Forest News

Georgia ForestWatch Quarterly Newsletter Summer 2009

Are Georgia's Bats in Danger?

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From The Director

How about some good news?

Wayne Jenkins
Executive Director

As has been mentioned in these pages but perhaps not often enough, our members are the bedrock foundation, the reason for the existence of Georgia ForestWatch. Sure, it's also about protecting the forest, but that's people work. It takes people, passionate about a place, an issue, a cause or idea that gets things done. That makes changes. That addresses a wrong and makes it right.

Our membership is activist-driven, exhibiting a cause-based hope for protecting the greatest extent of wild and intact forests in the northern part of Georgia. Almost all, if not all of us have visited and spent time in these woods exercising our bodies, relaxing our minds and feeding our souls. We understand the many ways in which these great forests provide for us and their host of species and still-intact ecological processes. We are the voice for these places – society's conscience on questions of their use, abuse, healing, protection and preservation.

Membership, being voluntary, is a giving from the heart and informed by the mind, with a desire to improve plus a willingness to join and work with others of like mind. ForestWatch members, from the twenty five dollar supporter to volunteer district leader to board president, all hold dear a shared vision. All are necessary for that vision to be maintained. All are important, critical for the work to get done.

Over the last two years the board and staff of Georgia ForestWatch have spent a good bit of time and focus on understanding and implementing approaches to increase our member base and financial support. This work has been generously supported by the Kendeda Fund and has created opportunities for growth and learning we have never had. Part of this effort has been a targeted direct mail outreach for informing and attracting new members. Presently this effort has brought us 89 new members, raising our total membership to over 730. This is the largest one time increase in membership during our 23-year history and very exciting to all of us on the board and at the Ellijay office.

So WELCOME new members! We are working hard to protect your forests and we invite you to become an active member of the ForestWatch community. Go to our website if you haven't already done so and delve into our history and current issues. Come take a hike or snorkel the Conasauga River with us. If you have an interest in learning more about our District Leader program, give the office a call. Do you live near Ellijay and have time on your hands during the week? Consider joining our cadre of office volunteers helping with "mailing parties" every few months. Are you a photographer or writer? Call or email to let us know how your skills might be helpful in protecting our national forests. Attend the Fall Retreat for a fun and informative get together with other passionate ForestWatch folk. All of us look forward to meeting and getting to know you better while discovering how we can all work toward protecting this incredible forest we call ours. ■

Correction:

In our last issue we erred in the date published in the statement below.

"In August of 2003, Georgia ForestWatch was in dire shape! Key board members and staff were lost, and with just $20,000 in the bank the organization had only about four months of life-blood remaining."

It should have read, "In August of 2004…" We apologize for the error.

Georgia ForestWatch welcomes the following new members

We're thrilled to announce the largest quarterly membership increase in our 23 year history!

Bruce Aldridge
Kathlyn Barksdale
Bill & Linda Bath
Allen & Edith Berry
Sandie Brown
Robert Bruner
Andrew Burke
Rick & Debbie Burton
Robert Campbell
Lynne & Theodore Chimiklis
Karen & James Clark
Pam & Roland Clemmons
Pierce & Margie Cline
John & Emily Codington
Richard Colvard
Coosa River Basin Initiative
Richard Corbin
Connie Corpening
Theresa Cromeans
Cheryl Cushman
Bryan Davis
James Edward Dean
Joe & Renee Drexler
Richard Dugan
Natalie Elliot
Laurence Fennelly
Carol & Michael Froman
Susan & Jon Gant
Chessire Gaylor
Georgia Conservancy
Tutta Glass
Reynold & Nancy Gobris
J. Ray Grant M.D.
Shirley & Robert Haff
Orville & Janice Hall
Robert Hamburger
M. Olivia Harris
Bruce Harvey
Eugene Hatfield
Karen Hawk
Gail Hayden
Harold Hazelwood
Roger & Virginia Hein
Marguerite & David Higdon
Julius & Pamela Hill III
Paige & Carl Hayes Hoover
Pierre Howard
Terry Hubbard
James Hunt
Gerald & Peggy Jackson
Katherine & Drury Jenkins
Dick & Susie Jones
Marijeanne Joslin
Renee Kastanakis
Gene Kelly
Ronald Kiger
James Knesel
Elizabeth Law
Mary Leone
Beverly Logan
Thomas & Patricia Lowndes
John Luhn
Sara & Kevin McClain
William & Virginia McGee
Catherine & Thomas McLendon
Elizabeth & Sean McPherson
Barry & Daphne McWhirter
Chris Neiner
Thomas Newsome
C.D. & Ruth O'Dell
Kathy Overstreet
Ken Owen
Ladye Payne
Annette Peppard
David Pew
Brad Robertson
Eugenia Robertson-Thompson
G.W. Robinson
Ronald Rogne
Andy Rollins
George & Helen Rose
Alison Rowland
Abbas & Shakeela Shabbir
Nancy Sharp
Lanier Shelnutt
Thomas Shope
James Smith
Ron Southerland
Ed Stansell
Leah Stavish
Arthur Stelson
Sandi Still
Wesley Stone
Ann Strauss
Brigitte Taylor
Nell Tortorich
Tacy Trentadue
Carrie Van Wyck
Mike Wallace
Katrina & Gary White
R. E. & Dorothy Worth
Kay & Richard Wrobel
Maxwell Young
Matthew Zbornik
Kurt Zeller

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Georgia ForestWatch is a 501(c)3
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Cover photo by Adam Mann, Environmental Solutions and Innovations. Gray Bats are an endangered species which finds safe harbor in several Georgia caves. Whether they will be safe from white Nose Syndrome remains to be seen.

