



A Search for Invasive Plants in Ramsey's Draft Wilderness: Documenting One Aspect of Ecological Integrity

This past July, while much of the region suffered from the extreme summer heat, two local college students spent a few weeks walking the trail and stream corridors in Ramsey's Draft Wilderness Area. According to Grahame Taylor of Eastern Mennonite University and Doug Benson of the University of Virginia, it was a great way to beat the heat. However, their mission wasn't to escape the soupy summer swelter, but rather to search for non-native invasive plants along their travel routes. And unfortunately, they were successful.

Non-native invasive plants (NNIP) often outcompete and displace native plants. They are a severe threat to natural areas and can cause a loss of biodiversity, increased exposure of native species to disease, and degradation of ecosystems. Like numerous other natural areas across the country, the George Washington National Forest (GWNF) has not been spared from NNIP. The Virginia Native Plant Society has documented roadside occurrences of NNIP in selected areas of the North River Ranger District for several years. As public use of the GWNF continues and increases, so does the area covered by NNIP.

Wilderness areas are among the last vestiges of large, intact wild areas in Virginia and the eastern U.S. Though largely undisturbed by humans, at least in recent decades, wilderness areas are not immune to ecological threats. Wild Virginia took on the task of surveying the Ramsey's Draft Wilderness Area for

some of the more common NNIP of the region. This project was the first organized effort to document NNIP in any of the GWNF's six wilderness areas.



Japanese stiltgrass and coltsfoot are abundant on the Sinclair Hollow road below Shenandoah Mountain Trail.

The U.S. Forest Service provided a primary list of nine species of NNIP to search for, plus a secondary list of eight species to note as well. A total of 469 trail and stream segments (100 meters in length) were surveyed. So Grahame and Doug covered a total 46.9 km, or 29.1 miles, while searching for NNIP. A 20 meter wide corridor was searched, 10 meters on each side of trails and streams.

We are in the process of completing the data review and analysis, but can report some preliminary findings. Five different species of NNIP were observed along the trails and streams. In order of the frequency observed, they are: Japanese stiltgrass (*Microstegium vimineum*), coltsfoot (*Tussilago farfara*), bush honeysuckle (*Lonicera* spp.), multiflora rose (*Rosa multiflora*), and au-

tumn olive (*Elaeagnus umbellata*). At least one NNIP was observed on 115, or 24.5%, of the trail and stream segments. Japanese stiltgrass was observed on 95 segments (20.3%), while coltsfoot was observed on 58 segments (12.4%).

No more than 4 NNIP species were observed in any single segment. Geographically, the area where NNIP were most frequently observed was the southern extent of Ramsey's Draft and the trail that borders it. In addition, the two parking and trailhead areas – Mountain



Searching for and identifying Japanese stiltgrass along Jerry's Run Trail.

House and Confederate Breastworks – are home to several NNIP. Eleven species were observed at Mountain House and 4 at Confederate Breastworks. When combining these two areas with the trail and stream corridors, a total of 12 NNIP were observed during the survey. Some other common NNIP are known to occur in the Ramsey's Draft area,

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Wild Virginia Update

Letter from our President, Nathan VanHooser

As I write this letter, fall is upon us with winter not far behind. The year is coming to a close and it's time to take stock of events from 2010, as well as look forward to 2011. As is Wild Virginia's habit, the Board will spend a day on retreat to reflect on our performance and plan for new successes. In several ways, 2010 saw a thawing of gridlocked forest management planning. Recent false starts to GWNF planning were pushed aside by a return to solid 1982 planning regulations. Whether the outcomes for the forest are positive still rests in the hands of citizens concerned enough to speak out. But without doubt, the process for a new Forest Plan grinds forward.

New energy generation issues within the National Forest system also began to take shape. While coal has long been in the spotlight, wind farms and biomass extraction burst onto the scene. These energy issues come with a stereotypical 'renewable' tag which cuts across the standard environmental grain. The insidious marketing at play will force public land defenders like Wild Virginia to clearly describe priorities in places like the GWNF.



Good things, such as wind energy generation, can be done in bad ways, like clearing National Forests mountain ridges for turbine farms.

