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Naturalist to cruise May River

NEWS

BY SARA WRIGHT
BLUFFTON TODAY

Imagine getting to go on a kayak tour of the May River with the naturalist who wrote the book on this area. You can. He has.

Todd Ballantine, author of “Tideland Treasure” returns to the Lowcountry this week from his home in Boulder, Colo., a mere 1.2 miles above sea level.

“Todd really internationally is considered one of the top interpretive naturalists in the country,” said Mike Overton, CEO of Outside Hilton Head and Outside Palmetto Bluff, which will host Saturday’s two-hour tour of the May River with Ballantine as a guide.

Hilton Head Island’s ground water had plunged in elevation following rapid development in the 1970s. Interpretive naturalists in the country,” said Mike Overton, CEO of Outside Hilton Head and Outside Palmetto Bluff, which will host Saturday’s two-hour tour of the May River with Ballantine as a guide. Hilton Head Island’s ground water had plunged in elevation following rapid development in the 1970s. “If you dig a lagoon, that’s an open well, that drains the groundwater down,” Ballantine said Tuesday by phone.

“They did their job, which was to drain, but they totally drained the wetlands.” Plants and animals were dying in the degraded oasis, and migratory birds stopped flocking to them, Ballantine said. Something had to be done.

He came up with a technology in 1981 to irrigate the wetlands using advanced treated domestic water that would otherwise have been released into the saltwater marsh or Atlantic.

After working to get a trial permit from the Environmental Protection Agency, Ballantine tapped the vast wetlands vegetation to do what it has been doing for eons: Capture the treated fresh water, filter it, and keep it from heading out to sea.

Plants do this by a process called Evapotranspiration, where they take in the water and release it to the atmosphere as vapor.

It was the first project of its kind in America. Now, there are six reclaimed water projects on hundreds of acres on Hilton Head, and the technology is used all over the world. He

also developed the master land use plan for the entire 605-acre Sea Pines reserve. In Bluffton, Ballantine helped design the nature trails and informative nature exhibits at Hampton Lakes, winner of the 2008 Best in Living in America award for Best Community in America.

After living for 33 years on Hilton Head, Ballantine and his wife and business partner Marianne Myers Ballantine moved to Colorado in 1999, but they return frequently to meet with clients see friends and family.

“Our ties to Hilton Head run deep and we’re never getting rid of those,” said Ballantine, son of the artist illustrator Ralph Ballantine, who helped found the arts community on Hilton Head.

From 9 to 11 a.m. Saturday, the younger Ballantine will lead an educational tour of the May River via kayak from Outside Palmetto Bluff.

Fans of “Tideland Treasure” are bound to learn a lot of ecology wrapped in the language of poetry.

“An oyster makes multimillions of eggs — a microscopic milk of eggs,” Ballantine said. “Somebody’s out there eating those eggs, which are just floating as they develop a smorgasbord for other creatures until the oyster finally settles and makes that cement helmet they wear.”

Those looking for a less aquatic experience are in luck, too: He will also give a talk called “Critters” at 7 p.m. Nov. 17 at Magnolia Hall at Sun City Hilton Head which is open to the public. His focus will be on familiar Lowcountry creatures such as armadillos, opossums, raccoons and no see-ums, he said.

An economics graduate of The Colorado College before earning his Master’s in science from Oxford, Ballantine focuses on balance.

“A sustainable environment is a good economy, good home life and balanced ecology,” he said.

In Bluffton too, wetlands can help protect the watershed, Ballantine said. “Every time anything occurs in the Bluffton area, it is probably going to affect the May River and the greater ecosystem it courses through,” he said.

“The preservation of wetlands to capture, filter and intercede with runoff is the way to go.”