

Pushing Back: from Less to More

Brent Bailey, Ph.D. Executive Director

This phrase struck an unpleasant chord when I read it: "...this age of diminishment," the author wrote, noting that "the rarest thing in nature today is sheer abundance." But it struck home, too: Many who love the outdoors recognize that the "new normal" for many animals, plants, habitats, and wild places is one of scarcity.

Scarcity extends beyond the natural world, too. As we try to reclaim some normalcy after two years of bobbing and weaving to duck a virus, we're short on resolve to address urgent climate impacts, lacking the means to fire up a sputtering economy, and struggling to knit together a social fabric that's frayed. A sense of diminishment can dampen hope, and a perception of "less" can shake a belief that we have an abundance of opportunities.

Whether we are on a one-way trajectory toward depletion, or if we're reaching the outer limit of a pendulum swing, may be up for debate. But the optimists among us – including most conservationists and outdoor enthusiasts that I know – are working to make the latter a reality. We're pushing the pendulum as hard as we can, to swing back toward abundance.

Acknowledging scarcity doesn't mean it has to be accepted as the new normal; we see it as a call to action. Globally, climate threats are being widely recognized. Locally, we're conserving forests that will slow stormwater that floods towns and overwhelms infrastructure, and that will also store carbon, mitigating climate change. Nationally, endangered species lists get longer. But locally, we're protecting habitats to give those species a chance to recover. National parks and other public lands are being loved to death by over-visitation, but our land trust is expanding its holdings statewide to provide safe, accessible natural areas for recreation by residents and visitors alike, many in places that have had a scarcity of outdoor recreation spaces.

It's our hope that the abundance – indeed, the tsunami – of federal funds flowing into West Virginia will be available to help reduce the scarcity of publicly accessible open spaces for wildlife, recreation, and water protection. Certainly, our state needs to play catch-up, to fix chronic problems with drinking water, sewage, roads, and broadband. But "catching up" will be aiming too low: We need to go beyond the basics if we want to be competitive, as a magnet for investment and visitors, by aiming at quality-of-life features in the state. If federal guidelines are well-honed, they can fund forest conservation that protects drinking water, trails for hiking and biking, boat launches onto clean rivers, and habitat for declining species. There is an abundance of land to be protected and developed with this community-friendly infrastructure, and an abundance of opportunity to turn an age of diminishment into an age of plenty.

City councils, county commissions, and state agencies control many of the levers on these funds. Talk to them! And let us know how we can help the community where you live.



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“If a window of opportunity appears,
don’t pull down the shade.”



James Spiny mussel Takes Center Stage

A small piece of the George Washington and Jefferson National Forest dips into Monroe County, West Virginia and in that sliver is the federally-designated Mountain Lake Wilderness Area. Last spring, when a private landowner listed for sale a 204-acre forest surrounded by the wilderness area in the local newspaper, the West Virginia Land Trust (WVLT) knew it had a “window of opportunity” to protect the perfect conservation property.

Many aspects made this the “perfect” opportunity. First, protecting the land tract also helps protect the hiking experience on the world’s best-known footpath: the Appalachian Trail (A.T.). We called our partners at the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) and determined the site fell within the viewshed of the A.T. WVLT went to work to secure an option to buy the property and, in August 2021, we protected a place that will remain wild and wonderful.

This conservation project ensures that new residential development does not encroach into the heart of the wilderness area and protects water quality and habitat for brook trout, and a federally listed endangered species, the James spiny mussel. In addition, Crosier Branch, which is a pristine mountain stream, flows through this property and empties into Potts Creek about a half mile away where the James spiny mussel is concentrated (see our other conservation success on Potts Creek in this newsletter!).

Fantastic opportunities also happen when partners come together for the greater good. We are thankful for everyone who contributed to the conservation of this site. This project was protected, in part, by funding and technical assistance made available as part of a voluntary stewardship agreement between the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, The Conservation Fund, and Mountain Valley Pipeline.

In early 2021, the ATC approached WVLT about protecting sites in West Virginia that border the AT or were within the viewshed of the trail. At the time, WVLT did not have any projects or places identified as a conservation priority that fit these criteria but as Tom Peters once said, “If the window of opportunity appears, don’t pull down the shade”.

How many more open windows are out there?

Once you start looking around you soon find the wonders of nature right under your nose.

While looking for “windows of opportunity” in Monroe County (see previous article), WVLT learned that West Virginia is home to the federally endangered James spiny mussel. This rare mollusk only lives in a few places within the James River watershed and Potts Creek—which is one of only two streams in West Virginia that flow to the James River—is one of those special places!

In September, WVLT took ownership of an old farm that includes the most critical concentration of the endangered spiny mussel in Potts Creek. With guidance and support from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, WVLT plans to restore habitat along the creek—including streambank stabilization and instream improvements—to ensure the James spiny mussel continues to thrive at this important conservation site. A major part of the restoration effort will involve revegetating the streambanks with native trees and shrubs to reduce erosion and sedimentation, as well as to increase shade that is necessary to maintain cooler water temperatures that benefit aquatic species.

The James spiny mussel is a unique part of West Virginia’s natural heritage and WVLT is excited to conserve its habitat. In general, mussels are an indicator of water quality since they are sensitive to pollution and unhealthy conditions. Their presence in Potts Creek suggests relatively good water quality and we are hoping to contribute toward improving and sustaining these conditions.

WVLT also plans to develop an interpretative trail offering birding opportunities and explaining the rare species living at this new preserve! The preserve is located within 20 minutes of the Hanging Rock Raptor Observatory, which can be seen atop Peters Mountain when standing along the creek.



Little Bluestone Community Forest

WVLT is leading land protection and fundraising efforts to purchase 370 acres along the Little Bluestone River in Summers County. WVLT secured a grant through the USDA Forest Service's Community Forest Program to help acquire the property. It is the first time the agency has awarded a project grant of this type in West Virginia. The good news grew: the Appalachian Trail Conservancy saw the value of the project for expansion of trail networks and offered financial support to move the project forward. The West Virginia Outdoor Heritage Conservation Fund also approved a grant to support the project.

The land neighbors the Bluestone National Scenic River and surrounds the Cooper's Mill historic site owned by the Summers County Commission. In 2020, the Summers County community approached WVLT to partner on the purchase and preservation of the Little Bluestone property.

"The community first impressed me with their passion for conserving the forest setting for the historic Cooper's Mill. I was surprised over and over by the beauty of the Little Bluestone River and its canyon," said Amy Cimarolli, WVLT Land Protection Specialist. "I really fell in love with the idea of pursuing a 'community forest' solution for protecting this land when I walked into the forest and found a healthy example of a Central Appalachian Forest teeming with native flora and fauna," she said.

The Forest Service's award will help WVLT acquire and conserve the landscape around Cooper's Mill and manage it for community benefits, providing additional public access and recreational opportunities on the Little Bluestone River while protecting water quality and wildlife habitat.

"This project is valuable to the entire region as it not only impacts the City of Hinton, but also Summers and Mercer counties as the project develops," said Jack Woodrum, West Virginia State Senator and former Summers County Commissioner. "Future trails could tie into the Bluestone Turnpike Trail, which will provide access from Bluestone State Park and Pipestem State Park to the community forest and Cooper's Mill. The hike is beautiful along the scenic river, making this a great destination for tourists," he said.

WVLT will continue fundraising for the project and working with partners to assess connector trails and develop plans to maximize community benefits. The area will be open for regular public use once we are able to secure funds needed for parking, trails, and other access features. Those interested in supporting the campaign may donate at www.wvlandtrust.org/donate and designate your gift to the Little Bluestone Community Forest Project.

Project partners and supporters include the Summers County Commission, WV State Senator Jack Woodrum (Summers County), Summers County Historical Society, Summers County Historic Landmark Commission, City of Hinton, Hinton Area Foundation, West Virginia Division of Forestry, Congresswoman Carol Miller, Senator Shelley Moore Capito, Senator Joe Manchin, and U.S. National Park Service.



UPDATE!

Mammoth Preserve Restoration



The Mammoth Preserve is a mammoth undertaking

Consisting of more than 4,800 acres in eastern Kanawha and western Fayette counties, the Mammoth Preserve is WVLT's largest property. Nearly 2,500 acres of the property was part of a coal mining operation that between the 1970s and 1990s left a sizable portion of that acreage with compacted soils unable to support the regeneration of native forests. Autumn olive, an invasive species that was once planted on the property as "wildlife habitat" (and is more tolerant of disturbed growing conditions than native plants), infested hundreds of acres through the years and formed impenetrable thickets that smothered native vegetation.

Between the summer of 2020 through spring 2021, in partnership with WVLT, Appalachian Headwaters and Green Forests Work led the first phase of reforestation efforts on the property to restore disturbed areas back to native forests reminiscent of pre-mining conditions. Coordinating with Alpha Natural Resources, project partners began removing invasive species, wiping out vast swaths of autumn olive using bulldozers and dragging chains that pulled the plants from the ground. Once cleared, heavy machinery "ripped" the compacted soils 3 or more feet in depth to create growing conditions that will allow roots to spread and improve drainage. The "ripping" process is like plowing a garden, but on a much larger scale.

Lastly, WVLT partners planted more than 200,000 trees in the restoration areas. The plantings included more than 30 native species—trees like oaks, hickories, and maples were planted to dominate the overstory and species such as dogwood and pawpaw were planted to grow into the understory and along edges. Successional species, such as locust and pine, were planted to help improve soil conditions and grow quickly within a few years to help shade out regrowth from autumn olive.

Restoration and preserve development will be ongoing for years to come, but the results of these efforts is already visible. Species diversity is notably improved in the areas that have been replanted. Once the Mammoth Preserve is open to the public, everyone will be able to witness the landscape evolve from scarred mine lands to a more robust and diverse ecosystem.

The Mammoth Preserve will be developed as a destination for recreational use as part of the Upper Kanawha Valley regional outdoor recreation plan, a major initiative led by Kanawha County. In addition to ecological restoration of former mined areas, the property is envisioned to provide trails for hiking, mountain biking, and equestrian use.

Signs, Signs, Everywhere Signs!



Signs tend to make everything seem more “official.” With the installation of new signage at Jenkinsburg Recreation & Natural Area (aka “Jburg”), we are thrilled to announce this special place is now open for business! Special thanks to Mike Blackburn of Natural By Design for building a beautiful kiosk and Lauren Lamb of Skull House Group for awesome graphic design!

Jenkinsburg is well-known for its “high bridge”, and swimming areas along the Cheat River and Big Sandy Creek, including “Blue Hole”. WVU students, locals, whitewater enthusiasts, hunters, and hikers frequent the area. In September 2020, with major support from The West Virginia Outdoor Heritage Conservation Fund and Friends of the Whitewater Community, WVLT purchased the property from long-time owners and stewards, Dave and Cynthia Hough, to ensure permanent public access into the future. The property is now cared for in partnership with Friends of the Cheat and we intend to keep the area open to the public with support from donors and volunteers.

PLAN YOUR TRIP: WVLANDTRUST.ORG/JENKINSBURG



WVLT also owns and manages the Yellow Creek Natural Area (YCNA) in Tucker County. The Center for Active WV at WVU provided major support that allowed WVLT to create new interpretive kiosks to welcome visitors and provide information for their next adventure! Kiosks showing connecting trails to YCNA were installed in partnership Blackwater Bicycle Association at the gateway to the Camp 70 Trails, the National Youth Science Foundation from their main campus, and the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources from Little Canaan Wildlife Management Area.

Special thanks to Mike Blackburn from Natural By Design, Lauren Lamb from Skull House Group, and Rolling, Tank & Fabrication who collaborated with WVLT on the design of the YCNA kiosks.

WVLT purchased the Yellow Creek Natural Area in 2019 with the support of four major grant funders, several local businesses, and 228 individuals from 19 states. The 860-acre property is home of the infamous “Moon Rocks” and contains 4+ miles of onsite trails and links to 20+ miles of the Heart of the Highlands Trail System. This property is permanently protected, open for public recreation, and cared for in partnership with Heart of the Highlands Trail System and Blackwater Bicycle Association.

PLAN YOUR TRIP: WVLANDTRUST.ORG/YELLOWCREEK



Preserve Management



EARTH DAY

To celebrate Earth Day, WVLT partnered with the Mon Valley Green Space Coalition (MVGSC) to host a “Touch the Earth Festival” on April 17 in Morgantown. The event included educational activities, guided tours of Marilla Park’s new connector trail, a tree-planting party, and a scavenger hunt in which participants learned to identify trees and plants. Friends of Deckers Creek, the Mon River Trails Conservancy, Recycle Right Morgantown, the Mon Chapter of the Sierra Club, and members of Morgantown’s Green Team also participated in the event.

One of the goals of the event was to educate community members about the possibility of a greenbelt around the city, which would enable residents to move around town without resorting to motorized transportation. Representatives from the MVGSC and WVLT have been communicating with the City of Morgantown to establish more connector trails, such as the new one built in Marilla Park that links neighborhoods to city parks and the rail trail.

“From an ecological perspective, it’s crucial to preserve and protect green spaces. Their positive impact on air and water quality can’t be overstated. Green spaces are also essential to the overall physical and mental health of a community. They provide recreational opportunities as well as peaceful, restorative retreats from our hectic day-to-day lives.”

JoNell Strough, WVU Psychology professor and MVGSC Chair.

WATERSHED PROTECTION PROGRAM

The Morgantown Utility Board recently launched its Watershed Protection Program in partnership with the West Virginia Land Trust and Downstream Strategies. The first of its kind in WV, this voluntary program allows customers to round up their water bills or make contributions to a fund that will help protect land in the Upper Monongahela River watershed, the drinking water source for Morgantown. Through the program, partners will work with private landowners to protect land around rivers and streams to ensure safe drinking water into the future.

PLEASE VISIT: [PROTECTMONSOURCEWATER.ORG](https://protectmonsourcewater.org) FOR MORE INFORMATION!



BLUE JEAN BASKET

CHARCUTERIE PICNIC

WVLT’s annual Blue Jean Ball was reimaged this year! To adapt to uncertain times, we turned our “party for green space” into a “picnic for green space.” The June 2021 event offered WVLT supporters the opportunity to participate in a “drive-thru” where they received a picnic set—reusable cooler bag, mini charcuterie board, and lunch. They then traveled to their favorite green space for a picnic. The event was a success—raising more than \$12,000!

Each year this fundraiser is cohosted with our friends at Mon River Trails Conservancy to raise funds and awareness for outdoor recreation projects in the Mon Valley.



The weather was perfect for our Blue Jean Basket! Pictured above are Debby Berry (WVLT) and Ella Belling (MRTC) welcoming guests at the drive-thru.



WVU FIELD INTERNS

WVLT supported two outstanding West Virginia University interns in 2021, Chisom Ejimofor and Gabriel Abrue-Vigil, both of whom were hired after their spring internships to work as field technicians for the summer.

CHISOM EJIMOFOR

Chisom's main project involved restoring native trees to a streamside area that had been previously disturbed by logging at Toms Run Preserve in Monongalia County. Working with WVLT staff and volunteers, Chisom focused on removing invasive plant species growing in a two-acre riparian forest along Toms Run near the Cascade Trail. After removing the invasives, she worked with partners and volunteers to successfully plant a variety of native trees. The area now serves as a demonstration area for riparian forest restoration. Chisom also developed an educational pamphlet that introduces visitors to the most common invasive plants at Toms Run Preserve.

Chisom Ejimofor graduated with a B.S. in Environmental, Soil, and Water Sciences with an emphasis in Reclamation from the Davis College of Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Design.



GABRIEL ABRUE-VIGIL

Gabriel's internship involved a combination of mapping potential trail routes at Toms Run Preserve and estimating the amount of sequestered carbon that our easement and fee lands contain. Gabriel used satellite imagery and a high-resolution land cover map to roughly estimate the above-ground fraction of carbon on WVLT's 29 easements and 19 preserves. Gabriel field-tested and supplemented his carbon estimates with ground reference data that he collected with volunteers. Gabriel was awarded a prestigious scholarship to the annual American Association of Photogrammetry and Remote Sensing conference where he presented his work to a national audience—his presentation was titled, "Forest Land Cover Analysis for Conservation Management Using Remote Sensing within Protected Land in West Virginia." Gabriel also presented his work at a WVLT Earth Day event and helped lead a guided hike about forest carbon sequestration.

Gabriel graduated with a B.A. in Environmental Geoscience, and Minor in Spanish. He is currently exploring opportunities in Spain.



EVENT RECAP

Special Places

CELEBRATION

A WALK IN THE WOODS!

For many years, WVLT friends and supporters have gathered in Charleston for our annual Special Places Celebration, to celebrate the land we love and the people who have made significant contributions to land conservation in West Virginia. This year, in lieu of an in-person gathering, we invited guests to “take a walk in the woods” at one of our special places—our nature preserves—to get a firsthand view of what they (and you) have helped to create!



2021
FRIENDSGIVING
CAMPAIGN
\$43,524

We sincerely appreciate your support and commitment to our mission, as we enhance communities statewide. This year's campaign received 103 supporters from two countries and 17 states! These funds will be used to expand our conservation impact statewide and to make our preserves more available for your recreational use. We hope you will join us for our 2022 Hiking Series, as we explore more recreational opportunities around the Mountain State!

From November 1 – 15, WVLT Board of Directors along with our organizational partner Bailey Glasser agreed to match all donations up to \$20,000. We exceeded the goal and with a grand total of \$43,524, together, we will continue to do great things!



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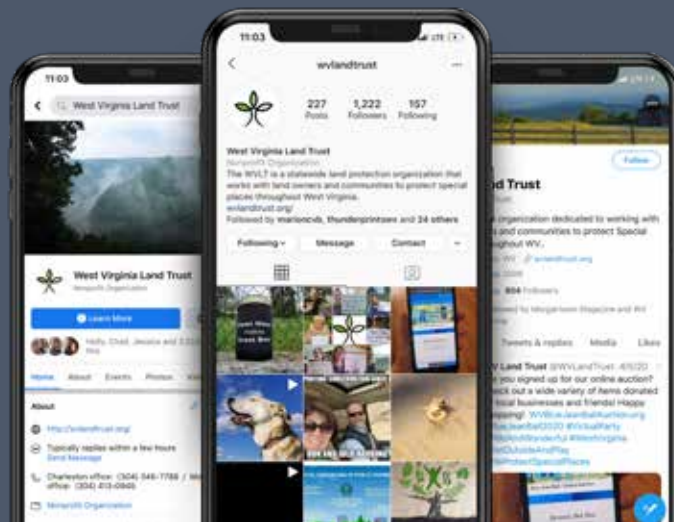
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Please Recycle Me!



WVLT has protected 20+ properties that are designated to be nature preserves and we are working hard to open them to the public. Access, parking, signage, and trail work are all underway. We are inviting you to visit these properties in 2022 to get a firsthand view of our important work and how you can help!

Check www.WVLandTrust.org/HikingSeries in January for the 2022 schedule.

Eight properties are already open for visitors.
Visit www.WVLandTrust.org to find a nature preserve near you!