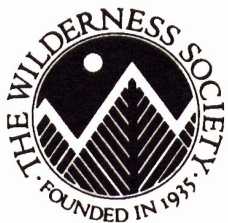


Virginia's Mountain Treasures



The Unprotected Wildlands of the George Washington National Forest



A report by The Wilderness Society



Cover Art: Betty Gatewood, Betty lives in Mt. Sidney, Virginia.
Mountain Fetterbush--*Pieris floribunda*
Shenandoah Mountain

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Founded in 1935, The Wilderness Society works to protect America's wilderness and to develop a nationwide network of wild lands through public education, scientific analysis, and advocacy. Our goal is to ensure that future generations will enjoy the clean air and water, wildlife, beauty, and opportunities for recreation and renewal that pristine forests, rivers, deserts, and mountains provide.

Our membership of more than 200,000 people is a potent force that gets the attention of Congress, the White House, and federal agencies who manage our public lands.

You can join the growing number of Americans who believe that preserving wilderness is essential by calling 1-800-THE-WILD (1-800-843-9453) to speak with a representative of our membership services. Or, you can join online at our website—www.wilderness.org.

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Virginia's Mountain Treasures

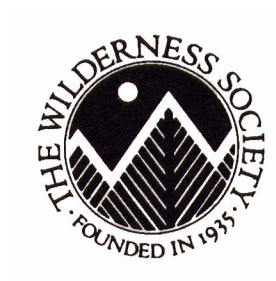
*The Unprotected Wildlands of the
George Washington National Forest*

by

Mark Miller

for

The Wilderness Society



Preface

During the course of my career, long before working full time for the conservation community, I had the pleasure of spending four years at Sweet Briar College in central Virginia. It is difficult to describe what that lovely setting meant to me, except to say that one of the highlights of living there was the panoramic view of the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains right outside my door. I fell in love with the state back then, captivated by its simple beauty, and mention this brief piece of personal history because preserving Virginia's wild landscapes and hidden wonders has become a personal quest for all of us at The Wilderness Society.

Eastern Wilderness is an uncommon and very precious commodity. Before passage of the Eastern Wilderness Areas Act of 1975, many people believed unspoiled wilderness simply no longer existed east of the Mississippi River. Thousands of dedicated activists proved them wrong. The Wilderness Society's report, *Virginia's Mountain Treasures: The Unprotected Wildlands of the George Washington National Forest*, describes more than 600,000 acres of potential wildlands, an assortment of dazzling natural jewels that remain intact even today. This booklet is a guide to the best of the best of these special places—little known corners of the wild that provide safe havens for endangered species, rare plants, clean water, historic sites, spiritual respite and renewal, breathtaking vistas and unforgettable outdoor experiences.

The good news is that every citizen of Virginia has a singular opportunity to take action right now and help create more protected wildlands in their own backyard.

The bad news is that the fragile roadless areas found within this forest lie in the shadow of the fast-

developing Mid-Atlantic region—within one day's drive of at least a third of the population of the United States. As wild country and open space disappear from private land, every acre of public land becomes more precious. We have a once-in-a-lifetime chance to permanently protect a priceless forest legacy and bequeath it to our grandchildren. But that opportunity is fleeting.

No one understood the impermanence and fragility of nature's web of life better than the late Ernie Dickerman, the indefatigable champion of Virginia wilderness to whom we owe endless gratitude. Place after place listed in our *Mountain Treasures* report is intact today because a warrior like Ernie refused to let logging and development encroach on his beloved wild lands. Luckily for us another generation of advocates and heroes now carries the torch he passed on: Bess and Jim Murray, Steve Krichbaum, Carol Lena Miller, Lynn Cameron, Hugh Irwin, Sherman Bamford, David Hannah, Pete Bsumek, Don Giecek, David Carr, Mark Miller, Juliana Simpson, Laura Neale, and the entire Virginia Wilderness Committee to name just a few. We offer our sincerest thanks to them too.

As you read this document I trust you will feel the spark of hope it is meant to engender. Virginians and others turned hope into reality in 2000 when Congress designated more than 10,000 acres of new Wilderness in the Priest and Three Ridges Wilderness Areas of the George Washington National Forest. It will happen again—if we can activate the collective power of thousands of individuals who believe in conservation. Together we will transform the words written on these pages to real and lasting changes on the land. Virginia's wildland treasures are our gifts to the future. I hope you will join us in creating that future.

William H. Meadows
President,
The Wilderness Society



Rough Mountain Wilderness

Photo by Mark Miller

Dedicated to Virginia's Conservationists Faithful Conservators of Our Mountain Heritage

This volume of Virginia's Mountain Treasures describes the finest selection of wildlands to be found within the George Washington National Forest. All of them deserve some degree of protection from the pressures of development. It will be evident, of course, to all our readers that we do not expect all of these lands to become wilderness, but it is from this bountiful reserve that any future additions to the National Wilderness Preservation System must be drawn.

