



FRIENDS

OF COASTAL SOUTH CAROLINA

SUPPORTING OUR NATIONAL FOREST AND WILDLIFE REFUGES • Winter 2016



Inside:

- **A Day in the Salt Marsh**
- **Eastern Diamondback
Rattlesnake Research on the
Francis Marion National Forest**
- **New Leadership for our Forest
and Refuges**



Dedicated to preserving the ecosystems and wildlife of the South Carolina coast for future generations; we support our national forest and wildlife refuges through our education programs, advocacy work and by engaging citizens in stewardship of these critical resources.

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Cover photo courtesy of Andy Day.

Ospreys are one of our most resilient species of raptors. Nationally, the population has more than doubled since the elimination of DDT. The species was one of the first studied on a large scale to bring contaminant issues into focus. Because of their place atop the aquatic food web they remain an important sentinel species.

Our thanks to AccuPrint of Mount Pleasant for their support with production of this newsletter.



From the Director

Dear Friends,

In October 2015 we found ourselves making last minute newsletter edits to address an epic flood event. October 2016 brought us another storm in the form of Hurricane Matthew. Then a November storm in the form of the election outcome. Once again I find myself rewriting; this time to address the political storm.

To say turbulent times are coming for conservation is, at the least, a monumental understatement.

There are still many unknowns at this point. What is clear is that with an incoming administration that is not likely to prioritize conservation of our natural resources in its agenda, it will fall to the citizens who care about conservation and our public lands and organizations like ours to step up.

We are blessed to be part of an incredibly strong conservation community here in the Lowcountry. Partnerships within this community and our combined strength will now, more than ever before, be the driving force to keep conservation initiatives moving forward.

Regardless of the political climate we will always look for common ground and understanding with our elected representatives. We do have elected officials who will continue to support conservation and we will continue to strengthen those relationships. We will continue to make it clear that Lowcountry citizens value our natural resources and will accept nothing less than our waterways, our fisheries, our clean air and our wildlife being protected.

There are no magic words or strategies. There is simply a lot of hard work ahead. The voice for conservation of our natural resources must be strong and loud. In the end conservation comes down to the choices each of us makes in our lives every day. The kind of consumers we choose to be, choosing to engage in critical conservation issues, and the values we instill in the next generation.

People choosing to engage in critical issues impacting our forest and refuges and our communities will make the difference. Because of this I see citizen engagement as one of our highest priorities in the coming year.

You will see many good things your support has made possible on the following pages and I hope that will be cause for optimism. None of this work happens without your engagement and support. We cannot make a difference without you and we truly do need your support now more than ever. Enough said.

With deepest appreciation and best wishes for a safe and happy holiday season,

Grace

Grace Lynch Gasper
Executive Director



Habitat restored on Cape Romain and ACE Basin National Wildlife Refuges



Dr. Reg Daves

- As many as one half of all North American bird species nest or feed in wetlands.
- Five to seven million migratory waterfowl depend on wetlands as resting and feeding areas. 50,000 depend on the ACE Basin annually.
- Although wetlands cover only about 5% of the land surface in the lower 48 states, they are home to 31% of plant species.
- An easy way to support wetland conservation is through buying federal duck stamps. Fees from these migratory bird hunting stamps support wetland protection and restoration. You don't have to be a hunter to buy one. Stamps cost \$25 and are available at Waccamaw National Wildlife Refuge (or online through US Fish and Wildlife Service).

The rice culture of the 1700s and 1800s permanently altered the Lowcountry landscape. Wetlands were cleared for planting and impoundments and water control structures were built to harness tidal waters for crop irrigation. Today these former rice fields are critical habitat for thousands of migrating and overwintering waterfowl.

The same systems of impoundments and water control structures that provided for crop irrigation became tools for land managers and biologists to control water levels for optimal waterfowl habitat throughout the seasons.

