



THANK YOU

FOR MAKING GREAT STORIES POSSIBLE

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Hiking Challenge 5 is Here!

The popular White Squirrel Hiking Challenge is back! The challenge is to go on eight hikes, all on lands that Conserving Carolina has helped protect—from famous waterfalls to local greenways to new trails with dramatic views.

Sean Cobourn went on the very first Hiking Challenge, back in 2011, with his twin daughters, who were eight at the time, along with some of their friends. “Being out in the woods with four or five or six little kids is quite an experience in and of itself,” he says.

Sean is a prominent rock climber, who helped put up many of the routes in the Hickory Nut Gorge. He plans to take part in Hiking Challenge 5 with his daughters, now 16—and, as an added challenge, they’re going to try to knock out all 8 hikes in a single day!

Hiking Challenge 5 is Here!

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Kim Chao on Bearwallow Mountain.

“It’s educational that these are all conserved lands. That’s important in my opinion,” he says. “I think instilling that virtue into my children is important, so they understand why these lands are there and why they’re conserved.”

Bob Carlson and Kim Chao learned about the first Hiking Challenge soon after they retired to the area from Chicago. They thought it would be a good way to get to know the local trails. But, soon, they realized that the Hiking Challenge could use a helping hand. Bob offered to help coordinate the Challenge and he’s been volunteering ever since. He and Kim became active members of our Rock Crushers volunteer crew, and they’ve dedicated many hundreds of hours to trail work.

Kim says, “We know some of trails in the Challenge very well, because we helped build them—but it also takes us to other areas where we might not think to go.”

She says, “I feel proud that these lands are all conserved by Conserving Carolina.”

The new WPA and Conserving Carolina White Squirrel Hiking Challenge 5 features eight hikes:

- Bearwallow Mountain
- DuPont State Recreational Forest—Waterfall Trifecta
- Florence Nature Preserve—Rattlesnake Knob

- Headwaters State Forest—Sassafras Mountain
- Norman Wilder Forest—Drip Falls
- Oklawaha Greenway
- Weed Patch Mountain Trail—Eagle Rock and the Tunnel
- Weed Patch Mountain Trail—Grey Rock Cliff

The new Challenge is sponsored by Witherspoon, Platt, and Associates, a conservation-minded real estate firm. John Witherspoon, broker-in-charge, says, “At WPA, we are avid supporters of Conserving Carolina and their mission to protect our environment and facilitate experiences with the natural world.”

If you complete all eight hikes and you are a Conserving Carolina member, you earn your white squirrel patch, as well as \$10 gift card from Mast General Store in Hendersonville. You can do the hikes in any order, at your own pace. If you’re not a big hiker, you can still get a taste of the Challenge by doing short but rewarding hikes like Bearwallow Mountain or the Sassafras Mountain overlook.

Have fun out there! We’d love to see your adventures—so share them on social media and use the hashtag #hikingchallenge5.



▶ **LEARN MORE: [CONSERVINGCAROLINA.ORG/HIKING-CHALLENGE-5](https://www.conservingcarolina.org/hiking-challenge-5).**

Weed Patch Mountain Trail Wins National Award

If you’ve hiked our trails in the Hickory Nut Gorge, you’ve hiked some of the best new trails in the U.S.! Last year, the Coalition for Recreational Trails gave its annual achievement award for design and construction to our Wildcat Rock Trail. This year, that award went to our Weed Patch Mountain Trail in Lake Lure.

Weed Patch Mountain Trail travels for 8.6 miles through the Town of Lake Lure’s Buffalo Creek Park and connects to Chimney Rock State Park. It offers stunning scenery and backcountry adventure for both hikers and mountain bikers. And it provides the first access to Eagle Rock, a long-sought destination for rock climbers. The spur trail to Eagle Rock passes through a natural rock tunnel.

Conserving Carolina is emerging as a national leader in sustainable trail building—a subject that our trails director Peter Barr presented on at *Rally 2019: the National Land Trust Conference*. Sustainable trail design reduces erosion, minimizes needs for future maintenance, and provides an enjoyable experience for users. Sustainable design elements include frequent curves, rises, and dips so water flows off the trail instead of running down it. On Weed Patch, stone steps and sections of rock-lined trail bed also help limit erosion.

Trails director Peter Barr flags the route of Weed Patch Mountain Trail.



This unused rail line could become a 18-mile rail trail. Photo courtesy of BlueRidgeNow.com.

