

OCONEE RIVER LAND TRUST

news

Preserving natural areas in our region since 1993

Spring 2019

George and Beth Thornton – Passionate Conservators

By Denise Horton

When George and Beth Thornton discovered that Champion Paper Co. was selling its property in Elbert County they were sure they had found their forever home.

After moving about every two years during Thornton's career as an executive with agricultural chemical companies, the couple was ready to return to their home state and settle down in a location that put them closer to their children and grandchildren.

Just as importantly, Thornton wanted to pursue his greatest passion—conservation of the land.

"We wanted to own land that we could steer from its current use into a combination of sustainable forestry and managing for wildlife," he says.

But like many great plans, the Thorntons' had a hiccup. After building their dream home and beginning the transition of the loblolly-filled pine plantation to a more diversified mix of hardwoods and long-leaf pine. Thornton was offered the opportunity to head the National Wild Turkey Federation, headquartered in Edgefield, S.C.

"I thought I would just drive to Edgefield every day," Thornton recalls, but Beth had other plans.

"I didn't want to be out here all by myself every day," she says. "So we bought a house in Edgefield and moved there."

The Thorntons have stayed busy in Edgefield. In addition to Thornton's job, the couple also established a commercial truffle business and opened a small general store in Edgefield's historic downtown.

But rather than neglecting their Elbert County property, Thornton says serving as head of the Turkey Federation provided him incalculable knowledge about caring for his land.

"The chief conservation officer at the National Turkey Federation was Dr. James Earl Kennemere," Thornton recalls. "We worked together for nine years and I had the

opportunity to talk with him and ask him all of my questions."

Thornton also learned more about conservation easements during his time with the Turkey Federation, knowledge that led him to establish a conservation easement on a large portion of his Elbert County property.

"I'm very concerned about long-term land use planning in our country," he says. "With the ongoing growth in our population and the increasing demand for food and fiber, I'm concerned that much of our productive land could be lost forever."

While the Thorntons have always known they wanted to protect their property, they weren't sure a conservation easement was the best approach.

"When I first heard about conservation easements, they seemed overly complicated and difficult," he says. "But as I began to dig deeper, I found they weren't as daunting as I had feared."

Thornton says he chose to work with the Oconee River Land Trust after meeting several board members, as well as ORLT Director Steffney Thompson and Land Steward Laura Hall at a recent event.

"ORLT had been recommended to me by other land owners who had established conservation easements, but getting to know the board members and staff made us very comfortable about working with ORLT," he says."

On a recent spring day, the Thorntons invited ORLT staff and board members for a



Denise Horton

George and Beth Thornton
on their conserved property
in Elbert County.



Dan Crescenzo



One of George and Beth's dogs
exploring a wildflower-filled field
during a recent visit to this property.

Atamasco lily (*Zephyranthes atamasca*).

walking tour of their Elbert County property.

"Everything has been burned at least once and some areas have been burned 5 times," Thornton says. "In particular, we're trying to eliminate the fescue and Bermuda grass that was planted under the pines. Privet was also common on the property, so we want to get rid of it, too."

The Thorntons will continue to have the property professionally logged as the loblollies mature. In some cases, the openness

Continued on page 8 . . .

DIRECTOR'S UPDATE

Metrics are all the rage: how else can you tell if someone is doing a good job if not through some measurable outcome? I like our numbers: ORLT to date has protected over 36,000 acres of forests, wetlands, granite outcrops, and farms, with 159 miles of streams and rivers, via 168 conservation easements in 41 Georgia counties and, for 2019, we have met with over 20 new possible conservation easement donors.

But large and growing numbers aren't the only way of looking at ORLT's work. Each acre, each foot of stream, each landowner tells their own story. It is the smallest unit of what we do in fact that reminds me of the importance of our work: an unexpected black walnut tree flourishing; a field that will remain a sunny source of food and edge habitat; an elementary student holding a frog for the first time; and each and every landowner who treasures their property enough to create a green legacy for their family and the future.

