



2017

ANNUAL REPORT

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hitchcockwoods.org

MISSION

To protect and preserve the Hitchcock Woods in a natural and ecologically healthy state, maintain and manage historic and traditional equestrian and pedestrian uses, and foster education and research on the history and resources of the Woods.

VISION

To maintain and restore the ecological integrity of the Hitchcock Woods and to serve as a model for sustainable urban forestry, balancing stewardship of forestland natural resources with compatible human uses.

W. GREG PASCHAL



IMMEDIATE PAST CHAIRMAN

In recent years, activity has escalated at the Hitchcock Woods Foundation, and this past year was no exception!

The most newsworthy happening was the release of Red-cockaded Woodpeckers into Hitchcock Woods, where they once thrived. This effort, spearheaded by Randy Wolcott, Forestry Committee chair, was a landmark event which involved exemplary cooperation between several non-profit and government organizations.

Perhaps the most critical issue facing the Woods and the Foundation continues to be the stormwater runoff which is delivered into the Woods from areas throughout Aiken. The City's Stormwater Task Force has been charged with finding a solution to this ongoing problem.

Anyone who rides in the Woods has no doubt noticed and enjoyed the renovated fences. This project was led by Woods Superintendent Bennett Tucker, and accomplished thanks to the help of Axe Club volunteers.

The third and final phase of our cultural resources study was completed under Courtney Conger, chair of our Historic Preservation Committee. This archeological study will help us to better understand the history of the Woods dating back to prehistoric times and will undoubtedly lead to some exciting educational opportunities.

Our Education and Outreach efforts continue to grow thanks to our Festival of the Woods Committee chair, Connie Darden Young's spirited leadership. We hosted our 2nd annual School Festival Field Day in association with our Festival of the Woods Event with the help of our volunteers and community partners.

Fiscally, the Foundation had another very solid year. It would be hard to overstate the generosity of our Woods' supporters. Their continued donations allow the Foundation to run smoothly and carry on our annual work. Along with private donations to the Annual Fund, the Aiken Horse Show and Festival of the Woods contributed nicely as well.

In order to secure the long-term stability of the Foundation, we have continued to add to an endowment when possible and with donations specified for that purpose. Having this endowment in place will help the Foundation sustain operations through varying economic climates.

Our Board of Trustees is made up of some very busy people who are very generous with their time. While only a few are named here, they *all* make a significant contribution to the success of the Foundation.

Lastly, but importantly, I would like to commend the Foundation's entire staff – Christine, Bennett, Joanne, Chris, and Suzi. Their efforts on a daily basis often go unseen, but they truly operate as a team and get the job done, whatever it may be.

It has been an honor to serve as the Chairman of the Hitchcock Woods Foundation, and I welcome and congratulate Pat Corey as the next Chairperson of the Foundation. Pat has been an invaluable member of the Board for over twenty years and will do a fantastic job.

Hitchcock Woods is in good hands and will continue to be a wonderful resource for those who live in or visit Aiken. Like any resource, its value is determined partly by how much it is utilized, so be sure to make time this year to be in the Woods!



Greg has called Aiken home since 1974. A financial advisor by profession, Greg is also an avid outdoorsman and has been in and around the Woods for most of his life.

PATRICIA E. COREY



CHAIRMAN

Thanks to the hard work and devotion of our trustees, staff and volunteers as well as the generosity of our donors, we start out this new term on a firm footing as we look forward to a very busy, full year ahead. The addition of three new and very talented trustees, Elizabeth Carey, Joanna Samson and Jane Hottensen and their strengths and abilities are very welcome as we embark on the work we do to sustain and maintain our wonderful Woods for the purpose of all who come to study and enjoy them.

Why we, the trustees and friends of the Woods, are so devoted and do the work we do.

- ♦ The Hitchcock Woods is one of the largest privately owned urban forests in the country and is the largest urban forest that is dedicated as and remains a natural preserve, has been maintained in a natural state for almost 100 years, and is open to the public.
- ♦ The Woods provides habitat for over 160 different species of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and plants, all of which contribute significantly to the essential integrity of the ecosystem as a whole. It contains multiple archeological sites, which have statewide and national significance. It also contains a significant remnant of the now almost extinct longleaf pine wiregrass ecosystem that once dominated the entire South Eastern coastal plain and provides habitat for several species on the federal endangered list.
- ♦ The South Carolina Heritage Trust has determined that the Hitchcock Woods is irreplaceable as an educational resource and is such a significant natural and cultural area of the State of South Carolina that it should also be managed to ensure its preservation

under a conservation easement held by the Department of Natural Resources.

