

# “How nature can heal historical wounds”



PHOTO BY HILARY HOLLADAY

The Alumni Distinguished Professor of Wildlife Ecology at Clemson, poet and author of the award-winning memoir, “The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man’s Love Affair with Nature,” Dr. Drew Lanham spoke before a packed house in the visitor center at James Madison’s Montpelier last Wednesday afternoon.

## Montpelier welcomes return of wildlife biologist Drew Lanham

BY HILARY HOLLADAY

Staff Writer

**D**r. Drew Lanham of Clemson University paid his first visit to James Madison’s Montpelier four years ago. As a member of a group invited to help envision the estate’s future, the ornithologist and wildlife biologist had an acute insight as he toured the mansion.

He was struck by the elaborate design and architecture of the house. Then, in the study where he imagined James Madison sitting at his desk and laboring over language that would be integral to the U.S. Constitution, Lanham gazed out the window. He thought about the enslaved people working on the grounds of Montpelier while their owner wrote about what American democracy would be.

During a lecture in Montpelier’s David M. Rubenstein Visitor Center last Wednesday afternoon, Lanham asked a packed house to step into that scene with Madison.

“I want you to imagine drafting that document. ... You’re dipping your quill and you’re writing, and you look up from your page out there at that Blue

Ridge, and you cast your eyes down just a little bit and there are the people you own. And you're writing this document of freedom.

"So, there's a little bit of tension there, right? And it's tension that we still live in," Lanham said.

The Alumni Distinguished Professor of Wildlife Ecology at Clemson, Lanham also is a poet and author of an award-winning memoir, "The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man's Love Affair with Nature."

A native of Edgefield, S.C., who earned his undergraduate and graduate degrees from Clemson, he has been back to Montpelier a number of times since his first visit. He is currently ecologist in residence, a visiting position that involves work behind the scenes and several public events, including an exploration of the remote sections of Montpelier's forest in April and a bird walk in May.

During her remarks before his lecture, Elizabeth Chew, Montpelier's executive vice president and chief curator, said Lanham "is collaborating with Montpelier researchers to develop a comprehensive understanding of how the wildlife habitats reflect the Madison-era use of the plantation land."

She explained, further, that the goal of the partnership "is to reconcile the natural and cultural histories of Montpelier's landscape and incorporate these stories into our visitor experience."

**How nature can heal historical wounds**

In a talk titled "How Nature Can Heal the Wounds of the Past," Lanham challenged his listeners to recognize the contradictions and paradoxes in American democracy. Drawing on the language and cadences of poetry, he connected the unjust treatment of enslaved men, women and children during Madison's time with the ongoing violations inflicted on minority populations and the natural world.

What recourse do we have, he asked, "when the warming earth swells our seas and compromises the air we breathe? Then, my friends, the conversation becomes more than one of conservation. It is one of survival—the fine line between life and death defined by how intensely we care.

"It is survival for each and every one of us with wings and fins and fur and warty toad skin. It is the sacred soil we sink our toes and roots into, and the heavens above we raise our hands to, to praise the clouds and the gods



PHOTOS BY HILARY HOLLADAY

Following his lecture, Dr. Drew Lanham receives a gift from Montpelier Director of Archaeology & Landscape Restoration Matt Reeves (above left), before meeting with members of the audience.

we revere. It is the tumbling rivers we seek like salmon and shad drawn home to final spawn. It is the patch of woods where we find comfort and shelter like thrushes wind-tossed on migratory journeys, driven down by battering storms.

"How do we defeat a wall of worry rising to keep hope out? Do we climb over that wall? Tunnel under the wall? Or just give up?"

**"Birds give me hope"**

As a conservationist, Lanham said his agenda is to "move us forward ... not just save the earth, but for us to think about ourselves and our moral obligation to do so."

For him, birds are a metaphor for freedom and "sudden salve," a way to step away from the degradations of racism and other social ills.

"Birds give me hope in something beyond the persistent range-wide hate. You know, it is sometimes exhausting being a black man in this country and it's hard to convey the damage and deep, wearing impact that day after day of profiling has on mindset and body being, overcoming the assumptions that your black male mission is, at best, some above-average ability to bounce or throw a ball, but more darkly, it is your genetically derived Negro disposition to steal or kill or rape."

Nevertheless, he said he is determined to keep observing and writing about birds, what he considers "my last, best hope for heaven's angels here on earth."

While humans may disappoint, "birds do not. I ask nothing of them

and they give me everything."

He continued, "I cannot watch a red-tailed hawk hang high on the wind and think lowly. I cannot hear the chirps of migrants and nighttime transit over my drowsy head and ever fail to wonder how miraculously intrepid the tiny flighted travelers are. I cannot witness a murmuration of starlings, or waves of sweeping, undulating, turning, twisting, climbing, diving, wing on wing, rubbing, rustling storms of starlings and think of them as invasives, as immigrants that don't belong."

