



Land Preserved along the Middle Oconee River

By Laura Hall

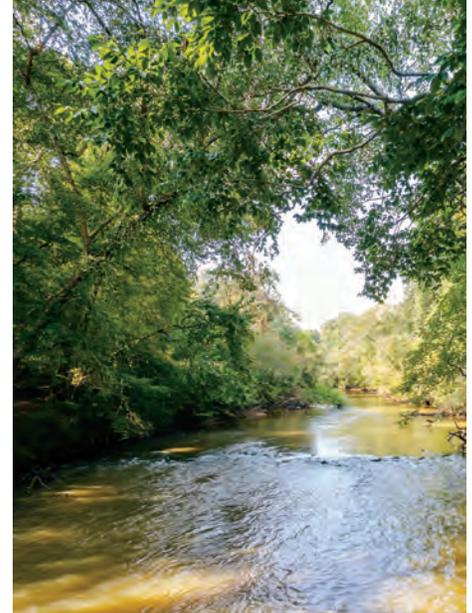
Fish weirs were built by the Cherokee people by piling rocks and boulders across the river in a distinctive V shape. They were able to catch fish as they swam into the V, which pointed downstream, by either funneling them into a wooden trap, or spearing them as they swam in the bottleneck.

Recently I hiked with landowners Sandy and Ken Cook along with 15 land trust members through sloped forest on the Middle Oconee River where we saw a large fish weir spanning almost half of the river.

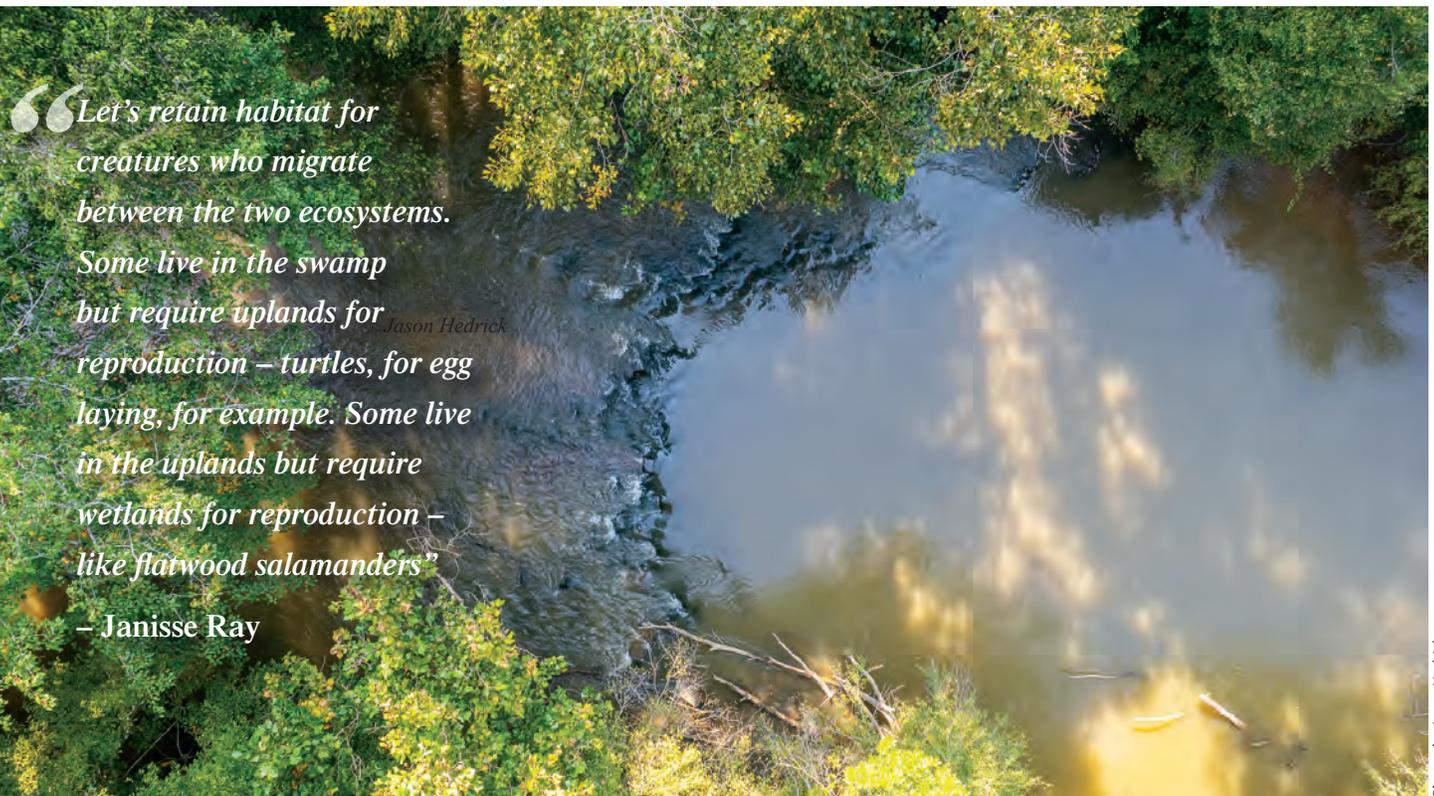
This forest preserved by the family has so much diversity – we saw many interesting species including: white fringe tree, Carolina silverbell, serviceberry, green and white ash, Carolina basswood, mountain laurel, Piedmont azalea, Solomon’s seal, partridge berry, and spotted wintergreen. Walt Cook, former ORLT Board member, preserved

