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# NEMOURS GAZETTE

A publication of the Nemours Wildlife Foundation

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SPRING – SUMMER 2018

## Flyway Cooperation Takes Wing at Nemours



**Above:** Participants gather for a group photo during the workshop. The following agencies were represented: US Fish & Wildlife Service, Georgia, South Carolina, Delaware and Maryland departments of natural resources, Virginia Department of Game & Inland Fisheries, Florida Wildlife Commission, North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, Ducks Unlimited, James C. Kennedy Waterfowl & Wetlands Conservation Center, Santee National Wildlife Refuge, Clemson University, University of Delaware and Nemours Wildlife Foundation.

**By Paul Schmidt**

Nemours Wildlife Foundation is spearheading an effort to resolve some of the most important waterfowl management challenges we have in the Southeastern U.S. The goal is to develop a strong public-private partnership to help landowners improve management of waterfowl habitat along the Atlantic Flyway. The first step in this process was completed at a workshop at Nemours Plantation February 20-22, where Nemours hosted more than 30 waterfowl experts from federal, state, and non-governmental organizations, universities, and private land managers to build consensus on the highest priority management-focused research needs. Foundation board Chairman Colden Battey, Vice Chairman Mike McShane, and member Lane Morrison observed and participated in the workshop along with President/CEO, Dr. Ernie Wiggers.

The two-day professionally facilitated workshop resulted in a summary report that identifies the seven highest priority research questions that need to be addressed to help landowners and managers make the necessary improvements to benefit wintering and migrating waterfowl.

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The list of priority research needed includes evaluating habitat carrying capacity and matching it with the energetic needs of waterfowl, evaluating the impact of disturbance on waterfowl, improving wood duck recruitment, and more.

Nemours has contracted with Paul Schmidt (formerly with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Ducks Unlimited) to help in this effort and, in conjunction with Mr. McShane and Dr. Wiggers, is leading the effort to build this partnership to gain sufficient support and funding to conduct a series of multi-state research projects in which Nemours will actively participate. With the help of researchers across the country, research projects will be designed this summer and will begin in earnest in the coming months.

Stay tuned for updates on this exciting new initiative putting Nemours in a prominent role leading waterfowl conservation in the flyway and beyond.

## **New Alligator Study Launched**

Alligators have been in the news constantly this spring, so we didn't want to be left out! In truth, at Nemours, we're never really left out when it comes to alligators. We have *plenty*.

However, some Nemours Wildlife Foundation staff and students ventured *beyond* the plantation's borders recently to work with Clemson University, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) and several coastal South Carolina communities with an important project to help understand those alligators not fortunate enough to have thousands of acres to roam.

As of the end of May, 30 alligators have been fitted with GPS transmitters to record data on their movements within five locations: SCDNR's Tom Yawkey Wildlife Center, near Georgetown; Kiawah Island, south of Charleston; Sea Pines Resort on Hilton Head Island; Fripp Island, near Beaufort; and Spring Island in Okatie, between Beaufort and Bluffton. Yawkey was the exception in the list of otherwise urban communities and was chosen as a control site so the behavior of alligators in a "wild" area can be compared to those in the other more urban locations according to Dr. Ernie Wiggers, of Nemours Wildlife Foundation.

Dr. Cathy Jachowski, the project's research director and assistant professor of Freshwater Ecology at Clemson University, told Savannah's WJCL news, "By making sure we know what alligators need and where they are going to hangout, then communities can start designing landscapes so that alligators can have their spaces, and those spaces are separate from the areas that humans use."

The intent of the study is to help the alligators *and* the residents she said. "That's really what this project is about. Understanding what alligators need and how to make sure they can have that while keeping community residents safe."



***Right:*** A very large alligator backs into the water after being fitted with a GPS transmitter at Sea Pines Resort on Hilton Head island. For more photos, see next page.

**Photos by Tom Murphy**

**Right:** SCDNR Alligator Program Biologist Andrew Grosse, Dr. Thomas Rainwater of the Baruch Institute of Coastal Ecology & Forest Science, and Nemours Biologist Beau Bauer bring in an alligator while Nemours' Dr. Ernie Wiggers waits with the snare on Hilton Head Island.



