From the Director

A new year

Friday, December 21, 2018: The Winter Solstice. Tuesday, January 1, 2019: The first day of the New Year. Both of these dates suggest a new beginning – a time to not only reflect on what we have accomplished, but also on the year ahead.

In 2018, Georgia ForestWatch accomplished many things. We limited the scope and scale of the Cooper Creek timber sale and provided important input regarding the Foothills Landscape Collaborative Project. We hired a new Executive Director and started an innovative internship program with the University of North Georgia. Our 2018 Fall Retreat had its largest attendance ever, and our highly anticipated Georgia’s Mountain Treasures publication went to press well before Christmas Day.

In late February 2019, the U.S. Forest Service is requesting our official response to the Storey Mill Forest Health and Restoration Project, which will require the clearcutting (with small reserves) of more than 340 acres atop Taylor’s Ridge in Chattooga County. (See Storey Mill article, p. 4). Although the clearcutting will likely benefit mountain longleaf pine – which will be planted in the cutover areas – the project requires considerable herbicide spraying and the construction of 3 miles of temporary roads. Georgia ForestWatch is limited in its ability to review this project as it falls under the “categorical exclusion” provision found in the 2018 Farm Bill (Section 8407(b)). According to language in the Bill, projects that potentially lessen the impact of insects in the forest – and are less than 3,000 acres – do not require Environmental Assessments or other impact analysis documents.

In March 2019, we hope to hire a new outreach coordinator, a position that has unfortunately been missing from the Georgia ForestWatch staff for several years. The new hire will establish better communication between Georgia ForestWatch and the larger public, as well as administer programs designed to increase membership and financial support. The individual will also organize and administer our ForestWatch hikes and collaborate with board, staff, and volunteers on major events. Although the position should ideally be a full-time offering, our current budget will probably limit their actual hours to only thirty per week.

In April 2019, we anticipate the release of the Foothills Landscape Collaborative Project Draft Environmental Assessment (EA), which should include forest treatments (logging, prescribed burns, herbicide spraying, road construction, etc.) across more than 150,000 acres of national forest. Prior to the release of the Draft EA, the U.S. Forest Service plans to hold several “Community Conversations” about the massive project, so please attend one of the events if one is held near your home. In the coming weeks, Georgia ForestWatch will provide the actual dates and locations of the meetings via email alerts or our online website: http://gafw.org/

In May 2019, the Forest Service will likely release the Draft EA for the Union County Shooting Range. If approved, the facility will require the clearing of 15 acres of public land along route 180, only several miles south of Brasstown Bald. The range is also less than one mile from the Appalachian Trail and only one-half mile from both the Mark Trail and Brasstown Bald Wilderness areas. Georgia ForestWatch has additional concerns about the construction of the range beyond the creation of unwanted noise levels, including lead contamination, traffic congestion on the Scenic Byway, and increased siltation in a nearby trout stream.

Throughout 2019, we plan to promote Georgia’s Mountain Treasures, a publication authored by our forest ecologist Jess Riddle. The document, which was published in December 2018, showcases 300,000 acres of unprotected wildlands in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests, areas we refer to as “Mountain Treasures.” The publication gives the public the most accurate, detailed information about these special places so they can speak more effectively on their behalf. Georgia ForestWatch will be distributing Georgia’s Mountain Treasures to members and major stakeholders throughout the entire year. We will also hold workshops and community events, so the public is better informed about the wildlife, history, geology, and watershed features of the mountain treasure locations.

Needless to say, 2019 will be a busy year for the staff at Georgia ForestWatch. We look forward to working with members on not only the above projects, but on an entire range of public land issues. None of these activities is without costs, however, so please give if and when your pocketbook allows. With your assistance, we can make our North Georgia mountains greener and more ecologically diverse – a true treasure for future generations to enjoy and cherish.

