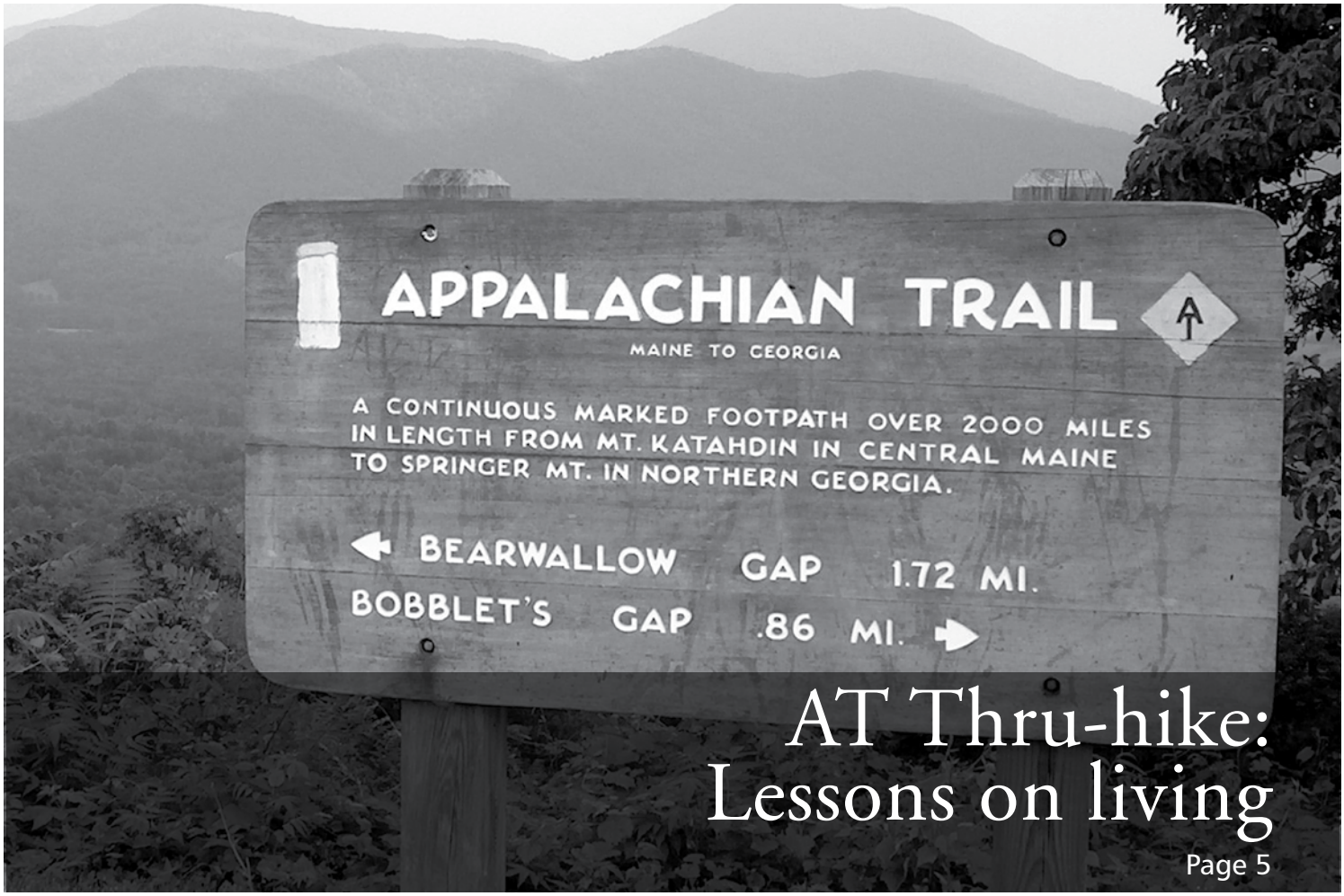
Forest News

Georgia ForestWatch Quarterly Newsletter Winter 2010



AT Thru-hike: Lessons on living

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From The Director

Roadless forests: A gift to ourselves, a gift to those who follow

Wayne Jenkins
Executive Director

Who speaks for our few relatively intact publicly held forests just as they are – damaged by our past use, but now recovering? Who is the voice that will say nature has its own intentions, ancient trajectories beyond our history of destructive use? Intentions perhaps beyond our knowing. And where will we allow this ancient intention to flow forward across a still beautiful and diverse land?

