

BLUE RIDGE CONSERVANCY

SAVING THE PLACES YOU LOVE
ANNUAL REPORT: FISCAL YEAR 2020

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Cover photo by Lynn Willis, High South Creative

View from Elk Knob State Park, 570 acres, Ashe and Watauga Counties.

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OUR MISSION

Blue Ridge Conservancy partners with landowners and local communities to permanently protect natural resources with agricultural, cultural, recreational, ecological and scenic value in northwest North Carolina.



BRC is accredited by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission for meeting the highest standards for excellence and conservation permanence.



Exceptional levels of financial transparency and accountability earned BRC a four star rating from Charity Navigator, the nation's largest independent evaluator of nonprofit organizations.

A MESSAGE FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



As spring arrives in the Blue Ridge Mountains, optimism for the future abounds. We sense progress in the fight against COVID and a return to some of our normal daily activities. I am also optimistic about the future of Blue Ridge Conservancy as we begin a new chapter. Soon after you receive this report, BRC will occupy our new headquarters on Aho Road, between Boone and Blowing Rock. The building and 46 acres of land were a bequest from longtime supporter Audrey Bentley, who passed away in March 2019. The land was Mrs. Bentley's family farm.

Our move and required renovations would not have been possible without the generosity of Richard and Debbie Swartzel, BRC Conservation Ambassadors. Richard also played an important role in the overall concept of the structural plans and provided valuable advice throughout construction. Jim Rogers and Amber Williams, owners of Appalachian Custom Builders and BRC Conservation Ambassadors, were also pivotal partners. Jim provided the design, construction plans and construction services, in addition to making a generous donation to the project. BRC's Board of Trustees determined the move to be a wise financial decision as we look to the future growth of the organization.

The Aho property will be developed as a conservation campus. Opportunities to partner with other organizations for education and other purposes are limitless. Recognizing the property's overall potential, the Swartzels have also funded a public trail system of approximately two miles on the property. Other plans for the campus include, but are not limited to, a demonstration stream restoration project, agricultural use and habitat for native plants and pollinators. The property is only a short distance from the future Middle Fork Greenway. A public spur trail will be constructed to connect the campus to the Greenway.

Last year was challenging for each of us and for Blue Ridge Conservancy. However, our work continued because we know that access to conserved public land is vitally important to our communities. Open space provides an opportunity to reconnect to the natural world. The pandemic underscored that our physical and mental health are improved by the ability to visit a trail, a greenway, a park or a river. With those principles guiding our work, BRC successfully closed eight land protection projects in 2020, in addition to seeing improved access on existing protected lands at the Cooper Farm in Valle Crucis and at Guy Ford Road on the Watauga River. Despite the obstacles presented by the pandemic, our year in land protection was once again successful.

2021 marks an exciting new chapter for the future of Blue Ridge Conservancy. The move to our new headquarters affords financial stability and an increased presence to communicate the importance of land protection in this critical time. We are forever grateful for and humbled by all that each of you do to help further our land protection mission in the region.

Sincerely,

Charlie

WELCOME, NEW BRC TRUSTEES!



Craig Lancaster

Craig earned his MBA from Gardner-Webb University and is the President and co-founder of White Blaze Marketing, a full-service marketing and video production agency located in Boone. Although he grew up in nearby Statesville, he spent his youth fly fishing and hiking with his family in the mountains of western North Carolina. Today he enjoys hiking, kayaking and exploring the High Country with his wife, Jessica. He also enjoys running in trail races and ultramarathons across the country.



Zika Rea

Zika Rea is the President and co-founder of ZAP Endurance and the ZAP Endurance Foundation, which she founded in 2001 with her late husband Andy. ZAP Endurance hosts adult running vacations in Blowing Rock and supports a full team of Olympic-hopeful long distance runners. As a full time athlete herself, Zika finished second at the 2005 US Marathon Championships and qualified for two US Olympic Trials Marathons, in 2004 and 2008.

