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This fall, the Forest Service is reaching out to the public through a series of community conversations and an online forum to better understand how the public uses the Foothills Landscape in the Chattahoochee National Forest. The 143,419 acres that make up this landscape mark the area where the mountains are visibly reduced to foothills. The Foothills Landscape offers a wide variety of recreation opportunities, with nearly 200 miles of hiking, biking, horse and OHV trails, and dozens of recreation sites. The area includes a portion of the Cohutta WMA and Dawson, Fannin, Gilmer, Habersham, Lumpkin, Murray, Rabun and White Counties.

Forest Supervisor Betty Jewett and her staff want people to share their knowledge, insights and values right from the start of project development so the Forest Service can plan “the right work in the right places for the right reasons.” Ultimately, public input from these community conversations will help shape the Foothills Landscape Project, a large-scale management proposal expected to be released for public comment (and NEPA review) in a year or two.

The Foothills Landscape was selected as the first of eight landscapes to be discussed with the public because it is one of the least controversial landscapes; as such, it may be easier to flesh out the collaborative process with stakeholders. This collaborative approach – asking for public input before a project is scoped – represents a major shift in how the Forest Service will be approaching project planning in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests.

But ForestWatch is all about details, and it is the size of these larger landscape-scale projects that is concerning. How the Forest Service can conduct the detailed site-specific analyses required by NEPA for such a large area is yet to be seen. Of equal concern is how the public can review these larger projects under the limited time frame allowed by NEPA (a 30-day comment period). This is why it is so critical that our members voice their opinions and participate in these community conversations.

After attending two collaborative planning meetings this past summer, and three of the Foothills Landscape Community Conversations, I am impressed by the Forest Service’s commitment to making this collaborative process work. So right now, the ball is in our court. We have an opportunity to let the Forest Service and others in our community know what areas are special to us, and how we would like to see these areas managed.

Please take advantage of this opportunity and tell the Forest Service about some of your special places in the Foothills Landscape and why they are special to you. It could be a favorite view, trail, old-growth forest, trout stream, etc. Let the Forest Service know how you value the Chattahoochee National Forest and what is important to you. These remarks can be very general – such as, protecting headwaters and keeping our forests healthy – but they can also be very specific.

In the next couple of weeks, ForestWatch will be posting more specific comments on our website (www.gafw.org) and Facebook page, and on the Foothills community forum page (http://www.communityremarks.com/conf/index.php). Some examples of our comments include: protect old-growth forests; thin pine plantations to restore these stands to healthier mixes of native tree species; restore woodlands on ecologically-appropriate sites; create early successional habitat from younger stands in need of management (not from mature forests that take more than 100 years to develop); and provide a diverse, quality trail experience that is maintainable and ecologically sustainable. These are just a few suggestions that will help promote sustainable recreation and forest management practices in the Foothills Landscape, and lead to diverse and healthy forests and watersheds.

You still have time to join the Foothills Landscape Community Conversations, and learn more about the process at the following locations:

**North Atlanta:**
Saturday, October 29, 9:30am-12:30pm
Gwinnett Environmental & Heritage Center
2020 Clean Water Dr, Buford GA 30519

**Chatsworth:**
Tuesday, November 1, 6:00-9:00pm
Cohutta Springs Conference Center
1175 Cohutta Springs Road, Crandall GA 30711

If you can’t make it to one of these face-to-face conversations, you can learn more about the Foothills Landscape at http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/conf/home/?cid=fseprd514937. You can share your thoughts, ideas and knowledge online until December 1st by visiting http://tinyurl.com/FoothillsLandscape and also see what your neighbors are saying.

**Or Mail Suggestions to:**
Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests
1755 Cleveland Highway
Gainesville, GA 30501
Re: Foothills Landscape

Responses made by December 1, 2016, will provide a valuable framework for the Forest Service to build upon in this initial planning phase. The Forest Service will continue to collaborate with the community to develop a proposed project over the coming year. It is critical that you let the Forest Service and others in your community know what areas are special to you, and how you would like to see these areas managed. Thanks for being a part of the conversation!
You may be able to save on taxes and give the money to ForestWatch!

by Ted Doll : Board Member

Uncle Sam may forgive the tax that you owe on an IRA withdrawal and give it to ForestWatch! If you are 70½ years of age or older and have a traditional, tax-deferred IRA, the government requires that you take “Required Minimum Distributions” (RMDs) every year. The RMDs are payouts from your IRA that increase each year beyond your 70½th birthday.