These thoughts arise as I sit waiting in the Atlanta Airport on a drizzly late November Monday. I'm heading to Washington, D.C. as a guest of Pew Environmental Group's Roadless Summit. Pew's nationwide invitation assembled nearly a hundred roadless advocates, representing over 40 conservation, preservation, recreation, faith-based and business groups. Their goal: to keep the roadless issue (formally the Roadless Area Conservation Rule) on the Obama administration's and Congress's radar in the midst of so many important national and international issues. Permanent protection for 58.5 million acres is no small potatoes and this seemed a good time to convene and catch up on events, hear from the administration and be heard, while invigorating ourselves and supportive congressional champions.

Despite the Bush administration's eight-year, all-out assault on the Clinton-era Roadless Rule, only seven miles of road have been constructed into roadless areas. What a testament to the many groups and individuals who have labored to protect the best of our last un-fragmented public land!

Here in Georgia, threats to the special character of our handful of roadless areas have been, well, interesting, to say the least. All of Georgia's roadless areas occur across the mountainous 650,000-acre Chattahoochee National Forest, and total 64,874 acres. They consist of six "stand alone" areas over 5,000 acres each, plus 17 smaller areas adjacent to existing designated Wilderness. In the current Land and Resource Management Plan, a few of our larger areas were placed in fairly protective management prescriptions, but some have had portions cut out or chopped into a mix of prescriptions that warrant concern.

For example, Mountaintown (the Forest Service calls it Pink Knob), at 12,000 acres, is Georgia's largest roadless area. It is composed of steep mountains, numerous trout streams, pockets of old growth and a mostly mixed older second-growth forest of large white pine, various oak species and hemlock. It is a beautiful place with good access from periphery roads and two hiking trails that penetrate its remote core. One of these trails, the Mountaintown Creek Trail has received heavy mountain bike use sanctioned but not planned by the agency, (In other words, it was originally an illegal user-created bike trail the agency now supports and is even spending money on.) The trail crosses the major trout stream 12 times, silting the stream and interfering with anglers. It is so steep in sections that it can only be ridden downhill thereby posing a safety hazard to hikers. The nearby Bear Creek biking complex and many closed roads in the larger western portion of the forest should serve the bike community well but this problematic trail within the roadless area has pitted bikers against local traditional users and conservationists who have worked many years for Wilderness status in Mountaintown.

In 2005, the Forest Service planned to manage some of the land within Mountaintown and adjacent high elevation areas, claiming it was necessary to create habitat for declining species. Despite the existence of tens of thousands of high elevation acres for experimental management elsewhere, it seems illogical that our few remaining roadless areas would require this kind of management. Luckily, we pushed back and the proposed work was rescinded.

This same claim has been used by other opponents of the Mountaintown Scenic bill. The insistence that roadless areas need to be managed seems stubbornly hollow given they are so rare and important for clean water, remote recreation, deep forest wildlife and old growth forest.

Unfortunately, managers' opinions may matter more than voting citizens when it comes to influencing the political

(continued on page 7)

Legal maneuvering increases over Chattooga boating issues

Just when one might have thought the ever-widening struggle over whether to permit boating on Wild and Scenic Upper Chattooga River was wending its way to an administrative finish – shazam and surprise!

The U.S Forest Service on Dec. 21 withdrew the three decisions that were aimed at permitting part-time boating on seven of the 21 miles of the Upper Chattooga's headwaters, citing "inconsistencies" the agency had discovered "between various components of the decision documents."

The agency's intention now is to conduct "additional analysis" and re-issue decisions "probably in early spring," according to Liz Agpaoa, regional forester for the USDA Forest Service's Southern Region.

The government clarified to a certain extent why the decisions were taken off the table: Because biological evaluations and assessments were "based on an alternative that was different from the selected alternative." Specifically, the analysis "assumed there would be a maximum of four groups per boatable day, but the selected alternative did not contain a limitation on the number of groups permitted per boatable day.

"Therefore, more analysis needs to be completed and new decisions made," according to a government lawyer's filing in a related lawsuit.

