



NaturePhile

Written/Published by: Your Trust-ed Staff

Volume #11/Issue #1 2013

The mission of the Balsam Mountain Trust is the stewardship of the natural and cultural resources on Balsam Mountain Preserve and the Blue Ridge Mountain region achieved through effective land management practices, scientific research and environmental education.



BMP members (left to right) Walton Reeves, Catherine Enright, Mary Staton, Bill Staton, Al Tunstall and Cindy Tunstall pose with the Trust's new horse. The Trust Board approved the purchase of the vehicle to facilitate moving/transporting larger crowds to incredible nature experiences.

(Photo by Michael Skinner)

In this issue: From the Trail Head (a report from your executive director); Education News; Save the Date—Trust Birthday Party; State of the Preserve (land management report); Some Beautiful Flowers



From the Trail-head

By Michael Skinner, executive director

Here we go again—another season in the cycle of life is turning green on the color wheel. Okay, well, green along with a few other colors but green is the color thermometer and it registers mostly healthy for life in and around the Preserve. We're seeing signs of life from our human friends as well. And speaking of friends, I want to offer a public apology to Rick and Kimberly Zimlich who donated to the Trust last year but whose names were missing (from the donor list) in the annual report we sent out as part of our 2013 Trust fund-raising package. The support we

receive from each donor is vitally important to us being able to continue to perform our mission. Occasionally something will slip through the cracks and in this case their being recognized did just that. A correction has been made on the annual report and we did get their names on the donor plaques which will be on display on the Preserve. So, to Rick and Kimberly—thank you for your continued support.

Natural and Cultural Resources Reports for 2013

These reports will be included quarterly in this publication to keep BMP members apprised about the general health of the natural and cultural resources on the Preserve. This report will touch on species, conditions, etc. which may be problematic at varying levels but the news, for the most part, should always be good. Due to management costs and a budget limiting the scope and range of what we can do, we may enlist the assistance of interested BMP members and/or outside consultants, volunteers, etc. At a minimum we will do everything we can to see that the treasures you've come to know and care about—that help make your residing on the Preserve important—are stewarded for their continued survival and your enjoyment.

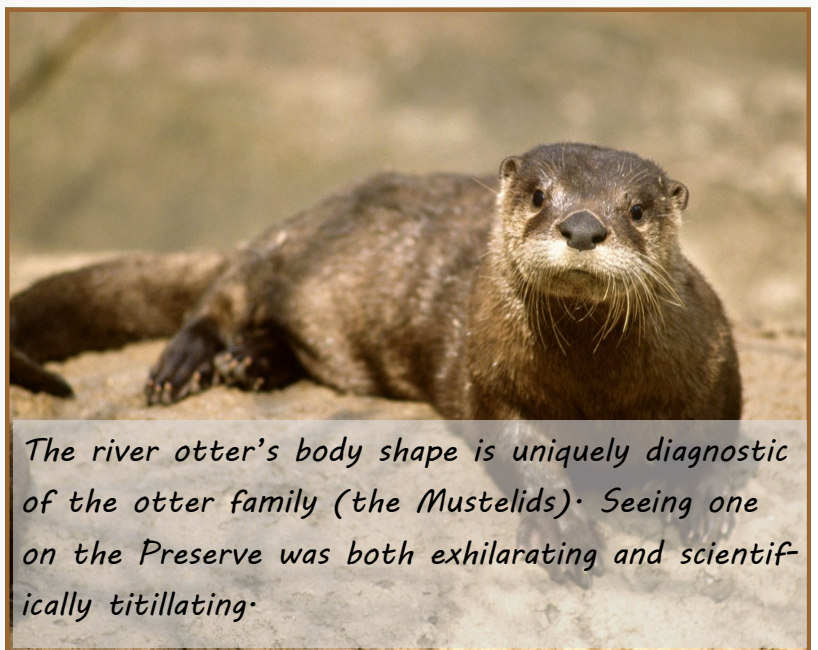
You'll find the Natural and Cultural Resources Report included in this issue.

