

Mobile Delta Purchase

Introduction

Members of the Alabama Wildlife Federation take great pride in the part they have played in the Mobile-Tensaw River Delta land purchase. Through their support they have secured for perpetuity an opportunity for present and future generations to enjoy the natural heritage of the Delta.

For sportsmen and women, the Delta represents a wealth of opportunities to fish, pursue game, and perhaps most importantly, introduce young people to an opportunity to bond with family and friends and build relationships that will last a lifetime. At the same time, they can connect with the land and its resources, the crucial preparation through which the seeds of conservation ethics are sown.

The Delta offers a variety of opportunities to enjoy the flora and fauna of this unique part of Alabama and the world. Whether it be a morning excursion by boat simply to enjoy the sights and sounds, securing memories with a camera, or enjoying a fishing or hunting trip, the Delta has something to offer everyone.

I hope you will take the time to experience it.

Tim Gothard, AWF Executive Director

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The Alabama Wildlife Federation (AWF), Alabama Forever Wild Land Trust (AFWLT), and Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR) worked together to purchase some of the most crucially important conservation lands in our state and in the nation – 50,000 acres in the Mobile-Tensaw River Delta – in July of 1999.

AWF’s Officers, Board of Directors, and Staff worked diligently to make arrangements and take measures necessary for AWF to purchase 12,000 of the 50,000 acres known as the Clearwater Tract on behalf of the Forever Wild Land Trust.

When combined with the roughly 50,000 acres contained in the existing Mobile-Tensaw Delta and W.L. Holland Wildlife Management Areas, this collection of lands, stretching from the Causeway in Mobile north for over 40 miles, provides approximately 100,000 contiguous acres available for public use, recreation, and enjoyment, as well as providing critical protection to the crown jewel of Alabama’s conservation lands.

Through the dedication and tenacity of our Officers, Board of Directors, supporters, and our partners with the AFWLT and ADCNR, this effort provides yet another contribution to Alabama’s rich outdoor heritage.

To commemorate this historic event, the AWF published a special issue of our Alabama Wildlife magazine devoted entirely to this effort and the natural resource values of the Delta:

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Forever Wild Land Trust

The Forever Wild Land Trust was created to purchase and manage unique lands within Alabama, thereby securing property for public use, that would be maintained as “forever wild.” Funding for the program is derived from a percentage of the interest earned from state royalties on offshore natural gas leases belonging to Alabama. Land purchases by Forever Wild target four principle designations that secure property for the most common groups of outdoor interests: nature preserves, recreation areas, state parks, and wildlife management areas.

History

Humans have lived in and around the Delta for many centuries, dating back to at least 1500 BC. A most spectacular evidence of prehistoric human existence is found deep within the Delta at a site known as the Bottle Creek Indian Mounds. Archaeologists believe that leaders of a Mississippian Period Indian culture lived atop these mounds during their cultural dominance around 700 years ago.

Around the time of Columbus, these prehistoric societies had largely faded, replaced by new tribes such as the Alabamians, Mobilians, and Taensa, from whom key place names (Alabama, Mobile, and Tensaw) were derived as the Delta became an avenue of exploration for wanderers to the new world.

In 1559 explorer Tristan de Luna waded ashore in Mobile Bay to attempt one of the first European settlements in the New World. Like other Spanish adventurers – Panfilo de Narvaéz, Alvarez de Pineda, and Hernando de Soto – de Luna found this part of coastal America to be especially appealing. The Spanish called the Mobile River “Rio del Espirita Santo,” River of the Holy Spirit. One explanation for this name is based on the great natural richness encountered during expeditions up the river into the Mobile- Tensaw River Delta. Where Spanish efforts fizzled, the French settled successfully in the Delta area; thus the prevalence of French place names around Mobile, as well as the city’s Mardi-Gras kinship with New Orleans.