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Executive Summary

Virginia's Mountain Treasures: The Unprotected Wildlands of the George Washington National Forest is a report published by the Wilderness Society with major assistance from local conservation organizations. This publication is the companion volume to *Virginia's Mountain Treasures: The Unprotected Wildlands of the Jefferson National Forest*.

The George Washington National Forest lies in thirteen counties in northwestern Virginia and two counties in eastern West Virginia. These lands total almost 1.1 million acres.

The U.S. Forest Service has begun its planning process for the George Washington National Forest. This process will determine how these treasures will be managed for the next 10-15 years.

Highlights

- ◆ This report identifies as Mountain Treasures 63 areas on the George Washington National Forest.
- ◆ A total of over 602,000 acres of the forest have been identified in this publication.
- ◆ Mountain Treasures should be protected from logging, road construction, and other forms of exploitative development.
- ◆ Only 25 Treasures were identified by the Forest Service as "Inventoried Roadless Areas" under the 2001 Roadless Conservation Rule.
- ◆ Virginia's Mountain Treasures serve as the bases for the source of clean water for many communities in western Virginia. Many areas were selected to keep watersheds intact.
- ◆ These Treasures help local communities draw in tourists from all across the Commonwealth as well as from across the nation.
- ◆ Recreation such as hunting, fishing, mountain biking, hiking, backpacking, and birding are significant activities which occur on Virginia's National Forest. Protected areas serve to foster this type of recreation.
- ◆ These Mountain Treasures protect some of the last remaining stands of old-growth forest in Virginia and West Virginia and provide refuge for neo-tropical migratory song birds, native brook trout, and other species that require large unbroken tracts of forest land.

The Planning Process

- ◆ This process will determine how these Treasures will be managed for the next 10-15 years.
- ◆ The forest planning process will impact the quality of water for local communities. It will also affect local tourism and tourism-related activities for local communities.
- ◆ The planning process may establish administrative procedures for the protection of old growth forests, native brook trout, and neo-tropical migratory song birds.
- ◆ This publication does not attempt to define how the Mountain Treasures should be protected. It only seeks to raise awareness that these wildlands should receive "meaningful consideration" in the upcoming Forest planning process.
- ◆ Some types of protection include: forest plan Special Biological Areas, National Scenic or Conservation Areas, Wild and Scenic River designations, roadless areas, and Wilderness and Wilderness Study Areas.

Overview

In the National Forests of the Southern Appalachians, there are still some lands that are largely wild and unroaded. Some of these are set aside as Wilderness, the Appalachian Trail corridor, National Recreation Areas, or Special Biological and Scenic Areas. Others are in administrative management categories that currently are considered unsuitable for logging and road building. However, many important wildlands are still open to future timber cutting, road construction, and other development.

This publication focuses on the unprotected wildlands of the George Washington National Forest. The Wilderness Society and sponsoring groups have identified *63 areas that need and deserve protection*. Some of these should be added to the National Wilderness Preservation System; others would be more appropriately designated as scenic areas, biological areas or recreation areas. Maps and descriptions are presented for each area. This report briefly explains some of the values of wild areas and discusses how wildlands in the George Washington National Forest contribute to the overall health and beauty of the entire Southern Appalachian ecosystem.

These areas constitute some of the wildest and least-developed tracts remaining in Virginia. A part of the George Washington National Forest extends into West Virginia; thus all or portions of nine wildlands in this report are in that state. In addition, some Mountain Treasures extend beyond the boundaries of the George Washington National Forest onto the Monongahela National Forest in West Virginia. Where this occurs a dashed line has been utilized to show the true extent of the roadless area.

Some of the Mountain Treasures currently are protected by the Forest Service, and we recommend continued protection for these lands. But many are not. For areas currently open to timber cutting and road building, we recommend protection from future logging operations and development. In 1993, the Forest Service adopted a plan for management of the George Washington National Forest that opened up many wild areas to logging and related road construction. That forest plan was challenged by a coalition of environmental groups, including the Citizens Task Force, the Sierra Club, The Wilderness Society, the Southern Environmental Law Center,

Virginians For Wilderness, and Trout Unlimited. This administrative appeal and others were dismissed by the Forest Service without changing the forest plan or addressing the appellants' concerns.

There are two primary laws governing the management of our National Forests. The National Forest Management Act (NFMA) requires on-the-ground protection of the Forest's components such as wildlife populations, soils, and water quality. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) is procedural in nature and requires the Forest Service to study and disclose the effects of its activities. In addition, it requires the public to be informed about and involved in the agency's management proposals.

The Forest Service is now in the process of revising the forest plan for the George Washington National Forest. However, the process for doing so has been changed. Under NEPA, previous National Forest Plan revisions had to undergo the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). Such an endeavor is supposed to entail not only thorough fact-finding and analysis, but also open opportunities for public participation.