ECUSTA TRAIL MOVES FORWARD

An unused rail line could find new life as a 18-mile rail trail that would link Hendersonville and Brevard, called the Ecusta Trail. Trail advocates have been pushing for this trail for over a decade. Finally, this summer, the Ecusta Trail took a huge step forward when Conserving Carolina secured a \$6.4 million grant to purchase land along the corridor.

N.C. House Rep. Chuck McGrady saw an opportunity for funding through the N.C. Department of Transportation and alerted Friends of the Ecusta Trail, a grassroots group. They asked Conserving Carolina to take the lead in seeking the funds and managing potential land acquisitions. We got the grant! But there’s still a lot of work to do. Conserving Carolina and our partners will need to raise approximately \$1.6 million in matching funds.

The Hendersonville Lightning reports that local businesses including nearby coffeeshops and breweries are cheering on the proposed trail, which could bring more customers their way.

Kieran Roe, executive director of Conserving Carolina, says, “We’re excited to be advancing the Ecusta Trail and other greenway projects in our communities. Greenways allow more people to access nature near their homes. By providing green space where we can exercise and release stress, greenways help us stay healthy. They also offer safe transportation routes for foot and bike travel, which means safer roads for everyone.”



Volunteers in our Friends of Brevard Area Trails group helped build the new trail.

New Trail Opens in Bracken Mountain Preserve

A new trail for hiking and mountain biking just opened in Bracken Mountain Preserve, which connects Brevard with Pisgah National Forest. Conserving Carolina volunteers and our Summer of Service members dedicated 239 hours to help build the approximately 1.5 mile trail, called the Pinnacle Trail.

The trail is named for the historic Pinnacle community. Founders of this community included a Blackfoot woman named Laughing Water and an African-American man named Tom, both of whom escaped from captivity before the Civil War. They raised a large family and helped start a self-sufficient community in the mountains.

The Pinnacle Trail offers a steep climb with 500 feet of elevation gain and creates a new loop. Torry Nergart, Conserving Carolina's conservation easement manager, who organized the trail-building workdays, is a resident of Brevard and an avid mountain biker. He says, "The new trail makes Bracken Mountain more of a destination, not just a way to get somewhere else or a quick after-work ride. Now, you can get in a really good climb and an extended downhill run. Afterwards, you're right there in Brevard's downtown."

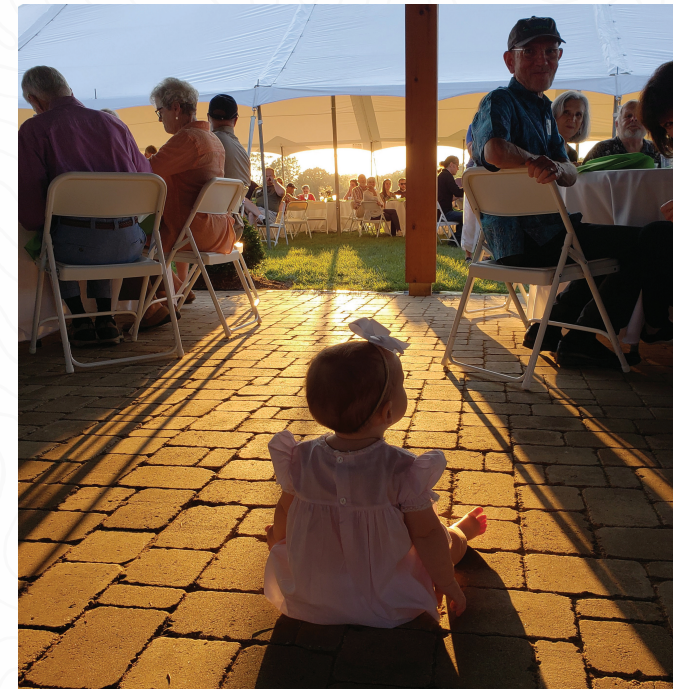
New River Park ON THE WAY IN BREVARD

In Brevard, kids are so close to the river—and yet so far. Brevard Elementary School and the Transylvania Boys and Girls Club are located near the French Broad River, just three-quarters of a mile from the Hap Simpson River Access Park. But children can't get to that park, at least not safely. They'd have to walk on a road with narrow shoulders and fast-moving traffic.

Now, a new park is on the way that will link the school and after-school program to the river. The new park will also connect to the Brevard greenway network. And a river walk could connect it to Hap Simpson Park.

