

The Ellerbe Creek Journal

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Editor
Stephen Hiltner

Layout, Design
Candy Webster

Photo scans
Tony Tschopp

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Contact ECWA at
919/286-2227
(Comments, project ideas, and
article submissions welcome)

ECWA's Urban Nature Reserve Expands

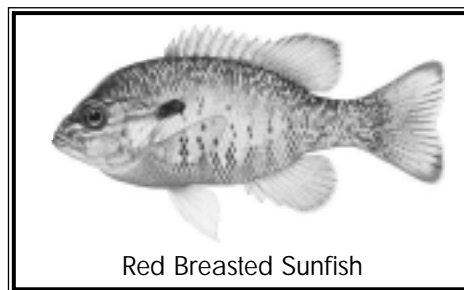
On August 13, ECWA purchased 11 acres of mature floodplain woods between Albany Street and Maryland Avenue. The purchase expands our Urban Nature Reserve to 17 acres--essentially all of the woods between those two streets, on both sides of the creek. Our gratitude goes to the Durham County Matching Grants Program for funding, to David Fields and the Carolina Duke Motor Inn for generously donating a portion of the property's appraised value, and to the donations of services by appraiser David Smith and attorney Rick Jamison.

Plans for the new property include restoring native flora, the building of a nature path for neighbors living on the north side of the creek, and improvements to the hydrologic functioning of the floodplain.

The Reserve, open to the public and located between two city parks, has become a popular place to walk and enjoy nature in the city. (more info starting on p. 3)

Restoration of Ellerbe Creek Begins

ECWA has received approval for a \$75,000 NC Clean Water Management Trust Fund grant to design a \$600,000 restoration of 0.6 miles of Ellerbe



Red Breasted Sunfish

Creek, extending from Indian Trail Park down through the ECWA Nature Reserve to I-85. The NC State Water Quality Group will provide the design expertise, in collaboration with ECWA and Durham's city and county governments. Designed to improve water quality and habitat in the

creek channel, and protect the city's West Ellerbe Creek Trail from erosion, the project will also include filtration of storm water runoff from nearby streets. Education will be an important component.

Just upstream, another stream restoration is planned for Ellerbe Creek through Hillandale Golf Course, from 15-501 down to Indian Trail Park. That project, funded by the NC Wetland Restoration Program (NCWRP) and already designed, will begin construction in the fall. These two projects represent a tremendous step forward in improving the health of Ellerbe Creek.

Watershed Plan in the Works

Thanks to the NC Wetland Restoration Program and the Upper Neuse River Basin Association (UNRBA), a comprehensive watershed plan for Ellerbe Creek is taking shape. State and city/county staff are working together with UNRBA, ECWA, Friends of South Ellerbe Creek and Durham Central Park, Inc. to build a long-term vision for Ellerbe Creek and its tributaries. Goals include improved water quality, less destructive flooding, greater public access via trails and urban nature preserves, and a restoration of the creek channel and its floodplain corridor.

Completion of the plan in draft form is scheduled for April, 2003, with subsequent distribution to the community for comment and presentation to Durham City Council and the Durham County Board of Commissioners for approval. This is a tremendous opportunity to build consensus for the restoration of Ellerbe Creek.



Upstream development worsens flooding in Northgate Park

New Board Expands ECWA's Reach

New board members are bringing to the ECWA mission an unprecedented level of energy and commitment. Josh Rose, who leads the Duke Natural History Society, is sharing his extraordinary knowledge of native flora and fauna. Julie Holmes, already active in Neighborhood Watch and other community efforts, is bringing her creativity and outreach abilities to the Ellerbe Creek project. Candace Turney now lends her expertise in accounting to the role of ECWA treasurer. Tony Tschopp has a strong interest in organizational development. With continuing members Larry Brockman (president) and Jane Finch (secretary), the new board is helping expand ECWA's reach.

