



Where the *Crested Screamer* Meets the *Whistling Duck*

A world-famous waterfowl breeding and learning center in Halifax County shows the meaning of preserving wildlife habitat

By Michael E.C. Gery

Puna teal, rosybill pochard, Coscoroba swan, masked lapwing, red-crested wood partridge, Stanley crane, whooping crane, lesser flamingo, greater white-fronted goose, white-faced whistling duck, crested screamer. You have never seen so many different waterfowl and wetland birds in one place.

Not only can you and I see these birds at Sylvan Heights Waterfowl Park & Eco-Center in Scotland Neck, Halifax County, but so can the world's most important avian scientists, breeders, zookeepers and researchers who come to learn what goes on here.

America's zoos rely on the birds that come from Sylvan Heights. More than 210 species of birds from all over the world breed and grow up here, including some that Sylvan Heights has saved from near extinction. Because of his uncanny ability to raise and sustain waterfowl, internationally famous aviculturist Mike Lubbock and his wife, Ali, have more than 3,000 birds here in Scotland Neck, the world's largest collection of waterfowl.

But this is more than a showcase and breeding center for exotic birds that go to zoos. It's more importantly a learning center where leading professionals and local visitors alike can understand the nature and need for birds. As he tromps along the park's pathways and observes its activity, Mike Lubbock points to the surrounding wetlands and woods: "We bring people to their own wilderness and teach about the habitat that allows birds and all the wildlife and plant life to live with us. You don't have to build a museum to see and enjoy wildlife. You have to preserve their habitat."

New this year at the 18-acre park is the Beaver Pond Blind, funded by the Touchstone Energy Cooperatives of Eastern North Carolina. At the end of an elevated boardwalk, the building, a European design, allows you to observe at eye-level the surrounding wildlife without the birds, mammals, amphibians and insects seeing you. Out there in the stream and swamp and woods you can see beaver, muskrat and mink, even a nesting green heron or kingfisher tunneling into a bank.

Nearby is the recently completed Bird's Nest Treehouse, a roofed observation platform—wheelchair-accessible—overlooking a sylvan scene that has inspired some to be married here.

The buildings, ponds, pathways and other features at Sylvan Park were built entirely by the staff, helpers and volunteers—one reason they all have grown so close to the place. A restroom area, for example, is not simply a pair of bathrooms. In its foyer are displays of live blue poison dart frogs, carnivorous plants and a hive of honeybees you can see working behind glass.

A very active aspect of Sylvan Heights is its educational program, designed for different age ranges. School, church and camp groups from all over come here so their students can see and do things they likely have never seen or done before, and won't soon forget.

Following celebrated accomplishments in his native England, Mike Lubbock designed and managed private flocks and farms in the U.S., including one he built with a partner in Sylva, in the western North Carolina mountains. A determined visitor there was William "Toad" Herring, a woodsman and waterfowl hobbyist from Scotland Neck. When he learned the Lubbocks were looking for a place in eastern North Carolina with good water, Toad and his wife Hanna lured them to a farm near his. As they looked favorably around the woods in 1988, a massive oak collapsed nearby, the "sign" that Mike says he needed to move his operation here.

Now officially in its fourth year, Sylvan Heights has an operational partnership with the N.C. Zoological Society, and has eight corporate sponsors including Touchstone Energy cooperatives, and more than 700 supporting members. 

Sylvan Heights Waterfowl Park

1829 Lees Meadow Rd.
Scotland Neck, NC 27874
(252) 826-3186
www.shwpark.com
Closed Mondays
Admission fee