Conserving Carolina helped Transylvania County apply for a N.C. Parks and Recreation Trust Fund grant toward the purchase of a 55-acre property on the French Broad River, behind the Boys and Girls Club. After the grant was funded, the county voted to buy the land. County Commissioner Mike Hawkins said he could see it becoming a hub in an emerging "blueway"—a recreational corridor along the water.

Ideas for the new park include river access, walking and biking trails, a water play area, practice fields for sports teams, and restored wetlands. Wetlands benefit the community by absorbing floodwater and providing habitat for many kinds of wildlife, including ducks and other birds. They're great places for bird watching!



Conservation Celebration!

One of our youngest members enjoyed the sunset at our Conservation Celebration at Caitlyn Farms in Mill Spring, on September 21. Over 300 people came out to enjoy a beautiful view of protected Little White Oak Mountain, as well as dinner, music, live and silent auctions and good company. Thank you for your support of land conservation!



Interested in Conservation Burial?

Many people are looking for more natural burial options as we return our bodies to the earth. Conserving Carolina supported Carolina Memorial Sanctuary to start the first conservation burial ground in NC, in Mills River—with woodlands, meadows, and a stream on land that is protected forever. If you let Carolina Memorial Sanctuary know that you heard about them through us, you will receive a discount and they will make a donation to support conservation.

► [LEARN MORE: CONSERVINGCAROLINA.ORG/CONSERVATION-BURIAL](https://www.conservingcarolina.org/conservation-burial)

PROJECT CONSERVE STRENGTHENS CONSERVATION THROUGHOUT WNC

A new team of AmeriCorps Project Conserve members are bringing their time, energy, and talents to conservation partners throughout Western North Carolina. Conserving Carolina leads Project Conserve, a national service program supported by AmeriCorps, the North Carolina Commission on Volunteerism and

Community Service, and our host sites. In the 15th year of Project Conserve, 31 AmeriCorps members are serving at 16 host sites, including nonprofits and local government agencies. Project Conserve helps passionate people start careers in conservation and it strengthens the work of our many partners.





Alexla Perez-Sanchez holds a tire that was fished out of Clear Creek, surrounded by the rest of the Summer of Service crew and friends who joined in the cleanup.

STORIES OF THE LAND
**SUMMER OF SERVICE:
 PASSING ON
 THE GIFT**

In Alexla Perez- Sanchez’s family, indoors was the place to be. “Being Hispanics, when we’re outside it’s mainly to be working, whether that be construction, picking tomatoes, doing stuff like that,” she says. “So, in my family, being outside was not seen as something that we would do for fun.”

Alexla came from Mexico with her mother when she was three, first to Atlanta, then Hendersonville. She didn’t speak English until she was 12, when other kids’ bullying pushed her to study hard and become a fluent speaker. Today, Alexla is an outgoing and funny 18-year-old, in early college at Blue Ridge Community College.

Last year, when she heard about Conserving Carolina’s Summer of Service, she joined because she wanted a motorcycle. It was perfect: the stipend for the summer AmeriCorps program would pay exactly what she needed to buy a sweet used bike from a friend.

As it turned out, a family emergency took precedence over buying that motorcycle. But, Alexla got something out of the program she wasn’t expecting.

“**I IMMIGRATED HERE WHEN I WAS THREE. THEN, FOURTEEN YEARS OF MY LIFE WENT BY. IT WASN’T UNTIL I JOINED SUMMER OF SERVICE THAT I FIGURED OUT HOW AWESOME EVERYTHING WAS IN NATURE.**”

She’d be outdoors working on a trail or pulling invasive cattails out of a bog. “That’s when I saw the beauty in nature,” she says. “I was like, wow. We just did that for this community

and we were outside all day, but it was nice, feeling the breeze, hearing the birds. It was nice.”

She reflects, “I immigrated here when I was three. Then, fourteen years of my life went by. It wasn’t until I joined Summer of Service that I figured out how awesome everything was in nature.”

It was the peacefulness she fell in love with, she says. “I feel like nature offers this sense of peacefulness and being, like, utterly complete. That’s why I fell in love with it, because I could just feel peaceful. I wasn’t feeling rushed like, ‘Oh, I have to do this, I have to get home.’ I was just present and it felt super cool. I’ve never felt that before.”

This year, Alexla returned to Summer of Service—an AmeriCorps program for local 17-to-20-year olds. The six members helped build a new trail, remove kudzu from a nature preserve, pull trash out of a creek, enhance community gardens, and support

many other conservation projects. And they became close friends.

Alexla says, “Summer of Service is life changing. It’s soul changing. And I’ve heard that from all of the members.”

