

PUBLISHER The Longleaf Alliance, **EDITOR** Sarah Crate, **ASSISTANT EDITOR** Margaret Platt, **DESIGN** Bellhouse Publishing
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COVER The brilliant red of winged sumac under montane longleaf in Cherokee County, Alabama. Photo by Ad Platt.

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THE LONGBLEAF LEADER

Healthy Forests

VOLUME XIII - ISSUE 3

FALL 2020

Longleaf Destinations

Black River Cypress Preserve: The Restoration and Interpretation of Nature

By Dana Beach,
Vice-Chair, Butler Conservation Fund

I met Gilbert Butler 17 years ago, kayaking on the Francis Marion National Forest's iconic Wambaw Creek. The private equity pioneer-turned-conservationist's love of southern cypress swamps had been decades in the making. Its source lay one thousand miles to the north, in the foothills of the Adirondack mountains, and on Maine's Mt. Desert Island, where Gil had developed a passion for wilderness kayaking.

His enthusiasm for paddling eventually led to the Southeast. Every spring he would explore Georgia's coastal waterways, and later those of the South Carolina Lowcountry. Over time, Gil became convinced that saving the environment, while encouraging people to live healthier lives, meant exposing them to the transformative beauty of nature.

Gil and I first toured the 1,000-acre Black River tract (near Andrews, South Carolina) in the spring of 2015. The owner, Resource Management Services (RMS) of Birmingham, Ala-

bama, had recently placed the property on the market. Six hundred acres of old-growth cypress and tupelo were protected by a conservation easement purchased a few years earlier by The Nature Conservancy. The "residual" 400 upland acres consisted of medium-aged loblolly pines, growing characteristically "thick as dog hair" in the sandy soils.

We were all mesmerized by the swamp, and Gil, especially, by the fact that the property across the river – six miles of mature cypress and tupelo forests interlaced with channels and alluvial ridges – was already owned by The Nature Conservancy. Applying decades of corporate experience in leveraged buy-outs to conservation work, Gil asserts, "The goal of protecting rivers is to get both sides. And the best case is not having to pay twice."

The Cypress Preserve purchase represented a distinct departure from previous South Carolina projects supported by Gil's



Johns Lake Pavillion is one of several facilities at Cypress Preserve. Photo by Dana Beach.

Scenic paddling adventure on South Carolina's Black River. Photo by Dana Beach.

New York based charitable foundation, the Butler Conservation Fund. The Fund had become the lead private sector funder of land protection on the Black for a decade, helping protect eight properties along the Black, encompassing more than 4,000 acres of land and 15 miles of river frontage.

But the Cypress Preserve was the first South Carolina property the Fund would own outright, with the goal of developing recreational and educational programs for school children and the public. The precedent had been set decades ago in upstate New York near the Butler family seat of Alder Creek. There, in the foothills of the Adirondacks, Butler charitable entities own and operate eleven campuses with 50 miles of trails for canoeing, hiking, bicycling, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing and nature study. Students from schools in the mostly rural area of the Adirondack foothills have logged approximately 120,000 visits to the campuses. Beyond the partnerships with

area schools, the campuses are open to the public year-round. More than 10,000 people annually enjoy the trails, picnic areas, and interpretive displays.

Sometimes circumstances align too closely to be considered coincidence. The Butler family estate in Alder Creek, New York – 1,000 miles to the north of Andrews, South Carolina – is also bordered by a Black River. This one was legendary in the economic history of the Northeast – part of the massive canal system that supported industrialization of the region in the 19th century.

It was this northern Black River where a young Gilbert Butler spent summers canoeing and swimming. Prophetically, perhaps, the Butler's beautiful family vacation home on the property was built in the early 20th century of longleaf pine – perhaps harvested from the forests of coastal South Carolina.

Although motivated initially by the majesty of the cypress-tupelo swamp, Gil recognized the significance of the upland pinelands at the Cypress Preserve. An insatiable scholar of American history and collector of 18th and 19th-century natural history prints, he had been inspired by narratives and images of the Southern landscape for decades.

Fortunately, most of the subjects painted by John James Audubon, Mark Catesby, and Alexander Wilson continue to animate South Carolina's Black River woodlands 300 years later. The springtime blackwater swamps still ring with the persistent "sweet, sweet, sweet" of prothonotary warblers. Even in their altered state, the pinelands still resound with the songs of Bachman's sparrows, sedge wrens, red-headed woodpeckers, summer tanagers, blue grosbeaks, and orchard orioles.

As the Butler Conservation Fund team mapped out the development and restoration of the Cypress Preserve, it seemed as if the spirits of these early naturalists, in concert with the forest's current residents, were reminding us of the former glory of the adjacent pinelands, urging their rehabilitation. Fortunately, the scientific foundation for reconstituting the intricate beauty of the native pine forests had been laid during



*Longleaf pine underplanting in a loblolly pine overstory.
Photo by Dana Beach.*



Trails at Cypress Preserve offer many hiking and biking opportunities, including through their recent longleaf restoration projects. Following Hurricane Matthew, this loblolly pine stand was underplanted with longleaf pine. Photo by Dana Beach.

the middle of the last century and further developed by a small cadre of longleaf devotees, notably The Longleaf Alliance.