These former rice fields are now some of the most important waterfowl habitat in North America and our Lowcountry wildlife refuges play a key role in protecting and managing these places. Maintaining these critical areas is no easy, or inexpensive, task.

Your support allowed Friends of Coastal South Carolina to contribute partner support to two North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) grant proposals that included protection and restoration of critical wetland habitat on Bulls Island in Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge and at ACE Basin National Wildlife Refuge.

The two projects enhanced over 1,424 acres of wetlands on the refuges and benefited nine priority waterfowl species and 29 species of shorebirds that depend not only on salt marsh habitat and tidal flats but also these wetlands.

This project is also a great illustration of the power of partnerships. The Charleston County Greenbelt Program, Ducks Unlimited, Pee Dee Land Trust, and The Nature Conservancy all contributed partner, in-kind or direct financial support to the proposal that made these projects possible.



Barb Bergwerf

Another record year for sea turtle nesting on Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge

Although Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge has only 10% of the suitable nesting habitat for Loggerhead Sea Turtles in the state of South Carolina it can receive up to 40% of the state's nests. This year was another record nesting year with over 2,500 nests laid on the Refuge's beaches.

You helped us provide over \$10,000 in support for Cape Romain's nest protection efforts this year. Without this work as many as two-thirds of the nests laid on the refuge would be lost to rising tides and predators. You helped the Refuge's dedicated staff and volunteers give a lot of hatchlings a chance to make it to the sea! Read more about Cape Romain's nest protection efforts at <http://www.sccoastalfriends.org/programs/species-and-habitat-management-support/>

A Day in the Salt Marsh

“When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world” John Muir.

There is no better place to prove this quote true than in the salt marsh. There is also no better place to learn to be a scientist.

It occurred to us that we often tell you about the philosophy behind our education programs, we give you snapshots of programs, but rarely do we tell you what a day in the field is really like. Please enjoy a day in the salt marsh.

It’s 9:30 am and the bus from Andrews Elementary School in Georgetown County pulls up. Forty kids who are participating in the eight lesson Earth Stewards program file off. Today we are on the edge of the salt marsh and maritime forest in the Francis Marion National Forest (our only national forest containing salt marsh habitat!). Many of the kids on the bus have never been in the salt marsh before. Today’s science lesson is about the interconnectivity among all the living and nonliving things in an ecosystem and about how scientists study populations in large areas. We review a few rules for staying safe in the field and then begin our hike through the maritime forest to the marsh.



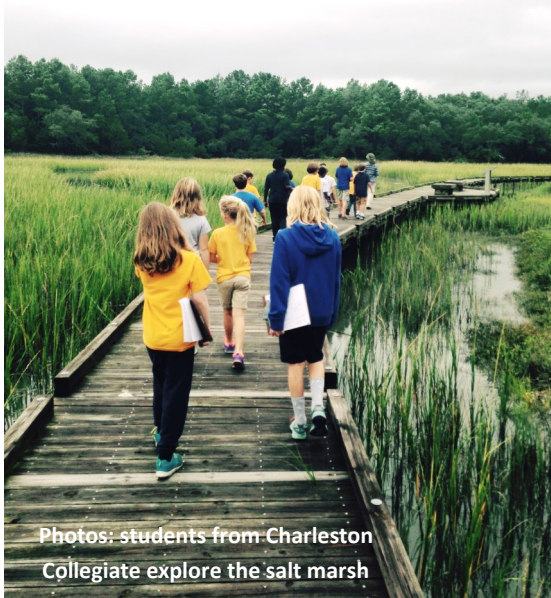
We stop along the trail to look for signs of wildlife and talk about the biodiversity (an important word in the fifth grade science vocabulary) of the forest. One time when we stop, we stand quietly with our eyes closed and just listen (scientists must use all their senses in the field).

