

# Program preserves wild lands

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The heat and humidity are pure southern Louisiana, but the landscape sure isn't.

There are steep hills and deep ravines, tall grasses, swaths of green ferns and exotic-smelling trees. Pines are a rarity, ceding the ground to elm, beech and oak.

But it is Louisiana — and not far from Baton Rouge.

A section of the Tunica Hills Wildlife Management Area, which lies off the road to Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, the land is one of 85 spots enrolled in the state's Natural Area Registry.

On a recent Sunday, Patti Faulkner and Judy Jones of the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, which runs the registry, mark their truck's location with a global-positioning-system device. Soon they head into the Tunica Hills to catalog the plants, birds and geological features that make the site special.

The ecologists climb down the hillside, making notes and collecting samples.

"This is really a thick canopy," Jones said.

The blazing spring sun manages to poke through the tops of the trees in only a few spots.

"Look at the switch cane," Jones says. The stalks of the bamboo-like grass dot the landscape.

The Tunica Hills are southern mesophytic forest, unique to the northwestern parts of the Florida Parishes and southwestern Mississippi. The landscape was created thousands of years ago by windblown glacial deposits that slowly eroded into something unusual in Louisiana — narrow ridges and deep ravines with streams running through them. The moist micro-climate sustains species more characteristic of the Appalachian Mountains than Louisiana.



Advocate staff photo by Travis Spradling  
A vine loops around trees in the Tunica Hills Wildlife Management Area north of St. Francisville. Natural Area Registry coordinator Judy Jones investigates the site's plants, animals and other characteristics.

Statewide, about 40,000 acres are on the registry, which is part of the Natural Heritage Program. The voluntary registry is designed to help maintain unique environments, partly by helping landowners learn how to best manage the habitat on their property.

While the state owns the Tunica Hills spot, many private owners also enroll.

Just north of St. Francisville, Murrell Butler put his 350-acre Oak Hill estate, a part of the old Greenwood Plantation, into the program in the late 1980s. Now he works with Jones and Faulkner to protect it against future development.

About 100 acres is cow pasture that sits along Bayou Sara. But a swamp occupies an old oxbow pond, and the rest of the property is typical Tunica Hills.

Birders often flock to Butler's property because the varied habitat attracts a wide range of species.

Butler says one of the benefits of the program is being able to ask questions about the environment and how best to keep the land natural. He has learned, for example, about knocking back invasive plants like Chinese tallow trees, which can crowd out native species and change habitat.

Across the state, east of DeRidder, Austin Arabie and his family have just put onto the registry 260 acres of the 750 acres they jointly own.

Two areas are enrolled, all rare longleaf pine and part of it a rolling savanna. The land is a botanist's bonanza for Chris Reid, who works with the state program.

On this mid-May day, wildflowers have exploded: yellow sunbursts, purple balls, white funnels, red bells. Carnivorous pitcher plants with long tubular stalks lure bugs inside for a final trip, an invitation to become plant food.

Arabie says that about 15 years ago, he realized his land was unique.

"I didn't see this anywhere else," he says.

## **The Louisiana Natural Area Registry**

By enrolling in the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries' Natural Area Registry, landowners express their intention to protect certain natural aspects of their property. Enrollment is not legally binding and does not subject the area to any new regulatory authority. The agreement may be cancelled by either party at any time, though 30 days notice is requested. If something occurs that reduces a site's ecological value, the land may be removed from the register.

### **A property must contain:**

- Habitat for native plants or animals with rare or declining populations in Louisiana.
- Plant communities characteristic of the native vegetation of Louisiana.
- Outstanding natural features, such as old-growth forests or wetlands.

### **Property owners agree to:**

- Protect the area and its unique natural elements to the best of their ability.
- Notify program officials of any threats to the area or to the plants and animals there.
- Be contacted by the registry's representatives yearly to determine whether conditions have changed or new threats have developed.

### **Property owners receive:**

- An annual ecological check-up on the health of the plants, animals or habitat.
- Preparation of a management plan, if needed.
- Consultation on how to protect the area if a transfer of ownership becomes necessary.

When Europeans arrived in North America, longleaf pine savannas stretched along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. Now the habitat remains only in isolated patches, replaced mostly by faster-growing loblolly pine.