However, in 2002 the Bush administration proposed new regulations that, if adopted, would allow the process for developing the forest plan for the entire 1.1 million acre GWNF to be "categorically excluded" from full NEPA review. Now it is not clear whether Virginians and other Americans will have the opportunity to participate in determining the future management of the George Washington National Forest. In addition, the administration also changed the NFMA regulations, significantly weakening the requirements for on-the-ground protection.

It is more important than ever before that the public state their views on the many issues affecting the Forest. One of these issues will be to determine which areas should be open for future logging and mining and which areas should be off-limits to industrial extraction. The Forest Service also will consider Wilderness recommendations for eligible lands. We urge everyone to *write to the Forest Service now and ask to be included in the Forest Plan Revision mailing list*. This will ensure your opportunity to comment on the draft forest plan and its development.

Why Protect Wild Areas?

In the United States, the practice of setting aside selected lands to remain in a primitive, undeveloped condition dates back more than a century. It is recognized that wildlands provide important benefits for people. Yet, how does one measure the joy of exploring an old-growth forest to see how nature works over time? How valuable is the experience of fishing for native brook trout in a pristine river, or camping deep in the woods where the sights, sounds, and smells are only those of the forest?

In 1996, an interagency effort, including leadership by the Forest Service, led to the publication of the *Southern Appalachian Assessment* (SAA). This multi-volume study described the resources of this 37-million-acre region, which includes national forests and parks, and extensive surrounding private lands.

According to the SAA, only 1 percent of the Southern Appalachian region is designated as Wilderness, consisting of 39 areas totaling about 430,000 acres. Another 2 percent of the land in the region is included in national forest roadless areas, which are eligible for Wilderness designation. These roadless areas comprise about 715,000 acres, affording opportunities to establish Wilderness areas in each of the region's national forests.

Increasing Recreation

As detailed in *Charting a New Course: National Forests in the Southern Appalachians* (Morton, 1994), the demand for recreational opportunities that wildlands offer is increasing in the Southern Appalachians as the population of the area continues to grow. The Forest Service expects a doubling of current rates of dispersed recreational use by the year 2040 in the South. With adventure-based recreation becoming increasingly popular, there is increased demand for more natural settings that hold greater challenges for outdoor enthusiasts with enhanced skills and experience. The remaining roadless areas in the national forests afford backcountry recreation opportunities that can meet future demand.

Ecological Benchmarks

Among other benefits of Wilderness, the SAA notes that "these areas can serve as ecological benchmarks for assessing human-induced impacts in more developed settings. They can be baselines for global monitoring studies and living laboratories to see how natural systems interact and evolve." The SAA lists a wide variety of scientific studies in the region's Wildernesses on topics from the effects of air pollution, to old growth forest dynamics, to visitor satisfaction.

Culture and History

Wildlands also provide cultural enrichment. If we leave some land in a natural condition and secure living space for our native plants and animals, we can more fully understand the kinds of landscapes experienced by earlier generations of Americans, including Native Americans. Accounts of life in America in the 17th and 18th centuries have more meaning if we can see and experience wild forestlands in conditions similar to those found in colonial times.

Our culture has been shaped by the exploration and use of wilderness in the past. Aldo Leopold, a noted conservationist, writer, and founding member of the Wilderness Society, said in his book, *A Sand Country Almanac*: "Wilderness is the raw material out of which man has hammered the artifact called civilization. Wilderness was never a homogenous raw material. It was very diverse, and the resulting artifacts are very diverse. These differences in the end-product are known as cultures. The rich diversity of the world's cultures reflects a corresponding diversity in the wilds that gave them birth."

Biodiversity

Another important reason for conserving large tracts of unfragmented forest is their contribution to biodiversity. Nineteen federally listed threatened and endangered species are found in 16 roadless areas. Older forests (stands over 100 years old) can be found in 125 of the 139 national forest roadless

areas, totaling 174,000 acres. The SAA shows that some ecological classification units are not represented by a designated Wilderness or even an inventoried roadless area, and it is important that they should be.

Wildlands also serve as prime Black Bear habitat in the region. In particular, the SAA finds that large populations of Black Bear are associated with areas of low road density, and, conversely, that areas of higher road density generally have lower populations. Wilderness, roadless areas, and other wildlands provide the habitat security that Black Bears require, as well as the greatest amount of hard mast — food — from mature oak forests.

Neotropical migratory songbirds associated with forest interior habitat also benefit from the large tracts of unfragmented forest found in designated Wilderness, Scenic Areas, and roadless areas. These include species in decline, such as the Wood Thrush, Ovenbird, and Cerulean Warbler, as well as cavity-nesting birds like the Pileated Woodpecker.

The SAA also found that 11 percent of the region's trout streams are in remote settings. Roadless areas contain pristine watersheds and streams that offer outstanding opportunities for high-quality fishing in backcountry settings.

During the years ahead, while we add to our knowledge of the habitat needs of our native flora and fauna, it makes sense to keep some of our land in an undeveloped condition. This will help ensure that we do not destroy the sustaining resources that are critical to the well-being of these species.