Finally! We reach the marsh. We take out our field journals and begin a page for today’s studies. We talk about four really important things the marsh does; it’s a nursery where many young animals grow up, it’s a sponge that absorbs storm water, it’s a filter that cleans water and it’s an important resting and feeding place for many species. We review the limiting factors (more vocabulary) in ecosystems. We make a note in our journals that the limiting factors in ecosystems are food, water, space and shelter.

Today we are studying a species that is an important foundation of

the salt marsh food web, and an important indicator of the health of the ecosystem, the fiddler crab. Following best scientific practices (another fifth grade science standard) we begin with a hypothesis about the number of crabs in the marsh, followed by data collection, counting crab burrows using one meter transects. At the end of the experiment we will make a conclusion based on data we collected. We also learn what a powerful tool math can be, and how scientists use math to solve big problems, as we used a few simple calculations to predict the number of crabs present in 30,000 acres of marsh; something that would be important to know if, as a scientist, you were trying to determine the overall health (or change in the health) of an ecosystem.

As we work among all the biotic and abiotic factors (more vocabulary) that make up the marsh ecosystem we also have a lot of fun digging through the pluff mud to see what we can find.



Photos: students from Charleston Collegiate explore the salt marsh

A Day in the Salt Marsh continued...

We finish the lesson with a discussion of the Sewee Indians who lived on this very spot over 300 years ago. As we look out over the marsh we talk about how early people relied on the marsh for food and many other things. We talk about how important the marsh is to people and wildlife today, about how humans impact limiting factors (vocabulary again),

and about our responsibility to protect these areas we depend on for so much. We also talk about how important our national forests and national wildlife refuges are in protecting really important places like this.

On the way back to the trailhead we take a “silent hike”. We space way out, single file, and walk down the trail without talking. The exercise gives us the sensation of taking a quiet walk alone through the woods, (something many of the kids in our programs have never done). After the exercise we write

several words in our journals describing the experience. Peaceful, calming, and beautiful are just a few of the most commonly chosen words.

Over lunch we discussed the words we chose to describe the silent hike, reviewed the day’s lesson and data, answered questions and talked about what we would do at the next lesson.

These are the kinds of experiences you are making possible for kids every day and we are grateful for your support in continuing this work.



Earth Stewards Grows to Include Fourth Graders



Through a generous grant from the National Parks Foundation’s “Every Kid in a Park” program, and our partnership with **Coastal Expeditions**, we were able to introduce 750 fourth graders from Charleston and Georgetown Counties to Waccamaw and Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuges. The program was designed to encourage fourth grade students to visit our public lands and was a natural introduction to our existing fifth grade Earth Stewards program.

We have always known one of the greatest strengths of our fifth grade Earth Stewards program was the multi-lesson design and this project gave us the opportunity to build on that model, beginning the learning experience a year earlier. Fourth graders from nine of our current Earth Stewards schools participated.

The fourth grade program focused on the adaptations of animals and plants to their environments; a key fourth grade science standard. Charleston area students learned about the adaptations of animals to the marine environment of Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge while students visiting Waccamaw National Wildlife Refuge learned how many native birds are especially adapted to their environments. Our favorite lesson explores how birds’ beaks are adapted to their food source.

Fourth grade students from Minnie Hughes Elementary School in the ACE Basin got to visit Bulls Island in Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge as part of our “Introduction to Earth Stewards” program this year. They found some really cool stuff to examine on the beach (above) and on the **Coastal Expeditions** ferry (right).

The exploration will continue when these students return as fifth grade Earth Stewards and more fully explore our coastal salt and freshwater ecosystems.



Make it a **GREEN** Holiday Season

There is no more important time to support conservation than now!



Music and Oysters for Wildlife

Saturday January 21, 2017

1:30 pm to 6:00 pm

Sewee Outpost, Awendaw, SC

Tickets, or a gift sponsorship, make great holiday gifts

Personal and small business sponsorships begin at \$250. Contact Grace Gasper at grace@sccoastalfriends.org for more details.