The amount you originally invested in your IRA is normally before-tax money. In other words, you didn’t pay any tax on that part of your income that you invested in your IRA each year. Depending on how you invested your IRA funds (for example in mutual funds) you may also have considerable gains on the original investment.

If you take the IRA distribution yourself, i.e., have it deposited in your checking account or get a check for it, you will have to pay considerable tax on it. The IRA distribution that you must take each year after age 70½ is taxable as ordinary income. That is, both the part of the distribution that represents your original investment (the principal) and the gain are taxable.

But there is a provision that now allows you to avoid the tax on your RMD (payout) if you donate it entirely and directly to a non-profit organization like Georgia ForestWatch. That provision is called the Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD). The QCD has been authorized by Congress in past years on an-on again, off-again basis. It was operative in 2013 but not in 2014. It was authorized again very late in 2015, so most people missed taking advantage of it. Finally, it was made permanent in the omnibus budget bill passed in the fall of 2015.

Here’s how it works. If you have a moderate size IRA, your RMD the first year when you reach 70½ might be, say $5,000. Suppose that your marginal tax rate (percentage of your income you pay in federal income tax after all deductions and credits) is, say 15%. If you take the RMD yourself, you would have to pay 15% of the $5,000 RMD, or $750, in federal income tax in addition to the tax you pay on your other regular income. But if you donate the RMD entirely and directly to Georgia ForestWatch under the QCD provision, Uncle Sam completely forgives the tax on the RMD. So Georgia ForestWatch gets the whole $5,000. If, on the other hand, you had the RMD deposited to your checking account, you’d have to pay $750 tax on it, and have just $5,000 - $750 = $4,250 remaining to donate to Georgia ForestWatch. Said another way, the QCD provision allows you to amplify what you give to ForestWatch, thanks to the generosity of Uncle Sam.

More information on QCDs can be found at Wealth Management.com (http://wealthmanagement.com/retirement-planning/ira-qualified-charitable-contributions-reinstated-made-permanent), and at the IRS website (https://www.irs.gov/publications/p590b/ch01.html#en_US_2015_publink100041439). Of course, you should consult your tax attorney or knowledgeable CPA for guidance on how to do a QCD and claim it on your federal income tax.

Thanks for your support in helping us protect Georgia’s National Forests!
Jim Walker has been a very active ForestWatch member for the last 15 years, working in the trenches as a District Leader covering the western half of the Chattahoochee National Forest. In addition to covering many miles in the woods to assess proposed Forest Service timber cutting projects, Jim has been a major force in helping write Georgia ForestWatch's comments on these proposed projects. Most ForestWatch members are unaware of the effort and time that is put into researching and commenting on agency projects.

Jim was very involved in developing and writing ForestWatch's response to the Forest Service's Brawley Mountain project in 2006. This response was over 40 pages in length, and involved a good deal of coordination, not only with other ForestWatch members but with our legal partners, the Southern Environmental Law Center. Brawley Mountain is an example of how well-thought-out and documented comments based on a careful examination of stand and site conditions can result in major improvements to a project. The Forest Service scaled back the project and protected the only mature forest in the project area. Since that time Jim has followed the project as it has developed, and his close attention has kept the Forest Service on its toes.

In 2011, Jim led the way in responding to a proposal by the Blue Ridge Ranger District to thin nearly 7,000 acres of “overstocked” stands of pine trees, including many stands located in the Ed Jenkins National Recreation Area. On-the-ground surveys by Jim and other ForestWatch surveyors revealed that most of the stands did not contain overstocked pines, and many had no pines at all. Upon receiving Georgia ForestWatch’s response and meeting in the field with ForestWatch, the project was dropped.

Recently, Jim has been heavily involved in ground-truthing and responding to the Forest Service’s plans to cut several thousand acres in the Coopers Creek watershed, including over 1,500 acres in Bryant Creek, Georgia’s finest native brook trout stream. Although some improvements have been made to the project, the final decision on the project is still pending. On a more personal note, Jim was raised and went to high school in the suburbs of Atlanta but traveled all the way to New Haven, Connecticut to attend Yale University. Within a few years after graduating, Jim and his wife Pat abandoned city life and moved to the wilds of Gilmer County. Working together, Jim and Pat built a log cabin on their property. This is not one of the faux cabins dotting the second home developments of North Georgia, but one constructed of poplar logs cut on the property and complete with a hand-built stone chimney.

