



# The Midlands Naturalist

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photo: Ed Siggelko near Congaree Creek

### Message from our MMNA Chair

I don't know what the groundhog predicted a few weeks ago, but with this cold and rain, it definitely is winter. Winter is great as the bare trees allow me to see more birds, even if I am just sitting in my home office and watching my feeder.

The phrase "pecking order" is truly based on the birds. I have been seeing a number of species at my feeder, with a clear dominance hierarchy. At the top are the brown-headed cowbirds. My feeder is small, and I'm usually thrilled to see four birds feeding at once, but those cowbirds scuffle and snatch food while surrounded by six others!

Size carries weight with who gets the food first, so if the cowbirds are not around, the cardinals rule. Next down the ranks are titmice, then finches. But size isn't everything. Lately there has been a small flock of pine siskins. They are smaller than my finches, but will terrorize any bird at the feeder, even each other. They hold their wings from their bodies, just slightly or fully extended. They remind me of people surreptitiously claiming the armrest at a crowded theatre... "Mine!"

Chickadees squeeze in but don't feed in place. Find a good seed, then follow the titmice into the branches to chip at that seed hull. It's a good strategy; fighting takes so much energy. Occasionally a brown-headed nuthatch will appear, but they are undercover... literally. They hang upside down until the other birds are distracted, then flip upright and snatch a peanut. In the long run, everyone gets to eat, even the beleaguered finches, who wait patiently for the interlopers to leave.

The world isn't always fair. There will always be tussles, differences in outlooks, fights over resources. However, it usually works out in the end. Now, let's wish the rain away.

Lee





# We'll be back!

Here are the notes from the most recent MMNA Steering Committee Meeting held last November.

photo: Congaree Land Trust

- **Current officers** will be carried over for the year 2021 as there is little activity/meetings. Elections for new officers will be held in November of 2021.
- **Dues:** 2020 dues will be rolled into 2021, so no new dues will be required this year.
- **Quarterly meetings:** The 1st quarter 2021 meeting has been cancelled. The May 2021 meeting will be assessed as the Covid vaccine rolls out and the virus threat is reduced.
- **Quarterly newsletter** will continue to be published and will essentially take the place of the quarterly meetings. Publish date will be the second month of the quarter until further notice.
- **Advanced training:** Steering team will work on lining up some leaders for small group outings - starting March of 2021 when the weather starts warming up and there is activity to observe. Also discussed putting together a summary of upcoming webinars (with links) from various organizations that have to do with nature in SC and our immediate area (NC, GA) and emailing to members on a regular basis. Webinars count as advanced training hours.
- **Jewels for nametags:** options for members to get jewels installed in nametags were discussed and will be coordinated with Kathy (our friendly "jeweler"). These include mailing to our PO Box and have Kathy install and mail back, or possibly having an outdoor "Jewel Day" where members can bring their nametags.

## Midlands Master Naturalist Association

<b>Lee Morris</b>	Chair
<b>Ed Siggelko</b>	Vice-Chair
<b>Alice Clark</b>	Recorder
<b>Ellen Blundy</b>	Treasurer
<b>Anne Palyok</b>	Activities Committee Co-Chair
<b>Dee Dee Williams</b>	Activities Committee Co-Chair
<b>Sara Green - SCWF</b>	Advisor
<b>David Groh</b>	Newsletter Editor

We welcome your submissions to this newsletter!  
Send your: photos, trip/hike reports, citizen science reports, book or website reviews, or anything you think will interest your fellow naturalists to:

[mmna.newsletter@gmail.com](mailto:mmna.newsletter@gmail.com)

### Our Website:

<http://www.midlandsmasternaturalist.org>



## mark your Calendar

- ☑ Quarterly Meetings:  
See notes above.
- ☑ Steering Committee Meetings:  
Last held on Nov. 7; next one TBD  
See notes above.
- ☑ FrogWatch Training  
Saturday, February 27<sup>th</sup>, 3 pm to 5pm  
See details on p. 4
- ☑ Palmetto Trail 21 Hike Challenge  
Deadline to register: February 26th  
See details on p. 14