Another member, Joe Treadway, says “It was very empowering for me that I was out there working and I did something with my summer. It makes me happy to say that, you know? A lot of people, the summer flies by and you do nothing. But I made a difference.”

Cassie Cole says that the impact goes far beyond their small group. “We go out in the community and we serve. If we go to El Centro and we do the pollinator garden, that provides a more welcoming environment for everybody to go in there. Lives are impacted. Or when we go and cut trails, more people can recreate. And you don’t know what’s going to happen there. You don’t know who people are going to meet or what experiences they’re going to have.”

For Alexla, her love of nature inspires her to protect it. She says, “If I’m fortunate enough to witness this beauty that I have, what about the generations that come after me? Yes, I may be 18 years old, but I know I’m not the end. I know there’s still going to be kids, grandchildren, great grandchildren that might never get to see this if we don’t step up to the plate. And I don’t think it would be fair to them.”

Joe Treadway and Clayton Cilone transplant flowers for the pollinator garden at El Centro.



School on the Mountaintop

Children in FernLeaf Community Charter School got to hike Bearwallow Mountain and then play on the wide-open mountaintop, in a field trip supported by Conserving Carolina. In the last year, we’ve supported Bearwallow field trips by FernLeaf, Edneyville Elementary, and Lake Lure Classical Academy.

Educators Michael and Molly Luplow helped start FernLeaf in 2016 because they wanted to make school better for kids—and a big part of that is getting them outside.

FernLeaf students go outside almost every day, on their campus on the banks of Cane Creek in Fletcher.

Now, we’re working with FernLeaf to make their campus even better. We recently partnered with FernLeaf and the Town of Fletcher to secure a grant to expand Cane Creek Greenway through the school campus. And we’re working with these partners on a vision to move the school to a hilltop with panoramic views, on land that would also provide a park for the Fletcher community.

The search for bugs turned up beetles, grasshoppers, spiders, grubs, and more.



▲ STORIES OF THE LAND

The Kudzu Warriors

Across the river from Norman Wilder Forest, it looks like another planet. A hillside is covered in bright green lumps. Those lumps used to be trees. Now, they're just stubs propping up kudzu. In a landscape like that, you wouldn't hear birds singing in the canopy or see butterflies flitting past. You probably wouldn't come across any wildlife—well, maybe a groundhog. That's where our Norman Wilder Forest was headed too.

Greg Miner didn't want to see that happen to the forest—a Conserving Carolina nature preserve between Saluda and Tryon—so he started volunteering nine years ago, to remove the kudzu.

A retired nurse, Greg says his co-workers would look at him like he was crazy when they heard about his volunteer work. They'd tell him kudzu is an impossible problem, that it will always come back.

So why do he and his fellow volunteers, called the Kudzu Warriors, keep working so hard to get rid of it? At a coffee shop after a work session in the blazing summer heat, a group of Kudzu Warriors laughed and said you shouldn't rule out insanity.

Seriously, they can name lots of reasons.

"It's like any volunteer work," Ted Altman said. "You actually get back more than you give."

Don Dicey said it's great for the camaraderie. Other members said it's great exercise. It's free training, so you know how to handle invasive plants on your own property. And it's amazing to see the wildflowers that come back once the kudzu is gone: trilliums, bloodroot, mayapples, columbine.

"The silverbells are what got me," said Ford Smith.

As these plants come back, you start to see more wildlife. Don said, "I run into turtles, I run into snakes, I run into salamanders."

From Greg's point of view, their work is a step toward a paradigm shift—from a culture devoted to human profits to one that values the whole community of life.

Conserving Carolina's Max Howes, who works with the Kudzu Warriors,

“**IT'S LIKE ANY VOLUNTEER WORK," TED ALTMAN SAID. "YOU ACTUALLY GET BACK MORE THAN YOU GIVE."**

said, "I like looking to the other side of the river and comparing that to Wilder. I know Wilder once looked like that, in parts, and now it doesn't."

Most of the preserve is now free of kudzu. Areas that were once overrun with invasive plants are now beautiful places to enjoy majestic tall trees and spring and summer wildflowers. Turns out kudzu is tough, but it's not impossible.

► [SEE TIPS FOR GETTING RID OF KUDZU ON P10](#)

This group of Kudzu Warriors includes (clockwise from center) Greg Miner, Don Dicey, John Lane, Ted Altman, and Ford Smith.



WHAT'S YOUR LEGACY?