Potential Benefits to Human Health

Wild nature yields products used in medicine and other disciplines that affect many aspects of our daily lives. For example, many antibiotics, including penicillin and cephalosporin, are derived from natural substances. Taxol, from the Pacific Yew tree, is used in the treatment of ovarian cancer. For years, the Yew tree, with little market value, was eliminated routinely from the forests of the Pacific Northwest.

Considering that only a small number of the plants and animals on earth have been studied for their medicinal properties, there are undoubtedly many

other useful substances yet to be discovered. These secrets of nature may have important and far-reaching benefits for humankind, and these discoveries may be possible only if portions of our natural environment remain intact.

In the book, *The Lands Nobody Wanted*, by William Shands and Robert Healy, the authors recommend that future management of the eastern national forests gives priority to “providing public benefits that cannot be supplied by private land, either because resources are unavailable, or because an economic incentive is absent.” Because, as stated in the SAA, large tracts of the region's privately owned land are expected to decrease over time, national forests and other public lands offer the best option for protecting large blocks of wildland in the Southern Appalachians.

Wilderness

Established by Congress, Wilderness areas are permanently preserved by law in their natural condition, with multiple benefits for clean water, backcountry recreation, high-quality fisheries, scenery, and old-growth habitat. They are protected from logging, road construction, mining and mechanized equipment. Recreation in Wilderness includes hiking, nature study, horseback riding, camping, canoeing, fishing, and hunting. Under bills passed in 1984, 1988, and 2000 approximately 43,000 acres, or about 4 percent, of the George Washington National Forest is Wilderness.

Roadless Areas

Roadless areas are large tracts of wildlands, unfragmented by roads, yet may be open to future road building and logging. These areas are the building blocks for future permanent protection such as Wilderness or National Scenic Areas. To qualify as roadless, areas must be generally wild (with less than 1/2 mile of improved road per 1,000 acres), must be natural (less than 20 percent of the forest less than 10 years old), and must provide outstanding opportunities for backcountry recreation or solitude.

The current forest plan for the George Washington National Forest lists about 260,000 acres, or 24 percent, of the land as roadless. Many conservationists contend that the Forest Service failed to identify additional qualified lands as roadless. In 2001, a nationwide rule was adopted to protect inventoried roadless areas from roadbuilding and commercial logging with certain limited exceptions.

The current administration has sought to remove these protections and only provide them when a governor can persuade the Secretary of Agriculture to implement them in his state. The governor of Virginia submitted such a request in 2005. That request is on hold since there is still the potential for the nationwide rule to survive.

Areas designated as roadless are popular recreational sites for primitive backcountry recreation and mountain biking.

The Southern Appalachian System

The George Washington National Forest comprises 1,061,000 acres of mountainous forest land in Virginia and adjacent West Virginia. It is part of the Southern Appalachian ecosystem, which contains millions of acres of federal public land stretching from Virginia to Alabama. This is the largest concentration of public lands in the eastern United States. In addition to the National Forests, the ecosystem includes the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the Blue Ridge Parkway, and Shenandoah National Park.

The great diversity of plant and animal life in the Southern Appalachians reflects the fact that these highlands have remained dry land and unglaciated for millions of years. These mountains owe their beginnings to the great crustal movements that closed the Paleozoic Era. Throughout the Paleozoic, enormously thick sediments had accumulated in a basin on the margin of continental America. These sediments were compressed laterally by the collision of continental plates with the result that the strata were folded and faulted into a series of overlapping slabs. Subsequent erosion then sculpted the terrain into many individual mountain ranges stretching from Georgia all the way to Newfoundland. Indeed the effects of this Appalachian Revolution can be traced across the Atlantic into southern Britain and Europe.

The resulting landforms have been produced by two types of drainage. In some cases, the original eastward flowing rivers, such as the James and the Potomac, must have been in place before the mountains were built. These powerful streams were able to maintain their original positions despite the rise of the mountains. In other cases, the streams have sought out the less resistant rocks to develop rivers that follow the grain of the folding, a classic example being the two forks of the Shenandoah.

In the George Washington Forest two of the major physiographic provinces of Virginia are represented. The Blue Ridge is made up of ancient Precambrian sedimentary, volcanic, or metamorphic rocks. These have been thrust westward against and even over the Paleozoic sediments. West of the Blue Ridge these sedimentary rocks have been thrown into multiple

folds to create the Ridge and Valley Province. The crests of the ridges are held up by hard Silurian sandstones, while the valleys are sculpted from the softer limestones and shales.

The mountains in the George Washington do not match the greatest heights of the Appalachians, such as North Carolina's Mt. Mitchell at 6,684 ft., but with many summits topping 4,000 ft. they have enough elevation to establish steep ecological gradients with the deep valleys and water gaps separating the mountain masses. Consider, for example, Reddish Knob at 4,398ft. To the south and east stretches the drainage of the Shenandoah; to the southwest lie the headwaters of streams that will join to form the James; and to the northwest are the upper reaches of the Potomac.

