2024 Third Quarter Issue

The South River Current

Promoting interest and collaboration for watershed stewardship

Left: The sunlight through the trees after a prescribed burning. Right: a shortleaf pine sapling.

Watershed Preservation: A Long-Term Project for the Shortleaf Pine

The health of a watershed includes not only the health of the water, but also the wellbeing of the environment surrounding it. That's why federal and state agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are implementing a plan to restore the shortleaf pine (*Pinus echinata*) population in portions of the South River Watershed, specifically at Maple Flats, Big Levels, and Loves Run. Restoration of the shortleaf pine community will bolster the region's sustainability and long-term water quality of the South River Watershed and larger Shenandoah Valley ecosystem. The group implementing the plan includes members of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, the George Washington & Jefferson National Forest, the Virginia State Chapter of The Nature Conservancy, the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources, the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation's Virginia Natural Heritage Program (DCR), and the National Shortleaf Pine Restoration Initiative. The plan involves prescribed burnings over 1,565 acres

to restore the natural cycles that maintained shortleaf pine in these areas and 500 acres of plantings to supplement natural shortleaf pine reproduction. These restoration techniques have been successfully used for several years elsewhere in the National Forest and on other partner agency and NGO lands. Prescribed burns in the South River Watershed were completed as scheduled in 2021 and 2023, and a third is scheduled for 2025. With the help from some friends, it is safe to say that projections for the future of thriving shortleaf pine tree population are good.

*View from Humpback Rocks (**picture credit**).*

Connections: Count the Blazes

When you hear the word "blaze," do you think of a big, roaring fire? If you are a hiker, you might know of another definition. "Blaze" is the word used in North America for a 2-inch by 6-inch vertical rectangle, often made of paint, applied to tree trunks and boulders to mark mountain trails. Trails are typically marked in a single color from beginning to end, but colors may combine when trails intersect. Want to follow the blazes? Below are a few nearby trails to explore.

- Humpback Rocks Hiking Trails
  This collection of trails is accessible from the Humpback Gap Visitor's Center parking area. A quarter-mile trail leads through an outdoor mountain farm museum from the 1890s. A one-mile hike from there leads to Humpback Rocks, and another mile heads up Humpback Mountain where views of the Rockfish and Shenandoah Valleys await. The Humpback Rocks picnic area sits two miles further and, a little further down on the Catoctin Trail, provides a scenic overlook of the Shenandoah Valley and western horizon. When the path merges with the Appalachian Trail (AT), white blazes mark the route. A single blaze indicates the trail continues straight while a double

blaze indicates an upcoming turn. Allow one hour to Humpback Rocks, two hours to Humpback Mountain, and four hours to hike to the picnic area. The best times to visit are from April through October. If you don't want to hike all the way from the visitor's center, there are parking lots and trailheads at Humpback Rocks and Humpback Rocks picnic area.

- Appalachian Trail (AT)
  This path spans 2,000 miles from Maine to Georgia but can be accessed locally from Rockfish Gap or the Humpback Rocks parking area as well as a number of other points in the South River Watershed along the Blue Ridge Parkway and Skyline Drive. Southbound hikers can reach it by continuing south on the Humpback Rocks Trail. Northbound hikers can reach it by taking the one-mile, blue-blazed path at the northern end of the parking lot or the one-mile, white-blazed path just off the Howardsville Turnpike Trail. The main AT trail is marked with white blazes. Blue blazes indicate a spur trail branching off the AT.
- Blue Ridge Tunnel Trail
  This trail sports a parking lot at both the Nelson County end and the Augusta County end. The tunnel itself is three-quarters of a mile in length so the length of your hike will depend on which parking lot you leave from. The East Trailhead, in the village of Afton, is closer to the tunnel and the half-mile trail is mobility accessible. A hike from the parking lot through the tunnel and back is about 2.5 miles. The West Trailhead is located just off U.S. Route 250 between Waynesboro and Rockfish Gap where the Blue Ridge Parkway, Skyline Drive, and AT all converge. Hiking from this end will require more time because it is nearly a mile in length and hilly, meaning the round-trip is almost 3.5 miles. The tunnel temperature stays between 50°F and 60°F all year long, so you might want to bring a jacket. Most importantly, always bring a flashlight or headlamp. (Do not rely on your cell phone flashlight.)
- Kennedy Ridge Trail
  This 7-mile out-and-back trail near Stuarts Draft is generally considered a challenging route and takes an average of 3 hours and 41 minutes to complete. The Kennedy Ridge Trail is a popular trail for birding, hiking, and walking. Park at the large parking area off Virginia State Route 675 (SR675) at the Stephens Trail and Horse Trailer parking area.

