

OCONEE RIVER LAND TRUST news

Preserving natural areas in our region since 1993

Spring 2018

Oglethorpe Family Chooses Conservation Over Development

By Denise Horton and ORLT Staff

Jennifer Lytle describes herself as a “recovering litigator,” who began joining her attorney father at the office when she was just 4 years old and was drafting pleadings when she was 10.

Born in Athens when her father was attending law school at the University of Georgia, Lytle grew up in Marietta, with a creek that ran through her backyard and provided her first opportunities for experiencing the great outdoors. She also recalls the joy she found visiting Lake Rabun, a Georgia Power lake known for its clear, clean water.

After earning her undergraduate degree in accounting and a master’s in finance, Lytle began working in mergers and acquisitions for the Dutch-based Hagemeyer company. She later accepted a position with another company that led to her focusing on forensic accounting.

“I ended up serving as an interpreter between lawyers and accountants, so that’s when I decided to go to law school,” she says with a chuckle.

As a lawyer, Lytle discovered that legal research and numbers were her forte. She used those skills for several years as a litigator before shifting her focus to other areas of law, including land conservation.

Now Lytle and her family have become conservators of the land, having decided to protect 40 acres of family-owned land in Oglethorpe County themselves with a conservation easement in 2017. The property contains oak-hickory-pine forests as well as a mesic hard wood forest of beech and oak trees. A tributary of Millstone Creek crosses the property, bordered by large, resurrection fern and moss-covered granite boulders. The stream’s forested banks are home to a diversity of wildflowers, including black cohosh (*Actaea racemosa*), cranefly orchid (*Tipularia discolor*), bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*), Solomon’s seal (*Polygonatum biflorum*), false Solomon’s seal (*Maianthemum racemosum*), and Piedmont azalea (*Rhododendron canescens*). The property is also located less than a mile from 4 other ORLT conservation easements, protecting another 376 acres.

Lytle and her husband, Mark, initially contemplated building a home on the land.

“Mark was an apprentice in the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture,” Lytle explains. “He found boulders that he was going to incorporate into a house.”

However, as time went by, the couple realized that although there was much to appreciate about living in the middle of a large tract of land where their nearest neighbor was a granite quarry, the rural location was a bit too remote for daily life, especially as their children became involved with various school and recreational activities. The Lytles also realized that placing the 40 acres into a conservation easement would permanently protect the beautiful property while still allowing them to establish an organic garden and continue outdoor recreation in an already existing open area.



Dan Crescenzo

“Mark has long had a passion for making sure we remember where our food comes from and since part of our property is already cleared and zoned agricultural, we’ve already been able to begin to create several garden beds with the help of an employee who is living there,” Lytle says.

Although the Lytles are avid hunters, Jennifer says hunting won’t be allowed on the family’s property for at least the next several years.

“Hunting is allowed all around that tract so I think it will be nice to provide a small reserve for deer and other animals,” she says. “I plan to put out feed plots that will encourage animals to visit our property. Over time, we might decide to occasionally kill a large deer that we will use as food for our family.”

The Lytles have recently moved into a former cotton mill in the small Northeast Georgia town of Comer that has been restored and renovated by Mark to ensure privacy and modern conveniences while still maintaining much of the traditional architecture. The mill also houses their offices in an adjoining part of the building.

Lytle says she looks forward to talking further with ORLT land steward Laura Hall regarding management of the conservation easement and to working with other conservationists in finding and protecting land. ■

DIRECTOR'S UPDATE

Remembering Both The Forests and The Trees

I wish I could say that I had been planning ORLT's 25th anniversary celebration for a long while, doing lots of deep thinking about the organization's journey and work.

Instead, it was only when reading Lee Shearer's January 23, 2018, article (see page 4) about the conservation easement that ORLT Chair Smith Wilson and his wife, Dianne Penny, established for their Athens farm that I realized:



ORLT has been in existence for 25 years! We need to stop our work long enough to celebrate! (Watch for an invite later this year!)