this land with a conservation easement in 2000, and recently passed it down to his son’s family. We are continuing to work with nearby landowners to hopefully conserve more than 400 acres along this river (last year we preserved a 105-acre property across the river from the Cook property). This land is in Jackson County just over the Clarke County line, and only 20 minutes from Downtown Athens.

Note that these lands along the river contain a diversity of priority habitats for the Piedmont of Georgia, including both riparian and upland areas: Sandy River Bluffs, Rocky or Cobbly River Shoals, Freshwater Marsh, Springs and Spring Runs, Cobbly wide Bottomland Hardwood Forest, Mesic Hardwood Forest, Canebrakes, and Oak-Hickory-Pine Forest – a variety of habitats that help plants and wildlife thrive. ■



Land preserved on the Middle Oconee River



“Let’s retain habitat for creatures who migrate between the two ecosystems. Some live in the swamp but require uplands for reproduction – turtles, for egg laying, for example. Some live in the uplands but require wetlands for reproduction – like flatwood salamanders”
– Janisse Ray

Fish weir on the Middle Oconee River

Photos by Jason Hedrick

Larry Dendy's retirement from the ORLT board after so many years of faithful service has me thinking about change and permanence, and how our work at the land trust must navigate these two realities. Conservation easements create unchanging restrictions on changing land. What grows upon the land may change over time, however, due to forces beyond our control (like invasive pests such as the ash borer), and those forces within our control (like land management techniques that mimic natural processes in order to create diverse habitats for wildlife, including quail). The only way to achieve this balance is to ground ourselves in the unique goals of each easement and to faithfully move to fulfill these goals. Land trusts must have eye on both the past and the future, as we wrestle with the issues of today. The reality of changing climate and the impact of invasive species means there will always be changes landowners will need or might want to address. ORLT is proud to partner with conservation landowners taking on these management challenges. We've noticed another positive change when looking at our work: bit by bit, land connecting existing easements is also being protected, leading to larger, contiguous conserved areas. This change provides better quality habitat for many species of birds and larger and higher quality wildlife travel corridors both in streams and on land. We are grateful to our easement donors and ORLT members who have enabled the creation of this ever-changing green legacy for the future. ■

—Steffney Thompson
Executive Director



Environmentalist Larry Dendy steps down from ORLT board

By Roger Nielsen

This summer the Oconee River Land Trust bid farewell to Larry Dendy, long-time board member, environmental activist and willing volunteer who moved to Ohio to be closer to family.

"Larry's been an environmentalist in the Athens community for many, many years," said Board Chair Smith Wilson. "I'm so pleased he joined the board. The poignant questions he always asked helped to keep us on track, and I'll miss that."

Dendy became a board member shortly after ORLT was founded in 1993 and served as secretary and vice chair. "I knew several of the people who had started the land trust and knew what they were doing, and it was something that I really believed in," he said.

"I always think of Larry as a loyal, hard-working constant," said ORLT Executive Director Steffney Thompson.

