

Georgia WILD Newsletter: March–April 2008

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DNR, Ga. Conservancy, ACCG team up for coastal conservation

ATLANTA, Ga. (Feb. 27, 2008) -- The Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR), the Georgia Conservancy and the Association County Commissioners of Georgia (ACCG) announced a joint effort in late February to conserve wildlife and natural habitats and promote sustainable development in the states fast-growing coastal region.

Representatives signed an agreement for coordination of the Coastal Georgia Land Conservation Initiative during the Board of Natural Resources monthly meeting. The three-year project, funded in part by a \$700,000 grant from the Robert W. Woodruff Foundation, will map critical natural areas in 11 coastal counties while also providing data, technology and training to help governments and residents in the region make sound land-use decisions.

"Growth on our coast is placing tremendous pressures on our natural resources," DNR Commissioner Noel Holcomb said. "Having this information is critical to making good decisions in the future, and we are pleased to team up with the Georgia Conservancy and the Association County Commissioners of Georgia on this extremely important project."

Growth is reshaping Georgia's coast. The population in the 11-county area is expected to double in the next 20 years, impacting natural habitats such as coastal beaches and dunes, rivers, salt marshes, freshwater wetlands and upland forests. These habitats support a remarkable diversity of wildlife, protect drinking water supplies, control pollution and underpin commercial fishing and recreational businesses including a \$1 billion-a-year nature-based economy. The southern coastal plain, which includes the target counties, has 187 plants, animals and habitats listed as a high conservation priority in the State Wildlife Action Plan.

But the stakes reach even beyond state lines. Georgia has one-third of the eastern seaboard's coastal marshlands and natural resources rated internationally significant, according to the Georgia Conservancy.

"Georgia is blessed with unique environmental riches along the coast," said Jim Stokes, president of the Georgia Conservancy. "Without careful planning, rapid growth and tourism activities are on a collision course with coastal drinking water supplies, habitats and public lands.

"Through our partnership with DNR and ACCG, we will be able to identify critical coastal lands, establish a regional land conservation network, promote sustainable development practices and organize grassroots efforts to engage citizens in land-use activities."

The Coastal Georgia Land Conservation Initiative will mesh planning for green and gray infrastructure: natural and built environments. Local leaders and communities, the level at which most development decisions are made in Georgia, will be equipped with tools such as region-specific GIS-based software designed to analyze conservation needs, development patterns and compatible land uses. Data from the project will be posted online. Partners will provide technical support, establish a region-wide conservation network and foster public outreach geared to sustainable growth.

The strategy dovetails with an ACCG land-use management project that emphasizes collaboration and marks the coast as a high-priority region.

"The Association County Commissioners of Georgia is proud to work on this important collaborative project with our partners from state government the Georgia Department of Natural Resources and an established environmental organization like the Georgia Conservancy, which strives to achieve a balance between necessary and desirable environmental protection and important and desirable economic development," ACCG Executive Director Jerry Griffin said.

"ACCG has spent the past two years concentrating on development of land-management initiatives throughout Georgia. Our coastal region is clearly in need of priority attention. This unique coastal conservation project will help us bring vitally important resources to this historic and treasured region."

As a first step, biologists with the DNR's Wildlife Resources Division are compiling a natural resources inventory of the coastal region, surveying habitats through aerial photographs, satellite images and fieldwork, and following up on reports of rare plant and animal species. The current focus is on state-owned Jekyll Island. That focus will soon spread, first to the six counties along the Atlantic Ocean Chatham, Bryan, Liberty, McIntosh, Glynn and Camden then to the more inland counties of Effingham, Long, Wayne, Brantley and Charlton.

When fully implemented, the Coastal Georgia Land Conservation Initiative will help sustain healthy coastal ecosystems and local economies by promoting growth patterns that are in harmony with the region's unique natural resources.

Partners at a glance

Association County Commissioners of Georgia

Formed in 1914 with 19 charter county members, today ACCG serves as the consensus building, training and legislative organization for all 159 county governments in the state. ACCG works to ensure that counties can provide the necessary leadership, services and programs to meet the health, safety and welfare needs of their citizens.

