

THE
ECOFORESTER
WINTER 2023 NEWSLETTER



INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- 4 PROJECT TO SUPPORT RESTORING IMPORTANT WILDLIFE CORRIDORS
- 6 ECOFORESTERS WINS NCWF CONSERVATION ORGANIZATION OF THE YEAR
- 7 GAME LANDS PROVIDE MISSING WILDLIFE HABITAT
- 8 END OF AN ERA: WHATS NEXT FOR CANTON?
- 9 THE SOLUTION TO SOUTHERN APPALACHIA'S ROAD ECOLOGY CRISIS
- 10 THE GOLDEN-WINGED WARBLER'S FIELD OF DREAMS
- 11 SUSTAINING WILDLIFE IN YOUR BACKYARD
- 12 WE'RE GROWING OUR IMPACT AND OUR STAFF
- 13 A MISSIVE ON BEING OUTDOORS
- 14 BOARD PERSPECTIVE
- 15 ECOFORESTERS AWARDS



STAFF

Andy Tait
Co-Executive Director, Forestry

Jordan Bowerman
Forestry Associate

Lang Hornthal
Co-Executive Director, Development

Brittany Howard
Office/Project Manager

Krishun Karau
Forest Stewardship Director

Lauren Breiting
Outreach Coordinator

Gabby Hovis
GIS & Forestry Associate

Willow McNeil
Development Assistant

Joey Borders
Forester

Kelly Waldron
Forest Restoration Crew Leader

Andrew Danner
Forester

Bobby Gordon
Forest Restoration Crew Leader

Mackenzie Alexander
Forestry Associate

Will Walston
Forest Restoration Crew Leader

**Newsletter photography by Pat Barcas*

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Linda Tatsapaugh
President

Rebekah Robinson

Dr. Alex J. Finkral
Vice President

Josh Kelly

Rob Lamb
Treasurer

Jay Lanier

Pat Snyder

Bruce Pittillo



FORESTS ARE HUMAN AND WILDLIFE HABITAT

Who doesn't like wildlife? Well, maybe when it's a bear getting in your trash! But even then, we marvel at how close we live to nature and share in its abundance. The bear is actually a good example of how the human and wildland interface is slowly becoming one. Our backyards are homes for birds that spend time before heading south or maybe even den down for the winter. There are also small mammals, insects, and reptiles that depend on private lands to raise their young and continue their existence.

For the most part, we don't give much thought to where wildlife lives or what they need to survive. Nature will provide their food and shelter and will give them the space to thrive. And for the most part, wildlife is resilient and able to adapt to the loss of habitat by migrating to less developed areas or in some cases, evolving to co-exist in nature that has been influenced by humans. But what if our influence was more intentional and created habitat rather than alter or destroy it?



Copperhead snakes are one of many reptiles impacted by the loss of habitat.



The Eastern Red Newt will be impacted by the loss of Hemlocks due to the Woolly Adelgid.

This edition of the EcoForester will consider wildlife in the forested landscape and how forest restoration can be a tool that strengthens wildlife populations while better grounding our place in nature. We will share how a project is focusing on making wildlife corridors stronger and better prepared for animals that must migrate in response to development and climate pressures. It will also share what our partners are doing to help.

The goal of this edition is to stimulate reflection (and action) on what we can do as landowners and supporters of conservation to assure healthy wildlife populations remain on the landscape. It also gives us the opportunity to highlight the important work by our conservation partners that helps keep wildlife populations abundant and healthy. The more we are reminded of the incalculable value of the services forests provide, the better the chances that society will accurately consider the tradeoffs to future forest degradation. We hope you enjoy this edition and give thanks for the many critters in our community!



