JOURNEYS

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL CONSERVANCY / SUMMER 2024

AWAKENING EDITION

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Right: Long summer days on Roan Mountain invite lingering a little longer to enjoy the beautiful landscape and stunning vistas. Photo by Joshua T. Moore

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The golden-winged warbler is the focus of a concerted ATC conservation effort in the Southern Appalachians (see page 20). Photo by Erica Heusser; Cornell Lab of Ornithology | Macaulay Library

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Heather B. Habelka

Heather B. Habelka spent her childhood summers identifying flowers with her grandmother, exploring the small stream in her backyard, and fishing and gardening with her father. Her mother encouraged her love of reading and writing. She read to Heather every night, indulged her almost daily requests to visit the library, and proudly displayed her poetry and short stories on the refrigerator.

Like many children, Heather lost her connection to nature, and to her imagination, when she started college. As a journalism major she found herself spending more time in front of her computer and less time getting lost in nature or in a great story. But that all changed when she and her husband, Jim, took a trip to Alaska almost ten years ago. They hiked paths once covered by glaciers, kayaked with salmon, and watched soaring eagles and breaching humpbacks put on the most spectacular show.

Upon returning home to Connecticut, Heather and Jim started hiking the trails surrounding their home and kayaking and boating on Long Island Sound. Today, as a freelance journalist, she covers many topics, including all aspects of health and wellness. She is also writing her first work of fiction.

Tracy López

Tracy López is a bilingual writer and poet. Through her nonfiction and fiction writing, she seeks to connect readers with people, characters, and the world around them – sharing stories that explore our shared humanity and celebrating both what makes us individuals and the commonalities that bring us together. When not writing, Tracy likes to spend her time reading, creating art, visiting museums, and autumn day-hiking. She has hiked parts of the Appalachian Trail at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia; Shenandoah National Park, Virginia; and in Washington County, Maryland. Born and raised in Maryland –just a short drive from the nation's capital – Tracy now lives in the beautiful mountain state of West Virginia with her husband Carlos, two sons, and a silly hound dog named Margot.

Her wide-ranging work has appeared in a variety of print magazines, including *Café Magazine*, *Ser Padres*, and *Plaza Familia*, and on Fox News Latino and several other online outlets. Tracy co-authored a middle grade novel, *Detour Ahead*, which was a National Jewish Book Awards finalist, was included in the Bank Street Best Children's Books of the Year, and received a starred review from *Kirkus*, who called it "A well-written and engaging tale…"

Joshua T. Moore

Joshua T. Moore is an East Tennessee native who loves all aspects of photography. Though he has always lived within 45 minutes of the A.T., he did not discover the beauty of the Trail until his late twenties. Hoping to someday complete a thru-hike, Joshua currently enjoys the views and Trail life while section hiking.

Over the years, he has served as a volunteer photographer for the National Park Service, capturing images of the Blue Ridge Parkway, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and Cumberland Gap National Historical Park.

Joshua's work has been featured by National Geographic Yourshot, the National Park Service, the U.S. Department of Interior, *Outdoor Photographer*, *USA Today*, Mother Nature Network, *Landscape Photography Magazine*, *Blue Ridge Country*, *Smoky Mountain Living*, *Blue Ridge Outdoors*, *Carolina Country*, *Smoky Mountain News*, Shutterbug, *The Official Virginia Travel Guide*, and many other publications.

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AWAKENING

SUMMER HAS ALWAYS BEEN MY favorite season. The look of dappled sunshine falling through the full green canopy of the forest, the low hum of cicadas as the heat rises, and the chirp of crickets at sunset all enhance early morning hikes and lazy afternoons sitting on the screened porch with a tall iced tea and a good summer read.

Summer is of course the busiest season on the Appalachian Trail — and not just because of the hikers. The challenges posed by heat and bugs never deter our volunteers and professional crews, who shift into high gear, tackling maintenance projects that make the Trail a safer, and more enjoyable, experience for us all. The ATC's conservation staff members are hard at work managing the spread of invasive species, monitoring the health of forests, and improving habitat for native plants and wildlife including those that are threatened or endangered.

This issue of *A.T. Journeys* takes you behind the scenes of three projects that are the focus of the ATC's efforts on the Trail this summer. First, thanks to the generous support of lead donors, we are kicking off a multiyear project to assess all 380-plus overnight sites along the A.T. (see "Improving Nights in the Woods," page 32, and "A Family Affair," page 16). These sites include shelters and campsites that have expanded in recent years due to record numbers of long-distance hikers. Most of the sites were not designed to accommodate so many visitors or to minimize the impact on the environment caused by the heavy use that is now commonplace. The assessment will enable us to identify which require a redesign or replacement to ensure the optimal A.T. experience.

Second, in appreciation of the fact that the Trail is a critical migration corridor for many species, we are hard at work this summer on improving the habitat in the southern Appalachians of the golden-winged warbler (see "Highland Havens," page 20). Named the 2024 Bird of the Year by the American Birding Association, this beloved songbird has struggled to withstand the challenges of shrinking landscapes that meet its summer and winter needs. The golden-winged warbler is just one of the animal and plant species that the ATC seeks to protect, in order to preserve critical biodiversity in the Trail corridor.

Last, but not least, we explore youth programs that are introducing a new generation to the importance and impact of A.T. stewardship (see "Engaging Youth in Trail Maintenance and Protection," page 40). The NextGen Forest Ambassadors program in Georgia, now in its seventh year, is a model for partnerships with youth-serving organizations elsewhere on the Trail, such as Outward Bound in the Mid-Atlantic. Given the threats to the Trail's future posed by increased use and a changing climate, among others, it is essential that we awaken in more young people a desire to protect the Trail we love.

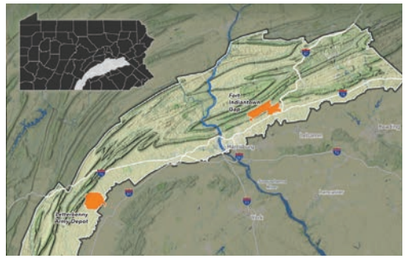
I hope that this summer for you will be a time for rest, relaxation, and a reawakened commitment to spend more time on, and show your support for, the Appalachian Trail.

Sandra Marra / President & CEO

Left: The heady fragrance of the swamp rose (Rosa palustris) *awakens our senses and heightens our appreciation of meadows along the Trail. Photo by Anton Atanasov / Unsplash*

PENNSYLVANIA'S KITTATINNY RIDGE IS NOW ONE OF 18 U.S. SENTINEL LANDSCAPES

IN THE LENAPE LANGUAGE, KITTATINNY MEANS "Big Mountain," which is an apt description of the geography of the Kittatinny Ridge landscape. Located in eastern Pennsylvania and traversed by the Appalachian Trail, it encompasses forested ridges and fertile valleys that provide clean water, sequester vast amounts of carbon, and serve as a crucial corridor for rare wildlife and songbird migration.



This critical landscape is also anchored by Fort Indiantown Gap, the busiest National Guard training center, the Army's second busiest heliport, and one of only three specialized Army National Guard aviation facilities. This combination of a landscape with high ecological integrity and a significant military installation critical to national defense is what led to Kittatinny Ridge being designated as a sentinel landscape in May 2024.

The ATC was proud to support the Kittatinny Ridge Sentinel Landscape application through its Landscape Conservation Program and in collaboration with many local and state partners. "Conserving the A.T. landscape in Pennsylvania helps millions of people and our national military strategies. I look forward to accelerating our existing conservation and community work along the Ridge with Mid-Atlantic Audubon, The Nature Conservancy, and many other important partners," says Katie Hess, the ATC's director of Pennsylvania landscape conservation.

Being designated a sentinel landscape will help fortify existing conservation efforts along the A.T. in Pennsylvania, protecting the natural habitat of one of the most biodiverse regions in eastern North America. It will also help mitigate threats to military readiness, due in part to the region's dark skies and rural land that facilitate aviation training, in particular.

Learn more at **kittatinnyridge.org**

Left: Cove Mountain in the Kittatinny Ridge, as seen from the east bank of the Susquehanna River. Photo by Matt Kane / The Nature Conservancy. Map above right courtesy of Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

LEGISLATION INTRODUCED TO PROTECT NATIONAL TRAILS

IN LATE JULY 2024, U.S. SENATORS TIM KAINE (D-VA) and Thom Tillis (R-NC) and U.S. Representatives Mike Lawler (R-NY-17) and Don Beyer (D-VA-08) introduced the Appalachian Trail Centennial Act. The legislation aims to strengthen the public-private partnerships that preserve, maintain, and manage national trails across the country. It marks the upcoming 100th anniversary in 2025 of the ATC, which has set the standard for partnering with the federal government to help protect a national trail.

"Preserving and maintaining our national trails requires the work of many stakeholders.... I'm proud to introduce this bipartisan legislation to better coordinate efforts between public and private stakeholders," said Senator Kaine.

Senator Tillis added, "I am proud to work with Senator Kaine to introduce this bipartisan legislation to recognize the important role of volunteer trail clubs and improve the management of the National Trails System to preserve the A.T. for the next 100 years."

Specifically, the A.T. Centennial Act would establish "Designated Operational Partners" for National Scenic and Historic Trails and recognize the ATC as the first. These partners would be able to enter into agreements of up to 20 years with the National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service to care for their respective trails. Partners would also be required to work with federal, state, and local entities to coordinate and advance efforts related to land and resource conservation.

"The A.T. Centennial Act recognizes what the ATC has learned over the decades — no single entity can manage a national trail on its own," said ATC President and CEO Sandi Marra. "Instead, organizations need strong partnership agreements with the federal government that will enable them to forever protect the places we love."

LIVE-STREAM

8/21/2024

SAVE THE DATE FOR THE ATC'S ANNUAL MEETING

The ATC's annual membership meeting will be held at 7 p.m. on Wednesday, August 21. The meeting will be live-streamed again this year (see URL below). All members are invited to participate.

The annual meeting is an opportunity to come together as a community to discuss the future of the ATC and recommit to educating and empowering current and future caretakers of the Appalachian Trail (A.T.).

The results of the 2024 Board of Directors election will be announced at the meeting. The slate of candidates will be published on the ATC website prior to the meeting, and all members whose membership is current as of August 1, 2024, are eligible to vote. Members will receive an email to cast their ballot online.

For more information, visit **appalachiantrail.org/2024meeting.**

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A LUSH OASIS

WATER SPLASHING ONTO MOSS-COVERED rocks is a refreshing sight during a hot summer hike. The constant flow of a waterfall mesmerizes us and reminds us somehow to follow the guidance of the philosopher and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Adopt the pace of nature; her secret is patience."

