Oconee River Land Trust news

Protecting conservation land since 1993 *Spring 2021*

Kay and Larry Hess – Protecting Nature in North Georgia

By Larry Dendy

Larry and Kay Hess stand on a sloping hillside gazing quietly at the surrounding early-April landscape. Tiny green leaves sprouting from giant oak and hickory trees flutter in the air, accented by colorful blooms of dogwoods and redbuds. The forest floor is emerald-speckled with emerging ferns, trilliums, mayapple and Jack-in-the-Pulpit.

In the distance the Middle Fork of the Broad River flows gently along, its muddy banks bordered by river cane and imprinted with tracks of deer, coyote and raccoon. The bright trill of sparrows, Carolina Chickadees, Northern Cardinals and Blue Jays breaks the stillness, punctuated by the occasional squawk of a Pileated Woodpecker.

"When I began acquiring this property I thought about maintaining its natural wild charm for posterity and I remembered The Tree That Owns Itself in Athens," says Larry, who lived in Athens as a teenager. "Kay and I believe donating this conservation easement has fulfilled our desire to protect the property and we believe ORLT will be good stewards of the land."

Larry and Kay have enjoyed their woodland retreat in the uplands of Banks County, GA, for more than a quarter of a century. And they intend that it will remain as nature created it—isolated, wild and unspoiled by human activity. Last year they ensured their vision by placing 205 acres of the property in a conservation easement with the Oconee River Land Trust.

The land, just a few miles from the town of Baldwin, was farmed in the 19th and early 20th centuries and then timbered. But it's been mostly idle for several decades, allowing the return of native trees, shrubbery, flowers and grasses, and wildlife.

With elevations ranging from 700 to 1,100 feet, the land harbors a wide range of ecological features including high priority upland mesic hardwood, oak-hickory-pine and natural pine forests. Upheavals of ancient metamorphic rocks pock the landscape.

Nancy Town Creek flows 485 feet along the northwestern border into the Middle Fork of the Broad, which continues another four-tenths of a mile through a bottomland hardwood forest of sycamore, beech, red maple and American hop-hornbeam. Numerous streams cut through the property, protected by 200-foot riparian buffers that help filter pollutants from surface.

Some streams pour over large boulders, creating sparkling waterfalls. One stream flows through a freshwater marsh partially created by beaver dams. The streams are in the Broad River Watershed, parts of which DNR has designated as high priority.

While Larry and Kay hold legal title to this land, they say it doesn't really belong to them. "We don't own all this," Kay says, "we just take care of it." The Hesses' conservation easement ensures the land will never be developed but allows some leeway in how they can use the property.

Rocky streambed with mountain laurels (Kalmia latifolia)

Landowners Larry and Kay Hess

Larry, a retired Atlanta architect, bought the first 40 acres of the tract in 1975 and gradually added more over the years. Kay, a retired pharmacist, and Larry met in 1984 and 10 years later they married on the property. Along with their children, other family and friends, they spent many weekends rambling over the land, playing in the streams and

. . . continued on page 7

Upcoming Hikes

Orange Twin Members Hike
(102 acre CE) – Clarke County
June

Apalachee River Members Hike
(809 acre CE) – Walton County
September

Tallassee Members Monitor
(304 acres CE) – Clarke County
November

For more information, see ORLT's website

DIRECTOR'S UPDATE

Earth Day is every day at the land trust. I remember my first Earth Day, April 22, 1970. My family lived in White Pine, a small town in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, not far from Lake Superior. For the first time ever, I went door to door, collecting newspapers and old magazines to recycle, and accepting donations in a coffee can. (I can see now that my life's path was set in elementary school!) One of the best parts of my current version of wagon pulling/donation collecting is visiting each year's new conservation projects, and seeing firsthand the beauty found on each property and in each landowner's story. Each year, I am reminded that our work relies on the help and support of amazing landowners, members, supporters and volunteers who are generous with their time, patience, and treasure. In the midst of a challenging 2020, ORLT worked with 10 new conservation landowners to protect over 2,000 acres of natural and planted pine forest, farms and wetlands. In total, ORLT now holds easements protecting over 42,600 acres in Georgia, ranging from Gordon County in the north to Chatham County in the southeast, as well as an easement just east of Augusta in South Carolina. We are active in 47 different counties, and 9 different watersheds. It feels good to know that our work is making a lasting difference on our patch of earth. ■

—Steffney Thompson
Executive Director

Mack Duncan named to board

ORLT welcomed Mack Duncan to the Board of Directors in April.

