

**Minutes**  
**Board of Natural Resources**  
**2 Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive, S. E.**  
**Suite 1252 East Tower**  
**Atlanta, GA 30334**

**Monday, May 20, 2024**  
**9:00 a.m.**

**Board Members**

Joe Hatfield, Chair  
Lesley Reynolds, Secretary  
Nancy Addison  
Jeff Andrews  
Randy Dellinger  
Patrick Denney  
Charles DePriest  
Dan Garcia  
Mark Hennessy  
Duncan Johnson  
Bill Jones  
Ray Lambert  
Brent Layton  
Paul Shailendra  
Bodine Sinyard  
Harley Yancey

**Guests**

Debbie Phillips, GA Industry Environmental Coalition  
Damon Kirkpatrick, Friends of Georgia State Parks  
Bryan Tolar, GA Urban Agriculture Council  
Chris Manganiello, Chattahoochee Riverkeeper  
Michael O'Reilly, The Nature Conservancy  
Brent Churchwell, Senate Budget Office  
Mike Oetker, Regional Director, SE Region, USFWS

**Staff Members**

Walter Rabon, Commissioner  
Thomas Barnard  
Trevor Santos  
Taylor Brown Fisher  
Cathy Barnette  
Kyle Pearson  
Artica Gaston  
Mike England  
Doug Haymans  
Angie Johnson  
Ted Will  
Brent Womack  
Anthony Rabern  
  
Jeff Cown, Director  
James Boylan  
Chuck Mueller  
Anna Truszczynski  
Katie Hegarty

The May 20, 2024 Board of Natural Resources meeting was called to order by Chairman Joe Hatfield.

Chairman Hatfield called on Commissioner Walter Rabon who introduced Mr. Mike Oetker, Regional Director of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Southeast Region, and welcomed him to the Board of Natural Resources meeting.

Chairman Hatfield called on Mr. Anthony Rabern, Regional Fisheries Management Supervisor, for a moment of inspiration.

Chairman Hatfield thanked Mr. Rabern for attending the meeting and providing words of inspiration to the board.

Chairman Hatfield adjourned the Board meeting to move into the Committee meetings.

Chairman Hatfield called the May 20, 2024 meeting of the Board of Natural Resources to order.

Chairman Hatfield called for a motion to approve the minutes of the Board of Natural Resources meeting on April 24, 2024.

**A motion was made by Mr. Johnson, seconded by Mr. Sinyard, to approve the minutes of the Board of Natural Resources meeting on April 24, 2024.**

Chairman Hatfield called on Jeff Cown, Director of the Environmental Protection Division, for his report.

Director Cown updated the Board on new staff in the Director’s Office, the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund, and various statewide events for State Employee Recognition Week in early May.

Director Cown stated this concluded his report.

Chairman Hatfield called on Walter Rabon, Commissioner of the Department of Natural Resources, for his report.

Commissioner Rabon began his report by presenting a Certificate of Service to Mr. Larry Blankenship, Director of Human Resources, and recognizing his 35 years of service with the State of Georgia. He stated that the Department is grateful for the dedication and passion Larry brings to the job each day.

Commissioner Rabon stated that Governor Brian Kemp signed the FY25 budget, which provides support to the Department and a cost-of-living adjustment for all employees. He further stated that this is a significant step by the Governor in helping to retain experienced and knowledgeable employees. He thanked Governor Kemp, as well as the General Assembly.

Commissioner Rabon stated that the Department hosted Governor and First Lady Kemp, Speaker Jon Burns, and other elected officials at the Coastal Regional Headquarters. He further stated that Governor Kemp signed a number of bills, including agency legislation, House Bill 244, which provides some needed changes and cleanup language for those involved in the oyster farming industry. He thanked the staff at the coastal office for making the event possible and for hosting several other groups, including the Board of Natural Resources and Leadership Georgia, over the course of three days.

Commissioner Rabon stated that earlier this month he, along with Deputy Commissioners Thomas Barnard and Trevor Santos, toured several state parks. He further stated that in a span of three days, they visited 10 state parks and historic sites, Sapelo Island Visitor Center, and Evans Public Fishing Area. He added that it was a great opportunity to visit with staff, discuss some of their challenges, and learn where needed support can be provided.

Commissioner Rabon stated that two weeks ago, Governor Kemp declared May 5-11 as State Employee Appreciation Week. He further stated that every day the employees demonstrate dedication, passion, and expertise in managing Georgia's land, wildlife, waterways, and outdoor recreational areas across the state. He added that their efforts not only contribute to the conservation of Georgia's biodiversity, but also help to ensure that future generations will have the ability to enjoy the state's precious natural resources. He further added that each of the regional offices celebrated in a different way, and the administrative staff in Atlanta were treated to an Employee Appreciation Event at Sweetwater Creek State Park. He thanked Artica Gaston, Director of Administrative Services, for putting the event together.

