



**ISSUE NO. 4**  
FALL 2024/WINTER 2025

**SOUTHERN  
ENVIRONMENTAL  
LAW  
CENTER**



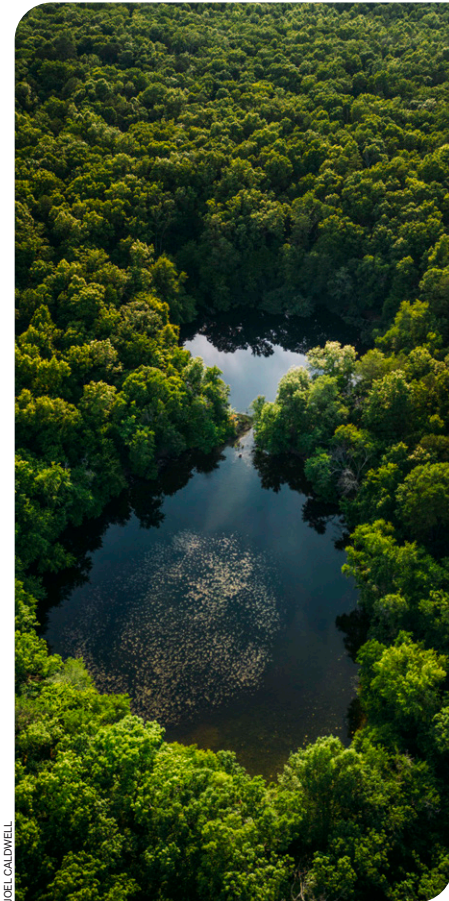
## ISSUE NO. 4

FALL 2024/WINTER 2025

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The Southern Environmental Law Center is one of the nation's most powerful defenders of the environment, rooted in the South. With a long track record, SELC takes on the toughest environmental challenges in court, in government, and in our communities.

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NASHVILLE  
RICHMOND  
WASHINGTON, D.C.**



Dear Friends of SELC,

When I first started at SELC's Asheville office in 2004 as its second employee, I was thrilled to be joining a small but mighty legal advocacy organization in my hometown nestled deep in the Southern Appalachian mountains. My time driving the mountain roads, building community with neighbors, and hiking along creek beds shaped how I see the world and why I fight so hard for a better future.

Just as this magazine was about to go to print, Hurricane Helene ravaged communities I love and a huge swath of the South. Like many of you, this has left me heartbroken but determined.

It will take sustained effort on multiple fronts to build the future we want from the tremendous damage wrought by this storm; SELC is committed to the work ahead. We know climate change fueled Helene and other recent storms. Climate change is here, and we are already fighting for solutions that will make our communities more prepared for its many impacts.

One of those solutions, protecting wetlands, is a big part of that effort. The South's wetlands are not only lovely, they're also nature's sponges, soaking up floodwaters and buffering us against storms. In these pages, you'll meet five of your neighbors dedicated to highlighting and preserving, the incredible value of wetlands.

As you read about them and all the impressive advocates featured here, I hope you'll take heart from all the hard work already underway. Our nonprofit, nonpartisan work to ensure all of us have the clean air, clean water, and livable climate has never been more important. As we face the critical year ahead, please consider being part of the solution by supporting SELC to build the future we all deserve, together.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "DJ Gerken". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of "DJ" and "Gerken" being capitalized and prominent.

DJ Gerken

President and Executive Director, SELC



# The wonder of wetlands

## 5 SOUTHERNERS LEADING THE FIGHT TO PROTECT THEM

By Stephanie Hunt; photos by Joel Caldwell, underwater photos by Steven David Johnson

Wetlands are wonderlands. These interstitial spaces between land and water are the superheroes of ecology and our environment, doing everything from serving as buffer and safeguard for storms and flooding, to capturing and storing carbon. Their impressive repertoire includes filtering pollution from our waterways and drinking water sources, bolstering groundwater aquifers, and providing critical nurseries and habitats for fish, birds, and other wildlife. While varying in shape and form — from bayou to bog, marsh to mangrove, blackwater swamp to Carolina bay — our nation's wetlands today all have two things in common: they are vital to our health and well-being, and they are in danger.

For more than 50 years our nation's wetlands enjoyed broad protection under the federal Clean Water Act. Then, in a stark reversal, the Trump administration moved to dramatically curtail those protections and, in 2023, the United States Supreme Court's decision in *Sackett v. EPA* followed suit, severely narrowing safeguards for these magnificent places. In the wake of *Sackett*, this loss is felt particularly hard in the South, where there is an abundance of wetlands and development pressures growing at an exponential rate.

Across the South, people are responding by protecting these precious places in any way they can. SELC is partnering with community advocates, artists, business leaders, and the many others calling for a less shortsighted path forward. Together, we are working in the halls of government and out in the field, from Alabama to Washington, D.C., to make sure these essential natural resources are protected for future generations. And while our lawyers are making the scientific and legal cases for protecting our wetlands, there's an equally compelling argument motivating people to speak out. Yes, wetlands are irreplaceable buffers between land and waterways, but they're also buffers for our spirit. Their beauty and vitality move us, as they've moved the people we meet below into action. From chef to preacher, photographer to young entrepreneur, these individuals are using their unique talents to ensure the *Sackett* decision is not the last word for the South's wetlands.



## The attorney

### GEORGE NOLAN, FROM CRAWDADS TO THE CAPITOL

"I doubt many SELC lawyers know what it's like to go frog-gigging, but I do. I know firsthand how important wetlands are," says George Nolan, SELC senior attorney and director of the Tennessee office. Nolan hails from a cattle farm outside of Nashville in the Duck River watershed, where creek-bottom wetlands keep one of the world's most biodiverse rivers healthy. "It was a great place to grow up, with five miles of dirt road to get to our house and not another structure in sight," adds Nolan, who, in addition to frog-gigging, is an expert crawdad-catcher and angler, thanks to his bucolic childhood with the run of the farm's creeks. "I'd leave the house in the morning with a little fishing pole and coffee can I'd fill with nightcrawlers, then fish all day — obsessed. I once caught an 8-pound, 24-inch rainbow trout in that creek," says Nolan. "I still can't believe it." Today he can't believe that, post-*Sackett*, the streams, creeks, and rivers he fell

*This page: Senior Attorney George Nolan on his family farm in Bon Aqua, Tenn. Opposite: Wetlands bridge the space between land and water here on Lake Pontchartrain, La.*

in love with as a child are in danger, with legislation pending in the Tennessee statehouse aimed at stripping away state wetland protections.

