

2019 - 2020

# ANNUAL REPORT

Hitchcock Woods

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Aiken, SC 29802

803.642.0528

[hitchcockwoods.org](http://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.*



## PATRICIA E. COREY CHAIRMAN

As I reflect on the past year in the midst of the global pandemic, I find myself in awe that we live in such an amazing community, which came together with great fortitude during a difficult and challenging time.

Our staff, Board of Trustees and volunteers are no exception. Because of their dedication and hard work, when everything seemed to be silenced and come to a standstill due to this virus, there was one place in downtown Aiken that never slowed down, never closed and was open and available to all to visit and enjoy its lush, beautiful woodland and peaceful solitude...The Hitchcock Woods. The number of visitors to the Woods actually increased significantly, but with 70 miles of trails in more than 2000 acres, social distancing isn't an issue.

The Foundation is also profoundly grateful to the generous and supportive donors and sponsors of the Woods who made our continuous operations possible. Their gifts given during a distinctly challenging time allowed this magnificent urban forest to be available as a healing sanctuary to so many who needed it. This would not have been possible without their generosity.

Keeping the Woods open and available to the community during this challenging time was indeed a priority for the Foundation, but it is important to emphasize that it is a direct result of the dedication, hard work and generosity of all who are involved. There is so much that happens "behind the scenes" for this forest to exist and to operate as smoothly as it does. To highlight just a few:

- The ongoing damage from the stormwater discharge continues to be our highest priority. Last year I shared with you that the Hitchcock Woods and the City of Aiken came together after sixty years to be part of a shared solution to significantly curtail the stormwater damage. I am pleased to say that work with the City of Aiken continued throughout the year, and we are on the brink of finally making that goal a reality.
- The Hitchcock Woods provides a habitat for over 160 different species of plants and animals, a habitat that does not cease to exist because of a virus. Our Forest Management Team worked tirelessly to continue restoring and maintaining the ecological integrity and balance of the forest as well as ensuring the safety of the community through careful planning, observation, prescribed burning and selective thinning.
- Red-cockaded woodpeckers, which are on the federally endangered list, are thriving in Hitchcock Woods and our bluebird fledgling population is one of the greatest in the state thanks to our Wildlife Team's continued dedication and careful monitoring.
- Ongoing maintenance and rehabilitation of miles and miles of trails by our Woods staff this year provided continued safe, sustainable and beautiful paths for pedestrians and equestrians to explore the Woods.
- The Foundation continues to work with the Department of Natural Resources to preserve and protect the latest archeological discovery in the Woods, artifacts of the railroad that ran between Charleston and Hamburg dating back to 1833 and never before seen in the U.S. or the world. The Foundation is also working with the Best Friends of the Railroad to have these artifacts certified by the National Register of Historic Places. We also continue to work on the preservation, monitoring and cataloging of our 35 other archeological sites dating back to prehistoric times.
- Our Administrative staff is the glue that keeps the Foundation organized and moving forward.
- Every member of our team is a steward of Hitchcock Woods, dedicated to protecting and preserving this exceptional resource in ways too numerous to list.

Indeed 2020 has been a year of challenges, change and uncertainty. 2021 is still an unknown, but the Foundation will endeavor to continue to do its work regardless and to explore new opportunities, educational and otherwise, to ensure the Hitchcock Woods is and remains to be a cornerstone of our community.



*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 1<sup>st</sup> Historic Preservation Commission. Pat has served as a Trustee for over twenty years.*



Photo credit: Joanne C. Gunnell

## W. BENNETT TUCKER WOODS SUPERINTENDENT

Sunlight glistening off long needled pines scattered across an open landscape, a breeze causing the wire grass and broomsedge to dance. . . the call of the eastern bluebird in spring followed by the “sputter” and “seep” calls of a Red-cockaded woodpecker working amongst the tree canopy in the morning sun. . . the flaking bark of a longleaf pine drifting in the wind from an eastern fox squirrel scurrying up a tree. This is the landscape that has welcomed early visitors to Aiken, SC since the 1830s.

With the construction of the Charleston to Hamburg, SC rail line in the mid-nineteenth century, Aiken emerged as a “healing place” for diseases such as tuberculosis and malaria bringing an abundance of visitors seeking a healthier place to settle. Because of this, Aiken became the prominent winter colony of SC around the late nineteenth century. Amazingly, 185 years after Aiken’s founding, the same forested landscape and longleaf pine scented air has been our “healing place”, refuge and sanctuary during a modern pandemic.

Over the course of the last year we were quite busy. We had a great fall season in 2019, celebrating the Festival of the Woods with Dr. Dwayne Estes, the director of the Southeastern Grasslands Initiative, and visiting with friends. Our 2019 Festival Family Fun Day was a success, and we are thankful for our friends and partners who helped us make that event happen.

