



# NaturePhile

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The Balsam Mountain Trust inspires people to be responsible stewards of the natural and cultural resources of the southern Blue Ridge Mountains through education and conservation leadership.



Here kitty, kitty, kitty. The Isons (BMP members) photographed this very fat and (apparently) happy bobcat (*Lynx rufus*) on their homestead. The size and bulk of this animal tells us that this animal is living a very successful existence. They're, like most hunters, food generalists, meaning that when opportunity knocks, you pounce! While bobcats are common on the Preserve, they are, as are most cats, secretive so seeing one during the day is always a treat. Their home range is variable, i.e., it can be as small as a quarter square mile up to 126 square miles. Whew! It just depends on far the closest grocery stores are located.

Photo by: Steve Ison

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## From the Trailhead:

By Michael Skinner, executive director

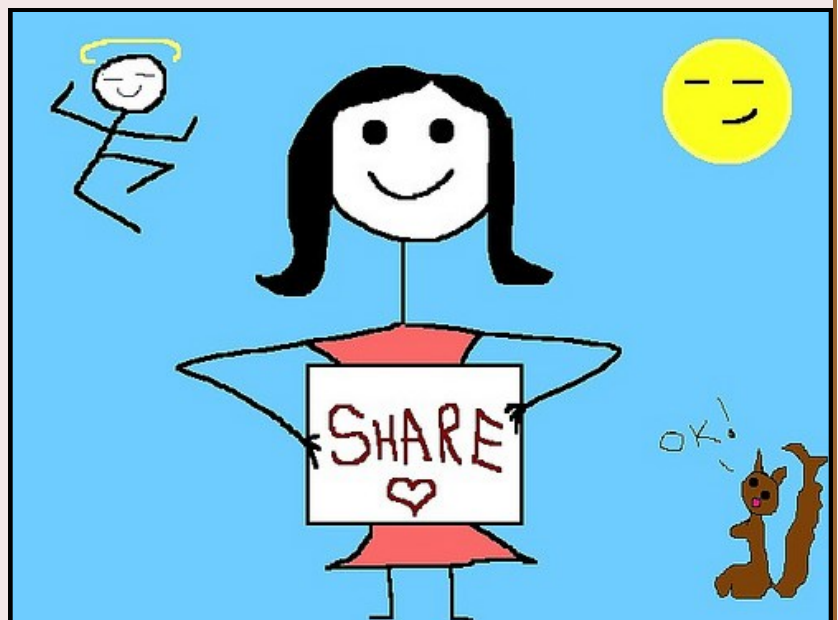
### Another Major (General) Thank You!

2016 was another productive, fun and eventful year for the Trust. As we consider how we're positioned to meet our mission, it is always humbling, as I witnessed with our autumn Trust party, how magnanimous so many Preserve members have been, and continue to be, towards helping support our tasks at hand related to our mission. As we go into 2017, we're looking forward to having many interactions with Preserve members to bring to each of you the wonders of the natural world. And many wonders there are to behold. We want to encourage each of you to take advantage of what the Trust offers to those who call the Preserve home—for whatever length of item you find yourself 'at home' on the Preserve.

And at year's end, we observed how generous members continue to be as it relates to our annual end-of-year ask fund-raising effort. With the ongoing generosity of our anonymous challenge grant member, many of you again reached into your philanthropic purses and wallets to provide a significant and important amount of the funds necessary for us to continue our mission. This fact notwithstanding, I must mention too, of the generous and selfless efforts extended to the Trust by our volunteers and our Board of Trustees—all of whom work for free. Trust outgoing board chair, Rob Howard, has been integral as the operational glue stick for the past two years. The new chair, Janie Stratigos, I'm confident, will continue where Rob left off, with a dedication to mission and in helping the Trust remain an important part of both helping the Trust craft BMP member's sense of place as well as to assist with our continued success with its message to the local communities around the Preserve. Our commitment to environmental education has proven to be an important part in the lives of school children and families who participate in these programs.

### Share and Share Alike

You'll recall that Trust senior naturalist Rose, and her husband Bryan, decided to start a family in 2015. With that, Rose took time off her full-time position in 2016 to get to know her new baby primate, Marginy. In her stead we hired an interim naturalist, Jen Knight for a 14-month term of service, who, coincidentally, is raising a primate of her own (Zora). During that time Rose and Jen conspired to come up with a proposal of job-sharing the position of Senior Naturalist/Education Director. After considering their proposal, myself and the Board of Trustees unanimously agree to give this a go. We're excited that we are able to keep both of these amazing people. We're also looking forward to each of you to stop by and participate in the programs we're all going to offer this year.



