

BLUE RIDGE CONSERVANCY

SAVING THE PLACES YOU LOVE

NEWS

Photo courtesy of Rick Short

SPRING 2012

Executive Director's Message	2
BRC Member Spotlight.	3
Thank you mPrints	3
Land Protection Projects	4-5
Welcome New Trustees	6
Farewell Zach, Welcome Rob	7
Peaky Top Event	7
Pond Mountain Article	8-13
Pond Mountain Update.	14
Looking Toward the Future	14
2011 BRC Hikes	15
BRC Events	16-17
Sponsor Highlight.	18
LTA Accreditation	19
Sponsor Thank You	19
2012 Events.	20

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You can support our efforts by joining or renewing online, or by returning the enclosed envelope with your membership or contribution.

OUR MISSION

Working with willing landowners and local communities to permanently protect land and water resources with agricultural, ecological, cultural, recreational and scenic value in northwest North Carolina.



**BLUE RIDGE
CONSERVANCY**
SAVING THE PLACES YOU LOVE

Newsletter underwritten by:

ASHE WOODWORKING
CABINETRY AND WOODWORKING

A Great Start in 2012!

Pond Mountain reached new heights in January when the good folks at *Our State* magazine recognized this special mountain as one of “North Carolina’s Prettiest Places.” We have reprinted the article on the inside of this newsletter to give everyone a chance to read this wonderful story. BRC completed the protection of Pond Mountain in 2011 and the area opened to the public in September. You will find information on page 14 including directions to Pond Mountain and how to enjoy this beautiful new state-owned resource.



In addition to Pond Mountain, BRC celebrated many more exciting accomplishments over the past several months. Beginning on page 4 you can read about our new land protection projects and how each brings us one step closer to preserving the wonderful natural resources of northwest North Carolina.

Blue Ridge Conservancy is also proud to welcome five new board members to our land protection family. In January Ann Baker, John Cooper, Sonny Church, Bob Dixon, and Susan Hambright joined the board—each bringing a wealth of talent and commitment to BRC’s mission of protecting the land and water resources of our mountains. In January we also said “good bye for now” to several board members who helped shape BRC into the successful organization it is today. We extend a huge thank you to Helen Ruth Almond, Heidi Campbell, Bill Herring, Michelle Leonard, Deborah Sherrill, and “B” Townes for their years of service to land protection.

A new and exciting challenge for BRC in 2012 is accreditation through the Land Trust Accreditation Commission. This process matches BRC’s operating procedures against the national standards for land trust operations. Staff is going step-by-step through the process and will submit all documentation in April, with a fall notification of the results.

Please enjoy the rest of the newsletter. We have packed it with stories of BRC and our plans for the future. Please continue to support BRC—we can’t do it without you!

*If, after reading our newsletter, you pass it along to a friend, you have doubled its impact without any additional cost to you or Blue Ridge Conservancy!
Thanks for your help spreading the good word!*

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From the Executive Director

Conserving Land—It's Personal, It's Forever

It was a warm July day in 2001 when I first saw the blueberry farm. My partner Johnny Burleson and I were visiting his Aunt and Uncle, Ode and Geri Burleson, at their family cabin on Big Horse Creek in Ashe County. Johnny grew up spending his summers playing in the cold waters of Big Horse. I was raised in the nearby foothills of Surry County and spent about every available adolescent minute helping my dad restore two old log cabins along the Blue Ridge Parkway in southwestern Virginia. The stage was set—the mountains were in our blood.

On that warm morning Aunt Geri, thinking we were in need of entertainment, suggested picking blueberries at a nearby farm. Of course, in the mountains “nearby” can be relative and although the farm was just a few miles away, getting there involved a mind-boggling number of curves and turns, a journey that eventually brought us to Swansie Shepherd Road. We hesitated, “surely this can't be right, it's too narrow, it's a gravel road, what if we go up there and there's no place to turn around.” But up the road we went toward a mountain hollow farm that Ashe County residents had known for decades as Swansie's place.

For those of you who have been to Swansie's place, you know how it is—the road begins surrounded by woods and slowly climbs up the valley and then it happens, the woods fall away, and there it is! What we saw that beautiful July day was a bowl-shaped hollow framed by incredibly steep green hillside pastures, a cornucopia of apple and pear trees, grape vines, and literally thousands of blueberry bushes. And right in the middle was a ramshackle 1880s farmhouse begging for attention. Like so many people, we felt an instant connection but had no idea of the important chapter that would soon unfold.

Fast forward two years to another beautiful summer day in June 2003. I don't remember who saw it first, me or Johnny, but as we strolled down West Jefferson's main street, there it was—a sign taped to the window of a real estate office reading “blueberry farm for sale.” There was nothing about the sign that gave away the farm's location, just a photo of an old rusty pickup truck, a few blueberry bushes and a local phone number. Whether it was fate or just the serendipitous nature of life, three hours later we found ourselves back at Swansie's place meeting with a realtor.

Buying a house or land is a big decision and usually calls for a slow and reasoned approach, but not that day. The decision to move forward “felt” right and within five months we were the proud owners of a blueberry farm. As we quickly discovered, this was no ordinary farm, but a part of Ashe County's heritage—a place where local folks and visitors had picked apples and berries for generations. We were stewards of a very special place.

Having restored an historic home in Raleigh, we were familiar with historic preservation and I had learned about conservation easements from my career at NC State University. So after some research and guidance, we donated a conservation easement to Blue Ridge Conservancy and placed the farm on the National Register of Historic Places, all with the hope of protecting this special place, forever.

Today, eleven years after that fateful blueberry picking adventure, Swansie's place—now called Old Orchard Creek—continues as a working blueberry farm permanently protected for future generations. Over the same period of time, Blue Ridge Conservancy has worked with over 120 other landowners to protect their properties through conservation easements.

For Johnny and me and for most of the other landowners who have protected their land through Blue Ridge Conservancy, the decision was personal. For many, the land had been in the family for generations and the idea of seeing it developed was incomprehensible. For others, it was protecting land that preserved a childhood memory—playing in a mountain creek, restoring an old log cabin, or sitting by a campfire on a chilly summer evening. But for everyone, the goal is protecting a place they love, forever!

The next few issues of BRC News will include the personal stories of other conservation easement donors. We believe you will find that these stories form a rich tapestry of love for the beauty, culture and history of the mountains. This story is dedicated to Ode and Geri Burleson, for it was their love of the mountains that led the way up a gravel mountain road to a hollow called Swansie's Place. Ode recently passed away after spending his last year with us on the farm.



Photo courtesy of Katie Langley Photography

Warmest regards,
Walter Clark

BRC Member Spotlight: Bill and Lisa Finger

On a summer morning at the West Jefferson Farmer's Market, BRC Executive Director Walter Clark and Bill Finger struck up a conversation. Walter and Bill quickly learned of a shared passion for the law and the environment, a recognition that proved fortuitous for BRC. This conversation led to a friendship between Bill and his wife, Lisa, Walter and Blue Ridge Conservancy.

