Spring/Summer 2015

# BLUESTEM

Newsletter for the Louisiana Natural Areas Registry

*Working with Landowners towards Conservation of Louisiana's Native Habitats*

**Volume 2, Issue 1**

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# New Additions to the Registry

In this issue we recognize Marc Bond, owner of Bond Crossing Natural Area, Mike and Paula Windham, owners of Silver Creek Forest Natural Area, and Mary Nesbitt, owner of Panther Territory Natural Area.

## Bond Crossing Natural Area - Tangipahoa Parish

Bond Crossing Natural Area consists of two tracts totaling 83 acres. Historically, uplands in this part of the state supported open longleaf pine woodland with a prairie-like herbaceous ground cover. The owner, Mr. Marc Bond, is committed to restoring this habitat on his property. Bond Crossing is enrolled in the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Longleaf Pine Initiative and was recently planted with longleaf pine seedlings through that program. Prescribed fire is a vital management tool, as longleaf pine habitats are fire-dependent. One of the tracts on Bond Crossing was burned earlier this year, and the second tract will receive its first burn next year. The herbaceous ground cover, which is characteristically very diverse in longleaf pine systems, is very promising, supporting grasses such as little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) and several rosette grasses (*Dichanthelium spp*.), along with a diverse assemblage of forbs. Detailed botanical study of this Natural Area will be carried out through this year.

Chris presenting Mr. Bond and his daughter, Graycen Taylor, with their certificate.

## Don't Forget to Contribute!

**We are still welcoming (and looking for) member contributions to the newsletter. Any Natural Areas member may submit news, an informative article, or images for potential publication in "Bluestem." The content may report new developments on a Natural Area or share information that might be interesting to other members. Please email your contributions to Sairah Javed (sjaved@wlf.la.gov) or save it to a CD and snail mail it to her at 1995 Shreveport Hwy, Pineville, LA 71360.**

Visit us on the Web!

*www.wlf.louisiana.gov/wildlife/louisiana-natural-heritage-program*

# Silver Creek Forest Natural Area - Washington Parish

Silver Creek Forest Natural Area consists of a small stream forest community along Silver Creek, a tributary of the Bogue Chitto River. The creek has beautiful, gushing clear water and the banks are surely full of hidden botanical treasures. Bigleaf magnolia (*Magnolia macrophylla*), Carolina lily (*Lilium michauxii*), and little brown jugs (*Hexastylis arifolia*) are just a few of the interesting species discovered here. While these species are not rare, they are not particularly abundant either. In Louisiana little brown jugs only occurs east of the Mississippi River in the Florida Parishes. Silver Creek Forest was damaged during Hurricane Katrina and the owners, Mike and Paula Windham, are committed to restoring its full beauty and health.

Sairah with Mr. and Mrs. Windham

# Panther Territory Natural Area - De Soto Parish

Panther Territory Natural Area is a beautiful shortleaf pine/oak-hickory forest community on ridges and slopes along a tributary of Keatchi Bayou. This forest community occurs on dry hills, principally in central and northern Louisiana. Historically there were an estimated 4 to 6 million acres of shortleaf pine/oak-hickory forest in Louisiana. Today only about 5 to 10 percent of the original extent remains. A few of the gems found here include old growth trees, including a loblolly pine (*Pinus taeda*) tree that measures 11 feet, 9 inches in circumference and two rare plants; American pinesap (*Monotropa hypopithys*) and granite gooseberry (*Ribes curvatum*). Mrs. Nesbitt's family has owned the property for generations and the name "Panther Territory" is an homage to Mrs. Nesbitt's mother, who used to hear panthers calling out in the night.

Mrs. Nesbitt and her new border collie pup, Maggie, after receiving her certificate.

# Louisiana Bearded Ants: *Pogonomyrmex badius* and *Pogonomyrmex comanche*

BY Michael Seymour, *LNHP Ornithologist*

News outlets have recently extolled the value of our native bees and the potentially crippling disappearance of the conspicuous American bumblebee, a pollinator of fruit trees and crops. Whereas these declines are fittingly alarming, few people recognize the crucial ecosystem engineering services provided by another group of closely related, social insects - the ants. Of Louisiana's more than 120 species of ants, only two bearded species are currently extant on our landscape: the Florida harvester ant (*Pogonomyrmex badius*) and the Comanche harvester ant (*Pogonomyrmex comanche*).

