



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.



This redtail hawk came our way after being found in the road in Jackson County. A good Samaritan was referred to us by the NC Wildlife Resources Division (we get a lot patients this way). The Trust is allowed to keep an injured bird of prey (or other critter) for 24—72 hours and then must turn it over to a licensed wildlife rehabilitator or veterinarian. The Trust has become known as the triage site for injured birds of prey in the region. This bird is still undergoing rehabilitation and so we won't know its prognosis for some time. Keep your fingers crossed for her though.

Photo by M. Skinner

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From the Trailhead:

By Michael Skinner, executive director

The Reputation We've Enjoyed (But Don't Take for Granted)

This thought relates to the photograph on the cover of this issue of NaturePhile, as the Trust has become the 'go to' organization in western North Carolina for not only injured, orphaned and otherwise not-doing-so-well, birds of prey, but for all manner of other of Mother Nature's children. And while we're not a licensed wildlife rehabilitation organization, we are legally al-

lowed to act as first responders. The western-most region of the state has a dearth of people trained and operating wildlife rehab clinics and that is a shame because human-wildlife encounters are increasing. It's always interesting too, to meet the people who take time out their busy lives to deliver their charges to the Preserve. It has often made the difference in whether or not a raptor may survive.

I mention this in my column because it relates to one of the benefits the Trust provides to not only the residents of the Preserve, but of the surrounding communities as well.

And Yet Another New Journey of Discovery to Begin on the Preserve

Beginning in April this year, the Trust, in cooperation with Western Carolina University's Geosciences and Natural Resources Department, is embarking on a population study of the bobcat (Lynx rufus).

Bobcats are referred to as keystone species, i.e., a keystone species is a plant or animal that plays a unique and crucial role in the way an ecosystem functions. Without keystone species, the ecosystem would be dramatically different or cease to exist altogether. All species in an ecosystem, or habitat, rely on each other. The contributions of a keystone species are large compared to the species prevalence in the habitat. A small number of keystone species can have a huge impact on the environment. (from National Geographic Society)

The methodology for this study includes, among other things, the placement of 'game cameras' in specific places on the Preserve in or around the conservation easement (CE). We're very pleased that Mr. Carlile (the CE owner) has granted the Trust permission to access the CE for the purposes of this study.

The Trust would also like to publicly acknowledge the following BMP members who purchased one (or more) 'bobcat-cams' for this study: Jayne Parker and Beckie Yon, Elaine and Michael Fulbright, Cindy and Al Tunstall, Andrea and Rob Colton, Janie & Jim Stratigos, Lisa and Sal Guerriero, Linsky, Levinson, Rosenblatt families, Karen and Andrew Manidis, Mary and Marshall Bassett, Sheri and David Straw, Jan Kohl & Robert Farquharson, DonnaJean & Bill Mamrack, Mary Lyon &



The bobcat in this photo was captured in a camera-trap when the Trust and the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Division did a survey for spotted skunks on the Preserve. That's the great thing about camera-traps—you never know what might turn up and say, "Cheese!"

The 'alien eyes' are a result of the camera strobe-light bouncing off the tapetum lucidum, located in the back of the eye. More commonly known as 'eye shine', this is what gives many animals such great night vision.

Rob Howard, Terry & David May and Tom & Lynn Pokorny. We hope that this project will provide significant data to help us determine the status of this magnificent native wild cat on the Preserve.

Many Trails Diverge in the Woods (of the Preserve) and We Take All of Them...Eventually (with apologies to Robert Frost)

Many of you enjoy the wonders of the outdoors on the Preserve by way of the many trails located on the property. This is just a quick note to let you know that by the time you read this, Trail 38 will be open and ready for business. You may recall that this trail was shut down some time ago by the occurrence of a weather phenomena (probably either a micro-burst or tornado) in and around the Dark Ridge Campground area. It was estimated that about 40 (plus or minus) acres were essentially leveled by the force of the storm. And because so many trees were knocked down, it was necessary to close Trail 38.

