

Stroll in this pristine preserve to enjoy nature's quiet glory

Redlair Farm & Forest, a 750-acre private nature preserve in Gaston County, opens its doors to the public on Saturday.

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The forest whispered.

Even with clouds steadily dropping rain and the muggy morning making my feet drag on the steep trails, I listened.

Twitter from birds and insects blended into a single voice. Two hours later, when I stepped out of the woods, it still spoke to me. I'd connected with a pristine preserve and felt touched by it.



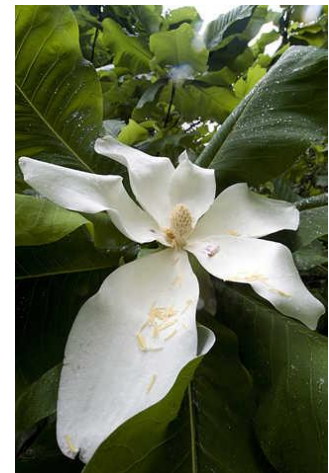
Redlair Farm & Forest in Gaston County gets under your skin and stays there.

Along its more than 80 miles of trails, you can imagine the ghost of 18th-century French botanist Andre Michaux stalking more big-leaf magnolia trees. He discovered the rare plants near this spot way back in 1789.

Discovery is the name of the game at Redlair, a 750-acre private nature preserve that opens its doors to the public on Saturday.

CaroMont Health is lead sponsor for the third annual NatureFest, which includes live music, animals and hay rides, artisans, paddling and food.

Protected by the Catawba Lands Conservancy, Redlair is owned by Haywood Rankin, along with his brother and sister. About 4 1/2 acres front the South Fork River. The working farm is part of Gaston County's corridor for the Carolina Thread Trail, the network of greenways that will eventually span 15 counties.



Rankin is a former full-time diplomat with the U.S. State Department and still works part-time for the agency. The day he took me on a walk around the farm, he talked about his recent work in the African country of Sierra Leone.

But mostly he talked about Redlair. His family ties to the property date to 1810. During the 1940s, his father, Forney "Red" Rankin, began acquiring the land and in 1954 moved his family there. The name "Redlair" comes from his nickname, the red hair of his five children, the farm's red soil and red foxes living in the woods.

Forest images

I didn't see any foxes the day we hiked the hilly property. But I got my shoes in the red soil and soaked up the sounds of the forest.

Along the way, Rankin pointed out interesting features - a slender, bent and rebent sourwood tree; a spice bush that packed a punch when you tasted a leaf; and a beech tree with its root system exposed on a creek bank.

He showed me places where big-leaf magnolia dominated the woods - hundreds of them, many in bloom. Embedded in one huge blossom was a dragonfly.



We must have crossed more than a dozen of the 50 or so wooden foot bridges that Rankin has built across streams. He's proud - and rightly so - of his work in a rugged area where all the materials have to be packed in. "Good, old-fashioned hard labor," he called it.

Rankin showed me spots where researchers from UNC Charlotte, Queens University and other area schools have been studying one aspect or another of nature.

As the morning heated up, Redlair's valleys felt like a steam bath. My face was soaked, but I noticed Rankin had barely broken a sweat.

On we went, his border collie Siobhan darting around our feet, until we came to a patch of what looked to my untrained eyes like just another stand of weeds.

That, said Rankin, is Schweinitz's sunflower, a federally endangered plant.

A treasure, right at our feet.

Rankin explained the rare plant doesn't blossom until September. As we headed back to his house, I imagined a yellow sea of Schweinitz's sunflowers rippling in the fall.

Series of hikes

Our hike barely touched the surface of Redlair's delights.

The entire trail system will be open to the public on Saturday. Educators, botanists and environmental experts will lead a series of hikes with different themes. There's a wildflower hike and another on how to identify birds by their songs and field markings. Another is called "Chicken of the Woods and Other Edible Delights." The "Little Sunflower on the Prairie" hike is all about Schweinitz's sunflower.

Space is limited, and preregistration is recommended at catawbalands.org.

I hope the third NatureFest draws a big crowd. And that folks exploring Redlair listen to what the forest has to say.

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<http://www.charlotteobserver.com/2010/05/30/1463028/stroll-in-this-pristine-preserve.html>