Although these mountains have never been covered by the ice age glaciers, they have not been unaffected by climate change. Studies of pollen deposition show that the plant associations have advanced and retreated in step with the ice. Present day climatic warming has left pockets of northern vegetation isolated on the highest peaks. Red Spruce and Balsam Fir occur as relict populations. The movement of plants and animals up and down the mountain chain has resulted in many cases of speciation as a result of the isolation of populations. An especially notable example is the flora of the shale barrens, patches of stony shards where temperatures are extreme and water is limiting. Species found nowhere else in the world, such as Virginia Clover and several species of Clematis, grow here. In other cases southern endemics find their farthest northern extension in the George Washington, notably Carolina Hemlock and Catawba Rhododendron.

Animals have also produced localized species found here and nowhere else. The George Washington is home to an endemic species of salamander, the Cow Knob Salamander, while the Shenandoah National Park is the only home of the Shenandoah Salamander. Other species of vertebrates, such as the Northern Flying Squirrel, here reach the limits of their southern distribution.

The Southern Appalachian Assessment (SAA) predicts that large tracts of forest and associated forest interior habitats will continue to decrease due to development and conversion to other land uses. The SAA concludes that “priority should be given to maintaining existing larger tracts that have the potential to support the species associated with mid- and late-successional forests. Currently, national forests and national parks contain the largest portion of these large tracts, and will most likely continue to provide the core habitat for source populations of deciduous forest species.”

The Southern Appalachian region has long been one of the major tourist destinations in the United

States. In 1995, there were more than 100 million outdoor-recreation-based trips in the Southern Appalachians, with more than 80 percent of those visits made by people from outside the region. The value of recreation-based tourism is nearly \$6 billion per year, with an annual employment of more than 100,000 people.

Hiking, backpacking, fishing, hunting, mountain biking, wildlife viewing, and nature study activities contribute significant numbers of jobs and income to the region. The SAA estimates that 30,602 jobs are directly related to recreation on federal land. This is almost a third of the annual employment from recreation-based tourism. The number of employees doubled between 1977 and 1991.



