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On June 16th, the US Forest Service sponsored a day-long “Collaborative Learning Workshop – Building Community Capacity to Realize Shared Goals,” in Gainesville. The workshop was free to anyone who wanted to gain problem-solving and decision-making skills that could be applied to any collaborative activities at an organizational, government or community level. The Forest Service hopes this workshop will be a catalyst for building community capacity to realize shared goals and awaken and strengthen our communities’ connection to the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest (CONF). For those of us who attended, the most important take-home message was that the day’s activities (and subsequent community meetings and conversations) represent a major shift in how the Forest Service will be approaching project planning in the CONF.

Firstly, the Forest Service proposes to use a more collaborative approach, asking for public input and support before a project is scoped – a process similar perhaps to the open and collaborative approach used in developing the first Farm Bill project on the CONF, the Armuchee Healthy Forests Project. Collaborative approaches are becoming more commonplace within national forests across the USA since collaboration is required by the Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003 and other laws and regulations; the recent Farm Bill amendment of 2014 focuses on addressing qualifying insect and disease infestations.

There has been significant debate within the conservation community over the last decade on whether or how groups should engage in collaborations with diverse constituencies to restore and protect public lands. This debate has been fueled by successes and failures of past collaborative projects, with many of these projects based out West. There have been valid concerns about the lack of transparency, inclusiveness and balanced representation in some collaborative projects. Additionally, there are concerns that collaboration might become a replacement for the National Policy Environmental Act (NEPA) and other environmental laws, or at the very least, weaken the detailed analysis required by the Forest Service of individual projects.

The CONF and Georgia ForestWatch are no strangers to the collaborative process, having co-organized the Collaborative Trails (CoTrails) Initiative with recreational user groups over five years ago. The process was not always smooth, and it was a large time commitment by everyone involved. But CoTrails has been nationally recognized as a model for addressing recreational problems in our public lands – for resolving user conflicts and maintaining a national trail system with limited resources. Given the regional nature of this collaboration, the Forest Service should reflect on the CoTrails process, and apply any lessons learned to future collaborative projects on the CONF.

During the afternoon session of the Collaborative Workshop, Betty Jewett, Forest Supervisor for the CONF, introduced another shift in how the Forest Service will be approaching project planning. Ms. Jewett asked the audience to help the Forest Service “think like a landscape,” to recognize the interconnectedness of natural systems and to view the forest holistically. Recognizing that the various landscapes in the CONF provide a sense of place for people, the Forest Service wants to hear our stories and find out what we want and need from our national forest. Beginning this fall, the Forest Service will be reaching out to partners, stakeholders and community members through a series of public meetings aimed at realizing a shared vision to address complex conservation challenges across a single large landscape.

Forest Service staff have divided the CONF into eight separate landscapes (for more information see http://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fsepd501294.pdf). The first landscape to be discussed this fall will be the foothills landscape – 143,419 acres stretched across the Chattahoochee National Forest. This landscape marks the area where the mountains are visibly reduced to foothills, and offers a wide variety of recreational opportunities, with over 200 miles of hiking, biking, horse and OHV (off highway vehicle) trails. The foothills landscape was selected because this landscape is one of the least controversial landscapes; as such, it may be easier to flesh out the collaborative process with stakeholders. Additionally, it may be easier to flesh out how this larger landscape approach may actually work in general, as well as guiding smaller individual projects on the CONF. One potential outcome is that we may see larger NEPA projects if the Forest Service “bundles” individual projects because they are all in a particular landscape. ForestWatch will pay close attention to ensure larger analysis areas don’t result in less-detailed, site-specific analyses in environmental assessments or environmental impact statements, and in projects that bend the Roadless Rule or Forest Plan requirements.

