



NaturePhile

Written/Published by: Your Trust-ed Staff

Volume #19/Issue #1 2021

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.

Thank You to All 2020 BMP Donors!



Yes, we're still celebrating the wonderful results of last year's fund-raising efforts! Even though 2020 was a rather atypical year, by any stretch of the imagination, we still realized an excellent end-of-year result because of the generosity of so many BMP owners. We'll have a complete rundown in the 2020 Annual Report.

In this issue: From the Trailhead: A 20th Anniversary; We Say Goodbye and We Say Hello!; New Animal Ambassador; Education Mewsings: The Wild Truth; AmeriCorps Update; Outreach Update; Research on the Preserve: Fireflies and Caterpillars; Save the Date: Annual Trust Party; And Finally



From the Trailhead:

By Michael Skinner, executive director

The Trust Celebrated Its 20th Anniversary in 2020:

I think most folks know that being a nonprofit, of any stripe, can be fraught with any number of challenges, not the least of which is having the resources—both financial and human—to carry out its mission. And the Trust is not any different than most nonprofits. I will state here, however, that we have indeed been lucky to have had the good fortune to benefit from the generosity of many owners on the Preserve—for twenty plus years now. And as with anything in life, changes occur and one must adapt to changes or face an uncertain future.

As 2020 was full of surprises, sadness, unexpected consequences, challenges, etc., because of the pandemic, we were able to soldier on and finish the year with a strong financial footing. This is due not only because of your generosity but also to the close attention we always pay to stewarding your gifts responsibly. And with that, we were still able to carry out our mission.

The Trust Welcomes a New Trustee and Says, “Thank You for Your Service!” to Another:

The skill and dedication of the Trust staff notwithstanding, it would be much more difficult to meet our mission without the dedicated service of our volunteer Board of Trustees. And rolling off the Board at the end of 2020 was Louise Sparks. Louise and her husband David have been on the Preserve pretty much since the beginning of the project. We would like to wish her well.



And joining us on the Board is John Morse, Ph. D. John and his wife Suzanne have been on the Preserve for quite some time and I thought it important to invite a world-renowned aquatic entomologist to provide his natural history knowledge and expertise as well as his counsel to help guide the Trust.

We’re excited to have him join our very capable and dedicated Trustees for service with the Trust. When you see John on the Preserve (more than likely you’ll find him in or near a stream!) say, “Hello.” He’s pictured here.

We Go ‘Round and ‘Round and ‘Round in the Circle Game:

Ahhh...the words of Joni Mitchell ring true for life. And in life there is change and change is constant. One of the changes that occurred at the Trust recently was the return of our older American alligator, Pickles back from whence he came, namely Alligator Adventures in Myrtle Beach, SC. We’ve had what can best be described as an alligator trade-in program with them for a few years now. Pickles was changing from a pickle into a giant butternut squash so it was time for him to go and grow bigger! In exchange, we got a young 2 year-old. His name is Myrtle. I know, original right?! Keep things simple and an okay name. He’s smaller and much easier to handle and came with an alligator’s disposition. :-)





Education Mewsings: The Wild Truth

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

The prehistoric predator, *Chelydra serpentina*, heaves itself from the depths and clambers with surprising speed across the lakeshore clearing rocks and even chain link fence with single-minded determination to reach its goal: a nearby suburban homestead. Is this the start of a nail-biting sequence from the latest Jurassic Park reboot? A Lovecraftian sci-fi horror scene? No, It is in fact, a much gentler genre - a common snapping turtle's odyssey of maternal drive and protection.

May marks the beginning of snapping turtle nesting season here in the mountains and many residents are caught unaware by the sight of these robust reptiles in their yards, neighborhoods or making dangerous journeys crossing roads. Despite their aquatic lifestyles females actually lay their eggs in nests on land, sometimes as far as several hundred meters away from the water.

However, there is no need for alarm as snappers do not hunt on land while nesting. They will hiss and, as their name implies, snap if disturbed but pose no threat to pets or kids if left alone. If you are one of the fortunate few to host a snapper nest, enjoy the show! Once a mother turtle identifies a satisfactory nesting site, she'll dig a nest, deposit and cover her eggs, then be on her way in about an hour and a half. And as with most reptiles, the eggs are left unguarded. Locally, eggs typically hatch between August and September and the nestlings make the perilous journey towards water on their own.