Harvester ants, like other native ants, provide many important services to humans, wildlife and habitats. Harvester ants aerate and mix soil and nutrients while tunneling, act as food items for birds, lizards and others, and are seed predators. However efficient seed predators may be, they occasionally drop seeds, giving rise to new plants in novel places. Harvester ants are quite large for ants, and at approximately 3/8 inch in body length, the sting of these ants packs a wallop! But that size makes them ideal prey items for other animals; so much so in fact, that in areas where harvester ants have been displaced by smaller, invasive, exotic ants, some animals, reliant on harvester ants to fill their stomachs, such as the Texas horned lizard (*Phrynosoma cornutum*), have suffered dramatic declines. It may be that the lack of Texas horned lizards in our state is linked to the decline of harvester ants here as well, a decline likely caused by widespread pesticide use in the 1960s and 1970s.

Like the lizard, harvester ants prefer sandy soils, a preference that presents challenges when constructing nest mounds. Fortunately for our harvester ants, they have beards (in fact, "Pogonomyrmex" translates to "bearded ant"). The beard-like psammophore is used during nest construction, when it holds additional bits of rock or extra grains of sand that would not readily fit in the ant's filled mandibles. Occasionally, the psammophore is used to carry small seeds.

The two species in Louisiana occur in sandy uplands including open pine woodlands and utility rights-of-way. Comanche harvester ants, imperiled in Louisiana, may be found in north central and northwestern Louisiana and is the more common of our two species. Within Louisiana, the critically imperiled Florida harvester ant is currently known only from Tangipahoa Parish - on Sandy Hollow Wildlife Management Area. Interestingly, harvester ants collect charcoal to spread atop their single-entrance nest mounds, the reason of which is currently unknown. But it may suggest that controlled burning of open pine systems is important for harvester ants too.

Although you may not have observed these two rare ants in Louisiana, you have almost certainly seen harvester ants. The ants used in toy ant farms are usually a species of harvester ant.

# TRUE OR FALSE?

## Restoration Fosters Beautification, Beautification Fosters Preservation

BY Johnny Armstrong, *Natural Areas Registry Member, Lincoln Parish* (jarmstrongwcr@gmail.com)

To my fellow registry members who harbor native communities not requiring restoration, I would like to offer you a trade. For a few years now I've been in the "restoration business" on Wafer Creek Ranch (WCR) Natural Area in Lincoln Parish. What makes WCR ecologically unique is a significant old-growth overstory component of the shortleaf pine-oak-hickory plant community, the original upland forest (woodland) type of the northwest Louisiana hill country. Due to agricultural and logging practices in the old days and many years of fire suppression, the ridge-and-hilltop forest transformed from a shortleaf pine woodland of upland oaks, hickories, grasses and wildflowers into a shady hybrid forest with few remaining groundcover species. The culprit? Native off-site species invaders such as loblolly pine, sweetgum, water oak, red and Florida maple, black cherry, French mulberry, sumac, blackberry, buckthorn, etc. So the fight was on, which translated to initial removal of loblolly by logging followed by herbicide of other unwanted tree species and brush. I've done all the herbicide work myself. I've never hired help because not many people know what upland species to leave and what native invaders to take. It's tricky. Herbicide is also very expensive. With state and federal budgets not geared to conservation, cost sharing programs for fire and herbicide are few and spotty. There's also seeding in with original ground cover species such as little bluestem and split-beard bluestem grasses, etc., and wildflower species such as *Liatris* (blazing star). The work goes year-round. Bottom line, restoration of native habitat is a lot of expensive, hard work, and generally we landowners need help with such a project. But the payoff is huge and it comes from the joy of knowledge gained from the fieldwork and the beautification it brings - the amazing result that truly is the sheer beauty that lies in each and every native plant community of Louisiana. It's magic! Slow magic, if one is trying to restore a mixed up neglected forest to something that resembles the original shortleaf pine-oak-hickory community. But what a pleasure it's been to see the native grasses and wildflowers begin to repopulate WCR because the invaders were conquered and sunlight is taking its rightful place in the community. Restoration on WCR will continue long into the future. But I have discovered restoration fosters beautification.

