



MOBILE REGISTER

Birding group seeks island acreage

09/15/03

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DAUPHIN ISLAND -- Seen through the shiny eyes of a bright yellow prothonotary warbler, tired from its 600-mile journey over the Gulf of Mexico from the Yucatan Peninsula, this island means eating, nesting, resting and making other little prothonotary warblers.

Prothonotary warblers nest only in wet, marshy forests. If there were no marshes on Dauphin Island, these gray-winged, white-bellied warblers would probably try to fly on, 50 miles northward to the Mobile-Tensaw Delta. But along the way, many of them would simply drop out of the sky and die of starvation and exhaustion, said John Porter, president of Dauphin Island Sanctuaries Inc.

This year, just as millions of migratory birds once again begin their fall flight from the Yucatan to lower Alabama, Porter's conservation group is launching an ambitious, \$4 million effort to protect the remaining marshes and scrub forests that those birds need.

"They have stopped here for millennia. Many of them couldn't adapt," Porter said. "Their numbers are declining, and that is exactly how it's happening. The marshes where they eat and breed are disappearing. They die looking for a lost home."

Dauphin Island Sanctuaries is looking to acquire up 35 acres of the island's remaining bird habitat, scattered in chunks along the island's east end.

All together, the land is worth an estimated \$3 million, and the group wants to own it all by 2006. On top of that, the group aims to raise \$1 million to provide long-term maintenance for the land.

"It's quite an undertaking. It's much larger than anything we've done before. But it's absolutely necessary," said Porter.

Lost to development:

A half century of water-draining house-and-road construction has eaten away the undisturbed green spaces on this barrier island. The warbler and the millions of other migrating birds now find fewer trees and stumps to nest in, fewer bugs to eat, fewer pools of water to bathe in.

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The human population of Dauphin Island has doubled in the past two decades, with more than 500 new houses built in the past 10 years, said Jimmy Reaves, the town's building inspector. The island had 650 residents in 1983. Census Bureau figures in 2000 put the population at 1,371.

"We have to protect these areas, and we have to do it now, before development on the island swallows them up," Porter said. "When the habitat is gone, the birds will be gone."

The group has given each area a name. The "Tupelo Gum Swamp" is an 11-acre swath of wetlands hidden between several dead-end roads south of Bienville Boulevard. The "Steiner Property" is a parcel that was left largely untouched because the Steiner family chose not to develop it during the island's boom of the 1950s. The land isn't on the books of the island's Property Owners Association.

Porter's group was founded as the Friends of Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuary in 1992 to take over maintenance of the Audubon Bird Sanctuary's land after the Audubon Society could no longer afford it. The sanctuary was handed to the island's Park and Beach Board.

Three years ago, the Park and Beach Board decided to assume maintenance of the sanctuary, and the conservation group turned its attention to raising funds to buy more birding land.

Since then, the group has led multiple campaigns, raising about \$400,000 to obtain more than a dozen lots totaling five acres, Porter said.

Its name was changed two months ago to Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuaries as the group widened its focus well beyond the 160-acre Audubon sanctuary, Porter said.

Acquisition strategies:

The group will try to attain as much of the 35 acres as possible through donations and conservation easements, Porter said. Dozens of individuals and a few real estate companies own the acreage, he said.

"A conservation easement is a great way for both the property owner and the conservation group to get their way," said Rick Courtney, a Mobile lawyer who is serving as the group's attorney.

A conservation easement is really just a land use covenant reached by the property owner and a conservation group, he said. The property owner keeps the deed, but agrees to limit future development. In turn, the owner can write off the lost value of his property on his taxes.

An easement is different from an outright donation in that the owner can retain some use of the property, he said. "He can put in the agreement that he can use a certain part of it, maybe build a small house or building there," Courtney said.

Land donations are fully tax deductible, he said.

"A lot of house owners on the island bought the lot next to them just to keep anyone else from building there," Courtney said. "If they give the lot to this group, no one will ever build there, and the owner can stop paying taxes on it year after year."

Wetland rules apply:

And many of these wetland lots would be difficult to develop because of the legal red tape involved, Porter said.

Because Dauphin Island falls within the federally designated 100-year flood plain, anyone seeking

to build on a lot containing more than one-tenth of an acre of wetlands must get a special federal permit, said Jan Shelby, spokeswoman for the Mobile office of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Of course, that also means that any lot containing less than one-tenth of an acre of wetlands could be developed without a permit. "That's land we need to identify and protect as quickly as possible," said Roberta Swann, a Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuaries board member.

Birdwatching is an important part of the tourism industry on the island, Mayor Jeff Collier said. The island draws bird fans year-around, and is the scene of birdwatcher conventions each spring and fall, he said.

"We don't know any dollar amounts and we haven't had any studies done, but we know our island is regarded as one of the best birding sites in the country," Collier said. "That means money for our rentals, our retail shops and our restaurants."

Collier said he supports the efforts of Dauphin Island Bird Sanctuaries. "The natural resources they are trying to protect are the island's greatest assets," he said.

Indeed, this year the town made its own wetlands grab -- it paid \$500,000 for a 28-acre plot across from the Audubon Bird Sanctuary. The town's loan was later repaid by the state with coastal-assistance money provided through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The town hopes to put a parking lot and convenience store on 3 upland acres on the plot and covert the rest into a nature park. The development will have to wait until the nation's economy and the town's revenue come out of a slump, Collier said.

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