Georgia WILD Newsletter: May–June 2008

Table of Contents

Birding boot camp brings south Georgia's wild side in focus

By Rick Lavender

The mist and morning sun seemed to bring the best out of Silver Lake's birds.

Arch-winged ospreys guarded ragged nests in tall snags. Fish crows lumbered past, their twangy caws giving away their identity. The strong "tea kettle, tea kettle, tea kettle" song of a Carolina wren pierced the background chatter of songbirds along the shore. Lanky cormorants fled for the lake's far edge where swallows swarmed, barely visible.

Scores of sights and sounds, all with a story to tell. And Nathan Klaus and Phil Spivey, wildlife biologists with the Georgia Wildlife Resources Division's Nongame Conservation Section, told those stories in late April for a group of mostly birding novices at a birding boot camp.

That pileated woodpecker? He's hammering a tree picked for its sound, not its food potential, Klaus said. The Northern parula, a miniature migrant lured to a small cypress by iPod audio, will nest only in Spanish moss or old man's beard, "one of the few (bird) species really tied to a plant." And those two male moorhens chasing and dunking each other by the dock? They're apparently fighting over a favorite log. "There's not a female in sight," said Klaus, grinning.

It was the start of a rich birding education in deep south Georgia.

The goal of the camp, one of three Wildlife Resources is holding this year, was to educate and involve the public and others in volunteer bird-monitoring projects such as the breeding bird survey routes.

The following two-day camps were scheduled in the piedmont region and the north Georgia mountains. But the opener explored the state's southern end and attracted interpretive specialists from the Department of Natural Resources' State Parks & Historic Sites Division interested in boning up on birds.

They were treated to an avalanche of nature, thanks to the insight of Klaus and Spivey and the magical places toured: newly acquired Silver Lake Wildlife Management Area near Bainbridge, a former Thomasville plantation now made public as River Creek, the Rolf and Alexandra Kauka WMA (often simply called River Creek), and to the south the Wade Tract, a privately owned, old-growth longleaf pine forest managed by Tall Timbers Research Station.

The dawn to mid-afternoon sessions yielded one memory after another.

Â· Peep camera images of young red-cockaded woodpeckers nestled in a heart-of-pine cavity.

Â· An adult bald eagle glimpsed cruising at treetop level.

Â· Bachman's sparrows, pronounced *back-man's* and named after 19th century naturalist and Charleston, S.C., pastor the Rev. John Bachman, flitting elusively through calf-high groundcover at the Wade Tract.
Â· Teen-age versions of great blue herons crouched, all angles and eyes, in a nest almost outgrown. Their anhinga counterparts watching from nearby trees, beige heads marking the snake-birds' youth.
Â· A Kentucky warbler caught by song and then by glance behind the River Creek office.
"Probably 90 percent of what we count, we don't get our eyes on," Klaus said of birding.
Not all of the highlights had feathers.
The 200-acre Wade Tract offered views seen almost nowhere else: age-old longleaf pine savannas stretching to the farthest hill. The pines are not crowded. The underbrush is laced with wire grass, runner oak, bracken fern and other native plants kept low but vibrant by decades of regular burning.
One lightning-struck pine was aged at 495 years old. The trees hide it well. Flattened tops, not thick trunks, are the crow's feet of longleaf, according to the biologists.
Machines have never rolled across most of the Wade Tract. Spivey smiled as he encouraged the group's youngest member to push a 5-foot piece of rebar into the soil. The steel shaft sunk as if piercing mud. The top soil here comes in feet, not inches, according to Spivey, who works out of River Creek WMA.
The uniqueness extends to plants. Klaus said the Wade Tract held rare species at every step. Literally.
The information gleaned from the camp ranged kingdom-wide. Klaus, a senior biologist based at Nongame Conservation's Forsyth office, explained that the way to tell fish crows from the more common American crows is not by looks but by their comparatively nasal sounds. Particularly their double-noted "Uh-uh" call. His wife, Joyce, added, "They say if you ask him if he's an American crow, he'll say, 'Uh-uh, Uh-uh.'"
Spivey told of a photograph showing a snake skeleton found stuck to the covering of pine pitch that is common around red-cockaded woodpecker nests: evidence that the endangered woodpeckers' strategy of chipping out resin wells to help protect the nests does work.
The name boot camp denotes grimy work. But, even with River Creek's mosquitoes rebounding from a spring cold snap, this camp was a joy.
On the second day, a parks employee said it was hard to believe she and others could take part in such on-the-job training. Later, they would share the lessons learned with visitors at their state parks.
But first came the lure of another bird's song.
Rick Lavender coordinates public affairs for Wildlife Resources Nongame Conservation Section

