farmer, maintained the property for 50 years using conservation-minded practices. Thankfully, his careful management ensured that despite decades of cattle grazing, erosion was minimal, and this land, nestled in the crook of the river, stayed well-conserved.

As new stewards of the property, the Schramms enjoy spending time on the land
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David Gabriel

Hike and Happy Hour took place at the Schramm Property in March

Upcoming Hikes



Boulder Springs Wildflower Walk

April 16, 2022 (Due to popular demand additional afternoon hike added!)



Middle Oconee River Hike

May 15, 2022

For more information, visit www.oconeeriverlandtrust.org

DIRECTOR'S UPDATE

ORLT's spring newsletter always celebrates our newest easements – we take a moment to highlight the beautiful conservation land and its physical reality. But if you are a land conservationist, you don't just treasure and protect land because it's beautiful (even if that beauty provided the first spark of your conservation ethic). You also know that protecting land preserves the foundation of a healthy community: necessary wildlife habitat, healthy ecosystems, clean water, and food. The Georgia Department of Natural Resources Wildlife Resources Division's recent report, "Conserving Georgia's Wildlife 2021" firmly establishes how protecting Georgia's natural legacy will ensure we have healthy, functioning ecosystems, which we all depend upon. The Upper Oconee Watershed Partnership's Forests and Waters Conservation Plan (see p. 3) likewise emphasizes the robust link between well managed forests and drinking water quality as forested land buffers and filters storm runoff and shades streams. This relationship between land and streams makes it vitally important that we have sufficient forested land in the watershed and conservation easements are one way to accomplish that goal. The report also reminds us that well-managed forested land provides a myriad of benefits: wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, and fiber. Conservation easements are a powerful tool for preventing habitat and species loss, and protecting forests and water. We think these results are beautiful too. ■

—Steffney Thompson
Executive Director



ORLT Welcomes Two New Staff Members

Land Steward, Sammy Pickering—After volunteering in the field for several months, Sammy was hired by ORLT to monitor properties around the state. Sammy graduated from the horticulture department at UGA and has a passion for growing and protecting native plants. With his knowledge of plants and love for the outdoors, ORLT is thrilled to have Sammy join the monitoring team.



Outreach Director, Theresa Pippin—With experience working and volunteering for various nonprofit organizations and a great love for the outdoors, Theresa joined ORLT to help with development and outreach. Theresa holds a degree in anthropology from the College of William and Mary and a masters in environmental planning and design from UGA. Her professional experience is focused at the intersection of people and land, a complementary background for her new position with ORLT.

The Land Trust's Role in Enforcing Conservation Easements

What happens after a conservation easement is donated? ORLT is responsible for monitoring and enforcing the CE, forever, with the goal of making sure the easement's conservation purposes are protected forever. We visit the property every year, and work with landowners to address any issues that come up and answer questions. And when necessary, we enforce the easement restrictions. Georgia law provides the framework for land trusts' enforcement activities and gives them broad power to stop and address violations on the easements they hold. ORLT has the right to annually monitor each protected property and enforce the terms of the easement with legal action if necessary to prevent a serious violation, stop an ongoing violation, and require restoration of disturbed areas. ORLT can also ask for monetary damages, punitive damages, and attorney's fees. These potential remedies are purposefully and necessarily extensive so as to help ensure that the property's conservation purposes are truly protected forever. ■

Oconee River Land Trust

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NOTES FROM THE FIELD : The Bowen Family Farm

By Laura Hall

The Bowen family have a cattle farm on the rolling hills overlooking Big Clouds Creek in Oglethorpe County. Jane Bowen and her daughter Catherine Bowen Drewry placed a conservation easement with ORLT on a portion of the farm several years ago—they did this to ensure preservation of the farm soils, stream buffers, mesic sloped forest and scenic view shed in this rural area, while keeping the right to continue forestry and raising cattle in areas that will not impact the conservation values on the land.

