

# Field Notes

*News from the Alabama Ecological Services Field Office*



## Partnerships Keep Critters off Endangered Species List

Most folks know that our job at the Alabama Field Office (AFO) is to protect imperiled fish, plants, and other wildlife from extinction. What you may not know is Alabama is number three in the nation when it comes to the most threatened and endangered species. Our staff of 18 each plays a role in conserving these species....from biologists, to administrators, and technical assistance, our office resources are all utilized to tackle this challenge.

In 2014, the AFO's workload got even bigger. Due to litigation and petitions under the Endangered Species Act, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Southeast Region was ordered to evaluate more than 400 species and determine whether or not they need federal protection. More than 100 of those species occur in Alabama. So in addition to managing the state's imperiled species, the AFO now must decide if these additional plants and animals need listing under the Endangered Species Act.

With the backlog of species growing, the AFO is now looking for voluntary and innovative ways to protect imperiled wildlife that doesn't require federal listing. Working to conserve species through private and public partnerships is another pathway to conservation. The goal? To recover the species so federal protection isn't needed.

In 2014, our focus on partnerships paid off. A collaborative effort with the state of Alabama, federal agencies, and scientific experts led to the determination that



*Lagniappe Crayfish, photo: Susan Adams, U.S. Forest Service*

five species of crayfish would not need protection under the Endangered Species Act. They are blackbarred crayfish, burrowing bog crayfish, Chattooga River crayfish, lagniappe crayfish, and least crayfish.

The new information came from several sources, including the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, the Geological Survey of Alabama, and the U.S. Forest Service's Southern Research Station. In addition, surveys were conducted by three regional crayfish experts. The result of those surveys suggests that the crayfish populations are indeed healthy, and don't need to be listed under the Endangered Species Act. That's not just good news for the species. It's also good news for taxpayers.

Today, the average federal administrative cost to list a single species can run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars per species. By comparison, the cost incurred to conduct crayfish surveys totaled about \$62,000, resulting in savings of hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars.

In 2015, the AFO received more good news. The Center for Biological Diversity removed six more species from the list, including the Warrior darter, cobble elimia, compact elimia, caper elimia, ample elimia and mud elimia.

In 2016, the AFO hopes to further strengthen our partnerships to protect our state's wildlife. We believe there's a seat at the table for anyone who has a stake in Alabama's natural resources.

For more information about how the Service and other federal agencies and states are working to proactively conserve more than 400 at-risk species, with the goal of precluding the need for federal protection, please visit [www.fws.gov/southeast/candidateconservation](http://www.fws.gov/southeast/candidateconservation).

## AFO Hutton Scholars: Where are they now?

*Benjamin Franklin once said “Tell me, and I forget. Teach me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I learn.”*

At the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Alabama Field Office (AFO), we take Franklin’s philosophy to heart. Since 2009, the AFO has been hosting young students to help achieve their dreams of conserving natural resources. Through the American Fisheries Society’s Hutton Program, AFO biologists have mentored four high school students to help set them on a path to a career in biology.

The Hutton Program is an eight week mentoring opportunity that allows high school students to intern with fisheries professionals. In addition, the students also receive a \$4,000 scholarship. High school seniors and juniors are eligible, and the scholar is selected from a pool of candidates.

Once a scholar is selected, he or she is paired with a mentor. Although Andy Ford and Jennifer Grunewald are their lead mentors, most of the staff plays a role in guiding the scholar. Even our trusted partners have turned into dedicated mentors. Biologists with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources have also taken Hutton scholars under their wing.

This year, Ford and Grunewald are responsible for the scholar’s eight-week schedule. They will give them hands-on experience in what it takes to be a fisheries biologist. Typical work includes mussel surveys, gopher tortoise relocations, sea turtle nest patrols, red-bellied turtle fencing, and stream fish sampling just to name a few.