Calling All New and/or Any Interested BMP Members

Establishing a new home anywhere is often fraught with any number of challenges. If you've chosen to call the Preserve home then you're probably to varying degrees interested in the natural beauty this community offers. To that end I would like to offer an invitation for each and every BMP member to make plans to become more enlightened about what your Trust does. There are a lot of moving parts on the Preserve's 4,400 acres and I would like to suggest it is important for each of you to understand both the simplicity and complexity of the natural systems in which you've chosen to live. There's no better time to do that than when you see the greening up of the land on the Preserve. Whether it's flowers, birds, bugs, mammals, etc., it's never a bad time to see and learn about who your wild neighbors are. With that too is the chance for us to walk your homestead to determine just exactly what it is you have in your private corner of the planet. Give us a call and begin your journey.

Amazing New Species Sighted on the Preserve... No, Really!

Many of you know I like to have fun when in the woods and interpreting everything wild but this is a case of being as 'serious as a heart attack, ack, ack, ack, ack.' So, one summer at band camp; no, wait a tic, so I'm driving on the Preserve one day late in April, accompanied by two of the three members of the German natural history film crew (see that mention in this issue) and we're heading



The river otter's body shape is uniquely diagnostic of the otter family (the Mustelids). Seeing one on the Preserve was both exhilarating and scientifically titillating.

up to Cold Spring Gap—where they hoped to film black bears and wild turkeys—and what to our wondering eyes should appear but a long, lean and lanky (otherwise known in zoological parlance as dorso-ventrally flattened) mammal known as a river otter. I kid you not. There was no mistaking the unmistakable appearance of this animal. It looked to be a young animal, so probably a nomadic male looking for new territory. Regardless, the creature was sighted crossing the downhill side of Preserve Road—below where the tree-house and pavilion complex is just before the intersection of West Club House Road. WOW! Was that cool! Mind you there are river otters in western North Carolina and probably in Scott's Creek—the creek just across the highway from the Preserve and, the creek into which all water leaving the Preserve flows, but seeing one far from water big enough to support its appetite was compelling. Maybe one our BMP members will get to see it. If you do, please let us know where and when it was sighted.

Trust Welcomes German Natural History Film Crew

The Trust was delighted to hear about international award-winning natural history documentary filmmakers Nautilus Films (http://nautilusfilm.com/index_en.htm) having an interest in working with the Trust to get footage for their series on U.S. national parks. Great Smoky Mountains National Park is one of the eight parks they are featuring. The reason they reached out to us was based on our relationship with the Park and their need for a private facility which would enable them to be able to perform certain filming techniques which they were not allowed to do in the Park, e.g., working from



The Nautilus Film crew comprised of (from left to right) Dr. Thassilo Franke, Jan Haft and Johannes Berger will benefit from the private nature of the Preserve by being able to film uninterrupted, set up blinds from which to film, etc. If you happen to see them while they're here please stop and say, "Hello," that is of course unless they're filming.

blinds. The Trust will receive international recognition as part of their project and, while here, they may discover new species or film some really fascinating things. From that they'll present a Trust Talk in 2014 for the BMP membership. They are filming with state-of-the-art equipment and are looking for a few particular species and subject matter. So, if you happen to see a box turtle on the road in the Preserve please detain the animal, noting exactly where you found it; call Michael and/or drop the little guy off at the Nature Center. Same goes if you find a turkey nest while on your forays around the Preserve. They'd really like to get shots of the young birds coming out of their eggs. That would really be neat for anyone to see. Hummingbird nests and nest building are also very high on their list of needs.



Education News

By Blair Ogburn, senior naturalist/education coordinator

Summer Camps 2013: Best way to take (and keep) kids outside!!!

Have you ever noticed that when you take a child outside they immediately get excited about something out there? Whether they see a clod of dirt or a bug underfoot their spirits seem to lift? Usually the minute I walk outside with a child the nature observations begin.

