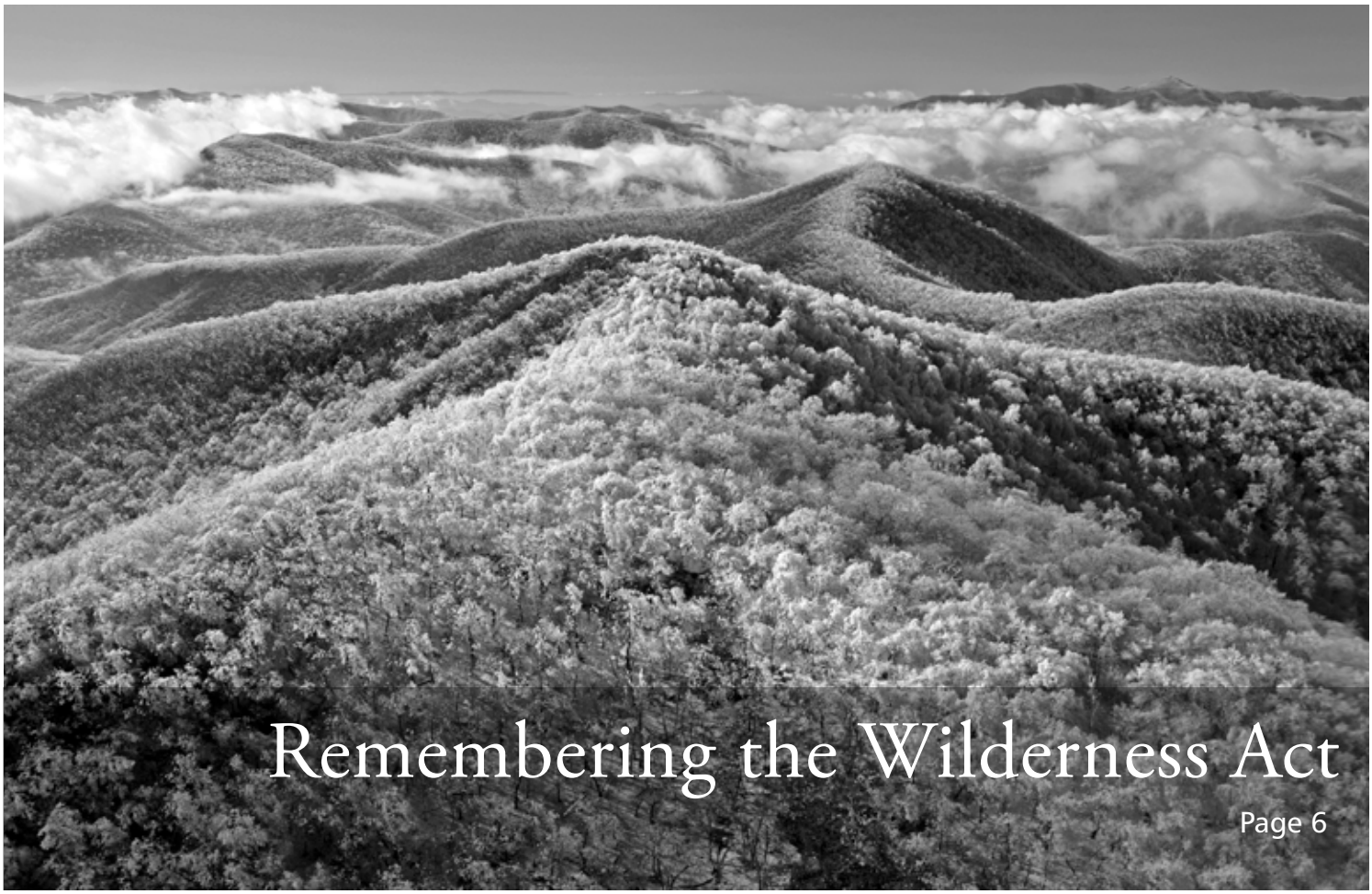
Forest News

Georgia ForestWatch Quarterly Newsletter Winter 2014



Remembering the Wilderness Act

Page 6

Inside This Issue

From the Director 2

Monthly Donors Provide Stability & Confidence 3

2013 Fall Retreat 4

Raven Cliffs Wilderness Trail Work Party 5

Remembering the Wilderness Act ... 6

Prescribed Burning in Our National Forests 7

A Hike from Lake Winfield Scott 8

Protecting Wilderness – The Rich Mountain Wilderness 10

Welcome New Members! 11

From the Director

Beetles save needles!