To those of us who love the land and nature, it seems like that second part of the question ought to be just as true. "Beautification fosters preservation." But we who have driven around the state, for years admiring some beautiful natural setting only to go by one day and see it leveled by loggers, dozers, oil and gas incursions, or whatever, well know that statement is at best only a half truth. We all know that sick feeling. Nature is sexy but money trumps natural beauty anytime, anywhere. We conservationist land stewards are outnumbered by the predators. Easily accessed native scenes of beauty (what native scene isn't beautiful?) are sitting ducks. Yet private landowners who are conservationists are a powerful resource for conservation on a grand scale. After all, most of the land in Louisiana is privately owned and, no doubt about it, therein lies many thousands of acres of high-conservation-value habitat - native ecosystems. A significant number of those landowners appreciate what they have and would like to see their property protected. But they simply don't know how. We Louisiana landowners are a large, unwieldy, unorganized group, uneducated regarding our conservation power, with few and diminutive tools to work with. Again, we need help!

Thank goodness for Heritage and the Louisiana Natural Areas Registry. I remember breathing a sigh of relief that Christmas in 2005 when Chris Reid and Patty Faulkner declared my beloved Wafer Creek Ranch as ecologically worthy of entering the registry. Wafer Creek Ranch Natural Area - a state registered natu-

ral landmark! To be watched over and monitored by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, no less. That's a big deal for the nature lover who owns the land. Short of definitive permanent legal protection, as is conferred by conservation easement, I cannot imagine a better way to "foster preservation" than by putting the landowner, landowner's heirs and future buyers on notice that the property has special ecological value to everyone, and not just monetary value for a few. Ultimately I hope the conservation easement mechanism becomes better utilized by private landowners, for such definitive protection will be needed to save many native plant communities in the future. It's a long, expensive process, even considering the tax deduction, but it's rewarding to leave the legacy of a fully protected native ecosystem. Sadly, easement options are limited in Louisiana. We need better, more affordable options. Beautification does not foster preservation.

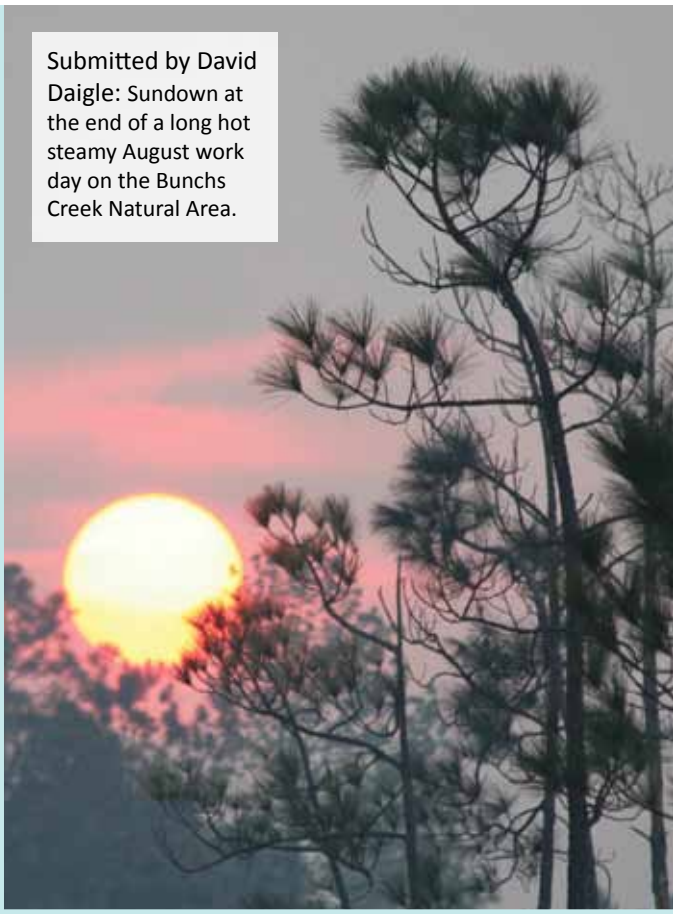
# ANNOUNCEMENT

## 2015 Natural Areas Conference in Little Rock, Arkansas - Nov. 3-5

The Natural Areas conference is a yearly event put on by the Natural Areas Association (NAA). The NAA's mission is to support the community of natural area professionals. They help members reach their professional goals, promote natural area management based on sound science, work to raise awareness about the need for natural areas conservation, and support natural areas research. This year's conference will explore many of the top issues that currently face conservation professionals, focusing on emerging changes in the conservation paradigm and the need for communication and constituency building in today's ever-changing political and social climate. Sessions at the conference will also delve into cutting-edge techniques for managing open pine ecosystems, prescribed fire, and river restoration. For more information visit *www.naturalareasconference.org* or contact NAA at info@naturalarea.org, (541) 317-0199, P.O. Box 1504 Bend, OR 97709

# MEMBER PHOTOS

Submitted by David Daigle: Nighttime prescribed burn for brush control on a windy early spring night. The prescribed burn was conducted in a narrow window of time just prior to longleaf candle development on the Clear Creek Natural Area.