In 1778, William Bartram, a naturalist, artist, and botanist, was on a biological expedition that had taken him from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Florida and west to the French settlement of Mobile. It was August when Bartram began his exploration of the Delta and the Mobile, Tensaw, Alabama, and Tombigbee Rivers. Near the mouth of Majors Creek in present day Baldwin County, Bartram wrote in his journal:

“Next morning I arose early, continuing my voyage, passed by, on each hand, high forest and rich swamps and frequent ruins of ancient French plantations: the canes and cypress trees of an astonishing magnitude, as were the trees of other tribes, indicating an excellent soil. Came too at noon, and advancing forward from the river and penetrating the awful shades, passed between the stately columns of the *Magnolia grandiflora*, and came to the ascents supporting the high forest and expansive plain above — What a sylvan scene is here!”

William Bartram was a keen observer and experienced botanist who had traveled extensively in the Southeast in the late 1700’s. For Bartram to be impressed with the grandeur of this area, and making the statement that it is a sylvan scene, meaning abounding in woods and trees, makes one realize the Delta was a special place then just as it is today.

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Physiography

The Mobile-Tensaw River Delta is the second largest river delta in the U.S., second only to the Mississippi River Delta. It is characterized by many distributary rivers, streams, bayous and creeks which form a maze of waterways. The Delta is formed by the confluence of the Alabama and Tombigbee Rivers which combine to form the Mobile River, which in turn divides into several major distributaries: the Tensaw, Appalachee and Blakeley Rivers. The Delta itself covers over 400 square miles or 300,000 acres of swamps, marshes, and river bottomlands that are among the most impressive in the world, so impressive that Congress recently named the Delta a National Natural Landmark.

The Mobile-Tensaw River Delta receives a lot of water, from roughly 100,000 miles of rivers and streams in the Delta’s drainage area, the Mobile River Drainage Basin. The Mobile River Drainage Basin is one of the largest in the world and has the greatest yield of water per square mile than any river basin in the country. It is nearly

44,000 square miles and includes portions of Mississippi and Georgia as well as sixty-seven percent of Alabama. It is the funnel to the Gulf for seven major river systems (the Tombigbee, Black Warrior, Coosa, Tallapoosa, Cahaba, Alabama, and Mobile-Tensaw) draining portions of four states (Mississippi, Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama) through ten different physiographic regions (including Alabama's Cumberland Plateau, Valley and Ridge formation, Piedmont Uplands, and Coastal Plain.)

Such a bountiful realm of water is further enhanced by the Delta's unique geology. Most river deltas are broad areas of alluvial deposit where the mouth of a river fans out meeting a lake or ocean. But the Mobile-Tensaw River Delta is quite different. It is believed to be a rare geological phenomenon. Rather than fanning out broadly to the ocean, the Mobile-Tensaw is instead an elongated delta formed, some experts say, as a result of a depression or sinking of the earth between two geological faults. Thus, the Mobile-Tensaw Delta is bounded on both sides by relatively high ground.

The Delta's dimensions are about 10 miles wide and nearly 50 miles long and elevations range from six to zero feet above sea level, which has a very dramatic influence on soil moisture, and thus the plants that grow there. Over many thousands of years, alluvial sediments have been deposited throughout the Delta and expansion continues today as sediments gradually fill in Mobile Bay. The Delta lies well inland, more than 30 miles north of the Gulf; therefore, it is largely a freshwater system and one that has long been attractive for many forms of life.

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Wetland and Habitat

The Mobile-Tensaw River Delta is one of the largest intact wetland ecosystems in the United States. Overall, it comprises approximately 260,000 acres of wetland habitats, ranging from submersed grass beds to cypress-gum swamps and seasonally flooded bottomland hardwoods, and is greatly influenced by numerous local conditions which together comprise the physical environment of the wetlands. Residents of south Alabama can attest to the effect a very mild and almost subtropical climate, coupled with 50-60 inches of annual rainfall, has on plant growth.

The wetland soils are also rich in phosphorous, nitrogen, as well as high levels of organic matter deposited during floods. However, the two most important environmental factors that affect the wetlands, and ultimately the whole system, are: 1) the hydrologic regime, or manner in which the rivers flood and move water across the landscape, and 2) the geomorphic features, or the physical characteristics which result from movement of the water across the Delta.

