

OCCONEE RIVER LAND TRUST news

Preserving natural areas in our region since 1993

Spring 2017

From Black Sheep to Cow Power *A Visit to the Gretsches Family Farm*

By Denise H. Horton



From the time they married – maybe even earlier than that – Anne and Fred Gretsches knew they wanted to be farmers. Exactly what kind of farmers and exactly where they might live would take a few years to come into view, but the Gretsches knew their future lay in owning their own land.

“I was always sort of the black

sheep of the family,” Fred Gretsches says with a chuckle. “We grew up in Savannah, but my parents were from New York City, and all of my siblings live in cities.”

For music aficionados, the Gretsches name is widely known as the iconic guitar brand that dates back to the late 1880s and is now also recognized as an important maker of drums. So in Fred’s case, being a “black sheep” meant developing a love of nature and spending his time outdoors rather than playing a six-string.

After graduating from the University of Georgia, the Gretsches began their married lives in Ellijay where Fred worked for Goldkist and Anne taught school. Moves to Athens and Live Oak, Fla., followed as Fred’s career with Goldkist continued.

By the late 1990s, Fred had accepted a position with Seaboard Farms and the Gretsches were back in the Athens area where they launched their careers as farmers, buying two poultry farms and 55 acres in rural Oglethorpe County.

“We were fortunate that the owner financed the sale,” Fred says. “I continued to work for Seaboard Farms for a few more years and Anne and the children did most of the work with the chickens. We really watched our expenses and poured every extra nickel we had back into buying more land.”

By the time the Gretsches bought the 350-plus acres where they now live, Fred had left Seaboard Farms and the couple were focused full time on building their own business, while also continuing to buy more property.

“We had several agriculture ventures, including raising hogs off of Double Bridges Road,” Fred recalls. “But as our cattle business grew, we divested of the hog venture and then we divested of the chickens.”

Today, the Gretsches own close to 450 acres and their focus is on “Cow Power,” that is, breeding Angus bulls that are sold to other cattle owners who raise Angus to sell for beef. Currently, the Gretsches own about 700 registered Angus bulls and cows and a glance at their annual “bull and commercial female” sale catalog shows they have worked hard to grow Angus cattle that are of the highest quality.

“We had always had a cow-calf operation, but then we saw this as a niche market that we could capitalize on,” Fred says, noting that nearly 70 percent of America’s beef comes from the Angus breed.

In addition to growing a profitable cattle business, the Gretsches have maintained a parallel emphasis on protecting and enhancing their land.

“Conservation is really important to us,” Fred says. “For years we’ve been involved with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Farm Service Agency, which encourage practices that help take care of the land – like putting in a well rather than using a pond for cattle to drink from, and having vegetative areas around ponds.”

That desire to protect their land made the decision to put 145 acres into a conservation easement with the Oconee River Land Trust an easy decision.

“The conservation easement is a way for us to conserve the rural heritage of Oglethorpe County, and to continue our efforts to enhance our land through programs like rotational grazing and nutrient management,” according to Fred, who said he and Anne anticipate creating additional conservation easements in the future.

The easement allows a great deal of flexibility, an important consideration for a family with four children.

Will, 26, is a sales manager with Pilgrim’s poultry who is also working on his MBA and will soon marry his fiancée, Amanda. Zach, 24, is studying for his doctorate degree in physical therapy and is also newly engaged to Autumn. Abbey, 20, is an agricultural communications major at UGA, and 16-year-old Jaden is a junior at Athens Christian School.

“It’s hard to look 50 or 100 years down the road,” Fred says, “But we wanted to create something that will allow future generations to be involved with this property if they choose. ■



DIRECTOR'S UPDATE

The Oconee River Land Trust was formed with the twin goals of protecting land and water: Preventing disturbances to the first feature naturally protects the latter. In 2016, while placing conservation easements on 9,700 acres of Georgia forests, wetlands and farms, ORLT also reached a milestone of nearly 100 miles of protected streams and rivers. These waterways include familiar names like the North Oconee, Broad, Flint, and Little Ogeechee, as well as lesser-known creeks such as White Oak, Flat



Shoals, Walnut, Millstone, Tobesofkee, Hillabahatchee, Little Barrow, and Rocky. Wide, undisturbed, forested riparian buffers prevent sediment and other pollutants from entering waterways, in turn protecting natural habitat and our drinking water.

We are grateful to the land-loving landowners, who – wanting to make sure their land remains green and their streams healthy – have donated conservation easements to ORLT. Working with private and public landowners, ORLT now protects more than 26,000 acres in 26 counties.

