

# Alabama current connection

FALL 2022 • Vol. XVI, Issue 2

## Artists and the Environment: *A Symbiotic Relationship*

BY MARTI MESSICK, COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER  
MOBILE BAY NATIONAL ESTUARY PROGRAM

**I**t is hard to overlook the relationship of area artists with our environment – artists are influenced by our coastal environment; likewise, the environment is impacted by artists. *Part 1 cont. on page 2*

*I'm So Pink,*  
by Susan Rouillier  
(acrylic on canvas)

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"It's funny to me that we talk about our 'white sands' in Gulf Shores. I see so many colors in the sand," Rick Tino said grinning. Tino is a local artist who finds inspiration in the sand dunes of our local beaches. He has a favorite spot – the dunes in the Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge on Fort Morgan Road.

A cursory walk through Tino's Fine Art and Frames shop in Gulf Shores, or any of the art galleries and shops in Mobile and Baldwin Counties, reveals many of our local artists garner ideas for their work from the flora, fauna, and habitat of our region.

Step into the 10,000 square foot Coastal Arts Center of Orange Beach (shown above) to find coastal themes throughout and simultaneously experience a breathtaking view through the wall of windows overlooking Wolf Bay. Over 100 artists are on display, many of whom find motifs from the area while others enjoy a



*Deep Fish* by Renee Wallace  
(broken china on wood)

## Through Their Eyes: *Artists Influenced by Environment*



*A Day at the Bar* by Frank Crawford (acrylic)

nature-rich retreat kindling creativity and clarity of mind. Guests can even create art in the hot glass blowing studio or on the pottery wheel at the clay studio.

Joseph Chubb, director of the Foley Art Center in downtown Foley, estimates at least 70% of the artwork in the center is nature themed. Currently, about 80 local artists and craftsmen display ornaments, pottery, jewelry, and fine artwork, most exhibiting southern coastal influence.

The Mobile Arts Council recently surveyed area artists on this environment-art connection and found similar influences. Mobile artist Renee Wallace has lived on Dog River for 30 years and notes, "...most every piece I create comes from an idea in our coastal environment." She upcycles hurricane debris and found objects to create two- and three-dimensional pieces. She also enjoys painting birds in acrylics to mimic the colors found in nature. "I feel most inspired when I see the birds on Dog River. The blue herons, osprey, pelicans, and owls..."

Self-described outdoor enthusiast and artist Frank Crawford offers his

take: "I may go down to Gulf Shores and catch some big speckled trout that really get me pumped up and painting. Fishing the Tensaw Delta is one of my favorites because there is more exploration involved. My home base on Dog River is really the most inspiring though. Just getting out there when it's good and quiet and there's nobody out yet, the sun's coming up, and the fish are biting; that's hard to beat. My painting is definitely influenced by mood so being outside gets me centered mentally and puts me in a good place to be creative and just let it all flow out [on the canvas]."

The choice of featured artist for the 2022 Fairhope Arts and Crafts Festival further illustrates this artist-nature link. Jo Patton, Fairhope resident and award-winning artist, was selected as the featured artist for her depiction of a mother and children building sandcastles on the bay in her painting *Building Memories*. A pier over Mobile Bay's waters, a signature subject for Patton, is featured in the painting. "To paint, to work at it, you have to have some quiet time.



# Through Their Actions:

## *Environment Impacted by Artists*



Jo Patton's *Building Memories* was the featured artwork for the 2022 Fairhope Arts & Crafts Festival.

You have to be able to muddle things around in your head," Patton said. She describes painting on site, on the beach or a pier, for much of her earlier work.

Many in the community find the parks and access points on the Eastern Shore from Meaher Park south to Mullet Point Park provide opportunity for both natural discovery and personal self-discovery – both are often the inception to artistic work.

Local artists avidly convey their work is influenced by the environment: the tranquility and the tumult, the rhythm and the discord, the serendipitous and the familiar. Inspiration comes from colors, shapes, textures, but more fundamentally from the sense of well-being afforded by time spent outdoors. Something else is apparent...while the environment influences the artists, the artists are having an impact on environment.

The artwork of JD Swiger asks us to face some uncomfortable truths. As Swiger said of his creation *Hammerhead*, "We are the monster." His depiction of a

shark head, made entirely of litter found on our local beaches, is a mask inviting the viewer to become part of the artwork. He created it as a photo op with an intentional message. We may view sharks as frightening, but the pervasive problem of litter is more alarming.

Swiger remembers his mom telling him to leave the beach better than he found it. He lives that message and hopes his artwork inspires others to do the same. Striking mixed media pieces using thousands of cigarette butts found on our Gulf Coast beaches hang in the Swiger Studio in Gulf Shores. Other more whimsical pieces made from plastic sand shovels and sunglasses are reminders that items left behind become pollution in the environment. There is an eye-opening collection at the studio, which not only includes JD's work but his brother Michael's as well. Locals are familiar with the Swiger brothers' murals on area business and school walls. The murals often feature larger-than-life depictions of local wildlife highlighting our coastal ecosystems.



