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# Legacy of PRESERVATION

BY LAURA ALBRITTON · PHOTOS BY JERRY TURNER

*Marta Jones Turner visits with a group of school children at Gentian Creek Preserve.*



*Marta Jones Turner and Jerry M. Turner recognized that, for young learners, nothing can take the place of experience in the field.*



Top: Reena Coppola, program director for Gentian Creek, leads a group of students.

Despite South Georgia's remarkable wildlife and terrain, some schoolchildren never encounter our region's flora and fauna outside of a classroom. The diverse plant and animal species remain accessible only through textbooks—or a computer. One Thomas County couple decided that this needed to change. Marta Jones Turner and Jerry M. Turner recognized that, for young learners, nothing can take the place of experience in the field.

"Developing a respect and appreciation for the natural world begins with what's within our reach in our backyards, the woods' edge, the ponds you fish in, trails you walk on," shares Marta. "It's where you are that you can make the most difference." With that in mind, the Turners have established an invaluable new institution: the Gentian Creek Preserve.

Since this nature preserve and educational facility launched in October, more than 700 students from Thomas County schools have participated in structured programs led by Gentian Creek Preserve staff. During the current school year, a total of 1,200 third, fifth, and seventh graders will have the opportunity to be "naturalists for a day."

A typical schedule includes an introduction at the Welcome Circle, watching a video about Gentian Creek critters, a knowledge pre-test, exploration of exhibits, microscope studies in the lab, an avian ecology lesson, a hike to observe eagles nesting, lunch, a botany or herpetology excursion on the trails, and a post-test. These experiences are inspiring a new generation to care for Georgia's ecosystems.

"From the time we arrived until the time we left, the students were engrossed in their surroundings," says Lynette Fykes, a teacher at Cross Creek Elementary.

Another teacher, Kendall Roach, notes, "This trip was very special because it afforded students an opportunity to learn from real

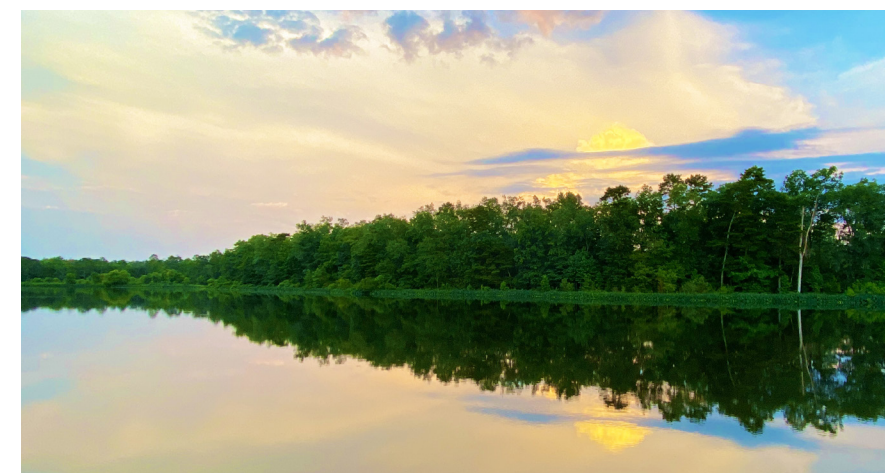
*JERRY TURNER GETS INCREDIBLE NATURE PHOTOS AND VIDEOS ON THE PROPERTY HE AND HIS WIFE HAVE NURTURED FOR YEARS.*

scientists and environmentalists, to get them outside and get their hands dirty with the land and species our community has to offer. It sparked an interest for many of my students that they didn't realize they possessed—a love for nature and scientific exploration."

All this is thanks to the pioneering vision of the Turners. "Creating this program and seeing it come to life has been the most interesting and rewarding work of my life—and the most meaningful by far. I know Jerry feels the same," Marta says.

Yet, when the Turners originally acquired 212 acres of diverse habitat near Thomasville, they had different intentions. With the purchase of the property in 2014, Jerry, a biologist, former educator, and talented professional nature photographer, had found a wonderland, the ultimate subject for his art. Determined to be good stewards, the Turners started converting former pastures to native plant meadows and removing invasive species throughout the property.