In addition to adding protected acres and miles of streams, ORLT's community of supporters is increasing. In 2016, our membership grew 24 percent; we hosted our inaugural Oconee River Belles Concert (a fantastic music event for which we are so grateful to our sponsors, the musicians, and attendees!); and we provided numerous opportunities for people to learn about ORLT by getting out on protected land. To handle all that growth, we have added interns, consultants, and new staff to our lineup, as well as additional office space (thanks to a very generous anonymous donor).

As 2017 gets under way, we are already busy meeting with landowners, visiting established conservation easements, and developing plans that will ensure more of our land and streams are protected forever.

– Steffney Thompson,
Executive Director

Since 1993,
we've protected
26,000
ACRES

Including 9,700 acres in 2016.

In 2016, we
completed
40
conservation
projects

Approximately 1
project every 9 days.

WE PROTECT
100 MILES
of streams and rivers

For perspective,
that's the length of
Georgia's coast.

WE PROTECT
130 ACRES
of granite outcrops

See page 3 for why
this matters.

ORLT Welcomes New Stewardship Coordinator

As a second-grader, Dan Crescenzo struggled to learn to read. His parents were encouraged to provide him easy books as a way to build his confidence, but they chose a different option.

"They knew my fascination with living things – particularly plants and insects, so they bought Audubon Society field guides," he recalls. "In no time at all, my reading skills vastly improved and I was teaching my parents about what lived in our backyard."

The outdoors have played a pivotal role in Crescenzo's life.

After showing an aptitude for identifying woody plants during an undergraduate dendrology course, a professor tried to persuade him to switch majors from philosophy to forestry. Instead, Crescenzo stuck with philosophy – earning his PhD in December 2016 at the University of Georgia – while focusing his research on questions about what makes species and ecosystems valuable and how ecosystems can be conceived of as subjects of justice.

"As I studied the philosophy behind our relationship with our environment, I longed to be doing something more hands-on, more in the trenches, than academic writing and teaching," he says. "I began to look for ways to get involved in protecting local ecosystems in Georgia."

Crescenzo joined ORLT part-time as an environmental coordinator in fall 2016 while still working on his dissertation. After graduation, he was named to a full-time position working closely with ORLT Land Steward Laura Hall. In his current position, Crescenzo assists Hall in completing the annual monitoring requirements of existing easements, including creating maps and compiling statistics, such as the number of river miles and acres of granite protected, and a variety of other follow-up documentation. During the latter part of each year, when all staff members focus on completing new conservation easements, Crescenzo reviews and proofreads baseline documents.

"My work at ORLT has felt like coming home to something I love," Crescenzo says. "I learned a lot during my time working on my philosophy degrees, but my passion has always been for protecting the land and for work that puts me into regular contact with it – that is, for putting philosophy into practice." ■



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Fragile Granite Outcrop Ecosystems Benefit from Private Land Conservation

By Brian Cooke

Yes focused on the ground, I try to keep my boots on the bare rock, or “on the gray,” as our guide has requested. Surrounding me are myriad shades of green and brown dotted with mats of elf-orphine (*Diamorpha smallii*) that provide a vibrant contrast of red – each color representing a unique and fragile organism. Ahead, hikers snake uphill in single file across a granite outcrop, one of Georgia’s high priority habitats.

Georgia contains more granite outcrops than any other state, with the highest density near Atlanta. Within the larger Piedmont matrix, which stretches across the middle of the state from Augusta to Columbus, however, these habitats are intermittent, scattered islands. Compared to most nearby Piedmont forests, granite outcrops are xeric, or dry. Precipitation drains quickly from the rock. Exposed to the elements, granite outcrop organisms can experience both very warm and very cold air temperatures. Despite these harsh conditions, granite outcrops support an assemblage of well-adapted organisms.

On our hike, we find shade from the warming sun in a mature “soil island” where the difficulty of life on outcrops is evident at the base of a wind-toppled tree whose taproot grew sideways in the thin soils in search of water and nutrients.

The process that ultimately resulted in the shade we enjoy began thousands of years prior when the bare surface of the granite outcrop was first colonized by lichens and mosses.

These organisms drive the primary succession, or soil creation, needed by other plants. Lichens and mosses chemically dissolve rock and trap rock particles on the exposed surface. Depressions created by the eroding rock pockmark outcrops, collecting eroded rock particles, errant organic material and water. These depressions are temporary



Brian Cooke

Elf-orphine (Diamorpha smallii).

“solution” pools with thin soils that are capable of supporting species like elf-orphine. With time, these depressions become soil islands with conditions that are increasingly suitable for a diversity of plants, including trees and shrubs.

