

SOUTHWEST GEORGIA OUTDOORS



- The benefits of **FORAGING**
- **SHOALIES** of the Flint River
- **CALEB HORTON** finds his calling

- The appeal of **ALBANY AUDUBON**
- **SWAMP OF TOA** hidden treasures
- **JOEY THIEL'S** turkey hunting tips



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THE ALBANY HERALD

306 W. Broad Ave. • Albany, GA 31701

229-888-9300

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Let me capture your imagination of what a perfect day outdoors would be, and I bet you will find it in this spring edition of Southwest Georgia Outdoors.

Imagine being outdoors to watch a bird dog work in a field of wiregrass and pines, instructed by one of the best bird dog trainers in Georgia.

Aspire to become the best turkey caller in the region, hauling out that big Jake with that trophy beard.

Dream about that day outdoors where you can smell the hardwood forest after a rain and know which herbs and mushrooms to forage, gather and melt in a pot of some wild game you harvested this year.

Smell the honeysuckle blooming on the banks of the Flint River when you make that cast, knowing that next catch is going to break the record for a shoal bass, while you listen to the water cascading over the low rocks gurgling around you.

Close your eyes and see the prettiest of field birds in our region and then see that native bluebird which stands out among the rest.

Walk the trails of the Chickasawhatchee Wildlife Management Area, better known as the Swamp of Toa, and hear the murmuring of the native Indian villages and the rumbling of the army of Hernando de Soto as they discovered a New World.

All of these dreams and aspirations of that perfect day outdoors can be found here.

Meet Caleb Horton, one of, if not the, best bird dog trainers in Georgia. Experience his life's journey and here he tells the moment he knew this was his mission in life. It starts off with a love of dogs. And as his co-worker Josh Waldrip says, "It's a way of life."

Then, step into the boots of Joey Thiel as he walks us through some turkey hunting basics that will bring success in calling these elusive birds. Thiel, known as one of Georgia's great turkey hunters and having accomplished a couple of National Wild Turkey Federation Grand Slams, urges us to enjoy the hunt and get to know the birds that are among the smartest and most challenging to call in for a successful hunt. His message is to keep it simple and that the hunt is as important as the trophy.

As we end hunting season and pick up the fishing rod, Tom Seegmueller shows the majesty of fishing for the Flint River's best known angling prize, the shoal bass. Here is a story of why catching this bass is different and why this region and this river is so important to its survival.

The Albany Herald Editor Carlton Fletcher shares the history and activity of the Albany Audubon Society. The local members of this national organization demonstrate that it is not just hunting and fishing that get us outdoors. The members show the love of appreciating what nature offers on her own through the various species of birds that live and travel this way.



One of southwest Georgia's greatest environmental resources is Chickasawhatchee Wildlife Management Area, locally known as the Swamp of Toa. This historic place encompasses 14,220 acres of land, giving local and state residents a wonderful place to enjoy the outdoors. You will experience the history and the evolution of one of this area's and Georgia's great places.

Tara Fletcher takes an adventure with Heather Smith, co-owner of Thunder and Lightning Mushroom Farm, and Lauren Dorminey, co-owner of Wild Herbs & Co., to forage the forest of southwest Georgia for native edible mushrooms, herbs and medicinal plants. But be careful. Some of the mushrooms are edible and others come with a warning from these experienced cultivators of local plants.

And, the chef at The Flint restaurant in downtown Albany, Glenn Singfield II, shares a recipe for Crab Herb Cream Cheese Stuffed Salmon that would make returning from the outdoors a culinary treat in your own kitchen.

As you read through this Spring Edition of Southwest Georgia Magazine, I hope you realize that a perfect day outdoors is right here. It can be experienced in many ways. Get outdoors with friends and family and capture your imagination of the wonderful region in this part of the world, this special place where we live.

Thanks,

**DuBose Porter, Executive Director
Georgia Trust for Local News
The Albany Herald**

The lost practice of...



Heather Smith and Lauren Dorminey



Foraging

If you think the food scene in southwest Georgia is not very adventurous, maybe you're just not digging deep enough.

I recently took a trip to a public area in Lee County to go foraging with Heather Smith, the co-owner of Thunder and Lightning Mushroom Farm, and Lauren Dorminey, co-owner of Wild Herbs & Co.

In my attempts to eat better and support local businesses with locally sourced products, I first found Smith. Heather's family-run business is a mushroom lover's dream, offering freshly picked varieties of mushrooms that aren't sold anywhere else in the region, mushroom tinctures and even mushroom jerky. In addition to the mushroom products, the Smiths teach classes on log inoculation, foraging, soil remediation and bucket growing at Thunder and Lightning Mushroom Farm.

Lauren is someone I've known for a few years. Her hippie vibe and look are not just an affectation. She and her partner in life and business, Geoffrey Hatcher, make a living off the land.

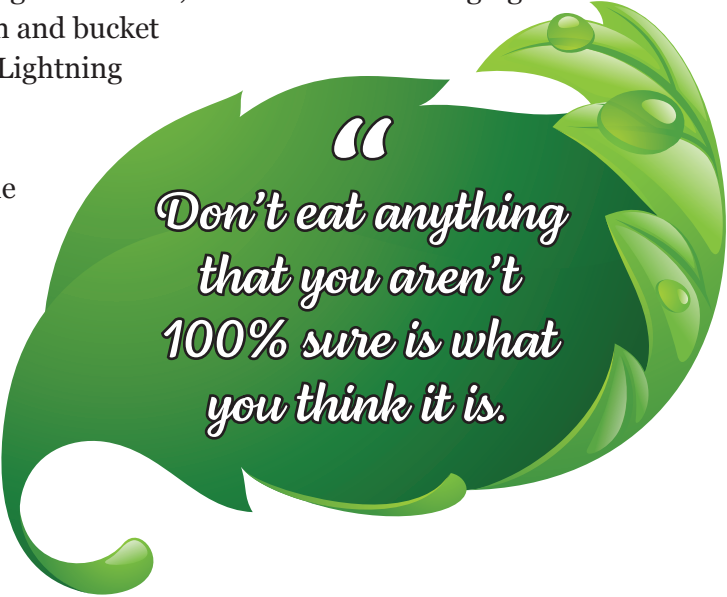
"Wild Herbs & Co. is a passion-driven business that started with a passion for plants; and like plants, the business has multiplied and shot off in many directions," Lauren said.

Like Heather, one of those directions led Lauren to teaching workshops, including making sourdough starters and foraging, with her mission to "bring people back to nature." Her main focus now is on floral arrangements, herbal folk medicine and educating others.

When I decided to write this story, I guess you can see why I called on these nature-loving phenoms.

Before we got started, I asked Lauren and Heather: What are your best tips for foraging?

"Try to forage with a friend, but if you go alone tell someone where you're going and how long you plan to stay," Heather said.



"Don't eat anything that you aren't 100% sure is what you think it is."





Above, Dorminey is looking at wild blueberry blooms



“Take plenty to drink, a collection bag and a small first-aid kit. Make sure to get permission to forage on private property and know the rules for foraging on public land.”

She also said that you can forage for mushrooms year-'round with the best hunting opportunities coming 2-3 days after rain-fall in temperatures between 65-75 degrees. The most important thing to remember, she said, is, “Don’t eat anything that you aren’t 100% sure is what you think it is.”

Lauren offered some sound advice as well.

“Forage in familiar areas,” she said. “Many plants are bioaccumulators, absorbing toxins from the environment, so be sure the space hasn’t been treated with pesticides or insecticides. Also, if you’re taking a plant, only take one for conservation purposes.”

With those words of wisdom in mind, we headed out.

Within minutes, Lauren spotted a familiar plant called mountain mint. She crushed some leaves between her fingers, and a pleasant aroma filled the air. We looked near dead and dying trees for mushrooms, and I learned that lichens almost always grow on the north-facing side of a tree. So if you’re ever lost in the woods, lichens will point you north.

We also encountered rabbit tobacco. Rabbit tobacco is edible and was smoked by Native Americans for lung health. Native Americans used another plant we found: yaupon holly. Before battle or before making a big decision, they would ingest large amounts of the plant, causing them to purge as a way of cleansing themselves.

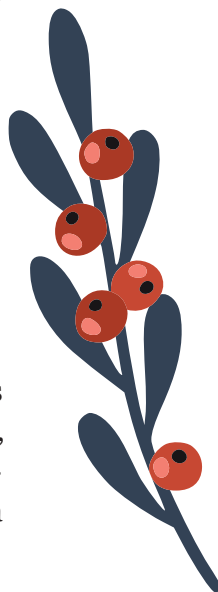




Wild Violet

Yaupon leaves also were used by early Americans to make tea. They served as a good substitute for the expensive imported British tea and contained caffeine. When India began to import affordable teas, the yaupon plant was all but forgotten.

We found an abundance of blooming wild blueberry bushes, blackberry plants, violets and native salvia (lyre sage). Medicinal plants were plentiful, too: Saint Andrew's cross (our native St. John's Wort), the lichen, usnea and the pine tree, whose sap is antimicrobial and whose needles can be boiled for a vitamin C-rich tea.



Other things found locally this time of year are reishi, chanterelle, oyster and boletus mushrooms, nettles, beauty berry, magnolia flower and bark, mimosa flower, dandelions, muscadines and scuppernongs.

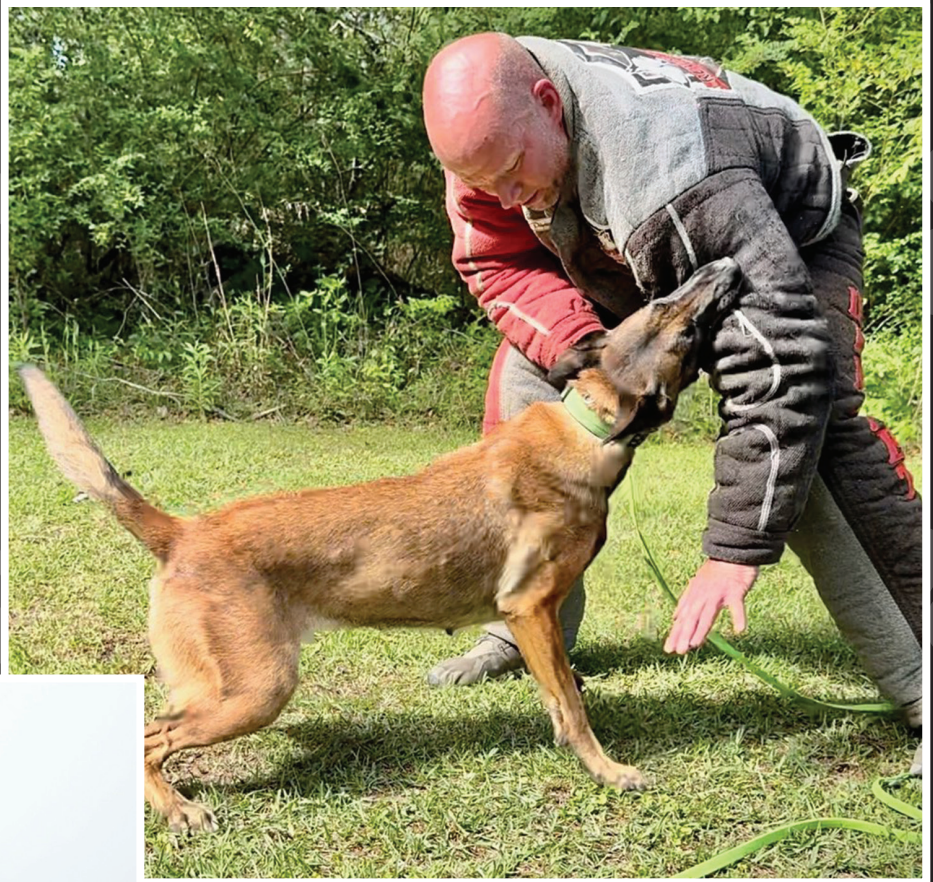
As we walked out of the southwest Georgia woods and to our cars, we opined about the lost practice of foraging for food and medicine. Spring and summer offer a wide selection of nature's bounty, and it's all yours for the picking.