U.S. Forest Service approves and plans new Tallulah River projects

by Joseph Gatins : Co-district Leader

The ink hardly was dry on a decision to repave an existing, 3,700-foot portion of the Tallulah River Road and newly pave about 490 feet of graveled roadway before the ranger district and Federal Highway Administration were planning replacement of four bridges on this remarkably beautiful backcountry byway.

Georgia ForestWatch had voiced concern that the bridge and paving proposals could lead to a cascade of proposals to widen the entire road in order to accommodate bigger recreational vehicles and increased traffic to the remote community of Tate City. But Chattooga River Ranger David W. Jensen reiterated in a public meeting in late June that the agency has no intention to widen or pave the entire, seven-mile stretch of road. To repave the road to current highway standards would require a road 20-foot-wide and entail cutting back and excavating too much of the adjacent banks.

One of the four bridge replacements, however, could require drilling or blasting back about 15 feet of rock face, about 30 feet long, to accommodate the temporary "Bailey Bridge" that will serve as a temporary bridge while its replacement is built. (The other alternatives in this case were to either shut the road down entirely, requiring Tate City residents to have cars on both sides of the river; or to require fording the river and following a long detour via Charlie Creek Road via Hiawassee. The vast majority of the two dozen Tate City residents present at Jensen's public meeting raised their hands in support of the blasting and the temporary bridge. One resident voiced concerns over the aesthetics of the blasting and/ or drilling of rock. But Jensen commented that mitigation measures would be used in this case to avoid having any "shot-rock" fall in the river. In time, moss also would cover the rock scar, he said.)

The FHwA bridge replacement projects are likely to take at least three years to complete at a cost ranging from $1 million to $5 million and will ultimately permit safe passage of all vehicles from low-riders to heavy trucks, tractor-trailers and long recreational vehicles. (The bridges, built in the 1940s, are beginning to fail.) Current bridges, 14 feet wide, will be replaced by spans 16 to 18 feet wide, and raised by as much as three feet higher from the river than today.)

The Federal Highway Administration has assumed the lead in conducting environmental review of the bridge projects.
The district, meanwhile, is staying busy with a variety of other projects:

- **Eastside pine thinnings.** This proposal, currently undergoing environmental review, would thin about 6,800 acres of mostly loblolly pine plantation stands. Georgia ForestWatch supports this project, but has urged the U.S. Forest Service to specify exactly how it proposes to restore these stands to a more natural forest in the long term. We also have cautioned the agency to closely review how much road building and reconstruction will be required, particularly in sensitive backcountry and riparian areas.
- **Keep your eyes on Warwoman area.** Details have not yet been made public, but the agency is hinting that it is readying itself to propose a large timber-harvesting program in the Warwoman area of the district. Previous efforts to jumpstart a small version of such a project foundered after Georgia ForestWatch and a partner conservation organization and the Southern Environmental Law Center pointed out that it would be difficult for the agency to do so without running afoul of the federal Clean Water Act. (The logging trucks would have rumbled down Tuckaluge Creek Road, located right on top of Tuckaluge Creek.)
- **Trail restoration.** The district proposes to enlarge and reconfigure the Willis Knob Horse Trail complex, and restore damaged trails at Raven Cliffs and Panther Creek, as well as try, again, to heal the trail damage on the Oakey Mountain OHV trail system (Off-Highway Vehicle). We support this necessary work, as well as similar restoration projects in the Satolah area of Rabun County.
- **Chattooga boating decision.** There's yet no decision at this writing as to whether the Forest Service intends to try to permit boating on the Upper Chattooga River – but the agency appears to be clearing the decks in anticipation of such. It has made public archeological and biological/environmental surveys that suggest such boating would not harm any archeological areas, or affect any protected and sensitive plants or species. ■

Joe Gatins photo

The Tallulah River Road project will pave 490 feet of graveled road leading up to the Coleman River Bridge. Fom this view, the near side of the bridge will be the paved portion.

Fire Learning Network Meets in Rabun County

by Darren Wolfgang : Forest Ecologist

The Nature Conservancy in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service recently hosted the fourth annual Fire Learning Network meeting in Dillard, Georgia. The three-day retreat and field trip focused on promoting awareness and sharing knowledge on the use of "controlled burning" in the Southern Appalachians. The mission of the Fire Learning Network is to bring together concerned citizens, environmental groups, leading regional fire researchers, as well as state and federal land managers from the Southern Blue Ridge region of the Southeast to discuss the appropriate use and safe application of controlled burning on public and privately held lands. The focus of the 2009 network session was primarily on monitoring and determining the successes or failures of a given burn. Attention was given to using vegetation modeling procedures to more accurately predict areas that are appropriate to burn from a biological perspective, as well as discussions of historic impacts of fire on the Southern Appalachian landscape.

