



# 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.

Breaking News: Possible new World Record blue-gill caught (and landed) at Ruby Valley pond. Angler is ecstatic! See related story inside.

*They're here!*

Like the fire ants before them, it was thought the climes of the Southern Appalachian Mountains would be to inhospitable for the nine-banded armadillo (*Dasypus novemcinctus*) but...guess again. They, like the coyote, are expanding their range in the United States. (See related article in *From the Trailhead*).

**In this issue:** **From the Trailhead:** The Immigrant Song; Good News x 2; Possible New World Record Fish; **Education Mewsings:** Learn with Leopold; **AmeriCorps Update:** Second Tour of Duty; **Say It In Pictures:** Annual Trust Party Photo Collage



## From the Trailhead:

By Michael Skinner, executive director

### The Immigrant Song (apologies to Led Zeppelin's Robert Plant)

I find the continuous challenge of keeping up with the curve balls Mother Nature throws at us as both exhilarating and, at times, extremely frustrating. But, that's okay because for her, it's all a part of the grand plan—at least to my way of thinking. We're all here to go along (and enjoy) for the ride. During that ride, we should all aspire to want to be good passengers on Earth Uber (or Lyft).

So now, to relate this initial musing to the front cover photo, armadillos have indeed made there way into North Carolina and, more specifically, to the Preserve. As noted, the cover shot was taken with one of our (your) bobcat game cameras. I haven't nailed down the exact location yet but the photo was taken on the Preserve. And once these critters are moved in, they become somewhat intractable and problematic from a wildlife management control perspective.

What we'll need to do is research best practices methodologies as to possible control measures for this species. Once again, as is often the challenge with invasive exotic species (and armadillos definitely qualify in this category), managing them may be more a form of control, rather than attempts at eradication. Because, like coyotes, once established it is very difficult, nigh next to impossible, to completely eradicate them. We'll need to have 'all hands on deck', i.e., each department on the Preserve that has anything to do with greenspace (which is pretty much everyone), to develop the best, most efficient and least destructive (measured in a range of from least destructive to not destructive at all) methods of control, contain, remove, etc., in an attempt to keep them at bay.

BMP homeowners, the golf course crew, the Community Association and community maintenance will all have to be on alert to determine when these are being seen, where they're being seen, how many, etc. The Trust will work with all departments to come up with a plan as soon as is practical and will keep BMP owners/members apprised of any progress and methods as developed.

### We Always Love Good News x 2

1x—BMP owners/members Sabrina and Jim Watson accompanied me to the top of Doubletop recently. This was Sabrina's first ascent of the tallest peak on the Preserve! THREE CHEERS! Jim had scaled the peak before but it was really cool to be with them as Sabrina continues to get her 'mountain legs'. Sabrina, Jim and I hosted visiting prospects on this hike who really seemed to enjoy their experience. Who knows, we may have new Balsam neighbors soon.

2x—The screech owl pictured here was another of the injured birds of prey we received this year. This bird, and this story, have a happy ending in that, after being treated and deemed releasable, it was taken back to the place where it was found (not too far from the Preserve) and released. It wasted no time in 'hauling feathers' back to the woods. YAY!



## ***POSSIBLE NEW WORLD RECORD BLUEGILL (BREAM) CAUGHT ON THE PRESERVE...FAKE NEWS?...YOU DECIDE***



With a fight-time pursuit of almost 4 hours, which, by the way, is usually reserved for billfish and sharks, Trust Naturalists (Captain) Jen Knight and (First mate) Rose Wall, fought valiantly to land this prize 'panfish', otherwise known as a bluegill or bream (sunfish family). Because they're naturalists, they thought the proper thing to do was to release it back into the Pavilion pond to fight another day.

To say they were stunned by the size of this piscine predator is an understatement. They are now in the process of submitting the requisite materials to the International Game Fish Association (IGFA) for confirmation of a possible new world record. Since Jen was the actual angler who

hooked and landed the fish, she will receive any accolades accorded to the record. The current world record is 5-pounds, 12.8 ounces. This fish weighed in at an amazing 47 pounds, 3.2 ounces. WOW! Could it be a cichlid... we'll find out.