*Afterlife* by JD Swiger  
(cigarette paper and pressed plant life)

**As JD says of his creation *Hammerhead*, "We are the monster." We may view sharks as frightening, but the pervasive problem of litter is more alarming.**



*Hammerhead* by JD Swiger  
(plastic pollution and resin)





*Side by Side* by Lynn Jordan Photography

Photographer Lynn Jordan moved to the Bon Secour community in 2009 and her eyes were opened to beautiful sunsets on the river and to the local shrimpers who rely on a healthy ecosystem to continue their trade. As a child, she was fascinated with the photos in *Life* and *National Geographic* magazines, but was not a photographer until she moved to the area. Fortunately, her husband needed an idea for a birthday gift and bought her a camera. The former English teacher developed an appreciation for her surroundings and a photographer was born. Her newfound hobby became a passion, with a view of her subject material laying conveniently outside her front door in the Plash Island area. Her photos often feature local shrimp boats. She has been dubbed “the shrimp boat lady” for bringing attention to the Alabama shrimping and fishing industry. Jordan encourages people to support local shrimping families by purchasing Alabama Wild Seafood and gives the boat owners a voice with her stunning photographs.

She and her husband now live in Silverhill, AL, where she operates The Farmhouse Gallery behind her home. About ten local artists are featured along with Jordan’s own work. Jordan notes visitors to the area often want to take a piece of artwork home with them to keep the “almost primal connection” to the water and shorelines alive.

Orange Beach artist Nick Cantrell spent his early childhood in Valley,

Alabama, where an early appreciation for both art and nature was apparent. He recalls with admiration an elementary school art teacher showing students how to dig in the clay to find elements to create their own paint. At age 13, Cantrell moved to Orange Beach. Though the scenery changed, his interest in the natural world did not. In fact, it flourished in the coastal environment. Cantrell calls himself a “river rat” and enjoys sailing, kayaking, and being in and near the water. “We went for a paddle between storms yesterday,” he said, mentioning how much he values the public access in the area.

Cantrell was always artistic, doodling on church bulletins and cards for his mom, but at 20 years old, everything changed. A blood clot in his arm left him in ICU for six days allowing for a lot of soul-searching and self-reflection. He returned to Auburn University and changed his major from Building Science to Art—compelled to cultivate his creative gifts. He began working on his craft but said he struggled with color and was more comfortable with pen and ink.

He obviously succeeded in overcoming his “problem with color” and now promotes an appreciation for nature through his appealing style of watercolor batik. Waterscapes, marine life, and other wildlife are his theme. “Develop a voice, honor that voice,” he says and he’s not just talking about his art.

Cantrell has worked with conservation organizations such as the Coastal Wildlife Rehabilitation Center, Mobile Baykeeper,



*Pelican Takes 5* by Nick Cantrell  
(batik watercolor)

the Coastal Conservation Association, and serves on the Board of Directors for the Friends of Bon Secour. He was instrumental in obtaining grant funding for the Orange Beach Canoe Trail. Cantrell wholeheartedly agrees there is an art-environment connection. He talks a lot about stewardship – stewardship of his own artistic gifts, and stewardship of our environment.

We are fortunate to live in an area providing abundant access to places that feed the artist’s soul. We are also fortunate to have a community of artists who care deeply about those places and work to preserve the environment for us all.

*Meet more artists on pages 12-13 of this issue.*



## An Invitation to Help Create a Masterpiece

By ROBERTA SWANN, DIRECTOR, MOBILE BAY NATIONAL ESTUARY PROGRAM

*Afternoon Glow at Shell Banks* by Joanne Brandt (oil on panel)

**A**ccording to Eden Gallery, the purpose of art in your life is to make you feel something. It can be a feeling of joy, sorrow, anger, and more. Art is a beautiful thing possessing the power to bring people together and give them a sense of peace.

Is not nature a form of art? Have you ever stopped to notice how many shades of green there are in a forest? Or how many blues and purples ebb and flow in Gulf waters? Have you ever closed your eyes and listened to the symphony of crickets, frogs and bird calls, notes high and low, melting into a song of nature? Does a babbling creek bring you joy? Does a clear-cut forest bring you a tinge of sorrow? As I reflect on the many ways nature brings art into my life, I am humbled by the work of so many individuals committed to the preservation of the natural canvas defining our Gulf Coast way of life, so future generations will have the same opportunities we now have to experience peace.

Protecting nature comes in many forms, the simplest being acquisition. There are many entities committed to protecting our coastal landscape including,

but not limited to, the Alabama Forever Wild Trust, Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Mobile and Baldwin counties, many coastal municipalities, the Nature Conservancy, South Alabama Land Trust, and Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuaries. According to our annual Grantee Performance Act Reporting, these groups have collectively acquired over 9,000 acres of priority habitats including beaches, wetlands, and upland forests.

Protecting nature is one thing, experiencing it is another. Did you know there are hundreds of locations across Mobile and Baldwin counties to access nature, including 243 public water access points? These sites provide residents and visitors alike with the opportunity to experience the wonder of nature—in the Delta in the black of night, a skyline lit with orange while gigging for yellow frogs amid the grey-green grasses of twilight, or out in the Gulf with the sun on the rise, birds dancing across the sun's rays to the beat of the waves. Our thanks go again to the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Mobile and Baldwin counties, and many coastal

municipalities who recognize the value of being out in nature and providing the possibilities for any and all to experience the joy of a fish jumping, a sun rising, a water still and deep.

In the next several months, the MBNEP will, with the help of our Management Conference members, be re-writing the Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan for Alabama's Estuaries and Coast. This blueprint for conservation will continue to be based on what people value most about living here: access to the water and open spaces; healthy beaches and shorelines; robust populations of fish and wildlife; preservation of our heritage and culture; environmental and community resilience; and swimmable and fishable waters. I look forward to being a part of the masterpiece to come and invite you to join us in its creation. Share your thoughts and input by scanning the code below or visit [mobilebaynep.com/masterpiecesurvey](http://mobilebaynep.com/masterpiecesurvey) to add to the project.







