

Discovering the Alcovy River Swamp and its surrounding habitats

Explore the lush river cane thickets, pawpaw groves, and mysterious swamps of the Alcovy River. Our nature trail is approximately 2 miles in length and takes about an hour and a half to walk at a leisurely pace. As you meander through hardwood forests, tupelo swamps, and old pasture, keep your eyes and ears open for resident wildlife such as fox squirrels, wood ducks, wild turkey, pileated woodpeckers, and bird-voiced treefrogs.

VISITORS MUST CHECK IN

Visitors during regular operating hours (Monday—Friday, 8:00 am—5:00 pm) must check in with the front office upon arrival and departure. Gates close promptly at 5:00 pm. Weekend and after-hour visits must be coordinated through property rental agreements.

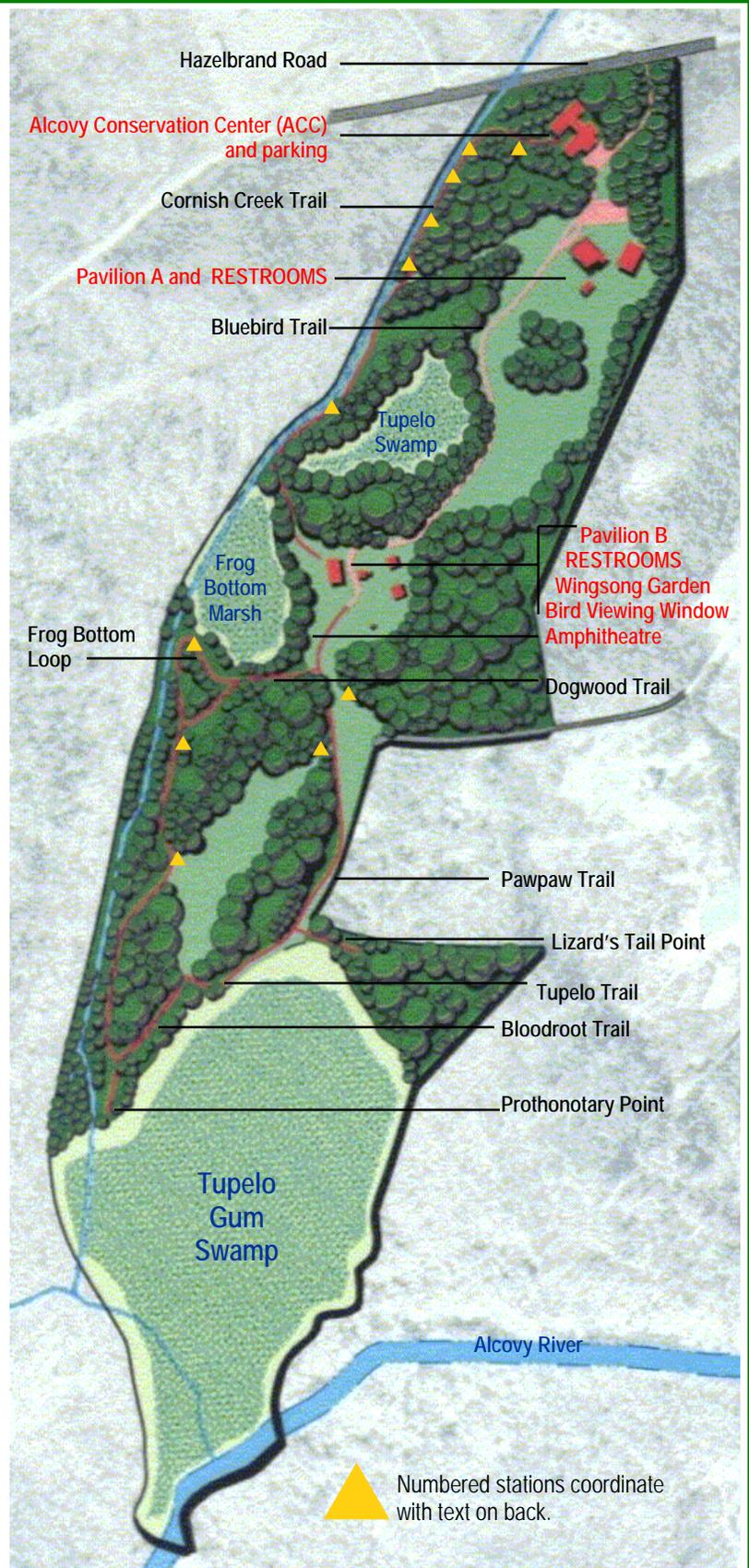
Children under 16 must be accompanied by an adult.

TO HELP YOU ALONG YOUR JOURNEY:

- Numbered stations ▲ along the trail coordinate with the interpretative trail guide.
- Yellow arrows and trail signs mark the path.
- “Question & Answer” signs scattered along the trail identify interesting plant life.
- An explorer’s backpack containing binoculars, field guides, and other field equipment is available for checkout at the front desk.
- First aid kits are available at the front office.

Please respect the habitat and wildlife by staying on the trails, packing out your trash, and keeping your pet on a leash. Your safety is your responsibility. Please exercise caution and common sense. It is advised that you always hike in the company of others.

ENJOY THE SWAMP!



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GWF is a member-supported, not-for-profit (501C-3) conservation organization and the state affiliate of the National Wildlife Federation.