Bill Wakeley is a nature and landscape photographer from Connecticut who captures breathtaking images of the Northeast and its wildlife. Sages Ravine is just off the A.T. on the border between Connecticut and Massachusetts.

Photo by Bill Wakeley
bill-wakeley.pixels.com

A FAMILY AFFAIR

THE DESIRE TO EXPERIENCE AND PROTECT THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL SPANS GENERATIONS IN ONE FAMILY AND INSPIRES THEIR COMMITMENT TO SUSTAINABILITY.

BY ANNE MERRILL

WHEN GINA URIBE STARTED READING *A Walk in the Woods* by Bill Bryson, she had no idea that she would initiate a family rite of passage. She had taken the book along to read on a family vacation in 2006, and her son, Matthew, asked her about it. They were both intrigued by the idea of walking from Georgia to Maine on a footpath through the mountains. An 18-year-old Eagle Scout, Matthew was looking for the next step and a new challenge. He announced he would thru-hike the Appalachian Trail the next year — and Gina told him she would help him.

Although Bryson's book served as the catalyst for four members of the Uribe family to undertake long-distance hikes, it was not their introduction to the A.T. Gina recalls visiting the Smoky Mountains and climbing Charlies Bunion when she was a child. Her dad pointed out a sign showing that the trail they were on went all the way to Maine. "We had done just a tiny portion of a trail that kept going and going," recalls Gina. She later took her own children, Matthew and Stevie, on hikes in the Smokies when the family was living in Florida.

Thru-hiking the A.T. is a rite of passage for the Uribe family. After son Matthew completed the epic journey in 2007, parents Gina and Kenneth (below right) reached the Katahdin summit in 2008. Daughter Stevie (left) completed her thru-hike in 2013. Photos courtesy of the Uribe family.

"HIKING ON THE A.T. IMPACTS YOU IN SO MANY WAYS. IT MAKES YOU APPRECIATE THE SMALL THINGS, AND THE THINGS WE TAKE FOR GRANTED. THE HAPPIEST I'VE BEEN IS WHEN I'VE HAD ONLY THE ABSOLUTE NECESSITIES WITH ME."

~ Stevie Uribe Wydra

To help Matthew prepare for his thru-hike attempt, mother and son met weekly to practice skills such as hanging a bear bag and pitching a tent. They researched equipment options and discussed what would work best. "I thought he wouldn't make it very far on the Trail," jokes Gina, "so I bought him the cheapest gear."

But Matthew surprised his mother and completed his thru-hike in 2007. "I didn't think it was going to be that hard. I thought it would be a nice little hike," says Matthew with a laugh. But his first few weeks heading northbound quickly set him straight about the physical challenge he was undertaking. He took the Trail name "Sublime" due in part to a hat he wore from the rock band, but he later came to appreciate how fitting the word's awe-inspiring connotation was for his time on the Trail. When he got to Maine, he recalls, "You feel like it's your dessert and you earned it. You savor it. It's the best tasting dessert you could ever have."

FROM SON TO PARENTS TO DAUGHTER

Having both lived vicariously through and learned from Matthew's experience, Gina and husband Kenneth (Trail names: "No Eyed Deer" and "Ginken") completed their northbound thru-hikes together in 2008. Hiking in an era before smartphone use was widespread, Gina remembers fondly the camaraderie and conversations with fellow hikers at overnight sites. "It was one of the last years when people got to shelters and talked. We talked equipment, we talked about food, we discussed where we were headed the next day," she says. "We weren't focused on our phones and posting updates on Facebook."

Given that her parents and brother had all thru-hiked the A.T., it was only a matter of time before the last member of the Uribe family, daughter Stevie, undertook what had become a rite of passage. "We appreciated what the Trail experience had done for us, so we said to Stevie, 'You've got to do this. Trust us. It will change your life for the better,'" says Matthew.

Her family members did not oversell how transformative a thru-hike could be. "Everything changed for me on the Trail. It changed my career path," shares

Stevie Uribe Wydra completed the family rite of passage — an A.T. thru-hike — in 2013. Photo courtesy of the Uribe family

Matthew Uribe's baseball cap inspired his Trail name, "Sublime." Matthew was the first member of the Uribe family to complete a thru-hike. Photo courtesy of the Uribe family

Stevie, who completed a thru-hike in 2013 after graduating from college. Stevie's parents, who were critical care nurses, joined her in Damascus for Trail Days and responded expertly to a medical emergency that happened there. "My parents were superstars!" recalls Stevie. "I decided I wanted to become a nurse, and I had a few miles on the Trail to think about it!"

After summiting Katahdin, Stevie (Trail name: "Starfail") signed up for prerequisite classes for nursing school. She later enrolled in the University of Colorado College of Nursing and obtained a Master of Science in Nursing degree.

"Hiking on the A.T. impacts you in so many ways. It makes you appreciate the small things, and the things we take for granted. The happiest I've been is when I've had only the absolute necessities with me," Stevie says.

SUPPORTING SUSTAINABILITY

Appreciating the role that overnight sites play in creating community on the Trail, the Uribe family recently made a significant investment in the ATC's project to make the sites more sustainable (see "Improving Nights in the Woods," page 32). They recognize the challenges that overcrowding and overuse cause on the Trail, especially at shelters and campsites in the southern region. And it's not just the humanmade structures that are experiencing wear and tear.

"There's a lack of understanding of the fragility of the environment along the Trail. People tromp over everything," says Gina. "The environment in its natural state can only tolerate so much before it reaches a breaking point."

By making overnight sites more sustainable, adds Stevie, "we can maintain the perks of community while minimizing the impact on the surrounding environment."

Having benefited from a transformative Trail experience, the Uribes are committed to ensuring that it will continue to inspire generations to come. "We're strong believers in the Trail itself, and it's an absolute honor to help protect it," says Matthew.

Now that a grandchild has joined the Uribe family — Stevie's son was born in April — there's yet another generation who can experience the rite of passage by thru-hiking the A.T. Stevie predicts, laughing, that her son will be in the thru-hike class of 2045.

Highland Havens

SUSTAINING CRITICAL HABITATS ALONG THE A.T. BENEFITS THE THREATENED GOLDEN-WINGED WARBLER AND BIODIVERSITY OVERALL

BY MARINA RICHIE

"TO KEEP EVERY COG AND WHEEL IS THE FIRST PRECAUTION OF INTELLIGENT TINKERING."

~ *Aldo Leopold,* A Sand County Almanac

IMAGINE A SCENE IN EARLY APRIL AS A WAVE OF A.T. THRU-HIKERS backpack north from Springer Mountain, Georgia. Thousands of miles to the south, imperiled golden-winged warblers are fueling up for their perilous flight from tropical forests of northern Venezuela and Colombia to the Appalachian Mountains. Some have spent the winter in coffee plantations that carry the Smithsonian Bird Friendly certification and protect biodiversity. In the tropics, the warblers flit among trees dripping with ferns, orchids, and moss as they probe for insects. But those forests can be increasingly hard to find.

Named the 2024 Bird of the Year by the American Birding Association, the golden-winged warbler dwells in two worlds. All neotropical migratory birds nesting in North America and wintering in Latin or South America remind us that we are linked on one life-giving blue planet spinning around the sun.

When ready, the warblers will flare their golden wings and flutter off into the night. Most warblers migrate while we are sleeping. Ahead lies a dangerous crossing of the Gulf of Mexico. Entering Florida, the songbirds will confront obstacles their ancestors never knew, like disorienting artificial lights and communication towers. But some will avoid deadly collisions to navigate all the way to the very home they left the autumn before.

The trail of a golden-winged warbler is a skyway. Shelter lies in stopovers where a bird can find trees, shrubs, and insects to eat. The destination is a nesting haven. Along the A.T., those habitats fall on high-elevation shrubby meadows feathering into deep forests. While the warblers migrate and nest all the way up the Appalachians into southern New England, the ATC focuses on improving key habitats in Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: THE GOLDEN-WINGED WARBLER'S PREFERRED HABITAT ALONG THE A.T. FALLS ON HIGH-ELEVATION SHRUBBY MEADOWS FEATHERING INTO DEEP FORESTS, SUCH AS THE LANDSCAPE ON THE NORTH CAROLINA-TENNESSEE BORDER. *Photo by Chris Gallaway / Horizonline Pictures.* RIGHT: GOLDEN-WINGED WARBLER CAUGHT IN FLIGHT. *Photo by Lorie Shaull, Creative Commons Attribution 2.0*

The ATC's efforts on behalf of the golden-winged warbler are vital. Numbers have plummeted by more than 98 percent for the southern Appalachian Mountain nesting birds. A second population is faring better. Those birds spend winters in Costa Rica and summers in the Great Lakes of the northern Midwest and Canada. But overall, the golden-winged warblers as a species have declined by 66 percent since the 1960s.

The primary reasons for drastic declines are a loss of both breeding and wintering habitats: In addition to a shortage of ideal shrubby meadows within a forested landscape for nesting, deforestation in Central and South America threatens their winter homes. Other threats include hybridization with the blue-winged warbler, collisions with cell towers and windows, outdoor cats, and climate change. This litany of risks has made the species one of the highest conservation priorities of all forest birds in the United States, according to the Golden-winged Warbler Working Group.

KEEPING MEADOWS MESSY IN VIRGINIA

Conner McBane, ATC's natural resource manager, is skilled at shaping shrub meadows that edge into young and mature forests in southwest Virginia. The patterns he seeks to create are guided by the warbler's definition of perfection — unkempt, messy, and scruffy.

One tool for making a beautiful mess is a large mower called a skid steer. For anyone who has known the tedium of mowing manicured lawns, this task is far more interesting.

"It's not like mowing your lawn," he explains. "You have to avoid the milkweed, the monarda, the goldenrod, and some of the blackberries. We're creating a light touch of a mosaic and mowing without a pattern."

The patchy mowing reflects a major shift from a decade ago when the ATC and the U.S. Forest Service (where the Trail passes through national forests) managed open meadows primarily for views.

"While well intended, A.T. managers then mowed everything in the openings to make people feel like they were in 'Little House on the Prairie,'" McBane says. "And they often mowed in May, June, and July, causing significant impact to biodiversity."