Advanced Tickets \$35 (\$40 at the gate)

Tickets are available at

www.sccoastalfriends.org



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Give the Gift of Conservation for the Holidays

Make a donation to Friends of Coastal South Carolina **in honor** of someone special to you or give a **gift membership**. Your gift makes a lasting impact and we will send our latest newsletter and a car decal to the recipient when we acknowledge your thoughtful gift.



Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnakes on the Francis Marion

Snakes are truly one of the most misunderstood and needlessly persecuted creatures in our ecosystem and the Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake (*Crotalus adamanteus*) is at the top of the list of persecuted snakes. Until recently “rattlesnake roundups” (snake killing contests) were still common, and popular, in many parts of the Southeast. In addition to killing a lot of snakes, roundups included some pretty horrific practices, like pouring gasoline down burrows to force the snakes out into the open. Aside from being an iconic, if not infamous, species of the Deep South, the Eastern Diamondback is the largest rattlesnake in the world and the heaviest native snake in North America (they can weigh up to 12 pounds). Eastern Diamondback populations have declined throughout the Southeast and their range is contracting.

Eastern Diamondbacks used to be fairly common on the Francis Marion National Forest but had seemingly all but disappeared. However, a couple of road-killed specimens found in 2007 and 2008 indicated the species was still hanging on. As a result of these finds the Forest Service began working with The Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy, led by Executive Director Jeff Holmes, to attempt to determine the size and health of the diamondback population on the forest, and how differential habitat use affects the condition of individual snakes.

As part of the study eleven snakes found on the Forest have been fitted with radio transmitters. Field technicians and dedicated volunteers have been tracking the radioed snakes and searching for additional snakes; a task which becomes more difficult in cold weather. Diamondbacks will occasionally come out to bask on sunny days throughout the winter but for the most part snakes retreat to their winter refuges when temperatures cool, which on the Forest are predominantly stump holes.

The reasons for the apparent population decline of diamondbacks on the Forest is yet unknown. This question is important to ask and answer because anytime the biodiversity of an ecosystem declines, and a top predator is lost, the overall health of the ecosystem could be at risk. Possible limiting factors include human impacts, like road traffic and the fact many people still kill rattlesnakes given the chance; fluctuations in the availability of major prey items (rabbits, squirrels, and cotton rats) and even the availability of shelter (stump holes).



If diamondbacks are indeed recovering on the Forest it would be a good sign for the health of the ecosystem, but a slow process at best. Even in ideal circumstances diamondbacks have a low reproductive rate. Females give birth to only about 10 young at a time and may only reproduce once every three to five years.

The research on the Forest will continue at least another year and hopefully longer. There are also ongoing studies of other reptiles and amphibians on the Forest. The Flatwoods Salamander is a critically endangered species last documented on Francis Marion in 2010. Another interesting and uncommon species of concern is the Gopher Frog. Both breed in isolated ponds. A new technique called eDNA (environmental DNA) will be used to determine which ponds these species use for breeding. Water samples from ponds can be analyzed for the presence of DNA shed by those species. A powerful tool for hard to locate species. Another species being surveyed, which has declined throughout much of its range, is the Southern Hognose Snake. Its decline is also a mystery; some researchers fear invasive fire ants play a role.

General reptile and amphibian surveys are also being conducted to determine occurrence and abundance of these many interesting creatures that give the Forest its amazing diversity. Those of you who attended our 2015 annual meeting will remember Jeff Holmes' great presentation and visiting some of the study sites.

- We have 38 different kinds of snakes in South Carolina (of those only six are venomous).
- More people are killed every year by lightning strikes and bee stings than by snake bites.
- The majority of snake bites occur when people try to handle or kill snakes.