Don Davis
Executive Director
Ringing in the new year with Georgia’s Mountain Treasures
by Sue Harmon : Board President

Two dozen members refused to let the gray clouds and muddy roads deter them from gathering on New Year’s Day. We met at the home of Helen Meadors, long-time supporter and charter member of ForestWatch, and her partner, Craig Burkhalter. The plan was to hike first, then enjoy a potluck lunch, and lastly hear a brief presentation by Forest Ecologist Jess Riddle, author of the Georgia’s Mountain Treasures book.

After gathering in the muddy field below Helen’s, with none other than Jim Sullivan, another ForestWatch founder, crashing the party, we all caravanned up to Patterson Gap, which borders two Mountain Treasures areas: The Southern Nantahala Wilderness Extensions and Patterson Gap. Jess led us on an easy one-mile stroll up into beautiful Till Ridge Cove, pointing out fire effects from the 2016 arson fire that blew through this area. Other points of interest were the big old black gum along the trail, the very large serviceberry and multiple large cherry trees in the cove, and the cucumber magnolia seedling sprouting up from its parent tree, post-fire. After getting a group picture on the big boulders in the cove, we headed back to Helen’s where a delicious potluck lunch was awaiting us, including, of course, the southern traditions of black-eyed peas, collards, cornbread, and Brenda Smith’s “Nothing-In-This-Is-Good-For-You” banana pudding. Helen’s and Craig’s eclectic and delightful folk-art collection was an added treat that caught the attention of many ForestWatchers.

After lunch, Jess spoke briefly about Georgia’s Mountain Treasures and offered to sign books for members. We solicited donations for a second (continued on page 5)
Through the Storey Mill Creek Forest Health and Restoration Project, the Conasauga Ranger District staff wants to reform 737 acres of forest in the southwestern corner of the Chattahoochee National Forest. This area lies on Taylor’s Ridge, a long, level, southwest-northeast ridge with many smaller ridges that jut off to the southeast, like a series of dormers on an extremely long house. The mostly dry and stony soils support mature forests of chestnut oak and Virginia pine interrupted by 21- to 33-year-old pine plantations.

The impetus for the project occurred last year when a forester discovered a new stand of longleaf pines on the south slope of one of the “dormer” ridges. Longleaf pine was once the dominant tree in the Coastal Plain. Their open stands harbored some of the highest grass and wildflower diversity anywhere in the temperate world. Agriculture, tree farming, and fire suppression have reduced them to less than five percent of their former habitat. Longleaf pines were never as prevalent in the mountains, but their range extends into the low mountains of eastern Alabama and northwestern Georgia.

Last summer when we toured the new stand with the District staff and The Nature Conservancy, we saw only a single longleaf seedling. Presumably, the duff layer on the forest floor is too thick, and there is not enough light on the forest floor for the species. We saw openings where two prescribed fires in the last decade had killed some Virginia pines, suggesting continued burning may create the necessary conditions for longleaf pine to regenerate. In the current project, the district proposes to cut and herbicide stems less than six inches diameter to further increase light in the stand.

Other parts of the stand and adjacent “dormer” ridges currently lack longleaf pine, but the District proposes planting them on eight ridges, all in a prescribed fire unit. Prior to planting, they would clearcut the ridgetops while retaining clumps of trees, herbicide unwanted woody species, and conduct a controlled burn to create an open area free from competition. After planting, herbicides and prescribed fire would be used to keep other trees from outgrowing the pine seedlings. Several years later, thinning with hand tools would create an open stand. Stands of 70 to over 110-year-old Virginia pine and chestnut oak currently occupy these ridges. Some stands include substantial amounts of declining species, such as shortleaf pine and blackjack oak.

The District cleared a few ridges in the area for this treatment four years ago. Most of the longleaf pine seedlings have survived and are now growing vigorously. Their sparingly branched stems poke out of a layer of mostly common, weedy species, primarily broom sedge (a tall grass) and blackberries. These stands likely contained dormant seeds of many species in the soil – including uncommon species – but those seeds appear to have been lost in the logging and planting process.