Dendy had forged strong personal connections throughout Athens and University of Georgia long before bringing his deep commitment to environmentalism to the ORLT board. He got to know dozens of university and Athens leaders during a 37-year career with the UGA Office of Public Affairs and active membership in organizations as diverse as the Kiwanis Club of Athens, the Athens-Clarke County Solid Waste Advisory Committee, OLLI@UGA, Sandy Creek Nature Center and the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens. He co-founded the annual Alec Little Award to recognize superior environmental service by individuals and organizations and is the author of "Through the Arch: An Illustrated Guide to the University of Georgia Campus."

"He's been a major player over the years," said Dan Hope, an ORLT founding board member and a co-founder of Sandy Creek Nature Center. "Larry is the kind of guy who volunteers for anything and everything."

Madeline Van Dyck, another of ORLT's founding board members, said Dendy brought strength and resolve to the board. "He's steady. He shows up. He stays to the end. He speaks his piece," she said. ■



Laura Hall

Larry Dendy, visited the Hess conservation easement to write an article about landowners Kay and Larry Hess for the spring 2021 newsletter.

Oconee River Land Trust

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Emerald Ash Borer Imperils Georgia Forests

By Daniel Crescenzo

While visiting one of Oconee River Land Trust’s conservation easements in Newton County this year, I was struck by the dozens of ash trees that had been killed by the emerald ash borer (*Agrilus planipennis*). Only a few short years ago, every one of these trees had been healthy. Seeing the damage firsthand, in a forest I was already familiar with and quite fond of, was especially disturbing. Concerned for the other forests ORLT protects, I set out to understand more about the borer and how it might be stopped.

Ash trees are native to Georgia – in the Piedmont, white ash trees (*Fraxinus americana*) grow as scattered individuals on moister sites above streams, particularly those with more basic soils – and green ash (*Fraxinus pennsylvanica*) grows on floodplains, in bottomlands along rivers and larger streams, sometimes as a dominant species in the canopy. Both species reach 80 feet at maturity and are recognizable in winter by their opposite branching pattern, and female trees, by clusters of winged seeds that hang on the twigs well into winter.

Ash trees are both useful to human beings and an important part of the ecosystem. Because ash wood has the unique quality of being both lightweight and absorbing shock well, it has famously been used for baseball bats and hockey sticks, as well as tool handles, flooring, and furniture. In the eastern United States, ash supports 150 species of butterflies and moths, as well as hundreds of other native insects, many of which only utilize ash or fringe tree (*Chionanthus virginicus*), a closely related understory species. Ash also provides food and shelter for a variety of birds.

Since its accidental introduction to Michigan in 2002, the emerald ash borer has decimated ash populations in the United States. The adult borer – a metallic green beetle about a half an inch long – lays its eggs beneath the bark of host trees. Its larvae then hatch into small white grubs that eat the nutrient and water carrying layers of the tree, forming an extensive network of tunnels. After 2-4 years of this grub activity, infected trees die. The borer colonizes diseased and healthy trees alike, killing all or nearly every ash tree in the forests it attacks. Occasional predation by birds has not been sufficient to control its numbers.

In just under 20 years, this insect has spread to almost every state east of the Mississippi, including Georgia, and as far west as Colorado, and all of the provinces in southeastern Canada, leaving a trail of destruction in its wake. The borer was first observed in DeKalb County in Georgia in 2013 and has since spread to 37 counties in the state, including every county in the Atlanta metro area, most counties in the mountains, as well as Barrow, Newton, and Walton Counties. It is expected to spread throughout the state.

The decline in ash populations has been precipitous enough that in 2017, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUNC) moved both white ash and green ash into the conservation status “critically endangered” – where they join another species whose demise from eastern forests is already well-known – the American chestnut. As ash trees disappear from America’s forests, so, too will the species that depend upon them, leading to a reduction in species richness and diversity of our forests.

The borer’s spread had been facilitated by accidental movement of ash wood, especially firewood containing the beetle eggs or larvae,

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White ash tree growing on an ORLT easement,

Laura Hall



Emerald ash borer adult, Photo courtesy of APHIS, US Department of Agriculture.



Characteristic D-shaped borer hole in infected ash tree, Photo courtesy of APHIS, US Department of Agriculture.

If you see this beetle, or its exit holes, let the Georgia Forestry Commission know!

Protecting Bird Habitat with Conservation Easements

Kathy Parker

“Bob-WHITE! Bob-WHITE!” That’s the cheerful greeting George and Beth Thornton hear most spring mornings on the rolling hills that surround their home in western South Carolina. Encounters with Northern Bobwhites are common on their land nowadays, but that has not always been the case.