To a forest ecologist like me, “thinking like a landscape” – more pointedly, recognizing the interconnectedness of natural systems and viewing the forest holistically – is a natural way of thinking about how our public forests should be managed to address complex conservation challenges. Personally, I welcome this change in agency thinking. Undoubtedly, there will be many interpretations of how to “think like a landscape,” and it is important that Georgia ForestWatch be a committed stakeholder in this process. ForestWatch brings a forest ecology perspective and our boots-on-the-ground experience to the table. We also bring a knowledge of our mountains, forest management practices in the CONF, and NEPA analysis process that is not matched by any other organization. We will keep you apprised of the Thinking like a Landscape collaborative process, and we encourage you to participate in some of the meetings and to help us speak for Georgia’s mountain forests.
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WELCOME NEW MEMBERS!
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Thank You Forest Guardians!
James & Debra Campbell
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Sue Harmon
Robin & Janet Hitner
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UPCOMING OUTINGS & EVENTS

Upcoming outings & events

July 16
Conasauga Snorkeling I
USFS Guides

August 5
Benton MacKaye Trail Hike
Jess Riddle

August 13
Conasauga Snorkeling II
USFS Guides

September 23
Medicinal Plants Hike
Patricia Kyritsi Howell

September 24
Smithgall Woods Hike
Jess Riddle & Will Wagner

October 8
Fall Retreat at Vogel

Email info@gafw.org to reserve your spot today!

We are finalizing the details for more hikes and will post them on our website. To receive alerts and registration information, join our free email alert program found on our website at www.gafw.org.

Coming in 2017:
$50 Family membership level

Cover photo credit: Jess Riddle
Around the forest

by Jess Riddle : Forest Ecologist

Conasauga Ranger District

At the end of April, the Conasauga Ranger District released plans for the Armuchee Healthy Forests Project. This is the first project on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest developed under the Healthy Forests Restoration Act amendment to the Farm Bill, and it aims to reduce the risk of southern pine beetle infestations along the western edge of the forest. ForestWatch has been concerned about Farm Bill projects, because the amendment exempts qualifying projects from a significant amount of environmental analysis and public review. The amendment also requires that projects be developed by a diverse collaborative group of interested stakeholders or partners, and that the process be open and transparent. On other national forests, these types of collaborative projects have varied in their degree of openness and diversity of stakeholders.

Throughout the process, the Conasauga Ranger District was open to suggestions from ForestWatch and other participants. The District significantly modified drafts of the plan in response to recommendations from the collaborative group. ForestWatch believes the final proposal is a good strategy for addressing a significant pest issue. Past land management practices have left many stands at greatly elevated susceptibility to this native pest, and have created the potential for epidemics on a scale that would not occur naturally. The project targets extremely dense pine stands (often of a single species) that are precisely the stands at most elevated risk. Modifications to standard treatments incorporated in the project should help ensure that treatments not only reduce the risk of southern pine beetle infestations, but also put stands on a trajectory towards a more natural mix of species.

Georgia ForestWatch was the only group to comment on the scoping notice. The final decision now waits on the results of botanical and archeological surveys, but it is unlikely to change significantly. We believe this project is a good example of how Farm Bill forest health projects should be applied on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest. ForestWatch will continue to monitor implementation of this project to ensure that good plans turn into a good project.

Blue Ridge Ranger District

Resolution of other issues was more difficult. It is still unclear if the District understands our fundamental points regarding logging in areas the forest plan calls “unsuitable for timber production,” woodland “restoration” on inappropriate sites, or heavily concentrating timber harvests around a high quality brook trout stream. When we presented an alternative plan for the project, which would still meet most of their goals while greatly reducing the environmental impact, District staff said the project was too far along to consider a new alternative. However, we believe there are still ways the alternative could be incorporated, and have been suggesting many of the basic features throughout the public review process.

The Forest Service is still processing the hundreds of comments they received in response to the Draft Environmental Assessment. They anticipate releasing a draft decision in July or August. ForestWatch and our partners are continuing to review the project and work toward improvements.

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October 7-9, 2016
Celebrating 30 Years of Watching Your Forests

Make plans to attend the annual Georgia ForestWatch retreat and membership meeting at Vogel State Park and help us celebrate ForestWatch’s 30th anniversary. Come learn about ForestWatch’s tumultuous beginnings from those folks who helped shape our early history – Jim Sullivan, Brent Martin, and more.

Our main program starts Saturday morning, October 8th, followed by a chili contest, hikes in the afternoon, raffle drawings, live music, and a traditional barbeque dinner in the evening.