## South Carolina Wildlife Federation Update

by Sara Green, Executive Director

Greetings from SCWF! We sure miss seeing everyone, but it's been great to connect with many of you virtually through our webinars. These online classes reached over 5,000 people last year! If you haven't joined us for a webinar yet, visit our website at: <http://www.scwf.org/online-nature-learning> to watch recordings of past webinars, and you can find the link there for the list of upcoming sessions. We are working with Austin Jenkins and Jay Keck to bring you some more in-depth webinars soon, and we're also making plans for some small in-person events later in the spring. Stay tuned!

As you may know, our 2020 Midlands Master Naturalist course had only ONE class last spring before everything was shut down and eventually cancelled by Clemson. Most of the class members elected to stay on the roster in hopes we could start over again this spring. We recently received word that Clemson will not allow us to hold the course this spring either. We are investigating the possibility of holding the class in the fall this year with the same group that had registered for 2020.

I also wanted to let you know about a staffing change at SCWF – Shannon Keenan has moved to Tennessee after her husband was offered a great job in Nashville. While we are sad to see Shannon go, we are thrilled to welcome Angi Fuller Wildt to our team as Director of Development and Events. Angi brings many years of nonprofit fundraising experience to SCWF, and will really help us grow the organization as we celebrate our 90th Anniversary this year and make big plans for the future. Angi is excited to meet all of you soon through one of our events – either online or in-person.

Although things have been very different over the last year, SCWF has continued our work to conserve and restore South Carolina's wildlife and wildlife habitat through education and advocacy. I encourage you to visit our website at: <http://www.scwf.org/blog> to read about our work during the pandemic and plans we have for the future. And, of course, if you feel led to help us increase our impact for wildlife, there is a Donate button at the top!

Lastly, I'd like to thank MMNA for continued work to keep members engaged throughout the craziness of the last year – we love seeing your stories of interesting sightings, adventures, books you're reading, etc. through this fantastic newsletter. I hope you all stay safe, and keep enjoying nature!



# Celebrating 90 Years of Conservation

Conserve. Advocate. Restore. Educate.

[www.SCWF.org](http://www.SCWF.org)





**An invitation to join the new Saluda Shoals FrogWatch USA Chapter based out of Saluda Shoals Park:**

Thanks to Riverbanks Zoo for helping us get this community science program established, we are excited to have our own chapter.

Grace Fields and I are still the coordinators and have worked hard to bring this program new life by introducing new events, updated trainings, and new identification resources.

This is a great opportunity to be a part of amphibian conservation while social distancing - since it can be done at your own home!

There are two Virtual New Volunteer Trainings in February:

The first one was held Thursday, February 11<sup>th</sup>.

**The remaining one will be Saturday, February 27<sup>th</sup>, 3 pm to 5pm**

You can register here for the training: [New SSP FrogWatch Volunteer Training](#)

Please share with anyone interested! If you have any questions you can email me ([rkennerly@icrc.net](mailto:rkennerly@icrc.net)) or our new chapter email [SaludaShoalsFrogWatch@gmail.com](mailto:SaludaShoalsFrogWatch@gmail.com)

Thanks!

**Rachel Kennerly**  
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 Saluda Shoals Park  
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## Duck Boxes (and more!) at Wannamaker Preserve

by Dave Schuetrum

*(Dave is the official caretaker of the Audubon SC Wannamaker Preserve property in Calhoun County. This article is part of a continuing series on habitat restoration work he is leading there.)*

Thursday...A bit of work and a bit of checking firebreaks in the woods.

1) I loaded up the duck boxes, posts, and assorted tools at the house to take out to Audubon's Wannamaker Preserve. DNR has a program for free duck boxes, (with critter guards). You have to get the posts and other assorted materials yourself. It is a good deal. You are allowed three per person.