Submitted by David Daigle: Sundown at the end of a long hot steamy August work day on the Bunchs Creek Natural Area.

Submitted by Katie Brasted: Woodlands Conservancy began running bird banding stations at both Woodlands Trail and Delacroix Preserve on a monthly basis in December 2013. More than 500 birds of 38 species have been banded with resulting data uploaded to the Louisiana Bird Observatory to contribute to the study of bird health and behavior along the Mississippi Flyway. Locally, the data is used to study bird behavior in restored and unrestored forested areas. Shown here is a white-eyed vireo.

Submitted by Katie Brasted: Recognizing the habitat value of this dwindling resource in Louisiana, the Plaquemines Parish Government placed Woodlands Trail and Park Bird Sanctuary on the Natural Areas Registry in 2004. This forested wetland provides important habitat for wildlife and migratory birds. (Photo by Josh Brasted).

Amity Bass

Nicole Lorenz

Carolyn Michon

Sam Holcomb

Chris Reid

Jeff Boundy

Beau Gregory

Michael Seymour

Keri Landry

Sairah Javed

Dan O'Malley

Neil Douglas

# Louisiana Natural Heritage Program Staff


**Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries**
2000 Quail Drive
Baton Rouge, LA 70898
(225) 765-2820

**Amity Bass**
Program Manager
abass@wlf.la.gov
(225) 765-2975

**Carolyn Michon**
Assistant Data Manager
cmichon@wlf.la.gov
(225) 765-2357

**Chris Reid**
Botanist
creid@wlf.la.gov
(225) 765-2820

**Beau Gregory**
Zoologist
bgregory@wlf.la.gov
(337) 491-2575

**Keri Landry**
Endangered Species Biologist
klandry@wlf.la.gov
(225) 765-2809

**Dan O'Malley**
Field Biologist
domalley@wlf.la.gov
(225) 765-2823

**Charles Battalgia**
Field Biologist
cbattalgia@wlf.la.gov
(337) 491-2575

**Sarah Lessard**
Data Technician
slessard@wlf.la.gov

**Jared Streeter**
Field Biologist
jstreeter@wlf.la.gov
318-343-4046

**Nicole Lorenz**
Data Manager
nlorenz@wlf.la.gov
(225) 765-2643

**Sam Holcomb**
State Wildlife Grants Coordinator
sholcomb@wlf.la.gov
(225) 765-0239

**Jeff Boundy**
Herpetologist
jboundy@wlf.la.gov
(225) 765-2815

**Michael Seymour**
Ornithologist
mseymour@wlf.la.gov
(225) 765-3554

**Sairah Javed**
Field Biologist/Natural Areas Coordinator
sjaved@wlf.la.gov
(318) 487-5885

**Neil Douglas**
Turtle Biologist
nhdouglas@att.net

**Chris Doffitt**
Field Biologist
cdoffitt@wlf.la.gov
(318) 487-3412

**Tracy Mancuso**
Administrative Assistant
tmancuso@wlf.la.gov
(225) 765-2812

**Alexis Burruss**
Student Worker
aburruss@wlf.la.gov

Charles Battalgia

Chris Doffitt

Tracy Mancuso

Sarah Lessard

Jared Streeter

Alexis Burruss

**LOUISIANA NATURAL HERITAGE PROGRAM**
**Louisiana Department of Wildlife & Fisheries**
P.O. Box 98000
Baton Rouge, LA 70898

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# MYSTERY PLANT

This issue's mystery plant is a shrub that grows in bogs, seeps, and wet pine savannahs and flatwoods. The leaves are simple and alternately arranged with finely toothed margins and a hairy underside. In autumn the leaves turn a brilliant red color. In early spring it produces clusters of white to light pink flowers, followed by bright red pome fruits that persist through winter. The bitter and tart fruits are sometimes used to make jam. However, eat them raw at your own risk because the fruits are so astringent they may cause you to gag or choke! In fact, its common name is in reference to this reaction to the fruit.

## WHAT IS IT?

Email your answers to Chris Reid (creid@wlf.la.gov) or Sairah Javed (sjaved@wlf.la.gov)

***The mystery plant from last issue was cypress knee sedge (*Carex decomposita*).**