"I offer to you the freedom—the

*freedom*—the freedom of a moment's wild escape in some feathered thing."

Lanham sees Madison's ancestral home as a place where the seeds of social justice and environmental stewardship must be continuously planted and nurtured.

In wrapping up, he invited his listeners to consider the "Three R's": recognition, reconciliation and reparation in regard to social justice and stewardship of the environment and urged everyone to contemplate the juxtaposed signs at the entrance to Montpelier—"LOVE" and "We the People."

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# Community prepares for coronavirus

## Schools, county, health officials respond to crisis

**BY HILARY HOLLADAY**

Staff Writer

These days, the coronavirus is on everyone's mind. The trick is to keep it off your hands and face and be ready if the situation gets worse. In recent days, many community stakeholders in Orange County have begun pooling their knowledge and making contingency plans in anticipation of a worsening

crisis.

The Rappahannock-Rapidan Health District is working with government bodies, schools and other organizations throughout the region to provide information and updates. Although the number of confirmed cases in Virginia of the coronavirus, also known as COFID-19, is currently small, that could change.

Dr. Wade Kartchner, the district's health director, said the mounting number of cases and deaths elsewhere from the highly contagious virus is "certainly cause for concern."

Kartchner stressed that the state and regional health departments have experience addressing past flu pandemics

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**At the Orange Food Lion, bare shelves reveal some local residents are heeding directions to purchase hand sanitizer and disinfecting sprays and wipes.**

PHOTO BY  
HILARY HOLLADAY

and have a solid preparedness plan.

He said that people should wash their hands regularly, cover their noses and mouths when they sneeze or cough, avoid touching their faces (where germs can take hold) and stay home when sick.

Of note, Kartchner said people who are not sick generally should not wear masks in an attempt to stay healthy.

“It’s not going to be helpful,” he said, because most people don’t know how to use the masks properly. If you take it off, touch your face with a germy hand and then put the mask back on, that defeats the purpose.

“The bottom line,” the doctor said, is “keep calm, cover your cough and wash your hands.”

Kartchner and a team of his colleagues have been meeting and consulting with community leaders in the five-county district, which covers Orange, Culpeper, Fauquier, Madison and Rappahannock counties.

Glenda Bradley, assistant county administrator, said the county meeting with health department officials has been scheduled for Monday morning. Participants will include Orange County supervisors, law enforcement leaders, county department heads, officials from the towns of Orange and Gordonsville, school administrators, representatives from social services and local nursing homes.

In the meantime, county employees have received information on the virus from their health insurance provider.

Bradley said, “Each department also has been provided disinfecting supplies to use on areas of particular concern or areas that are more likely to be touched frequently.”

She added that maintenance workers have been instructed to consistently clean surfaces, including door handles, countertops, microwaves, refrigerators, bathroom fixtures, light switches, phones and keyboards.

She said that further steps, including the possible use of gloves and masks by staff in essential positions, might be taken “once confirmed cases are in the community or within close proximity.”

Jim Crozier, chair of the board of supervisors, said he expects to get “a much better idea of what the health department recommends” after attending the meeting on Monday. For now, he said, “the county as a whole is taking what appear to be the appropriate precautions.”

He said he has heard from “four or five” local employers encouraging their workers to stay home if they show signs of flu-like illness. He has not heard, however, from local residents afraid they have the coronavirus.

As a public figure used to shaking a lot of hands, Crozier has begun washing his hands more frequently and keeping hand sanitizer at the ready if he can’t easily access soap and water. He said he has noticed that some people are opting for fist-bumps or just “acknowledging that they see you” rather than shaking

hands. (Others around the county have been seen tapping elbows instead of hugging.)

Dogwood Village is taking the threat of the coronavirus very seriously. Patty Talley, director of customer and consumer relations, said letters went out to the nursing facility’s residents and their families “stressing the importance of handwashing, avoiding close contact with individuals that are sick, covering your cough or sneeze with tissues and throwing them in the trash, cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched surfaces, avoiding touching your eyes, nose and mouth and remaining home when you are sick except for physician visits.”

In addition, visitors are now being asked to fill out a questionnaire when they arrive at Dogwood Village. They are asked whether they have recently traveled outside the U.S., and, if so, where? Those with a fever or any symptoms of a respiratory illness are asked not to visit. The same goes for those who have had close contact with a person with a confirmed diagnosis of the virus or with anyone being tested for it.

Talley said that so far no one has been asked not to visit based on their responses to the questionnaire. She said that if someone with flu symptoms insisted on seeing a dying relative, the staff would work out a way for the visit to take place.