Trail 38 is really nice because it covers a relatively easy distance of about five miles which means it's also easy to hike, incorporating both woodland and road paths. This loop trail which begins just above the campground and ends at Dark Ridge Camp. So, lace up those favorite hiking boots and head east, south, west and north. Oh, and when you see any member of the Preserve's maintenance crew, thank them for their effort in getting this wonderful trail opened up.



Sixth Trust Board Chair Installed in January



Janie Stratigos is the sixth Board chair in the Trust's history. She joins eleven other Trustees who will continue to guide the organization to even higher levels of success.

Photo by M. Skinner

Longtime BMP homeowner Janie Stratigos was installed as the sixth Trust Board chair in 2017. She will serve a two-year term. Along with the other eleven Trustees, she will be at the helm to work with the Trustees, the Trust staff and its myriad stakeholders to position the Trust for continued success.

The other Trustees are: Ed James (treasurer), Linda Outlaw (secretary), Mary Arbaugh, Carol Landers, Al Tunstall, Peter Smith, Pete Bates, Sheri Straw, Jan Kohl and Roy Gallinger. Jan Kohl and Roy Gallinger are the newest Trustees whose terms began this year.

Any Board member or Trust staff person is always willing to have conversations with any person interested in the Trust.

Milestone Reached with Trust's (Now Officially Permanent Resident!) Bald Eagle - Hope

There is now yet another reason to think that naming our bald eagle Hope was a good idea. Not only was the moniker originally applied because of the history of this bird (more on that in a moment) but it was particularly apropos as we were waiting (and Hope—ing) that we would finally receive our permanent U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service blessing by granting Hope permanent resident status (particularly interesting in the current political climate too) with the Trust. As many of you know, this is the third eagle the Trust has had in its relationship with the American Eagle Foundation (AEF), located in Pigeon Forge, TN). The AEF believed in Michael's experience and expertise enough to allow the Trust to have (now—three different eagles: Spirit, Freedom and Hope) an eagle to use in its environmental education programs. One, among many, of the benefits of having such a charismatic ambassador, is how close program participants can get to this, and our other 'faculty' during our presentations.

Now, back to Hope's history. She was the victim of a thoughtless person and their well-aimed rifle, i.e., she was shot in the left wing which rendered the tissue and bone damaged enough that she can no longer use the wing for flight. This is what rendered her as a permanently non-releasable bird. She does, however, have a personality suited to glove-training and public presentations—which is how she's utilized in Trust programs. She's a very vocal bird and will often 'talk' to visitors at the Nature Center. Hope turns seven this year. We're not sure if you know this or not but all bald eagles hatch on July Fourth!

We hope to have many years of her engaging the thousands of program participants who meet her. And remarkably she could live to be fifty in captivity. Whew!

Please stop by and wish her Happy Residency when you're in the neighborhood.

Note: You may recall we had a naming contest amongst BMP members and Hope was the clear winner with a huge majority of votes!



Hope mugs for the camera. Her (now) permanent resident status granted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to the Trust now makes it easier for the Trust to deal with less paperwork and any uncertainty about her future home. YAY!

Photo by M. Skinner



Education Mewsings:

By Rose Wall, Co-Senior Naturalist/Education Director

Balsam Mountain Trust LOVES Our Volunteers

Volunteers are vital to the operation of any non-profit organization. And here at the Trust we are no different. We rely heavily on volunteers to provide care for our animals. Others also assist with educational outreach or carrying out small field research projects. Most of our volunteers and interns are students from local universities and high schools that aspire to have a career working with wildlife. Our staff understands that they are not just here to enjoy themselves; they are also here to gain experience and to determine what career path they want to take. Knowing that, we take our roles as mentors very seriously. We are honored to have the opportunity to provide that experience for a cohort of young people working to help protect wild things and wild places.

Volunteer Spotlight: Bret Ladrie

Bret Ladrie is a Junior in the Natural Resource Department at WCU. He's been volunteering with us since his Freshman year and is a huge asset to the Trust. I sat down with him this week to ask a few questions:

2016 by the numbers:

volunteers: 16

of hours donated: 755

Estimated value: \$18,000
(National Corp. of Com. Service)

What do you enjoy most about volunteering here?

