

50 STATES, 50 FIXES

In Alabama, a Social Media Influencer Really Gets Wild

Kyle Lybarger built a loyal following online by talking about native plants and why biodiversity matters.



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Nerding out on native plants may not seem like a formula for success as a social media influencer. But meet Kyle Lybarger.

Born and raised in Alabama, often wearing camo, Mr. Lybarger has found an unexpected degree of internet fame by introducing his followers to the overlooked world of Southeastern flora.

Along the way, he has become a guardian — sometimes official, sometimes not — of a growing patchwork of rare and endangered plant populations across several counties in northern Alabama and beyond.

50 States, 50 Fixes is [a series about local solutions](#) to environmental problems. More to come this year.

“A lot of what we’re doing is saving these remnants so they still exist if people want to bring them back in the future,” said Mr. Lybarger, who is 32.

In a state where more than 90 percent of the land is privately owned, that has meant knocking on doors to speak with landowners who are unknowing hosts to rare plants. Mr. Lybarger, a forester by training, offers to care for those populations at no cost, thanks to his income from social media.



Kyle Lybarger has become a guardian of rare and endangered plants in Alabama.



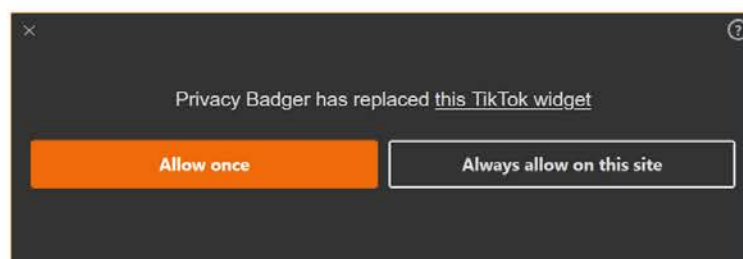
A forester by training, he helps some landowners care for native species at no cost.

On TikTok alone, he has almost half a million followers.

“Kyle figured out some secret sauce that immediately carried like wildfire across the nation,” said Dwayne Estes, executive director of the Southeastern Grasslands Institute and a professor of biology at Austin Peay State University. “It’s an incredible success story in American conservation.”

When pressed, Mr. Lybarger attributes his social media success to stubbornness, to a positive energy he inherited from his late dad and, largely, to not worrying about what others think.

“I was a deer hunter, forester, Southern man posting about flowers,” Mr. Lybarger said. “You have to really not give a crap about what people think of you to do that.”



It all started with what Mr. Lybarger now recognizes as a terrible mistake.

About a decade ago, he was managing a private forest where the owner let him hunt, and he wanted to attract more deer and wild

owner let him hunt, and he wanted to attract more deer and wild turkey. The land included an open, rocky area, and he decided it would be a good place to plant food for wildlife. As is often the practice, he treated it a bit like a farm: He sprayed it with herbicide, added soil, put down a feed mix and cut down some trees to let in more light.



"I was a deer hunter, forester, Southern man posting about flowers," Mr. Lybarger said. "You have to really not give a crap about what people think of you to do that."

Given the dry, shallow soils, it didn't take.

But around the edges of the glade, where he hadn't sprayed or seeded, the additional sunlight unleashed a beautiful surprise.

"I came back up the next summer and it was just, like, color everywhere," Mr. Lybarger said. "Just, like, really crazy looking plants that I saw and I was like, I feel like I should know what this plant is."

Now, of course, he can name them. The bright orange clusters were butterfly weed, the elegant purple spikes were blazing star, the Seussian silhouettes were rattlesnake master.

After he posted photos of the flowers on Facebook, a local botanist and science teacher named Kevin England got in touch. On a visit to the glade, Mr. Lybarger marveled as Mr. England pointed out rare and vulnerable species like Alabama larkspur.

Mr. Lybarger realized that he had killed off an area with a wild seed bank of countless species that were ideal for attracting wildlife, all in order to plant two or three species that weren't part of the native ecosystem.