While the immediate area surrounding the Delta receives annual rainfall in excess of 50 inches, the more important rainfall events are those that take place within the Delta's entire watershed. A 1982 Alabama Geological Survey report described the flows of water from the Mobile Bay Drainage and stated "the Mobile River below the confluence of the Tombigbee and Alabama Rivers has an average flow of 39,300 million gallons of water per day." The timing, intensity, and duration of the river's flooding of the Delta, collectively known as the hydroperiod, ultimately have the foremost impact on the species composition, structure and function of the wetland's plants. Floods in the spring and summer months have a greater impact on tree survival and plant growth than flooding in the fall and winter.

The movement of water traveling along rivers through the floodplain causes a constant process of natural sediment erosion and deposition, producing numerous variations in wetland habitats. The meandering river channel produces oxbow lakes that develop into deepwater alluvial swamps. Sloughs form in meander scrolls. Sand bars form on the inside of river curves. Natural levees form where coarse sedimentary material settles out along the river channels as floodwaters recede, while backwater areas, or backswamps, often form in depressions located between the natural levees and valley walls. Each of these variations of wetland habitat has specific soils and ele-

ventions, and thus distinct periods of inundation by water. The combination results in specific plant species, and hence discrete plant and animal communities.

Within the Mobile-Tensaw Delta, several terrestrial habitats are readily discernable to casual human observation as you move in a general north/south direction along the rivers. Many of these same habitats, and others, are less discernable to casual observation as you move laterally or in a general east/west direction along the rivers.

Starting at the northern end of the Delta, the Alabama and Tombigbee Rivers form a long peninsula of over 36,000 acres of the most extensive area of seasonally flooded natural levee bottomland hardwoods in Alabama. This area, called Fork of Rivers, is perhaps one of the most extensive intact examples of this wetland community type left in the entire southeastern United States. The seasonally flooded natural levee forests grades into deep alluvial swamp forests of bald cypress and tupelo gum as you move south. These deepwater swamps have surface water throughout all or most of the growing season but water levels vary seasonally and annually.

Moving laterally within this area, along the banks of the present day channels of the Middle and Tensaw Rivers, bald cypress and tupelo dominate the species which are common along the open water river corridors. They transition into the river swamp forest, or deepwater alluvial swamp, which naturally supports bald cypress and water tupelo in equal numbers. Common shrubs include common alder, buttonbush, swamp privet, fetterbush, and black willow. Typical herbs include golden club, swamp lily, and fragrant water lilies. Spanish moss is a common epiphyte growing among the crowns of trees. These habitats can easily be seen from the I-65 bridge that dissects the Delta north of Mobile.

Moving further laterally from the river channels, oak dominated bottomland hardwood forests occur in areas where temporary flooding is common. The lower hardwood swamp forest, sometimes referred to as the first bottom, is characterized by a greater diversity of woody species. These include overcup and laurel oak, water hickory, river birch, red maple, and green ash, as well as cottonwood in disturbed areas. Non-woody plants include lizard's tail, jewelweed, and several species of ferns. Lower hardwood swamp forests do not stay wet during the entire growing season, nor do they flood every year.

Between the first bottom and the uplands reside two additional habitat types: backwaters and flats, sometimes referred to as the second bottom, and the upper hardwood swamp – a transitional area to true uplands. Backwaters and flats are intermediate in the elevation profile of the system. Trees include those which are common in first bottoms as well as American elm, water oak, willow oak, sweetgum, and sycamore. Vines such as greenbrier, poison ivy, trumpet creeper, and grape species become more common. Grasses and sedges also become more prevalent. This habitat, which is most prevalent in the north and central portion of the Delta and fades as you move south towards Mobile, has standing water during less than 25% of the growing season.