The decision to withdraw the decisions had the net effect of negating the administrative appeal that Georgia ForestWatch and four other interest groups, including the American Whitewater lobby, had filed. Of these appeals, only Georgia ForestWatch's appeal seeks to maintain the status quo, which, for the past 30-plus years, has prohibited boating on this section of the headwaters. Georgia ForestWatch also successfully contended – and the agency agreed – that the decisions should be stayed pending a final decision.

The agency's turn-around also adds a possible wrinkle to the federal lawsuit that American Whitewater and other pro-boating groups and individuals previously had filed in U.S. District Court, Anderson, South Carolina, which sought to open the river immediately to boating, even before the administrative appeals were resolved. The government on Dec, 30 petitioned the court to dismiss the boaters' suit, contending "it is moot and because plaintiffs were, in any event, required to exhaust their administrative remedies before coming to this Court in the first place …" A response from American Whitewater was due Jan. 19.

For breaking events on this issue, click on www.gafw.org and/or http://www.fs.fed.us/r8/fms/sumter/resources/Chattooga.php ■

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Nonprofit educational corporation.

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Cover photo: Bearclau photo. ForestWatch member Myra Kibler set out to hike the Appalachian Trail by herself at age 59.

Smooth transition in ForestWatch leadership

by Peg Griffith : Georgia ForestWatch President, 2008-09

I am pleased to announce that Ted Doll, former Board Secretary, has been elected as President of the Board and is already hard at work. Ted is retired from Georgia Tech, where he was a Principal Research Scientist. He lives in Sautee Nacoochee with his wife Lynda. He recently served as Chair of the Stop I-3 Coalition (now called WaysSouth) and has been active with the Sautee Nacoochee Center and the Sierra Club for many years. Ted can be reached at 706-878-2526 or theodore.doll@gmail.com.

I'd also like to give a fond farewell to Charlie Seabrook whose board term is up. Charlie will stay in the loop as a ForestWatch advisor, but much of his time now will be devoted to his writing projects. We are deeply appreciative of Charlie's contribution on the board, especially his media and editing expertise.

Ted is supported by Ida Long as Treasurer, and Kasey Sturm as Secretary. They will be excellent officers, with deep knowledge of the organization and environmental issues. I will continue on the executive committee through the end of 2009, and remain on the board thereafter. Former President Joe Gatins did the same for me, and these well planned leadership transitions speak volumes about the current health of the organization.

Our goal is to continue the extraordinary cooperation and dedication of our staff, district leaders, and other volunteers that have made ForestWatch so strong.

Lori Martell photo

New ForestWatch President Ted Doll

We're in a great place right now:

- We have a wonderful staff
- We have the tools needed for effective and efficient communications with our membership
- The Board recently completed a year-long engagement with a professional consultant to increase membership and funding
- We have begun work on revising our Strategic Plan to guide us for the next three years
- We are fully engaged with the agencies and constituencies that affect YOUR national forests

I ask that you continue to give your full support to Georgia ForestWatch in every way you can. Thank you for your commitment! ■

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AT Thru-hike: Lessons on Living, Part 2

by Myra Kibler : ForestWatch Volunteer

See the Fall 2009 issue for Part 1 of this article. Read it online at: www.gafw.org/newsletters/2009fall_newsletter.pdf

Life was good. I was comfortable. I didn't study maps or read trail guides. I just went out each day and followed the white blazes painted on the trees alongside the Trail. Oh, I knew generally what was ahead, and I did carry a map for the section I was on. I'd use the map to calculate how many days of supply I needed for the next section. But I liked to take what came without too much forethought. I remembered words, "This is the day we are given. We didn't earn it. We don't deserve it. Nevertheless, it is ours to seek the goodness thereof." That became my mantra. I said it to myself each morning as I set out. I wanted to welcome whatever lay ahead and find the goodness in it. Of course there were bad days. Days of discouragement. Days of sadness. Dull days. I even had some bad weeks when my hip hurt so much I could hardly walk. I held up for a couple of days and then inched on just a few miles each day. Gradually the pain lessened and then went away. Every journey has bad days. For the mileage freaks, bad days are disastrous. Their mileage is shot. If they are trying to keep up with other hikers, they might get left behind. They get discouraged, and some go home. For me, I had the luxury of slowing down. I didn't have to make it to Mt. Katahdin or bust.