[Editor's note: As of publication, Rose has retained legal counsel in preparation for the financial remuneration (prize money) battle which may ensue.]

We want to caution all BMP members/owners that when fishing at the Pavilion pond, especially with youngsters, you bring your own fighting chair just in case you should hook into this monster.

If you look at the photo (top), the anguish, the effort, the amount of physical effort expended is almost palpable.

The lower photo is of the proud angler after an amazing struggle. The photo-bomb penguin was not planned. The bird was removed by BMP security. No attempt was made by the bird to eat the fish.

Note: No fish were harmed in the creation of this 'fish story' and barbless hooks were employed.



Photos by M. Skinner

## Education Mewsings: For the Love of Leopold

By: Jen Knight, Co-Senior Naturalist/Education Director

**“One swallow does not make a summer, but one skein of geese, cleaving the murk of a March thaw, is the spring.”**

Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*

Aldo Leopold, considered the “father of modern land management”, recorded seasonal changes around his Wisconsin home in a 1949 collection of essays called *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There*. Come January 2018, the Trust will be piloting a new reading/writing three-part winter series around this classic. In the spirit of the coming writing workshop (and shameless Trust-promotion) I thought I would share how the book has influenced my ( and my family’s) own perception of, and helped us cope with, the Minnesota winters we endured as Florida transplants (before coming to our senses and moving to WNC).



As required reading in most university wildlife departments, *A Sand County Almanac* was my first experience with Midwestern ecology. Before moving to the Twin Cities, Leopold’s epic saga of the Northern winter was especially compelling: tree branches breaking under the weight of snow; the eerie silence of the snow-muffled woods; the first spring wildflowers defiantly erupting through the tyranny of the oppressive white blanket. Little did I know these distant and foreign concepts, the struggle of life versus snow, would one day become the routine events of my everyday life. One day, I too would anticipate the sight of geese (admittedly though, far from being my favorite animal) as a sign in a still-bleak winter landscape that spring will indeed return.



At first, the snow is enchanting. I learned there is magic in these northern winters and found myself echoing Leopold’s appreciation for its mystical stillness. Under its spell, a gray stand of skeletal trees is transfigured into a glistening confection, the cardinal’s hue amplified to brilliant punctuation, and the moonlit sojourn of the fox across the marsh is frozen in time. Even the flapping of wings can be inscribed upon winter’s snowy tablet, an ephemeral treat for the observant snow-shoer.

Top: Winter is what you make it.  
Above: Me, in 2010, conquering MN snow.

Photos by: Jen and Neal Knight

But like many others, I felt my appreciation for the beauty of fresh snow dwindling sometime around the beginning of February. For me, as a native Floridian, the novelty of northern winters wears off long before winter is over. I found myself not longing, but aching for spring; certain, that if I had to shovel the walk just one more time, I

would finally and truly lose it. You know things are bad when you actually want a Canada goose in your yard.

And then, it snows.

For a few moments, despite all my grumbling, I was entranced by the stillness once again. Under that magic winter spell, the dirty plow piles are bleached, the rooftops frosted, and icicles cast a diamond shine on the otherwise dingy gutters of my own house. I would try to save up some of the wonder and amazement for when I had to chip ice off my windshield, but was largely unsuccessful in this endeavor.

I found, somewhat paradoxically, that the best way to stave off the oppressive side of winter was to face the cold head on—another of Leopold’s lessons. As we looked forward to more winter storms and

icy roads, I was determined to live the never-ending winter to its fullest by focusing on winter-only activities. Snow-shoeing was my favorite outlet and there is still nothing quite like the instant gratification of tracking in the snow. The powder of a fresh snowfall captures every twitch and movement of the wildlife who must traverse it and I will admit there is a grim sense of satisfaction and solidarity knowing that all of us—humans, mice, and even geese—are in this together.