Like many bird species that inhabit grasslands and other types of open or scrub habitats, Northern Bobwhite populations have plummeted since the mid to late 1900s. This has occurred as forests have matured, hedgerows attractive to quail have decreased, and habitats have been lost to development. The roughly 450 acres of conservation easements the Thorntons have with the Oconee River Land Trust (ORLT) on property they own in Georgia and South Carolina are helping quail and other open-habitat birds turn the tide on their population declines.

The Thorntons are not new to land conservation for species like Northern Bobwhite and Wild Turkey – or to the hunting that they enjoy on their land and on other reserves. George’s formal training ranged from anthropology and entomology to business administration, including working in the lab of a beekeeper during his graduate studies. He has woven these diverse threads together into a rich career, as he assumed leadership positions in both agribusiness and conservation. This includes nine years as the CEO of the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTf), a non-profit conservation organization committed



Laura Hall

George and Beth Thornton.



Midlands Reserve wetland surrounded by bottomland hardwood forest.

to enhancing Wild Turkey populations and preserving a heritage of wildlife management that includes hunting. Wild Turkey numbers have rebounded in the last several decades, thanks to the NWTf and other conservation organizations that focus on creating and maintaining habitats these birds depend on. George and Beth are applying similar principles to their ORLT conservation easements.

Their South Carolina land (which they call “Midlands Reserve”) only recently came into the Thorntons’ possession, through a sequence of events George refers to as “serendipity”. He and Beth visited the property last fall as a favor to their nephew and the former landowner, although they were not seriously in the market for land. Like much of the forested Piedmont, the uplands of the reserve were in pine production. Despite the dense forests and low diversity of plants and wildlife in the pine plantation, the Thorntons felt a connection with the land as soon as they toured it. They saw that with proper management, the uplands could become a haven for quail, turkey, and other wildlife. The majestic bottomland forests, canebrakes, and wetlands along the streams, coupled with the possibility of restoring upland pine plantation to healthy pine-oak savanna, inspired the Thorntons to purchase and protect the land.

George and Beth soon began the task of restoring the uplands – a process already well underway on their nearby ORLT conservation easements in Georgia. In the short time they have lived on Midlands Reserve, the Thorntons have transformed their land into a diverse landscape that attracts many different birds, mammals, and other wildlife. Through a combination of limited clearcutting, thinning, and

prescribed burning, they have opened the pine forest and created a patchwork of savannas, meadows, wetlands, and hardwood forests. The conversion of dense forest to more open pine-oak savannas allows more sunlight to reach the ground, which stimulates the growth of a diversity of native forbs and grasses that seed-eating birds love, including Northern Bobwhites and Wild Turkeys. Plantings of heavy seed-producers in small openings adjacent to forest augment this natural food supply. Native shrubs left along the forest edge provide cover for the ground-dwelling birds. As a result of the Thorntons' restoration efforts, quail and turkey have naturally dispersed in from the surrounding landscape as their preferred habitat has become available. No birds have been actively imported or released.

Serendipity is evident in another way on the Thorntons' permanently protected properties. Along with creating a patchy landscape suitable for many game birds, they have preserved riparian buffers along their streams and other habitats of concern. Mature bottomland forests, canebrakes, wetlands, and mesic hardwood forests wrap around their uplands – following the streams that meander

through their land. During the breeding season, these habitats are home to numerous migratory bird species, like warblers and buntings, that winter in the tropics. Additional species stop briefly in these habitats to refuel and rest before moving on to their breeding grounds farther north. Many of these migrants have experienced sharp population reductions in the last 50 years,

with habitat loss as one of the chief causes.

By preserving natural wildlife habitats for many species with their conservation easements, George and Beth are providing what many declining songbird populations need to recover. They are helping to ensure that the woods will be alive with birdsong in the future and that their land can be enjoyed for generations to come. ■



Indigo Bunting, a declining migratory species that breeds along forest edges.



Northern Bobwhite

Richard Hall



Midlands Reserve pine savanna.



Common Yellowthroat, a declining species that breeds in moist scrubby habitat.

