

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE • TM **2024**

**YOU'RE THE STAR OF THE STORY!
CHOOSE FROM COUNTLESS POSSIBLE IMPACTS**

TREASURE IN THE BALSAM MOUNTAINS

BY BALSAM MOUNTAIN TRUST



**Special
Book Fair
Edition**

ILLUSTRATED BY Monsieur MOUSTACHE

Dear Friends of the Trust,

Welcome to our 2024 Annual Report – your own "Choose Your Own Adventure" into the Treasures of the Balsam Mountain Trust! We know everyone learns differently, so we invite you to explore our work through three distinct lenses: the **Head** (for the data folks), the **Heart** (for those who wear theirs on their sleeve), and the **Stomach** (for those with bellies full of laughs). At the Trust we believe it takes all three to preserve the Preserve.

If your **Head** leads, you'll see how we foster a data-driven and scientifically literate society by opening the Preserve to college students and experts for research and learning. You can feast on highlights of the Trust's performance measures – our way of putting numbers on things that often can't be enumerated.

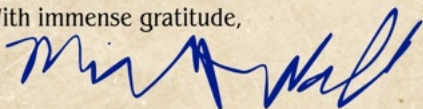
If your **Heart** guides you, prepare to feel the emotional impact of our work as we nurture a conservation ethic within and beyond the Preserve. Our animal ambassadors are our "secret sauce." You'll learn how our values of perseverance, empathy, and fostering trust in their care win the hearts and minds of the region we serve.

And for all my people who choose joy, start with the **Stomach** for a belly full of laughs. We firmly believe humor and joy make learning infectious, and weaving silliness into our conservation education simply works!

Hurricane Helene made 2024 immensely challenging for Western North Carolina. Yet, epitomizing "Appalachia Strong," the region came together. Balsam Mountain Preserve was fortunate to be virtually untouched. Even though we canceled our annual fundraising party, your unwavering support helped us meet our goals, ensuring an impactful 2025.

Thank you for being an indispensable part of the Balsam Mountain Trust family. Whether you engage with us through data, emotion, or a hearty laugh, your support makes all the difference.

With immense gratitude,



Michael A. Wall, Ph.D
Executive Director



Dear Friends of the Trust,

One of the best parts of being involved with the Trust is how it's opened my eyes to parts of the natural world that I never noticed before. Let me share a few examples.

Our roadsides are more vibrant every year, thanks to years of collaboration between the Trust and the Preserve Community Association. Reduced mowing and "leaving the leaves" on steep banks have stabilized soil, preventing siltation in streams and boosting native wildflower diversity.

Becoming a responsible resident of the Southern Appalachians is easier with the Trust's education programs. We reveal wonders like synchronous fireflies and empower new connections, whether it's kids overcoming a fear of snakes or learning simple composting. Our staff bring the Balsam Mountains to life for everyone.

Our revitalized research and conservation program closely monitors the mountain's health. Annual bird counts track the health of our forests, and stream invertebrates tell us about the health of our streams. These systematic observations help our naturalists identify problems, implement solutions, and remeasure indicators, ensuring a continuous cycle of improvement at the Trust.

At the Trust, fostering community and belonging is central to our work. Shared experiences—hiking, volunteering, celebrating—strengthen our collective commitment to preserving this special place, embodying our tagline: "Conservation through Community." We cannot fulfill our mission without you. Your invaluable input and generous annual contributions of time, talent, and treasure make the Trust what it is today. **Thank You!**

In closing, it's truly an honor to serve the Balsam community and encourage your connection to the natural world. Everyone I meet has a unique story about their journey here, and I'd love to hear yours!

Fondly,
Mary Edmondson
Board Chair, 2025-26

P.S. As we plan our 25th anniversary celebration, our core values of **community, communication, and conservation** will be front and center. Join us in celebrating our past and present, and embark on the next exciting chapter of the Trust's history!

THE ADVENTURE STARTS WITH YOU!

Our work in conservation and education thrives because of a remarkable community of supporters like you. Every contribution, in every form, is deeply cherished, from invaluable cash donations that provide the bedrock of our operations, to the incredible in-kind gifts of exquisite art and unique items that enrich our charity auctions, to the essential in-kind sponsorships that bring our community events to life. You are the heroes of this adventure!