"We have more than 430,000 acres of wetlands in Tennessee that no longer have federal protection after the *Sackett* decision, but are presently protected by state law," he explains. "Our development community, buoyed by a state representative who is also a developer, is pushing legislation that would change that." Nolan feels the threat; he regularly receives unsolicited offers to buy his property, as developers gobble up acreage around the farm where he and his brother still raise a small herd of "Baldies," a hybrid of commercial Angus cows and Hereford bulls. While he enjoys spending weekends out on his beloved land, he rarely has time for fishing anymore. He's too busy organizing a broad coalition of wetland advocates across the state and lobbying the legislature.

"We successfully prevented that bad legislation from passing in this last session," he says, but the bill was sent to a "summer study," which means more lobbying when legislators reconvene in early 2025. "We're intent on educating our lawmakers about the fact that wetlands protect us from flooding and ensure our aquifers and streams contain clean water. Protected wetlands are critical for wildlife and important for Tennessee's economic prosperity," he says, noting his fellow Tennesseans spend billions on fishing, hunting, and outdoor recreation annually, generating local and state tax revenue.

Development pressure in Middle Tennessee, Nolan realizes, isn't going away. "We're either going to do it well or not," he says. "Protecting our wetlands and managing growth with thoughtful conservation is key to doing it well."





# The reverend

PASTOR ANTWON NIXON PREACHES SWAMP POWER



It has been more than three decades since Antwon Nixon saw Oscar on an elementary school field trip to the Okefenokee Swamp, but he vividly remembers being mesmerized by the 13-foot, 1,000-pound alligator. “He was huge, swam around in the blackwater like he owned the place. I was infatuated,” says Nixon, a native of Folkston, Georgia, a tiny railroad town — population 4,600 — bordering the primeval wetlands of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge.

When Nixon first learned about an Alabama company’s plans to mine titanium near the Okefenokee in 2021, years after that childhood visit, he thought of Oscar. “Something dormant in me became vibrant again once I realized the swamp was under threat,” he says. On a return visit to the rare wilderness in his backyard — the largest blackwater swamp in North America and home to one of the most well-preserved and intact freshwater ecosystems in the world — he found Oscar’s impressive skeleton on display in the visitor’s center. The nearly century-old gator had died of natural causes, but generations of his offspring now thrive amid the refuge’s more than 400,000 acres of pinelands, open wet prairies, and forested cypress swamps, and Nixon is determined to protect them, along with the red-cockaded woodpeckers, gopher tortoises, and other species who live there.



*A view of the pines on the swamp's edge.*

“We’re now, like the Bible says, in perilous times,” notes Nixon, senior pastor of Folkston’s Mt. Carmel Baptist Church and a community activist. His nonprofit, Sowing Seeds Outside the Walls, expands opportunities for youth in this lower-wealth region. “I’m here to make positive, productive change in Folkston,” he adds. “We can’t sell out our community and the swamp to a private company seeking to extract public natural resources.” The mining operation wants to mine 700 acres adjacent to the Okefenokee refuge, endangering the swamp’s complex hydrology.

*Rev. Antwon Nixon stands in front of Mt. Carmel Baptist Church in Folkston, Ga. Part of Nixon’s nonprofit work includes playing basketball with local youth. Folkston sits on the edge of the Okefenokee swamp, whose unofficial mascot is the alligator.*

An eagle glides overhead as Nixon gazes out over mirrored surface where canals lead to the Okefenokee’s wilds; a great blue heron fishes on a small peat island, unconcerned by the gators stealthily by. “Wouldn’t ecotourism be better? The animals would win, the land and swamp wins, the community wins,” Nixon says. With efforts pending to designate the Okefenokee swamp as a UNESCO World Heritage site, he foresees more people coming to experience this pristine wilderness, in turn creating demand for new outfitters, hotels, and restaurants — i.e., more jobs for Folkston folks. By attending statehouse rallies, lobbying, and campaigning on behalf of the Okefenokee, he’s honoring Oscar’s spirit — “living out my childhood imagination,” says Nixon of the mystical swamp that enchanted him long ago. “Lots of people don’t realize what we have right here at our backdoor. I’m speaking out to change that, before it’s too late.”



*Nixon visits the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge.*



**Hear Antwon Nixon and others share the swamp’s story on SELC’s podcast Broken Ground.**







# The innovator

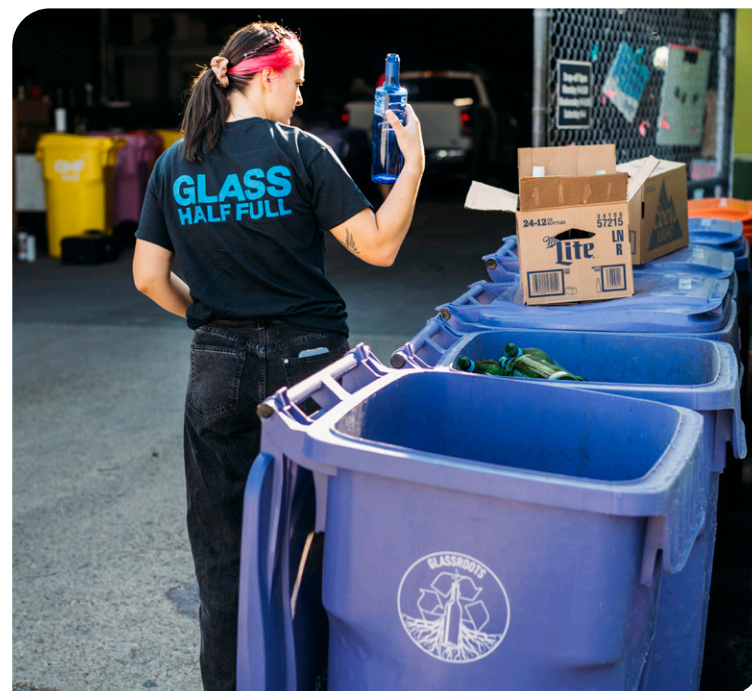
## AN EPIPHANY TURNS BOTTLES INTO BAYOU-SAVING SAND

A pick-up truck reverses past a kaleidoscopic mural into the drop-off zone at Glass Half Full, a glass recycling center on an industrial strip in New Orleans. Two men from a Catholic church the next parish over unload empty wine bottles and glass jars etched with a cross. “Candle holders,” one explains. “We clean out the wax but hate to throw them away, so we bring them here.” Ashes to ashes, glass to crushed glass, communion wine to coastal sand — call it holy recycling, or at least a wholly original take on it, thanks to an “aha” moment when Franziska Trautmann and Max Steitz were seniors at Tulane University.

