

The Indiana Jones
of Plants

Ted Turner's
Wildest Son

T Bone Burnett
Talks Texas

GARDEN & GUN

★ 21st CENTURY SOUTHERN AMERICA ★

Southern Dream Towns

20 Places Where the Livin' Is Easy*

Charlottesville
Like a Local

Water Women
of Cedar Key

Roy Blount Jr.
Declares
War on Flies

Clyde
Edgerton's
Favorite
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* Like
St. Augustine,
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Miami's Killer
Cuban Sandwiches
by Rick Bragg

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Force of Nature

Beau Turner controls two million acres of forest and ranch land. Thankfully, he'd like to see much of it restored to its natural state

BY **CHRIS DIXON**
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEFFERY SALTER

When I reach his pickup truck at 6:00 a.m. sharp,

BEAUREGARD REED TURNER is already fuming. He's not mad, just well doused in a sheen of pungent deet, and understandably impatient. In about two and a half hours, the heir to the largest landholding in America will have to run his five-year-old son, Beau Jr., to school near Tallahassee, Florida. This leaves precious little time to stalk a pair of Eastern gobblers that have eluded him and his father, Ted, for the last couple of years.

I climb into the Tacoma, and Turner hands me camouflage pants, shirt, and hat and a gorgeous turn-of-the-century Parker Bros. twin-triggered 12-gauge. Minutes later, we're scrambling up a hill with only the barest hint of a moon to guide our way through fire-scarred piney woods. The wiry forty-year-old marches hard and fast, his turkey calls alternating between a diaphragm call and a vocal owl hoot. After two sweaty miles, answered only by whip-poor-wills, we come to the top of a long, moderate rise on Avalon Plantation's eastern fringe across red clay hills that mark the edge of the Florida Panhandle's hilly Upland zone. To our south, the tree-blanketed land drops a few hundred feet and remains pancake flat for better than twenty miles to the Gulf of Mexico. Then, about a quarter mile off, we hear a gobble.

"Bingo," he whispers.

I'd arrived the day before to this bucolic corner of northern Florida for the opening of the Beau Turner Youth Conservation Center. It's situated on a nine-hundred-acre Turner-owned parcel adjacent to the family's thirty-two-thousand-acre Avalon Plantation, and marks a hopeful experiment aimed at treating an increasingly common childhood affliction that the writer Richard Louv termed Nature Deficit Disorder. The previous night, several hundred hunters, fishermen, clergy, volunteers, and wildlife and

government officials, along with a gaggle of kids, had gathered for an official opening. Bass were caught, arrows were flung, shrimp were peeled, and a new chapter was launched in the life of a man who is arguably the most important conservationist in America.

Unless he really gets worked up on a topic like the twin evils of cartoons and video games or the wonders of longleaf pine, Beau is considerably more mild-mannered than his famously blustery father. But he does share Ted's broad, high-cheekboned grin, lanky, boyish good looks, and twangy drawl. He's

PHOTO OP: Beau Turner, Jr. looks for the right angle to photograph his father on the family's Avalon Plantation.



disarmingly friendly and occasionally hilarious, and were it not for a few strands of gray hair amid the brown, you'd think he was half his age.

Today, Beau is manager and principal steward of two million acres of prime North and South American forest and ranch land. The work began in the early 1990s, with Beau channeling Ted's seemingly insatiable compulsion for buying massive parcels (the Turners own twice the amount of land that makes up Delaware and Rhode Island combined). They don't train you for this sort of job in college, but it was a skill set Dad recognized before Beau even entered the Citadel as an undergraduate.

Rather than partying, or vying for a corporate or journalist's job within the vast Turner enterprise, Beau spent his weekends canoeing the black waters of South Carolina's Edisto River or deep in the woods of Hope Plantation, the Low-country paradise where he and his four siblings spent their childhoods. In 1989, Ted signed a conservation easement and Hope became the keystone in a remarkable private conservation effort that has preserved better than thirty thousand acres in South Carolina's ACE Basin National Wildlife Refuge.

"My father put so much trust in me to buy property," Beau says. "It was like a land rush. I didn't have time to finish a master's I'd started at Montana State. I began pulling down millions of miles—smashing records for Delta. Dad would buy so many ranches—twenty-, fifty-, sixty-million-dollar properties all over the world. Ranches that were for sale, ranches that were not for sale. I literally found the sales brochure for Vermejo Ranch in the trash can. And that became



our single biggest and most successful landholding."