# Coastal Corner

## They're Not Making It Anymore

*The Lloyd parcel, a 60-acre tract located at the confluence of Green Branch and Waterhole Branch on Fish River in Baldwin County, contains about one mile of undeveloped shoreline. Photo of Waterhole Branch by Daniel Galbraith.*

*By WILL UNDERWOOD, COASTAL SECTION ADMINISTRATOR, ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION AND NATURAL RESOURCES, STATE LANDS DIVISION*

**A**s a child growing up on a farm, in what was then a markedly more rural south Baldwin County, it was common to hear the old timers repeat the Mark Twain adage to "Buy land, they're not making it anymore." To the old timers, land meant livelihood, a way to provide for their families in both the short and long term. Value was placed more on what could be grown on the land as opposed to what could be built upon it. Ground suitable for producing sweet potatoes was as good as gold, heavier ground was rotated through a variety of other row-crops, and marginally productive land was often relegated to low density livestock grazing or timber.

While we still see the trappings of an agrarian past all around us in coastal

Alabama, it is easy to recognize the shift in resource use and valuation brought about by a changing demographic and economic base as we transition towards Alabama's future coast. Considering these changes, natural resource managers are faced with some tough choices as we work to balance resource and water quality protection with the pressures of an increasing coastal population and growing demand for public access to natural resources.

Perhaps even more challenging is trying to lay a solid foundation to meet those demands in the future as population growth estimates are realized and management is complicated by the overlay of climate change, sea level rise, and non-native invasive species.

My maternal grandmother, who grew up on the bluff in Fairhope watching the comings and goings of the ferries plying the

waters of Mobile Bay, was fond of retelling a grade school narrative that Alabama's rich and diverse natural resources were sufficient for the state to be self-contained, needing no imports from the outside world. Yet, for all this resource abundance, Alabama has the lowest percentage of land (<5%) held in public trust among the southeastern states. The various factors driving this statistic are beyond the scope of this column but do beg the question of how resource managers will meet the desire of a current and future public for access to recreation in our coastal environment. Could our previous generation of resource managers even have imagined today's public would be looking for recreational amenities such as disc golf courses, 3-D archery ranges, mountain bike trails, and launches for kayaks and stand-up paddleboards?

Perhaps not, and I suspect that a generation from now coastal residents will likely be enjoying some new forms of outdoor recreation that I and my contemporaries have never contemplated.

So just how do we hedge our bets against the uncertainty of population growth, the need to provide recreation to future generations, and the responsibility to well manage the natural resources with which we are entrusted as caretakers? To my mind, one of our smartest moves is to follow the advice taken by the old timers I mentioned earlier. While we may value land a bit differently than the generations that came before us, we are still faced with the same truth... "they're not making it anymore."

Land conservation provides us with a flexible tool that can accomplish outcomes that we may not have even yet imagined. Protecting water quality, preserving viewsheds, providing space for marsh migration in the face of sea-level rise, preserving habitat for important wildlife species, sequestering carbon – these are all functions protected lands can provide. Add in the potential for these same lands to provide public access and recreation, even for those uses we haven't yet contemplated, and it is easy to see acquiring land for the public trust is a winning proposition for everyone.





# City of Foley: *Access and Acquisition*

By AUBREY BLANCO, NATURAL RESOURCES PLANNER, ADCNR STATE LANDS DIVISION, COASTAL SECTION

*White top pitcher plants (Sarracenia leucophylla) under a pine savannah are visible from a nature trail at Graham Creek Nature Preserve.*

**A**midst rapid growth in Baldwin County, the City of Foley is acquiring and preserving natural resources and creating public access for residents and visitors.

In 2008, the Graham Creek Nature Preserve was established to provide conservation education and passive recreation. With more than 500 acres located on the eastern side of Wolf Bay, Graham Creek Nature preserve is one of the largest municipal nature preserves in the State of Alabama. When it was first acquired, Leslie Gahagan, the City of Foley's Environmental and Nature Parks Director, asked the Mayor and City Council to allow her to design a nature preserve with the land. "Graham Creek [Nature Preserve] began as a vision for public access and exposure to our disappearing coastal habitats, but it has blossomed into a treasured city park, valuable educational site for all ages, and an ecotourism destination for passive recreation," said Gahagan. "It is a legacy for the leadership of Foley."

The acquisition of this land was the first step taken to conserve and protect the area. Since then, they have worked to make the land accessible for passive recreation and conservation education, securing numerous grants to build amenities such as a canoe launch, pavilions, boardwalk nature trails, playgrounds, and three disc golf courses – a fourth to be added this fall. In 2016, the Graham Creek Interpretive Center was constructed. Housing multiple nature displays, it is used for educational programs, field trips, summer camps, and workshops.

In 2020, the City of Foley secured funds from the Alabama Coastal Area Management Program to continue the improvement of public access at the Preserve. A boardwalk nature trail was constructed as a joint project between the City of Foley and the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR) State Lands Division, Coastal Section. Funding for this project was provided in part by the Coastal Zone Management Act administered by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Office for Coastal Management. This boardwalk begins west of the canoe and kayak launch, crosses the headwater stream of Graham Creek, and ends on the southern bank. The trail allows visitor access to the southeastern portion of the Preserve increasing accessibility to Graham Creek for bird watching and fishing.