Golden-winged warblers' migration

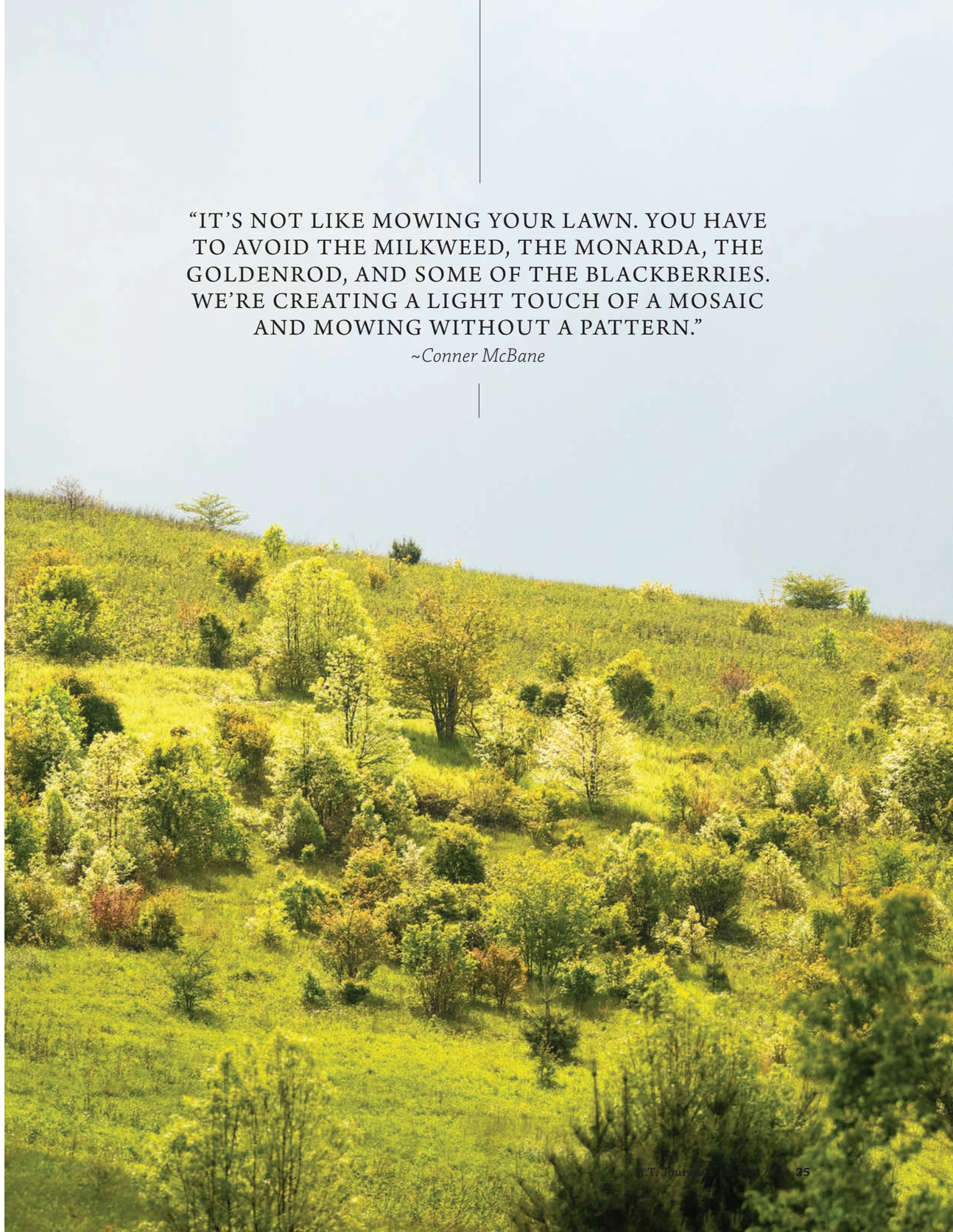
Map provided by eBird (www.ebird.org). Photo at right by Chris Gallaway / Horizonline Pictures

The change to being wildlife stewards took time to educate people and to fine-tune new management prescriptions. The resulting tangled and multi-layered habitats offer homes for at least 50 wildlife species including other declining birds, like yellow-breasted chats, chestnut-sided warblers, and vesper sparrows.

Butterflies at risk of extinction benefit too. Monarchs lay eggs on milkweed plants that are the sole hosts of caterpillars. The Diana fritillary, a showy big butterfly of the southern Appalachian Mountains, relies on edges and openings among moist mountain forests and only breeds if the wooded margin is intact.

"IT'S NOT LIKE MOWING YOUR LAWN. YOU HAVE TO AVOID THE MILKWEED, THE MONARDA, THE GOLDENROD, AND SOME OF THE BLACKBERRIES. WE'RE CREATING A LIGHT TOUCH OF A MOSAIC AND MOWING WITHOUT A PATTERN."

~Conner McBane



THE MONARCH BUTTERFLY AND CHESTNUT-SIDED WARBLER ARE AMONG THE THREATENED OR DECLINING SPECIES THAT BENEFIT FROM THE HABITAT PREFERRED BY THE GOLDEN-WINGED WARBLER. *Photo above left by Lasclay/Unsplash; photo above right by Chris Gallaway / Horizonline Pictures.* WILD PONIES IN GRAYSON HIGHLANDS STATE PARK. *Photo by Joshua T. Moore*

OLD FARMLANDS AS IDEAL HABITAT

Any sighting of a golden-winged warbler arriving in a nesting area is a cause for celebration. The 200 acres surrounding Virginia's Knot Maul Branch Shelter had once been farmland. Known as the Tilson tract, it was acquired by the ATC and the Forest Service in 2009 to expand the narrow Trail corridor. The area has gradually grown into ideal habitat.

"Now, the Tilson tract is the biggest hotbed of golden-wings in the George Washington National Forest," McBane says.

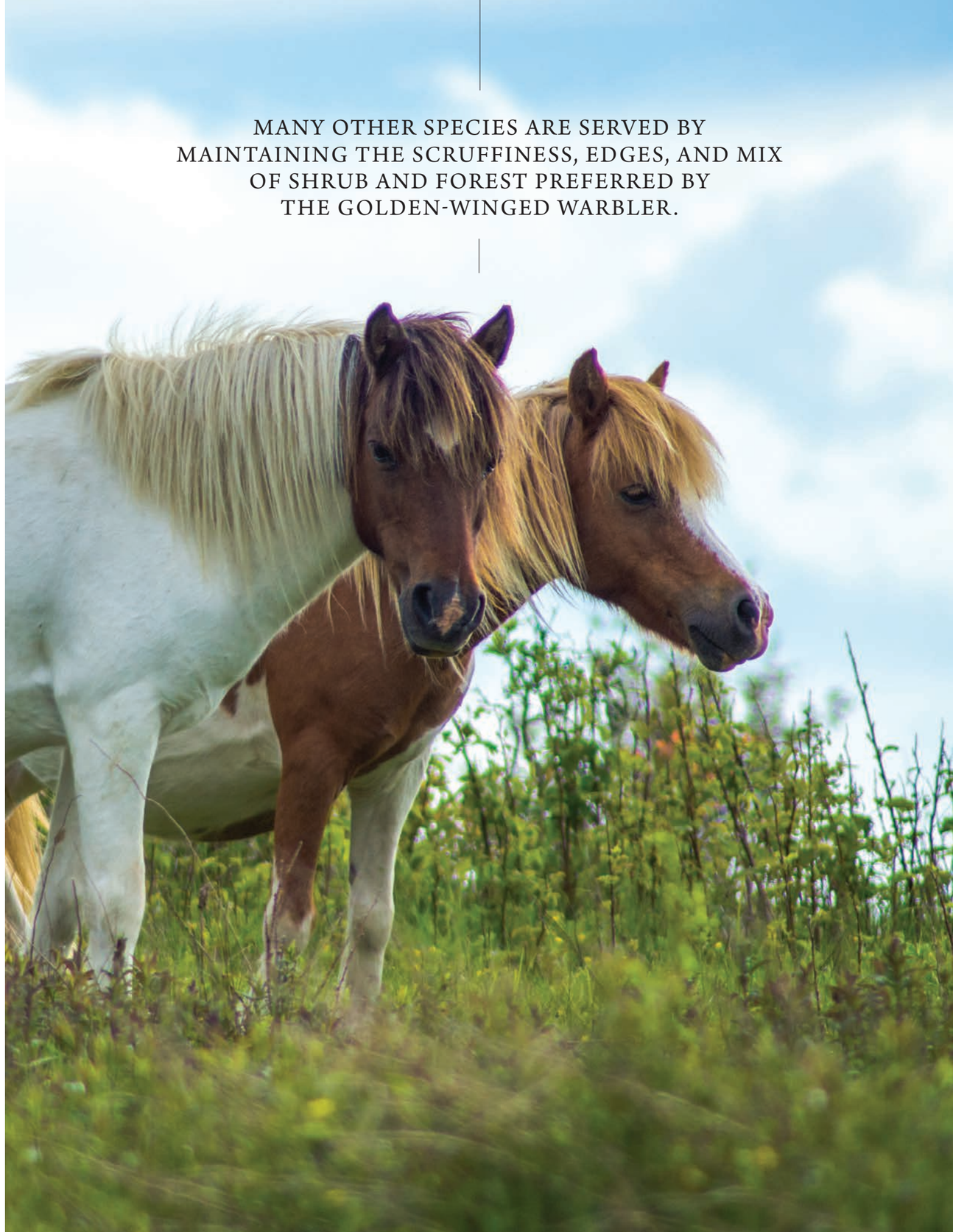
Each nesting territory is about five acres — the size of a baseball field, but nothing like it in appearance. A female weaves her nest on the stems of a goldenrod or a blackberry bush and far down at the base for concealment. Each delicate cup holds three to six eggs.

Once the chicks hatch, they need plentiful protein. Native trees hosting abundant caterpillars play a key role. Parents fly back and forth from the nest with insects. The male also likes to sing and defend a territory from a nearby tree. But not just one tree in the opening will do. The best scenario is five to 15 trees per acre. When the chicks fledge, the families fly into adjacent mature forests for food and shelter.

To maintain these ideal conditions, McBane follows guidelines from the Golden-winged Warbler Working Group for thinning of certain black cherries, locust, and black walnut trees, but never of mature hardwoods. He concentrates in areas that are close to the desired conditions with dense shrubs like hawthorn and blackberries.

He's surprised that the higher-elevation meadows of the A.T. in Virginia, like Mount Rogers and Whitetop, lack golden-winged warblers, because the conditions seem right for them. McBane's work to enhance habitat in some of the highlands is helping other wildlife like the Appalachian cottontail and

MANY OTHER SPECIES ARE SERVED BY MAINTAINING THE SCRUFFINESS, EDGES, AND MIX OF SHRUB AND FOREST PREFERRED BY THE GOLDEN-WINGED WARBLER.