Zika received her bachelor's degree from Emory University in 1998 and her master's degree in Exercise Science from Appalachian State in 2002. She and her husband Pete have two children Elyse (12) and Sean (10).

LAND PROTECTION AND STEWARDSHIP



BRC has protected 22,115 acres in 247 places:

**13,679 acres through 146 conservation easements
and 8,436 acres through 101 land acquisitions.**

In 2020, BRC adopted a conservation plan to act as a guide for future direction, decisions and conservation opportunities. The plan addresses three themes of land prioritization:

- Connecting People to Nature
- Conserving Resilient Land
- Protecting Scenic Landscapes

*Black bear cub, Ursus americanus
Photo: Steven Young*



To read the full plan, visit www.blueridgeconservancy.org/protected-areas. The plan was based on recommendations from Tatiana Magee, BRC's Land Protection Intern, as part of her thesis to earn her master's degree at Appalachian State University.

Southern Appalachian Mountain Bogs, Alleghany County, 70 acres

Wetland habitats once frequently dotted the landscape in western North Carolina but are far less common today, with development pressures draining and converting lands for other uses.

BRC acquired 46 acres to add to the Sparta Wetland Mitigation Site in Alleghany County, including 4,500 linear feet of stream. The land will be owned and managed by the NC Wildlife Resources Commission. Funding for this acquisition came from the NC Environmental Enhancement Grant Program, the NC Land and Water Fund (formerly NC Clean Water Management Trust Fund), Fred and Alice Stanback and a private donor.

BRC transferred another 26 acres of wetland habitat in Alleghany County to the US Fish and Wildlife Service. This is the first property owned by the Service as part of the Mountain Bogs National Wildlife Refuge. The Refuge was created to conserve these rare habitats and support biodiversity, and was designed to protect small, isolated pockets instead of large tracts of land.

Conserving these special habitats maintains and improves water quality for generations to come.

Brushy Mountains

The Brushy Mountains, often referred to as “the Brushies,” are an isolated eastern spur of the Blue Ridge Mountains with headwater streams feeding into the Yadkin and Catawba Rivers. Rising 800 feet above the valley floor, the Brushies have a mild climate and are known for their apple orchards. BRC completed three projects in the Brushy Mountain vicinity:

Kocar, Forrest and Ham Properties, Wilkes County, 163 acres

BRC closed on three projects in Wilkes County, adding land to two existing conservation easements and taking ownership of another, further protecting the scenic beauty, cultural history and ecological richness of the Brushy Mountains.

Jackie Kocar donated a conservation easement on 18 acres of undeveloped land to Blue Ridge Conservancy in 2007. To further her commitment to conservation, in 2019 she purchased and then protected 8.87 adjoining acres to serve as a buffer for the existing wildlife habitat so that it may remain undisturbed forever.

"Nestled in the Brushy Mountains, these gently rolling acres are a perfect place to watch birds, walk the trails with my dogs, study wildflowers, listen to owls and just be at peace. But most importantly, the easement ensures that the wildlife, plants and trees will have their home here forever. I only wish I could have been able to protect a larger tract of land. I am so grateful to BRC for being willing to do this on my small acreage, and for working with others in northwest NC to preserve our special places."

In 2011 BRC completed a conservation easement protecting 97 acres high in the Brushies adjacent to the Brushy Mountain Bee Farm. In December, Steve and Sandy Forrest donated the entire property to BRC. Future plans for its most appropriate use are currently being considered. The land is wooded and protects the water quality of several headwater streams.

Also in December, 58 acres were added to Karl and Holly Ham's conservation easement in the Boomer community. This project expands wildlife habitat and connectivity, as it is adjacent to three other BRC conservation easements protecting family land in Wilkes County.



BRC is proud to work with landowners who wish to protect their land and conserve this unique landscape while the region continues to grow.





Conserving riparian zones ensures wooded and open space along rivers and streams can provide important habitat for native and migratory species.



