

LOWCOUNTRY CHARM ON A HIGH-TECH MISSION

After seventy-five years, the Webb Wildlife Center in Garnett is still busy establishing a legacy for cutting-edge wildlife research and spectacular outdoor recreational opportunities.

by Joey Frazier

DNR STAFF



JOEY FRAZIER

The Belmont family built this plantation-style hunting lodge (above) in the late 1890s. (Opposite) These horsemen are following the dogs during a horseback bird dog field trial. Many such competitions were once held at Belmont, now the James W. Webb Wildlife Center.

Seventy-five years ago, in 1941, the South Carolina Wildlife Resources Department purchased nearly six thousand acres then known as Belmont Plantation in Hampton County. The purchase was made with federal funds provided through the 1937 Wildlife Restoration Act, commonly referred to as the Pittman-Robertson Act. Although it would be many years before the state wildlife department would offer a formal program featuring public hunting or fishing opportunities, that was, at least in part, the vision when this property was acquired.

Of course 1941 was back in the good old days when hunting opportunities were not yet in short supply. Folks serious about outdoor pursuits had free, or at least inexpensive, access to vast acres for hunting or fishing and probably could not imagine a time when those opportunities might not exist. Fortunately for the citizens of South Carolina, and even more importantly for the Palmetto State's game and non-game species, the agency had the foresight and determination to make responsible decisions, including goals set firmly in the hope of a better future. Their's was a unique viewpoint, one where the good old days might not be in the past, but waiting patiently in the future.

When you look down the lane leading to the lodge at the James W. Webb Wildlife Center, you feel like you are about to go back in time, back to those storied days

from hunting literature, and in a way you are. But don't be misled by the moss hanging in the trees, this place has become a premiere wildlife research destination, according to S.C. Department of Natural Resources Regional Wildlife Biologist Dean Harrigal. However, it continues to offer Lowcountry charm in the unique and popular plantation-style deer hunts offered to the public through the agency's lottery draw hunt program, and excellent wild turkey, small game, furbearer and waterfowl hunting are available on an open, sign-in basis. The area also provides numerous natural resource programs, camps, hiking trails and fishing ponds that make the Webb Center a special place for many folks around the state.

DNR technician April Atkinson loves her job, and she likes to share her knowledge of the property with folks who visit the Webb Center. Originally a king's grant to the Tison family, this property was farmed for more than one hundred years, according to Atkinson. Later the Belmont family of horse racing fame bought the land from plantation broker John King Garnett. They built the current lodge in the 1890s and named the property Belmont Plantation.

"So this property is unique in a lot of ways," Atkinson says, "but the best thing is that it's been protected for seventy-five years."

During that time, the Webb Wildlife Center has provided public hunting and recreational opportunities, as well as



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(Above left and inset) The avenue of live oaks lining the entrance to the Webb Center reminds all who come here of the historical legacy of this beautiful property. (Center) Graduate student and later Webb Center property manager Tom Swaynham and District Wildlife Biologist Lewis Rogers prepare a rocket to net a white-tailed deer for research in the mid 1980s.

(Inset) Wildlife biologist Jay Cantrell, current Webb Center property manager, holds a wild turkey that has been captured, banded and fitted with a GPS transmitter as part of an ongoing research project with Louisiana State University. Many DNR wildlife biologists, such as Tom Swaynham (left) and current Deputy Director of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Emily Cope, got much of their hands-on training at Webb.

being an important research property and demonstration facility. There have been many research projects during the last seventy-five years, focused on a variety of species that includes Eastern diamondback rattlesnakes, bobwhite quail, white-tailed deer and red-cockaded woodpeckers. Results from these projects have reached beyond the boundaries of the Webb Center and have had positive impacts on wildlife management all across the range of these species.

Now retired wildlife biologist Lewis Rogers came to the Webb Center in 1969.

“It was still Belmont, then,” Rogers says. “There was some pubic deer hunting and dove hunting, but primarily I worked with private land owners providing technical assistance.”

Rogers remembers the 1980s as a time when bobwhite quail populations on the property, and around the Southeast, declined sharply.

“It’s still a mystery,” he says. “We’re not really sure what happened, but we do know that loss of habitat was a big part of it.”

