Chattooga River Watershed: A Georgia’s Mountain Treasure

Inside This Issue

From the Director .....................2
ForestWatch Retreat ..................2
Invasive Species Profile: Japanese Meadowsweet ............3
Supporting the Work of Georgia ForestWatch ..............4
In the Valley of the Giants .................5
Foothills Collaboration ................6
The Chattooga River Watershed: A Georgia’s Mountain Treasure ....10
Around the Forest .........................11
Welcome New Members .................11
As I write this article, I realize that summer’s end is fast approaching, and I wonder what happened to “those lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer,” to quote the late Nat King Cole. Time has flown by this summer, with staff, District Leaders and our members busy with the Foothills Landscape Collaboration Project—but perhaps not as busy as the Forest Service.

The Foothills Landscape Collaboration Project has been a top priority for the Chattahoochee National Forest this past year (https://tinyurl.com/ycyq2yot), so Forest Service staff could complete the aggressive timeline and release a project scoping in fall 2017. This project represents a major shift in how the Forest Service undertakes project planning in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests by seeking public input and support before a project is proposed instead of after, and shifting towards a large-scale landscape approach to management. This project will guide management projects in the 143,419-acre foothills landscape for more than 10 years, which is why it is critical that ForestWatch remain involved in the Collaborative as a strong conservation voice.

ForestWatch and our partners, the Southern Environmental Law Center and Georgia Chapter of the Sierra Club, welcome a more ecological landscape approach. We are also pleased that the Forest Service envisions the project as restoration-based, as there are ample restoration-based opportunities across the foothills and in the Chattahoochee National Forest.

However, we still have concerns about how the approach the agency is taking (as we understand it) complies with NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act). We expect the agency will release a very general project scoping (proposed action) this fall. The scoping likely will not identify specific stands, but may reference areas in the foothills where the agency thinks certain management activities may be successful. In 2018, the Collaborative will work through project alternatives that will be incorporated in a draft Environmental Analysis (EA). It is yet to be determined how much stand-level analysis will be included in the draft EA.

We will continue working with the agency to make sure the requisite on-the-ground analysis is included in NEPA documents and that Forest Watch has an opportunity to review areas designated for specific treatments. While we support this new collaborative approach, we do not believe that collaboration should, or can, replace detailed site-specific analyses required by NEPA.

The upcoming series of Community Conversations are an opportunity for our members and the public to give feedback on the Foothills Landscape Project and collaborative process. After the past year of collaborating, Forest Supervisor Betty Jewett wants to know if “we got it right.”

(continued on page 11)
Invasive species profile: Japanese meadowsweet (Spirea japonica)
by Jess Riddle : Forest Ecologist

A sprawling east-Asian shrub is turning up on road banks across north Georgia. Easily blending into the green background during most of the growing season, around early July, Japanese meadowsweet bursts forth with clusters of small, bright pink flowers. The conspicuously flat-topped clusters, three to four inches across, sit atop long, willowy brown to reddish-brown branches, each no thicker than a pencil. Egg-shaped leaves with serrated margins take turns sprouting out of either side of the branch. Six or more stems grow in a tight cluster and reach up to about six feet high. The flowers ripen into tiny brown capsules, and the entire cluster persists over the winter.

Our native species of meadowsweet are rare wetland plants unlikely to be encountered on a casual hike in the national forest. Japanese meadowsweet (also called Japanese spirea) may be most likely confused with wild hydrangea, which has similar-sized stems and persistent flat-topped flower clusters. Hydrangea has white flowers and round leaves that occur in pairs, one on either side of the branch (as are the scars they leave on the stem).

Japanese meadowsweet wouldn’t be so bad if it would stick to the road sides. However, it can invade undisturbed habitats. In rich hardwood forests, it can create thickets so dense that it eliminates the herbaceous layer. The shrub has also been seen colonizing the edges of remote rock outcrops that support rare species.

Fortunately, Japanese meadowsweet is relatively easy to control. Smaller individuals are easily pulled up by hand. Common herbicides are effective as either foliar sprays or as cut-stump treatments. The main difficulties in controlling the species are finding all of the populations and the seeds remaining viable for years. Unfortunately, the species and some hybrids remain popular ornamental plants despite its invasive tendencies. Help stop the spread of Japanese meadowsweet and encourage landscapers to plant beautiful native species instead!
Supporting the work of Georgia ForestWatch
by Lyn Hopper : Office Manager

Georgia ForestWatch cannot do the important work of protecting Georgia’s national forests without the contributions of our members. There are many different ways our members support ForestWatch activities – by donating, volunteering, joining, acting on issues, or telling others about us.

