



**CONSERVING
CAROLINA**

LANDSCAPE

FALL / WINTER 2025

**You are making
powerful stories
possible!**

3 50,000 ACRES PROTECTED

4 RAIL TRAILS BECOMING REALITY

8 FAIRVIEW COMMUNITY FOREST

10 NEW HIKING CHALLENGE

...and more!

THOUSANDS OF ACRES OF WILDERNESS!

When the Great Recession hit, it brought chaos for the people who had purchased lots in the GreyRock subdivision in the mountains north of Lake Lure.

The planned development spanned over 4,000 acres — one of the largest swaths of private forestland left in Western North Carolina. The 700 house sites had gorgeous mountain views and the developer promised that homes would be surrounded by protected forests as common land.

Then the market fell. In 2008, the development went bankrupt. The developer was arrested for fraud. Roads and power lines were never built. With no roads, people couldn't get to their own land. The value of lots plummeted. And there was almost no hope of preserving common land. More likely, undeveloped land would be split up and sold.



THOUSANDS OF ACRES OF WILDERNESS!

Continued from page 1.

Instead, a very different vision emerged. Conserving Carolina and the GreyRock Community Association saw an opportunity to protect thousands of acres of wilderness — and we worked toward that shared goal for 16 years.

This October, with your help, Conserving Carolina bought 483 acres that make up the last major piece of this epic conservation project. Altogether, we have now protected a 2,669-acre wilderness next to Chimney Rock State Park!

Over half of this land is protected as the Town of Lake Lure's Buffalo Creek Park, and the rest is protected as the Joel Ridge Nature Preserve, owned by Conserving Carolina.

You may have already visited part of this land — Buffalo Creek Park, where we opened the stunning Weed Patch Mountain Trail in 2018. Since then, we have added more land — and we're working on more trails.

Buying this land wasn't easy! We needed to purchase unsold lots from the property owners' association and other lots from

individual owners. We worked with the association to swap lots in areas that would not be developed for lots within the reduced development footprint. We helped negotiate release from covenants and forgiveness of unpaid dues.

The process was cumbersome, says Rebekah Robinson, our assistant director of programs, but it was worth it for the end goal.

By partnering with us on this project, the GreyRock owners were able to fulfill the original promise of homes surrounded by nature — while greatly expanding the conservation benefits:

CLEAN WATER

The new addition includes six miles of streams and six low elevation seeps (a rare kind of wetland). And the total property we bought from GreyRock includes over 38 miles of streams! Surrounded by pristine forests, these streams provide clean water for Lake Lure and the Broad River.

WILDLIFE

Connected to Chimney Rock State Park and close to our Youngs Mountain preserve, the GreyRock land offers vital, connected habitat for wild animals. The land has streams, seeps, cliffs, and many kinds of forest. These varied habitats provide homes for numerous rare species including wildflowers, salamanders, birds, and butterflies.

SCENIC VIEWS

This large-scale project helps protect mountain scenery around Lake Lure.

TRAILS

Trails in Buffalo Creek Park have been closed since landslides tore through during Hurricane Helene. But even as these trails await reroutes and repairs, new trails are underway. When ready, new and reopened trails on the land we bought from GreyRock will total approximately 17 miles! The new addition creates potential for even more trails — including a link between two state trails.

Conserving Carolina is spearheading the Hickory Nut Gorge State Trail, which will eventually span over 100 miles. On the newly added property, there is potential to link this trail system with the Wilderness Gateway State Trail!