Six years later, they acquired an adjacent 43 acres with an old hardwood and pine forest and wetlands. After Marta, a former executive vice president at Flowers Foods,





retired from a distinguished, 40-year corporate career, the Turners worked with Tall Timbers to place Gentian Creek in a conservation easement, ensuring the acreage remains undeveloped in perpetuity.

The couple also planned on leaving a legacy in their will so that an education center could eventually be established on the property. That was when their investment advisor, John Lentz, threw them a curveball. "Why wait?" he asked.

Rather than earmark funds for the distant future, Lentz urged them to seize the day. "Create the educational program," he proposed. "Shape it according to your vision. Have the pleasure of seeing the program up and running." The Turners were intrigued. After some soul searching, they set about constructing a world-class nature facility to provide a unique educational opportunity for young people. Thinking back on what their advisor suggested, Marta says it was "the best question I was ever asked."

With the benefit of Jerry's expertise as a biologist and photographer, Marta shaped a strategy for their outdoor education program. Part of their mission was to transform the

property's old pony barn into an inviting, multi-purpose facility, with exhibits, laboratories, and classrooms. Extensive work on the property's trails was needed, including the creation of bridges and improved drainage.

After forming the Gentian Creek Preserve Foundation, the Turners negotiated an agreement to work with Thomas County schools and gathered top-notch talent to turn their ambitions into a reality. Derek Duvenhage served as general contractor for the barn and trail renovation; Martin Young of Young Designs, John LoCastro of Pentathagwyn Studios, and Ian Quinton of International Design & Display helped envision

## *The Turners got solid advice from their financial advisor.*

possibilities and pull together a cadre of designers, artists, and exhibit fabricators to create the nature center. Haile McCollum of Fontaine Maury guided brand development and created a social media plan. After 18 months of research, planning, and building, the exhibits were installed and social media platforms launched in September 2022.

During this process, the Turners brought on teacher Reena Coppola to conduct a 12-month survey of Gentian Creek Preserve. Coppola holds a master's degree in biology and has





*GETTING INTO THE WEEDS*

*Reena Coppola, program director for Gentian Creek, has played a vital role by establishing program units, conducting research, mapping the trail system, collaborating with illustrators to design custom murals, creating program content, and leading exploratory excursions and laboratory studies for students.*



experience with the Florida Institute of Oceanography and several other institutions.

“Since we first envisioned the program,” Marta stated, “Reena has played a vital role—establishing program units, conducting research, mapping the trail system, collaborating with illustrators to design custom murals, creating program content, and leading exploratory excursions and laboratory studies for students.”

One tool Coppola developed is “quick keys,” photographic guides to help children learn to identify microscopic organisms, plants, birds, amphibians, and other life. Now the full-time program director, Coppola oversees the outdoor education studies, which include herpetology, entomology, botany, aquatic ecology, and avian ecology. One young fan recently told her mother, “I want to be the apprentice to Mrs. Coppola. And I’m going to need a microscope for Christmas!”