According to the organizers, burning has varying objectives and goals; such factors often influence the intensity and scale of a given controlled burn. Several attendees, including Georgia ForestWatch, pointed out the current strategy for evaluating the effectiveness and impacts from a controlled burn are inadequate. ForestWatch has been singing this song for some time now, regrettably to seemingly deaf ears. Currently monitoring protocols used by the U.S. Forest Service are vague and inadequate, capturing very little useful pre- or post-burn information. Without attention to detail one must wonder how managers know when they've met their objectives or have been successful in their pursuits.

While we ponder these questions, thousands of acres of the Chattahoochee–Oconee National Forests have been approved for controlled burning in 2009. On the Chattooga River Ranger District, for example, nearly 5,000 acres are slated for prescribed fire treatment. The District hopes to continue this pace annually. Similar initiatives are underway on the Oconee, Blue Ridge and Conasauga Ranger Districts, to varying levels. Although prescribed fire is beneficial in appropriate locations and under the right circumstances, the approach currently being implemented seems very "wholesale" in its nature. Only a subset of the areas targeted for burning seem appropriate or necessary; the rest appear to represent attempts to meet burn acreage targets from the Land and Resource Management Plan and taking advantage of increased Washington funding for fire related activities. (Presently, 48% of the Forest Service budget, up from 13% in 1991, is spent on fire related issues.) Without proper monitoring, it is impossible to gauge effectiveness or success of such large scale burning activities.

The most common reasons to burn mentioned by Fire Learning Network officials:

- Burning to reduce forest debris and "fuel" in Wild/Urban Interface Areas, as to prevent wildfires like those seen in Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, and California in the Southeastern U.S.
- Burning to expand the populations of various plants and animals dependant on grassy, open forests called "woodlands."
- Burning to kill the midstory of a forest to promote grass on the forest floor.
- Burning to reduce competition from species that are intolerant of fire, such as Eastern White Pine, Red Maple, and Yellow or Tulip Poplar.

As you may already know ForestWatch is not categorically opposed to "firing" the woods but remains very skeptical about the expanding use of "prescribed" fire on our public forests as it is being proposed and presently pursued. We are pleased to be invited to participate in the Fire Learning Network and hope our participation leads to a better understanding and use of prescribed fire on the people's forests. ■

HemlockFest 2009 November 6-8

We encourage you to support our good friends at Lumpkin Coalition and plan to attend the 5th annual HemlockFest – three days of good music, good food, and good fun for a great cause. This benefit music festival is held to increase public awareness and generate funds to help save the hemlocks.

New to the hemlock woolly adelgid issue? Visit www.gafw.org/hemlock_threat.html. Funds raised each year are used for support of the Georgia laboratories rearing adelgid-devouring beetles, education and research on the adelgid problem, as well as assisting businesses and homeowners to protect hemlocks on their private property.

For more info on HemlockFest 2009, visit www.lumpkincoalition.org/HemlockFest.html.

ForestWatch Retreat

BOOK TODAY!

"Back to the Forest . . . Into the Future"

Saturday, October 10, 2009 • Vogel State Park

This year's fall retreat will be active, informative, rustic, fun and affordable. The theme, *"Back to the Forest . . . Into the Future,"* focuses on critical forest management issues looming in the near term. The goal is to get everyone involved in discussing and learning about policy choices that ForestWatch will face in 2010 and beyond.

We'll tackle two big issues:

- ***Energy Independence and the National Forests – Is converting trees to biomass the answer?***

  The national initiative to reduce reliance on fossil fuels has come home to roost in our national forests. Should trees be used as biomass for production of ethanol and electricity? How would this affect soil, streams, forest health and diversity? Should biomass production be confined to private forestlands? Are ridge-top windmill farms in the Blue Ridge appropriate? How would new transmission lines, roads and infrastructure impact the national forest?

- ***Managing Recreational Uses of the National Forests – Are we loving them to death?***

  In ForestWatch's early days, we advocated saving the national forests for the recreational uses of millions of citizens within a day's drive. Now that the forests aren't being clear cut, there has been an explosion of recreational uses. Some of these uses seriously impact the health of the forest, and all recreation needs to be monitored and controlled. How should recreation be managed and conflicts between users resolved? Should ForestWatch be working more closely with use-focused groups like kayakers, mountain bikers, hunters, etc.? How do we promote responsible recreation? What is the proper balance of commercial, non-profit and individual uses of the forest?

Lori Martell photo

You never know what you'll see on ForestWatch retreat hikes. Trust us, you don't want to miss this!

We'll hold panel discussions on these topics with active audience participation. Knowledgeable volunteers will describe the issues as they see them. Then it'll be your opportunity to question the panelists and give us your thoughts.