She stressed that Dogwood Village has always asked family members with flu or flu-like symptoms to postpone their visits until they’re well.

“We don’t want to be the bad guy. We just want to keep our residents and our staff safe,” she said.

Dorren Brown, executive director of the Orange County Free Clinic, said that she and her staff are in regular contact with the Virginia Department of Health: “They’re sending us stuff all the time” related to the coronavirus.

Brown said a patient who arrives with flu-like symptoms is immediately outfitted with a face mask, but she pointed out that this is standard practice at the clinic, not something introduced in response to the coronavirus.

Orange County Public Schools (OCPS) sent an information sheet home on Friday with students in kindergarten through grade eight, according to Bill Berry, assistant superintendent for student and administrative services. He said the document went home with high school students on Monday.

Last week Berry said the central office had been fielding inquiries about “our preparedness to address the virus.” He noted that the school division is in contact with Kartchner’s office and that school nurses were being educated on proper protocols. Signs in school lavatories urge handwashing, he added.

The OCPS information sheet includes instructions from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) regarding safe hygiene practices that will prevent the disease from spreading. It also describes the school system’s “action steps” in response to a looming pandemic, including a promise

to provide clear, timely information to parents.

The document states that OCPS uses disinfectants and cleansers meeting the standards of the CDC and the Environmental Protection Agency. To maintain “a clean, safe environment,” the schools will begin cleaning “high touch” surfaces every day. Those surfaces include doors, doorknobs, and handicap access “push plates.”

Further, school staff members will keep an eye out for anyone with symptoms matching those of the coronavirus and dispatch them to the school nurse for evaluation.

Cleaning supplies were to be distributed to classrooms and offices, according to the information sheet, so staff could clean their desks, chairs, keyboards, phones and other surfaces, “especially if someone coughed or sneezed in that vicinity.”

Finally, according the information sheet, OCPS is in contact with the Virginia Department of Education and other school divisions to discuss what to do if schools must close for a lengthy period.

Germanna Community College has been dealing with the same concerns that the school division is facing.

“We’re looking at options, including potentially moving onsite classes online if the situation warrants. We hope it doesn’t come to that but will take whatever measures [are] necessary to protect our students, faculty and staff,” said Mike Zitz, special assistant to the president for media relations and public affairs.

Meanwhile, at Food Lion in Orange, shelves typically stocked with hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes were looking very picked over on Friday. A checkout clerk said he’d noticed lots of customers buying the disinfectant wipes.

Matt Harakal, the supermarket chain’s manager of media and community relations, released a statement reading, in part, “We are following the guidance of global, national and local health authorities. We encourage our associates to take steps to prevent the spread of any germs and to follow the recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), including regular handwashing and staying home when sick.

“We are in close contact with all our suppliers and are restocking any out-of-stock items as fast as possible. We will continue to closely monitor the situation as it develops around the globe while ensuring we are supporting our customers in the towns and cities we serve.”

Community stakeholders agree that education is essential—along with good hygiene.

Crozier said during his 30 years as a first-responder, “We dealt with a lot of other illnesses, viruses, that had never come down the pike before. In each case, you take the best common sense precautions that you can. That usually decreases the odds of contracting something.”

So what approach should county residents take for the time being?

In brief, Crozier said, “Plain old common sense and cleanliness.”

## Making Montpelier's pastureland "purposeful," not merely pretty

BY HILARY HOLLADAY  
Staff Writer

On a beautiful spring morning at James Madison's Montpelier last week when the trees were alive with birdsong, you could almost imagine there was no pandemic to worry about.

Allyson Whalley, the estate's curator of horticulture, was standing in the sunshine talking about the ecological history of Montpelier while Devin and Rachel Floyd of the Center for Urban Habitats prepared to plant 120 pounds of seeds, by hand and by machine, across almost 20 acres of pastureland near the Constitutional Village.

If all goes as planned—and the people at Montpelier and the Center for Urban Habitats are all about planning—the various grasses and flowers planted there will attract a host of butterflies and other creatures native to Orange County but rarely seen here in recent times. A vibrant “plant community” will emerge, a gift to all the living creatures, including humans, traversing the land. Among the plants seeded last week were little bluestem, autumn bentgrass, broomsedge, fall panicum, calico aster and butterfly milkweed.

Whalley said that last fall a survey of the grounds revealed a number of noninvasive plant species native to the greater region but not previously identified in Orange County. Naturalists have kept extensive records in Virginia for hundreds of years, so the finds were significant, she added.

In past decades, Whalley said that the horticultural staff might have seeded the field with a generic mix of wildflowers. But given Montpelier's focus on the “three C's”—the “Constitution, conversation and conservation”—she wanted to make the pastureland “purposeful,” not merely pretty.

