

Backyard Briefs

A weekly column

By Judy Jessop, Nature Conservancy Volunteer

My memories of Bull Run Island are watery. I have viewed it from a boat or canoe often and each time the island's earthen feet lurked ghost-like beneath murky water. My most recent visit however, was different, for Jeff Horton of The Nature Conservancy, and I were able to walk through this forested floodplain island on exposed solid ground that was moist but not muddy.

We took careful steps, for dotted on the forest floor along with tupelo and other young hopefuls, were what we came in search of, baldcypress saplings. We were surveying this island because The Nature Conservancy and the Nicholas School of the Environment at Duke University are conducting research here, which should help us learn how to manage forests in a way that encourages the regeneration of baldcypress.

On this day Mother Nature seemed to be demonstrating rather dramatically, that there is at least one factor that is very important to the success of young bald cypress—a bit of dry weather. We have all noticed the drought that has broken a few records this summer. What some may not realize is that we have had four years of drought conditions. With each passing year more of Bull Run Island's soil has become exposed for longer periods.

Changes in elevation on an island like Bull Run are measured in inches and when the water level of the river recedes slowly we begin to see the micro topography on such an island. An interesting circular pattern of different aged baldcypress was repeatedly evident as we went about checking on research plots. Cypress seeds germinated each summer wherever the soil was exposed. As a result, we could tell just how far the water receded each year by the age of the cypress seedlings. On a slight mound, for example, we would find four year old saplings that were ringed by three year, followed by two, and finally this year's seedlings. Each band expanded outward from a central highpoint, the trees stepping downward in size, providing a permanent record of how far the water receded with each passing summer.

Until the drought of recent years, the germination of cypress seedling was very low on this island. Though long-term healthy regeneration of baldcypress may require the combination of several conditions, the importance of a dry period for seed germination is clearly demonstrated here on Bull Run.