

SHOOTING THE BREEZE

A Publication of Bull Run Mountains Conservancy, Inc.

Appalachian Giant

by Michael Kieffer



Imagine hiking on the Bull Run Mountains on a cool fall day. In the flood plain, we find sycamores and tulip poplars four to five feet in diameter. After losing ourselves in a swift, cold stream teeming with darters, minnows, shiners, and brook trout, we try to decipher sights and sounds that are coming faster than our senses can discriminate.

Immediately after departing one treasure, our upward ascent brings us to coves, hollows, and gentle eastern slopes that all appear to be molded by 130-foot red oaks, white oaks, various hickories, and white ashes. On the west facing side of the hollows we have barren acidic chestnut-oak/heath and pine-oak/heath communities that

have been scarred by fire; on the east facing side, rich basic oak hickory forests that appear unburnable.

When we reach the ridgeline, we enter an extensive stand of pitch pines. Their trunks bear clusters of short, needle-loaded branches that give them an unshaven look. Their deeply fissured bark scales resist fire as they effectively burn like hairs on a hand, far from the life giving cambium. The scene melts into a pure stand of table-mountain pine, whose lower branches droop gracefully and are loaded with squat cones composed of large scales that once open, expose large, stout, strongly hooked spines.

As we join the human struggle to find a consistent thread in this world, we reflect back on our journey, only to stumble upon the fact that one type of tree “sows” this mountain together: *Castanea dentata*, the American chestnut. In the bottomlands these trees sky to 150 feet and have six-foot diameters. In the mid-slopes they are dominant in many of the hardwood communities. On the ridge they are sub-dominant in all of the hardwood communities. In fact we never were out of sight of a chestnut on the entire hike.

Luckily in this fictional walk we did collect some of the American chestnut mast throughout the hike, even robbing some of the squirrels’ caches along the way. Time to make a little extra cash by selling them to city folk as a major holiday treat “Chestnuts roasting on an open fire...”

Today, most of the elements in the mountain communities are intact, but the thread that was part of almost every hardwood community in all of Appalachia, the American chestnut, is nothing but a ghost, with only rootstock sprouts to remind us of what used to be a constant.

Introduced around 1890 with a nursery shipment of Asian chestnuts, the first signs of the fungus blight, *Cryphonectria parasitica*, were witnessed in the trunks of American chestnuts by 1904. The American chestnut was completely eliminated, as a defining component to any North American hardwood forest community, in less than 40 years.

The American Chestnut Foundation (TACF) has hybridized American chestnuts (*Castanea dentata*) with the desirable characteristic blight resistance of the Chinese chestnut (*Castanea mollissima*), using a technique known as “backcrossing.”

Instead of the usual story line of loss and destruction, the American chestnut offers the hope of renewal and resurrection. Here is to hoping our grandchildren will once again be roasting American chestnuts on an open fire.



Courtesy of TACF

Winter Lecture Series January—March 2026

Join us for a series of informative lectures on the first Wednesday of each winter month. All lectures will be held at BRMC headquarters, 17405 Beverley Mill Dr., Broad Run, VA 20137. The Winter Lecture Series is presented through a partnership of BRMC and the White House Farm Foundation.

Toxic sewage sludge from Maryland coming to a VA farm near you!

Wednesday, January 7th—10a.m.

Join us for a presentation by Dean Naujoks of the Potomac Riverkeeper. In this lecture, Dean will share information about PFAS found in sewage sludge that is being applied to Virginia farmlands. Learn about this emerging issue, see what the Potomac Riverkeeper Network has done to address it, and explore ways that you can take action to protect clean water.



Old-Growth Forests: Ecosystems that Benefit Communities

Wednesday, February 4th—10 a.m.

Join us for a presentation by Brian Kane, the mid-Atlantic regional manager for the Old-Growth Forest Network. Brian will discuss the ecological qualities and benefits of



old-growth forests and share several examples from notable old-growth forests in the mid-Atlantic. He will also discuss some of the common threats to the forests in the present day.

Mapping a Conservation Vision for Northern Virginia

Wednesday, March 4th—10 a.m.

Join us for a presentation by Matt Gerhart, conservation director of the Northern Virginia Conservation Trust. Geographical Information Systems (GIS) are an important tool for spatial targeting of conservation efforts. Matt will discuss the ways that the Northern Virginia Conservation Trust has used GIS analysis to prioritize their conservation efforts in our region.



Confessions of a...birder

by Kevin Dywer

When I landed my job working for Audubon, I was passingly interested in birds. Only because I liked photography, had just purchased a Canon Rebel, and birds seemed to be the most fun thing to take pictures of. I never set out to be a “birder,” and always resisted the notion that I was turning into one. Nerdy, right? But facts are facts. I am a birder.