Mary Topa
Executive Director

Mark Dalusky, Research Coordinator and Forest Entomologist at the University of Georgia, spoke at our Fall Retreat on October 5th and updated Georgia ForestWatch members on the Hemlock Woolly Adelgid Biocontrol project. As many of you know, Georgia ForestWatch - Wayne Jenkins, in particular - was instrumental in getting funds to establish a predatory beetle lab at the University of Georgia in 2007 for the rearing of beetles that are adelgid specialists. Since 2007, controlled releases of these predator beetles have been made in the field in conjunction with sister labs at Clemson University, Young Harris College and North Georgia University. Many of these researchers were at the HemlockFest in Dahlonega on November 2 and updated the public on their progress. I was asked to be the forest ecology expert during a question and answer period on Saturday. I was heartened by the progress of the biocontrol project, given the scope of the problem and limited support system these researchers have. I know many of you have supported the project, and like me, hope that their efforts can help save our majestic hemlocks.

Biological control of hemlock woolly adelgid (HWA) offers the best hope for long-term management of HWA in forests where chemical control is impractical or unsustainable, particular since resistant populations of native hemlock have not been found. As a researcher who has been involved with invasive insect projects, I know that it can take decades before predators become established in the field (if they become established), and it can take just as long to assess their effectiveness in controlling the targeted invasive insect. Successful control in the field is often mediated by several predators, not just one. One thing is for sure – the HWA is here to stay. It won't be eradicated, but the researchers hope that the predator beetles will keep HWA numbers low enough that native hemlocks can coexist with this new pest.

For those of you who were not able to attend our retreat, I've asked Mark Dalusky to help out with a brief update in this column. So thank you Mark! As of this year, the researchers have found HWA infestations at some level across hemlock stands in the entire state of Georgia. From the Jacks River Trail region eastward, infestation is severe with significant hemlock decline and subsequent mortality ranging from 40 to 90%. The most severely impacted stands are in the eastern third of North Georgia. Hemlock decline, while substantial, is not as severe along the southernmost boundary of hemlock (Amicalola, Cartecay, Fort Mountain, Tails Creek, Rock Creek and Mill Creek drainages). Hemlocks in the far western part of Georgia are still quite healthy, with occasional pockets showing moderate HWA levels of infestation (in Cloudland Canyon State Park and Lookout Mountain drainages).

The University of Georgia and sister labs from Young Harris College, Clemson and North Georgia University will continue their efforts to implement biological control of this pest using a native predator solution. The native predators are proving to be much more effective than the expensive and unproven foreign predator track currently being pursued by the USFS Forest Health Protection unit and their colleagues. Dalusky and colleagues have released the two available North American predators *(Laricobius nigrinus* and *Scymnus coniferarum*) in nearly 170 distinct sites, from the Chattooga River across North Georgia to the Fort Mountain and Rock Creek drainages. This season they plan on releasing substantial numbers of predators at Cloudland Canyon State Park and an associated land-trust property. Several dozen of their older release sites are showing very good recovery of hemlock and establishment of the native predators in a significant percentage of sites sampled.

In Georgia, predators don't prevent hemlock health decline entirely, but this may come with time. The researchers believe that they will know within the next five years what level of biocontrol has been established. Their hope is that predators will lessen the severity of hemlock decline and shorten the duration, ultimately establishing an equilibrium whereby the predators keep HWA below damaging densities. Mark Dalusky cites an excellent example of just this evolutionary state in the Boone-Banner Elk-Grandfather Mountain area of the North Carolina high country where *Laricobius nigrinus* has established over some 300 square miles, and hemlocks have been recovering nicely for the past three-four years. Predators can be collected from this area by the thousands for redistribution to other hemlock sites. Dr. Richard McDonald of Symbiont Biological Pest Management is the progenitor of this excellent example of classical biological control of an exotic, invasive pest using a native predator solution. We tip our hats to Dr. McDonald, and hope to benefit by his example.

In summary, there are tens of thousands of dead trees across North Georgia and we'll lose that many more at least. But there is hope in the dramatic improvement witnessed in many predator release sites. Their soil-injected insecticide program has temporarily saved tens of thousands of significant and often very large hemlocks. As the predators take hold and spread, the goal is to reduce pesticide use rapidly – as this is only a short-term solution – until treatment is no longer necessary.