Bring your family and friends for informative programming and lots of fun. Be sure to join us Friday night for a meet-and-greet, potluck dinner, and stories about the good ol’ days by a campfire. This is a retreat you will not want to miss! Limited cabins and campsites have been reserved for Friday and Saturday nights and are available on a first come, first served basis – just call the ForestWatch office at 706-867-0051.

Save the Date! Don’t Miss it!
On a clear and somewhat breezy Friday morning in late May, I gathered with seven other hikers at the just-beginning-to-bustle Blue Ridge WalMart parking lot to meet one of ForestWatch’s ecologists, Jess Riddle. The plan: to carpool to Dyer Gap for a hike along the Benton MacKaye Trail, up to the summit of Flat Top Mountain (3,732 feet), then loop our return to the gap along gated Forest Service Road 64A. Introductions in the parking lot revealed new members and old, with ages ranging from 10 to 70+, as well as two father/son pairs. I’ve come to cherish the opportunity to meet so many interesting people on ForestWatch hikes. We piled ourselves into three vehicles and set off.

For 10 miles we wound west on old GA Hwy 2, catching glimpses of wildflowers along the roadside, my favorite being the fire pinks, glinting their scarlet winks every now and then. The swaying back and forth, the easy bouncing over rocky, rutted road beds feels somehow relaxing to me. I know. Others feel differently about mountain roads. But for me, they spell relaxation. These dusty drives remind me of many childhood hours spent in the back of our ‘52 Chevy, Dad dutifully easing that bomb of a car over the rocks and ruts of north Georgia’s gravel roads, while us kids were helping Mom scour the roadsides for wildflowers. Roadside botanizing was our family’s idea of adventure. Now I get my botany adventure fixes on ForestWatch hikes.

As our hike crew caravan came to a stop at Dyer Gap, we gathered our day packs and poles and began to make our way to the trail. My curiosity was aroused by the granite marker along the roadside, indicating the historical significance of our destination – the site of an old homestead community of six to eight families that ran a school and mill until 1918. Later in its history, Flat Top Mountain, the second highest peak on the Benton MacKaye Trail in Georgia, became the site of a fire tower. I wondered what clues to the past we would find on the mountain.

As we climbed, we took our time to stop and look. We noticed the big trees, the seeming multitudes of millipedes and snails on the trail, which were tricky to avoid. We practiced plant identifications, with some brief excitement that we might have (continued on page 7)
Georgia’s mountain treasures: Andrews Cove
by Jess Riddle  :  Forest Ecologist

From the South Carolina state line to just north of Helen, a simple crease runs straight across the otherwise rumpled and crumpled topography of north Georgia. Native Americans and early settlers found sections of the crease, called the Warwoman Shear, a convenient travel corridor. The Andrews Cove Trail still follows the westernmost two miles of the corridor. The trail descends from the Appalachian Trail at Indian Grave Gap through the namesake cove to a campground built by the Civilian Conservation Core.

Along the trail, the crease is deep, as though some giant axe had smashed into the earth. The mountain walls rise 1,000 feet above Andrews Creek. The gentle rumbling of the stream completes the sense of being enveloped by the mountains. Jumbles of rock, some as large as cars and splashed with green from scrambling vines, cover portions of the slope. Early settlers’ low opinion of such areas is probably why we now call one of Andrews Creek’s tributaries “Devils Den Branch.”

Rocky soils can allow water to run through rapidly and create a habitat that is hellish for small and drought-sensitive plants. However, those same conditions create opportunities for deeper-rooted and more drought-tolerant species, which may be why chestnut oak and scarlet oak thrive along the Andrews Cove Trail. Normally citizens of dry ridges and sun-baked slopes, here they cloak both those sites and sheltered, north-facing slopes, frequently towering to exceptional heights along the trail. The deeper and more nutrient-rich soils that have accumulated at the bottom of the cove around the campground support an abundance of wildflowers each spring.

Away from the trail and up the mountain walls, the rock becomes unbroken. Small cliffs and rock outcrops dot the slopes, and tributaries of Andrews Creek slide and cascade down. These barriers stymied late 19th and early 20th century logging operations, and above them stands one of the largest concentrations of old-growth forest remaining in north Georgia. Twisted old oaks dominate this forest with occasional patches of table mountain pine and other species. The thin, nutrient-poor soils do not allow trees to grow as large as those in the cove below. However, nearly one square mile of ancient forest provides a window into the past and what wild Georgia really looks like.