Large numbers however do also tell a story that we can listen to. I went hiking in Tucson over spring break, and I wasn't the only one. It was very clear that on a fine spring day lots of people like to walk in nature. In a park on the very edge of Tucson, I saw walkers of all ages: families, couples, individuals -in a hurry or slowly meandering, taking photos, talking, splashing in snow melt fed streams, walking on dirt trails -it didn't matter. Spring in the desert, like spring in Georgia, is a time of blooming and green new life, perfect temperatures, and a time to get outside and enjoy. ORLT wants more opportunities for people to do just that. In addition to sponsoring hikes and educational outings on private conservation easements, ORLT has proposed a \$3.8 million SPLOST project to build a park on a county-owned 309-acre property (Tallassee Park), located near the edge of Athens along the Middle Oconee River. The park will provide access to a unique and beautiful greenspace for middle school students, neighbors, county residents, and visitors to hike and enjoy. This investment in the community will benefit Athens citizens' health, provide recreational and educational opportunities, and create a new generation of conservationists who in turn find joy in each individual wildflower they see on some future spring hike. ■

- Steffney Thompson,
Executive Director

Since 1993,
we've protected
36,400
ACRES

including 4,500
acres in 2018

WE PROTECT
LAND IN
41
COUNTIES
IN GEORGIA

CURRENTLY
159 MILES
of streams and rivers

are permanently
protected by ORLT

ORLT
PROTECTED
30
new properties
IN 2018



Welcome New Staff Member

Hadrien Turner Stewardship Assistant

As ORLT's Stewardship Assistant, Hadrien Turner is spending hours walking properties that have conservation easements, completing the annual monitoring requirements of existing easements.



Having just started in February, it's a job he's looking forward to learning even more about, but not one he envisioned when he graduated from the American University of Paris with a double major in Global Communications and Film Studies in 2008.

"I thought about law school, but instead I moved to New York City and worked tons of different jobs," he recalls. "I did a lot of work in the music industry, organizing live events, and working in emerging tech."

"Growing up, I was really into nature and fascinated with wildlife, those are interests that have been rekindled as I've gotten older," Turner says. "I knew I wanted to be outdoors and not sit at a desk all the time." This became apparent as Turner developed his love of the outdoors into an ever-expanding knowledge of native plant and bird species, something that has made him invaluable in his role at ORLT.

Turner continued his work as a freelance writer and editor, including serving as news editor for rap musician Snoop Dogg's online publication, after moving to Athens in August 2016 so Ray could pursue her graduate degree at UGA's Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources. He also branched out into other types of work, including landscaping and working at Fry Farm in Bethlehem.

"I have a good friend who has a conservation easement on his property and he generously introduced me to Laura Hall," he recalls. Because of this connection, Turner began volunteering at ORLT events and getting additional hands-on experience in monitoring.

When the part-time land steward position became available, Turner jumped at the opportunity to join ORLT.

"Some of my earliest memories are receiving Ranger Rick and My Big Backyard magazines and catching bugs in my backyard in Virginia," Turner says. "Working with ORLT is an opportunity to learn so much more about flora and fauna and how best to protect it."

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Notes from the Field

By Laura Hall

During 2018 ORLT worked with a group of fantastic landowners who love being on their land—hiking, hunting, farming, fishing, and connecting others to the special places they have helped preserve.

Here are a few highlights from some of these projects:

- The Greene family protected 250 acres less than a mile from the Flint River in Thomaston, GA.
- The Rolader family preserved 345 acres of forest along Cedar Creek—home to over 150 native woodland and wildflower species.
- The Thornton family protected 260 acres along the Ogeechee River in Mayfield Georgia.
- The Rocker family preserved an additional 560 contiguous with over 400 acres they previously protected in Hancock County near Sparta. This land, which has been in their family for generations, is on the Little Ogeechee River and has a historic schoolhouse from 1862 called ‘Rockby’ that is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.
- The Bennett and Walstad families preserved an additional 380 acres contiguous to their already-preserved 1,500 acre sustainable Five Arrow Farm in Social Circle on the Alcovy River.
- The Shiver family preserved additional land with granite outcrop habitat with rare snorklewort growing in the vernal pools, forestland along Kimbro Creek, and an upland seep in Greene County totaling over 350 acres.
- The Judah family preserved over 100 acres on Rocky Comfort Creek south of Warrenton, where naturalist and advocate for American Indians, William Bartram, camped and traded with Cherokee and the Creek Indians. Two rare species grow on the property’s granite outcrops: mat-forming quillwort and snorklewort.



Laura Hall



▲ Mesic slope with wild comfrey and Georgia buckeye.

▲ Five Arrow Farm pasture and forest. One of our 2018 protected farms.



This historic schoolhouse is part of a permanently protected easement in Putnam Co.



Vernal pools and granite outcrop at Shiver property. These protected rare granite outcrops in Greene Co. boast incredible biodiversity.