Habitat does not seem to matter to a child either. It could be my sister's perfectly manicured lawn or the 100+ acres of wildness behind my house and within seconds my 9 year old son says, "There's a squirrel!" or he points out a bird or a bug or a flower or some rain, or a stack of rocks, a pile of poop, a fresh fruiting strawberry and even a mushroom. And all the while I probably could have taken this same walk yet only to notice the fresh air and a bird song. If I cannot be young forever I am so glad I have someone young to be with.

One of the reasons I teach nature camps is to take children outside and keep them there. Even with a hub of operations (like the Nature Center) we still spend most of our time outside during day camp. This year we have a camp line up that will not disappoint with adventure and learning packed into each day. Your children (or grandchildren—from ages 4+) will be immersed in Mother Nature's bounty of beauty while spending time here with the Trust 'animals'.

Take a look at our camp schedules below (and please don't forget to take a moment to sign up your campers). By the end of May these camps will be filled with kids from many wonderful places so let us know early if you plan to have a camper here.

Summer is a time to learn and to play and to explore and to exercise and, it is simply the best time to be in the great out-of-doors. Sign up now and your campers will celebrate being young, wild, and free – best of all with the summer Trust Team: Michael, Blair, Dawn, Stormy and Jessica from Activities.



Summer Camp Date	Summer Camp Age Group	Summer Camp Theme
June 18 – June 21	*Ages 6 to 13	Combination Camp (Nature, Sports, Arts and Adventure)
June 26 – June 28	*Ages 4 to 6	½ Day Art and Nature Camp
July 3 – July 6	*Ages 7 to 13	Nature, Arts and Culture Camp (and 1 overnight camp out)
July 9 – 11	*Ages 5 to 10	Wild about Animals Camp
July 16 – 19	*Ages 6 to 13	We Love Water Camp (must be able to swim and/or wear life jacket)
July 30 – August 2	*Ages 8 and up	3rd Annual Adventure Camp



Save the Date (please)

31 August 2013 (Saturday)

*The Next Trust Birthday
Party*

(Details will follow as they become available)

Land Management Report, 1st Quarter, 2013

The quarterly land management reports provide BMP members with updates on the state of the natural and cultural resources on the Preserve. As different times of year (seasonality) render some gathering of information problematic, these reports will provide the reader with information on the state of these resources appropriate to the season and situation.

A View from 30,000 feet:

One of the things the Preserve has going for it is that, overall, the general health of the natural resources is excellent. What is beginning to become problematic are some of the threats to which natural systems are constantly and consistently subjected and challenged. Some of those have been monitored on the Preserve for some time and the current conclusion with some of these dastardly critters is that there is nothing we can do stop the damage, sickness, outcome, etc. As is the custom with scientific observation though, we'll maintain our vigilance and keep up our communication with experts as well as continue to monitor any new information which may help us in our fight to maintain a healthy environment on the Preserve.

A Close-up View:

Botany: With the herb layer emerging and leaf-out on trees in early progression at the time this report was written there isn't too much to offer related to the continuing health of the botanical side of the Preserve. What follows though is a bullet-points list of some of the obvious and known aspects of our plant societies. A more comprehensive report will be offered in the second quarter issue of *NaturePhile*:

- The hemlocks (*Tsuga canadensis*) being treated on property remain healthy save for a few trees showing loss of vigor due to their individual level of adelgid (*Adelges tsugae*) infestation; most appear to be sprouting new growth buds; we will assess cone production in the second quarter report; our consulting expert, Frank Varvoutis, will continue to assist the Trust in assessing overall health of the treated trees. Ron Lance reported mid-year in 2012 that some of the treated trees were showing varying levels of stress. This is an ongoing project and updates will be provided in this report.
- A cursory look at varying age classes of American beech (*Fagus grandifolia*) continues to show a range of viability. Observations show continuing die-off from beech bark disease with some trees (in all age classes) exhibiting good vigor and leaf-sprout. As with the hemlocks, updates will be provided throughout the year.
- Through discovery during the crafting of a forest assessment and management plan by Forest Stewards, there is a unbalanced ratio of vines growing on trees on the Preserve. Project leader Rob Lamb has determined in some areas for every two trees there is one vine. The vines are grape (*Vitis* spp.) and pipevine (*Aristolochia macrophylla*). Luckily kudzu (*Pueraria lobata*) is located in a small area near the boarding house ruins and adjacent to holes #8 & 9 on the golf course. As the Preserve's management is crafted the vine concentrations will be considered for management strategies.
- One thing which seems to be certain for spring wildflowers this year is that it is shaping up to be a productive and thus beautiful season. Time for you to get out on the trail and see the bounty the Preserve holds in this regard.
- There will more information, identification and what BMP home-owners can do to help with different aspects of our management plan in upcoming issues of *NaturePhile*. Stay tuned.

