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Walking in the Trees

Judson College Earth Team members approach the birding tower at Perry Lakes Park near Marion. —page 3

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Towering Over Perry Lakes Park

Architects, biologists, and birdwatchers from around the country flock to this wilderness area. By **Joe Rada**, photography **Mary Margaret Chambliss**



Lauren Stephens—a Judson College graduate and former Earth Team volunteer who helped create and maintain Perry Lakes Park near Marion—spots birds from atop a former fire watchtower that stands 100 feet high.

Barton's Beach, the largest gravel-and-sand bar on the Cahaba River, often serves as an outdoor classroom for Dr. Thomas Wilson, a biology professor at Judson College. "It's a nesting ground for turtles and a popular stopping point for all kinds of migrating birds," he says.

By the time you reach the 132nd step of the Perry Lakes Park Birding Tower near Marion in Perry County, you're bound to be a bit winded. After all, you've climbed the equivalent of a 10-story building on zigzagging flights of ever-steeper and narrower stairs.

That's why you should take your time en route, pausing at all eight landings. You'll see glorious elm, maple, oak, beech, hickory, cypress, and other trees at different levels. You'll also catch glimpses of lakes and boardwalks below, spot at least a few (and perhaps a great many) birds, and catch your breath.

This former fire tower, a 100-foot-tall steel skeleton relocated here by architecture students at Auburn University's Rural Studio, is the crowning touch in a little-known but surprisingly diverse natural area. Where else might you find swamps, hundreds of bird species, a hardwood forest with a mature canopy in a floodplain, local Judson College students helping to create and maintain the place, and a steady flow of architects arriving from all over the world for a look?

Loving Perry Lakes The love starts with Judson biology professor Dr. Thomas Wilson, who oversees Perry Lakes Park as environmental adviser. "Everything's done by volunteers," Thomas says. "Perry County leases the park from the state but provides no staff or funding. Anything we—my students and I, along with other friends of the park—want done, we do it ourselves. Luckily we've found a lot of people glad to donate the needed materials."

They've been quite successful. Seven miles of interpretive hiking trails link lakes, wetlands, streams, the birding tower, a fish hatchery, and the banks of the Cahaba River.

"Perry Lakes Park includes about 180 acres," Thomas says. "But when you add the woods around

the adjacent Marion Fish Hatchery and Barton's Beach, it comes to nearly 1,000 acres in all.

"Among the woods, the wetlands, and the river, we've identified 207 species of birds, including a lot of waterfowl and songbirds," he continues. "The prothonotary warbler (also known as Audubon's swamp warbler) is our signature bird, but we see other warblers, as well as wood ducks, white ibis, merlins, Wilson's snipes, sandpipers, yellow-billed cuckoos, and a whole lot more."

"You can stand at the top of the tower and watch the egret rookery as the parent birds come and go, feeding their young—oh, it's an amazing sight," Thomas says wistfully. "We also have a bald eagle nest that has seen three generations hatch so far."

Calling the Earth Team Judson College students, dubbed the Earth Team, help their teacher. "We built wooden benches and placed them where people like to sit and watch nature," says Judson graduate Angi Gullard of Huntsville. "We have cleared away fallen trees after storms. We designed trail signs, painted them in our biology lab, and put them wherever they were needed—basically anything Dr. Wilson asks the Earth Team to do."

Former Earth Teamer Lauren Stephens of Birmingham calls Perry Lakes Park a natural for all kinds of studies. "Besides being a nice place to hike, it's an outdoor lab," she says. "Judson students come here on field trips in history, biology, ornithology, and other subjects. Lessons are more memorable in nature than in a classroom."

Thomas also teaches his team the politics of preservation. "They go to city council and county commission meetings, lobbying for our park," he says. "They organized a postcard campaign asking state legislators to protect the park's largest trees. Some even met with the governor to talk up our park projects." [➔ turn to page 6](#)

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DR. THOMAS WILSON, JUDSON COLLEGE BIOLOGY PROFESSOR



View From the Top For most Perry Lakes Park visitors, climbing the tower tops off the experience. For that thank Natalie Butts, Coley Mulcahy, Paul Howard, and Adrienne Brady—former architecture students from the Rural Studio, based in nearby Newbern.

“For our thesis project we recycled a decommissioned fire tower and moved it here from 80 miles away. We had to become certified tower construction workers so we could climb and build safely at the extreme heights,” says Natalie. “We spent 15 days taking it down and documenting and tagging the pieces and 45 days putting it back together. It took nine months to finish the tower and boardwalk, but we also made improvements to the structure’s safety.”

The tower joins other Rural Studio efforts in the park, including a cedar pavilion, a covered walking bridge, and fancy outhouses. “Often when I’m here, I run into architecture students from all over the country and even Europe and China, checking out the structures,” Natalie says. “Among the architects, biologists, and bird-watchers, this little park is on the map.”

Autumn or Anytime Thomas, with a hiking stick in hand, meets a lot of those guests. Other times he has the place to himself. “After the first frost in fall, when the ticks and mosquitoes are down and the leaves start to turn color, is a really great time to be out here,” he says, though he finds reasons to wax eloquent about every season.

“This is a fairly rare setting nowadays, a hardwood forest with a mature canopy in a river floodplain,” he continues. “It’s a healthy ecosystem, from the mushrooms on the ground to the turtles in the sand to all the birds in the trees. The tower is its signature element, letting people see all that and more from many different levels.” ●

Perry Lakes Park—located off State 175 northeast of Marion (about 60 miles south of Tuscaloosa)—is open daily from sunup to sundown; visit www.perrylakes.org. To get involved as a benefactor or volunteer, visit www.wilsonbiology.info, or e-mail Thomas Wilson at wils5789@bellsouth.net.



ABOVE: The view looking up from the bottom of the tower is nearly as impressive as the view looking out or down from the top. Architecture students from Auburn University’s Rural Studio relocated the tower from 80 miles away during a nine-month project. **RIGHT:** Thomas leads his Judson College students on an educational outing at Perry Lakes Park.



Caution: Watch Your Head

The Perry Lakes Park Birding Tower offers spectacular views, but it’s not for those who are faint of heart or afraid of heights. Climbing the 132 open-air steps, which gradually get steeper and narrower higher up, takes stamina. If you’re tall, watch your head, because some of the metal braces are low and at odd angles. That said, any who make it to the top are rewarded for the effort.

A Birdwatcher’s Dream

Don’t forget your binoculars when visiting Perry Lakes Park. More than 200 species of birds have been identified in the area, and the tower is the perfect place to view them. Here are just a few birds you might see.

- Prothonotary warbler
- White ibis
- Wilson’s snipe
- Yellow-billed cuckoo
- Pileated woodpecker >>
- Northern Parula
- Yellow-throated warbler
- Anhinga
- Northern flicker
- Blackburnian warbler