Beetles Save Needles!

Mary A. Topa

Monthly donors provide stability and confidence

by Brian Wills : Board Member

As a board member and donor, I have been very encouraged with our organization's capacity to raise funds over the last year. Fundraising is tough for every organization, and to see our supporters rally around Georgia ForestWatch has been a great encouragement. I believe the support we've received this year represents much more than the operating dollars received. Rather, I believe the financial commitments made this year by our donors are a statement about the value of an organization doing important work and doing it effectively. It's a vote of confidence that our organization matters. If you're one of those donors who helped provide that vote of confidence this year, thank you – you are a difference maker for conservation in north Georgia.

2014 promises to be an exceptional year for Georgia ForestWatch. We have ambitious plans for outreach in the Atlanta metro area and with our Georgia colleges and universities. We want to build bridges to the many metro residents who look to the forests of north Georgia for recreational activities. Furthermore, we recognize the strategic importance of reaching a younger generation – the next wave of conservation practitioners in the southern Appalachians. And without question, we will stay the course in 2014 with regard to our core work – protecting the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest. We hear from many of our supporters and partners that Georgia ForestWatch remains the most effective organization of its kind working in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest. The financial support we receive each year is critical for ensuring that this work continues.

I want to take a moment and encourage our financial supporters to consider making a monthly giving commitment to Georgia ForestWatch this coming year. Monthly commitments add stability to the organization. Donors who pledge and give monthly help us plan and manage our budget more effectively. When we can count on regular contributions, we can plan our organizational efforts with confidence. From a donor standpoint, it's easy to set up. My wife and I started making our gifts monthly in 2013 using an automated function via our bank's website.

Once again, I want to thank all of you who continue to support the work of this important organization. Recently, I spent the day hiking in north Georgia with a friend and, as always, was filled with overwhelming gratitude that I am able to enjoy such a beautiful part of the world. As someone who has spent years in conservation, I am keenly aware that we cannot take our forests for granted. The work of Georgia ForestWatch is a significant, actionable way we can participate in preserving the natural legacy of our great state.

Thank you for your partnership in 2013 and all we will accomplish together in 2014! ■

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2013 Fall Retreat

by Mary Topa : Executive Director

The 2013 Fall Retreat on October 5th at Vogel State Park was a big success and a good time was had by all. The weather was gorgeous, the company was grand, the food was delicious, and we had just the right balance of informational talks with fun activities. It was another great opportunity to spend time with all the wonderful people who make up the Georgia ForestWatch family. If you were unable to attend, mark your calendars for next year - our 2014 Fall Retreat & Annual Membership Meeting will be held once again at Vogel State Park on October 4th!

We kicked off the retreat on Saturday morning with a celebration of Georgia ForestWatch successes during the past year, a discussion of new initiatives, and updates from various ForestWatch partners. Mark Dalusky from the University of Georgia led a discussion on the Hemlock Woolly Adelgid biocontrol project. As many of you know, Georgia Forest Watch – and Wayne Jenkins in particular – was instrumental in getting funds to support a lab at University of Georgia in 2007 for the rearing of predator beetles. Carlos Martel gave an overview of CoTrails activities during the last year, and Sarah Francisco from the Southern Environmental Law Center talked about the progress to date on the Locust Stake OHV Trail System.

After lunch it was time to get outdoors and enjoy the beautiful fall weather with activities for young and old alike: birdhouse painting, tree climbing with Genevieve Summers and Jim Walker, paddle boating, hikes with Mark Warren (Through the Eyes of the Cherokee) and Tom Govus (Coosa Bald), and a nature photography hike with Honor Woodard. Ted and Lynda Doll

Photo credit: Mary Topa

Tree-climbing with Genevieve Summers and Jim Walker

Chief cooks, Melinda Edwards and Volunteer of the Year, Michael Griffith, getting ready for the lunch crowd.

regaled many of us with stories and pictures of their recent Africa trip. And for those who just wanted to catch up with friends and enjoy the great weather, there was music in the afternoon and evening, thanks to jam sessions by Brian Wills, Marie Dunkle, Ben Wills and Matt Knutson.