**Garrett Lloyd** of Fairhope was the AFO’s first official Hutton Scholar in 2009. During his internship, he worked with multiple agencies and groups, allowing him to network and experience many aspects of biology. His hard work paid off. Garrett’s connections landed him



*Mentors Andy Ford and Jeff Powell assist Hutton Scholar Dionna Walker; photo: USFWS*

jobs with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources as well as the Week’s Bay Foundation. His most recent opportunity came as he attended college at Troy University. He became a part of the Pathways program...a federal program that selects college students and employs them with specific agencies. The program may lead Garrett to full time employment after graduation.

Below is a list of other Hutton Scholars who spent the summer with the Alabama Field Office. How are they doing now?

### **2010 Hutton Scholar David Bernasconi**

– Since finishing the program, David received a bachelor’s degree from Louisiana State University in Natural Resource Ecology and Management with a concentration in Wildlife Ecology. While in school, he was an alligator research technician and conducted his own bald eagle migration project. After that, David worked as an avian technician in the mountains of Borneo in Malaysia. He was also a volunteer research assistant at the Danau Girang Field Center, also in Malaysia, where he helped to track and trap clouded leopards, sun bears, and other species. This past summer, David was a bald eagle technician for the North Carolina Resources Commission. He is currently looking for graduate school opportunities, and eventually wants to earn his PhD.

*“This program holds a special place in my heart as it gave me a huge leg up in the eyes of my undergrad professors and early employers. I am still in contact with my mentors today and they have been extremely important friends and professional resources.”*

### **2013 Hutton Scholar Katie Dankovic**

– Katie is attending the University of South Alabama, where she is majoring in Biology with a concentration in Marine Sciences. She joined a team of Biology majors, working on various projects overseen by her Herpetology professor. One project entailed finding populations of the Bahaman Anole, a highly invasive species in both Mobile and Baldwin Counties. Katie is also working on a database for evidence of cancerous tumors in reptiles, specifically turtles, in various zoos and aquariums. She plans to spend the summer with the Dauphin Island Sea Lab, where she’ll study sharks, rays, and Marine Conservation Biology. She has also taken up birding three times a week! Katie graduates in December.

*“Before I participated in the Hutton Program I wasn’t exactly sure that I wanted to major in Biology in college. But after participating in the program for the summer, I went into college very confident that I could major in Biology and enjoy it. The Hutton Program gave me some much needed confidence in myself to succeed.”*

### **2015 Hutton Scholar Dionna Walker**

– Fresh from her internship, Dionna is just getting started! She’s a freshman at the University of Alabama Birmingham, double majoring in Biology and International Studies, in addition to minoring in Environmental Studies. Since her college career is just beginning, she spends most of her time studying. Dionna is in the Science and Technology Specialized Honors Program, which is designed to help undergraduate students get involved in research and complete a thesis project. She hopes to begin lab work and start on her project by fall of next year.

*“I had a great time working at the Alabama Field Office. I feel like I learned a lot and got to know some amazing people. My favorite part of the internship was the field work. It was interesting, engaging and gave me a chance to get my hands dirty and get to know a lot of people in a different way than I would have just in the office.”*

Stay tuned to the Alabama Field Office Facebook page to see who may be selected as our 2016 Hutton Scholar! <https://www.facebook.com/usfwsalabama/>

## Boy Scouts Help Create Vital Sand Dunes

On a hot September day, a group of Boy Scouts from Elizabethtown, Kentucky made their way to the beaches of Gulf Shores Plantation. Although there were plenty of sights and sounds for the Scouts to experience, their tour time was limited. This vacation had a purpose. They planned to spend the next several days planting sea oats with the hopes of creating sturdy sand dunes. Kentucky native Robert Bush coordinated the project. He and his wife have a condo on the Alabama Gulf Coast. “When Hurricane Ivan wiped out the sand dunes on Gulf Shores Plantation, it also destabilized the boardwalk. The boardwalk is our main access to the beach. Many folks rely on that boardwalk, including the elderly and disabled,” said Bush.