All loaded up. That's part of the day's story.



all photos: Dave Schuetrum



2) My first stop. It takes three trips to get everything to the place where you will plant your box. And you have to think like a Wood Duck, too!

3. My inner Wood Duck in my head squawked and told me that here is a good place. I had pre-drilled the holes for the wood screws to hold the boxes, and already added wood shavings in the boxes.

Wood Ducks need a bed of shavings inside to help make it home. I also added some diatomaceous earth mixed in with the shavings. It will keep down any mites and insects and is safe to use.







4. What a view! That's Lyons Creek the flows through the Preserve.

5. The next place was beside this swamp.



6. Pretty good! I have put up duck boxes before and have a system worked out. I had my waders on, too.



7. Another great view! There is a spring that runs through there and it always holds water.







8. This is the third place. Another spring fed swamp.



9. Looks good!



10. Another view! And back to the truck for some rambling.



11. I needed to check the fire break on the sixty acre clearcut and look for any bad areas where the fire might jump. We will be burning the clearcut in preparation for planting Longleaf Pine.





12. Earlier on, we had the clearcut sprayed with herbicide to kill any undesirables and for burning. See the dead leaves on the Sweetgum?

13. The firebreak wound its way around the hardwood edges. Looks good!



14. Lower jawbone from a deer. A pretty young one looking at the teeth.

15. Looks like the dozer tried to push over this dead Loblolly. It did not work so he pushed a firebreak around it.

I worked my way back up to the truck. Next thing to do out there one day is to girdle any large Loblolly Pines growing in the clearcut. They will spread seeds that will compete with the growing Longleaf. The snags will be good for wildlife.





## Winter Orioles and Other Visitors

by Trish Jerman

For the past few years, we've had several Baltimore Orioles in the winter, happily eating grape jelly and a bit of dried fruit from the bird feeder.



They much prefer to take the jelly from the well in the top of my Wild Birds Unlimited hummingbird feeder than from a purpose-made glass jelly feeder.

The orioles came early this year, and seem to be moving on.

For the first time, I've also had a Yellow-rumped Warbler perched on the feeder guzzling grape jelly - but haven't been able to get a decent shot of the warbler yet.



I'm a big believer in being a backyard naturalist, and generally am intrigued by the behavior of what shares our small urban yard with us. Lately, we have had two dimwitted rabbits spending most evenings in our driveway possibly eating fallen fruit from the Cherry Laurel.

When the dog comes out, they run - smack into the fence - which they follow until they can sprint down the driveway and into the yard next door. My leash arm is longer now, because the dog, too, is a student of backyard wildlife!

Unfortunately, the rabbits' wits are not so dim that they don't come right back and eat my kale. My husband won't eat it, but the rabbits love it. I am offended by both!



## On Monarch Butterflies

By Bobbi Adams

More than fifty years ago, I was involved with the study of migration patterns in Monarch butterflies. At the time, I was teaching about insects in an outdoor classroom to fifth and sixth graders in the oldest county park in the country.

A study was begun to trace migration routes, and we tagged butterflies (Kits are available online and are only used to tag butterflies east of the Mississippi.) It is safe to handle adult Monarchs and older caterpillars, except when molting is taking place.

Milkweed *Asclepias tuberosa*



photo: Bobbi Adams

Monarchs are large strong butterflies. The adults usually have a wing spread of four inches, although they may be smaller if their preferred food of milkweed plants is restricted. In the past couple of years the meadows and swampland which house milkweeds have seen a 53 percent decrease.

I've always enjoyed traveling along the interstates as drainage ditches house varying types of milkweed plants. I have two types of milkweeds in my garden: *Asclepias tuberosa*, which is perennial, and *Asclepias curassavica*, which is perennial further south.

I am told by a friend, who gave me the plants, that the latter may come back from the roots now that our climate is warming. It is thought the latter cultivar has disrupted migration to Mexican forests as there is a permanent population in Myrtle Beach.