While enjoying wine one evening, Trautmann and Steitz bemoaned the number of bottles thrown away in their party-centric city. Back in 2019, Louisiana was one of several Southeastern states with no glass recycling program. “But there should be one,” thought Trautmann, now Glass Half Full’s 26-year-old CEO and co-founder, alongside Steitz. “Then we saw this machine that crushed glass into sand and realized, Louisiana needs recycling and sand. Our coast is eroding at some mind-boggling rate — a football field an hour,” says the Louisiana bayou native. “We were young.

We had no idea what all it would entail, but we thought, why not? Why can’t this work?”

*Above: Co-founder Fran Trautmann stands in front of the glass mountain at the Glass Half Full facility, which starts with collecting bottles from around New Orleans.*



With an \$8,000 GoFundMe in 2020, Trautmann and Steitz launched a backyard operation, feeding bottles, one by one, into a small crushing machine. Their market quickly grew. Today, the company’s \$1 million annual budget supports 17 regional collection routes and a staff of 20 diverting 150,000 pounds of glass each month from landfills and producing 2,000 tons of sand annually for use in coastal restoration, disaster relief, landscaping, and construction. Due to sea-level rise and levee-induced erosion, the state has lost a quarter of its wetlands since the 1930s. Sourcing new sand is urgent, but also expensive. “Coastal researchers call us a ‘pop-up quarry,’ creating sand economically in the middle of a city instead of through detrimental mining practices,” she says.

Those same researchers are studying whether Glass Half Full sand can slow the state’s coastal and wetland loss. Initial studies demonstrated it is nontoxic to marine life and effective for growing native flora. One demonstration wetland is on New Orleans’ industrial edge, along Bayou Bienvenue. This is also where they are building a new \$6.5 million warehouse to expand operations. Beyond New Orleans, Glass Half Full has opened a warehouse and collection sites in Birmingham, with other locations to come.

Having turned a wide-eyed college idea into a profitable, expanding, and sustainable enterprise, Trautmann remains most energized by these demonstration

*This test site will add to the data on how sand produced by Glass Half Full performs for coastal restoration. Above, Trautmann assesses the latest life on the island.*



islands and their potential for wetland restoration. “We’re literally filling in holes in the marsh,” she says, looking out over the bayou, dragonflies zooming about. “There’s marsh grass that was inches high when I planted it, and now it’s huge, taller than me. That’s incredible.”



# The chef

## RICKY MOORE CELEBRATES NORTH CAROLINA'S SEAFOOD BOUNTY

A long line trails outside the front door of Durham's Saltbox Seafood Joint. It's lunch time, and the mouth-watering cooking smell of fresh, local seafood lures the construction workers, medical professionals, college students, and business execs waiting for a flounder platter or plate of perfectly fried croaker with a side of zingy "S.S.J." slaw.

"My customers know they'll get whatever's fresh and in season," says Moore, who grew up in New Bern, North Carolina, where the Trent and Neuse Rivers join before entering the Pamlico Sound — the gateway to the Atlantic and North Carolina's fisheries and one of the largest estuaries in North America. "They'll ask, 'hey, is blue fish ready yet? What about soft-shell crabs? Or is sheepshead available?' That (seafood availability) is a direct reflection of the fisherfolk I work with and how we are managing and preserving our wetlands. If we don't protect our wetlands and marshes the way we need to, the fishing industry and those they serve, including my business, will be affected."

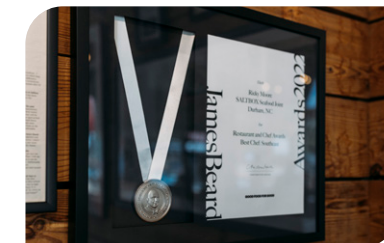
*Chef Ricky Moore welcomes customers to Saltbox Seafood Joint, located in Durham, N.C., known for serving North Carolina seafood.*

As a young boy with a creative bent, Moore craved the openness of coastal wetlands, where his imagination came alive. "I felt a sense of peace when I went out to the marsh. It was so cool, my place to escape. I still need the marsh to be there for me," says the James Beard-award winning chef. He remembers going flounder gigging at night and "hanging around in the marsh, catching crabs with a net and fishing for spot and croaker with my grandmother, using a pole with a string, no rig." Those salty, formative memories stuck with him as Moore's artistic inclinations took a culinary turn after joining the army at age 17. Soon Moore was cooking for the 82nd Airborne, then went on to the Culinary Institute of America. His career has taken him to Michelin-starred kitchens in Paris, Singapore, and Toronto, and to top restaurants in Chicago and Washington, D.C., but Moore knew he ultimately wanted to return to North Carolina, to his native and culinary roots. Saltbox is nothing fancy, just a country cooking "joint," soulful and refined.

"I love showcasing North Carolina's seafood bounty and the fisherfolk who bring it to us, in the simplest, purest way possible," he says. His livelihood depends on not only feeding his customers the best local seafood delicately fried with a light cornmeal dusting or spiced and griddled, but educating them about sustainable fisheries, and how dependent the industry is on water quality and wetlands in North Carolina, particularly now that more than 2 million acres of wetlands are endangered after the state legislature embraced the Sackett decision. "Our wetlands are like sponges, like a filter," Moore explains, and without them, the estuaries and fisheries that depend on them are imperiled. "We need to think long range, about how we manage and maintain wetlands generationally. As a business owner who serves North Carolina seafood directly, that's important to me. This is real. We can't let it fall. We are all accountable."