This incredible cycle has been going on for millennia. The ancestors of snapping turtles dates back to the late Cretaceous, over 65 million years ago. While ancient snappers were globally distributed, the only surviving species are the common snapping turtle found throughout North America and the much larger alligator snapping turtle, *Macrochelys temminckii*, found in the southeastern United States.

Although they put on a good defensive show, these omnivores are not aggressive towards swimmers and much prefer to scavenge the bottoms of slow moving bodies of water for dead fish and plant matter. In fact, they have been described as the "garbage disposals" of freshwater ecosystems and play an important role in keeping lakes and rivers clean.

Inspired to help these Cretaceous cuties? Consider putting some temporary gap fencing around nests in your yard, but check them daily come August and always scan the yard before mowing. Never put yourself at risk to help an animal in the road, but if you're able to assist, please do! Just be sure to watch your fingers! It's safest to push it from behind with a stick or broom. Other smaller turtles such as the Eastern Box Turtle are also making journeys to new habitats during nesting season, so please drive slowly and be on the lookout to help these animals across the road (in the direction they are going) when you can. Turtles are territorial, so please do not relocate them to a different place. (Editor's note: moving turtles out of the area in which they're found can also spread disease into new populations.)



Fur meets scales: BMP residents Karen and Andrew Manidis' dog, Abby, has a very close encounter with the proper (safe) end of a nomadic common snapping turtle on the Preserve.

AmeriCorps Update: Education and OutReach Update

By Nicole Cook, Resilience Corps NC Member, Education Outreach Coordinator

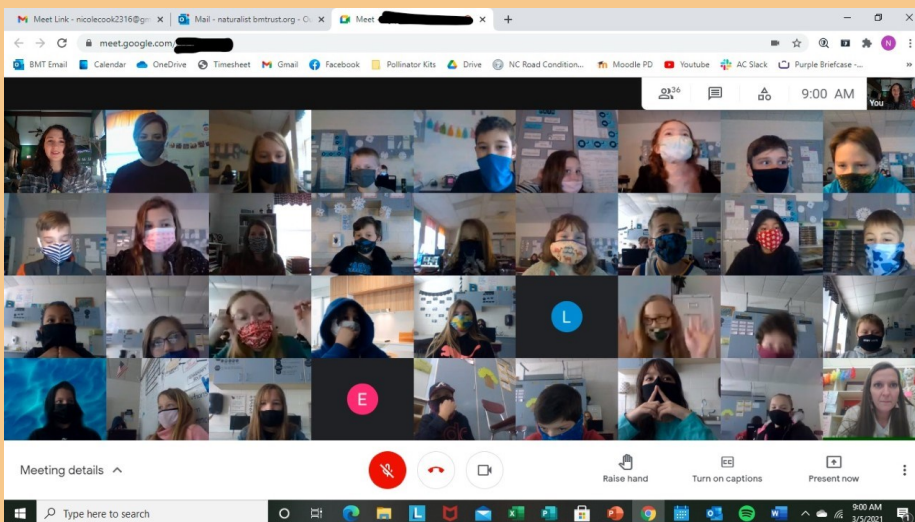
I am thrilled to have continued my work with the Trust this year! My second AmeriCorps term with BMT began in September and I happily dove right back into community outreach and environmental education. So far, I have delivered live virtual animal programming to all of the fourth-grade classes at 5 local Title I schools through our Adopt-A-School program! Students learn about fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals and meet nine of our animal ambassadors. The Adopt-A-School program typically pairs local businesses with students from low-income families attending schools in the area. The businesses sponsor a school which covers the cost of live animal programming for all of the 4th and 5th grade students at that school. This year, we were not able to get as many local business sponsorships since COVID has hit many of them hard. Luckily, we have the support of many fabulous Balsam Mountain Preserve owners who made generous donations to help keep our animal programs going, even in the midst of a pandemic!

Although virtual programs aren't quite the same, I have been pleasantly surprised by the amount of participation and engagement I see from the students. I facilitate the live, virtual programs using Google Meet and have typically had a constant stream of questions coming to me via chat while I show off our amazing animal ambassadors. The student favorites tend to be Luna the barn owl and Blossom the opossum. The kids also love to stump me with numbers questions, like "How many bones does a snake have?", "How many eggs does a fish lay?", or even "How many feathers does a bird have?" all of which can vary from species to species. I'm looking forward to even more tricky questions as I wrap up Adopt-A-School programs.