Do you want to leave a legacy of natural wonders for the generations that come after you? One of the most powerful ways you can make a difference is through planned giving.

That could mean a bequest in your will. Or it could mean making us as a beneficiary of your retirement account or life insurance policy, among other options.

We're here to talk to you about planned giving. We also encourage you to talk with your financial advisors. When you designate a gift, please let us know so we can plan for the future—and so we can thank you!

OVER 70½? GIVE TAX FREE

If you're over age 70-and-a-half, you can make tax-free donations from your retirement account to protect the places you love. When you make charitable gifts directly from your IRA account, these gifts will count toward your annual IRA required minimum distribution, but you don't have to count them as income. Talk with your advisors about whether this is a good charitable giving option for you.

LADY SLIPPER AWARD - WINNERS -



JASON AUSTIN

VOLUNTEERING FOR:
3 years

VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES:
Rock Crushers trail crew

HOME:
Weaverville

HOW HE GOT INVOLVED:
While hiking in the Smokies, he came across an Appalachian Trail Conservancy crew member and had a conversation about how trails don't just appear overnight. That inspired him to give back.

MOST REWARDING VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE:
Working on the Weed Patch Mountain Trail from start to finish, then hiking the entire trail.

HOPES & DREAMS FOR CONSERVING CAROLINA:
To create a trail network throughout the entire Hickory Nut Gorge, connecting beautiful protected places.

WHAT MOTIVATES HIM:
After sitting under fluorescent lights at his job, getting outside makes him feel alive. He strives to enjoy it as much as he can and to make trails accessible for others.

TOP ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUE:
Public lands that belong to everyone, now and forever.

HOBBIES:
Hiking and backpacking



CONNIE BACKLUND

VOLUNTEERING FOR:
25 years, since the beginning of Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy (CMLC).

VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES:
Current board president

HOME: Flat Rock

HOW SHE GOT INVOLVED:
She was invited to one of the "creation meetings" for CMLC and felt an immediate alignment of personal passions.

MOST REWARDING VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE:
Welcoming the 2019-2020 AmeriCorps Project Conserve members and sharing a passion for conservation with the next generation of leaders.

HOPES & DREAMS FOR CONSERVING CAROLINA:
To find ways to address climate change, including corridors for species to adapt and migrate up the mountains.

COOL FACT:
Retired from a career with the National Park Service

WHAT MOTIVATES HER:
A strong connection with land from childhood that continues to grow.

TOP ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUE:
Sharing nature with young children and sparking their excitement to spend time in nature

HOBBIES:
Taking care of the family farm that she grew up on in Ohio

HABITAT AT HOME

How to Grow Milkweed

Milkweed is the only plant that monarch butterflies can lay their eggs on. Monarch populations have plummeted due to the loss of milkweed on agricultural lands across the U.S., partly because of the use of weed-killers like Round-Up. Now, gardeners are helping stabilize monarch populations by growing milkweed. But, getting it started can be tricky.

Here's what you need to know:

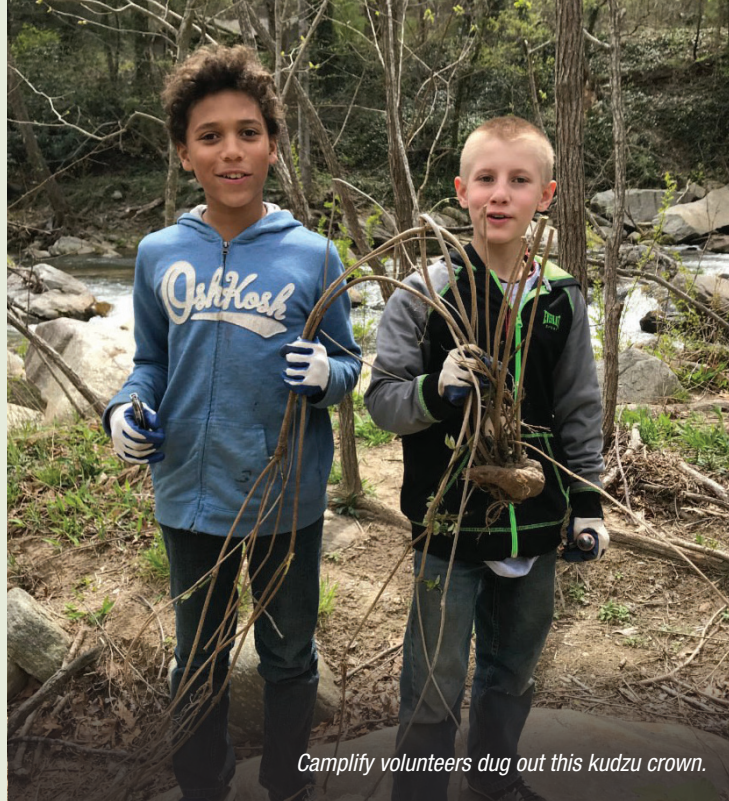
IN OUR REGION, native varieties include common milkweed, swamp milkweed, or butterfly weed. Butterflies get the most benefit if you plant these locally native varieties.