*The Ellerbe Creek Watershed
Association
is a nonprofit organization
dedicated to restoring
Ellerbe Creek
and making it an asset
for the people of Durham*

A WEB Revival

From out of the blue and into the breach leaped our new webmaster, Tony Tschopp, to bring new life to ECWA's website. Tony has added many new sections, including a calendar, news archive, a bird list compiled by Ellerbe Creek birders and a Do It Yourself section (DIY) full of creek- and wildlife-friendly landscaping tips for the backyard. Next time you're in the etherhood, come visit us at www.ellerbecreek.org.

ECWA Reserve Voted Best Urban Jungle

(reprinted from the Independent Weekly, April 10-16, 2002)
Early in the morning, the urban nature reserve off of Albany Street in Durham is way spooky. The land dips and rolls in strange heaps, remnants of old vines hang down like gnarled fingers and hunks of old concrete rise up out of the dirt, like bones from the elephant graveyard in *The Lion King*. There's a bit of mist, a flash of early sunlight and then the startling sight of a blue heron flying through the woods toward nearby Ellerbe Creek. Hard to believe that rush-hour-filled I-85 and Guess Road are a mere base-hit's distance away. Over the past year, members of the Ellerbe Creek Watershed Association have wrestled what was once an impassable snarl of vegetation into a 6-acre trail that features two small wetlands, a miniature "prairie" and a natural grape arbor. A wooden bench and signs that explain the natural alchemy underway ("Good Bugs, Bad Bugs," "Native Plant Restoration") dot the landscape. The reserve sits next to a portion of the city's new West Ellerbe Creek Trail that's fast becoming a favorite with local bikers, joggers and pet-owners. As chances to commune with nature in the inner city go, this one's tops.

Trail Wildflowers Bloom With Abandon

Last September, as if to celebrate the expansion of ECWA's nature reserve, native sunflowers transformed the West Ellerbe Creek Trail into a ribbon of spectacular yellow blooms. Several weeks later, trail users were greeted by flocks of goldfinches feasting on the bountiful harvest of seeds. This display of nature's abundance did not happen all of its own, but was the result of thoughtful management. At ECWA's request, the city agreed not to mow the trailsides. To control

the resulting growth, volunteers selectively weeded out plants that were allergenic, thorny, too tall or too aggressive, encouraging those with particularly



Native hibiscus thrives in the floodplain

attractive flowers or growth forms (see article on volunteers). The result exceeded all expectations.

This year, ECWA is working with city staff to identify additional city trails that could serve as showcases for the piedmont's natural heritage.

ECWA's Reserve Serves Teachers' Needs

ECWA's native wildflower plantings at Indian Trail Park and the adjoining nature reserve gained increased use this past year by area teachers. The City of Durham's Parks Department based its Nature Caravan daycamp program in Indian Trail Park for one month last summer, and city parks ranger Chris Shepard has led numerous walks through the reserve as part of his Nature in the City series. Libby Montagne's and Robin Franklin's 2nd graders, who call themselves the Mighty Oaks, walked over from E.K. Powe one day to explore the reserve. Sarah Tichnor's 1st grade class successfully adopted some monarch caterpillars from ECWA's wetland gardens. She also related the following experience:

"When hunting for monarch caterpillars one day, I came nose to nose with a very large black-and-yellow argiope spider and brought her to school as a visitor. The next day she laid an egg sack and we realized why she had been so big! We enjoyed her for about a week and returned both the spider and the egg sack to Ellerbe Creek."

Stream Cleanups Bring Neighborhoods, City Together

ECWA led three stream cleanups last year. One, along the West Ellerbe Creek Trail upstream of Guess Road, was part of the city's NEAT program, an innovative environmental outreach program led by stormwater education staffer Bambi Wilson. Neighbors, students from the School of Science and Math and city staff all worked together to pull all manner of trash, including an auto transmission, out of the creek.

In May, a dozen volunteers, enthusiastic despite a drizzle, showed up for a cleanup along the South Ellerbe Creek Trail south of Club Boulevard. The big-ticket items were two clothes dryers that were pulled out of a drainage ditch with the help of a pickup truck. Bags were stuffed full of plastic bottles, styrofoam, oil cans, defunct waterguns, spraycans, footballs and basketballs. The east branch of South Ellerbe Creek, also called Pearl Mill Creek, is one of the frontlines in the struggle to reclaim the city's creeks. Thanks to Fred Broadwell for organizing the cleanup, to Durham city's Impact Team for taking away all the trash, and to all those who braved the rain.