All who know 'Petey' will agree: environmental honor fits

By Deron Davis
At its annual conference in March, the Environmental Education Alliance of Georgia honored Petey Giroux with the group's Eugene Odum Lifetime Achievement Award.
Anyone who knows Petey knows how committed she is to making the world a better place. Her enthusiasm for people and the planet is so great she has developed an enormous and diverse network of fans.

Some people know her as the dedicated parent who created entertaining and educational characters to teach kids about environmental issues. (There is the garbage-strewn Waste Watcher, endangered Canis rufus and freshwater songstress Momma Bass, all starring Petey).
Others have learned how to bring Petey's creative teaching strategies to their indoor and outdoor classrooms through the almost countless workshops she has conducted across the state as the first ever chair of environmental education for Georgia PTA and then as the first coordinator of Georgia Project WET.
Still others know Petey as a Twilight Twirler, strutting her stuff and spinning her baton up and down parade-filled streets. Then there are the African drummers with whom she has donned a Dashiki and pounded away on percussion instruments. And her graduate school friends (who are less than half her age -- sorry, Petey) know her as a consummate storyteller who made their trip to the Boundary Waters fun and exciting.
Regardless of how you know Petey, you know shes a determined leader.
Wearing the "mommy shoes" as she calls them, she helped her own children become vibrant, successful young women. Two of them are now wearing "mommy shoes" of their own for Petey's four beautiful grandchildren.
Petey transformed the work of PTAs across the state by making environmental education a priority for them.
She worked hand-in-hand with the folks at the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area to establish a friends group and create an environmental education training center for adults.
Petey served as conference chair, president and advisory board chair of the Environmental Education Alliance of Georgia, contributing greatly to the successful organization the alliance is today.
And let's not forget the mark she left on Project WET USA, the Georgia Aquarium and the Georgia Conservancy (they'll never be the same).
Anyone and everyone who knows Petey knows she is an unparalleled friend to people, plants and animals (especially her own dogs and cats, which she rescued).
Petey has earned the love and respect of *all* who know her.
Deron Davis is director of waterSmart for the Georgia Environmental Protection Division, and an unabashed Petey Giroux fan.

Silver Lake offers golden glimpse of forests past

By Phil Spivey
BAINBRIDGE, Ga. *(June 2008)* -- William Bartram, the fabled naturalist and explorer, set out to document the southern landscape in 1773 and traveled widely for four years by boat, horseback and foot throughout parts of the South from the Carolinas south and west into Georgia, Florida and Alabama. He described riding for days through "magnificent savannas and its delightful groves, passing through a level, open, airy pine forest, the stately trees scatteringly planted by nature, arising straight and erect from the green carpet, embellished with various grasses and flowering plants."
It is estimated that prior to European settlement these longleaf pine forests and associated savannas covered 150,000 square miles from southeast Virginia south along the Atlantic and Gulf coastal plains into eastern Texas, even extending into the piedmont and mountainous

regions of Georgia and Alabama and likely containing 200 billion board feet of virgin longleaf timber.

Natural fires and others set by native Americans which may have burned for days or weeks were the ultimate architect of longleaf pine habitats, allowing this fire climax forest to spread throughout across the landscape except where interrupted by major river bottomlands or wetland complexes. Eons of fire allowed specific plant species to flourish, especially within the savanna or prairie-like groundcover, while at the same time favoring only longleaf as a canopy tree species.

Early settlers made use of the longleaf forest as naval store resources, by clearing patches for agriculture and through harvesting timber, which built many of our eastern cities. In modern times, large swatches of habitat were cleared and by 1996, only 2.95 million acres of longleaf pine habitat remained, mostly on large military bases or national forests. Lack of frequent fires also diminished the quality of many thousands of acres.

