

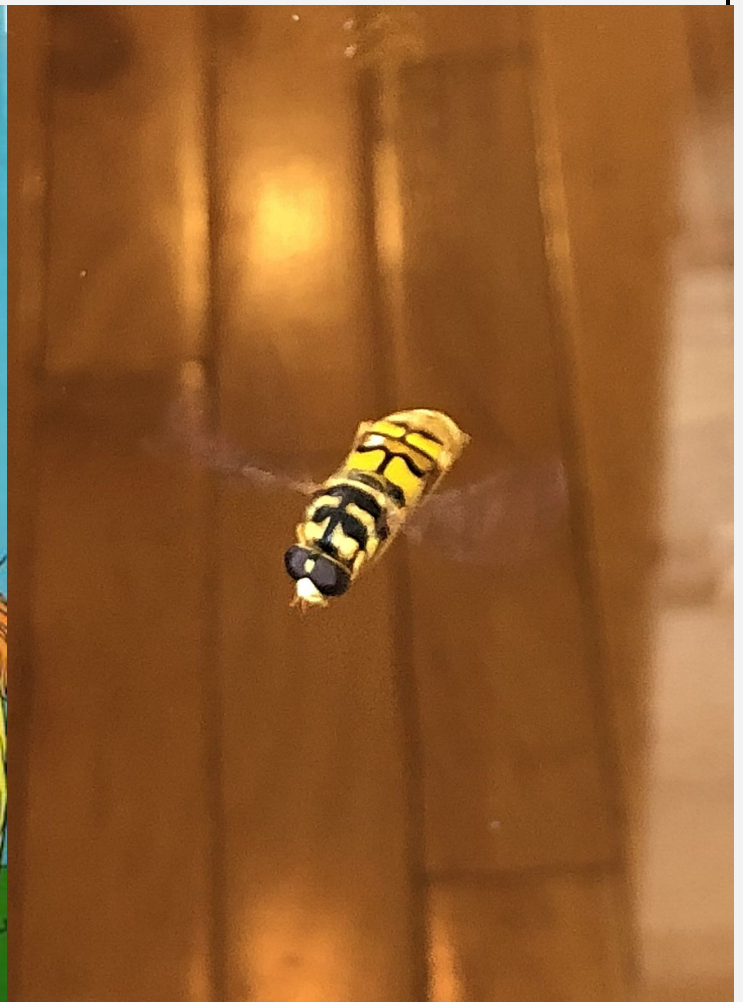


NaturePhile

Written/Published by: Your Trust-ed Staff

Volume #19/Issue #2 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 conserva-



What, you may ask, does The Lorax have in common with a hover fly? They're both indicators and prognosticators of what may lie in store for us as the challenges of climate change drive decisions that will have to be made that will determine the fate of myriad species, including humans. Scientists around the world suggest that we've surpassed, or are about to, exceed the safe range of global temperature increase that might determine the sustainability of much of life on Earth.

What each of us should ask ourselves might be, "Am I doing everything I can to mitigate and/or minimize the impact I have on the health of the natural systems on this planet?"

In this issue: From the Trailhead: Is it Time for You to Consider Your Commitment to a Healthy Planet?; Education Mewsings: The Trust Welcomes some New Wild Staff Critters; AmeriCorps Update: Not Goodbye, rather Farewell! Save the Date: Annual Trust Party (A)Live and Well



From the Trailhead:

By Michael Skinner, executive director

Our Place in the Web of Life on Planet Earth:

Can I ask a favor of each of you who have decided to make the Preserve a part of your life? For those of you who know me, I think you'd agree that I'm not prone to articulate a 'the sky is falling' type of posture, either in prose or in conversation. For those who don't know me, I would like to offer that I've attempted to, over my almost twenty years with the Trust, maintain a 'glass is half full' state of mind and being. We, as a species, i.e., as living, biological organisms, depend on the biosphere and, not un-coincidentally, the incredible biodiversity of life

both here in western North Carolina and on the planet as a whole. The frontispiece photos of this issue illustrate an over-arching comment on the state we find ourselves in regarding the health of the biosphere.

