

OCONEE RIVER LAND TRUST

news

Preserving natural areas in our region since 1993

Spring 2015

The BAR Flint Preserve

An Easy Place to Love

By Pierre Howard

(Editor's Note: Former Georgia Lt. Gov. Pierre Howard, who served as president of the Georgia Conservancy from 2009-2014, is a long-time friend of Arthur and Bea Flint, owners of the BAR Flint Preserve. He wrote the following column after the Flints established a conservation easement for their property.)

In northern Cherokee County near Waleska, just beyond the reach of advancing suburban sprawl, lies the 599-acre BAR Flint Preserve, a place where time stands still. It was once a home and refuge of the Cherokee Indians, as the petroglyphs along Shoal Creek attest. The quiet streamside woodlands have a distinctly spiritual feel, as if the spirits of the Cherokees are still present.

The preserve was assembled through several purchases by Dr. Austin and Bea Flint of Canton, longtime residents of Cherokee County, where Dr. Flint set up his medical practice after graduating from Emory University Medical School. Dr. Flint initially bought the land as an investment, but the more time the family spent on the land, the more attached they became to it. The land got hold of them and wouldn't let them go. They decided that it should be preserved forever.

A first-time visitor soon learns that it's an easy place to love. Lying in the Southern Blue Ridge ecoregion of Georgia, one of the richest centers of biodiversity in the eastern United States, the land is folded. Its steep dry ridges are covered with oak-hickory and oak-pine forests, and its verdant valleys cradle four pristine streams—Shoal Creek, Laurel Branch, McCory Creek and Rock House Creek, all important tributaries of the Etowah River in which the endangered Cherokee darter (*Etheostoma scotti*) has been documented.

Along their banks, glades of cinnamon, haystack and New York ferns grow in profusion. Umbrella magnolia, paw-paw and mountain laurel shade their banks.

In September, the outrageously beautiful blue downy lobelia (*Lobelia puberula*) blooms from streamside crannies beside extensive beds of dark green running cedar (*Lycopodium digitatum*) and the mottled green of Shuttleworth's ginger leaves (*Hexastylis shuttleworthii* var *shuttleworthii*).

In April, the streamsidings are lined with the fragrant blossoms of mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*) and numerous violet species.

When winter comes, the lake hosts duck species including mallard, ring-necked duck, lesser scaup, northern shoveler and gadwall. Beauty and adventure are present in every season. The land has produced some real surprises.

A rare American chestnut tree was found along one of the dry ridge roads, and nearby, Dr. Flint photographed a pine snake, uncommon so far north in Georgia. It's the kind of species that inevitably makes reptile experts ask, "Did you get a photo?" One exciting feature of the preserve is that there is so much more to discover there.



Pierre Howard (L) and Dr. Austin Flint



Upcoming Member Hikes

TALLASSEE FOREST

Saturday, May 9, 10 a.m.-2 p.m.



APALACHEE RIVER

Friday, May 15, 10 a.m.-1 p.m.
(Rain Date) Saturday, May 16, 1-4 p.m.

Look for details on our website and in the mail.

A new website, front-page coverage in the Athens Banner-Herald, and several new conservation easements in the works—2015 is off to a great start for the Oconee River Land Trust!

We appreciate reporter Wayne Ford joining us on a visit to property in the Veriest community of Oglethorpe County. You can read his story, which first appeared in the March 14 issue of the Athens Banner-Herald, on the News link of our website.

But even more important were the quotes provided by landowner Larry Cook about his decision to establish a conservation easement: “When I bought the land my original plan was to keep it in the same state it was. I never cared for it being split up or developed.”

In the article, Mr. Cook succinctly explains how the easement allows him to continue to have working pastures, harvest timber, and lease hunting privileges while protecting its conservation values.

2014 was a banner year for ORLT as we completed 14 conservation easements and more than doubled the numbers of acres protected to nearly 12,000. These easements are as small as 11 acres in the community of Gray, Ga., to more than 1,500 acres in Effingham County and the 1,400 acres in Oglethorpe County.

While there are many factors that contribute to this success, the bottomline is always the landowners who partner with us to conserve the natural forest and working lands that border our state’s rivers, streams and wetlands.

We have launched a new website—www.oconeeriverlandtrust.org—to better explain our mission, provide details about conservation easements, and share the beauty of protected land through photographs.

As of the end of 2014, ORLT had 52 conservation easements in 18 Georgia counties. Although most of the protected land is in the Upper Oconee River Watershed, our work also extends into other nearby watersheds. Currently, there are 18 counties with ORLT easements: Baldwin, Barrow, Bibb, Butts, Cherokee, Clarke, Effingham, Emanuel, Franklin, Hancock, Jackson, Jones, Madison, Morgan, Newton, Oconee, Oglethorpe and Walton.

It’s easy to get caught up in the numbers, but what really matters is ensuring that lichens and wildflowers will continue to grow on granite outcrops, that the long leaf pine habitat of indigo and gopher tortoise snakes is protected, and our water and land resources are protected for future generations.

Thank you for the many ways you contribute to those goals.

—*Steffney Thompson*

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Beavers: Nature's Foresters

By Walter Cook

Among the several conservation easements

I monitored recently, four featured wetlands created or improved by beaver. None of these had the typical dam on a distinguishable stream course.

Instead, beaver had worked in a flat-forested wetland, where water flowed in broad, shallow sheets to an eventual outlet to a stream. The dams were about a foot high and often located throughout the wetland, ensuring there was deep enough water to house a lodge.