The preserve expanded in 2021 when the Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act (GOMESA) funded acquisition of 82 acres on the west side. With additional GOMESA funds and anticipated donations of land, the Preserve is expected to double in size over the next two years. The acquisition of this land will be maintained and protected by the City of Foley for generations to come.

Located north of Graham Creek Preserve, just a four-mile paddle up Wolf Bay, sits the City of Foley's Wolf Creek Park, also managed by Gahagan. This land contains approximately 20 acres and was donated by the Baldwin County Commission to the City in 2012. Gahagan and the City of Foley obtained grant

funding to improve the public access at Wolf Creek Park in 2014, with the construction of a canoe and kayak launch, fishing pier, boardwalk, gravel parking area, and small pavilion and picnic area. The City of Foley plans to make additional improvements to provide further amenities to the public. Planned enhancements include a restroom building, playground area, and educational signage to promote sustainable use of the coastal resources. These past and future improvements are part of a joint agreement with City of Foley and the ADCNR State Lands Division, Coastal Section with funding provided in part by the Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972 as amended and administered by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Office for Coastal Management. Additionally, in an effort to preserve the natural resources within Foley City limits, Gahagan and the city obtained a GOMESA grant to purchase four acres to conserve the bird rookery south of Wolf Creek Park.

Through these acquisitions and implementation of public access, locals and visitors from all over are able to enjoy the amazing natural resources south Alabama has to offer.

For more information, please visit the Preserve's Interpretive Center at 23030 Wolf Bay Drive in Foley, AL, open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., or visit online at [grahamcreekpreserve.org](http://grahamcreekpreserve.org).





# Access: Getting to the Water

BY HENRY PERKINS, PRIVATE SECTOR PROGRAM LEAD, AND HERNDON GRADDICK,  
OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT, MOBILE BAY NATIONAL ESTUARY PROGRAM

*Live Oak Landing on the  
Tensaw River in Stockton, Alabama*

**A**labamians care deeply about access to our coastlines and waterways. A partnership between the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program is committed to providing more opportunities to reach the places Alabamians value most. Access is an especially critical component of coastal protection because connecting people to their environment fosters conservation and protection.

There are 243 public water access points in Mobile and Baldwin counties. These sites invite the public to enjoy valued coastlines and waterways for fishing, swimming, paddling, and boating.

The MBNEP, in partnership with the ADCNR, recently updated the inventory of all 243 sites. Our team went to each location and conducted site surveys. Some of the questions asked were: Is this spot overgrown? Is it eroding? Is there parking available? Is it handicap accessible? Is this site fishable? Are there picnic tables? Are pets allowed?

We also identified opportunities for improvements so guests can more safely spend time in nature. Some of the recommendations included adding signage,

shade, tables, or parking to make spaces more accessible.

Of the 243 Access Sites in Coastal Alabama, here are some of our favorites:

## **Audubon Bird Sanctuary**

When visiting Dauphin Island, most of us head straight to the public beach or the West End, known for its convenient parking, restrooms, and showers. However, there are other lesser-known ways to get to the water. One of our favorite spots is the Audubon Bird Sanctuary, where a meandering walk takes you on a trip into the sights and sounds of Coastal Alabama. Listen and you'll hear the plaintive call of a red-winged blackbird, the shriek of osprey, sea-oats rustling in the breeze, or a splash in Alligator Lake hinting at the residents below. Within the sanctuary there are three miles of trails, some taking you to the white sands on the Gulf. The sanctuary and its beach are crowded with birds, grasses, trees, and flowers, but fortunately less so with people!

## **Bon Secour**

Bon Secour is a Coastal Alabama jewel. Walking through the Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge feels like stepping through time, back before Baldwin County's coast was defined by beach houses and condominiums, before the intracoastal waterway brought the growth of the 20th century, back before the Spaniards or indigenous peoples harvested treasures

from the shore. Over 7,000 acres of coastal lands protect the delicate species and ecosystems. Taking the trail through the pristine dunes is otherworldly, a landscape uncommon and unspoiled. The dunes stand like miniature mountains and cliffs overlooking the Gulf. The pine forests hold a similar, almost eerie beauty where the pencil straight pines look almost like they were painted into the landscape. This the natural world in all its glory and not to be missed.

## **Live Oak Landing**

Our delta is one of the few remaining wildernesses in the continental United States. With few roads accessing its interior, it can be challenging for the lay person, the non-outdoorsman, to experience this invaluable piece of the world. Fortunately, there are some gateways to Alabama's defining coastal feature. Recently renovated, Live Oak Landing provides a stepping stone for families who want to better know the Mobile-Tensaw Delta. Located north of Bay Minette, near Stockton, the landing offers hiking, camping, boat ramps, and more – a plethora of outdoor activities. As the name implies, towering oaks canopy the grounds with sweeping Spanish moss dangling from branches. The muddy river rolls slowly by, inviting boaters to venture out into the 300,000-acre swamp giving shelter to native species.





# Squeaky Sneakers

BY AUBREY BLANCO, NATURAL RESOURCES PLANNER, ADCNR STATE LANDS DIVISION, COASTAL SECTION

**In 2008, Angela Underwood, Manager of the Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERR) and Nancy Raia, Community Outreach Director of the Eastern Shore Art Center located in Fairhope, AL, collaborated to create a community outreach program known as Squeaky Sneakers.**

Through involvement in hands-on environmental education and innovative forms of artistic expression, Squeaky Sneakers promotes the conservation of estuaries and other coastal resources. It began as a summer camp directed mostly toward young children but has grown to include participants who range in age from preschool to senior citizens with diverse backgrounds and abilities.