The other commercial treatment in the project, where logs are hauled out of the woods, involves thinning a 56-acre stand to promote shortleaf pine regeneration. The District plans are to cut about half of the trees in the shortleaf pine-rich, mature stand. The project also includes 2,721 acres of new prescribed burn units and two non-commercial treatments, in which any cut trees would be left in the woods. One involves cutting mostly Virginia pine out of a 21-year-old plantation and planting longleaf pine in the gaps created by that treatment.

The other aims to produce 351 acres of open, park-like woodland with an abundance of grass and wildflowers between widely spaced trees. The District hopes to achieve that largely through repeated prescribed fires. If the area remains too dense, they will cut and herbicide stems less than six inches in diameter and selectively kill some overstory trees by girdling, mostly Virginia pine. They have chosen quite scruffy areas for the treatment where natural canopy gaps foster few tree saplings and grasses are already often quite common, which bodes well for the treatment.

The District proposes to complete this project under the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA), which lets them...
skip doing an environmental impact analysis in order to expedite response to pests and diseases. The truncated process also omits an administrative objection period. The pest in question for this project is southern pine beetle, which periodically chews its way through dense pine stands. To qualify, a project must include public collaboration, have a restoration focus, preserve the oldest and largest trees where possible, and satisfy several other criteria. The District gets high marks on the collaboration requirement. They reached out to stakeholders early and repeatedly. However, how this project meets other requirements of the HFRA remains unclear.

Overall, this project includes both strong design features and red flags. Longleaf pine naturally occurs on the kinds of sites targeted for treatment, and the species has declined creating a need to restore it on the landscape. The woodland restoration sites also appear to be good choices. We anticipate that treatment will succeed and produce sustainable increases in biodiversity. The existing longleaf restoration plantings, however, look more like a tree crop than a holistically restored ecosystem. They also come at the cost of mature forest. Finally, the proposed use of the HFRA raises concerns about whether future projects will be fully analyzed and responsive to the public.

Comments to the District were originally due January 31st, but will be accepted after that date due to the government shutdown.

Ringing in the New Year with Georgia’s Mountain Treasures
(continued from page 3)

printing so that we can be sure to get these books in as many hands as possible and to that end we raised over two hundred dollars! THANK YOU to all who donated!

A surprise celebratory favor, commemorating this special New Year’s Day, was shared with all the guests: a beautiful linoleum block print flyer rendered on handmade banana leaf paper, each one numbered and signed by Craig.

A giant-sized THANK YOU goes out to Helen and Craig for sharing their home, their land, their art, their love of the forest and of course, Craig’s mule shuttle service, which came in quite handy.

Celebrating Georgia’s Mountain Treasures was a great way to ring in the New Year, but they are definitely something to celebrate all year long, and we hope for many years to come!
Sosebee Cove, located near Vogel State Park, is a true botanical wonderland. Just a few feet down the trail you run into the five-foot-thick, moss-covered trunk of Georgia’s largest yellow buckeye. Lining either side of the trail, trilliums, bloodroot, trout lilies and many other spring wildflowers grow in great profusion. At least they do now. In 2011, a new flower was found in the cove, and it threatens to do away with the others.

Fig buttercup (*Ficaria verna*) was introduced from Europe as an ornamental plant. The radially symmetric, inch-wide flowers seem innocent enough as they raise their glossy, lemon yellow petals less than a foot from the ground. But the heart-shaped leaves that cluster at the base of the plant arise in late winter, beating most native spring ephemerals out of the ground. The fleshy leaves standing on thick stems form such a dense layer that they keep out other plants. In the northeastern United States, where the species has been present longer, floodplain patches can carpet acres without interruption.