For several months of the year, Bill and Lisa call Ashe County home. During the rest of the year they live in Jacksonville, Florida where Bill practices environmental law. Florida provides great opportunities for Bill and Lisa to enjoy their shared love of hiking, motorcycling, flat-water kayaking and bicycling. One of Bill and Lisa's favorite mountain activities is enjoying the beauty of the landscape while exploring the back roads of North Carolina and Virginia on their classic motorcycles.

Before completing his law degree, Bill earned a Bachelor's degree in Wildlife Management and a Master's degree in Natural Resource Policy. All of his studies were at the University of Florida. In his legal practice, Bill specializes in brownfield redevelopment. Bill describes his work like this: "instead of clearing trees and green space to accommodate construction of new commercial or industrial facilities, we employ brownfield redevelopment regulations to bring derelict, and often contaminated properties up to a higher standard allowing their reuse." His work involves extensive use of conservation easements, like those used by BRC and other land trusts. The easements are often used to protect privately-owned water resources and wetlands. Bill has also worked with national conservation organizations, like the Trust for Public Land and The Nature Conservancy, to convert old freight rail lines into pedestrian corridors. He expresses his passion very clearly, "I knew all along I

wanted to work to improve the environment. I love my work."

Lisa, who is equally passionate about her professional endeavors, divides her time between professional nursing, dog training, and assisting Bill with his law practice. Bill quickly

credits Lisa with performing all of the important organizational work required by his practice.

Bill and Lisa's passion for the environment is equally matched by their love for animals. They are the proud parents of two dogs and three cats. They have two Dobermans, one of which is a trained therapy dog, entrusted with children and seniors. The younger Doberman is also in training.

So what does all of this have to do with Blue Ridge Conservancy? As a result of their first meeting at the Farmer's Market, Bill

and Lisa have become avid supporters of Blue Ridge Conservancy. Not only have they become loyal members, but Bill is lending his legal expertise to BRC's land conservation efforts. For example, last year he helped craft a new template for conservation easement donors and has since helped BRC bring other legal documents up to new standards. This assistance is incredibly valuable, particularly as BRC begins the Land Trust Alliance accreditation process. "We are very fortunate to have friends like Bill and

Lisa," stated Walter. "Our work introduces us to a lot of different people and many, like Bill and Lisa, become great partners in our conservation efforts. I am so grateful for their friendship and for their commitment to Blue Ridge Conservancy."



Photo courtesy of Bill & Lisa Finger



BRC SHIRTS AND HATS One of Blue Ridge Conservancy's most committed supporters is M-Prints Screenprinting and Embroidery shop in downtown Boone. Stuart Mangum is a consummate community-minded business owner.

M-Prints helped us produce top-quality embroidered hats and screenprinted shirts. Order your hat or shirt—or both!—by calling us at 828-264-2511 or on our website at www.blueridgeconservancy.org. There are women's and men's sizes and various colors available. The cost for a hat or t-shirt is only \$15.00. Get yours while supplies last!



2011 BRC LAND PROTECTION REPORT

Blue Ridge Conservancy had another great year in 2011 protecting the places we all love. Here are some of our stories:

Wade and Kathy Reece Conservation Easement—Valle Crucis, Watauga County

The fact that Wade and Kathy Reece love the North Carolina Mountains is evidenced by their eleven years of work creating and protecting a mountain retreat in beautiful Valle Crucis. It all began in 2001 when they purchased 28 acres along the Watauga River and moved an old log cabin to the property from Yadkin County. But this was no ordinary cabin, it was a structure that had belonged to Kathy's grandfather. Because of their love of place and their desire to see their land protected forever, the Reeces contacted Blue Ridge Conservancy with the desire of placing a conservation easement on the property. In 2006 the easement was completed. In early 2010 Kathy and Wade purchased two adjoining tracts totaling 8.5 acres and began the conservation easement process again. Throughout the summer of 2011 the Reeces and BRC worked together to complete a conservation easement amendment that added the 8.5 acres to the original easement. The property and conservation easements now total over 36 acres of mainly open pasture. Wade and Kathy's efforts will help protect the beauty of Valle Crucis in perpetuity. Blue Ridge Conservancy is proud to assist landowners like the Reeces who protect precious places for the benefit of future generations.

All five photos by Eric Hiegl



Anderson Conservation Easement—Avery and Mitchell Counties

This property has been with the Anderson family for nearly fifty years and it was important to the family to see the land protected by a conservation easement so that future generations will be able to enjoy the beauty of the area. The 57-acre property, straddling the Avery and Mitchell County line, is primarily wooded, including a forested mountain ridge that rises to over 4,500 feet. The land lies within the Audubon Society's Roan-Cane Creek Mountain Important Bird Area indicating its importance for habitat protection. The property also hosts two unnamed tributaries to Henson Creek in the French Broad River Watershed and the conservation easement protects 1,700 feet along these streams. Because of the easement's important contribution to water quality protection, the North Carolina Clean Water Management Trust Fund (CWMTF) supported the easement by paying the transactional costs associated with the donation. Blue Ridge Conservancy is proud to have partnered with CWMTF and the Andersons to protect this beautiful tract.

The Bragg Family Conservation Easement—Avery County

This property consists of 90 acres and is located in Avery County on the southern slopes of Beech Mountain. The Bragg family's donation of a conservation easement will protect portions of an unnamed tributary to Shawneehaw Creek, several springs, and hardwood forests at elevations ranging from 4,040 feet to nearly 5,000 feet. The lower



portion of the property is currently used to grow Christmas trees. The Braggs are longtime supporters of land conservation in North Carolina. The family has donated conservation easements on their farm in Mecklenburg County to the Catawba Lands Conservancy. Frank Bragg is also a long-time board member of Catawba Lands Conservancy.

Bridal Cove Conservation Easement and Land Donation—Ashe County

The Bridal Cove project is a combination of conservation easements and donated land in the Pottertown area of Ashe County. Land protection on the property began in 2008 with an initial donation of a conservation easement on 44 acres and a gift of 64 acres to Blue Ridge Conservancy. In 2011, Bridal Cove LLC donated a conservation easement on the remaining 72 acres, with another 10 acre gift to BRC.



Within a short distance of Elk Knob State Park, the Bridal Cove tract enhances wildlife habitat, protects the water quality of the North Fork New River and helps ensure that the beauty of the area will be maintained. This tract also has the unique distinction of being a summer gathering area for migrating golden-winged warblers, listed as a Federal Species of Concern. According to Eric Hiegl, Director of Land Protection and Stewardship, “It is especially gratifying when you have an opportunity to expand an existing protected area.” Thanks to the folks at Bridal Cove for their dedication to land protection.