DAPPLED SUNLIGHT GRACES THE A.T. AS IT TRAVERSES MAX PATCH ON THE BORDER BETWEEN NORTH CAROLINA AND TENNESSEE. *Photo by Chris Gallaway / Horizonline Pictures*

overall diversity. He hopes one day the golden-wings will find a nesting haven there, too.

There's another reason to pay close attention to the highest elevations on the A.T. As climate change warms the planet, many species are moving up in elevation or north to find cooler refugia. The golden-winged warbler's range has already shifted northward in recent decades. Those mountainous habitats may also lessen the chances of hybridizing with the closely related blue-winged warbler that tends to nest lower down.

SINGING THE WRONG SONG?

Tipping back his head, a golden-winged warbler poured out a melody worthy of May wildflowers on Max Patch that straddles the North Carolina and Tennessee border. But something was off on this fine morning. The jaunty male was singing the wrong song. Instead of a *buzzy beeee…bz-bz-bz*, the warbler riffed *bee buzzzz*.

Matt Drury, the ATC's associate director of science and stewardship, focused his binoculars on the tiny bird with a dash of yellow on wings and head feathers, a black eye streak, and a chickadee-like black bib. Yes, this golden-winged warbler was decidedly belting out a blue-winged warbler tune.

Baffled, Drury turned to Avery Young, a biological science technician with the Pisgah National Forest. They stared and listened. This was not how they imagined the start of their field day recording birds and hoping to hear and see golden-winged warblers.

Where an A.T. hiker might whistle or hum a favorite tune for fun, a male warbler needs to sing at

ABOVE: MATT DRURY OF THE ATC AND AVERY YOUNG WITH THE PISGAH NATIONAL FOREST LOOK AND LISTEN FOR GOLDEN-WINGED WARBLERS ON MAX PATCH. ONLY ABOUT 1,000 GOLDEN-WINGS MAKE IT TO WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA, AND EFFORTS TO MAINTAIN AN IDEAL HABITAT THERE WILL BENEFIT OTHER DECLINING BIRD POPULATIONS AS WELL. *Photos by Chris Gallaway / Horizonline Pictures*

AVERY YOUNG, BIOLOGICAL SCIENCE TECHNICIAN WITH THE PISGAH NATIONAL FOREST, AND MATT DRURY, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF SCIENCE AND STEWARDSHIP AT THE ATC. THEIR EFFORTS TO RESTORE HABITAT FOR THE GOLDEN-WINGED WARBLER ON MAX PATCH ALSO IMPROVE THE TRAIL EXPERIENCE FOR VISITORS, WHO APPRECIATE THE NATURAL BEAUTY AND ABUNDANT WILDLIFE. *Photos by Chris Gallaway / Horizonline Pictures*

AT MAX PATCH, WHERE HEAVY HUMAN USE POSES CHALLENGES TO THE SENSITIVE MEADOWS, DRURY OFTEN LETS THE WARBLER'S NEEDS FOR THORNY BLACKBERRY THICKETS SERVE AS A VISITOR USE MANAGEMENT TOOL.

least a version of his species' song to attract a female and defend a territory. Would this male golden-winged warbler shift to the right one? Could he?

The two warbler species are so closely related they can mate and produce offspring, known as Brewster's warblers. This causes genetic dilution of both species — and is particularly problematic given the golden-wings' diminished population size.

Later that day, Young found another golden-winged warbler singing the expected song in a 13-acre area between Max Patch and Buckeye ridge, where the ATC had recently completed a tree thinning to maintain views and improve the warblers' habitat. That sighting was welcome news. Biologists estimate only 1,000 golden-winged warblers make it to western North Carolina, with fewer each year.

MORE THAN WARBLERS AT STAKE

At Max Patch, where heavy human use poses challenges to the sensitive meadows, Drury often lets the warbler's needs for thorny blackberry thickets serve as a visitor use management tool. What better way to keep people on a trail than let the trailside berry bushes grow high?

"Those are some of the thorniest, meanest blackberry I know," Drury says. "That's the best closure possible."

Mowing every two to five years is about right, Drury said, along with other enhancements conducted in a partnership with the Pisgah National Forest. While Max Patch is a focus, he's also giving warbler habitat a boost at other places along the Trail including Hump Mountain and the Upper Laurel Fork area of Tennessee.

Drury stressed that the ATC's goal is to benefit biodiversity. Like McBane in Virginia, he noted how many other species are served by maintaining the scruffiness, edges, and mix of shrub and forest. The wildlife seeking the havens of golden-winged warblers extends beyond songbirds and butterflies. Black bears feast on blackberries. Bobcats prowl the thickets seeking cottontail rabbits. Hungry ruffed grouse nip the leaves of shrubs.

Imagine this scene: First light enters the Knot Maul Branch Shelter in Virginia where a couple backpackers stir in their sleeping bags, wakened by the dawn chorus. Among the serenading birds is a golden-winged warbler heralding the day with the right song on a day where everything will go... just right.

IMPROVING NIGHTS IN THE WOODS

MAKING OVERNIGHT SITES ON THE A.T. MORE SUSTAINABLE IS ESSENTIAL TO PROTECT THE TRAIL EXPERIENCE AND THE ENJOYMENT — AND COMFORT — OF VISITORS.

BY TRACY LÓPEZ

PROTECTED BENEATH THE DENSE CANOPY of the forest, another world emerges as the sun sets and the last golden rays of sunlight find their way through. Birds settle in with folded wings on oak, maple, and hickory tree branches, and fireflies emerge to take their shift as they blink love letters to one another. Hoots of barred owls, the lullaby of crickets, or the calls of tree frogs fill the darkness. Night on the Appalachian Trail can be a magical experience. And a weary hiker settling into a tent, hammock, or shelter can experience this magic and get much-needed rest at one of the A.T.'s nearly 400 recognized overnight sites.

In his vision for a long-distance trail through the Appalachian Mountains, Benton MacKaye listed "shelter camps" as one of four key features, describing them as follows: "They should be located at convenient distances so as to allow a comfortable day's walk between each. They should be equipped always for sleeping and certain of them for serving meals…." The first such structures to be built along the A.T. were in New England and were inspired by the European huts that have provided accommodations for mountaineers for centuries.

"AFTER A DAY'S HIKE, IT IS GOOD TO KNOW THAT YOUR DESTINATION WILL PROVIDE A SUITABLE PLACE TO SPEND THE NIGHT, USUALLY WITH THE BASIC AMENITIES OF NEARBY WATER — WHICH SHOULD BE MORE THAN 200 FEET AWAY — AND A SMOOTH, DRAINED SPOT FOR A TENT OR A SIMPLE SHELTER." ~Morgan Sommerville. *Photo by Elizabeth Saetta.*

AS THESE EXTENDED SITES OR NEW CAMPING AREAS — AND THE HUMANMADE PATHS TO THEM — ARE CONSTANTLY REUSED, SOME HAVE BECOME UNACCEPTABLY LARGE "MEGA-CAMPSITES" OR "MEGA-CLUSTERS" OF HIGH-DENSITY CAMPSITES… "IT'S AN ECOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL NIGHTMARE," SAYS JEFF MARION, A RECREATION ECOLOGIST.

"There have been overnight sites along the A.T. pretty much since the beginning," explains Morgan Sommerville, director of Visitor Use Management (VUM) of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy. "Adirondack-style shelters were built because lightweight tents were not commonly available. Originally, many had pole floors and users were expected to go into the surrounding forest to cut tree boughs to stack on the poles for bedding."

Today, of course, such destruction of nature is no longer an acceptable practice. As gear has gotten lighter — and more water-resistant — sleeping in tents or hammocks instead of shelters has become widespread. As a result, recognized overnight sites on the Trail now include more than 100 campsites in addition to some 280 shelters. There are also an estimated 5,000 unofficial, visitor-created overnight sites.

The increase in Trail visitation in recent years has had a huge impact on overnight sites and the surrounding natural environment. When hikers arrive on a rainy evening at a shelter filled to capacity, in a rush to set up a tent before heavier rain sets in, they will often expand existing nearby campsites or create new ones. After a long day spent with only their own thoughts for company, hikers may be drawn to the conviviality of a campsite dotted with a dozen or so tents and decide to join the fun, despite contributing to the sprawl. Hikers who prefer solitude may arrive at a crowded area and venture off the Trail to find or create a new campsite for a quiet night's rest.

As these extended sites or new camping areas — and the humanmade paths to them — are constantly reused, some have become unacceptably large "mega-campsites" or "mega-clusters" of high-density campsites. Soil is compacted, surrounding vegetation is destroyed, and erosion in the area worsens. The sediment and other runoff that is no longer filtered by plants or organic litter ends up in nearby water bodies. Rare species found around these areas are negatively impacted.

"It's an ecological and social nightmare," says Jeff Marion, a recreation ecologist with the U.S. Geological Survey, stationed at Virginia Tech University in Blacksburg, Virginia. "The areas of intense camping impact expand over time due to campsite expansion and proliferation in flat, popular areas near water. This often happens in high densities that degrade the social or experiential conditions the A.T. community seeks to provide." Without professional management there is little to no opportunity for these areas to recover, and parts of the Trail and its surrounding protected corridor can suffer lasting damage.

MAKING OVERNIGHT SITES SUSTAINABLE

Enter the ATC' s Sustainable Overnight Sites program — or SOS for short. The program's goals are to evaluate all overnight sites along the A.T. and then rehab, remove, or replace any that do not meet sustainability criteria. These criteria are intended to actively shift camping to a subset of sustainable campsites. These are located in areas that resist expansion and proliferation while enhancing social conditions. A core objective is to minimize the total area of camping impact, which reduces vegetation loss, soil compaction and erosion, and high-density camping. This provides greater protection of both resources and social conditions. ATC staff, land managers, volunteers, and scientists have been developing

ABOVE: THE HAWK MOUNTAIN SHELTER AREA IN GEORGIA (SHOWN HERE IN 2009) IS AN EXAMPLE OF HOW HEAVY USE AND VISITOR-CREATED EXPANSION CAUSES SERIOUS ENVIRONMENTAL DAMAGE TO THE SITES AND, BY EXTENSION, TO THE TRAIL CORRIDOR. THE CAMPSITE HAS SINCE BEEN MOVED AND THE SURROUNDING AREA IS RECOVERING. *Photo by G N Bassett (CC BY-ND 2.0).* BELOW: EARTHEN TENT PADS DUG INTO HILLSIDES — SUCH AS BACKCOUNTRY CAMPSITE 113 (ALSO KNOWN AS THE BIRCH SPRING GAP CAMPSITE) IN GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK — PROVIDE HIKERS WITH DESIGNATED SITES TO PITCH THEIR TENTS. NOT ONLY ARE THEY NATURAL IN APPEARANCE, BUT THEY ALSO HELP TO PREVENT SITE EXPANSION. *Photo by Brian Greer (Trail name: "Bandit").*

> "THE IDEAL SITES ARE LOCATED AND BUILT IN CONCERT WITH OUR RECENTLY COMPLETED A.T. EXPERIENCE ANALYSIS SO THAT THEY PRESERVE THE MOST NATURAL EXPERIENCE POSSIBLE. WHEN PROPERLY LOCATED, THEY PROVIDE MORE PRIVACY THAN TRADITIONAL OVERNIGHT SITES."
> *~Morgan Sommerville*

and applying the criteria since the 1990s. However, according to Sommerville, the standards came into practice near the end of finishing the A.T. shelter chain, so sites that have not benefited from them outnumber the sustainable overnight sites.