Harsh conditions limit the usefulness of outcrops for agriculture, sometimes leading to their use as timber staging areas or dumping grounds, thus damaging their unique ecology.

Large outcrops, like Stone Mountain and Panola Mountain, are protected by the state, but smaller outcrops have received less

conservation attention. This is where ORLT steps in. Conservation easements enable private landowners to preserve isolated granite outcrops while simultaneously protecting surrounding land.

The Cason easement, for example, is an active 175-acre farm, with what ORLT deems a “special natural area” of hardwood forest that includes a seven-acre granite outcrop. The conservation easement safeguards the special natural area from disturbance while the established farmland continues to support the landowners and the local economy.

To date, ORLT has worked with private landowners to successfully protect more than 130 acres of granite outcrops, mostly in Oglethorpe and Meriwether Counties, with conservation easements. This is a conservation success that ORLT hopes to continue throughout the rapidly growing Piedmont region.

“The majority of granite outcrops occur in our region of focus, Georgia’s Piedmont,” according to ORLT Executive Director Steffeny Thompson. “We are well positioned and motivated to protect this unique habitat.” ■

Fall Concert Raises \$25,000



Austin Steele

Alison Brown, Claire Lynch and the Indigo Girls played to a full house on Oct. 20 at The Foundry in Athens. Headliners are pictured above with Brown’s two children and opening act, Sans Abri. Thank you to Northeast Georgia’s conservation and music-loving communities who came out and made ORLT’s inaugural benefit concert a huge success. ORLT is grateful to the sponsors, members, volunteers, concert-goers, and chief underwriter, the Riverview Foundation, for their roles in supporting land conservation in our beautiful state.

Observations from the field

Laura Hall, Land Steward

Landowner Chris Welton stands in an extensive wetland along Flat Shoal Creek – full of arrowhead, tag alder, soft rush and other wetland species that attract ducks, egrets, and herons. The water is clear and flows through the wetland along a sandy bottom channel. (Arrowheads are underground tubers, preferred by at least 15 species of ducks, as well as snapping turtles, and play an important role in cleaning water by breaking down contaminants.)

In 2015, Chris preserved 186 acres of mature pine forest and bottomland in Meriwether County, just north of Pine Mountain. This area, just an hour's drive south of Atlanta, has become popular for hunting preserves and pine plantations.

Recently, Chris conserved an additional 230 acres and also convinced Claude Harmon and another neighbor to do the same. Together, they have protected 900 acres of contiguous land with permanent conservation easements.

Chris harvests and manages the pine forest to mimic nature in small uneven age stand patches so that the wildlife always has cover. The resulting mosaic of forest stands creates edge habitats that encourage plant and animal diversity on the property. When conducting his limited harvests, Chris doesn't necessarily cut the largest trees, recognizing that they are important for the overall ecology of his forest. He also uses regular prescribed fire as a management tool. The fire urges native grass and long-dormant wildflower seeds to germinate, attracting, feeding and providing nesting habitats for many bird and butterfly species.

ORLT has worked with 14 landowners in this part of the state to conserve almost 3,000 acres, including more than 80 acres of granite outcrops, extensive bottomland and mesic hardwood forests, and oak-hickory-pine forests with considerable diversity of species. The granite outcrops found here are model examples in the state with rare and



Chris Welton

threatened species including glade windflower (*Anemone berlandieri*) and Menges rock pink (*Talinum mengesii*).

These lands also preserve almost 5 miles of streams that flow to the Chattahoochee River and 10 miles of streams that flow to the Flint River, including 1.5 miles of river frontage along the Flint. Both the Flint and Chattahoochee rivers are designated as "High Priority Watersheds" for preservation by Georgia Department of Natural Resources. ■

K-12 Students to Benefit from Outdoor Classroom on Donated Land



On a warm December day, an excited group of teachers and administrators, along with ORLT staff, board members, and other guests, gathered to tour Jefferson City Schools' (JCS) new 175-acre outdoor classroom. They were there to explore the wetlands and forests that, with the help of community partners, will soon provide students hands-on experiences with the natural environment.

Placed under a conservation easement with ORLT in 2004, this extensive and diverse wetland was used for hunting by the previous owners, who recently donated the land to JCS. "Our group, the Jeffco Boys, owned the property for almost 50 years. Across those years, we came to love, enjoy and appreciate this special place," says Tom Gay, one of the former owners. "We are excited to transfer ownership to the Jefferson City School Board. We can think of no better purpose."