The Forrest Conservation Easement—Wilkes County

Steve and Sandy Forrest, who own and operate the Brushy Mountain Bee Farm in Wilkes County, have donated a conservation easement on 97 acres of wooded property adjoining their business. The property is located in the Brushy Mountains which is one of Blue Ridge Conservancy’s land protection focus areas. These mountains are isolated from the Blue Ridge by the Yadkin River and known for their abundant orchard crops. The Forrest’s property rises above 2,400 feet, placing it among the highest peaks in the Brushy Mountains. The donated conservation easement will protect a mature hardwood forest and hundreds of linear feet of headwaters to the Yadkin River, including Cub Creek. Because of the easement’s important contribution to water quality protection, the North Carolina Clean Water Management Trust Fund (CWMTF) supported the easement by paying the transactional costs associated with the donation. Blue Ridge Conservancy greatly appreciates working with Steve and Sandy to protect this beautiful and ecologically significant property in the Brushy Mountains.

BRC Welcomes Five New Trustees!

Ann Baker, of Crossnore, has deeply-rooted connections to the land in northwest North Carolina. Ann used to spend summers in the home of her great grandfather in Blowing Rock overlooking the Globe Valley. Ann has vivid memories of enjoying the smells of the moss in the Rhododendron woods and the purity of the air—instilling in her a respect for clean air and water.

Ann and her husband, Charlie, have three children. Ann enjoys being outside, hiking, swimming, boating, and gardening. When she's not enjoying her time outdoors, Ann manages a Christmas tree farm and teaches fine arts students at The Crossnore School, Mayland Community College, and Penland School of Crafts. Ann has her own art studio and has managed the Fine Arts Gallery at The Crossnore School. Ann also devotes her time to improving her community through Crossnore's non-profit organization and serves on advisory boards at Warren Wilson's Environmental Leadership Center and The Avery Partnership for People at the End of Life.



John Cooper is the former president and founder of Mast General Store, Inc. John and his wife, Faye, have one daughter, Lisa Martin, who is Vice President of Mast General Store, Inc. John enjoys hiking and biking and volunteers his time extensively. He has served on numerous community, regional and statewide boards as member and officer. Currently, John is working with a group trying to save and restore the Appalachian Theatre in Boone and is a member of Boone Sunrise Rotary.

John's history with Blue Ridge Conservancy goes back many years and includes the donation of conservation easements to protect the beautiful community of Valle Crucis. Through Mast General Store, Inc. John also established Land Trust Day on the first Saturday of June each year, which directly supports BRC and other land trusts. John is committed to land protection in the High Country.

Sonny Church lives in his native community of Wilkesboro where he owns and operates Brushy Mountain Water Company and Creative Reclamation. While growing up in Wilkes County, Sonny was drawn to the woods and streams near his home and learned at an early age to appreciate the adaptability and diversity of nature. Sonny earned a Bachelor of Science in Biology at Appalachian State University and considers himself a life-long learner. He enjoys opportunities life offers him to meet new people and gain new experiences.

Sonny is also very active in his community. He volunteers his time with the Yadkin Valley Greenway Council, the Wilkes County Heritage Museum, and participates in the "Lunch Buddy" program at the Wilkes County Schools. Sonny believes that efforts such as Wilkes County's greenway development and BRC's land and water protection have permanent and positive impacts that benefit future generations. "Land protection, including greenways, can be an important tool as we strive to find balance between land and resource conservation and the commercial and residential development that comes with a community's growth", states Sonny.

Bob Dixon, a retired pediatrician, lives with his wife Roddy in Alleghany County. They have two children and six grandchildren and list their permanent address as "on the road between Sparta, Raleigh, and Greenwood, SC." They enjoy their lives largely out-of-doors. Avid backpackers, scuba divers, and sailors, they "dig in the dirt" much of the remainder of the time. Bob raises many differing kinds of fruits and berries in patches and plots on small acreage adjacent to their home at Milepost 234 of the Blue Ridge Parkway. They are easement donors on Bullhead Mountain.



Bob attributes an initial attraction to the outdoors to an enjoyable boyhood scouting experience. While not distinguished by grade advancement, his troop claims to have spent the most weekends in the woods of any group in the southeast. Bob's environmental ethic is based on successfully preserving what has not yet been altered and giving nature a chance at restoring what has been compromised. Local land trusts are a prime facilitator of that endeavor. Bob hopes to actively engage in that process through BRC.

Susan Hambright lives in Blowing Rock and has a farm in Avery County that is permanently protected with a conservation easement. She fell in love with the mountains when she lived in Idaho in the late 1970's and has seen the need to protect our land ever since. Knowing that uncontrolled development would destroy our lands and natural habitat, she has been an advocate for saving our resources for future generations. It is her way of "paying it forward" to people yet to come. She is a CPA and has served on several non-profit boards over the years, and is currently a guardian ad litem where she advocates for at risk children in court. Susan has been married to Bob Hambright for 36 years and they have 2 grown sons.

The Turning of a Page... Goodbye Zachary, Hello Rob

A lot can change in a year! In July, BRC said goodbye to our dear friend and colleague, Zachary Lesch-Huie. Zachary had been with BRC since early 2008 and we quickly missed his perpetual smile and wonderful sense of humor. Barely a month after Zachary's departure, Rob McCorkindale



joined BRC as our new and talented AmeriCorps member. Rob hit the ground running providing tremendous support for our land protection and stewardship endeavors.

Zachary left BRC to accept a job as Affiliate Director of The Access Fund. Based in Colorado, The Access Fund is a national advocacy organization that works to conserve the rock climbing environment and to keep U.S. rock climbing areas open for public use. In his new position, Zachary helps grassroots affiliates address climbing access and conservation issues at the local level. He also manages the Fund's joint membership program with participating affiliate local climbing organizations. For those who know Zachary, you also know that his new job combines two of his passions—his love for conservation and his long-time interest in rock climbing. We miss Zach and wish him all the best.

Rob came to BRC from Mount Jefferson State Natural Area and New River State Park where he worked as an

Environmental Educator. Like Zachary, his passion for environmental protection and land conservation runs deep. Rob recently received his Certification in Environmental Education from the State of North Carolina, which is awarded to candidates with demonstrated teaching skills

and a strong community environmental stewardship ethic. He also holds a Graduate Certificate in Geographic Information Science (GIS) from Appalachian State University. Knowledge of GIS is extremely important in land conservation because it includes skills in processing digital imagery and analyzing geographically referenced data. These mapping skills are used to identify and assess the conservation values of properties that BRC is considering for protection. Rob holds B.S. degrees in Economics and Psychology from Vanderbilt University and an M.S. in Conservation Biology from Green Mountain College.