Also, in September 2019, eight of our Hitchcock Woods Foundation Prescribed Fire Team members/volunteers travelled to Newberry, SC for the 2019 South Carolina Prescribed Fire Council annual meeting. The highlight of the meeting was that I was presented the 2019 South Carolina Prescribed Fire Manager of the Year award for “Excellence in Prescribed Fire Management and Advocacy.” This award was an extreme surprise and such an honor.

In November, we translocated 2 more pair of Red-cockaded woodpeckers from the Francis Marion National Forest to Hitchcock Woods to help boost the population in the Woods. Currently, after the 2020 spring nesting season, we have 8 active Red-cockaded woodpecker clusters and around 45 RCWs on the landscape in Hitchcock Woods.

Our dedicated Axe Club volunteers really shined this year in helping us prepare for the 2019-2020 Aiken Hounds drag hunting season. We are thankful for every member who came out to help with that last fall. Once we started the new year, our prescribed burning season commenced, and we were able to conduct prescribed burns on 570 acres this year to reduce the wildfire threat and to help promote groundcover restoration for the benefit of wildlife habitat management.

Last winter our woods resource stewards, Mr. Mike Grabowski and Mr. Frank Morelli, attended the Longleaf Alliance’s Longleaf 101 class in the South Carolina Lowcountry. The class covers “all things longleaf” from the history and growing of longleaf, to stand dynamics and ground cover restoration. It is an intense class and they learned a great deal in a short amount of time; they have been able to apply their new knowledge in their stewardship of the Woods.



*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.*



*Photo credit: W. Bennett Tucker*

In the early spring, our lives all began to be impacted by the novel coronavirus. Despite not being able to have the annual spring Aiken Horse Show, we made changes to our operations, adjusted our schedules to help be stewards of the forest and of our visitors, and we safely welcomed many during the spring and summer who just needed a “forest break.”

We press on with our work and stewardship of this forest for the benefit of all in this community. I want to thank our resource stewards, Mike and Frank, for their service to the Foundation. Much gratitude also to our supporters and volunteers because without you, our work and care would not be possible.

Let us march on with the spirit of the longleaf pine... tough, resilient and long-lived.

As always, I’ll see you in the woods!



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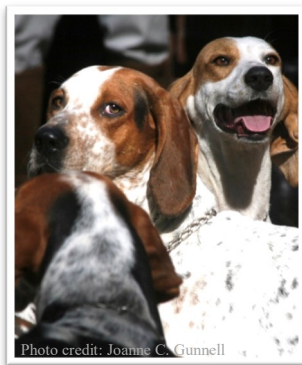