We honored Michael Griffith with our Volunteer of the Year Award, thanking him for all that he has done for Georgia ForestWatch over the years. We see his artistry every time we link on to Georgia ForestWatch's website, get our action and hike alerts and renew our memberships online. Michael manages our office email system, and basically all things computer. In other words, in this tech-savvy world, he makes our staff's lives easier and Georgia ForestWatch look good! But let us not forget the chef side of Michael – he has worked at our fall retreat in the kitchen as one of the chief cooks (along with Melinda Edwards and David Govus) and bottle washers for more years than his wife Peg can remember. Last year, he was the chief cook and didn't sit down for 48 hours! Thank you Michael for all that you have done for ForestWatch!

Our food was delicious and plentiful this year thanks to Michael, Melinda and Andy Edwards, David Govus, all the chili cook-off contestants and volunteers who helped with preparation and clean-up. We couldn't have pulled this off without all your culinary and organizational skills, and tireless energy!

(continued on page 5)

At the evening campfire, in addition to storytelling and live music by Brian and Ben Wills and Matt Knutson, we had a special treat. Janet Westervelt took folks on an Owl Prowl, but unfortunately, the owls didn't know there was a party and none showed up. Hopefully, we can do this again next year and get a better response to our owl RSVP.

Many attendees stayed overnight to go on a hike with Ben Cash on Sunday, or to enjoy Trahlyta Lake and each other a while longer before the journey home.

We look forward to seeing y'all at the 2014 Fall Retreat! We would like to thank our sponsors, donors, staff (with a big shout-out to Sherri Richardson, our new Office Manager), Tom Colkett and members of the Fall Retreat Committee, and all our volunteers for making our 2013 Fall Retreat a huge success! ■

Thank you!

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Raven Cliffs Wilderness Trail work party

by Sue Harmon & Kathy Stege : GFW Members

On September 28, a hearty handful of ForestWatchers joined Forest Service personnel and a large team of volunteers from a variety of organizations to celebrate the 20th annual National Public Lands Day, the nation's largest, single-day volunteer effort for public lands.

Chattahoochee Oconee National Forest Supervisor Betty Mathews described this special day of service: "If you love your national forests and the many recreation opportunities they have to offer, you have volunteers to thank. Volunteering is a fantastic way for you and your family to connect with nature and to other folks who share similar interests. And no experience is needed—there are always things that anyone can do, regardless of age or skill level, to improve the forest for future visitors."

The work at hand focused on wilderness trail maintenance at the Raven Cliff Falls Trail. This heavily-used trail meanders alongside Dodd Creek which means erosion from the trail can be a real problem for the health of the creek. The crew of volunteers removed and rebuilt one bridge and also worked to divert water on the many badly eroded, muddy patches along the trail. Wielding fire rakes and Pulaskis, moving some rather large rocks, hauling limbs and scattering leaves, as well picking up trash provided plenty of opportunities for all to be involved. Many passing hikers expressed their thanks for the volunteers' work.

Consider signing up for this event next year! Volunteering is a great way to enjoy time with Forestwatch friends while doing something good for our forests!

Photo credit: Mirza Balic

Georgia ForestWatch volunteers on National Public Lands Day

Remembering the Wilderness Act

by Daniel Force : Outreach and Development Coordinator

On September 3rd, 1964, the U.S. Congress had the foresight to pass the Wilderness Act. This enlightened legislation allows for the federal protection of land for the sake of nature and natural processes, where man is only a visitor and does not degrade these areas with development or disturbance by motorized equipment or vehicles. The Wilderness designation ensures that land will remain relatively untouched and provide an unrivaled escape into nature. The 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act is approaching, and Georgia ForestWatch is partnering with several organizations to help celebrate throughout the year!

President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the Wilderness Act in 1964.

A Little History

The Wilderness Act was not written over night. Former Wilderness Society Executive Director Howard Zahniser began drafting the bill in 1955. Bills based on Zahniser's draft were introduced in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives in 1956. After eight years, 18 hearings, and 66 revisions of the bill, the Wilderness Act was passed. The passing of the Wilderness Act not only established a system of Wilderness, it also put in place a process for expanding the system. Now, rather than having to wait for land management agencies to make wilderness recommendations, citizens could develop their own wilderness proposals and submit them directly to a member of Congress. Altogether, the Wilderness Act is responsible for nearly 110 million acres dedicated to the National Wilderness Preservation System.