The program coined its name after a seining trip with one of the groups as part of their innovative environmental learning. Seining requires individuals to enter the water, sometimes waist deep, with shoes on. A large net is cast and dragged toward the shore in hopes of capturing some marine creatures to admire and then release safely. After trudging through water with shoes on, a squeaky noise commenced as the participants eagerly gathered around the net to see what creatures they netted – thus, the Squeaky Sneakers moniker.

Underwood describes how the seining activity is followed by catch-of-the-day artwork. Students draw the seine net,

the animals they caught, and of course, their sneakers.

Underwood explains how participants are offered a different approach to learning through the integration of multiple subjects. They read books introducing a new topic, such as estuaries. They then partake in a hands-on activity reinforcing the information from the book. The students take what they learn from both the book and the activity and express their new knowledge through art. Participants use multiple forms of media, such as watercolors and acrylic paints to create their artwork.

In 2010, the BP Oil Spill devastated the Gulf Coast. To better educate the students and help them understand the impacts of the oil spill on the natural environment, Underwood and Raia taught participants to use black tar paper and acrylic paints to develop art pieces highlighting marine life. Students also used materials such as preserved fish specimens from the Weeks Bay NERR to create fish prints. They painted on the fish, pressed paper over the top, and removed the paper to reveal a lifelike, fish print.

Squeaky Sneakers has been introduced into the classroom at local schools as well. At Fairhope High School, Squeaky Sneakers worked with students from a Consumer Sciences and Fashion Design class. “The students created beautiful fabrics using the Easy Batik lesson,” Underwood recalled. Batik is the art of using some type of resistant (such as wax)

on a fabric, painting the fabric, and then removing the resistant to leave behind a beautiful design. “The students used toothpaste or hand lotion [as the resistant] on the cloth or canvas, and then washed it off after the paint dried,” she described. “They even made fabrics with designs based on estuaries, which they used to create clothing – the clothing was put on exhibit at the Eastern Shore Art Center.”

The program has encouraged participants of all ages and abilities to immerse themselves in science through art, and ultimately develop an appreciation and become stewards of the coastal environment.

To learn more about Squeaky Sneakers, contact Nancy Raia at [nancy@esartcenter.org](mailto:nancy@esartcenter.org) or Angela Underwood at [Angela.Underwood@dcnr.alabama.gov](mailto:Angela.Underwood@dcnr.alabama.gov). Virtual Squeaky Sneakers lessons can be found on the Weeks Bay Reserve YouTube page.

The Weeks Bay NERR was established in 1986 and is managed by the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources as part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s National Estuarine Research Reserve System. The mission of the Weeks Bay NERR is to “provide leadership to promote informed management of estuarine and coastal habitats through scientific understanding and encourage good stewardship practices through partnerships, public education, and outreach programs.”



# Conservationist of the Year

## ADCNR Commissioner Chris Blankenship

By AUBREY BLANCO, NATURAL RESOURCES PLANNER, ADCNR STATE LANDS DIVISION, COASTAL SECTION

**F**or 40 years, the Alabama Wildlife Federation has recognized leaders in the conservation of Alabama's wildlife and natural resources through the Alabama Wildlife Federation Governor's Conservation Achievement Awards. The 2022 award honorees include Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources' (ADCNR) Commissioner Chris Blankenship and the City of Foley's Environmental Director Leslie Gahagan (opposite page).

ADCNR Commissioner Chris Blankenship was awarded the 2022 Conservationist of the Year award for his overall conservation efforts, environmental achievements, and other significant contributions to the conservation of natural resources. This is not his first AWF Governor's Conservation Award. In 2016, he was the recipient of the Fisheries Conservationist of the Year Award.

Commissioner Blankenship, a Mobile native, began working at age 14 on Dauphin Island charter boats, where his commitment to conservation was born. After graduating from the University of South Alabama he became a Conservation Enforcement Officer with the ADCNR Marine Resources Division (MRD) in 1994 and moved into the role of director in 2011. During his time in the MRD, Blankenship ensured the protection and prosperity of irreplaceable Gulf of Mexico fisheries and natural resources. One of Blankenship's particularly notable achievements as director was the implementation of the Rigs-to-Reef program. This program converts decommissioned oil and gas platforms into large artificial reefs. These



Commissioner Blankenship (second from the left) poses with his 2022 Conservationist of the Year award.

underwater structures promote marine life in areas with limited underwater features by providing food and refuge. The reefs support endangered sea turtles as well as a number of fish species – red snapper, gray triggerfish, greater amberjack, and various grouper species.

In 2017, Governor Kay Ivey appointed Blankenship as the ADCNR Commissioner, a position he holds today. He leads the management of over 750,000 acres for wildlife, 146 boat ramps, 33 wildlife management areas, 22 state lakes, 21 state parks, 15 archery ranges, and 13 shooting ranges. ADCNR is also responsible for hunting and fishing biological and enforcement needs, saltwater commercial and recreational fisheries, management of state parks and the Forever Wild Land Trust, and administration of oil and gas leasing and exploration related to state-owned water bottoms in Alabama. Blankenship

enthusiastically faces these responsibilities, knowing his team's work will help preserve Alabama's vast natural resources, ensuring future generations' enjoyment and appreciation of "Alabama the Beautiful".