Eagle Supporters (\$10,000+)

Anonymous, Barry & Sally Halevy, Beckie Yon and Mary Jayne Parker, David & Nancy Linsky, Don & Mary Edmondson, Doug & Teresa Franklin, Gary & Meg Moskovitz, Marshall & Mary Bassett, Michael & Beverly Neal, Michael & Patricia Dilick, Robert Farquharson & Jan Kohl, Rowdy & Donna Lemoine, Sabrina Watkins & Jim Watson, Spring & Ron Rosen.

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Trout Supporters (\$500-\$1,499)

ARCA Design, Barbara & Scott Huse, Bill Host & Patti Petersen, Brian & Viola Battin, Daniel & Jackie Devine, Darla & Ross Robertson, Dave & Tracy McCalpin, David & Kathy Herring, Douglas & Lynn Smith, Edward E. Haddock Jr. Family Foundation, Erin White, High Country Furniture, James & Leslie Moster, Jeff & Patty Marvel, John & Pam DeMartino, John and Mary Laura Philpott, Larry & Mary Arbaugh, Laura & David Howard, Mark & Debra Vagasky, Mark & Lauren Sembler, Michael & Lynn Murphy, Nichol Bunn & Kai Hecker, Owen's Surveying, PayPal Giving Fund, Perry & Julie White, Platt Architecture P.A., Richard Brobst & Karen Thomas, Richard & Kimberly Zimlich, Ron & Amy Davidson, Shick Construction LLC, Stanberry Insurance Agency, INC., Steve & Joanne Feiner, Sylva Family Care, Tom and Lynn Pokorny, Zachary Pierce.

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Alan & Enid Mendleson, Barry & Linda Fox, Carolyn Brewer & Jack Christian, Chad Lauze, Eric & Shari Krueger, Frances Hardison & Patricia Leahy, Gail Powell, Janet Kisler, Kimberly Wilson, Michael Wall & Allison Teem, Nathanael Webster, Neal & Deb Slafsky, Parker Platt, Paul & Nancy Anderson, Robert & Kimberly Williams, Stephen & Gale Barnett, Steven & Colleen Reiter, Susan Swope.



984

4th and 5th graders inspired (or at least titillated) by Miss Toad in our school programs.

Trusting in Data

So, you're a numbers person, eh? We hear you. Here at the Trust, data-driven decision making is in our DNA. That's why we strongly believe in bringing in experts to study the biodiversity riches of the Preserve and how to best manage it towards a sustainable future. And while we believe a lot of our conservation impact is hard to measure, it doesn't stop us from trying. So, for the numbers people, bask in the glory of...numbers on pages 7 & 8.



Nurturing Nature's Future

On a summer's day on the Mountain, three undergraduates and their professors waded into the lush green undergrowth of one of the Preserve's cove forests. Birdsong rings out from the forest canopy, and wildflowers in rich hues spring up from below. "This place is amazing..." breathes one of the students.

When the little party reaches their designated plot, they get right to work. One student gathers an assortment of mosses and lichens, tucking them into carefully labeled bags. Another student thrusts a hollow, t-shaped instrument deep into the ground, extracting a slender cylinder of soil. The third student searches the ground carefully for a certain type of mushroom. When she finds it, she lies on her stomach taking photos of the fungi before gently collecting samples. Back at the lab, the fungi, moss, and soil samples will be analyzed for microscopic life and what it reveals about the soil's – and the forest's – health.

These students are recipients of the UNCA Undergraduate Research Award, an endowment funded by the Trust and Mr. Charles Atkins to support student research and inspire the next generation of life scientists. They joined dozens of college students and professors on the Mountain this year, conducting beneficial research and honing scientific skills in the outstanding natural laboratory that is the Preserve.



Hands-On Conservation



The scene: a summer's day at Dark Ridge Creek. Amy and her summer intern Michael, along with a small group of wader-clad, net-wielding Preserve residents, gather curiously around a water-filled tray.