Wikipedia: User: Umbris



photo: David Groh



photo: David Groh



## Backyard Bird Behavior at the Feeders

by Ed Siggelko

There has been some research done on bird intelligence and cognitive abilities, most has been with the Corvid family (crows, ravens, jays) but nothing compared with the research into various mammals. Most researchers in the avian world agree that the Corvids are good at observational learning, have some cognitive abilities, and can even use rudimentary tools to help them get food.

The other bird species have not been studied to the extent of the Corvids, but there is quite a bit of observational information about their behaviors and intelligence. They think birds can count up to a few numbers, remembering things like the number of eggs in their nest. In fact cuckoos are known to remove an egg before they leave one in the host nest so the actual nesting birds don't realize there are too many eggs down there. The following definitely falls into the observational category, but hey, that's what us naturalists do!

We've always had bird feeders in the backyard and woods that run up the slope behind our home, mostly your typical feeders for bird seed, suet, and hummingbird feeders. A number of years ago my wife, Debbie, got me a peanut feeder as a birthday gift and we quickly realized how the woodpeckers, chickadees, nuthatches and titmice flocked to pull the shelled nuts from between the grates. On a busy day they can drain well over half the contents!



photos: Ed Siggelko

There were other species that would hang around the ground hoping for some nuts to drop out – northern cardinal, mourning dove, brown thrashers and some sparrows. This pattern went on for a number of years, and I started watching these other birds as they would perch on our fence or on a branch and watch the woodpeckers feasting on the nuts.

Slowly the cardinal starting making attempts to hang on the feeder and with their short, stubby beak try to get a peanut. They might succeed in knocking some to the ground but would lose their grip and generally have to head down to look for what had fallen. Eventually a few learned how to get just the right position so they could actually pull out a nut and carry it to a branch to eat or share with their mate. One note, I only recall seeing the male cardinals attempting this, the females still stuck to the ground. However, the red-bellied woodpeckers would tend to run them off the feeder if they made too many attempts.



Blue Jay



A year or so later I started seeing some bluejays perching nearby watching the peanut feeder to see what all the ruckus was about. They are pretty intelligent birds with the right equipment to snatch up a few peanuts, so in short order they would fly in, grab a nut and head off to a nearby branch to eat it. Being larger than the other birds at the feeder they will tend to monopolize things as long as they are hungry and can put a serious dent in the supply of nuts. Now they come on a regular basis, but not every day like the other regular feeders.

The one that surprised me was the brown thrasher, which I looked at as more of a ground feeder. They have over the years hopped around looking for anything that the others knocked loose, but just this year started watching more closely as the various birds flew in and out with their food. One day I saw one awkwardly make an attempt to hang on and get a nut, it definitely has the beak from grabbing one but the landing and hanging on needed some polish. After a day or so it became pretty adroit and now I see the brown thrashers visiting there on a more regular basis.

Brown Thrasher



My final observation was on our suet feeder where again the woodpeckers, chickadees and nuthatches are the most common visitors. Occasionally the northern cardinal or house finches will give it a shot but they really don't have the beak to get much suet.

Pileated Woodpecker



We have some pileated woodpeckers in the woods, you can hear them calling frequently, and I started seeing one male come in very close to watch the other birds at the suet feeder. Finally one day he swooped down, got the feeder swinging pretty good, and hammered away for several minutes before flying off to another tree.

I know it took some trial and error on his part as well because it has to hang pretty low to be able to get at the suet. He would repeat this almost every day for a few weeks then take some time off before returning.

Always interesting to see how our regional animals adapt to different situations and solve problems. So, the next time someone calls you a birdbrain, remind them that birds are pretty darn smart!



## Plant Blindness – A Curable Disorder

by Lee Morris

As a naturalist, I am usually drawn to anything living. As a teacher, I have noticed... not everyone experiences that pull. Even worse, some people don't even realize what is living and what isn't.



Plant blindness is a “disorder” described in 1998 and named by two botanists, James Wandersee and Elisabeth Schussler \*.