Did You Know?

- The Virginia Department of Forestry's Augusta Nursery has planted seedlings in Crimora to serve as a riparian buffer. (See picture.)

- The local shortleaf pine areas are home to the State-Endangered tiger salamander (*Ambystoma tigrinum*), the State-Endangered and Federal-Threatened wildflower swamp pink (*Helonias bullata*), and a number of high-priority bird species, including prairie warbler, pine warbler, field sparrow, eastern bluebird, northern flicker, scarlet tanager, eastern wood-pewee, and bald eagle.

- There are eight different species of pine native to Virginia—eastern white, pitch, red, shortleaf, table-mountain, Virginia, longleaf, and loblolly.

Unloading small shortleaf pine logs.

Take a Walk Back: Echoes of an Earlier Ecosystem

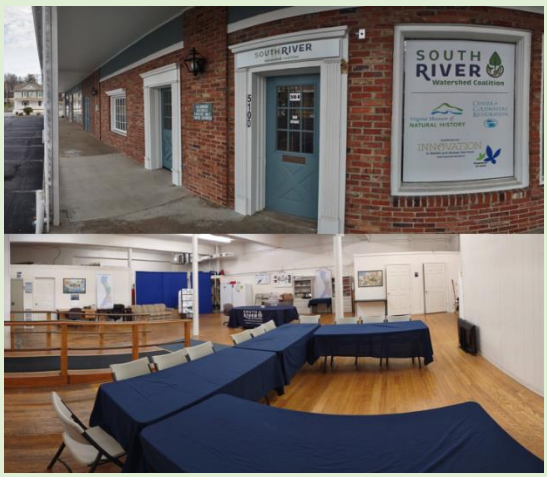
Since the days of Henry David Thoreau, poets and naturalists have contemplated the importance of preserving the natural world, but few early Americans had the luxury of quiet contemplation. They needed to build homes, barns, and boats, and they needed to find firewood. The pine-filled forest was a plentiful resource. In fact, shortleaf pine forests and associated habitats once covered a vast area of the continent, stretching from eastern Texas and Oklahoma to the eastern seaboard of New Jersey south to Florida. Early settlers and Government Land Office surveys describe these pine-dominated and mixed pine-oak forests as open woodlands where sunlight reached the ground, and a diverse assortment of native wildlife flourished. Over time, settlers and colonists found pine resistant to rot and used the straight, tall logs for poles, for building naval ships, and to make charcoal for iron furnaces. Despite decades of deforestation, a handful of pine species were still prevalent in most forests until the last 50 years when farming and logging, altered fire regimes, changes in land use, the invasion of the southern pine beetle, and Littleleaf Disease took a toll. Over the last 30 years, the once extensive shortleaf pine ecosystem has lost over 50% of its former acreage. But the tree has obtained a champion. In 2010, a diverse group of the region's resource management leaders formed the Shortleaf Working Group (SWG). Then, in 2013, several public and private organizations joined to form the Shortleaf Pine Initiative (SPI). Together they are working to address the multiple threats facing this imperiled ecosystem and have formed an Advisory Committee and Planning Team to lead their efforts. For a deep dive into the ecology and history of the shortleaf pine, click **here**. To get involved in SPI, email info@shortleafpine.net.

What Can I Do? Be a Particular Planter

The Virginia Native Plant Society (VNPS) is dedicated to protecting and preserving the native plants of Virginia so that all can enjoy the Commonwealth's rich natural ecosystems and biodiversity. Next time you are contemplating a change to your landscape, consider asking these questions:

- Is this plant native to my region?
  See the Virginia DCR's **native plants lists** by region.
- Was this plant grown from local stock or does the plant have a local origin?
  Ask if the plant was propagated from regional stock. Research has shown that plants from local stock will grow better because they have evolved to withstand local climate conditions.
- Am I gardening near a "natural area"?
  The genetic variation that exists in non-local plants could negatively affect natural plant populations nearby. Consider incorporating plants found in "natural areas" near your property.

Be an educated planter! For a more detailed explanation and examples, visit the **VNPS website.**



Now Available

The South River Watershed Coalition office is available to reserve for community group meeting. The space is outfitted with projection capability and Wi-Fi plus tables and chairs for 15 to 20 people. The office is located at 510-D West Broad Street in Waynesboro. Reservations are free; donations are appreciated.
Email info@southriverwatershed.org