Founded to help the local greenway effort, ORLT has grown from an all-volunteer organization to five busy, full-time staff members. We've expanded our conservation reach from Athens outwards and have protected more than 32,000 acres in 32 counties.

We don't just protect land along the Oconee Rivers, either. Our conservation easements conserve many types of undeveloped land from forests to farms in watersheds across the state, including the Alcovy, Apalachee, Broad, Chattahoochee, Flint, Ocmulgee, and Ogeechee.

I am lucky enough to visit almost every single property we work to conserve, and every time, even on the hottest, most humid day when I am not entirely thrilled to be out tromping in the woods, I am reminded of the quiet beauty of the undisturbed beech forest, the busy life of the beaver swamp, the lift to the heart generated by an open meadow, and the amazing tenacity of the life that survives on bare granite.

It is a privilege to walk these beautiful properties and to work with their conservation-minded landowners.

In 2017, ORLT permanently protected over 6,000 additional acres on 28 properties. I am looking forward to walking in more forests, testing my growing knowledge of trees, and being reminded again why we do this work: *Beautiful land, cleaner streams, fresh air, and the landowners who steward that land.*

– Steffney Thompson,
Executive Director

Since 1993,
we've protected
32,000
ACRES

including 6,000
acres in 2017

WE PROTECT
LAND IN
32
COUNTIES
IN GEORGIA

CURRENTLY
135 MILES
of streams and rivers

are permanently
protected by ORLT

ORLT
PROTECTED
28
new properties
IN 2017

Welcome New Staff Member **MARGARET MYSZEWSKI** Conservation Coordinator



A former environmental analyst with the University of Georgia has joined ORLT as conservation coordinator.

Margaret Myszewski spent a decade at the Carl Vinson Institute of Government focusing on issues concerning land use, sustainable development, water quality, and climate change.

Most recently, she was program coordinator for the Georgia Coastal Research Council at UGA, an organization focused on improving scientific exchange between coastal scientists and decision makers in Georgia and promoting the incorporation of the best available scientific information into state and local resource management.

A native of Iowa, Margaret earned her bachelor's degree at Drake University in Des Moines. She holds a master's degree in Medical Microbiology from UGA and earned her law degree at the University of Oregon with an emphasis in environmental and natural resource policy.

As conservation coordinator, Margaret will focus on ORLT's conservation and stewardship efforts.



Jennifer McAuley

In March, ORLT partnered with Jefferson City Schools to host a Family Wetlands Day at the school system's outdoor classroom. Hands-on activities such as netting for macroinvertebrates (pictured) and holding live reptiles provided a fun and educational opportunity for families. The wetland, newly named the "BioSTEAM Center," is owned by JCS and protected with a conservation easement by ORLT.

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Oconee River Belles Benefit Concert Raises \$25,000

By Denise Horton and Carla Francis

Grammy Award-winning banjoist Alison Brown and her band returned to Athens on March 22 for the 2nd Oconee River Belles concert. All \$25,000 raised at the event directly funds ORLT’s mission, thanks to underwriters, the Riverview Foundation.

“While the concert lasted only a few hours, the money raised supports land conservation year-round,” said Carla Francis, ORLT outreach and development coordinator, noting that the concert also serves as a celebration and gathering place for the region’s arts and environmental communities.

Just prior to the concert, hors d’oeuvres and cocktails were served in The Foundry’s courtyard, as a “thank you” to the event’s sponsors. Alison Brown made an appearance, where she greeted sponsors and took photos with many of the reception’s attendees. Jason Thrasher, artist and author of Athens Potluck, photographed the event.

Local band Cicada Rhythm opened the concert, captivating the audience with homegrown talent, before the Alison Brown Quartet and guests took the stage.

Brown is known for leading an ensemble that marries an array of roots-influenced music, including folk, jazz, Celtic and Latin, and is acclaimed as one of today’s finest progressive banjo players. Brown’s musical guests included newlywed duo Sierra Hull and Justin Moses and Grammy-nominated duo Rob Ickes and Trey Hensley.