Later in the year, when an autumn flood left a tawdry residue of plastic bags hanging from limbs over the creek, volunteers Jane Finch, Arn Bjorn Rasmussen and Farley Ransom stepped in to again clean the half mile section along the West Ellerbee Creek Trail.

New Invasive Pest Plant Discovered

Every backyard gardener knows how much time is consumed while trying to contain aggressive, non-native plants like English ivy, wisteria and *Microstegium* (bamboo grass). While preparing for a stream cleanup along the South Ellerbe Creek Trail, ECWA's executive director discovered a new

weed on the Durham scene. Garlic mustard (*Alliaria*), a major pest plant that overruns nature reserves and backyards throughout the Midwest, has gained a foothold on a tributary of Ellerbe



Weeding *Microstegium* from the West Ellerbe Creek Trail

Creek. If allowed to expand into other parts of the watershed and beyond, garlic mustard could become as big a pest in parks and backyards as *Microstegium*. The introduced plant shades out native species and further dominates by releasing toxins through its roots. It may well have hitchhiked into Durham in the soil of nursery stock from the north.

With help from volunteers Rebecca Yahr and Robert Freese, action was taken immediately to pull out the plants before they went to seed. Jennifer Robison, a student at Dickerson College in Pennsylvania, bagged some of the garlic mustard to do genetic research for her senior thesis project. According to Jennifer, garlic mustard, together with Japanese honeysuckle and multiflora rose, has created vast exclusionary swaths along the Appalachian Trail, leaving only small clumps of bluebells and other natives here and there. Another weed pulling will be needed when remaining plants bloom this spring. With timely intervention and some luck, ECWA could have the rare opportunity to extirpate a destructive weed before it becomes ubiquitous in Durham County.

Restoring People by Restoring A Floodplain

One June morning, I was planting more rescued prairie plants next to the West Ellerbe Creek Trail when a man walking by asked about what I was doing. As I described the restoration project going on at the ECWA reserve, it was clear he was taken with the idea. He introduced himself as James Blue, then said he had been staying at the Super 8 Motel on Guess Road and had just discovered the trail. For him, it was a revelation to walk along the creek, since his hometown of Birmingham, AL is considering building a trail system next to one of its own urban creeks. He asked more questions about ECWA, checked out the wetland gardens in nearby Indian Trail Park, and then told me he is inspired to help realize a creekside trail system in Birmingham. For him, it was a refreshing walk before the long drive home. The trail is proving to be a restorative stopoff for migrations of all sorts.

Surviving The Great Drought of 2002

This past summer's drought broke all records, and made the beneficent sun seem more like a merciless tyrant, determined to extract the last drop of water from its hapless subjects. The drought happened to follow the spring planting of hundreds of native plants in the reserve, many of them rare and unusual refugees from a prairie remnant pegged for development. When ECWA's executive director headed out of town for an extended summer trip, it was only through the timely efforts of board members Steve Williams, Larry Brockman and Jane Finch that the great majority of the transplants were spared. Meanwhile, neighbor Betsy Blair kept ECWA's backyard native plant nursery watered.

ECWA would also like to thank reserve neighbor David Smith of Perennial Drive for providing

access to his tapwater during that most trying of summers. David and his family have since moved to Chatham County. We will miss their support, and the blues riffs that floated out across the Ellerbe valley from his banjo.

Droughts and Floods—The Same Solution

We were all forced into mandatory summer school this past year as the drought delivered its harsh lessons. Water is precious, Mother Nature sternly declared, and not to be wasted. Rainbarrels became a hot item, aided by a city/business/neighborhood collaboration to make them available at a reduced price.

Oddly enough, it was the wetlands that were least affected by the drought. They alone had the underground reserves of water necessary to sustain growth. Wetlands are the great buffering elements



Lizard's Tail—a native wetland flower

in the landscape, nearly done away with and now in great need of revival. In downpours, they reduce flooding; in drought, they sustain plants, wildlife and creek alike, slowly meting out their precious supply.