*An aerial view of the wetlands, and development, along the North Carolina coast. Chef Moore prepares the day's catch. His James Beard award hangs on the restaurant wall.*



**Scan to see Ricky Moore and his seafood supplier, Capt. John Mallette, in action.**



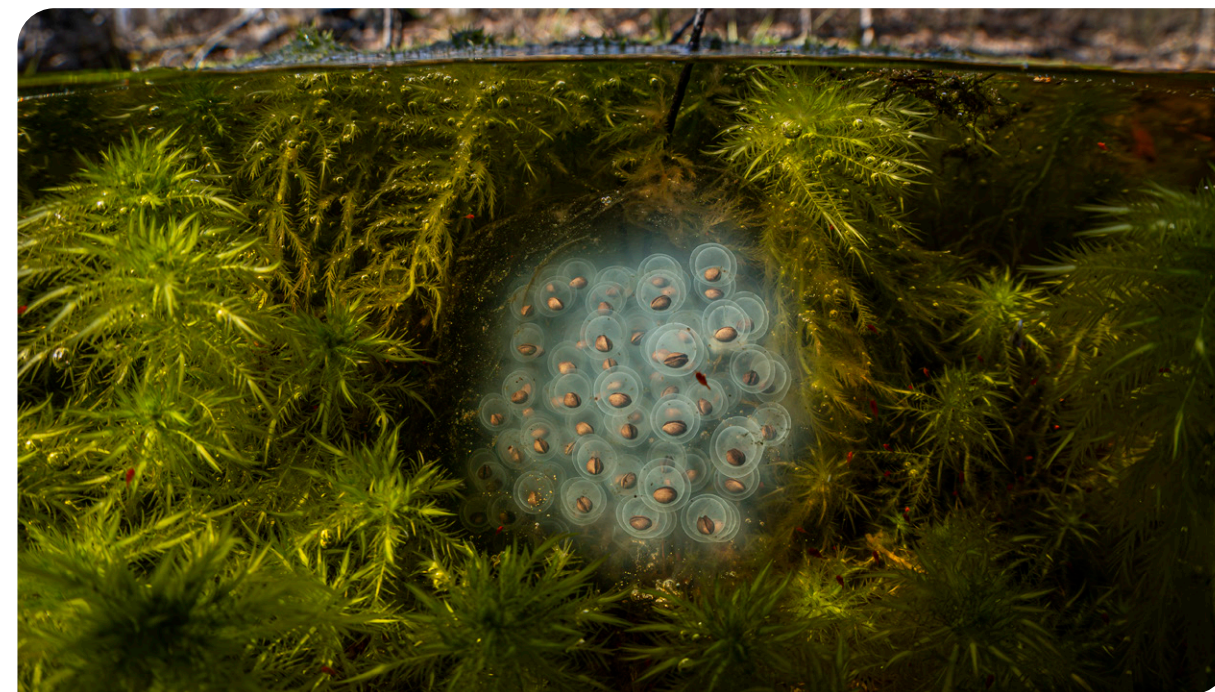




Steven David Johnson pulls on his waders and lugs heavy camera equipment through the woods of the George Washington National Forest, about an hour from his home in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. These woods are home to vernal pools, temporary basins that fill up in spring from snowmelt and rainwater then dry up in summer. Johnson has fallen under the spell of this little-known type of wetland. “Vernal pools are ephemeral, that’s part of their magic,” explains Johnson, who reverently crouches down, genuflecting to the water, his voice hushed and soothing as if he’s in a baby’s nursery. Which he is. Vernal pools are basically aquatic cribs for next-gen salamanders and frogs wiggling into the world.

While these types of ephemeral woodland wetlands are not explicitly protected federally or by the state, many of the endangered species dependent on them, like the tiger salamander, are. That’s why Johnson, a professor of photography at Eastern Mennonite University with a background in fine art, uses his images to raise awareness about these little-known aquatic havens. Plus, he loves the visual exquisiteness of vernal pools — how the water-filtered light imbues a Dutch Old Master quality to his artwork. “It’s a good day when I get that Vermeer lighting,” he says.

“When I moved here 20 years ago and discovered that central and Southern Appalachia was a biodiversity hotspot — home to some 50 species of salamanders — I realized that documenting salamanders and their life



*Above: Female spotted salamanders deposit their eggs in luminous clusters just below the surface of the water. Below left, left to right: An eastern newt larva sports fringed gills; a spotted salamander surrounded by tiny copepods; a state-endangered tiger salamander beneath the surface of a vernal pool.*

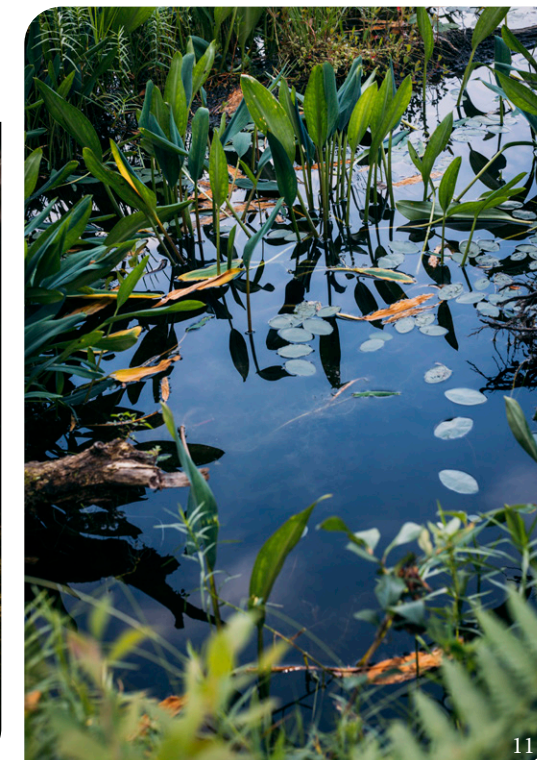
cycle was the story I wanted to tell,” he says. Camera in hand, he moves stealthily through the tea-colored water of Maple Flats, where beavers have engineered a new shallow pool. Dragonflies loop-de-loop overhead; water bugs skate across the surface while green frogs and cricket frogs fill the air with their cacophony. From dry land, Maple Flats looks like a big puddle, but Johnson’s lens proves otherwise. His close-up images — luminous orbs of salamander eggs, larval newts donning frilly gills, fairy shrimp and damselflies looking like something out of the Star Wars bar scene — reveal an intimate, astonish-

ing aquatic underworld, the inhabitants of which are integral to the ecosystem.

Photographing these amphibians, copepods, and insect larvae in a more familiar fine-art framing “helps people connect and gives them a glimpse of these very secretive lives,” says Johnson. “My hope is that by getting imagery out, people will start to realize, oh that’s not just a mudpuddle, there’s something there.” And that something is startlingly gorgeous and needs protection.” ■

# The photographer

STEVEN DAVID JOHNSON’S PASSION FOR VERNAL POOLS





SEEING THE SOUTH

# A Virginia winter



Photos by Jack Looney and Bill Mauzy

Our country's oldest mountain range, the Appalachians, defines Virginia's western edge. Stripped of summer's greenery, the plains and ridges, nooks and crannies of this ancient landscape are laid bare, sparkling under winter's frosty coat.