The upper hardwood swamps lie next to the true uplands that indicate an exit from the delta. It includes the highest elevations of the floodplain, and encompasses the natural levees and terraces as well as very old ridges and dunes. Tree species composition includes more upland species than other Delta habitats, due to their tolerance for periodically saturated soils. Species include white oak, swamp chestnut oak, cherrybark oak, bitternut hickory and spruce pine. Holly, pawpaw, spicebush, wax myrtle and saw palmetto are common beneath the trees. Upper hardwood swamps are only covered with water for very brief periods during the growing season, flood no more than 50% of the years within a 100-year cycle, and have a water table which is below the soil's surface.

Continuing further downstream, a maze of bayous, creeks, distributary channels and other watercourses bisect the Delta between the Tensaw River and Big Lizard Creek adding to the hydrologic and ecologic diversity of the system. Along the lower stretches of the blackwater streams which flow into the lower portion of the Delta, bay forests occur on sandy, acidic soils bordering the streambanks. High water tables along with low relief provide conditions for the development of organic peat layers which are very acid and saturated almost year-round.

Tidal freshwater marshes occur in the extreme lower portion of the Delta near the mouth of Mobile Bay. They occupy large expanses of the low flats at the mouth of the Delta and in recently emergent bottoms along the margins of creeks and rivers upstream five to ten miles. Marshes represent a pioneer habitat type, being the first established emergent plant community in the slow velocity, shallow depositional setting of the Delta mouth. Many marshes have been shown to be nutrient traps that purify water flowing through them. The marshes are subject to a daily tidal fluctuation of approximately 1.5 feet, and during low river flows in late summer they are inundated by increasingly brackish waters which move up Mobile Bay from the Gulf of Mexico. Submersed aquatic vegetation also occurs in the large shallow bays in the southern portion of the Delta and in small areas located along the smaller tributaries and in pockets along the margins of the large rivers.

The underlying theme to this wetland landscape is that water and soil elevations govern the dynamics of the plants that grow there. The Mobile-Tensaw River Delta is an outstanding wetland resource representative of the forested expanses of the past. The Delta and the Mobile Bay are clearly linked together hydrologically and ecologically via the flow-through system of water and nutrients.

The importance of the Delta wetlands can also be defined in economic terms through its contribution to the health of the downstream estuary. The commercial and sport fisheries in Mobile Bay and the adjacent Gulf of Mexico contribute significantly to the Alabama coastal economy. The crab, oyster, shrimp and finfish populations of Mobile Bay are dependent on a healthy Delta ecosystem, including the bottomland hardwoods. Without the bottomlands to retain floodwaters and receive their sediments, the soil and large pulses of freshwater could have disastrous effects on the downstream bay. The bay is adapted to periodic and gradual increases in freshwater and silt, but too much at once could kill many of the plants and animals vital to the estuary's functioning. The bay ecology is also dependent on the abundance of rich organic matter that provides the energy and nutrients for the aquatic food chain. Much of this organic matter is produced in the forested wetlands of the upper Delta and brought downstream to Mobile Bay.

One should also consider that the habitats described above are complex conglomerations of neighboring habitats, interwoven with numerous drains and small streams. It is critical that the forested wetlands of the Delta, especially the seasonally flooded communities, be protected and managed properly for the long-term maintenance and future preservation of this ecosystem and our economy.

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Plants

The Mobile-Tensaw River Delta is host to many special plants. Among some of the rare plants known to occur in this area is the green-fly orchid, *Epidendrum conopseum*, the only epiphytic orchid known to occur in the state. Epiphytes are plants that grow on other plants, not as parasites, but using the host plant as a place to grow while getting nutrients from rain and dust. Green-fly orchid has been collected in only 10 counties in Alabama. It has been found growing in the swamps of the Mobile Delta and enjoys a diversity of hardwood tree hosts, including live oaks, southern magnolias, swamp tupelo, and bald cypress. Bottoms supporting this species are usually shaded and moist, allowing epiphytes to flourish.

Green-fly orchid may be more abundant than known records indicate. Small plants attached to the limbs of trees often escape notice, especially those camouflaged by resurrection fern, *Polypodium polypoides*, and Spanish moss, *Tillandsia usneoides*. Green-fly orchid blooms in July. The scientific name *Epidendrum* means "tree-dweller" and *conopseum* means "gnat-like".