Photos by Kathy Parker

Emerald Ash Borer ... continued from page 3

across county and state lines. Until recently, both the federal Department of Agriculture and the Georgia Forestry Commission (GFC) had quarantines in place to slow the spread of the beetle by prohibiting transport of ash trees and materials. But these efforts have proved largely ineffective, so this year, following the federal Department of Agriculture's removal of national emerald ash borer quarantine

regulations, the statewide quarantine was likewise repealed. GFC's sources will now be devoted to managing beetle populations in other ways.

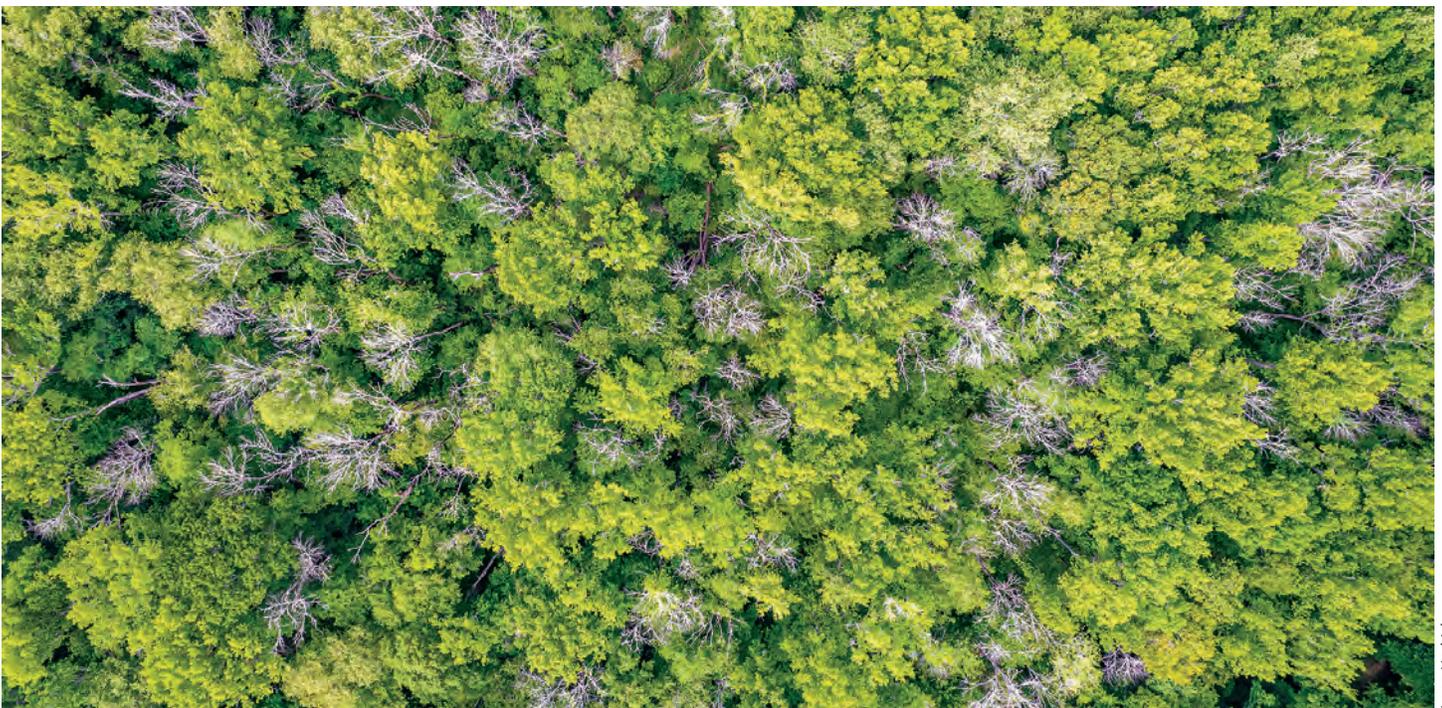
Researchers are following two strategies in this regard: cultivating resistant varieties and biological controls. A small percentage of ash trees appear to have some resistance to the beetle. Attempts are already under way to use

these individuals to create more beetle-resistant varieties that can then be used to re-populate forests. Several species of parasitic wasps from Asia are also being studied. These have been established in some limited areas, where the wasps effectively control beetle populations in younger ash trees by devouring their eggs or larvae. However, older trees in these areas are less protected by the wasps and continue to decline. It remains to be seen whether a combination of these strategies may prove effective in slowing the decline of ash trees in America's forests.