The mesic sloped forests have areas with large boulders and Georgia buckeyes are found growing here; they will bloom soon—a pale yellow flower with pink highlights. The hummingbirds will time their migration through our area with the bloom of the buckeye, *Aesculus sylvatica*, also called painted buckeye.

The family leases the farm to a group of hunters who take about 25 deer annually. They attract deer by managing upland pine, pine-hardwood forests, and old loading decks with frequent prescribed fires. These fires encourage a diversity of native grasses and forbs, including: the bluestems, *Andropogon glomeratus* and *A. ternarius*, and *A. virginicus* (broomsedge), plume grass, *Erianthus giganteus*, and switchgrass, *Panicum virgatum* and Indiangrass, *Sorghastrum nutans*. These open areas in the pine forest were once loading docks—regular prescribed fire will maintain them as grassy meadow habitat, and then they can be mowed for loading dock use in the future. The deer also love the clover growing in the pasture, and the edge habitat between pasture and forest—where the wildflowers and grasses thrive. ■



Catherine Bowen Drewry and her mom Jane Bowen



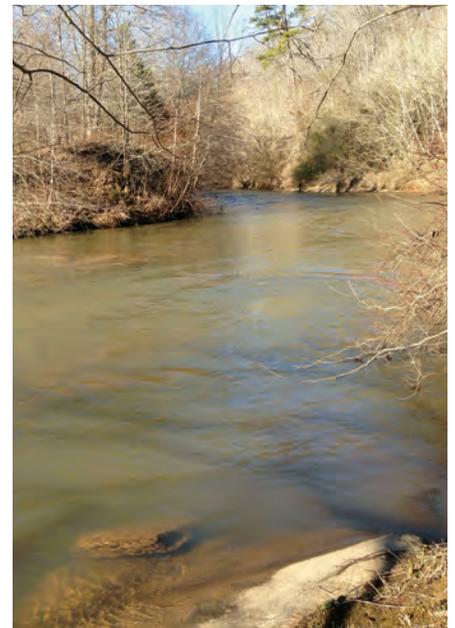
Mesic sloped forest above Cloud Creek on the Bowen Family Farm

