

# Conservation Chronicle

Aiken Land Conservancy Newsletter

Spring 2013



## Bluebirds Need Your Land!



By Jim Burke

What does land conservation have to do with bluebird conservation? The answer is, more than most people know. The bluebird population in North America declined by ninety percent between 1920 and 1970 due to loss of habitat, use of insecticides like DDT, and the importation in the 1800's of two non-native bird species, the English House Sparrow and the European Starling whose populations became invasive.

But, the main culprit was habitat loss. To remedy that situation, the North American Bluebird Society (NABS) was founded in 1978 to educate the public about the dwindling bluebird population and to encourage the establishment of bluebird trails. NABS currently has fifty-eight affiliates in the United States, Canada and Bermuda. The South Carolina Bluebird Society (SCBS), an affiliate, was formed in Aiken in October 2010 and has quickly grown to a membership of 165.

The Aiken Land Conservancy and the South Carolina Bluebird Society share a mutual interest in the conservation of land, especially open land as well as forested areas with minimum understory. This type of habitat is ideal for Eastern Bluebirds and many other avian species. In just over two years the SCBS has established and monitors forty-five bluebird trails in Aiken County consisting of 472 nest boxes for Eastern Bluebirds and other cavity nesting birds, such as the Carolina Wren, Carolina Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, Wood Ducks, and Brown-headed and White-breasted Nuthatches.

This year is a busy and exciting time for SCBS. The annual conference of NABS will be held in Aiken, October 3-5. This event will bring people to Aiken from across the U.S. and Canada. A full day of tours and field trips are scheduled for October 3. This will be followed by two days of outstanding guest speakers giving presentations on a variety of birds and other wildlife topics. The conference is open to the general public. For additional information about the program and registration or memberships in SCBS and NABS, please visit [www.southcarolinabluebirds.org](http://www.southcarolinabluebirds.org) or contact Jim Burke at [jburke@southcarolinabluebirds.org](mailto:jburke@southcarolinabluebirds.org).





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# Executive Director's Report

*Katie Roth*

Spring has finally arrived in Aiken! After a cold, wet winter, ALC members enjoyed our first Spring Birding Walk at Three Runs Plantation on Saturday, March 16 (see page 9). The lovely trails at Three Runs provided the perfect place to see and identify many of our feathered friends. Since these trails are not open to the public, this event was a great opportunity to “bird” at a private location. And - the Three Runs residents that joined us now have a new appreciation of the birds in their neighborhood. I would like to extend our thanks to the Augusta/Aiken Audubon Society for their help with this event, along with Three Runs Plantation. We look forward to bringing you more member “field trips” in the future to get out and explore the land we are working so hard to preserve.

I recently attended a meeting of the South Carolina Land Trust Network. All land trusts in South Carolina are invited to meet twice a year to share best practices and get updates on what's new in the conservation world. I find it is beneficial to get together with other Executive Directors and discuss ideas on how to improve our land trust. We all encounter similar struggles and it is good to discuss how to improve our fundraising, increase our membership and educate landowners on the importance of conservation easements through the experience of others. Since I've started attending the meetings, I think we've become a more cohesive group and we've created a good support system for exchanging ideas and solving issues we all have in common. Although most of us know each other, there are always a few new faces at the meetings. When I introduce myself and say I am from Aiken, I often hear “what a beautiful place” or “I've heard such great things about Aiken”. I am proud to say I am from Aiken and hearing those comments only reminds me of the importance of preserving this wonderful place we call home.

One of our major goals this year is to increase our membership. Do you have family or friends that are interested in preserving our quality of life in Aiken? Please share this newsletter with them and encourage them to join us! The more support we have, the more we will be able to accomplish together. 🌿

*The mission of  
Aiken Land  
Conservancy  
is to preserve  
natural and historic  
resources through  
land conservation.*



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# President's Report

*Larry Comegys*

Our mission statement succinctly defines our role as an organization to protect natural and historic resources. We do that, of course, by holding conservation easements placed by landowners who also believe in protecting natural and historic resources.

For most landowners the timing of placing their property under a conservation easement is often determined by estate planning and tax issues. A February 25, article in the Wall Street Journal titled “Laws Give Tax Breaks for Land Conservation. But Hurry,” reminded us again how significant the tax advantages of conservation easements can be. The generous federal tax advantages that have been in effect for conservation easements have been extended only through this year and will expire at the end of the year if they’re not extended again by Congress. Now is the time to act to place property under conservation easement.

The current law allows a property owner to deduct the value of a conservation easement donation for up to 50% of their adjusted gross income per year. This deduction can be taken for up to fifteen years if the value of the donation is sufficiently large relative to income. Farmers, ranchers and timber growers who earn at least 50% of their income from their land can deduct up to 100% of their adjusted gross income.