In the Southeast, the plant, also known as lesser celandine or pilewort, is still rare. Adjacent states reported new infestations around the same time it was found in Sosebee Cove. If the species is going to be controlled, now is the time to do it. The combination of yellow, glossy flower and fleshy, heart shaped leaves makes it distinct from most native plants. Without flowers, it might be confused with other plants with heart shaped leaves such as violets, wild ginger, or little brown jugs. None of those plants has fig buttercup’s combination of fleshy texture, dense growth habit, and net-like pattern of often dark veins on the leaf undersides. Pulling the plant up confirms the identification by revealing club-like tubers, which are the source of the name.

Thanks to the efforts of Georgia Botanical Society and the Forest Service, the Sosebee Cove population has dwindled instead of taking over. Pulls in 2012 and 2014 took out trash bags full of the plant, but only a handful of plants have come back in more recent years. Keeping this plant out of Sosebee Cove and other areas will required continued vigilance and many people keeping an eye out for this dangerous species.

References:
Axtell, Annie E., Antonio Ditommaso, and Angela R. Post. 2010. Lesser celandine (*Ranunculus ficaria*): a threat to woodland habitats in the northern United States and southern Canada. *Invasive Plant Science and Management* 3:190-196
Reaves, Richard. 2018. Personal communication. 12/20/2018
Black Mountain:
A Georgia Mountain Treasure

by Jess Riddle : Forest Ecologist

This article is part of a recurring series on Georgia’s Mountain Treasures. Mountain Treasures are some of the last large wild places in Georgia. But they don’t have permanent protection from road building, logging, and other extractive resource use. We’ve surveyed them to learn more about their special plants, animals, history, and scenic features. We’re using that information to update the book Georgia’s Mountain Treasures, and lobby for more protection during the next Forest Plan revision. We hope these articles will inspire people to enjoy and get to know these areas.

Black Mountain seems to stand alone. When you hike or drive around Suches, you can see how the steep upper slopes raise the peak out of the surrounding landscape. A dark stand of planted white pines initially draws the eye; then the fire tower constructed in 1949 confirms the identity. Visitors can enjoy the view from the natural rock outcrop at the base of the tower, which looks south across forested slopes and diminishing ridges towards Dahlonega and the Piedmont.

However, the mountain is hardly alone or disconnected. Each year thousands of hikers cross through the roadless area on one of the most level stretches of the Appalachian Trail (AT) in Georgia. The Maine-bound thru-hikers of spring give way to summer and fall day-trippers who take advantage of the easy access at Woody Gap, the first paved road crossing on the AT and the eastern edge of the roadless area. On its way through oak forests, the trail hits some ridgetop patches of rich soil that teem with sweet Betsy trillium, bloodroot, and Solomon’s seal. Adjacent areas feature unusual-looking clumps of large oval leaves, like the tip of an umbrella magnolia branch embedded in the ground. They belong to...
Conasauga Ranger District
In a day, prescribed fire can change the trajectory of hundreds of acres of forest for decades, making it a powerful management tool. The Conasauga Ranger District has proposed to expand their burning in the Armuchee Ridges north of Rome. Adjacent to existing burn units, the new units will encompass 1,817 acres split between gentle valley floor and deeply dissected mountain slope. They include dry habitat that ecologically could benefit from fire as well as moister areas that could be damaged from fire. Whether the negative impacts can be avoided will depend on exactly how the burns are carried out, and those details are not available at this time. The proposal also includes a three-acre burn unit to study the effects of prescribed fire on large-flowered skullcap, a federally threatened species that is declining in many populations. The population to be burned is a planted population that is being monitored.

In the spring, we anticipate the District issuing a proposal to use herbicides in the Cohutta Wilderness to control invasive princess trees. Herbicides are currently not permitted in any Georgia Wilderness Areas. The princess tree population in the area exploded after the 2016 Rough Ridge Fire produced ideal conditions for the species to regenerate: exposed soil and high light levels. Georgia ForestWatch has been working with the Forest Service to try to control the princess trees in the Wilderness (see My day on an invasive species pull project in our last issue). It now appears those manual efforts cannot keep pace with the thousands of acres of rapidly growing and readily re-sprouting seedlings, creating a tricky management situation. Only herbicides offer full control by killing their roots. Now we must weigh the risks presented by herbicides against those presented by princess trees. Both contain significant unknowns. Stay tuned for a more complete analysis when the proposal comes out.