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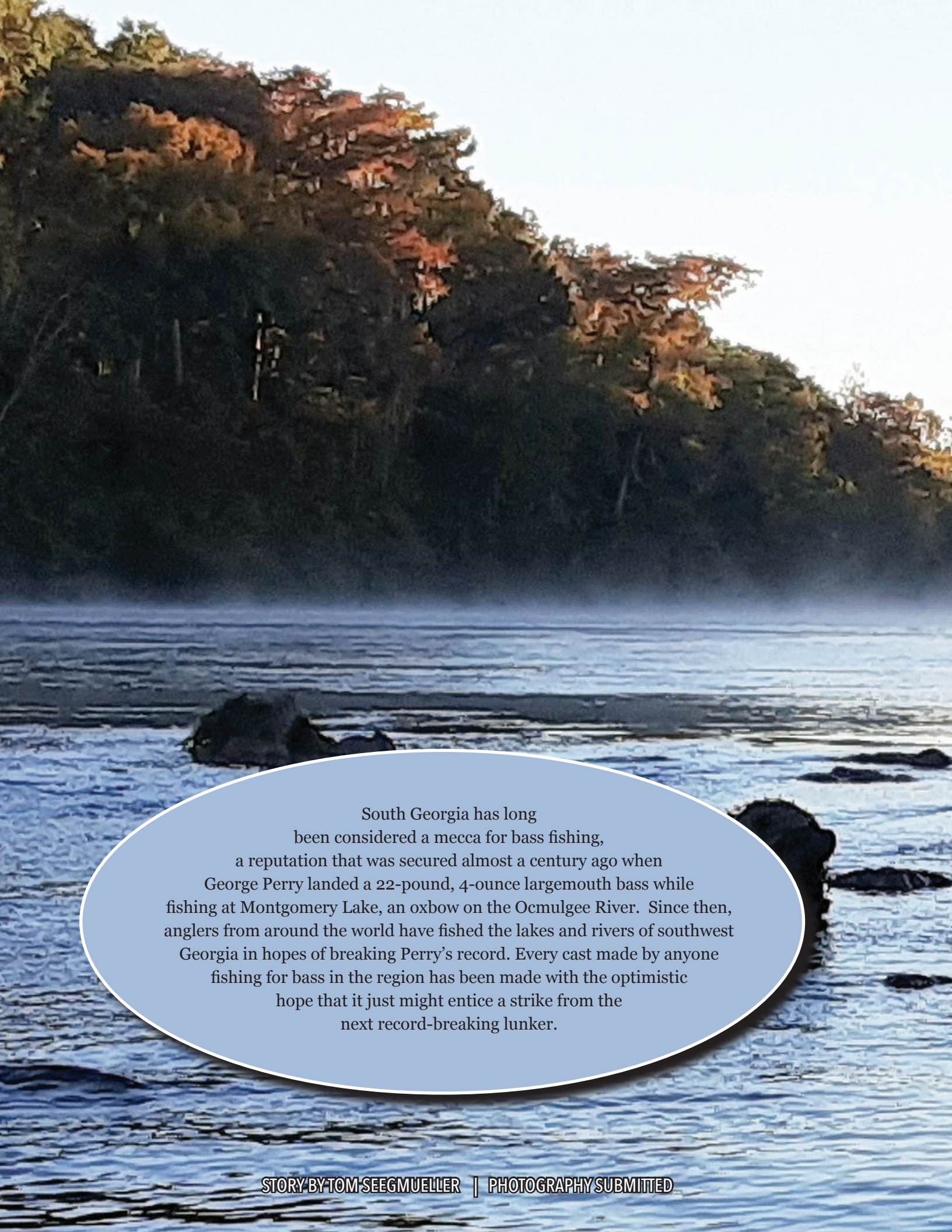
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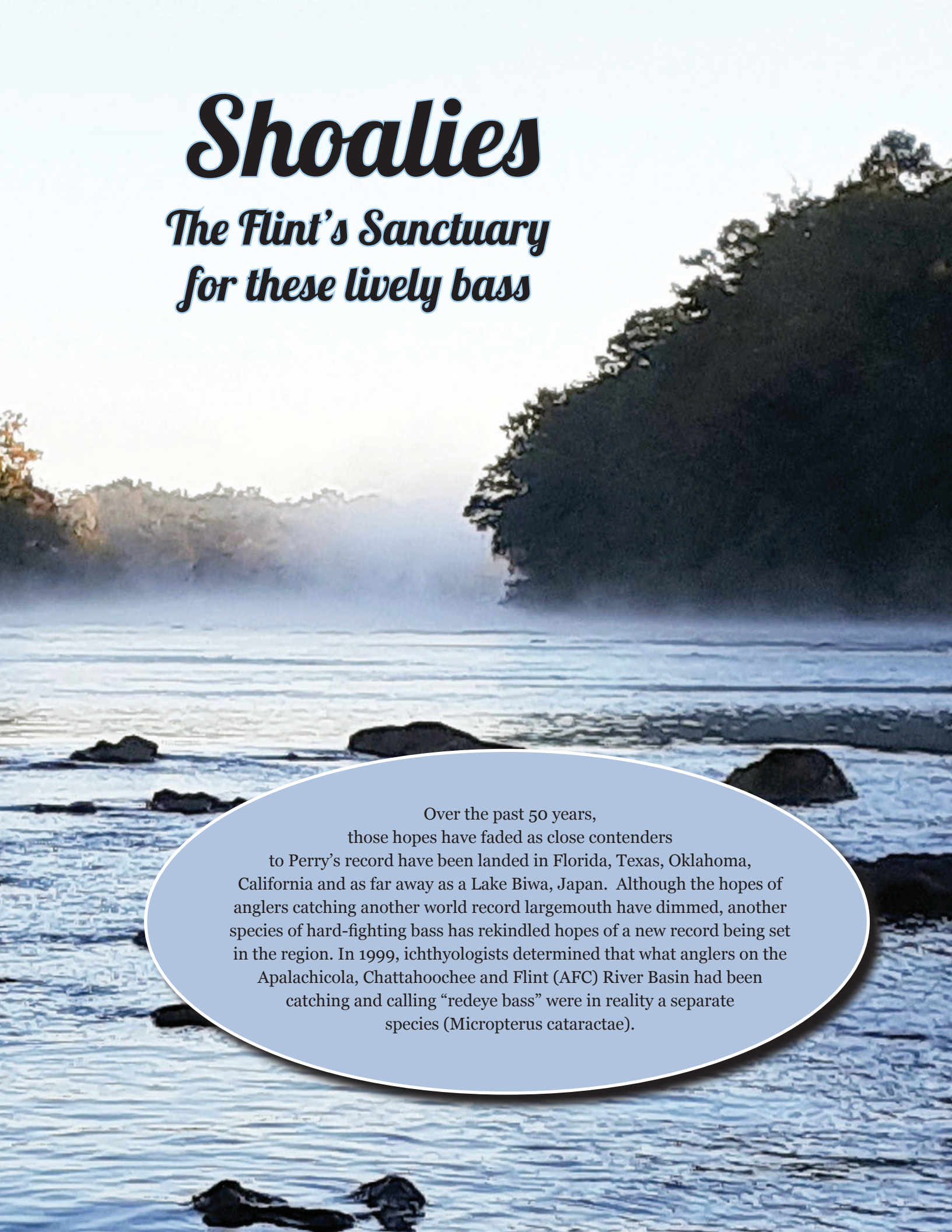
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South Georgia has long
been considered a mecca for bass fishing,
a reputation that was secured almost a century ago when
George Perry landed a 22-pound, 4-ounce largemouth bass while
fishing at Montgomery Lake, an oxbow on the Ocmulgee River. Since then,
anglers from around the world have fished the lakes and rivers of southwest
Georgia in hopes of breaking Perry's record. Every cast made by anyone
fishing for bass in the region has been made with the optimistic
hope that it just might entice a strike from the
next record-breaking lunker.



Shoalies

The Flint's Sanctuary for these lively bass

Over the past 50 years,
those hopes have faded as close contenders
to Perry's record have been landed in Florida, Texas, Oklahoma,
California and as far away as a Lake Biwa, Japan. Although the hopes of
anglers catching another world record largemouth have dimmed, another
species of hard-fighting bass has rekindled hopes of a new record being set
in the region. In 1999, ichthyologists determined that what anglers on the
Apalachicola, Chattahoochee and Flint (AFC) River Basin had been
catching and calling "redeye bass" were in reality a separate
species (*Micropterus cataractae*).

For decades, anglers in the region had recognized the fish as something special, referring to it as a shoal bass or more recently a shoalie, in deference to its preferred habitat along the AFC basin.

The shoal bass is a member of the black bass family, which includes nine of the most popular freshwater game fish in the world, due in part to their voracious appetites and fighting power. Although the shoalie is somewhat diminutive in comparison to its largemouth cousins, its pound-for-pound reputation as a fighter is undisputed.

“A good largemouth just loads you up and bows your rod,” southwest Georgia fishing expert Billy Shores said. “With a shoal bass, you feel it fighting the whole time. They’re just gettin’ it. They live in the current, and they’re runners. When they hit that bait, they are coming with so much speed they just slam it. On cool mornings in the fall, they just want to blow up. They want you to see them.”

Shores goes on to explain that even when they aren’t necessarily feeding, shoal bass will hit your lure.

“You might be throwing a bait, and they will go after it just because it aggravates them,” he said. “They just want to hit it and knock it out of their way.”

Outdoorsman Robert Ivey, who grew up on Lake Blackshear, got hooked on fishing in the first grade.

