

Georgia WILD Newsletter: July 2009

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Discover the 'secret' of Charlie Elliot Wildlife Center

Dubbed by some the best-kept secret in Georgia, Charlie Elliott Wildlife Center is a 6,400-acre wildlife management area, public fishing area and wildlife education center near Mansfield. The area, named for a noted outdoors journalist and the first director of Georgia's parks and wildlife divisions, also features a conference center, lodge, banquet hall and visitors center with a museum.

Only a hour-and-a-half drive from 60 percent of the states population, the center is easily accessible for most Georgia residents. More than 21,000 visited last year. The center is open year-round and owned and operated by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources' Wildlife Resources Division.

Walter Lane, a program manager with Wildlife Resources' Nongame Conservation Section, heads up the wildlife center. Lane said that education programs at Charlie Elliott are an excellent way for children, teens and adults to connect with nature.

"It is interesting that we are becoming more connected as a society through electronic media and yet many indicators suggest that children and adults are becoming less connected to nature," he said. "We reach over 20,000 students, teachers and adults each year through our onsite education programs and our outreach programs."

Several teacher workshops are held at the center throughout the year, in addition to summer camps and wildlife education programs for all ages. In July, the Forestry for Education teacher workshop welcomed 30 educators from across Georgia in a weeklong opportunity to learn about sustainable forestry and conservation methods in the timber industry.

"The feedback that we are getting from our students, teachers, campers and parents indicates that we are providing a valuable learning experience," Lane said. "For example, the fathers of two of our teen campers asked me what had we done to their kids because all they wanted to do after they came back from camp was spend time outside.

"... I am proud to work with such talented and dedicated educators and it is exciting to me when I hear about the great job that they do!"

Charlie Elliott Wildlife Center is open 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. For more information call (770) 784-3059 or visit www.georgiawildlife.com and click on the Education and Regional Education Centers tabs.

The center, which encompasses Clybel Wildlife Management and Marben Public Fishing areas, offers opportunities for activities such as fishing, biking, birdwatching, hiking, hunting, archery,

shooting, primitive camping and horseback riding. Regulations and hours apply. Check with the center or at www.georgiawildlife.com for details.

Interns' diary: High water, heat, mud mark hunt for bats

Bat conservation interns Laci Coleman and Michael Blubaugh were hard at work in late May and June, visiting bat habitat from Fort Stewart to Fort Gordon. Wildlife biologist Trina Morris of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources' Nongame Conservation Section said their experiences included teaming with University of Georgia graduate student Jay Scott to complete Southeastern myotis emergence counts at southwest Georgia caves and finding alligators and plenty of mosquitoes but no bats at Bond Swamp National Wildlife Refuge during the hottest weather so far this summer.

The fieldwork is helping document where Rafinesque's big-eared bats and Southeastern myotis are found in Georgia. Both are high-priority species in the State Wildlife Action Plan.

Here are more glimpses from a diary kept by Laci:

Week 1: May 18-22

Monday morning we met in the office to go over basic rules, fill out paperwork and generally get acquainted with the position and each other. Tuesday morning we headed out early. Matt Clement and Michael went straight to Moody Forest Natural Area while Trina and I drove to Albany to pick up our state truck before heading to Moody to meet the guys. Monday night we saw our first Rafinesque's big-eared bat in an abandoned house on the property. Tuesday through Friday we went out into swamps where Matt had previously found bats so we could get the hang of things. We found two new roosts: one with a Raf and a Southeastern myotis, and another with a maternity colony of about a dozen Rafs.

Week 2: May 25-29

... We went to Phinizy Swamp WMA to check a slough Wednesday. We did not find any roosts, but we believe the reason for this is the high water levels and our inability to check a large number of trees. On Thursday, we met with the owner of a private easement southeast of Yuchi WMA where we found plenty of habitat, but were once again unable check a large amount of the habitat due to high-water levels. We may try and return to this area later in the summer if water levels go down. We went back to Phinizy on Friday to check another large area. The high water got us again! Although we did not find any bats, we did find a decent amount of suitable habitat and were able to enjoy quite a bit of wildlife such as river otters, plenty of large gators and abundance of birds.

Week 3: June 1-5

This week we stayed at the Richmond Hill Fish Hatchery, which is by far one of the nicest places that we have been to. We shared the house with some fisheries interns living there for the summer. It was nice to meet nice new people who could show us around. ... Tuesday and Wednesday we worked on Fort Stewart. Two very helpful technicians were assigned to escort us around the base and lead us to swamps and bridges. The mud in this area was by far the worst to walk through up to this point; all of the swamps we were able to search were extremely wet and soft. A lot of the best habitat was either underwater or on areas we were unable to access due to military training. Because of this, the technicians suggested that we return to the base some time after the first week of July in order to check more areas.