On Saturday afternoon, we'll offer short educational hikes. For non-hikers, we'll have interesting programs on bird watching, hemlock woolly adelgid, prescribed fire as a management tool and more. In the evening, we'll feast on BBQ prepared by our own David Govus, Andy Edwards and crew, then relax around a campfire and enjoy music played by ForestWatch members (bring your instrument and join in). Admission to the retreat is $20 per person and includes lunch, all activities, BBQ dinner and free wine & beer.

We are limited to 75 persons because of the shelter size at Vogel. Don't miss out! Make your reservation now – call Jill at 706-635-8733. All retreat programming will take place on Saturday, October 10, so you can come just for the day or stay overnight. We recommend staying overnight so you can visit and relax. **But to do so, make reservations early! Call Jill now – they're going fast!** ■

Brawley compromise

by Jim Walker : District Leader

On Tuesday, May 12, Georgia ForestWatch Executive Director Wayne Jenkins, Sarah Francisco of the Southern Environmental Law Center, and I met with Forest Supervisor George Bain to discuss the Brawley Mountain Project. Many readers may recall this project ("Apples and Oranges and Clear Cutting for Golden-Winged Warblers," Forest News, Spring 2006), which was originally scoped on December 15, 2006, after having been introduced to the public in a Forest Service field trip in October of that year. Those who do may want to skip past the first few paragraphs of the following background information.

This proposed project, which conflates two important issues: habitat enhancement for golden-winged warblers and "woodland restoration,"[1] is a fine example of the kind of complex decisions that have to be made by the Forest Service (and by Georgia ForestWatch in response). Expansion of this warbler population is the goal, and "restoration of open woodland conditions" is the means. Though not optimistic about the chances for long-term success, since the mountains of North Georgia are at the extreme southern end of the golden-winged warbler's range, and climate change is pushing it north,[2] ForestWatch consistently has supported the goal of attempting to preserve and increase this small warbler's population in Georgia. However, we cannot support the "woodland restoration" component of the project, believing that woodland conditions are obviously inappropriate and entirely unrealistic for the Brawley site in particular, and that opportunities for true woodland restoration are extremely limited on the Chattahoochee National Forest in general. With the current Land and Resource Management Plan proposing "to restore 10,000 acres of open woodland, savannas, and grasslands on the Chattahoochee" within 10 years, woodland is a very significant issue, which will be addressed at greater length in future issues of Forest News.

Champagne for Monkeys photo

ForestWatch and our legal partner have accepted a compromise position on the Brawley project area that will expand habitat for Golden-wings without cutting nearby mature hardwood forest on the west ridge.

As originally designed, the project would come at a high cost. Financially, most or all of the initial cost might be covered by the revenue from the harvested timber, at least in favorable market conditions, which is not currently the case. But there would also be substantial ongoing costs for herbicide to kill stump sprouts

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Wild & Woolly

WINE TASTING & AUTHOR-FIDDLER FESTIVAL

AUTHORS

(Left to Right)

Mildred W. Greear
George Ella Lyon
Thomas Rain Crowe
Kathryn Kolb
John Lane
Janie P. Taylor

LOCAL FOOD

An event sponsor, Brooks Franklin, enjoys the local food deliciously prepared by Cindy Halbkat of Sah-ka-na-ga Gardens.

VOLUNTEERS

Too many to list here gave their time and talent to help make this event happen - thanks to all! Pictured here, longtime ForestWatch supporter Helen Meadors donated hours helping with the native plant sale.

On Saturday, May 2, 2009, a good time was had by all at the Wild & Woolly Author-Fiddler Festival our annual affordable fundraiser at Tiger Mountain Vineyard. Were you there?

NATIVE PLANTS

With the drought improved we included a modest native plant sale this year. Happy plant shoppers include Jennie Hobson, Patricia Muesse, Julie Jordan, and Dennis McClure.

TIGER WINE

Thanks to our friends at Tiger Mountain Vineyards for hosting us once again! Award winning Tiger Wine was available for tasting and for sale. Visit www.tigerwine.com