New Leadership for our Forest and Refuges



Rhea Whalen began her career with the U.S. Forest Service in 1993 as a freshman in college. Whalen earned a bachelor's degree in fisheries and wildlife management from Arkansas Tech University in 2001. Rhea came to the

Lowcountry in 2015 as the Francis Marion Ranger District's **District Ranger for the Francis Marion & Sumter National Forests.**

Rhea has worked for seven ranger districts on the Ouachita and Ozark National Forests in Arkansas as a general laborer, biological science aide, fisheries biologist trainee and wildlife biologist. For the last eleven years of her career Whalen was a district wildlife biologist on the Boston Mountain Ranger District on the Ozark-St. Francis National Forest in Arkansas. She has also worked for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as a Park Ranger and for the Arkansas Game & Fish Commission.

Rhea is married to Keith, who is the current fisheries biologist for Francis Marion and Sumter National Forests. The Whalens have two sons, a daughter and five grandchildren. Rhea enjoys gardening, hunting, fishing and crafting.

Rhea states that she was interested in the District Ranger position and Lowcountry because "I was drawn to the culture, diversity and great partnership opportunities that coastal South Carolina has to offer. When you are looking for a leadership position, you want to be in an area that has many partners and cooperators, which can in turn help you grow and diversify the natural resource programs. The Lowcountry is spectacular and I am very happy to be here!"

Farewell and best wishes to Emily Scott Mastrianni and husband Mike

It's not often we include a wedding photo in our newsletter, but we knew you would want to see this one. Emily and Mike left us for their new home in Washington state following their wedding this summer. Through her two years as our education programs coordinator Emily's exceptional teaching skill took our programs to a new level of excellence. We wish Emily and Mike the very best in their life together and hope to keep in touch.



We welcomed Durwin Carter to the Lowcountry in 2016 as the new **Project Leader for the South Carolina Lowcountry National Wildlife Refuge Complex.** Durwin leads Cape Romain, Earnest F. Hollings ACE Basin, Santee, and

Waccamaw National Wildlife Refuges.

Durwin earned his bachelor's degree from Georgia College and his master's degree from the State University of West Georgia (both in biology). He completed his longleaf pine-related thesis at Jones Ecological Research Center in Georgia, where he also worked as a research technician.

Durwin has 14 years of experience in refuge management positions at the field level and in his most recent role served as the Deputy Refuge Supervisor for Area 1 of the Southeast Region's National Wildlife Refuge System. In that role Durwin helped lead more than 200 staff on 39 refuges in Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Louisiana. Prior to that role he served as Project Leader for Holla Bend and Logan Cave NWRs in Arkansas; Refuge Manager at Grand Bay NWR in Mississippi; and he began his career with the Service in outreach and assistant manager positions at Eufaula NWR in Alabama.

In his spare time Durwin enjoys cooking, travel and spending time with his family. Durwin and his wife Maureen, son Evan, and daughter Eileen are enjoying living in Pawleys's Island. We were delighted to have Eileen in the Earth Stewards program with her fifth grade class at Waccamaw Intermediate last fall.