Last year, Commissioner Blankenship received a proclamation from Governor Ivey designating an area offshore south of Dauphin Island as the Christopher M. Blankenship Artificial Reef Zone, honoring his past and continued efforts in ensuring the richness of the Gulf of Mexico's fisheries and ecosystems. The 63-square-mile area starts about 10 miles southwest of the Sand Island Lighthouse. This reef zone is another milestone in the artificial reef conservation efforts Blankenship implemented during his tenure in the MRD.

Congratulations to Chris Blankenship for this prestigious recognition and thank you for your leadership in the conservation of natural resources in Alabama.



# Water Conservationist of the Year

## City of Foley's Leslie Gahagan

**Leslie Gahagan is the City of Foley's Environmental and Nature Parks Director, managing the Environmental and Nature Parks departments, including the popular Graham Creek Nature Preserve, which she helped establish. The Elberta native was honored as the 2022 Water Conservationist of the Year by the Alabama Wildlife Federation, an award presented to an individual with outstanding contribution to water resource conservation through efforts focused on the protection and improvement of water quality.**

Gahagan has over 20 years of experience in conservation. Gahagan began her career as a Stormwater Inspector with the Alabama Department of Environmental Management and joined the City of Foley in 2006. She grew up nearby in Elberta and has dedicated her life to preserving and improving the area in which she lives. She is a Certified Professional in Erosion and Sediment Control and is very active in South Alabama's environmental community. Gahagan serves as the President of Wolf Bay Watershed Watch and is very involved with the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program (MBNEP), serving on the Executive Committee, the Project Implementation Committee, and the Community Action Committee as co-chair. She was also appointed by the Baldwin County Commission to serve on their Environmental Advisory Committee.

To protect and improve water quality in both the Bon Secour River and Wolf Bay watersheds, Gahagan helped spearhead MBNEP's efforts to develop

watershed management plans for these basins. In addition, she updated Foley's development regulations to include low impact development requirements and has

worked as a project manager on several headwater stream restoration projects. In 2014, she worked to restore natural sinuosity and floodplain features to highly impacted channelized segments to improve dissolved oxygen levels in Wolf Creek to improve water quality feeding into Wolf Bay. As Project Manager for the Bon Secour River Headwaters Restoration project, she ensures stormwater flows from Foley are naturally treated and gradually released resulting in the reduction of litter, sediment, nutrients, and downstream flooding. Gahagan is the Project Manager for both the Wolf Creek and Sandy Creek Headwaters Restoration projects, currently completing design to stabilize banks, remove invasive species, and restore degraded stream segments feeding into Wolf Bay. The construction of these projects will begin in 2023.

A significant amount of her time is spent developing, overseeing, managing, and obtaining grant funding for the land management and conservation projects. While wearing many hats, Gahagan continues to be active in public education for stormwater management and water quality. She credits many of her successes to the City of Foley for allowing her to flourish and to her family for their support.

Congratulations to Leslie Gahagan for this prestigious recognition and thank you for your outstanding leadership in water resource conservation.



*2022 Water Conservationist of the Year, Leslie Gahagan (right) posing with her best friend and 2018 Water Conservationist of the Year, Ashley Campbell (left).*



# Spotlight on Local Artists



**Cat Pope** [catpope.com](http://catpope.com) *Marsh Sunset* oil on linen

I feel the most connected to the land when plein air painting. Painting outdoors has a long history, and I aim to capture the feeling of our slice of the Gulf Coast in this practice. Once I arrive at my chosen scene, I root myself in the morning, even just for an hour or two. Painting what I see forces me to pause, breathe in, and distill what I experience onto canvas. It's a great challenge to fight the bugs, wind, and often rainy elements while outside. I've spent a great deal of time at Five Rivers Delta Resource Center, as well as Bayfront Park studying the landscape, how the water moves along the grasses, the way the sun kisses on the clouds... it's all changing by the minute! The finished painting records my experience of this moment in time.



**Joanne Brandt** [joannebrandtartspace.blogspot.com](http://joannebrandtartspace.blogspot.com) *Watch Your Step!* oil on panel

I moved to Mobile in 1980 to work for the Army Corps of Engineers as a wetland biologist. I also lived on Mobile Bay near Dog River for 20 years. The water and wetland areas in the Mobile Bay area are a major part of how I see my home place. I especially enjoy depicting our marsh areas, as well as boats and marinas in the marsh settings. In a way, I am reflecting the aesthetic beauty of the marsh, as well as man's relationship to the wetlands for recreation, fishing, and boating. There are so many moments when I have been inspired while plein air painting. Most of the time I will get inspired because of a certain light and shadow playing across the scene. There is a special beauty in the late afternoon amber glow on the marsh grasses. I tried to capture that one afternoon at Shell Banks on the Fort Morgan peninsula. Listening to the great blue herons, watching the pelican fishing nearby, and watching the mullets jumping – can't be any more beautiful than that.



**Susan Rouillier**  
[susierou.com](http://susierou.com)  
*I'm So Blue* acrylic on canvas



About twelve years ago, I was standing on the Mobile Bay shoreline, when a long undulating V of Ibis flew right in front of me. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen and I didn't even know what they were. I was stunned and thought, "Where have I been?" and "If only I could catch this magic with a camera". So I went back the same time the next day hoping they would come. That is how little I knew. But I kept trying, first with a point-and-shoot camera which didn't work, and then purchasing better and better cameras. The birds inspired me and I began painting them, and in the past two years I have been writing poetry mostly about birds and nature and published two books – *South Mobile Birds*, and *South Mobile Wildlife*.