PROJECT TO SUPPORT RESTORING IMPORTANT WILDLIFE CORRIDORS

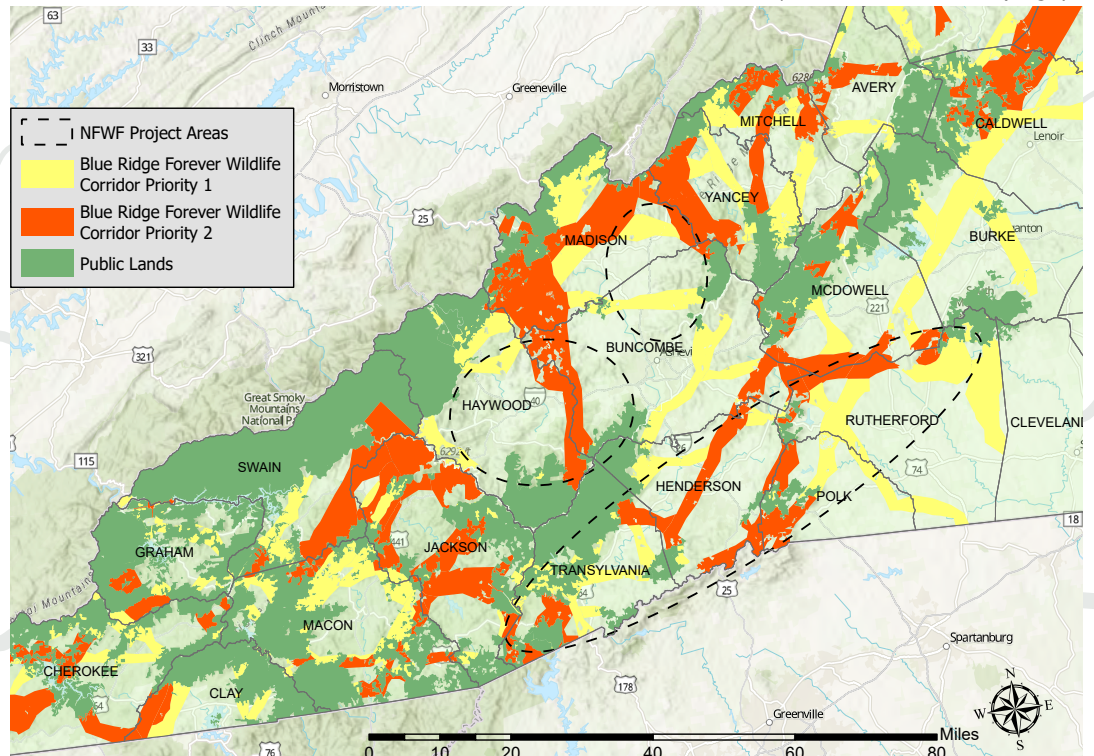
If you were an animal, where would you live? Chances are it would be within proximity of where you were born, or close to food and water sources. It would also depend on your stage in life and what resources you needed to survive. Whether it was a mate you were seeking to breed with or a hiding place from predators, your surroundings would determine whether you survived or thrived.

Due to increasing human populations and the desirability of the region, development pressures will continue to alter the makeup of forests and wildlife habitats. This often comes in the form of a housing or commercial development that removes forests from the landscape, or in the fragmentation of a forest. Both ways alter the landscape, creating a change of “scenery” for any wildlife that depends on that space for survival. With almost 70% of forests being privately owned, the impact of development on wildlife habitat will be significant. Fortunately, we also have public lands that provide refuge for wildlife.

Public lands and conservation owned forests provide a more stable habitat for wildlife to utilize over their lifetime. These lands often have less disturbance and high conservation values that benefit wildlife. This means that forests will continue to age and have qualities that are found in more mature forests, like nesting and feeding cover for animals that reside in tree canopies and cavities. These factors are great for preserving habitat, but also mean that younger forests are less prevalent on protected lands, unless land managers encourage them through harvesting or prescribed fire. Therefore, wildlife that needs a variety of habitats or has a larger natural range will also seek out opportunities in privately owned forests.

Private forests act as the connective tissue between more remote or protected areas. These corridors are vital links for wildlife, not only as their habitats are diminished, but also as a warming climate causes them to seek higher altitudes and cooler habitats.

(continued on next page)



Wildlife corridors help wildlife move between protected conservation areas.

Similar to wildlife passageways that help shepherd wildlife across busy interstates, wildlife corridors are the highway animals use to survive. This is why it is important to not only conserve forests and greenspace, but also to make sure existing habitats are healthy.

Our Prioritizing Restoration to Support Wildlife Corridors project was created to support landowners whose forests were located in important corridors. Private landowners are the unsung heroes in our communities, as the management of their land benefits both human and wildlife alike. But keeping your forest healthy can be expensive, which is why this project is sharing resources that help landowners plan for future challenges and fund stewardship activities like non-native invasive species control and oak regeneration. Supporting forest owners in their quest for healthier forests is the best way to ensure forests can continue to support our communities.

This work is in the beginning stages as we outreach to rural communities in our project area, providing free

consultations and workshops that give landowners choices and opportunities to improve the health of their forest. By improving the ecological conditions on private lands proximate to conservation land, we are increasing the landscape available to wildlife and better preparing for an uncertain climate future.

Wildlife habitat and forests will always be connected. Not only is it where they live and feed, but also where they hide from predators and humans. As habitat is lost due to development, it is important that we maintain remaining forested landscapes and restore them where needed.

The National Fish and Wildlife Federation recognizes that landowners need assistance managing their forest. It is an honor and responsibility to be a good forest steward and to make the necessary planning to prepare for threats to forest health. This grant will provide landowners with consultations, planning, and cost share assistance implementing their plan. By investing in landowners, wildlife and people alike will continue to prosper due to the services healthy forests provide.



If you are in our 12 county project area, own 10+ acres, and would like to improve your forests health, you can access grant funded consultations, discounted management planning, and cost share opportunities.