Editors' Picks



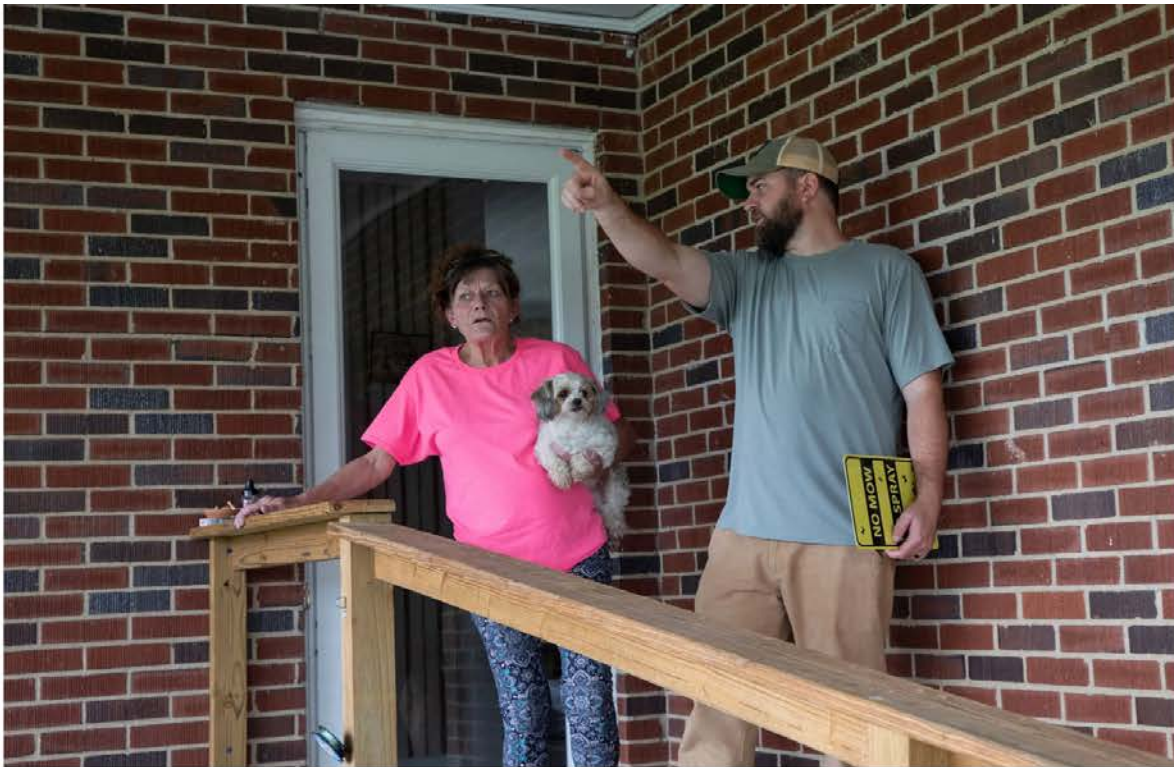
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A Fashion Week Not Quite Like the Rest



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Mr. Lybarger and Pat Eaton, who has a patch of endangered fleshy-fruit gladeceess growing near a pond on her family's property.



Mr. Lybarger placed signs on a roadside in Lawrence County, Ala., in an effort to protect a patch of rare plants.

“That’s kind of when the lightbulb went off in my head that managing for biodiversity, and what’s supposed to be there, is probably the best option.”

He dove into an emerging body of research indicating that before

European colonization, the Southeast was home to expansive grasslands in addition to forests. Over the centuries, fire suppression and other factors allowed forests to dominate areas that were once savannas, a growing number of scientists say.

Mr. Lybarger found a mission: to save the remnants of those grasslands.

And so, one morning this spring found him chatting with Pat Eaton, who has a patch of endangered fleshy-fruit glade cress growing near a pond on her family's property.

Worldwide, the plant grows in only two Alabama counties, in fewer than 10 known populations, according to Al Schotz, a botanist at Auburn University and the state's natural heritage program. Only one of those populations is on public land, he said.

"This species, it could disappear in a heartbeat, and we have quite a few others that fall into the same category," Mr. Schotz said. "Private landowners, they'll be the cornerstone of conservation for a lot of these plants, because state and federal agencies, they just don't have the funding to go acquire every parcel of land with a very rare species."

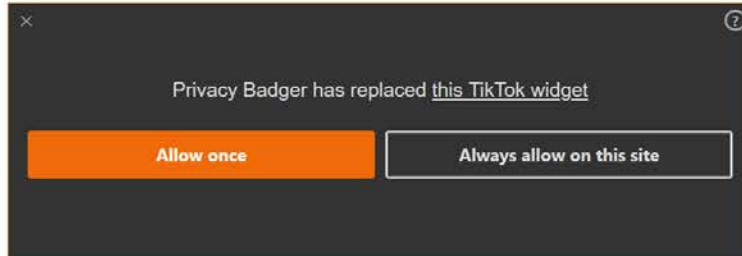
Just a stone's throw from the patch on Ms. Eaton's property, a long strip of dead grass showed where someone had sprayed herbicide along the road. Mr. Lybarger asked Ms. Eaton if it was OK to hang a sign instructing people not to mow or spray.

"Absolutely," she replied.



Over the centuries, researchers say, fire suppression and other factors allowed forests to dominate areas that were once savannas.

A few miles away, Mr. Lybarger pointed out another federally endangered species, leafy prairie clover, that his social media followers had been instrumental in protecting. In 2023, he partnered with an artist to design a T-shirt featuring the plant, hoping to raise awareness and help pay for conservation efforts. Then, he said, he found out that some of the timberland where the wild populations grew was for sale.



"We ended up raising over \$100,000 just from T-shirts," Mr. Lybarger said.

He used most of it to purchase the 24 acres that had been put up for sale, which he has pledged to put into a land trust or conservation easement. The remaining \$20,000 or so will go toward similar projects in the future, he said.

But he thinks his biggest contribution comes through education on social media, influencing people to grow the native plants that best support declining pollinators and other insects.

"One person, one yard, one-tenth of an acre can make a bigger difference than you think," he said.