Laura Hall

Protecting Our Water: Oconee River Watershed Forests and Water Conservation Plan

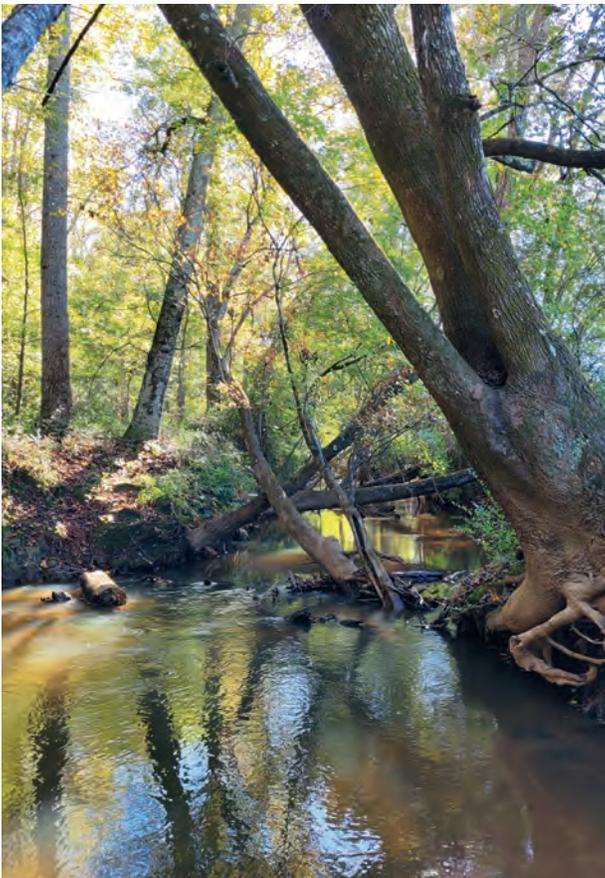
By Steffney Thompson

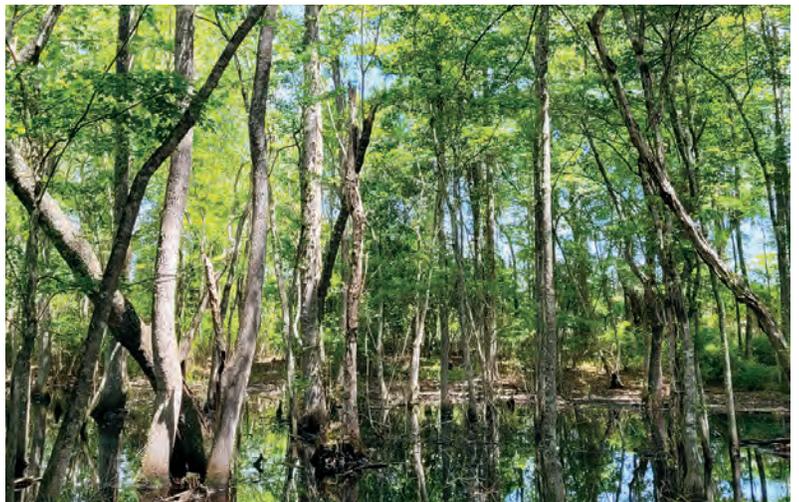
After 2 years of research and cooperative dialog, the Oconee River Watershed Partnership has issued the Oconee River Watershed Forests and Water Conservation Plan. Funded by a grant from the Network for Landscape Conservation Catalyst Fund and coordinated by Cassidy Lord, the Plan's goal is to increase forestland conservation and restoration in order to protect drinking water quality and quantity in the watershed. The Plan, filled with useful maps and statistics, documents the clear connection between healthy forests and clean drinking water in the Upper Oconee River Watershed, and our reliance on privately owned forests for clean water. The biggest threats to drinking water in the watershed are increased impervious surface cover due to high population growth and pressure to convert privately owned forests to non-forest uses. Dropping below the existing 60% forested land cover will lead to an increase in drinking water treatment costs and impact water availability. The plan provides actions that the partners and others can take to achieve conservation and restoration in prioritized areas near streams, including forest restoration and management that prevents sediment runoff and land conservation using conservation easements. Other benefits that arise from protecting drinking water are also highlighted, including: improved wildlife habitat, improved carbon sequestration and climate resiliency; air quality protection, topsoil retention, and increased recreational opportunities. Read the Plan at www.oconeeriverpartnership.com to find out what strategies and tools are recommended to protect drinking water in the Oconee watershed. ORLT will continue to pursue the Plan's goal as it always has: by conserving forests, streams, rivers, and wetlands in the Oconee River Watershed. ■



Protecting the Middle Oconee River, pictured here, protects our drinking water

Snapshots from the Field – Highlights from ORLT’s 2021 Con





ORLT By the Numbers:

**In 2021, 1,230 new acres and
6 new properties protected**

**In total, 43,730 acres and
200 miles of rivers & streams
have been permanently
protected by ORLT**

Why Native Meadows are Important

By Dan Crescenzo

For many years, the prevailing view was that the Georgia Piedmont's presettlement forests were made up of mostly old growth hardwoods, and post-settlement agriculture and forestry converted these forests to agricultural lands and pine monocultures. On this view, the goal of modern restoration and ecological management is to keep fire out of these forests and allow them to develop into old growth hardwoods. But the real story is more complex than that.