**Left:** Dr. Rainwater measures what turned out to be an 11.5 ft. gator on Fripp Island. **Right:** It takes teamwork to subdue the alligator while ensuring its safety and the researchers'.



**Left:** Nemours intern Castles Leland and Andrew Grosse assist Nemours intern Randi Bowman and Beau Bauer with the installation of a transmitter on a Spring Island alligator.

**Below:** A close up of the GPS transmitter.



**Left:** Beau Bauer applies a numbered and color-coded tag to the Fripp Island alligator's tail. **Right:** This Kiawah Island alligator quickly re-enters the lagoon after receiving its transmitter.



# The Gator Guy (aka Eagle Guy, Turtle Guy...)

By Michele Barker

Tom Murphy supposedly retired in 2009, but you would never know it.

With a master's degree in Wildlife Management from the University of Georgia, 34 years with the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR), numerous publications, and awards such as SCDNR's Meritorious Service Award (2008) and the SC Chapter of the Wildlife Society Lifetime Achievement Award (2007) to his credit, Murphy has continued his research as a biologist with the Spring Island Trust since 2009.

He has studied, and contributed heavily to, the preservation of Bald Eagles, Wood Storks, Osprey, shore birds, manatees and turtles, but a perusal of his resume seems to single out alligators. Tom recently participated in the tagging of and transmitter placement on 30 alligators for a project with Clemson University, SC DNR, Nemours Wildlife Foundation.

Since nearly every time I see him he's either engaged in one of many humorous stories of his past exploits or deeply involved in a project, I emailed him some questions to answer. His "homework assignment", he called it. He got an A+!

- How did you get started working with alligators? *Received a grant to look at the effects of heated reactor water on an alligator population living in a 2,800-acre cooling reservoir (Savannah River Site).*
- What is the most unusual experience you've had with alligator? *Sperm sampling is pretty unusual.*
- What was your most dangerous/frightening experience? *Sank a boat with an 11' gator at night (both Tom and the gator survived!).*
- Most satisfying part of working with alligators? *Understanding how 180 million years of evolution has produced such a resilient species.*
- What surprised you most about what you have learned about them? *The ability of alligators to navigate back to their original capture sites.*
- What would you most want the public to know about them? *They are amazing animals that should be respected, not feared.*
- Largest alligator you've encountered? *13'1"*
- If you're "retired", why are you still doing this? *I have no retirement skills and a colleague and friend asked me to help.*



**Left:** Tom Murphy holding on to a 10 1/2 foot alligator about to be tagged at Spring Island, SC in 2009. This alligator had grown to 11 feet when it was captured again this spring as part of the transmitter project.

# From the President...

Probably like you, our spring has been very busy as evident from the many items in this newsletter. While all our activities are important, I want to give you a little background on one in which I became very involved. I've been a wildlife biologist for more years than I want to count (43 if you twist my arm), but in all this time I have never had the opportunity nor real desire to get up close and personal with an alligator. But, thanks to two close colleagues, Dr. Chris Marsh and Tom Murphy, that all changed this spring.

Although retired, Tom has continued his life-long study of alligators through a project with the Spring Island Trust which Dr. Marsh directs. Tom's unique work is producing very interesting results which they thought should be expanded and tested in other urban communities. After reviewing their work, I enthusiastically agreed, and we have now begun a one of a kind study to examine how alligators have adapted to and seem to thrive in urban landscapes.

Before going further, I want to thank the residents of Spring Island for supporting Tom's original work and providing funds to Nemours Wildlife Foundation to help us expand upon it. Thanks also to the people of Fripp Island, Kiawah Island, and Sea Pines who allowed us to include their properties in this study and for additional financial support for the project. The more knowledge we can generate on how alligators have adapted to living with humans, the better decisions we can make that benefit both us and alligators.

Now, the success of the project hinged on our ability to capture 30 alligators of the correct gender and size class. Neither I nor Beau Bauer, our biologist, had ever done live gator captures. Fortunately for the project and for us, Andrew Grosse, alligator biologist with SCDNR agreed to join our efforts. We all soon realized Andrew had the "the magic touch" when it came to capturing gators with a rod, reel, and large treble hook, and we should just observe and assist once he had the gator close to shore.