A beaver lodge in a wooded wetland is built so the beavers can enter it under water, but have a dry shelf within the lodge. This prevents entry by predators such as fox or coyote.

"Bank beaver" will dig their lodges into the shore of a lake or river, but with the same underwater tunnel entrance to a shelf above the level of the water surrounding the lodge.

To move around the wetland without being detected, beaver dig canals to the lodge and dam. Working mostly at night, they can tow whole saplings to the dam for repairs, or to the lodge, where branches and twigs can be severed and stored in their underwater larder for future meals.

On the Jeffco Conservation Easement near Jefferson, the Middle Oconee River was straightened many years ago with the spoil from the dredging placed along the channelized river, forming a man-made levee.

In at least four places, the beaver have made crossings that go up one side of the levee, across the road, and down the other side. The animals do not spend much time exposed to predation, but go straight across the levee. Their lodges may be in the riverbank, since no lodge has been sighted in the wetland. It is possible that river otters also use the same crossings.

On the northeast side of the Jeffco wetland, a barbed wire fence marks the boundary of the easement. The low, flat wetland abruptly meets an easy but distinct slope onto dry land. The water at the fence is deep, two feet or more in many places.

At one such location, beaver have crossed under the fence to the non-easement side and have cut several trees in a group of sweetgum saplings. The severed saplings have been

dragged along an obvious path that extends under the bottom strand of barbed wire and into the deep water.

To me, a retired forester, the whole enterprise resembles a "thinning," and the path is analogous to a "skid trail."

We also found a "scent post" at the water's edge, a small pile of dead leaves, small twigs and mud. Both beaver and otter build them and leave their scent to mark their territory.

Farther along the fence, beaver made a quarter-acre "clearcut" in a sapling stand several years ago on the easement side of the fence. On this year's monitoring, the clearcut area had advanced across the fence and up a slight slope. But the trees had been cut down two or more growing seasons ago, so the stumps had sprouted new stems. Some of the new stems had been cut and probably eaten on the site, since they would have been small and tender.

In forestry, that cutting to produce sprouts is known as coppicing; it is more common in Europe, where willow is coppiced to produce whips for basketry.

Beaver and foresters have a lot in common: We are smart and industrious and enjoy being in a natural environment.

But I never developed a taste for sweetgum bark, and I don't think I would enjoy living in a lodge. The living space would be cramped, and probably pretty smelly.





A Bird's-Eye View:

University of Georgia journalism students have teamed with ORLT to explore the use of drones for monitoring conservation easements. The project, overseen by Professor Emuel Aldridge of UGA's New Media Institute, documents two exceptional priority habitats for the state of Georgia found in Oglethorpe County.

A bird's eye view from a drone may offer an efficient way to monitor large or difficult-to-reach areas and the footage also may

provide promotional and educational value. The students are also developing a mobile app to explain the proper use of drones.

Students who are participating in the project include Alex Croy, Laura Schoop, Caroline Farley, and Sarah Margaret Bush.

ORLT Launches New Website:

www.oconeeriverlandtrust.org

As part of our goal to better inform the general public about the importance of land conservation, we have launched a new website.

Not only does our new site provide information about ORLT, it also has general information about the conservation easement process, brief descriptions of our easements, how to become an ORLT member, and lots of photos!



Please visit the website and let us know what you think. Our goal is for this to be a dynamic site that provides up-to-date information on our work and successes, as well as an entry point for those interested in knowing more about conservation easements and land trust organizations.

Thank you!

There are many people who help ORLT on an ongoing basis—our landowners and board members are chief



among them. However, we wanted to offer our special thanks to our intern Carla Francis, who has contributed extra amounts of time to developing PowerPoint presentations, planning our fall reception, and generally helping out in multiple ways this year. We're thrilled she plans to be around for another year!



BAR Flint Preserve

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When the Flints told me in the late spring of 2014 that they wanted to preserve their land in perpetuity, we called the Oconee River Land Trust, and we could not have picked a better conservation partner.

From the first meeting on the property with the Flints, Laura and Steffney inspired confidence and trust in everyone working on the project. They go about their work in a manner that combines obvious expertise with an easy grace, a recipe that makes friends of landowners in short order.

Since conservation easements are forever, it is unavoidable that some hard conversations have to take place as decisions are made about land use and development parcels. In every case, Steffney and Laura listened to the landowners needs and found solutions that satisfied their concerns without compromising the protection of the natural assets of the land.

On Dec. 29, 2014, the Deed of Conservation Easement was filed in Cherokee County. It was an exhilarating feeling to see the clerk stamp the deed and mark it filed. After practicing law for 35 years, I didn't realize that I could get excited about the filing of a deed! Now, the land is protected forever.

Thinking about it recalls the quote from the great John Muir, "As long as I live, I'll hear waterfalls and birds and winds sing." Now, I will forever hear the streams, the birds and the winds of Cherokee singing in my mind.

The BAR Flint Preserve will be beautiful this spring as the wild azaleas and mountain laurel burst into bloom. Migrating neo-tropical birds will fill the woods along the creeks with song, and butterflies will flit in the sunlit patches. It is reassuring to know that it will be that way for every spring to come!



Blue downy lobelia



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

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



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Membership Levels:

- Student (\$10)
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- Land Conservator (\$500)
- Land Saver (\$30)
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- Trustee of the Land (\$1,000+)

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