In the area of land management and environmental responsibility, ACCG has long provided its member counties with training, technical assistance and published materials incorporating CDs, DVDs, tool kits and manuals into a multi-media format. Statewide, ACCG works closely with many state departments, including the Georgia DNR as well as the Governors Office and the General Assembly, on land-management and environmental issues of importance to all Georgians.

Georgia Conservancy

Founded in 1967, the Georgia Conservancy (www.georgiaconservancy.org) collaborates, advocates and educates to protect Georgia's natural environment. Through its focus on clean air and water, land conservation, coastal protection, growth management, and education, the Conservancy works to develop solutions to protect Georgia's environment and promote the stewardship of the states vital natural resources.

As a statewide organization, the Georgia Conservancy has housed its coastal office in Savannah for more than 35 years to act on the most pressing coastal issues of the day. The Conservancy's current coastal initiatives include preserving coastal lands, protecting Jekyll and Cumberland islands, defending coastal protection laws, participating in the Savannah Harbor deepening debate and raising public awareness of coastal climate change and sea level rise.

Georgia Department of Natural Resources

The mission of the Georgia DNR (www.gadnr.org) is to sustain, enhance, protect and conserve Georgia's natural, historic and cultural resources. Two DNR divisions are participating in the project: Coastal Resources and Wildlife Resources.

Coastal Resources (<http://http://coastalgadnr.org>) has primary responsibility for managing marshes, beaches and marine fishery resources. Through the states Coastal Management Program, the CRD promotes sustainable development through technical aid to local governments, property owners, developers and the public, while also fulfilling other roles such as monitoring coastal water quality and managing activities associated with recreational and commercial fishery resources.

Wildlife Resources (www.georgiawildlife.org) regulates hunting, fishing and the operation of watercraft, protects nongame and endangered wildlife, and maintains public education and law enforcement programs to ensure conservation of natural resources. The divisions Nongame

Conservation Section works to conserve the states native diversity of wild animals, plants and natural habitats through education, research and management.

New Project WILD leader is a natural

SOCIAL CIRCLE, Ga. (March 6, 2008) -- Who's teaching Georgia's teachers how to go *wild* in the classroom? Mary Terry, of course the new Project WILD coordinator for Georgia's educators. After serving more than 14 years as an interpretive park ranger/naturalist for Davidson-Arabia Mountain Nature Preserve in Lithonia, Terry joined the Georgia Wildlife Resources Division in February, bringing to the states Project WILD program a wealth of knowledge, and most importantly, a contagious enthusiasm and love for Georgia's wildlife.

Project WILD is one of the most widely used conservation and environmental education programs among educators of students in kindergarten through high school throughout Georgia and the United States. The award-winning curriculum helps teachers and youth leaders teach a wide range of subjects such as math, science, social studies, language arts and expressive arts while also explaining the importance of the environment.

As Georgia's Project WILD coordinator, Terry plans and conducts training workshops statewide for educators and others interested in teaching children about wildlife. At the workshops, participants receive two activity guides consisting of more than 170 hands-on activities. Teachers become students, participating in exciting wildlife conservation activities that become valuable resources to take back to the classroom.

In 2006, Project WILD celebrated a milestone, having trained one million educators since its introduction in 1983. In Georgia, more than 20,000 educators have been trained. Using the Project WILD curriculum, these educators have provided environmental education instruction to more than 3 million students across the state, enabling the students to experience the outdoors and gain a deeper appreciation for wildlife and the need to conserve natural resources.

The Georgia Department of Education recognizes Project WILD workshops for Professional Learning Unit credits. Educators can learn more about Project WILD and view a list of upcoming workshops at the Georgia Wildlife Resources Divisions Web site, www.georgiawildlife.com. (Click on the link for education.)

For more information, contact Mary Terry at (770) 784-3059 or by e-mail at mary.terry@dnr.ga.gov.

Meet Mary Terry

What drives Project WILD's Mary Terry to share her knowledge about Georgia's wildlife? Heres a closer look.

Q: *What makes you love what you do?*

A: I have been teaching Project WILD since it began! When I first went to training, I thought, How cool is this! What a great way to inform kids and adults about wildlife management and habitats. This is something everyone needs to experience!

