

Maddie Jewess
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Analysis of Internship at the Strawberry Plains Audubon Center

My first encounter with the Strawberry Plains Audubon Center (SPAC) was actually on the coast, came in the form of a t-shirt, delightfully patterned with ruby-throated hummingbirds, and worn by my friend Lizzie. When I asked her about the shirt's origin, Lizzie recounted her experience volunteering at the annual Hummingbird Migration Celebration. The first and second times I visited Strawberry Plains was under recruitment by Lizzie, volunteering at the hummingbird festivals of 2012 and 2013. I have fond memories of the days I spent in the children's booth painting faces, bird watching, comparing the textures of various animal pelts, and holding a hummingbird in my palm briefly, feeling its heart beating rapidly, before it flew away.

Then, in my environmental studies class, the Conservation Education Manager of SPAC, Mitch, came looking to recruit interns to work the following semester. Memories of the place danced through my mind as I considered the prospect of working in the native plant nursery, and the chance to spend more time on the enchanting grounds. I immediately contacted Mitch about the internship, and we arranged a tour with the Interpretive Garden Specialist, Kristin, who ran the nursery. We talked for a while about the importance of native plants in the local ecosystem before walking through the nursery and beyond to the vernal pool and wildflower meadow. It was clear Kristin and Mitch were intimately familiar with the place, and offered endless commentary on the complex relationships the SPAC supported as a habitat for species like cedar waxwings and spotted salamanders, their roles in maintaining and cultivating those relationships, and the roles it played in their lives.

The spring semester came and went, and over that time, I was able to develop an ever-evolving sense of place, and can now begin to ruminate on my role in Strawberry Plains and its

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role in my life. Over the semester, I would drive once, and often twice, a week from Oxford to Holly Springs. The trip takes about forty minutes one way, and involves crossing the Tallahatchie River bridge over Sardis Lake and passing by Wall Doxey State Park. I would usually carpool with my fellow intern, Emma, who is young, but experienced in working with plants. We passed the time commuting by talking over the radio. Oftentimes, though, when we reached the entrance of Strawberry Plains, we would stop talking and just take in our surroundings. The winding, unpaved road dictated we proceed slowly down the driveway to the Visitor's Center. Even in winter, SPAC is attractive. The American Beech, *Fagus grandifolia*, the marcescent trees that dapple the forest, still holding on to their bleach-brown leaves, present a striking contrast to the evergreens and bare deciduous trees.

Emma and I spent most of our time working side-by-side in the potting shed, doing the meditative work of repotting, fertilizing, watering, lifting, transporting, and arranging plants and soil that is required of those working in a nursery. Of the various types of work I have had to do in my life – schoolwork, housework, office work, etc. – no work has ever felt less like work, and more like pleasure, than does working in the nursery. It is a type of work that engages all of the senses. Scooping soil into pots with my bare hands, I could feel its moisture content. If I had just opened a fresh bag of soil, it felt damp, rich and cool between my fingers, and it caked on to my hands until I was able to wash them. If the soil had been left out for a while, it felt dry and rough, and left my hands relatively clean. When I pulled each adolescent plant from the pots they'd outgrown, I closely inspected the roots to see if they had become root bound, and compared their colors, lengths, and thickness to other plants of the same species to see if they appeared healthy. I had to stay vigilant, and watch out for potentially hazardous ants and spiders (and also the welcome worm and snail) who may have decided to make a home in the plant. The humus-y

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smell of the soil, and the floral to piney scents of various plants, intermingled to create a delicious earthy fragrance that frequently followed me home. All the while, the ambient sounds of birdsong, frogs croaking, the hose spraying and the mechanical sound of tools working the grounds in the distance faded in and out of my consciousness. Doing this type of work under constant bombardment to the senses drew me outside of myself and into the surroundings.

Most of our efforts in the nursery were in preparation for the native plant sale we held in May. The sale is one of the most important events at SPAC not only as a source of revenue, but also as a way to engage with the community on the importance of gardening with native plants. The small pockets of refuges and woodlots we have set aside in the United States have formed tiny noncontiguous islands with high rates of species extinction. However, most species could live amongst humans if their most basic ecological needs were met. Native plants, which are adapted to conditions of our region, furnish suitable habitats for local wildlife to subsist, reproduce, and thrive. My primary role at Strawberry Plains was to help cultivate plants native to northern Mississippi in support of this mission.