"What in the world is THAT?!!" A fat, squishy, tube-shaped animal writhes indignantly in the tray where it has been briefly detained. The creature's body is semi-transparent, and one end – the head? – bristles with tentacles. We watch in slightly alarmed fascination as it attempts to escape.

The "tube" creature is, in fact, entirely harmless, despite appearances. This weird little alien is the aquatic larva of a crane fly – those giant, leggy insects that love to fly around porchlights on summer nights. It joins a myriad of other aquatic creatures carefully sorted in the tray's compartments. Mayfly nymphs shoot through the water like tiny, three-tailed minnows. Fierce dragonfly nymphs lurk quietly in the shadows. Caddisfly larvae - artistes extraordinaires - peek out from intricate cases they have fashioned from sticks and leaves and their own silk. Together, the creatures paint a vivid picture, revealing volumes about the stream's health.

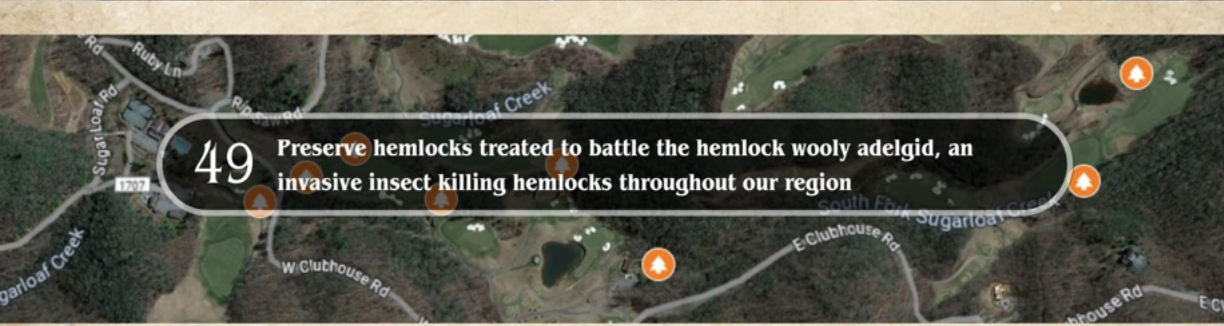
Amy and other Trust staff were busy out in the forest in 2024, working side-by-side with enthusiastic residents to preserve the Preserve. This year we...

- Launched a new water quality monitoring program.
- Surveyed and removed non-native invasive plants like Multiflora Rose.
- Worked to conserve our native Ginseng population.
- Monitored our bird population through surveys.
- ...and much more!

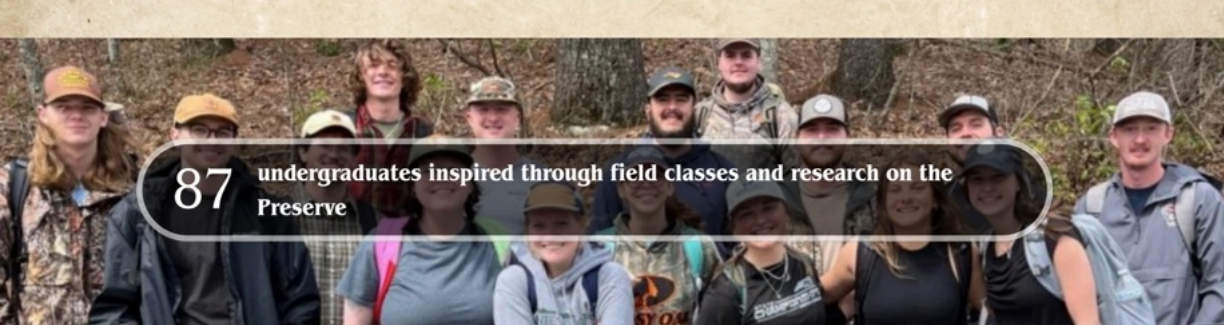




100 hikes, Trust Talks, conservation work days, and other Preserve programs in 2024



49 Preserve hemlocks treated to battle the hemlock wooly adelgid, an invasive insect killing hemlocks throughout our region



87 undergraduates inspired through field classes and research on the Preserve



44 populations of invasive species mapped for treatment and removal in collaboration with Forest Stewards