The northeastern section of the trail was fun. It was new territory for me. The weather was good. I'd made it through the leg-breaking rocks of Pennsylvania, through all the bears in New Jersey and mosquitoes in New York. My body liked this life on the Trail. I never found a scale, but my clothes became loose. You can tell thru-hikers by then; they are lean and gnarly. The White Mountains were a challenge, but by then I knew I could do it. I just took my time and kept walking. I did get in trouble on Mt. Washington in weather I hadn't counted on. I should have studied about Mt. Washington to know the dangers of the weather there before getting into it. Mahoosuc Notch, the hardest mile on the AT, was pure fun. I left my full backpack at a hostel and carried a daypack through the Notch, scrambling up rocks, crawling through tight passages, sliding down rock slabs.

Photographer unknown

Myra's triumphal finish at Mt. Katahdin in Maine

Hikers pair up and help each other. I ended up once on a ledge I couldn't get off, and the next person through took my hand and swung me over to another spot where I could climb up.

By the time I got to Maine, I knew I would finish the trail. I confess I could not avoid getting Katahdin fever then. Even before then. Once I got that close, I would have been disappointed not to stand on top and have my picture taken by the famous sign. But I slowed down. I relished each step. It was late in the season, and few thru-hikers were still on the trail. To be alone in shelters by lakes listening to the loons was magical. The Hundred Mile Wilderness was lovely; the weather was cool and sunny, just heavenly. And then it was over. As I entered Baxter State Park, I was told I was number 206. Out of over 2,000 hikers to begin a thru-hike, only a few finish. And I was there.

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AT Thru-Hike

(continued from page 5)

Atop Katahdin on September 26, I celebrated with friends, some of whom I'd hiked with on and off for months. We took photos of each other and talked about what we were going to do next. I really had no thoughts of what I'd do next. I had stayed in the present throughout the hike. And what a vacation from my normal pattern that was! So I said I was going to try to remember what I'd learned about how to live after I returned home. On the way down the mountain, I encountered a man coming up. He was using a stick, and his wife was carrying a daypack for him. He said he knew me. I looked at him closely and did not recognize him. He reminded me that we had left the summit of Springer Mountain together. He had broken a leg somewhere near the end and had been off the trail for five weeks. Now his wife was helping him finish in a series of day hikes. He said, "I never expected to see you here." I said, "I'm rather amazed to be here myself!" And what a surprise it was to start and finish the trail the same day as someone else.

Back home, I tried to consolidate my experience into some lessons for living. The Trail really did change my life. I now have more confidence in myself than I did before. I enjoy a hot shower more than you can know if you haven't lived without one. I have taken the lesson of simplicity forward in my life. I know exactly what I really need and what I can live without. I know that small steps and persistence can accomplish a large task. And I learned another big lesson that I have more trouble putting into words: I learned to be at home in the woods. It has to do with more than being able to sleep on a thin pad and love listening to owls and loons. It's more than knowing how to ford rivers and climb mountains and how to be comfortable in a tent during a snowstorm or not feeling panic when lost. It has to do with trust and feeling the oneness of everything. It's hard to explain.

My cholesterol remained too high according to my doctor's chart, though my HDLs were very high also. My Katahdin weight of 115 was impossible to maintain back at home. And the stress of living normal life occasionally keeps me awake at night. The physical sense of well being that I had in the last third of the hike was ephemeral. I changed jobs to something that I felt was more worth my time and dedication, but I retired as soon as I was able. I knew that I wanted to live where I could walk in the woods every day. I now live in a house surrounded by woods, on the edge of the Cohutta Wilderness. A creek runs through my property in hearing distance from my porch. I live in my playground and my refuge. What could be better? ■

Georgia ForestWatch welcomes the following new members

William Arcand

Sam Austin and Anita Stewart

Pamela Benvenue

Katherine Berg

Cappy Calhoun

Clayton Womans Club

Jerry Gonzalez

John and Carrie Kane

Oren Kleinberger and Jill Gottesman

Martin Mihalic and Shari Watkins-Mihalic

Joy and Ken Streater

Barbara Steinhaus

Michael and Debra Tyson

2009 Financial Report

Income		
	Earned Income	$5,161.76
	Program Fees	6,890.84
	Membership Dues	19,295.00
	Contributions	106,689.25
	Grants	45,000.00
	Sponsorships	11,500.00
	Total Income	**$194,536.85**
Expense		
	Administrative	$45,665.57
	Program	194,066.30
	Total Expense	**$239,731.87**
Net Income		**- $45,195.02**
Total Assets		**$222,818.59**

Final decision issued for Watergauge pine thinning and "bog habitat enhancement"

by Darren Wolfgang : Forest Ecologist

The Chattooga River Ranger District has approved burning of 1,000 acres, thinning 318 acres of dense pine stands and enhancement of seven acres of bog habitat in the Watergauge Road area of Rabun County.