I've had conversations with scientists for many years, related to the progressive nature of climate change—and its resulting affects on the natural world—and they have run the gamut of opinions, as one might imagine. What's interesting to me now is, an overwhelming consensus on where we are and, what we face as the self-anointed stewards of this planet. And the news is not promising. I'm not going to list the litany of challenges with which we're now faced—one can find that peppered all over various news sites on the web. Rather, what I would like to ask each of you who call the Preserve home, at any level, to do, is consider that the Trust is, and has been for over twenty years, your eyes, ears and boots on the ground guardian of one of, what I hope is, the main reason you own something on this amazing 4,400 acres of natural wonder. And as part of your consideration, I would like to ask each of you what value you assign to the Trust. Is the value worth your supporting us? Yes, many of you do but the number of donors to the Trust make up the minority of owners on BMP. So now, I'm going to ask each of you who do not contribute, to consider placing us in your stable of charitable organizations worthy of your financial support.

Our commitment to conservation education is well established, but our need to perform natural and cultural resource stewardship is on par with that commitment. The stewardship program on the Preserve was written quite some time ago and our active implementation of this program has been moth-balled due to lack of financial resources. In my travels around the property I've noticed numerous issues we are facing related to resource stewardship, not the least of which is the growing inundation of invasive species. Forests cannot manage themselves. We have to have an active, vibrant and thoughtful stewardship program on this property. This comes at



The branch hanging down is tree-of-heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*) and the grass growing upwards underneath it is Nepalase browntop or Japanese stiltgrass (*Microstegium vimineum*) - both highly invasive, non-native plants found on the Preserve with no current plan to control them—or other invasive exotic species.

What's most problematic with species like these is that they usurp the ecological foundations upon which so many other native species depend on to survive and thrive. This in turn can have devastating affects on the established food webs present in the area, such as on the Preserve.

price. A price that I hope each of you realizes 1) protects the health of the biodiversity here and as result 2) protects your investment.

Give me a shout if you'd like to have a conversation about this subject. Cheers and thanks for taking a look.



Trust Hires New Seasonal Admin/Naturalist:

Please stop by the Nature Center and introduce yourselves to Rachael Hart, the Trust's newest staff person. Rachael was selected from a small but very talented and qualified group of candidates for this seasonal position. She brings a passion for all things nature and has adapted very quickly in her role as our seasonal administrator and naturalist.

Rachael is playing a key role in helping to take some of the day-to-day tasks off of Michael, Rose and Jen which frees them up to perform duties more inline with their responsibilities.

Along with administrative and animal care functions, she is usually the first smiling face visitors to the Nature Center are greeted. She is always willing to engage them with her ebullient and engaging personality and style.

The Wonders of the Natural World...

...are myriad and this example is a bit of a rooted dichotomy, if you will. The plant you're going to read about here is the common mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*) - a plant, which, by the way, comes with no fewer than forty different common names, e.g., Moses' blanket, feltwort, cowboy toilet paper, hare's beard, velvet dock, torch plant, miner's candle, shepherd's club—just to name a few.

This is non-native, somewhat invasive species, was brought here in the early 19th century by European settlers for medicinal and piscicidal (fish poison) properties. (While invasive, it is also fairly easy to control.) The medicinal properties of this plant range from treating heart problems, lung ailments, chest colds, earaches, frostbite and more. According to the literature, it is not much used for modalities related to human health anymore. Some of the others uses are both fascinating, useful and comical, which I will share with you now. Uses which I have field tested and borne out its efficacy.

When hiking, especially when one might consider having some survival gear on hand, this plant, in its dried state makes a wonderful fire-starting tinder (hence one of the common names of torch plant). If you don't carry any tinder in your pack, you can generally find mullein (if you're in its growing range) to use by looking at the base of the plant for dead, dried leaves. The photo illustrates that it does, in fact, burn quite well.