Dan Crescenzo

Laura Hall

ORLT's SPLOST Proposal: Tallassee Forest Park

By Caroline Johnson-Hall, Director of Development and Outreach

The Oconee River Land Trust's mission covers a wide variety of conservation values, including protecting clean drinking water and rivers, preserving critical habitat for wildlife and native plant species, and ensuring plenty of greenspace for current and future residents of Georgia to enjoy. We firmly believe that avid outdoorspeople make avid conservationists, and our goal is to enable as many people as possible to be able to enjoy the beautiful landscapes Georgia has to offer.

With this in mind, ORLT submitted a SPLOST proposal this year for Tallassee Forest Park, which would create a 310-acre nature park in Tallassee Forest featuring forested and river-side trails, a covered pavilion for outdoor education and events, and a playground.

This property is directly across from Burney-Harris Lyons Middle School on the west side of Athens, an area of town with little access to public outdoor greenspace. Teachers and staff at Burney-Harris Lyons have expressed their excitement to ORLT about the possibility of creating educational field trips for their students and hosting outdoor events in the new park.

Tallassee Forest has also already attracted local naturalists and outdoor enthusiasts with the wide variety of habitats and biodiversity of species it contains. 58 species of butterflies have been documented at Tallassee Forest, including four rare species: the Great Purple Hairstreak, Henry's Elfin, the Green Hairstreak, and Gemmed Satyr, all of which are found in Tallassee Forest's wetlands. Rare and endangered habitats like Holly forests and canebrakes grow large and undisturbed. With 7 high priority habitats, including wetlands, springs, streams, bottomland forest, and others, many conservationists and lovers of the outdoors have been eagerly awaiting public access.

In the meantime, members of the public have been investing in Tallassee Forest with ORLT by volunteering their time and labor to clean trash and invasive plants from the forest. Twenty-five volunteers have helped clear privet and elaeagnus from the front of the property, while another ten cleared several truckloads of scrap metal and trash from another site.



Part of the Oconee River that winds along Tallassee Forest.

Dan Crecenzo

There is still work to be done to clear more invasive plants, and ORLT plans to organize more volunteer days in the near future, building on community interest and involvement with this incredible biodiverse site.

The future of Tallassee Forest Park is hopeful, but your help is still needed. On April 22nd, the SPLOST proposal for the park was added to the final list of recommended projects that will go to the Mayor and Commission for a vote.

Public comments are open on the SPLOST 2020 website. If you believe in ORLT's mission of inspiring a growing community of avid conservationists, and expanding greenspace and environmental education in an area with very few of these resources, we strongly encourage you to voice your support one of these two ways. ■



Hadrien Turner

Tuckston Methodist Church removed 12 trash bags and all this scrap metal from Tallassee Forest in April.



25 volunteers clean trash and invasive plants in February from Tallassee Forest.

Caroline Johnson-Hall



▲ Athens Academy watershed workday. ▶ Athens Academy students plant native shrubs to reduce pollution and erosion run-off into their campus pond.

Laura Hall

ORLT's Spring Educational Outreach

Getting kids and teens excited about conservation and the natural world around them is essential to the future of our work. That's why this year we've partnered with several different schools to promote environmental education among a wide variety of ages. Here are a few highlights of our partnerships:

Jefferson County Schools' Family Wetlands Day on April 13th is an annual celebration for students and their families to learn about water quality, the importance of wetlands, and wildlife habitat. The event is hosted on an ORLT easement located behind Jefferson Co. Middle School, with students gaining the opportunity to go on nature walks, participate in water testing activities, and study other environmental topics. We're excited every year to participate in this fun event, and it's clear the students are too.

Athens Academy's first Water Day on March 20th was an enormous success, bringing together environmental groups from the Athens area to teach high schoolers about the importance of protecting water resources and riparian habitat. ORLT partnered with Environmental Science teacher Nikki Chester to lead a work-day session that established a vegetation buffer along one of the school's two ponds. These ponds are part of the Oconee River watershed, and by the students clearing trash from the pond-side, establishing a no-mow zone, and planting native plants along the bank, they will be directly reducing pollution and erosion run-off into the pond and ultimately, the Oconee River.

Stroud Elementary School's Day of Service on April 12th engaged students in a variety of volunteer projects and outdoor environmental education sessions on the trails behind their school. Students were able to learn about a variety of topics, including forestry, native species, and stream health. ORLT used tree branch samples to discuss the importance of biodiversity in a forest, the medicinal background of several native trees, and the positive impact individual species have on both animals and humans.