Q: *What began your in interest in nature? In education?*

A:: I was lucky to have grown up on a farm where I had access to hundreds of acres of land where I could experience the out of doors and nature. I loved every minute of being on the farm. Like every child, I (illegally) tried to raise the abandoned baby bird and the squealing baby squirrel without much success. My first job in the field was at an environmental education center. There, one of our tasks was to rescue and rehabilitate wildlife. I was hooked! I wanted to teach everyone about wildlife. From there, my interests just kept growing. I had always loved wildlife, but now I had a passion to teach!

Q: *What have these many years of experience shown you about teaching teachers?*

A: Teachers love Project WILD! It gives them activities and lesson plans that are fun and educational for the students. The teacher trainings are so much fun. One of the main things I realized about teachers was something that I find very dear to my heart resources, resources, resources. They love posters, lesson plans and freebies. And so do I!

Q: *Why have you stuck with this field?*

A: Working with kids, adults, teachers and wildlife professionals who love to explore habitats is a great job! I cannot imagine not working in this field. I get to be outdoors, meet interesting people, see great sites, experience wildlife closely and work in the greatest of environments.

Tax checkoff an easy way to support Georgia wildlife

SOCIAL CIRCLE, Ga. (March 6, 2008) -- As Georgians file their annual income tax forms, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources Wildlife Resources Division wants to remind residents they can support wildlife at tax time each year. The State Income Tax Checkoff provides a hassle-free option for donating to the Wildlife Conservation Fund. Proceeds from this initiative are used to fund critical wildlife conservation projects statewide.

"The income tax checkoff is an easy way to donate to wildlife conservation," said Mike Harris, Nongame Conservation Section chief for the Wildlife Resources Division. "Donations made to the Nongame Conservation Section are especially important because the section receives no state appropriations for its numerous conservation projects each year."

By filling in any amount more than \$1 on line 26 of the long form (Form 500) or line 10 of the short form (Form 500EZ), citizens can make a direct donation to support nongame species management and conservation in Georgia. For those receiving a refund, the donation can be deducted from the amount of the refund. For those who owe taxes, the donation can be added to the payment.

The income tax checkoff and the wildlife license plates depicting a bald eagle or hummingbird are important funding sources for conservation projects benefiting peregrine falcons, manatees, frogs, salamanders, sea turtles, songbirds, and other native wildlife and plants. Funds raised from the checkoff and wildlife tags also help acquire critical habitat and further conservation, recreation and education projects throughout the state.

For more information on projects funded with checkoff and wildlife tag dollars, visit www.georgiawildlife.com or contact Nongame Conservation offices in Social Circle (770-761-3035), Forsyth (478-994-1438) or Brunswick (912-264-7218). Through support of both the checkoff and nongame wildlife plates, Georgians can help give wildlife a chance.

Nature trail in works at Laurens fishing area

A nature trail at Hugh M. Gillis Public Fishing Area (PFA) is scheduled to open this summer. The 3.75-mile trail, which follows an abandoned railway bed that runs through the northern end of the PFA, is designed to emphasize natural habitats and habitat/wildlife relationships. The walk winds through forested wetlands, planted pines, longleaf pine and scrub oak wiregrass, stands of upland pine and mixed hardwoods, Altamaha grit outcroppings, and along the banks of Lake Hugh Gillis.

There are rest areas and a wooden observation deck overlooking a natural wetland and creek bed. The trail also features angler access to Gillis Lake.

Bryant Bowen, a fisheries biologist with the Georgia Wildlife Resources Division, described the walkway as a unique opportunity to get away.

The trail was built using state watchable wildlife grant funds.

Dogs on leash are allowed. So are bicyclists, as long as they do not damage the trail or disturb others, Bowen said.

Study seen as key to shad, locks in southwest Georgia

BAINBRIDGE (March 6, 2008) -- The Alabama shad, once abundant enough to support commercial fisheries in Alabama, Kentucky, Indiana and Iowa, is now considered rare throughout much of its former range and listed as a species of concern by NOAA National Marine Fisheries.