ECWA continues to show how water can be reintegrated into the urban landscape, in stormwater wetlands, swales and backyard miniponds packed with graceful native sedges and showy wildflowers.

As part of this process, a number of myths and fears need to be dispelled, strongest among them the tendency to equate wetlands with mosquitoes. In fact, the little nasties are much more likely to breed in the stagnant water of roof gutters and neglected backyard containers than in a well-managed wetland.

Volunteers Come From All Over Durham

ECWA got a big boost last year from volunteer groups in Durham. Last Spring, Duke students transformed the trailhead near the Albany Street bridge, installing the kiosk and a boardwalk over the demo-ditch wetland, heave-hoed on boulders to improve their usefulness as seats, and pulled all sorts of interesting junk out of the woods, including an organ pipe and a chrome bumper. The bumper now crowns a rock wall, symbolizing the bumper crops of native wildflowers we're hoping for in coming years.

15 EPA employees, organized by ECWA president Larry Brockman, planted a Pawpaw patch, propagated Jerusalem artichokes (a native sunflower) along the paved trail, and took on the two acre wisteria monster with loppers and saw. In cleaning out a wetland, they found three old plows that probably date from when the floodplain woods was a tobacco field.

On August 1st and 2nd, twelve middle schoolers participating in the Youth Volunteer program of the Volunteer Center of Durham came to help do some weeding at the Ellerbe Creek Urban Nature Reserve. When they arrived, most of the kids thought that every plant could be poison ivy, and every bug was out to bite or sting them. This quickly changed, as they learned to tell one plant from another, and discovered that the bugs were content to be left alone. They also learned how to safely handle saws, loppers and other tools. One group, led by neighbor Don Moffitt, repaired a trail entrance and cut wisteria vines that were smothering some pine trees. Another group weeded the entire West Ellerbe Creek Trail of long and lanky plants like horsetweed and the allergenic ragweed. After two mornings of work in summer heat, the kids departed with a sense of accomplishment and a greater comfort with natural surroundings.

In October, ECWA members and Durham Academy middle schoolers weeded out invasive

bamboo grass and collected trash along the creek. They also harvested hundreds of tiny new plants that a native sedge species conveniently grows at the top of its stems. These are being planted along the trail this spring



Volunteers make ECWA's work possible

Thanks to Departing Board Members

Steve Williams left the ECWA board this past fall. Back when ECWA was forming, Steve W. was doing his own independent explorations of the creek. It was the Sierra Club's Ed Harrison who told him about our group, and since then Steve W. has been a stalwart of the ECWA board. He played an important role in ECWA's transition from an all-volunteer group to one with a part-time staff position, contributing a strong interest in structure and strategic planning to a group often consumed in the excitement of current projects. Steve began a documentation of Ellerbe Creek history, donated his editing expertise to the Ellerbe Creek Journal, and always seemed to know someone in the community who could help with various projects.

Also departed from the board are Dale Evarts and Perry Sugg. Dale was the last remaining original board member who provided needed counsel at key moments. Along with his thoughtful views, Perry brought an expertise in map-making and erosion control to the group.

We thank all three for their contributions, and are glad they will remain part of the greater Ellerbe Creek group, offering their skills from time to time.

Kiosk Rises at the Reserve

Much thanks goes to Keith Paulsen for his volunteer work last year to design and build the kiosk that now stands sturdily at the Reserve trailhead near the Albany Street bridge. The kiosk was raised into place, Iwo Jima-like, during a Duke student work day.

Thanks also to Julie and David Holmes for making the ECWA sign mounted in the kiosk. Julie used her pottery expertise to fashion the letters, and David made the wood mounting.

The kiosk has ID photos and info about plants that bloom along the trail. A history of the reserve and a list of birds sighted are also posted. Upcoming is a "you are here"-type map of the watershed, to orient trail users.

Stop by and appreciate the work of these dedicated supporters of the reserve. The trailhead is located at Albany Street and Perennial Drive, across from Indian Trail Park.