The southern rein orchid, *Platanthera flava*, is another engaging orchid found in the Delta, usually blooming in May. This tiny orchid is typically found in wet and frequently shaded situations. The southern rein orchid is found over most of the United States east of the Mississippi River drainage except south Florida. After polli-

nation, the ovaries of this species swell quickly, well before the flower begins to wilt. At this time each yellowish-green southern rein orchid flower appears to be growing from an oval jade vase.

Tiny-leaved buckthorn, *Sageretia minutiflora*, one of the rarest shrubs in the United States, is also known to occur in the delta. Its specific habitat is found on and around the calcareous shell mounds in the Mobile-Tensaw Delta, as well as on Little Dauphin Island and Dauphin Island. This shrub blooms in September and has very fragrant flowers.

The rare sarvis holly, *Ilex amelanchier*, has been reported from only 3 counties in Alabama, Mobile, Washington and Baldwin. It occurs in woodlands astride creeks, river floodplain forests and cypress-gum swamps. It is found in the sub-canopy under red maple, tupelo gum and cypress. Sarvis holly is a difficult plant to locate when not in fruit, especially after losing its leaves. It is one of the rarest hollies in the state.

Loblolly bay, *Gordonia lasianthus*, not to be confused with sweetbay, *Magnolia virginiana*, which is also called bay, is found only in Baldwin, Covington, Geneva, and Mobile counties in Alabama. Loblolly bay is found in swamps, bogs, hammocks and bays along the southern coastal plain, from southern Virginia, west to Louisiana, and south to Lake Okeechobee in peninsular Florida. The flowers are fragrant, showy and white, about two to three inches across, and are open in midsummer for a period of several weeks. The loblolly bay is botanically related to the tea plant of Asia. This tree is a beautiful evergreen, growing up to 70 feet in height, with leathery oblong leaves that are dark green above and paler below.

Rare Plants of the Delta

Scientific Name	Common Name
<i>Acorus americanus</i>	sweetflag
<i>Brachiaria platyphylla</i>	broad-leaf signalgrass
<i>Canna flaccid</i>	golden canna
<i>Celtis iguanaea</i>	iguana hackberry
<i>Cleistes divaricata</i>	rosebud orchid
<i>Coreopsis gladiata</i>	coastal plain coreopsis
<i>Epidendrum conopseum</i>	green-fly orchid
<i>Gordonia lasianthus</i>	loblolly bay
<i>Hibiscus coccineus</i>	scarlet hibiscus
<i>Hypericum nitidum</i>	Carolina St. John's-wort
<i>Ilex amelanchier</i>	sarvis holly
<i>Juncus gymnocarpus</i>	naked-fruited rush
<i>Kalmia hirsute</i>	hairy laurel
<i>Ludwigia arculata</i>	piedmont seedbox
<i>Lygodium palmatum</i>	American fern R
<i>Orobanche uniflora</i>	one-flowered cancer-root
<i>Panicum nudicaule</i>	naked-stemmed panic grass
<i>Piers phillyreifolia</i>	climbing fetter-bush
<i>Pinguicula primulifolia</i>	southern butterwort
<i>Pinguicula planifolia</i>	Chapman's butterwort
<i>Plantanthera flava</i>	southern rein orchid
<i>Plantanthera integra</i>	yellow fringeless orchid
<i>Ponthieva racemosa</i>	shadow-witch
<i>Populus heterophylla</i>	swamp cottonwood
<i>Potamogeton robbinsii</i>	Robbin's pondweed
<i>Rhapidophyllum hystrix</i>	needle palm
<i>Rhododendron austrinum</i>	orange azalea

Rhynchospora crinipes	hairy-peduncled beak rush
Selaginella ludoviciana	Gulf spiked-moss
Xyris drummondii	Drummond's yellow-eyed grass
Xyris scabrifolia	Harper's yellow-eyed grass

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Wildlife

Equally as impressive as the Delta’s plant composition is its abundance and diversity of animal life. During the Ice Age, around 10,000 years ago, the Delta’s extensive drainage area escaped the colder, harsher conditions of higher latitudes. In essence, it became a vast refuge for species unable to exist further north.