The approved project represents a smaller portion of a larger, 508-acre "woodland restoration" proposal, which ForestWatch had appealed with the help of the Southern Environmental Law Center. Our appeal was based largely on the point that the scale and experimental nature of the "woodland restoration" required detailed environmental analysis, rather than a "categorical exclusion" from detailed analysis as proposed by the district.

Rather than contest the appeal, the district chose to exclude the more experimental portions of the project that were targeted for "woodland restoration" until an environmental assessment can be conducted. Under the new proposal, the district will focus its efforts on thinning the 318 acres of overly dense pine stands currently at risk for Southern Pine Beetle infestations, as well as using hand tools to remove some of the woody brush and girdling larger trees that are shading out desired wetland plants in the seven-acre "bog habitat." The district also agreed to conduct an environmental assessment for future creation of "open pine/oak habitat conditions" in this area, as our appeal sought, thus avoiding a misguided and potentially precedent-setting use of a categorical exclusion from detailed environmental analysis.

The Forest Service has agreed to the following important project implementation details for the pine and wetland ecosystem management:

- No wheeled or tracked vehicles will be allowed to operate in the bog habitat or riparian areas, with the exception of a few Forest Service designated stream crossings.
- Species level monitoring will be implemented to track the impacts of the use of prescribed fire and vegetation management within the project area
- Prescribed fires will be ignited on ridge tops and allowed to back down slope and self-extinguish in more moist areas to better mimic the beneficial impacts of natural fire in the project area, as opposed to "forcing" fire into areas that would not normally burn.
- Proceeds from the timber sale of the pine stands will be reinvested in the project area to combat the existence and spread of non-native invasive species.
- The majority of slash and treetops will be scattered across those temporary roads, skid trails and log decks that will not be planted with a mixture of native or non-invasive grasses and forbs.
- As part of the thinning, "hardwoods will be retained, prioritizing the retention of hard and soft mast producing hardwoods over the less desirable hardwoods such as tulip poplars and red maple."

Our hats go off to Sarah A. Francisco, senior attorney at the Southern Environmental Law Center for her skillful negotiations with Chattooga River District Ranger David W. Jensen in arriving at this outcome. We also appreciate Ranger Jensen's willingness to rethink the original proposal and engage ForestWatch as a collaborative partner in this project. ■

From the Director

(continued from page 2)

leaders needed to permanently protect special areas like Mountaintown through legislation. We seem to be a long way from finding common ground between roadless supporters and the agencies that would rather manage than protect roadless areas. These agencies have hundreds of thousands of acres to work on – they don't have to manage roadless areas. They also have shrinking budgets, revenue losses and massive maintenance backlogs across the forest. Georgians will need to communicate with their elected officials in a much more effective way if we are to break through the solid wall of resistance from managers.

You can make a difference. Let your elected officials know you want roadless areas in Georgia permanently protected. Contact information for reaching the staffers of key Representatives and Senators can be found in this issue. Give the gift of protected public forests to yourself and the future. The forests can't speak for themselves. You have to do it. ■

FORESTWATCH RETREAT

On Saturda
together a
rustic appr

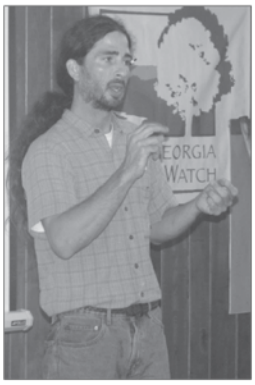
Thanks to

PROGRAM

An attentive crowd learned about many issues affecting the forests with interactive panel and presentations by:

(Left to Right)
Duncan Hughes
Charlie Seabrook
Denny Rhodes
George Bain
Joe Gatins

Presenters not pictured:
Wayne Jenkins, Jim Walker and Darren Wolfgang



GREAT FOOD

We ate well thanks to:
(Not pictured)
Melinda & Andy Edwards,
Jim Sullivan,
Dudley Sisk & Barbara Luhn,
Grapes & Beans,
Mercier Orchards,

and:
Michael Griffith (right),
David Govus (on the grill)

Along with a host of volunteer helpers!

ay, October 10, 2009, members and friends learned and played
t the ForestWatch Retreat held at Vogel State Park. This year's
oach was a great success.

everyone who helped - we couldn't have done it without you!