Some progress this year was decidedly positive in nature. Wild Virginia completed field work on our first non-native invasive plant assessment. While invasive species pose a daunting problem, taking the first steps for real action are encouraging. Boosting that success is the possibility of finding a rare partnering opportunity with the Forest Service on an issue that may see increased funding next year.

We also found a unique vehicle this past year to excite the public's passion for wild places. Charlottesville and Staunton got their first

taste of a nationally recognized Wild and Scenic Film Festival sponsored by the likes of Patagonia and Blue Ridge Mountain Sports with Wild Virginia as the local host. The twin evenings of film drew hundreds to be inspired by activists both grand and humble. And Wild Virginia was able to project our local message of ecologically based management of the GWNF to a wide audience enjoying the films.

In the next month, Wild Virginia's Board will plan for 2011. Some programs will stay the course with long-term goals that transcend any single planning cycle. Other programs will strive to take advantage of fickle legislative winds to derive short term wins. Either way, please consider joining us on a project in whatever capacity your time allows. Our monthly hikes are a great way to see your forest lands. And we have fun project tasks with interesting people to fit just about any commitment level. Thank you for your continued support of Wild Virginia.

Volunteer Spotlight - Dana Gilbert, Newsletter Editor



Dana Gilbert recently joined Wild Virginia in the summer of 2010 as the newsletter editor.

As a self-professed nature lover, she supports Wild Virginia's mission to protect forest ecosystems. She graduated in 2009 from University of Richmond where she majored in English and rhetoric and communication studies.

A recent transplant to Charlottesville, Dana works at 2rw Consultants, an engineering firm focused on sustainable design, as an adminis-

trative manager. A Shenandoah Valley native, she tries to spend every possible moment outdoors and enjoys camping, horseback riding, cooking, and developing a green thumb.

Dana hopes to continue learning more about the issues plaguing our National Forests, particularly George Washington National Forest. She loves hiking areas along the Appalachian Trail and is currently working on visiting all 35 of Virginia's state parks (with Douthat next on the list).

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Wild Virginia Hikes and Outings

All hike info also available on our website: <http://www.wildvirginia.org>

A Full Outings Calendar : COME JOIN US!

Sunday, December 5 Loft Mountain

At almost 3300 ft in elevation, this is a relatively easy 3 miler in Shenandoah National Park that provides great views to both the east and west. It loops around the Frazier Discovery Trail where there is a bit of up and down hiking. The rest of the loop is on the Appalachian Trail and a parallel fire trail, both of which are as relatively flat as any trail along the top of Skyline Drive can be. The views and the geological and historical significance of the area make this an especially interesting hike.

Remember to dress appropriately for this early winter hike. Bring water, lunch, snacks, and warm clothing. Access to the trail will be from Skyline Drive. Contact Ernie Reed at lec@wildvirginia.org or (434) 971-1647 to reserve a spot and for car pooling information. Closure of Skyline Drive will cancel this hike. Check for road closures via the internet at http://www.nps.gov/shen/planyourvisit/drive_status.htm or by calling (540) 999-3500.

Sunday, January 9 White Rock Falls

Combined with the Slacks Overlook Trail, this is moderate loop hike just under 5 miles. An impressive gorge formed by White Rock Creek, a tributary of the North Fork Tye River, leads to a 35 foot waterfall which empties into natural pool below. This hike is one of the most delightful in the Pedlar Ranger District of the George Washington National Forest. After descending from the Blue Ridge Parkway, the trail ascends back to the trailhead parking area. Total elevation and loss is about the same at 1100 feet.

Dress appropriately for early

winter. Bring water, lunch, and snacks. The hike starts at the White Rock Falls trailhead, milepost 18.5 on the Blue Ridge Parkway, at 11:00 a.m. Contact Ron Fandetti at fan-jet50@gmail.com or (434) 831-2193 to reserve a spot and for car pooling information. Closure of the Blue Ridge Parkway will cancel this hike. Check for road closures via the internet at <http://www.nps.gov/blri/planyourvisit/roadclosures.htm> or by calling (828) 298-0398.

