



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.



Sometimes the wonders of the natural world just defy descriptives and I believe this shot is one of those times. Kathy Nervie was at the helipad with guests from out of town and, talk about right place, right time she got this! This is an example of just how amazing the views can be from the Preserve.

In this issue: [From the Trailhead: Support Comes in Many Different Flavors](#); [Mourning the Loss of a Dear Friend](#); [Education Mewsings: Hibernation Hospitality](#); [AmeriCorps Update: New Service Member Nicole Cook](#)



From the Trailhead: Generosity, Sadness and the Times, They are a Changing

By Michael Skinner, executive director

Your Generosity is Deeply Appreciated:

The Trust staff and its Board of Trustees (currently comprised of BMP homeowners), was deeply humbled by, and appreciative of, again, the show of support at this year's annual Trust Party, which—by the way—continues to be one of the premier celebrations on the mountain. Both sides of this annual celebratory evening (i.e., the attendees and the planners) are evidence that the Trust continues to be an important part of the “sense of place” envisioned by the original developers of this project. We hope, too, that with new families becoming part of the Balsam family, we can provide each of you with experiences in the natural world that will enhance your time here as well as to provide you with a deeper understanding of why the health and prosperity of the natural world is so important to our own health and quality of life.



Time to Say Farewell to an Old Friend

Rusty, our American kestrel and longest-tenured and faithful animal ambassador, passed recently due to complications from liver cancer. She has always been a great bird with which to work and was easy for our staff and volunteers to handle on the glove. She was an adult, non-releasable program bird and was one of our two originally acquired species.

Kestrels do not have a very long natural lifespan, usually about 3-5 years in the wild. The advantage of captivity for Rusty was that she had excellent medical care, free room and board and very little stress. That often bodes well for an extended lifespan. We got her as an adult and had her for about twelve years, so she had a wonderful journey while she was with us. She provided some of the Wow! factor we bring to our programs. And while Rusty aged well with us, the record for a captive kestrel was about 22 years. Wow!

No! Not Again! Yet Another New (and Unwelcome) Species Recently Discovered on the Preserve:

We have become a global society in so many ways, and chief among the moving parts of this paradigm is the distribution of supply chain products around the Earth. When this happens, it invariably leads to hitchhikers. In this case, a recently discovered plant on the Preserve called Cypress spurge (*Euphorbia cyparissias*). Rose showed me the plant and it was a new one for my brain's inventory. I phoned a friend (many of you remember and/or know Ron Lance, who's arguably one of the best botanists in western North Carolina) and it turns out it may not even have been described here (western North Carolina) as yet. Jen had a hunch it was a spurge of some form or fashion, which it is.

Introduced in the 1860s from Europe by folks who thought it was pretty (haven't we heard that one before?!), it quickly spread and is now considered a noxious weed where it grows. It is a very hard



Last issue it was the German cockroach, this time it's the cypress spurge (*Euphorbia cyparissias*). This plant can be highly invasive and is difficult to eradicate, once established. The good news is that it is pretty easy to identify because it doesn't look quite like any other species found on the Preserve.

Top photo (web sourced); bottom photo by M. Skinner



plant and too easily eradicated. It can be harmful to cows and pigs if eaten but doesn't seem to bother sheep.

So when you're out hiking or otherwise enjoying the beauty of the Preserve and you come across this plant, please pull it up and destroy it. It will outcompete our native wildflowers. When pulling it up, please be careful to get the entire root system as it grows in runners (rhizomes) underneath the soil surface and if you're not careful, you'll break off the plant at ground level and leave the rhizome below, only to grow and continue its inexorable march of displacing our amazing native wildflowers.

And Now for Some Great News!

If you were at the Trust Party, I announced some really wonderful news about a recent certification the Preserve received. The entire 4,400 acres of the Preserve is now certified as a National Wildlife Federation Backyard Habitat. There are some Preserve members who had their individual homesteads certified in this process but now the entire property is certified. YAY! This is just one more way of recognizing that what the Trust does serves to make your experience on the Preserve that much for rewarding and fun...we hope!

BMP's own Dr. John Morse held Class for Bugs

Okay, actually the class was held for BMP members interested in learning about the amazing world of aquatic invertebrates, who also flyfish. Knowing what you're tying and/or throwing, that looks like real food for a wild trout, can be a great way to entice them onto your line.



Dr. Morse, standing, provides instruction into the amazing diversity of aquatic insects found in nature for BMP residents.



Education Mewsings: Hibernation Hospitality

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

As summer draws to a close, Balsam residents - human and animal alike - are starting to think about winter preparations. For humans fall is a time to prune back summer growth in garden, take the winter coats and sweaters out of mothballs, and increase the amount of Pumpkin Spice in your diet. Some of you may be closing up the house to head back to Georgia, Florida, and Texas.