Today, Webb Center staff is working in partnership with Louisiana State University on a very significant three-year, multi-faceted wild turkey project.

“About two years ago we started working with LSU on a wild turkey research project,” says Jay Cantrell, Webb Wildlife Center biologist and property manager. “This project is looking at a host of things, but we are focused on hen nesting ecology.”

Cantrell explains how the study could give biologists valuable insight into where turkeys nest, when they nest,

when hens begin incubating nests and how many successfully hatch their eggs, and where they raise broods.

“What we are seeing here in South Carolina and around the Southeast is a long but steady decline in turkey numbers,” Cantrell says. “We are trying to find out why. Why are the numbers going down, and is there anything we can do about it?”

Although many theories exist about what is causing this decline in turkey populations, the bottom line is that it’s still a mystery. There could be one factor — or more likely a combination of factors — contributing to shrinking numbers of this popular game bird. Although some of the possible reasons may be habitat-related, with changing forestry and agricultural practices and development, predators, timing of hunting seasons or some other unknown environmental factors, Cantrell believes the decline may be caused by density within the turkey population.

“We restocked turkeys back in the 60s, 70s and 80s,” Cantrell says. “When turkeys are in a new area with good habitat, their reproduction rates are high as populations expand and fill the available habitat. In South Carolina, most of that habitat has been occupied and they just might be leveling off at a new normal.”

Researchers at the Webb Center are trapping turkeys and fitting them with radio and GPS transmitters to track the birds and download the data to map their movements and see the types of habitats turkeys use at different times of the year, especially during the nesting season. Researchers are also learning a lot about turkey mortality.

“Of the sixty birds we trapped this year and thirty last year, some died from natural causes,” Cantrell says. “Some

others were killed during hunting seasons and some of the transmitters failed, but of the forty-five we tracked this year, we collected over 155,000 individual location points, so there is a lot of data to look at and analyze.”

Besides tracking turkey movements, the program also is recording turkey gobbling with remote recorders located around the property to see how peak gobbling corresponds to breeding and nesting activity. There is also a genetic component to the project where researchers get DNA from feathers of trapped and harvested birds and eggshells of monitored, hatched nests to establish a lineage map of breeding trends.

Researchers also are tracking hunters. Turkey hunters at Webb Center can voluntarily participate by carrying a remote GPS logging device in their pocket during a hunt, according to Cantrell. The device plots hunter movements, allowing researchers to later map hunter locations and see how that overlaps with turkey movements.

“It gives us insight about areas we might open up or roads we may want to close to get hunters to the places the birds are using. It’s been very popular with our hunters,” Cantrell says. “So this [project] has gone in many directions, and it will be interesting to see where else it goes from here.”

Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division Deputy Director Emily Cope worked at Webb Center not long after she came to the agency and has spent a great deal of her tenure involved in land acquisitions for the department.

“I’ve actually been involved in protecting more than

80,000 acres that have since been put into our Wildlife Management Area program,” Cope says. “We [the DNR] have really made our mark across the state protecting lands, not only for the greater good of conservation, but also to allow our constituents and visitors to South Carolina a great place to go and enjoy the outdoors, and Webb Center set the standard for what our WMAs could and should be.”

During the decades since Webb Center was acquired, the DNR’s WMA program has evolved to reflect changes in use. Although originally these lands were protected and managed almost exclusively for hunters and anglers, today’s users are much more diverse, according to Cope. Hunting is still at the core, but the management on WMA lands benefits numerous species, including nongame species.

DNR Regional Biologist Tom Swaynham managed the Webb Center property in the mid to late 1990s. He remembers coming to a place with a sound management plan already established and a solid reputation as a research facility that was also very popular with hunters.

“We did red-cockaded woodpecker research, and we even had a radio telemetry study on rattlesnakes at Webb Center back then,” Swaynham says. “Our WMAs are some of the most special places in South Carolina, and I would encourage people to get out and see them.”

“I am especially excited that the DNR is celebrating seventy-five years of protecting lands and providing public recreation opportunities through our Wildlife Management Area program,” says Cope. “Webb Center was our very first property, and I often wonder if the staff back in 1941 really thought about the legacy they were establishing and how we would build on it today.” 🦋