“I hope that by being involved with the Natural Heritage Program, I will learn more about the native plant communities on our place,” Arabie says.

He wants to better manage the land to keep it “in a natural state.”

He, his mother and two sisters often open their land for groups, such as the state’s native plant society and botany students from universities.

“I feel good about cooperating with scientists like Chris Reid and allowing them the opportunity to explore and document the plant communities on the property,” Arabie says.

Jones tells family matriarch Nickie Arabie that the contract she is signing asks owners to give the program 30 days notice before opting out.

“We want you to tell us before you sell it,” says Jones.

The state might buy it or find another owner who would continue to preserve the land, Jones says.

Just south of New Orleans on the west bank of the Mississippi River in an area known as English Turn, Faulkner and Jones are stunned.

They’re walking down The Woodlands Trail, a six-mile path through 609 acres of remaining bottomland hardwood habitat. Hurricane Katrina knocked down many of the trees.

“I can’t get over how open it is,” Jones says.

The last time she was there, she could hardly see the sky.

Many of the trees that did survive are cypress — a testament to how well those trees, which are slowly disappearing, withstand hurricanes, Faulkner says.

The land is owned by Plaquemines Parish. The trail was developed by a nonprofit group.

The hurricane mangled the area, severely damaging the natural beauty that helped qualify it for the registry. Officials will wait to see how the land recovers before deciding whether to keep it in the program, Faulkner says.

It’s not always easy for land to make the cut.

South of Abbeville, Faulkner and Reid roam a boggy expanse of brown, decaying plant life that would be swamp if not for a long spring drought.

To get to this spot, the pair — along with Jones and data manager Nicole Lorenzo — had to fight through hundreds of yards of six-foot palmettos, fan-like plants synonymous with “wetland” in

Louisiana. The sheer size of the palmetto fronds are why the state is building a new facility for the future Palmetto State Park.

Crescent-shaped ridges formed by old bends in the nearby Vermilion River cradle small swamps. The group is evaluating the undeveloped areas of the future park for consideration as part of the Natural Area Registry.

As Faulkner and Reid stand amid waist-high cypress knees, Reid points south. “Look at the size of that tallow tree.”

Chinese tallow, some 30-feet tall and thousands more from a few inches to a few feet, have taken advantage of patches of sunlight opened by Hurricane Rita.

The tallows are a flaw in the otherwise uniquely Louisiana landscape, keeping the site from being included in the registry.

On a saline prairie in North Louisiana, it’s tiny earthfruit that have caught the attention of the people running the registry.

The individual buds are no bigger than the tip of a pencil. Three buds together are about as wide as the pencil shaft. The plant is rare enough to be listed as a “threatened” species.

It blooms for only a few weeks each year and only on the edges of bald spots in saline prairies, or salty splotches of ground usually surrounded by small oaks tucked into pine forests.

The saline prairies, in Winn Parish north of Alexandria, look like small clearings in the woods. The soil will only support grasses.

Weyerhaeuser Corp., a forest product giant, has marked off the habitat as a no-cut area.

Company botanist Alan Boyd and members of the Natural Heritage program spend a lot of time with their faces near the ground, looking for the elusive *Geocarpon minimum*, the scientific name for earthfruit.

“You can look at a spot as big as your hand and not see one. Then, once you see one, you usually see more,” Boyd says.

But on this day, they see none.

Boyd guesses that dry conditions over two years caused the earthfruit to stop reproduction.

“They don’t want to waste their seed on a bad year,” he says.

But he’s confident the earthfruit will blossom again for its six-week life before disappearing for another year or two, or maybe more.

When earthfruit first was discovered in the Winn Parish saline prairies in the early 1990s, the only other known ranges were in Arkansas and Missouri.

To find other prize spots for the registry, Reid and others will use maps, aerial photograph and tips from people.

Austin Arabie, one of the owners of the longleaf pine land near DeRidder, says he's "confident that there is no downside" to joining the registry.

He hopes more landowners will enroll to "preserve and protect the few natural areas that are left."

**ON THE INTERNET:**

Natural Area Registry:

<http://www.wlf.louisiana.gov/experience/naturalheritage/naturalareasregistry/>

<http://www.2theadvocate.com/features/3015806.html?showAll=y>