*A special thank you to Lucy Gafford of the Mobile Arts Council for her enthusiasm and assistance in our vision to connect our community with artists who see the beauty in the Mobile Delta and surrounding area. We are grateful to each artist who took time to share their thoughts and their work for this issue. All artwork shown is reproduced with the permission of the artists.*





**Melissa Root**  
[instagram.com/root.melissa](https://www.instagram.com/root.melissa)  
*Longleaf Morning* pastel



My artwork is absolutely influenced by our environment. If anything, there is too much to observe and paint! How wonderful to be faced with such abundance. Late one afternoon on Dauphin Island, near Isle Dauphine Club, painting friends and I climbed onto a nearby dune and looked out over a spit of sand as the sun lowered and cast long shadows onto the nearby sandy rough land. The sun made golden light and violet shadows. I had a feeling of joy and gratitude. My painting of beach shrubbery wasn't so great, but I remember the feeling well.



**Frank Ledbetter**  
[frankledbetter.com](http://frankledbetter.com)  
*Cruising* stainless steel



I am very much inspired by the coast, the beautiful animals, and lush landscapes surrounding this area. I love animals, and you can see a lot of different species of birds, fish, and other animals in my work. I have been scuba diving and snorkeling many times and have always felt inspired by the things I have seen on those trips. As a result, many of my works of art are depictions of aquatic life and their environment. The Bay, the Gulf, or Fowl River is where I get the most inspiration. Probably because there is so much wildlife to see near the waterways. I believe that we should do everything we can to maintain a healthy environment and work to restore our endangered habitats such as the Mobile River Delta. And my hope is that my art inspires others to feel the same way.



**Janet Hinton**  
[janethinton.com](http://janethinton.com)  
*Fly Creek* acrylic on canvas



I paint the water of this area, from the creeks and rivers to Mobile Bay. I first noticed the water and reflections while traveling abroad. I was photographing a bridge but what interested me the most was the reflections of the bridge in the water. When I returned home I painted that reflection from my photographs. Now I photograph and paint just the water with no horizon or shoreline. It is simply the water with its color, texture, lines, and shapes.



**Bruce Larsen** [BruceLarsenArt.com](http://BruceLarsenArt.com) *Blue Heron* sculpture

When my son was a student at the Fairhope K-1 Center years ago, I accompanied his class to Mobile Bay with their Pelican's Nest science teacher Charlene Dindo. They waded out into the water with seine nets and observed the sea life in their own back yard. For a family that had recently moved to Fairhope from a big city, that was a really magical moment! In the lab back at the school was a dwarf seahorse that had also been caught in the bay. That has led to one of my latest projects. The works will be of dwarf seahorses and will involve the community in finding and preserving local metal and informing them about the environmental issues the little seahorses face in the Bay.





# Russell Ladd

## *An Outdoorsman Who Loved the Delta*

BY HERNDON GRADDICK, OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT, MOBILE BAY NATIONAL ESTUARY PROGRAM

**T**here are many leaders in the world, and a few special ones leave things better than they found them. Russell Ladd was one of the special ones. Russell was a Mobilian's Mobilian, born and raised. An outdoorsman who loved the Delta, he grew up hunting and fishing at a small camp deep in the Mobile-Tensaw at Chuckfee Bay. He called the Delta the glue that held his family together for generations.

The formative years of his youth were heady. In the era following America's victory in WWII anything seemed possible, and Russell Ladd's life became proof of that optimism. He graduated from University Military School (UMS) in 1953 in a class of 25 cadets. He was valedictorian, and the leadership skills that would characterize his life had already begun to emerge.

For college, Ladd went way up North – to Virginia – to study at the famed Washington and Lee University. There he was president of his fraternity, a leader in ROTC, and editor of both the school newspaper and the yearbook.

Returning to Mobile, he devoted his life to family, to their thriving business, and to helping conserve coastal Alabama's



*From all of us working to maintain and restore the natural resources of Alabama, we extend thanks to the life and legacy of Russell Ladd.*

**Russell Ladd**  
1935-2022

outdoor way of life that he loved so dearly. Ladd worked to share his love of the Delta with others. He took dozens of tours on trips around the Delta over the years, supported conservation efforts, and even created his own website to share some of his encounters on the water.

### **Community leaders remember Ladd and the significance of his influence:**

"Coming from someone who moved down here from the North to have the support and recognition of someone like him has been one of the highlights of my career. He is one of the people that would make me feel that the work that I do matters," reflected MBNEP Director Roberta Swann.

"Russell loved to talk about the relationships he built with his grandchildren in the Delta. It often

seemed to me that Russell's love of the Delta was grounded in his love of family," recalled Thompson Engineer's Eliska Morgan.

Wiley Blankenship, director of the Coastal Alabama Partnership, remembers the time he spent with Ladd, and how it changed his perspective on a world he hadn't known. "I had never been to the Delta before. The first time he took me out, he said we were going to see the Delta how it's supposed to be seen...in a flat-bottom boat with a 9-horsepower engine. He had a way of talking about the place that was magical. "Right before he passed away, he was really excited about seeing some of the grass beds coming back. He was excited to start seeing some of the fish coming back too, tarpon, in particular. I wish he were here to see what the next five years hold."