Wildlife have their own autumnal regimes to prepare for winter. They too are “getting out” their winter coats, preparing burrows, and even changing their diets to accommodate the foods of the season and lay on a protective layer of fat. Some of them will also be heading to Florida and warmer climes.

Unlike Balsam residents, wild critters have a lot to lose if their preparations don't go perfectly according to plan. If they don't find just the right spot to hibernate or gather enough food stores they will die. While some winter attrition is natural, vulnerable wildlife populations can be disproportionately affected by sudden environmental changes – like the weekend disappearance of all the dead annuals in your garden, prime overwintering ground for many native bees.

Interested in helping wildlife overcome the high stakes? Fortunately, there are several easy ways for us to incorporate critters' concerns into our fall routines:

Leave It Messy - A manicured yard may be attractive to human eyes, but dead stems, brush piles and leaf cover are critical winter habitat for wildlife. If you prefer to keep things tidy, use trimmed stems as ground cover in the garden beds or designate a corner of the yard for yard clippings. Compost piles are excellent sources of cover and warmth so keep an eye out for opportunistic critters when turning in new material.

Rooms at the Inn - Birds and small mammals will shelter in empty nest boxes, so clear out old nesting material once everyone has moved out. Rock walls, gravel banks, and decorative stones with sun exposure soak up warmth and provide excellent basking spots for our cold-blooded friends. The faster they can warm up in the morning, the faster they can get to foraging.

Drinks All Around - Every living thing needs water so keep bird baths clean and full. A few stones in the water will allow insects like migrating monarchs to safely. The motion of a floating ping pong ball will keep the surface from freezing overnight during early cold snaps.

Supplement Your Spread - Planting late-blooming flowers and shrubs with fall/winter berries will provide a foraging boost to insects and other animals as they stock their larders and “carbo-load” for winter. Avoid dead-heading flowers until late November to allow migrating birds to stock up on fat and nutrient rich seeds.



Practice Good Hygiene - Bird feeders support migrating flocks on their long journeys and provide a reliable source of calories to the birds that overwinter. However, the constant stream of visitors from across the country can also make feeders a source of disease. Imagine if the most popular buffets along I 75 were never cleaned! Wash feeders with dish soap and disinfect with a vinegar solution weekly to prevent outbreaks.

The strength of the BMP community comes from the fellowship between neighbors and hospitality offered to guests. Together, we can extend the same warmth to our wild neighbors and visitors wherever we winter.



AmeriCorps Update: Introducing our Newest AmeriCorps Service Member, Nicole Cook

By Nicole Cook, AmeriCorps Service Member

I am so excited to be joining the Balsam Mountain Trust team as their CTNC AmeriCorps member and Education Outreach Coordinator! I am a recent graduate from UNC Asheville where I earned a B.S. in Environmental Studies. I was born in Raleigh and grew up in both North Carolina and Georgia where my family now lives.

I have always had a passion for nature and conservation. I grew up camping, hiking, canoeing and exploring the natural world. My first venture into conservation began in high school when I volunteered at a sea turtle rescue and rehabilitation center on Topsail Island. I continued my work with sea turtles in Costa Rica, where I helped lead groups of high school students on sea turtle conservation-based trips. During my time in college, I was fortunate enough to study abroad in Panama and South Africa while gaining experience in ecology and conservation field research. This is also where I developed interests in herpetology and ornithology. While I love to be out in the field, my true passion lies in environmental education. Before starting this position, I worked as a naturalist at the Highlands Nature Center, where I provided educational nature camps and daily programs for visitors to the Center. I learned that I love engaging with the public, and especially with children, to share my love

Above: Nicole, pictured here with her new 'kids', monarch caterpillars, has embraced her new position with the Trust and immediately took over raising monarch larva as part of the Trust's ongoing program to help this species.

of wildlife and the natural world as well as my passion for conservation!

I am so grateful that my journey led me here to the Balsam Mountain Trust. I am extremely excited about our Adopt-a-School programs. Teaching school children about the importance of the plants and animals around them is extremely important for the health of planet. It doesn't hurt that their excitement and enthusiasm are contagious. I am also looking forward to continuing to develop the Field Biology Internship for high school students. I think this will be the perfect opportunity to combine my experience in the field with an opportunity for mentorship and education. Previous AmeriCorps members at the Trust have delivered programs to families at a local women and children's shelter and I am eager to continue that work. I also hope to form connections with other underserved communities, particularly people with disabilities, and develop and deliver programs to these groups. I am excited to get started and to learn from Jen, Rose, and Michael along the way!