Rob is an AmeriCorps Project Conserve (APC) Member serving at BRC. APC is a national service program in which members come from across the nation to dedicate themselves to serving western North Carolina for an 11 month service term. The program focuses on collaboration with non-profit organizations, community groups, and local governments to provide service throughout the region.

United in Conservation: Blue Ridge Conservancy and Foothills Conservancy Celebrate Land Protection at Peaky Top

As the old saying reads, "there is strength in numbers." And this was certainly evident last July when Blue Ridge Conservancy joined our neighboring land trust, Morganton-based Foothills Conservancy, for dinner and drinks on a beautiful summer evening at Peaky Top, one of Blowing Rock's spectacular homes.

Perched overlooking the "Globe" and Grandfather Mountain, Peaky Top provided a wonderful setting for a conversation with mutual friends. Peaky Top's location overlooks thousands of acres of land, some permanently protected and some not. Its proximity to the edge of each conservancy's service area gave Executive Directors Walter Clark and Susie Hamrick-Jones the opportunity to convey to guests the successes and challenges experienced by each

organization and the importance of private support.

Blue Ridge Conservancy extends a special thank you to Janet Wilson, board of directors at Foothills Conservancy, and the staff of Foothills for their help in making this a successful event. "Neighborhood" meetings like this one provide a setting where friends can gather to learn more about their local land trusts. **If you are interested in hosting a meeting in your neighborhood, contact Walter Clark at 828.264.2511 or walter@blueridgeconservancy.org.**



[REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION BY OUR STATE MAGAZINE]

Pond Mountain: **Soaring Legacies**

Trustworthy stewards ensure that Pond Mountain's beauty and conservation will thrill future generations.

Written by **LEIGHANN HENION**

Depending on where you stand on Pond Mountain, it's possible to catch a view of three different states as the mountain peers over the northwest corner of North Carolina.

It is a place that has always had an uncontained beauty and an influence that stretches out and luxuriates for miles.



Photography by **TRAVIS DOVE**

E

ven when he heard Dale Shepherd wheezing over the phone, Mark Johnston wasn't terribly concerned.

Shepherd, an 82-year-old Christmas tree farmer, assured Johnston, his employee of more than 30 years, that he'd live to be 100. Given that Shepherd was still working like a man half his age and Johnston's relatives have a habit of living until they're 104, the claim didn't seem outlandish.

So when Shepherd told Johnston—a wiry guy with a Wild Bill Hickok-style goatee—that he was calling from

the hospital, Johnston nonchalantly asked, “Well, when you coming home?”

The line went quiet. “I’m never coming home,” Shepherd said.

“Aw, come on now...” Johnston said, unwilling to believe that the man he considered a second father might be dying.

But Shepherd was serious. “I’m in bad shape,” he said, “but there’s something I’ve got to tell you.” And that’s when it happened. The landscape itself was set to shift.

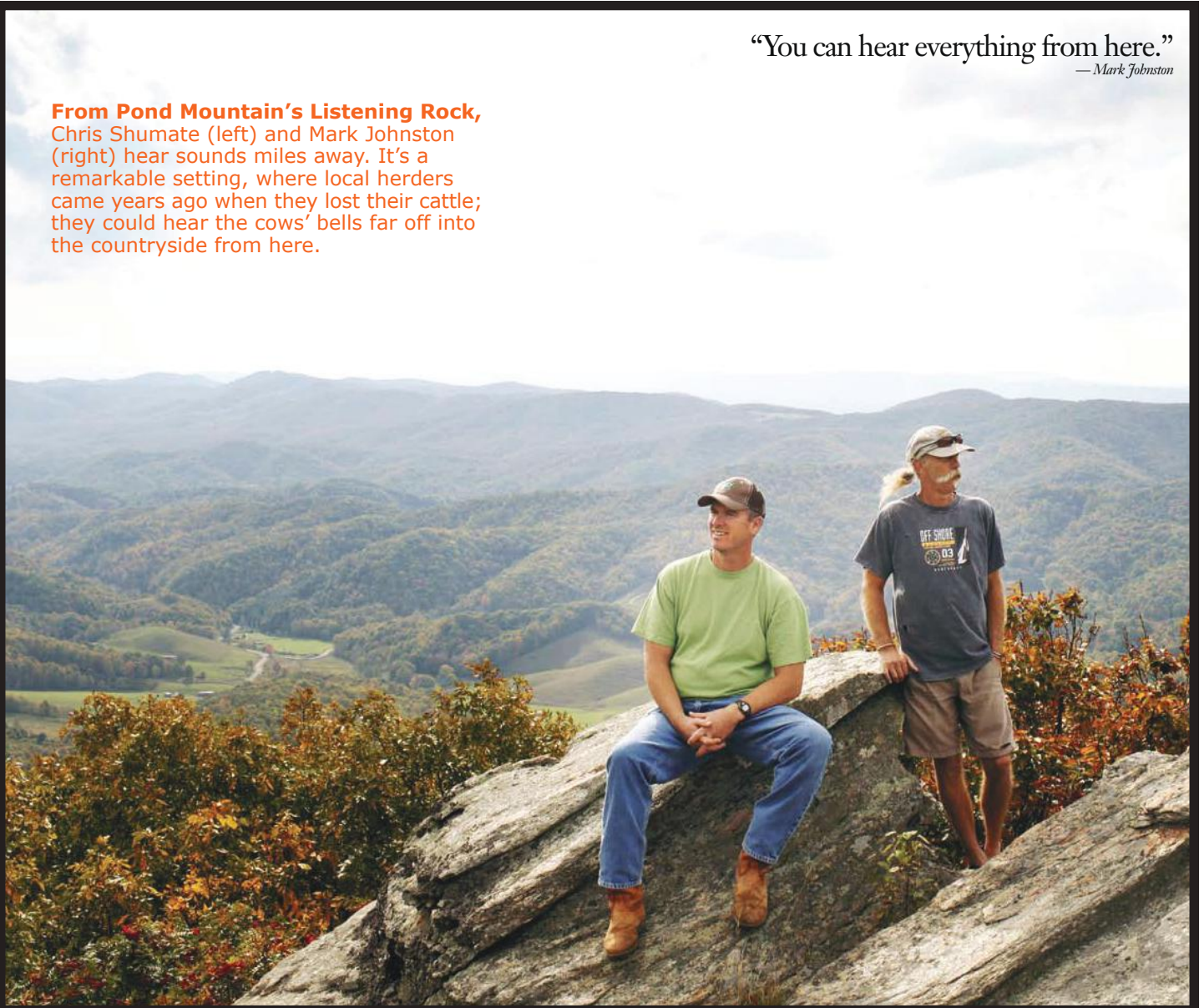
Shepherd, a quirky, self-made millionaire who sometimes borrowed gas money from Johnston to fill the tank of his 21-year-old mess of a car, announced that he was leaving 1,800 acres—the whole of a mountain—to Johnston and another workman, Chris Shumate.

