

OCONEE RIVER LAND TRUST

news

Preserving natural areas in our region since 1993

Fall 2014



Executive Update

As you can see from the newsletter, ORLT is full of new things – a new office, a new land steward, and two new interns. We also are busy with 11 **new** projects that, when completed by the end of the year, will conserve another 5,000 acres of greenspace in Georgia. The new projects range from farms and timber land, to granite outcrops and fern glades. We hope to be able to tell you more about these diverse projects in our next newsletter

We are very excited about all the new things, but our focus remains on the same old thing: Protecting land forever so that we might have clean water, places for contemplation and recreation, and habitat for native plants and animals.

A recent article in Smithsonian magazine reminds me of the importance of what we do, even on our relatively small scale. We are part of a larger effort to create green refuges and corridors that allows the natural world to change as it may need to in the face of new conditions. Biologist E.O. Wilson reminds us of the absolute powerful and vital role that protected land plays in nurturing biodiversity and resiliency for our world. (Smithsonian, September 2014).

Please join us at our new office on Thursday, Nov. 6, from 5-7 p.m., for a happy hour gathering and the opportunity to meet our new staff, to learn more about our new projects and to renew your membership and support of the Oconee River Land Trust.

—Steffney Thompson

Peterson Conservation Easement

ORLT's 39th conservation easement protects 135 acres of beautiful, mostly forested, bottomland along the Middle Oconee River in Jackson County. Chris and Sarah Peterson, the landowners, have made sure that the wetland and river will not be disturbed, and ensured that this land will continue to do its important job of hosting wildlife and plants, as well as filtering pollutants out of stormwater runoff, thereby enhancing the water quality of the river that supplies most of Athens' drinking water. We are grateful to the Petersons for working with us to protect this lovely land.

Notice your habitats

By Laura Hall, Land Steward

Wetland ecosystems are hugely important in keeping our streams and rivers healthy, and thus our communities' drinking water clean. Wetlands act like a sponge and filter stormwater – slowing and cleaning the water as it flows through these areas. Wetlands filter out sediment, while also grabbing nutrients and chemicals, helping to turn them into usable forms of food for fish and animals.

In the Georgia Piedmont, there are a variety of wetland habitats, including flatwood wetlands, seepage wetlands, open marsh and beaver ponds, floodplains, and bottomlands. These habitats vary based on how frequently they flood and are defined by specific soils, trees, shrubs and herbaceous species.

Sedges, *Carex* species, are typically seen in many of the wetlands in the Piedmont, and are an important plant for their ability to actually “clean” the water. There are many different species and they vary from several inches to several feet tall, but most have a similar seed as seen in this photo.

Marshes are one of the broadest categories of wetlands and, in general, harbor the greatest biological diversity. They are characterized by shallow water and are dominated by floating-leaved plants, such as water lilies and duckweed, or emergent soft-stemmed aquatic plants, such as cattails, arrowheads, reeds, and sedges. Native species you may see in these areas include the scarlet rose mallow, *Hibiscus coccineus*.

Many animals that live in other habitats use wetlands for migration or reproduction. For example, herons nest in large old trees, but need shallow areas in order to wade for fish and aquatic life.



Sedges, *Carex*



Scarlet rose mallow, *Hibiscus coccineus*

Amphibians often forage in upland areas but return to the water to mate and reproduce. For many species to exist and thrive, it is crucial for wetlands to connect to upland and other habitats.

Some plants have special adaptations that allow them to live in places where their roots are constantly submerged in water. Because wetland soils are almost always wet they contain very little oxygen, which means that plants growing in these soils need a different method to “breathe.” The cypress knees are another method plants use to get oxygen in this environment.

“The Alcovy River swamps are among the most significant natural communities of the Piedmont region of the eastern U.S., most particularly because of the rarity of the mature water tupelo stands in this ecoregion.”— Charles Wharton, in “The Natural Communities of Georgia,” (University of Georgia Press, 2013).



Buttress trees in a wetland along the Alcovy River that is protected with a conservation easement held by ORLT.



Laura Hall: Passion for land preservation

By Denise H. Horton

There may be just a little dirt in Laura Hall’s blood. After all, her connection to the land dates back at least to her grandfather, the late O.D. Hall, who moved to Athens in the 1930s to work for the Soil Conservation Service.

Laura, who has joined ORLT as its land steward, remembers following her grandfather and watching as he gardened, soaking in his love and knowledge of plants, soil and moisture and how they all worked together to become fruits, vegetables and flowers for the family to enjoy.

She also remembers days spent with her brother, Brian, exploring the woods and the Oconee River next to her home in Timothy Estates subdivision on the west side of Athens. “Not only was it a place to make trails, built forts and climb trees, but it gave us a very important connection to the land, plants and animals,” she says.

