

FEATURE

Environmental Engineer Flight watches over base wetlands

By Capt. Tracy Velino
437 AW Public Affairs

The next time you hunt for your golf ball in the woods on the Wrenwoods Golf Course here, tread carefully. Your ball may have rolled onto protected wetlands.

Charleston AFB is home to 333 acres of jurisdictional wetlands, 30 or 40 of which are in the woods on golf course property. Jurisdictional wetlands are wetlands regulated by the Army Corps of Engineers.

"The Army Corps of Engineers requires us to conduct studies periodically to determine the jurisdictional boundaries of the wetlands," said Al Urrutia, 437th Civil Engineer Squadron Environmental Management Flight project manager. "Jurisdictional wetlands are wetlands delineated in that study. The Corps concurs on the results of the study, and then those wetlands are regulated by the Corps."

The last wetland survey at Charleston AFB was done in 1997.

"We contracted that study out," said Urrutia. "The contractor came in and spent about six months in the field with a global positioning satellite backpack on, determined where the line of wetlands was, and prepared a report for here, Hunley Park and North Field.

Certain types of soils, plants, and groundwater are required to

have a jurisdictional wetland, according to Urrutia.

In addition to the 333 acres of wetlands on the 3,733-acre main base, 21 of 271 acres on Hunley Park are wetlands. At North Auxiliary Field, 431 of its 2,392 acres are wetlands.

Members of the environmental flight are CAFB's stewards of the wetlands. "We coordinate with the ACOE and make sure the wetlands are not disturbed," said Harold Deese, environmental flight project manager.

The Clean Water Act requires federal agencies to preserve and maintain wetlands. "Anything you do to those wetlands, like a construction project, has to be coordinated through the ACOE," said Urrutia.

"Wetlands are sort of a filter for rainwater," said Deese. "As the rainwater goes through the wetlands, it filters out all the contaminants and goes back into the groundwater for recirculation. That's why wetlands are protected. It's a vital part of the recycling program for water."

Other wetland areas on the main base include: A nature trail near Bldg. 246, both ends of the runway and areas on the jogging trail.

In Hunley Park, the wetlands are along the banks of the Ashley River. "It's a beautiful view," said Keith Thompson, environmental flight.

The North Field wetlands are

listed as a habitat for federally designated species of concern.

"The wetlands at North Field are even more interesting than the ones here," said Deese. The wetlands there are suitable habitats for two species of concern, the Carolina Birds in a Nest plant and the gopher frog.

Federally designated species of concern are protected by the state of South Carolina even though they are not in that highest threatened and endangered species list, said Urrutia. "In other words they are not in that highest category, but we are required to treat them as if they were.

"The Carolina Birds in a Nest plant has been spotted at North Field," said Urrutia. "It's the only known plant species of that type in Orangeburg County."

Members of the environmental flight are not aware of any sightings of the gopher frog. "The gopher frog is very rare," said Deese. "There are very few places in South Carolina that have that kind of frog. We don't know if we have any up there, but it's a suitable habitat for them."

The endangered species act requires protection not just of the species but of suitable habitats for the species, said Urrutia.

Recently, CAFB completed a wetlands protection erosion control project on Wrenwoods Golf Course. Earthen storm water drainage ditches running through the golf course were eroding, causing sediments to accumulate where the ditches first entered wetland areas.

"When it rains, the heavy rains, all that water from the flightline comes racing through the concrete-lined portion of the ditch, slamming into the unlined portion and eroding it," Urrutia said.

The first step for the environmental flight was to consult with



Photo by Senior Airman Jason Smith

A Green Anole suns itself in the Hunley Park wetlands.

the ACOE. "They said go ahead and do it, because really we were enhancing the wetlands and the work was being done on the ditches outside the wetlands, leading into the wetlands," Urrutia said.

Contractors re-graded the ditch walls in front of tee boxes one and eight, covered the walls with rock and moved some irrigation lines.

"Basically the project was to keep those walls that were eroding quickly from eroding any further," Urrutia said. "It was for the portions of the ditches that run through the golf course that were easy to access.

"It really has two effects from the environmental standpoint, the preservation and maintenance of the wetlands, and the storm water ditch itself," Urrutia said.

The project took about \$30,000 and two weeks to complete in September.

"It was a very simple, very important project," Urrutia said.

The CAFB wetlands are not marked or fenced in, but people don't normally go there because they're heavily wooded, Urrutia said. "It doesn't matter if people do go there as long as they don't litter."

So it's OK to continue to search for your ball in the woods at the Wrenwoods Golf Course. Just don't leave behind any plastic tees.



Photo by Capt. Tracy Velino

Airman 1st Class Jamie Kennedy, 437th Aircraft Generation Squadron, hits his ball toward the green after clearing the completed wetlands protection project with his previous shot.



Photo by Senior Airman Jason Smith

An overview of the 21 acres of Hunley Park wetlands.