



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.



Winter is a perfect time to photograph in black and white. The most recent snowfall in the area really begged for gray-scale photography and the area around the Preserve was no exception. Michael saw this composition while driving up Preserve Road. This was shot on a iPhone X and post production was done in digital darkroom. Isn't nature amazing?!

Photos by: M. Skinner

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From the Trailhead:

By Michael Skinner, executive director

2020—A Year of Living Quietly, but with Purpose:

First—a heartfelt thank you for those who participated in our first (and hopefully, the last) virtual Trust party. Given the state of the world at the time of the party, we thought we did pretty well, all things considered. Kathy Nervie, while receiving plaudits for her leadership in guiding the folks who helped make the party a success, deserves another go-round of 3 cheers from me and the Trust team!

Another research project has gotten underway on the Preserve, initiated with a conversation between myself and one of our regular ‘customers’, Kathy Mathews, Ph. D., at Western Carolina University. Desi Hoagland, one of Kathy’s students is going to be studying what is referred to as a dark firefly—so named because they don’t have the lantern light we most associate with fireflies. The species in question is *Ellychnia corrusca*. Desi’s research will try and shed some light (I know, terrible pun) on this species as there is very little known about the niche it fills in nature. At the completion of his study, he’ll have to, of course, complete his analysis and produce a white paper to provide some scientific background on another amazing resident on the Preserve. Stay tuned as we’ll provide information as we can about his results. It’s very exciting to see another research project underway on property and to know that we’ll provide BMP owners with more amazing discoveries—all of which help to provide each of you with more reasons to be in a place that holds so much wonder and, helps to provide you with a ‘sense of place’ on the mountain.



One of the ‘dark’ fireflies, the species being studied on the Preserve will be discovered under the leaf litter in the woods on the Preserve. You do wonder why they evolved to not have the lantern light of their more well known cousins.

And now, just for fun, some colors of the season:



Michael photographed this magical poinsettia leaf on a plant purchased locally. He was drawn to the panoply of color in one leaf on an otherwise 'normal' poinsettia.

He who marvels at the beauty of the world in summer will find equal cause for wonder and admiration in winter

John Burroughs

Education Mewsings:

By Jen Knight, Co-Senior Naturalist/Education Director

Trail Notes: Up and Over Doubletop

As you may know, the Trust is working to record and upload all the BMP hiking trails with the app AllTrails. This free app allows users to access local trail maps, post pictures, ratings, and share information - it's like having a personal trail guide in your pocket!

Projects like these are one of the many perks of being a naturalist. While we have our share of desk days, spending a workday out on a hike makes up for it. In addition to recording the GPS data for AllTrails, hiking the property gives us a chance to survey trail infrastructure like handrails and bridges, collect iNaturalist observations, and assess the status of the guided hike trail markers.

Despite being with the Trust for 7 and 5 years respectively, Rose and I had never made it out to the more distant remote cabin located off Trail #43. We decided to hike #42 and #43 which would take us up and over Doubletop Mountain and then connect us to the remote cabin. Together, these trails offer up some unique habitat types, a spectacular panoramic view, and a creepy-cool destination in the remote cabin.

We began at the #42 trailhead off Stemwinder Road and soon found ourselves winding through a moss-covered boulder field. These unique formations are more common at the margins of former glacial zones but can be found throughout the Appalachian Mountains. The



boulders are not glacial deposits but are results of periglaciation, freeze-thaw cycles that break up and shape the landscape. It is thought most of these boulder fields formed during the last ice age, around 20,000 years ago. Here on the northern side of the mountain, these rocky coves play host to ferns and mosses that thrive in the cool, shady conditions.

Another standout sight was the large, leathery brown lichen growing on the exposed rock as we climbed higher. Known as smooth rock tripe (*Umbilicaria mammulata*), this brittle and bitter lichen is technically edible after soaking and boiling, though is generally reserved for survival situations. It is rumored that Washington's men turned to rock tripe at Valley Forge to fend off starvation. It is also one of the largest lichen species in the world, with some specimens reaching 2 feet in diameter.

The observation deck at the summit offered a great view of the surrounding Balsam Mountains but we found the best view by taking the trail past the overlook just over the property line into the Nantahala National Forest. The rhododendron open up to an exposed cliffside where club mosses and lichen spread coral-like over the granite. The unobstructed panorama afforded a view of the WCU campus to the southwest and a turkey vulture just overhead.

Unlike Trail #42, Trail #43 is an old logging road with much less consideration given to the limits of human stamina. The trail cut straight down the other side of the mountain

with few switchbacks or meanders. The hike down was quick, but our return trip gave us much more time to ponder the ground at our feet.

Fortunately, the remote cabin did not disappoint. Like the other remote cabin located off the Sugarloaf Trail, this 19th century structure is not original to the property but was moved onsite in the early days of the Preserve. In fact, the two cabins were originally a single building that was split, reassembled, and curated with antiques and tchotchkes to the delight of BMP hikers ever since.

We assume the cabin is un-

dergoing some repair work as one wall was partially disassembled when we arrived. The contents of the small room were a fascinating study in decay and reclamation. Every drawer held a cache of acorns and the bristles of the paint brushes had been nibbled off long ago. Although not their intended purpose, these objects still held value for their "users" and we were reminded that no one recycles or reuses quite like Mother Nature.

Hopefully this account inspires you to take a walk, try out AllTrails, or rediscover some favorite haunts. There is something new to notice every season and no shortage of natural wonders here on the Preserve - Happy Trails!



Jen photographed Rose exploring a steep cliffside at the end of the trail at the top of Doubletop Mountain.