At 588,000 acres, New Mexico's Vermejo Park Ranch is the largest parcel of private land in the United States (North Carolina's Great Smoky Mountains National Park is 520,000 acres). The Turners aren't actually sure if it's true, but they don't dispute a 1997 article in *Fortune* magazine that declared Ted the nation's largest private landowner in the wake of the Vermejo acquisition. To Beau's chagrin, Ted negotiated a tidy royalty on the over 500 natural gas wells that dotted the land (today there are 834), but Dad also famously decided to stock the land with bison—and endeavored to repopulate this stunning corner of the

TOP: Turner relives a successful morning hunt. ABOVE: The house at Avalon Plantation.

Old West with pronghorn antelope, bear, and cougar. Today, the Turners charge eight hundred to a thousand clients a year upwards of thirteen thousand dollars for hunting excursions on their myriad properties. Nearly fifty thousand bison dot Turner grassland from New Mexico to Nebraska to Montana while their meat fills the menu at fifty-four nationwide Ted's Montana Grill restaurants—including one twenty-five miles down the road in Tallahassee.

The Turners are abundantly wealthy but far, far less so than in 2001 when

Ted's \$10.7 billion in AOL/Time Warner stock began an epic free fall that shaved 90 percent off his net worth. By 2003, land acquisitions nearly stopped and Beau had to oversee painful cuts in natural resources staff and biological restoration efforts. Today, his role is equal parts business and human resources manager, rancher, endangered habitat specialist, and conservation evangelist. His day-to-day interactions might put him in contact with any of 350 Turner employees—hunting guides; executives; Mike Phillips, a Montana state representative and director of the Turner Endangered Species Fund; or his dad.

Ted Turner never had any doubt his son would be right for the job. "When he was a little kid, Beau was just like me," he says. "He just had an instantaneous love of the outdoors—nature, animals, birds, reptiles, fish—from the moment he became conscious. And that's just never changed. Because he and I—like my other children—spent a great deal of time together outdoors, he learned everything I knew and I learned everything he knew."

THE FOREST PRIMEVAL

The Turners believe that land can generate income while still being returned to a biodiverse state similar to that found before white folks first set foot on North America—a state they call pre-Anglo. In New Mexico, this has included expensive partnerships with state and federal agencies and biologists to reestablish riparian zones, desert bighorn sheep, California condors, and even Mexican wolves. In Montana, it has included controversial work to establish endangered westslope cutthroat trout on Cherry Creek at the Turner's Flying D Ranch, which had to be poisoned to rid it of brook, rainbow, and Yellowstone trout. The idea didn't endear the Turners to many Bozeman-area environmentalists who fought tooth and nail for nearly a decade, but the plan seems to be working.

Across the Southeast, the Turner ethic has led to the release of endangered indigo black snakes and giant silvery-black

fox squirrels at Saint Phillips Island. At Avalon, it has meant spending millions to re-create the longleaf/wire-grass pine forest ecosystems that once blanketed the Southeast. “Hurricane Hugo should teach you that longleaf pine is the answer for the South,” Beau says. “Not only is it fireproof, but it’s hurricane proof. They were the only trees left standing after going under fifteen feet of water and all that wind in the Francis Marion National Forest. The only thing that can kill them is lightning.”

At Avalon, and other Southeastern spreads, the Turners have declared war on invasive plants. They’ve denuded swaths of kōgan grass, bamboo, kudzu, and privet and have removed thousands of slash and loblolly pine and tung nut trees—originally planted to produce linseed oil. In their place, they’ve planted perhaps a million longleaf saplings and countless plugs of wire grass. They’ve hired a biologist to survey the population of endangered gopher tortoises around Avalon. The tortoises are strong diggers, and snakes, lizards, and rodents can find refuge from the baking or freezing weather or burning timber in their burrows. This makes them among the most important engineers in a functioning Southern forest.

Aside from Saint Phillips Island, the Turners burn their rural Southeastern lands regularly—a practice that has led to an ongoing study to determine fire’s effect on bees and plant pollination. Because of this work, Avalon’s forest is far more open than the dense, monoculture pine farms that cover the South—with twenty to thirty feet of walkable space between trees. But food plants, including fields of wild barley and oats, along with bear, turkey, and even tiny red cockaded woodpeckers, are thriving. The Turners have labored since the late 1990s to establish the endangered red cockaded woodpeckers on Avalon. The fifteen or so families of four or five birds have nests in big loblollies, sharing the land with neon green needle blooms of juvenile longleaf saplings. White paint circles and bright yellow flows of pitch mark woodpecker homes. “See that resin?” asks



TOP: Turner coaches a young girl through the finer points of archery at the opening of his Youth Conservation Center. ABOVE: Support for the center has come from all manner of individuals, and many showed up for the kickoff event.

Conservation Center community liaison Raymond Bass. “They peck all around their nests to make that sap flow. It keeps the snakes out.”

“Beau will be long gone before this pine forest manifests its true grandeur,” says Mike Phillips. “It’s a stunning example that speaks to his land ethic. Here’s a guy who not only likes to move dirt, but who has enough sense and humility to say, ‘I don’t necessarily have to be there to see the end result of the stuff I’ve done. It’s

enough that my grandkids will.”