A Partnership for the Wilderness

While there are nearly 110 million acres of designated wilderness in the United States, there are substantially more lands that would fully qualify for wilderness designation, but have yet to be reviewed by the government agencies with oversight of the lands or acted upon by Congress. Georgia is fortunate, as the U.S. Forest Service has already recommended wilderness additions to the Chattahoochee National Forest, allowing for public scrutiny and support. As part of their 2004 Land and Resource Management Plan for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests, the U.S. Forest Service recommended 11 areas within the Chattahoochee National Forest to be added to the National Wilderness Preservation System. The 11 recommendations are all additions to existing wilderness areas and total 8,448 acres. The recommendations have a low degree of development and a very high degree of public support. The recommended areas are shown in the chart below.

Recommended Wilderness Additions	Acres	Adjacent Wilderness
Ben Gap (Towns)	1,294	Southern Nantahala
Shoal Branch (Towns)	412	Southern Nantahala
Tate Branch (Towns/Rabun)	1,085	Southern Nantahala
Cedar Mountain (Lumpkin)	561	Blood Mountain
Duck Branch (Union/Lumpkin/ Fannin)	190	Brasstown
Wilson Cove (Towns)	563	Brasstown
Ellicott Rock Addition (Rabun)	562	Ellicott Rock
Foster Branch (Fannin)	165	Cohutta
Ken Mountain (Lumpkin/Fannin)	527	Cohutta
Helton Creek (Union)	2,451	Raven Cliffs
Tripp Branch (Towns)	638	Tray Mountain
Total	**8,448**	

The recommendations were never implemented and Congressional action is now required. The Georgia Chapter of the Sierra Club and Georgia ForestWatch have joined together to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act by asking our U.S. Senators to introduce legislation to designate these additional wilderness areas. The Sierra Club has met with Senator Isakson's office staff who have been receptive to our cause. Together the Sierra Club and Georgia ForestWatch have reached out to wilderness and environmental groups throughout Georgia to gain support for this initiative. By gathering wide support and working with our Senators, we hope to designate these wilderness areas in celebration of the 50th anniversary.

Without this designation, these otherwise unmolested forests and waterways are potentially open to commercial logging and the ecological damage such practices bring: clear cutting of mature forests and old growth trees, destruction of wildlife habitat, and erosion and pollution in adjacent waterways. We believe that the window of

(continued on page 9)

Prescribed burning in our national forests

by Jim Walker : District Leader

The 2004 Land and Resource Management Plan for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests calls for prescribed burning on "a three-year rolling average of 30,000 acres each year." Of this 30,000 acres, the largest acreages (20,000) are to be burned in the Oconee National Forest each year on average, leaving 10,000 acres to be burned each year in the Chattahoochee National Forest. Data for the whole Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests were unavailable, but the Blue Ridge Ranger District alone has burned 3,660, 3,364, 3,583 and 4,930 acres in 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013, respectively.

Every prescribed burn scoping notice cites the same three purposes justifying the prescribed burn: forest health, wildlife habitat improvement and hazardous fuel reduction.

According to the scoping notices, under forest health, fire is supposed "to contribute to the maintenance or restoration of native tree species whose role in forest ecosystems has been reduced by past land use or is threatened by insect and disease, fire exclusion, or other factors." It does seem likely that prescribed burning of a certain intensity, conducted at a particular time of year, and with a specific return interval would favor certain species. In particular, it is not hard to kill white pine saplings up to a certain size with fire. However, there is no documented evidence that burning has increased oak regeneration, a desired goal, in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests.

The scoping notices also say that prescribed fire is supposed to improve wildlife habitat by "enhancing habitat diversity, creating habitats required for wildlife and plant communities, including disturbance-dependent forest communities, and reducing evergreen understory to promote regeneration of desirable species such as oaks." Unfortunately, there is little or no documentation to date that prescribed burns have enhanced habitat diversity, attracting the desired wildlife species in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests.

While the effectiveness of fire in achieving the first two purposes is debatable, at least they address an appropriate practical concern. But that is not the case with the third purpose of prescribed burning: hazardous fuel reduction.

I have lived in eastern Gilmer County near the national forest for 38 years, and in that time there has never been a catastrophic fire, no raging fire like you see so often televised out West, never the loss of a single home. Only once in that time have I known a wildfire to get up into the canopy, and that was in a very small area. When I was a Boy Scout leader, I always told the boys not to pick up firewood off the ground because it would not burn well, if at all, since it is almost always too wet. The North Georgia mountains have too much rainfall and humidity throughout most of the year to support a catastrophic fire.

