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# Woodlands Conservancy protects parishes from coastal decay

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Contributing Writer

As Louisiana's coastline shrinks, New Orleans needs all the buffering it can get from water and storm surge. Two years ago, the Woodlands Conservancy bought 190 acres of bottomland hardwood wetlands on the lower coast of Algiers in Orleans Parish. That property parallels 609 acres that was already managed by the conservancy in Plaquemines Parish.

The parcel is next to other chunks of land in Algiers, including the 128-acre Audubon Wilderness Park, owned by the City of New Orleans and operated by the Audubon Nature Institute. The wilderness park neighbors the Freeport-McMoRan Audubon Species Survival Center for breeding animals on 986 acres in Algiers, leased by the Audubon institute from the U.S. Coast Guard. Also next door is the 1,200-acre English Turn Golf and Country Club residential community.



The area owned by the conservancy is one of the largest forested masses between the city and open water of Lake Borgne, which is only six miles away, Woodlands Conservancy's executive director Katie Brasted said last week. Along with offering storm protection, "our acquisition is one of the remaining fragments of forested wetland providing wildlife and migratory bird habitat south of Lake Pontchartrain," she said. In addition, the property has educational and recreational benefits.

The conservancy's land in Algiers is five adjoining properties, purchased in late 2012 through a donation from Orleans Parish residents Lee and Nancy Dupont. The acquisition area, now called the Delacroix Preserve, is parallel to Woodlands Trail, and it extends a corridor of public and partly public green

spaces, Brasted said. The area provides liftoff for over 4,400 migratory birds during spring and fall migration, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

In recent years, money for the conservancy's restoration work has come from federal agencies, the private sector, nonprofits and foundations, including the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Chevron Tree Farm, BP, National Wildlife Federation, Change Happens Foundation, EarthShare's Gulf Coast Restoration Fund and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Supplemental Environmental Projects.

Last year, Woodlands Conservancy received USFWS funding to remove non-native, invasive species from its 190-acre Delacroix Preserve. The invaders — primarily Chinese tallow, Chinese privet and Chinaberry — appeared several decades ago but their presence swelled after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. "Without intervention, the native habitat that sustains migratory birds, along with Louisiana's resident birds and wildlife, is threatened," Brasted said. And native trees in low-lying areas act as storm buffers and sponges that protect surrounding communities.

The conservancy has collected data on invasive vegetation since 2007 with the help of California State University Channel Islands and Oregon State University. Efforts to combat these foreign species began in 2009 on the 609-acre Woodlands Trail Bird Sanctuary in Plaquemines Parish. On four plots totaling 126 acres, sections have been reforested with over 10,500 seedlings and trees, Brasted said. "Adaptive management is required because each area is different, depending on the invasive species and its frequency, density and location," she said. "Parts of Woodlands Trail, where repeat treatments have been funded, have shown great success. But much remains to be done with repeat treatments in some areas, and work is needed in sections that haven't been treated."

A team from California State University Channel Islands and Oregon State University will return to New Orleans in March for post-treatment assessments to help decide what the next steps are in restoring the forest, Brasted said.

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In late 2013, Woodlands Conservancy initiated bird-banding stations at Woodlands Trail and Delacroix Preserve with funding from the Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program. At these stations, use of healthy, forested wetlands by birds versus their usage of areas undergoing native-plant restoration is studied.

Woodlands Conservancy is one of five sites monitored by the Louisiana Bird Observatory, a state-wide partnership of stations. "Our site furthers LABO's measuring of bird demographics at large landscape levels, and it provides training for students and research opportunities for universities in the New Orleans area," Brasted said. In the past thirteen months, data was gathered at the conservancy on 506 birds from 37 species.

In Plaquemines Parish, birding surveys show that at least 163 species use Woodlands Conservancy managed property, Brasted also said. Of those, nine are considered "species of continental importance" by Partners in Flight, a bird conservation group. Eighteen are "species of conservation concern" under the state of Louisiana's Wildlife Action Plan.

At the peak of their spring migration, up to 20 million birds cross the Gulf of Mexico daily on their way north from the tropics, according to David Muth, New Orleans-based Gulf Restoration Program director with the National Wildlife Federation. "Bottomland hardwood forests in coastal Louisiana and the food and shelter they provide can mean life or death for small songbirds and hummingbirds encountering rain or cold in that four-hundred-plus-mile crossing," he said. "The Woodlands Conservancy helps protect one of the most important forests still standing in southeast Louisiana."

What's next at the conservancy? "We'll be completing a business plan in the next several months, focused on developing a funding strategy for the first phase of a Woodlands Conservancy Wetlands Research & Education Center," under a design completed by architects Mossop and Michaels in New Orleans last July, Brasted said. The estimated cost of the center's phase one development is \$1.6 million.

"During 2015, we plan to grow our programming to engage more elementary and college students," she said. The conservancy has collaborated with fifteen colleges and universities to date and continues to liaise with CSUCI, OSU, University of California in Los Angeles and Tulane University on a regular basis. "We've worked with about 50 college students and 40 elementary students," Brasted said. That includes Belle Chasse Primary School's fourth grade class for the last two straight years in a learning project funded by the Brown Foundation in Metairie and California-based Chevron Oronite Co. This year Chevron Oronite is expanding its support for the conservancy to include more students. "In addition, we've had two to three Tulane interns a year, when we get them," Brasted said.

At Tulane, Jayur Madhusudan Mehta, an environmental studies program instructor and a doctoral candidate in anthropology, developed a service learning course for undergraduates at the Woodlands Conservancy with help from Tulane's Center for Public Service. "In the past year, over 40 Tulane students have participated in documenting invasive tree species, cataloging native trees, collecting imagery using unmanned aerial vehicles, and planting trees at the Woodlands properties," Mehta said last week.

As for its Audubon neighbors, "Woodlands Conservancy is unlike them in that we own land and are organized as a land trust, with our research and restoration activities focused on conserving and enhancing habitat for native Louisiana wildlife and migratory birds," Brasted said.

The Freeport-McMoRan Audubon Species Survival Center will introduce six giraffes to its Algiers site this year, Joel Hamilton, vice president and general curator at Audubon Zoo, said last week. "There's been a misconception that we'll be clear cutting there," he said. "We're not going to do that. Our lease for that Coast Guard property requires that we maintain a canopy of trees." When asked where the giraffes would go in the event of a hurricane, he said they'd be sheltered in a barn at the site.

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