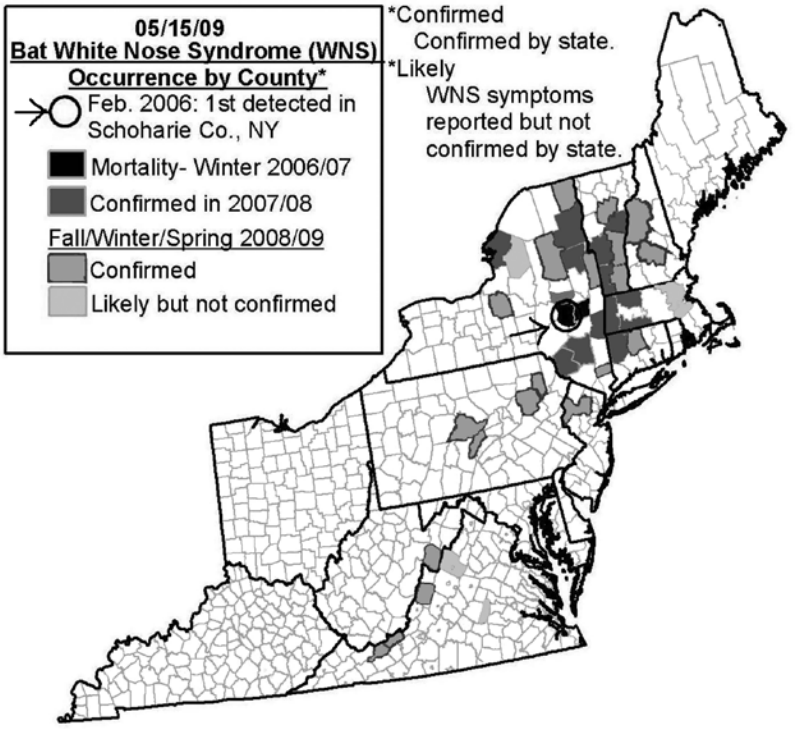
FIDDLERS

(Left to Right)
Marie Dunkle
Kelly Smith

Bad news for bats

by Darren Wolfgang : ForestWatch Forest Ecologist

A mysterious disease affecting bats is sweeping Eastern North America at alarming rates. Experts are calling this disease "White Nose Syndrome," a poorly understood condition that causes bats to awaken during hibernation, leave their caves, and forage for insects during daylight hours of cold dormant season months, a time when very little if any insects are available. This behavior subsequently causes infected bats to deplete their valuable energy reserves, intended to carry them in a dormant state through the hibernation period, exhaust themselves, and ultimately die. Researchers in conjunction with state and federal biologists have uncovered a possible link between the syndrome and a certain cold loving fungus. Sources have identified the fungus as possibly being associated with the Geomyces fungal group, which is a fairly common group of soil fungi. Researchers have suggested that the fungus was inadvertently introduced or mutated in the vicinity of Albany, New York. Preliminary research further suggests that the fungus may feed on the exposed skin membranes of the bats wings in certain underground environments.



Map courtesy of Cal Butchkoski, Pennsylvania Game Commission

What is perhaps more troubling than the existence of the syndrome itself is the fact that the disease is spreading at a rate that could be irrepressible. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Northeast Region, the disease is thought to have first been documented in early 2006 in Schoharie County, NY (see map below) when a photographer captured bats with an irregular white substance on their muzzles. The disease has since been detected or suspected in at least nine states in the Northeast.

A news release issued on May 21, 2009, by the U.S. Forest Service – Southern Region 8, indicated that acting Regional Forester Liz Agpaoa recently mandated closure of all abandoned mines and caves within the Southern Region, constituting 13 states from Oklahoma to Virginia and Florida. The closure prohibits people from entering.

"We are working to stop the uncontrolled spread of White Nose Syndrome among bat species . . . The closures will allow scientists and land managers time to work together and study the fungus, learn how it spreads and how to best address it," Agpaoa said.

The closure is likely linked to similar actions have previously recommended by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service for cave and mine closures in 20 states from New England, to the Midwest, and the Southeast.

The two federal agencies estimate that as many as 500,000 bats have already died in the New England and Mid-Atlantic regions, including 25,000 Indian Red Bats, a federally endangered species. Dennis Krusac, Threatened and Endangered Species Specialist for the Forest Service in Region 8, stated that many national forests in the Southern Region are home to several species of bats, including the federally endangered Indiana bat, Virginia big-eared bat, gray bat and Ozark big-eared bats. Researchers estimate that up to 90% mortality is probable among bat colonies infected with the syndrome. As one Virginia scientist points out, "If it gets into caves more to our south, in places like Tennessee, Kentucky, Georgia and Alabama, we're going to be talking deaths in the millions" according to the recent article "A Mystery Bat Disease Cute But Contagious" (*The Economist, May 21, 2009.*)

While closing caves and mines in states suspected of harboring bats infected or susceptible to contraction of the syndrome is an excellent first step, researchers have acknowledged that human spread via cave exploration is not the only vector for spreading this disease, and that bat to bat contact could be the primary reason driving the rapid spread of this disease in the Eastern U.S.

Significant declines in bat populations in the Eastern U.S. could have huge impacts on agricultural productivity and the spread of human health hazards such as West Nile Virus, carried largely by mosquitoes, a favorite food for many bat species. According to the Fish and Wildlife Service article "Introduction to Bats," bats are the only major predators of night-flying insects. One bat can eat between 600 and 1,000 mosquitoes and other insect pests in just one hour. The article further states that of the 45 species of bats found in the continental United States, six are federally listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended.

These species include the:

- Gray bat (Myotis grisescens),
- Indiana bat (Myotis sodalis),
- Ozark big-eared bat (Corynorhinus (=Plecotus) townsendii ingens),
- Virginia big-eared bat (Corynorhinus (=Plecotus) townsendii virginianus),
- Lesser long-nosed (Leptonycteris curasoae yerbabuenae),
- Mexican long-nosed bat (Leptonycteris nivalis),
- Hawaiian hoary bat (Lasiurus cinereus semotus)(Hawaii),
- Little Mariana fruit bat (Pteropus tokudae)(Guam), and
- Mariana fruit bat (=Mariana flying fox) (Pteropus mariannus mariannus)(Guam) ■

ForestWatch Retreat

Saturday, Oct. 10, 2009

Vogel State Park (south of Blairsville, Georgia)

"Back to the Forest... Into the Future"

This year's retreat is rustic and affordable! We'll have audience-interactive discussions with national forest leaders on critical issues, followed by lunch, hikes, cookout dinner and music around the evening campfire.