Thank You to Our Donors

Without You, Our Work is Not Possible

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The Frances P. Bunnelle Foundation
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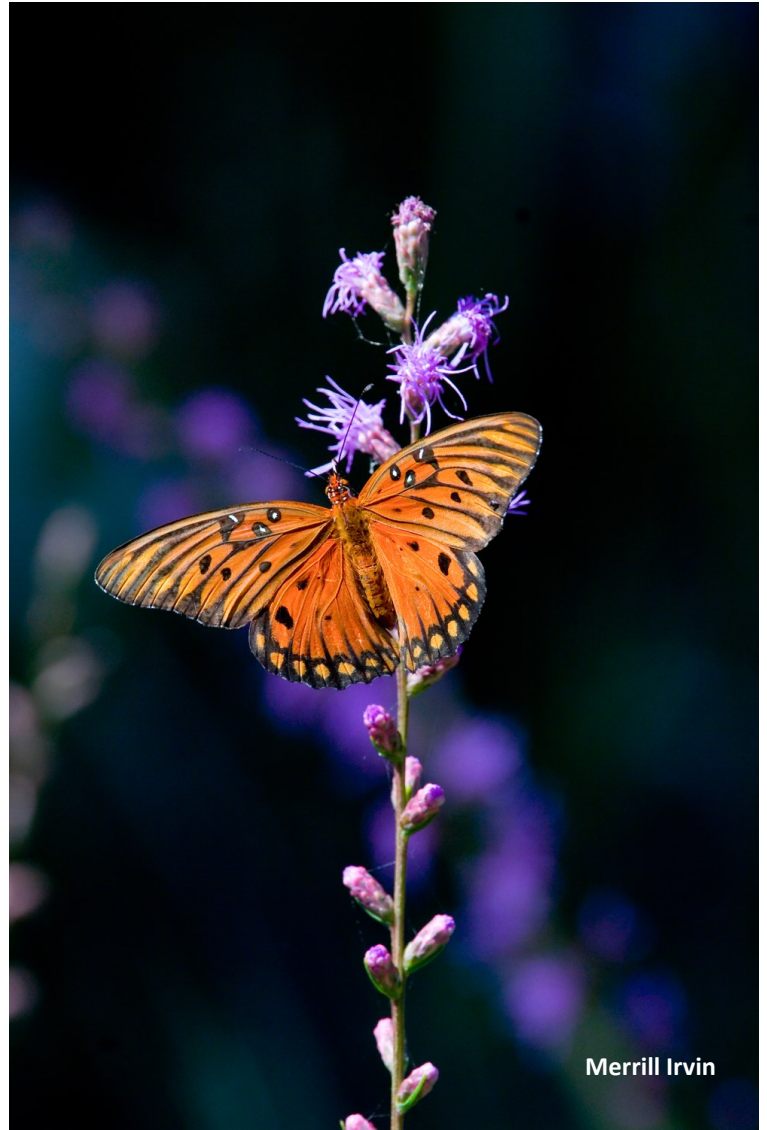
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Palmetto Giving Day!

Tuesday May 2, 2017



Giving Day will look a little different in 2017 and we are very excited about the change. This fall the Coastal Community Foundation announced that they would not host Lowcountry Giving Day in 2017. We appreciate all the Community Foundation has invested in Lowcountry Giving Day and certainly understand the decision, as the event has grown tremendously.

Not wanting to let a great opportunity slip away nonprofit community leaders in Georgetown County rallied and did what nonprofits do. They came up with a creative solution to a challenge. The result is **Palmetto Giving Day**. A grant from the Frances P. Bunnelle Foundation will fund the Giving Day website (the site will be hosted by Kimba and will be user friendly and free of the glitches that frustrated all of us this past year) and nonprofit partners will make the day happen. This is truly a grass roots effort and we are honored to be participating. We look forward to sharing more details about the event this spring.

Partnerships are critical to our success and **Palmetto Giving Day** is no exception. If you would like to join us as a **Palmetto Giving Day Partner** and provide a matching incentive gift please contact Grace Gasper at 843-697-7535 or grace@sccoastalfriends.org.



On May 3rd you helped us raise a total of \$20,275 Thank you!

Our sincere thanks to the Frances P. Bunnelle Foundation for inviting us to participate in our second Lowcountry Giving Day and for their very generous \$ 7,500 matching gift.

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Music and Oysters for Wildlife



Be Part of the Lowcountry's Best Oyster Roast!

January 21, 2016
Sewee Outpost, Awendaw, SC

To join us as a 2017 event sponsor

Contact Grace Gasper at
grace@sccoastalfriends.org

To contribute to our silent auction

Contact Kelly Hogan at
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Many thanks to Palmetto Brewing Company, The Rusty Rudder Restaurant, John LaRoche, and Carolina Seafood for providing food and beverage, and to the Sewee Outpost and Awendaw Green for the fantastic venue and music.



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Music and Oysters for Wildlife 2017
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