Although we were unable to find bats in the trees on Fort Stewart, we did find a large concrete bridge where over 100 bats were roosting with their young. We know for sure that some of these bats were Rafs, but we are not completely certain of other species. ...

Week 4: June 8-12

This week we stayed at Hannahatchee WMA and worked there and at Fort Benning and Standing Boy Creek Tract. We knew coming to this area that the habitat would be less than impressive, so we chose to focus a lot on bridges and old buildings if we could find them. Fort Benning had a lot of good-sized bridges for us to look at as well as some old buildings, an old chimneystack and several bat boxes. We didn't find any bats under any of the bridges, which is why we decided to look in other places. There are previous records of Southeastern myotis living on the base so we knew they must be roosting somewhere. Finally, on Wednesday, we found a bat box in a neighborhood on the military base that was a roost to about 15-20 Southeastern myotis bats.

Neither Standing Boy Creek nor Hannahatchee had any substantial swamp habitat so we spent minimal time in both places. ... Although the area this week was pretty disappointing, we are happy to have found a new roost and are excited about the upcoming weeks.

Weeks 5 and 6: June 16-June 24

We are working a strange schedule this week in order to participate in cave emergence counts on the weekend as well as complete our usual fieldwork. Tuesday we checked an area along the Alcovy River just a few miles from the office before heading down to Ocmulgee WMA for the remainder of the week. Although we did not find any new roosts, the swamps along the Alcovy had impressive habitat with medium-sized trees and a good number of hollows. ...

We worked in Bond Swamp on Thursday on our own, but on our way to a new place along the river we got our truck stuck in a muddy hole along a dirt road. We had to wait for a while to be pulled out, so we decided to spend the remainder of the afternoon cleaning up and going to town to buy food, bug spray and other supplies. ...

On Friday afternoon, we traveled to Albany to get keys to Flint River WMA and Mayhaw WMA to stay in for the remainder of the weekend and early next week. ... The habitat at Flint is very impressive despite what the color model suggested. We were surprised to find some of the biggest trees we have seen yet along the Flint River sloughs. Saturday night we helped Jay Scott with a cave emergence count at Chokee Creek near Albany. He taught us a method of counting bats under white light one minute out of every five minutes while videotaping the entire emergence under infrared lighting to estimate the number of bats that exit the cave overall versus the amount that exit under white light. Jay took us to Waterfall Cave and Climax Cave Sunday afternoon where we would do emergence counts on our own; Sunday night we performed another count of Chokee Creek Cave.

Monday afternoon we attempted to search Mayhaw WMA for decent habitat, but were disappointed by the overall lack of trees and young age of the few wet spots that we did find. We performed an emergence count of Climax Cave near Bainbridge on Monday night. It was an amazing experience to witness the emergence of thousands of Southeastern myotis bats at nightfall. We both agree that it was one of the coolest things we have ever done! ... Tuesday night was a bit of a disappointment because the bats in Waterfall Cave did not emerge as normal. There was some lightning and a bit of rain nearby, and although it did not rain at the cave, we believe that local conditions caused the bats to stay in the cave.

We packed up Wednesday morning and headed home. ... We were more than ready for a break!

Week 7: June 28-July 2

This week is also a bit of a strange week: We are working Sunday through Thursday morning to allow a long weekend for the upcoming holiday. Sunday afternoon we met at Yuchi WMA to check out some potential habitat we missed when we were in the area last time. Monday we were able to check a private easement along the Savannah River. ...

Tuesday morning, we finally got to check the area we came for Fort Gordon. Two wildlife biologists accompanied us, one a Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources graduate. They were both very enthusiastic and fun to work with. On our first day at Fort Gordon we found three roosts! We found a pip (an Eastern pipistrelle) under a bridge and a Raf under a different bridge. We also found a Raf in a historic army bunker site from the Vietnam time period. The swamp areas that we checked so far were not as impressive, but we were excited nonetheless to finally see some bats! We didn't find anything else the second day at Fort Gordon, but the week was overall exciting. Before now there were no records for this county. Success!

What's next: Trina says that while many sites visited so far have not yielded bats, Laci and Michael are learning the ups and downs of fieldwork and searching for rare species. Rafinesque's big-eared bats require mature bottomland hardwood habitat that is not easy to find in most parts of the state.

During July, the interns will search some of the areas that are expected to have better habitat. The weather has also changed and many of the floodplain forests such as those at Fort Stewart are drying out. This will hopefully make the search a little easier for late summer. Look for updates in the August Georgia Wild e-newsletter.