Before Congress enacted these more generous tax advantages for conservation easements deductions were limited to 30% of your gross income and could only be spread over five years. Unfortunately, we don’t know if the more generous tax advantages will be extended again, or if they will revert to the old rules, or if they will be further changed or reduced under new tax laws. What we do know is now is the best time it’s ever been to place your property under a conservation easement. Uncle Sam wants your conservation easements, at least for this year! 🌿

*Wall Street Journal Reminder:  
Conservation Easements Can  
Significantly Lower Your Taxes*

# Generous Tax Benefits for Conservation Easement

Congress recently extended through 2013 a very favorable Federal tax incentive for conservation easements. With no sign this 'enhanced' benefit will be extended, landowners are taking a close look at the financial benefits of placing an easement on their property. Donating a voluntary conservation easement can be one of the smartest ways to conserve the land you love while maintaining your private property rights and possibly realizing significant tax benefits. A donor applying for tax benefits must hire an independent certified appraiser to establish the value of the easement. The basis for calculating the tax benefit is determined by foregoing the value of the development rights on the property.

Donations of open space easements that meet federal tax code requirements may entitle the donor to federal income tax deductions. For tax years 2012 and 2013, the 'enhanced' deduction is equal to 50% of adjusted gross income, which if not used in 2012 or 2013, may be carried forward for either the lesser of fifteen years or exhaustion of the deduction. IRS Form 8283 must be filed to obtain this deduction. Form 8283 requires attachment of a copy of an appraisal, an appraiser's declaration, and the Aiken Land Conservancy's acknowledgement of the gift.

South Carolina also has tax benefits for donating a conservation easement as long as the donor has qualified for and claimed on their federal income tax return a charitable deduction for an open-space easement. South Carolina's tax incentive comes in the form of a tax credit equal to 25% of the fair market value of the conservation gift. The tax credit is limited to a maximum of \$52,500 per year and to \$250 per acre. The South Carolina tax incentive allows the donor to carry the unused portion of the credit forward indefinitely until the full credit is claimed. This state sponsored tax benefit applies in addition to federal tax benefits.

If you would like to learn more about how a conservation easement might affect your financial portfolio, please contact the Aiken Land Conservancy today to discuss these benefits further.

# Conservation Conversation

**With Chuck Maxwell and Barbara Nelson**

***Why did you place a conservation easement on your land?***

*"Chuck and I have always been supporters of land conservation. We used to spend a lot of time hunting waterfowl and upland game birds. When we purchased this property, we knew it was blessed with an abundance of resources and wildlife, including some endangered and threatened species. Since it is part of Shaw Creek and also has associated upland hardwoods and ponds, it has a tremendous amount of diversity and serves as a wildlife corridor. We wanted to make sure that it remained in its natural state and supported those wildlife populations forever, so we looked to the ALC to ensure that."*



# New Winthrop Polo Field Sign Unveiled

ALC recently gave the sign at the Sumter Street entrance to Winthrop Polo Field a much needed facelift. Replacing the old sign that was crumbling with dry rot, the new sign presents a brief history of the field with photographs and a concise listing of field use rules. Designed by talented board member Linda Prior-Hunley with help from board members Margaret Shealy and Steen Smith, the sign addresses our important partnership with Aiken Polo Club who maintains the field. The sign is created from weather resistant material that will resist mold, mildew, and rot brought on by our humid summers. Shortly, a clear protective brochure holder will be added giving visitors a way to learn more about the history of this important Aiken landmark.

The Aiken Land Conservancy has recently worked hard to improve the beauty of the field by clearing weeds and low growing shrubbery from beneath the trees along the perimeter of the property and trimming dead and diseased limbs as necessary from the live oaks along Mead Avenue. We will be hosting an additional field clean up day (open to the public) soon to repaint the board fencing along Grace Avenue – all in an effort to maintain this jewel of the horse district.

## Adam Winthrop Polo Field

*Owned and protected by*  
**Aiken Land Conservancy**  
*and maintained in partnership with*  
*Aiken Polo Club for use as an open space to*  
*benefit the Aiken community as a cultural,*  
*recreational, and environmental resource.*



Enjoy your visit and please follow these guidelines for using and maintaining Winthrop Polo Field:

1. Daylight use only.
2. No parking.
3. No golfing.
4. No unauthorized vehicles.
5. No organized events without prior ALC permission.
6. Carriages please stay to the outside of the field.
7. No carriages when gate is closed or on rainy days.
8. Riders do flat work in moving circles.
9. No racehorse training.
10. No exercising sets of polo ponies.
11. Polo players must follow Aiken Polo Club rules.
12. For safety, pedestrians please yield to equestrians.

*For information or contributions:*

Aiken Land Conservancy  
P.O. Box 3096 Aiken, S.C. 29802  
1.855.ALC.LAND

[www.conserveaiken.org](http://www.conserveaiken.org)



## Brad Boni

*New ALC Board Member*

The Board Development Committee is pleased to announce that Bradley (“Brad”) L. Boni, Esq., has been elected to serve on the Board of the Aiken Land Conservancy (ALC). Brad is an Aiken attorney whose law practice deals largely with real estate matters. His nomination was suggested and is enthusiastically supported by Mary Guynn, whose fine legal counsel has been so valuable to the Conservancy for many years. Brad is a native of North Augusta who moved to Aiken while in secondary school. After attending law school at the University of South Carolina, he practiced law in Beaufort County and in Columbia. In 2004, he and his wife returned to Aiken, and he began his law practice here. His office is located at 759 Richland Avenue, West. Brad modestly notes that his personal and professional association with both Mary and Dante Busbee, the Conservancy’s first legal counsel, will be of significant value to his efforts for ALC. Brad and Kelly, his wife of fifteen years, have three wonderful children. 🌿

# Thank You!

ALC Board of Trustees would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to Jim and Sarah Wildasin for donating a fireproof file cabinet. It is crucial that our original conservation easement documents are properly secured. Fireproof storage is very expensive (especially for a 501c3), but thanks to the Wildasin's generosity and support, our documents are safe.