In the weeks and months to come, I am hoping to provide free animal and nature programs to other community groups including REACH of Macon County and the Center for Domestic Peace. I also have many virtual offerings on the books for local libraries for Earth Day and summer programming.

Once again this year, we'll be holding our Virtual Bird Fest! Each year we hold this celebration of migratory birds with content and support from many other conservation and education organizations in western NC. This year, we decided to go virtual, and offered fun activities, live streams, and more on our Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/BalsamMountainTrust>).

We also included a live Saturday morning bird walk that was attended by both BMP owners and members of the general public.



Research on the Preserve

By Michael Skinner, executive director

As part of the mission of the Trust, we engage in scientific research to improve and disseminate knowledge gleaned from research projects and to steward the natural and cultural resources found on the Preserve. The Trust is facilitating two projects at this time. They are 1) Caterpillar Sampling in Fire-Experienced Forest Stands, principle researcher: Jane Dell, Ph. D., Western Carolina University (WCU) and 2) Biogeography of winter fireflies (*Ellychnia corrusca*) and attempting to determine this species Grinnellian niche, principle researcher Desi Hoagland, undergraduate at WCU (Editor's note: The Grinnellian niche of a species is determined by the habitat a species occupies and its accompanying behavioral adaptations. It includes other factors but this is definition suffices.)

And speaking of fireflies, you may have seen the announcement of the Trust hosting the trip to Cataloochee Valley in the Smokies during the first week of June to witness the synchronous firefly show. We need to go on a weekday to mitigate the crowd size so we're planning on heading over on Wednesday, 3 June about 6:30 p.m. This will give us time to have a quick picnic dinner, find a good place to set up your lawn/camp chairs and wait for the wonder. You will not want to miss this! Carpooling makes the most sense with this adventure, especially given the concerns we all might have with the Covid-19 protocols. Also, please note that getting into the valley requires a vehicle that can handle gravel roads. Please talk to your neighbors about carpooling. If you have any questions, please call Michael at 828-400-7260.



This dark firefly, photographed here trying to get something to eat at the Summit House, is the species being studied on the Preserve.

Here's hoping for brilliant weather and an

incredible natural history moment!

It's Kristal Clear :-)

It's always fun for us to share outdoor experiences with BMP owners while out on the trail and in this publication. To wit—this is shot of



Jason and his son Tanner, Kristal (part of the Linsky, Levinson, Rosenblatt families, who have had a home on the Preserve for a long time). Michael took them on a hike to Doubletop Mountain earlier this year and Tanner had fun with the ginormous icicles hanging from the rocks.

Winter is great time to be out on the Preserve trails because you can see for miles and miles and miles and miles. (with apologies to The Who!)

Come hike with us and enjoy the wonders of discovery!

Save the Date...Please! It's Time to Celebrate

And the date is: 2 October 2021. The Trust is planning on celebrating with all BMP owners this year with an in-person Birthday Celebration, to be held at the Summit House. We're excited that we're going to be able to do this live and in-person so put the date on your calendars and get ready to "Take a Walk on the Wild Side"...of Nature. More announcements will be coming during the year but please plan on being part of our celebration.

And Finally... the Wonders (and Challenges of the natural world and our impact on it)

One of the things that helps make the Preserve special is the incredible diversity of the native flora and fauna found here. With that, please take a look at the two wildflowers shown here. One is the early



spring blooming native golden ragwort or common groundsel (*Packera aurea*) (left). This plant loves the sun so therefore you find it growing along the roads on the Preserve as well as other open areas. It's an annual plant (each plant grows for one season). It spreads by seeds.

The plant also sports some medicinal qualities in that it has been used to treat hypertension (high blood pressure), chest congestion, water retention, spasms as well as menopausal symptoms.

Another early spring bloomer is the wild field mustard (*Synopsis aurea*). This plant is highly invasive and came to us by way of Eurasia. This plant, being non-native, is considered invasive because it will out compete other native plants in the environment. But as is often the case with some invasive species, this one does provide food for our native cabbage butterflies and, interestingly, is



sought out by plant enthusiasts as a forage herb. The flowers are a bright, lemon-yellow color and they and the thinner stems can be eaten in salads and cooked like spinach. The cooked plant definitely has a mustard flavor. With that then, when you're out on property think about either pulling the plant up before it goes to seed and/or harvest them and use them gastronomically in your farm-to-home table fare. Yummy! You can find information about it on the web. And as with any wild edible, go easy at first with the portion amount as your GI tract may need to be acclimated to this stranger.