We are very proud to tell foundations that member donations generally provide 50% of our annual income. These donations come in the form of annual membership dues, support for specific activities such as fundraising events, direct appeals, and special projects, and planned contributions such as monthly giving and bequests. Your donations are fully tax deductible, and they help us accomplish all aspects of our mission, both now or in the future. Member donations generally are applied where they are most urgently needed, covering everyday operating expenses or specific projects, like the Georgia’s Mountain Treasures project.

For direct donations, we accept cash, checks, and credit cards. Call us at 706-867-0051, or mail your contribution to 81 Crown Mountain Place, Building C, Suite 200, Dahlonega, GA 30533. We also offer secure payment on our website (http://gafw.org/membership/) via PayPal. Note that you do not need to have a PayPal account to use this payment option.

Here are some other ways to donate to ForestWatch:

**Memorial/Honorary Donations**
Pay tribute to someone special and help create a lasting forest legacy. Be sure to indicate whether your donation is “In Honor” or “In Memory” and include the contact information for the individual or family if you would like an acknowledgement sent to them.

**Recurring Donations**
You may be able to set up a recurring donation through your bank, or if you are a PayPal customer, you can set up a recurring payment through your PayPal account. If you prefer to pay by credit card, we are happy to set up a monthly recurring donation for you. Just call the office manager at 706-867-0051 to arrange it.

**Stock Gifts**
If you would like to donate stocks, bonds, or other securities, please contact our office manager at 706-867-0051. Transferring stock is an excellent way to make a donation to ForestWatch because neither you nor ForestWatch pays a capital gains tax on the appreciated value. We sell the stock immediately through your financial advisor or a broker we use. You will be notified of the sale price, which is the full market value of your charitable donation.

**Workplace Giving**
You can make a workplace giving contribution to ForestWatch if your company has an EarthShare program. Contact us if you want to learn more about bringing EarthShare to your workplace.

**Matching Gifts**
Be sure to find out if your workplace offers matching gifts to nonprofits. This is a wonderful way increase the impact of your gift.

**Retirement Funds**
Retirement funds are taxed as income to your heirs and may be subject to estate tax. However, if you would like to name Georgia ForestWatch as a beneficiary of some or all of your 401k, Keogh, or other IRA, the funds would pass to ForestWatch tax-free, with no tax liability for your heirs. Contact your attorney or your employer’s human resources department to get the appropriate forms.

**RMDs**
If you are 70½ years old and have a traditional, tax-deferred IRA, the government requires that you take “Required Minimum Distributions” (RMDs) every year. The RMDs are taxable payouts from your IRA that increase each year beyond your 70½ birthday. 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 nonprofit organization like Georgia ForestWatch. That provision is called a Qualified Charitable Distribution or QCD. To learn more about QCDs, see our website (http://gafw.org/you-may-be-able-to-save-on-taxes-and-give-the-money-to-forestwatch/).

**Life Insurance**
If you want to make Georgia ForestWatch the beneficiary of some or all of your life insurance policy, contact your attorney or your life insurance agent and complete the appropriate beneficiary forms.

**Bequests**
The simplest type of planned gift is a bequest in your will. A bequest is a gift from your estate – a transfer of cash, securities, or other property made through your estate plans. Bequests may reduce estate taxes and allow you to make a larger gift than you are able to make during your lifetime. A bequest can be made for a specific amount, for a percentage of your estate, or for all or a portion of what remains after any bequests to your family or loved ones are made.

To make a gift to Georgia ForestWatch, you can draft a new will OR your lawyer may simply add a codicil to your existing will stating: “I give _______ to Georgia ForestWatch, Inc, 81 Crown Mountain Place, Building C Suite 200, Dahlonega, GA 30533, a nonprofit organization to support their mission activities, Federal Tax ID 58-2188475.”

No matter how you choose to contribute to the work of Georgia ForestWatch – by donating, volunteering, joining, or telling others about us – we couldn’t do this important work without YOU. Thank you so much for sharing our passion for preserving, protecting, and restoring Georgia’s national forests!
On Wednesday, June 21, I joined nineteen other ForestWatchers in exploring the Cooper Creek Scenic Area north of Suches. Sue Harmon and Anne Hughes, along with new member and retired forester Cliff Shaw, were our trusty guides. It’s hard to believe that this was the first ForestWatch hike I’ve attended since joining the staff 2½ years ago. (Actually, I signed up for the Len Foote Hike Inn hike back in February, but ended up in the emergency room instead! Ask me if you’re interested in the details.)