South Toe River, Yancey County, 9 acres

In 2007 BRC completed a conservation easement that encompassed 27 acres on two parcels of land along the South Toe River in Yancey County. It was part of a larger conservation project area that included three additional adjoining conservation easements, totaling 191 acres.

Another nine acres across the river were added to the conservation easement in 2020. The land includes 1,000 feet of river frontage, bringing the total river frontage protected to 1.4 miles.

The South Toe River is designated as Class B, Trout Water, Outstanding Resource Water by the NC Division of Environmental Quality. This easement provides exceptional habitat for several species of concern including an endangered mussel, the Appalachian Elktoe, which are known to be present in similar habitats nearby.

Watauga River Access, Watauga County, 2.6 acres

BRC purchased 2.6 acres in Valle Crucis for future river access along the Watauga River. The land includes 1,300 feet of river frontage and direct access off Scenic Byway 194. The Watauga River is designated by the NC Natural Heritage Program as a regionally significant aquatic habitat, and by the NC Division of Water Resources as High Quality Waters.

When complete, the site will be added to the Watauga River Paddle Trail, a series of river access points spanning the length of the river.

Funding for this purchase came from the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Watauga County Tourism Development Authority (TDA). Ultimately the property will be transferred to Watauga County to be managed as a public river access.



The Conservation Fund and US Forest Service added 205 acres to Pisgah National Forest at Linville Gorge, buffering the adjacent Wilderness Area. Its protection secures iconic views, enhances access for recreation and preserves wildlife habitat and water quality for the area.

Long Arm Mountain, Burke County, 205 acres

Long Arm Mountain was one of the last privately owned features in the Linville Gorge. An iconic destination in North Carolina, Linville Gorge is one of the deepest, most rugged and scenic gorges in the eastern US. Sitting atop Long Arm Mountain, this 205-acre property is visible from the Gorge and the Blue Ridge Parkway. The project preserves the valuable watershed of Bull Branch Creek, which starts on the property and flows into Linville River. It also secures a new public access on the east side of the Gorge.

BRC partnered with The Conservation Fund (TCF) and Foothills Conservancy of NC to protect this property. TCF purchased the land in 2018 and transferred it to the US Forest Service for permanent protection

at the end of 2020. This effort was made possible with support from the Land and Water Conservation Fund and Fred and Alice Stanback.

“So much of conservation work is about building lasting and trusting relationships within the community,” said BRC Executive Director, Charlie Brady. “The landowner initially reached out to Blue Ridge Conservancy through a board member to discuss protecting this unique tract in the Linville Gorge. We’re thrilled to be a partner in this project to add the land to Pisgah National Forest.”

Pisgah National Forest consists of over 500,000 acres of hardwood forestland, pristine waterfalls and whitewater rivers. The Cherokee called the gorge “Eeseeh,” meaning “river of many cliffs.”



Three Top Mountain, Ashe County, 1,000 acres

Over the past several years BRC has worked to purchase land on the eastern end of Three Top Mountain. NC Wildlife Resources Commission currently manages the Three Top Mountain Game Land on the western two thirds of the mountain. Until 2018 the entire eastern third of the mountain was privately owned. Since that time BRC has acquired six tracts of land totaling 1,000 acres, including 1.3 miles of ridgeline and eight headwater streams.

BRC is in the process of transferring the majority of the property to the Wildlife Resources Commission by the end of 2021. Two grants were received from the NC Land and Water Fund, one in the amount of \$1,135,730 and the other for \$1,064,895. These grants leveraged \$2.7 million in private funding to purchase the properties.

These acquisitions protect 13 miles of headwater streams and expand the range for wildlife habitat and migration corridors. The North Carolina Natural Heritage Program defines the mountain as exceptional, the highest rating a natural area can receive.

Three Top Mountain is named for its three impressive rock outcroppings and is part of the Amphibolite mountain chain. Located in Ashe and Watauga Counties, the Amphibolites include Howard Knob, Elk Knob, Snake Mountain, Phoenix Mountain, Paddy Mountain and Mount Jefferson.