That love of the land has continued throughout Laura’s life and led her to earn a bachelor’s degree in landscape architecture from the University of Georgia. As a part of her undergraduate experience, she also spent several months at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in Australia studying permaculture farming and sustainable landscape design.

Laura had her own landscape architecture firm in Athens for nearly a decade, concentrating her efforts on sustainable landscapes and organic gardening.

“I grew up with a critical and frustrated view of our poorly planned developments and cities in this country,” she says, comparing the lack of green space found in many parts of the U.S. with that of Melbourne, where young children can safely ride their bikes alone to school and where work outs occur, not in gyms, but by rowing on the river or biking, running and walking on trails found throughout the city.

In 1997, however, Laura joined the Jaeger Company in Gainesville where she developed streetscapes and public park designs for several downtown areas of the state, including Conyers, Jasper, Gainesville and Ellijay. She also worked on a portion of the Rails for Trails project that became the Silver Comet Trail in West Georgia, in addition to a number of forest and creek restoration projects.

“After seeing up close how much work and funding it takes to clean our rivers and streams and restore habitats, working with land trusts seemed like a positive approach,” she says of her decision to become a land conservation director with the Athens Land Trust in 2001, a position she held until moving to ORLT this summer. “We can do so much more with less by preserving land and water on the front end.”

As ORLT’s land steward, Laura focuses on two areas—documenting the conservation values of properties that are being considered for easements and monitoring existing conservation easements to ensure they are being maintained properly.

“Laura’s interests and skills are a natural fit with ORLT’s work and mission,” says Steffney Thompson, ORLT director. “Having her on board will allow us to preserve even more wildlife habitat, water quality and historic resources, while still allowing traditional uses such as agriculture, hunting and forestry.”

While Laura speaks eloquently of the economic benefits of land conservation, she’s even more passionate about the benefits future generations, including her two sons, may reap from green space.

“We have a lot of science and documentation that backs up the importance of kids (and actually all of us) spending time outside and connecting to nature. And, when kids have experienced a connection with their natural environment, they care about our communities’ natural resources and grow up to become good land stewards,” she says. “I really think that all kids should have this opportunity; it feels like a basic right.”

ORLT welcomes new interns

ORLT welcomes two new interns

this fall, Carla Francis and Heather Abernathy, both of whom are master's students at the University of Georgia.

Carla grew up on the shores of Lake Lanier in Gainesville. After earning her bachelor's degree in environmental economics and management at the UGA College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences in 2011, she moved to upstate New York for an AmeriCorps-Student Conservation Corps internship at Saratoga Spa State Park.

"It was a dream job," she says. "I taught classes centered on history and the environment, while also developing interpretive information about the park, maintaining trails, and controlling invasive species. I also spent a lot of time leading tours and discussing the 'healing' powers of the park's natural springs and their historic uses."

After returning to Georgia, Carla worked at Rock Eagle 4-H Center in Eatonton before beginning her master's studies in the public administration program at UGA this fall. She plans to focus on the budget and finance management of organizations similar to ORLT.

Heather earned her bachelor's degree from the UGA Odum School of Ecology and is now pursuing a master's degree in wildlife ecology and management at the UGA Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources.

She will continue research she began as an undergraduate at UGA's Coweeta Long-Term Ecological Research program in the Little Tennessee River basin in western North Carolina, focusing on how regional variation in precipitation and land cover affects the distribution and abundance of salamanders and migratory birds.

Heather grew up in Cumming, Ga., across from Sawnee Mountain, a place she says she "loves dearly to this day," catching frogs, crawfish, arthropods and "any insect or animal I could get my hands on." She also was "addicted" to the TV show, Animal Planet, and awed by the careers of those featured on the show.

"Pretty much from that point on I knew I wanted to work in the life sciences as a biologist," she says. "I love all aspects of the natural world, anything from



Carla Francis

being a backyard naturalist to backpacking to trail running."

"We are thrilled to have Carla and Heather, and look forward to working with them this year," says ORLT Director Steffney Thompson. "Their backgrounds and interests are a great fit with our mission and we plan to provide them experiences that enhance both their current graduate studies and their future careers."



Heather Abernathy



JOIN US for our Annual Meeting

Thursday, Nov. 6, 5-7 p.m.

in our new office space at the
Leathers Building
675 Pulaski Street, #2300
Athens, GA

- Enjoy light hors d'oeuvres, beer and wine
- Hear an update on ORLT's accomplishments
- Meet Land Steward Laura Hall
- Renew your membership

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Laura Hall, Land Steward



THE 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, 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.***

Name _____

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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!

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The Oconee River Land Trust ■ 675 Pulaski Street, Suite 2300
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