#1 UPLAND HARDWOOD FOREST: Layers of Life

Here in the forest, the plants are arranged in layers. Oaks, hickories, and other large trees form the top layer, or canopy. The mid layer, or understory, is made up of smaller trees such as dogwoods, hawthorns, and hollies. Lower layers include the shrub layer, the herb layer (wildflowers, grasses, and ferns), and the forest floor. Each layer represents a unique ecological niche, with its own particular temperature, humidity, insect populations, and food supplies. Different species nest and forage in different layers—a great system for dividing up the forest's resources.

#2 CORNISH CREEK: Channelization's Lingering Effects

In the 1960s this Alcovy River tributary was channelized to prevent it from flooding its banks. Bulldozers and dredgers scooped out its bottom and removed its natural bends, reducing the once beautiful and complex creek to little more than a drainage ditch. Now, almost forty years have passed, and the creek is still not fully recovered. During storms the water travels too fast. As a result, it erodes the banks and transports large amounts of sediment downstream. High sediment loads reduce water quality and damage aquatic habitats.

#3 RIVER CANE THICKET: Once Common, Now

Threatened The only bamboo native to North America, river cane (*Arundinaria gigantea*) was once an extremely common sight along Georgia's rivers and streams. The eighteenth-century American naturalist and writer William Bartram described canebrakes 40 feet high and several miles wide, but most of the canebrakes that remain today are nowhere close to that size. Many of the great cane stands were lost to agricultural development and river control and alteration. Suppression of wildfires has also taken its toll, since the stands require occasional burning to maintain their productivity.

#4 FLOODPLAIN: Keeping Water At Bay

This low, flat area surrounding Cornish Creek is a floodplain. Its function is to hold the overflow of water from the creek during a flood. Did you notice the change in vegetation as you entered this area? Because the land is periodically under water, only the most moisture-tolerant species can survive here. Trees include sweetgum, river birch, and muscledwood. In the herb layer, river cane predominates. Notice the piles of sediment around the bases of the trees. This is evidence of past flooding.

#5 POWER LINE: Man and Nature in Cooperation

This power line right-of-way is a wonderful example of the way that people and wildlife can live together. The area is developed, but care has been taken to minimize impact on wild populations. Underneath the power lines the land is maintained as a meadow, full of a rich diversity of berry-, seed-, and nectar-producing plants. These plants provide food, shelter, and nesting spots for wildlife.

#6 WETLANDS: Serving the Environment and Mankind

Not too long ago, wetlands like this one were considered useless, disease-ridden wastelands. Now we understand that wetlands provide many benefits to humans and our environment. They act as water purifiers, filtering out pollutants and sediments. They prevent flooding downstream by providing storage space for excess water flow, performing this task free of charge. They are spawning ground for fish; protective habitat for migratory waterfowl; quiet refuges for

human-shy mammals; and home to the wide variety of reptiles, amphibians, and mollusks that need wetlands habitat to survive.

#7 FROG BOTTOM: An Amphibian Oasis This seasonal wetland area provides important breeding opportunities for frogs, salamanders, and other amphibians. Many salamander species spend the majority of their adult lives feeding in the uplands, but in order to mate they must return to the wetlands where they were born. Females lay their eggs on submerged sticks or plant stems. After the eggs have hatched, the larvae spend about 60 days in the water, developing their legs, losing their gills, and gaining their adult colors. Because salamanders spend portions of their life cycles immersed in wetland habitats, the health of their populations can tell us a great deal about the health of our wetlands.

#8 FARM TERRACING: Traces of the Past Fifty years ago this forest was a field and the farmer built terraces (similar to long, wide steps) so that the steep hillside could be farmed. The terraces allowed the farmer to maximize the area available for cultivation. They also prevented soil erosion by slowing the flow of water runoff. Now the forest has reclaimed the field, but traces of the old terraces are still apparent; they remind us of the land's agricultural past.

#9 SUCCESSION: The Battle for Dominance There is a battle going on here. This old field is slowly giving way to a forest. The first year the field was removed from cultivation, sun-loving annual weeds sprang up from seed and took over the bare, exhausted earth. They aerated the soil with their roots and fertilized it with their leaves, and as a result, grasses and other herbaceous perennials were able to get their start—and edge the annuals out. Grasses and wildflowers eventually gave way to shrubs, which then gave way to trees. These trees—mainly sun-loving pines—are dominant now, but they won't remain that way for long. As they mature, an understory of shade-tolerant trees will take root and eventually rise above them.

#10 OLD HEDGEROW: Planted by the Birds

Dense, diverse, and heavily fruiting, this old hedgerow makes an ideal home for songbirds and other wildlife. That's because the hedgerow was *planted* by birds. Season after season they perched on the farmer's fence and casually sowed the seeds of their favorite fruits and berries until eventually the fence all but disappeared amid their plant selections. The resulting hedgerow—a tangle of blackberry, pokeweed, wild grape, and sweetgum—is a mini-ecosystem, complete with all the key ingredients a wild creature needs to survive. It's a plentiful source for berries, nectar, and seeds, and its dense leaves and thorny branches make it a secure spot for hiding, resting, and nesting.

#11 THE EDGE: Where Forest Meets Pasture

Edge is the area where two habitat types meet—in this case, pasture and forest. The edge is a transition zone, and it's one of nature's busiest, most bustling spots. Here you'll find residents of both habitats, along with species specially adapted to live in this in-between zone. Edges allow wildlife to move easily from one habitat type to another to fulfill their needs. This edge area provides hiding places for pasture-dwellers and secure stopovers for forest animals on their way to the pasture for a meal.