The Storey Mill vegetation management project is covered on page 4.

Blue Ridge Ranger District
Use of the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests (CONF) has shifted increasingly to recreation. The forms of recreation have also shifted with direct impacts and consequences for how people value nature. Several times each spring and fall, people wearing synthetic fabrics and numbers gather on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests to compete in tests of speed. Thanks in part to ForestWatch’s comments, protocols for these events have improved to include consultation with local emergency services and alternate rain routes for trail events. Still, little is known about the impact of these events on other trail and road users, the trails and roads themselves, or surrounding habitat.

The Blue Ridge Ranger District has proposed to extend the permits for two spring road races to five years. Forest Service roads east of Springer Mountain will host the Southern Cross bike race on March 2nd. The Brasstown Bald Buster, a 5k road run, will ascend Brasstown Bald from Jacks Gap on April 27th. Organizers expect 200-350 and 300-450 participants, respectively.

Forest-wide
The most important project on the CONF, the Foothills Landscape Project, remains quiescent. The Forest Service has been working on the environmental assessment for the project, which will describe potential impacts and provide details on the planned actions, but the date for release will be March at the earliest. Before releasing that document, the Forest Service plans to conduct additional public meetings. Georgia ForestWatch will remain engaged in the process. Please consider attending these meetings, so that the Forest Service will hear what people care about. Your comments will likely improve the project.

Blue Springs Branch separates two proposed prescribed burn units west of Calhoun.

Photo credit: Jess Riddle
hillsides in search of gold. The miners, not satisfied with that supply, planned to drill through the Blue Ridge to bring additional water from the Toccoa River watershed. The tunnel was never completed, but the collapsed exit is still visible in Tunnel Cove, adjacent to Walnut Cove.

A couple of ridges over, the remains of a road from a few decades later ascend the Blue Ridge, its age shown by the mature trees that grow out of the large rocks piled on the lower edge. The Grassy Gap Road roughly followed an even older Native American path that connected settlements on either side of the Blue Ridge. Few trees that witnessed these comings and goings remain. The wave of industrial logging around 1900 largely denuded the mountainsides, generally leaving forest on only the steepest and rockiest slopes. Interestingly though, the old logging road up Lee Creek, a tributary of Yahoola Creek, ends far below the ridgeline. Dry, scruffy ridges dominated by chestnut oaks make up most of the quarter-of-a-square-mile old-growth tract. The headwater forks, however, pass under large, stately tuliptrees, northern red oaks, and chestnut oaks as they slide over bedrock. The former state champion chestnut oak, a 53-inch diameter behemoth, stands at the head of one of the coves, but Hurricane Irma knocked off both its literal and figurative crown.

The Black Mountain roadless area offers not only opportunities for solitude, but also stands at the intersection of the Southern Appalachians and the tropics, the mountains and the city, and the past and the present. Its role as an integral link will likely become more important as climate change forces species to migrate. Mountains allow species to stay in the patterns of temperature and precipitation they are adapted to by moving up. Many species will also have to move north. North Georgia has two remaining corridors of natural habitat: a low one along the Chattooga River and a high one along the Blue Ridge. Black Mountain is one essential link in that high path.

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- Keith & Melanie Vickers
- Wildflower Bunch Garden Club at Big Canoe
2018 Supporters, thank you!

The Georgia ForestWatch Directors, Advisors, District Leaders, and Staff want to thank you for your generosity and support in helping protect Georgia’s national forests. This important work could not be accomplished without each one of you.

(If you have made a donation of $100 or more in 2018 and your name is not listed, please accept our apology and call us so we can correct our records. Thank you!)
Meechie Dickerson
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