GRANT FUNDED CONSULTATIONS

- Have a forestry associate cruise your woodlands and consult with you on the health of your forest
- Learn about the tree species in your forest and how to improve the things you value the most
- Includes free mapping and invasive species checklist

AFFORDABLE FOREST MANAGEMENT PLANNING

- Forest Planning is the best way to assess your forest investment and values.
 - Planning can reduce property taxes
 - Planning will help you access cost share funding
- Planning takes the burden off your children and helps prepare for the future

ACCESS ADDITIONAL COST SHARE FUNDING

- Funding is available to landowners for forest improvement and invasive species control
- Get help applying for cost share and better understand what codes are acceptable
- Reduce your out of pocket expenses

This project is made possible by the National Fish & Wildlife Federation's America the Beautiful Challenge Grant. Learn more at: www.nfwf.org

ECOFORESTERS WINS NCWF CONSERVATION ORGANIZATION OF THE YEAR

By: Pat Barcas

“

IT'S
IMPORTANT
FOR THE
PUBLIC TO BE
REMINDED
OF ALL THE
BENEFITS
THAT
FORESTS GIVE
TO US THAT
WE TAKE FOR
GRANTED.”

The North Carolina Wildlife Federation has awarded EcoForesters with the 2023 Conservation Organization of the Year. EcoForesters Co-Executive Directors Lang Hornthal and Andy Tait accepted the award on Sept. 9 at the 59th annual Governor's Conservation Achievement Awards Banquet in Cary, NC. They were in good company- there were 18 awards given altogether, ranging from Land Conservationist of the Year, to Environmental Educator of the Year, to Wildlife Enforcement Officer of the Year.

“EcoForesters is grateful to accept this award. It's great because it's recognizing us on a state level, and it's bringing attention to our mission outside of North Carolina,” said Hornthal. “It's important for the public to be reminded of all the benefits that forests give to us that we take for granted.”

The event, attended by nearly 300 people, is the state's highest natural resource honor and a signature North Carolina Wildlife Federation Program since 1958. The crowd heard uplifting stories of conservation heroes in their quests to learn more, do more, protect more, work hard and fight harder for North Carolina's wildlife and wild places.

According to CEO of NCWF Tim Gestwicki, the awards give the organizations a chance to celebrate the beauty of nature and the commitment of those working every day to protect, conserve and restore North Carolina's natural resources. “It's always one of our favorite events of the year; a chance to celebrate the beauty of nature and the shared commitment of those working every day to protect, conserve and restore North Carolina's wildlife, habitat and natural resources,” said Gestwicki. “This year's honorees are helping ensure we sustainably manage our state's bountiful flora and fauna for future generations – North Carolinians who demonstrate promise and possibility while making great strides in preserving unique ecosystems and species.”

Hornthal said the event was an inspiration. “It's so important to broaden the reach of the public's understanding of forest health and impacts to our lives,” he said. “It's always an honor to be recognized, especially outside the world of forestry. It was inspirational to be at the event and hear about all the good work that's happening in our state.”



From left to right: Reid Wilson (Secretary of Natural and Cultural Resources), Lang Hornthal (EF Co-Executive Director), Andy Tait (EF Co-Executive Director), Jay Lanier (EF Board Member), Steve Chester (NCWF Board Chair) Photo Credit: Ricky Garni

“
IT'S ALWAYS AN
HONOR TO BE
RECOGNIZED,
ESPECIALLY OUTSIDE
THE WORLD OF
FORESTRY.
”



GAME LANDS PROVIDE MISSING WILDLIFE HABITAT

By: Chris Henline *NCWRC Conservation Technician*

Sandy Mush Game Lands consist of ~2800 acres of mixed hardwood/pine forest and old farmland fields. It stretches from the confluence of Sandy Mush Creek and the French Broad River back up the tributaries of Sandy Mush and Turkey Creek. It is managed by the NC Wildlife Resources Commission as public property with the primary objective being restoring quality wildlife habitat. The management strategies are geared toward promoting various stages of early successional habitat for a wide range of game and nongame animals.

There are several stages of early successional habitat ranging from a cleared field all the way up to an emerging young forest. These habitat types require disturbance to help keep them in an early successional stage. If we did not disturb the habitats, everything would revert to a mature forest. This is a single habitat type, thus it is attractive to a smaller group of animal species. So, how do we create and maintain early successional habitats? Land disturbance can be as simple as mowing a field or planting a food plot, conducting a prescribed burn, or all the way up to a timber harvest. We use all these techniques on the Sandy Mush Game Lands. We have certain fields where we plant annual food plots. Many of the old pastures are managed by rotational mowing and prescribed fire. We also have conducted some small timber harvests. By rotating these techniques, we can create and maintain most of the stages of early succession with a patchwork appearance. This is then intermingled with mature forest habitats, thus promoting a wider range of animal species.