“The Oconee River Belles Benefit Concert provides an unparalleled combination of roots music and grassroots fundraising for the rivers, forests and farms that inspire it,” Brown said of her decision to headline the event for a second year. “It’s also a one-of-a-kind opportunity for listeners that brings together performers who care about the land and want to protect it.”

The land trust extends its heartfelt appreciation to concertgoers, sponsors, members, volunteers, and others who are working with ORLT to protect greenspace for people and wildlife.

Stay tuned for information about the third annual concert, coming in Spring 2019. ■



Musical power couple Justin Moses and Sierra Hull.

Jason Thrasher



Headliner Alison Brown with sponsors at the pre-concert reception.

Jason Thrasher

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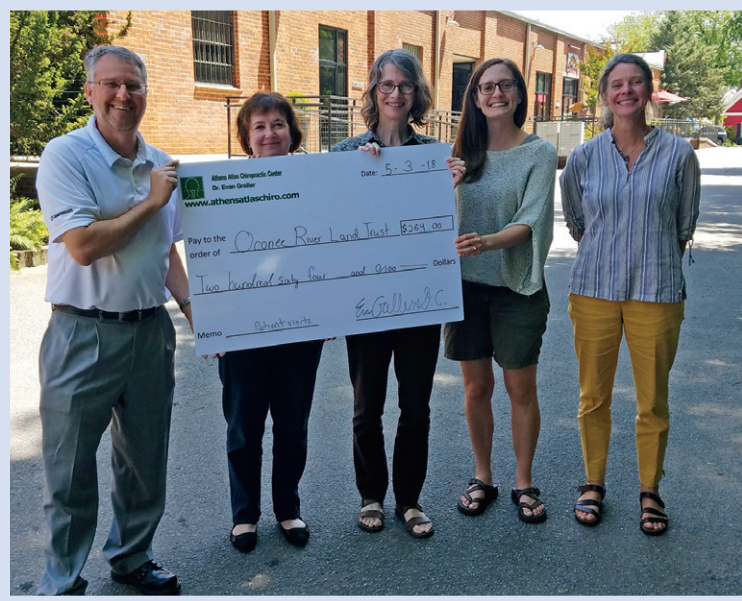
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Smith Wilson and Dianne Penny

A special thank you: Riverview Foundation, UGA’s Music Business Program (MBUS), Hannah McIntosh (MBUS intern), Tommy Jordan, Troy Aubrey of Foundry Entertainment, Mrs. James Hall, and Stephen Humphreys of Athens Imports.



Thank You Athens Atlas Chiropractic Center!

Athens Atlas Chiropractic Center's **Dr. Even Greller** presents a \$265 check to ORLT on May 3rd. The Athens-based office donated \$1 for every patient visit during the month of April. In the 20th year of his practice, Greller wants to, "give back to the community that's given so much to him." ORLT is delighted to have been their April non-profit of the month. Thank you to Dr. Greller and Athens Atlas Chiropractic Center for contributing to a greener future!

AS GROUP ENTERS 25TH YEAR . . .

Oconee River Land Trust chair puts farm into easement

A little more of Clarke County is protected, thanks to an Athens couple and the Oconee River Land Trust.

Late last year, Smith Wilson and his wife Dianne Penny made it official; signing the papers that put about 70 percent of their 50-acre farm into a conservation easement held by the trust.

"We've wanted to do it for a long time," said Penny, an artist.

Last year, they finally went through the process of donating a conservation easement on the Morton Road farm they share with two dogs, two mules, two Percheron horses that weigh nearly a ton each, and occasionally with grown daughters Elizabeth and Catherine when they come to visit from Atlanta or New York.

The front part is the farm, including their house, pasture for the horses, a smokehouse built by Wilson's great-grandfather in 1885, which the couple still uses to smoke hams, and a horse-drawn buggy his grandfather bought more than a century ago.

The protected acreage, once played-out cotton fields but now hardwood forest, backs up to Shoals Creek, part of the watershed of the Oconee River.