MILKWEED SEEDS will only germinate if they sense that winter has come and gone. They have to go through a period when they're cold and moist, or they won't grow. You can simulate winter by putting your seeds in damp vermiculite or a damp paper towel and keeping them in the fridge for four weeks before planting.

THINK AHEAD! If growing from seed, you need to make time for that four weeks in the fridge. You can start seeds indoors or sow outdoors after danger of frost.

ONCE YOU HAVE MILKWEED PLANTS, enjoy the flowers and keep an eye out for yellow-white-and-black-striped caterpillars! Those are the larvae that transform into monarch butterflies.

► **LEARN MORE:**
CONSERVINGCAROLINA.ORG/GROWING-MILKWEED



Camplify volunteers dug out this kudzu crown.

GOT KUDZU?

Kudzu takes over, killing trees and leaving no place for other plants or wildlife to live. Here are some tips for getting kudzu under control:

- Hold the line! Even if you just cut it off your trees or mow it back, that's better than doing nothing.
- Persistent mowing or grazing will eventually kill kudzu, but you have to keep at it for years.
- Digging out the kudzu crowns—a bulb-like feature at the top of the root system—will kill the vines if you are able to completely remove them.
- Herbicide alone is not the most effective treatment. It works better to combine mechanical control (like digging, mowing, or grazing) and a selective herbicide. Get expert advice and use caution if using herbicide.
- If hiring professionals, look for a service that offers environmentally sensitive invasive plant control. (We list a few online.)
- Volunteering is free training. And our veteran Kudzu Warriors (see p. 8) are happy to talk with you about how to tackle your kudzu problem.

► **LEARN MORE:**
CONSERVINGCAROLINA.ORG/GET-RID-OF-KUDZU

FIELD NOTES



How often do you see a plant with no green parts, during its growing season? This pinesap doesn't need green-tinted chlorophyll because, unlike most plants, it doesn't get its food by turning sunlight into energy. It's a parasitic plant that gets its energy from fungi in the ground (which get it from trees). Usually, pinesap is a pale yellow, but they can be violet, like this one growing in Gorges State Park.



This juvenile black rat snake was hanging around a waterfall in Transylvania County. As an adult, it will be entirely black, but juveniles display this black-on-gray pattern. Black rat snakes (also called simply black snakes) are non-venomous and excellent mousers.

You Are Invited

Sunday, Dec. 8, 2019, 12:30-3:30

Holiday Brunch

Screvens Plantation, Tryon, NC

Join us for brunch, a holiday market, and cheer at this benefit for Conserving Carolina! Casual attire. \$50 per person.

Tuesday, Dec. 17, 2019, 4:30-6:30

Holiday Drop In

Deerlake Village Clubhouse, Brevard NC

Come celebrate the season over delicious hors d'oeuvres and beverages. Come in festive attire or as you are. Free for Conserving Carolina members. Feel free to bring a guest.

See More Upcoming Events

There's always a lot going on—from film screenings and speaker series to guided hikes and volunteer days. You can find events on our website calendar or join our email list to get monthly events emails. We'd love to see you!

► **FIND EVENTS:**
CONSERVINGCAROLINA.ORG/CALENDAR



For your convenience, your membership renewal date appears on the address label.

For Nature and People. Forever.



Photo by Kevin Adams

GIVING IS BEAUTIFUL

Your year-end gift to Conserving Carolina helps protect the places that fill us with wonder. Thank you!

Conserving Carolina memberships also make special gifts for your loved ones. Until Jan. 1, all gift memberships come with a 2020 calendar with stunning waterfall photography, a tote bag, a gift card to Mast General Store, and year-long membership perks.

**PLEASE GIVE TODAY. YOU CAN MAIL A CHECK, DONATE ONLINE
AT [CONSERVINGCAROLINA.ORG](https://www.conservingcarolina.org), OR CALL 828-697-5777.**