VOLUNTEERS

Too many to list here gave their time and talent to help make this event happen!

Volunteer of the Year, Joe Gatins (at left), received a hand made split rivercane basket.

HONEY

Thanks to our friends Carl & Virginia Webb who generously donated a jar of award-winning honey for every retreat attendee. Buy the best honey in the world at: www.mtnhoney.com

HIKES

Despite light rain, many folks went on one of 4 educational hikes lead by:

Ben Cash, Jim Sullivan, Ted Doll (adjacent photo, at right), and Wayne Jenkins & Darren Wolfgang (lower row hiker photo)

MUSIC

The evening campfire was a spontaneous explosion of poetry & storytelling layered with music by:

(Left to Right)
Allan Hall
Chris Brooks
Jim Sullivan

All photos Lori Martell except hiker photo bottom row which is by Bill Goldstrohm.

Southern Blue Ridge District needs help

by Bill Brooks : ForestWatch Volunteer

The beautiful forests of the southern Blue Ridge District on the Chattahoochee National Forest have felt the full brunt of being an urban public forest. Much has changed during the last 50 years since the starting point for the Appalachian Trail was shifted 21 miles north to Springer Mountain. Back then, quiet forest coves and high ridgelines saw only the occasional local hunter, angler or horseback rider. Backpackers were a rare breed and mountain bikers unheard of. How things have changed!

If a forest can be loved to death, this area is a prime candidate. At its heart is Georgia's second-largest roadless area, Lance Creek, at 9,064 acres. Surrounding this roadless area is the southern half of the Ed Jenkins National Recreation Area (which contains the termini of both the Appalachian and Benton MacKaye trails.) The focus area of this article also includes lands a bit further south and east from the Ed Jenkins border. The area is rich with trout streams and waterfalls. Camping, hiking, fishing and hunting opportunities are all easily accessed from the south, the exposed underbelly facing Atlanta and the region's millions of recreation-hungry residents. Once lonely forest stands and clear trout streams now barely get a weekday rest from weekend warriors on foot, bike, horse, and off-road vehicle seeking outdoor adventure.

Threats to the district

One heavily overused part of this area is Georgia's top-rated mountain bike trail, Jake-Bull Mountain Trail System. One of the better maps of the system is at this link: www.mindspring.com/~keithmc/rides/maps/bulljake3.pdf. As a multi-user trail system, mountain bikers, horse riders, hikers, and traditional users (hunters and anglers) all share the area, though not always amicably. Over 35 miles of official trails and several miles of unauthorized trails cross the area. As we see all across the Chattahoochee, expanding trail systems are placed on poorly engineered, old and abandoned logging roads or "socially created" trails, which by use become unwisely recognized as official. Since most of these trails were never designed for heavy horse or bike use, erosion of silt into the trout waters of Jones Creek or the Lance Creek watershed is a significant problem.

A 2007 assessment of the failing trail system by the U.S. Forest Service calls for relocation and closure of some of these trails. Some new trails and day-use areas are also proposed. At this time, the Forest Service is relocating over five miles of trails within the Bull-Jake system, with more trail work scheduled in fiscal year 2010. Georgia ForestWatch will be offering input as additional trail relocations are defined during the scoping process. As the Lance Creek area is one of the largest roadless areas in the forest, it is expected that some inappropriate trails will be closed and additional trails opened in less sensitive areas, particularly in the basin below Springer Mountain. (Jones and Lance Creeks start as springs on the east and west side of Springer Mountain). ForestWatch has sent reports to Forest Service staff in Blairsville and Gainesville on several occasions this year as the trail system continued to deteriorate.

Groups such as the Chattahoochee Horse Trail Association, Southern Off-Road Bicycle Association, and the Georgia Equine Rescue League support the trails with workdays, signage, and clean-ups. Years ago, Trout Unlimited invested heavily in stream barriers for Jones and Lance Creeks, maintaining the native trout waters as "trophy waters" status. But, all this good work has not been enough to protect the area from unacceptable degradation, perhaps in part because of the above-mentioned lack of initial good trail system design. Or, perhaps the multi-use approach has run its course and you just can't have all things everywhere.