"Our first reason for doing this is protection of watershed property," said Wilson, a retired building contractor whose preservation development projects include The Bottleworks on Prince Avenue. He is also member of a volunteer citizen committee that oversees sales tax-funded projects of the Clarke County School District.

The couple's easement is not the largest property the Oconee River Land Trust protects, and far from the only one. But it's notable for the nonprofit organization for a couple of reasons.

One is that it helps mark an anniversary for the trust, now turning 25 years old.

Another reason is that Wilson is the chairman of the trust's board. It's the second time one of the land trust's board members has donated such an easement, said Carla Francis, the trust's outreach and development coordinator.



Statewide, the land trust helped property owners put more than 6,000 acres into protection last year, including a site in Greene County that's home to a rare and endangered plant and a tract of Black Belt Prairie in Houston County, Francis said.

The group now oversees about 32,000 acres of protected land in some 140 easements, Wilson said. They are in 32 of Georgia's 159 counties, including all of those around Athens.

With easements, landowners give up certain development rights, which can vary from property to property. The Wilson and Penny easement allows for just one house ever to be built on the property, Wilson said. However, qualifying easements can be eligible for federal and state income tax benefits and lower property taxes.

"We tell people, 'Don't do it for the tax advantage,'" Wilson said. "Do it for the preservation value." ■

— Story and photo originally published in the Athens Banner-Herald. This article has been edited for clarity and space. —

A Unique Blackland Prairie Protected

Globally Rare Habitat is One of Just a Few in Georgia

By Laura Hall, Land Steward

Conservationists and landowners Russell Bennett and Carlton Walstad have established conservation easements preserving some important habitats for Georgia.

A total of 1,200 acres is located in Houston County, near Perry, and includes both chalk woodlands and rare Blackland Prairie.

Blackland Prairies, also known as Black Belt Prairies, are sometimes called “gumbo flats,” due to the sticky consistency of the limestone-rich clay when it’s wet. The prairie hosts hundreds of native grasses and showy wildflower species.

Created by a combination of seashells left behind when ancient seas ebbed and frequent fires, Blackland Prairies are found along a shoreline that once curved from middle Georgia through northern Alabama. Unfortunately, in many areas, these grasslands have been destroyed by agriculture and by efforts to suppress fires, which results in less fire-tolerant plants.

According to Tom Patrick, a botanist with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Blackland Prairies are a globally rare habitat and are found in only a few locations in Georgia, including the Atlantic coastal plains and the red uplands of Houston County. Examples open to the public are found in the Ocmulgee and Oaky Woods Wildlife Management Areas (WMA), owned by the state near Kathleen, Georgia. The wildflowers typically peak in July.

Patrick has identified several species of conservation concern on the property, including Southeastern Bold Goldenrod (*Solidago rigida*), which has previously only been found in northwest Georgia.

Patrick also has found Boykin’s milkwort (*Polygala boykinii*), and Dakota vervain (*Glandularia bipinnatifida*) on the properties. These plants, which are considered rare in Georgia, have been added to the Georgia Rare Natural Element database.

The landowners are planning to continue prescribed fire as part of the future management of the prairies.

While protecting Blackland Prairie is important, the “associated mesic chalk slope” forests and bottomlands found near these areas are also of “significant conservation concern,” according to Kristina Sorensen, a biologist who completed the documentation of the natural resources on the properties.

“These woodlands have a slightly different composition than typical mesic and bottomland hardwood forest due to the alkaline nature of the soils,” Sorensen says. “Typical overstory species include chinkapin oak, Shumard oak, white ash and redbud with dwarf palmetto in the understory. And in the bottomland green ash, Florida maple, sugarberry, laurel oak and swamp chestnut oak. There is often no midstory and the understory is dominated by dwarf palmetto, river cane, numerous ferns, vines and large expanses of Cherokee sedge (*Carex cherokeensis*).”

In addition to the Blackland Prairie easements, Bennett and Walstad have also preserved 100 acres of greenspace that is contiguous to Hard Labor Creek State Park in Morgan County.

