

Man of the world, son of the land

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When Haywood Rankin tries to describe his 730-acre private nature preserve to the average person on the streets of Gastonia, he often finds himself at a loss for words. It's a bit like trying to describe Bach to someone who has never listened to one of the great German composer's symphonies.

The music of the songbirds, the pageantry of the endangered Schweinitz sunflower, the majesty of the towering Bigleaf Magnolias, and the aroma of the spice bush, can all be experienced along the 70 miles of trails at Redlair Farm & Forest in the Hickory Grove community of eastern Gaston County.

Redlair is one of the most pristine tracts of land you will find in the North Carolina Piedmont. And it's right here in Gaston County.

"There is something magical about eastern Gaston County in the Catawba River basin," said Rankin, a conservationist and retired foreign diplomat whose family has lived on the land for generations. "It's a special river. That's why the Catawba Lands Conservancy has focused on it." For a few hours on Saturday, Rankin will open up his private sanctuary to the public. The third annual Redlair NatureFest will feature guided hikes, local artisans, live music, crafts, hayrides and fly-fishing demonstrations from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. The preserve will also host a half-marathon and paddle-boat rides down the South Fork River.

Returning to the land

Rankin came home to Redlair in 1998. He was 52 at the time, and had just retired from a 26-year career with the U.S. State Department, which employed him in various African and Middle Eastern nations.

"If I hadn't come back then, the farm would have fallen completely apart," said Rankin, a former Morehead Scholar at UNC Chapel Hill who speaks fluent French and Arabic. "My father had lost both of his legs and was at Covenant Village [retirement home]. If I was going to come back, that was the time."

For Rankin, the land has become an antidote to the stresses of the world around him. He still jets off on sporadic assignments for the State Department to troubled areas around the globe. He has served in the Sudan, where Muslim and Christian factions fight to the death over ancient tribal lands, in Chad and in the Congo. His most recent assignment was in Sierra Leone, a West African nation he visited in January and February of this year.

"The State Department has asked me every year to go back to Africa to these places that are hard to keep staffed," he said. "These are not for tourists. They are difficult, tough places and I like that. Sierra Leone is best known by the movie 'Blood Diamond' and I found that to be a quite accurate portrayal."

The 2006 film chronicles the diamond industry in Sierra Leone and how rebels mine and trade the

jewels to fund a bloody civil war against government forces. Among other atrocities, rebels amputated peoples' hands to prevent them from voting in upcoming elections.

"Diamonds are a horrible thing because they are so corruptive, but it's such an amazing thing to be among people who have suffered so much and yet are so nice," Rankin said.

From war-torn countries, to peace and tranquility

An oasis of peace and safety awaits him when he returns to Redlair. The only diamonds here are the inconspicuous little gray signs posted on trees to guide hikers on the paths.

Rankin walks the land every day. He notices even the smallest change as he treks through the hilly landscape, often with his wife, Sabine, and their two dogs.

As he guided this reporter on a nearly two-hour hike through Redlair's dense forests last week, he pointed to a flaming-red "Chicken of the Woods" mushroom and noted that it wasn't there the day before. His dog stopped to lap up water from a crystal-clear creek.

He said he rarely finds evidence of any destructive activity by trespassers. Part of the reason is that his neighbors help him police the preserve. "They're the type who carry shotguns," he said, and any unwelcomed guest on a four-wheeler is likely to get chased off before they can do any damage.

In return, he allows hunters to hunt, and horse riders to ride. "But in the right way," he said. "Education is key. You can have a wonderful greenway system in Gaston County if people are educated. I'm in an extremely good position here because this whole Hickory Grove community helps me. They understand that we have a way of life that is largely non-existent. They understand this is all that's left that's not suburbia. You can go up and down Hickory Grove Road and ask them. They'll understand what Redlair is."

Beating back the invasion

Following Rankin's lanky, 6-foot-5 frame down the narrow paths, it's hard not to notice his head darting from side to side, searching out the landscape he has known since his childhood. Then he stopped. He bent over and plucked up a sprig of greenery rising about 3 inches from the forest floor. Rankin has waged a 10-year war against the invasive kudzu, a vine-like plant imported from Asia in the late 1800s.

"I've gotten to the point, over the years, where I can almost feel the kudzu growing under my feet," he said. "You develop like a sixth sense. Sometimes I miss it and you'll see it climbing a tree and then I'm really annoyed, but eventually, I'll get it. We don't put up with kudzu on this land." With the war against kudzu largely won, a wide variety of native species now flourish at Redlair. Rankin says the Bigleaf Magnolia, which grows tobacco-like leaves about 2½ feet long and 12 or more inches wide, will grow natively only in Gaston County.

"You'll see it in Charlotte and at Biltmore Estate in Asheville but they have planted it," he said. "It will only germinate in Gaston."

Because the ecosystem is so fragile, Rankin said he is not able to open Redlair to the public year-round. Instead, he holds the NatureFest one day each year and also opens the preserve up to students at area colleges. Queens College in Charlotte, Belmont Abbey College, UNC Charlotte and Johnson C. Smith University have all sent classes to Redlair to study the rare species and their interplay with the environment.

"It's beautiful. It's spiritual," Rankin says. "It's what people are missing in their lives. You have a sense of it being way bigger than yourself, and you just can't get that many places anymore. It's

way more spiritual than any church I've ever been in. How do you explain that to people, especially to people who haven't had that in their lives?"
On Saturday, Rankin will give it his best try.

Want to go? Redlair Farm & Forest, 144 Redlair Lane, Gastonia, supports 70 miles of hiking trails in a protected area that spans 4.5 miles along the South Fork River. Saturday's event will include: Food and refreshments, local artisans, live music, guided hikes, fly-fishing demonstrations, animals and hayrides, crafts and face painting.

For more information visit www.catawbalands.org

<http://www.gastongazette.com/news/son-47844-often-gastonia.html>