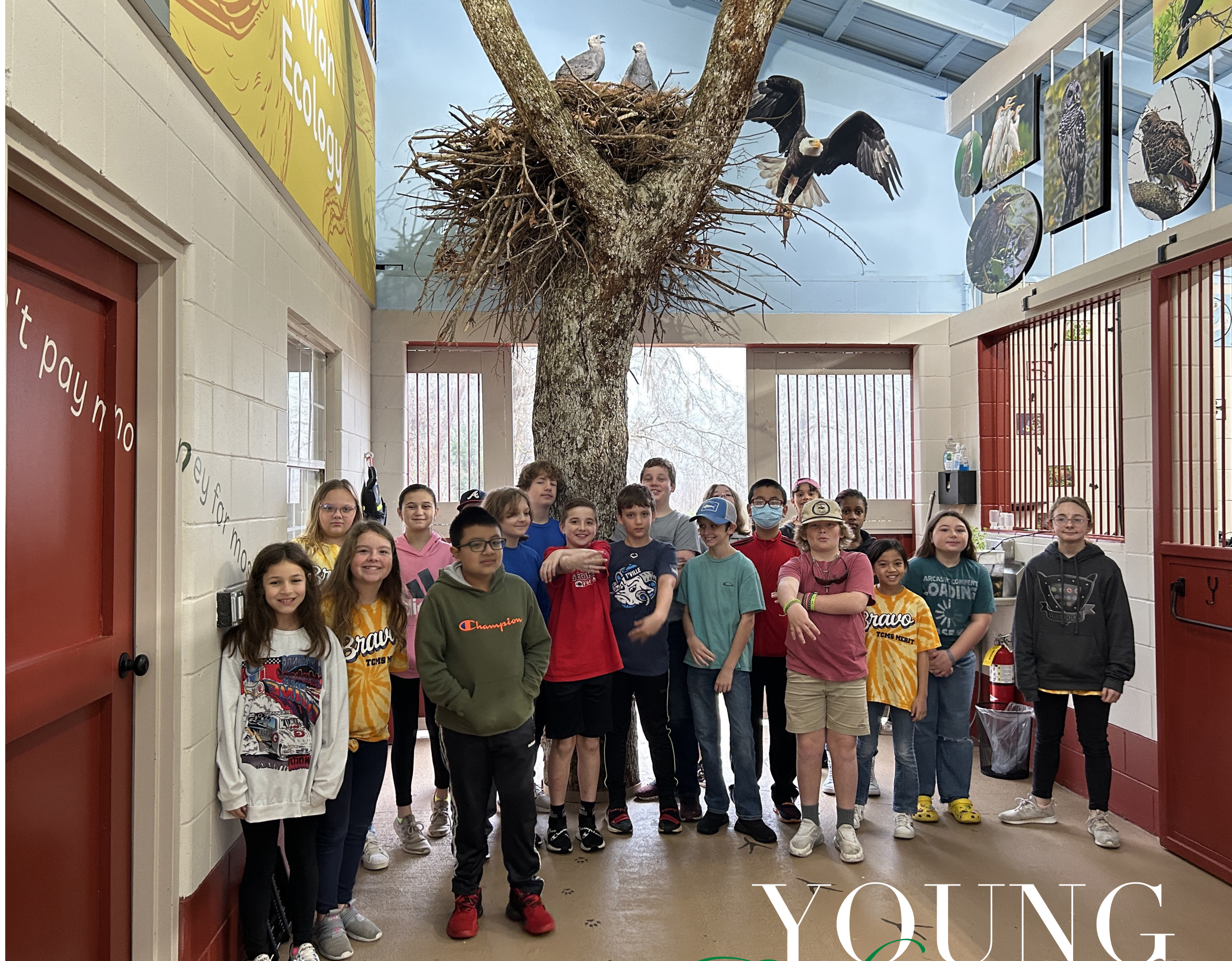
In the nature center, everything from the color scheme to the wall murals has been designed to welcome and engage children. While the facility is undeniably impressive, the program’s star attraction—

*Continued, p.38*



# NATURE

Since this nature preserve and educational facility launched in October, more than 700 students from Thomas County schools have participated in structured programs there.



# YOUNG Explorers



## NATURE

and the most important classroom of all—is on the other side of the walls.

All materials for units of study and exhibits at the barn are based on animals and plants found at Gentian Creek Preserve. This lends an immediacy to the learning process, turning the subject matter from theoretical to experiential. It's a teaching method that pays dividends. When children are given a post-test at the end of the day, their retention of knowledge is striking.

Founding this outdoor education program has allowed the Turners to use Jerry's photographs and videos for the very purpose he makes them—to connect people to the natural world and help them understand nature's life-supporting processes. "We also hope that his work helps create an appreciation of the link between all living things," Marta adds.

Jerry's involvement ensures that the program offers a sympathetic fusion of science and art, inspiring not only future biologists but also photographers and videographers. Especially captivating are Jerry's videos, recorded with trail cameras positioned throughout the preserve, which intimately capture the activities of beavers, bobcats, herons, and other animals.

The Turners have been delighted by the overall response. Several parents expressed gratitude for the way Jerry and Marta are linking together conservation, philanthropy, and education.

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# NATURE

"Thomas County Schools are so fortunate to be partnered with the owners and staff of Gentian Creek, who put their heart into igniting a desire for our students to examine, explore and appreciate the natural habitats of Thomas County," says Roach. The most enthusiastic endorsement comes from children themselves, who want to know, at the end of their visits, "When can we come back?" **SGL**

*For more on Gentian Creek Preserve, visit [gentiancreek.com](http://gentiancreek.com), or to view more than 300 nature videos, visit [linktr.ee/gentiancreek](https://linktr.ee/gentiancreek).*

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