A TREE WITH A HOLE IN IT

Hitchcock Woods Foundation board member Randy Wolcott remembers pretty clearly his first glimpse of a red-cockaded woodpecker cavity. He told me about it one morning last July as we were looking out over the strange, almost lunar, landscape of the “Chalk Cliffs” area of the Woods. The spot’s strange beauty and unique mix of plants make it a popular destination for visitors here. Kalmia, or mountain laurel, a plant normally associated with more mountainous regions, blooms in profusion in the spring. You’ll also find ground juniper (Juniperus communis) and bushy Virginia pines growing here, alongside longleaf pines.

The topography of the cliffs is caused by a geologic formation called a “vaucluse udorthent slope,” a huge dome of clay poking up through the region’s characteristic sandy hills. It’s an open question as to whether the ravines and gullies running through the area are the result of human excavation or natural erosion. No one really knows for sure, says Wolcott. It’s also where one of the last known naturally-occurring clusters of the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW) was located on the property before finally disappearing in the late 1960s or early ’70s.

As we stood looking across the landscape, quiet except for a gently dripping rain, Wolcott told me about visiting the Chalk Cliffs for the first time nearly twenty-five years ago, not long after he first moved to town.

“I came here and saw that tree with the relic cavity, and that’s what piqued my interest and got this whole thing started — I said, ’What is that? Why did they go away? What if we could get them back?’ It just kept gnawing at me over twenty years . . . I never stopped thinking about it.”

Wolcott has served for the past eighteen years on the board of the organization that protects and manages the woods — the Hitchcock Woods Foundation. It has kept him involved in his adopted home community of Aiken, and it doesn’t take much time in his company to begin to understand just how seriously he and the other board members and staff of the Foundation take the mission they are charged with, which was laid out by the Wood’s original owners, Thomas and Louise Hitchcock.
THE NEARLY barren landscape of Hitchcock Woods’ chalk cliffs is not easily explained — was this carved out by erosion or excavation?

HISTORY, TRADITION AND CONSERVATION

The Hitchcocks were transplants to Aiken, too; part of the wave of wealthy Northerners who began buying large tracts of land and former plantations in the South Carolina Midlands and Lowcountry in the decades following the Civil War, converting them into “sportsman's paradises.” From the Webb Wildlife Center south of Aiken in Hampton County and up the coast through the ACE Basin and the former rice fields along the ACE Basin and the former rice fields along the ACE Basin, Hitchcock Woods is part of that remarkable story. The foundation was established by the Hitchcock family with an original gift of 1,190 acres in 1939 to protect and maintain the Woods for the use and enjoyment of the Aiken community. The foundation has since expanded the Woods to nearly 2,100 acres today, making it one of the largest privately owned urban forests in the country. It is managed by the Hitchcock Woods Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, and receives no operating support from municipal, county, state or federal taxes. In 1997, the majority of the Hitchcock Woods was protected in perpetuity through a South Carolina Heritage Trust easement. But that’s getting a little ahead of the story.

Back in 1891, the sandy rolling hills around Aiken were already gaining attention as a splendid winter training ground for race horses, and the Hitchcocks were most definitely horse people. In their case, it wasn’t the pursuit of ducks or deer hunting that lured them south — it was the training of steeplechasers and race horses. Mrs. Hitchcock, who had spent time in the area as a child, convinced Mr. Hitchcock to try it for just one season. The result was a decades-long relationship between the town of Aiken and the Hitchcock family that would add greatly to the region’s prominence as a center for equine sports. In 1916, the Hitchcocks began the famed Aiken Horse Show, which celebrated its centennial anniversary in 2016, and in 1919, Mrs. Hitchcock founded the “Aiken Drag,” now known as the “Aiken Hounds,” the oldest continually hunted drag pack of foxhounds in the United States. Today, Hitchcock Woods is one of the largest urban woods in the United States, dedicated for the use and enjoyment of the citizens of Aiken forever.

For fox hound and steeplechase enthusiasts, the Woods are a place to ride and jump and practice their sport. The Aiken Hounds club maintains its traditions, drag hunts, and, of course, the annual Thanksgiving morning Blessing of the Hounds event that draws hundreds to the Woods each November. For others, it’s simply a wonderful place for a good walk, with miles and miles (more than seventy) of sandy trails and beautiful woodlands to explore. But what most casual visitors don’t know about is the extent to which, for about the last three decades, the Hitchcock Woods Foundation has been actively managing the property to restore the longleaf pine ecosystem that once dominated its sandy uplands. In the process, they’ve created a sanctuary not just for equestrians and hikers, but for native wildlife of all kinds, including one very special bird.

The Hitchcock Woods Foundation has been recognized time and time again for its conservation efforts. In October 2011, for instance, Trees SC, a statewide nonprofit that provides a forum for the stewardship of South Carolina’s urban and community forests, recognized the Foundation with its Community Forestry Award, calling the Woods “a model for the state in conservation of an urban forest.” And in the spring of 2017, after decades of intense management activity designed to restore big sections of the property’s upland areas to its historic longleaf pine savanna habitat, five pairs of juvenile red-cockaded woodpeckers were “translated” to the property from a successful breeding population in the Francis Marion National Forest under a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

According to Woods Superintendent Bennett Tucker, who’s spent the last decade preparing the land for the birds’ arrival with a careful regime of prescribed burning and thinning of understory trees to re-create the pre-Colonial habitat necessary for these woodpeckers to flourish, and Mark Pavlosky, a wildlife biologist hired by the Foundation to oversee the project, the Hitchcock Woods could at some point in the not too distant future support as many as twelve potential breeding groups of the endangered birds (a group includes a breeding pair of adults and multiple juvenile helpers).