Sue Harmon facilitated introductions when we arrived. Because part of my job involves maintaining the member database, I was familiar with all the names but did not recognize all the faces. It was fun to see which face went with which name!

Although I packed my poncho, we were lucky and did not have one bit of rain. Nevertheless, everyone likened it to being in a rain forest because the humidity felt like 100% for sure! I was fortunate to spend much of the hike following Anne Hughes as she pointed out and named the native plants along the trail. We saw foliage of dwarf crested iris, Solomon’s seal, Solomon’s plume, trilliums, mountain rue, mayapples, Indian cucumber root, northern maiden hair fern, rattlesnake fern, dewberry, prostrate bluets, and blue cohosh. In bloom, we saw pipsissewa, black cohosh, bluets, and rhododendrons, as well as many fungi and lichens.

Melanie Vickers identified a hooded warbler by its song. Sue told us the names of many trees in the area, and Cliff pointed out the old-growth white oak and large tulip poplars near the trail. We saw evidence of old fire damage in one tulip poplar trunk and a decaying American chestnut stump. We ate lunch around one of the biggest tulip poplars, estimated at 6 feet in diameter. In the photo below, we are standing in front of this giant.

After lunch, Cliff took the interested and not-too-tired folks bushwhacking through the forest to see a few more old-growth specimens, and I accompanied some of the other participants back to the cars.

This hike reminded me why I love working for Georgia ForestWatch – the mission, the people, and the passion they all show for preserving our national forests. Being on the “inside” at the office, I am also a first-hand witness to the high level of professionalism toward which the staff and volunteers strive. I am proud to be part of this team – see y’all on the trails!  ■

Resting in front of a “giant” tulip poplar
For those of us who have participated in the Foothills Landscape Community Collaboration, it has been a long road, and the process at times seems interminable. It began with a Collaborative Learning Workshop in June 2016, followed by Community Conversations in five different locations in October through November 1. Then came four Proposal Development Workshops in January, March, May, and July of 2017, each consisting of one full day followed by a shorter session the next evening. And there have also been an all-day science symposium and five field trips, with more to come. As of this writing, there have been seven additional focused-issue discussions or field trips scheduled through August, to be followed by more Community Conversations in the fall. ForestWatch, the Southern Environmental Law Center (SELC), and the Georgia Chapter of the Sierra Club have been committed participants throughout this process, representing a much-needed conservation voice.

The Forest Service has started incorporating comments from these Community Conversations in a Draft Restoration Plan for the Foothills Landscape Project document. This document can be found on the Foothills Landscape website (https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/conf/home/?cid=fseprd514937) and is the rough draft of an eventual scoping notice (proposed action) expected to come out in October. At this stage it is not clear how detailed this project scoping will be, and whether individual stands and proposed treatments will be identified in this document or a later scoping notice. Either way, it will be nearly impossible for ForestWatch to survey all the sites where treatments are likely to be proposed (at least based on conversations during the collaborative meetings) in just 30 days – the time typically allowed for a scoping response.

But there is more! During the first five months of 2018 there will be workshops for critiquing the proposed actions, followed by additional workshops from May through October 2018 to analyze the environmental effects of the proposed projects.

This type of collaborative process on such a project-specific, large landscape scale has not been done before on this forest or any other forest within the Southern Region of the Forest Service. The Southern Region encompasses 13 States – from Virginia to Florida and Oklahoma – as well as Puerto Rico. So who knows? Maybe all of these
collaborative conversations and workshops will lead to some kind of consensus, or at the very least, mutual tolerance of proposed actions.

Extensive notes from each Workshop were recorded and can be viewed online under the “Workshop Harvest” sub-heading – along with an abundance of information about the Foothills Landscape and the Draft Restoration Plan for the Foothills Landscape Project. In the midst of so much information and so many diverse opinions, Georgia ForestWatch, SELC and the Georgia Chapter of the Sierra Club felt the need to offer their thoughts in writing because the concepts discussed in the Draft Restoration Plan are complex, and the time to discuss them in detail during in-person collaborative meetings has been somewhat limited (understandably so).