In the meantime, although it is no longer required by Georgia or federal regulations, landowners can still take care not to transport any firewood or other woody debris from ash trees off their property or onto it and report any sightings of the borer to GFC. Individual trees can also be preventatively treated with pesticides, but the treatments are too labor and resource-intensive – typically involving trunk injections and high-pressure soil treatments – to be feasible for entire forests. Whether or not the decline of ash in American forests can be reversed, it vividly illustrates the need for continued vigilance against the introduction of further potentially invasive species. The easiest way to prevent invasive species from damaging ecosystems is to not introduce them in the first place. ■



Ash trees, before and after Emerald ash borer infestation, photos from June 2006 and June 2009, by D. Herms., courtesy of American Forests Magazine, Winter 2013 issue.



Aerial view of dead green ash trees in a bottomland forest on an ORLT-held conservation easement in Newton County, drone footage flown in June 2021.

Jason Hedrick

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Larry Dendy	Bernard & Karen Kahan		

Upcoming hikes

By Laura Hall

Please come join ORLT on its 2 fall hikes (socially distanced and with small groups) – each with its own special focus. The groups will be limited to 20 people, so please register ahead on the Oconee River Land Trust website at: oconeeriverlandtrust.org, and if you have questions contact Laura Hall at Laura@oconeeriverlandtrust.org.

Orange Twin – Privet-pull and Hike along Noketchee Creek

Thursday, October 21st 2:00-4:00

Join Clyde Yates and I on this 100-acre protected forest in Clarke County that is only 15 minutes north from Downtown Athens. This is an easy hike- we will walk down to Noketchee Creek, a beautiful clear flowing stream that flows to the North Oconee River, and spend about 45 minutes pulling privet from the extensive fern glades. Then we will hike for an hour through this beautiful forest full of diverse native species including mountain laurel and mature beech trees.

The hike is moderate, approximately 1.5 miles, with some slopes and off-trail sections. We will plan to meet if there is a light rain, but will postpone our hike until October 28th, if there is a downpour or storms.

Tallassee Forest Preserve Monitoring Hike

Saturday, November, 20th, 12:30-4:30

Help ORLT monitor its largest conservation easement in Clarke County. Tallassee Forest Preserve, which borders the Middle Oconee River, is owned by the county and will one day be open to the public. This is a moderate 4-mile hike with slopes – we will hike the entire 300-acre preserve from the upland forest through the bottomland along the Middle Oconee River and back. Some sections of the hike will be off-trail. There are extensive canebrakes and areas of river oaks along the river, a wet meadow, and diverse species on the slopes of the hardwood forest, which include large areas of American holly in the understory.

Meeting location: Burney Harris Lyons Middle School parking lot at 1600 Tallassee Road, Athens, Ga. (Look for ORLT staff in the parking lot area near Tallassee Road)

We will plan to meet if there is a light rain, but will postpone our hike TBA, if there is a downpour or storms.



Sandy Cook



Orange Twin



Photos by Laura Hall

Tallassee



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from October 7-24





Sammy Pickering, volunteer field worker, is helping monitor ORLT's conservation easements.

Thank you Volunteers!

Thank you to our volunteers this season for using your knowledge and skills to help ORLT steward more important land in Georgia.

Sammy Pickering helped with field work over the past few months

Jason Hedrick flew his drone over preserved properties – you can see some of his work in this newsletter and on our website or social media.

Isaac Ostrom helped identify native species on member hikes.

Sandy Cook is assisting ORLT with its newsletter (she and her husband Ken now own ORLT's 1st conservation easement, see photograph of Sandy in bottom photo, 2nd from right).



Jason Hedrick droning one of ORLT's conservation easements.



Isaac Ostrom, identifying white fringe tree

Photos by Laura Hall

Recent Hikes Recap

Apalachee River Hike – On September 11th we had a good day with 15 hikers in Morgan County walking through canebrakes and extensive river oaks along the river where Hard Labor Creek joins the Apalachee River. This 800-acre protected property has such a diversity of habitats and species-we even found a ripe pawpaw fruit.

Cook Hike – On July 10th we hiked along the Middle Oconee River with the Cook family and 15 members on ORLT's 1st protected property -this forest is full of so many native shrub and wildflower species.



Cook family (3 on the right) with other hikers.



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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Please enroll me as a member of the Oconee River Land Trust.***

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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**.