In the valleys lie family farms surrounded by national forests, where SELC has long advocated for protections. Come explore this winter wonderland with local photographers Jack Looney and Bill Mauzy — who are well aware of what a special place they call home.



BILL MAUZY



BILL MAUZY

JACK LOONEY



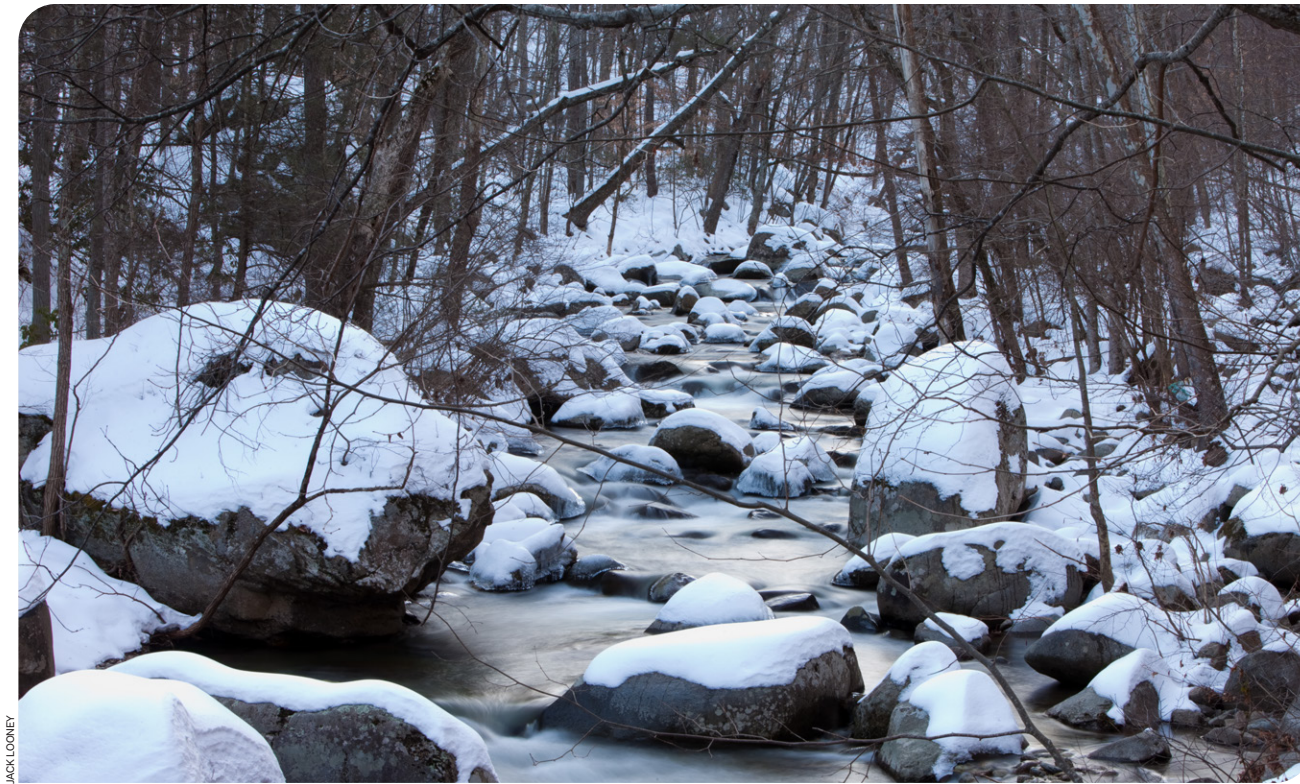






“I’m endlessly drawn to the winter forms of our most sculptural Virginia native trees, oaks, beeches, persimmons, and black walnuts. These black walnuts set against a backdrop of Virginia pines and eastern red cedars jumped out to me from a great distance as I crept along a snowy mountain road in Nelson County.”

— Bill Mauzy



*Previous page: Winter reveals the topography around Wintergreen Resort in Nellysford, Va.*

*Top left: Snow outlines the shape of each branch after a Virginia winter snow.*

*Bottom left: Farmland checkers the valleys across western Virginia.*

*Top right: Snowfall is a key source of clean water during the winter months recharging our creeks and streams.*

*Bottom right: A new color palette emerges when snow blankets the land.*





JACK LOONEY

“There’s something amazing about exploring these mountains with a few friends during the winter when Shendoah National Park and the Blue Ridge Parkway are so accessible. I love to just drive and look for interesting scenes.”

— Jack Looney

*Top left: Winter hiking exposes new landscapes and shows familiar places in new ways.*

*Bottom left: While the Appalachian Trail is tremendously popular, you can often have stretches to yourself, especially in the winter months.*

*Right: A barn along the bank of the South Fork of the Potomac River, near the border between Virginia and West Virginia.*