Non-native invasive plants on roadsides in 2024

● *Ailanthus altissima* ● *Paulownia tomentosa*
● *Berberis thunbergii* ● *Rosa multiflora*

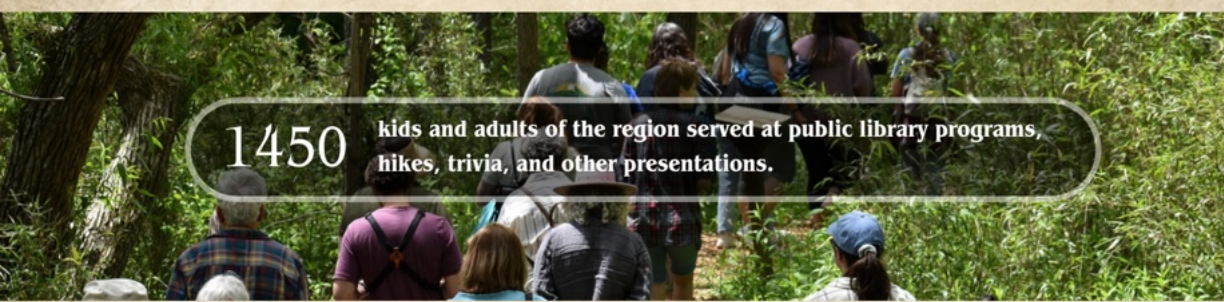


57 birds documented in the summer of 2024, part of a 20 year study on avifauna of Balsam Mountain Preserve



8.8

average dissolved oxygen in Dark Ridge Creek in 2024. Brook trout survive in waters over 5mg/l but thrive at 8 mg/l and above



1450

kids and adults of the region served at public library programs, hikes, trivia, and other presentations.



270

kids and adults of the region attending the Trust's 2024 BirdFest in Monteith Park



100s

of synchronous fireflies flashing in the Trust's annual firefly pilgrimage to Cataloochee Valley



1092

hours of selfless love, care, and compassion from our Animal Care volunteers

The Heart of Conservation



Here at the Trust, our Education Outreach Coordinator and AmeriCorps Member, Gina Patton, helps us connect with even more hearts and minds! We are always working to expand our reach, find wonderful new ways to share our love of nature and make our programs shine. We also deeply value teaming up with incredible local conservation and community groups, amplifying the positive impact we can all achieve together in the Southern Appalachians.

While that all sounds good, what are we really doing? We bring our amazing Animal Ambassadors into almost every 4th-grade classroom in Jackson and Haywood Counties, sparking wonder in young eyes. We see a gym full of eager attendees captivated by our "Amphibians and Reptiles" library programs. Months of heartfelt collaboration go into crafting our annual BirdFest – a joyful celebration packed with engaging educational booths, free programs, fantastic music, delicious food, and inspiring art. You might also find us leading a peaceful interpretive hike on the Preserve or at Pinnacle Park, or even teaching a creative nature class, like the delightful Botanical Drawing for Beginners. And, of course, we ensure our beloved Animal Ambassadors receive the best care and our dedicated weekend volunteers feel supported, all behind the scenes.



Building Trust



Cheyenne, the Trust's Red-tailed Hawk, continued to make significant strides in building trust with Rachael Hart throughout the year. Due to past negative experiences with humans, Cheyenne had developed a defensive nature. Over the past year, Rachael dedicated time to understanding Cheyenne's body language and vocalizations, always respecting her cues when she preferred solitude. As a result, Cheyenne now increasingly welcomes Rachael's company. This patient approach has resulted in a positive and trusting relationship, with Cheyenne always dictating the pace. Their bond represents a beautiful development of trust, a huge win for any animal in managed care. Rachael looks forward to Cheyenne's future, ensuring she remains more than content at the Trust.



A Journey of Perseverance

2024 proved a year of profound perseverance for Ama, the Trust's adult morphed axolotl. Battling an unknown illness, Ama spent much of the year in sterile environment. Along with our trusty veterinarian, Dr. Ross, Rachael diligently managed Ama's treatments from October 2023 to August 2024. This past fall, Ama's wound finally healed! Now you'll find Ama in her groovy Tiki-themed terrarium, burrowing in the substrate or basking in her pool. Ama is now thriving and continues to be a beloved ambassador, a testament to her small but mighty spirit.