Clearly, the Board's focus is and must be to continue to execute our mission, which is to maintain, protect and preserve the Hitchcock Woods and its unique natural characteristics. We are also very aware of the threats and challenges that present themselves, more so now than ever before. We have pinpointed three focus areas: (1) City stormwater damage and erosion to the Woods; (2) Educational outreach about the value of the Hitchcock Woods to the community; (3) Establishment of an Endowment to sustain our work on behalf of the Woods in future decades.

The Board is unanimous that our highest priority continues to be addressing the escalating erosion and damage caused by the flushing of city storm water into the Woods. The damage and erosion to the Woods has reached a critical level that threatens the future of the Woods if a solution to this problem is not implemented immediately.

It is an honor to serve as Chairman of this amazing Board of Trustees and its outstanding staff. That said, there is much that goes on behind the scenes and could not happen without the dedication and hard work of each and everyone of you as well as our many volunteers and supporters. A heartfelt thank you and salute to all of you.



Pat Corey moved to Aiken in 1985. Pat was instrumental in the drafting and passing of the Aiken Historic Preservation Ordinance and served as chairman of the 1st Historic Preservation Commission. Pat has served as a Trustee for over twenty years.

CHRISTINE K. ROLKA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

*"For anyone who crosses the threshold between bustling city and wooded tranquility, they become aware of the unspoken placidity known as Hitchcock Woods." ~ Zerrin Varnadore
2016 Cèlestine Eustis Essay Winner*

Protecting and Preserving Hitchcock Woods

I always say that I emerge from each visit to the Woods a better person, and also joke, a better wife and mother too! A growing body of research explains the multitude of benefits forests provide, including physical, mental, spiritual and even academic. Those we reap from feelings of awe, often inspired by visiting forests or wild places, are what strike me most when I think about Hitchcock Woods. As a 26 year Woods veteran, I am continually surprised at my growing appreciation of this resource and by the abundant natural and historic wonder contained in these 2,100 acres! There is more to learn, love and protect than I ever imagined. Award winning environmental author, activist and two-time Festival of the Woods Speaker, Janisse Ray, remarked that "the desire to protect, stand up for, defend and love a place starts with developing a sense for it through its layers of story and meaning". Thanks to you – our dedicated network of Woods lovers and supporters - our activities this past year mirror this process, and are providing the pathway for future lovers and stewards of this special place.

Accomplishments

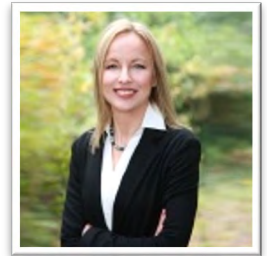
The following are some of the many successes your support made possible this past year:

Restoration of an Extirpated Species – Thanks to the impassioned hard work of our staff, trustees and private, state and federal agency partners, we accomplished in one year what we projected would take 3 to 5 years at our 2016 Spring Strategic Planning Meeting – the reintroduction of the Federally Endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker (RCW) to the Woods! Our RCW management and translocation plans were completed and approved, artificial RCW cavities were installed, and breeding pairs of RCW's were captured on the Francis Marion National Forest. The Foundation's vision, forest management plan and activities to restore the historic longleaf wiregrass ecosystem over the decades, came to fruition as we released the first of these beautiful birds into the Woods last November.

Preserving and Reinvigorating Woods Traditions – In the spirit and tradition of Mrs. Hitchcock's era: we ushered in the second century of the Aiken Horse Show and enjoyed record attendance from loyal patrons and those curious to see what "our Masters" is all about; a reinvigorated Axe Club helped build and prepare our newly installed jumps for the Aiken Hounds 103rd drag hunt season.

Cultural Resources Inventory and Management Plan – The final Phase of our three year Archaeological Survey of the Woods was completed, resulting in an inventory of historically significant sites, artifacts, and a management plan to guide our efforts to share and protect them for future generations. To our astonishment, a well preserved and never before seen portion of the 1833 Charleston to Hamburg RR Track was also discovered in the Woods.