JACK LOONEY

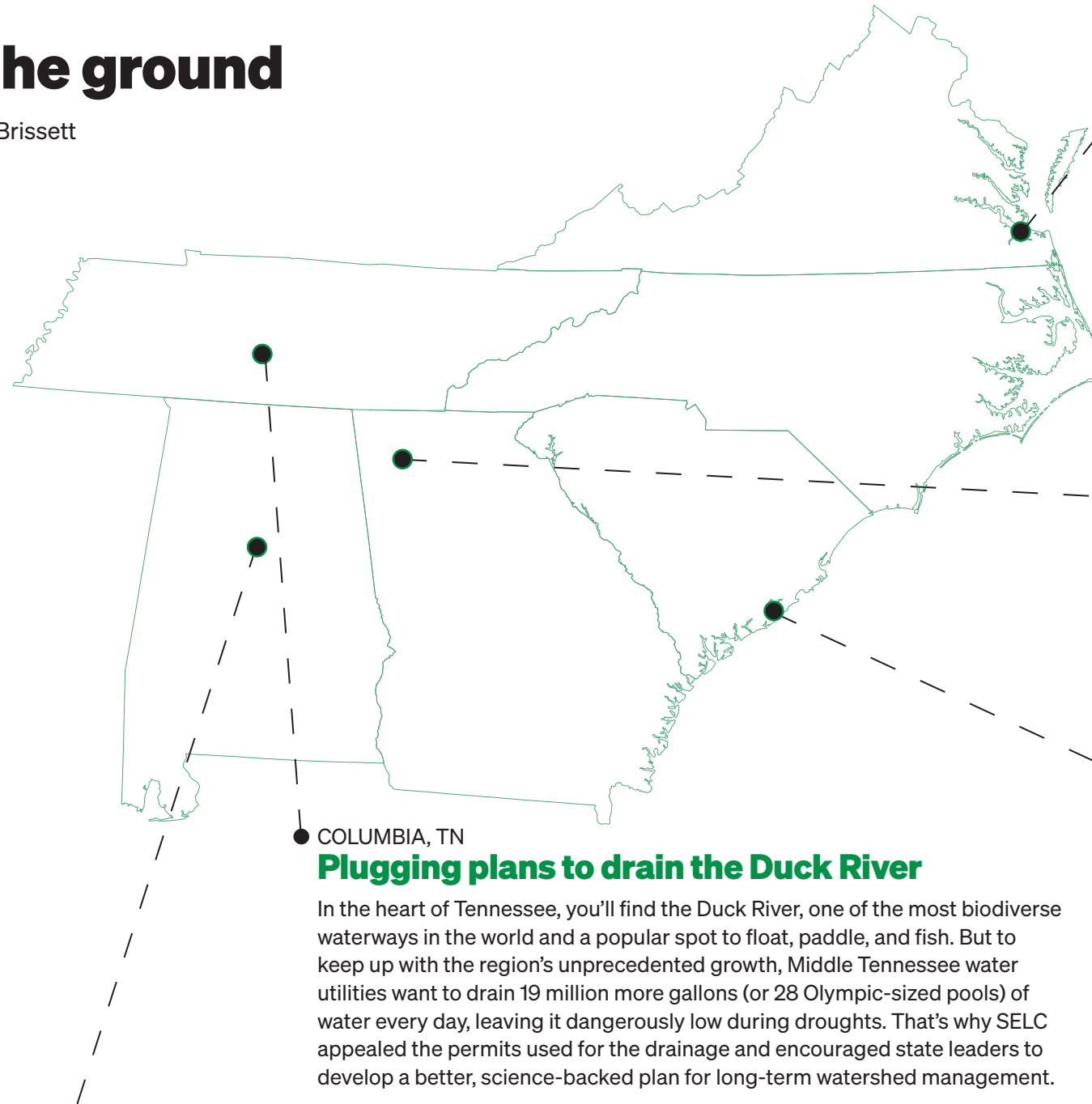


BILL MAUZY



# On the ground

By Wilson Brissett



## HAMPTON ROADS, VA Offshore wind in Virginia

Off the coast of Virginia, an innovative offshore wind development is in full swing. The massive installation led by Dominion Energy, when complete, will produce enough energy to power more than 600,000 homes, making it the country's largest project. In a promising move, Dominion announced the purchase of two more wind leases, one offshore in Virginia, and another off the coast of Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. The projects are also bringing new businesses that support offshore wind to the area, providing an economic boost along with electricity.



## CALHOUN, GA Win stops industrial toxins polluting Georgia drinking water

When a community in the heart of the nation's carpet industry is drinking toxic industrial chemicals, it is a sign of a broken system. For years, the city of Calhoun, Georgia, which is located on two major rivers, accepted illegal, unrestricted discharges of cancer-causing PFAS chemicals, known as forever chemicals, at its public wastewater plant. SELC and the Coosa River Basin Initiative uncovered this pollution and filed suit in March to address it. By September, the parties agreed to a settlement that will transform the city's wastewater operations into a model for regulating PFAS and requiring drinking water remedies for the community.

## CHARLESTON, SC Community science takes on climate change

Across the Lowcountry, locals are using their phones to combat climate change through the power of community science. The South Carolina Aquarium Citizen Science app has multiple projects focused on conservation, but the SeaRise Project is focused on collecting data on coastal flooding. Users can submit high-water photos directly from their phone and record location, date, water level, and environmental data. SELC is joining with the aquarium to encourage people across the Lowcountry to submit data through the app so the information can be used to more accurately predict future flooding, enabling communities to plan accordingly.



**“We are dedicated to finding solutions to solve the climate emergency that respond to local needs.”**

— ALYS CAMPAIGNE, SELC'S CLIMATE INITIATIVE LEADER

## COLUMBIA, TN Plugging plans to drain the Duck River

In the heart of Tennessee, you'll find the Duck River, one of the most biodiverse waterways in the world and a popular spot to float, paddle, and fish. But to keep up with the region's unprecedented growth, Middle Tennessee water utilities want to drain 19 million more gallons (or 28 Olympic-sized pools) of water every day, leaving it dangerously low during droughts. That's why SELC appealed the permits used for the drainage and encouraged state leaders to develop a better, science-backed plan for long-term watershed management.

## BIRMINGHAM, AL Alabama trades parking for climate progress

Cities that cut down on excessive parking enjoy more walkable spaces, less air pollution, less flooding, and more room for small businesses to thrive. That's why Birmingham recently joined the growing ranks of Southern cities — including Atlanta, Raleigh, and Richmond — in eliminating the mandatory parking minimums that have driven an unnecessary spread of parking pavement across the region. In addition to ending mandatory minimums, the city council also took actions to increase bicycle parking and incentivize non-car transportation. Over time, these changes will cut tailpipe emissions, lower temperatures in heat islands, and ease flooding by removing concrete.



FEI/OLIVIERO/TORRETTI



## CHANGEMAKER

# Carol Remmer Angle

## Public health pioneer builds on legacy of air protections

By Samantha Baars



Carol Remmer Angle, a trailblazer in the field of public health whose research and advocacy helped lay the groundwork for modern environmental law, is empowering a new campaign to protect communities across the South from air pollution.

Crowned “The Woman Who Fought Lead,” by her alma mater Wellesley College, Angle is a leading expert on lead poisoning and a public health icon, known best for her work as a pediatrician, toxicologist, nephrologist, and educator. Her research helped the world understand the impact of environmental lead pollution on human health, culminating in the adoption of the Clean Air Act of 1970 and the removal of lead from gasoline and other products.