Historically, over a hundred species found nowhere else in the world, including turtles, snails, crustaceans, and aquatic insects, lived within the drainage basin. The Delta, as the common point of passage for rivers flowing across the basin, was home range for many of these species.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century the vast wilderness along the Mobile, Tensaw, and lower Tombigbee and Alabama rivers was the last stand for our three big mammals: whitetail deer, black bear, and panther. North America’s largest woodpecker, the ivorybill, also nested here. As the great southern forests were cleared for lumber and agriculture, the Delta became a refuge and a last hope for survival for these and other species.

“The only part of the State where deer are still abundant is in the big wooded swamps of the lower Tensaw and Mobile Rivers. In that region a number are killed during the open season every fall. They are hunted with dogs, each hunter selecting a “stand,” where he remains in expectation that the deer will pass within range of his gun—usually a shotgun loaded with buckshot. The deer take readily to the water and swim easily from one island to another in this great swamp.”

“Bears doubtless ranged all over Alabama in early times, but at present are exterminated everywhere except in the swamps of the southern counties. In the big swamps bordering the Tensaw and Mobile Rivers they are still common and a number are killed there every fall. A.J. McIntyre, of Carlton, is reported to have killed in recent years over 100 bears and to have caught 10 cubs.”

--A. H. Howell, 1921. Mammals of Alabama.

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Where are they now? Those Delta whitetails later became the breeding stock upon which much of Alabama’s wildly successful deer recovery was founded. Fortunately, some bears still remain, and the newly formed Alabama Black Bear Alliance is an organization working to keep them from going the way of the panther. The big cats lingered in the Delta perhaps into the 1960s, but panthers are almost certainly gone now. Ivorybill woodpeckers disappeared along with the last large tracts of old-growth timber. If any Alabama sturgeon still survive in the Delta, they are nearly gone. We should remember that despite its beauty and diversity, the Delta is neither pristine nor untouched, and it even has a few missing pieces.

Today the Delta puzzle also has pieces that don’t seem to fit anywhere. Not only have some native species been lost; the Delta now hosts unwanted aliens—ecologically destructive exotic species—such as nutria, feral hogs, and fire ants. A large South American rodent, nutria were introduced in the Delta in the late 1940s. Since then, they have wreaked havoc on native aquatic vegetation. Feral hogs are descendants of livestock, and the Delta is overrun with them in places. These wild pigs take a heavy toll on native amphibians, reptiles and ground-nesting birds, including turkey, and they compete for food with deer, turkey and squirrels. Fire ants first invaded this

continent through the port of Mobile in the 1930s, but fortunately, their preferred habitat, open areas on relatively high ground, is fairly limited in the Delta. As for the nutria and hogs, the Delta's native alligators are doing their best to keep their numbers in check.

If you want recent conservation success stories, you need look no further than alligators and bald eagles. Both were on the verge of extinction only a few decades ago. After years of protection and management, there are probably more alligators in the Delta now than in all the rest of Alabama. Bald eagles are again nesting in the area, thanks in part to an aggressive eagle restoration program.

The Delta is a birder's paradise. Sightings of formerly rare species such as eagles, ospreys, and brown pelicans have become commonplace, and the Delta may be the only place in Alabama where so many different birds can be found in one area. Over 300 species have been recorded from the Delta, including more than 100 that nest here. The bottomland forest of the upper Delta is prime habitat for warblers, vireos, turkeys, and owls. The lower portion is important to shorebirds and wintering waterfowl, although the number of canvasbacks, widgeon, and mallards has declined through the years. Along the watercourses of the interior are graceful swallowtail and Mississippi kites, anhingas or "snakebirds," and a variety of wading birds. If the endangered wood stork nests anywhere in Alabama, it is probably here.