“They handed me a fishing pole with a clothes pin tied on the end of the line and threw it over a curtain,” he said. “When they tugged on the line and I yanked that prize back over the curtain, I knew I wanted to be a fisherman.”

As a result, Ivey’s been fishing the AFC for 50 years.

“I remember when I caught my first shoal bass when I was a kid and didn’t really even know what I had,” he says. “I was 10 or 12 then, and I’ve been fishing for them ever since. They’re a very aggressive fish; they’re a hard fighter, especially in the swift water. They jump a lot; they put on a good show, and they’re a beautiful fish.”



There’s a consistency to the comments made by anglers that target shoal bass. It’s not just the respect they have for their unique red-eyed, tiger-striped, streamlined quarry, but also for its habitat as well. Chances of the next world record shoal bass being caught in Georgia are extremely high. The statistical probability of this occurring relates to the fact that the AFC is the only natural habitat for the species, although a non-native population now exists on the Upper Ocmulgee River, the same body of water where Perry caught his record bass. With the exception of the approximately 60 miles of the AFC that runs south from the Jim Woodruff Dam on Lake Seminole to Apalachicola Bay in Florida, more than 400 miles can be considered Georgia water.

One must acknowledge that statistical probability of catching a record fish is by no means a certainty. According to the International Game Fish Association, the current world record shoal bass weighs in at 8 pounds, 12 ounces. Charles Clark caught the record shoalie while fishing on the Apalachicola River in Florida on Oct. 23, 1977. It was originally recorded as a red-eye bass until the shoal bass was recognized as a separate species in 1999.

Since then, two shoalies have been caught that tie the Georgia record of 8 pounds, 5 ounces. Joseph McWhorter caught the first fish on the Chattahoochee River on Dec. 12, 2021. Four months later, on April 16, 2022, Clark Wheeler caught a fish of equal weight on the Flint. With all three rivers holding world or state records and only a 7-ounce weight variation between them, either record could be broken by a shoal bass hiding downstream of any rock in the AFC basin.

Dr. James Alexander Henshall, a pioneer in the study of North American gamefish, wrote "Book Of The Black Bass" in 1881 in an effort to give the species its proper place among gamefish.

Henshall wrote, "The black bass is wholly unknown in the Old World except where recently introduced, and it exists, naturally, only in America ... no doubt the black bass is the appointed successor to the Lordly trout. ... He will eventually become the leading gamefish of America is my oft-expressed opinion and firm belief."

Henshall would live to see the prophecy he made in the 463-page volume come true. In 1923, he wrote in the foreword of a later book, "There are now more articles of tackle made for the capture (of black bass) than all other gamefish combined."

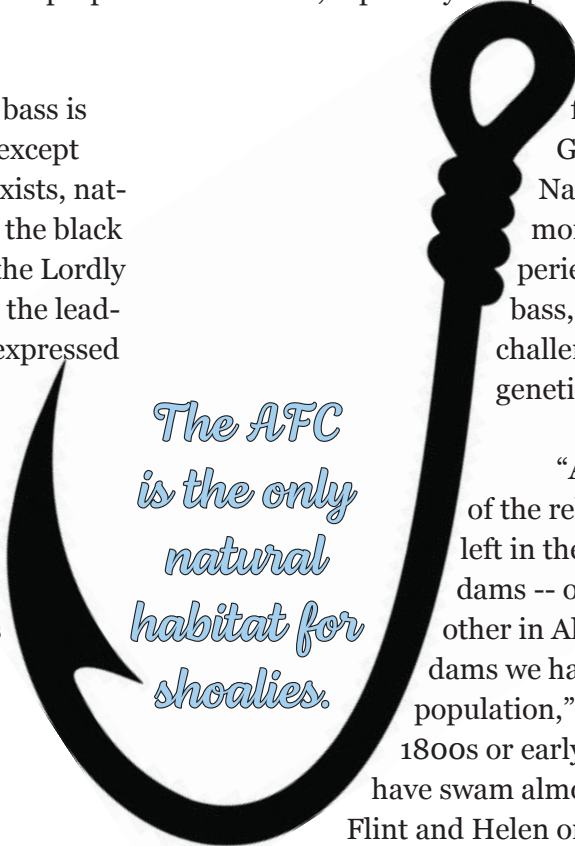
Ray Scott founded the Bass Anglers Sportsman Society of America in 1968, capitalizing on the ever-growing passion of anglers dedicated to bass fishing. Today it's estimated that there are 30 million bass anglers in the U.S. contributing to a \$60 billion-a-year industry. The overall economic impact of fishing in the U.S. is estimated at more than \$115 billion annually. This figure is fueled by the estimated 58 million anglers in the country.

As more anglers shift their focus from largemouth to shoal bass, with the upper and lower Flint River gaining regional and national attention, there has been a growing concern over the health of the species and its habitat. The concerns of the potential extinction of the species is directly related to its limited natural range.

Georgia's revised State Wildlife Action Plan of 2015 listed the shoal bass as "a high-priority species and a species of special concern." However, the species is not currently listed by state or federal agencies as threatened or endangered. The greatest threat appears not to be from harvest by anglers but from habitat degradation, fragmentation, and the introgression with non-native species, especially the spotted bass.

Travis Ingram, a fisheries biologist with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources who has more than 20 years of experience researching the shoal bass, said the most concerning challenges facing the species are genetic.

"Although the Flint is one of the relatively undammed rivers left in the Southeast, there are two dams -- one at Seminole and the other in Albany -- so between these dams we have a genetically blocked population," Ingram said. "In the late 1800s or early 1900s, those fish could have swam almost from Atlanta on the Flint and Helen on the Chattahoochee to Apalachicola."



*The AFC
is the only
natural
habitat for
shoalies.*





Today these dams create three specific habitats for the shoal bass along the AFC basin.

An even larger genetic threat to the shoal bass comes from the intrusion of the spotted bass, which was illegally released into the basin decades ago by anglers hoping to catch that species closer to home. Ironically, this is the same reason that shoal bass can now be found on stretches of the Ocmulgee River.

“We now have spotted bass on the upper Flint and see them to a lesser extent on the lower Flint,” Ingram said. “On the water between Lake Blackshear and down to (Lake) Seminole, on what I call the ‘middle Flint,’ we haven’t seen the spotted bass quite as bad.”

In an effort to address the concerns related to the state’s population of shoal bass, the DNR recently implemented a series of new regulations. The statewide minimum length for shoal bass will be 15 inches. The 15-inch limit will apply to all state waters, including Lake Lanier near Atlanta, where the limit was previously 14 inches. The exception to this rule is on the Flint River and its tributaries downstream of the Warwick Dam, where it will be illegal to possess shoal bass between 15 to 20 inches.

The new regulation will help manage the population for trophy potential and protect larger fish from over-harvest. The 15-inch minimum length will still apply to the Flint River above the Warwick Dam. The “SOWEGA Slot” will also be enforced on the Muckalee, Kinchafoonee, Ichauway, Pachitla and Spring creeks.

Black bass creel limits will remain at 10 for largemouth, spotted bass and Alabama bass, but the limit is reduced for other black bass species. In the 10-fish creel limit, only five can be of the following species: Altamaha, Bartram’s, Chattahoochee, red-eye, shoal, smallmouth, Suwanee or Tallapoosa bass.

These regulations are the result of fisheries research, sampling efforts, and angler responses to an online survey conducted by DNR. Anglers also are urged to keep all spotted bass they catch on the Flint because of the threats of competition for food and habitat as well as the risk of hybridization with the native shoal bass.

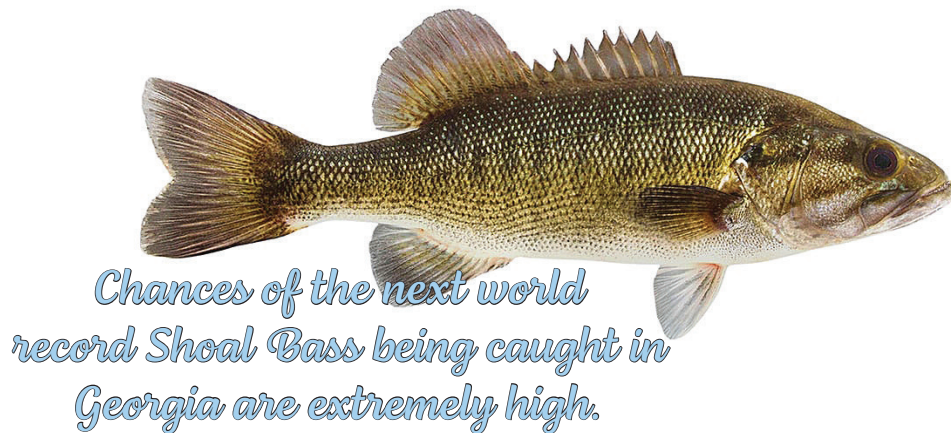
Ivey has caught numerous tagged shoal bass.

“I’ve caught ‘em with radio transmitters or tagged by Auburn University, which is studying them, and I’ve caught those tagged by DNR for their studies,” he said. “You can call the tag in and get a history of where the fish was caught and tagged, where it moved to. These fish provide researchers a lot of information on the species and the health of the river. I’ve talked to Jeff ‘Bodine’ Sinyard, who’s on the DNR board, and they are doing a great job of monitoring the river. It seems to be a really healthy ecosystem.”



The tags offer an indicator of the distances these fish travel. Asked if he was aware of any shoal bass being caught in the impound of Lake Blackshear, Ivey said, “I’ve talked to the biologists, and they have caught some in Lake Blackshear. The tournament fishermen go upriver and bring them back, and they are released after weigh in. The biologist said he can guarantee you they are heading back up to swift water.

“Some migrate a long way. One I caught once was in its spawning area; another had come a long way before I caught it. They move a lot. One fish was caught four times, according to the tag reports.”



Shores said the first thing he learned about fishing for shoal bass was, “Throw up into the whitewater; throw up in the whitecaps. Throw up in the boulders. It’s all pretty much common sense, but if you’ve never done it, you could throw a fluke randomly and there was so much whitewater up there, and something would hit it. You could throw a Zoro Spook -- I like black and red flake ultra-light craws -- the shoal bass feed I learned primarily on other fish and hellgrammites. Those are the larva of dragonflies. When they come out of the rocks, the shoal bass will get ‘em. Anything that you can mimic them with, you’ve got a chance of getting ‘em.”

Shores and Ivey have a few warnings for those thinking about pursuing shoal bass. First and foremost, it’s addictive.

“I got my john boat, and you couldn’t keep me off the river; I spent weekend after weekend down near Newton,” Shores said.

Today he fishes numerous other stretches on the Flint.

“The more you go, the better you understand the water,” he said. Both of these seasoned anglers recommend initially going with someone who is familiar with the basin.

“Try to go with somebody that knows what they are doing; there are some really shallow shoals,” Ivey warns. “Going with a guide is a good way to start.”