Although old growth hardwoods were a prominent part of Georgia's pre-settlement Piedmont landscape, they were not the only part. Pine-oak savannas and other open habitats were also common and equally important for the region's biological diversity. Native Americans set frequent fires in large areas of the Piedmont to improve hunting, and at least some fires occurred as the result of lightning. These fires created open pine savannas – grassy areas with widely scattered pine and oak. Much as beavers create open habitats along streams where moisture and sun loving native species can grow, fires in uplands, whatever their cause, create forests where sun loving species that prefer drier feet can grow.

Today it is becoming more widely understood that this mosaic of mature forests and open habitats is a key factor in plant species diversity – the wider range of biotic and abiotic conditions provided by overlapping degrees of sunlight, moisture, temperature, soils, species, and fire regimes, provides a greater number of niches for species to inhabit. There is also a growing body of evidence that this diversity is essential for insect diversity. A recent review of studies on native



Dan Crescenzo

Monarch butterfly caterpillar (*Danaus plexippus*) munching on a redwing milkweed (*Asclepias variegata*) in a pine savannah in Oglethorpe County

pollinators found that open forests and forest openings, as opposed to dense or heavily shaded forests, have consistently higher pollinator diversity and populations.

With bee and butterfly populations plummeting, it is a good idea to approach ecological management with their needs in mind. In addition to preserving natural hardwood forests to provide vital wildlife corridors and homes for plants that prefer shadier, moister conditions, some native meadows or open woodlands should be maintained. Power line right of ways, back yards, the edges of pastures, and unused loading decks are great places to establish native meadows without clearing existing forests, and dense planted pine can be thinned, with scattered hardwoods retained, to create diverse open woodlands. In order to keep pollinators healthy, pesticides should not be used in native meadows or woodlands. Ideally, native meadows and woodlands should be managed with fire, but winter mowing will work as well. Importantly, because native pollinators are adapted to native plant species, management for species diversity should encourage native flora as opposed to exotic species.

Maintaining woodlands and native meadows in lieu of traditional food plots is also an excellent game management practice. Native grasses and sedges provide good browse for deer, particularly when they are burned periodically to encourage fresh new growth, a variety of seeds for quail and turkey, and insects for young poults. The National Deer Association lists many familiar native species that thrive in sunlight as deer favorites in the Southeast, including blackberries, grapes, greenbriars, coral honeysuckle, ragweed, pokeweed, hearts a burstin', beauty berry, and native lespedezas.

Some of these species provide excellent wildlife cover as well, if they are allowed to grow into thickets along the edges of openings or in woodlands. In addition, small fruit bearing trees like crab apple and persimmon, that can only thrive in more open forests or along the edges of openings, are favorites of deer and turkey. And although the widely planted Asian sawtooth oak produces more acorns than native species, native chestnut oak and swamp chestnut oak are similarly sweet and significantly larger than sawtooth oak acorns, and white and post oak acorns, though smaller, are also very palatable.

Planting or managing existing open areas to encourage native species is a win-win: pollinators benefit, and hunters improve their



Southern crabapple blossom (*Malus angustifolia*) along edge of a wildflower meadow in Jones County

game lands. So, whether you are a backyard gardener looking to attract pollinators, or a game manager looking to improve habitat for turkey or deer, consider managing a portion of your land as native meadows or open woodland. Your efforts will help to enhance ecological integrity, species diversity, and habitat in your local ecosystem. ■

Suggestions for sourcing native plants and seed:

- Beech Hollow Farm and Nearly Native Nursery are good places to purchase smaller numbers of locally sourced, ethically obtained native plants.
- Visit the Georgia Native Plant Initiative, which can be found on the State Botanical Garden of Georgia’s website, to see a complete list of nurseries where you can purchase ethically sourced plants.
- For larger areas, check out Round Stone Seed Company online for good grass and wildflower mixes and individual species seed. Make sure to search for native seed mixes, as this company sells both native and nonnative seed.

Happy planting!