In January, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, along with help from many other organizations, purchased a remnant tract of predominately longleaf pine forest in southwest Georgia's Decatur County from International Paper. The some 3,900 acres is known as the Silver Lake tract. This tract was part of a 16,000-acre forest known as the Southlands Experimental Forest, which was established in 1948 for forestry research because it represented habitats characteristic of many of the pine habitats within the Southeast, including areas supporting all four of the major southern pines -- longleaf, loblolly, slash and shortleaf. The property is along the shore of Lake Seminole near Bainbridge.

Silver Lake was also designated as a mitigation site for red-cockaded woodpeckers found on other tracts owned by International Paper, with plans of eventually supporting up to 30 red-cockaded woodpecker family groups.

The state plans to purchase another 4,500 acres of adjacent forest later in 2008, all of which will be managed as a wildlife management area by the DNR's Wildlife Resources Division.

Contributors to the 8,430-acre acquisition, priced at $38.6 million, include the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Georgia Nongame Wildlife Conservation Fund, the Doris Duke Foundation, the Woodruff Foundation, Decatur County, the National Wild Turkey Foundation, the Georgia Land Conservation Program, Southern Company and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (through the Longleaf Legacy Program), the Georgia Ornithological Society and The Conservation Fund, which purchased the property from International Paper with plans to sell it to the DNR.

Gov. Sonny Perdue announced funds to acquire 2,600 of the additional 4,500 acres in April at Silver Lake. Perdue also said the property will open to the public on Aug. 1, with hunting starting with the opening of small game season Aug. 15.

The Silver Lake tract contains about 1,800 acres of mature, uneven-aged longleaf habitat much like that described by Bartram. Some stands date to the early 1900s. For decades, frequent controlled burns were conducted to maintain the open, park-like setting that provides optimal habitat for many early successional and grassland species like the loggerhead shrike and Bachmans sparrow. Currently, about 18 red-cockaded woodpecker family groups make the mature longleaf pines home while bobwhite quail and wild turkey use the grassy understory. Longleaf specialists like the Florida pine snake, coachwhip and gopher tortoises are common, and rare snakes including the southern hognose and eastern indigo snakes may be present.

Dozens of isolated wetland ponds dot the landscape, some of which now hold water permanently following the creation of Lake Seminole in 1958. But others still provide important breeding sites for an assemblage of amphibians that use longleaf habitats. Ornate chorus and pinewoods tree frogs are especially abundant, but surveys will be needed to verify others. Hardwood hammocks dominated by live oaks and huge loblolly pines provide refuge for white-tailed deer and wild turkeys.

Silver Lake itself, the 350-acre namesake of the property, supports several nesting pairs of osprey, at least one bald eagle nest and several small rookeries of wading birds along the cypress-lined shoreline. Wintering waterfowl also make use of the lake and isolated wetlands.

Recreational opportunities on the wildlife management area will include all compatible activities but especially hunting, fishing, birdwatching and hiking, all in an area of the state with little other public land. The purchase will also complement Lake Seminole WMA, which is leased from the Army Corp of Engineers and is adjacent to the Silver Lake property. Consolidation of these tracts will ease management, especially for controlled burning.

Phil Spivey is a former wildlife biologist with the Wildlife Resources Division's Nongame Conservation Section.

Botanical trivia

Check your plant IQ with these multiple choice questions. *Answers below.*

1. How many plant species are there in Georgia?

a) 500
b) 1,000
c) 2,500
d) 4,000

2. Which one of these is not a plant?

a) grass
b) mushroom
c) shrub
d) tree

3. Where do plants get their "food" from?

a) nutrients in soil
b) energy from sunlight
c) carbon dioxide in air
d) all of the above

Answers:

1. d.

2. b. A mushroom is the reproductive part of a fungus; it is not a plant.

3. d. Food is an animal concept, but it has three parts: energy (chemical bonds), carbon and nutrients (non-carbon elements and components). Animals get this all in one place (i.e., from the things they consume). Plants, however, get energy from the sun (using photosynthetic cells), carbon from carbon dioxide in air (taken in thru stomata) and nutrients from soil (taken up by roots and root hairs).