Shepherd’s other assets would take care of his family, but Pond Mountain, located in the Lansing area of Ashe County, had a different sort of value, one he didn’t quite know how to calculate. But he believed Johnston and Shumate would be good stewards. He’d witnessed the place become part of them, too.

“You can hear everything from here.”

— Mark Johnston

From Pond Mountain’s Listening Rock, Chris Shumate (left) and Mark Johnston (right) hear sounds miles away. It’s a remarkable setting, where local herders came years ago when they lost their cattle; they could hear the cows’ bells far off into the countryside from here.



More than once, Shumate and Johnston

worked 60-hour weeks on the mountain's 600-acre Christmas tree tract, only to return on their day off to share the beauty of the place with their families. The men value rime ices—frozen fogs that, after reaching a certain altitude, leave glitter on everything in sight. Shumate, in particular, also marvels over warmer, foggy days, when he looks out over North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia and sees their landmark peaks—Grandfather Mountain, Cherokee National Forest, and Mt. Rogers—rising above settling mists. When he talks about those scenes, he sometimes compares the mountaintops to islands in a milky sea. This isn't the sort of language Shumate uses on a regular basis. But Pond Mountain is so bewitching, it can nearly twist a man's tongue.

It is a place that has always had an uncontained beauty and an influence that stretches out and luxuriates for miles. The mountain was named for the numerous cattail-filled ponds that spring on its ridges from unseen sources and its roughly 17 miles of streams and rivers that continually feed the New River. Johnston and Shumate thought the property was too much for anyone, much less themselves, to own. But own it they did. Well, sort of.

When the logistics of taxes and family buyouts were clarified, the two men realized they could not afford to pay taxes on their inheritance. They went to a local bank for assistance. "We'd never borrowed money in our lives beyond a car loan," Johnston says. "We had bankers laugh at us."

There were, however, plenty of real-estate investors who didn't laugh. A group from Atlanta, Georgia, heard about Pond Mountain's fate and started wooing the Ashe County locals with corporate helicopter rides. They talked of building ski slopes.

These staggering plans and purchase offers didn't surprise Shumate. His father—who was Shepherd's long-term friend—advised Shumate from a young age, "If you ever need a job, go work for Dale. Everything he touches turns to gold." Shepherd was now gone, but his Midas touch was still at work.

The investors promised to make Shumate and Johnston rich. Still something didn't feel quite right. The two men didn't push the deal through, but debts accumulated. Bankruptcy became a possibility. They gained more than they imagined possible, and they were in danger of losing it all.

When Shepherd was growing up on a

family farm in the shadow of Pond Mountain, he often stared up at its peak. "Mama, someday, I'm going to own that mountain," he said. It seemed like a laughable claim at the time. But the power of a childhood dream, any dream, lies in its potential to come true.

In the last months of his life, Shepherd began visiting his childhood home down the hill from his mountain. The

property's new owner, Walter Clark, was always pleased to see him. The fact that Clark, a transplant from Raleigh, took Shepherd's old house and restored its whitewashed, bead-board walls and ornate, wooden railings fascinated Shepherd. He was also curious about Clark's decision to put the farm in a conservation easement, an arrangement that assured his home place would always remain as Shepherd remembered it—pastoral and lovely.

During one of their porch-sitting sessions, Shepherd told Clark that he hoped Pond Mountain would be preserved someday. Shepherd never told Johnston and Shumate about this desire—maybe because he was so confident that they would find their way to it on their own. And they did.

Shumate realized that conserving Pond Mountain might be the best way to move forward. In a serendipitous twist of events, he approached Clark, who'd been hired by the Blue Ridge Conservancy, a nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting land and water resources. Pond Mountain would be Clark's first project on the job.

Clark set up an office in Shepherd's boyhood home and got to work writing the first land grant he ever attempted. Part of him felt silly. It was such a far-reaching request. If funded, it would be the organization's largest acquisition to date. Clark lacked the declaration-spouting confidence of the boy who lived on that patch of land before him, but his mission was clear. He and the Conservancy were going to own Pond Mountain, and the people of North Carolina were going to be designated heirs.

"It was a dream," Clark says. "I never had any idea it could actually happen." But it did. In 2010, the Blue Ridge Conservancy—aided by the National Committee for the New River, Foundation for the Carolinas, Blue Ridge Forever, Clean Water Management Trust Fund, Natural Heritage Trust Fund, and an individual donor—transferred nearly 1,800 acres on and around Pond Mountain to the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission.

"People think it's wild that I live in Dale's old house, and it does seem meant to be in a way, but I didn't see this as an important project because I lived there," Clark says. "It was more than that. A lot of people weren't really interested in helping with Pond Mountain because it was a Christmas tree farm, but that made it all the more important to me."

Some environmentally minded people are only concerned with virgin forests and pristine landscapes, but to Clark, part of Pond Mountain's beauty lies in the fact that its conservation will take a chemically dependent agricultural site to turn it back into an organic ecosystem. Halting fertilizer and pesticide use on the property has the potential to better the water quality of residents downstream. And, given that the mountain's pinnacle stands at nearly 5,000 feet, we're all downstream.



In the end, the conscientious Pond Mountain deal was less lucrative than the one Johnston and Shumate could have had if they'd gone with absentee investors, but Clark has an inkling of what inspires such generous decision-making. "Even if I don't do anything else in life, I'm able to look at this mountain and know I've played a role in protecting it, and that's something special," Clark says. "Land has a permanency that we lack in our lives. This is just the beginning of the story for Pond Mountain."

The mountain is no longer under threat

of commercial development; human hands still shape it—most notably, the sunfreckled fingers of Jim Keeper, who oversees the construction of a small parking lot open to hunters, hikers, campers, and intrepid sightseers. Although his grasp does not extend far past the site's gravel roads, Keeper's job as a N.C. Wildlife Management Crew leader often requires bushwhacking paths into woodlands. "This is the opposite," he says. "Here, we've been given an opportunity to watch it all grow."

This growth lies in the native grasses shooting forth on patches of land that nature has already reclaimed from cultivated fields, but growth is also visible on maps. Pond Mountain's acquisition led to the purchase of additional land tracts, including 220 acres that give wildlife a secure corridor from Pond Mountain to the Cherokee National Forest in Tennessee. The bench mark of the property now forms the actual corner of North Carolina, the specific point where it touches Tennessee and Virginia. "Pond Mountain is sort of the center of everything," Clark says.

The mountain is officially designated as game land, but the species it protects aren't all hunting prey. A songbird—the golden-winged warbler—is actually the central focus of wildlife efforts as the mountain transitions to brambled territory. The bird, which has near-threatened status with the International Union for Conservation of Nature, is known as an indicator species. "When that bird is here, it will mean the habitat is right for other game—cottontails, quail, rough grouse," Keeper says.