According to the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the 2004 Land and Resource Management Plan, in 30 years (1970-1999) there were 3,249 wildfires (any fire that was not prescribed) on the Chattahoochee and Oconee National Forests. No separate data were given for the two forests, so it is not known how many of these

Photo credit: Lanary Winslett

fires occurred on the Chattahoochee or Oconee National Forest. Because of its topography, climate, and history, the Oconee National Forest may be more prone to fire, but it is also one-sixth the size of the Chattahoochee National Forest. These fires burned a total of 42,845 acres, or 1,428 acres per year. In the 30-year span, only 13 fires burned over 300 acres. Humans caused 76% of the fires, including 1,889 arson fires; 142 fires were caused by lightning. There is no indication in the 2004 Land and Resource Management Plan or the Environmental Impact Statement that there has ever been a catastrophic fire on the Chattahoochee or Oconee National Forest.

There are limits to how much burning the Forest Service can do. Strict adherence to specific criteria for weather conditions such as air temperature, relative humidity, wind speed and direction, etc. severely limits the number of days when burns are allowed. Smoke is always a problem. And the Forest Service, which is grossly underfunded, simply does not have the resources to greatly expand its burning program.

While Georgia ForestWatch has occasionally opposed proposed burning of an ecologically inappropriate site such as Rich Mountain, we have not opposed the prescribed burning program in general. However, there is one part of the program that particularly bothers me and that is the constant emphasis on hazardous fuel reduction.

Of course, anything can happen; it cannot be said that the risk of catastrophic fire on the Chattahoochee National Forest is absolutely zero. But it is certainly negligible. Efforts to scare homeowners and the general public with talk about issues that are applicable to western fires, such as "extreme fire behavior," "spotting distance" (how far firebrands are carried by wind and convection), and creating "defensible space within the wildland urban interface," are deceptive, to say the least. Why does the Forest Service feel the need to use such boilerplate language to justify its prescribed burning program on the Chattahoochee National Forest? And is its rationale for other projects ("woodland restoration," for example) similarly divorced from reality? ■

A hike from Lake Winfield Scott

by Tom Colkett : District Leader

On a cool, somewhat cloudy November morning, we meet in the parking lot near the trail head beside Lake Winfield Scott. Fourteen people and five dogs; for the most part, already friends, almost family through years of association with Georgia ForestWatch; hiking together, planning together, meeting to study Forest Service plans and fighting to protect the national forests here in Georgia. There is no battle today, this is a celebration of what has been protected, this beautiful forest and the mountains that hold and support them and provide the water for the most of the state of Georgia as well as parts of Alabama and Florida.

Starting out, just before it empties into Lake Winfield Scott, we cross Slaughter Creek on a small wooden bridge. As we reach the service road to the campsites and cabins, we stop to admire the remnants of a nice patch of kidneyleaf Grass-of-Parnassus, still a few fading blossoms left, just a shadow of the earlier beauty of these plants. They grow here where the waters cascading down Slaughter Mountain tend to slow down, stop and surrender the rich soil they've picked up along their journey. This is one of the only places I've seen it growing in these mountains. Another less common plant, royal fern, also grows here, and is again an indicator of the rich, wet springy soils at the bottom of this mountain cove. Just around the corner from here and before entering the forest proper, we find some stiff gentian still blooming brightly. We will continue to find it sporadically throughout the hike.

As we follow Jarrard Gap trail up to the Appalachian Trail (AT), the footing is rocky and covered in leaves making it important to watch where we put our feet. Leaves on the ground help us identify white, scarlet, chestnut, northern and southern red oaks, hickory, sourwood, maple and black locust. Others are identified by their distinctive barks, especially the sourwoods with their elephantine skin and twisted light-searching trunks, and the northern red oaks with long multiple smooth-indented grooves looking like ski slopes carved into wooded mountain slopes.

Photo credit: Larry Winslett

A great view of Blood Mountain can be enjoyed from Lake Winfield Scott.

Before we reach the AT, we meet up with an interesting family group. A woman and four college-aged kids from North Georgia University had rented a cabin back toward Suches and were told they could easily hike up to Blood Mountain from there. This is about 7 mile one-way trip, and they are completely unprepared for the hike. No food, no water, no rain gear, no proper footwear and they are lost. This will be the first of multiple meetings with this family group and we let them know that their current course of direction (down the Jarrard Gap trail) will only take them farther away from their goal. We help redirect them, share some snack bars and give them directions each of the several times we meet over the next couple of hours. They are in remarkably good spirits considering their predicament, but, in the end, they give

(continued on next page)

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A Hike from Lake Winfield Scott

(continued from page 8)

up the idea of getting to Blood Mountain for the day, and finally accept a ride back to their cabin from one of our hike members after following us down to the parking lot.

