

The Post and Courier

Helping Kiawah's Bobcats Good for Other Wildlife

By [Bo Petersen](#)

Monday, October 10, 2011

KIAWAH ISLAND -- If bobcats can thrive in this landscaped golf resort, maybe the entire developing Southeast coast can hold onto its eye-catching beauty.

That's what Jim Chitwood is thinking. That's why he's driving a second round of research by the Kiawah Conservancy, such as collaring a few more of the island's 35 or so bobcats with GPS tracking devices. He wants to know where they rest during the day, where they like to hunt at night, where they den and mate.



Bobcats and their habitat are key to conserving coastal wildlife.

Bobcats are one of those alpha creatures that signal a good, healthy ecosystem: If they can co-exist with development, this is a place where animals and plants of all kinds can thrive. Two of the cats collared recently already have been killed by cars while crossing streets. The more researchers can learn about the cats, the more the conservancy will be able to tell property owners about how to safeguard them.

It is becoming tougher for wildlife to thrive as Kiawah builds out.

Homes are starting to crowd the natural environs that are its allure. The resort is about half developed now. Sooner or later, most of the high ground will be built upon. Marginal, "natural" areas -- such as the wildlife-rich expanse of dunes on the island's west end spit toward Capt. Sam's Inlet -- are being eyed for construction.

Meanwhile, the Freshfields Village market area just off the island is becoming a shopping mecca. Behind it, Bohicket Road is developing as a market area. This place could become another Hilton Head, one more gardenlike barrier island gradually overrun and turned into a city.

"We're a developed island, and we're getting that very specific information from the research to help us maintain it as a habitat," Chitwood said. The techniques they learn "can help coastal communities all the way to Florida." And they already are. The phone rings daily at the conservancy or town's wildlife biology office as other researchers look for keys to preserving natural landscaping and wildlife corridors.

Sure, you're thinking, swanky Kiawah as a model for preserving the coastal barrier islands? But what's going on here deserves a closer look.

Why Kiawah?

Chitwood isn't your ordinary environmentalist. He has that shoulder-shrug modesty of a research guy, and he wears it like a lab coat over the quiet command of a corporate exec. He's a retired physical organic chemistry researcher who spent most of his career at Eastman Kodak, the imaging company.

He wasn't looking to retire to a cabin in the wilderness. He was looking to retire to Hilton Head, until he couldn't stand what was happening there anymore.

On Kiawah he saw a chance to help do it right. He joined the conservancy and was asked to take a role in its research, a mix-and-match set of projects tracking bobcats, banding birds and taking inventory of other wildlife such as minks. He immediately asked one of those commanding questions: What can you do with it?

Knowing what to do with it, as it turned out, is Chitwood's strength.

"To me it was an 'Aha!' moment," said Donna Windham, conservancy director.

"The question in my mind has always been, why do we care? What can it tell us? That's just in my DNA," Chitwood said. He brought in academic and environmental agency partners. He pored over the research already compiled and began connecting the dots. The bobcats, particularly fascinated him.

If you go

What: Kiawah Conservancy's 'An Evening with Rudy Mancke.' Cocktails-and-dinner fundraiser for the Dr. Jim Chitwood Science Fellowship Program to pay for ongoing wildlife research.

When: 6 p.m. Saturday, October 29.

Where: The Sandcastle, Kiawah Island.

Cost: \$75 per person. Limited seating, reservations required.

To register or request more information: Go to <http://www.kiawahconservancy.org>, click on 'Events,' call 843-768-2029 or email jennifer.woody@kiawahconservancy.org.

On the web

To track bobcat movements on Kiawah Island, go to www.wildlifeatkiawah.com.

The island seems to hold a relatively stable population of the wild cats, and the dominant males have staked out five distinct territories. Younger males tend to get pushed off the island: They have been found as far away as Green Pond in Colleton County. The clincher is that the habitats preferred by the remaining bobcats tend to be important habitats for other species as well -- wetland fringes, secondary dunes and the like.

The bobcat study led to the conservation of more than 20 acres of that habitat. But that's not going to be enough. The conservancy also has been working with property owners on

natural landscaping. That, Chitwood saw, might be the key.

"Landscape has to play a key role, and part of the question was, can it?" Chitwood said. The idea is, if enough property owners can be persuaded to maintain enough natural landscaping, it would give the bobcats the passages they would need -- habitat for them and any number of other critters, including 83 species of nesting and migratory birds, such as bluebirds and painted buntings.

"Get it simple enough, focused enough and it's doable," Chitwood said. "It's the great island beauty that brings property owners and guests. If we can get that air time (with owners) we can have them onboard, because they want it."

End game

It seems to be doable. The conservancy, so far, has persuaded owners to keep a total of 15 more bobcat-habitat acres natural. That's not much on an island of more than 7,000 acres. But it's a start.

As landscaping replaces environs, the satellite tracking will tell the conservancy how the bobcats react. Tracking the populations of other species, particularly birds, will help gauge the changes too.

So, the conservancy is moving from its first stage -- working to keep natural areas -- into its second, "developed" stage, teaching people how to respond as species react to changes. The "end game" now is adapting a developed island to maintain a workable