The remainder of this article is a highly abbreviated summary of our comments on the Draft Restoration Plan for the Foothills Landscape Project. We have selected excerpts from an 18-page letter sent to Angie Bell, the Foothills Project Team Leader, on June 9th on behalf of Georgia ForestWatch, SELC, and the Georgia Chapter of the Sierra Club. The letter was intended to further the collaborative effort, not stymie it. Any text within quotation marks is from the Draft Restoration Plan document.

I. Sustainable Recreation

We wholeheartedly endorse the agency’s “desire … to provide recreation settings and opportunities within the Foothills Analysis area that are economically, environmentally and socially sustainable,” and also understand that the agency does not currently have sufficient funding to adequately maintain its existing network of recreational facilities and trails. To mitigate impacts we support the general concept of focusing limited agency dollars on high-use sites with demonstrated needs for maintenance or mitigation of natural resource impacts, and limiting access to low-use sites causing significant adverse impacts to natural resources.

II. Watershed and Aquatic Habitat Health

We support the agency’s efforts to right-size its road system by spending limited agency funding on high-use roads and decreasing access to low-use roads that cause significant adverse impacts. We also agree with the agency that one of the primary threats presented by an out-sized road system is sedimentation of streams. We suggest prioritizing road maintenance funding on high-use portions of roads close to impaired streams and decommissioning or downgrading maintenance levels of low-use roads near impaired waterways. The agency should avoid any commercial timber harvesting in the Riparian Corridor and instead focus commercial harvesting in areas with a functioning road system in place.

III. Non-Native Invasive Species

We agree with the agency that “non-native invasive species need to be reduced across the landscape and measures need to be in place to minimize their spread during implementation of the Foothills project.” We believe invasive species represent one of the greatest threats to the ecological integrity of the Foothills. As such, the agency should minimize the likelihood of the spread of invasives into uncolonized areas by avoiding road building and mechanical treatments in unroaded areas.

IV. Old Growth

Old-growth forest was predominant in north Georgia prior to European settlement; now it is less than 3% of the Chattahoochee National Forest. Because existing old growth is so rare, we are opposed to any harvesting of existing old growth and likely cannot support a project that contemplates cutting existing old growth. Nor do we think the agency can justify harvesting existing old growth given the biological, ecological, cultural, aesthetic, and spiritual values old growth provides.

Regarding future old growth, we support the agency’s efforts to implement the Forest Plan objective requiring 5% of each 6th level...
Foothills collaboration
(continued from page 7)

HUC [hydrologic unit code] with at least 1,000 acres of national forest system land to be designated as existing or future old growth, though in truth we think (and the best available science supports) that much more than 5% of the forest would be in old growth under a natural disturbance regime. To truly utilize the best available science and move the forest closer to its NRV [natural range of variation] the agency should consider designating areas as future old growth even above the 5% requirement.

V. Protecting Communities from Wildfire
Protecting communities from wildfire is an important goal, and we support the agency’s commitment.

VI. Restoration
According to the Draft Foothills Restoration Plan, the collaboration will create a restoration plan that will guide the development of the proposed action.

We are pleased that the agency envisions the Foothills project as a restoration-based project. The Foothills Landscape and its watersheds have been affected by past management and other anthropogenic disturbances, including the intense logging program implemented in the southern Appalachians in the last century and a half; invasion of exotic species and loss of keystone species such as chestnut and hemlock from NNIS [non-native invasive species]; the replacement of mixed pine-hardwood communities with single pine species; altered disturbance regimes (e.g. fire frequency and loss of beaver habitat); private land development; and high recreational use. Projects that serve legitimate restoration objectives have the opportunity to enjoy widespread support as they meet ecological needs, allow the agency to remove timber from the forest, and create early-successional habitat for game species. Restoration projects can be a win-win-win for the agency – bringing together wildlife, timber, and conservation interests that have struggled at times to find common ground in the past.

But restoration must also be grounded in Forest Service guidance on restoration which relies on the best available science. To rephrase, the agency’s assessments of what is and is not restoration must be based on the agency’s regulations, not only on public input.

The goal of restoration, under the [Forest Planning] Rule, is to establish “the composition, structure, pattern, and ecological processes necessary to facilitate terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems sustainability, resilience and health under current and future conditions.” The natural range of variation is “the full range of variation produced by dominant natural disturbance regimes” and generally refers to a “pre-European reference period.”