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Caleb Horton, left, the owner of Southern Tradition Kennels in Lee County, and Josh Waldrip show off a pair of pups at Horton's kennel.



HORTON HEARS A WHISTLE

*Undecided of his future,
Caleb Horton goes
to the dogs*

Caleb Horton wasn't what you'd call adrift, as he sorted out what he wanted to do with his life. He'd worked a couple of part-time jobs that didn't pay a whole lot while he was earning his degree in History at Valdosta State University, where he went so far as to earn his teacher certification.

And while he had the blueprint in front of him established by his dad, Scott, who built a career in education before retiring recently, Caleb figured out soon enough his dad's life was not the one he wanted for himself.

"I basically was trying to figure what I wanted to do," the younger Horton said of a time of indecision that he faced head-on. "Even though my dad had a good career teaching and coaching, the one thing I knew during this time was that I was not going to be a teacher."

While he was figuring out his future, Horton was fortunate enough to land a job working with bird dogs. It didn't take him long to realize that the elusive something that he'd been searching for might very well be at hand.

"Man, I just fell in love with the tradition of it," Horton said. "I already loved dogs -- my mom, Debra, was a dog person -- but there was something about getting on horseback and watching the dogs work, learning the history of dog training."

**“
This is
not a 9-to-5;
it's a lifestyle.
You have to make
a commitment.
Doing this job,
working with
dogs, is a 365-
day-a-year job.
It's a way
of life.**



Kirby, a German Wirehaired Pointer, shows off his skills at Caleb Horton's Southern Tradition Kennels.



Horton learned an important lesson about the art of training hunting dogs when he went on a 3 1/2-month trip to the extreme north: Saskatchewan in Canada, North Dakota, South Dakota, Illinois.

"I went on that trip with Ricky Ferry, and I basically embarrassed myself," Horton said. "On the first morning I was there, he asked if we were ready to go. I was excited; I said, 'Sure.'"

Turns out Ferry was looking for a little ... well, actually, a lot more.

"It was part of my job to get the horses saddled and watered and to get everything else we would need ready to go," Horton said. "He looked at me like I didn't have a clue, and he was right. I definitely did not get off to a good start."

While on that life-altering trip, Horton learned the ins and outs of training dogs. And an idea started worming its way into his subconscious: This might be that illusive thing he'd been seeking.

A short while later, on April 1, 2016, Horton decided he'd soaked up enough of the culture, history and skills required of successful dog trainers. On that day, he decided he'd step out on faith and start his own business. And for the past nine-plus years, Horton has become one of the most sought-after trainers in the region, his Southern Tradition Kennels now trains hunting dogs and provides obedience training for animals throughout Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Tennessee and South Carolina.

"I decided it was time to go for it," Horton said. "I'd had an inkling of what this was all about when I first started, but as I watched the dogs develop, saw them make their first point, i knew this was what I wanted to do.

"Let's face it, you don't have to be super intelligent to train a bird dog, but there's just something about this that appeals to me. It didn't take me long to figure out this is what I wanted to do with my life."

A love for dogs is pretty much an initial requirement Horton and his Southern Tradition co-worker, Josh Waldrup, had discovered, but each points out that there is a whole lot more to successfully training an animal to be a successful hunting dog.

"This is not a 9-to-5; it's a lifestyle," Horton said. "And it's not something you can do half-way. If it's pouring down rain or it's 20 degrees outside, you've got to be out here. You have to make a commitment."

Waldrup, who has been working with Horton for six years, said he was fated to work with hunting dogs, having grown up on a southwest Georgia plantation.

"All I love to do is hunt; any kind of hunting," the new father said of his passion for training dogs. "I love to work with the dogs, teach them some of the things that are required of them when they're in the field. This is absolutely my life. I'm appreciative that my wife knows me and allows me to go after my passion.

"Doing this job, working with dogs, is a 365-day-a-year job. It's a way of life."



While Horton says Southern Tradition Kennels offers obedience training for “everything from chihuahuas to St. Bernards,” his business is known for its ability to get the best out of hunting dogs.

During a recent afternoon at his northwest Lee County kennels (at 1836 Highway 195), Horton took Kirby, a German Wirehaired Pointer he is training for a client in Florida, and set him free to scare up a couple of quails he’d introduced to land in a field adjacent to the kennels. Kirby showed why the training he’d received over the previous 3 1/2 months had paid off by scaring up one of the birds and pointing the other that had settled some 75 yards away in another part of the field.

Georgia, a German short-hair, showed off similar skills.

“We have a 50-run kennel, and we keep from 40-50 in training pretty much constantly,” Horton said. “We have 42 in there now; there’s never a lull.”

There’s also no promise that the dogs he’s entrusted to train are going to be the kind that are ready to take to the training.

“Sometimes, you have things like this happen,” Horton says, pulling up his pants leg to show off bite marks mid-calf.

“You can tell when owners have mistreated, beaten their dogs. They’re a lot harder to train. It takes about twice as long to fix a dog’s negative behavior.

“We generally, though, can get a dog ready in three to four months. We usually do obedience training in a month or so.”

Horton, who was planning his yearly trip to Washington state to help a friend there train dogs to hunt ducks, geese and other waterfowl during the recent trip to check out his operation, said he’s lost no passion or enthusiasm for his chosen profession/lifestyle in the almost decade-long run of Southern Tradition Kennel. He’s even learned a lesson or two from his schoolteacher dad over the years.

“It’s a pretty fulfilling thing to take some of these dogs we train to competitions and see them do well,” Horton said. “It’s one of the things that makes me know I made the right decision with my life. This is it; this is what I want to do.

“It’s kind of like my dad working with some of his students or some of the athletes he coached. You have to find out how to motivate them and then use that to make them the best they can be.”





Caleb Horton works with 45-or-so dogs undergoing training at his Southern Tradition Kennels in Lee County.



Albany



“

They're truly fascinating, beautiful creatures, and my favorite part of being with this group is going on field trips to watch and photograph birds in their natural surroundings.

Audubon Society

**An appealing and peaceful opportunity
to gain new knowledge, appreciate
and respect the environment**



isten to long-time members of the Albany Audubon Society chapter talk about their reasons for being a part of the group, and you start to understand that it's not just a fascination for our feathered friends that draws them.

"There's so much that appeals," Kathie Entz, a retired educator and 15-year member of the local chapter, said. "There's a peace to birding, a calm, an opportunity to gain new knowledge, to appreciate and respect the environment. There's always someone smarter in the group, someone you can learn from.

"Like I never understood how California could have so many wildfires until I went to California and saw their environment. And when I came back and studied our terrain, I started to understand more the controlled burns utilized in our part of the country to control such fires."

Then, there's current Lee County High School Literature teacher Laurel Houston, who describes her encounters with birds as "relaxing."

"Just watching birds at the feeder in my backyard gives me a peace," said Houston, who was introduced to birding when, as a young girl, she was encouraged to join her mom and dad on outings. "And then you have things happen like my boyfriend, Chris Allen, and I, while on a trip to Cape Canaveral were walking in the woods and we came on some birds that everyone told us were 'scrub jays.' We'd never seen nor heard of them.

"But while we're walking on a trail, these birds would come up and eat out of our hand. They'd light on our hats. We just had never seen birds do that before."



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Chris Allen is one of many birders who uses outings to take compelling photographs of birds.

Melvin Dees, who retired from civilian work at Marine Corps Logistics Base-Albany a couple of years ago and who has been a member of the local Audubon Society since 2007, said he never ceases to be amazed at the instinctual travels of birds that keep wintering in the same warm Southern climates year after year.

“You can see these birds heading south as colder weather approaches, and they fly across the width of the Gulf of Mexico to the same places every year,” Dees said. “Then, you encounter their spring migration, where they fly back across the Gulf without a stop along the way. They fly back in the spring in their breeding plumage, and it’s an amazing transformation to see them.”

Karon Mitchell, an Albany homemaker who also has been an Audubon member since 2007, said she too is amazed at the birds’ capacity to follow patterns that have been a vital part of their existence for centuries.

Laurel Houston, a Lee County teacher, holds out her hand to a “scrub jay” during a birder outing at Cape Canaveral, Florida. There, Houston said, certain birds will eat out of your hand.





“We like to go to Dauphin Island (in Alabama) or St. George Island (in Florida) to see the spring migration,” Mitchell said. “It never ceases to amaze me to think that, on some random night, the leader of a flock decides that this is the night to head back north, and they fly in the night -- to avoid predators -- all the way across the Gulf of Mexico as a group.”

Anne Jacobs, a Biology professor at Georgia Southwestern State University in Americus, who came to her fascination with birds while living in Los Angeles, said observing the birds in their habitat checks off many of the boxes of activities that enrich her life.

“They’re truly fascinating, beautiful creatures, and my favorite part of being with this group is going on field trips to watch and photograph birds in their natural surroundings,” Jacobs said.

“There are so many things I see here on the East Coast that I didn’t see out west, and while I have a little competitiveness in me -- I do try to find as many species as I can -- I love the act of learning about these creatures and seeing them in their habitat.

“I love to watch a mocking bird bully an oriole and then have another bird come in and bully the mocking bird. This is nature at its finest.”

Forest and Stream editor George Bird Grinnell is credited with founding the first iteration of the Audubon Society, named for famous bird painter John James Audubon, although his efforts to stop what he called “senseless slaughter” of birds eventually failed.

A second Audubon Society was started and incorporated in Chicago by Irene Rood on 1893. Seventy persons joined up for the kickoff to the second coming of the Audubon Society, and within a year the organization mushroomed to more than 39,000 members.

One of the requirements for membership? Do not molest birds. And while the new Audubon Society lasted less than a decade, its name and purpose survived.





In 1895, another iteration of the Audubon Society was created, and that group has a history that traces unbroken to today. Boston socialites Harriet Hemenway and Minna Hall organized a series of teas with wealthy women, encouraging them to avoid garments that were adorned with feathers collected by plume hunters. They sent literature asking these women to “join a society for the protection of birds, especially the egret.” That group grew into the Massachusetts Audubon Society, quickly signing up more than 900 members.

As other groups joined across the country, their boycott of the plume trade brought about an end to the practice.

In 1896, a group in Pennsylvania created their Audubon Society, and during the next few years, bird lovers in many other states followed. The St. Louis Audubon Society was established in 1916 as the St Louis Bird Club. In 1944, the Bird Club became the first local Audubon chapter in the United States.





In 2023, the National Audubon Society boasted two million members who were part of 610 chapters.

The Albany Audubon Society was founded in 1972. That group, according to an essay penned by Entz, founded a bluebird housing project with the ambition to restore the eastern bluebird population in south Georgia under the initial leadership of Lloyd Kinney. Kinney enlisted the help of Donnie Lanier, and together they installed their first bluebird nesting box at Camp Osborn, a local Boy Scout Camp in Worth County. The following year, the local group expanded, with additional boxes installed in nearby Smithville. Lanier took over leadership of the Eastern Bluebird nesting box project in the 1980s.