He runs a hand across his military-grade buzz cut before waving over Shumate and Johnston. They're on the mountain today because they want to give Keeper a key to Shepherd's cabin; they still have trouble calling it theirs. Shepherd always took care of the people who tended this land, and it's a job that's now fallen to them. Keeper



Top: A solitary tree turns a redish hue as the sun sets on Pond Mountain. **Middle:** Chris Shumate inspects a tree atop Pond Mountain. **Bottom:** Pond Mountain was named Pond Mountain for a reason — there are as many as 14 ponds dotting the 1,800 acres.

sometimes bunks in their privately owned cabin with his crew. Occasionally, he returns on weekends with his young family, like the laborers before him.

Someone has already offered Shumate and Johnston more than twice what they think nonprofit or state agencies would be able to pay for Shepherd's cabin, but they just can't bring themselves to sign it over to anyone who might restrict access. The tree farmers hope that—when they're finished harvesting in 2016, as required by their agreement with the state—someone will come forward with a pledge to make up at least part of the difference. They'd like to work with the Blue Ridge Conservancy to organize protection of the house, as a conference or welcome center, along with an adjacent 40 acres.

The structure itself—which has a 360-degree view of what is arguably one of the most stunning long-range views in the country—is wrapped in logs and silvered wood and topped with a cedarshake roof that's beginning to loosen and split under the harsh elements of altitude. To its right lies an outcropping.

“This,” Johnston says, hopping onto the stone, “is what's called the Listening Rock.”

The Listening Rock, located on what is—for now—private property, is a place where local herders went if they lost cattle long ago. They sat on the stone and listened for the cow's bell tinkering in the distance. “You can hear everything from here,” Johnston says, shaking his head. “It's weird.”

He says that he has experienced the aural power of the stone himself. “One day,” he explains, “I was out here, and I heard people talking, and I kept thinking: Where are they?” Finally, Johnston took out his binoculars and scanned the valley until he found two farmers engaged in conversation roughly a mile away. “Everybody who grew up around Pond Mountain has a Listening Rock story like that,” he says.

The wind is too strong to allow for nuanced listening this afternoon, but Johnston maintains that seemingly impossible things happen here when conditions are right. From this perch at the top of the state, it's not hard to imagine a golden-winged warbler's song amplified by the Listening Rock. Keeper doesn't think it will be long until their population begins to rise. And when those birds take flight from the growing thickets of Pond Mountain, they will leave streaks of gold in the sky—indicators of a precious, living sort of wealth.

*Leigh Ann Henion's debut book is forthcoming from Penguin Press. Visit leighannhenion.com to learn more about her work. Leigh Ann's most recent story for *Our State* was “Mountain Dancer” (Sept. 2011).*



Above: A thick morning fog. **Below:** Dale Shephard built a cabin on Pond Mountain that offers one of the best views in the state.



Pond Mountain Opens to the Public

Blue Ridge Conservancy is pleased to report the opening of Pond Mountain Game Land. The opening on September 1st, 2011 is the culmination of several years of hard work by BRC and our conservation partners in the project—the NC Wildlife Resources Commission, NC Clean Water Management Trust Fund, NC Natural Heritage Trust Fund, Fred and Alice Stanback, the New River Tree Company and the National Committee for the New River. Pond Mountain is one of BRC's most significant land protection efforts and we are proud to have partnered with so many public organizations and private individuals to protect this area of the mountains for the benefit of North Carolina's landscape, wildlife, water quality and the visitors that these resources attract.



Public Access and Recreational Opportunities:

Pond Mountain's location, size, elevation, and ecological characteristics provide unique opportunities for all outdoor recreational enthusiasts. Pond Mountain Game Land contains approximately 1,973 acres, ranging in elevation from 4,000-5,000 feet, and a variety of landscapes from mature hardwood forest, to early successional forest, to open meadows and high-elevation ponds. The many types of habitat found on the mountain attract a diversity of wildlife species. The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission will manage and enhance the game land for a variety of wildlife species and will provide many opportunities for outdoor recreational enthusiasts.

Recreational opportunities include bird watching, hiking, horseback riding, photography, cross-country skiing, camping, and hunting. Users of the game land should note that horseback riding is allowed only on designated trails from May 16 – August 31. Camping is only allowed at a designated primitive campsite. Hunters should note that deer and bear hunting are by permit only. Vehicular access to the interior of the game land is not allowed during the winter months of January-March. Foot travel is welcomed during the winter, however.

For regulations, maps, and other information on the Pond Mountain Game Land, follow this link www.ncwildlife.org/Hunting/Wheretohunt/PublicPlaces.aspx, and for directions: <http://g.co/maps/j52dv>.

Looking Toward the Future

At Blue Ridge Conservancy we greatly value the generosity of our donors, members and friends. Your donations and membership dues support BRC's work to permanently protect the agricultural, cultural and natural resources of northwest North Carolina.

Over the last few years the economy has been difficult for individuals, businesses and for non-profits like BRC. We need your help! **Please consider a gift to BRC.** In addition to a direct contribution you may want to consider a planned gift.

A planned or legacy gift provides another way for donors to give to charitable organizations. Some donors choose to name their favorite organizations in their wills. Others name

non-profit organizations as beneficiaries of life insurance policies. Others donate land which can be used as a liquid asset—often with perpetual easements attached—to benefit the long term financial needs of the organization. There are a variety of sophisticated financial tools that allow donors to accommodate their personal financial needs—and those of their heirs—while at the same time supporting their favorite charitable organizations.

BRC is happy to provide additional information to guide donors who wish to consider a legacy gift. **If you are interested in learning more, please contact Walter Clark at 828.264.2511 or walter@blueridgeconservancy.org.**

Come Hiking with Blue Ridge Conservancy

Blue Ridge Conservancy has a rich history of collaborating with public and private entities to permanently protect lands of significant conservation value in northwest North Carolina. To showcase these projects Blue Ridge Conservancy conducted a series of hikes in the seven northwest counties of North Carolina.

We hope you enjoy these descriptions of our series of hikes in 2011 and please see the back page of this newsletter for our 2012 hike schedule. If you have suggestions for future hikes, please contact Joe at 828.264.2511, or joe@blueridgeconservancy.org.



YMCA Camp-Herring Ridge, Wilkes County

Jon Bontrager of the YMCA Staff joined Zachary Lesch-Huie to lead a hike up a tributary to Big Warrior Creek. This hike features beautiful waterfalls as it climbs the well-traveled path along this boldly flowing stream.



Beech Creek Bog Hike

Stewart Skeate of Lees-McRae College led and interpreted our hike to Beech Creek Bog. Stewart introduced our hikers to the unique flora of this precious ecosystem.



