



Louisiana's Natural Areas Registry

**STORY BY
PATTI FAULKNER**

**PHOTOS BY
PATTI FAULKNER
& CHRIS REID**

Rare, endangered and exotic plants and animals are often perceived as being found only in far distant places—places only visited or experienced in books, by television or maybe on vacations. But a closer look reveals many unique and threatened species right here in our home state. Louisiana's natural heritage lies within the beauty and diversity of its swamps, prairies, plains, forests and waterways. These habitats harbor a multitude of native and unusual plants and animals with intriguing names such as Louisiana blue star, Southern lady's-slipper, long-sepaled false dragon-head, parrot pitcherplant, gopher tortoise, Louisiana pearlshell mussel and Red-cockaded Woodpecker. This first of a four-part series on the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries' Natural Heritage Program explores the program's role in protecting and preserving these natural communities and their uncommon inhabitants.

All of us who love the outdoors have our favorite places to hike, hunt, bird watch or just commune with nature. Be it the piney woods, hills and ravines of the Felicianas, riverine forests, bottomlands and swamps, live oak cheniers or one of the many other diverse habitats found in Louisiana, we have a wide variety of natural communities in our state. In fact, there are currently 66 different types tracked by the Louisiana Natural Heritage Program (LNHP). By definition, natural communities are composed of groups of plant and animal species that regularly or often occur in association with each other in certain landscapes. Nature is seldom divided into discrete units; rather, it is characteristically composed of a continuous mosaic of natural communities.

Pressures from development, conversion of natural areas to other uses, wetland losses and urbanization have significantly reduced and fragmented the natural areas still remaining in our state, resulting in decreased habitat for Louisiana's native wildlife and spaces for its citizens to enjoy the outdoors. Today, only a small fraction of our natural places remain in their original condition, and many plant and animal species are now rare or endangered. Louisiana's natural heritage needs man's help to ensure its continued survival.

Traditionally, the primary approach to conservation of natural areas has been government acquisition and management in places such as state parks, wildlife management areas or national parks and forests. However, the extent of these conservation areas is small when compared with the amount of native wildlife habitat encompassed by private lands. According to the Louisiana Forestry Association, 48 percent of Louisiana (approximately 13.8 million acres) is in forests. Of that total acreage, 62 percent is owned by non-industrial private landowners, 29 percent is managed by timber industry, while only 9 percent of forestland is owned by the public in state and federal lands. Similar numbers exist for non-forested lands. Consequently, some of the most suitable wildlife habitat is found on private parcels, and because of this fact, conservation efforts must include these private lands. For this purpose, the Louisiana Natural Areas Registry was created.

In 1987, the registry was created by an act of the Louisiana Legislature. It is managed by the Louisiana Natural Heritage

Program within the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. The registry is designed to honor and recognize owners of outstanding natural areas for their commitment to the protection of Louisiana's natural heritage. To date there are 59 landowners with their properties in the Louisiana Natural Areas Registry. The registries are located in 23 of 64 parishes and account for more than 33,516 acres under conservation.

So, just how does the registry work? The Louisiana Natural Heritage Program manages a database of information on rare, threatened and endangered species and natural communities in our state. From information in this database and use of topographic maps and aerial photos, special sites are identified within Louisiana that have potential for providing important habitat for some of Louisiana's rare species. A Natural Areas Registry representative contacts landowners of these areas to discuss the special plants, animals or natural communities that occur on their properties. This first step of informing owners about the importance of their property has a tremendous impact. Through education, the program greatly reduces the chance that significant natural areas of our state might be inadvertently destroyed. The registry program is completely voluntary and registration of a site is only publicized at the owner's request or approval. The registration agreement provides no rights of public access and exact location of properties is never published.

**Opposite page:
Forested Seep
where the globally
rare *Trillium
texanum* (below)
can be found.**



To qualify for the Natural Areas Registry, a property must contain at least one of the following natural values:

- Habitat for native plants or animals with rare or declining populations in Louisiana, such as the Forested Seep and the globally rare plant, *Trillium texanum*, that exists under this forest canopy.
- Plant communities characteristic of the native vegetation of Louisiana such as the live oak natural levee forest.
- Outstanding natural features such as old growth forests or wetlands.