Eventually, Bush crossed paths with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. He quickly learned that sand dunes also provide valuable habitat for the Alabama beach mouse and nesting sea turtles. Stabilizing these sand dunes was the right thing to do. “I knew teaming up with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was a win-win situation,” said Bush.

So Bush created a plan. With the guidance of Service biologist Bill Lynn, Bush coordinated two massive dune plantings with Boy Scout Troop 369. The first one happened in 2013. The Scouts returned to Gulf Shores Plantation two years later for another planting. “I was a Boy Scout myself. It makes me feel proud to see these Scouts coming all the way from Kentucky working so hard to restore our dunes in Alabama,” said Service biologist Bill Lynn. “These scouts and their families put a lot of hard work into this project.”

Planting sea oats may sound easy, but it actually takes some muscle and perseverance. Each plant requires a deep hole and a handful of water-absorbing crystals. It takes hundreds of sea oats to create a good set of sand dunes. The Troops spent four days planting more than 3,300 plants in the



photos: USFWS



blazing sun. Bush also got his hands dirty, helping the Scouts at every turn. “When I see this, I see an accomplishment. Not only are we giving back to nature, but we are also helping to stabilize the sand,” said Bush.

We at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Alabama Field Office would like to express our sincerest gratitude to Robert Bush and Boy Scout Troop 369! We would also like to thank the Alabama Coastal Heritage Trust for donating the sea oats and sand fence. To watch video of the planting, copy and paste this link into your browser: <https://www.facebook.com/usfwsalabama/videos>

## Meet the Biologist: Tim Mullet

Dr. Tim Mullet is the newest biologist to join the Alabama Field Office. He will serve as the science liaison to the Gulf Coastal Plains and Ozarks Landscape Conservation Cooperative (LCC). That may sound like a long title, but the concept behind LCC's is actually quite simple.

LCC's are self-directed partnerships between federal agencies, states, tribes, non-governmental organizations, universities, and other entities to collaboratively define science needs in certain regions of the country. Through this collaboration, we can better tackle science-related issues, such as climate

change and habitat degradation. Time and time again, we've learned partnerships lead to more success.

Tim's position was created so the Alabama Field Office could contribute and commit to the Gulf Coastal Plains and Ozarks LCC partnership. As science liaison, he will provide a unique perspective to measuring habitat quality.

Tim is a graduate of the University of Alaska Fairbanks where he studied the effects of human disturbance on wildlife in the context of their acoustic interactions in the subarctic ecosystems of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. He is the first scientist to model the spatial distribution of winter soundscapes in the world, and more specifically, Alaska, and his work has recently been published in the *Journal of Landscape Ecology*. Tim's use of sound as an indicator of wildlife behavior, species

distributions, and human disturbance has made him one of the leading experts of soundscape spatial modeling in the emerging field of soundscape ecology.

As the science liaison, Tim hopes to apply ecoacoustic theory to understand species habitat selection in degraded and restored habitats in an effort to conserve threatened and endangered species. He hopes to prove that sound-producing and sound-dependent species are aware of their surroundings of the acoustic environment and select appropriate habitats as a result. If his theory is proven, it may change the way we assess habitat and landscape composition in the LCC.

We are very glad to have Tim on our staff, and we look forward seeing his remarkable contribution to conservation.



*Dr. Tim Mullet is the newest member of the AFO staff, photo: USFWS*

## Jim Jeter, Alabama Forestry Commission



*Jim Jeter and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Southeastern Regional Director Cindy Dohner; photo: USFWS*

Our featured partner is Mr. Jim Jeter with the Alabama Forestry Commission (AFC). Jim is a Registered Professional Forester, in Alabama, where he has been an active member in the forestry community for over 36 years. Jim is an Auburn University graduate and began his career in the private sector with the Westervelt Company. For the last 25 years, Jim has worked for the AFC as their Statewide Best Management Practices (BMP) Program Coordinator and Hardwood Specialist. In these roles, Jim is responsible for interpreting and monitoring BMP policies and procedures pursuant state and federal laws; he is also responsible for educating landowners, loggers, forestry consultants, professional foresters, forest industry, and other natural resource professionals on proper BMP implementation, wetlands protection, and silvicultural practices allowed in wetlands; and ensuring AFC personnel are trained and aware of potential threatened and endangered species issues under the Endangered Species Act. He most recently won a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Southeastern Regional Director's Award for his work in conservation. Thanks for all that you do!