Mack, a retired exploration geologist, brings a wealth of knowledge about Georgia's natural communities to the board. He grew up on a 44-acre property in rural Clarke County and joined his parents, the botanists Wilbur and Marion Duncan, on numerous field trips.

A graduate of the University of Georgia, Mack served in the U.S. Navy during the Vietnam Era before earning a doctorate in geology from Indiana University. He worked in private industry, retiring in 2007 as productivity manager with the J.M. Huber Corp., and subsequently served as a consultant in gold exploration in Peru, kaolin exploration in Brazil and other mineral exploration work in the United States and Canada.

Mack served on the Sandy Creek Nature Center board and is a member of the Oconee River Greenways Commission. He spends his time hiking, reading, working out at the gym and caring for his family's 44-acre Athens property with a focus on native plants in a variety of habitats. ■

Recent ORLT Hikes and Events

This Spring, ORLT led 3 carefully socially distant events. It felt good to get outside and explore.

In March, as part of UGA's IMPACT's Weekend Service Trip program, 6 UGA students chose to help remove invasive species from the 102-acre Orange Twin conservation easement in Athens-Clarke County, and got to see a little of what makes this property special. They worked hard restoring the fern glades in the bottomland habitat along Noketchee Creek, and we really appreciated their help.

In mid-April, ORLT held a wildflower walk on the 141-acre Boulder Springs Conservation easement in Oconee County. Residents of the Boulder Springs neighborhood strolled through the mesic hardwood forests near Robinson Creek, learning to recognize wildflowers such as Catesby's trillium (*Trillium catesbaei*), bloodroot (Sanguinaria canadensis), and smooth Solomon's seal (*Polygonatum biflorum*), as well as native shrubs like American hazelnut (*Corylus americana*) and American fringetree (Chionanthus virginicus).

On the first of May, ORLT hosted a leisurely bird walk on the 820-acre Walker easement along the Ocmulgee River in Bibb County. Formerly mined for clay to make bricks, the mined areas on the easement have filled with water and re-vegetated, providing excellent habitat for migratory bird species, as well as year-round residents.

"Meet the Beavers"

By Daniel Crescenzo

Beaver pond with beaver lodge in the distance (on easement in Oglethorpe County)

Opinions about beavers vary widely. For many people the thought of beavers conjures up images of cute, animated animals with flat tails and big teeth. Others view them as pests that destroy trees and flood agricultural fields and forestry land or as integral parts of the ecosystem, promoting duck, deer, and turkey habitats. So what are beavers really, then? Pests or integral parts of the ecosystem?

The North American beaver – *Castor canadensis* – is a nocturnal, medium-sized mammal, typically weighing between 24 and 71 pounds, found in and along streams, rivers, ponds, lakes, and wetlands throughout the United States, with the exception of peninsular Florida and parts of the Southwest. Beavers may be relatively common today, but in the 1800s and early 1900s, they were hunted to near extinction for their pelts, which were used for hats and clothing. They eat a variety of plant matter, including twigs, leaves, inner bark, and roots of trees and shrubs. Beavers sometimes create lodges in open water – homes made of branches where they rear their young – but more commonly in the Georgia Piedmont, they dig burrows and make dens in the banks of rivers and streams. Beavers are a prominent species on many of ORLT's easements, including a 2020 618-acre conservation easement in Washington County, preserving several beaver wetlands.

Importantly, beavers are expert ecosystem engineers. They use their large incisors, which never stop growing, to access food and building materials for dams, which they construct in order to create their preferred habitat -- open water. Beavers' habit of girdling or cutting down trees and shrubs, and of creating ponds along streams, is largely responsible for their bad reputation. But it is also what makes them especially valuable members of the ecosystems they inhabit: Beavers sustain the health and function of riparian ecosystems by creating a mosaic of habitats in which a greater diversity of species can thrive than would otherwise be present.

Some landowners worry about the effects beavers might have on the health of their trees. However, beavers only typically fell or damage trees near streams or rivers, where Best Management Practices (BMPs) already recommend restricting timbering, and in land with slopes above streams, flooded areas are typically confined close to the stream channel. ORLT protects streams with wider no-disturbance areas called riparian buffers, which are usually wide enough to encompass any land flooded by beavers. True, beavers can be a nuisance when they block culverts with branches or flood access points to different parts of one's property, or flood agricultural land. When beavers engage in these sorts of activities, landowners have reason to want to remove beavers from the area. These challenges, however, should be weighed against the numerous benefits of having beavers on one's land.

