

If you moved here from somewhere, you were most certainly drawn to a very unique and special place. Coastal South Carolina wildlife and topography is intricate and overwhelming...and right at your back door. If you are a bit unsure of where to begin, that's understandable...just let the experts get you started on a life long love affair with Lowcountry nature. Amber Hester Kuehn, Environmental Editor.



“Master Naturalist”

By Kristen Marshall Mattson

“Wait, what kind of bird just flew by?”

“Why are the tides so high in the creek by my house?!”

“That wildflower is so pretty -- I wish I knew what it was.”

There is a program where you can learn these answers, but it is one of the best kept secrets in the Lowcountry. There is no advertising, but its classes always fill up months ahead of time. So what is its secret? Answer: Participants say it is a life changing experience and they tell their friends about it. This grassroots program is the Low Country Master Naturalist Program at Spring Island.

In 1999 someone told the late Jack Keener, then a Beaufort County Extension agent, about

Master Naturalist programs starting in Texas and Florida, and suggested he start one here. Jack pulled together a team of support people from LowCountry Institute, SC Department of Natural Resources and Clemson Extension, resulting in the first Master Naturalist class in South Carolina being offered here in 2000. In 2003 the Lowcountry Institute (LCI) became Clemson Extension’s local partner. In 2005 LCI helped Clemson Extension to expand the program statewide and there are now six other host sites around the state. Today, LCI staff continue to teach the course and there are over 650 people who have completed the program.

The key to the Master Naturalist program is its emphasis on experiential learning. Participants spend 12 sessions in the field with expert naturalists

gaining first-hand knowledge and experience with local ecology. Several of these sessions occur on Spring Island, a private residential community with over 1,400 acres of nature preserve and the home of the LowCountry Institute. Other field trips take place on both public and private lands, such as at Savannah National Wildlife Refuge, Nemour's Plantation, Congaree National Park, Audubon's Beidler Forest, Fish Haul Creek Park on Hilton Head Island, and Hunting Island State Park. Lessons during the course include mapping activities, beach walks, surveys of salt marsh organisms, examining marine invertebrates under microscopes, trawling in the ACE basin estuary, learning how to identify and classify various groups of organisms, bird watching, and trapping fish, reptiles, and amphibians. By incorporating shared experiences as the basis for learning, there is a real sense of discovery and wonder imparted to participants...and most of all, we have FUN!

The experience is not over when the class is completed. One of the goals is to create a corps of volunteers who give back to the community through service that emphasizes natural resources. Volunteer projects range from educating children, residents, or visitors about the environment, participating in citizen science research, performing ecological services such as roadside cleanups, habitat restoration, or nature trail maintenance, and contributing back to the program itself. In 2013, Lowcountry Master Naturalists contributed over 7,200 hours of volunteer service.

Graduates of the Lowcountry class may join the LowCountry Master Naturalist Association (LCMNA) upon completion of the course. The

Association is a 501c3 nonprofit and was created to provide Master Naturalists with continuing education opportunities, networking, and volunteer projects. The LCMNA sponsors quarterly meetings with speakers, provides many options for participating in volunteer programs. It also organizes "advanced training" field trips for graduates to further increase their knowledge about Lowcountry ecology and the environment.

Lowcountry Master Naturalists have contributed in significant ways to our community. The founding of Fort Fremont Historical Park on St. Helena Island was due to the work of Master Naturalists who saw that conserving the 15-acre site had environmental and historical value. Restoration of Crystal Lake Park on Lady's Island, a passive nature park, was also due to the hard work of Master Naturalist volunteers. Both sites were purchased and put into conservation by the Beaufort County Rural and Critical Lands program. On Hilton Head Island, many Master Naturalists serve as docents leading nature programs at the Coastal Discovery Museum. These are just a few of the many ways Master Naturalists are involved in our region.

There is also a Master Naturalist class offered by LCI that is designed specifically for K-12 school teachers. These dedicated teachers give up one Saturday per month for the entire school year to participate. They not only learn about the ecology of the Lowcountry, but they are also given the tools to bring nature into their classrooms, inspiring future generations to have a greater sense of place in the region where they live. The program emphasizes connecting nature to people, history,



geography, and math, further enriching the education of the students. Registration is through the Beaufort County School District. The Teacher Master Naturalist program is grant funded, so it is available at no cost to the teacher.

The LowCountry Master Naturalist class is offered in both the fall and the spring, with registration opening six months prior to the start of a class. Cost is \$600 and includes nine field guides, course materials, entrance to field trip sites, and instruction by some of the area's most knowledgeable naturalists and environmental educators. The course has consistently filled every time it has been offered so you should plan to register early if you wish to participate! For more information about the program and to register for an upcoming class, visit the LCI website, www.lowcountryinstitute.org.

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