Executive Director Receives Award

In a ceremony outside the Museum of Life and Science's Butterfly House, the Headwaters Group Sierra Club recognized four community members with a 2002 Environmental Leadership Award.

ECWA's Steve Hiltner was honored to find himself a recipient along with County Commissioners Ellen Reckhow and Becky Heron, and Wayne Cash, best known for his work with the Eno River Association.

ECWA Nature Reserve Full of Surprises

Visitors to ECWA's 17 acre Urban Nature Reserve continue to report surprising discoveries along the creek. Three deer graced the reserve this past spring, thankfully not eating newly planted native shrubs. Fox, muskrat, great blue herons, wild turkey, barred and horned owls, big snapping turtles—all show that a modest reserve in an old city neighborhood can serve as thoroughfare, storehouse and sanctuary for wildlife.

A surprise of a different sort awaited volunteer Robert Schmalzigaug while he was clearing brush around the reserve's wetland, some 200 feet in along the nature trail. The beast was secretive by nature, but with a gleaming facade, apparently able to hibernate for four decades or more while blackberry bushes deposited successive layers of leaves and stems upon it. Though almost completely obscured, and without any clear source of sustenance, it managed to attain more than ten feet in length. Robert first suspected its presence when he noticed a glint of light coming from deep within the imposing tangle of brambles and vines. Though identification was difficult, further investigation narrowed it down to the genus *Chevrolet*. The specimen must have taken one last lunge into the thicket long ago, coming to rest dramatically perched on an embankment overlooking the wetland.

It was hoped the specimen would provide a dramatic urban element to complement the pastoral valley being restored around it, but close inspection revealed a less than picturesque hulk. For now, the beast will be allowed to disappear once again beneath its brambly veil.

Resident Ichthyologist Discovers Chubs, Eats Crow

Though ill reputed, the taste of crow can be as sweet as honey. In the last issue of the “*Ellerbe Creek Journal*,” I wrote of several species of large minnows known collectively as “chubs,” many of which build nests of mounded pebbles, and of the ecological importance of these nests to a variety of stream dwellers. I also said that the species, widespread in the Piedmont region and once undoubtedly common in *Ellerbe Creek*, were most likely no longer to be found there.

I am, at least in this instance, willing to graciously admit that I was mistaken. Chubs, touted by Cherokee mythology as fishy monarchs of the stream, have not entirely abdicated the *Ellerbe* throne.

The science of ichthyology, like so many other disciplines, is an endeavor of luck and circumstance as much as of reason and deduction. Over the past three years, I have conducted at least five fish samples in a short reach of *Ellerbe Creek* just downstream from *Duke Street* and *Murray Avenue*, in the process turning up a grab bag of sunfish species, hordes of pollution-tolerant mosquitofish (I think of them as stream rats), a handful of shiners, and even a catfish. But no chubs. Not one. So it was with more than slight surprise that I noticed a dark scattering of stones on the streambed in this very reach during a summer lunch-break stroll.

I’d discovered the remains of a chub nest built earlier in the spring and well on its way to scattering in the stream’s current. One more good rainstorm and I would have never noticed the nest, but there it was (droughts do have their benefits). In textbook fashion, the chub had built his nest at the downstream end of



a deep pool formed where the water’s flow cut beneath a root wad. Just above the nest was an overhanging branch. This chub was pretty smart; the branch protected him from avian predators such as kingfishers, and the rooty pool provided shelter in the case that a bass or snapping turtle happened to interrupt his time with the ladies.

From the smallish size of the nest and its pebbles, I’d guess that it was built by the most pollution-tolerant chub species, the *Creek Chub* (*Semotilus atromaculatus*). But of course I can’t be positive. A fish in the hand is better than an entire school darting beyond the reach of my nets, and a dish of crow is not for regular consumption.

When I catch the critter that built that nest, and I will, I’ll let you know. Until then, long live the chubs!

Chad Hallyburton

For more information on ECWA and *Ellerbe Creek*, visit our website: <http://www.ellerbecreek.org>

ECWA
2201 Pershing Street
Durham, NC 27705

Mail to: