

MOUNTAIN CONSERVATION TRUST

Newsletter Vol. 7, Issue 4

Spring 2005

Jasper Rotary Hears About Long Swamp Creek Project

MCT Board members Mark Dickerson and Edward Daugherty spoke to the Jasper Rotary Club on March 30th at their regular Wednesday meeting at the Woodbridge Inn. It was a wonderful opportunity to tell the Rotarians about MCT's Long Swamp Creek Watershed Project. Edward described the study that the land trust has undertaken to determine the feasibility of creating a greenway along the creek from Cove Road just outside Jasper to Sandy Bottoms near Tate where Highway 53 crosses the creek. Funding has been provided for activities such as scientific inventories of the diverse plants and animals by the Urban and Community Forestry Financial Assistance Program administered by the Georgia Forestry Commission.



Larry Toney, Edward Daugherty, Tom Eubanks

A greenway would provide recreational opportunities for hikers, joggers, horse riders, fishermen and mountain bikers along a five mile stretch of the creek. In that section of Long Swamp, a secondary trout stream rushes through a scenic, completely undeveloped gorge with rock outcroppings and waterfalls seldom seen by the public.

Mark told the group how MCT has already protected the headwaters of Long Swamp on Burnt Mountain. He explained how a land trust like MCT can also help private landowners protect their land from being developed by future owners by signing a land protection agreement with the land trust. The landowner continues to own and live on the land, and the property is not normally open to the public. 🐾

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Etowah Scenic River Campaign

By Laura Slausenhop

A group of Dawson County residents are working to protect a special treasure with Georgia's State Scenic River Act. Nestled in the midst of Dawson County are 21 pristine miles of the Amicalola and Etowah rivers. The area surrounding this section of the streams is heavily wooded and there are no cabins or docks crouching on the banks. The Etowah is home to 76 species of aquatic life making it one of the richest rivers in aquatic diversity in the southeast according to Candace Stoughton, Etowah River Project Direc-

tor for the Nature Conservancy. The Etowah Scenic River Committee is lobbying the Dawson commission to recommend that the Georgia Department of Natural Resources initiate a scenic river study on 14.4 miles of the Amicalola River, from Linsey Ford to the confluence of the Etowah River. The study will also include 6.8 miles of the Etowah which flows across the city of Atlanta tract.

In the early 1970s, the city of Atlanta purchased 10,000 acres in Dawson County with an eye to building a second airport. When the property was

(continued on page 6)

MAKING TRACKS

By Barb Decker, Executive Director

In the past eight years MCT has certainly grown as an organization as it has worked to permanently protect the scenic beauty and natural resources of the North Georgia Mountains. Over 680 families have embraced the mission and become members. Their support has enabled MCT to protect over 1,100 acres of mountain land, ensuring that the wildlife habitat, scenic vistas, water resources, and recreation areas will never be despoiled. We work on projects in partnership with local government and schools, universities, agencies, and many other environmental organizations.

Thanks to this wonderful growth, the scope and complexity of the trust's operations have become too much for two half-time staff members to handle. The Board of Directors and I feel that the time has come for the position of Executive Director to be a full-time one. And it is time for a new E.D. to bring fresh ideas and enthusiasm to the job. For those reasons I have resigned my position effective April 30th.

As for my immediate plans, Fred and I will return to Kenya this summer to visit our old camp in the Tana River Primate Reserve to see how the red colobus are faring.

Many thanks for the help, friendship and support you have given me over the years.

Heartfelt Thanks

After more than eight intense and exciting years with the Mountain Conservation Trust of Georgia, Dr. Barbara Decker has resigned her position as Executive Director. During her tenure, the Trust has evolved from a simple assembly of concerned citizens rallying against careless development of the mountain areas of Pickens County to a well recognized regional land trust of growing influence. Barbara Decker has been a tremendously important and instrumental part of this process.

Under Barbara, the Trust has succeeded in securing permanent conservation easements on the Burnt Mountain tract totaling approximately 1100 acres, of which 840 acres are now owned by Pickens County. This protected land is the uppermost watershed providing the water supply for Jasper and Pickens County. Additionally, the Trust has played a principal role in the establishment of the Georgia Alliance of Land Trusts, which provides education and coordinates mutual support programs for its members.

The MCT Board of Directors expresses its deep appreciation to Barbara for her years of able and devoted service. We wish her continued success in her future endeavors.

Thank you, Barbara, for all you've done to make this Trust what it is today.

Clay Johnston



President

From the President 🌿 Moving Forward

The Trust is moving forward and we are deeply engaged now with a conservation and public access project in Pickens County.

Our Long Swamp Creek Watershed Project: developing a plan for the protection of the extraordinarily beautiful and environmentally important streamside environment along Long Swamp Creek (a.k.a.: Cove Creek) from Cove Road down to Highway 53, near the community of Tate. This plan creates a greenway along the creek one that's been enjoyed by many area residents throughout history.

This corridor is a five mile stretch of spectacular terrain with very steep bluffs (up to 240 feet above the stream bed), covered with mountain laurel and rhododendron, azaleas and many wildflowers and ancient trees. Living in the creek are numerous species of fish, including the Etowah darter, which is on the federal endangered species list.

A committee of the Trust is working with the Pickens County Commissioner

Robert Jones, Tax Assessor Roy Dobbs, Planning Director Norman Pope and Economic Development Director Larry Toney, all of whom have been supportive of the project. This work is being carried out with advice and assistance from Candace Stoughton and Steve Friedman of the Nature Conservancy of Georgia – and that organization is working with the University of Georgia to develop a Habitat Conservation Plan for the Etowah River and its tributaries, of which Long Swamp Creek is one. Our project is funded in part by a \$17,000 grant from the Urban and Community Forestry Financial Assistance Program administered by the Georgia Forestry Commission, an initiative in which Dr. Barbara Decker was instrumental. Trustees actively involved are Edward Daugherty, Brad Currey, Mark Dickerson, Clay Johnston and John Kiser. We expect to complete this plan by August 2005, in time to present it at the Mountain Conservation Trust Annual Meeting.

Additionally, we have begun the search for a new Executive Director – this work will be led by trustee Brad Currey.

The Executive Director's job starts with leadership from the Board. He or she needs to effectively work with the board members to establish and maintain high standards and ambitious goals.


Primary responsibilities are to make sure that we have a large and growing base of members, and a large and growing revenue stream from membership, our primary source of funding. The Members are our constituency: the reason public officials and the general public pay attention to the Trust and also the base for securing corporate and foundation gifts and support.

Secondly, he or she needs to be an excellent and prolific communicator: speaking, writing, showing up at important meetings in the region, being a visible and audible presence for conservation matters in Pickens County (firstly) and into the counties further up the Appalachian range. He or she must be able to use the trustees' experience, knowledge and energy to get such things done that will multiply his or her effectiveness and that of the organization.

We welcome suggestions and nominations from our members. Several key environmental leaders have been asked for recommendations as well. We see this job as a great opportunity for someone who wishes to play a leadership role in building an organization and protecting this extraordinary part of the North Georgia Mountains.

The Trust move is moving forward with your continued help, support and participation. Please feel free to contact the Trust with questions and comments and be sure to attend our Annual Meeting this fall.

Best regards,



President

Amicalola Garden Club Members Support Long Swamp Creek Project

At the February meeting of the Amicalola Garden Club at Tate United Methodist Church, Barbara Decker described MCT's Long Swamp Creek project. The members, many of whom are also members of Marble Valley Friends, were enthusiastic about protecting Long Swamp. Some have memories of playing in Long Swamp Creek as children. The

Amicalola Garden Club is one of the oldest garden clubs in Georgia, formed 68 years ago in Tate. Its members have always supported the conservation of Pickens' natural resources and beauty. As one of its first activities in 1939, the club sponsored the Conservation Program by offering \$5 to the Pickens student who wrote the best essay on conservation. 🌿

GHOSTS OF F

Nature Restoring Its Natural Balance

Predators Return to the Forests

In the past decades, deer herds were translocated to forests in the Eastern U.S. by hunters hoping to increase their chances during hunting season. The deer's natural predators had already been virtually eradicated and, as a result, deer populations increased rapidly. Nature has responded to redress the predator-prey imbalance and keep the forest ecosystem in balance, a dynamic equilibrium. Coyotes, cougars and bobcats kill many deer each year, and if left alone,

can help control the increasing deer populations in the East. A cougar kills a deer every week. Coyotes account for up to 25 percent of fawn mortality in the South and 30 percent of adult deer in the North. Bobcats are capable of killing prey up to eight times their own body weight, and studies in south Florida found that they are responsible for 17 per cent of adult deer mortality and at least 60 percent of fawn deaths.