Photo credit: Joanne C. Gunnell

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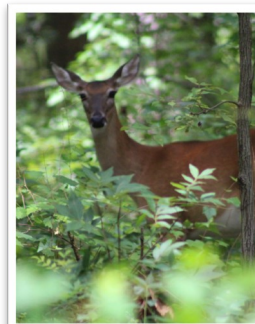
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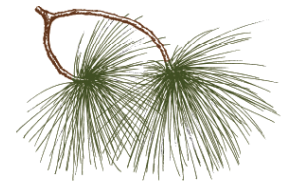
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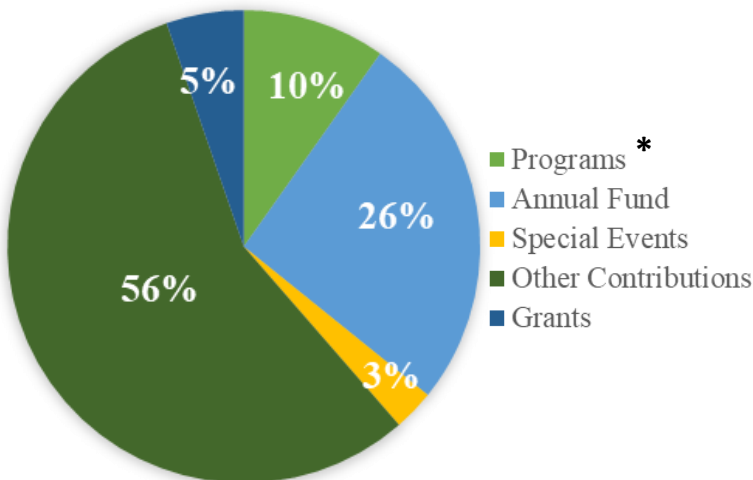
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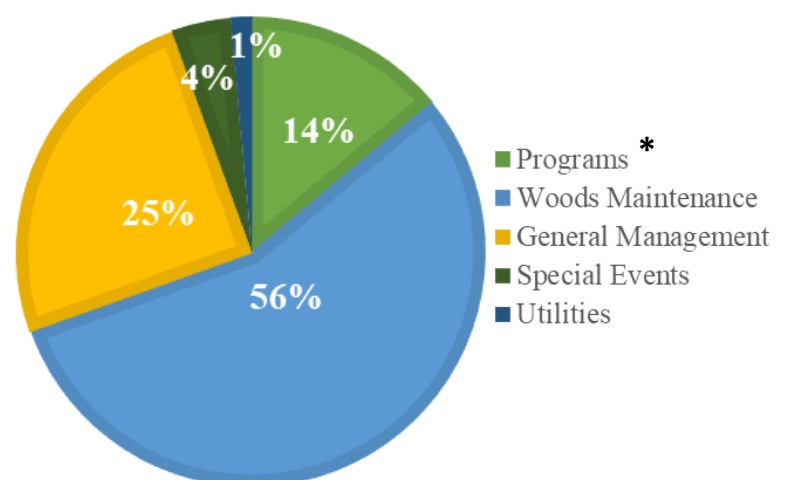
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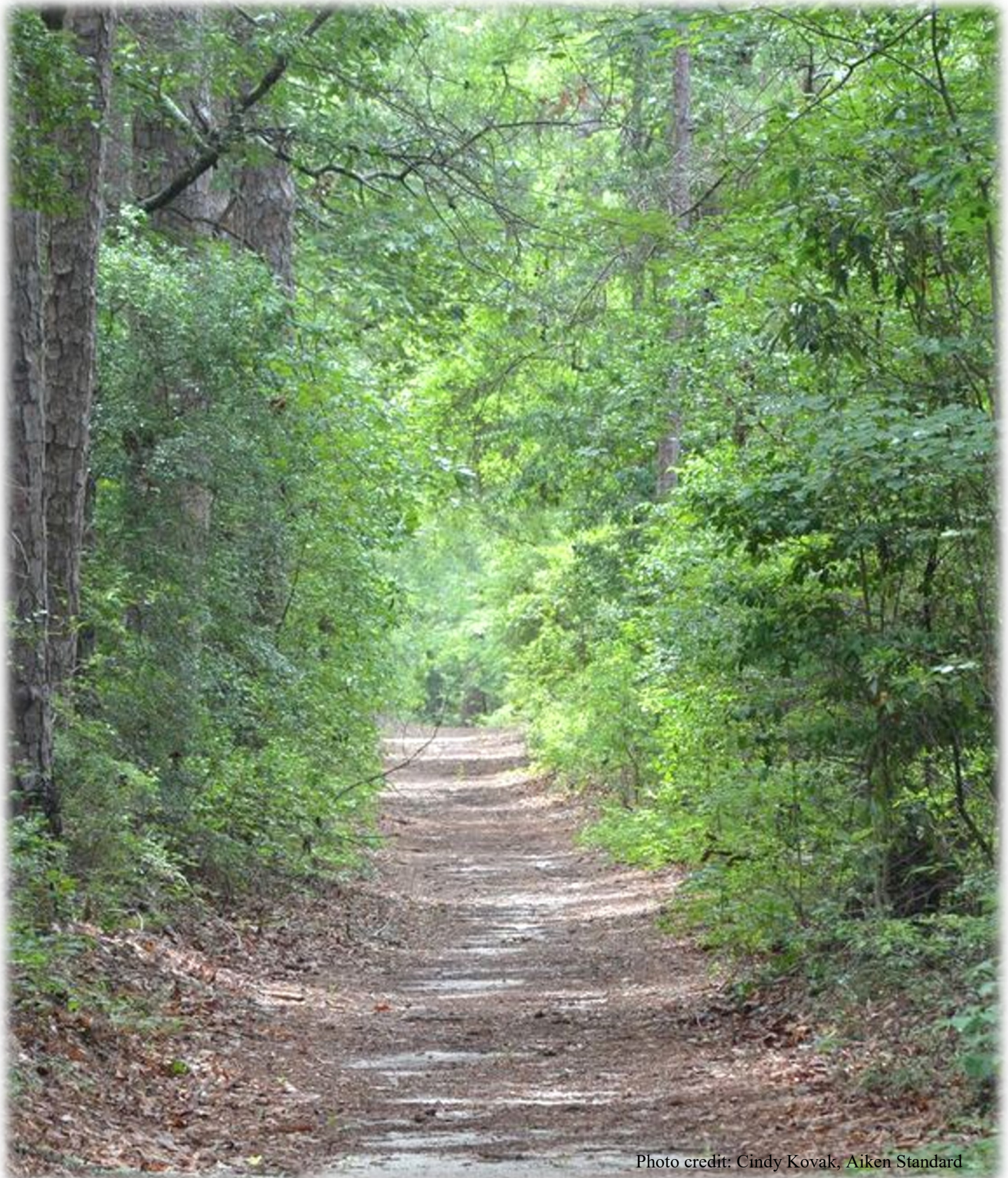


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