Sunday, February 27 Crabtree Falls

Crabtree Falls is arguably the most beautiful set of waterfalls in Virginia. Billed by many as the tallest waterfalls east of the Mississippi, Crabtree Falls is a must see for anyone who lives in the mid-Atlantic region.

The hike, approximately 3.5 miles round trip with an elevation gain of 1,380 feet, will take about 4 hours including a lunch break. Please plan on meeting at the trail head at 10:30am. Bring water, lunch, snacks, and warm clothing. Access to the trail will be from VA Highway 56. Contact Eric Gilchrist at ericgrv@gmail.com or (434) 882-3179 to reserve a spot and for car-pooling information.



Enjoying the views during August hike to Elliot Knob

Forest Plan Update - More Analysis Needed, Say 'No' to Hydrofracking

You've probably heard this before – Forest planning continues for the George Washington National Forest (GWNF). It has been a consistent refrain for quite some time now. Although planning originally began in 2007, it is only since March of 2010 that the process has moved forward without interruption.

It appears we are approaching the final steps in the process. In accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), an Interdisciplinary Team of Forest Service employees has developed a range of alternative forest management plans for analysis and consideration. The six are identified simply as Alternatives A through F, and information about them is available on the GWNF website.

Each of the plans outlines different approaches to important management considerations such as the amount of land considered suitable for timber production, areas to be recommended for wilderness study or other congressionally designated areas, watershed protection and management, access to areas in the forest (e.g., trails and roads issues), management of roadless areas, and energy extraction (e.g., wind energy, natural gas extraction, "whole tree" harvesting for biomass, etc.). Alternative A is "no change", or simply continuing the current plan, which

was completed in 1993. Alternative C is based largely on the "Conservation Alternative" that Heartwood and Wild Virginia submitted to the Forest Service (this and other formal comments by Wild Virginia are viewable on our website).

A public meeting was held in Verona on October 5 to unveil the six plan alternatives. The meeting was well attended by interested individuals and organizations as well as several newspaper and TV reporters. Many members of the public expressed strong opposition to hydraulic fracturing, a drilling method being used in other parts of the eastern U.S. to extract natural gas from the Marcellus shale formation. The process requires tremendous amounts of water, has very serious water quality and environmental implications, and has not been thoroughly studied to date. It certainly should not be allowed in the GWNF.

The Forest Leadership Team of the GWNF is scheduled to meet in mid-November to consider all the plan alternatives. The team may select one of the alternatives and recommend it be adopted as the draft Forest Plan. More likely though (and a much preferred method), the team will select components from the various alternatives to create a draft Forest Plan to recommend to the Regional Forester in Atlanta, who has

ultimate responsibility for the plan. The draft Forest Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) are expected to be released in early 2011.

While we are glad that forest planning is continuing now without interruption, it is premature to select a plan alternative at this point. Much of the detailed analysis needed to make informed management decisions and select a plan alternative has not been completed. For example, the National Forest Management Act requires the Forest Service to "provide for diversity of plant and animal communities" and to "maintain viable populations" of fish and wildlife species. The ecological sustainability evaluation the Forest Service is conducting as part of the planning process is not complete, and has not yet fully addressed these issues. Similarly, only very general discussion has occurred regarding the issue of climate change. Greater analysis and specific management recommendations are needed in developing the forest plan.

Here's another phrase you have heard often – Stay tuned. We will continue our active participation in the process, and hope you will remain involved as well. A 90 day formal comment period will follow the release of the draft plan and EIS. Some comment and feedback will almost certainly be needed.

Invasive Plants (from page 1)

but were not observed during the survey. Japanese honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*) is an example of an unobserved NNIP that occurs here.

A very positive finding, and something of a pleasant surprise, was the small presence of garlic mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*). Garlic mustard is very invasive and extremely difficult to control once it is estab-

lished in an area. Though it was observed in both parking lot areas and an isolated trailside spot just north of Mountain House, it was not seen in the wilderness area itself.

We will continue to analyze the survey results, and will produce a report for general distribution in the near future. Maps and final results will be included. We will also consider if control measures for some of

the NNIP are warranted, based on the effort, resources, and methods that will be needed as well as the probability of success and long term effectiveness. Please stay tuned for more information.