I realized the transformation had happened one cold March day about five years ago, when I took my camera out to Jones Beach’s West End on Long Island, where I was living at the time. I wandered around the dunes for a while, getting some decent shots of waterfowl in some hidden marshes, but not much else. I was getting in my car to leave, when another car pulled up and a woman with a camera got out. She saw my camera and asked if I got any shots of the Snowy Owl. *Snowy Owl?* I asked. *There’s a Snowy Owl here?* Yup.

My middling day of bird photography changed dramatically. The woman, her husband, and I set off into the dunes again. It took about an hour, but there she was, practically posing for us in a perfectly picturesque spot on the dunes. We kept our distance (I learned a lot about birding ethics that day) and took picture after picture after picture. The owl looked at us once in a while. It yawned, it adjusted its position. Nothing special to her, but every movement elicited a machine-gun-fire of camera clicks. For about two hours, we were absolutely connected to that owl.

People talk about how being in nature can be an almost mystical experience. After that day at West End, I kind of know what they mean.



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BRMC Public Programs~Winter 2026



BRMC Speaker Series: A Hiker's History of the Appalachian Trail—Saturday, January 31, 2p.m.

Mills Kelly tells the trail's history from the ground up, or more accurately, from the boots up.

Several million hikers each year set foot on the trail for a few hours, a few days, or perhaps a few weeks. The trail was created for them, yet their role in its history is largely ignored. Working with trail shelter logbooks, hiker accounts submitted to trail clubs, newspaper and magazine stories about the experiences of casual hikers, Mills reveals what it was like to hike the trail from the late 1920s until the 2020s. Mills is a historian, podcaster, hiker, author, and a retired teacher who taught at GMU for 24 years.

LEOPOLD'S PRESERVE

Monthly Naturalist Walks

BRMC is proud to partner with the *White House Farm Foundation* and its mission to enrich individuals with knowledge of and involvement with our natural ecological systems through monthly naturalist walks on Leopold's Preserve: 16290 Thoroughfare Road, Broad Run, VA 20137.

Winter Schedule

Saturday, January 31st, 10a.m.-noon—Geology

Join us to explore and discuss the geology of the Triassic basin and learn the basics of field geology.

Saturday, February 21st, 10 a.m.-noon—Dendrology

Join us to learn about trees as we identify them by their bark, buds, and twig traits. We will determine the size and age of the trees as we explore the woodlands.

Wednesday, March 4th, 6:00-8:00 p.m.—Amphibians of Spring

Join us to enjoy the harbinger's of spring in full force.

Thursday, March 5th, 5:45-7:00 p.m.—Woodcock Watch

Join us to view their elaborate courtship displays and flight.



WHITE HOUSE
FARM FOUNDATION

WITH SUPPORT FROM PLEIN FAMILY FOUNDATION

HOMESCHOOL PROGRAMS—for youth and adults

All programs are 10am-12pm. \$5 pp, including adults.

BRMC invites you and/or your child to spend an adventurous outing interacting with and learning about nature! We meet at Leopold's Preserve, 16290 Thoroughfare Road, Broad Run, VA 20137.

Geology

Tuesday, January 13th—ages 15-adult—10a.m.-noon. Join us to explore and examine the geology of the Triassic basin, as we use BRMC's rock collection to learn the basics of field geology.

Wednesday January 21st—all ages—10a.m.-noon. Join us to explore and discuss the geology of the Triassic basin, as we use BRMC's rock collection to learn the basics of field geology.

Orienteering

Tuesday, February 10th—ages 15-adult—10a.m.-noon. Join us as we learn compass skills, topo map interpretation, then orienteer to a secret location in the woods.

Wednesday, February 18th—all ages—10a.m.-noon. Join us as we learn to use a compass and the lay of the land when orienteering to a secret location in the woods.

Amphibians of Spring

Tuesday, March 3rd—ages 15-adult—10a.m.-noon. Join us to explore habitats and life cycles of amphibians. Our focus will be on one of the areas largest salamander spp.—the spotted salamander.

Wednesday, March 4th—all ages—10a.m.-noon. Join us to explore the habitats and life cycles of amphibians. The spring chorus of frogs is the harbinger of spring and we will enjoy their display in full force.



M. Belknap

Overcoming the Wintertime Blues by Matthew Frost

December has arrived. The sun retreats a little sooner each day, below-freezing temperatures have crept into the forecast, and winter is right around the corner, rearing its frigid head among the fallen leaves. For people like my girlfriend, this brings what we call the Wintertime Blues.

