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NEWORLEANS

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Group acquires Algiers land

By Sara Pagonos
New Orleans bureau
January 21, 2013

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NEW ORLEANS — The Woodlands Conservancy achieved a goal it has pursued for 12 years: Ensuring that 190 acres of bottomland hardwood wetlands in Lower Coast Algiers remain intact, providing habitat for migratory birds and resident wildlife and protecting people from storm surge.

The nonprofit group announced the purchase of the land Friday, gathering just past English Turn Golf Course Community on the edge of the forested land.

Katie Brasted, executive director of the Woodlands Conservancy, thanked an array of donors who paid for the property's appraisal: the Coypu Foundation, Chevron, ConocoPhillips, Martha Gunther, Jackie Leonard, Curtis Sorrells, the Orleans Audubon Society, the New Orleans Chapter of the Sierra Club, the Crescent Bird Club and the Louisiana Ornithological Society.

But the largest benefactor in acquiring the land, whom she described as a New Orleans businessman and his wife, remained anonymous by request. They donated the money — about \$500,000 — to buy the land from the Archdiocese of New Orleans.

The land is parallel to the Woodlands Trail and Park Bird Sanctuary in Belle Chasse that the Woodlands Conservancy manages and is adjacent to an existing Wilderness Park on one end and English Turn at the other.

Adding this parcel creates what Brasted called a “contiguous corridor” that is used by 100 species of migratory birds that depend on it during their annual flights.

The parcel is also just six miles from the Gulf of Mexico. Brasted noted that the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service estimates that with continued

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coastal erosion and sea level rise, the woodlands area will be one of the largest forested land masses between New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico in the next 50 to 100 years.

The purchase also means that “our children and grandchildren will always have the opportunity to view wildlife and have recreation, and this will be here in perpetuity,” she said.

Ray Herndon, director of the Lower Mississippi Region of the Conservation Fund, stressed the importance of bottomland hardwood wetlands, which once covered 24 million acres but now are reduced to 5 million, making preservation critical.

The land that the Woodlands Conservancy worked so tenaciously to acquire has itself been affected by changes in the environment. In the 1800s, it was cypress forest. But changes in drainage created by human development changed the soil, and now the woodlands are largely populated by non-native species, such as Chinese tallow and privet, that don't provide the same habitat and are not as strong a buffer against storm surge.

Sean Anderson, a professor with California State University Channel Islands who has worked with the group, said that all trees are not created equal. The species that have moved in don't have the root systems and wide canopy of cypress and tupelo forests, he said. He compared the newcomers to bamboo forests. “It's like toothpicks versus two-by-fours,” he said.

Restoring the land is the next big challenge, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will be assisting the Woodlands Conservancy in coming up with a plan to remove the invasive species and reforest it with native trees. Shell also presented a check for \$35,000 to help with that work.

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