Lanier retired from the city of Albany after 32 years as an engineer and director of Public Works. All three of his children still reside in the Albany area, including renowned Georgia wildlife artist David Lanier. Donnie Lanier's passion for conservation of the eastern bluebird lives on to this day. The simple beginnings of adding the first birdhouse has grown from Albany to surrounding counties. Currently there are more than 500 Albany Audubon Society bluebird nesting boxes and 14 routes. Bluebird nesting boxes dot the countryside with anywhere from 30-70 boxes per route.

"Many of us in the local chapter continue the bluebird box project today," Entz said. "We repair and empty the nests of other critters in the ongoing effort to bring the eastern bluebird back from near eradication in the state."



“We are involved in a number of projects in the region. We have speakers at our monthly meeting; we’re not just about birds. We get involved in important educational and environmental projects.”

Many Audubon members say they keep track of their bird count through international applications like eBird, created at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y. The free app allows birders to keep running and yearly totals of species identified by birders.

“I’m not really competitive; I’ve probably seen a couple of hundred birds,” Entz said. “A lot of members, like me, are more interested in photographing the birds. I saw advertisements in The Albany Herald for the Audubon Society and for a local photography club. I joined both and have combined both.”

Dees says he’s recorded “just under 300 birds” but “my count needs updating,” while Mitchell says her “lifelist” is “right around 200.”

On the other end of the spectrum, the admittedly competitive Jacobs said her lifelist count is 837, 231 of which she’s encountered since moving to Georgia. Houston says she’s “not a lifelister,” although she speculates that she’s seen and photographed -- with Allen -- “more than 100 species.”

Dees, who said he developed a curiosity about birds from simply lying in bed listening to their songs, said a sense of camaraderie among Audubon members keeps him involved with the group.

“My aunt suggested I join the local chapter, and it turned out to be a great group to be a part of,” he said. “I love seeing the birds and learning about different species.”

Mitchell said she’s still in the process of developing “soft eyes” while walking through the woods.

“You have to look for movement and when you see it, keep your eyes on the spot,” she said. “If you look away, you’ll lose sight of the bird.”

Houston has found the birding interest she was introduced to by her parents to be an ongoing interest that she shares with her significant other, while Jacobs anticipates each year the brief window that opens for the return of the Mississippi kites, her favorite bird, one that “flies and glides like an acrobat.”

Entz encourages persons interested in birding or outdoors in general to give the Albany Audubon Society chapter a try. (Chapter officials can be reached at albanyaudubonsociety.com or on Facebook.)

“This is truly something that everyone, with any level of ability, can get involved in,” she said. “I think for a lot of people, (joining) is just a matter of knowing we exist. We’re here, and we welcome the young and the old.”



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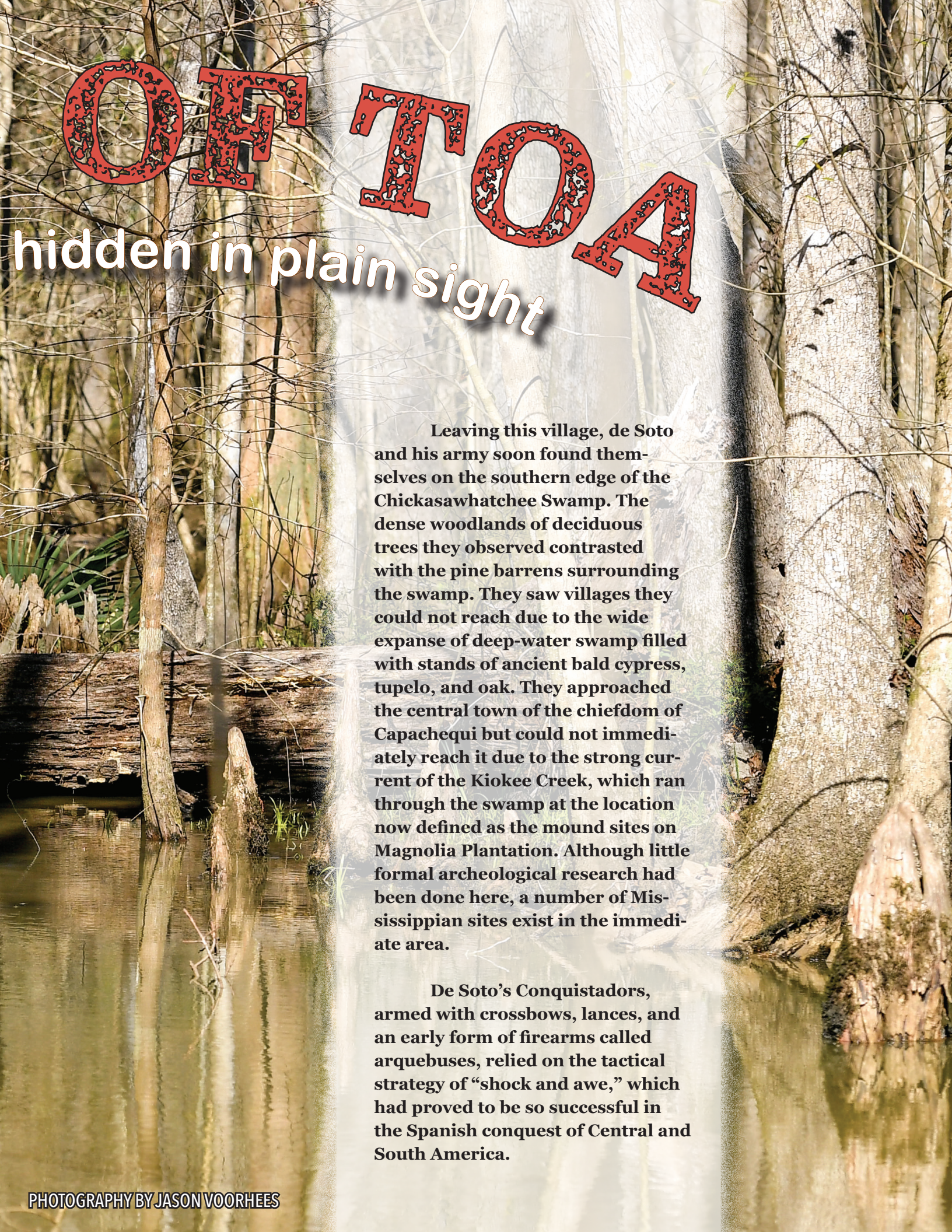
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SWAMP

Treasure is often

The old adage, “treasure is often hidden in plain sight,” certainly holds true in regard to the Swamp of Toa. This deep-water swamp covering more than 335 square miles of the south Georgia coastal plain is second only in size to the Okefenokee, although its biological diversity and historical significance are more than equal.

The first historical account of the swamp we now call Chickasawhatchee dates back to March 1540 when the army of Hernando de Soto first crossed the Flint River near present-day Newton. Crossing the river their native interpreters referred to as “Toa” would prove to be problematic. de Soto’s expedition, which would ultimately spend three years wandering along a circuitous route through the Southeast, was at its full strength of more than 600 men accompanied by 250 horses, dogs of war, and swine when it stood on the east bank of the river. It would take the assembled menagerie four days to cross the river before reaching the first village in the region of the chiefdom of Capachequi, where they found abundant food stores.



OFF TO A

hidden in plain sight

Leaving this village, de Soto and his army soon found themselves on the southern edge of the Chickasawhatchee Swamp. The dense woodlands of deciduous trees they observed contrasted with the pine barrens surrounding the swamp. They saw villages they could not reach due to the wide expanse of deep-water swamp filled with stands of ancient bald cypress, tupelo, and oak. They approached the central town of the chiefdom of Capachequi but could not immediately reach it due to the strong current of the Kiokee Creek, which ran through the swamp at the location now defined as the mound sites on Magnolia Plantation. Although little formal archeological research had been done here, a number of Mississippian sites exist in the immediate area.

De Soto's Conquistadors, armed with crossbows, lances, and an early form of firearms called arquebuses, relied on the tactical strategy of "shock and awe," which had proved to be so successful in the Spanish conquest of Central and South America.

The strategy also would prove to be successful when they came in contact with the sophisticated Mississippian culture they encountered. These European Extermdurans considered themselves to be Christian warriors, fighting infidels around the globe. The Mississippian chiefdoms had their own warrior culture rooted in centuries of combat and were prepared to protect their lands. However, in the long run, their military might would prove to be inconsequential in comparison to other factors of what we now recognize as the Columbian Exchange.

Although there is no record of de Soto ever finding the golden treasures he sought, it recently has been acknowledged that he did amass another form of wealth, which is rumored to be buried in Georgia. Pearls were greatly valued in Europe during this period. The Mississippian culture valued them as well, collecting them from the freshwater mussels they harvested from the waters of the Southeast. Today these pearls would have an estimated value of up to \$2 million.

Although direct contact between the two cultures was often brutal, and the resulting loss of life for the native inhabitants as a result of combat was high, this loss of life was only a fraction of the overall genocidal impact of the exchange. Measles, chicken pox, small pox, typhus, scarlet fever, malaria, and other diseases are estimated to have killed 60 to 95% of the native population. This destruction was so rapid and so severe, it had major climatic impact on the entire civilized world.

As the Mississippian culture disappeared, the practice of using fire as a tool to clear new land for planting as well as managing game populations declined. So dramatic was the change that the resulting carbon footprint altered by the expansion of forests into what had been agricultural areas and grasslands maintained by the use of fire that the post-Columbian carbon sequestration was a significant cause of the Little Ice Age recorded in Europe at the time.

It also resulted in the biological alteration of the Southeast as the expansion of hardwood forests drew bison, elk and other species into the region.

