

# Enhancement Reclamation is for the Birds... Literally



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**The story of the Airport Mine's transformation from aggregate mine to environmental gem is one of perseverance, but also, very importantly, one of commitment to community.**



ALL PHOTOS BY LEHIGH HANSON

*Cattle egrets and many other species roost at the Crooked Creek Wildlife Sanctuary.*

**CARY GORDON, LEHIGH HANSON'S** Marlboro Sand and Gravel plant manager, had his very own Obi-Wan Kenobi moment one day while driving across the plant's 9,000 acres. It was then he spotted a grove of magnolia trees in full bloom. But as he got closer to the tree line, the realization dawned: that's no bloom. What he thought were bright white magnolia flowers, were actually thousands of birds.

"I immediately thought, we need to share this with the public," Gordon said. "My wife, Jennifer, is going to freak out!" Cary's wife, Jennifer, is

the executive director of the Carolina Waterfowl Rescue (CWR), a nonprofit wildlife rescue organization that rescues, provides sanctuary, and rehabilitates wildlife. For some time, a place had been needed to rehabilitate waterfowl before birds could be released back into the wild, and the Lehigh Hanson property checked all the environmental boxes. There was just one problem: the company had sold that particular portion of land where Cary spotted all the roosting waterfowl. But where there's a will...

"It was just the right thing to do," Gordon said, "So we decided to



*The ribbon cutting ceremony when the land was officially donated to the Carolina Waterfowl Rescue.*



*One of the fingers islands that makes excellent Rookery habitat.*



*Drone aerial view of Marlboro Sand and Gravel's Airport Mine showing finger islands created from previous dragline mining.*

recreate it five miles away on our property and make it open to the public.”

The approximately 220 acres that Lehigh Hanson ultimately ended up donating to the CWR was previously the ‘Airport Mine’ at the Marlboro site, which had been mined to a depth between 25-50ft, making it suitable for this type of habitat enhancement reclamation.

“The project originated because the parcel naturally became a rookery,” said Salley Lewis, Environmental Project coordinator with Lehigh Hanson. But there were many steps and players involved to take the

Crooked Creek Wildlife Sanctuary from dream to reality.

First, it took support and buy-in from Lehigh Hanson’s leadership. “A lot of work fell to the plant manager [Cary], and the operations manager backed him all the way,” Lewis said. From there, the regional president visited the site, followed by the North American president. After months of the Marlboro Plant’s determination and support from all levels of the company, the project started taking some physical shape — at least on paper.

The property had previously been mined using draglines, which left

natural shallow finger ponds that support many native South Carolina species and islands that could be further enhanced to create ideal rookeries for nesting birds. Additionally, the existing inhabitants provided convenient protection for a rookery, as alligators kept predators like raccoons and foxes away. The combination of mining, established features and the natural setting became the foundation for what would become a frequently altered and detailed, but effective, reclamation plan that had to be approved by the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC).



“A lot of energy went into the design of every little spot, right down to the special wildlife fencing we used to let animals move fluidly through the area” Gordon said. Various sections of the sanctuary also cater to certain species, like cliff swallows and bobwhite quails, which have been in significant decline since the 1980s, sparking a statewide initiative to bring back quail populations. To support swallows, highwalls were preserved to become cliffs for swallows and for the bobwhites, the

landscape was tailor-made to fit their habitat needs by minimizing trees to create fields where native seedlings, grasses, and berry bushes were planted.

**Teamwork**

But regulatory agencies and habitat architects were just some of the essential players from the community who energized and supported the project through its development. Another local partner was key. “Lehigh Hanson, CWR, and Duke

Energy — who supplies Marlboro’s energy — all met and recognized the site’s potential for the community and the environment,” said Gordon. Duke Energy holds annual grant competitions that benefit the local community in the areas of education, workforce, nature, and more — and when the CWR applied seeking support for what would become the Crooked Creek Wildlife Sanctuary, the energy company quickly became a proud partner. “Duke stepped up for the public,” said Gordon. “They were great partners.” Not only did they grant funds, but also additional energy during development of the site, and now they host employee volunteer days at the sanctuary.

The story of the Airport Mine’s transformation from aggregate mine to environmental gem is one of perseverance, but also, very importantly, one of commitment to community. Today the site provides hiking, kayaking, field trips for Boy Scout troops, and bird watching to the public, with hopes of future equestrian trails and even another 200 acres of habitat that will focus on reptiles.

The Crooked Creek Wildlife Sanctuary is a gift to the community and one that the community came together to support. “It isn’t for Hanson. It’s for the people. Marlboro County has been a great partner and we need to show we’re there for them,” said Gordon. It’s clear through this project that the community is also there for Hanson.

“It took so much cooperation for this project to happen. There was DHEC, the South Carolina Wildlife Foundation, Pee Dee Land Trust, Duke Energy... it took buy-in from all parties,” Lewis said.

And it all started with a champion — a plant manager — driving through a field, who recognized that, “When these things come together, you need to take advantage.” The force was strong in Cary Gordon that day to see the opportunity to better his community and to seize it. His is a shining example of the positive impact our industry can and does make on our communities. ■

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