Beavers, otters, jack-in-the-pulpits, reptiles, kingfishers, egrets, and an active heron rookery are just a few of the special things found on this property.

Jennifer McAuley, a middle school life science teacher, has dreamed for a long time of creating an outdoor classroom here. She points out many opportunities for teaching as the group walks along, and imagines having art students create educational signage.

There is a grassy area at the end of a dike that has been recently mown. Restoration of important native grasses, such as broomsedge, switchgrass and Indian grass, along with the proper mowing schedule, can provide good cover and nesting habitat for many bird species. "As well, many rodents and long-lived insects, including the praying mantis, can thrive here with infrequent mowing," says Karen Porter, ORLT board member and retired professor emerita of ecology at UGA.

"Getting outside in such a beautiful place and understanding that the environment is a living, breathing organism that changes," is the greatest benefit for students who will visit the property, says Ronnie Hopkins, who chairs the board of education, "We want the students to understand why that is important, why ORLT's work is important, and how our actions are connected." ■

Canoochee Bogs Update

It was a request ORLT couldn't refuse: Endemic carnivorous plants, rare orchids, and a keystone species were at stake. When the Georgia Department of Natural Resources asked ORLT to form a partnership in preserving one of the last remaining high-quality pitcher plant bogs in the state, the answer was simple. "Yes."

The Canoochee Bogs are privately owned by several different entities, one of whom wants to protect 50 acres of this high-priority habitat. ORLT's role is to work with the landowner to place a conservation easement (CE) on the land. DNR will coordinate and conduct habitat restoration activities, including plant propagation and prescribed burning. Since placing an easement on the land is not financially feasible for the landowners, fundraising efforts are under way to purchase the landowner's development rights via a CE, thereby ensuring the land is permanently protected while restoration activities are forever permitted.

Once it's protected, the land will be restored to a longleaf pine savanna, the habitat on which these pitcher plant bogs depend for survival. The Canoochee Bogs are the only known Georgia location for the state-listed endangered coastal plain purple pitcher plant and at least five orchid species as well. A February bird survey recorded Bachman's sparrow, brown-headed nuthatch, and American kestrel, among others. Gopher tortoises also live at the bogs.

Permanently protecting the Canoochee Bogs with a conservation easement is imperative for biodiversity protection in Georgia. We hope that you will join us in protecting the bogs when ORLT kicks off a fundraising campaign later this spring! ■



Sundew

Susan Carter



Rebecca Byrd

Bachman's sparrow at the Canoochee Bogs.

Birds at the Bogs

- Bachman's Sparrow
- American Kestrel
- Eastern Bluebird
- Northern Bobwhite
- Sedge Wren
- Northern Flicker
- Common Yellowthroat

These and more species recorded by DNR on February 21-22, 2017.

Stream Blitz Volunteers Sample for Bugs at Tallassee Easement

Volunteers sampled a tributary of the Middle Oconee River for macroinvertebrates on March 19. Bugs that they found, including stonefly larvae and hellgrammites, indicated that the stream is in good health. Everyone had a fun time dipping nets in the stream and then sorting through the leaf litter to uncover scores of bugs. Thank you to our partner, the Upper Oconee Watershed Network, for leading sampling activities and for providing equipment. ORLT plans to partner with UOWN for future sampling events.



Winter Hike Full of Wildlife Spottings

A flock of wild turkey made a guest appearance at the February 5 hike in Jackson County. Hikers enjoyed meeting the landowner, Ken Cook, who generously allowed the group to hike on his conservation easement. Other signs of wildlife included a hermit thrush, a well-preserved buck skull, and beaver trails. For future hiking opportunities, see page 7 or visit www.oconeeriverlandtrust.org.

LEGACY GIVING HIGHLIGHT: *Dan Hope*

Growing up, I was fortunate to live in several places in close proximity to natural lands. In a small town in Iowa, our home had cornfields behind it and open country within easy walking distance. In Wollaston, Mass., a suburb of Boston, my elementary school and our home overlooked marshes and Quincy Bay. In Maryland, our home was surrounded by farmland and an 11,000-acre state park.

Many of those places were parks and were protected. Today, 50 or 60 years since I first saw them, I can still enjoy them. One of those Maryland farms was purchased by the Maryland Department of Natural Resources and is being reforested.

Today, more than ever, there is pressure to take over natural areas in the interest of profit and greed. Many members of the U.S. Congress have even proposed selling protected federal lands. This is why it is so important that land trusts continue to conserve natural lands, protect water quality, and preserve wildlife habitats – enhancing the quality of our lives and those of future generations.