## Behind the Scenes with Cartographer Drew Rollman



*Cartographer Drew Rollman's map books help streamline surveys for biologists; photo: USFWS*

Drew is a Cartographer and Geographic Information System specialist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Most recently, Drew has been a vital member of the Strategic Habitat Unit (SHU) team. SHU's are segments of watersheds, rivers, and streams in which conservationist can manage, recover and restore aquatic wildlife.

### **Biologists in the Alabama Field Office say they couldn't do their SHU work without you. How exactly do you contribute?**

One thing I've been doing for the past two years with Strategic Habitat Unit (SHU) surveys is creating Map Books that plot out all of the identified culverts or bridges within a SHU. The SHU is broken down into 12 digit HUCs and that becomes a unit within the SHU.

I turn each of those units into a booklet that has maps and coordinates to every culvert/bridge within the unit. My feedback from field crews is that this has effectively streamlined the crossing surveys.

### **In what ways do these map books help streamline SHU work?**

After using these map books in two other SHU's, we've been able to increase productivity in the field to the point where six teams can survey about 400 sites in one week's time. With the map books, you can navigate from crossing to crossing or use the coordinates and load them into a Garmin to navigate. Using the map books has been a huge time saver in the field. It has allowed us to bring multiple agencies together for a survey blitz, and streamlines the field work by maximizing everyone's time to the fullest.

### **What can we expect from you in the future?**

That depends upon the needs of the staff. I just do what I can to help our biologists meet their conservation goals.

# Northern Gulf Coastal Program Update



The Coastal Program is one of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's most successful and effective cooperative conservation programs. The mission of the Coastal Program is to protect and recover Federal Trust Species (threatened and endangered species, migratory birds, marine mammals, and inter-jurisdictional fish) by supporting voluntary restoration, enhancement and protection of high-priority coastal habitats.

The national Coastal Program provides financial and technical assistance to on-the-ground habitat restoration and protection projects through locally-based field coordinators in 24 coastal areas around the nation. Patric Harper is coordinator of the Northern Gulf Coastal Program in the southeastern region. The program was able to meet many objectives in 2015:

Shorebird monitoring, fencing, signage and education and outreach in Alabama by the American Bird Conservancy

Additional funding for training and supplies for the Mississippi Habitat Stewards Program

Student Conservation Association costs for two interns to work at Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge

Coastal streambank and wetland restoration on Weeks Bayou by the Land Trust for the Mississippi Coastal Plain

A Florida State University study in Alabama concerning reproductive success of loggerhead sea turtles due to nest relocations

Costs to construct a release pen and subsequent monitoring of a juvenile cohort of Mississippi Sandhill cranes to be released on a 800+ acre site.

So what's on tap for this year? Coastal Program biologists plan to finalize a draft entitled "Next Steps for a Healthy Gulf of Mexico Watershed."



Patric Harper, Coastal Program Coordinator, photo: USFWS



Denise Rowell, photo: Harrison McClary

Congratulations to Denise Rowell for earning her Accreditation in Public Relations! Denise was awarded the credential by the Universal Accreditation Board. Great job, Denise!



Southeastern Regional Director Cindy Dohner and Jeff Powell, photo: USFWS

Congratulations to Deputy Supervisor Jeff Powell for winning a Regional Director's Award for his conservation work in Alabama! This award comes from the office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Southeastern Regional Director. Well done, Jeff!

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