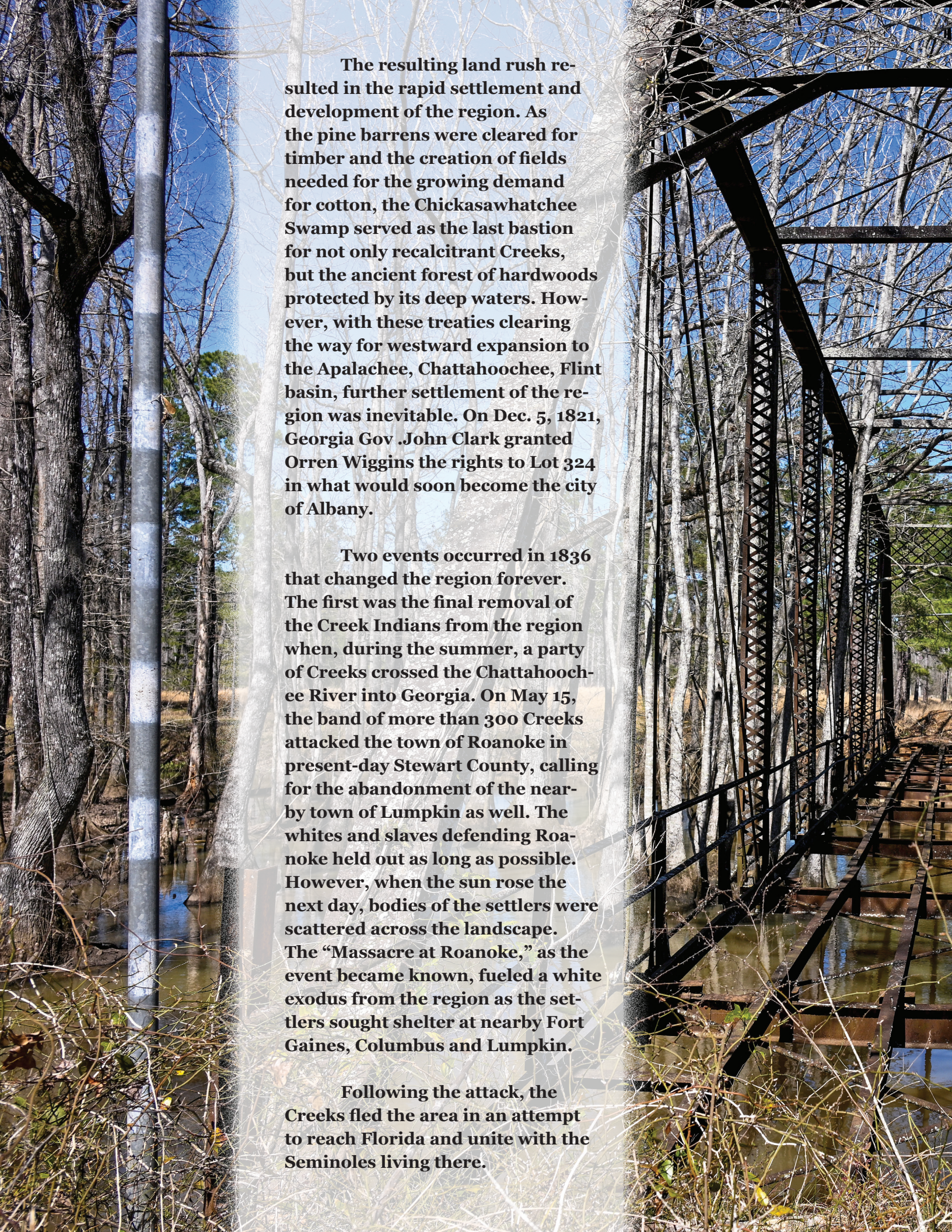
The resulting environmental changes were so severe that the region that was settled in the 18th and 19th centuries was unlike that which existed when de Soto's army marched through it just 200 years earlier. The hogs that were brought as a living larder escaped, multiplied and were extremely destructive to the surviving Mississippian agricultural system, which focused on "the three sisters" where corn, squash, and beans were grown together. The descendants of these swine continue to have a negative impact on the agricultural practices in the region today.

The environment was not the only thing that was drastically changed by the devastation of the Columbian Exchange. The culture of the surviving native inhabitants dramatically changed as well. For almost 300 years, there would be little outside impact on the region until the late 1700s, when the growth of a new nation began to expand its western borders. During this period, the Creeks were the predominant survivors in southwest Georgia, adapting rapidly to the social and ecological challenges they faced.

By the early 1800s, the westward expansion of the growing nation began to have an impact on the Creeks living in the region. As more white settlers moved into the region, tensions increased as evidenced by the accounts recorded in the registry of Georgia Indian Depredation Claims made to the governor of Georgia. These claims record the raids and depredation of the Creeks on the settlers, not only in an effort to seek financial compensation for their losses but to receive protection from the state militia.

These tensions would peak in the 1820s with the Treaties of Indian Springs. The first of these treaties was signed by the Creeks on Jan. 8, 1821, ceding their remaining lands east of the Flint River in Georgia to the United States. However, as a result of this treaty, many Creeks who were determined not to cede anymore of their land, resisted the implementation of the treaties. To their dismay, the Second Treaty of Indian Springs was signed in 1825 by six chiefs of the lower Creeks, led by William McIntosh. The treaty sold the remaining land of the Muscogee Creeks in Georgia for \$200,000. The signature cost McIntosh his life at the hands of fellow Creeks who disagreed with the terms of the treaties.

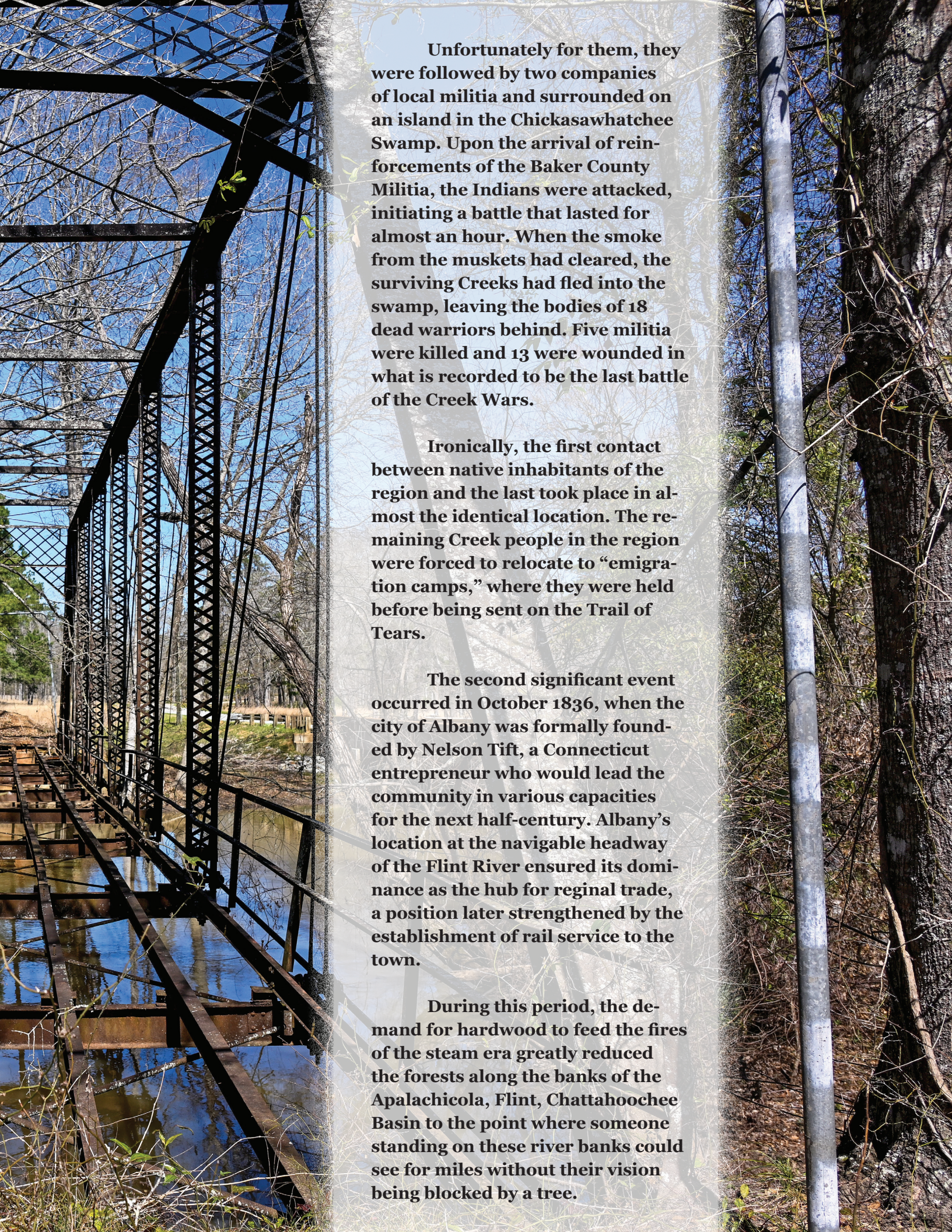




The resulting land rush resulted in the rapid settlement and development of the region. As the pine barrens were cleared for timber and the creation of fields needed for the growing demand for cotton, the Chickasawhatchee Swamp served as the last bastion for not only recalcitrant Creeks, but the ancient forest of hardwoods protected by its deep waters. However, with these treaties clearing the way for westward expansion to the Apalachee, Chattahoochee, Flint basin, further settlement of the region was inevitable. On Dec. 5, 1821, Georgia Gov. John Clark granted Orren Wiggins the rights to Lot 324 in what would soon become the city of Albany.

Two events occurred in 1836 that changed the region forever. The first was the final removal of the Creek Indians from the region when, during the summer, a party of Creeks crossed the Chattahoochee River into Georgia. On May 15, the band of more than 300 Creeks attacked the town of Roanoke in present-day Stewart County, calling for the abandonment of the nearby town of Lumpkin as well. The whites and slaves defending Roanoke held out as long as possible. However, when the sun rose the next day, bodies of the settlers were scattered across the landscape. The “Massacre at Roanoke,” as the event became known, fueled a white exodus from the region as the settlers sought shelter at nearby Fort Gaines, Columbus and Lumpkin.

Following the attack, the Creeks fled the area in an attempt to reach Florida and unite with the Seminoles living there.