The program is largely informed by years of research Marion and his teams conducted on the A.T. and in other protected areas. "One noteworthy recent finding was that sites located in sloped terrain — more than 15 percent grade — naturally constrain both site expansion and proliferation pressures," explains Marion. "Even better is that this results from campers interacting with the surrounding natural topography rather than from staff-intensive educational messaging, regulations, or law enforcement."

According to Sommerville, "The ideal sites are located and built in concert with our recently completed A.T. Experience Analysis so that they preserve the most natural experience possible. When properly located, they provide more privacy than traditional overnight sites." Marion also points out that the smaller sustainable sites are easier for managers and stewards to monitor and maintain, which is necessary for preserving natural conditions and the Trail experience.

"Previous definitions of the A.T. experience were applied at a Trail-wide level with no good means for applying them at a local level," says Sommerville. The ATC has since developed management prescriptions and criteria for an experience spectrum from primitive to urban that produces a local gap analysis between the current and desired A.T. experience. Managers and maintainers can then make appropriate decisions about the extent and type of facilities to provide. The SOS program will ensure that both local and Trail-wide needs are being met for sustainability and improved visitor experiences.

A TICKING CLOCK

Implementation of the SOS program needs to advance before the overnight site conditions further deteriorate, which poses increased rehabilitation and environmental costs. "Climate change is also having an impact on the Trail and its sites," explains Marion. "The increased frequency and intensity of weather events further degrades both campsite and Trail." For example, large campsites or clusters of sites have much larger numbers of damaged and dying trees that large storm events can bring down, endangering both campers and aging shelters.

Undertaking a project of this size and complexity requires dedicated funding far greater than what is typically needed for routine, annual upkeep and repairs. Little to no government funding is allocated for planning, design, or maintenance of overnight sites or shelters, so funds from private donors are essential.

"Donor funding is allowing us to begin the inventory and priority-setting in close cooperation with local A.T. managers in the Clubs and agencies, which sets the stage for a continuous flow of overnight site mitigation projects," says Sommerville. The ATC also plans to investigate design and construction of group-specific overnight sites, which donor funding can help optimize. Funds would also support data acquisition

ABOVE: MOUNTAINEER FALLS SHELTER IN TENNESSEE IS AN EXAMPLE OF A SUSTAINABLY BUILT SHELTER ALONG THE A.T. FOLLOWING JEFF MARION'S SIDEHILL GUIDELINES, THE SHELTER WAS BUILT IN 2006 ON SLOPED TERRAIN. *Photo courtesy of Tim Stewart (Trail name: "mountain squid").* BELOW: BECAUSE OF THE A.T.'S DIVERSE TERRAIN AND ECOSYSTEMS, SPECIFIC ENVIRONMENTAL AND VISITOR USE CONSIDERATIONS MUST BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT WHEN DETERMINING HOW BEST TO CREATE AND MAINTAIN SUSTAINABLE OVERNIGHT SITES. AS A VITAL FIRST PART OF THE SOS PROGRAM, CAMPSITE INVENTORY TECHNICIANS FOLLOW ATC PROTOCOLS TO EVALUATE ALL CURRENT DESIGNATED AND USER-CREATED OVERNIGHT SITES ALONG THE TRAIL. *Photos courtesy of Jeff Marion.*

UNDERTAKING A PROJECT OF THIS SIZE AND COMPLEXITY REQUIRES DEDICATED FUNDING FAR GREATER THAN WHAT IS TYPICALLY NEEDED FOR ROUTINE, ANNUAL UPKEEP AND REPAIRS.... GENEROUS DONORS HAVE HELPED START THE PROGRAM, BUT MORE FUNDING IS NEEDED FOR THIS VITAL PRESERVATION PROJECT.

that will help A.T. managers prioritize areas for work and help the ATC learn about day hikers — a population for whom there is very little data — and the negative impacts associated with the large annual bubble of thru-hikers.

Generous donors have helped start the program, but more funding is needed for this vital preservation project. "Our family foundation views the sustainable overnight campsites program as a great way to invest in the Appalachian Trail and its corridor over the next century," says Greg Winchester, ATC donor and board member. "The program will improve the overall hiker experience from the day hiker to the thru-hiker. It will remove blighted and eroded campsites and replace them with new campsites that are both aesthetically appealing and ecologically friendly. As the most well-known long-distance trail in the world, the A.T. deserves this program of excellence." (*Editor's note: See also "A Family Affair" on page 16.*)

A TRAIL EXPERIENCE FOR EVERYONE

Everyone who camps on the Trail has their own unique preferences. Marion, a founding member of the ATC Stewardship Council, spent forty-three years section hiking the A.T. He practices Dispersed Pristine Site Camping in areas of the Trail where it is allowed. When done properly, he explains, this practice results in no lasting resource impact and a low probability of anyone reusing the same camping spot. The primary challenges are the A.T. community's ability to fully convey these low-impact practices and visitors fully learning and applying them to avoid creating new campsites. In some areas, it can be difficult or inappropriate to use this camping option. This is one of the many reasons why Marion feels it's important to have sustainable well-established or designated campsites that any camper can use. He also recommends that hikers take advantage of reliable phone apps that can be increasingly used to identify the most preferred sustainable campsites and shelters, further limiting damage to the Trail and surrounding areas and preserving A.T. resource conditions for future visitors.

Fiona "Happy Feet" Russo of New Rochelle, New York, found that a hiking app helped her "get the scoop" on shelters and camping areas she considered staying in and alerted her to issues like mice or other potential problems. "I love camping by myself, I love camping at a shelter, tents, lean-tos — it's all good with me," she shares. An experienced backpacker and section hiker, Russo appreciates all the different benefits the Trail's overnight sites provide, such as designated places to set up camp after a long hike and shelter from the elements. "A double-decker was essential to keeping me out of a heavy rainstorm after a long day on the Trail."

Beyond safety from the elements, the camaraderie and kindness she experienced from fellow hikers at the sites were some of the most striking moments of her time on the Trail. "At one shelter, a member of the tramily was experiencing snow for the very first time. She made a little snowman and put it on the ledge. Truly a memorable moment for all of us."

To donate to or find out more about the progress of the Sustainable Overnight Sites Program and the ATC Stewardship Council's Trail Management Committee, contact **info@appalachiantrail.org**

TUMBLING RUN SHELTERS

WILLIAM BRIEN MEMORIAL SHELTER

FONTANA DAM SHELTER

NOTABLE SITES

Tumbling Run Shelters, Pennsylvania
The campsite has two shelters– one for snoring hikers and the other for those who don't snore. The site also includes an eating pavilion, picnic tables, a group tenting area, and a privy. This is a possible model for future group overnight sites.

William Brien Memorial Shelter, New York
Built in 1933, the William Brien Memorial Shelter is one of the oldest on the Trail. Unlike many of the other Trail shelters, it is made of rock from the surrounding area.

Fontana Dam Shelter, North Carolina
This shelter – also known as the Fontana Hilton – overlooks beautiful Fontana Lake and has full bathroom and shower facilities and charging stations for phones.

However, what the ATC hopes to achieve through the SOS program is on the opposite end of the A.T. overnight site experience spectrum: to provide hikers with simple, remote, natural-appearing sites.

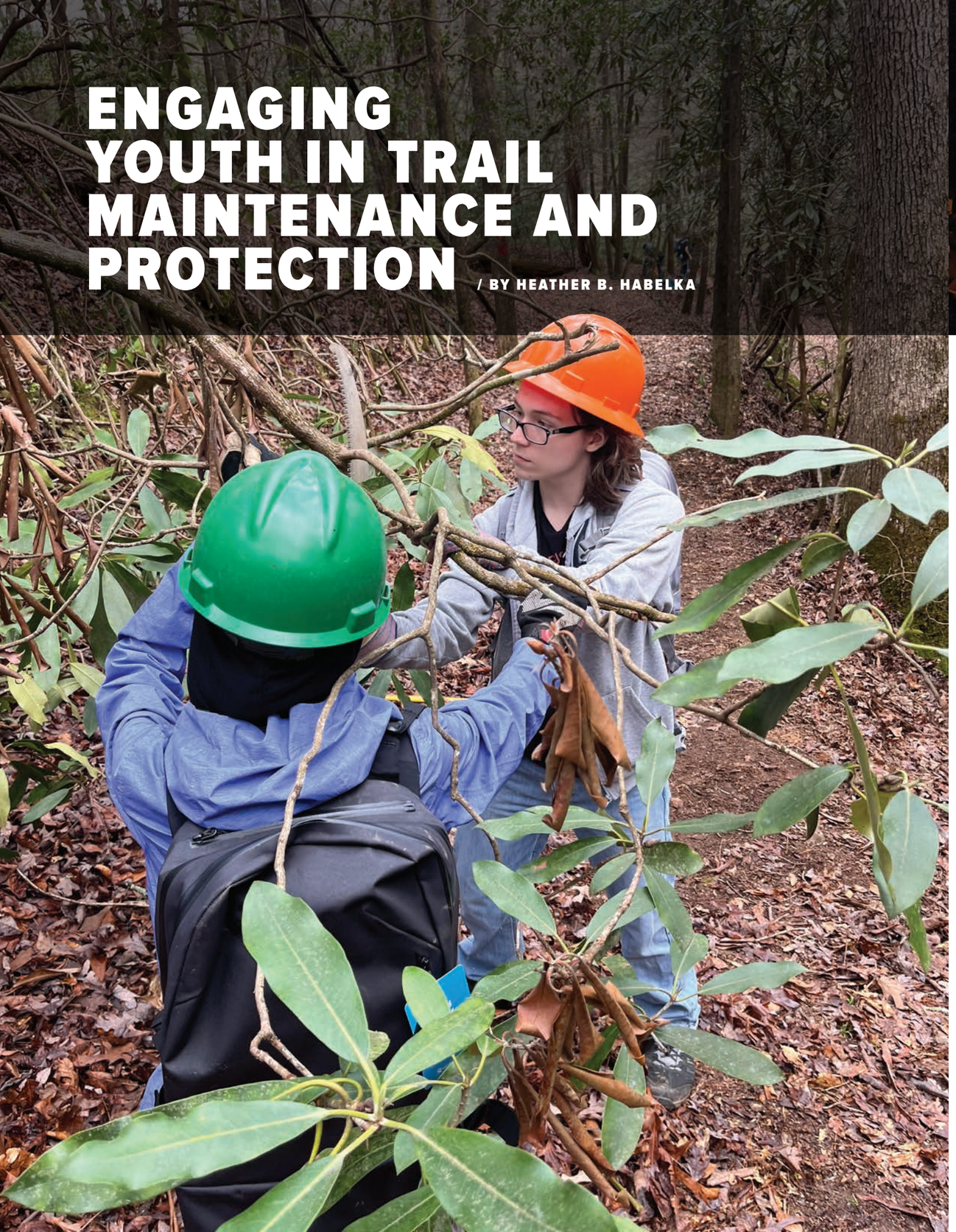
Hawk Mountain Site, Georgia
Both a hidden gem and a rehabilitation success story, this popular shelter area had become four acres of barren ground due to overuse and visitor-created expansion. In 2016, with the help of generous donors, the Georgia A.T. Club, and the U.S. Forest Service, the ATC launched a sustainable overnight site rehabilitation project there. It was the first use of the new formal VUM planning process anywhere on the A.T. The ATC and its partners developed and built a new campsite nearby with thirty tent pads, a moldering privy, and three food storage lockers.