The Trust has embarked on a job-share arrangement with Rose and Jen. Both of them are building families and asked for this consideration and were, without hesitation, provided the opportunity to do this. They've both expressed gratitude for the Trust accommodating their schedules.



## Hitting the Dusty Trail and Backyard Habitats

I'm very excited to offer a couple of new opportunities for BMP members in which you can become involved. The first one is a program we've discussed many times in the past and are now looking forward to getting under way in 2017. Many of you have spoken of wanting to Adopt-a-Trail on the Preserve and



The Dark Ridge Creek Trail is one of many favorite trails BMP members love to hike. If you want to adopt this one you better get your vote in early (and often!) to become the groomsperson(s) as the most popular trails will go fast. Seriously though, we can have teams to perform the grooming protocols.

Photo by Michael Skinner

now it looks you'll have that opportunity. We'll schedule a date later in the year which you can attend to learn about how any of you can take ownership of your many trails located on the Preserve. We'll team up with the BMP maintenance crew to provide the care and feeding of the trail system on the Preserve. What BMP members can do is provide important support services while the maintenance crew does the heavy lifting.

This idea was incubated most recently by one of your own—BMP owner/member, Dr. John Morse, who has been keen on doing this for quite some time. As stated, we'll schedule a meeting closer to spring time to work out details. In the meantime, if you'd like to get on the list by picking your favorite trail to adopt, shoot Michael an email and he'll start a list.

The other initiative we're going to try and start this year is the ambitious goal of having everyone's homestead land become certified as Backyard Habitat. This is program developed by the National Wildlife Federation and you find

out more about this program by visiting this site: <http://www.nwf.org/Garden-For-Wildlife/Certify>. An attainable goal for 2017 might be to get 20 homesteads certified. And with a nominal cost of around \$20,

we're hoping that this year will be a sell-out! We'll announce informational meeting times for this program as the season progresses. Stay tuned for a lot of fun on the mountain this year.



## Education Mewsings:

By Jen Knight, interim naturalist

### Flower Power!

If you've been on the mountain since Thanksgiving, you've probably noticed the white tarps in some of the grassy areas along the Preserve roads. These areas are the inaugural plots of the Balsam Wildflowers Project planted by volunteer BMP members in late November. The planting event was the culmination of much planning, research, and reconnoitering by Charlie Harris of the BMP Plant Committee and Trust naturalist—Me!

These plantings are one half of a two-pronged approach to increasing wildflower growth along BMP roadsides. Besides planting new tracts of wildflowers, the project also seeks to preserve existing stands and solicited the input from members over the summer to locate them on the Preserve. Working with Johnny Nicholson and the maintenance crew, we developed a subtle marking system to protect these





From left to right: Beckie Yon, Louise Sparks, Jayne Parker, and Rob Howard clear debris and sprinkle seeds at the West Gate plot.

Photo by Jen Knight

nine species they selected are a mixture of annuals and perennials that, in addition to satisfying these criteria, should also re-seed well.

With all the legwork completed, seven intrepid volunteers and I set off on November 27<sup>th</sup> 2016 to scatter seeds and beautify the mountain. Those white tarps? They're actually an agricultural cloth called row cover. Typically used to prevent frost damage, we employed them to fend off hungry turkeys to give our seeds the very best chance at germination in the spring. Of all the flower species planted, the ones likely to bloom this coming spring are the clasping coneflower, the ox-eye daisy, swamp sunflower, and false sunflower.

The Balsam Wildflower Project is more than a beautification effort. These areas will provide critical habitat to local and migrating pollinators like native bees and monarch butterflies. With pollinators on a worldwide decline, quality habitat patches like these are becoming increasingly important. Fortunately, what's good for bees and butterflies is often good for other critters too. The seeds and cover provided by the flowers are important resources for small mammals and birds which in turn are prey for snakes, birds of prey and other predators.

areas from mowing.

We also asked members to submit the locations of sunny spots along well-traveled roads and intersections as potential spots for planting. The final sites were selected with an eye toward visibility as well as likelihood of planting success. After we reviewed and flagged all the sites, the BMP maintenance crew provided invaluable site preparation assistance.