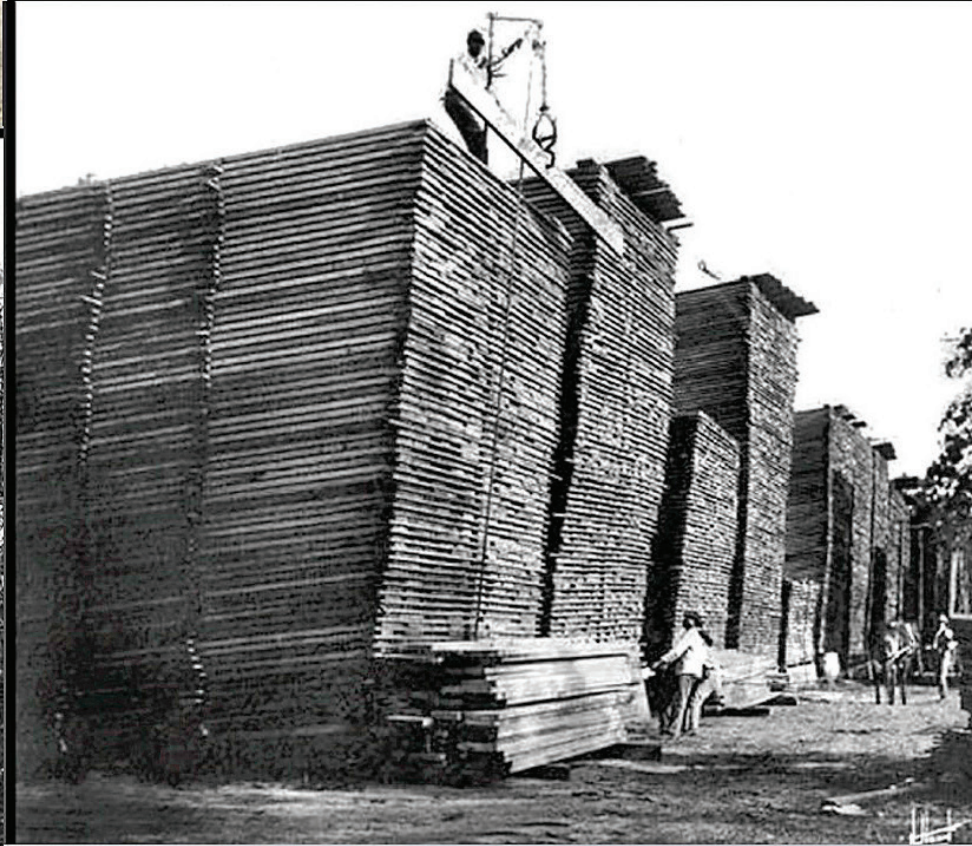


Unfortunately for them, they were followed by two companies of local militia and surrounded on an island in the Chickasawhatchee Swamp. Upon the arrival of reinforcements of the Baker County Militia, the Indians were attacked, initiating a battle that lasted for almost an hour. When the smoke from the muskets had cleared, the surviving Creeks had fled into the swamp, leaving the bodies of 18 dead warriors behind. Five militia were killed and 13 were wounded in what is recorded to be the last battle of the Creek Wars.

Ironically, the first contact between native inhabitants of the region and the last took place in almost the identical location. The remaining Creek people in the region were forced to relocate to “emigration camps,” where they were held before being sent on the Trail of Tears.

The second significant event occurred in October 1836, when the city of Albany was formally founded by Nelson Tift, a Connecticut entrepreneur who would lead the community in various capacities for the next half-century. Albany’s location at the navigable headway of the Flint River ensured its dominance as the hub for regional trade, a position later strengthened by the establishment of rail service to the town.

During this period, the demand for hardwood to feed the fires of the steam era greatly reduced the forests along the banks of the Apalachicola, Flint, Chattahoochee Basin to the point where someone standing on these river banks could see for miles without their vision being blocked by a tree.



The easily accessible hardwoods found in the region also fed the furnaces of lumber and grain mills, cotton gins, as well as the steam engines for transportation by rail and river. The virgin stands of pine and cypress were cut along the creeks and rivers in the region and floated downstream to mills that exported the superior lumber around the world.

Meanwhile, the deep waters of the Chickasawhatchee protected hundreds of acres of this treasured timber from the logger's saw. But, as the saying goes, "all good things must come to an end." A brochure promoting Albany and Dougherty County in 1904 proudly proclaimed the end of this long-protected ecosystem in its description of the Red Cypress Lumber Company and the village of Pretoria on the swamp's border.

"In no industry, perhaps, has more marked progress been made during the last two decades than in cypress timbering," the brochure said. "Most men in the business today can look back to the time when mud boats hauled by oxen were used to draw the cypress logs to the edges of the swamps. These primitive methods have given place to tram railroads, which penetrate, and powerful skidders that operate in the very heart of the densest swamp, so that the giants of the swamp forests are felled and handled with no more difficulty than is a pine log in the open piney woods."

After years of slogging through the swamp, it's easy to verify the Herculean efforts made to extract these ancient giants. Visitors may stumble across the remnants of the tramlines leading deep into the swamp as well as the couplings of the rail cars, pieces of the steam jennies and cables that drug them to the rails, as well as tokens to the Red Cypress Lumber Company Store. Sadly, the remains of fallen cypress too large to be handled by this equipment still litter the swamp as silent reminders of the towering giants that once stood there.

Early calculations determined that even with the mechanical might at hand, it would take 40 years to log the swamp. However, with an annual production of more than 12 million board feet of lumber, it took the RCLC less than 20. The "peck" cypress that came from the swamp are considered to be some of the finest ever harvested. During this period, the wood was valued for its durability and resistance to water and termite damage. Today, its surface texture is valued for its unique appearance, and a single board sells for more than a thousand dollars.



The deep waters of the swamp weren't the only challenges facing the loggers and others who sought to tame it. Malaria in the region can be traced back to de Soto and was as debilitating in the early 1900s as it had been in the 1540s. In an effort to reduce the threat of the deadly mosquito-borne illness endemic to the region, the RCLC hired James M. Barnett, an Albany physician, to improve conditions at the lumber camp as well as the mill at Pretoria.



After studying the disease, Barnett went to work putting what he had learned into practice. All windows and doors were screened. Beds were covered with mosquito netting, and any standing water within a half-mile of the camp was drained. When draining was not possible, crews poured crude oil into the ponds in an effort to suffocate the mosquito's larvae before they could hatch. The loggers and their families also took quinine daily.

One of Barnett's more unconventional practices was to have all the camp's window sills and door frames painted white and, when possible, the buildings themselves covered in white-wash. It is rumored that the good doctor had a strong proclivity for white, wearing clothing of that color, riding white mules and purchasing and collecting any albino animals that were captured in the region.

Whether or not the practice had an impact, it is reported that within two years of his arrival the malarial outbreaks at the camp had declined dramatically. Barnett's pioneering efforts at mosquito control changed the overall approach to combating the disease across the nation. Following the closing of the RCLC in 1911, Barnett would go on to continue not only his education but his fight against malaria.

In 1958, the St. Joe Paper Company purchased 32,776 acre of what had been the RCLC in and around the Chickasawhatchee. The remaining upland and bottomland forests there would be harvested, and much of the property replanted in slash and loblolly pine. In 1964, the Georgia Wildlife Resources Division entered into an agreement with St. Joe, leasing up to 22,000 acres annually until 2000.

In 2000, the Nature Conservancy, Georgia Conservancy, Doris Duke Foundation, Woodruff Foundation, and others partnered with the state of Georgia to purchase 14,220 acres, with the title for the land being transferred to the state in 2001. Today, additional purchases and donations of contiguous land have increased the acreage of what is now known as the Chickasawhatchee Wildlife Management Area to a total of 19,792 acres. As a result, 10% of the original swamp of Toa is now protected and open to the public for a variety of activities.

Chickasawhatchee WMA offers a wide variety of year-round outdoor activities, including hunting, camping, hiking, horseback riding, birdwatching as well as seasonal opportunities for canoeing and kayaking. The 25 miles of open roads, 23 miles of seasonal roads and 42 miles of firebreaks offer unique opportunities to access the property.

Two campgrounds provide 13 acres for primitive camping. The Mike Commander Shooting Range offers shooters the opportunity to fire at computerized targets at ranges from 25 to 200 yards. An archery range, classroom and bathrooms are also on site.

The current management plan for Chickasawhatchee has a focus on improving the upland habitat for quail.





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THE FLINT



Glenn Singfield II is a talented and innovative chef who embarked on his culinary journey with a solid foundation at Le Cordon Bleu in Atlanta. After honing his skills and refining his passion for the culinary arts, Glenn opened his first restaurant, Albany Fish Company, in 2014, where he quickly gained recognition for his unique approach to cooking and commitment to excellence.

Building on the success of AFC, Glenn continued to push the boundaries of his culinary creativity and, in 2019, opened The Flint. The restaurant became known for its exceptional dishes, which blend both contemporary and classic techniques, reflecting his evolution as a chef. Glenn's dedication to high-quality ingredients and his relentless pursuit of culinary innovation have made him a respected figure in the restaurant industry.

With a career rooted in passion and hard work, Glenn Singfield II remains committed to crafting unforgettable dining experiences and shaping the future of modern cuisine.

CHEF GLENN SINGFIELD, II

presents one of his delicious creations

Crab Herb Cream Cheese Stuffed Salmon

INGREDIENTS

- 4 salmon fillets (skin on or off, your choice)
- 1 cup crab meat (preferably fresh or lump crab)
 - 8 oz. cream cheese (softened)
 - 1/4 cup fresh parsley, chopped
 - 2 tbsp. fresh dill, chopped
 - 1 tbsp. fresh lemon juice
 - 1 clove garlic, minced
- 1/4 cup grated Parmesan cheese
 - Salt and pepper, to taste
 - 1 tbsp. olive oil
- 1 tbsp. melted butter (optional)
- Lemon slices, for garnish (optional)

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Preheat oven to 375°F (190°C). Line a baking sheet with parchment paper or lightly grease it.
2. Prepare the stuffing: In a bowl, combine the crab meat, softened cream cheese, parsley, dill, lemon juice, minced garlic, and Parmesan cheese. Season with a pinch of salt and pepper. Mix until all ingredients are well-incorporated.
3. Prepare the salmon: Pat the salmon fillets dry with a paper towel. Make a slit along the side of each fillet to create a pocket for the stuffing. Be careful not to cut all the way through the fillet.
4. Stuff the salmon: Carefully spoon the crab and cream cheese mixture into the pocket of each salmon fillet. Use your hands to gently press and ensure it's filled well, but not overstuffed.
5. Cook the salmon: Heat olive oil in a large oven-safe skillet over medium heat. Once hot, carefully place the stuffed salmon fillets in the skillet, skin-side down (if using skin-on). Cook for about 2-3 minutes, just until the salmon begins to sear.
6. Transfer to the oven: After searing, transfer the skillet to the preheated oven. Bake for 10-15 minutes, or until the salmon is cooked through and flakes easily with a fork.
7. Optional finishing touch: For extra flavor, drizzle a bit of melted butter over the salmon fillets before serving.
8. Serve: Garnish with lemon slices and fresh herbs. Enjoy with your favorite side dishes like roasted vegetables, rice or a simple salad.

TIPS:

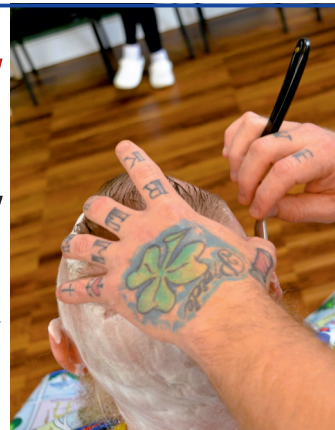
- If you want an extra crispy texture on the outside, you can broil the salmon for 1-2 minutes at the end of baking.
- Adjust the seasoning to your preference, adding more garlic or lemon juice as desired.



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Joey Thiel

Turkey Hunting Tips

For the beginner and the experienced



That said, I've been blessed to walk out with an ol' long-beard over my shoulder more times than I can count, including a couple of NWTF Grand Slams. I've had the honor of guiding family, friends, clients and introduced a lot of young people to turkey hunting by calling in their first bird. So, if experience is the best teacher, I've been schooled by the best and the worst birds anyone has ever run across.