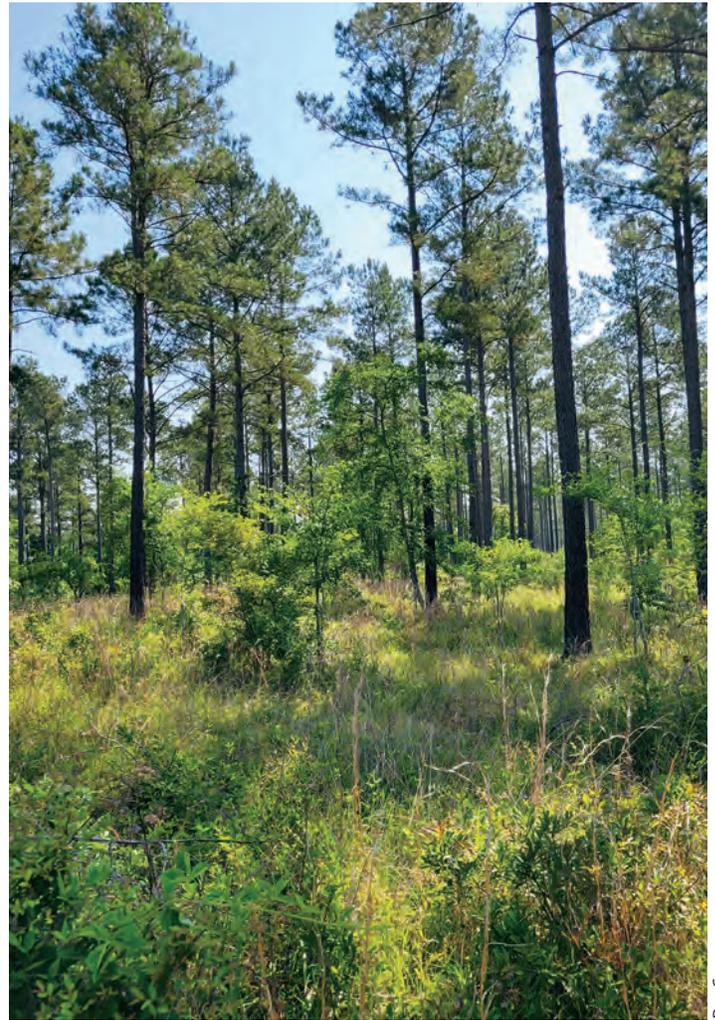
ORLT Board member Roger Nielsen, his wife Pat, and landowner Sara Schramm walk towards the North Oconee River

David Gabriel



ORLT’s Conservation Director, Laura Hall, speaks with hikers

David Gabriel



Dan Crescenzo

Pine-oak savannah with grasses and scattered understory shrubs in Elbert County

Schramm Family . . . continued from page 1

with their teenage sons. The family enjoys exploring the property, observing a variety of wildlife—deer, otters, turkey, ducks, coyotes, and resident and migratory birds to name a few, spending time fishing and hunting, or stopping by on the way home from work to catch the sunset. They also hope to set an example to surrounding landowners about using conservation easements to protect this rural area and its natural beauty.

From enjoying the view of this land from the vantage point of a cyclist, to now owning the property and coming to know it intimately, and sharing it with others, the Schramms should be proud that they have (as George has stated) “protected a section of the watershed and maintained the views for the next generation of cyclists and passersby.” Recently, inspired by their conservation easement here in Georgia, Sara and George purchased 5 acres on the Iowa River located right in the middle of Sara’s hometown of Iowa Falls, bringing their conservation story and connection to the riverbanks full circle. ■



Oconee River Land Trust

675 Pulaski Street, Suite 2300
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“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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Name _____

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Membership Levels:

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- Land Protector (\$150)
- Land Conservator (\$500)
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Mail this form (or join online at oconeeriverlandtrust.org) with your charitable contribution to:

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Planning for the future?

If you are interested in Legacy Giving, contact **Steffney Thompson** at **706-552-3138** or **steffney@oconeeriverlandtrust.org**.