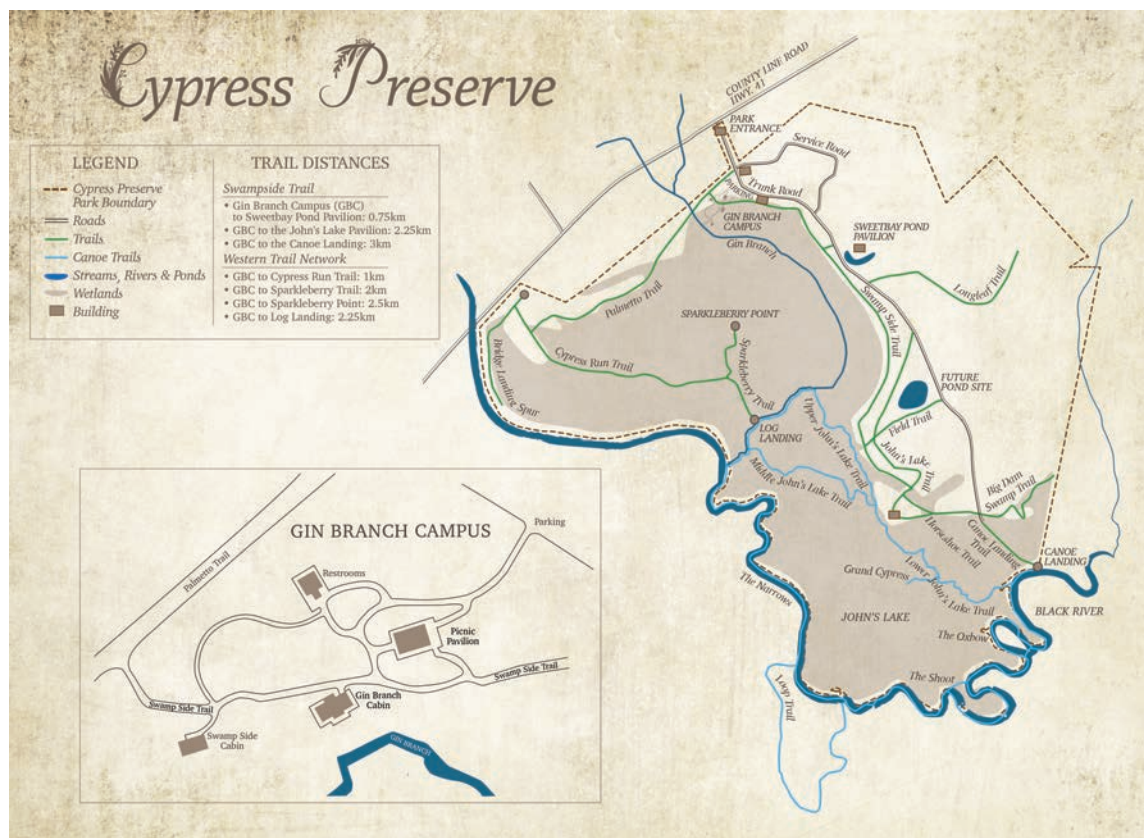
After purchasing the property in December 2015, we decided to thin the loblolly stands to allow more sunlight and space to stimulate plants in the understory. Initial botanical reconnaissance revealed an impressive diversity of understory plants that had survived in the plantation landscape. With a little help, we believed they and other native species could flourish.

We did not intend, however, to begin the longleaf restoration work immediately. It took a hurricane to set the stage for that.

In the fall of 2016, Hurricane Matthew took the initial thinning and doubled it, knocking down half of the remaining loblollies and leaving the forest floor a tangle of downed trees. The Butler Conservation Fund contracted with Amy McFadden, who had overseen the earlier forestry work, to clean up the fallen forest. In addition, we began the process of restoration by planting 70,000 longleaf seedlings. Today, four years later, a healthy percentage are thriving, as they emerge from the grass stage. This adds a critical component to the ecological education program. The Cypress Preserve is now a living laboratory to demonstrate the restoration opportunities for a heritage upland forest and to study its evolution over time.

To accommodate visitors and scholars, the Cypress Preserve offers eight miles of trails for biking, hiking and nature study, and another eight miles of kayak and canoe routes. The aquatic paths follow the main stem of the Black River and wind along the sloughs among the dark stands of ancient cypress and tupelo.

The centerpiece of the system is the Swampside Trail, extending from the Cypress Preserve campus near the property entrance on Highway 41 to a kayak landing on the river. The



While the official opening of Cypress Preserve is delayed, interested visitors can reserve a time to visit and enjoy the property by contacting Erin Pate (erin@cypresspreserve.org or 803-413-500).

trail is unique in allowing visitors to traverse the ecotone between upland and swamp habitats. It is a compelling expression of the Butler Conservation Fund's vision of education – respectful, active, inspiring access into the mysterious world of the cypress/tupelo swamp. Not surprisingly, the Swampsides trail, where the pinelands and swamp meet, hosted the highest number of bird species during the year-long bird survey of the Preserve. A bird study of the property, conducted by Citadel ornithologist Brogin van Sloik, has catalogued resident and migratory species that have visited and nested on the property, chronicling the birds' abundance according to the time of year and habitat type.

The Preserve is also serving as a botanical research site. Cecelia Daley, a protégé of the legendary Citadel biology professor Dr. Richard Porcher, completed a survey of the thousand-acre property this year, cataloguing 452 vascular plants, including eight rare or threatened species. Cecelia will wind up another survey on an upriver campus called the Peninsula Tract this December. So far, she has identified 341 plant species on that 176-acre property, including five that are rare or endangered. One of the most exciting discoveries this spring was a grove of *Macbridea caroliniana*, commonly known as "birds-in-a-nest." The Butler Conservation Fund plans



Eastern bluebird. Photo by Dana Beach.

additional work on birds, reptiles, mammals, insects, and mosses in the coming year, along with broadening the scope of the forest ecology and restoration agenda.

The Cypress Preserve's fall opening has been delayed because of COVID-19, but the scientific research and campus development continues unabated. In keeping with the spirit of partnership and leverage, the Butler Conservation Fund looks forward to collaborating with The Longleaf Alliance in this unfolding journey of discovery, education, and restoration.