And talk about emergency preparedness! I have, on occasion, utilized this amazing plant as my own personal emergency Charmin bath tissue. If you find yourself out in the woods without the proper civilized tools for cleanup after evacuating, then this 'cowboy toilet paper' will fit the purpose—and admirably I might





Mullein makes an incredible substitute (in an emergency) for toilet paper, if you forgot to pack some on your hiking adventures. Left: what the plant looks like during its second year of growth on the Preserve. You'll often see them in groups like these pictured.

add. And talk about soft! Wow! This stuff is amazing! So if you're hiking in the Smokies, this plant is a highly desirable substitute for your standard toilet paper. And you shouldn't have issues of an allergic reaction. Just make sure you check for any unwanted hitchhikers that might be clinging on to the leaves!

And while the plant is a non-native, it does bring some benefits to our wild friends in the guise of providing small amounts of nectar and pollen to our local bees, flies and beetles. In terms of value to birds, there hasn't been much research that would allude to it being very beneficial other than as a seed source for goldfinches.

The plant is a (mostly) biennial, i.e, it typically blooms in it second year. However, it has been recorded flowering in both its first and third years. This typically depends on what type of environment and what latitude in which it is growing.



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.



Education Mewsings: Welcome Your New Wild Neighbors

By: Rose Wall, Co-Senior Naturalist/Education Director

We are thrilled to welcome several new animal ambassadors to our Trust Team! These animals are an important part of our mission, bringing life to our education programs at schools, libraries and other public facilities throughout the region. The animals that call the nature center home are ones that, by and large, cannot live in the wild. Many come to us from wildlife rehabilitators that have deemed them non-releasable; others are captive bred. Our staff and volunteers work hard to provide them with homes, food and enrichment that mimic what they would experience in the wild. We hope you'll stop by the nature center soon to meet your new Balsam neighbors.

Petunia nee Lil' 'Poss, Virginia opossum, *Didelphis virginiana*: We've been calling our new possum Lil' Poss, which has evolved now to Petunia-. This possum came to us from Appalachian Wildlife a local rehabilitation facility. She was hit by a car, leaving her with brain damage and a missing eye. Unfortunately, many possums suffer a similar fate when "playing dead" – a wonderfully adaptive trait when encountering a predator, but not a car! You can help possums and other animals by never throwing waste out of your car window, which keeps them from being attracted to the dangerous roadside.

Oh, and in case you are wondering, Blossom the 'possum is still with us. Since she is getting on in years, we've brought on a younger animal to share the teaching load.

Opossums are the only North American marsupial—a mammal that carries its young in a pouch.

Possums make the perfect backyard neighbor. They do not contract rabies and they keep down Lyme disease by eating ticks—a favorite snack!

Ashe and Rufus, Eastern Screech Owls, *Megascops asio*: We have two new screech owls that came to us from Wild at Heart Rehabilitation Facility in Piedmont, SC. These animals both have eye issues from unknown injuries that deem them non-releasable into the wild. One is a gray-phase and one is the less-common red-phase. Come by to compare these two beauties.

Screech Owls weigh about as much as an apple and stand about as tall as a pint glass. Their "horns", also known as "ear tufts", are actually neither. Scientists believe these raised feathers better hide from predators.



tall as a pint glass. Their "horns", also known as "ear tufts", are actually neither. Scientists believe these raised feathers better hide from predators.

Myrtle, American alligator, *Alligator mississippiensis*: This gator comes to us through a special partnership with Alligator Adventures in Myrtle Beach, SC. Once she outgrows our facilities, we will exchange her for a new hatchling. Check out the photos of our summer animal care intern, Elise holding Pickles, our last American alligator and our new arrival, Myrtle.

Unlike most reptiles, alligator mothers guard their nests and care for their young. They'll stay with her for about a year. Alligators typically live between 35 and 50 years in the wild but it is estimated that some may live into their 24s.

