Georgia WILD Newsletter: June 2009

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At Grand Bay, learning about wildlife is, well, grand

The center, a joint venture by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources and the Coastal Plains Regional Education Service Agency, offers several education programs and field trip opportunities as well as accredited teacher training. Students can roam the half-mile boardwalk while learning about wetland ecology, wildlife and plant identification, air quality, and plant adaptations.

Neda Hon, the centers director and environmental education coordinator, said Grand Bay has always been a popular place. "Since the center's opening 12 years ago we have been booked solid, usually filling the years calendar within the first three days, Hon said. At one point we had a waiting list of 3,500 students.

What I really get excited about is that at least 80 percent of our students and teachers are repeat visitors. I am proud that these teachers keep coming back year after year because it means we are having a positive impact."

Approximately 6,000 students and teachers visit the center every year.

Hon also offered these observations:

Learning that sticks: "A way I know that the hands-on learning really sticks is that since I started this program I have had a few students grow up to become science teachers. That's a special feeling."

Sharing the knowledge: I was in a restaurant and ran into a mom who stopped to tell me a funny story. As a family, they were driving along and the son saw a gopher tortoise in the road. The mom stopped to move the tortoise from the road and the young boy insisted that he only be moved off the road but not away from his home because as a protected species he had learned on his field trip to Grand Bay how important it was to leave (the tortoise) in his habitat, and not to keep him as a pet or take him far away.

The mom was pretty impressed. At that point, I was, too."

The mission of Grand Bay Wetland Education Center is to teach students about natural processes and relationships between plants and animals. In doing so, the hope is students establish a positive connection with the natural world and their place in caring for the environment.

The center is 10 miles north of Valdosta on 8,700-acre Grand Bay Wildlife Management Area in Lowndes County. The center and WMA include part of the Grand Bay/Banks Lake ecosystem, second in size in Georgia only to the Okefenokee Swamp.

The center is open 8 a.m.-4 p.m. Monday-Friday and available to school groups by reservation only.
For more information, contact:
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245 North Robinson
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http://www.cpresa.org/GrandBay/grand_bay_wetlands.html

DNR interns start a summer of searching S. Ga. swamps for bats

By Trina Morris

Two new Georgia Department of Natural Resources interns, Laci Coleman and Michael Blubaugh, recently began their summer job: searching for bats in the swamps of Moody Forest Natural Area. Theyre on the hunt for roosting Rafinesques big-eared bats (*Corynorhinus rafinesquii*) and Southeastern myotis (*Myotis austroriparius*).

Both of these bats are considered high-priority species in the State Wildlife Action Plan and are under review by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The big-eared bat is already a Georgia-protected species and is considered rare. Both species are uncommon across their range and may someday receive federal protection if populations continue to decline.

Laci and Michael are part of a larger project done in cooperation with Bat Conservation International and many states across the Southeast. Bat Conservation International, or BCI, is leading efforts to develop a conservation plan for the Rafinesques big-eared bat and Southeastern myotis. Included are further surveys for each species across their range.

We have potential habitat for these species in Georgia but didn't have the time or money to complete the surveys, explained Trina Morris, a wildlife biologist with Georgia DNRs Nongame Conservation Section.

BCI provided funding for two interns to fill in the gaps in Georgia.

The interns will continue the work started by Matt Clement, a University of Georgia graduate student who developed survey methods for this species in Georgia over the last two years. Clement documented a few hundred roosts and nearly a thousand bats in a handful of DNR-managed lands. (*See Georgia Wild, January-February 2008 under the e-newsletters tab at www.georgiawildlife.com.*) Clement also helped train the interns during their first week of work at Moody Forest Natural Area in Appling County, one of the better spots in the state for these species.

Both Laci, a student at UGAs Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources, and Michael, a student at Ogeechee Technical College in Statesboro, will be fulfilling internship requirements for their wildlife degrees. Morris and Clement recently led them through the swamps of Moody Forest. The interns searched known roosts to learn how to find bats in the trees. They also checked out new areas, even discovering a new maternity colony and several other roost trees. The bats roost in large hollow trees, mostly tupelo and cypress, in bottomland hardwood swamps.

It takes a little practice learning how to use the spotlight and mirror technique, Morris said of using a mirror and reflected light to peer up into a hollow tree. But they picked it up very quickly and they were really excited when they found bats.

The team will spend the summer slogging through the swamps of South Georgia, looking for areas with trees old enough to provide good habitat for the bats. Most of the habitat for these species has been logged, and large, old trees are hard to find. The interns will have to fight the heat and cope with the elements, including snakes, alligators and biting insects.

But both are ready for the challenge and excited for the opportunity to gain experience through an internship with DNR. They will also be keeping a diary of their experiences in the field, and of course keeping track of how many bats they find.

The monthly DNR e-newsletter Georgia Wild will check in with Laci and Michael throughout the summer but also take a final look at what they learned and experienced in the September issue.

Trina Morris is a wildlife biologist with DNRs Nongame Conservation Section, part of the Wildlife Resources Division.

Identifying the ebony jewelwing

By Bill Dunson

A trick to learning names of new critters such as butterflies, dragonflies and damselflies is to concentrate on identifying a few common species first.

So the damselfly of the week for you to learn is the strikingly beautiful ebony jewelwing found throughout eastern North America. Not only is it common along small streams, it is also found in woods openings, it flies slowly and alights often, and it is distinctively colored. However, you need to know that the female and male look different, and the male's brilliant colors can vary. Both sexes have broad black wings but the female has white spots on the tips. The female's body is dark and the male is either a brilliant metallic blue or green. The male does not actually change color but can appear blue or green depending on the direction of the light and the angle of view.

In other words this is a structural color, a common but little appreciated phenomenon by which the prism-like surface of the body refracts light. There is no pigment present that imparts color. Another good example is the throat of the male ruby-throated hummingbird, which may appear as red or black.

Now why does this tiny insect male have such a gorgeous coloration? The most likely explanations are advertisement by the male to defend its territory, to attract a female and to ward off avian predators (assuming it is distasteful). The slow flight of the male and the showy nature of its black wings and metallic body certainly indicate that it must be protected from birds.

So keep an eye out for this amazing example of insect beauty and natural adaptation.

Bill Dunson is a retired professor of biology from Pennsylvania State University who grew up in Georgia. He now lives summers on a farm in southwestern Virginia and winters in Englewood, Fla.