Commissioner Rabon stated that a Senior Staff Retreat was held at Crooked River State Park. He further stated that it was an opportunity for senior staff across all divisions, including the administrative units, to convene for a number of working sessions. He added that during the three days of meetings, staff were challenged to think ahead and think strategically. He further

added that innovation is key to keeping the agency moving forward and creative thinking will help develop solutions to obstacles they may face.

Commissioner Rabon stated that he recently had the opportunity to speak to the Association of Georgia Land Trusts during their annual meeting. He further stated that his focus was on the department's conservation efforts as well as the importance that partnerships play in advancing conservation priorities, such as the Gopher Tortoise Initiative – a collaboration of over 30 agencies, conservation organizations, companies, private foundations, and landowners.

Commissioner Rabon provided a brief update from the Law Enforcement Division and stated that on April 27, the Georgia Chapter of Safari Club International presented their 2023 Investigative Game Warden of the Year award to Corporal Eric White from Region 5. He congratulated Corporal White on this well-deserved award.

Commissioner Rabon announced that National Safe Boating Week will be held from May 18-24, reminding all boaters to brush up on boating safety skills and prepare for the boating season. He stated that this is the annual kick-off of the Safe Boating Campaign, a global awareness effort that encourages boaters to make the most of their boating adventure by being responsible. He further stated that Memorial Day Weekend is coming up and Game Wardens will be patrolling the states waterways to start up summer.

Commissioner Rabon called on Angie Johnson, Director of the State Parks and Historic Sites Division, for her report.

Director Johnson stated the 2024 Rangers Conference was held at Fort Yargo State Park from April 15-17, and the theme was Rangers Carry the Mission. She further stated that attendees were Assistant Managers, Interpretive Rangers, Maintenance Rangers, and Golf Superintendents, and the conference provided essential training and acknowledged accomplishments from the year.

Director Johnson stated the annual awards ceremony honored all Park Rangers for their hard work during 2023. She further stated that Senior Park Ranger Jason Webb from Richard B. Russell State Park was named the Ranger of the Year.

Director Johnson stated that on the afternoon of May 3, multiple agencies responded to the report of a missing person on the gorge floor at Tallulah Gorge. She further stated that the rescue turned into the recovery of a 19-year-old male from a pool just north of Oceana Falls in the Tallulah River. She added that Park Manager Lieren Merz and Interpretive Ranger West Malenke assisted Rabun County EMS in packaging the victim while LED Game Warden Matt Kiracofe assisted DNR Aviation as they lifted the victim from the gorge floor. She further added

that Assistant Director Ray Smith and Region 2 Manager Matt Owens coordinated trail and overlook closures.

Director Johnson stated that Roosevelt's Little White House hosted the 79<sup>th</sup> annual commemorative ceremony marking the passing of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. She further stated that speakers included the President and CEO of the Friends of Georgia State Parks Damon Kirkpatrick and members of the Warm Springs Advisory Committee. She added that Haven Roosevelt Luke, President Roosevelt's great-grandson, was the keynote speaker. She further added that Site Manager Jason Grantham presented the 48-star flag to State Representative Debbie Buckner.

Director Johnson provided an update on the Kolomoki Mounds Operational Plan and stated the Parks and Historic Sites Division is taking steps to become compliant with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) law change which became effective January 12, 2024. She further stated that the division is taking a phased, subtle approach to decrease the impact on park visitors and the community while being compliant and proactive with the law. She added that the first step occurred Thursday, April 11, at 5 p.m., when a closure notice was placed on the mound door and the door was locked until further notice. She further added that artifact removal occurred from Monday, May 6 – Wednesday, May 8. She stated that CIRU composed a new guided tour outline and Solemn and Sacred places guidelines for site staff to refer to while interpreting the site during the renovations. She further stated the site also has a copy of the NAGPRA overview and FAQs for reference. She added that the long-term goal is to construct a new building at an alternative location on the park property.

Director Johnson stated the Friends of Georgia State Parks Passport Program was created to help Friends fund projects and programs in Georgia State Parks. She further stated that in early 2023, the program began funding various projects around the state with help from our local volunteer chapters. She added that to date, the program has funded almost 30 projects at 18 parks and historic sites resulting in nearly \$140,000 in park improvements and program enhancements. She further added that local chapters have worked with their park managers to prioritize the funding and to provide matching funds from local donors to help expand the program's breadth and reach.

Director Johnson stated that Vogel State Park Manager Jack Becker is currently on an 8-month deployment in support of CENTCOM missions in Southwest Asia. She further stated that Jack is in the Air Force and his rank is Master Sergeant, and he has served for 16 years between the Army and the Air Force.