In the ideal world of his grandkids, Beau would love to see red wolves and even cougars make Southeastern comebacks. Cougars are relegated to a tiny portion of the Everglades while the howl of red wolves can be heard only on roughly 1.5 million acres in and adjacent to eastern North Carolina’s Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge. The primary hurdle to expanding their range is interbreeding with coyotes.

“The public now understands that the whole Little Red Riding Hood idea was wrong,” says Phillips, who formerly directed the red wolf program for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. “Red wolves represent little more threat than coyotes. But no Turner property is big enough

to offer our services to Fish and Wildlife for red wolves. Beau and I looked at Saint Phillips as a site. But it’s simply too close to the mainland and they could have crossed over too easily. They have been successful, through very proactive management, at Alligator River. So the question then becomes, can we apply that scheme anywhere else? It’s intensive and expensive, and coyotes keep coming like waves on a beach.”

“But the benefits of having them could be huge,” Beau says. “The Francis Marion might be a great spot, but we need to really assess the public’s concerns and whether the habitat can sustain a population.”

KIDS IN THE WOODS

Beau says that being a father and watching his own son stare like a deer in the headlights at cartoons and video games helped him to realize the importance of setting up his Florida Conservation Center. He’s operating the project in partnership with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission. Soon, this hunting and fishing retreat, campground, and environmental education center will host thousands of Boy Scouts and scores of kids from Tallahassee’s gritty south side. If it is successful, Beau might like to try to start one up at Hope Plantation. But what he’d really like to see is other landowners offer kids the chance to hunt, fish, or even farm on their property. He also believes easements should be placed on blighted or unused land alongside major cities like Atlanta and Miami—providing a place for kids to plant trees or crops, fish, or simply run around and be kids.

“We’ve got to get kids outside,” he says, his voice rising an octave and several decibels. “This is a battle and we have to think of it like climate change. Most kids today—they don’t know where their food comes from and their parents don’t even want them to get dirty. When I was a kid, I used to play in creeks behind people’s houses looking for salamanders. Today people would

“Hurricane Hugo should teach you that longleaf pine is the answer for the South”

be hounding you to get out of their yard. The disconnect is just so great.”

ON THE BIRDS

We take up a position opposite the birds alongside a pair of tire tracks. I sit in front, propping the barrel of the shotgun on my knee while Beau crouches over my right shoulder. Beau whispers a plea not to move and then begins a soft series of yelps with his mouth call. An eternal minute later and the birds are near enough that we hear them coming through the leaves, perhaps thirty yards straight ahead. My heart hammers as two bright red and blue heads bob into view above the greenery. Beau rises to his knees and fires over my shoulder at the bird to his right. It falls as the second bird starts to run. I draw a bead and squeeze the first trigger. The old shotgun roars. Two shots, two kills. Hot damn.

We hike back to the truck and Beau opens up on a number of topics. He plans to run his Conservation Center on solar power. “All I’m really trying to do when I

do anything is to see if I can affect someone’s thinking. Like, maybe, say, just a conservation easement. An easement on five thousand acres in the South is like a hundred thousand acres in the West. It’s absolutely huge. And look at fire ecology. The South was the first to jump on fire as an ecology tool. I just hope it picks up out West, where they have a disastrous fire scenario setting up.”

We talk a little more about his dad, and I ask if he’s ever taken to task for Ted’s more notorious statements. He laughs. “Absolutely.”

Recently, Ted told interviewer Charlie Rose that if we don’t get a handle on global warming, in forty years humans will be forced into cannibalism. Back in 1999, when asked what he’d say to the pope, Ted pointed at his foot and said, “Ever seen a Polish mine detector?”

“I mean, Dad had to apologize to the pope. He was trying to be funny, but he just shouldn’t have said that. My dad’s an outrageous guy who speaks his mind, and I respect that. Do I believe 100 percent of the stuff he says? No. But I do believe about 90 percent.”

Beau says his dad’s spent most of his life trying to change the world through huge conservation easements, vast habitat restorations, or a wildly idealistic gift of a billion dollars to the United Nations. “But I’m just saying, I’m going to see if I can do it locally. I’m going to see if I can bring this community closer together. One day, I’m going to have a longleaf nursery out here. And I’m going to get kids out here planting corn, getting their hands super dirty. Affect a kid’s life before the first drugs, the first DUI, or that first friend who gets you to try something bad. There are no better people to do that than hunters, farmers, fishermen, foresters—people making livelihoods in the outdoors. If we catch them early enough, then maybe we have a chance.” G&G

FIRST FISH: Turner helps a young girl release a bluegill at the Conservation Center.