Laura Hall identifies plants with 4th and 5th graders at Stroud Elementary during their Day of Service.

Caroline Johnson-Hall



Parents and students come to celebrate wetlands at Jefferson County schools' Family Wetlands Day. Here students look at native invertebrates like crawfish.



Students' wetlands-themed artwork on display.

Dan Crescenzo

Thank you to the landowners and educators who hosted us this spring!

Chris Peterson, landowner

Charlie Bostwick, landowner

Jud Shiver, landowner

Tommy and Emelyn Mitcham, landowner

Ronald and Jane Kauffman, landowner

Kathleen and Dave Miller, landowner

Jim Galloway, landowner

George and Beth Thornton, landowner

Mikala Newsom, Stroud Elementary

Nikki Chester, Athens Academy

Liz French, Jefferson County Schools

Creating and Maintaining Stable Interior Roads

By Daniel Crescenzo, Stewardship Coordinator

Erosion on interior roads and adjacent to wildlife openings is an ongoing problem that many landowners have to deal with. On my yearly monitor visits to the Healy property, I have noticed that the roads are consistently in good condition from one year to the next. So on this year's monitor visit, I spoke with property manager Ash Brewer about how he keeps the roads in such good condition. Here's what he said about creating and maintaining stable roads:

The common practice of frequently regrading and installing new waterbars may temporarily keep roads functional, but it does not create stable roads. Rather, it exposes more soil, which in turn increases erosion. Silt from frequently regraded roads often washes into nearby streams and degrades water quality, and in a short period of time, the roads are rutted and covered in erosion gullies. Creating stable roads requires longer-term planning and thinking, but it is worth it.

The first step in creating a stable road is to choose the right location. Roads should follow the contour of the land, and never be built perpendicular to the slope or at any sharp angles to the natural contours. Crossings of streams and wetlands should also be avoided or at least minimized.

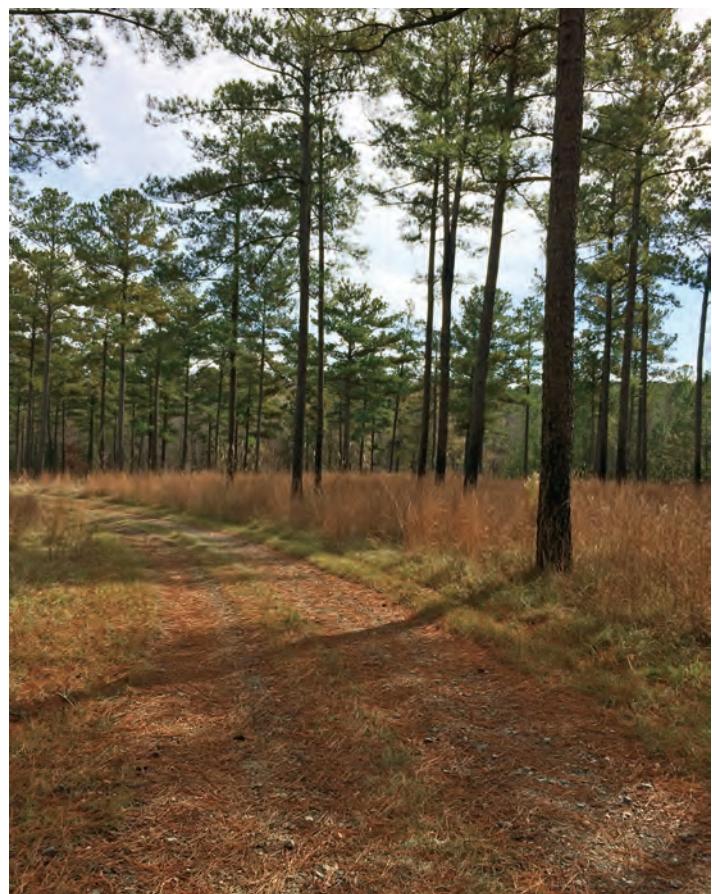
Once a location has been picked, grade the road's surface to build up a crown in the middle of the road. Waterbars should also be installed as needed on steeper hillsides, but not more than are necessary to accommodate slope and not directly above streams or wetlands.

Next, choose your gravel. On flatter surfaces, crush n' run gravel with powder mix will do nicely. For steeper areas, choose larger 5s gravel. High-quality gravel is readily available in the state of Georgia from gravel pits and quarries. These operations will deliver the gravel to your property, or you can pick it up yourself.