This year on the Sandy Mush Game Lands, we have planted around 65 acres of food plots consisting of small annual plots scattered across the landscape. We have mowed or used chainsaws to maintain about 60 acres of habitat. This

includes sawing an 11-acre block to “reset” a young forest type back primarily for ruffed grouse management. We conducted prescribed burns on about 30 different blocks ranging from 1-21 acres in size for a total of 150 acres completed. This was the most successful burning year we have had on Sandy Mush in several years. Our burning and some of our cutting projects were geared toward managing native shortleaf pine as savannahs with native warm season grasses and forbs as the understory. The pines were released by sawing down competing species, while the fire promoted native grasses and wildflowers to reestablish. These areas will be maintained on a 2-year burning schedule. We also completed a timber harvest on 3 separate tracts totaling 42 acres. The primary objective was to remove white pine and poplar while releasing young oaks as well as hemlocks. The hemlocks had been treated for woolly adelgid, which has been destroying our native hemlock stands. We will be conducting research to see if releasing the hemlocks will promote a better resistance to the adelgid.

All this disturbance has been beneficial; however, there has been a negative side effect. While releasing many good species, nonnative exotic species have also flourished. This has caused an ongoing battle that will have to be fought for years to come. We have been overwhelmed with exotics, but fortunately, we have some partners that dislike these invaders as much as I do. We have contracted with Ecoforesters for the last several years to help control some of these invasive species. They were able to pretreat the areas in our grouse project, and treated our burn units after the fires when the vegetation started regrowing. We also had them pretreat our timber cut units with plans of doing a post treatment next growing season. We hope that these treatments will allow us to gain some control over these pesky invaders.

THE END OF AN ERA: WHAT'S NEXT FOR CANTON?

By: Lang Hornthal

Back in May, EcoForesters hosted a panel discussion on the impacts of the mill closing to local forests. While many were hopeful that the mill closure would keep forests from being cut, the discussion explored the value proposition of having this market for low value timber. A viable pulp market provides landowners with a source of income, which is often needed to restore or maintain forest health. In its absence, landowners will either pay out of pocket for this stewardship or look to other sources of revenue like selling the land or cutting more valuable trees. The evening was successful in setting the stage for impacts to the closure – but what is coming next?

Land of Sky Regional Council has convened a group made of forestry professionals, state economic development leaders, and non-governmental organizations to better explore the short and long term impacts of the mill closing. Short term challenges include training the local workforce for new opportunities, providing support to the logging industry upended by the closure, and even considering the impact to our local rail system, which heavily relied on hauling chips. More long term impacts were identified, including the uncertainty of Canton replacing such a large community partner, and the potential ripple effects if private forest owners (70% of ownership) stop thinning and restoring their forests.

The good news is that our community and leaders have stepped up in a big way by providing funding for the recovery and job training. The Community Foundation of Western North Carolina's Forward Fund has invested \$150,000 to address the "ripple effect" of the closure. Dogwood Health has committed \$1 million dollars to the Haywood County United Way that will provide assistance to individuals and families. To make the best use of these funds, the region's Council of Governments Southwestern Commission further studied the rapid response services needed to affected workers that include job resources, training opportunities, mortgage assistance, and health insurance options. Canton Mayor Zeb Smathers said in a news release that he was "moved by how many people have



Cross laminated timbers are made by gluing smaller wood pieces together to create a solid wood engineered panel used in construction.

Photo credit: Oregon Department of Forestry

reached out proactively to help and am struck by the level of partnership.”

While Canton is sure to recover given the attractive small town's location and proximity to the National Forest, the local forest industry is still evolving. There is little expectation that a new paper mill (or other forest product industry) will move into Western North Carolina and utilize the volume of wood chips generated by Evergreen Packaging. However, new uses for the same forest materials are viable in other parts of the country and could contribute to local forest economies. Some products that are being considered are:

- Cross laminated timbers- engineered wood panels using smaller solid-sawn lumber
- Biochar - charcoal produced and stored in the soil as a means of removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere
- Biomass - wood pellets for energy production on a local level
- Biofuels - utilizing lignin found in tree matter to produce cleaner burning fuel

The US Forest Service is also looking for answers to this complex problem. In response to the mill closures, the agency will be hosting Wood Innovation Grant Workshops to work with the community to develop and fund solutions. Furthermore, the Forest Service has supported the creation of pulpwood disposal sites in Haywood and Cherokee counties, with a third site possibly opening in Rutherford county. This investment is a short-term, unsustainable solution until a pulpwood market is revived. However, the action is imperative to maintain the existing timber infrastructure, desired forest health conditions, and restoration efforts on the National Forests. Hopefully, efforts like this will help alleviate similar issues for private landowners in the near future.

Until that happens, community and forestry partners alike will work together to find sustainable solutions that ensure that our forests remain forests to provide the many benefits we have come to rely on.



