



# NaturePhile

Written/Published by: Your Trust-ed Staff

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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.



Many of you have gotten to know the Trust's animal ambassadors over your time on the Preserve. Chief among them have been the three bald eagles that we have had the privilege to care for as part of that complement. Our current eagle, Hope, will be returning to the American Eagle Foundation (AEF), (otherwise known as the Dollywood eagles) because, with Michael's retirement, there will be no one on staff qualified to hold the permit required to host this species. Please know that she will be returning to a highly regarded institution that will provide unsurpassed care for her. Please stop by the Nature Center and wish her well.

Pictured above is Michael with Spirit, the Trust's first eagle-in-residence. The first two eagles were on loan from the American Eagle foundation until the Trust secured its own eagle permit.

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**Pictured above: Michael and Hope at a Botanical Gardens of Asheville presentation. People were consistently in awe of Hope (and the other birds of prey) and the chance to get up close and personal with her.**

**Below: Michael with the Trust's second eagle, Freedom, who was also on loan from the AEF. Michael has always felt privileged and honored to have been able to share the wonder of these birds with audiences in and around western North Carolina.**



***The Trust's bird of prey program helped establish the Trust as a resource for program attendees to be enthralled and educated by the wonders of the natural world.***

***As the Trust enters its next chapter, its birds of prey and other animal ambassadors will continue to delight and educate audiences both on and off the Preserve.***

***The Trust will also continue to be an integral and important part of what makes Balsam Mountain Preserve unique.***

***Stop by the Nature Center to visit with the Trust staff and the critters who reside there.***



## **From the Trailhead:**

**By Michael Skinner, Executive Director (Interim)**

### **With Change Comes Exciting New Opportunities**

**With my final article for this publication I wanted to share some great news about a couple of wonderful Trust staff. What I'm excited about for everyone on the mountain is that the Trust has hired a new senior naturalist, Brittany Blackford (pictured here).**

**Brittany will be joining us after moving from Indianapolis with her menagerie of two dogs, one parrot and a snake. So, yes, we think she will be a great addition to the team. The staff and Board of Trustees are excited to be getting a top notch environmental educator and naturalist who will continue the tradition of offering engaging programming for BMP owners. (And, the executive director position is well on its way to be filled so stay tuned for news on that front.)**

**Brittany (FYI—she prefers Brit, will begin her duties with the Trust on 4 September 2022. Please make room in your schedule to stop by and meet her. We're confident you'll find her willing to engage and share her passion and knowledge about the natural world. She's really excited to have an impact on, and to contribute to, the success of the Trust.**



**We're also excited to have Brit join us to help Rachael and our AmeriCorps Service member, Emily, with the daily responsibilities of Trust operations.**



### **On Another Personnel-Related Matter**

**The Trust has again this season, had the good fortune to have found an outstanding intern who is completing her service in August. Emily Francis (pictured left) provided the Trust with an insatiable curiosity and excellent work ethic. She will be returning to school at Western Carolina University.**

**I'm including a commentary from Rachael here as she's worked closely with Emily during her internship: "From my point of view, this was Emily's first animal care experience and she excelled. She totally "understood the**

*assignment”, and over time I saw her grow more and more and she has done so with no compromise to her character. She has become a true warrior for the natural world and I’m very excited and proud to have her on the team, both at the Trust and in the environmental world.”*

### **Your Trust Donation Dollars at Work on the Preserve**

You may remember that at last year’s Trust Party, funds were raised to treat eastern hemlock trees for the hemlock woolly adelgid insect. This invasive, exotic species will eventually kill any hemlock that becomes infested with it.

Recently we had Frank Varvoutis (owner of Hemlock Healers, who many of you have used to treat the hemlocks on your individual homesteads) treated 61 hemlocks with the funds raised. As the Trust continues its mission, it’s important to every BMP owner that the Trust be a part of your formula for the maintenance of the biodiversity, which is why we think you decided to make BMP a part of your lives.