An Irreverent Reverence of Nature

In addition to our values of collaboration, communication, and community, the Trust likes to wrap everything up in a big bear hug of "having fun while we're doing it." In addition to creating a fun and joyful workplace, there is good research showing that humor in educational settings increases engagement, boosts retention, builds rapport, and encourages participation. So, Trust staff are never shy about serving up some conservation education with a side of silliness.

A Tail of Tiny Teeth and Turtle Triumph!



Ah, winter in Appalachia! It is a time for rest and rejuvenations before spring. For our shelled friends, Merlin and Hermione, it's all about that deep, luxurious brumation – basically, a super chill, low-energy nap deep in the dirt. Think of it as hitting the ultimate snooze button!



Salve for an unsolicited pedicure

Unfortunately, some mischievous rodents, perhaps fueled by a serious case of the winter munchies, occasionally decide a brumating turtle looks like a tasty, and very slow-moving, snack bar. This winter, such was the case for Merlin's back foot! Fear not! Our shelled pal was quickly discovered, given some top-notch TLC (Turtle Loving Care!), and is now shell-ebrating life, fully healed and ready to roll into an education program near you!



Hazel's Favorite ^{Snake} Snack

Did you know that opossums love to eat shed snake skins? Well, at least our tailless opossum, Hazel, sure did back in 2024. Part of keeping our animal ambassadors happy involves what folks in the biz call "animal enrichment." This means we try to give our critters new and unique experiences.

On a lark, Rachael let Hazel encounter a shed from one of our rat snakes. It disappeared like pork rinds at a Fourth of July picnic! We'd occasionally surprise Hazel with a chunk of snake shed here and there. She never tired of them!

Hazel has since left this mortal coil, but in our hearts, we know that snake sheds must grow on trees in Animal Ambassador heaven.



bmtrustnaturalist



bmtrustnaturalist Not your Grandma's Jelly Roll
... more

Social Butterflies



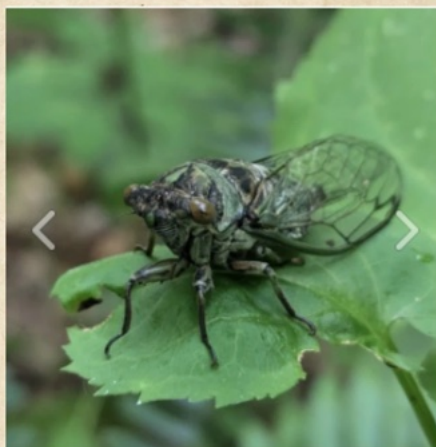
increase in social media
total reach over 2023



increase in content
interactions over 2023



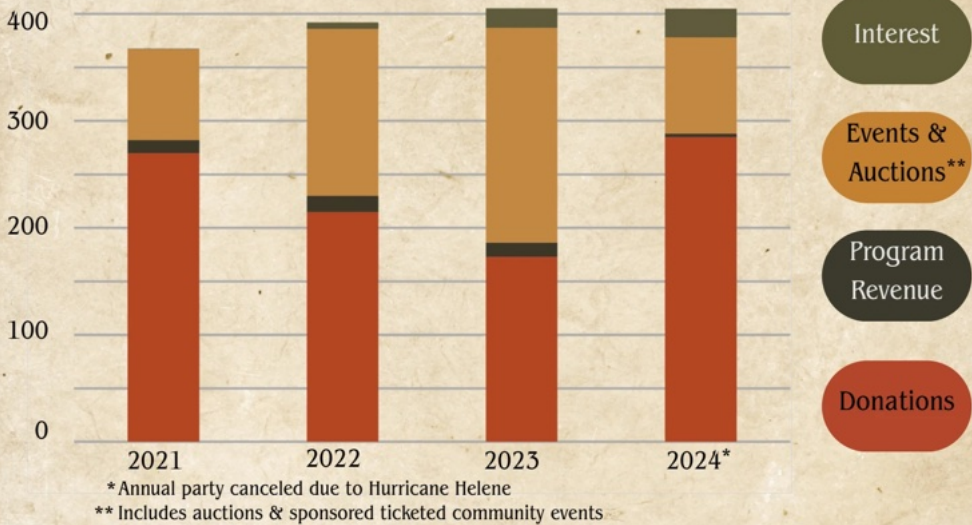
bmtrustnaturalist Ever heard of SLUBBING? Slubbing (or
self-anointing) is a behavior observed in Virgini... more