Similar to charcoal, biochar is created by heating wood with little to no oxygen and used as a soil amendment.

Photo credit: akepong | Adobe Stock

SAFE PASSAGE: THE SOLUTION TO SOUTHERN APPALACHIA'S ROAD ECOLOGY CRISIS

By: Francis Figart

Driving around in the mountains near Asheville this time of year, you are pretty likely to see woodchucks, wild turkey, and white-tailed deer. Perhaps you get lucky and spot a black bear or, in some places, even an elk moving through the vegetation. Look up and you may find red-tailed and broad-winged hawks and the occasional osprey or bald eagle. Watch for the smaller lifeforms too: box turtles, a variety of snakes, and even rare salamanders live right near the roadway.

“Highway travel always means risk for humans,” says Steve Goodman, a conservation biologist with National Parks Conservation Association. “But roads pose an even more serious threat to wildlife, forming barriers to the habitat connectivity that is necessary for species health and long-term survival. One solution has been shown to improve safety for travelers and survival of both plants and animals: wildlife crossings.”

Animals cross roads for the same reasons humans move around—in order to find food, shelter, and a mate. To do this as they have for millennia, they need contiguous forested habitat, now being fragmented by roads.

Southern Appalachia is just getting started on what will be a decades-long focus on incorporating wildlife crossings into existing infrastructure. Scientists like Goodman have teamed up with concerned citizens, and two dozen federal, state, Tribal, and non-governmental organizations are now collaborating as Safe Passage: The I-40 Pigeon River Gorge Wildlife Crossing Project. They are working together to understand where animals are getting killed along 28-miles of treacherous highway and how various types of wildlife crossing structures might help them cross. This would reopen historic connectivity corridors that were functionally lost after highway construction in the 1960s.

Today, Safe Passage is making recommendations to departments of transportation in both Western North Carolina and East Tennessee that can give many species a better chance to get to the other side of Interstate 40, the busy highway that passes near Great Smoky Mountains National Park as it moves 29,000 vehicles per day between Asheville and Knoxville.

The Safe Passage Fund Coalition—made up of The Conservation Fund, Defenders of Wildlife, Great Smoky Mountains Association, National Parks Conservation Association, North Carolina Wildlife Federation, The Wilderness Society, and Wildlands Network— makes it possible for the public to add their own dollars to the effort by donating at SmokiesSafePassage.org.

Frances Figart (rhymes with “tiger”) is the author of a children’s book on road ecology, A Search for Safe Passage, and the Creative Services Director for the 29,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Reach her at: frances@gsmassoc.org



Relatively minor modifications to existing culverts and drainage systems along highways can help smaller animals cross these roads safely. Photo Credit: Sue Wasserman

THE GOLDEN-WINGED WARBLER'S FIELD OF DREAMS

By: Andy Tait

In the 1989 classic movie “Field of Dreams” about bringing back long gone baseball legends to play on his Iowa farm, Kevin Costner’s character is told “If you build it, he will come.” Shortly after converting his corn field to a baseball field, past greats like “Shoeless” Joe Jackson do emerge from the corn to play on the field.

Similarly, for the golden-winged warbler, a bird whose population is in steep decline, if you build their habitat they will come and breed here. Due to a drastic reduction in their required early successional habitat for breeding, their populations have steadily declined for 50 years. The golden-winged warbler summers and breeds in native grasslands/wildflower meadows and young forests with a few mature trees in a very open woodland structure, surrounded by mature forests at higher elevations in the southern Appalachians and further north.

EcoForesters helped create this habitat by thinning some forests near where a golden winged warbler had been observed in 2014 and even conducted an ecological timber harvest to benefit this bird. Many other species of wildlife (deer, ruffed grouse, quail, turkey, and many other birds and other animals) depend on, or at least prefer, similar habitat for breeding or raising their young.

This summer, Keith Ray - the Conservation Director for the land trust that owns the property, the Southeast Trust for Parks and Land (STPAL) - surveyed the site and heard two males singing for mates, and even saw one (but it flew off before he could get a picture)! This is proof positive that two

breeding pairs could be on site and increasing the population of this at risk bird species.

Before any disturbance happened, EcoForesters restoration crews went in and controlled the only moderate invasive plants so they wouldn’t spread after more sun was let into these stands. Many species of wildflowers have now sprouted up in these sunny openings and drawn in pollinators which are the essential food source for the warbler (and many

birds). Any existing oaks were also left on site since they support the greatest abundance and diversity of insects, as well as provide an essential acorn crop. Other fruit-producing trees like hawthorn, cherry, walnut, hickory, and apples were also left, and released from competition so they will produce more fruit for wildlife.