Plant blindness is “the inability to see or notice the plants in one’s own environment”. This doesn’t mean one doesn’t SEE plants – people do. However, the human brain filters our visual input. If we paid attention to everything we see with one look, we would be overwhelmed with data.

So we focus on items in the environment that are more meaningful to us – typically things that move. Interacting with humans, hunting animals, or warding off immediate threats are evolutionarily more important than the verdant backdrop that most plants are generally perceived as.

*photo: Wikimedia Commons*

I teach General Biology (at the University of South Carolina Union, a very rural county). The course has a unit on biodiversity. I usually start that unit by going around the room, asking students to name an animal.

That is relatively easy for them; even thirty students can name a unique animal. (Interesting, the animals listed are typically mammals, birds, or commonly known insects like bees and dragonflies – a very small percentage of the biodiversity of Earth - but that is another story.)

Then I go around again, asking them to name a plant. The students quickly move to plant categories – flowers, trees, bushes. Garden flowers get named; food plants usually are not. Sometimes, my students are surprised that plants are actually living.

This is a symptom of the Digital Age, where young people (and a fair number of older folk) spend much less time in the natural world. Plants are important to humans in so many ways, from medicines, to food, to construction materials – not to mention the oxygen that we breathe – and yet people are not connected to them beyond backdrops, house plants, yards that need to be heavily landscaped or manipulated. Think about most people’s relationship with their yards: “weeds” need to be eliminated, bugs need to be killed, and the turf grass needs to be a specific height. These types of yards are not created for pleasure. They are mainly a chore.

What can we do? As Master Naturalists, we can use our experience to help re-educate people about plants. Talk to people about plants, especially children and young adults. Read up on the cool, crazy things plants can do: plants can release chemicals into the air when being eaten to warn other plants to sharpen their defenses, and trees talk to each other in forests using underground fungal networks. Make plants cool again – and let’s try to cure this blindness.

\* [www.botany.org/bsa/psb/2001/psb47-1.pdf](http://www.botany.org/bsa/psb/2001/psb47-1.pdf)



## Palmetto Trail 21 Hike Challenge

UPCOMING  
EVENT



Introducing, the 21 Hike Challenge! The 21 Hike Challenge is a way to encourage everyone to get out on the Palmetto Trail and explore South Carolina, all within 21 hikes of your choice. 21 Hikes in 10 months ...You've got this!

- Just choose (2) hikes per month anywhere on the Palmetto Trail. Your hike could be 1 mile or 10, you choose.
- Each month, participants will log their (2) hikes (passage and mileage must be entered) through the "21 Hike Monthly Challenge Report" form.
- At the end of 2021, we will send everyone who completed the challenge a 21 Hike Challenge patch and certificate!
- NOTE: You can also choose to bike your mileage to take part in the challenge

The challenge **begins on March 1, 2021 and runs until December 31, 2021.**

Participants **must register by February 26th at 5:00 pm** to join the 21 Hike Challenge.

[Resister here.](#)

[Submit hike data here.](#)



## The Saluda Riverwalk and its Sentinel Destination: Boyd Island Sanctuary

by  
Mary Taylor Haque

*Mary is a landscape architect and Professor of Horticulture Emerita at Clemson - along with being an Upstate Master Naturalist.*

The River Alliance, The Darnall W. and Susan F. Boyd Foundation, and their hosts of partners and teams are putting the final touches on a fabulous new project that will transport you into a new year with a revitalizing energy and excitement! The new Saluda Riverwalk in Columbia reveals stunning views, lots of birds, and lush vegetation along the vibrant three-mile pathway. The project is funded by Richland County via the Transportation Penny and will be turned over for the City of Columbia to manage when it is complete. It is not yet technically open, so early visitors are parking along Candi Lane and accessing the trail through a still rugged parking lot. Originally proposed as a part of the Three Rivers Greenway in 1996, the Alliance has been working on the Saluda Riverwalk since 2003.



photo: Mary Haque

The walk leads to the most dramatic destination point I have experienced in the midlands: The Sanctuary at Boyd Island.