Recreational users often arrive surprised to learn that large group activities such as professional mountain bike races, competitive horse trail rides or marathons are being held. These events sometimes use camping areas at the Bull or Jake Mountain trailheads, or the 4-H Camp Wahsega, a state-owned inholding to the east. During these large events, groups fill the 18 primitive campsites along Jones Creek, no longer regulated by a registration and fee collection system.

Recently, reports of excessive and unapproved large-group use of the area have spurred new attention from the Forest Service. The use of trails and roads during wet periods compounds the problem – something not even allowed on designated off-highway vehicle trails such as the nearby Whissenhut OHV Trail System (These trails are closed during heavy rains and much of the winter wet season.) The old Nimblewill Gap road down into the Bucktown Valley is nearly impassable, with crushed and blocked culverts and sediment-loaded ditches bleeding muddy torrents down the road every heavy rain. The segment south of the gap is not much better. The story repeats on many other roads and trails across the area: failure due to overuse and inadequate maintenance.

Military use of the people's forest

Adding to the civilian recreational impacts is military training. To the east, dating to the post-World War II era, is the U.S. Army Ranger 5th Mountain Battalion at Camp Merrill. Operated year-round, the camp hosts Army Rangers-in-training as they conduct mountaineering and survival training. Military use is not limited to Camp Merrill, but also includes the national forest outside its boundaries. Army and National Guard units use the public forests in day and night training operations. Humvees, troop marches and helicopter landings are routine here and further east on Mount Yonah.

During the last year, military training in the Jones Creek area has increased, with platoon-sized squads coming for group exercises supported by a large troop carrier truck, a Humvee, and a medical truck. This surge in military use made Road 77-A impassible. After a tip-off, Forest Service staff went to investigate while a platoon of 101st Airborne troops from Fort Campbell, Kentucky was encamped. The Forest Service and Army then worked together to get the road graded, graveled and passable for traffic, just in time for the wet winter season and the increased traffic from game hunters. The support here was crucial, as the Blue Ridge district has over 500 miles of road to maintain, with only a $60,000 annual budget—a huge shortfall. Still, this military training was not planned ahead of time through appropriate Forest Service channels, and citizens question whether this is an appropriate use of public forests.

A recipe for disaster: Use up, budget down

While use of the area has increased, both state and federal resources have dwindled. The Forest Service's eight district offices have consolidated to four, making the Blairsville office responsible for policing and maintaining this area despite it being too far away to do so. State support has also fallen to a new low. In July, budget cuts caused the Georgia Department of Natural Resource's Wildlife Resources Division to abandon the southern 17,000 acres of the Blue Ridge Wildlife Management Area. Staff and budget for game management and law enforcement were severely reduced. The district DNR office is in Gainesville, also too far away to adequately manage. Busy Lake Lanier often demands most of the four officers' time in this 6-county area, so game wardens are scarce. And, only five federal law enforcement officers are assigned to all of the Chattahoochee. Users are encouraged to assist law enforcement by reporting violators to the DNR Tip Line, 800-241-4113, or 911.

The sad results of this increased visitation, lack of law enforcement, and budget cuts are multitudinous: Wear-and-tear on area roads, trails, campsites and streams, broken and missing gates, missing signage, collapsed culverts, rutted roads, and illegal use of closed trails and roads especially by off-road vehicle traffic. Campsites along Nimblewill Creek and Jones Creek have been littered. Wildlife food plots in the area have been ripped-up by mud-boggers as has much of the northern end of the badly eroded road from Nimblewill Gap. Cabin break-ins along the forest boundaries and at the Jones Creek inholding have increased, as well as car break-ins at trailheads and theft of road signs. When reported, these cases are logged in different county records, making it hard to have a clear picture of the problem. Gone are the days when a game warden lived in a cabin at Winding Stair Gap, guarding the forest from within.

(continued on page 12)

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Southern Blue Ridge District

(continued from page 11)

Citizen input by ForestWatch members and others lends much needed support to the federal and state rangers striving to protect the area. This has lead to an increase in patrols by Lumpkin County deputies, which have the 17,000 acres of the former Blue Ridge WMA in their jurisdiction. These much-appreciated patrols may not be adequate to control the burgeoning lawlessness. Perusing law enforcement reports illustrates the challenge. To do so visit the following link: www.georgiawildlife.com/enforcement/law-enforcement-reports.