**A healthy, treated hemlock (on the left) and an untreated, dead one (on the right). Hemlocks play a vital role in the ecology of the forests within its range. There have been about 400 species documented as having either a direct or indirect relationship to this species.**



**By: Sheri Straw, Trust Board Chair**

### **A Note From Your Trust Board Chair**

**It's been an eventful first half of the year at the Trust! We continue meeting our mission to the Preserve and the broader community with exciting programming that inspires and educates. Highlights have included field research, Garden Club, Science Committee, Trust Talks, and our annual Plant Sale/Open House. Your donations make our mission possible, and we thank you for your continued support. (Please see related article about hemlock treatments realized with your donations!)**

### **Changes to the Team**



**Thank you to Michael Skinner, who has returned on an interim basis to support the Trust as we complete our hiring process for a new senior naturalist and executive director. Michael will continue to support the Trust as we transition to new staff members. (See related article in this NaturePhile about the Trust's new senior naturalist.)**

**Best wishes to our Co-Education Directors, Rose Wall, and Jen Knight. Rose and Jen have taken on a new opportunity with Buncombe County.(Asheville). Their decision was a practical one as the new position they've taken allowed to be closer to home and families. We are so thankful for their contributions to our education programs during their time with the Trust.**



**Past Board Chairs wish our Education Directors well!  
Pictured from left, Janie Stratigos Rose Wall, Sheri Straw, Jen Knight, Rob Howard**

**The Trust helps t make Balsam Mountain Preserve and our community a better place.**

**Member engagement is growing! We continue to plan exciting programming through the season. Watch for upcoming Trust Talks, Garden and Science Clubs, Kids Camps, and events at the Nature Center.**

**And please Save the Date for our Annual Trust Party on October 1.**

**With sincere appreciation – Sheri Straw**



## **Research on the Preserve: Recent Trout Study Conducted on BMP**

By John Morse, Ph. D., Trust Board member and Chair of Science Committee

Where are the trout on the Preserve? Fly-fishing enthusiasts on the mountain often prowl its roughly 35 miles of streams searching for answers to this question. Recently, a team from the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC) helped address it.

With nets, buckets, laboratory tools, and backpack electro-shocking equipment, I accompanied WRC fisheries biologists Ray and Maggie through the rhododendron as they explored Sugarloaf, Cashie Branch, and Dark Ridge Creeks, and their tributaries.

The team's purpose was to assess the distribution, habitat conditions, genetics, and general health of native brook trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*) on the Preserve. They found brook trout in five of the nine streams investigated (see maps), along with wild rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*), a non-native introduced exotic species, bred from captive stock introduced in numerous streams of North Carolina over many years. The length and weight of each brook trout captured in the survey was recorded along with a small portion of dorsal fin that was clipped and preserved for future genetic analysis before the fish was released in healthy condition back into its habitat.

The usually larger rainbow trout we saw were noted and released but without additional analysis. As their common name implies, brook trout, a.k.a., brookies or specks, are the only trout-type species naturally occurring in headwaters of the Southern Appalachian Mountains. Native brookies have had an unnatural competitive imbalance occur since the introduction of both rainbow and brown trout.

Rainbow (and brown) trout will usually out-compete native brook trout if they can move into the headwaters, but obstructions such as waterfalls (e.g., Sugarloaf Falls, Licklog Falls) and culverts (e.g., for Doubletop Creek under Cabin Flats Road) can prevent rainbow and brown trout from encroaching into brook trout habitat.

(Note: There have been non-native brown trout (*Salmo trutta*), (also a non-native introduced exotic) caught in Preserve streams but they have been seen for many years.)

As the Trust re-energizes its natural resource stewardship plans, streams – and their associated biodiversity, will be an important part of any strategies developed to keep your