Day Fee: only $20 per person

(Day fee includes 2 meals & all programing. Does not include $3 park entrance fee at the gate.)

Lodging available for Fri & Sat nights:

Limited number of cabins & tent sites available for additional fee. Contact our office manager Jill to reserve at 706-635-8733.

Come just for the day or make a weekend of it. We're putting the word out early because of limited lodging at Vogel State Park - get it while it lasts!

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Brawley Compromise

(continued from page 7)

and for burning the project area every 3–5 years until the effort to maintain woodland conditions is abandoned and the land is allowed to return to forest.

Ecologically, the cost would be much higher. Especially since a significant part of the project – the part known as the west ridge – is extremely high-quality, mature, mixed mesophytic forest. While these stands do not yet meet the Forest Service's old growth criteria – the oldest trees are in the range of 120–130 years old, over 100 feet tall, and up to 30 inches in diameter – they are already exhibiting structural characteristics of old growth. Early-successional forest can be created quickly and easily, just by cutting the trees, but late-successional forest such as that found on the west ridge cannot be created at all – it must develop over many decades or centuries, depending on the starting point. So Georgia ForestWatch believes it is important to preserve what little we have.

Given the uncertain chance of success and the extremely high cost, in response to the original scoping we suggested that the project be carried out on an appropriate smaller scale. In particular, we asked that the mature forest on the west ridge, which has no equal on the project area or anywhere in the vicinity, be spared. Excluding the west ridge would leave almost three-quarters of the project area for enhancement of gold-wing warbler habitat which we believed would be more than adequate to demonstrate the efficacy of this approach, or lack thereof.

In the spring of 2006, we were told that the Environmental Assessment of the project would be out in June and a decision would be made in July. After several months of no apparent progress, Jenkins wrote a letter to District Ranger Alan Polk reiterating that "Georgia ForestWatch would like to see the Brawley Mountain Project implemented with no further delay," but without the west ridge.

When the assessment finally came out on August 1, 2008, the preferred alternative was considerably improved over the original proposal, having eliminated from the project much of the mid slopes and all of the lower slopes, coves and riparian areas, which are unsuitable for this warbler's habitat. But it still included a significant part of the exceptional, nearly old growth forest on the west ridge. Our comments mostly restated the arguments made in the original scoping comments, concluding ForestWatch "is well aware that a small population of [gold-wing warbler] exists in the vicinity of Ledford Gap in the project area,[3] and we are hopeful and somewhat optimistic that habitat enhancement will promote its expansion, at least in the short term. Therefore, we continue to support intensive efforts to enhance habitat conditions for [golden-wing warbler] as we have for the last two years. ... We only ask that it be carried out on a reasonable scale, with a sense of balance between the very high ecological and financial costs, on the one hand, and the uncertain, open-ended benefits, on the other. Such a sense of balance would exclude the entire western ridge from the project area, since it is occupied by a healthy, functioning late-successional ecosystem of which there is no other example in the project area or in the vicinity and an extreme paucity on the forest as a whole."

The dispute about Brawley Mountain has never been about the golden-winged warbler, it is about protecting a small piece of irreplaceable mature hardwood forest in a landscape dominated by clear cuts in the early stage of recovery and overstocked pine plantations.

On April 3, of this year, another field trip to Brawley, with representatives of Georgia ForestWatch, the Forest Service, including Forest Supervisor George Bain, and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, and also Dr. Jon Evans, Professor of Biology, and Dr. Ken Smith, Associate Professor of Forestry and Geology, both of the University of the South (Sewanee), led to some rather contentious debate, but also laid the groundwork for compromise.

A little over a month later, at the meeting mentioned at the beginning of this article, Supervisor Bain began by explaining his position on the question of restoration in general and woodland in particular, which is almost entirely at odds with our point of view. But then, to our great appreciation, he went on to recognize our concern for protecting the mature forest on the west ridge, agreeing with ForestWatch that such stands are not adequately represented on the Chattahoochee. So, he proposed the following compromise.

First, all references to "woodland restoration" will be removed from the Environmental Assessment and the term will not be used in the upcoming Decision Notice, being replaced by "creation of woodland conditions" or something of the like. In no way did Supervisor Bain concede our point that woodland restoration is inappropriate for the west ridge; he just did not want this disagreement, however significant it may be, to stand in the way of doing something for the golden-winged warbler. And second, while the west ridge will not be entirely spared, as we had insisted, all treatment (timber removal, herbicide, prescribed fire) will be confined to the southwest side of the ridge, and the mature stands in question, which are on the northeast side, will be left alone. Where large trees do occur on the southwest side of the ridge, no oaks over 20-22" in diameter will be cut. In addition, the treatment area will be

expanded somewhat in another part of the project area away from the west ridge.

