

trunks, red maples, sugarberry, hackberry, beech, black willow, a many other riverine species. One giant loblolly pine tree is too big for two people to reach around.

Fish and reptiles form the Coosa River inhabit the stream as do beavers and muskrats. In the spring and early summer, spotted gar, an ancient looking fish that is long and slender with a mouth armed with rows of sharp teeth bask in the sunlight just below the surface. These dangerous-looking fish are harmless to humans.

### The Ridges

Beyond the stream we encounter the steep banks of the ridge. Eventually, a swinging bridge will provide easy access to the ridge trails.

Climax hardwood forest trees including yellow poplar, red oak, white oak, persimmon, dogwood, and many others tower above you



*The flattened musk turtle, endangered in St. Clair County, makes the wetlands of Blue Springs its home.*

as you climb the ridge. Beneath the massive canopy lie rare and delicate treasures that include plants like jack-in-the-pulpit, ladyslippers, trilliums, mosses, lichens, and lilies. Here the chipmunks, squirrels, and forest birds play.

The beauty of Blue Springs Nature Preserve is that it is ever-changing and you never know what to expect when you explore its bountiful fauna and flora. Every trip will be different and an experience you won't soon forget.

### About the Author:

*Bill Phillips, Land Use Chairman of the Blue Springs Nature Preserve Steering Committee, has more than 35 years experience conducting a variety of ecological projects. He currently resides in Ringgold, Georgia, which is home base for Envision Ecology, LLC, a consulting and mitigation banking company that he founded in 2006. In the 1970s and '80s, Phillips wrote for several popular outdoor magazines and served as the technical editor/senior writer for Bassmaster and Southern Outdoors.*



# Blue Springs Nature Preserve

Steering Committee Newsletter / February 2008

### Letter from the Chairman

Dear Steering Committee Member,

I hope everyone had an enjoyable holiday season and a great start to 2008. The New Year holds much opportunity for progress in the development of Blue Springs Nature Preserve



In this issue of the steering committee newsletter, we decided it would be a good idea to showcase just how diverse the wildlife at Blue Springs is. Bill Phillips has been instrumental both as an environmental consultant regarding wetlands work at the site and as a cheerleader for the opportunities to experience nature that are available to us. Early in his career, Bill actually wrote for several outdoors magazines, so I can think of no better person to present this topic than him.

Reading Bill's article reminds me what a real treasure we have in Blue Springs. I am excited at that we will have a chance to share this with the entire region.

Sincerely,  
*Spencer Weitman*

### Blue Springs Nature Preserve Steering Committee

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Steering Committee Chairman

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### In This Issue:

#### Where the Wild Things Are:

Exploring Nature at Blue Springs Nature Preserve

# WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

## Exploring Nature at Blue Springs Nature Preserve

by Bill Phillips

Standing atop the hill on the eastern side of Blue Springs Nature Preserve, looking down into the expanse of greenery, you cannot help but recall the early scene in the movie Jurassic Park when the paleontologists first get a glimpse of a live dinosaur.

Although we are some 60 million years removed from the time when dinosaurs did roam over the Blue Springs area, there are still plenty of interesting plants and animals occupying the diverse habitats in the sanctuary to enjoy.

The park lies in the Coosa River Valley, with the big river just a stone's throw to the south. The primary stream that drains Blue Springs is Trout Creek, which joins with Blue Spring Creek to form the main stream, a primary tributary to the Coosa River. Trout Creek bisects the property to the east. Beyond Trout Creek is the site where 15 acres of wetlands will be developed, creating even more diverse habitats.

From north to south, the park features hills, pastures, and then a large ridge beyond the creek. The



*The trillium is one of dozens of plant species native to the Blue Springs Nature Preserve.*

hills are occupied by a mixed variety of pine and hardwood species that include shortleaf and loblolly pine, red oak, willow oak, persimmon, eastern red cedar, ironwood, yellow poplar, Sweetgum, and flowering dogwood, to name a few.

Blue Springs is the feeding/nesting area for many birds, including barred, great-horned, and screech owls, mourning doves, robins, chickadees, nuthatches, Chuckwills-widows, and many more too numerous to name here. Spring migration will bring many migratory species as well. If you are a bird-watcher, you won't want to miss Blue Springs in springtime.

### The Meadows

The former livestock pastures, which have become more natural meadows since cows no longer graze there, have an ever-increasing number of species of meadow grasses, shrubs, and orbs. More of these plants will colonize the meadows as the park develops so that virtually every meadow plant species known for the area will be included. The meadows display a progression of blooming wildflower species as the seasons move from spring through fall.

The park boasts a myriad of wildflowers throughout the summer

### About National Cement

National Cement is a major producer of cement in the United States. Established in 1908, the company employs over 1,255 employees in Alabama and California.

The company is highly committed to environmental stewardship and supporting the communities in which it operates.

### About Blue Springs Nature Preserve

Blue Springs Nature Preserve, 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, is located in the town of Ragland in St. Clair County, Ala. The 147-acre preserve was made possible thanks to a land donation from National Cement Company of Alabama.

For more information, please contact Tommy Palladino at (205) 328-9334 or send an email to [info@bluespringspreserve.com](mailto:info@bluespringspreserve.com).

*Ecologists Christy Lowery and Kristy Smedley stand by the giant loblolly pine with a circumference greater than their combined arm span.*



and into fall, when the goldenrod and asters bloom. In the fall, thousands of migrating monarch butterflies have been known to stop off at the park.

In the spring, the meadows will come alive with insects, birds, rabbits, deer, and wild turkey. If you look overhead, you may see a soaring a red-tailed hawk or possibly even a bald eagle. Eagles forage along the Coosa regularly, as do ospreys, which occasionally fly over the park as well. Dozens of swallows and, in the evening, chimney swifts, dart across the sky eating gnats and mosquitoes, competing with the little brown bats and the rarer gray bats that

include Blue Springs in their hunting ranges.

The pastures and the forests along their edges supply food, cover, and nesting habitats for a wide variety of birds. Bluebirds are plentiful and robins run along the ground in search of worms. Eastern kingbirds sit on old fences, darting into the air on occasion to grab an insect out of midair. Sparrow hawks watch for tiny rodents from limbs on dead trees, and meadowlarks sing their familiar tunes.

### The Wetlands

Moving down along the main stream, we encounter wetlands

where cricket frogs, bullfrogs, treefrogs, bronze frogs, and chorus frogs sing loudly after April showers and in the evening throughout the summer. The chorus frogs begin singing in January. By spring, the other frogs join in. In the fields and along the little streams, American, Southern and narrow-mouthed toads chime in. You will know the narrow-mouth "toad", which isn't a toad at all but a frog, by its sheeplike voice. It is a tiny, pointed-headed creature that lives under rocks.

Wading birds, including American egrets, cattle egrets, little blue herons, great blue herons, and little green herons all have been seen along the edges of the wetlands and the stream. Kingfishers also fly along the stream and dip into the water for a fish.

Mature hardwood comprises the primary stream bank habitat. It is a true southern bottomland that has changed little over time. Here you see trees that are becoming rare elsewhere as bottomland habitats are destroyed. One of the more interesting species is the PawPaw, which has fruits that can be gathered in the fall. You will also see gigantic sycamores, known because of their white

*Butterflies galore: monarch butterflies, Alabama's state insect, mingle with goldenrod at Blue Springs. At the right is a red-spotted purple butterfly.*