Pat and Jim raised two sons, Josh and Caleb. Both were homeschooled until middle school, and each graduated in the top of his class – one was high school salutatorian, and the other valedictorian. Josh and Caleb were recognized for academic achievement as STAR (Student-Teacher Achievement Recognition) students. Jim was very active in Boy Scouts and the troop that he helped lead set the benchmark for long-distance hiking, biking and camping. Both sons became Eagle Scouts.

Not too many years back, Jim hiked the entire length of the Benton MacKaye Trail in Georgia, camping along the way. Jim’s memorable remark about the journey was that he saw more bears than people. Somehow in the midst of all this activity Jim managed to find time to tend to his day job as a translator of Russian scientific articles. During several trips to Russia, Jim made contact with Russian environmentalists, giving him a different perspective on that mysterious country.

Recently retired, Jim has become even more active in Georgia ForestWatch, in addition to pursuing his hobbies of tree climbing, reading and contemplation.
Georgia ForestWatch received the scoping notice for the Fightingtown Creek Wildlife Habitat Project in August 2015, and Forest Ecologist Jess Riddle summarized the proposal in the Fall 2015 Forest News. The project consists of two components. One is designation of potential old-growth habitat to meet the Forest Plan’s objective to “Reserve 5 percent” of subwatersheds of a certain size on the National Forest “for development of future old growth.” The other is creation of approximately 436 acres of early successional habitat (ESH) to benefit wildlife, primarily ruffed grouse, through commercial and noncommercial timber harvest, including road reconstruction and maintenance to facilitate removal of the commercial timber.

Of course, ForestWatch has no objection to designation of potential old-growth stands, other than wishing there were more of them. Nor do we object to creation of ESH in general. However, we do have concerns about the individual stands in which ESH would be created in the project as proposed in the August 2015 scoping.

As noted in the fall 2015 commentary, the 17 proposed ESH stands are all within Management Prescription 9.H, the purpose of which, according to the Forest Plan, is “the restoration of historical plant associations and their ecological dynamics.” Many of the stands in the project area were severely degraded by clearcuts in the latter decades of the twentieth century, eliminating much of the mast-producing oak component that is so important for wildlife. Rather than creating ESH in these old clearcuts, the majority of the stands proposed for creation of ESH are older ones, harvesting of which would further degrade the area, contrary to Management Prescription 9.H.

Jess Riddle and District Leaders spent three days surveying the proposed stands and submitted comments in September 2015, emphasizing the long-term damage to the forest from creating ESH in older stands. After another visit to the area, Jess submitted suggestions for more appropriate stands, recommending that ESH be created from old clearcuts that were in need of some management.

On June 30, 2016, ForestWatch received not a final Environmental Assessment of the project, but a draft alternative “developed to address concerns expressed during the scoping period while still allowing for the creation of the desired habitat conditions ... Specifically, this alternative was designed to consider:

- Loss of highly-valued mature hardwood forest through regeneration harvests, and associated loss of mast production
- Loss of mature forest habitat for wildlife species not dependent on ESH
- Loss of potential oak regeneration.”

Under this alternative, only six of the originally proposed stands would be treated with even-aged regeneration, which would remove almost all of the overstory trees. Eight stands would be treated with partial retention of the canopy, leaving 25% of the existing overstory in clumps that would be left on site indefinitely. And three stands would be treated with shelterwood with reserves, a two-aged regeneration method in which some trees, in this case an average basal area of 25-40 ft² per acre, primarily oaks, would be retained on site indefinitely.

This was certainly a big improvement over the original proposal, but we still were concerned about the unnecessary harvest of so many mature oaks and other hardwoods.

Then on July 28, the Forest Service; Georgia ForestWatch; Linda Ordiway, the regional biologist for the Ruffed Grouse Society; and Mark McConnell, a wildlife outreach specialist from the University of Georgia, met onsite to discuss options for the project. Of all the field trips I have been on with the Forest Service, this was the most informative and collaborative. The best news coming out of this collaborative effort was that no trees would be cut on slopes of 35% or greater. Along with the partial canopy retention and shelterwood treatments, this means that instead of 436 acres, only 195 acres would be cut. Additionally, the Forest Service dropped three of their original stands and added three of the stands that ForestWatch recommended. And some changes were made in response to the Ruffed Grouse Society’s input.