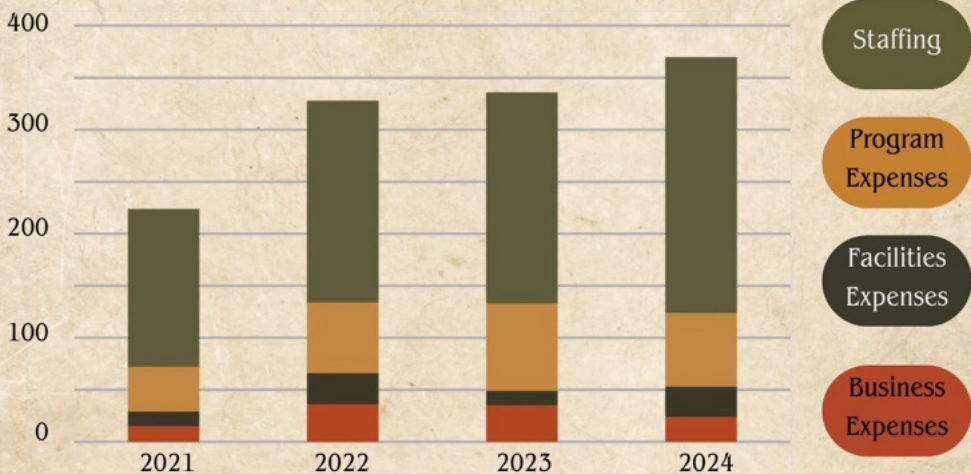
bmtrustnaturalist Cicada Killer, Qu'est-ce Que C'est?
Fa-fa-fa-fa, fa-fa-fa-fa-fa-fa. Well, there is a son... more

Historical Financial Summary

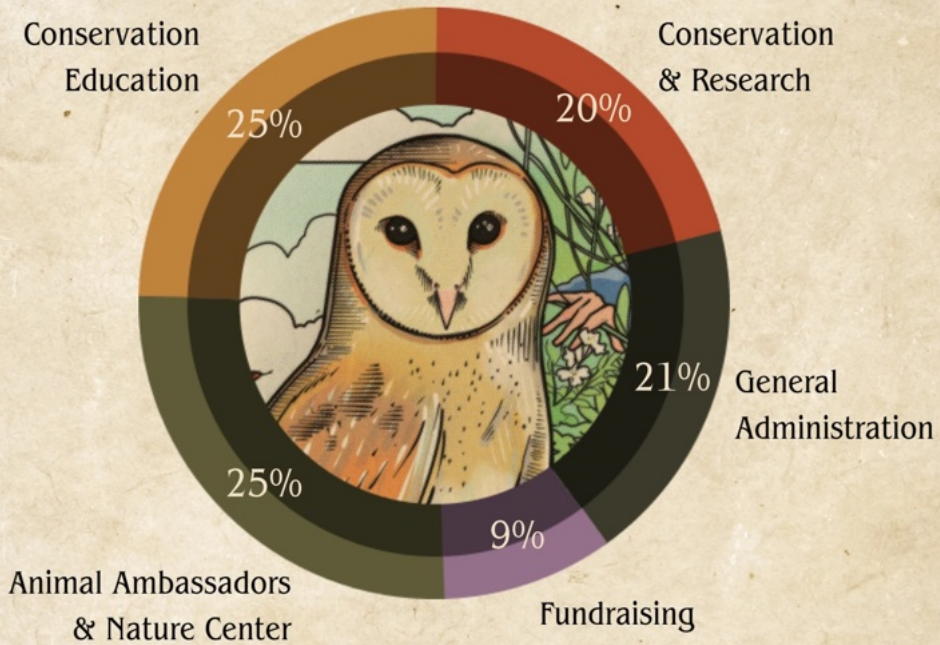
Revenues



Expenses



2024 Expenses by Functional Area



Revenues

Donations	\$285K	70%
Program Revenue	\$3K	1%
Events & Auctions	\$90K	22%
Interest	\$27K	7%
Total Revenue	\$405K	100%