This property contains mesic and bottomland hardwood forests along Rocky Creek, which flows into the park and adjoins another 900 acres that the landowners preserved in 2016. ■



Christopher “Crittter” Broadnax



John Gwaltney

▲▲ **Piedmont Azalea (*Rhododendron canescens*):** Blooming alongside Rocky Creek, this showy flower was photographed on protected land contiguous to Hard Labor Creek State Park. Taken by a landowner, ORLT is always delighted to receive photos from the field. Email your shots to carla@oconeeriverlandtrust.org for a chance to be published. For a chance to visit this scenic property, and the Blackland Prairie, turn to page 8.

▲ **Dakota Vervain:** (*Glandularia bipinnatifida*)

► **Boykin’s Milkwort:** (*Polygala boykinii*)



John Gwaltney



Welcome Karen Middendorf: ORLT's Newest Board Member

By Carla Francis, Outreach and Development Coordinator

Having recently returned from a wolf tour of Yellowstone National Park, Karen Middendorf sat down for an interview. Enthusiastic descriptions of wolves, elk, and moose followed. “She’s one of us,” I quickly gathered.

Middendorf, who joined the ORLT board in February, has been

involved in the Athens community for many years. She is the founder of Firehall 4 Animal Hospital, a 10-year member of the Athens-Clarke County Planning Commission, and a founding member of the Piedmont Gardeners.

A resident of Clarke County for nearly 40 years, she originally hails from Huntingburg, Indiana. A handful of years after earning her undergraduate degree from DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana, and her Doctor of Veterinary Medicine from Purdue University, she and her late husband, Wayne, moved to Athens. There they raised 4 children on their horse farm in northwestern Clarke County.

In 2016, Middendorf sold Firehall 4 Animal Hospital, where she still works part time as a veterinarian. She now spends more time with family, gardening, quilting, and hiking in the mountains.

Middendorf credits her father, a two-time board member of the Nature Conservancy, for her appreciation of the natural world. She fondly recalls visiting family forestry land with him, where she learned in person the positive impacts timber stand improvements can have on forests.

Middendorf is well-equipped to serve on a board that works to protect a variety of landscapes, from forests to farms.

Welcome to ORLT, Karen! ■

Walk Cook Steps Down From Board

With 24 years of dedicated service under his belt, Founding Board Member Walt Cook has stepped down from ORLT’s board of directors. Never one to fully retire, Walt continues to volunteer his time monitoring conserved properties, serving on ORLT’s Tallassee Committee, and attending ORLT events.

Since the land trust’s founding in 1993, Walt has been an integral part of the organization, especially through his field service: locating property boundaries with a map and compass, regardless of the briars, hammering hundreds of boundary signs to trees in remote areas, visiting county courthouses near and far to obtain plats, and flagging foot trails for landowners. According to Steffney Thompson, ORLT Executive Director, “Back when it was just me on staff, Walt was absolutely essential to the land trust’s work. In addition to doing all our field



Dan Crescenzo

work from baselines to monitoring, Walt used to come with me to meet landowners, and reassure them that ORLT was an organization they could rely on. Walt also taught me how to read a topo map and find my way on a property. I and the land trust would have been lost without him!”

His most memorable contribution is, however, being the first landowner to protect property with a conservation easement through ORLT. “I wanted ORLT to do something important,” Cook explained. This signal of confidence and trust, from a respected name, gave others confidence to protect their land with ORLT.

While Walt continues dedicating his time to a greener and more accessible natural world, his presence will be missed on the ORLT board. Happy trails, Walt! (CF) ■



Dan Crescenzo

Many thanks to the 6 folks from Athens-based Tuckston Methodist Church, who volunteered at Beech Haven Preserve on April 21st. The hard-working volunteers removed 5 large bags of bottles, cans, old baseballs, and other odds and ends, and hauled an impressive 16 tires off the property. They even hauled the trash to the dump at the end of the clean-up. Beech Haven is a 100+ acre protected area in an urbanized area of Athens, and volunteer efforts are helping to prepare it for its future use as a public preserve. It is owned by ORLT and Athens-Clarke County.