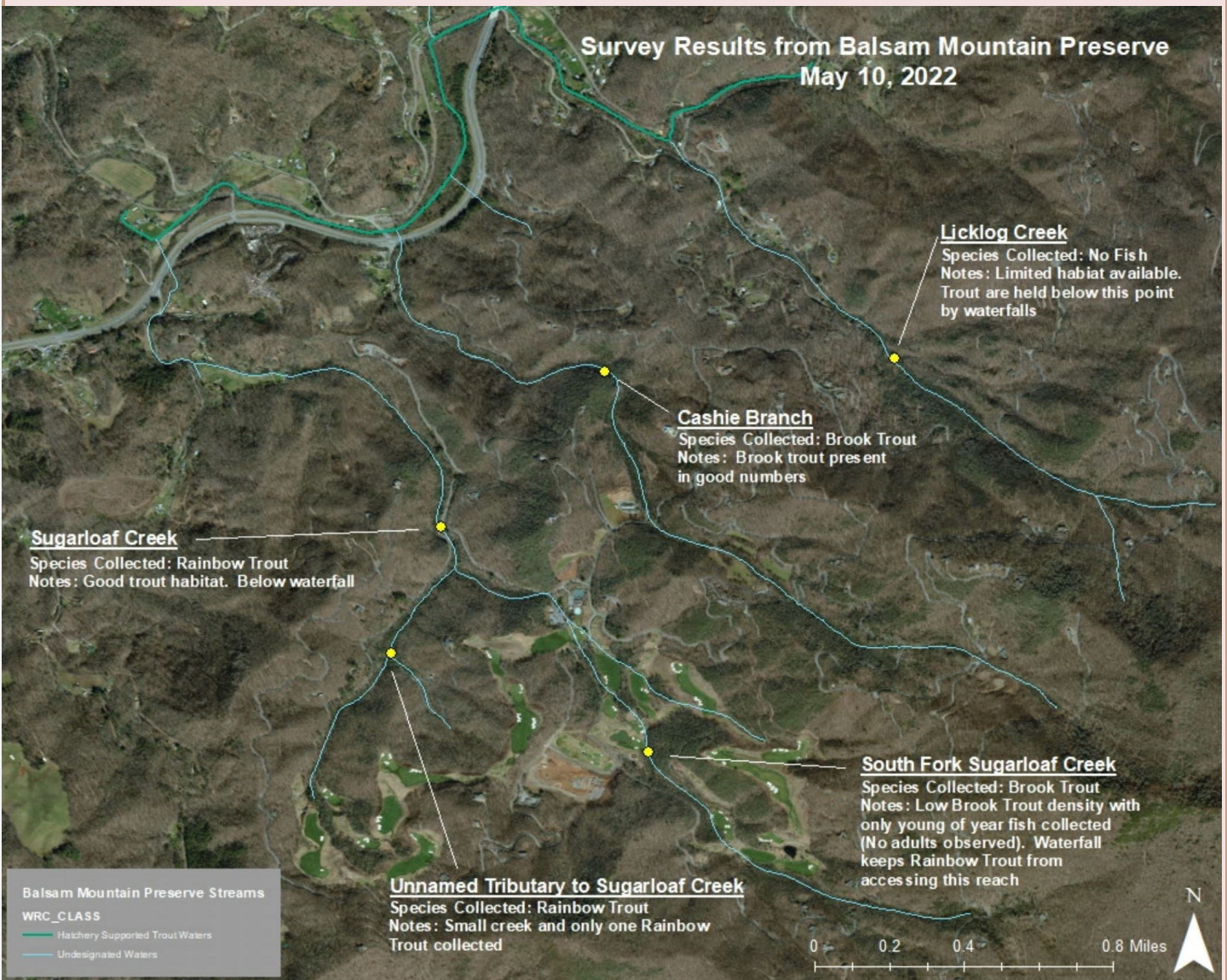


A native brook trout in breeding color, is a beautiful example of the rich biodiversity found on the Preserve. Research plays a vital role in maintaining the biodiversity on the mountain. BMP members can get involved with learning about this richness of species by participating with the Science Committee as well as by spending time on the trails with Trust staff in journeys of discovery.

## Research on the Preserve: Recent Trout Study Conducted on BMP, con't.

natural (and cultural) resources healthy and viable for years to come. This is, after all, just one aspect of how the Trust plays an important role in the maintenance of your experience and investment on the Preserve.

The map included here indicates where the some of the trout surveys were conducted on property.



## Research on the Preserve: Recent Trout Study Conducted on BMP, con't.

These photographs help illustrate the process and results of samples taken from BMP streams. This type of research will help determine the health of BMP streams as well as the biodiversity associated with small, cold-water mountain streams. The survey results will help guide any resource stewardship strategies which may be employed to maintain BMP's stream health.



North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission fisheries biologists use an electroshocking tool to sample trout on the Preserve.

Inset: a rainbow trout caught during the field survey

Photos by: David Crowe





An amazing insect, no, not the Japanese beetle being consumed in this photo, but the bumblebee mimic (*Laphria thoracica*) having lunch. Robber flies have an amazing diversity and this one confirms the need for us to do everything we can to preserve and care for our incredible native species. Japanese beetles are, unfortunately, common the Preserve but predators like this robber fly, can help keep them in check.

Long-time BMP resident, Sam Belfore, shared this sunrise shot and so, we wanted to share it with the rest of you. Don't think any words are needed here.