Education and Stewardship – The Woods continue to become more recognized as a community resource. They provided sanctuary and recreation for walkers, hikers, equestrians, cross country runners, naturalists, history buffs, as well as Aiken Earth Day Run participants; the perfect setting for our Annual Festival of the Woods



Christine joined the Foundation in March 2015 after working for a national wildlife conservation organization for 14 years, and as an educator prior. She earned her M.A. in Natural Sciences from the University of South Carolina. Christine and her family enjoy spending time in the Woods and the outdoors.



In the original Axe Club, community volunteers, many of them nationally known businessmen, worked alongside the Hitchcock family staff in blazing trails, maintaining jumps, and tending to the Woods.



Students learn about the past through artifacts discovered during the archaeological survey of Hitchcock Woods.

celebration; a classroom for hundreds of area school children, scouts, college students and future foresters; a tourist destination for the International Dendrology Society; and a theme for community outreach presentations and Science and Earth Day Events.

Looking ahead

Protecting and preserving a place like Hitchcock Woods is not easy, but thankfully for most of the Foundation's staff, trustees and devoted supporters, it is a priority and very much a labor of love - one that extends back to the Foundation's establishment in 1939, and chock full of challenges and achievements along the way. The year ahead will be no different. While we have much to celebrate, we have more to do to protect the Woods from threats to its ecological health and integrity, to build the next generation of stewards, and to grow our endowment to sustain our future work. Your hard work and continued support is needed more than ever. Thank you for all you do to support the Foundation's work on behalf of our beloved Woods!

BENNETT TUCKER WOODS SUPERINTENDENT

As the cicadas create their summer song and a thunderstorm rumbles off in the distance, I sit and reflect on the exciting memorable year that I have had, one of those activities being the return of an old friend to this urban forest.

Highlights over the last year include groundcover restoration work, continued progress on our prescribed burning program, response to storm damage from Hurricane Matthew, a strong turn out from the Axe Club to spruce up the drag line jumps, another successful Aiken Horse Show as well as Festival of the Woods. The grand story of the year, is the return of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker (RCW) after nearly fifty years of being absent from this Longleaf forest.

Late summer 2016, the woods staff took on a restoration spraying project in the selectively thinned stands, encompassing roughly 100 acres on the northeastern side of Hitchcock Woods. This spraying project focused on selectively controlling the stump re-sprout of the less desirable weaker species that were removed post ice storm, in order to reduce the competition for sunlight. We have been pleased with the natural regeneration of the Loblolly, Shortleaf and Longleaf pines as well as some of the native groundcover species. This winter our aim is to continue to conduct prescribed burns in these units to reduce the wildfire hazard and assist in the breakdown of the residue on the ground, ultimately providing a flush of nutrients back into the soil. Prescribed burns will also selectively promote the success of the Longleaf pine regeneration in the coming years in these same management units, mimicking the historic natural landscape. We have plans to keep these areas

maintained, and to incorporate pollinator wildflowers in the openings in the near future.

Our fall effort to spruce up the “Aiken jumps” along the drag lines in preparation for the Aiken Hounds drag hunt season would not have been possible to complete as quickly without the great help of the Axe Club volunteers. The volunteers came out twice a week over a 3-4 week time frame to help Woods staff brush all of the 80 jumps. I would like to personally thank everyone who helped in this effort!

As it stands right now, I am proud to report we have at least ten RCW’s back on the property and they are doing well. Last fall, after installing the necessary artificial cavity inserts across the property in 9 different cluster sites, 5 “PBGs” or Potential Breeding Groups (5 males and 5 females), were translocated from the Francis Marion National Forest. This effort was a joint partnership to restore the species to Hitchcock Woods, after almost 4-5 decades of them being gone, due to a lack of proper stewardship between the turn of the 20th century through the 1980s, when the Hitchcock Woods Foundation began to restore the forest back to the way it was more than a century ago. Out of the 10 birds that



Bennett Tucker was hired as Woods Superintendent in June 2006. His certification in firefighting and first responder training strengthens our prescribed burn program and enhances our ability to work with public agencies in emergency response.