Despite all that ruggedness, Andrews Cove lies at the heart of one of the most easily accessible roadless areas in north Georgia. Highway 17/75 forms the entire western boundary. Traversing between Unicoi Gap and Indian Grave Gap, the Appalachian Trail carries thousands of people across the area each year. Along the way, the Appalachian Trail follows the edge of the Andrews Creek watershed over Rocky Mountain and ties into the two mile long Rocky Mountain Trail. Away from the trails though, seldom visited places like the hanging valley of Lost House Branch still offer opportunities for solitude.

Getting there:
• Andrews Cove Campground is six miles north of Helen, GA, on GA 17/75. The Andrews Cove Trail starts at the back (top) of the campground.
• The Appalachian Trail crosses GA 17/75 at Unicoi Gap, nine miles north of Helen, GA.
• The Appalachian, Andrews Cove, and Rocky Mountain Trails can also be accessed from Forest Service Road 283, which starts 11 miles north of Helen, GA, on GA 17/75. Depending on maintenance, four-wheel-drive may be necessary to use the road.

The southeastern border, and a good spring wildflower display, can be accessed from Forest Service Road 79 (Tray Mountain Road), which begins two miles north of Helen, GA, on GA 17/75. Depending on maintenance, four-wheel-drive may be necessary to use the road.
found golden seal. But alas, it was a look-alike plant. As I peered through the broad thin leaves of a Fraser magnolia, a mosaic umbrella of glowing, light green leaf tiles spread over us. Looking down, the northern maidenhair fern was unfurling, uncurling, ever swirling its paper thin, gently scalloped leaflets in the slightest of breezes. Sometimes the beauty in these forests takes my breath away.

Our youngest hiker, Lukas, was most interested in keeping this hike moving and happily jaunted a few yards ahead, blazing the trail all the way up the mountain. Luckily for all of us, Jess never tired of questions about flora, fauna, fungi, ecology issues and just about anything else forest related. Believe me, I’ve tested him on this. Sometimes I find myself asking about the same flower or tree or issue on several hike trips in a row. He patiently reviews characteristics, mnemonics, or issue details to help me learn. And of course, there is always more to learn, which is what makes these hikes exciting to me. You never know what you’ll find behind the next tree, around the next bend in the trail, on top of the next rock outcrop, or growing on the next log.

At the summit we took our lunch break and wandered over the one square mile of flat area above the 3,500-foot elevation level. We investigated the footings of the old fire tower and pondered the purpose of an old foundation, surely related to the tower or mill or homestead that used to spread itself out in this space. A lone, old wolf tree was waiting sentinel for us. The substantial and somewhat twisted white oak was evidently spared when the land was cleared for the settlement. Flat Top Mountain receives one of the highest annual rainfall totals in Georgia, sometimes exceeding 100 inches; resulting fields of ferns make for a quite a stunning understory.

Our return to the gap via the Forest Service road was a pleasant downhill stroll, as we continued our leisurely botanizing with the added joy of watching Lukas play in the puddles along the way.

As we drove back out of the forest, to disperse ourselves back into our other lives, I felt a whole lot of gratitude for having the chance to connect and learn with ForestWatch friends, old and new, all the while being surrounded by a forest that awes me every time I enter it. Maybe I’ll meet you on the next ForestWatch outing. I hope so.
In May, fire managers from across the Southern Appalachians gathered in Johnson City, TN, for the 11th annual Southern Blue Ridge Fire Learning Network meeting. The Nature Conservancy and the US Forest Service hosted the workshop to promote and share knowledge about good controlled burning practices. The workshop supports the network’s broader goal of “[restoring] fire-adapted ecosystems and [building] resilient forests and communities in the Southern Blue Ridge.”

This year’s two days of presentations and one day of field trips touched on many of the same topics as past workshops: determining where to burn, monitoring effects of controlled burns, recent research findings, how to gather resources to burn more area annually, and how to present controlled burning to the public.