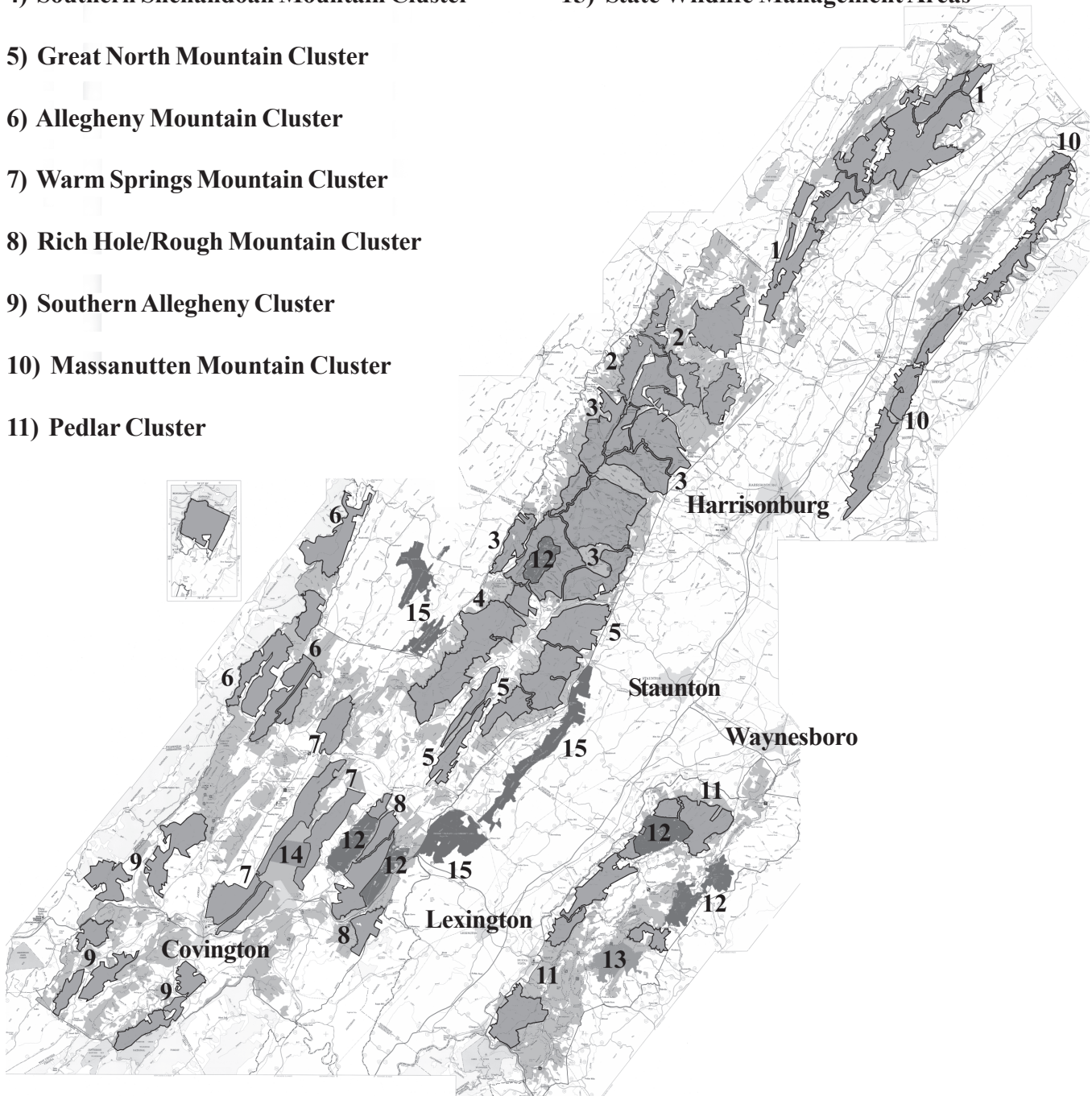
A Milk Snake

Photo by Steve Krichbaum

George Washington National Forest

Legend

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1) Big Schloss Cluster | 12) National Forest Wilderness |
| 2) Northern Shenandoah Mountain Cluster | 13) Mount Pleasant National Scenic Area |
| 3) Central Shenandoah Mountain Cluster | 14) Douthat State Park |
| 4) Southern Shenandoah Mountain Cluster | 15) State Wildlife Management Areas |
| 5) Great North Mountain Cluster | |
| 6) Allegheny Mountain Cluster | |
| 7) Warm Springs Mountain Cluster | |
| 8) Rich Hole/Rough Mountain Cluster | |
| 9) Southern Allegheny Cluster | |
| 10) Massanutten Mountain Cluster | |
| 11) Pedlar Cluster | |



The Unprotected Wildlands of the George Washington National Forest

The wildlands in this report — 63 areas totaling about 602,432 acres — are special places that should be protected from logging, road construction, and other forms of harmful development. These federally owned lands, selected for their outstanding wild and natural values, include high-quality fisheries, mature and old-growth forest, wildlife habitat, backcountry recreation opportunities, intact watersheds, and beautiful scenery.

Although many ecosystems of the central Appalachians have been degraded by past environmental impacts, these Mountain Treasures offer a unique opportunity for us to retain a system of large, connected, and unfragmented natural areas, providing habitats for forest-dwelling plants and animals and genetic reservoirs for the future.

The region's remaining natural areas are coming under increasing assault from road construction, logging, and motorized recreation. It is essential to maintain the size and connectedness of the National Forest roadless areas in order to provide for wildlife movements, genetic interchange, and the functioning of natural ecological processes.

Some of these Mountain Treasures were identified and "inventoried" in the Roadless Area Review and Evaluation II (RARE II) conducted by the Forest Service in the late 1970s. These areas received initial protection under the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule, although the status of that rule is still in doubt. Many of these areas would be suitable for Congressional Wilderness or National Scenic Area designation. (For acreages of "Inventoried Roadless Areas", see the Summary Table.) The Forest Service also evaluated eligible waterway segments for possible recommendation as wild and scenic rivers.

Currently, only about 4% of the George Washington National Forest is permanently preserved as Wilderness — about 43,600 acres. This is well below the national average of 18% for National Forest acreage. The six Wilderness Areas on the Forest are generally small, averaging about 7,300 acres — far below the national average for national forest Wilderness of around 40,000 acres. For the environment and our quality of life, more and larger

Wilderness areas are needed. The Forest has only one designated National Scenic Area. Mount Pleasant is 7,748 acres.

Under the current forest plan adopted in 1993, the Forest Service established a variety of administrative categories to designate special areas for their values as biological sites, backcountry recreation, scenery, and watershed protection. This usually ensures that these lands are protected from logging and road construction during the 10-15-year life of the forest plan. However, such protections are not permanent and can be altered or rescinded by agency action.

Roads are, of course, one of the most serious issues in contemporary conservation. Roads produce habitat fragmentation, edge effects, problems with access, and other impacts. As of 2003 there were 1,790 miles of classified system roads within the George Washington National Forest. In addition, an enormous number of "temporary" roads (certainly hundreds of miles), which have been constructed for logging and other management purposes, are not maintained by the Forest Service and do not figure in the agency's inventories. Though "temporary", their impact will be discernable for a lifetime.

In the selection of Treasures proposed for protection, attempts were made to identify areas with few or no roads, to keep watersheds intact, and to cluster areas to form wildlife corridors and reduce fragmentation. One area in particular, Shenandoah Mountain, deserves mention as the largest and least fragmented block of contiguous wildlands remaining in the Central Appalachians.