These agency regulations provide several key takeaways that should guide evaluation of restoration opportunities in the Foothills area. First, restoration is focused on areas that have been “degraded, damaged or destroyed.” In other words, areas of high ecological integrity – where the dominant ecological characteristics occur within the natural range of variation – are not candidates for restoration treatment.

Second, restoration seeks to move the composition, structure, function, and connectivity of forest ecosystems toward the natural range of variation (NRV), or the range of variation produced by natural disturbance regimes prior to European influence. We suspect that in the Foothills area two structural conditions are highly departed from NRV: lack of old-growth forest and lack of ESH [early successional habitat].

Third, because restoration moves the forest closer to NRV, site-specific restoration activities should move the forest toward a condition that would naturally occur in that specific area. Creating a new ecosystem in a specific area, when there no evidence that ecosystem naturally existed in that space, is not restoration.

Fourth, restoration must consider landscape-scale concerns as well as site-specific concerns. For instance, forcing woodlands on a site to meet a forest-wide objective, when there is no evidence that woodlands are appropriate for the site, is not restoration of woodlands but an effort to create woodlands anew. The latter would likely take much more intensive management to maintain the woodland.

VII. Specific Restoration Opportunities in the Foothills Area
The agency has indicated a number of ecosystem types that it hopes to restore on the Foothills landscape. Where possible, we have identified sites where restoration of those ecosystems has a good chance of success. Because of the size of the Foothills analysis area, we have not been able to make site-specific recommendations for all ecotypes.

a. Yellow Pines
We agree with the agency that we need to look for opportunities to restore shortleaf, pitch, and table mountain pines (yellow pines) “on sites where they once likely occurred.”

b. Woodlands
To have a productive conversation about woodlands, including where they exist or should exist on the landscape, we think it is critical to get
all collaborative participants on the same page regarding how the agency views woodlands. It seems essential for all participants to understand what the Forest Service envisions when it discusses woodlands. In that regard, the following questions are ripe for resolution:

- Is a woodland an ecosystem or a structural condition? The Forest Plan defines a woodland as “a plant community in which trees are often small, characteristically with a greater portion of their total height being crown than clear bole, and having trees spaced far enough apart that the canopies of adjacent trees do not touch and with the ground vegetation being mostly herbaceous, commonly grass.” We think that definition makes clear that a woodland is a particular ecosystem, i.e. a ‘plant community.’ Success in creating woodland, and analysis of where woodlands are appropriate, must be evaluated according to whether the treatment results in (or is likely to result in) a functioning woodland ecosystem with woodland-endemic species and conditions.

- What does woodland look like? There seems to be some level of agreement that a woodland is an area with widely scattered trees and an understory of grasses and herbs. The trees would be relatively short with more significant horizontal than vertical branch growth.

- Where are woodlands located? The lack of large trees, wide spacing of trees, and understory growth in woodlands, particularly as compared to other areas on the Chattahoochee, must indicate that site-specific conditions limit tree growth and reproduction in woodland areas. These conditions could be soil quality, grazing, or potentially fire.

c. Mountain Bogs and Canebrakes
We support the restoration of mountain bogs and canebrakes.

d. Plantations
It is our view that plantation restoration should be a priority in the area. Restoration of these areas to a more natural mix of oak/pine forests will increase their resilience to warming climate and more severe drought. Plantations are not a natural ecosystem and are therefore highly departed from NRV. Where appropriate, the Forest Service may choose to restore plantations using timber harvest to benefit local loggers and allow the Forest Service to accomplish timber objectives. In short, treating pine plantations is likely to be uncontroversial but likely to result in ecological, wildlife, forest health, and economic benefits.

e. Chestnut
We support research and efforts to incorporate experimental chestnut studies and research results into the Foothills project.

f. Threats to Other Native Species
We support taking proactive steps to protect several other species native to the foothills that may soon face a fate similar to chestnut and hemlock.

g. Forest Composition and Structure
It is not accurate to state that “both mid-late and late (alone) successional habitats exceed the desired ranges” – the classes only exceed the minimum amount. We believe there is still a shortage of early successional habitat (ESH). However, there is not an excess of late successional habitat (as defined by the Forest Plan), and there is a shortage of true late successional habitat.

h. Beaver Reintroduction
We support restoring beavers to streams that they likely once occupied, where practical.