Because the Forest Service still intends to cut mostly mature stands, the Fightingtown Creek project is not what we would like it to be, and no doubt we will reiterate our concerns when the Environmental Assessment comes out. But compromises were made on all sides, and the result is much better than the original proposal.
Changes to the Board
by Robin Hitner : Board President and District Leader

There have been some changes to the Georgia ForestWatch leadership during the past six months. Please welcome two new Board members – Sue Harmon and Brenda Smith. Both Sue and Brenda have been active members of ForestWatch, volunteering their time over the years by leading hikes, helping with events, and learning about the issues in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests.

Sue Harmon grew up on the south side of Atlanta, one of three sisters whose parents loved to take their family on rambles in the woods, mountains, rivers and lakes of Georgia and the Southeast. Sue earned a Master’s Degree in Early Childhood/Special Education from Georgia State University and embarked on a 31-year career in the field with Gwinnett County Public Schools, meanwhile marrying and raising two daughters.

Upon retirement in 2008, Sue began increasing her volunteer activities with various organizations including the local food bank and public schools, and served on the Board of Veteran’s Heart Georgia in 2015. Sue has been a member of Georgia ForestWatch since 2005, and has been a familiar face on our hikes since 2009. Over the last year she made the decision to focus most of her volunteer time with Georgia ForestWatch. She began regularly attending District Leader meetings in 2015, and actively contributes to the organization by leading hikes, helping with events, organizing the native plant sale for the Wild & Woolly Forest Festival, and networking with the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club, the Georgia Botanical Society, and the Georgia Native Plant Society. Sue was instrumental in getting Janisse Ray to be the keynote speaker for the 2016 Wild & Woolly Festival. She is passionate about finding ways to increase ForestWatch’s visibility and spread the word about the unique and important work that ForestWatch does.

Brenda Smith was born and raised on a cotton farm in Forsyth County, Georgia and spent most of her spare time in the woods. That’s probably where she learned to love trees. She grew up one of six in what some would call poverty, but what she likes to call the “school of tough choices and cement values.”

Brenda came to higher education late in life after her two children were grown up. She attended what was then Gainesville Community College where she earned a two-year Associate’s Degree in Fine Arts. She then graduated from North Georgia College and University (NGCU) in Dahlonega with a Bachelor’s Degree in Art Education. While working as an art teacher, Brenda earned a Master’s Degree in Art Education from NGCU. She taught art for 15 years on the elementary level before retiring and moving to Rabun Gap where she lives happily in her mountain cabin with an assortment of dogs.
More than 15 years ago Brenda started visiting Rabun County with a friend who was a “born and raised native.” She met several people who were involved with Georgia ForestWatch when she signed up for some of our hikes. Brenda then learned about the conservation part of the organization from two of the hike leaders, Honor Woodard and Joe Gatins, and became a member in 2005. Soon, she found herself helping with the Wild & Woolly fundraiser each year and learned more of the trails in the area. Brenda started leading hikes five years ago for ForestWatch and has enjoyed meeting people and sharing her dynamic love of the woods and concerns about preserving them. Her hikes are some of our most popular, and include art hikes, poetry and music hikes, picnic hikes and storytelling hikes.

We are also saying goodbye to Brian Wills who has stepped off the Board this month. Brian accepted a transfer within The Nature Conservancy and has moved to the Georgia coast. He joined the Board in October 2012, and has been the Vice President for two years. We wish Brian and his family the best and greatly appreciated his tenure on the board.

In other Board news, members Ted Doll, David Govus, Robin Hitner and Tom Crawford were reelected to the Board at the August 2016 Board meeting. And we have a new Board Advisor, Patrick Hunter. Patrick is a staff attorney at the Southern Environmental Law Center (SELC) in Asheville, NC – his priority projects include Coal Ash and Protecting our Southern Appalachian Forests. Patrick grew up in New Bern, North Carolina on the fringes of the Croatan National Forest. He attended undergraduate and law school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where he graduated with honors. All of us at ForestWatch who have worked with Patrick over the last three+ years know what a great person he is and a tremendous asset to our organization. We are truly blessed to have a long-term partnership with SELC on so many projects in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests. Thank you Patrick and Sarah for helping us protect the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests!
Three Forks mountain treasure adventure

by Sue Harmon : Board Member

In mid-July in Georgia, at 9:30 in the morning, the sun’s heat was already starting to build. I sat in my parked car, the door ajar, waiting for Jess Riddle at the Clayton Ingles. I knew that I was embarking on a day of certainties and uncertainties. I knew I would see interesting and beautiful things in the forest, but I also knew there would be no trails, that the climbs would be steep, the footing uncertain and the plant thickets daunting. I relish these opportunities to get out into the wilds of Georgia with someone who can read the forest like I read Dr. Seuss, easily and precisely, despite the wildness of the words or woods, despite the twists of tongue or terrain.