Black Rat Snake, *Pantherophis obsoletus*: This snake comes to us from Appalachian Wildlife Reha-

bilitation Center. It was taken from the wild and raised in captivity. The details of care for this snake were unknown. Because of this, it has been deemed non-releasable due to potential risk of disease transmission to other wild reptiles. Remember, it's always best to leave wild animals in the wild! This critter is also awaiting a name. Give us a shout if you have an idea.

Black Rat Snakes are the largest (longest) non-venomous snake found in the mountains of WNC, reaching lengths of 7 feet or more. They love to eat rodents but are also excellent tree climbers as they hunt for bird and squirrel nests.

As we say hello to our new animals, we also say goodbye to some of our former residents. Please join us in remembering Poplar our Eastern Screech Owl and Rusty and Sparky our American Kestrels. We've also recently said goodbye to baby painted turtle we raised at the nature center as part of a head start program and then released back to the Owen Lake where we found it as a hatchling.

A Thought For Each of You Reading this Issue of NaturePhile:

By Michael Skinner

Recently, I took this photograph of Rose's daughter Marigny, as she had just metamorphosed from a human caterpillar into a beautiful monarch butterfly...sort of! As this issue of NaturePhile is comprised of some of my thoughts regarding the state of the natural world and with the related challenges we are facing, Rose made a comment to me about seeing Marigny (who was engaged in her own amazing world of make-believe — of which I was jealous!) and making, what I believe was a very profound statement. What I will now call here, a maxim. She said, while looking at her butterfly daughter, "I'm obligated to hope."

I think we are all, "obligated to hope."



AmeriCorps Update: Not So Much, “Goodbye,” rather, “Farewell!,”

By Michael Skinner, Trust executive director

For the past two years, and for that matter, since we began our journey as a host for the AmeriCorps Service Program, we have indeed been fortunate to have had a stable of incredibly talented and enthusiastic Service members. And the most recent last two years allowed us to host Nicole Cook.

An AmeriCorps commitment is for one year (or about nine months). Nicole, as well as a number of our other AmeriCorps members, realized what a fantastic opportunity this program provided—and that the Trust was a formative institution in which they could gather valuable, experiential skills that they could directly apply to future employment. We were so lucky and grateful that numerous Service members re-upped for a second ‘tour of duty’ with the Trust.



This program has afforded the Trust the opportunity to host young people, who are typically at the beginning of their careers, who saw the Trust as a viable resource from which they could get practical, hands-on experience in the arena of conservation science and education. This program serves in a quid pro quo sort of atmosphere in that 1) the Trust gets an amazing value from the human resource side and 2) the Service member gets direct, hands-on experience in number of areas which will (and has) provided them with new skills directly applicable to future employment opportunities. In Nicole’s case, she decided to go on to graduate school at Western Carolina University. And

since she will still be ‘local’, she has threatened to show up at the Nature Center, to make sure the well-oiled machine she left in place, is still running at maximum output. :-)

Personally, I have been nothing but amazed at the quality, commitment and talents of each of our AmeriCorps Service members. They have each, in their own unique way and personality, brought an amazing depth to the programs the Trust offers to the public groups presented with our programs. More importantly, these programs serve as a lifeline to economically underserved schools and other public institutions, which would not necessarily receive the quality of environmental education programming the Trust provides. Which, in this writer’s humble opinion, we are in dire need of in this day and age. The natural world provides our lifeline to a healthy, happy life. What the Trust does to meet its mission, which includes AmeriCorps Service folks, is vital to understanding the importance of life on earth—and our responsibility to it—as the self-proclaimed caretakers.



This Trust has hired another AmeriCorps Service person to begin in September and we’re looking forward having them on board. As I see it, each of our Service folks have continued to raise the bar for the next one. I know that our team will do everything it can to provide an atmosphere of success and support for our newest recruit. Hats off to Rose and Jen for being the direct supervisors for this position and, to our Board of Trustees for its willingness to financially support this position. And this means, of course, three cheers to all of our financial supporters on the mountain who make this program possible.