The Foundation has an active plan to restore it to longleaf, “says Tucker. At that point, it became apparent to the board’s members that they needed to take a more proactive long-term approach towards managing the property that would help manage fuel loads, restore the longleaf pine habitat and provide a better home for wildlife. Their next step was hiring a forester. Gary Burger, now a land manager/forester with the S.C. Department of Natural Resources, was hired as the first Superintendent of the Woods in 1998 and oversees the restoration project for the next twelve years. In 1998, the Foundation set out to have an ecological assessment of the Woods and a management plan developed with a team of forest, wildlife and ecology experts who would guide the future of the entire property. The handpicked group had expertise in botany, forestry, ecology and wildlife biology and came up with a very comprehensive plan for managing the Woods.

“Fire is one of the most basic steps we can take to return the property to longleaf,” says Tucker. “Fire is a matter of taking care of what we have.” In fact, there are longleaf pines on the property the team estimates are as much as four hundred

FIRE IN THE PINEY WOODS

That’s what brought me to the property in July, so that Tucker, Pavlosky and Wolcott could show me some of the “clusters” where RCW pairs were released this past spring, and also to look at the work they have been doing on the property more generally. It’s a fairly complex business, Tucker explains. The judicious application of prescribed fire over the last few years has been a key part of preparing the land for the birds, but the management plan actually dates back much further than that. The Foundation began restoring the Woods for other reasons, back when the idea of bringing back RCWs was still just a glimmer in the back of Randy Wolcott’s mind. In the mid to late ’80s, the Foundation board realized that they needed to take a more active approach to managing the Woods, says Bennett. That is, they needed to actively manage the property, and only a small amount of thinning related to timber sales. Outside of the areas cleared for use as equestrian trails or fields, the Woods was overgrown, with a thick understory and a heavy layer of “duff” (old leaves and dried vegetation) on the ground. Basically, an uncontrolled wildfire waiting to happen.

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“That’s when we really started managing with an active plan to restore it to longleaf,” says Tucker. “Fire is one of the most basic steps we can take to return the property to longleaf.” The Foundation has an active plan to restore it to longleaf, “says Tucker. “Fire is one of the most basic steps we can take to return the property to longleaf.”
years old. One of those trees may in fact be a new state champion; Tucker is in the process of submitting its measurements (140 feet in circumference) to the S.C. Forestry Commission for confirmation.

The Woods’ current leaders see the fact that they haven’t changed our management of the woods, managing it and restoring it, “says Wolcott. “We haven’t changed our management of the woods since the 1960s and early 70s, before the mid-story trees just finally disappeared from the property totally, says Pavlosky. Luckily, nature has equipped those birds as they are available to those vacant clusters.”

These birds are relying on instinct to tell them what to do — normally they would be able to watch and learn, but since they were removed prior to their first breeding season, they have to figure it out on their own. Luckily, nature has equipped them to do just that.

It’s a long process, but one that has had plenty of support from the Hitchcock Woods Foundation board. Some trustees recall seeing RCWs in the 1960s and early 70s, before the mid-story trees just became too thick and overgrown, and the birds finally disappeared from the property totally, says Tucker. So they remember what it was like to have birds on the property. Adjoint property owners are excited too, several have spotted the RCWs foraging in their backyards, and they’ll frequently call Tucker with an update when that happens.

NEW CHALLENGES

As we continue with our tour of the property — at one stop toting to take photos of a pair of RCWs flitting in the pines, and also spotting the beginnings of a new nest cavity — we eventually cross the “Sand River,” an interesting feature of the property and an area where stormwater runoff is presenting a challenge for its stewards. The bed of “Sand River” is basically dry until after a good rain, when the city of Aiken’s stormwater collection system drains directly into it. The volume and velocity of city stormwater being directed and discharged into the channel is causing accelerated damage at an alarming rate, explains Wolcott. One rainstorm discharged 35 million gallons of runoff water from Aiken’s 1,190 acres of streets and buildings into the channel through a single ten-foot diameter pipe during a one hour period — at its peak at a rate of 100,000 gallons per minute — explains Wolcott. Over time, the erosion caused by these releases has gotten very bad, cutting a 75-foot “canyon” out of the landscape in the river channel below the outfall. It’s a problem — one that the Hitchcock Woods Foundation is currently working with city leaders to try and solve.

The Foundation is also keenly aware of its responsibilities when it comes to preserving cultural artifacts remaining from the property’s long history of human use. A recent inventory of the property revealed, in addition to artifacts related to the early railroad line that once connected Charleston and “Hamburg” (near Augusta) in the 1830s, some sites indicating that people were living on this land as far back as 11,000 years ago.

That’s a long time, but really, just a blink of an eye, geologically speaking. With the Hitchcock Woods Foundation’s commitment to protecting the land and preserving its heritage, human, equine and canine visitors, families, sportmen and women, students, historians and amateur naturalists should be enjoying treks through this urban forest for decades to come.

SCDNR Regional Public Information Coordinator David Lucas is a former editor of South Carolina Wildlife.

To plan a trip to Hitchcock Woods or any of the other natural areas featured in this issue of SCW, visit the SCDNR’s website www.dnr.sc.gov and the South Carolina Association of Tourism Regions at www.scatr.com.