Because my job was in the nursery, I spend the majority of my time at SP focused on plants, which comprise the first trophic level and provide the energy that sustains life. But plants are not the only members of the biotic community. The 3000+ acres of hardwood forests, wetlands, and native prairie of SPAC maintain critical breeding, wintering, and migratory resting habitat for nearly 200 species of birds, which are the primary focus of the National Audubon Society, as well as for many species of amphibians, mammals, and reptiles. The relationship between native plants and wildlife is something I was able to witness firsthand as the seasons progressed. In January, sparrows reigned supreme using dessicated winter brush piles and tall grass as their habitat and foraging grounds. February rains filled the vernal pool and provided

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habitat for spotted salamanders to lay their eggs. Coral honeysuckle and native azaleas blooms in March gave sustenance to Ruby Throated Hummingbirds and Tiger Swallowtails. Staggered blooms through April and May supported a continuous cycle of caterpillars, the butterflies they became, and the birds who ate them.

However, the SPAC is not just about plants and the amount of life the land can support. The center has a history, and studying that history helped me understand our changing relationship with the land over time. In the book *Strawberry Plains Audubon Center: Four Centuries of a Mississippi Landscape*, Hubert H. McAlexander discusses the history of the land from the colonial period up to the establishment of the SPAC. In the early sixteenth century, the land was used as hunting grounds for the Chickasaw people (3). At this time, oak-hickory forests dominated the landscape. By the end of the 18th century, increasing contact between Chickasaws and white American colonialists, and the introduction of African slaves led to the establishment of farming villages, and then towns in the area which would become Marshall County. After the 1832 Treaty of Pontotoc, in which Chickasaws ceded their tribal lands in northern Mississippi to the United States, thousands of Americans migrated to the Chickasaw Cession (8).

Among the migrants was John Tate Finley, the great-grandfather of the benefactors of Strawberry Plains Audubon Center who, in 1836, purchased a 680-acre tract on Spring Creek in Marshall County. The following year, the plantation was already producing 1500 pounds of cotton to the acre (McAlexander, 14). Until World War II, Strawberry Plains functioned as a cotton plantation owned by a small number of families, including the Finleys, with great productivity due largely to slavery prior to the civil war, and sharecropping following the war. After WWII, as mechanization of agricultural production and large-scale irrigation of crops developed, the cotton industry declined in northern MS (McAlexander, 121). Because of farming

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practices and the abandonment of systematic controlled burning, the original oak-hickory ecosystem was disturbed (McAlexander, 142).

Despite the disturbed ecosystem, Thomas and Ruth Finley, who completed the purchase of all the Strawberry Plains acreage around 1930, developed a deep love for the land. Thomas worked with the local Mississippi Agricultural Experiment Station on conservation projects, and Ruth was an avid birder (McAlexander, 124). Their daughters Ruth Finley and Margaret Finley Shackelford shared their parents love for Mississippi's birds, wildlife and natural habitats. To honor their parents memory, and to carry on their vision of protecting "God's creatures other than man," the sisters entrusted the property to the National Audubon Society (McAlexander, 131). Their gift of Strawberry Plains to the Audubon Society laid the foundation for ecological restoration that is healing the land and bringing back native wildlife, and also helped to preserve the history of a community, demonstrating man's relationship with the land over time. The mission of SPAC is to couple conservation with the history of a community. In the words of Madge Lindsay, the former director of the SPAC, "The center is not just about history, and it's not just about nature. It's about what happens on the land and how to keep it viable for both wildlife and people... the landscape connects us all. The common ground is the ground itself" (McAlexander, 148).

I also spent a significant amount of time at Strawberry Plains not working. Strawberry Plains provides multitudes of workshops and educational programs year-round. I attended as many of these programs as I could when I wasn't in class or working in the nursery. Most notably, I completed the Audubon Naturalist Course, which met at SPAC six hours a week for ten weeks throughout the Spring. The classes were instructed by leaders in their field, biologists, geologists, ecologists, and other experts covering a vast array of topics from plant identification

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to climate and global phenomena. I can't overstate the value of this class. Not only did we learn from experts in the field, we actually learned *in the field*, from the grounds of Strawberry Plains, to the headwaters of the Coldwater River, Tishomingo State Park, and Chakchiuma Swamp in Grenada, MS. Learning about local ecosystems in their respective localities provided a level of context that I've never experienced through a book or a lecture.

During my first solitary walk around Strawberry Plains, I followed one of the shorter trails, the History Loop, that traverses the Davis family cemetery and the slave and sharecropper cemetery. In between the two cemeteries are several ruinous old homesteads, evidenced by piles of moss-covered brick and patches of trifoliolate orange. There is an aged Beech tree scarred by hungry black bear claws. There are native and invasive species competing for sunlight and space. Because of Winter's spate of record-high temperatures, there are naïve flowers blooming so early they may freeze or wilt before they can be pollinated. Out of these features emerges a feeling of timelessness, the enduring. Tired human constructs reclaimed by nature. Visions of renewal punctuated by markers of death. Seasons creeping out of time. This place has undergone extensive change in the past four centuries, but it remains here ancient and powerful because of the dedication of a few devoted people, and in spite of many others. Its beauty gives me hope.

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Bibliography

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