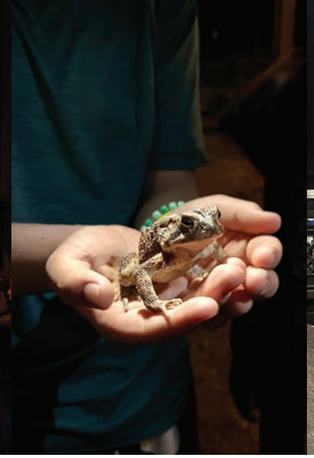
And the original Hawk Mountain site that was once several bare acres? Vegetation has grown back, and it's now less than a half-acre.

Above: Photo by Laurie Potteiger; Below left: Photo by Lewis and Becky Moyers; Below right: Photo by Lukas Chin.

ENGAGING YOUTH IN TRAIL MAINTENANCE AND PROTECTION

/ BY HEATHER B. HABELKA





BY COLLABORATING WITH LOCAL AND NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS, THE ATC HAS DEVELOPED SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS FOR ENGAGING TEENS ON THE A.T.

TEENS ARE POWERFUL VOICES FOR stewardship. The Appalachian Trail Conservancy partners with several organizations to activate these voices and set into motion a ripple effect of stewardship, inclusive connection, and skill development. The ATC's investment in youth programs is critical to cultivating the next generation of stewards through a shared connection and sense of belonging on the A.T. Not only do program participants learn about nature and the outdoors, but they come to understand the important role that the A.T. plays in conservation and how those lessons relate to their communities at home.

FOREST AMBASSADORS

This April, the ATC and its partners welcomed thirty students — in grades eight through eleven — from thirteen schools across Georgia and Metro Atlanta counties to serve as NextGen Forest Ambassadors. NextGen is an entirely free program for students who undergo a rigorous application process, and provides transportation and some essential outdoor gear, as well as a small stipend upon successful completion of a stewardship project. Now in its seventh year, NextGen has been hosted by the ATC's partner for youth engagement, the Georgia Mountains Children's Forest Network, and is run as a partnership with the ATC, Georgia Appalachian Trail Club, US Forest Service - Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest, The Greening Youth Foundation, Georgia Mountain Research and Education Center, West Atlanta Watershed Alliance, and Southern Appalachian Wilderness Stewards.

Together with their leaders, instructors, mentors, and alumni counselors, the ambassadors participated in four days and three nights of expert-led camping at Wahsega 4-H Center in Dahlonega, Georgia, and a one-day hike on the Appalachian Trail. During the program, the students learned about Leave No Trace principles and A.T. maintenance, honed outdoor skills, took time for self-reflection, and contributed to solutions-based conversations on how to connect young people with the A.T.

Stefan L. Moss — an environmental educator and scientist — has been with the program for five years. As a NextGen program leader and instructor, he facilitates discussions on the myths about young people and environmental stewardship. "We talk about myths they've heard about the inability of

LEFT: TRAIL STEWARDSHIP IS A VITAL PART OF THE NEXTGEN FOREST AMBASSADORS PROGRAM. *Photo by Rachel Lettre*. ABOVE: NEXTGEN AMBASSADORS LEARN IMPORTANT OUTDOOR SKILLS, SUCH AS BUILDING CAMPFIRES, CAMP SAFETY, AND IDENTIFYING SPECIES THEY MAY FIND ON THE TRAIL.*Left photo by Sarah Adams, center photo by Emily Fussell, right photo by Rachel Lettre.*

ABOVE: BEFORE THEY GO INTO THE FIELD, STUDENTS GATHER FOR A TOOL TALK AND A TAILGATE SESSION — A DISCUSSION ABOUT SAFETY WHILE PERFORMING TRAIL MAINTENANCE. *Photo by Sarah Adams.* BELOW: STUDENTS PAUSE DURING THEIR HIKE TO TAKE IN THE VIEW FROM PREACHERS ROCK, AN OUTCROP NEAR THE SUMMIT OF BIG CEDAR MOUNTAIN. *Photo by Stefan L. Moss.*

"PART OF NEXTGEN IS TO GIVE THEM THE SKILLS TO PUBLICLY ENGAGE OTHERS ABOUT ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES, TO GIVE THEM THE TOOLS TO BECOME THE BEST STEWARDS THEY CAN BE, AND TO CONFIDENTLY STEP OUT AS LEADERS."

~ Stefan L. Moss

youth to engage and the assumption that they're disconnected or somehow not interested in nature," he says. "Part of NextGen is to give them the skills to publicly engage others about environmental issues, to give them the tools to become the best stewards they can be, and to confidently step out as leaders."

"It's all about the outdoors, and the ATC is a microcosm of the outdoor community," explains Robert "Bo" Bobinski. He is a member of the Georgia A.T. Club and a Leave No Trace Georgia State Advocate. "Taking kids outdoors teaches resiliency and takes them out of their comfort zone. Going outside is an easy resource to help young people become more self-aware and develop different perspectives. They transform by overcoming fears and insecurities." Bobinski, a NextGen Program Leader and Instructor, has been part of NextGen since the program's inception in 2017. He has observed that students who participate in the program become more self-sufficient and require little to no guidance. "They start taking initiative. They grow up a little."

Courtney, a high school junior and Georgia A.T. Club member, participated as an ambassador this year. The 16-year-old recalls developing a love for the outdoors as a baby when her mom would take her hiking on her back. "My school community lives inside, not outdoors like the Trail community. When I'm outside I disconnect from the stressful things in my life. Being outside is grounding. I notice more. I'm less overwhelmed."

Kleevens Gabriel, an 18-year-old NextGen alumni counselor, came to the United States from Haiti four years ago with his mother and sister. He was introduced to the ATC during his high school garden club's hiking trip on the A.T. Approach Trail. It was there that he first crossed paths with Bobinski. "The hike and learning about Trail maintenance was a great experience. I loved how I felt about this version of myself on the A.T. and how it reminded me of hiking with my father and cousins in Haiti." Gabriel was an ambassador in 2022 and then became an alumni counselor. "Through NextGen I've made great friends I can trust and talk to. It feels so healthy to sit together, talk around a fire, and share a lot. When I'm feeling overwhelmed, this program keeps me emotionally in check. The challenge is to carry this mindset into daily life. It's peaceful and empowering."

The curriculum's strategic lack of Wi-Fi fosters the students' personal growth and critical skill development. "When there's no service and phones are tucked away, they find things to do. We watch them ease into face-to-face communication," Bobinski explains. For Courtney, the anticipation of social interaction was one of the most challenging aspects of the program. She set a goal to talk with everyone, which she accomplished. "There's always something you can learn from someone, whether I'm around people my own age or older. After NextGen, I've changed. I'm better at talking to people," she says.

A FOCUS ON STEWARDSHIP AND CREATIVITY

A key component of NextGen's curriculum is the required stewardship project that they develop during the program and complete in their home community. The ambassadors are paired with a mentor and encouraged to explore their interests and focus on their emerging skills.

Courtney's stewardship project was a book that features her illustrations and photos. She writes about the differences between linear and circular planning. She sees linear planning as being more prominent in our society and economy, while circular planning — the idea that everything is recycled — is something that's seen less, but is more sustainable. She also explores declining biodiversity as a result of excessive human consumption.

> "IT'S A RARE MOMENT TO CREATE A CONNECTION THAT THEY WILL KEEP INTO ADULTHOOD....I TAKE GREAT COMFORT IN KNOWING THAT PROGRAMS LIKE THIS ONE HELP PLANT SEEDS FOR THE NEXT GENERATION."
>
> *~Sarah Adams*

Gabriel channeled his aptitude and interest for photography and videography into his stewardship project. He set up and manages the NextGen Instagram account (@nextgenforestambassador) and produced a short film about his experience to help the ATC recruit future NextGen ambassadors.

Throughout their time together, the ambassadors also explore ways to carry their education and immersive experiences into their homes, schools, and communities. According to Bobinski, "With all the different groups and viewpoints involved with NextGen, the kids get to watch a lesson in cooperation. We are keenly aware that we are mentoring, but we are also modeling behavior for the ambassadors and the alumni. We are leading by example." He shares the story of a student whose family — due to cultural norms — didn't recycle. But after his experience as an ambassador, he was able to bring the sustainability practice of recycling into his home.

For Mia, a 17-year-old high school senior and alumni counselor, the NextGen Ambassador experience led her to a commitment to conservation. "When I joined NextGen in 2022, I had an eye-opening experience about how much I enjoyed living outside and experiencing a non-digital lifestyle," she says. "My love for hiking and the A.T. grew so much and so did my desire to keep the forest clean and to save it."

For many participants, the NextGen experience shapes future academic and career goals. Courtney plans to publish her book and to study environmental science and sustainability in college. The program strengthened Mia's desire to teach others. "Being an alumni counselor teaches me leadership skills, and how to speak in public," she says. "It has grown my passion for educating."