Eleven clusters of Mountain Treasures have been identified on the GWNF's five Ranger Districts. The bulk of these lands are on the west side of the Valley, in the Ridge and Valley physiographic province. The Pedlar RD, however, on the east side of the Valley, is part of the Blue Ridge Mountains province; and a small portion of the Warm Springs RD lies in the Allegheny Mountains & Plateau province. The lands of the GWNF are situated in two major watersheds, the James River and Potomac River, both of which drain into the Chesapeake Bay.

The peaks and ridges of the GWNF are some of the driest lands in the East. Most precipitation falls on the western slopes of the Allegheny Plateau and eastern slopes of the Blue Ridge. Lying in this double rain shadow, the bulk of the Forest only averages about 35 inches of precipitation annually. The lands constituting the GWNF are some of the steepest, rockiest, driest, thin-soiled, most remote, and most difficult to access in the state. Consequently, from a commercial timber perspective, they are of relatively poor value economically.

Nevertheless, this has not prevented the development of beautiful old-growth on the Forest. Shenandoah Mountain in particular has a concentration of such sites. Old-growth forest provides many unique benefits for fish and wildlife, recreation, scenery, and overall biodiversity. The Forest Service has done a preliminary identification of “possible” old growth on the GWNF, based on the agency’s computerized database of ages for each individual “stand” on the Forest (there are over twenty thousand of these). Depending on the type of forest, “stands” must generally be at least 100-150 years old to potentially qualify as old-growth. Despite the use of the Regional Old-Growth Guidance issued by the Forest Service in 1997, the cutting of old-growth forest continues on the GWNF.

This landscape of the GWNF is one of extremes. The lowlands in the Shenandoah Valley are heavily developed, with the I-81 corridor, manufacturing, municipalities, suburban sprawl, and industrial agriculture contributing to streams with poor water quality. In contrast, the headwaters of these drainages, many of which lie within the GWNF, retain some of the best water quality in the region. Unfortunately, in addition to direct management threats from within, the Forest’s aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems are at risk of degradation from air pollution and acid precipitation from outside the area.

Both the Forest’s content and its context must be kept in mind in our conservation decisions. The fragmented and degraded quality that characterizes

much of our landscape limits us to thinking “small” as the norm in contemporary conservation. The 1.1 million acre GWNF in its entirety and these Mountain Treasures in particular give us the rare chance to think “Big” in the East. To pass up this remarkable opportunity will be to betray not only science and reason, but also life and all the generations who follow us.

Many of these Treasures possess outstanding wilderness attributes and would be invaluable additions to the National Wilderness Preservation System. Others would make excellent National Scenic Area candidates. While some Treasures may not be suitable for Wilderness designation, they have the potential to recover from past degradation. If not further disrupted, they will be of ever growing value in maintaining the biological diversity and ecological integrity of the region.

With increasing population and development pressures, places to escape to the “sounds of silence” and enjoy nature’s song are increasingly rare in our landscape. Places to be treasured, they are where the wild things are. These remote sanctuaries are our natural heritage and a vital necessity for sustaining the health of not only ourselves, but also all that we call home. They are where we go to hike, camp, watch birds, mountain bike, hunt, and fish. *In a sea of noise and development, this place we call the George Washington National Forest is nothing less than a modern-day Ark, precious and irreplaceable.*

The maps used in this report are the Forest Service recreation maps for the George Washington National Forest, dated 1983, and available from the agency for \$6.75 each. On the maps in this report, a heavy black line denotes the general boundary of the wildland. Broken lines indicate that an area extends beyond the Virginia boundary into West Virginia and the Monongahela National Forest. Shaded areas represent land in federal ownership. Heavily shaded areas are designated Wilderness or the Shenandoah National Park. Unshaded areas are private land. The cluster maps are much reduced in scale, and vary in scale to fit the page.

Conservation

Virginia's Mountain Treasures embrace a wide spectrum of values in the natural world. They lend themselves to a wide variety of conservation methods. Some of these require specific legislation from the Congress of the United States. Others can be implemented by administrative action through the forest planning process. Into which category each of these Treasures should fall is a matter of negotiation between the Forest Service, the Congress, and the informed citizens of the region. It is important to distinguish between Congressional and administrative actions, since the latter may be changed at any time.

Wilderness The highest level of protection available to one of these treasures is designation as a unit of the National Wilderness Preservation System. A Wilderness Area is off limits to logging, mining, road building, permanent structures, and mechanical transportation, although exceptions are allowed for fire, rescue, and protection of the resources. Only Congress can designate or alter a Wilderness Area.

National Scenic Area Another congressional designation is the National Scenic Area. This does not necessarily provide the same degree of protection as the Wilderness System, since there is no agreed standard such as is laid down in the Wilderness Act of 1964. Each National Scenic Area is crafted to suit the local conditions, and may permit some of the actions, such as mountain biking, that are not allowed in Wilderness Areas. Nevertheless an NSA is established by Congress, and only Congress can effect a change in its status. The Forest Service may declare a local Scenic Area by administrative action.

