



**LOOK CLOSELY** and you will see that a nest box has been installed in this longleaf pine to encourage red-cockaded woodpeckers to set up housekeeping.

# MODEL OF AN URBAN FOREST

At Hitchcock Woods, history, tradition and a commitment to conservation come together to create a natural jewel for the Aiken community and a haven for one endangered species.

PHOTOS & TEXT BY DAVID LUCAS

## 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 “vaucuse 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?’ And then I started hearing the story, and I just became intrigued. 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 Santee River floodplain, many such properties now form the backbone of a network of public lands preserved for the benefit of South Carolina’s citizens and wildlife, and 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 “translocated” 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).

## 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. At that time, there was no burning being done, 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.

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 the early ’90s and oversaw 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 that 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.

“That’s when we really started managing with an active plan to restore it to longleaf,” says Tucker. “The longleaf was already here — it was just a matter of taking care of what we had.”

In fact, there are longleaf pines on the property the team estimates are as much as four hundred



**THE RCW** restoration project in Hitchcock Woods is progressing nicely, evidenced by this specimen pecking away in search of a snack in the bark of this pine.

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 were approved as a site for RCW translocation as validation of that path. "We call that the capstone to our management of the forest over the last twenty years — of burning it and thinning it and managing it and restoring it," says Wolcott. "We haven't changed our management of the woods because of the RCWs. Our work on managing the forest creates the habitat for them, so our board was very supportive of us getting involved with this. It just fit very well with the management plan we have in place."

Educating the public — about the benefits of ecological management and burning in the

forest — came next and is an ongoing effort. Standing in the middle of such a large property, it's easy to forget that it's surrounded by homes and busy streets. Building relationships with nearby residents and property owners by showing them that burning could be done in a less intrusive way and that the benefits were worth it was key to the success of the plan. Crews limit burning to only about seventy acres a day, says Tucker, and burns start early and are always put out by 2:00 p.m. That can make the process more challenging and time-consuming than it would be otherwise, but that's just a fact of managing a large property like this in the center of a metropolitan area. The Hitchcock Woods staff and board are dedicated to doing it right.

"It's a challenge," says Tucker, about conducting controlled burns in an area surrounded by homes and roads, "but we get it done."

The restoration program also includes mid-story and timber stand improvement. When they first got started, the duff load and understory in many parts of the woods were too thick for a person to walk through, says Tucker.

After the rain finally takes a break, the four of us pile into a small pickup for a look around the property and head to some of the cluster sites prepared for last fall's translocation. Along the way, biologist Mark Pavlosky updates me on the project's status.

"In November of 2016 we moved five pairs of sub-adult birds," says Pavlosky. "We currently have three breeding pairs on the landscape — six adult birds. We've had three nest attempts, two successful. We banded three chicks from two different nests, and that is great news. We didn't expect such great success of retaining 60 to 70 percent of our birds."

All of the birds were moved from the Francis Marion National Forest under a cooperative agreement with the USFWS. The SCDNR has translocated birds from Sandhills National Wildlife Refuge to Donnelley WMA and other properties within the ACE Basin under a similar program. In addition to the three breeding pairs that stuck together and stayed on the property after being released, a single male bird has been spotted by himself, and Pavlosky believes there might be an eighth bird, a female that vanished around the start of the breeding season this past

spring, still here, somewhere.

"The goal is to keep moving birds to the woods," he says. "We've got nine potential cluster sites [locations where a group of birds can set up housekeeping] prepared across the property that we can move birds to, so we'll continue to move birds as they are available to those vacant clusters."

According to the project guidelines, they have three more years to move additional birds to the site. Hopefully, by the end of that period, more of the translocated birds will have also begun reproducing subsequent generations.

For instance, if a single male is still around in the fall and another single female is available at the Francis Marion National Forest, it could be brought here to "try again" to make a match. Filling up the nine current cluster sites is the first goal for the project. Long-term, as continued management efforts make more areas of the Hitchcock Woods suitable for translocation, more breeding pairs could be released in those areas as well. Pavlosky estimates the Hitchcock Woods could eventually support as many as twelve "potential breeding groups," pairs of young adult birds that could each be the foundation for a new, self-sustaining colony.

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. Adjacent 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 point stopping 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, sportsmen 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](http://www.dnr.sc.gov) and the South Carolina Association of Tourism Regions at [www.scatr.com](http://www.scatr.com).