While this would not exactly be our "preferred alternative," we do understand that if something is to be done for the golden-winged warbler at Brawley, it should be done as soon as possible. So both ForestWatch and the Southern Environmental Law Center accepted these terms. A decision notice should be issued soon, and the Brawley Mountain Project may finally get under way. ■

[1] The Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests define woodland as "A plant community in which trees are often small, characteristically with a greater proportion of their total height being crown than clear bole, and having trees spaced far enough apart that the canopies of adjacent trees usually do not touch and with ground vegetation being mostly herbaceous, commonly grass." According to the Southern Appalachian Assessment, woodland is "forestland incapable of producing 20 or more cubic feet of industrial wood per acre per year under natural conditions, because of adverse site conditions." In the Brawley Mountain proposal, the first step in attempting to create woodland conditions will be to remove more than 80% of the canopy.

[2] As the Forest Service itself has concluded (see: http://www.treesearch.fs.fed.us/pubs/7514). The North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission has a very informative web page on golden-winged warblers that is entirely free of any bias regarding the Brawley Mountain Project (http://www.ncwildlife.org/pg07_WildlifeSpeciesCon/Profiles/warbler-goldenwing.pdf).

[3] In 2001, Nathan Klaus of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR) found "at least 3 territories, 3 males, 1 female, 5 fledglings, plus 2 adult hybrids" at Brawley Mountain. DNR/Forest Service transit surveys in 2007 and 2009 found 2 GWWA each year. ForestWatch observers have also found GWWA at Ledford Gap in the project area in recent years, including at least one this year.

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Mountaintown controversy continues

by David Govus : Co-District Leader

In mid-May the Forest Service began rebuilding the upper reaches of the Mountaintown Creek trail. Beginning at Buddy Cove Gap on Forest Service road 64 in the Cohutta Mountains the trail follows an old logging road bed for six miles or so down Mountaintown Creek, a blue ribbon trout stream with a healthy population of wild trout, fording the stream 12 times. This creek drains the western half of the Mountaintown Inventoried Roadless Area which at over 13,000 acres is the largest roadless area on the Chattahoochee National Forest. This old logging road bed healed and stabilized decades ago and has long been used by hunters, fishermen, naturalists and hikers to travel up and down the creek. In the early 1990s mountain bikers started using this very steep trail as a one-way downhill thrill ride. The Forest Service soon thereafter designated the trail as legal for bike use without giving the public notice, seeking comment or performing an environmental analysis, thus violating the law. In 2000 it appeared that the Mountaintown Roadless Area would be designated as a wilderness study area under the then developing Forest Plan. Georgia ForestWatch of course strongly advocated for wilderness designation which, while bringing full protection from logging and road building would have resulted in the closing of the bike trail. The election of George W. Bush seemed to change matters and the final forest plan released after the election did not recommend Mountaintown for wilderness protection.

In 2002 the Forest Service routed the Pinhoti trail through the heavily used Bear Creek bicycle trail complex and over the ridge to the Mountaintown trail and up the trail to its head at Buddy Cove Gap. At the time the Forest Service promised Georgia ForestWatch that the connector trail between the Bear Creek mountain bike trail complex and Mountaintown would not be open for bicycle traffic. Since that time the private property owners at the bottom of Mountaintown Creek have become increasingly unhappy with bikers trespassing through their land to finish the downhill ride through Mountaintown. There is no legal exit for the bike trail and even the most expert riders are unable or unwilling to ride back uphill.

Last summer the Forest Service unveiled a plan to improve access to the Mountaintown area by creating a foot trail from the Bear Creek camping area and parking lot over the ridge to the creek and to allow bikes to use the Pinhoti connector thus allowing bike traffic into and out of Mountaintown from the Bear Creek bike trail complex. Georgia ForestWatch supports the pedestrian access but is strongly opposed to connecting the Bear Creek bike area with Mountaintown Creek Trail. Over the years, as bike use has become more prevalent, pedestrian use in Bear Creek and nearby sections of the Pinhoti trail has declined. It is unpleasant and dangerous for hikers to share narrow trails with speeding bikes. The Mountaintown trail is extremely steep and with 12 fords of the creek is spectacularly ill-suited for mountain bikes. Georgia ForestWatch recommended that the Mountaintown Creek trail be closed to bikes and revert to the use many enjoyed for decades as a foot trail for fishing, hiking, camping, etc.

It was with some surprise that we then learned that the Forest Service planned reconstruction of the upper part of the Mountaintown trail using heavy equipment before a decision was reached as to whether the bike trail should remain. In a public meeting concerning the bike trail Ranger Michelle Jones of the Conasauga District admitted that if proposed today a bike trail would never be put in the steep riparian corridor of Mountaintown. If it would not be permitted today, then it is entirely possible that the analysis currently underway will come to the conclusion that bike use should come to an end in Mountaintown. Why then the heavy reconstruction which is only necessary if it is to remain a bike trail?