At least 40 mammal species occur in or around the Delta, and there are few other places in the Southeast where you can find three rabbit species. The Delta has the large swamp rabbit or "canecutter," the cottontail, and the diminutive marsh rabbit. Otters and bobcats are common, and with the decline of both the fur trade and larger predators, raccoons may be more abundant than ever. Muskrats are still present, but they were much more common before the nutria moved in. Every few years a manatee wanders up the coast from Florida and enters the Delta.

Reptiles and amphibians have a haven in and around the Delta, with about 70 percent of Alabama's species represented. At least 18 turtles, 40 snakes, 10 lizards, 1 alligator, 20 salamanders, and 20 frogs are here. Alligators may symbolize the place, but the astounding diversity of turtles is the big story. Box turtles and gopher tortoises can be found on the high ground of the Delta's margins, but get down into the rivers, oxbows, creeks, and sloughs and you can find an incredible sixteen aquatic turtle species. Two, the Alabama red-bellied turtle (our state reptile) and the southern black-knobbed sawback, are found virtually nowhere else. Few places in the world can boast the turtle diversity of the Delta.

Because the Delta is a melting pot of freshwater and marine ecosystems, it supports a phenomenal diversity of at least 126 fish species. Nearly a third of the state's freshwater fish are represented by the 97 species found here. Largemouth bass, bluegill, and crappie are popular with fishermen, but also present are obscure species with names like taillight shiner, Dixie chub, tadpole madtom, and cypress darter. Twenty-nine saltwater species, including mullet, flounder, bull shark, and striped bass are found here as well.

A full account of the area's wildlife would take volumes, but to get a feel for the place, imagine a morning float trip through a remote corner of the upper Delta. If you are alert, your ears will tell you more than your eyes. The commotion of cries, croaks, buzzes, whistles, and splashes may resemble a Tarzan soundtrack, but with a little concentration you can isolate each sound. Katydid, cicadas, and tree crickets provide a contrasting backdrop to the bellows of alligators and grunts of pig frogs. Distant choruses of green treefrogs echo faintly as prothonotary, parula, and Swainson's warblers sing from the moss-draped tupelos. As you glide beneath a noisy rookery of squabbling egrets and herons, a soaring swallowtail kite gives its klee klee klee cry. Barred owls begin their morning hoot-fest, triggering a gobbler to sound off on the high levee. Even the fish are boisterous here; huge alligator gar wallow on the surface and jumping mullet splash up and down the river. Despite the clamor, your passing does not go unnoticed. Alarmed deer snort from the banks. Turtles plop from their basking logs. A beaver slaps the water. Wood ducks explode from the shallows and whistle off upstream. A crashing in the trees

is probably only a hog, but you smile to think it just might be one of the Delta’s bears putting a safe distance between him and you.

Rare Animals of the Delta

Scientific Name	Common Name	Standing
Acipenser oxyrhynchus desotoi	gulf sturgeon	T
Ammocrypta asprella	crystal darter	SP
Cycleptus elongates	blue sucker	R
Hybognathus nuchalis	Mississippi silvery minnow	R
Notropis edwardraneyi	silverside shiner	R
Percina lenticula	freckled darter	R
Polyodon spathula	paddlefish	R
Scaphirhynchus suttkusi	Alabama sturgeon	R
Ambystoma texanum	small-mouthed salamander	R
Amphiuma	Mean’s two-toed amphiuma	R
Amphiuma pholeter	one-toed amphiuma	R
Farancia erytro	gramma rainbow snake	R
Rhadinaea flavilata	pine woods snake	R
Graptemys nigrinoda delticola	delta map turtle	R
Macrolemys temminckii	alligator snapping turtle	SP
Pseudemys alabamensis	Alabama red-bellied turtle	E
Aimophila aestivalis	Bachman’s sparrow	R
Anas fulvigula	mottled duck	R
Elanoides forficatus	American swallow-tailed kite	R
Haliaeetus leucocephalus	bald eagle	T
Ictinia mississippiensis	Swainson’s warbler	R
Mycteria	American wood stork	E
Pandion haliaetus	oprey	SP
Ursus Americanus floridanus	Florida Black Bear	R
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Recreation

Among the many amenities the Mobile-Tensaw River Delta provides, outdoor recreation opportunities abound. Hunting, wildlife photography and viewing, fishing, canoeing and boating to name just a few.