Axe Club volunteers prepare fences for the Aiken Hounds drag hunt season.

were carefully brought to be released in Hitchcock Woods, a few of them left the property leaving us with 7 birds. After this spring nesting season, 2 of the 3 breeding pairs successfully had young and we are back up to 10 birds on the landscape today. We look forward to the next phase of translocation this year to continue to bolster the population and increase the success of this species. This project would not have been possible without many partners involved, but specifically the vision of the Hitchcock Woods Foundation Board and Forestry Committee Chairman, Randy Wolcott. To have an endangered species back on the landscape is the ultimate “feather in the cap” for the restoration of this forest resource and the hard work that has been undertaken on the ground over the last 30 years through prescribed burning and ecological selective thinning.

In closing, we continue to reach out and foster education through the Festival of the Woods, field trips with forestry students from Clemson University and Suwanee Forestry and Wildlife students. We also continue to stay engaged with the state prescribed fire council, state exotic pest plant council and the local Aiken County Forestry Association. I would like to thank everyone for their individual support of the Hitchcock Woods Foundation and as always, I will see you in the Woods!



A Red-cockaded Woodpecker peeks out of an artificial cavity in Hitchcock Woods.

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CUMULATIVE GIVING FROM JULY 1, 2016 TO JUNE 30, 2017

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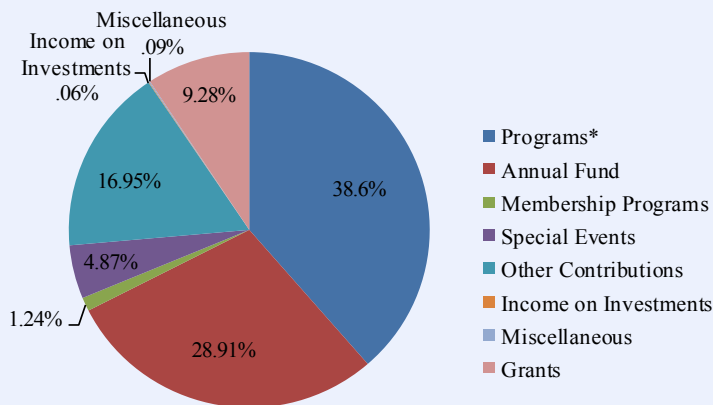


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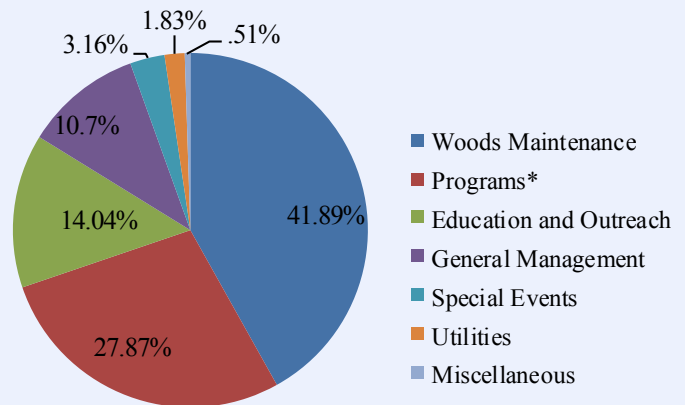
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The Foundation's fiscal year runs from July 1 to June 30, aligning our annual operating budget and schedule with the cycle of peak activity in the Woods, from early fall to late spring.

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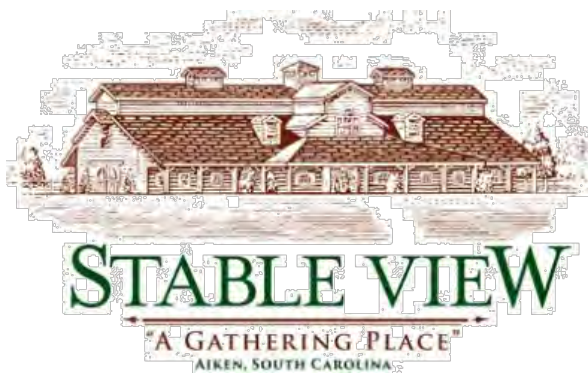




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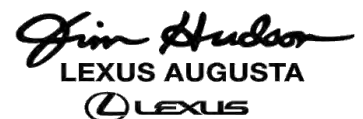
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One of the oldest and largest Longleaf Pines in the United States can be found in Hitchcock Woods. Its age is estimated to be between 300-400 years old. Photo courtesy of Joanne C. Gunnell