“The Amphibolite mountain chain is a core conservation focus area for Blue Ridge Conservancy,” said BRC’s Executive Director, Charlie Brady. “Three Top Mountain is home to an incredible abundance of biodiversity. We feel that it is our duty to protect these lands to keep ecosystems and their inhabitants healthy and intact.”

Jonasee Rock

BRC acquired an additional 78 acres on Three Top Mountain in two phases in 2019 and 2020. This property conserves significant outcroppings along the ridge and the locally known Jonasee Rock. Because the property is home to several threatened and endangered plant species, BRC will retain ownership and steward the property to protect those species.



MIDDLE FORK GREENWAY



Greenway Expansion in 2021

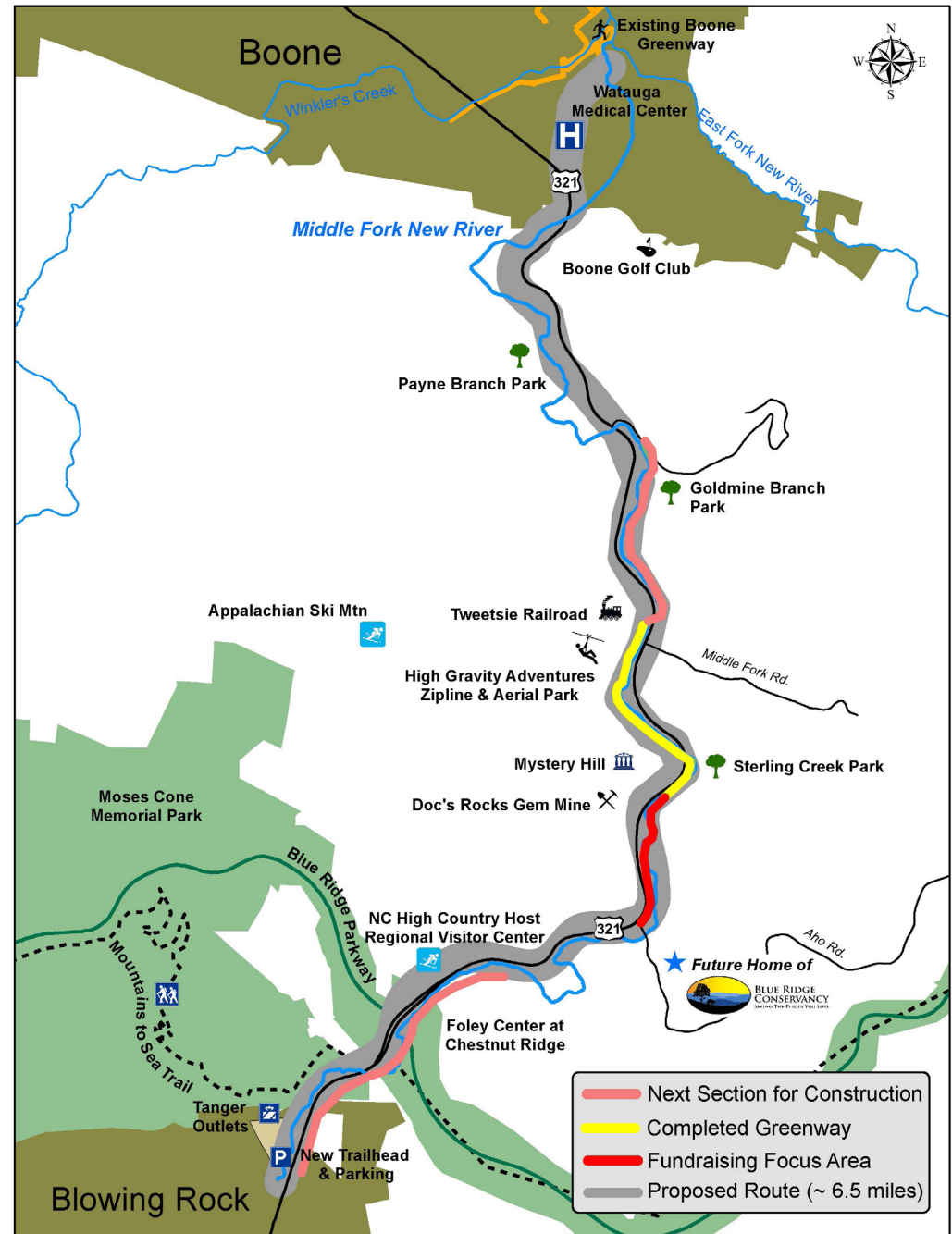
After several years of focusing on land acquisition, design, engineering, permitting and fundraising, the next section of the Middle Fork Greenway (MFG) is slated for construction in the spring of 2021.