National Wild and Scenic Rivers System Congress is responsible for placing rivers into this national system. Virginia is one of a very few states that have no rivers at all in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. The Forest Service, by administrative action, may recommend a river for inclusion.

Wilderness Study Area This can be designated either by an administrative action or by an act of Congress. A WSA is sometimes managed as if it were Wilderness pending final congressional action.

Inventoried Roadless Areas This designation is now in flux. Originally established by presidential mandate, it exemplifies the difficulties associated with administrative designation. Since the Inventory was originally

accomplished, there have been changes, and attempted changes, to the meaning and extent of the roadless designation. There is now a campaign to have the Congress establish the IRA category.

Special Geological, Botanical/Zoological, or Cultural/Heritage Areas These are administratively designated areas, chosen by the Forest Service for some unique natural or cultural quality that deserves protection. The emphasis is on the protection of that resource.

Old Growth Forest Communities These communities are designated administratively for the protection of old growth, although in some of them commercial timber harvesting is allowed.

Scenic Corridors This is an administrative designation to maintain the visual quality of gateway communities and backdrop areas.

Sensitive Species Habitat Conservation Areas This administrative designation is used to protect special habitats for threatened or endangered species. Again, some of these habitats may be subject to logging.

Source Water Protection Watersheds These watersheds are designated administratively. Nevertheless they are "suitable" for timber production.

Rare Communities This administrative designation is designed to protect unusual ensembles of species not frequently found in the forest.

Remote Backcountry Although this administrative category sounds as if it should maintain its primitive condition, in some of these areas motorized recreation is allowed.

A number of other special categories are available for administrative protection of sensitive resources. It must be borne in mind, however, that many of these administrative designations do not fully protect the resources, as implied, and also that the designations may change without due consideration. The surest way to conservation is through congressional action.



A view from Whites Peak

Photo by Mark Miller

When I was a boy, before World War II, my father took me to the top of Apple Orchard Mountain to see the spring warbler migration and the spectacular rhododendron groves. I remember his indignation when those lovely mountain forests were turned into an industrial site by the FAA and the Bedford Air Force Station. True, some of the devastation has been cleared away, but the mountain will never be the same again.

As a result of this early experience I have worked all my adult life to see that this does not happen again to Virginia's Mountain Treasures. The challenges change with time – logging, aircraft navigation, gas and oil development, cell towers, and wind factories – but the only way to ensure the integrity of our finest Treasures is to place them in the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Jim Murray
Virginia Wilderness Committee

In the late 1960's I was very involved at home with a young family, and I remember that my husband was often away, "doing something about wilderness with Ernie Dickerman". I was too busy domestically to follow exactly what. Later, when the children were old enough to go along on family hikes, we would often go to wilderness or potential wilderness areas. I remember saying to Jim, "why didn't you tell me that all this was out here?" And he replied, "Ernie and I have been trying to – for years." Thus began my commitment, which continues today, to the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Bess Murray
Virginia Wilderness Committee

Recommendations

The Forest Service should defer timber sales and road construction in these areas while the new George Washington National Forest management plan is being developed. This will ensure that these areas are protected during their study in the planning process and during public comment on their future. In December 2005, the Governor of Virginia petitioned the Secretary of Agriculture to prohibit road construction and commercial timber harvesting in all of the inventoried roadless areas in Virginia, consistent with the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule. The Forest Service should include all the wildlands in this report meeting roadless inventory criteria in the new plan's revised roadless inventory. All of the areas meeting the roadless

inventory criteria should be protected consistent with the 2001 Rule until the completion of the planning process.

In the upcoming forest plan revision, the Forest Service should remove all of the areas in this report from the timber base, and ensure their long-term protection through a variety of management prescriptions. The Forest Service should recommend suitable candidates for designation by Congress as Wilderness or National Scenic Areas. In addition, the agency can and should use administrative designations in the forest plan such as backcountry, old-growth forest, high-quality watershed, or scenic areas for protection of the remaining wildlands in this proposal.

What You Can Do To Help

Strong citizen support is needed to protect these mountain treasures. You can help in the following ways:

Get on the mailing list to comment on the proposed forest plan revision.

Contact:

George Washington National Forest Plan Revision
5162 Valleypointe Parkway
Roanoke, VA 24019

Also, visit the agency's web site at www.fs.fed.us/r8/gwj/ or call the Forest Service toll-free at (888) 265-0019.

Visit and enjoy these areas, and become a knowledgeable advocate for their protection. Maps and guides are available from the Forest Service, the

Appalachian Trail Conservancy, the National Geographic Society, and other sources. Some of the cosponsoring groups host trips to these wildlands.

Comment on the draft forest plan, urging the Forest Service to protect these mountain treasures in the forest plan, and to recommend suitable areas to Congress for preservation as Wilderness, Wild and Scenic Rivers, and National Scenic Areas. Also send your comments to your federal representative and two senators at:

US Senate
Washington, DC 20510

US House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515