Bret is especially excited to be able to work with the animals directly, such as flight training birds. He has a particular affinity for our Harris's Hawk, Apollo. Bret says that coming here is one of the best parts of his week; it's a time for him to relax, enjoy time outside and with animals, and to learn from Trust staff.

What are your aspirations for the future?

When Bret started college, he wanted to be a biological field researcher. But through his volunteer position here, and his time at other similar organizations, Bret has discovered his love of sharing scientific information with the wider community. His dream job now is to be a curator at the NC Museum of Natural Sciences.

How do you think this volunteer position will help you reach your goals?

Bret said that volunteering here has broadened his horizons and opened him up to new career opportunities. He's gotten the experience he needs to secure other positions, like his internship last summer at the NC Aquarium. And, as a bonus, he feels more connected and knowledgeable about nature in the region. He finished up by saying: "I just love this place!"

Given our small staff size, we would not be able to accomplish near the amount of work we do with our volunteers. Please join us in offering them a heartfelt THANK YOU.!





AmeriCorps:

By Bethany Sheffer, CTNC AmeriCorps Service Member

Precipitous Palm Oil: How you can Make Better Consumer Choices that Help Birds and the Indonesian Rainforest

What do cookies, ice cream, lotions and crackers all have in common? They contain palm oil, a substance that has become ubiquitous in society. This highly sought-after product is now present in half of all products found on U.S. grocery store shelves and is experiencing increasing demand around the world. In just the past decade, production of palm oil has doubled and is predicted to do so again by 2020 (Zuckerman 26).

So what's the big deal? Why should we care? For one, palm oil production in Indonesia and Malaysia, where the majority of the world's palm oil is grown, has wreaked havoc on rainforest ecosystems. Audubon Magazine reports that 75 percent of the 102 bird species that depend on lowland forests found on Indonesia's Sumatra island are now regarded as globally threatened (26). What's more, fragmentation of rainforest habitat by roads and oil palm plantations make it easier for poachers to target birds such as the Rhinoceros Hornbill, a beautiful bird with a large casque (beak) that closely resembles its relative, the Helmeted Hornbill. Chinese middlemen pay handsomely for Helmeted Hornbill casques because of their similarity to ivory. These birds' casques are hollow, but poachers confuse the two and have consequently decimated both species' populations. Scientists place current estimates for the Rhinoceros Hornbill at fewer than 3,000; Helmeted Hornbills are critically endangered.

Second, destruction of Indonesia's tropical rainforests poses consequences that extend beyond ecosystem disruption and bird populations. The archipelago serves as one of Earth's most important carbon sinks while also boasting its largest concentration of tropical peatlands – soils formed over thousands of years through the accumulation of organic matter. When palm oil companies scorch the peatlands in preparation for planting, enormous quantities of carbon dioxide are released into the atmosphere. Indonesia ranks fifth in the world in greenhouse gas emissions because of those emitted by peat decomposition and deforestation.

So what can you do to help? As a consumer, there are conscious choices you can make to ensure that the palm oil products you purchase are sustainably grown and harvested. Consult groups such as the Rainforest Action Network (www.ran.org) and Greenpeace (www.greenpeace.org) who track the industry and produce scorecards on a company's adherence to sustainable and ethical practices which can inform your purchases of products that contain palm oil. You can also read Audubon Magazine's full report on palm oil harvesting at: <http://www.audubon.org/magazine/fall-2016/as-global-demand-palm-oil-surges-indonesias>



And Finally...



It was recently discovered that one of our co-senior naturalists/directors of education—Jen, apparently has some form of superpower which affords her the opportunity to control certain aspects of behavior among the humans and other animals on planet Earth. Seen in this artist's rendering (one of her students), Jen was captured using the EE ray to plant post-hypnotic suggestions of caring for all life on Earth in the brains of any living creature within reach of the powerful energy pulse. If you need proof just look at the people and bugs to the left of Jen in the drawing.

Keep close to Nature's heart... and break clear away, once in awhile, and climb a mountain or spend a week in the woods. Wash your spirit clean.

— John Muir