

# Life in the Wild

*News from Cape Romain,  
Ernest F. Hollings ACE Basin, Santee and  
Waccamaw National Wildlife Refuges*

## A Refuge Tale

It all began fourteen years ago when the Winyah Bay Focus Area Task Force came up with an idea for a National Wildlife Refuge in the Georgetown–Horry County area. The main focus of the early proposal was to protect Sandy Island from development. Sandy Island is located between the Waccamaw and Great Pee Dee Rivers and represents the largest undeveloped tract remaining in the Waccamaw Neck. The island contains a diverse mosaic of wetland and upland communities that are both rare and of high value for wildlife. At the time Sandy Island was under threat of development because a bridge had been proposed to the island.

As time passed, and the Environmental Impact Statement for the proposed refuge was completed, the purpose of the refuge changed dramatically. The proposed boundary was expanded to 49,000 acres and the purposes were defined to include habitat for wintering waterfowl, endangered species, and migratory birds, and providing compatible wildlife dependent recreational opportunities for the public.

In 1997, when Waccamaw NWR became a reality, the 1997 National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act was signed into Law. The Act requires that each refuge be managed to fulfill the Refuge System Mission as well as the specific purpose for which the refuge was established. The Act also declares that compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses are legitimate and appropriate on National Wildlife Refuges. This includes hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation. Because the Refuge's establishment date coincided with the signing of the 1997 Refuge Improvement Act (Public Law 105-57), both ecosystem management and compatible wildlife dependent recreation were an integral part of Waccamaw NWR's establishing legislation.

In early years the Refuge land base grew by leaps and bounds. In keeping with the refuge's establishing purposes, ideas were

posed to construct an environmental education center so that people traveling by could enjoy learning about recreational opportunities on the refuge, and area youth could be enriched by the environmental education programs the Center would offer. In 2000 members of The Nature Conservancy (TNC) suggested the perfect site. Located between Conway and Georgetown, on a high bluff overlooking the confluence of the Pee Dee River and Yauhannah Lake, the 22-acre Yauhannah Bluff Tract has inspired mankind for over ten thousand years. In 2002, with help from TNC and former US Senator Ernest F. Hollings, funding was obtained to acquire the Yauhannah Bluff property and to plan and design the Center.

An important milestone in the planning process was the completion of a comprehensive archeological survey on the property. The survey began in the winter of 2005. Throughout the cold winter months, the proposed construction area was surveyed and excavated. A wealth of information about past human habitation on this spectacular bluff was discovered. Many of the artifacts found during the excavation are on display in the new facility.

For years there had been speculation that the site chosen for the Center may have been the location of William Waties' trading post, which was in operation



*Congressmen Henry Brown and Regional Director Cindy Dohner cutting the ribbon at the Grand Opening. Photo by Ray Paterra/USFWS*

in 1716; however no direct evidence was found during the excavations to support this speculation. Archeologists did discover that the site had been inhabited by Native Americans from early in the Archaic Period (10,000 years before present). In more recent times, colonization by European settlers resulted in the construction of plantations in the area, many by well-known families such as the Pawleys, Waties, Hulls, and Alstons.



## U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Design for the new facility began in 2005. So that it would complement the architecture and lowcountry style of other historic plantation house along the Great Pee Dee River, a specific style of architecture was chosen for the building. It would take four long years before the new Waccamaw NWR Headquarters & Environmental Education Center was finished. Today the Center encompasses 7,300 square feet, and includes an interpretive exhibit hall, multi-purpose room, auditorium, merchandise area, conference room, refuge staff offices, and a wet lab/classroom for environmental education programs.

The exhibit hall is a favorite among visitors. It includes a floor plan that is spatially oriented to duplicate geographic features within the Refuge, including the Waccamaw and Pee Dee Rivers, Bull and Thoroughfare Creeks, and Sandy Island. A fascinating grouping of exhibits depicts the differences in the characteristics of red- and black-water rivers, tidal marsh habitats, indigenous wildlife, and historic uses of the land by a variety of human inhabitants. With help from the Southeastern Wildlife and Environment Education (SEWEE) Association and the Frances P. Bunnelle Foundation, Waccamaw NWR has already established an on-going environmental education program in several Georgetown County elementary schools.

Since 1999 the SEWEE Association (Friend's Group for the National Wildlife Refuges and National Forest of coastal South Carolina) has been partnering with local elementary schools to deliver a multi-week program that focuses on freshwater wetlands and swamps. The program is designed using the curriculum standards for fifth-grade and students participate in hands-on, interactive classes to learn first-hand the purposes



*Folks enjoying the exhibit hall. Photo by Ray Paterra/USFWS*

of wetland and swamp habitats in South Carolina's coastal plain. The SEWEE Association works with the teachers to present lessons and activities in the classroom and field studies in the Forest or on our Refuges. Students participate in hands-on, interactive classes and learn first-hand the purposes of this habitat within the coastal plain.

All the refuge supporters came together on a warm October day in 2009. Nearly 150 people gathered to celebrate the grand opening as the tranquil Pee Dee River flowed quietly in the background. Local, state, and federal dignitaries joined U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Refuge and Regional Office staff to recognize all the people and organizations that have contributed to the success story that is Waccamaw NWR. Former State Senator Arthur Ravenel Jr. served as the Master of Ceremonies. He thanked the Winyah Bay Task Force for their vision and introduced U.S. Representative Henry Brown who expressed his appreciation for the hard work of everyone involved. The Regional Director for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Southeast Region, Ms. Cindy Dohner, recognized long-term partners like The Nature Conservancy, the Historic Ricefields Association, and former Regional Director Sam Hamilton.

At the end of the day, Refuge Manager Craig Sasser thanked everyone involved, including the SEWEE Association, several foundations and key individuals.

The moral of this story is that it takes an entire team of dedicated individuals working together to plan, develop, and establish a National Wildlife Refuge, and many more to support and construct an environmental education center. We are thankful that they have all joined with us to preserve the beautiful natural landscapes of the Waccamaw National Wildlife Refuge.

The Waccamaw NWR Headquarters and Environmental Education Center is open weekdays from 8 am to 4:30 pm. For more information, call 843/527 8069, visit our website at <http://www.fws.gov/waccamaw>, or stop by the Center at 21424 N. Fraser Street, Georgetown, SC 29440, just 21 miles north of Georgetown on Highway 701.

## *Change is Coming*

Climate change has been described as the most compelling conservation challenge of our time. Accelerating climate change will affect our nation's fish, wildlife, and plant resources in profound ways. While many species will continue to thrive, some populations may decline and in some instances, go extinct. Others will survive in the wild only through direct and continuous intervention by managers. This defining challenge for the conservation community requires the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and its employees and partners to apply the skill, determination, creativity and commitment to conserving the nation's natural resources that have defined the American conservation movement since its inception more than 130 years ago. Learn more about climate change and how it can affect the refuges within the SC Lowcountry Complex in the next edition of *Life in the Wild*.



*From left to right: Mark Purcell, Kevin Godsea, Raye Nilius, Marc Epstein, Craig Sasser on Boneyard Beach. Photo: Garry Tucker*

### **South Carolina Lowcountry Refuge Complex Contact Information**

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