Coyotes Move East

By Laura Slausenhop

Biologists now know that Wile E. Coyote does not only dine on small animals as had been thought, Coyotes kill deer – a lot of deer. In parts of Maine, for example, deer constitute as much as 80 percent of their diet, and they kill almost as many deer as hunters do. It was also generally believed that they only kill the old, weak, and sick, but where deer are in balance with their food supply, coyotes predominantly kill healthy deer.

Eastern coyotes are descended from Western coyotes which migrated from the western U.S. in the last century. They filled a niche in the East as native predators like the eastern timber wolf and mountain lion were eradicated and land was cleared for agriculture and timber harvesting. Western coyotes traveled first through the Great Lakes region, interbreeding with grey wolves, and appeared first in the East in the 1940s. They were well established in the Northeast by the 1970s. The species can now be found almost anywhere in the United States and Canada as well as Central America. These amazing creatures have an uncanny ability to survive and reproduce under extreme conditions and in very diverse locations. They thrive in all types of habitats from dry warm deserts to damp grasslands to plains, in forests and colder climates at elevations of up to 9,840 feet or even in large urban areas. Coyotes are now found in every county in Georgia.

Coyotes range in size from 3.3 – 4.3 feet in length and weigh 19-35 pounds. Their coats are grizzled with a whitish, cream, gray, or yellowish tint on the belly with long muzzles and faces of gray or reddish brown. They have bushy, black tipped tails and long pointed ears. A black stripe down the front of their forelegs distinguishes them from domestic dogs.

Coyotes have been revered by Native Americans, reviled by ranchers and farmers and held responsible for a reduction in hunters' whitetail deer harvests

in the Northeast. Any number of labels has been applied to coyotes including opportunistic, cunning, wily, gluttonous, outlaw and spoiler. Perhaps versatile is a more fitting label.

In some areas, they live in extended-family packs. Others may live as mated pairs or as lone individuals. The pairs are monogamous and can be together for 4 or more years. Coyote dens are often found in hollow logs or abandoned burrows but can also be along brush-covered slopes or steep banks, in thickets or under rock ledges or crevices.

Coyotes are very mobile. They can travel great distances, up to 400 miles, and reach a speed of almost 40 miles per hour for short distances. They're also very strong swimmers and can leap up to 14 feet. And they're not picky eaters. Coyotes will eat almost anything. In addition to deer, staples of their diet include small rodents, rabbits and squirrels, but they will also eat insects, fruits, berries, seeds and grasses in the warm season and carrion in the winter. In the Southeast, in the spring, they prey on fawns. They have also been known to fish or climb trees in search of their next meal. Unfortunately for their reputation, they occasionally prey on domestic poultry or livestock.

Coyotes are best known for their howls. They vocalize extensively. The songs are used to announce location, hunting success or to reinforce the social ties of the pack. Sometimes, they just seem to enjoy the sound of their own voices. They are very subtle communicators, using a wide variety of postures, facial expressions, ear and tail positions with their howls and barks to send messages to other individuals.

Coyotes are a very good example of how nature can restore balance. As other predators were destroyed in the East, they filled the void. We would do well to remember we share this planet and consider carefully our impact on the world around us. 🐾

FORESTS PAAST

The Yeti Of Eastern Forests

By Barbara Decker

To many nature lovers, the thought that there are cougars in the remote forests of the Southern Appalachians is thrilling. There is something romantic about it. But many skeptics remain. Until recently, most sightings of cougars in the East were considered comparable to reports of Yetis or UFOs.

About eight years ago, the residents of Big Canoe participated in a wildlife survey of their gated community on the slopes of Oglethorpe Mountain, the southernmost peak in the Appalachians. They recorded their sightings with color-coded pins on a map of the development that was mounted in the post office. As I analyzed the data with the help of biology students from Berry College, it did not surprise me to find records of deer in almost all areas. What left me stunned was the report by Charles McCain of seeing a cougar along Steve Tate Highway.

I found that this was not the first reported sighting of a cougar in that area. Over the years, golfers and maintenance workers said that they had also seen it. Since then I have received reports about every other year of sightings on Burnt and Oglethorpe Mountains from people whom I consider sane and reliable.