Meanwhile, the BMP Plant Committee worked on putting together a custom seed mix. They wanted a balance of blooms that would succeed in

the given locations, benefit wildlife, flower throughout the season, and, of course, dazzle on-lookers. The



Balsam Blend Seed Mix from left to right: (top row) purple coneflower, black-eyed susan, clasping coneflower, (second row) lance-leaved tickseed, swamp sunflower, Shasta daisy, (bottom row) smooth aster, ox-eye daisy, false sunflower.





From left to right: Charlie Harris, Jim Watson, and Sabrina Watkins tamp down newly planted seeds at the Trailing Way plot.

Photo by Janie Stratigos

Conservation efforts to support pollinators and other wildlife are central to the Trust's mission and we are delighted that so many people and groups could come together to make this project happen. If you'd like to get involved in future plantings, or want create your own pollinator paradise, contact me ([jknight@bmtrust.org](mailto:jknight@bmtrust.org)) to purchase surplus seeds and find out about more opportunities.



### AmeriCorps:

By Bethany Sheffer, CTNC AmeriCorps Service Member

Hello everyone! It is lovely to finally issue a formal greeting to you all! I am absolutely delighted to be serving as Balsam Mountain Trust's 2016-2017 Education Outreach Coordinator through the Conservation Trust for North Carolina (CTNC). I may have met some of you in passing at the Nature Center, but I'd like to formally introduce myself to the BMP community now that our previous (and wonderful) AmeriCorps member, Larissa Lopez, has completed her term of service and moved on.

A native of Michigan, I grew up in the state's scenic Upper Peninsula. I was encouraged to take an interest in the natural world at an early age by my father, who harbored a love for animals, and by my daycare guardian, who was an Ojibwa native. I spent a great deal of time exploring nearby creeks and forests while learning the importance of respecting the land. Once I entered college at Grand Valley State University, however, my interest in studying language persuaded me to minor in Spanish and major in Public Administration so that I could eventually work in the nonprofit sector. I received a B.A. in Public Administration with the additional major of Liberal Studies in 2011, where I explored social and political development in Latin America. In the spring of 2016, I received a Master's in Public Administration with an emphasis in Nonprofit Leadership from Grand Valley State University in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

My zeal for the natural world didn't catch up with me again until 2013, when I enrolled in a "Beginner Birder" workshop through my state's Audubon chapter. That experience re-ignited my passion for the outdoors while sparking an exuberant interest in wild birds. Since then, I have participated in both local and international bird-focused citizen science efforts and currently advocate for a number of bird-related causes. I'm especially interested in those that intersect the U.S. and Latin America because of my educational background and personal experiences in that area of the world. Additionally, I am extremely



passionate about educating people about the importance of birds, their diverse habitats, and the need to protect them both.

While I was drawn to the Trust for a number of reasons, I was most inspired by its focus on engaging underserved populations and its utilization of native wildlife in educational programming. I developed an interest in working with under-represented populations during my nonprofit career in Michigan and see a necessity to include marginalized groups of people in conversation, surrounding environmental sustainability. My early exposure to wildlife and enthusiasm for preserving it also stirred an interest in working closely with captive animals, particularly birds. I am absolutely overjoyed to have such an incredible privilege!

I am greatly looking forward to developing ties with Jackson County residents and BMP members during my tenure at the Trust, so please do stop by and say, "Hello," if you visit the nature center. During my time with the Trust, I will be working on a number of projects that seek to engage additional underserved audiences while developing key partnerships with community organizations in Jackson County. One such endeavor will be a migratory bird festival in the spring and that's very exciting for me! I will also be continuing Larissa's work of engaging the local Latino community and developing instructor kits for monarch and pollinator programs. Additionally, I will be delivering the Adopt-A-School, monarch and pollinator programs at elementary schools and will be offering backyard birding programs to libraries in Jackson and Haywood counties this spring/summer. I love the work thus far and look forward to an exciting year filled with abundant learning opportunities, new friendships and unique adventures!



Bethany is shown here with one the Trust's ambassadors, Luna the barn owl. As an AmeriCorps service person, the Trust tries to immerse service members in as much programming animal handling experience as we can. Bethany's enthusiasm is contagious which makes it really fun to work with her.

Photo by Larissa Lopez