VIII. Timber Harvest in Unsuitable Prescriptions
Based on acreage totals presented in the May 23 workshop there appears to be more than adequate acreage in the suitable base for the Forest Service to conduct timber activities. If the agency chooses to pursue actions in unsuitable prescriptions it must justify those actions in accordance with the National Forest Management Act. Creating ESH in unsuitable prescriptions is never appropriate because ESH can be created anywhere on the landscape, including in suitable prescriptions. Conversely, restoring a pine plantation to a more appropriate, natural mix of hardwoods and soft woods may be appropriate in unsuitable prescriptions because the justification for the treatment is site-specific – restoring that particular pine plantation –and cannot be met in another stand.

IX. Close
While there is opportunity for disagreement about what constitutes restoration, there is significant opportunity for agreement on the right type of work, in the right areas across the Foothills Landscape. We ask the agency to focus treatments on areas where there is high, perhaps unanimous, agreement that a treatment is in fact restorative.
The Chattooga River Watershed: A Georgia’s Mountain Treasure

by Jess Riddle: Forest Ecologist

High on Whiteside Mountain near Highlands, North Carolina, the Chattooga River bubbles out of a ridge. One of the last free-flowing rivers in the Southeast, the Chattooga now flows to the Atlantic Ocean, but once flowed to the Gulf of Mexico. In the foothills of the Appalachians, the Savannah River lay lower than the Chattahoochee River. By relentlessly eroding farther inland over the eons, the headwaters of the Savannah eventually intersected and intercepted the headwaters of the Chattahoochee. In a dramatic example of “stream capture” or “stream piracy”, the waters of the Chattooga began flowing into the Savannah rather than the Chattahoochee.

Not merely an anecdote of geomorphology, this event shaped the infrastructure and economy of the area, and may be a key to biodiversity conservation. With increased erosive power, the Chattooga and its tributaries began down-cutting. Gorges formed. Streams now enter the gorges via waterfalls and cascades, and fill them with the roar of rapids. Those rapids make the Chattooga one of the premier whitewater rafting destinations in the Southeast. Rafting combined with fishing and other outdoor recreation makes the river a major driver of the local economy.

The roar of motors, however, is absent from most of the river. Steep slopes keep roads away from the streams, unlike most of north Georgia. The lack of flat land has also limited farming and other development far down the river, resulting in far more public land along the Chattooga than along other rivers in Georgia’s mountains. Much of the Chattooga River watershed is part of Nantahala National Forest in North Carolina; the Chattahoochee National Forest in Georgia; and Sumter National Forest in South Carolina.

Today, a chain of Georgia’s Mountain Treasures runs up and down the Chattooga. As roadless areas, some are a bit ragged, but others are solid blocks of unfragmented land. All have a core of nearly pristine land around the river and reach out along tributary streams. Together, they represent one of the two best opportunities in north Georgia to maintain a connected corridor of natural habitats (the other being the Appalachian Trail ridge).

Such corridors are important to plant and animal populations and are becoming more so. If a storm or wildfire wipes out a population in one area, connection to adjacent areas helps other populations recolonize, which protects against extirpation across the broader area. Connections between areas also protect genetic health and prevent inbreeding by allowing gene flow among populations. As climate change pushes species out of their current habitat, they will have to migrate to new areas with suitable conditions. For many species, this will be a long and continuous process.

The Chattooga River corridor allows for migration not only from south to north, but also from low to high. At just under 900 feet elevation, the secluded shores of Tugaloo Lake are among the lowest areas on the national forest. Chattooga Mountain Treasures extend all the way to the top of Rabun Bald, Georgia’s second highest peak at 4,692 feet, and the watershed reaches its apex on Whiteside Mountain at 4,930 feet.

Much of that elevation change occurs over just a few miles. Consequently, the Chattooga watershed and adjacent sections of the Blue Ridge Escarpment act as a wall to moist air masses coming up from the Atlantic and are some of the wettest areas in eastern North America. Shade and humidity in the gorges allow a number of rare and delicate ferns, mosses, and liverworts to avoid drying out and to thrive in this environment. Filmy ferns, perhaps the most striking inhabitant, have leaves only a single cell thick.

Flanking the streams, yellow-rumped warblers sing from high in white pines that rise above the surrounding canopy of hardwoods (and formerly hemlocks). Forests in the area have an unusual abundance of heaths, like rhododendron and bearberry, huckleberry, and pines. The pines grow to exceptional proportions, including the tallest known trees in Georgia, white pines over 180 feet tall.