Thanks also go to Prestige Appliance in Aiken, who moved the very heavy, fireproof cabinet to its new secure location. Doug and Ronnie certainly got their workout flexing their muscles to benefit the ALC!

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# Longleaf Memory

By Benjamin Steen Smith, *Aiken Land Conservancy Board Member*

In and around Aiken in places like Hitchcock Woods and the Aiken Gopher Tortoise Preserve, organizations like the Aiken Land Conservancy (ALC) and public entities such as South Carolina's Department of Natural Resources have been working to preserve and restore the longleaf pine ecosystem. Interested individuals can visit the sandy uplands in Hitchcock Woods and experience a savannah-like forest of tall widely spaced pines with a grassy, herbaceous understory, a true remnant of the South's natural heritage. When America was founded, roughly 60% (or upwards of 93,000,000 acres) of the Southern Atlantic and Gulf Coastal Plains consisted of a vast, nearly unbroken forest of longleaf pine, stretching from Southeast Virginia to East Texas. It was an ecosystem molded by and adapted to fire, harboring a unique mix of flora and fauna like gopher tortoise, fox squirrels, red-cockaded woodpeckers, and a myriad of grasses and wildflowers. Towering up to 100 feet above the open grassy understory for miles on end was the longleaf pine, the distinctive and most prolific tree of the South. Today, about 1.4% of that total remains (counting second growth trees and later), with true Southern pine old growth existing only in a few isolated parcels. In just a few generations, a landscape and ecosystem has been transformed both in reality and in our perceptions. The longleaf landscape that elicited superlatives from the likes of Bartram and Muir and sometimes groans of monotony (for its seemingly endless nature) is not the landscape of today. Although honored in coffee table books and protected preserves, the longleaf forest and its inhabitants no longer define our region as say the Saguaro Cactus would to a resident of Arizona. And, we've become accustomed to this new reality.

In a span of about fifty years between the 1870's and 1920's, most of the old growth longleaf was harvested and not replaced, partly due to cut-and-run ethics in an era of abundant resources, and partly because the longleaf was difficult to regenerate and slow growing. Early attempts to reforest with Longleaf were unsuccessful. On the other hand, the formerly non-dominant Loblolly and Slash Pine became the trees of choice by foresters and land owners because they germinated easily and grew rapidly to harvestable size. Under the previous natural regime, the thick-barked longleaf was better adapted to fire than the Loblolly and Slash, particularly during the early stages of growth. However, a developing South led to an increasingly fragmented landscape less prone to the long burning lightning caused ground fires common to the pre-development South. The reforestation of the South with Loblolly and Slash was hailed as a great success. These forests continue to be a renewable source of wood and pulp, but at a loss of the uniquely adapted flora and fauna that previously existed.

Organizations like the ALC work to preserve and restore longleaf habitat with its associated unique plant and animal life, providing an opportunity to reconnect people with our natural history, enhance quality of life and pride in community which includes not only people but also remembers the gopher tortoise, fox squirrels, and the longleaf pine. 🌲

#### References:

1. Earley, Lawrence S., *Looking for Longleaf*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2004.
2. Finch, Bill, Beth Maynor Young, Rhett Johnson, and John C. Hall, *Longleaf, Far As The Eye Can See*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

#### Photos:

Top - Piney Woods 1900 Louisiana / Mississippi

Center - Florida Dense Pine 1929

Bottom - How the Southeastern Forest looked in 1491. The Longleaf Pine - Wire Grass Savanna - Okatie Plantation in Beaufort County





# Spring Birding Day

ALC held our first Spring Birding Day in cooperation with the Augusta/Aiken Audubon Society (AAAS) on Saturday, March 16 at Three Runs Plantation. A free event for ALC, AAAS members and Three Runs property owners, it was a beautiful morning to explore the trails (not usually open to the public) with expert birders.

The group counted nearly 40 different bird species including Golden-crowned Kinglets, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Yellow-throated Warblers, Eastern Towhees, Carolina Chickadees, a Belted Kingfisher and a variety of woodpeckers and hawks. Groups birded at different locations along the trail system and met back at the clubhouse to share stories and check off species noted on the large bird count chart. A picnic lunch in the beautiful Three Runs pavilion finished off a lovely day! Our thanks to the AAAS and especially Gary Smith for helping to make this a fun outing for both experts and those new to birding!





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Awake, thou wintry earth - Fling off thy sadness!  
Fair vernal flowers, laugh forth your ancient gladness!

~Thomas Blackburn, "An Easter Hymn"



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