Along the ridge that the AT follows, the lack of leaves allows us to see down into the valleys on both sides, one of the great advantages of fall and winter hiking along with cooler temperatures. We stop at a well-used campsite along the trail for lunch, but by this time the clouds are covering the sun, and the wind is blowing stiffly through the gap. Needless to say, we decide on a quick lunch and to get back on the trail again. By this time, members of our hiking group are moving at different speeds, falling into small informal groups that continually change as we hike. Some move quickly for the exercise and exhilaration, others hike more slowly for conversation, and still others move at a much slower pace, stopping to paw tenderly at and identify plants. Along the trail we find numerous examples of lovely mountain holly, some instances of yellow birch which is pretty infrequent in Georgia, and horse gentian, a beautiful rarity. In Slaughter Gap, where the AT turns to the north towards Blood Mountain, we find a nice large group of witch hazel in full bloom, their soft yellow strands easily go unnoticed by the casual hiker. These shrubs will soon form seed pods that will explode out their seed under the pressure of a hard frost.

From here, it's all downhill, 2.5 miles along the Slaughter Creek Trail through mature oak-hickory forest, and then into areas that are less attractive, overgrown with opportunistic plants taking advantage of an old clear-cut. We point out the need for conservation groups like Georgia ForestWatch to protect against these practices. Then it's into a long stretch of heath forest, mountain laurel and huge rhododendrons tenting over and shading the trail. The trail crosses numerous small streams as it descends, and some of the lower streams have hollowed-out chestnut trunks that serving as plumbing and run the water under the trail.

As we reach the bottom of the trail we're once again in wet soils among the Parnassus and royal ferns, along with common elderberry and northern wild raisin or witherod. Now back across the bridge and a short walk to the cars where the group forms again to continue conversations started along the trail and leading into farewells and best wishes until the next time we can get together again.

If you haven't joined a Georgia Forest Watch hike yet, I heartily recommend that you do so, it's a great celebration with good friends. Till then! ■

Remembering the Wilderness Act

(continued from page 6)

opportunity to protect these special areas is closing, and if they are lost, we can never get them back.

How is Georgia ForestWatch Celebrating the 50th Anniversary?

Aside from our wilderness designation project with the Georgia Chapter of the Sierra Club, Georgia ForestWatch will be celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act throughout 2014. We are in the process of planning a series of hikes in wilderness areas that will take place throughout the year. Partnering with the U.S. Forest Service, we are targeting problem areas in the Chattahoochee National Forest and setting up opportunities for trail maintenance and work parties. Additionally, Georgia ForestWatch, the U.S. Forest Service and several other conservation organizations are collaborating to throw a big celebration for the 50th anniversary in Dahlonega, Georgia in September. The details of this event are still in the works, but it will include plenty of educational activities, speakers and entertainment. Lastly, Georgia ForestWatch will celebrate the 50th anniversary by doing what we always do, continuing the fight to protect our forests and preserve their natural beauty and meaning for future generations

If you would like to get involved and help us celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act in 2014, please contact Daniel Force at dforce@gafw.org for volunteer opportunities. ■

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Protecting wilderness – The Rich Mountain Wilderness

by David Govus : District Leader and Board Member

As the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act approaches, it is a good time to assess the state of wilderness in Georgia. On the positive side, Georgia has 117,837 acres of designated wilderness in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest and over 353,000 acres of designated wilderness in the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge in South Georgia. Georgia possesses more wilderness acres than any other state east of the Mississippi with the exception of Florida. The prospects for additional wilderness designation in Georgia are tight. Our current congressmen and senators are not supportive of wilderness designation, and without local congressional support, wilderness designation is almost impossible. The current (2004) Land and Resource Management Plan has a modest goal of adding 8,448 acres to existing wilderness areas. This proposal consists of small parcels that adjoin existing wilderness areas and are already effectively managed as wilderness. In the nine years since the plan was released, our congressional delegation has shown little or no interest in sponsoring legislation that would incorporate these areas into the adjoining wildernesses. However, we hope this will change in 2014.

Equally as important as designating more wilderness is protecting existing wilderness from human activities that degrade the wilderness experience. Georgia ForestWatch has led several initiatives to do just that.