Funding from the National Forest Foundation, Agua Fund, an anonymous foundation and collaboration with the Forest Service made the project possible.

Species Spotlight - The Coyote (*Canis latrans*)

Article by Jennifer Johnson

I remember the first time I heard a cacophony of yips, barks, and howls echoing down the hollow toward my family's farmhouse. It was thrilling and slightly disconcerting, even though I was safely tucked away in my bed. I imagined myself a kindred spirit of cowboys huddled around a campfire listening nervously to the wolves howling across the prairie. These were not the lonely howls of wolves, though -- it was a band of coyotes proclaiming our farm as their territory. Coyotes magnify their nightly symphonies to sound like a much larger group than actually exists to convince rivals that the territory is sufficiently protected. To me, it sounded like there were 30 animals howling, but in reality, most coyote bands usually consist of only 6 adults.

During the day, my sister and I would become utterly fearless of the coyotes and try to track them. We did not realize the futility of trying to see a nocturnal animal during the day. Not surprisingly, we never laid eyes on a coyote. Even wildlife biologists who are paid to research coyotes have trouble getting a glimpse of these elusive animals. The wily coyote is hard to trick. Traps set by researchers have to be carefully washed and handled with gloves so that no human scent is transferred. Coyotes, being intelligent animals, are extremely wary of human beings. Conversely, humans are intrigued by these animals that so closely resemble man's best friend. Wolves (*Canis lupus*), coyotes (*Canis latrans*), and domestic dogs (*Canis familiaris*) are all closely-related and can interbreed, but coyotes have a slightly different DNA structure than dogs

and wolves.

In the past 50 years, the coyote has expanded from the northwest and southeast to every state in the continental U.S. and Alaska. Hawaiians look out! Coyotes will probably figure out how to navigate the seas soon. The eastern coyote has interbred with the timber wolf and the red wolf so it is slightly larger than the coyotes out west. The average weight is 20 to 45 pounds.



Coyote (*Canis latrans*)

Part of their success in expanding their range can be attributed to their ability to eat anything they can chew. Called "opportunistic carnivores," they are more than happy to snatch a pet from the suburbs, or eat trash out of a New York City garbage can, but mostly they spend their time chasing down small rodents, insects, snakes, and birds. Of course, they will also eat baby calves and sheep, if the opportunity presents itself. This conflict with farm animals leads to many coyote deaths each year. The United States government has implemented several programs to kill coyotes to protect livestock.

On a Wild Virginia outing in the George Washington National Forest,

a fellow hiker warned everyone to keep their dogs on a leash when hiking the forest trails. According to him, local residents set traps near the trails in hopes of catching coyotes. From 2006 to 2010, Augusta County paid a \$50 to \$75 bounty for dead coyotes. Due to budgetary concerns, the bounty was repealed on January 1, 2010.

The plight of coyotes is part of an excellent novel titled *Prodigal Summer*, written by Barbara Kingsolver, a native of the Appalachian mountains of Kentucky (Interestingly, the novel also explores the plight of the American chestnut!). In the book, a park ranger tries to convince local people that coyotes are not pests to poison and trap; they are an integral part of the forest ecosystem, and bring balance and harmony to the natural world. The park ranger knows the coyote's success in the Appalachian mountains is possible because it fills a niche that was left when the red wolf was exterminated.

Keep an eye out for coyotes this winter. During January and February, they will be looking for places to safely breed. Stay out of their way and, as with any wild animal, never feed them. The coyote has become our neighbor and will hopefully continue to benefit our wild ecosystems for many years to come.



1st Annual Wild Virginia Photo Contest!

Submit your amazing photos of the George Washington National Forest. There are four categories:

- Landscapes
- Native Plants
- Wildlife
- Humorous/General

The finalists will be selected by the board and then we will ask the public to vote! Winners in each category will receive a **free Wild Virginia membership** and **tickets to the Wild and Scenic Environmental Film Festival in Spring 2011**.

Deadline: January 15, 2011

Finalists Announced: February 15, 2011

For details on how to submit photos and to read the full Terms & Conditions, please go to <http://www.flickr.com/groups/wildvirginia>



Photo by Gary Fleming



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