One of these episodes involved a 12 foot, 450+ pound gator that required about 50 minutes to subdue. Handling this huge, amazing animal literally gave me chill bumps and was an unforgettable experience. Even better was releasing him alive and well.

On another occasion a large male broke Andrew's line, much to our disappointment as it was late in the evening and we needed only one more capture to complete our goal. As Andrew relined his reel, the team found the gator hiding on the far side of the pond. He should never have given Andrew a second chance! We all went home happy with our goal met. To say Andrew was a key member of the team would be a huge understatement.

The students and staff of Nemours made their impact on this project too. Initially, Dr. Thomas Rainwater from the Baruch Institute and



**Above:** On Fripp Island, Dr. Wiggers holds down the head of an 11 1/2 foot alligator while the other team members prepare to attach the GPS transmitter.

Dr. Cathy Jachowski of Clemson University led the process of attaching the transmitters to the animals. This involved a small surgical procedure and complicated attachment protocol (thanks to Dr. Al Seagr for advising us on this part). Because they could not always participate, others had to learn the attachment process. Not a problem! Beau Bauer and our intern Randi Bowman stepped right up to the plate. They made a fantastic team and enabled us to maintain our aggressive schedule. Over the course of several weeks all our students participated, gaining invaluable experience. Somewhere along the way, we named our group “the A-team” and I will vigorously defend the validity of this title to anyone and everyone!

Working on this project and watching our staff and students perform so professionally was very rewarding to me, as was the opportunity to work with two pioneers in my profession, Tom Murphy and Phil Wilkerson of Georgetown. Phil began working with DNR back in 1962. His early work included studying alligators and sea turtles because both species’ populations were in decline. Tom’s and Phil’s work on these species is still cited in research today and they were very instrumental in the recovery of these two populations.

Interestingly, while we were capturing alligators on the Yawkey Wildlife Center we caught a female and male gator that Phil had captured and marked back in 1980. She had grown only about two inches in length in those 38 years and the male, about 11 inches. Both were considered adults back in 1980 which would put them around 30 years old then, so now they are 68+ years old.

Among the many “take homes” from all of this is the reinforcement of my belief that alligators are remarkable creatures and so well adapted to their role in nature. The A-Team is pretty remarkable too. Good Job Team!



**Left:** One of Dr. Wiggers’ recent acquaintances whom he met on Kiawah Island in May.



**Right:** Dr. Wiggers holds a gator’s mouth closed as Beau Bauer readies tape to hold it shut while the transmitter procedure takes place.

## Dr. Ernie Wiggers Honored by Clemson University

Our President/CEO, Dr. Ernie Wiggers, was honored in January with Clemson University's College of Agriculture, Forestry and Life Sciences Distinguished Service Award during the South Carolina AgriBiz & Farm Expo in Florence, SC. The award is the highest honor bestowed upon a former student by the university and is presented for outstanding service to Clemson University, success in professional or personal callings and commitment to the community. He is pictured here with Dr. Greg Yarrow of Clemson University, one of several colleagues who nominated him.



### New Graduate Students and Interns

Four students new to Nemours joined us for the spring. **Above and below** from left, intern Emily Beasley from Missouri State University, graduate students Allison Kelley and Angelina Stancampiano from Marshall University, and intern Randi Bowman from Lewis Clark State College. Emily is assisting returning graduate student Amanda Williams and Randi is assisting staff biologist Beau Bauer. Allison is continuing work on Marshall's Eastern Diamond Back Rattlesnake project while Angelina carries on the university's Southern Fox Squirrel research.



# News & Notes...



**Right:** Virginia Dukes and Allison Suber, students at **Beaufort Academy**, spent a week in March at Nemours working with our interns and graduate students. Their week began with tracking rattle snakes and ended with getting to watch the release of a rehabilitated wild bald eagle.