Monitoring from Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Cherokee National Forest, Virginia national forests, and a broader University of Western North Carolina program all tell a similar story. Typical controlled burns kill many trees less than six inches in diameter, but few larger trees. After a burn, however, the number of small trees may actually increase as root systems of killed trees send up new shoots. Fires consume the layer of fallen leaves on the forest floor and some of the layer of decomposed leaves underneath (the duff layer). Contrastingly, fallen twigs, branches, and other woody debris increase, probably as a result of the small trees killed by the fire. Fallen leaves, branches, and duff are fuel for subsequent fires, so what happens to them can influence future fire behavior and intensity.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of monitoring plots in these forests have been burned only once so far. Thus, we have little information on what repeated controlled fires over an extended period of time can do to a forest and its soils. Will trees killed to the ground keep sprouting back? Will the fires gradually consume and reduce the amount of fallen branches? Will the duff layer continue to thin? What happens to the duff layer will be particularly important. The duff layer stores a large portion of the nutrients in a forest, sponges up rainfall, and protects steep slopes from erosion. However, some species like pitch pine need a thin duff layer for its seedlings to establish successfully. Without fires, pitch pines may become scarcer as older trees gradually die off and there are few seedlings to replace them. Answering these questions and determining how

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fire can be applied to maximize benefits and minimize harm will require continued long-term monitoring and research.

A group at Duke University will soon produce a summary of existing research about the effects of fire and timber management on different groups of animals. Preliminary findings from analyzing hundreds of scientific research articles paint a complex picture. Overall, birds and small mammals become more common after fires and timber harvest, but amphibians decline; unfortunately, few studies included reptiles. Whether a particular group increases or decreases may change depending on whether pine forests or oak forests are burned, or whether high intensity fires or low intensity fires are involved. Interestingly, high intensity fires and high intensity timber harvests have opposite effects from each other for some animal groups.

Oak regeneration has long been a major focus in controlled burning research. Most oak forests have very few young oak trees, and fire exclusion is often cited as the cause. Dr. Tara Keyser, a Forest Service researcher, studied the effects of frequent fire on oak regeneration. She looked at areas burned four times over six years and the abundance of oak saplings that were over four feet tall (saplings with the greatest chance of growing into adult trees). Although oak saplings increased, so did saplings of sassafras and many other species. Fire may contribute to oak regeneration, but this research suggests that fire alone will not perpetuate an oak-dominated forest. Managers should not assume that ensuring the next generation of oak forest is as simple as doing a few controlled burns.

Another researcher examined the weather patterns associated with lightning strike fires on the Grandfather Ranger district in western North Carolina. The meteorological details seemed to require an advanced degree to understand. The 192,000-acre district averaged two lightning strike fires per year. They typically occurred June through September, and no fires were recorded December through March. Controlled burns have usually been conducted in late winter, but there is increasing interest among managers in completing them during the growing season. Large fires were associated with moderate droughts, but, perhaps surprisingly, small fires sometimes occurred during wet periods.

Interacting with fire managers reinforced my view that they sincerely believe in the benefits of prescribed fire, and want to improve their use of fire. While the presentations were interesting and informative, they did not address some of ForestWatch’s long standing questions regarding fire in the mountains, such as what was the frequency of fire before European settlers arrived? The research presentations showed the complexity of fire, and that we all still have a lot to learn about it.

If you want to learn more about the Fire Learning Network meeting, check out the meeting website at http://sbrfln2016.weebly.com/resources.html. Links to the presentations will eventually be posted.

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A Fond Good-bye to Laura LeMay

By Mary Topa : Executive Director

As some of you may know, Laura LeMay has moved permanently back home to Cartersville. It is with sadness that we say good-bye to Laura, but we wish her all the best. Laura has been a wonderful ambassador for Georgia ForestWatch during the past two years. She has accomplished much in her role as Outreach Coordinator, and we are proud to acknowledge her contributions to our organization as we wish her the fondest of farewells.

Laura hit the ground running when she was hired in May 2014, right after our move from Ellijay to Dahlonega. The office was still in disarray (ok, mostly it was my office), and I was immediately impressed by her passion for the environment. Like many of us, this passion stemmed from a childhood of playing outside. She understood how important it is to get people outside to experience nature, and what better place to experience nature than the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest? This philosophy was exemplified in the variety of hikes she organized for ForestWatch and the enthusiasm she displayed when talking about ForestWatch with the public at tabling events, presentations to other conservation groups, and with our members.