It is not enough to lay aggregate on the road. It must also be packed down to ensure that it will not simply wash away after a season of heavy rains. The most effective way to do this is to rent a steamroller. While this may be expensive up front, it will save time and money in the long run to get roads into proper shape.

Once your gravel is packed, plant grass seed on the road – both in the aggregate and along the edges of the road. The grass will help to further stabilize your roads as its roots grow down into the soil. Also, be sure to stabilize any turnouts you may have constructed.

Your newly constructed or stabilized roads will require some work to fill in holes, re-plant grass, and the like. But after a few years, they should be stable and require little maintenance. A well-constructed road will not require frequent re-grading and new waterbar construction. Spending a little more time and money up front to correctly install or repair your roads will save you a lot of time and money down the road. ■



Allowing vegetation to grow on the road helps keep gravel in place.



An example of a well-built road with minimal erosion. Allowing vegetation to grow on the road helps keep gravel in place.

Dan Crescenzo

Passionate Conservators

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created by logging has been turned into open meadows that are ecologically designed and maintained areas of diverse crops including wheat, red clover, and chufa, a European grain that is an ideal crop for turkeys. Blackberries, persimmons, and wild grapes also flourish along the edges.

"We're trying to create a lot of edge habitat to protect ground-nesting birds like quail," Thornton says. "The ideal food plot is 3 acres with a scalloped edge, which makes it harder for predators to find the nests."

In other areas, he's planted crabapple, plum trees and a variety of oaks.

"I have a smorgasbord of six or seven different types of oaks, which ensures that each year we have a good crop of acorns," he says.

Thornton is a proponent of using fire to control undergrowth and stimulate the germination of many species, including native grasses and wildflowers, but he also leaves dead trees and snags for wildlife.

"A lot of people would pile up the extra limbs and brush and burn it, but I have it redistributed so it provides cover for ground-nesting birds, rabbits, and other small species that can be preyed on by hawks and eagles," he says.

During the walking tour, ORLT Land Steward Laura Hall was pleased by how many

native plants are evident on the Thorntons' property.

"Just standing here, I can see at least 30 different native plants," she said, pointing out large stands of cohosh, pawpaws, Solomon's seal, sweet shrub, spiderwort, witch hazel, angelica, and several other plants.

While Thornton is making very intentional efforts to increase the property's quail

and turkey populations, he has a long list of other wildlife that he has seen signs of, including eagles, otters, beavers, deer, pygmy rattlesnakes, and, possibly, a bear. He points to what appear to be round hay bales scattered in the meadows of his property.

"Those are actually observation blinds. Certainly, they can be used by hunters, but Beth and I enjoy sitting in them and watching the wildlife that comes around," he says.

"This is a great place for friends to bring their children for their first deer hunt," Thornton says. "We're not interested in having



Our board took a recent trip to the Thornton property to see George and Beth's conservation work in person.

a lot of hunting, but we enjoy sponsoring groups like Hunt For A Cure and the Wounded Warriors organization."

"Even before we clearly understood what a conservation easement was or how it worked, we knew we wanted to manage this land in a way that it will some day look a lot like it did 200 or 300 years ago and that it will be permanently protected," he says. "That might not happen in my lifetime, but we feel good knowing that our grandchildren or great-grandchildren can some day see that happen." ■



Laura Hall

Wood Betony (*Pedicularis canadensis*)



Dan Crescenzo

Spring Event Roundup

By Caroline Johnson-Hall

ORLT is excited to have hosted several events and hikes this spring, allowing our members and other community residents to catch a glimpse of the work we do and the incredible properties we protect.

In February we hosted Hike and Happy Hour for Athens Wetlands, an hour-long hike on the first sunny day of the year with complimentary craft beer at the end. Nearly all of our 75 hikers donated to ORLT to support our mission of preserving Georgia wetlands.

The following month, we partnered with Eloise Carter, author of Guide to the Plants of Granite Outcrops, to take an OLLI class of 30 people to see granite outcrops, one of the Southeast's rarest habitats. That same weekend, she partnered with us again to take another 15 participants to some of the other granite outcrops we help protect, enchanting participants with her knowledge of the native species there, including the endangered Snorklewort (*Amphianthus pusillus*).