Jess pulled up in his trusty, silver Honda sedan and I piled in with my pack. We set out for the Three Forks area, headwaters of the famous Chattooga River. Rumbling over gravel roads, Jess pointed out characteristics of the forest - a grove of dead white pines, a large tree here or there. I always learn something new when I’m out with Jess, and always more than one something. He can read a forest like no one I’ve ever met before.

Eventually Jess eased the Honda off to the side of the road. We stepped out and began to gear up as he pulled out a topo map to get our bearings. For a long while I’ve dreamed of being able to access Georgia’s beautiful secret forests. But without the skills or a competent guide, I’ve had to settle for trail hikes. Notable exceptions were the times I was fortunate enough to hike with Ben Cash up on Kelly Ridge or Pheasant Branch or the un-trailed reaches of Lake Russell WMA, where the ancient stone walls persist.

But now I have the opportunity to go out into these roadless areas where few humans ever set foot. Jess has the job of surveying these forests and collecting data on what makes them special. We call these areas “Georgia’s Mountain Treasures.” The data will be used to justify increased protection of these areas to the Forest Service and others during the upcoming Forest Plan revision process for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests. The lure of finding mountain treasures carries me, but even just to bear witness to these remote areas feels both enlivening and humbling.

Jess folded the map and tucked it away, then scanned the road bank for an opening in the brush and the best footing for a steep upward scramble. We shortly found ourselves wading through shoulder-high huckleberry. My hiking poles were a handicap, but I hadn’t yet learned to collapse them and tuck them into my pack for this kind of bushwhacking: Lesson #1.

Lesson #2: Don’t wear your glasses on a string around your neck. The huckleberries will pull them under and drown them. There will be no finding them. Lesson #3: If you take a hat, either wear it or secure it to your pack. Don’t tuck it under your arm for safe keeping. So there you go, within the first hundred yards I was fumbling through brush and had lost my glasses and hat. But I didn’t tell Jess. He likely had enough doubts about my competence for this venture as it were.

At last we reached the top of a ridge and the characteristic rock outcrop areas I’m used to exploring with Jess. Safe footing was tricky to find on a sheer rock face with a 50% slope, but somehow he made it look easy and I followed. There went my booted foot, ahead of me down the mountain. Leaning back, I took a seat on the rock and went with the downward slide, laughing at the sight of myself. Jess seemed to appreciate the comic relief, yet, at the same time, I suspect he was sighing in relief that he didn’t have an injured 64-year-old on his hands. I know I was. The very last thing I wanted to do on these adventures was hinder his work with my physical incompetence.

As soon as I looked up from my chuckle I saw the sun pouring through wide, green, spatulate leaf blades and wondered out loud “cucumber magnolia?” “No, it’s pawpaw,” Jess replied. “But that was a good guess.”

Apparently we had arrived in pawpaw heaven because the clonal trees were everywhere, too numerous to count. We continued to descend, exploring deep into the crevice of the cove, with Jess noting the wide variety of tree species, compared to the low diversity in the sparse herb layer. We were hoping for something unusual, a rare flower or fern or salamander. Soon enough Jess was shedding his pack at the base of a rather large pawpaw. Now pawpaws are small trees, and rarely grow more than 25 feet in height. By the time Jess finished measuring, he declared that this specimen was likely larger than the current state champion. Treasure #1. And more was yet to come.

Our next trajectory had us wading through chest-high dog hobble. Even Jess lost his footing once. Using your arms you try to push and part the tangle, while doing the same with your legs and feet, which have totally disappeared from your view. Only
by feel do you know if your footing might be solid enough to take your weight or alternately suck your foot into the depths of a rotted stump. To Jess this kind of bushwhacking is just a nuisance. To me it was a physical challenge that I was determined to conquer. The hobble finally released us and we looked up to be greeted by massive rock slabs. One was a sheer vertical wall, momentarily highlighted by the sun and covered in moss that undulated over the horizontal ridges of the rock's layers. The other massive slabs were juxtaposed, creating a slender triangular shelter on top of the mountain, 8 feet wide at head height and maybe 15 feet deep, with a flat floor. Treasure #5. Time for lunch.