In a quest for appreciation and to help my partner acclimate to Northern Virginia weather, we turned to Nature. We are fortunate to have walking trails behind our apartment complex, which take you through a diverse mesic hardwood forest of red and white oaks, beech, tulip poplar, and more. The Pohick Creek flows through it and is home to various wildlife including red foxes, deer, and our favorite resident, the barred owl. Almost daily, we venture out onto the trail and complete a mile loop. But in winter, by the time we both get home and are ready to walk, the moon has risen to flaunt itself in the sky, and the day has ended. This year, however, instead of succumbing to torpor, we have sought to conquer the cold through layers and light! Like our local coyotes and foxes, we began to "grow" thicker fur to keep ourselves insulated by adding layers. We also started using a headlamp to illuminate the paths, allowing us to experience nature in isolated darkness. We hear the raspy caw of the American crow, the brisk rustle of nearby brush from squirrels, and the "Who cooks for you?" of the barred owl without ever spotting them.

As the loop ends and we find ourselves back on familiar ground with streetlamps dimly lighting the sidewalk, our senses begin to adjust to the humdrum of suburban life. Our nighttime adventure still lingers in our minds as we stroll through the door to embrace the heat and recount the various noises we heard. In the end, we have learned that overcoming the Wintertime Blues was not just about escaping the cold but learning to participate and embrace the changes that the season brings.

As Robert Frost said in My November Guest "Not yesterday I learned to know/ The love of bare November days".



Town & Country Nature Walks Hopewell Sanctuary!

Join BRMC as we explore the geologic and cultural history of Hopewell Sanctuary (private). Take a stroll with Michael Kieffer, BRMC's Executive Director, as we enjoy this wonderful property located in the historic Hopewell Gap on the Bull Run Mountains.

Saturday, February 14th~10a.m.-noon



BRMC Youth Outdoor Naturalist Camps Summer 2026!



Registration is open for all camps & workshops at www.brmconservancy.org or at

HERPETOLOGY CAMP*

Session I: June 22nd-June 23rd, 10a.m.-3 p.m.

Session II: June 25th-26th, 10 a.m.-3 p.m.

Herpetology is the study of reptiles and amphibians. BRMC invites your child to spend two days hiking and handling, searching and observing salamanders, frogs, lizards, snakes, and turtles on Hopewell Sanctuary (Private) and Leopold's Preserve.

Ages 7-14. Limited to 15 participants.

Register today! Fee: \$100 early registration before March 1, 2026/ \$150 after March 1, 2026



BUDDING NATURALIST CAMP*

July 6th—10th, 10:00am-12:30 pm

A parent/guardian is welcome to accompany their child or children

At this week-long camp, young children will be exposed to the outdoors and wildlife, as they explore life on and around the Bull Run Mountains through a series of discovery hikes, frog and salamander searches, snake viewing, and stream exploration. Ages 4-6. Limited to 6 participants.

Register today! Fee: \$125 early registration before March 1, 2026/ \$175 after March 1, 2026

SUMMER NATURALIST CAMPS*

Session I: July 13th-17th, 10:00am-3:00pm

Session II: July 20th-24th, 10:00am-3:00pm

BRMC invites your child to spend an adventurous week interacting with the natural world. Each day we will focus on different groups of plants and animals on and around the Bull Run Mountains. Campers will add to their understanding of natural systems through hikes, stream walks, frog and salamander catching, bird watching, butterfly and insect collecting, and games. Ages 7-14. Limited this to 15 participants.

Register today! Fee: \$250 early registration before March 1, 2026/ \$300 after March 1, 2026

Chesapeake Watershed Workshop*

July 27th—July 30th, 10:00am-3:00 pm

Join us for a workshop focused on the conservation of streams that flow into the Chesapeake Bay. We will explore headwater seeps on the Bull Run Mountains and go downstream on Catharpin Creek, Little Bull Run, and North Fork. At each location participants will perform stream monitoring, vegetation analysis, and stream habitat and riparian buffer evaluations. Ages 15-18. With support from the Chesapeake Bay Restoration Fund, **6 full scholarships are available for this workshop!**

Register/apply today! Fee: \$200 early registration before March 1, 2026/ \$250 after March 1, 2026

**Our host properties will include Hopewell Sanctuary (Private), Leopold's Preserve, and Silver Lake Regional Park. All of these private/public lands are located within 5 miles of each other. Further information on each camp will be provided to participants.*

BRMC reserves the right to cancel a day of any camp due to severe weather. However, we do not anticipate issues with the time window of the camp hours.



Bull Run Mountains Conservancy

Education · Research · Stewardship