With turkey season quickly approaching, I was asked what advice I could give both the beginner and experienced turkey hunter that might help them be more successful this spring. I'll begin by prefacing what I'm going to say by sharing a little bit about my experience.

I started turkey hunting many years ago. Since then, I've literally chased these birds all over the country. In that time, I've bumped more birds, bungled more hunts, and come home without one more often than I come home with one.

Over the years, I've found that the No. 1 thing you need to stuff into your turkey vest is patience. The key word in turkey hunting is "hunt," aka the pursuit of. The definition of pursuit is a chase or quest for something. In short, very few quests are achieved quickly or easily. Much like hunting big whitetail, there is no substitute for putting your stand time in during the rut. The same applies to hunting the wild turkey. A gobbler wakes up every spring morning and spends the bulk of his day searching for receptive hens for breeding. The key to being successful is being in the right place at the right time when he is vulnerable.



If your hunt ends because birds aren't coming right after flying down or because the birds go quiet for a while, you're cheating yourself. During turkey season, it is not uncommon to spend daylight to dark hunting. The best advice I can give is to pack a lunch, go early, stay late, be patient and enjoy your day. Truth be told, I've called in and killed more birds throughout the day than at fly-down.

Just as important is to know the land you hunt. The first question to answer is, are there turkey on it? In recent years, some areas have seen a decline in population, and not all property holds birds. The only way to answer that question is to put your boots on the ground. Finding feed sign or scratching, tracks, droppings, feathers, dust bowls, and strut signs not only let you know birds are in the area, but also gives you a look into their daily lives. Another scouting tip is to begin listening and marking birds before the season starts. I begin the third week of February going out before daylight, listening to and marking birds on the roost. While it may sound silly, you want to know your birds and understand the sign, because these are all pieces of a puzzle to help you formulate a game plan for a successful hunt.

The second reason for scouting is when it comes to turkey hunting, woodsmanship is as, or more, important than calling. Knowing where a bird is, knowing how to set up on him, and knowing how to adjust to any number of scenarios that may arise play huge roles in being successful. Something to keep in mind: Landscapes are often altered because of weather events, timber operations, and other land-use changes.

It's not just major changes; it could be as simple as a tree that has fallen in a key location that would hinder a bird that would otherwise come to your call. I've seen gobblers fly across the Flint to come to a call, and I've seen them hang up because they didn't want to go around a large puddle. A wild gobbler can be a contrary-natured bird. Knowing the land will allow you to set up, giving him a path of least resistance. The significance of good woodsmanship is often overlooked or taken for granted, but I assure you it is that one extra piece of the puzzle that will help make you more successful.

Probably the most asked question I get is what is the best turkey call to use? My answer is always the same: The best call for you to use is the one that you find easiest to run. There is a plethora of calls to choose from: diaphragms, tube calls, trumpets, wing bones, box calls, scratch boxes, and pot calls of all makes and sizes that run the gamut from high-end custom to the commercial calls you find in most stores. They will all make the sound of a wild turkey, if you take the time to hone your skill at turkey calling.

That said, don't overcomplicate it. Biologists have identified at least 29 different calls or vocalizations used by wild turkey, and each has its own purpose. What I encourage you to do is to master the yelp, the cluck and the purr. These three calls are the basic calls used to call turkey and are the foundation used to advance your calling skills. The key is to listen to real wild turkey then practice mimicking the pitch, volume and cadence. Then practice, practice, practice.





Son, Anthony Thiel shows off his first turkey with his father, Joey Thiel

There has long been a debate among turkey hunters as to whether one could call too much, call too loud or have a need to be conservative. While hunting, it is important to remember the idea is to bring the bird to you. If you can hear the bird, he can hear you, too. Again, this is where the woodsmanship comes into play, because you want to get close enough but not too close. Once I get set up on a bird, I try to read the bird by listening to him and other turkeys that may be roosted near him. That is what determines how I call. Learning to read a bird is an acquired skill that can only be achieved through experience. I can't tell you I won't lean into one if he's hot as a two-dollar pistol, but as a rule, I call more conservatively with a series of yelps and clucks every 20 to 40 minutes. The one thing to remember is, you are trying to create a realistic scenario that will make him come looking for you. The only way to do that is to be a student of the game, study the birds, learn their vocalizations and practice.

Twelve and 20 gauges are by far the weapons of choice in turkey hunting. When we talk about today's shotguns for wild turkey, the modern choke and load combinations are capable of easily sending ultra tight patterns distances of 40-plus yards. The important thing to keep in mind is, from the muzzle out to around 15 yards, your pattern is tick tight, about the size of your fist. Since turkey hunting is more like big-game hunting, where the hunter is aiming for a kill zone, my turkey guns do not serve a dual purpose. They are set up specifically for wild turkey.

When I began turkey hunting, I put a bright fingernail polish on the bead of my gun to help me with my focus on the kill zone. I can tell you from experience that relying on a single- or double-bead sight system to determine where your gun is pointing is not your best option for aiming at a turkey. For years, I have used the high viz fiber optic rifle sights that can be placed on your shotgun.

This system not only helps you in any legal light situation, it also allows you to line up in the exact same position every time you look down the barrel. Two years ago, I skeptically decided to put an optic on my Winchester SXP Longbeard Edition 20 gauge, and so far I have no complaints. I say "skeptically" because I depend on a battery to power the illumination of the sight. Regardless of what you choose, selecting the sight you're going to use should be done before patterning your gun.

The next step is to select your choke. While today's shotguns come with a variety of chokes, including extra-full for turkey, it is important to remember when selecting a choke's restriction that 10/1000ths of an inch change in restriction can alter a pattern for better or worse. If you are shooting standard turkey loads, it's best to try different loads with the choke you choose to see which pattern is best with your gun. Keep in mind, the general rule is you want less contraction for larger shot like 4's and 5's, and you can go with a tighter choke for smaller loads like 6's.

Should you decide to use the tungsten or TSS loads, be sure that you have a choke that is rated for that. This is why I prefer to use a quality after-market choke that is designed specifically for turkey, and I don't mind sharing that my personal preference are chokes made by JEBS. They have already figured out a formula that considers the brand of gun, gauge and load you intend to use and matches it with one of their chokes to ensure you have the best pattern density possible. JEBS will work with you to ensure you are ready for the upcoming season.

Your gun, sight, ammunition and choke are a combination that you must tune in order to produce desired results. The only way to know if you have achieved this goal is to pattern your gun. As in sighting any gun, consistency is key. Shoot from the same position and aim for the same spot every time. I begin by using field loads that are somewhat comparable to what I'm going to use hunting. I start at 15 yards, move to 20, then 30. When I'm satisfied at 30, I shoot a turkey load, then move the target to 40 and shoot a second turkey load for my own peace of mind.

As a rule, if the gobbler is coming, I'm going to let him come until he is within 25 to 30 yards. The advantage I have in knowing my equipment is having confidence in making a longer shot or knowing when to pass on the shot, if I must. Take the time to do your research, invest in putting a good shooting combination together, pattern your gun and know what you can and can't do before the season starts.

Finally, comfort is crucial for success in the turkey woods. However, comfort encompasses several topics that I will try to simplify. I'll begin with your boots, for several reasons. In our part of the world, during this time of year walking in low-light conditions, often not being able to see our feet, quality snake boots are a must, but are only part of the criteria. They also must keep your feet dry. In early spring, we can still encounter frost, heavy dew, rainfall, as well as walking through marshy and swampy areas. The third thing is, if you're going to turkey hunt right, you will need a pair of boots comfortable enough to spend the day walking in.

With spring weather being as contrary as the birds at times, most mornings start out cool and the day ends hot. If you're cold or sweating, you're not comfortable. Dress appropriately, keeping in mind what you wear going in, you must either wear or carry out.

However, among my Mossy Oak wardrobe there are some things that I won't hunt without. First is my wide-brimmed Boonie hat because it serves as a built-in umbrella from the sun and rain and helps to shade the features of my head and face while hunting. Next are my loose-fitting facemask and good-fitting gloves. I also carry a good quality rain poncho with my gear.

Next is bug protection. Ticks, mosquitoes, chiggers and other insects can ruin a hunt and even make hunters sick. I minimize the risks by doing the following: First, I bathe and wash my hair with a menthol body wash and shampoo. I believe ticks and redbugs find it repugnant, and it helps to repel them. Second, following the manufacturer's recommendations, treat all your hunting clothes, including your hat, gloves and socks, with permethrin. I even spray the inside of my ground blinds and spray my hunting seat. Third, blouse your pants in your boots, and tuck in your shirt. Have your shirt sleeves tight as possible. Fourth, when you get to the woods, spray down with Deep Woods Off or Repel, from head to toe. Fifth, invest in and use a Thermacell. Think of it this way: There are nine tick-borne diseases that can make you seriously sick. Over the years, I've been bitten by more ticks than snakes. Be smart.

Concealment is important because it allows you to adjust, shift or move with an added degree of protection. I use the Ameri-step 4 spur collapsible turkey blind. It weighs 1 pound, collapses small enough to fit in your pack, and opens quickly, quietly and is big enough for two hunters to get behind comfortably. It's easy to carry on those days you run and gun and is especially handy for those longer sits.

**Over the years,
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vest is patience.**



Rhett Tassmore and Joey Thiel



**Success isn't
always measured in the
length of the beard or spurs;
rather it's measured in the
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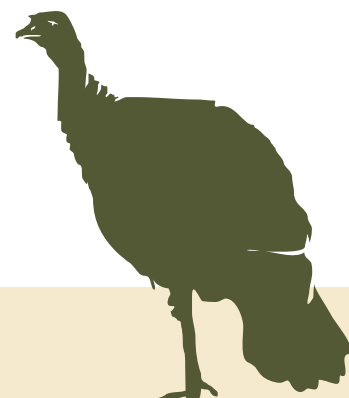
Over the years, I evolved from sitting on my cushion that came with my vest to those little flat seats that you place against the base of a tree. While I still use the latter, with age my run-and-gun is more of a scoot-and-shoot, and I'm willing to give a bird a little more time. I also use Cabela's XL Lounger; it's well-built, allows you to sit a little more off the ground and is a lot more comfortable. This allows you to sit still for longer periods of time.

While I usually have lunch at the truck, I keep a ZipLock with either some jerky or trail mix in my pack, a bottle of water and a pack of gum. It's enough to keep the hunger knocked off and keep you

hydrated. These three things could make the difference in sticking it out and being successful or throwing in the towel and going home empty-handed.

A final note: What goes in must come out. Do not forget to have some all-purpose paper, or your undershorts may be sacrificed for a greater good.

These basic tips can help you be successful, but I want you to remember that the pursuit is as important as the destination. Success isn't always measured in the length of the beard or spurs; rather it's measured in the memories that you make along the way.





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