During her first six months she helped organize volunteer opportunities and events to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Wild & Scenic Chattooga River and the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act with partner organizations. Both events were well-attended and very important to ForestWatch. We quickly discovered that Laura had a knack for organizing events and was an excellent ambassador for ForestWatch with partner organizations and the public. Our Wild & Woolly Forest Festival and Fall Retreats were always well-run, well attended, and lots of fun with Laura at the helm. She exhibited calmness in the face of last-minute chaos, and always made sure attendees and volunteers were taken care of.

Laura helped increase our social media presence, updating our Facebook page on a more frequent basis. She was also instrumental in helping launch our new website last year, working closely with my niece, Maureen Topa, on the design template and uploading much of the information on our old website to the new site.

Thank you, Laura, for all that you have done for ForestWatch. We will miss you and wish you the best of luck in your new endeavors!
On April 30, a crowd of 125 gathered for the 12th annual Wild & Woolly Forest Festival. This year’s event took place in the wine cellar at Chateau Meichtry Family Vineyard and Winery, near Ellijay, and included great food and music, wine tasting, a silent auction, a pre-event hike, and our traditional native plant sale.

Early in the day, Jim Walker and David Govus led more than 25 hikers on a spring wildflower hike in the Wildcat Tract of the Dawson Forest. A good time was had by all, and the hikers spotted some nice wildflowers.

We were so pleased this year to welcome as our guest speaker the fabulous Janisse Ray, Georgia author and environmental activist, who is perhaps best known for her autobiographical Ecology of a Cracker Childhood. Janisse reminded us that the important question is not, “How do we maintain hope that our environmental work will make a difference?” but rather, “How do we stay in touch with the love in our hearts for the land?” After her inspiring talk, Janisse offered a book signing.

Tents were set up outside, and the weather was cooperative – at least for the first hour – so participants could wander in and out of the wine cellar, enjoying the beautiful view and shopping the native plant sale outside. It seemed like providence that the major rain was during Janisse Ray’s presentation, when everyone wanted to be inside anyway!

Musician Bill Pound kept us all entertained throughout the event, with a mix of lively and varied music for guitar, flute and harmonica. We are so appreciative of Bill’s generosity in donating his time and talent to support Georgia ForestWatch.

Once again, we had many wonderful silent auction items donated by local artists, Dahlonega merchants, Patagonia Atlanta, ForestWatch board members, and many others. There were paintings, photos, and pottery, Patagonia shirts and pullovers, a free night’s stay at the Len Foote Hike Inn, and other great items. A few of the beautiful native plants donated by Lynda Doll and Jack Johnston were included in the auction as well.

Melinda Edwards and Laura LeMay kept us well-fed – the assortment of finger foods was not only beautiful to look at, but was a great accompaniment to the variety of wines that were offered.

Throughout the event, winemaker and vineyard manager Justin McNeill poured tastings from a selection of Chateau Meichtry wines. They were a big hit, and we heard a rumor that when the ForestWatch event was over, many of our attendees headed over to the Tasting Room for more!

Dedicated volunteers helped immeasurably to make the Wild & Woolly Forest Festival such a success. From setting up tents and chairs to staffing the registration desk to parking cars to selling native plants to preparing and maintaining the food tables to dismantling everything after the event – these volunteers were essential for a seamless and enjoyable festival!

We’d like to especially thank Laura LeMay for all her hard work on organizing this Wild & Woolly Forest Festival – for taking care of all the details, making it look easy, and making sure everyone had a good time.

To all who helped, all who attended, and all who contributed to this year’s Wild & Woolly Forest Festival, a big THANKS! We couldn’t have done it without you. See you again next year, and we hope to see you at the Fall Retreat on October 8.

A special thanks to the following sponsors, donors, in-kind contributors, volunteers and staff!
Wine tastings were offered by Winemaker and Vineyard Manager, Justin McNeill. The amazing Bill Pound provided great music. Guest speaker Janisse Ray inspired us.

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Photos by Laura LeMay

Lyn Hopper and Vanessa Cowie welcomed attendees. Thanks to all our wonderful Wild & Woolly volunteers!
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