Her comments about the preserved state of the outcrops was encouraging. "I think the outcrop in Newton Co. (OLLI) was remarkable because it was undisturbed – so much less compared to Mt. Arabia or Stone Mountain," she said. She was also impressed with the granite outcrops on our Shiver hike. "That outcrop (Shiver) has the largest number of pools with Amphianthus that I have seen on one site." Our sincerest thanks to Eloise for taking part in these hikes and for being a wonderful educator.

As spring began blossoming, ORLT organized two wildflower hikes, one north of Atlanta and one in Bishop. Our Perryton hike allowed participants to see the unusual Pink Lady-slipper flower, while our Boulder Springs hike boasted a wide array of colorful wildflowers. ■

Dan Crescenzo



L-R: board members Smith Wilson and Madeline Van Dyck, landowner Charlie Bostwick, and staff member Hadrien Turner on our Perryton wildflower hike.

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 Steward (\$50) | <input type="checkbox"/> Land Conservator (\$500) |
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Thank you for your support!

Mail this form (or join on-line at oconeeriverlandtrust.org) with your tax-deductible contribution to: Oconee River Land Trust, 675 Pulaski Street, Suite 2300, Athens, GA 30601



Brooke Myslajek

Over 75 people came to ORLT's 'Hike and Happy Hour' on Chris Peterson's conservation easement to benefit Athens wetlands.

Don't miss our hike and volunteer day announcements! Email caroline@oconeeriverlandtrust.org to be added to our email list or follow us on Facebook to get updates on opportunities to see the amazing forests, farms, rivers, granite outcrops, and more that ORLT protects.

What Your Membership Does

We are so excited for the opportunity to protect another 4,500 acres and 24 miles of rivers and streams last year, to show people who the conservation work we do is important, and to engage the next generation of avid conservationists through educational outreach. Your membership not only provides you discounts on events like **Forage and Feast**, invitations to member-only events, and subscriptions to our newsletter and event postcards, you empower us to continue our mission of protecting clean drinking water, critical wildlife habitat, and greenspace in Georgia. If you haven't renewed your membership this year, consider doing so through our website or by mailing the form below to our office. Thank you so much for your support!

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.



THE OCONEE RIVER LAND TRUST
675 Pulaski Street, Suite 2300
Athens, GA 30601

Upcoming Events:

Add "in Jackson County" to the end of the July Walt Cook hike.

Under "Upcoming events" add ""

Change the title for the thank you to event sponsors to "

"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."

Join us for Forage and Feast

ORLT will host our first Forage and Feast workshop and dinner on June 29th. Participants will walk through Five Arrow Farms' forest and fields with Marc Williams, botanist from Asheville, NC, as he teaches us about edible and medicinal plants. Hikers will collect edible plants along the way with Marc's direction and help prepare a multi-course dinner with their foraged food, pairing it with local craft beer and wine. All proceeds go towards ORLT's conservation mission. Space will be limited to 25 participants so keep an eye on our website, email list, and Facebook page for tickets to go on sale. If you are interested in becoming a sponsor and having your business promoted as an ORLT partner, please contact Caroline Johnson-Hall at caroline@oconeeriverlandtrust.org for more details.

Special thanks to First American Bank for sponsoring this event!

Thank You to Our Forage and Feast and Apalachee Paddle Sponsors!



Upcoming Events

May 25th, 8:00 a.m. – 10:30 a.m. Join us for a Macon bird walk with the Ocmulgee Audubon Society. We'll be by the Ocmulgee River with opportunities to see a variety of songbirds, waterfowl, and cormorants.

June 29th, 4:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m. Oconee River Land Trust is excited to host our first *Forage and Feast* dinner and workshop at Five Arrow Farms in Social Circle! Participants will learn about wild edible plants and go on a guided foraging hike, before preparing their own multi-course dinner from foraged plants. \$100 non-members, \$75 members. Space will be limited to the first 25 guests – please visit tickettailor.com/events/oconeeriverlandtrust/266748 to purchase your tickets.

July 27th, 8:00 a.m. – 10:00 a.m. Stroll along the Oconee River in Athens on this birdwatching walk to see songbirds and waterfowl at Walt Cook's protected property in Jackson County.

August, TBD Oconee River Land Trust will be hosting a fundraiser selling succulent plants in August. Stop by and pick up a hardy new desk plant to support ORLT's mission!

September 7th, 10 a.m. – 12 p.m. Join us near Perry, GA for a hike on one of Georgia's Blackland Prairies, where we'll see several incredible wildflower species, including the Southeastern Bold Goldenrod, in bloom.

— For more information, stay updated with our website and Facebook —