Hike in Bear Paw State Natural Area

The sunny day provided a great setting for numerous wildflower sightings and Stewart Skeate interpreted the flora and fauna along the way.



Hike on the Black Mountains and Cade's Mountain Farm

The Cade's property, permanently protected with a conservation easement through Blue Ridge Conservancy, produces goat milk-based products, lavender-based products, and hosts weddings and special events.



Michael and Virginia Tate Farm and Pond Mountain Hike, Ashe County

On Saturday, August 27th, nearly seventy hikers met at the Michael and Virginia Tate Farm in northwestern Ashe County for a great hike to the top of Pond Mountain.



Bullhead Mountain Hike, Alleghany County

It was a foggy day September 24th, when nearly thirty brave souls from all parts of North Carolina ventured up Bullhead Mountain in Alleghany County.



Hike at Elk Knob State Park, Ashe County

This year the beginning of peak leaf-viewing season happened to land on Saturday, October 8th. What great luck for BRC and its group of hikers to Elk Knob!



All three photos by Joe Potts

View full story and more photos at
www.blueridgeconservancy.org



Gatherings of Old and New Friends — A Review of Blue Ridge Conservancy's 2011 Events and What's on the Horizon for 2012



Photo by Pearson Ripley

ANNUAL BLUEBERRY FESTIVAL

Old Orchard Creek Farm in Ashe County once again hosted Blue Ridge Conservancy's annual Blueberry Festival. The summer sun, ripe blueberries, friends, music, and good food all made for a wonderful afternoon of fun on behalf of land protection in northwest North Carolina.

Spirits rose with the mercury as Martha Bassett and Kennebec strummed and sang their beautiful tunes to a capacity crowd. BRC teamed up with several local merchants to provide festival fun. While the music played, guests enjoyed delicious wood-fired pizzas provided by Good Wood of Hickory and chased it down with ice cold bottled water from Brushy Mountain Water Company and iced tea from Pepper's Restaurant in Boone. To top it off, blueberry cobbler from Faith Mountain Farms of Ashe County made for a perfect dessert on a hot summer day. Special thanks also to Ashe County Transportation Authority for getting our guests comfortably to and from the Blueberry Festival.

During the intermission between musicians, BRC Executive Director, Walter Clark welcomed everyone to Old Orchard Creek Farm. With help from BRC board members, Millie Barbee, Michelle Leonard and Virginia Tate, Walter thanked guests for joining in the celebration and sponsors for providing their products and services.

The Annual Blueberry Festival is a celebration of Blue

Ridge Conservancy, our friends, supporters, and the work we do together to protect the beautiful mountains of northwest North Carolina. Historic Old Orchard Creek Farm is an example of this work as the farm is permanently protected by conservation easement.

Mark your calendars—the date for the 2012 Blueberry Festival is Saturday, July 14th. Come on out for a day of fun at Old Orchard Creek Farm. **For event and sponsorship information, please contact Joe Potts at 828.264.2511 or joe@blueridgeconservancy.org**

ANNUAL STICK BOY MAYVIEW RUN, 2011

Blue Ridge Conservancy's 12th Annual Stick Boy Mayview Madness run drew a record number of runners and walkers to Blowing Rock's historic Mayview neighborhood on October 22nd. The weather was perfect and the autumn colors spectacular as 200 participants wound their way through the neighborhood enjoying beautiful views of the John's River Gorge, historic homes and Grandfather Mountain.

Blue Ridge Conservancy is deeply grateful to our sponsors, technical supporters, and loyal participants. In addition to many important and generous sponsors, BRC



Photo courtesy of Katie Langley Photography

received technical support from several local resources. Pirate Race Productions assisted staff and volunteers in organizing the event and coordinating logistical needs. John Weaver, Director of Track and Cross Country at Appalachian State University, donated his time and expertise by providing race timing services and promptly posting finish times for participants. Zap Fitness of Bowling Rock provided expertise not only for operation of the event, but by hosting weekly running clinics leading up to the event. The clinics educated participants on long-term personal fitness including running techniques and diet. Katie Langley, a local photographer and long-time supporter of BRC, donated her expertise by photographing the event. Katie's beautiful photos can be viewed on BRC's website and Facebook page.

After the race, Stick Boy Bread Company treated racers with delicious baked goods and their unique "baked medals" for winners of each event category. And Cobb Milner and the friendly staff at Bistro Roca hosted our finish line and post-race awards ceremony. BRC thanks Stick Boy and Bistro Roca for their support of local land protection and for all they do to enhance our community.

Thanks to Stuart Mangum and mPrints Screenprinting of Boone for providing our race shirts. Stuart and his company have provided many years generous support to BRC.

Mark your calendars—the date for the 2012 Mayview Madness is Saturday, September 22nd. **For event and sponsorship information, please contact Joe Potts at 828.264.2511 or joe@blueridgeconservancy.org.**

ANNUAL GAMEKEEPER WINE TASTING & AUCTION

It was a beautiful August evening in the mountains for Blue Ridge Conservancy's Annual Wine Tasting and Auction. More than seventy-five supporters of land protection gathered at historic Camp Sky Ranch to enjoy great food and wine and to bid on unique and locally-produced merchandise and services. In keeping with a near 10-year tradition, the Gamekeeper Restaurant and Bar of Boone and Blowing Rock provided delicious cuisine. For dessert, Stick Boy Bread Company provided a beautiful cake complete with BRC's logo.

BRC would like to thank Elizabeth Hempfling from Events by Elizabeth Ashley for donating her expertise in event planning. Also, thanks to Miss Match for donating unique and elegant table settings. Katie Langley of Katie



Photo courtesy of Katie Langley Photography

Langley Photography lent her talents providing beautiful photos of the setting, our guests and a great evening of fun in support of local land protection.

Jack Sharp Jr. and his family generously donated a wonderful venue for the event. Camp Sky Ranch has a rich history and a great future. Thanks to Jack and his family for supporting BRC. If you haven't been there, visit the camp and learn what this great local resource has to offer.

Finally, we want to thank all our other sponsors who made this event successful by contributing their time and resources.

Mark your calendars—the date for the 2012 Gamekeeper Wine Tasting and Auction is Wednesday, June 6th. **For event and sponsorship information, please contact Joe Potts at 828.264.2511 or joe@blueridgeconservancy.org.**

LAND TRUST DAY, 2011

On the first Saturday in June, businesses across North Carolina show their support for conservation by donating a percentage of their sales to local land trusts. On June 4th, 2011, Blue Ridge Conservancy partnered with sixteen businesses in the High Country in recognizing the importance of protecting the beauty of the northwestern mountains.

We thank our 2011 sponsors and look forward to Land Trust Day 2012. So mark your calendars for June 2nd and join the celebration. Also, let us know if you have a business, or know of a business that would like to partner in land conservation. **For event and sponsorship information, contact Joe Potts at 828.264.2511 or joe@blueridgeconservancy.org.**

Sponsor Highlight: Ashe Woodworking, Inc.

