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 Guns

*Like St. Augustine, Florida

Miami’s Killer Cuban Sandwiches
By Rick Bragg
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The growing legacy of Ted Turner's wild son Beau
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.

CHRIS DIXON
When I reach his pickup truck at 6:00 a.m. sharp, Beau Reed Turner IV 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 wispy forty-year-old mashes 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, 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 wispy forty-year-old mashes 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 bear a gobbler. “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, clerger, 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-checkboned grin, lanky, boyish good looks, and twangy drawl. He’s 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 Lowcountry 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 560,000 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 world. 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 rancher, is the 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 before he learned everything I knew and I learned everything he knew.”

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 Montanans—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...
red cockaded woodpeckers on Avalon. The late 1990s to establish the endangered
even tiny red cockaded woodpeckers, are ley and oats, along with bear, turkey, and
food plants, including fields of wild bar-
on bees and plant pollination. Because of
an ongoing study to determine fire's effect
lands regularly—a practice that has led to
is it fireproof, but it's hurricane proof.
longleaf pine is the an-
tortoise is strong diggers, of endangered gopher tortoises around
find refuge from the baking or freezing
of slash and loblolly pine and tung nut
trees—originally planted to produce
and privet and have removed thousands
swaths of kogan grass, bamboo, kudzu,
on invasive plants. They've denuded
pecker homes. "See that resin?" asks
Don't necessarily have to be there to see
who not only likes to move dirt, but who
and watching his own son start
like a deer in the headlights
atoms and videos games helped
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,
other landowners offer kids the chance
he's operating the project in

The public now understands that the
is interbreeding with coyotes.
are near enough that we hear them coming
through the leaves, perhaps thirty yards
a great spot, but we need to ready assess the public's concerns and whether the habitat can sustain a population."

"But the benefits of having them could be huge," Beau says. "The Francis Marion National Forest is far more open
this work, Avalon's forest is far more open
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"Hurricane Hugo should teach you that longleaf pine
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The disconnect is just so great."

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ON THE BIRDS
we take up a position opposite
the birds alongside a pair
of tire tracks. I sit in front,
the sound of kids starting to run. I draw a bead and squeeze
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be placed on blighted or unused land
Beau says his dad’s spent most of his
about 90 percent."
I respect that. Do I believe 100 percent
out loud. "I believe that scheme anywhere else? It’s inten-
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