

Katie Brasted

Executive Director, Woodlands Conservancy

When Katie Brasted first moved to the Lower Coast of Algiers, she could step out of her home and spot deer, egrets and indigo buntings. A lot of local wildlife called the sparsely developed area home. "It was a magical place," said Brasted.

However, Brasted soon learned that the entire area was set to be developed—not just the Orleans Parish side, but the entire peninsula. Brasted realized a lot of other people also cared about preserving local greenspace and forested areas, which led to the development of Woodlands Conservancy in 2001.

After consulting with a friend in city planning, Brasted got the area included in a master plan for recreation and open space. In 2012, they acquired five properties adjacent to English Turn totaling 190 acres, now called the Delacroix Preserve.

However, the nearby 650-acres, managed as a public park since 2004, was not protected from development. In 2015, Brasted read in the newspaper that prop-

erty containing the Woodlands Trail and Park was potentially getting developed into a baseball complex. The Woodlands Conservancy team helped demonstrate that the community cared about this greenspace. They acquired the property in January 2022, allowing the Woodlands Conservancy team to protect this land in perpetuity.

This protection came at a crucial time. "Experts tell us we're going to be the largest forested landmass between New Orleans and the open Gulf in about 30 years or so," said Brasted.

On the Belle Chasse property, 11 miles of free trails are open to the public seven days a week. They meander among a spillbank and lead to a group of WWII Ammunition Magazines. When exploring the trail, keep an eye out for local wildlife such as white-tailed deer, alligators, rabbits, armadillos, bats and plenty of bird species.

Lastly, the pandemic resulted in a silver lining for the conservancy, because it caused a massive

increase in awareness of these trails. Visitors surged by 400 percent during 2020, with plenty of people taking the opportunity to get out and enjoy this natural area. Even in the past two years, the number of visitors remains above pre-pandemic numbers.

The importance of the protected forested wetland area is difficult to overstate. For starters, it's an essential space for wildlife such as migratory birds. Imagery from the wetlands shows over 4,400 birds leaving during migration. It's a crucial stopover site for birds migrating across the gulf, essentially the first "gas station" with plenty of trees where they can fuel up before or after their massive journey. Involved in bird banding since 2013, the Woodlands Conservancy team also helps monitor these populations.

Next, the preserved space acts as a natural sponge to absorb stormwater. As more areas develop, water flows inward. The preserved wetland areas help take in that water and miti-

gate some flooding issues. In this case, the Conservancy's 840 acres can absorb a significant amount of stormwater.

In addition, the land helps provide storm protection for the nearby community. Hurricanes Katrina, Ida and Zeta produced less wind damage than expected in the surrounding neighborhoods. The forests help buffer some of the wind and protect them.

Lastly, protecting large expanses of land can also support a number of wildlife species. Although pocket parks are helpful, when land gets broken into little chunks, more species can drop out. These large pieces of land can sustain more wildlife overall.

Visit the Woodlands Conservancy website to learn more about ongoing volunteer activities, as well as shop for gifts that help support the organization. Volunteers help maintain the restoration work, do plantings on a yearly basis, and generally support the organization's efforts.

— *By Lindsay Mack*

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Woodlands Conservancy also needs more support when opportunities arise to acquire land. When lots can be added to lands that are already protected, or otherwise provide ecologically significant space to the community, then the team is eager to acquire them. More support helps take care of these opportunities, some of which are only available for short periods of time.

They are also interested in raising awareness about the availability of land trusts. Property owners who have a home or farmland can work with a land trust to protect that area from future development. In some cases, this may provide tax breaks, and planned giving arrangements can include land trusts as well. If this is of interest, contact the Woodlands Conservancy team to learn more.

Spread the word about the Woodlands Conservancy to friends and family, and drop by to visit the trails and WWII relics. As more areas continue to grow and develop, it's crucial to recognize the role of these protected natural spaces.