Last spring, Angle established a new fund dedicated to protecting communities across the South from pollution. This fund initiated SELC’s newly minted Air Program, under the leadership of nationally recognized air expert Keri Powell, SELC’s new Air Program Leader and Carol Remmer Angle Senior Attorney for Community Health.

“Her career helped inspire modern environmental law, and extended and improved the lives of generations around the world,” says Executive Director DJ Gerken. “We are honored to be associated with her inspiring legacy and to do our part to carry it forward, improving air quality and public health across the South.”

### Angle’s impact

Linking her young patients’ symptoms of advanced lead poisoning to exposure from lead smelting and battery reclamation plants, she also monitored air, soil, and water lead levels near the factories and throughout Omaha, Nebraska. Angle’s observations contributed to the growing recognition that lead exposure isn’t only an issue of chipping house paint, but one of the entire environment.

“Growing up with a mother in this line of business made the connections between our health and our environment brilliantly clear for me early on,” says Marcia Angle, her daughter and an accomplished physician herself.

A professor emerita at the University of Nebraska College of Medicine, the elder Angle served in the college’s Department of Pediatrics for years and was one of the first women in the country to serve as a medical school department chair. She is also a co-founder of one of the nation’s first poison control centers and advised numerous organizations including the National Institutes of Health and the Environmental Protection Agency.

Now, she is ensuring SELC is in a position to protect clean air for all communities with a generous endowment that will allow the organization to stay focused on this work for as long as it takes.

### Breathing better

Enter Keri Powell, a veteran in clean air advocacy and a leading litigator who joined SELC as a senior attorney in September 2023. She was tasked with supercharging the organization’s clean air program, including running point on pivotal litigation against biomass plants and other industrial facilities that contribute to toxic air pollution across the South.

Powell’s new clean air team is busy reviewing and challenging permits and building an ambitious strategy to close federal loopholes that have allowed massive polluters to cluster unfairly around Black, Latino, and Indigenous communities.

“We can all breathe a little better now that Keri is leading our work to defend clean air,” says Gerken. “Her expertise will boost our longstanding efforts to ensure clean air for all.”



*Keri Powell, here with Angle, is SELC’s first Carol Remmer Angle Senior Attorney for Community Health and leader of SELC’s new Air Program.*

**“Her career helped inspire modern environmental law, and extended and improved the lives of generations around the world. We are honored to be associated with her inspiring legacy and to do our part to carry it forward, improving air quality and public health across the South”**

— DJ GERKEN, SELC EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

### On the ground

Protecting clean air can help preserve our Southern environment and culture. This spring, SELC provided critical legal pressure to help Riceboro — a Black coastal community south of Savannah, Georgia — prevent one of the nation’s largest emitters of a toxic pesticide from setting up shop right next to a Gullah Geechee arts center and museum.

We know communities of color and lower wealth areas are systemically forced to endure more pollution than white, wealthier neighborhoods.

“I’ve always been motivated by the core belief that everyone has the right to breathe clean air,” says Powell. “I’m most proud of our work when we’re able to assist overburdened communities in getting their concerns heard and addressed.”

Angle and Powell are proof that determined public servants can achieve unprecedented environmental progress. By advocating for stronger regulations and more effective enforcement, SELC continues their legacy of fighting for healthy air quality for all communities. ■



# Pulse check: Richmond's transit success

By Samantha Baars; photos by Phuong Tran

Providing cleaner, more equitable transportation options is one of the best things a locality can do for its residents and the environment.

Add Richmond as another pin on the map of cities in our region where innovative transportation solutions are taking more Southerners farther — and often faster — than ever before, while curbing pollution.

The Richmond region has created a powerful combination with the 2018 launch of the first express bus route in the city, called the Pulse, alongside a total route redesign. Then, during the pandemic, the bus system dropped all fares, drawing even more riders.

Transit ridership in the Richmond region was one of the first in the country to surpass pre-pandemic levels. It rose another 14 percent in just the past year.

## On the bus with Density Dad

Taking the free bus is easy on Barry Greene's wallet and helps him set aside special time to hang out with his two-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Olivia.

"As a father, I get excited about the exposure to folks from different walks of life," says Greene, whose urbanism blog called Density Dad digs into topics like public infrastructure and building equitable communities.

On the dad and daughter duo's weekly outing, they usually scoot up and down Broad Street on the bus, often stopping at the Children's Museum of Richmond or a coffee shop for a treat.

"It's so easy to live in a part of town where people seem homogeneous in their class and type of work, but when she's on the bus, particularly here in Richmond where it's free, it's all this mixture," says Greene. "It's probably easy as a parent to shield your kid from that, but

**"When you don't have an itinerary and you get on the bus and just go, you might be surprised by where you decide to hop off and hop on."**

— BARRY GREENE

I just love the idea that she'll never be in shock when she realizes that everyone is different: some people have it tough while some people have it great."

As far as the experience of riding the Pulse, Greene says it's a spacious ride, the drivers are kind and patient, and bus stops are new, clean, covered, and adorned with maps and digital updates.

## A Pulse check for Richmond South?

The Pulse line is Richmond's first "Bus Rapid Transit," or BRT line, which provides faster, more reliable bus service through dedicated road lanes and other measures.

Faith Walker is high on the list of people to thank for moving free and far-reaching transportation like the Pulse forward in Virginia's capital city.

From the helm of nonprofit RVA Rapid Transit, she strongly advocated for the bus line, often describing the concept to curious community members, and explaining how covered and well-lit shelters can "dignify" taking public transportation.

But she's hesitant to accept praise when there's still so much to do to get people where they need to go in Richmond.

"One of the things we hear most from folks is they want transportation to give them access to higher paying jobs," says Walker. "When I started doing the work and learning about the social determinants of health like housing, education, family, and access to health-care, I realized that transportation connects it all."

Projects like the Pulse can revitalize economically distressed neighborhoods and significantly expand the range of job opportunities for transit-dependent people.

## Man with a plan

The Richmond region is now planning a second rapid transit line and expanding bus service into surrounding counties.

"What Richmond has done is a model that can be replicated in other places, and a reminder that transit



Left: Barry Greene and his daughter wait for the next Pulse bus along Broad Street in Richmond, Va. Above: A good book is a great companion on any bus ride.

can work well in the South," says Trip Pollard, leader of SELC's Land and Community Program and a long-time transit advocate.

Pollard has served on numerous local advisory committees and is the former chair of Richmond's Green City Commission. In addition to his support for the Pulse and the bus network redesign, his advocacy helped push Richmond to rezone chunks of the city to encourage more development around transit stops, which has spurred a surge in new housing built near bus and rail routes.