None of this would’ve been possible without a motivated landowner (STPAL) and help from numerous other partners. Audubon

and the NC Wildlife Resources Commission planned the project with the landowner, and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provided cost share funding for the project through their Working Lands for Wildlife program (part of EQIP) to restore early successional habitat for the golden winged warbler and other wildlife. Even the skilled, careful logger and the timber buyer (Gilkey Lumber) played key roles in bringing this project together. This is a great example of how active ecological timber management can benefit wildlife and provide sustainable wood products and jobs to the local economy. **Contact EcoForesters to learn more about our NFWF project and restoring habitat in your forest.**



Habitat created for the Golden Winged Warbler benefits both songbirds and game species like wild turkey, deer, and grouse.

Photo credit: Michael Stubblefield

SUSTAINING WILDLIFE IN YOUR BACKYARD

By: Pat Barcas

“IT'S SIMPLE: BY GARDENING WITH NATIVE PLANTS, NO MATTER WHERE YOU LIVE OR HOW SMALL OR LARGE YOUR SPACE IS, YOU CAN HELP SUSTAIN WILDLIFE.”
- BRINGING NATURE HOME (TALLAMY, 2009)

Doug Tallamy is an entomologist, ecologist, professor and conservationist that has become a bit of a superstar in conservation circles through his books *Nature's Best Hope* and *The Nature of Oaks*, among others. He holds the position that any parcel of land, no matter how small, can serve as a haven, habitat, or food source for animals and insects. Why grow grass when you can grow native plants that benefit pollinators and migrating birds?

“It's simple: By gardening with native plants, no matter where you live or how small or large your space is, you can help sustain wildlife,” says Tallamy in his book, *Bringing Nature Home*.

Tallamy's Homegrown National Park initiative is a grassroots call to action to regenerate biodiversity and

ecosystem function by planting native plants and creating new ecological networks. The Homegrown National Park, along with the Audobon Society, are two great resources that can guide you into converting your grass lawn into a haven for birds, insects, and other local wildlife.

According to the Blue Ridge Audobon Society, in the United States, a native plant is defined as one that was naturally found in a particular area before European colonization. Native plants are the foundation of a region's biodiversity, providing essential food sources and shelter for birds, especially those threatened by the changing climate. Since native plants are adapted to local precipitation and soil conditions, they generally require less upkeep, therefore helping the environment and saving you time, water, and money.

10 THINGS TO GET YOU STARTED WITH GROWING A NATIONAL PARK IN YOUR BACKYARD, ACCORDING TO DOUG TALLAMY:

1

Shrink the lawn: grass is nice to walk on but offers no ecological benefits. Make walkways that define beds and tree groves instead.

2

Remove invasive species. Tallamy calls them “ecological tumors” that spread unchecked into local ecosystems.

3

Be generous with your plantings. Increase abundance and diversity with the goal of mimicking a natural forest.

4

Do not spray or fertilize. Insecticides and herbicides are antithetical to the goals of creating habitat. Less evident is that fertilizers are also unnecessary. Creating soils rich in organic matter is entirely sufficient for healthy plants.

5

Create caterpillar pupation sites under trees. Leave leaf litter under your trees, rocks, and old tree stumps, as well as plant wild ginger, foam flowers, wood poppies, native pachysandra, ferns, and mayapples.

6

Reduce nighttime light pollution. Research is showing that our porch and security lights are major causes of insect decline. Consider turning off your lights at night.

7

Network with neighbors and get on the Homegrown National Park map. The map is an interactive community-based visual tool that aggregates each individual contribution to planting native and measures progress towards Homegrown National Parks' initial goal of converting 20 million acres of private land to productive ecosystems.

8

Build a conservation hardscape. Examples include installing a bubbling water source for birds, installing window well covers to prevent needless amphibian deaths, and setting your lawn mower to no lower than three inches, meaning you can pass over toads and turtles without harm.

9

Plant Keystone Genera. Tallamy's research at the University of Delaware has shown that a few genera of native plants, or keystone genera, form the backbone of local ecosystems, particularly in terms of producing the food that fuels insects.

10

Educate your neighborhood civic association. Many homeowners believe they cannot use more native plants in their landscape because of rules developed and enforced by their township, civic association or homeowner association. These rules are likely dated as they were created when we didn't know then what we do now.

To learn more go to www.homegrownnationalpark.org



WE'RE GROWING OUR IMPACT-AND OUR STAFF

Please welcome Willow and Brittany to our team!

EcoForesters is fortunate to have twenty five hard working staff members that are in the woods daily making a difference. As we grow, we are adding new positions that will make us more efficient assisting our field staff. If you are in contact with EcoForesters as a forest owner or donor, chances are you have engaged with Willow or Brittany.



Our previous Social Media manager, Willow McNeil, has taken on a new role as our Development Associate! In this new position, she will be communicating with EcoForesters donors and assisting with grant writing, helping us further grow our impact and cultivate relationships with our funders. If you're an EcoForesters donor, you might have heard from her in the last couple of months! We are excited to have her continue her career at EcoForesters and utilize her writing and planning skills.