By flooding streams in different places to different depths at different times, and by clearing some areas along the ponds they create, beavers engineer spaces for emergent and native shoreline grasses and herbs to grow. This vegetation provides excellent food and cover for ducks and other aquatic animal species. Beavers' habit of clearing or flooding new areas and leaving the old behind also establishes many stages of successional habitat along streams, which benefits deer and wild turkey, as well as nongame species. Moreover, abandoned beaver ponds grow into beaver meadows, which, as a result of having been previously flooded, are superior to the kinds of habitat that might be created by simply clearing a patch of forest and letting it grow back up: According to DNR wildlife biologist JT Pynne, "beaver meadows are extremely rich in nitrogen leading to high productivity of herbaceous and palatable species that benefit the spectrum from large mammals to threatened butterflies."

From both an ecological and a game management perspective, beavers are an asset on the land, rather than a liability, and their impact on forestry is usually negligible. So the next time you see some trees that have been gnawed on by a beaver, or a streamside forest with trees that are slowly being submerged by beavers, remember that the beavers are benefiting the ecosystem and the species that inhabit it. ■

A Snapshot of ORLT's 2020 Projects

Here are some highlights from 2020's conservation easement projects:

Since 1993, we've protected

42,600

TOTAL ACRES

ORLT PROTECTED

2,037

NEW ACRES

IN 2020

CURRENTLY

192 MILES

of rivers & streams

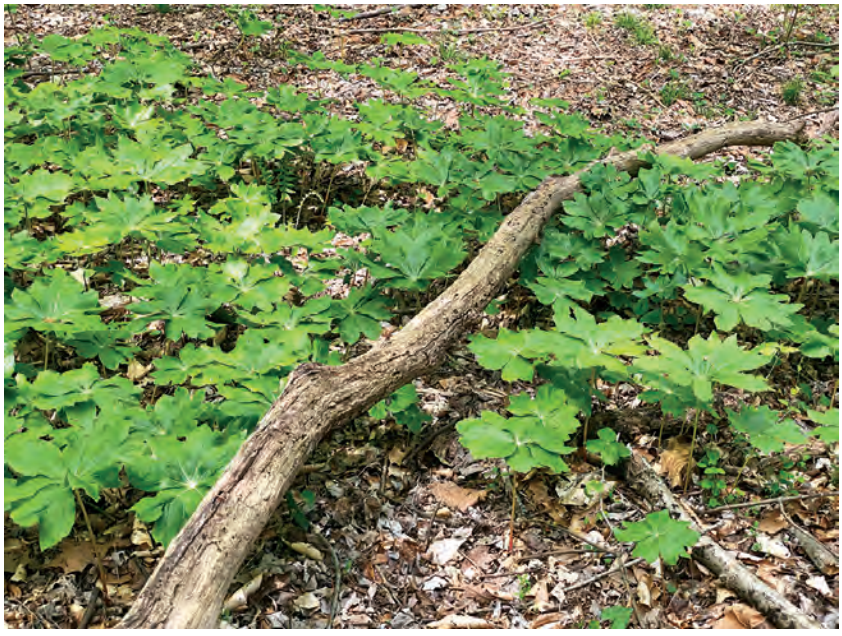
are permanently protected by ORLT

ORLT PROTECTED

10

new properties

IN 2020



Notes from the Field

By Laura Hall

Friends came together to preserve this land along the Middle Oconee River. The sandy river bluffs are full of native grasses and spring wildflowers including this Lyre leaf sage (*Salvia lyrata*), a perennial herb that grows wild across much of the eastern U.S.

Along the edge of the river, where a small clear stream flows into the river, are hundreds of Tiger Swallowtail butterflies 'puddling' – likely attracted by salt and other nutrients that have accumulated in a small pile of pebbles. Tiger Swallowtail caterpillars feed on tulip poplar and wild cherry, common species in the mesic forests found on the property.

In the understory of the oak hickory beech forest there are large expanses of longleaf woodoats (*Chasmanthium sessiliflorum*), a short native grass, which attracts quail, turkey and deer, who feed on the numerous seeds this plant produces. Several species of blueberries are growing as well in the understory of this forest. Darrell Garner, one of the landowners, when out with his family walking the land, has seen dozens of wild turkey gathering with groups of deer in these areas.

This 105-acre land was placed into a conservation easement last year and has so many diverse and intact habitats, while only being 20 miles from Athens and Interstate 85. The landowners plan to preserve an adjacent 129-acre property along the river this year. Across the river is ORLT's first conservation easement, donated by Walt Cook, preserving a beautiful mesic forest. ■

Land along the Middle Oconee River conserved last year by ORLT.

Lyre leaf sage (Salvia lyrata)

Eastern Swallowtail butterflies.