Laura Hall



Landowner Jane Bath, Stewardship Coordinator Dan Crescenzo, and Eleanor Walker tour the Bath Conservation easement in April. Nearly 40 hikers, including a handful of energetic kids, explored the property and ate a picnic lunch overlooking the Apalachee River. The Bath family placed over 250 acres of their land into a conservation easement in 2002.

Beech Haven Birding: In partnership with the Oconee Rivers Audubon Society, ORLT hosted a bird walk during peak spring migration. The walk began on land trust owned land, meandered through the former Rowland family summer retreat, and ended up at the Middle Oconee River. Fifty-one species were identified, including Wood Thrush, Blackburnian Warbler, and Indigo Bunting. To see the full species list, visit the ORLT blog at www.oconeeriverlandtrust.org.



Bookshelf needed: We're running out of space to store our project notebooks. If you have a standard 6' tall bookshelf, 30" wide, with about 12" deep shelves that you can part with, we'd love to take it off your hands! Email carla@oconeeriverlandtrust.org if you have a shelf.



Note: Each white notebook represents a protected property. From a teeny urban oasis in Athens, to a 1,000 acre tract in South Georgia. Ordinary looking at first glance, these bookshelves hold extraordinary documents.

Hats for Sale: Stay cool this summer while showing the world that you support ORLT. Stop by the office or call to purchase. Limited supply, \$20/hat. (706-552-3138)



NEVER MISS a hike, bird walk, or scenic photo by signing up for ORLT's monthly eNewsletter. Visit www.oconeeriverlandtrust.org and scroll down to the "Sign Up For eNews" to enter your email address.

Walker Property Birding: For the second year in a row, ORLT partnered with the Ocmulgee Audubon Society to host a bird walk in Macon. "Big John" Walker, who protected 800+ acres with a conservation easement in 2016, led birders around his property's lakes, wetlands, and down to the Ocmulgee River. Notable bird sightings included Yellow Warbler (pictured), Bobolink, and Cape May Warbler. A total of 62 species were identified. To see the full species list, visit the ORLT blog at www.oconeeriverlandtrust.org. ORLT enjoyed birding with OAS and looks forward to future partnerships!



Anne Armstrong

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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. Our tax identification number is 58-2108824.



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.”

Opt Outside with ORLT

Summer 2018, Houston, Co., Date TBD – Blackland Prairie Hike:

Join botanical experts for an opportunity to see one of the state’s few remaining Blackland Prairies. Privately owned, this is a unique opportunity. Learn more about this Globally Rare Habitat on Page 4.

September 12-13, Oxford GA – Granite Outcrops Tour with OLLI:

Highlights include visiting two pristine granite outcrops, rolling farmland, and a chance to visit land that is normally closed to the public. Sept. 12th is a classroom presentation to educate participants on what they will see the following day. Registration at olli.uga.edu

October 2018, Date & Location TBD – ORLT’s 25th Birthday

Celebration: *The land trust is turning 25 this year! Stay tuned for more information on the Birthday Celebration.*

November 22, 10am-noon, Rutledge, GA – Rocky Creek Ramble:

Ramble alongside Rocky Creek through beautiful hardwood forest. This property is contiguous with 5,800 acre Hard Labor Creek State Park.

December 1, 2pm-4pm, Greensboro, GA – Hike and Happy Hour

on a Historic Farm: *Visit a historic farm, which was protected by a conservation easement in 2017. Expect scenic pastures, hardwood forests, beaver swamps and good company. The hike will be followed by a happy hour.*

More information at www.oconeeriverlandtrust.org. Stay up-to-date on events by signing up for ORLT’s monthly eNews. Sign-up on the homepage of ORLT’s website.

► Hikers on the Mathis easement, a 650-acre protected property in Jackson County, with 2 miles of riverfront property on the North Oconee River.

▼ Hikers at the Bath property, a 250-acre protected property in Oconee County.



Kathy Parker



Laura Hall