Now bear in mind that sightings are not considered conclusive evidence by federal or state wildlife officials or the Eastern Cougar Network, which gathers and verifies reports on sightings. In their view, 99.9% of the reports are really feral cats, bobcats, or even deer. ECN considers a report 'probable' if it comes from tracks or kills, where the method of killing can indicate a cougar, or from sightings by wildlife professionals. They only consider a sighting 'confirmed' if there is an actual cougar body, a photograph or video, or if DNA tests of droppings or hair verify it. Of course, the sighting is confirmed if you can capture the cougar live!

In the Western Hemisphere, there are fifteen subspecies of cougar a.k.a. puma, mountain lion, painter, catamount, or in Florida, panther. The eastern cougar, *Puma concolor cougar*, which once ranged from New Brunswick, Canada, to Georgia, was not considered a suitable neighbor to the early

colonists. All eastern cougars were believed to be extirpated in the East by 1900 as a result of hunting and deforestation. But sightings kept trickling in, enough to place the eastern cougar on the first list of Endangered Species in 1978. They are still fully protected by law, as are the Florida panthers.

Due to improved conservation measures in the last century, forests have regrown and deer populations have

mushroomed, offering cougars the two essentials of cover and prey. So ecologically, it makes sense that the lion may have migrated east or that remnant individuals have survived. But given their elusive nature, the probability that you will see one is zero. Most wildlife officials remain convinced that even if that infinitesimal chance does occur, you are most likely seeing a western cougar which was released or escaped from captivity. Several carcasses that have been retrieved either were declawed or tattooed, indicating a captive animal. Since the 1990s DNA analysis and other methods like radio telemetry have begun to confirm the presence of cougar in Midwest and Eastern forests. But it

is still difficult to differentiate the western cougar subspecies from the eastern one using DNA analysis. Thousands of people from Maryland to Georgia have seen large cats in the Appalachians. Cougars have been confirmed in Virginia, New York, Massachusetts, Vermont, Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, and Delaware. Sightings are also relatively frequent in eastern Tennessee and the South Carolina mountains, although most are unconfirmed.

Characteristics: If you see a cat which looks about seven feet long from its nose to the end of its tail with an unspotted coat, weighing about 140 pounds, back away slowly—you're looking at a cougar. They are usually silent and solitary, pairing only for two weeks during mating season. Bobcats are only two to four feet long and have bobbed tails and a blurred spotted coat.

A cougar's preferred diet is deer, and she may kill one per week. They also feed opportunistically on smaller mammals and even insects.

Website: The Eastern Cougar Foundation www.easterncougar.org has links to articles and the website of the Eastern Cougar Network. 🐾



Etowah Scenic River Campaign

(continued from page 1)


deemed too hilly for the project, the area was left undisturbed and eventually came under the management of the DNR's Wildlife Resources Division. Public access and recreational facilities were improved and a forest stewardship program was established. The area became a lush haven for hikers, campers, canoeists, hunters and fishermen.

Helping to guide the Etowah Scenic River Committee is Bill Hess who retired to Dawson County with 30 years of experience with the U.S. Forest Service. Working with Mr. Hess are Kurt Krattinger, Arlene McClure, Dan Centofanti and Ann Williams. The group came together after an article was published in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* in January about renewed interest in a second airport and a high speed rail link along Highway 400 to Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport. The committee has led a townhall meeting of over 200 people and sponsored a petition that garnered 1,173 signatures encouraging the county to take action to protect the rivers. The petition was presented to the Dawson County Commissioners at their April 7th meeting. The commissioners voted to recommend to the Governor and General Assembly that the DNR conduct a Scenic River Study with the understanding that

the process of designation would be at no cost to the county and that the designation would not affect any plans in the future for construction of a reservoir on a tributary of the Etowah or Amicalola Rivers. A major obstacle to the efforts of the committee is the city of Atlanta. As owners of the tract, the entire Atlanta City Council must also approve.

Mr. Hess has taken his case to the media and is planning a trip on the Etowah and the Amicalola for state and local leaders and airport officials so that those who will be making the decision will appreciate the need to protect this very special place.

The Georgia Scenic Rivers Act was passed in 1969, but has rarely been used. Designated waterways must be found to have outstanding scenic and recreational qualities. There are only four rivers that have made the list – the Conasauga and Jacks Rivers in the Cohutta Wilderness in northwest Georgia, a portion of Ebenezer Creek near Savannah and the Chattooga River in northeast Georgia. The Chattooga is also a National Wild and Scenic River.

For more information please go to
www.etowahscenicriver.org. 

Thank You!

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Thank You!

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(Donations Received after April 1st will be recognized in summer 2005 newsletter)

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