This summer, Gabriel will participate in the National Wildlife Federation's Earth Tomorrow Summer Institute. When he enters college this fall, he'll study environmental and civil engineering. He plans to become an engineer and travel the world to develop sustainable buildings and cities. In addition, his experiences as a child and on the A.T. have inspired a longer-term mission. "I hope to one day return to Haiti and rebuild my home country to bring it back to its beauty."

A SENSE OF BELONGING

Ambassadors are encouraged to view their peers as resources, instead of turning to their leaders and instructors for help. "If we see students struggling to set up their tents, for example, we'll guide them to ask their peers who are excelling with that task for help. By capturing these moments, we're able to facilitate peer-to-peer leadership which is often better than peer-to-leader," Bobinski explains.

As a returning NextGen alumni counselor, Gabriel was challenged by the group's larger size. "I intentionally mixed up seating to build a family connection. By the end of the four days, we were all sharing the nature experience on the A.T."

According to Sarah Adams, ATC Regional Manager – Georgia & Nantahala, the program cohorts unite a diverse range of students throughout the Atlanta and North Georgia area. "Many of them haven't been on the A.T. or in a national forest until this program. It's a rare moment to create a connection that they will keep into adulthood. I'm amazed by how many of the dedicated trail volunteers I work with trace their inspiration to volunteer back to a childhood experience on the A.T. I take great comfort in knowing that programs like this one help plant seeds for the next generation."

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

"The ATC's mission to protect the A.T. is a vital one. It's a footpath for everyone in America," says Moss. "It allows all of us to come to a place where we can find our own connection to nature and to celebrate the environment."

The success of the NextGen Forest Ambassadors program has inspired the ATC to seek out and expand youth-focused partnerships along the entire Trail. For example, Rachel Lettre, Mid-Atlantic Regional Director, recently has been working with Outward Bound — a national leader in outdoor education for young people. Participants are introduced to stewardship opportunities and local Trail Maintaining Clubs on the A.T. in Maryland and Pennsylvania (see sidebar below). While the focus of each program is unique, the stewardship and life lessons learned and the communities that are formed and cultivated are constant.

"There's a sense of community that builds," Courtney shares. "The A.T. is an inclusive community regardless of your personal purpose of the hike. What you put into the A.T. community you get back."

Editor's Note: The last names of students under age 18 were deliberately omitted for privacy reasons.

OUTWARD BOUND'S GET OUT AND LEAD

This summer, the New York–New Jersey Trail Conference is participating in Outward Bound's Get Out And Lead (GOAL), a youth-focused stewardship program. Run by Philadelphia Outward Bound School, GOAL is a 10-day scholarship-funded expedition. Students ages twelve to eighteen engage in canoeing, rock climbing, and backpacking on the A.T. The summer program includes a Trail maintenance component. "Kids who didn't grow up outside get outside and give back to the outside," says Zac Cole, Long-Distance Trails Program Coordinator with the NYNJ Trail Conference.

"The GOAL expeditions focus on building self-esteem and leadership skills," explains Olive Fine, Expedition Program Manager with Philadelphia Outward Bound School. "We focus on how those leadership skills might develop when youth are actively engaging with service toward the trail they're hiking on. We want to help students understand how much work and effort goes into the trail, river, and campsites that they walk, paddle, and sleep in."

The Trail maintenance projects done by the students include clearing brush, cutting back branches, removing debris, rerouting water runoff, and checking that Trail markers are visible. "These youth engagement programs are a great model of how A.T. Maintaining Clubs can partner with organizations to get work done on the Trail while introducing young people to stewardship," explains Rachel Lettre of the ATC. According to Fine, the opportunity for students to work with enthusiastic Trail professionals and receive thoughtful answers to different questions has been very beneficial. Students realize there are career opportunities in stewardship and that they can have a say in how natural resources are managed. Cole adds, "They also develop a new awareness and appreciation that they can become stewards of their own backyards and join local hiking clubs and field outings."

Photo by Jack Carroll

STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION

December 31, 2023 and 2022

ASSETS	2023	2022
Current Assets:		
Cash and Cash Equivalents	$5,372,402	$4,656,136
Accounts receivable, net	9,617,906	8,709,404
Pledges receivable, net	281,667	--
Inventories	234,225	255,732
Prepaid Expenses	183,621	182,802
Total Current Assets	**$15,689,821**	**$13,804,074**
Non-Current Assets:		
Long-term investments	11,402,036	10,468,474
Pledges receivable, net	677,667	--
Property and equipment, net	701,155	885,765
Right-of-use assets - operating	170,584	129,645
Right-of-use assets - finance	41,072	24,488
Other assets, deposits	9,074	9,074
Land held in conservancy, net	4,072,296	2,962,296
Total Non-Current Assets	**$17,073,884**	**$14,479,742**
TOTAL ASSETS	**$32,763,705**	**$28,283,816**

LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS		
Current Liabilities:		
Accounts payable and accrued expenses	$521,583	$909,205
Deferred revenue	9,244,507	7,999,462
Current maturities of lease liabilities - operating	46,341	41,069
Current maturities of lease liabilities - financial	11,427	7,450
Current maturities of annuities payable	27,224	27,894
Total Current Liabilities	**$9,851,082**	**$8,985,080**
Non-Current Liabilities:		
Lease liabilities, less current maturities - operating	127,138	88,576
Lease liabilities, less current maturities - financial	34,306	17,601
Annuities payable, less current maturities	208,781	236,280
Total Non-Current Liabilities	**$370,225**	**$342,457**
Net Assets		
Net assets without donor restriction	10,535,260	9,368,919
Net assets with donor restriction	12,007,138	9,587,360
Total Net Assets	**$22,542,398**	**$18,956,279**
TOTAL LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS	**$32,763,705**	**$28,283,816**

PHOTO BY JOHN CAMMEROTA

STATEMENT OF ACTIVITY

December 31, 2023 and 2022

	2023	2022
REVENUE, GAINS, (LOSSES), AND OTHER SUPPORT		
Contributions	$6,763,280	$4,273,631
Contributed nonfinancial assets	1,284,202	1,656,530
Membership	1,045,676	1,116,007
Contractual services	4,360,732	4,480,486
Sales, less cost of good sold	197,835	172,657
Other income	54,971	80,880
Annuity actuarial adjustment	945	9,894
Investment gain return, net	1,481,707	(2,102,057)
TOTAL REVENUES	**$15,189,348**	**$9,688,028**
EXPENSES		
Program Services:		
Conservation and Land Trust	$6,488,371	$7,400,155
Member Services	--	740,684
Publications	615,562	738,305
Communications	898,836	566,410
TOTAL PROGRAM SERVICES	**$8,002,769**	**$9,445,554**
Supporting Services:		
Management and general	$1,863,140	$1,979,531
Fundraising	1,737,320	837,555
TOTAL SUPPORTING SERVICES	**$3,600,460**	**$2,817,086**
TOTAL EXPENSES	**$11,603,229**	**$12,262,640**
CHANGE IN NET ASSETS	**$3,586,119**	**$(2,574,612)**
NET ASSETS, BEGINNING OF YEAR	**$18,956,279**	**$21,530,891**
NET ASSETS, END OF YEAR	**$22,542,398**	**$18,956,279**

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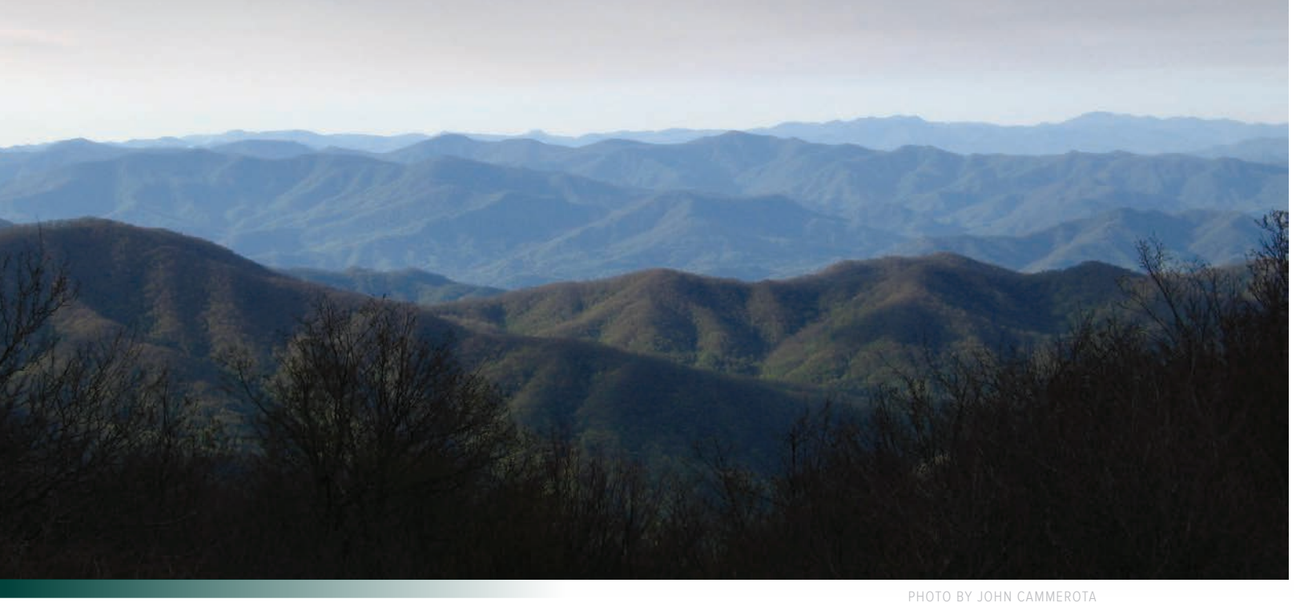

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THE SAGA OF AN A.T. DAY HIKER

A DEDICATED SECTION HIKER COMPLETES THE TRAIL OVER THE COURSE OF ELEVEN YEARS

BY DON DEARMON

I HATE TO BACKPACK.

That may sound absurd since I've backpacked over 1,000 miles of the Appalachian Trail. Certainly, there were many times along the A.T. when I reveled in having everything I needed in a pack on my back. But, for me, it also meant long, uncomfortable miles lugging a too-heavy pack, followed by a sleepless night crammed into a shelter.

Fortunately, I discovered that I could enjoy an easier way to tackle the Trail as a day hiker. I'd start at one trailhead with a small daypack, sustain a good pace, then leave the Trail for the comforts of an inn or motel, a hot shower, and a solid meal prepared by someone other than me. I've hiked over 1,100 miles of the A.T. as a day hiker.