Surrounded by swirling waters of various colors due to different sediment loads, the four-acre island stands sentinel above the confluence of the Saluda and Broad rivers as they flow together to become the Congaree.

You may have seen it from bridges, canoed down sections of the rivers, and walked other trails, but the revitalizing yet calming feeling that comes with being surrounded by the turbulent waters of these rivers as they merge to form the Congaree at the tip of Boyd Island is unique.

The island is a glorious destination for the citizens of South Carolina and the world, and provides a perfect exclamation point at the terminus of the magical Saluda Riverwalk.



As I stepped onto the bridge to Boyd Island for the first time....

a Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) soared skyward,



photos: Imtiaz Haque



© Imtiaz Haque

Canada Geese (*Branta canadensis*) floated on the river,

and a Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) hunted along the water's edge.



© Imtiaz Haque



Mike Dawson, Executive Director of the River Alliance, says to look for river otters (*Lontra canadensis*), white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*), and North American beaver (*Castor canadensis*) along the trail. Wayside exhibits on cultural and natural history of the area were created by the State museum, so be on the lookout for those as well.

The exfoliating bark of American sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*) allows the dramatic white new bark to show off against blue skies in the winter landscape. It intercepts logs swept down river during flooding events.



photo: Mary Haque



photo: Mary Haque

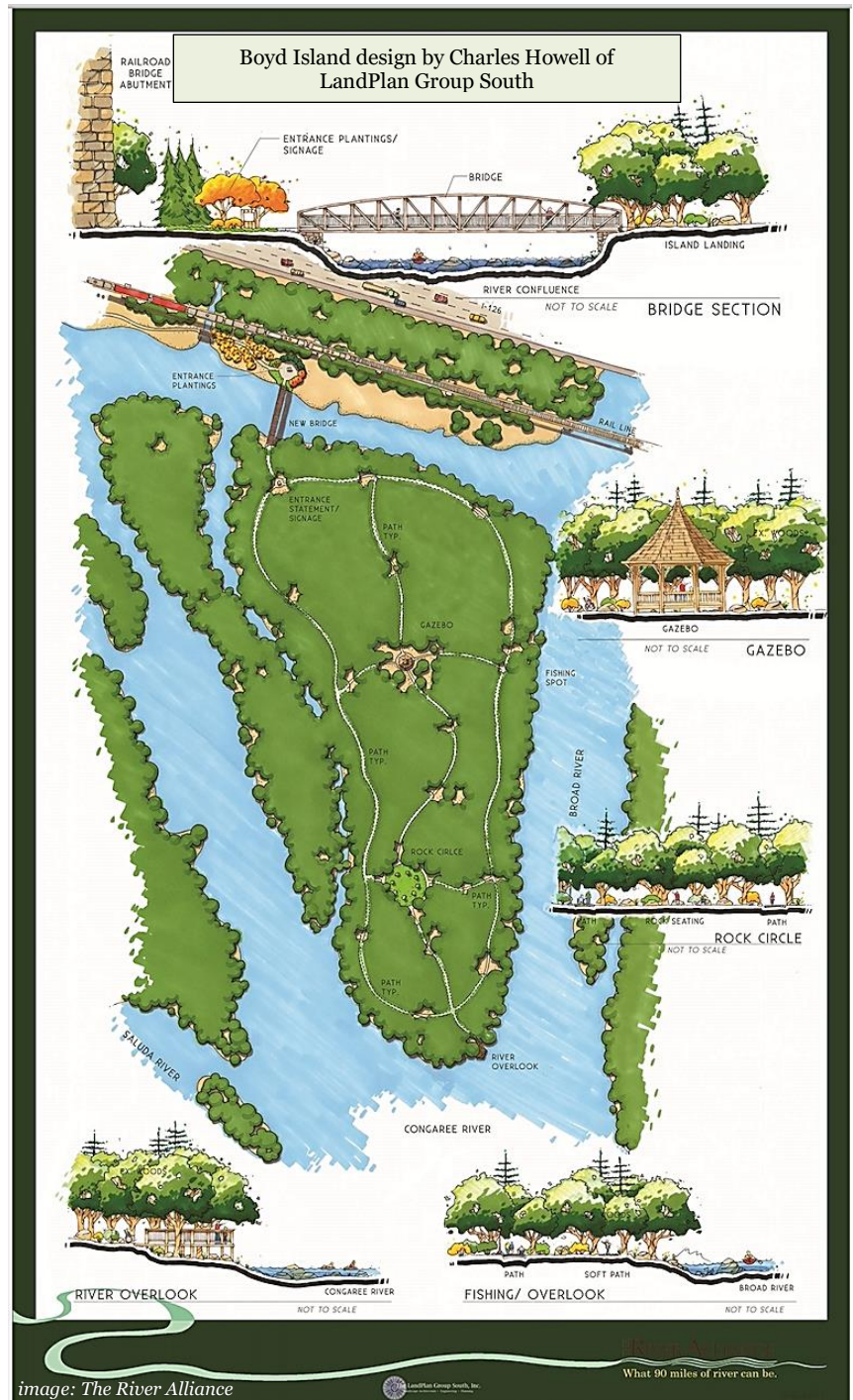
Spanish moss (*Tillandsia usneoides*) drapes from river birch (*Betula nigra*) trees, giving parts of this midlands walk a low country feel.