The Oconee River Watershed Partnership – Working to Protect Drinking Water

By Cassidy Lord, Partnership Coordinator

The location of the University of Georgia in Athens was chosen because of its easy access to large quantities of clean water. Located just up the hill from the North Oconee River, the original 633-acre site boasted a cool spring that produced over one thousand gallons of water each day. A number of other nearby springs and streams readily supplied the growing academic and residential populations.

But as the area grew, the quality and quantity of these springs and streams were degraded by development. Today, Athens' drinking water comes from the North Oconee River and Bear Creek Reservoir. In fact, Bear Creek Reservoir supplies water to Athens-Clarke, Oconee, Jackson and Barrow counties. Around ninety-five percent of all drinking water in the area comes from surface water sources such as rivers, lakes and streams.

But just like before, as the area grows, the quality and quantity of the surface water used for drinking water is declining. The US Forest Service estimates that 35-40% of Athens drinking water comes directly from upstream forests – forests which positively contribute to both water quality and quantity. An analysis of conservation potential in the Upper Oconee watershed projects 20,000 acres of these water-producing forests will be lost in the next twenty years.

With the added complexity of the unknown impacts of climate change and development on our watershed's forests, it's time to act now to protect our drinking water into the future.

The Oconee River Watershed Partnership aims to secure drinking water resiliency for Athens and the Oconee River watershed through long-term forestland conservation and restoration. Managing forests as a sustainable resource protects the processes that filter and store the rainwater that eventually becomes drinking water. By working with conservation organizations, like the Oconee River Land Trust, drinking water providers, and the forestry sector, the Partnership is creating a collaborative framework to generate sustained funding for private landowner outreach, conservation easement acquisition and implementation of sustainable forestry practices.

Mike Lord

North Oconee River.

To learn more about the Oconee River Watershed Partnership, visit their website at oconeeriverpartnership.com. ■

Kay and Larry Hess *continued from page 1*

cooling off in the summer under a waterfall that tumbles off a 50-foot rock ledge.

In the late 1990s, Larry and Kay moved to the property. Their first dwelling was a structure created by anchoring two refrigerated truck trailers on concrete slabs and connecting them with a metal roof. About 60 percent of the windows and doors are recycled as is the attic insulation. With many improvements and upgrades, the structure is now a creative space for artists, sculptors or writers.

Later they built their current residence, a stunning contemporary earth-bermed house that Larry designed. Perched on a knoll, the house has a soaring 22-foot-high ceiling above a spacious main room featuring a fountain, giant plantings and original art work. The gable siding and eaves are of cypress with stones from the property at all of the entry openings.

Among the many pleasures of living on the property for Larry and Kay are enjoying the abundant wildlife. Wild turkeys forage beneath their bird feeders and sometimes peck at their windows. They once saw a bobcat peeping through the glass in a door. In addition to common North Georgia birds, migrant birds visit the property including White-eyed Vireo, Summer Tanager and Hooded and Pine Warblers.

The Hesses are converting a two-room cabin on the property into a vacation getaway. Built around 1890 by a farmer who reportedly traded 100 twists of tobacco for lumber to build the floors and walls, the cabin is where they stayed when they first began coming to the property. They're enlarging the structure and plan to rent it on a weekly basis. They are also allowed to build two single-family residences that could be used for rental or lodging for workers. "This will not only enable us to support and maintain the property but also share with others the experience of living close to the natural world," Larry says.

Larry and Kay know they could have made a lot of money by selling their property instead of preserving it. But as Larry says, "It's never been about the money. It's always been about the land."

And while they love the land and wish they would never have to leave it, they know that eventually they'll have to sell. When that time comes, they will leave with the comforting knowledge that the hillsides and lowlands, the dense forests and quiet streams, the Mountain Laurel, Piedmont Azalea and Running Cedar, the fish, snakes, box turtles and possum—everything they treasure about this place--will always be there.

"We've been blessed to live here for 25 years and these woods will always be home to us," Kay says. "Our hope and dream is that it will remain intact as nature dictates. We want these woods to provide the same sense of inspiration to whoever is here, instilling a desire to preserve and hold special our natural world." ■

(See the full article and more photos at oconeeriverlandtrust.org)

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."

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:

- ☐ Student ($30)
- ☐ Land Steward ($50)
- ☐ Family ($100)
- ☐ Land Protector ($150)
- ☐ Land Conservator ($500)
- ☐ Trustee of the Land ($1,000+)

Thank you for your support!

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

Planning for the future? If you are interested in Legacy Giving, contact **Steffney Thompson** at **706-552-3138** or **steffney@oconeeriverlandtrust.org.**