The next mile of trail will connect Niley Cook Road to Tweetsie Railroad. A portion of this trail will be paved surface and the remainder will be a natural surface trail. It includes two bridge crossings over the Middle Fork New River, a 29-space parking area off Highway 321, raingardens to capture stormwater runoff and an additional 8-space parking area off of Niley Cook Road.

“It has been quite a challenge working with the topography and the river but the MFG team has done an amazing job of putting it all together, even down to the native plantings along the river,” said Wendy Patoprsty, Middle Fork Greenway Director.

Many local community partners have collaborated to raise the funds needed for this section. Appalachian Ski Mtn’s Brad Moretz and Brenda Speckmann had a vision for a community wide Round-Up, which raised \$200,000 in 2019 and inspired gifts of \$100,000 from both Wells Fargo and Truist (formally BB&T). These private dollars will serve as matching funds for state grants from the NC Parks and Recreation Trust Fund, the NC Division of Water Resources and the NC Recreational Trails Program.

The MFG is an example of how state funds can supplement local dollars to complete a project of this magnitude. “Since 1994, NC Parks and Recreation Trust Fund has worked with local governments to develop parks and improve communities across the state of NC,” said Judy Francis, Recreation Resource Specialist at NC Division of Parks and Recreation.





New River Light and Power, Resource Institute, North State Environmental and Brushy Fork Environmental Consulting removed the dam and restored the river.



"Funds allocated by the General Assembly are distributed through an annual competitive grant process, and we are thrilled to see the Middle Fork Greenway gaining momentum and having on-the-ground progress."

The 1.2-mile section from the Trailhead in Blowing Rock to the Foley Center at Chestnut Ridge is fully funded, and the contracted engineers are working on final designs, alignment and permitting, with a construction goal of 2022.

"The Watauga County TDA is pleased to partner with Blue Ridge Conservancy again on a public access project," said Wright Tilley, Watauga TDA Executive Director. "Our board is focused on helping visitors and our community have safe access to outdoor recreation, and the Middle Fork Greenway is one of our priority projects that we are proud to support."

Payne Branch Dam Removed from Middle Fork of the New River

New River Light and Power, Appalachian State University's nonprofit electric utility, completed its grant-funded project to remove the historic Payne Branch dam, which was located off Highway 321 just south of Boone on the Middle Fork New River. The project has helped rehabilitate an approximately 1,200-linear-foot section of the river corridor.

BRC and Watauga County created public access with funding from Appalachian Regional Healthcare System and private donors. Blue Ridge Trail Works constructed the trail and park area, with the long term goal of connecting the park to the Middle Fork Greenway.

"We are beginning to see activity and progress along all six sections of the future Middle Fork Greenway," said Charlie Brady, BRC Executive Director. "There is a clear path to completing the trail, but there are still many steps involved to connect Blowing Rock to Boone, naturally."

BRC IN THE COMMUNITY

Watauga River Access Completed on Guy Ford Road

The Lower Gorge River Access site on Guy Ford Road in Watauga County is open to the public thanks to the collaboration of several organizations and many individual donors interested in ensuring the riverfront property became a community park. The park's infrastructure, including a parking lot, loading ramp, signage and railings was completed in August 2020.