Expenses

Business Operations	\$22K	6%
Nature Center Maintenance	\$28K	8%
Land Stewardship	\$15K	4%
Animal Ambassadors	\$12K	3%
AmeriCorps	\$23K	6%
Preserve Programs	\$2K	1%
Party Expenses	\$16K	4%
General Fundraising	\$4K	1%
Staffing	\$246K	66%
Total Expenses	\$371K	100%

2024 Trust Staff

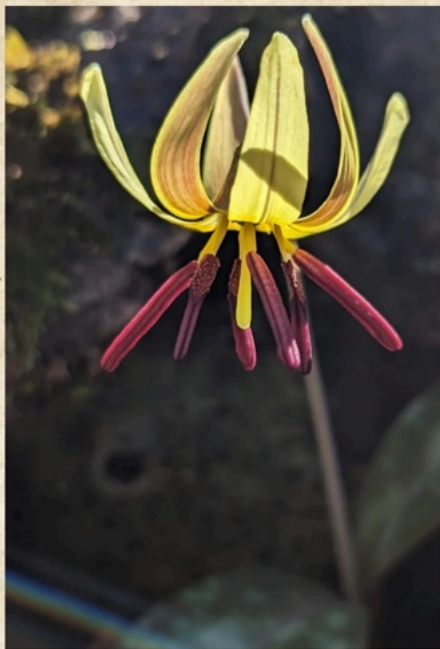
Amy Duggins, Community Science Coordinator

Gina Patton, Education Outreach / AmeriCorps member

Kimberly Jacobs, Administrative Coordinator

Michael Wall, Executive Director

Rachael Hart, Wildlife Caretaker/Naturalist



2024 Trust Board of Directors

David Howard (incoming for 2025)

Joel Bradley, Chair/Acting Treasurer

John Morse

Mary Edmondson, Vice Chair

Michael Wall, Executive Director

Robert Moore (incoming for 2025)

Sabrina Watkins, Secretary

Sally Halevy

Spring Rosen

Will Gandy

Credits - Words fail to express how grateful we are to Erick Toussaint for bringing this 'Choose Your Own Adventure' to life. Erick is the talent behind the front and back covers; he bears no responsibility for Michael's amateur attempts to design the 'guts' between those covers. If a photo of a critter looks exceptional (see pages 3, 12, & 14), that is the talent of Jacob Long, an accomplished local wildlife photographer who captures the personality of critters like no other. Massive thanks to Jessie Casteel for the great shots of BirdFest on pages 8 & 10. Margi Dykens, a retired botanist, librarian, and brilliant human being, improved all of the text with a careful edit. Writing and other photography was a team effort, with Amy, Gina, and Rachael doing the heavy lifting in their respective areas of expertise.

A young girl with long brown hair is smiling and looking towards the camera. She is positioned behind a glass pane, likely part of a terrarium or exhibit. In the foreground, a large, textured, brown object, possibly a piece of bark or a large log, is visible. Below this, a snake with a red body and black and white bands is coiled on a bed of brown mulch. The background shows a wooden structure and a framed picture of a forest scene.

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.



WILL YOU DISCOVER THE TREASURE IN THE BALSAM MOUNTAINS?

An old-timer on a rocking chair at the general store in Sylva tells tale of the legendary treasure in the Great Balsam Mountains. Pointing a craggy finger toward Balsam Gap, he says, "Mosey along that way and see for yourself." As you walk away, he warns, "The treasure is there for anyone! But, only those with the smarts, the heart, and the humor will see it." Do you have what it takes to be part of the adventure? Start your journey by choosing your strongest trait.

If you have the "smarts" turn to p.3

If you have the "heart" turn to p.9

If you have the "humor" turn to p.13

What happens next in the story? What is the treasure in the mountains? How did it get there? Only you can find out!

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE



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