As of the first of June a contractor for the Forest Service was working in the riparian zone of Mountaintown Creek with a small track hoe (excavator). Georgia ForestWatch volunteers visited the site after a rain and found that the standard erosion control practices found on any private construction project that disturbs the earth were not in place. The contractor, in addition to putting in water dips, had excavated sections of the trail apparently to create a smoother tread for bikes. This excavation created a good deal of loose soil that was washing into the creek during rain events and was totally unnecessary for a foot trail. The water dips will ultimately be helpful, but since they were carved out by an excavator, the result was more loose soil on very steep slopes that will take some time to stabilize with traffic on the trail. All that was needed on the trail were the traditional log cross bars to divert water flow. These log bars have been used successfully for decades on the forest. Apparently log cross bars do not suit bikers. Georgia ForestWatch offered to perform this task at no cost to the Forest Service and of course with little or no disturbance to the ground. Several willing workers could have accomplished this task within a few days. The motorized carts and track hoe traveling up and down the trail have resulted in the trail resembling a muddy road and a threat to water quality.

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Save the date: Conasauga Snorkel

by Lori Martell : Outreach Director

If you've never attended the ForestWatch Conasauga Snorkel – here's your chance! Mark your calendars and save Saturday, August 1. Plan to join us for this rare opportunity to come face-to-face with an amazing array of freshwater fish thanks to our guide, Aquatics Biologist Jim Herrig.

Jim will begin with an informative presentation so you'll know what to look for. Jim and I are also happy to give first timers snorkeling tips, so no experience is necessary. All equipment is included in the $20 per-person fee (wetsuit, snorkel, mask). And, for non-swimmers, there are unique view tubes which give a clear underwater view without getting your head wet.

As a tropical scuba diver, the thought of snorkeling in a cold mountain stream had never entered my mind. I was blown away by the diversity of fish and their unique behaviors. In addition to keeping me toasty warm in the shivery water, the buoyancy of the wetsuit allowed me to float quietly which encouraged the fish to ignore me and go about their normal life. I particularly enjoyed watching the rock-flipping behavior of small darters. It was every bit as awe-inspiring as diving in Grand Cayman, and a whole lot more affordable!

We will send out an e-mail alert about one month prior to open signups. (To be fair, early signups are not accepted.) Once the alert goes out, it's first come first served. The snorkel is open to everyone, member or not, including children age six and up who are accompanied by an adult.

Lori Martell photo

The ForestWatch Conasauga Snorkel is your chance to enjoy this crystal clear and cold mountain stream and its fascinating biodiversity surrounded by the cozy warmth of a wetsuit.

Note: Fins/flippers are not used on the snorkel because they stir up sediment which is very bad for the fish that depend on clear water with a clean pebble bottom.

If you are not receiving ForestWatch Alerts via e-mail, you will miss the snorkel announcement. Don't let this happen! E-mail me today at LMartell@gawf.org and say, "Subscribe me to alerts." We send alerts about once a week and they keep you in the loop on fun outings and important action issues.

Want to read more about the snorkel? Visit our website at: http://www.gafw.org/newsletters/07FallNewsletter.pdf ■

Mountaintown Controversy

(continued from page 14)

As other folks became aware of the work being done the Georgia Environmental Protection Division was notified, becoming more deeply involved as they learned more about the trail work. Initial thinking at EPD was that the Forest Service should have applied for a buffer variance from the local County "issueing authority" for soil disturbance within the fifty foot trout stream buffer in their capacity as for stream protection for the state which has ultimate authority for protecting our streams. The process usually requires an engineering plan that indicates how ground disturbance within a state stream buffer will be controlled for protecting a stream from non-forestry and agriculture development. When queried about this District Ranger Jones said she believed that because they would be disturbing less than one acre of ground, that the agency did not need a variance. When asked why no stream protection materials where put in place she deferred to the contractor saying that she thought that the usual practice was to do the work and then place silt fence and hay bales for controlling erosion. Our last conversations with Georgia EPD indicated that a letter explaining the agency's duties and the states regulations for work within stream buffers would be sent, and that they had been assured by the district that erosion control materials where being put in place. Due to budgetary cuts, the EPD has been unable to have a site inspection performed by their staff.

If indeed the Forest Service is required by state stream protection regulations to apply for and obtain variances when doing non-forestry work across the forest then it appears that the trail work on Mountaintown Creek has accomplished a bit more than the district had in mind and revealed a long standing situation that needs correction. Georgia ForestWatch has little interest in another layer of burdensome process and paperwork for the Forest Service to comply with. What we are interested in is protecting the trout streams of our forests and the experiences of those using the forest. Recreational use of our forests is increasing and who does what, where needs careful deliberation and attention paid to both resource impacts and experiential impacts or user conflicts. Supporting the use of mountain bikes on a one-way, very steep and sometimes narrow, downhill bomb run that crosses a premier trout stream twelve times and fundamentally affects the hiking experience of fisher folk, hikers, hunters and other non-mechanized users of the area seems lacking in common sense and fairness. Waiting until after disturbing and breaking a packed trail tread and rain event for placing erosion control devices seems "bass ackwards". Doing that work without proper oversight by local issueing authorities now appears to be illegal.

For more on Mountaintown, visit: http://www.gafw.org/mountaintown.html ■

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