In 2016, BRC purchased the property with financial support from the Watauga County TDA, the Tennessee Valley Authority and 200 individual donors. Funding for the infrastructure came from the North Carolina General Assembly, Watauga County and the Watauga TDA.

The river flows across the state border into Tennessee, and experienced paddlers will run the section through the Watauga Gorge, a Class V whitewater section. This property also serves as a takeout for Section III of the Watauga, where access already exists at the Upper Gorge Park off of Highway 321. The property is enrolled in the Public Fishing Access Program managed by the NC Wildlife Resources Commission.

Valle Crucis Park trail extended through the Cooper Farm

In 2015 Blue Ridge Conservancy received a donation of 21.7 acres of farmland located within the Valle Crucis Historic District along NC Scenic Byway 194. Thanks to the generosity of John and Faye Cooper, longtime residents, conservationists and owners of Mast General Store, this scenic property will forever remain as agricultural and recreational land along Dutch Creek and the Watauga River.

Last spring a major stream restoration project improved the integrity of Dutch Creek. The property is now more conducive for agriculture and is safer for public access. A new unpaved trail extends from the Valle Crucis Park loop through the field, offering additional opportunities for fishing, exercising, bird watching and more.



“2020 vividly demonstrated how important access to public lands is to the physical and mental health of all North Carolinians,” said Charlie Brady, BRC Executive Director. “BRC has been inundated with stories of individuals and families who are grateful to have greenways, blueways, parks and trails where they can spend time in the outdoors while practicing social distancing.”



SUPPORTER SPOTLIGHT



In 2021, BRC will occupy new office headquarters on Aho Road. The building and 46 acres of land were a bequest from longtime supporter Audrey Bentley. The property will serve as a conservation campus thanks to the generosity of Conservation Ambassadors Richard and Debbie Swartzel, and Jim Rogers and Amber Williams.

Richard and Debbie Swartzel

When Richard and Debbie learned of the Conservancy's plan to turn the Bentley home into an office, they knew immediately that they wanted to contribute to the project as a memorial to Richard's "adopted" parents and two of their best friends, Barbara and EC Morris. Richard and Debbie believe this project gives the Conservancy a strong foundation to grow and to expand many of the values Barbara and EC believed in.



Barbara and EC Morris.

"I was lucky enough to have two sets of parents growing up – I was 'adopted' by my best friend Joe's parents, Barbara and EC Morris," said Richard. "They loved and nurtured me, building my self-esteem and boosting my confidence, which has helped me through this journey of life. After Debbie and I got married she referred to them as our 'Family by Choice,' which is a fitting explanation of the bond between our families. We shared a lot of our time together outdoors exploring God's creation, from weekends at the lake waterskiing to backpacking and hiking in the woods searching for waterfalls, wildflowers and wildlife. They also worked behind the scenes in many church and civic groups to help make things happen."

Jim Rogers and Amber Williams

Amber Williams met former BRC Director of Communications Nikki Robinson while participating in the Watauga Leadership Challenge presented by the Boone Area Chamber of Commerce. Amber and her partner, Jim Rogers, attended a couple of BRC fundraising events and saw how well-run and welcoming the organization is. When BRC announced an important gift of land and a home that had been bequeathed to the organization, Amber reached out to Nikki to say that Jim was interested in sharing his talents and expertise in design and building to advocate for BRC as they put the home to the best use. After meeting with the Conservancy and discussing ideas, the shared vision resulted in Jim taking on the roles of designer and builder for the project.

Both Amber and Jim believe that giving back to the community is something everyone is called to do. This project has been the perfect place to connect their talents with the common goal of conservation.