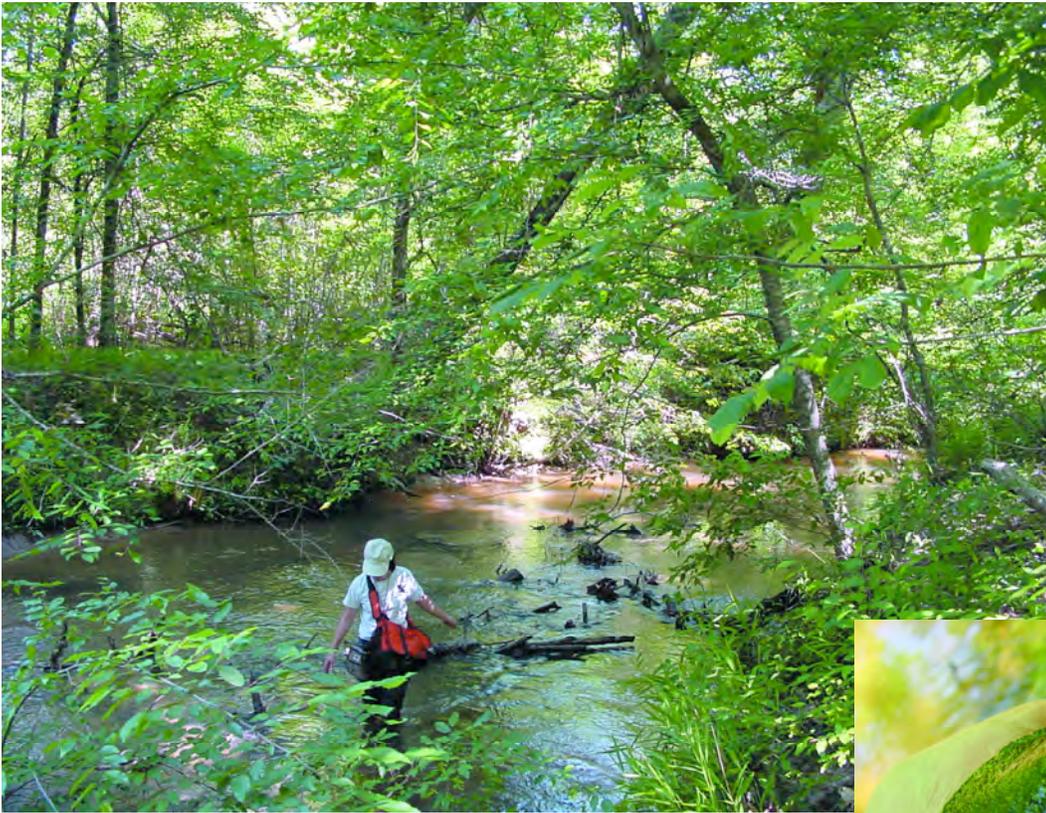
When a landowner decides to register his or her property with the Natural Areas Registry Program, a program representative draws up a Registry Agreement specific to that particular property. The agreement names the landowner and describes the property, natural habitat and any rare plants or animals found there. By signing the document, the owner agrees to protect the area and its unique species and habitats to the best of his or her abilities, to notify the program of any threats to the area or the plants and animals within and to notify the program of any intent to sell or transfer ownership of the area. The agreement is not

legally binding, does not subject the property to any additional legal regulations and involves no payment or receipt of funds. To honor this special commitment to protect Louisiana's natural areas, the property owner receives a framed certificate signed by the LNHP Coordinator, LDWF Secretary and the Governor of Louisiana, bearing the owner's name and selected name of the registered area.

Upon entering the registry program, the Natural Heritage Program will work with landowners to provide help and guidance for appropriate management of their unique natural areas. LNHP will develop (free of charge) a management plan specific to the special habitat on the registered area to act as a guide for proper maintenance of the site. The Heritage Program can also provide a listing and guidance on state, federal and private conservation programs and options. Some of these conservation programs provide cost share funds to defray a landowner's expenses for activities such as prescribed burning and invasive species control. Also available are the options of an annual ecological check-up on the health of the plants, animals and habitat of concern on the property and consultation on how best to protect the area should a transfer of ownership or other

Calapogon multifloris on longleaf pine savannah at Lake Ramsey.





An LDWF Natural Heritage employee looks for mussels in Castor Creek. Below, a Louisiana pearlshell mussel.



change become necessary. Participating landowners receive a periodic mailing of the Natural Areas Newsletter, published quarterly, which contains information such as updates to the registry, new conservation programs and information on Louisiana's natural communities and rare species. Registry participants also have the satisfaction of joining the other select Louisiana landowners in this voluntary program to protect natural diversity, benefiting both present and future generations for our state and nation.

LNHP believes a knowledgeable and active citizenry is key to protecting our nat-

ural environment. The people of Louisiana are the guardians of their own natural heritage. Support of all Louisiana citizens is needed to ensure that our outstanding natural areas are preserved for future generations to enjoy.

Patti Faulkner is a Louisiana Natural Heritage Program ecologist.

The Louisiana Natural Heritage Program (LNHP) was founded in 1984 through a partnership with the state of Louisiana and the Nature Conservancy. The LNHP is part of the Natural Heritage Network, known as NatureSero, whose goal is to gather, organize and distribute standardized, detailed information on the biological diversity across all 50 U.S. States, Canada, Mexico and parts of Latin America.