

# Georgia WILD Newsletter: October 2008

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## Volunteers needed for grass seed collection that benefits birds, others

*A call for volunteers, from Georgia Important Bird Areas coordinator Charlie Muise.*

Dear bird lover,

Here is a chance for you to help birds and enjoy a few hours with like-minded people in a beautiful place.

The Georgia Important Bird Areas (IBA) program is leading an effort to collect native warm-season grass seeds. We will provide these seeds to the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, and DNR staff will sow the seeds by hand as part of an effort to restore native grasslands, increasing important bird habitat.

This effort will succeed if we have a large number of people help us. Fortunately, the work is not difficult and can be done by nearly any person who can walk across a field of tall grass on the side of a very small hill. It could be a fun family event, or a social event for a church or Scout group. The biggest challenge to most of us will simply be whatever Mother Nature dishes up: There is no shade or facilities nearby.

Conservationists have undertaken restoration efforts in recent years. The IBA has decided to assist the DNR because, although the agency has facilities to prepare the seeds, it does not have enough manpower to collect these seeds, which cannot be harvested by machine.

The seeds we will collect are unique because they are what botanists call native phenotype. That means they are not only the species that belong here but they are actually direct descendants of the plants that were here hundreds of years ago -- the plants our grassland birds evolved with.

When Europeans first arrived, native grasslands were all over what is now the Southeastern U.S.

"I'd say all of Georgia had native grasses," said Nathan Klaus, a senior wildlife biologist with the DNR Wildlife Resources Division. "That is not to say it was all a grassland, just that anyplace that was somewhat open had the grassy understory, usually from fires.

"There were numerous smaller glades, probably ranging in size from less than an acre to several hundred acres.

"The sites included post-oak woodlands that graded into oak/pine woodlands, and open pine savannas and woodlands -- shortleaf in the Piedmont, longleaf in the Coastal Plain -- across the Southeast," Klaus said. "Much of the longleaf savanna was not wiregrass; about half of it was

longleaf bluestem/Indiangrass woodlands. Sprewell Bluff (State Park) is the best remainder of that ecosystem."

As fires were suppressed, other plants took over. Then invasive exotic plants began to out-compete our grasses until those native species were only able to hang on in pockets. Now, less than 1 percent of Georgia's native grasslands survive. The loss of extensive stands of native warm-season grasses has resulted in a decline of many species, including Eastern meadowlarks, loggerhead shrikes and many sparrows.

Upcoming seed collection events are scheduled at:

\*\* Panola Mountain State Park on Saturday, Nov. 8, from 1-4 p.m. We will also open the bird banding station at 7 a.m. All are welcome to attend. The park is in Stockbridge, just southeast of Atlanta.

\*\* Sprewell Bluff State Park, near Thomaston, on Sunday, Nov. 9, starting at noon. Park Manager Phil Delestrez will lead an interpretive walk through some old-growth longleaf pine from 9 a.m. until noon. All seed-collecting volunteers are welcome to attend.

If you can't make it one of these events, there are still ways to help:

\*\* Support efforts to restore habitat with professionally prescribed fire.

\*\* Don't buy plume grass or blood grass (also known as cogon grass, a highly invasive plant).

\*\* Support habitat restoration by buying a duck stamp or get a hummingbird or bald eagle plate for your car. (Duck stamps support national wildlife refuges; the license plates support the DNR's Nongame Conservation Section.)

\*\* Consider donating time or money to the Georgia Important Bird Area Program (<http://www.atlantaudubon.org/iba-georgia>).

\*\* Learn more about native plants from the Georgia Botanical Society ([www.gabotsoc.org](http://www.gabotsoc.org)) and the Georgia Native Plant Society ([www.gnps.org](http://www.gnps.org))

For more information or to sign up for a seed-collection event, please contact Charlie Muisse, Georgia Important Bird Areas coordinator, (678) 967-9924, [cmmbirds@yahoo.com](mailto:cmmbirds@yahoo.com) or <http://www.atlantaudubon.org/iba-georgia>.

## The bestest classroom: Smithgall Woods

Sheila Humphrey has a classroom without equal. About 3,000 children a year visit Smithgall Woods Regional Education Center, where Humphrey, as the center's educational coordinator, and others teach them about nature-based topics varying from animal adaptations to stream ecology.

"The kids when they're leaving say, 'This is the bestest field trip we've ever had,'" Humphrey said.

Thanks go to staff and setting. The center is part of Smithgall Woods-Dukes Creek Conservation Area, a 5,600-acre Heritage Preserve and state park restored from years of hydraulic mining and timber cutting by the late media entrepreneur and civic leader Charles Smithgall. The state acquired the property near Helen in a gift-purchase in 1994. At Smithgall, Blue Ridge foothills cloaked in forest bow to Dukes Creek, a top trophy trout stream.

Visitors can hike, bike, fish, hunt, camp, observe wildlife, attend a parks program and sample corporate-styled lodging.

But at the heart is the educational center. Started in 1997, this partnership with the Pioneer Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA) and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources' Wildlife Resources and parks divisions reaches out to students and teachers at Smithgall and in area schools. The center is one of six that Wildlife Resources operates.

Humphrey logged nearly 19,000 contacts with children and adults last year. Most involved outreach programs such as show-and-tells on snakes and raptors, which are open to all ages. But with tight school budgets putting field trips at risk, Humphrey stresses the value of the educational structure, hands-on aspects and outdoors experience offered at Smithgall for third-grade and older students.

"All of our programs address the Georgia Performance Standards," she said. "So they can be covered in a really neat way that's going to be totally different from what the kids are getting in the classroom."

For example, an orienteering course incorporates math. A stream program explores water quality by seining for macro invertebrates. Another program delves into water velocity. Teachers also can learn about ecosystems and earn credit in workshops. Options for on-site teacher-led programs are available. Smithgall's visitor center even has three birds of prey, snakes and a discovery room.

The price is right. Education center programs at Smithgall cost \$3 per child; adults are free. The charge for an outreach trip within the Pioneer RESA region is \$50.

As a retired teacher, Humphrey knows these are bargains. But the real benefit is seen in the children.

"It gives some of these kids the opportunity of coming out and doing things in nature that they don't have the chance to do," she said.

And in a place where nature can be experienced at its bestest.