



## Haven Can't Wait Southern Sanctuary Provides Critical Habitat

**The Gulf sturgeon** may not be the prettiest fish in the sea, with its bony scales, tube-like snout, and fleshy chin whiskers. But there's no denying the survivalist tendencies of a creature who's lived through three periods of mass extinction.

Now this prehistoric species with 225 million years of staying power faces what may be its most formidable threat yet: human development. Part of a diverse biological community inhabiting the Gulf of Mexico and the network of rivers and estuaries throughout the coastal regions of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida, Gulf sturgeon populations declined so drastically during the last half of the 20th century that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the species as threatened in 1991.

But this tough old bottom-feeder and a vast array of other species living along the Bogue Chitto River in Mississippi will receive a respite from human encroachment, thanks to a local couple who sealed a deal to preserve 207 acres adjacent to the river. In December, Merry and Ryck Caplan's land in Tylertown became the first property in Mississippi and the 100th overall to be designated a sanctuary by the Humane Society Wildlife Land Trust, which has worked

with landowners to help protect habitats in 37 states and seven foreign countries since its founding in 1993.

Home to bobcats, beavers, wild turkeys, deer, armadillos, foxes, and many other mammals, the Caplan Wildlife Sanctuary also hosts a myriad of bird species, including hawks, kestrels, herons, mallards, and ospreys. The Bogue Chitto River, where Gulf sturgeon swim annually to spawn, forms the property's southern boundary.

The Caplans see the land's value in its natural beauty and importance to animals. "So much wildlife and nature in the Gulf region is being destroyed," says Merry Caplan. By donating a conservation easement to the Trust, they retained ownership of the land while also gaining permanent protection.

The couple has a history of respecting the land and its creatures, even while operating a small resort there for six years. Instead of exploiting the property for hunting and for its valuable resources such as gravel and timber, their eco-friendly getaway hosted ducks, chickens, and an organic garden; guests enjoyed guided nature walks, environmental education programs, gardening demonstrations, and picnics. "We tried to create a place where nature was protected and

people could relax," says Caplan, who cultivated her love for the outdoors while earning a doctorate in environmental and religious studies.

The sanctuary is covered with mature hardwoods, large cypress and pine stands, several ponds, and 30 acres of beech magnolia forest registered by the Mississippi Natural Heritage Program as "pristine"—a designation reserved for properties with rare plants and animals, native vegetation, or outstanding natural features. In harsh weather, this tree cover protects the land and provides crucial hiding places for many species; during Hurricane Katrina, the old-growth trees and heavy forest withstood the high winds amidst a landscape that looked as though it had been clear cut.

Caplan and her husband explored other conservation programs but chose the Trust because of its policy of permanently prohibiting hunting and trapping. Staff work with owners to ensure enforcement; methods include annual monitoring, no-hunting signs, wildlife decoys, and collaboration with law enforcement to catch poachers.

The Humane Society Wildlife Land Trust accepts lands—and conservation easements—based on their value as havens for wild animals. While Trust staff recognize the importance of helping threatened and endangered species, they are also concerned with the protection of all creatures through preservation of essential lands and links between them.

"The effects of habitat loss are being magnified by the accelerating process of climate change, and protecting and connecting habitat is more critical than ever," says executive director Robert Koons. "Without adequate habitat, wildlife lack the shelter, food, and security necessary to survive."

For the Caplans, the safety provided by the Humane Society Wildlife Land Trust to their treasured flora and fauna brings great relief. "If I don't accomplish another thing in my life, I feel I've done something significant," Caplan says. — *Ruthanne Johnson*

▶ **LEARN MORE** about land conservation tools and criteria for Humane Society Wildlife Land Trust sanctuaries at [wlt.org](http://wlt.org).



Beavers are among the many species who thrive in or around the waters of the 207-acre Caplan Wildlife Sanctuary in Mississippi.



## Profile: A Species in Trouble

The Caplan Wildlife Sanctuary boasts an oxbow lake, which forms when a river's wide meander is cut off by changing land formations. Rich in biodiversity, this kind of residual, horseshoe-shaped body of water never has the chance to form when rivers are harnessed by dams for irrigation and electricity.

In a state already home to about 3,800 dams, critical habitat provided by the Bogue Chitto River adjacent to the Caplan Sanctuary has become increasingly important to animals like the Gulf sturgeon. Dams have been particularly destructive to the species—also endangered in Mississippi due to pollution, dredging, and poaching—because they create impenetrable barriers to the natal rivers where the fish spawn.

▶ **FISH IN A FLASH:** Gulf sturgeon can grow up to 8 feet long and weigh as much as 200 pounds. Their armored plates, or scutes, flash in the light as they breach river waters in impressive displays during July and August and into the fall, when they feed in the Gulf of Mexico.

▶ **FEAST TO FAMINE:** In the winter, as they swim in the Gulf of Mexico, the fish use their tactile chin whiskers, or barbels, to skim the shallow seagrass beds and sandy bottoms of the continental shelf for mollusks, grass shrimp, marine worms, brachiopods, and crustaceans. When sturgeon reach sexual maturity between 7 and 17 years old, they eat little to nothing while over-summering in rivers throughout the South, saving their energy for reproductive pursuits.

▶ **LIVE LONG AND (TRY TO) PROSPER:** Juvenile Gulf sturgeon remain in their spawning river for up to three years before joining adults in their migrations, munching primarily on shrimp, woodlice, worms, flies, mollusks, and plant material. Although they can reach 60, Gulf sturgeon usually live between 20 and 25 years.

THIS PAGE: RYCK CAPLAN; OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: JEB WALLACE/PHOTO/ASSOCIATED PRESS; BOTTOM: PRIZGO/SHUTTERSTOCK