The greatest rarities occur where the forests give way to rock. The Highlands Plateau with its iconic granitic domes supports a number of endemic species, those that occur nowhere else in the world. Cliffside goldenrod and Blue Ridge golden ragwort grow in this alternately drenched and sun-baked habitat. Most of the Highlands Plateau is in North Carolina, but it spills into Georgia in the upper Chattooga watershed. More Georgia rarities, however, are northern species that find refuge on Rabun Bald’s high elevations.

For protection, all of these rare species, and common species that may become rare with climate change, rely on two congressionally-designated areas and temporary national forest management designations. The Ellicott Rock Wilderness sets aside 8,296 acres, split among Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. The Wild and Scenic River corridor protects a narrow ribbon along the Chattooga and the West Fork. To protect a wider variety of habitats, connect them along the river, and link low- and high-elevation areas, the Chattooga Georgia’s Mountain Treasures areas will need advocates during the next Forest Plan revision.
Over the last quarter, the Forest Service has announced no new major projects. The Armuchee Healthy Forests Project reached its final form though. Georgia ForestWatch participated in all of the public meetings for this project, and supported the efforts to reduce the risk of southern pine beetle damage in the Armuchee Ridges, mostly by thinning planted loblolly pine stands. Stands and treatments in the final decision memo are identical to those in the earlier scoping, so the project still appears to be on track.

The Foothills Landscape Collaboration has been a top priority for the three Districts in the Chattahoochee National Forest this past year. Georgia ForestWatch has been a critical conservation voice, with staff, District Leaders, Board members and members participating in meetings, online conversations, and field trips. We would like to thank all of our members who have participated in the face-to-face meetings and online community conversations during the past year. The fourth and last workshop was held on July 11 and 12 in Ellijay, and this was followed by more focused discussions and field trips with the Forest Service. At times, ForestWatch staff and members were the only non-government attendees. Initial proposals include higher rates of cutting across the 143,000-acre landscape than we have been accustomed to on the Chattahoochee National Forest over the last decade. Site-specific proposals have not been developed yet, so we cannot say whether rates of cutting can be justified.

ForestWatch and our partners, the Southern Environmental Law Center and the Georgia Chapter of the Sierra Club, submitted comments on the Draft Restoration Plan for the Foothills Landscape Project in June (see “Foothills Collaboration” article by Jim Walker and David Govus on p. 6 of this issue). The Forest Service has set an aggressive timeline for completion of the scoping notice (proposed action) by October, officially opening the more formal, public comment period.

Finally, the Blue Ridge Ranger District has not released any new information on Cooper Creek.

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS!
(April-July)

Cliff and Saundra Altekruse
Michael Bartell
Barry and Martha Berlin
Ron Bourne & Hildreth Davis
Ralph Garner
Hansel & Gretel Candy Kitchen
Tom Hennigan
Zora Herr
Curtis Hertwig
Susan Lowrance
David May
Nearly Native Nursery
Yale Nogin
Karen and Jim Porter
Steven Pruett
John & Jo Anne Romfh
Barbara Roper
Louis Schweizer
Clifford Shaw
Anne Shenk
Karen and Steven Smith
Lawrence Stevens
John Wagner
Ron Walker
Avis Winfield

THANK YOU FOREST GUARDIANS!
(April-July)

Jim and Debra Campbell
Cedarwood Foundation
(from James Smith, in Loving Memory of Carroll Walraven)
Thomas and Jeanette Crawford
Jim and Hedy Dawson
Richie Deason
Dobbs Fund of the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta
Ted and Lynda Doll
Curtis Hertwig
John and Marilyn McMullan
Pete & Sally Parsonson
Patagonia
Doug & Elaine Riddle
Jim & Patricia Walker

From the Director – Getting It Right
(continued from page 2)

The Foothills Landscape Community Conversations will take place in:

- **Clayton:** September 6, 2017 from 6:00 to 8:00pm at the Rabun County Civic Center
- **Atlanta:** September 9, 2017 from 10:00am to noon at the Chattahoochee Nature Center in Roswell
- **Dahlonega:** September 12, 2017 from 6:00 to 8:00pm at the Lumpkin County Community Center
- **Chatsworth:** September 14, 2017 from 6:00 to 8:00pm at the Cohutta Springs Conference Center

For a more detailed update on Foothills Landscape Collaboration activities, see the article on p. 6 of this issue, by District Leaders Jim Walker and David Govus.
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