The Rich Mountains lie several miles north of Ellijay, Georgia. Rising abruptly from an elevation of 1,400 feet to over 4,000 feet, the Rich Mountains derive their name from the dark and rich Porters Loam soil found there. The fertile soil and 70 inches of rain a year combine to make the Rich Mountains home to a wide variety of rare plants. Numerous species of trilliums, yellow birch, buckeye, columbo, yellow lady slipper and many other rare plants, coupled with dramatic boulder fields, make the Rich Mountains a special place. The Forest Service purchased 13,000 acres comprising nearly all of the Rich Mountains from northern timber companies in 1970. Included in the purchase was a substandard road 10 miles in length bisecting the area from east to west. Built by the timber companies to extract timber, this road was extremely steep and not built to acceptable standards. The Forest Service acquired the road with no easements granted to anyone. Despite this, the Forest Service refused to assert its authority over the road and did not close the road or maintain it.

Photo credit: David Govus

Erosion chute created by mudbogging prior to 2006.

In 1986, at the urging of a number of conservationists led by the famous naturalist Charles Wharton, author of The Natural Environments of Georgia, then Representative Ed Jenkins introduced and Congress passed a bill designating the 10,343-acre Rich Mountain Wilderness Area. Unfortunately, over 5,000 acres north of the road that contained many important botanical areas were excluded from wilderness designation because of the open road, and the road became the northern boundary of the wilderness area.

Over time, off-road enthusiasts discovered the road and began using it as an off-road playground. Mudbogging trucks with their rough tread tires churned up the road bed, and with no maintenance, the road deteriorated badly sending tons of silt into Stanley Creek and the headwaters of the Ellijay River. ATVs carved illegal trails deep into the wilderness and the howl of these off-road machines could be heard throughout Rich Mountain.

In 2000, Georgia ForestWatch initiated a campaign to force the Forest Service to take control of the road. At the urging of ForestWatch members, Gilmer County informed the Forest Service

Photo credit: David Govus

Picture of the road when it was a mud bogging course.

that the county had no ownership interest in the road. The Forest Service still refused to deal with the problem. Finally, in 2002, the Forest Service closed the road and initiated an analysis. In early 2005, the Forest Service announced their decision to rebuild the road with a special $600,000 appropriation arranged by then Representative Charles Taylor of western North Carolina, a longtime foe of wilderness.

Georgia ForestWatch was disappointed with the decision as we had hoped that the road would be permanently closed. ForestWatch sued the Forest Service on the grounds that rebuilding the road and adding it to the official road system violated the road density guidelines for the area contained in the 2004 Land and Resource Management Plan. In addition to the legal issues, it was poor use of taxpayer's money as the road was to be rebuilt on the same steep alignment, thus guaranteeing future failure despite several hundred thousand dollars of gravel.

Georgia ForestWatch settled the lawsuit with the Forest Service in August of 2005. As a result, the western third of the road was closed and obliterated. The eastern 6 miles was rebuilt and opened only during the fall hunting season, with ATVs banned. Now nearly 10 years later, peace and quiet reigns in the Rich Mountain Wilderness Area. All traces of the illegal ATV trails have vanished and one can enjoy an area where the hand of man is not evident. Unfortunately, as Georgia ForestWatch predicted, the steep sections of the rebuilt road with grades in excess of 30% are failing. All despite the fact that this was the most expensive road repair project per mile in the history of the Forest Service. ■

Welcome New Members!

Damion & Sherri Carufe
Rachel Doughty
Stanley Hurder
Brittany & Jamie Marschalk
Michael Patterson
Rick Starry
Jim Sullivan
Michelle Thompson
Donald Bender
Gilbert Treadwell
Gerald Anderson
Josh Horne
Kim Bergonzi
Ron McMurtrie
Kyle Goolsby
Woody Hubbard
Vicki Brewster
Scott Fields
Teri O'Sullivan

JOIN NOW! Complete this form and mail to Georgia ForestWatch, 15 Tower Road, Ellijay, GA 30540; or call 706-635-8733 to join via phone. Want to go paperless? Join online at **www.gafw.org/join_give.html**

Georgia ForestWatch Membership Form

Name: _____

Address: _____

City, State, Zip: _____

Phone: _____ E-mail: _____

Make your conservation statement – go paperless and receive your newsletter via email:

❒ Yes! I want to go paperless!

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Photo credit: Darren Wolfgang

The staff and
Board of Directors
of
Georgia ForestWatch
wish you a joyous
holiday season and
happy new year!