We refueled, then slung on our packs and I figured we were heading out, but Jess was inclined to explore horizontally, around the rock shelter. Okay. Carry on. More hobbling in the hobble. As we passed around the side of the massive vertical slab, a tumble of new boulders, some as large as cows, spread out in front of us. Beyond them was an opening in the mountain that took my breath away. The overhanging rock was likely 20 feet up and the width of the opening was close to 30 feet, the depth 20 feet or so. Evidence of humans came in the form of a rock cairn fire pit and a substantial stack of sawn logs. Jess couldn't stop wondering how folks got there. Was there an easier way? A northern red oak sapling grew in the fire ring, indicating at least a year or more since a fire was burned in the pit. In the sandy duff of the rock shelter's floor, a continuous mass of cave alumroot (Heuchera parviflora) spread its scalloped, fuzzy basal leaves and sent up slender spikes that sprinkled the tiniest of blossoms in a twinkling suspension around our ankles. Okay. Treasure #3. We were hitting mid-afternoon and my legs were feeling more than a little tired.

We decided to take a quick look around the corner before heading down and out, and there it was, yet a third rock shelter and this one the grandest of all, maybe 40 feet wide and 40 feet tall and 20 feet deep. Jess shed his pack, tossed it up on top of the boulders and began to squiggle up into the narrow space between two of the massive rocks. Soon he had squeezed himself up and over and out, onto the floor of the shelter. I chose an easier path, down through the rhododendrons and back up over a smaller, more doable set of boulders. Jess continued to scramble boulders towards the deepest, darkest corner where he found two small trees, the diameter of a man's legs and 15 feet long, that had been carefully set vertically on either side of a crevice, by someone at some time. Who and why? Treasure #4. While Jess explored I gave myself permission to sit, knowing I would need every single spare calorie to make it back to the car.

As we left the floor of the grandest of the rock vaults, we eased around the opening to discover a sheer vertical rock face, likely 80 feet high. I noticed a little duff on one of the ledges and wondered out loud if it was a bird nest. Jess immediately scanned the rock face upwards and pointed out a rather large bird's nest, 2.5-3 feet wide near the very top. He thanked me for pointing that out and said it was likely a raven's nest, as that is their typical nesting habitat. Ravens are only known to nest in Georgia on Brasstown Bald. Treasure #5.

Time to start back towards the car and the only route to get there involved rhody (rhododendron) surfing. Now if you are a young, fit and nimble 30-something who is experienced in bushwhacking, then you kind of slide and slither through rhodies, using your arms to open a hole that you glide through. But if you are 64, inexperienced and gangly, and you haven't learned to put your hiking poles away, then each part of your awkward assembly of appendages seems to get independently tangled, all at the same time. In short order I was cursing rhodies, while simultaneously begging them to release various parts of me.

Eventually we cleared the thickets and found more open forest floor. Treasure #6 began to appear in the form of several small communities of mountain camellias (Stewartia ovata), a plant on the Georgia Watchlist, vulnerable to extirpation. Jess took the GPS coordinates and mulled out loud whether we should try walking the creek to get back to the road. I voted in favor of that idea. I was way too slow navigating the rhodies to get out of the woods before dark.

We made our way down to Overflow Creek and yes, it was way better than rhody hell. My sticks that had been such a hazard in the brush were indispensable for creek walking. The water was cool and mostly ankle or calf deep. Jess chose to try to keep his boots dry by alternating rock hopping and bushwhacking the shore. I do believe Joe Gatins was right in characterizing Jess as part mountain goat.

Jess spotted beaver's teeth marks on logs, a salamander among the rocks and more mountain camellias, as he scanned the creek's sandy islands for unusual species. And then we saw ahead of us a mass of large boulders that blocked the creek flow, creating a most magical waterfall, but, alas, also a serious obstacle. With careful consideration and much testing of the waters, I finally figured out (continued on page 11)
Farm fields and old rustic barns create a pleasant pastoral scene in Cherry Log, a small mountain community halfway between Blue Ridge and Ellijay. Cold Mountain provides an unbroken green background to this scene. Out of view, beyond the mountain lies the Rich Mountain Wilderness Area.