Zoology: Wildlife on the Preserve is somewhat more difficult to assess due to what are, probably, obvious reasons. Because of that we utilize both scientific and anecdotal evidence as well as other reports, sightings, etc. to keep a running tab of animal life on the Preserve. More comprehensive reports, as with botany, will be offered in subsequent issues of the publication.

- Black bears are being seen with more frequency now that the weather is warming but since we don't tag

or track any individual animals many folks are probably seeing some of the same animals. Black bear populations remain healthy with a record number of animals being observed in western North Carolina. Note: the first Trust Talk of the season will be our regional bear biologist Mike Carraway who will better inform us of the state of the black bear in western North Carolina.

- The Trust's land management team has created a policy statement, which was added to the management plan regarding coyotes, wild pigs and domestic dogs and cats. Please read this addendum (below) and let us know if you have any comments.

Balsam Mountain Trust – Policy Statement for Natural Resource Management Strategy on Balsam Mountain Preserve – Addendum, 04 – 2013

- Wildlife Resources Management

- Coyotes, wild pigs (a.k.a. wild boar), domestic dogs and cats

This policy statement is an addendum to the Trust's *A Holistic Natural Resource Management Strategy for Balsam Mountain Preserve*. Specifically it addresses the following species:

- 1) coyote (*Canis latrans*)
- 2) wild boar (pig) (*Sus scrofa*)
- 3) domestic dog (*Canis lupus familiaris*)
- 4) domestic cat (*Felis catus*)

Recommendations:

(The recommendations and background information are based on conversations with western North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission large game biologist Mike Carraway, Joe Yarkovitch, wildlife biologist with Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GSMNP) and Lynda Doucette, chief ranger with GSMNP (Note: Mr. Carraway provided the recommendations for our current black bear management plan on the Preserve.)

Note: GSMNP does not have a management plan for coyotes (as they do for wild boar) because they don't consider the coyote an invasive species. Rather it is a native (North American) species expanding its natural range. This is happening because there is no predator, e.g., the wolf, controlling their populations. Coyotes are susceptible to the same diseases as domestic dogs, e.g., parvovirus, distemper, rabies, etc.

- 1) While wanting to do everything we can to provide for the unique experience of having wildlife living within the boundaries of the Preserve, we desire that this experience for BMP members/residents/visitors be as safe and non-confrontational as possible. While this may be problematic at some level, for the aforementioned species we are hereby establishing a depredation protocol for coyotes and wild boar.
- 2) In establishing this protocol the Trust's land management team will do everything in its power to see that 1) only the two species listed (coyotes, wild boar) will be attempted to be removed from the Preserve and 2) in removing same, the protocol will not allow, under any circumstances, removal by lethal depredation methods, e.g., leg-hold traps, poison baits, etc. This will eliminate the possibility of collateral damage to non-targeted wildlife and domestic animals.
 - a) If, after policy protocols are engaged and are unsuccessful, consideration may be given to engaging a professional trapper to assist with removal of coyotes and wild boar. Domestic dogs and cats may fall under this option depending on how problematic the situation becomes.
- 3) The depredation of coyotes and wild boar will be undertaken only by qualified persons. Qualification will be determined by the Trust and the Preserve's head of security.
 - a) Coyotes and wild boar may be taken any time of the year but cannot be taken at night.
 - b) Coyotes and wild boar may be taken during any sanctioned wildlife management hunts occurring on the Preserve, e.g., turkey season.
 - c) Any harvesting of coyotes and/or wild boar must be reported to the Trust and Preserve security; hunters must report species of animal taken, number taken and disposition of same.

d) Hunting of these species and hunter's methods for harvesting must be scheduled with and described to the Trust and Preserve security prior to the hunt.