Density Dad Barry Greene is one of the people who picked a place to live in Richmond based on its proximity to a Pulse stop. Having previously lived in walkable places, he knew getting rid of his car was a challenge he now could meet when moving back to his hometown.

He recommends catching the bus to try it out.

"You just become integrated in the city in which you live," adds Greene. "When you don't have an itinerary and you get on the bus and just go, you might be surprised by where you decide to hop off and hop on." ■





# An invitation into rural corners of the South

## Broken Ground podcast introduces us to the neighbors building a better future

By Samantha Baars

A deep commitment and intimate connection to our place in the world is powerful, regardless of its size or how easy it is to find on a map.

Podcast host Leanna First-Arai says the people who invite us into their small, rural corners of the South on the new season of Broken Ground are a testament to the big impact of those strong connections.

This season you'll hear from some of the people living in these places polluters are betting are out of sight, therefore out of mind, and how their communities are pushing back against the threats to their quality of life, homes, and businesses.

Read the interview with First-Arai for a glimpse of what went into making Broken Ground's latest season.



EMILY RICHARDSON-LORENTE

### This is your third season hosting Broken Ground? What makes this one different?

It has been a big privilege to collaborate on this season in a different way than the other ones. With our fifth season that covered the fight against the Byhalia Connection oil pipeline, I was already very intimately connected with the situation there. Last season we talked to environmental journalists across the South, and I already had working relationships with some of the subjects and the issues they covered.

This season for me has been an opportunity to learn about some really shocking situations and issues that were not on my radar.

### Can you give us an example?

I learned so much about how biomass impacts the South. Policy in the U.K. that drives this transatlantic industry is wacky and should be something that, as humans connected across the seas, we have learned from. We should not be causing Southern forests to be so quickly chewed up and shipped over to burn in U.K. power plants.

I'm really excited to share with listeners the issues that we learned about and not only the level of shock, but the level of charm, we found in some of these amazing corners of the South.

### What do you want people to know about this season of the podcast?

One of the things we are hoping comes across this season is the way that Southern stereotypes have historically been damaging to many people living across the South. We're bringing in and getting to know people living in lovely small towns from Fair Bluff, North Carolina to Anniston, Alabama.

You'll meet some surprising characters from all walks of life who are part of a coalition that's calling for clear air and water.



MALLORY CASH

Above: Folks check out watermelons ready for weigh-in at the annual Watermelon Festival in Fair Bluff, N.C. Left: Broken Ground host Leanna First-Arai cruises Alabama's Coosa River. Below: Interviewing residents in Adel, Ga.

In so many small towns across the rural South, there's such persistent poverty and a feeling of fading away or being forgotten. For some rural places, there's also excitement around what environmental futures could look like. The door is open for building even more small, close-knit communities that have their own amazing ways of stopping the powers that be from getting away with polluting in these remote places.

### How does the team approach a new person or place?

The fact that we are exploring has kept us grounded. We've been committed to finding out what environmental justice and injustice look like in rural places.

With reporting in general and going into some of these beautiful corners of the South, it's important to be humble, super open to learning, and to seek surprises and the rupturing of our own stereotypes that we carry with us.

There is so much generational poverty that has been inherited across the rural South and carries trauma with it. We went into these spaces just as ready to learn as ever, but also with a lens of trying to learn how communities are organizing and trying to carve out a brighter environmental future for themselves.

### What are some takeaways from your reporting on issues particular to those communities?

Perhaps the most broad and striking takeaway from all this reporting has been the persistent theme of state environmental regulators being positioned to allow industry to conduct their dirty business — whether we're talking about titanium mining in Georgia or biomass plants, landfills, or fishing across the South. In these stories, regulators seem to look the other way when residents are very clearly stating what they do or don't want in their community.

### How does Broken Ground offer listeners something unique that they won't get from other environmental podcasts?

Working on this podcast with a team that has such intense expertise, we are often able to focus on solutions on Broken Ground. I think people like to hear fresh thinking around how to make things better at a time when it's hard to understand what's possible. ■



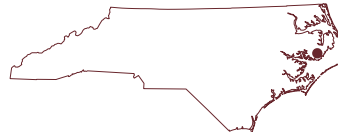
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Listen to the new season of Broken Ground.





MY SOUTH: RAMONA MCGEE



# Mattamuskeet National Wildlife Refuge

## North Carolina



NEIL JERNIGAN

“Visiting Lake Mattamuskeet during the winter is a magical experience, when thousands upon thousands of waterfowl are calling it home. On my first trip there, it was immediately obvious to me why it’s such a revered place among birders. It’s not every day you see and hear such a concentration of birds in North Carolina, or anywhere.

As the largest natural lake in the state, Mattamuskeet has long been an important destination on the Atlantic Flyway. That’s why it’s been set aside for almost 100 years as a wildlife refuge. I don’t take getting to protect this unique place for granted. It’s somewhere I wish everyone could visit. I promise it’s worth braving the cold to witness this unforgettable natural event.”



STEPHANIE GROSS

*Senior Attorney Ramona McGee leads SELC’s Wildlife Program and our case to stop the use of an algacide at Mattamuskeet National Wildlife Refuge known to be toxic to birds.*



# Solutions start in the South.

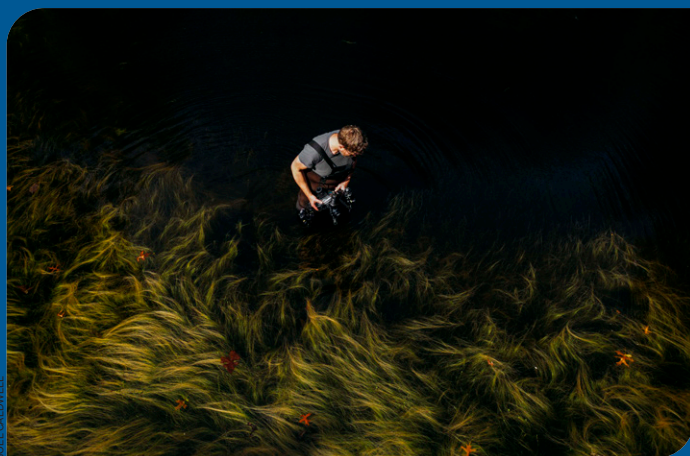


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