My love affair with the A.T. began in 1970. As a fifteen-year-old Eagle Scout, I backpacked 300 miles of the Trail with a fellow Scout. We started in Maryland and passed through Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York. Our final destination had been Maine, but my buddy's leg injury truncated our plans.

My wife and I raised four children in Frederick, Maryland, living within half an hour from the Trail. As my children grew up, we enjoyed short hikes together on the state's nearly 41 miles of the A.T.

But backpacking? No thanks. I'd given that up after college — or so I thought.

In 2011, soon after I'd turned 56, a neighbor convinced me to take a couple of backpacking weekends in Shenandoah National Park. Those trips would set off a decade-long journey to hike the entire Trail.

My neighbor, Ted Gregory, was a committed backpacker and a good hiking companion. I became a reluctant backpacker, and we became official LASHers (long-a** section hikers). We started planning outings that jumped around the fourteen states that the A.T. passes through.

First, we completed a 75-mile section of the highlands of southwestern Virginia. Then we backpacked two sections of New York. We completed the 72 miles of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. We hiked the 100-Mile Wilderness in Maine and the final 15 miles to the Trail's northern terminus at Mt. Katahdin. Hiking through New Hampshire's White Mountains took a toll. As we aged well into our sixties, we spent three different summers just to navigate a 101-mile stretch.

I started to add some of our backpacking miles together with sections of the A.T. I completed only by day hiking. I also hopped around Tennessee, North

"The day I hiked over Saddleback Mountain in Maine, I was hit by a thunderstorm. Thoroughly soaked and chilled, I slipped and fell several times on the steep, rocky descent, nearly running into the back end of an enormous, antlered moose." –Don DeArmon. Photo by Jordan Bowman.

Carolina, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. This added an extra 50 to 100 miles each year to my A.T. total. As my day hiking and backpacking miles grew, I realized I was in reach of completing the entire Trail.

THE JOY OF DAY HIKING

Day hiking for me was much simpler and more enjoyable than backpacking. I could hike more miles comfortably. My hiking garb was usually just nylon shorts and a T-shirt. I hiked in Keene low-top hiking shoes and wool socks. My daypack contained a light rain jacket, some first aid essentials in a small plastic bag, toilet paper, and a sandwich and light snacks. I kept my cell phone off and took photos with a point-and-shoot camera. I sometimes used a single trekking pole like a staff. Even carrying abundant water, my daypack didn't break 10 pounds.

The logistics of day hiking required careful planning. Trailheads and road crossings didn't always line up neatly with the 12 to 18 miles I preferred to walk in a day. That meant an occasional 20-mile — or more — day. I also had to secure nightly lodging. I planned each day with an extra margin of safety to avoid an unexpected overnight on the Trail. After all, I was hiking for fun, not to worry!

Arranging to get to trailheads in the morning and get off the Trail again at night also took some doing. I used a variety of methods, including family members, hitchhiking, and paid shuttle drivers. Finding my starting points where the A.T. crossed local roads was often a challenge. My wonderful wife staged me for nearly all of Vermont. Two of my children spent a week with me while I finished up the southern end of the Trail in North Carolina and Georgia.

I also hitchhiked a fair amount. Along the A.T., hitchhiking is common as thru-hikers head to nearby towns in order to resupply. My trail name — "Hitchhiker" — was suggested by a hiking companion when I shared stories of my teenage cross-country hitchhiking exploits. I managed Shenandoah National Park's 101 miles by parking along Skyline Drive, hitchhiking to my starting point, then hiking 15 to 18 miles back to my car. On another trip, I took an overnight train to South Carolina and hitchhiked 135 miles to North Carolina to begin a week's worth of day hikes. Ted and I hitchhiked more than 50 miles together on two occasions after completing backpacking trips in Virginia and New Hampshire.

Don DeArmon (left) and Ted Gregory (right) pause while backpacking through Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Photo courtesy of Don DeArmon.

THE A.T. EXPERIENCE

Many hikers' goals are to experience the wilderness, but nearly everyone comes home talking about the people they met. I crossed paths with military veterans, youth groups, families with kids, and hikers from all around the world.

Still, the wilderness was always at hand. I've seen so much wildlife. I've fallen many times. I've scraped knees, turned ankles, got sunburned, and chafed. I've been very thirsty, hungry, tired, wet, and very muddy. I've been very cold, hot, and dirty. Being sweaty is an A.T. constant no matter the season or weather.

Yet hiking under forest canopies and through rhododendron thickets, viewing the vistas across open mountain balds, or climbing up and down rock-faced mountain paths was thrilling. At the end of each day, I was beat, but I felt gratified from walking my miles and experiencing another section of the Trail. Hiking the A.T. always made me feel alive.

However, while day hiking, I missed being able to chat with a companion. I've walked as long as six hours without seeing another hiker. One of the ways I occupied the long hours was to memorize and recite poetry aloud. My physical pacing seemed to help me memorize. I found the rhyme and meter of Longfellow and Robert Service to be particularly engaging. Edward Arlington Robinson, Tennyson, Yeats, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Frost, and Poe were some of the great poets that kept me company.

DeArmon fords one of the many streams in the 100-Mile Wilderness. Photo courtesy of Don DeArmon.

COMPLETING THE TRAIL

As I entered my late sixties, I felt some urgency to step up my pace if I was truly going to complete the A.T. I knew that any injury could end my hiking days. I logged 156 more miles in 2019. Then the pandemic hit and prevented any out-of-state, day-hiking trips during 2020. I still had 265 miles left to go, all in New England.

In 2021, I tackled the A.T. again. I hiked 43 miles in Vermont and 69 miles in western New Hampshire to finish those states. From Monson, Maine, I hiked 54 miles south. But with 99 miles to go, I faltered.

Ted came to Maine, and I slapped on a backpack for a notorious stretch of the Trail. With its mile-long obstacle course of enormous boulders, Mahoosuc Notch is said to be one of the hardest and slowest stretches of the entire Trail. I had a great time — even though I was backpacking.

When we drove back to Maryland, I still had 79 miles to go. I didn't know whether I could stomach another trip to Maine. I'd hiked over 2,100 miles already. Did I really need to finish?

Thanks to Ted's urging I undertook one last day-hiking trip to Maine in 2021. I quickly discovered I'd left perhaps the most challenging section of the entire Trail — based on the total elevation climbed and descended — for my final miles.

I had my car, but my insistence on day hiking required shuttle rides that took two hours and cost over $100. Several of the trailheads were down unmarked logging roads. Getting to one segment required a half-hour hike-in along an old forest road just to reach the A.T. Still, I considered it time and money well spent because I'd have never located the trailheads and A.T. crossings without the local shuttle drivers. As a result, I undertook seven terrific hikes, ate satisfying dinners, slept well at night, and made steady progress.

Finally, the last day arrived. On the morning of September 11, 2021, I started out with a Diet Coke in one hand, my hiking pole in the other, and two helium balloons tied to my daypack. Most hikers I crossed paths with were curious and offered congratulations. Atop Baldpate, four middle-aged hikers from Colorado spontaneously thrust their trekking poles into two overhead V's for me to walk under when I told them it was my last day. I teared up as I pondered my looming accomplishment.

Two hours later, I popped out of the woods at Grafton Notch State Park. I was 66 years old, and had finally walked every mile of the Appalachian Trail. As I savored the day and thought of all the other outstanding days on the A.T., I understood why some thru-hikers end up hiking the Trail more than once.

I smile when I think of my eleven-year journey. I know I will be back on the A.T. again soon.

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Don DeArmon — retired now after a 34-year career on Capitol Hill — takes a cross-country drive across the U.S. every year.

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THE NATURE OF CHANGE ON THE TRAIL

BY CONNER MCBANE

HOW HAS THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL changed over the last 100 years? Aside from the obvious relocations, increasing visitor use, and growth in the number and size of facilities, the A.T. environment is drastically different from when the Trail idea was conceived — including the species of grass found in the corridor and the overstory trees of the "green" tunnel.

I was eight years old on my first hike of the Appalachian Trail up to McAfee Knob in Virginia. Over 20 years ago, I didn't run into anyone else on this section of Trail, but that's impossible now. In addition to the drastic increase in hikers, the nature of the Trail has changed significantly over time.

The entirety of Mount Rogers high country was once covered in red spruce forests aside from some high-elevation bogs and wetlands. Then, during the 19th and 20th centuries, widespread logging reduced the spruce forests by half. Now the Mount Rogers high country is known for large open areas and "wild" ponies. There was even a time when American chestnut reigned champion of eastern forests, white ash groves speckled Virginia mountains, and eastern hemlocks grew larger than 40 inches in diameter. It is hard for me to imagine how different the A.T. of the past is from the Trail we know and love today.

Change isn't inherently bad. Unfortunately, the changes we see on the A.T. today are happening fast and are often irrefutably negative. These changes require an even greater commitment to management and protection to ensure a high-quality A.T. experience today and for generations to come. As a natural resource manager, I am concerned about the loss of wildness of the Appalachian Trail and a large number of rare and endangered species along with it. Although increasing hiker numbers do have an impact, these losses are largely due to encroaching development, large-scale invasive species spread, and climate change.

Despite these massive challenges, there are significant opportunities to protect the A.T. The ATC has increased capacity and funding for natural resources work, land acquisition, and Trail sustainability. The soul of the A.T., the volunteer trail clubs, are focusing efforts to protect and manage natural resources — as are the ATC's federal and state partners. A.T. hikers are more aware of the benefits of a healthy ecosystem and how that positively affects their experience.

Will these efforts be enough?

I want the next generation, including my children, to experience an A.T. as spectacular as the one I have experienced. I want them to know the magic of a red spruce forest, the unique wildflowers of a grassy bald, the old growth scraggly oaks overtopping a sea of trillium, and cool streams and seeps spilling with salamanders. I want them to experience the wild A.T. that encourages self-reliance.

There is still a lot of work to do, but I remain optimistic. I invite you to join me in this call to action for the protection and management of natural resources on the A.T. Please visit appalachiantrail.org to volunteer, donate, and be a part of making a positive difference for the Appalachian Trail experience!

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Conner McBane is a natural resource manager at the ATC. He is also the 2024 recipient of the Proud Service Award, the ATC's highest honor.

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Conner's natural resource management work on the A.T. has included planting red spruce saplings on Whitetop Mountain in southwestern Virginia. Restoring red spruce forests in the southern Appalachians is essential for the protection of endangered species such as the Carolina northern flying squirrel, among others. Photo by Chris Gallaway / Horizonline Pictures

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