We are thrilled to have added an office/project manager to our administrative staff. Brittany Howard is keeping us straight while helping manage our community forestry projects. Her position is invaluable in supporting our LSR and NFWF projects, and she has helped keep us organized and efficient while navigating these important grants. We are grateful to have her aboard and are thankful for her hard work optimizing these important projects!

A MISSIVE ON BEING OUTDOORS

By: Pat Barcas

After working as a forest restoration technician at EcoForesters for the last 18 months, I'm finally coming to terms with the fact that I like to be outdoors, nay, need to be outdoors. I recently spent three nights in a hotel room in the heart of a city; my feet didn't touch dirt the whole time, and I barely saw a tree. It felt odd. I was outside, but was I really outside? I was glad to be back in the forest when I returned to North Carolina. I suspect readers of this newsletter might understand my plight.

While we all feel great being outside, what are the real benefits? I can tell you my perceived benefits: with no cell service, I'm often forced to unplug for the day. I feel more connected to things such as weather, the growing season, and the pulse of the forest. A large part of my job is spent observing, which I love. We're on the hunt for invasives, and sometimes we take a (figurative) fine tooth comb to the forest floor. The more time I spend doing this, the more the "green veil" is lifted. I notice small mushrooms popping up, animal tracks, unusual plants and insects, and how it's all connected.

Curiosity is stoked: why did a tree grow this way? Why does the creek follow that path? How did that big rock get there? The forest, in all its chaos, makes sense in a senseless world.



Stewardship Director Krishun Karau holding a rattlesnake skin.

I NOTICE SMALL MUSHROOMS POPPING UP, ANIMAL TRACKS, UNUSUAL PLANTS AND INSECTS, AND HOW IT'S ALL CONNECTED.

For those of us lucky enough to have access to land, getting out and hiking it, observing it, and just being on it can have tremendous benefits. According to a 2019 study, spending 120 minutes a week outside in a natural environment is associated with good health and well-being. A quick Google shows what we all have probably observed in ourselves: being in nature can improve your mood, reduce stress and anger, improve your physical health, improve confidence and self-esteem, and connect you with your local community.

Think about it: going for a stroll in your woods gets your heart rate up, exercises your senses and your muscles, puts things in perspective, and just makes you feel good about the state of things. Whether your parcel is big or small, there are always new things to discover.



Crown tipped coral mushrooms growing on a downed log.

Taking it a step further is the low impact Japanese practice of shinrin yoku, or forest bathing. The activity puts an intention while basking in the forest environment. Practitioners learn to live in the present moment while immersing their senses in the sights and sounds of a natural setting. This has been found to lower heart rates and blood pressure, as well as the levels of harmful hormones such as cortisol.

I am grateful to be able to restore, explore, and observe one of the most biologically diverse areas in the world. These woods that we all love are amazing to me, and I vow never to take them for granted. I hope you don't either.

BOARD PERSPECTIVE

By: Jay Lanier

As the summer gives way to the first cool mornings of fall, I start to see a change in my dog, Sidney. Perhaps it's the drop in humidity that she can surely smell or the changing pollen profile on the wind, but she starts to pay a little more attention every time I get close to the closet where I keep my hunting gear. With all those small cues, the 10-year-old German wirehair pointer, who sleeps more than she used to, sheds her years and is ready to return to the woods.

We hunt ruffed grouse together. It's a fool's errand, but it's our thing. Most days we're happy to just hear a flush or two, let alone see one, but it's not really about bringing one home for the table. The bird is a vestige of the Pleistocene and usually lives in places where there is snow cover all winter, allowing it to hide, buried, emerging just a couple hours a day to feed. If you look at a map of the species' distribution, you'll see that our southern Appalachians are an outlier. In these parts, our grouse don't just live anywhere. They almost invariably live in what forest biologists call early successional habitat. That's a mouthful, but it's just a fancy way of describing a spot in the woods where you'd say, "Hell no! I'm not gonna walk through that." The only way these very specific habitats exist is through canopy disturbance. Essentially, these are the places where all the seeds waiting for light to hit the forest floor race to fill the hole in the overstory, and in the process, create the nurseries of the woods. Deer, turkey, grouse, rabbits, warblers and a host of other small wildlife rely on these dense stands to raise their young. When that habitat ages out after about 20 years after the disturbance, those generations must seek new shelter, but what if it's too far away?



Sidney is eager to get in the woods again!

Most of you know that only a tiny fraction of our Southern Appalachian forests is truly old growth. These are magical places to visit, but with most of our stands somewhere between 80 and 120 years old, we have an unhealthy monoculture when taking a macro view of the ecosystem. On the flip side, early successional habitat is almost just as rare. Just like any healthy population, the resilience afforded by a mix of old, middle-aged, and new forests prepares it to handle rapidly changing conditions much more effectively. It also is the key to maximizing wildlife in these spaces.