State-listed in Georgia as threatened, this species now occurs only in the northern Gulf of Mexico and contributing coastal rivers, with the largest population found below Jim Woodruff Lock and Dam in the Apalachicola River.

In an effort to better understand how Woodruff Dam impacts the spawning success of Alabama shad, the Georgia Wildlife Resources Divisions Fisheries Management Section and the South Carolina Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit have been investigating how these fish interact with lock operations at the dam, which backs up Spring Creek and the Chattahoochee and Flint rivers to form Lake Seminole.

In March 2005, fisheries biologists began a three-year study by inserting a sonic transmitter into more than 50 of the anadromous Alabama shad. (Anadromous fish live mostly in the sea but spawn in freshwater.) The shad were tracked to determine their population size and behavior in relation to the Woodruff Dam lock using electro-shocking and observing fish as the lock filled and after its doors opened.

Numerous dams built along the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint (ACF) river basin over the past 200 years have prevented Alabama shad from making their annual migration upstream to spawning grounds. The shads movements are very similar to salmon: They spawn in freshwater, migrate to the sea in six to eight months, and return to their birth location after two to six years at sea.

"This study helped us see exactly how much the existing hydroelectric and navigation complex of the dam and lock affect this fish species," said Ramon Martin, Wildlife Resources fisheries regional supervisor. "Thanks to the cooperative efforts of federal, state and private conservation organizations we have been able to evaluate the current status of this imperiled population and develop a plan that will benefit all anadromous species in the ACF river basin." Results from the study sized the population of migrating Alabama shad in the Woodruff Dam tailrace at between 2,767 and 28,184 fish. An estimated 41 percent were successfully passed through the navigation lock, and fish relocated in the Flint River as far as Albany. Other anadromous fish including the striped bass and the Gulf sturgeon were also studied to determine the feasibility of passing through the lock.

Historical data on the Alabama shads migration and population is very limited, dating mostly to shad runs in the 1880s, Martin said. The former U.S. Fish Commission recorded commercial landings in the Mississippi River basin of 6,955 pounds from the Ohio River in Indiana and Kentucky in 1889, and 150 pounds from Alabama in 1902.

Wildlife Resources will continue to monitor Alabama shad and restore anadromous fish stocks in the ACF river basin. This project was partially funded by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the State Wildlife Grant Program, which is operated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The State Wildlife Grant Program provides federal funds for states to develop and implement programs that benefit wildlife and their habitat, including species that are not hunted or fished.

[Plan at a glance](#)

Excerpts from the anadromous management plan developed by Georgia Wildlife Resources and other partners:

- Alabama shad (*Alosa alabamae*) and Gulf sturgeon (*Acipenser oxyrinchus desotoi*) are anadromous species that occur in the northern Gulf of Mexico and contributing coastal rivers.
- Overexploitation and loss of critical habitat to migration barriers contributed to declines in abundance of these species. Alabama shad is considered an imperiled species by the states and is designated a species of concern by both the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service. The Gulf sturgeon is federally listed as threatened. Determining population size and restoring access to historic spawning areas are critical to the recovery of these species.
- The existing hydroelectric and navigation complex may significantly impact anadromous fish behavior in the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint (ACF) river system. The number of individuals in spawning populations is perceived as critically low. The navigation locks at U.S. Army Corps of Engineer dams in the Chattahoochee River (Jim Woodruff, George W. Andrews and W.F. George) may provide passage to migrating fish, but passage efficiency and factors influencing passage have not been evaluated. Determining how fish interact with these navigational dams during lock operation is critical to the development of a fish passage plan for the system. Also, fish passage at the two hydroelectric dams on the Flint River (Albany and Warwick dams) needs evaluation to restore access to anadromous fish spawning habitat throughout the entire basin.
- Recovery of anadromous fish spawning runs in the ACF system will enhance the fishery resources, restore access to currently unavailable aquatic habitat and aid in the recovery

of these two imperiled species. The project will encompass state agencies in Georgia, Alabama and Florida, and collaboration with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Army Corps of Engineers, the South Carolina Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, and The Nature Conservancy. This project has many future implications and may serve as a model in restoring declining anadromous fish stocks throughout the Southeast.