## *Welcome and Welcome Back!*

**M**obile Bay National Estuary Program welcomed Marti Messick as Communications Manager in May of 2022. She has been an instructor in the Department of Communication at the University of South Alabama since 2013. An avid appreciator of nature, she is immersing herself in the world of the MBNEP.

In September, MBNEP welcomed back Herndon Graddick in the role of Outreach and Engagement.

Graddick has a wealth of media and nonprofit experience and is an active consultant and liaison for the MBNEP.

Messick and Graddick are excited to be working on several projects to expand the community's understanding of the work of the MBNEP.





**Since 1989, the third Saturday of September has become a day many coastal Alabama community members and visitors look forward to every year – the Annual Alabama Coastal Cleanup.**

This year, thousands of volunteers flocked to the beaches and waterways of South Alabama to partake in the 35th Annual Alabama Coastal Cleanup on Saturday, September 17th. Coastal Cleanup is coordinated by the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, State Lands Division, Coastal Section, and Alabama People Against a Littered State (PALS), who join efforts to pull off the largest single-day volunteer event in the State of Alabama. The Alabama Coastal Cleanup aligns with the International Coastal Cleanup, an annual event engaging individuals from all over the globe to remove trash from the world's beaches and waterways. Over the past 34 years, more than 1.7 million pounds (and counting!) of marine debris has been removed from the coastal Alabama waterways and shorelines.

Participants are asked to record the different types of marine debris they collect. Plastic bags, beverage cans, bottles, cups, food containers, and fishing

## 35TH ANNUAL ALABAMA COASTAL CLEANUP

line are the most common items. The collection of this data provides better understanding of the activities causing marine debris creating a framework to prevent it. Marine debris is an ongoing issue worldwide. Not only unsightly, it is dangerous to the health of surrounding ecosystems and the creatures inhabiting them.

The cleanup is made possible by sponsors and volunteers, many who continue their support and efforts year after year. This event promotes community involvement and helps protect and preserve the beauty of Alabama's irreplaceable natural resources.

YOU can help mitigate the debris in Alabama's waterways and help keep "Alabama the Beautiful." To learn how you can partake in future Coastal Cleanups, head on over to [AlabamaCoastalCleanup.com](http://AlabamaCoastalCleanup.com), like us on [Facebook@AlabamaCoastalCleanup](https://www.facebook.com/AlabamaCoastalCleanup), or call 251-621-1216.

## Alabama current connection

**Mobile Bay National Estuary Program**  
[mobilebaynep.com](http://mobilebaynep.com) / 251-431-6409

The Mobile Bay National Estuary Program's mission is to lead the wise stewardship of water quality and living resources of Mobile Bay and the Tensaw Delta. The MBNEP serves as a catalyst for activities of estuary stakeholders, helping to build community-based organizational capacity for sound resource management and leveraging commitment and investment to ensure the estuary's sustainability. Follow us on Facebook and LinkedIn.

**Alabama Department of Conservation  
and Natural Resources, Lands Division,  
Coastal Section**  
[outdooralabama.com](http://outdooralabama.com) / 251-621-1216

In an effort to protect and enhance coastal resources and reduce potential conflicts between environmental and economic interests, the Alabama Coastal Area Management Program (ACAMP) was approved by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in 1979. The ACAMP is administered through the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, State Lands Division, Coastal Section.

*Alabama Current Connection* is produced biannually by the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program. Support is provided in part by the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR), State Lands Division, Coastal Section; the U.S. EPA; NOAA; and the Dauphin Island Sea Lab/Marine Environmental Science Consortium.

*Alabama Current Connection* encourages reprinting of its articles in other publications. If you have recommendations for future articles, please contact:

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We reserve the right to edit submissions.

To subscribe, visit [mobilebaynep.com/currentconnection](http://mobilebaynep.com/currentconnection).

*Funding for this newsletter is provided by Mobile Bay National Estuary Program and the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, State Lands Division, Coastal Section, in part, from a grant by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Office for Coastal Management Award #21NOS4190139.*





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## ALABAMA-MISSISSIPPI BAYS AND BAYOUS SYMPOSIUM

# Finding Balance:

## ECOLOGY, ECONOMY, AND COMMUNITY

The Bays and Bayous Symposium attracts over 400 scientists and professionals throughout the southeast. Since 2006, this two day biennial event has been held alternately in Alabama and Mississippi.

It incorporates formal presentations and discussions with networking of resource managers, scientists, and other active participants in watershed leadership sharing our latest understanding of the condition of the lands, waters, and living resources of the northern Gulf of Mexico. The symposium showcases current information about changes in the estuary's watersheds, impacts from major stressors, recovery programs for species and

habitats, and emerging challenges. The symposium will be held at the Mobile Convention Center on January 24-25, 2023.

The theme is *Finding Balance: Ecology, Economy, and Community*. The symposium is an opportunity for scientists and community leaders to connect along the northern Gulf Coast, enabling them to share ideas and make connections

critical to the long-term sustainability of the Coast. It provides a scientific overview and practical perspective of our knowledge and activities addressing the water quality, living resources, habitats, human impacts, and challenges of the northern Gulf of Mexico.

This is the first post-pandemic symposium, and we are anticipating an excellent turnout. Students are encouraged to join in the event with a discounted registration rate and networking opportunities with professionals in their career tracks.

Student presentations will be considered for the Mike deGruy Student Awards. Awards will be given to first place (\$300), second place (\$200), and third place (\$100) student presenters for both oral and poster presentations.



To register for the symposium,  
visit [baysandbayous.com](https://baysandbayous.com).