She got the idea for the grassland project after visiting the “Piedmont Prairie” at the Sarah P. Duke Gardens at Duke University in Durham, N.C. She obtained grant funding so she could hire the Center for Urban Habitats to plant a mix of seeds that will encourage the growth of native flora and fauna. She also hired the Central Virginia Wildlife Habitat Cooperative, a landscape contracting enterprise run by the Center for Natural Capital in Rapidan, to analyze the soil and do the large-scale site preparation.

Rachel Floyd explained that the Center for Urban Habitats, based in Charlottesville, concentrates on restoring natural plant communities. She and her husband rely on extensive data compiled by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) as they decide what to plant and cultivate. Once they know which native species already are growing in a particular place—in the meadowland at Montpelier, for example—they check those species against the DCR database.

“We're looking for the beginnings, hints toward what the natural plant community should be,” she said. “And then you can look at the DCR data and see what would be there in a completely restored, healthy plant community of that type. And then



PHOTOS BY HILARY HOLLADAY AND CONTRIBUTED

**With help from the Center for Urban Habitats, James Madison's Montpelier horticulture staff planted little bluestem, autumn bentgrass, broomsedge, fall panicum, calico aster and butterfly milkweed across nearly 20 acres of pastureland near the Constitutional Village. Pictured, top to bottom: staff at the Center for Natural Capital in Rapidan bag seeds used for last Thursday's planting. Montpelier curator of horticulture Allyson Whalley and Devin Floyd load a spreader. The seed dispersal pattern is first tested on a tarp.**

you have target goals right down to the percentage of each plant that should be there in a really pristine example of that community.”

Why does it matter so much? While Rachel sorted through a large bag of seeds, Devin Floyd strolled up with a detailed answer on the tip of his tongue: “The primary goal of this project is to reintroduce to this landscape a grassland ecosystem type that has been missing for over 300 years. The reason I'm doing that is part of a much bigger conversation and movement that's sweeping the East and following on the heels of the recognition that

there weren't towering virgin forests that span from the Atlantic to the Mississippi.

“We have a dynamic, mosaic-like landscape with grasslands and forests—a lot of variety. So what's happened, with the decline of all of the grassland systems and a focus on either developed or farm agriculture land and forests, leaving out that middle ground—that natural grassland—the grassland species have declined. The reason that is so important is that thousands of species are adapted to grasslands: plants and animals.

“The grassland ecosystems of

Eastern North America were the most biologically diverse natural plant communities in North America. The ones in the Piedmont were extraordinarily high in biodiversity, and that extends from the funky bacteria in the soil up through the plants, into the insects, up through reptiles, amphibians, birds, the rest of the food web.”

Settlers built dwellings and planted crops on open fields whenever they could, Devin Floyd said. In the process, they imperiled many other life forms: “With a decline in grassland systems beginning about 300 years ago, we have seen the decline of grassland birds, grassland bees—all of it.”

The idea behind the grasslands project at Montpelier is to fill in a missing piece of the landscape that is far more fecund than most people realize.

And the way Whalley looks at it, the restored grasslands along the road leading away from Montpelier will serve multiple purposes. Once the estate is open to the public again, she said, this part of the property “will be a place where people can come in and see the different plants emerging. We will have to keep [the area] clipped this year, but that doesn't mean you won't see a lot of bird activity and a lot of pollinators. And so [the project] is not only restoring nature itself, but it is a place to restore and recharge psychologically.”

Devin Floyd's voice rose with excitement when he described the future of the Piedmont prairie at Montpelier—a future set into motion on April 2, 2020.

“What we can expect is a continuum of change through time,” he said, beginning with “a slight uptick in diversity in insects and flora in these meadows” in the coming year. Although Rachel Floyd is more cautious in her estimation, Devin Floyd said he expects a surge in rare butterflies within a year.

“If we can get a little more golden ragwort blooming out here in these wet meadows—a lot more—you're going to get the hairstreaks, the elfins, the [butterflies] that people wish their whole life they could see. You'll be able to see them along the trails here,” he said.

Taking the long view, he said the grasslands will eventually accommodate wild orchids.

“They will just show up on their own,” the long-range planner said with a flicker of a grin, “in the next 50 years.”

Both Whalley and Devin Floyd pointed out that the grasslands are being seeded in close proximity to Montpelier's Landmark Forest, and Poplar Run comes through that old-growth forest and crosses the meadow.

Whalley said, “It's a pretty interesting location within the property ecologically, right?”

Floyd agreed. “The juxtaposition of old forest and prairie... with a riparian corridor running right down the middle is pretty phenomenal,” he said.

“That's how you get peak biodiversity on any given landscape in the region—those three elements. You get a stream, you get a grassland, you get a forest. If they're all healthy and kicking, you can't beat the diversity.”

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—Devin Floyd