Ashe Woodworking, Inc. is a successful custom cabinetry, furniture and woodworking business serving the High Country for over 10 years. Owners Mike and Maria Whaley built their shop on the family farm northwest of Lansing in Ashe County, a little bit off the beaten path. “We don’t get a lot of drive-by business”, says Maria. “We choose to live, and work, in paradise” says Michael, “and we are able to sustain that by providing a great product, built to client specifications, at a fair price.” And 30 years of experience gives Ashe Woodworking the skill to achieve that goal. “Most of our business comes from repeat customers and referrals,” says Maria. “Great customer service is as important to us as the product we deliver.” Mike and Maria also firmly believe in community involvement and live that belief by donating custom-made auction items to several local organizations, including BRC. “It makes sense to give back to the community that helps us succeed”, says Maria, “It’s good for business and it’s good for the soul”. That philosophy helped earn Ashe Woodworking the distinction of Ashe County Chamber



Photo by Maria Whaley

Small Business of the Year in 2007, an honor of which they are very proud. Consider contacting Ashe Woodworking for your custom cabinetry, furniture, and woodworking needs. All materials are hazardous air-borne product free. Visit their website at www.ashewoodworking.com or call 336-384-9509 to schedule a complimentary consultation.

If you are interested in sponsoring a future edition of the Blue Ridge Conservancy Newsletter, please contact Joe Potts at 828.264.2511 or email joe@blueridgeconservancy.org.

Blue Ridge Conservancy is proud to be a partner of the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation



GetThePlate.org

Blue Ridge Conservancy Applies for LTA Accreditation

The Land Trust Alliance's Land Trust Accreditation Program recognizes land conservation organizations that meet national quality standards for protecting important natural places and working lands forever. BRC is pleased to announce it is applying for accreditation. A public comment period is now open.

The Land Trust Accreditation Commission, an independent program of the Land Trust Alliance, conducts an extensive review of each applicant's policies and programs. The Commission invites public input and accepts signed, written comments on pending applications. Comments must relate to how BRC complies with national quality standards. These standards address the ethical and technical operation of a land trust. For the full list of standards see www.landtrustaccreditation.org/getting-accredited/indicator-practices.

To learn more about the accreditation program and to submit a comment, visit www.landtrustaccreditation.org. Comments may also be faxed or mailed to:

Land Trust Accreditation Commission
Attn: Public Comments
112 Spring Street, Suite 204
Saratoga Springs, NY 12866
(fax) 518-587-3183

Comments on the BRC application will be most useful by May 20, 2012. All comments must be in writing.

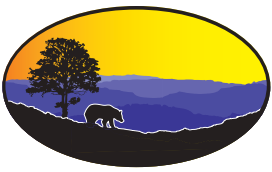
Thank You Blue Ridge Conservancy Sponsors!

A great year of events has brought another great group of event sponsors. Blue Ridge Conservancy's events are important to sustaining our future. Land Trust Day, BRC's Blueberry Festival, Mayview Madness, and The Gamekeeper Wine Tasting and Auction, along with our series of hikes, give our supporters the opportunity to meet us and their fellow BRC supporters while enjoying fun and active events.

A special thanks to our event sponsors. Those sponsors who participate in multiple events **bold green**:

1861 Farmhouse	Miss Match
Bald Guy Brew	Mountain Aire Golf Club
Black Cat Burrito	Mountain Outfitters
Blue Mountain Metal Works	Old Orchard Creek Farm
Blue Ridge Anglers	Organic Hair Design
Bohemia Coffee Shop	Our Daily Bread
Boone Bike and Touring	Peabody's Wine & Beer Merchants
Brushy Mountain Bee Farm	Pepper's Restaurant
Brushy Mountain Water & Coffee	Pilot's Landing- Ocracoke Island
Cade's Mountain Farm	Proper Restaurant
DeWolfson	Red Onion
Dilly's Café & Candle Shop	Reid's Catering
Footsloggers	River & Earth Adventures
Fred's General Mercantile	Road ID
Green Mother Goods	Rock Dimensions Climbing Guides
Hawk's Nest Zipline	Steve Duprey & Steve Wylie
High Meadows Golf and Country Club	Stick Boy Bread Company
Inn at Little Pond Farm	Sugar Mountain Café
Inn at Yonahlossee	Sunrise Grill
Katie Langley Photography	TApp Room
Linville River Pottery	The Car Wash
Lynn Willis Photography	The Children's Playhouse
mPrints	The Saddle Club at Yonahlossee
Magic Cycles	Venture Properties
Mast General Store	Westglow Resort & Spa
Melanie's Food Fantasy	ZAP Fitness

Please stop in and thank our sponsors by shopping with them or using their services. **If you are interested in sponsoring a BRC event, please contact Joe at 828.264.2511 or email joe@blueridgeconservancy.org.**



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BRC PROPOSED 2012 EVENT SCHEDULE

- Saturday, April 7** BRC Hike: YMCA/Herring Ridge, Wilkes County
- Saturday, May 19** BRC Hike: Bear Paw State Natural Area in Watauga Co.
- Saturday, June 2** Land Trust Day
- Wednesday, June 6** Gamekeeper Auction and Wine Tasting at Camp Sky Ranch
- Saturday, June 16** BRC Hike: Beech Creek Bog
- Saturday, June 23** Blue Ridge Conservancy/National Committee for the New River
"Celebrate Summer, Celebrate Conservation" in Piney Creek, NC
- Saturday, July 14** Blue Ridge Conservancy Annual Blueberry Festival
- Saturday, July 28** BRC Hike: BRP Crabtree Falls/Cade's Mountain Farm
- Thursday, August 9** Blue Ridge Conservancy/Conservation Trust for North
Carolina Celebration at Gideon Ridge
- Saturday, August 18** BRC Hike: Pond Mountain/Michael & Virginia Tate Farm
- Saturday, September 22** Stick Boy Mayview Madness 5k, Blowing Rock
- Saturday, September 29** BRC Hike: Bullhead Mountain/Hawk watch
- Saturday, October 6** BRC Hike: Elk Knob State Park

For more details and information, please go to www.blueridgeconservancy.org



Find Blue Ridge Conservancy on Facebook and Twitter! Come by our Facebook page or follow us on Twitter for beautiful photos of conservation areas, info on upcoming BRC hikes and events, and up-to-date news on how we're saving the places you love in northwestern North Carolina. If you support our work, be sure to hit the 'Like' button and recommend our page to your Facebook friends.



PLEASE SEND US YOUR EMAIL ADDRESS SO WE CAN KEEP YOU UP TO DATE! Send an email to info@blueridgeconservancy.org