The Oconee River Land Trust was created to ensure the natural world is not eradicated from our lives and those of future generations. This is why I have supported ORLT by donating my time and my money for the past 24 years and will continue to do so. My wife and I have also included the Oconee River Land Trust in our estate planning to ensure that ORLT will be able to continue its mission in perpetuity. I hope you, too, will consider protecting our natural resources both now and in the future. ■

As a founding board member and former board chair, Dan has served on ORLT's board since 1993.



“ My wife and I included the Oconee River Land Trust in our estate planning to ensure that ORLT will be able to continue its mission in perpetuity. I hope you, too, will consider protecting our natural resources both now and in the future. ”

Planning for the future?

If you are interested in Legacy Giving, contact **Steffney Thompson** at **706-552-3138** or **steffney@oconeeriverlandtrust.org**. Our tax identification number is 58-2108824.

***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 (\$10)

☐ Land Protector (\$100)

☐ Land Saver (\$30)

☐ Land Conservator (\$500)

☐ Land Steward (\$50)

☐ 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

Volunteer Spotlight: **John Workman**

As his last name implies, John Workman is a man of action. Last fall, he strode into the ORLT office and declared his readiness to volunteer. Within a week, he was hammering up property boundary signs with longtime board member Walt Cook. These days, John can also be found monitoring conservation easements or swinging a pulaski on a trail-building crew.

Originally from Ohio, John and his wife, Jeannine Collins, have lived in the Athens area for many years. John describes years of backpacking and horse packing in the U.S. and Canada as inspiring him to volunteer for the environment. One memorable experience was a 4th of July snowball fight on a horse packing trip in Alberta, Canada. Another fond memory came from a birthday celebrated in Colorado at 8,000 feet of elevation. The trip guide used a Dutch oven to bake John a birthday cake over an open campfire.

"Continuing to protect the environment" is what John describes as the most important aspect of his volunteer efforts. His work, which he describes tongue-in-cheek as "hard labor and walking in the woods," is doing just that.

Thank you, John, for your hard work and good spirit in stewarding protected property!

If you are interested in volunteering with ORLT, contact Carla@oconeeriverlandtrust.org. ■



John Workman cutting trail at the McNutt Property in Clarke County.

UPCOMING EVENTS:

April 1:

Bird Walk with the Ocmulgee Audubon Society

Location: Macon

7:30 am - 11:30 am: Meet at Capital City Bank (325 Fifth St., Macon 31201) to carpool to the Walker easement, a uniquely beautiful property filled with wetlands, lakes, and bottomland hardwood. Wear waterproof shoes, bring binoculars, food and water as needed, and a four-wheel-drive car if one is available. Spring migration will be in full swing! Free event. There are no restroom facilities at this property.

For more information about the event, visit www.oconeeriverlandtrust.org.

May 7:

Bird Walk with the Oconee Rivers Audubon Society

Location: Jackson County

8:00 am - 12:00 pm: Meet at the Lotsanotty easement for ORAS' final bird walk of the migration season. Walkers will wind through 1.5 miles of forest, field, stream, and along the Middle Oconee River. Possible bird sightings include Louisiana waterthrush, black-and-white warbler, scarlet tanager, great crested flycatcher, and others. Free event, open to birders of all experience levels. Bring binoculars and food and snacks as needed. There are no restroom facilities at this property.

Visit www.oconeeriverlandtrust.org for directions to Lotsanotty.

Thank You ORLT Baseline Professionals!

The folks that helped ORLT preserve important and beautiful land in 2016.

Placing a conservation easement requires documentation of the property's natural resources and conservation values, including habitats and associated species. ORLT is fortunate to work with a handful of experts, whose backgrounds range from biology to forestry, who document these resources to help landowners preserve the areas they love and wish to pass down to their heirs.

Thank you to the following folks who created baseline documentation for 9,700 acres in 2016:

- Elizabeth Branch, *Natural Resource Consultants*
- Stephen Kirk, *Southern Environmental Stewardship*
- Jeff Scott, *Environmental Consultant*
- Michael Ransom, *Southern Timber Solutions*
- Luke Rushing, *WLA Studio*
- Kristina Sorenson, *Conservation Matters*
- Vic VanSant, *Wildlife Biologist*





THE OCONEE RIVER LAND TRUST
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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."



EXPAND YOUR GREEN LEGACY

Ensure a greener, healthier Georgia for yourself and future generations by including the Oconee River Land Trust in your estate plans. From monetary bequests to gifts of real estate, there are many ways to create a green legacy in our beautiful state.

For more information, contact Steffney Thompson at 706-552-3138 or visit oconeeriverlandtrust.org/planned-giving.