Susan Boyd and George Bailey with the Boyd Foundation are excited about plans for an artistic gazebo at the south end of the island. Charles Howell of LandPlan Group South is designing the island trails and features including the gazebo, which incorporates forms from an elegant and rare colony of Shoals Spider Lilies (*Hymenocallis coronaria*) which live nearby and bloom mid-May to mid-June. They grow in crevices between granite boulders in the riverbed, an unusual habitat for flowering bulbs.

If you want to experience the majesty and power of the three rivers, Boyd Island Sanctuary, and the entire Saluda Riverwalk project, you can access the trail from Candi Lane near another travel worthy destination: Riverbanks Zoo and Botanical Garden.

The Saluda Riverwalk received a prestigious “Excellence on the Waterfront” award from the Waterfront Center, an international organization that recognizes visionary plans and outstanding projects from around the world each year. The South Carolina chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects recently presented Kenneth B. Simmons and Associates a 2020 general design award for this magnificent project. Accessible for wheelchairs, strollers, bicycles, and fishing, this is an easy walk along elevated boardwalks and concrete pathways.



If you are planning other recreational outings on the lower Saluda River, be sure to check the Dominion Energy webpage on “Current Conditions”; be on the lookout for rapidly rising water, and pay attention to warning lights and sirens. Dominion releases water from the Lake Murray Dam, and flows may change dramatically at any time and without prior warning. When sirens or lights are activated, leave the river immediately, and enjoy the phenomenology of water from the elevated boardwalks of the Riverwalk.

It seems counterintuitive to be able to experience nature so close to a hydroelectric power facility, transmission lines, railroad trestles, interstate highways and the center of our capital city, but the urban infrastructure seems to disappear as one experiences the joy of seeing our three dynamic rivers and their greenways highlighted as one of Columbia's greatest assets.





## Volunteer Hours

Now, more than ever, volunteer service hours are critically important to the SC Master Naturalist program and its many affiliated organizations. The educational, environmental, and other volunteer services you provide help demonstrate the value of the program to the state of South Carolina.

Please keep us aware of the benefits that you provide by reporting your volunteer hours via the [Online Volunteer Hour Reporting System](#). At the same time, report your advanced training hours to keep your certification active and allow you to qualify for the amethyst that goes in your nametag for yearly service.

Go here for more details:

<https://www.clemson.edu/extension/mn/volunteering.html>

And here for a tutorial on how to use the database (it's easy!):

<http://www.midlandsmasternaturalist.org/about-mmna-association/volunteer-links>

