

The Virginia Wilderness Committee History and Accomplishments

By Jim Murray · January 2012

For the past forty-three years the Virginia Wilderness Committee has been the principal voice of wilderness advocacy in the Commonwealth of Virginia. It has been the architect and supporter of seven Acts of Congress designating 24 Wilderness Areas totaling 217,625 acres, plus an additional three National Scenic Areas.

The Virginia Wilderness Committee was organized in 1969 at a time when wilderness was considered to be a western prerogative. The prevailing wisdom was that all the forests of the eastern states had been subjected to roads and logging so that nothing worth of the name of wilderness still remained. The Forest Service was even promoting a “separate but equal” concept with its Wild Areas legislation. The VWC joined in the national effort to defeat that bill and to pass, instead, the Eastern Wilderness Areas Act of 1975, an omnibus measure that established once and for all the applicability of the Wilderness Act of 1964 to eastern forests. Virginia’s modest share was our first Wilderness Area, the James River Face.

At the same time the VWC had been laboring to expand a miserly proposal for wilderness in the Shenandoah National Park. Our efforts resulted in the expansion of the proposed wilderness from 62,000 to approximately 80,000 acres with the significant additions of Turk Mountain and Matthews Arm.

For a number of years after these successes the VWC struggled on with little to show. Our big break came with the election of new Congressmen, Rick Boucher in the Ninth and Jim Olin in the Sixth Congressional Districts. Both were sympathetic to calls for more wilderness with the result that the VWC was able to promote fourteen new Wilderness Areas in 1984 and 1988.

Another decade went by with limited success because of a change in the legislative climate. The VWC did, however, manage to promote the passage of an act for a National Scenic Area designation for Mount Pleasant. Then by moving its emphasis to the Fifth Congressional District the VWC was able to get Three Ridges and The Priest made Wilderness.

Moving once more to the Ninth District the VWC brought together a coalition of conservation organizations to promote a major piece of legislation for the Jefferson National Forest. In 2009 six new Wilderness Areas, a number of additions, and two National Scenic Areas received permanent protection in this legislation.

Along the way the VWC has taken part in the development of land use plans for Virginia’s National Forests. We have attended a never-ending succession of public meetings, and we have published in conjunction with the Wilderness Society two

influential booklets entitled Virginia's Mountain Treasures featuring the prime wild lands in the Jefferson and George Washington National Forests.

Looking to the future, the VWC has begun an initiative to bridge the divide between the wilderness community and its traditional critics. This effort began with the negotiation of an agreement between mountain bike representatives and the VWC to support National Scenic Area status for the large block of national forest land on Shenandoah Mountain between US 33 and US 250. The understanding is that some portions of this area are to be proposed for wilderness designation while others would remain open for mountain biking. This agreement had the effect of gaining support from the International Mountain Biking Association for the Virginia Ridge and Valley Act of 2009.

This initiative of negotiation and compromise has been broadly extended by meetings with representatives of timber interests, mountain bike organizations, game managers, and a number of other conservation groups. These traditional adversaries have gone so far as to hammer out a compromise agreement that shows promise of reducing conflicts in the use of national forest lands. The participants are committed to carrying the cooperative spirit to the level of individual projects on the national forests.

Finally, the VWC has tirelessly worked to educate the public about wilderness values and opportunities through talks, exhibits, and participation in public meetings. Most recently we have begun a program called Go WILD (Wilderness in Learning Development). Funded by a generous gift in memory of a former VWC Board member, this program makes grants to schools and colleges to introduce young people to the wilderness experience.

Thus the Virginia Wilderness Committee has been instrumental in the assembly and passage of every single piece of wilderness legislation in the Commonwealth, it has participated in public land use planning, and it has striven to educate the public about the importance of wilderness in our increasingly urban and mechanized world. The VWC remains committed to the identification and protection of the finest of Virginia's forest lands under the National Wilderness Preservation System.

See summary of wilderness acreage in Virginia below.

Wilderness Lands in Virginia

	Acres	Year established
Barbours Creek	5,382	1988
Beartown	5,609	1984
Brush Mountain East	3,743	2009
Brush Mountain	4,794	2009
Garden Mountain	3,291	2009
Hunting Camp Creek	8,470	2009
James River Face	8,886	1975
Kimberling Creek	5,805	1984
Lewis Fork	5,926	1984
Little Dry Run	2,858	1984
Little Wilson Creek	5,458	1984
Mountain Lake	12,375	1984
Peters Mountain	4,531	1984
The Priest	5,963	2000
Raccoon Branch	4,223	2009
Ramseys Draft	6,518	1984
Rich Hole	6,450	1988
Rough Mountain	9,300	1988
Saint Mary's	9,835	1984
Shawvers Run	5,686	1988
Shenandoah	79,579	1976
Stone Mountain	3,270	2009
Three Ridges	4,608	2000
Thunder Ridge	2,344	1984
Total	214,904	

+ 2,721 acres in West Virginia (Mt. Lake) = 217,625 total acres