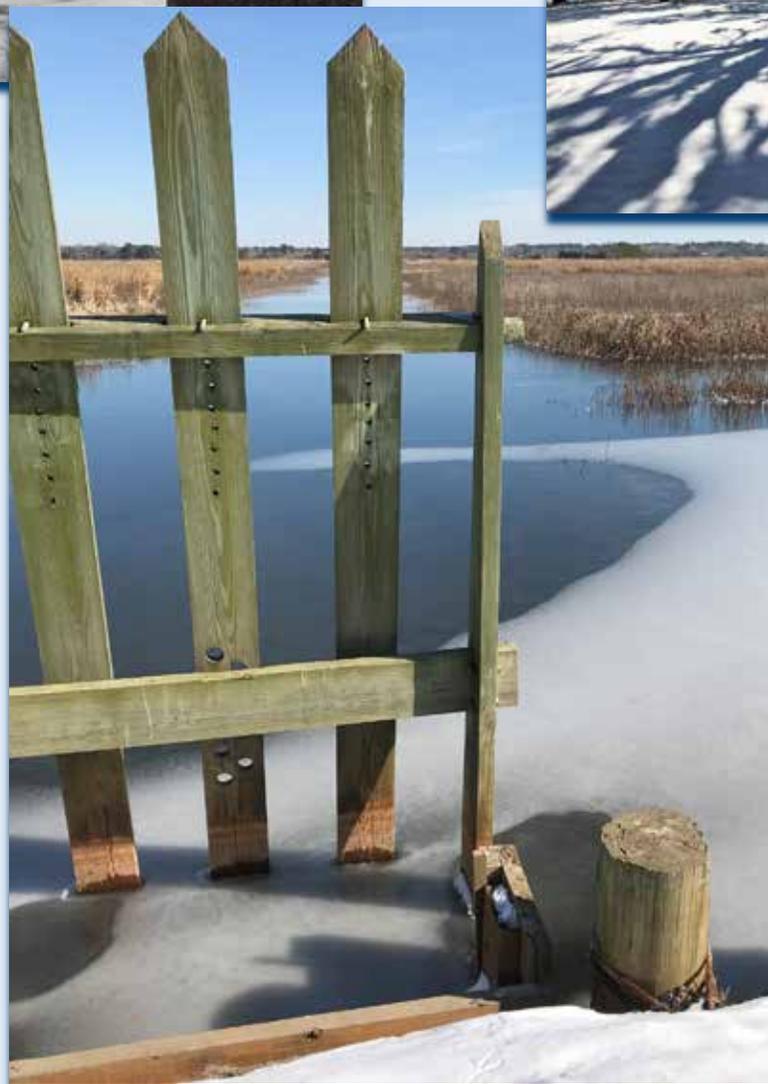
The **first days of 2018** saw the unusual occurrence of snow at Nemours!

**Above:** The foundation's headquarters just a few hours after the snow began to fall on Wednesday, January 3rd.

**Right:** Friday, January 5th, ice in the marsh on one of our impoundments.

**Upper right:** The sun shining through a pecan tree behind the foundation offices that same day.

Snow is uncommon in the Low-country, but for it to stick around for longer than a day was extraordinary!





Scenes from our **6th Annual Oyster Roast** on March 10th. **Above left:** Levi Rickenbaker, son of Nemours' Justin Rickenbaker and his wife Emily, appears to be trying to take over the vice chairmanship of the NWF Board of Directors from Mike McShane. **Top right:** Dr. Ernie Wiggers addresses those gathered to hear our graduate students' presentations. **Bottom, left to right:** NWF Board Vice Chairman Mike McShane and NWF board member Lane Morrison; Chip and Lalla Lee Campsen; Mary and Norris Laffitte. Photos by Gigi McShane.



**New faces at Nemours!** Bubba Irwin (left) and Landon Avant (right) have joined the Nemours Wildlife Foundation plantation management staff to work with Robert Kitler and Justin Rickenbaker. Bubba lives in the White Hall area and came to Nemours from the SC Department of Transportation and self employment. Born and raised in Walterboro, Landon previously worked at Lavington Plantation



A glimpse of **life on the dikes:** Cameras have been placed by Clemson graduate student Amanda Williams to gather data for her study of predators on managed tidal impoundments. Below right, a bobcat makes its way along a dike while below left an otter scampers past the camera. Amanda began her project this spring and is being assisted by Emily Beasley, an intern from Missouri State University.



**NEMOURS WILDLIFE FOUNDATION**

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