Hunting and Fishing

Sportsmen have long realized the uniqueness of the Delta, its abundant fish and wildlife resources, and the peaceful solitude of hunting and fishing this area. The lower Delta is subject to tidal influence and salt water intrusion. Generally, during late summer and early fall the volume of fresh water declines and salinity is elevated. Marine fish, such as spotted seatrout, red drum, and flounder, enter the rivers providing fisherman an added bonus to the more common resident freshwater fish.

This region provides some of the best fresh water fishing to be had anywhere. Bass, bream, crappie, and catfish being the most sought after species. Unique fish, such as the alligator gar, Alabama’s largest fresh water fish, inhabit this region and fishing for them is gaining popularity due to the fish’s size and fighting ability.

Ducks and duck hunting in the Delta has a long and rich tradition. This land of rivers, sloughs, shallow bays, and marsh is the wintering and stopover point for many species of waterfowl. Resident wood ducks find the hollow cypress trees of the delta excellent places to nest. In recent years, hundreds of wood duck nest boxes have been constructed and erected to increase nesting habitat where natural cavity trees are limited. The abundant invertebrates in the shallow waters and aquatic plants provide an excellent food source for young ducks. Another resident duck, the mottled duck, nests in grass and canes of the tidal marsh. This is the only place in the state where mottled ducks occur in significant numbers.

Beginning in late summer, the Delta begins to receive the first of the winter migrants. Blue-winged and Green-winged teal are harbingers of the variety of migrant waterfowl to follow. The Delta has a reputation of providing excellent waterfowl hunting, beginning with teal season in September which allows waterfowl hunters the opportunity to try their skill with some of the fastest wing-shooting around.

As the temperature drops, waterfowl from Canada and the northern states begin to arrive in the Delta. The sloughs, creeks, and lakes of the upper Delta are choice areas for wood ducks, mallards, and ring-necked ducks. The lower Delta attracts a wide array of divers and puddle ducks. By the end of the fall migration the Delta will be the winter home to twenty different species of waterfowl, a greater variety than anywhere else in Alabama.

The upper Delta, near the confluence of the Alabama and Tombigbee Rivers, has a higher elevation than the lower Delta lands and is forested with good mast producing hardwood species, such as oak and hickory. This area will provide hunting opportunities for game such as deer, squirrel, raccoon, wild hogs, and turkey.

During periods of heavy rain, usually late winter and early spring, flood waters may cover a large part of the area. Some game species such as squirrels, raccoons, and turkey will wait out the flood in the trees. Game species such as deer and wild hogs move to higher ground and will return as the flood water recede.

Boating, Photography, Wildlife Viewing

Water, that power of nature that created and maintains the delta, also limits access. That character in itself creates another recreational opportunity, canoeing and boating. From the north end of the Delta lands, over 40 miles of waterway meander through the Delta on their way to Mobile Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. Float trips by canoe, johnboat, and the like can provide the opportunity to slowly seep in the wonders of the Delta – cypress trees, marsh, birds, alligators, just to name a few – fishing along the way, taking photographs, or simply basking in the beauty and serenity that abounds in every direction.

Regardless of the form of recreation one chooses to enjoy in the Delta, its impact is exceptional and can have a lasting effect. This effect is difficult to put into words but is expressed well in the reflections of a life-long Delta sportsman.

“The delta has been an important part of my life. It has, with its character and offerings, facilitated the development of some of my most sincere relationships. The closeness of my family, the bonds strengthened with my children, and the camaraderie formed and solidified with friends, has indeed been shaped by our time together hunting, fishing, and simply enjoying its beauty and serenity. All of which provide the therapy necessary to cope with life outside the Delta.”

-- Russell Ladd, III