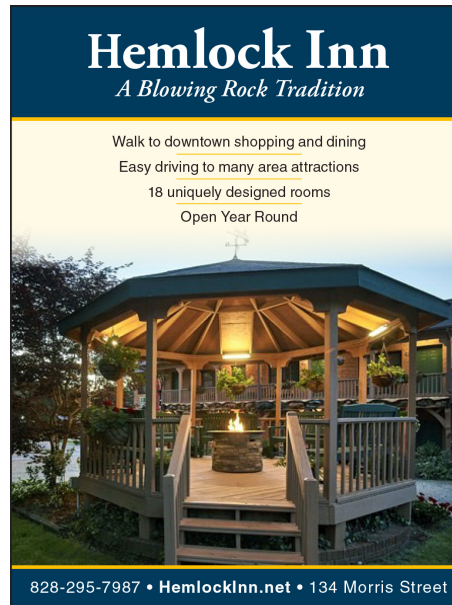


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Order merchandise online at
www.blueridgeconservancy.org/store

Rhododendron Ramble 2021

Hiking Challenge

Blue Ridge Conservancy usually hosts a series of guided hikes, but this year we are trying something different: The Rhododendron Ramble is designed for you to experience conservation lands on your own time.



If you choose to accept our hiking challenge you will need to complete the following hikes, in any order, before the end of 2021:

Elk Knob State Park Backcountry Trail

Glen Burney Trail

Stone Mountain State Park (*Trail of your choice*)

J. Douglass Williams Park (*This park is open May-October*)

Blue Ridge Conservancy played a role in the protection of these important recreational areas.

For more information or to log a hike, visit:

<https://blueridgeconservancy.org/rhododendron-ramble>

This hiking challenge is sponsored by Footsloggers.

2020 BRC Financial Report

Blue Ridge Conservancy leveraged operating expenses of \$668,000 to generate \$6,418,000 for programs, including Middle Fork Greenway and land conservation projects.

Outer Circle

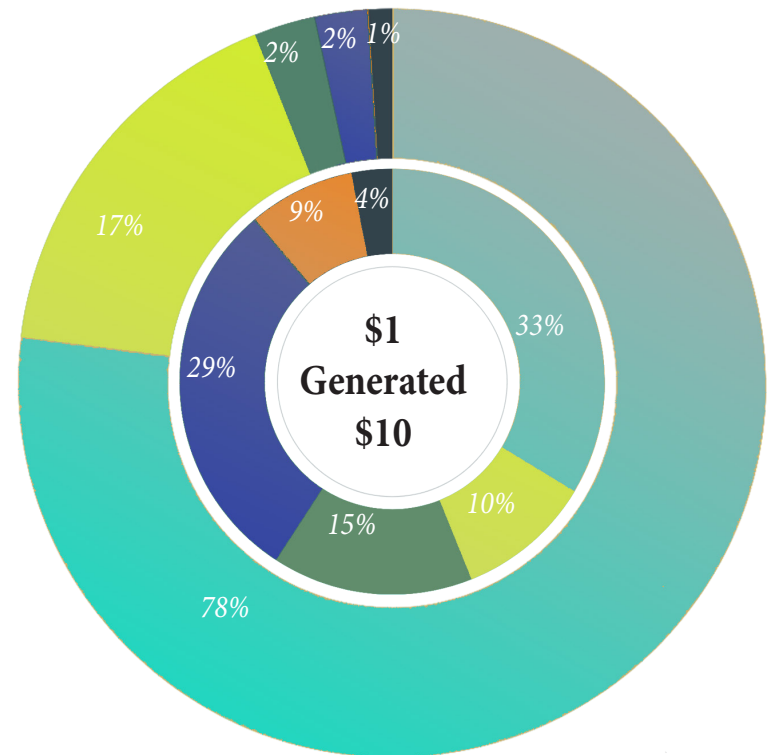
Total Conservation Investment

\$6,417,600

Inner Circle

Operating Expenses

\$668,000



WE WOULD LIKE TO RECOGNIZE AND THANK OUR 2020 DONORS:

We appreciate our 2020 donors! This list represents donations made to Blue Ridge Conservancy and the Middle Fork Greenway during the 2020 calendar year.

Conservation Ambassadors

(These donors have committed gifts of \$2,500 or more per year for at least three years)

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