4) Domestic cats and dogs*, for the purposes of a management policy are defined as:

- approachable/tame, thus possibly allowing the animal to be returned to its owner or, taken to the appropriate authority/shelter
- tame but unapproachable, i.e., the animal has obviously been with humans; the animal appears to be well-fed; may still have affixed collar or other identification item
- feral/wild, i.e., not approachable; runs when sighting and/or approached by humans
- It has been the practice on the Preserve to, when possible, attempt to capture domestic cats/dogs by live-trapping – the results of which will have the animal being taken to a local animal shelter or, if tenable, return the animal to its owner. This policy will continue.
- If the animal is obviously rabid and on the loose it should be dispatched as the situation warrants while allowing for the safety of human interaction.

* It has been the practice the Preserve and Trust to allow area bear hunters to train their dogs by letting them run and tree bears on the Preserve prior to the beginning of North Carolina's bear season. No bears are killed during these exercises. This serves a dual function: 1) it helps keep bears afraid of people and 2) it cultivates a 'good neighbor' feeling among the locals living around/near the Preserve

Note: these dogs are fitted with electronic tracking devices which allow their human owners to find them after their 'practice rounds' on the Preserve. Should any BMP member find one of these dogs please contact BMP security.

Note: To mitigate the possibility of your pet having a negative encounter with a bear, coyote, feral dog/ cat, etc., it is recommended that you leash your pets while walking/hiking on property. It is recommended not to let your pets run unattended.

Background Information:

Coyotes and wild pigs have established populations in western North Carolina

- Coyotes have expanded their range from the western United States and are continuing to do so throughout ranges east of the Mississippi River; there is anecdotal evidence of coyotes being brought into western North Carolina (and other eastern U.S. areas) by humans for sport hunting.
- Coyote control is problematic at best as when a pair-bonded couple establishes a territory it effectively negates nomadic coyotes from coming into that territory. This is where you have the double-edged sword, i.e., if you eliminate the established pair then you get the nomads who establish their own territory; if you leave the established pair then they breed and enlarge their families who then move out to establish new territories. They can also 'turn on and off' their ability to raise young based on environmental conditions.
- Coyotes are efficient predators but not wanton killers; they may hunt as solitary predators and/or will hunt in packs; coyotes are highly intelligent members of the dog family.
- Coyotes have been known to attack and kill wild game new to their diet, human pets and humans, although this last example is rare.
- In North Carolina there is no closed season on coyotes and they may be hunted at night.
- A coyote bit a pet dog belonging to a BMP member in March 2013; coyote bites in the United States average 4-7 bites/year while domestic dogs account for ~ 4.7 million (estimated) .
- Coyotes are established on the Preserve; anecdotally their numbers are small.
- There is no natural predator (other than humans) in western North Carolina which might control coyote populations (in the western U.S. wolves chiefly perform this function); coyotes have replaced the wolf in the eastern U.S. as one of the top-tier predators; others would be bobcat, black bear and mountain lion (which is also expanding its range from west to east).

- Wild pigs have had populations established in western North Carolina for a number of years; their occurrence is rooted in them having been brought into the area and released by unscrupulous hunters looking for a large game animal to hunt.
- Once established, a herd of wild pigs can destroy vast areas of forest, agricultural land, manicured lawns and golf course property while foraging for food.
- Wild pigs can be extremely aggressive and are very intelligent.
- In North Carolina (and similar to coyotes) there is no closed season and they are now considered nuisance animals.

Note: if you have any questions please call Michael at 828/631-1062

The wildflowers are blooming; time to get out and enjoy the bounty of the Preserve and the mountains. Send us your best pictures—we'd like to share them with everyone.

Photos by Michael Skinner