Director Johnson stated this concludes her report.

Commissioner Rabon called on Ted Will, Director of the Wildlife Resources Division, for his report.

Director Will stated the WRD Fisheries staff are in the hatchery and on the road this Spring for fish production and fish stockings to meet the needs of Georgia anglers. He further stated that efforts have been successful with production of 1.5 million largemouth and 2.4 million hybrid striped bass. He added that in addition, channel catfish production is underway with a goal of producing 500,000 fry each year.

Director Will stated the North Georgia fisheries staff hosted a trout fishing event on May 10, to celebrate Mother's Day. He further stated that the event was meant to allow moms to get some quality time outside and potentially create a new trout angler in the future. He added that almost 40 moms, and a total of 80 participants caught approximately 150 trout during the successful event.

Director Will stated that the 2024 Turkey Season statewide harvest numbers are slightly lower than 2023, but public land harvest has increased. He further stated that more than 280 turkeys have been banded on public WMAs since 2020 as part of the Turkey Trapping Project and it helps estimate the harvest rate. He added that in 2024, hunters have reported 36 band returns.

Director Will stated that as of May 16, Wildlife Resources Division has set a new statewide record of prescribed burned acres. He further stated that in total 81,496 acres have been burned with more of the growing burning season to go, so the number will be higher.

Director Will stated that Georgia's nesting season for the loggerhead sea turtles began with multiple nests found over the first weekend in May, including one on Wassaw, one on Jekyll, and two on Blackbeard. He further stated the recovery goal target is 2,800 nests a year. He added that Georgia has exceeded that number the past two years and has seen a 4% growth in the loggerhead population since the early 1990s.

Director Will provided an update on big and small projects for coastal birds. He stated that on the Platform Project, the Wildlife Conservation Section constructed 5 elevated nesting platforms on remote island sites. He further stated that within a week of construction, 3 of the 5 platforms already had Oystercatcher nests. He added that on the Big Island Project, a 2-acre bird island has been constructed using sandy dredge material from the Intracoastal Waterway, thanks to partnering with USCOE. He further added that birds already appear to be visiting the island, even while the dredging effort is underway, so the outlook is good for successful use.

Director Will stated that Georgia's State Wildlife Action Plan is a statewide strategy to conserve populations of native wildlife species and the natural habitat they need before these

animals, plants and places become rarer and more costly to conserve or restore. He further stated that a revision to the plan is underway and include assessing conservation status of more than 1,000 native species, prioritizing species of greatest concern, identifying threats and conservation actions, and updating conservation opportunity areas and high priority watersheds.

Director Will stated this concluded his report.

Commissioner Rabon provided a video presentation from the 2024 Game Warden Academy to inform the board on what the cadets learn and experience during their 16 weeks of training.

Commissioner Rabon stated this concluded his report.

Chairman Hatfield called on Ray Lambert, Chair of the Environmental Protection Committee, for his report.

**A motion was made by Mr. Lambert, seconded by Ms. Addison, and carried unanimously that the Board adopt the resolution to approve the Proposed Amendments to the Rules for Air Quality Control, Chapter 391-3-1. (Resolution attached hereto and made a part thereof)**

Mr. Lambert stated this concluded his report.

Chairman Hatfield called on Paul Shailendra, Chair of the Land Committee, for his report.

**A motion was made by Mr. Shailendra, seconded by Mr. Johnson, and carried unanimously that the Board adopt the resolution to authorize the Commissioner to seek State Properties Commission approval to purchase Phase 1 from Corinne Gordon Grizzard, 12.5± acres, as an addition to the Black Rock Mountain State Park, Rabun County. (Resolution attached hereto and made a part thereof)**

**A motion was made by Mr. Shailendra, seconded by Mr. Johnson, and carried unanimously that the Board adopt the resolution to authorize the Commissioner to seek State Properties Commission approval to purchase from The Nature Conservancy, 177± acres, as an addition to the Conasauga River Wildlife Management Area, Murray County. (Resolution attached hereto and made a part thereof)**

**A motion was made by Mr. Shailendra, seconded by Ms. Addison, and carried unanimously that the Board adopt the resolution to authorize the Commissioner to seek State Properties Commission approval to renew the lease with Effingham County, 2.9± acres, for a boat ramp to continue to provide public access to the Savannah River, Effingham County. (Resolution attached hereto and made a part thereof)**

Chairman Hatfield stated the next board meeting will be held at 9:00 a.m., on Tuesday, June 25, 2024, in the DNR Boardroom, in Atlanta.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned.

---

Joe Hatfield, Chairman

ATTEST:

---

Lesley Reynolds, Secretary