

The story behind *Southern Wonder*

When I moved to Alabama in 2002 to take a job as an assistant professor at Birmingham-Southern College, I was embarrassingly ignorant about the state's incredible beauty and fascinating flora and fauna. That same year, Bruce Stein of NatureServe published a report listing Alabama fifth among US states for total species. What's more, the state ranked number one in biodiversity in the East. I soon designed a course to explore Alabama's biodiversity and teach foundational concepts in evolution, ecology, geology, and conservation biology. I had to learn *why* the state had so many species, and for that I turned to the technical literature and fellow scientists across the state. I often lamented there was no book to explain why the state was such a marvel. In 2008 I used my first sabbatical to begin writing a book for the public to celebrate and explore the Alabama's biodiversity. Three-and-a-half years later, I finished the draft, and after another eighteen months the University of Alabama Press published the book (November 2013).

This was my first attempt to write for a non-science audience and I was unsure if the book would succeed. Much to my delight, *Southern Wonder* has been well-received. It even won several awards including the Southern Environmental Law Center's 2014 Phil Reed Environmental Writing Award, and the Southeastern Library Association's 2013 Overall Excellence: Hard Cover Award. But most importantly, the book is getting into the hands of people who live in and visit the state, empowering them to be good stewards and advocates for the state's biodiversity.

I have many people to thank for help along the way. My family—especially my wife, Ginger—were patient and supportive. The Nature Conservancy of Alabama and my dear friends Ann and Dan Forster contributed the funds needed to publish the book. A grant from the World Wildlife Fund for Nature sponsored several of my expeditions within the state. Over thirty photographers donated the images. And finally, the staff at the UA Press transformed 97,600 words into the beautiful book that it became. I offer my eternal thanks to you all.