ForestWatch believes the problems in this district exemplify the myriad challenges the agency is ill equipped to resolve. As an urban forest, sitting on the doorstep of Atlanta's five million citizens, the Forest Service has neither the staff nor budget to deal with increasing recreational use, deteriorating trails and camping areas, growing user conflicts, environmental degradation and illegal activity here and across the forest. The approach is presently reactive and inadequate to get ahead of the problem. The assumption seems to be that the forest can accommodate an ever-expanding array of recreational pursuits, all trying to share space but impacting each other's experience and the resource.

Perhaps the Forest Service needs to freeze trail system expansion and initiate a comprehensive forest-wide environmental analysis covering all forms of recreation, rather than this reactive project by project approach currently in play. Recreation groups who have taken responsibility for maintenance of specific trail sections should honestly evaluate their capacity to maintain them. A citizens' task force should be convened to collaborate with the agency for planning an effective forest-wide recreation management plan. The choice is simple: create a plan to guide recreational use of the forest, or forever react to a growing cadre of expensive and dangerous problems. ■

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Success over illegal ATV activity in Cashes Valley

by Wayne Jenkins : Executive Director

All Terrain Vehicles (ATVs) arrived in the Chattahoochee National Forest in the late 1980s. These compact four-wheeled vehicles with rough tread tires could go most anywhere and by the late 1990s they had. This national forest was riddled with illegal trails, with trenches worn in banks and riparian areas mud bogged. One of the worst areas was the Cashes Valley area.

This beautiful valley of about 5,000 acres is part of the Mountaintown Roadless Area. It has some private property remaining as in holdings and, at one time, featured a school, churches and a store. Boyd Johnson, the last of the full time original inhabitants, lived in the valley without electricity until the 1990s.

The valley is accessed by an old public road with three fords that cross Fightingtown Creek. This road is not a Forest Service road and is not maintained by the two counties that it passes through. Starting in the mid 1990s, ATVs started using the road and within a few years had created a web of illegal trails stretching all the way to the Benton MacKaye trail on the ridgeline that wraps around the valley. Riparian areas along the creek turned into mud bogs, and accessible slopes were turned into hill climbs with trenches worn waist-deep. The beautiful 19th century church in Cashes Valley, along with several other remaining structures, was burned to the ground. Garbage was strewn everywhere and a general lawlessness prevailed.

Matters improved somewhat after 2000 when Georgia ForestWatch forced the state of Georgia to enforce the law and prohibit counties from illegally selling license plates to ATVs. Without license plates, Forest Service law enforcement officers could ticket ATVs for riding on the Cashes Valley public road. It became much more difficult to reach illegal trails or mud bogging sites.

Unfortunately in 2002, then Supervisor of the Chattahoochee National Forest bowed to political pressure and forbade officers from ticketing ATVs on the Cashes Valley road. ForestWatch protested at the time but to no avail. ATVs quickly took over the area and destroyed all rehabilitation that had occurred. Tens of thousands of dollars of mulching and grassing by the Forest Service was destroyed.

ForestWatch continued to map the illegal trails, photograph the damage and send this information to the Forest Service. In the last few years, the situation has improved as a new Ranger, Michele

David Govus photo

Signs declaring motorized vehicle use illegal were posted at key points in Cashes Valley. Also, bulldozers were used to create barricades to close illegal ATV routes. The good news is – it's working!

Jones, took over the area and George Bain was appointed as the new Forest Supervisor. We lobbied Supervisor Bain to rescind the ban on ticketing ATVs riding on the public road and he did. In June 2008, Ranger Jones committed a crew and two bulldozers to closing illegal trails and rehabilitating ATV damage. Several ForestWatch volunteers worked for a number of days with the Forest Service crew pointing out all the illegal trails and the best places to block them. Law enforcement officers then began aggressively ticketing violators on the public road.

A thorough survey just conducted in December by ForestWatch volunteers revealed no ATV activity in the valley—an amazing transformation and a great victory for Georgia ForestWatch, the Forest Service and for the forest! Special thanks to Supervisor Bain and Ranger Jones for committing the necessary leadership and resources to begin healing this once ravaged area. ■

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