I'm here to admit that I give to and support EcoForesters for selfish reasons. When our forests are managed with thoughtful harvesting and an eye towards invasives control, you get healthier, more diverse, more resilient ecosystems. What do you get from those spaces? Well, you get thriving, abundant wildlife of all kinds. You get clean water for our breweries and trout. You get clean air for the view at the top of Black Balsam on a hike. You get places to let your kids get muddy. You get most of the good things that people want when they think about the forest. As for me? What do I get? I get a happy dog.

WHY DONATE RIGHT NOW?

1. Your donation will be matched with federal dollars to double our impact
2. Our free workshops and consultations are resulting in landowner action
3. We are bringing funds to local land trusts to help with forest stewardship
4. Invasive species are getting worse and we are helping train landowners
5. With over 200,000 acres put under management plans there is more to do!

Our positive actions are getting results and our model for landowner engagement is working. If you care about conservation and our future forests, please join us in making a difference.

TO MAKE YOUR TAX DEDUCTIBLE DONATION, GO TO: WWW.ECOFORESTERS.ORG

ECOFORESTERS' AWARD WINNERS

ECOFORESTER OF THE YEAR

Each year, the EcoForesters Awards celebrate a select few who have shown their dedication to the restoration of Appalachian forests. This year, our EcoForester of the Year is Russ and Stacy Oates, who have exemplified active stewardship through years of improving their land in Yancey County. Hard work is needed to repair the damage done to our local ecosystems by the poor forestry practices of the past—but that hasn't deterred Russ and Stacy! A retired wildlife biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Russ has devoted himself to restoring the diversity and ecological health of his 214-acre property. His long-term goal is to provide a mature forest to rival the pre-1900 forest, including important species such as oaks, hickories, and chestnuts.

Through working with EcoForesters, Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy, and the American Chestnut Foundation, Russ and his wife Stacy have encouraged a robust forest composition, planting over 500 saplings with our crew. These trees provide habitat to a variety of wildlife, including many native bird species. Another portion of their land has been cleared and planted to manage as Golden-winged Warbler habitat, a species of particular conservation concern. We are grateful for the opportunity to work with Russ and Stacy and foster the restoration of their property. Their devotion to planting and carefully tending trees is an impressive example of what is needed to restore our forests, and their work serves as a model for all landowners to follow.



Russ Oates on his family property.

ROOT CAUSE AWARD

Bent Creek Experimental Forest is the oldest experimental forest in the eastern US, founded in 1927. Spanning almost 6,000 acres outside of Asheville, this research unit focuses on upland hardwood silviculture, and is part of the US Forest Service's Southern Research Station. The original mission of Bent Creek was to restore lands from past mis-management and promote ecologically sound forestry. Their long term research provides the best available scientific advice on how to sustainably manage southern Appalachian forests. For all of their efforts to promote good forestry, we honor their staff with this year's Root Cause award.

Due to poor management practices of the past, the presence of oaks in our forests has declined, replaced by very common, faster-growing species such as maples and yellow-poplar. Oaks are the keystone species for wildlife in our region's hardwood forests, providing food and habitat to a variety of species. To restore these trees, discovering the best practices to regenerate oak stands is crucial. But forestry research spans decades and varies across the landscape, so long-term dedicated researchers at Bent Creek, and similar sites across the southeast, are the unsung heroes of sustainable forestry! In addition to oak regeneration, their work has informed current silviculture around numerous other stewardship issues that have benefitted forests in the southern Appalachians and beyond.



Tara Keyser leading a femelschlag field tour at Bent Creek Experimental Forest.

Photo credit: @usfs_sfs



EcoForesters.org

OUR MISSION

EcoForesters is a 501(c)(3) non-profit professional forestry organization dedicated to conserving and restoring our Appalachian forests through education and stewardship.

HOW TO REACH US

MAIN OFFICE:

38 Old Charlotte Highway
Asheville, NC 28803

SYLVA OFFICE:

569 Mill Street
Sylva, NC 28779

MAIL:

PO Box 16007
Asheville, NC 28816

EMAIL:

info@ecoforesters.org

PHONE:

828-484-6842

WEBSITE:

www.ecoforesters.org

FOLLOW US ON:



@ecoforesters

Non Profit
US Postage
PAID
Permit #422
Asheville, NC

COMING FEBRUARY 2024

Haywood County Forest Landowner Workshop

THIS WORKSHOP WILL COVER:

- What's going on in your forest
- How forest planning can bring tax savings
- How to control invasive plants
- Cost share funding that will make your forest stronger

Stay tuned for more details on our website!

This workshop is made possible by the USFS Landscape Scale Restoration Grant and is in compliance with the Americans with Disability Act.