One doesn’t have to spend much time wandering the slopes of Cold Mountain to appreciate its uniqueness among Georgia peaks. While several mountain treasures are named “Rocky Mountain”, none may be quite as rocky as Cold Mountain. Cold Mountain is covered in rock. Intense freeze-thaw action during ice ages fractured the mountain surface. Now, boulders ranging from basketball to refrigerator size, pile on top of each other and cloak the northwest slopes. These areas, known as boulderfields, constitute a distinct ecosystem and support plant and animal species not found in other habitats. The boulderfields on Cold Mountain are unusual for both their extent – possibly the largest collection in Georgia – and their relatively low elevation. Boulderfields and the conditions that formed them are typically restricted to elevations above 3,400 feet, but here they extend below 2,800 feet.

Despite most soil being hidden away under the boulders, boulderfields are often cool and moist enough to be quite lush. Moss mats cover most of the boulders, and from them springs a dense layer of wood nettle and zig-zag goldenrod, the latter uncommon in Georgia. Slightly deeper pockets of soil support sprawling tangles of gooseberry bush, and shading all the understory species are basswoods, yellowwoods, buckeyes, and tulip poplars. Tangles of dutchman’s pipe vine sprawl over and off the trees, the rope-like stems twisting around each other like oversized spaghetti.

Most of Cold Mountain’s boulderfields were logged in the early 20th century, a testament to just how thoroughly north Georgia was logged and how persistent loggers were when there were big, valuable trees to be cut. A few of the most extensive areas of boulders may have either escaped logging or were merely picked over for the most valuable trees. Huge buckeyes remain in these areas. Around on the southwest slope of the mountain where trees do not grow as large, a roughly 27-acre patch of old-growth remains. Here, chestnut oaks and Virginia pines cling to the thin, dry soils.

Soils are deeper in the hanging valley above the boulderfields. This unusual cove near the summit of the mountain supports a small, anomalous, nearly pure, black cherry stand. The matriarch of the stand, a low forking tree over 5 feet in diameter, is the current state champion. Unfortunately, it is on its last legs. The base is so rotten that an adjacent silverbell sapling has grown a limb literally straight through the big cherry.

The state champion yellowwood also grows on Cold Mountain. Yellowwoods are gaining popularity as an ornamental for their large clusters of white, pea-like flowers, but they are scarce in the wild. They thrive in rich, rocky habitats, so it is no surprise Cold Mountain supports the largest population in Georgia.

**Getting there:** From Ellijay, take GA515/US76 north/east 8 miles and turn right onto Rock Creek Connector. At the T-intersection, turn right onto Rock Creek Rd, and follow it 4.1 miles to a game check station and parking area. Seasonally gated Forest Service Rd 295 starts opposite the game check station and winds across the lower slopes of Cold Mountain. The boulderfields and yellowwoods are upslope from the road.
 Forgotten Grasslands of the South: Natural History and Conservation, by Reed F. Noss

Reed Noss draws on decades of personal experience and a thorough understanding of the scientific literature to paint an engaging portrait of some of the most underappreciated ecosystems in the Southeast. Yes, there are grasslands in the southeast. Using Noss’ broad definition, grasslands were once widespread in this region: glades in the mountains on thin rocky soils, blackland prairies on shrink-swell clays in the Piedmont, fire-maintained longleaf pine savanna in the Coastal Plain, and several others.

Noss largely focuses on the value of these ecosystems and answering the obvious question, “Why are there grasslands in the Southeast?” In so doing, he provides primers on many broad theories that undergird conservation biology and ecology. And he avoids losing the discussion in the abstract.

Woven through discussions of the value of endemic species and how ice ages influenced the distribution of ecosystems are the author’s visits to individual sites. Unfortunately, some of these site descriptions devolve into lists of species names that have little meaning if the reader is not already familiar with the species. The language is also occasionally technical. After looking up a few definitions though, the prose is quite readable, and the author’s personal passion for the subject shines through everywhere. Overall, Forgotten Grasslands of the South offers an occasionally tedious, but highly informative review of a neglected part of Southeastern nature. ForestWatch members may especially appreciate the focus on conservation and grounded introduction to many conservation biology and ecology concepts.
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