Leopold taught me to find the magic in the simple and commonplace events of nature. Nature observation isn't all dramatic raptor kills, rushing waterfalls, and storming ice floes. The subtle transitions and deafening silences can be just as striking when you look and listen for them. I hope you too will find new inspiration in his writing and so, invite you to join us for our first session on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017. We'll be welcoming remote participation in this workshop by harnessing the power of technology – so no excuses! Contact me for more information at [education@bmtrust.org](mailto:education@bmtrust.org).



It's never hard to find the beauty of winter on the Preserve.

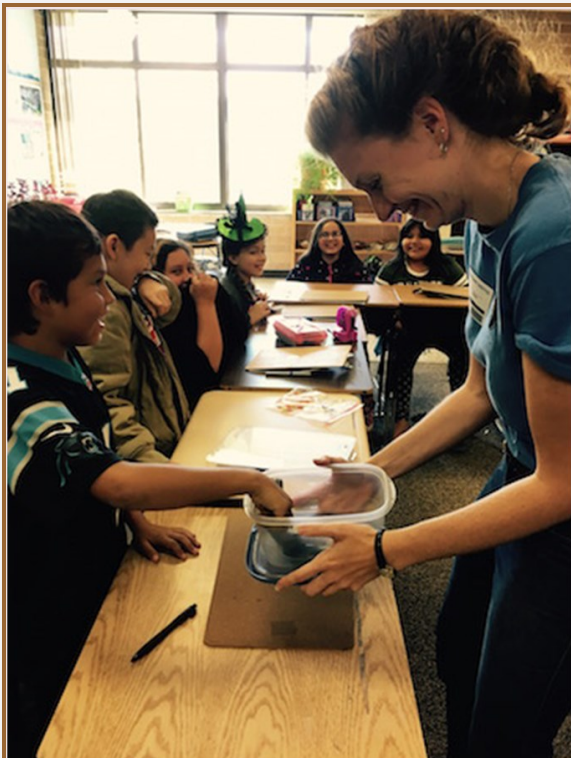
Photo by: Jen Knight

## AmeriCorps Update

By Bethany Sheffer

Hello, everyone! Many of you already know that I've signed on for a second (and final, unfortunately) AmeriCorps service term with Balsam Mountain Trust. I will continue to serve with the organization until the end of June 2018. I've deeply appreciated my time with the Trust and am excited to continue working on projects, delivering programs and learning from Trust staff.

During these next several months I will be focusing on completing three projects that carried over from my first term: 1) creating a Pollinator program educational kit for 1<sup>st</sup> grade teachers, 2) developing a high school internship protocol and 3) organizing the Trust's second annual International Migratory Bird Day Festival. These projects will greatly enable the Trust to expand its educational outreach and invite individuals of diverse backgrounds to participate in environmental conservation.



**“Feel the slime and scales!” Students touching a trout during AAS’s “Fish and Amphibians” segment.**

On the educational front, this year’s Adopt-A-School programs have commenced and are going splendidly! Each one of the program’s nine sponsors agreed to champion their same schools for the 2017-2018 session, so we couldn’t be more pleased. I’d like to warmly recognize our newest sponsor, who is a newcomer to the Trust Board this year as well: Dr. Roy Gallinger of Sylva Family Practice. We are so grateful for his generous sponsorship of Scott’s Creek Elementary School and look forward to the visit next year. Monarch butterfly programs at our two partner schools wrapped up in October and were a joy to deliver. My most cherished moment from those programs involved witnessing 2<sup>nd</sup> grade students’ enraptured observation of a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis. It was truly magical and an undoubtedly impressive moment for them! Through this program and the Trust’s summer rearing efforts, we released between 50-60 Monarch butterflies this year – so exciting!

### **And Finally...It’s Always Good to Share Fun Times**

And while this year’s Trust Party was supposed to be a ‘low-key’, celebration, it seemed to be anything but. The Trust staff and Board of Trustees were humbled by the show of support. Thank you! Thank You! Thank You! And now for your enjoyment, a few images illustrative of the fun and success. Enjoy!