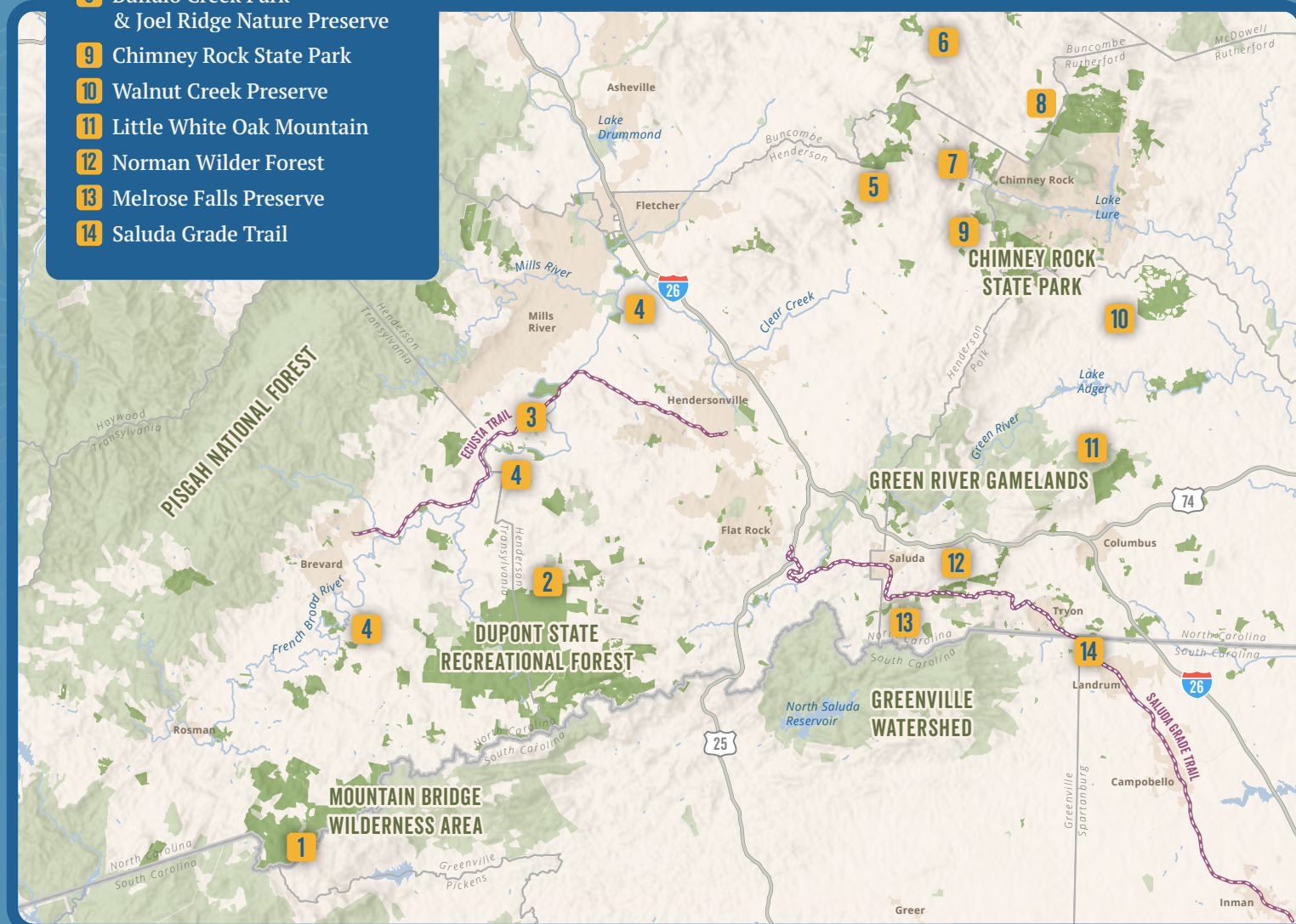
Funding for this last big piece of the GreyRock purchase came from the NC Land and Water Fund, NC Complete the Trails Program, Fernandez Pave the Way Foundation, Fred and Alice Stanback, and other private donors — with support from all of our members. Thank you for helping us seize the opportunity to protect a truly extraordinary wild landscape!

ABOVE View from Weed Patch Mountain Trail. By Gordon Tutor.

COVER Stream on new addition to Joel Ridge Nature Preserve. By Max Cooper.

50,000 ACRES PROTECTED

- 1 Headwaters State Forest
- 2 DuPont State Recreational Forest
- 3 Ecusta Trail
- 4 Natural floodplain restorations along the French Broad River
- 5 Bearwallow Mountain
- 6 Fairview Community Forest
- 7 Transfiguration Preserve
- 8 Buffalo Creek Park & Joel Ridge Nature Preserve
- 9 Chimney Rock State Park
- 10 Walnut Creek Preserve
- 11 Little White Oak Mountain
- 12 Norman Wilder Forest
- 13 Melrose Falls Preserve
- 14 Saluda Grade Trail



We've reached a major milestone. Conserving Carolina has now helped to protect more than 50,000 acres — forever!

You can be proud knowing that wonderful places like this are here because of you — including some of this region's greatest treasures. Here are some highlights from our more than 35 years in land conservation. **Can you imagine if these places were not protected? And can you envision what comes next?**

Our vision is for connected wildlife corridors, more trails in the Hickory Nut Gorge, more restoration along rivers, more farmland preservation, and more parks and greenways so people can enjoy nature close to home. **Thank you for all of your support to make it happen!**



RAIL TRAILS BECOMING REALITY



Ecusta Trail opening. By Kiko Salazar.
RIGHT Venture Ecusta. By Chelsea Gillespie.



This was a huge summer for our two rail trail projects — the Ecusta Trail and the Saluda Grade Trail.

In June, the Saluda Grade Trail took a major leap forward, when we worked with our partners to buy the 31-mile rail line! Then just one month later, in July, we celebrated the opening of the first 6 miles of the Ecusta Trail, from Hendersonville to Horse Shoe.

The Ecusta Trail was full of people before it even opened, and a massive crowd celebrated the opening on July 18. Henderson County reported that over 6,800 people used the trail that weekend — and hundreds of people have been out on the trail nearly every day since.

The Ecusta Trail's popularity demonstrates the positive impact that these two rail trails can have for our communities. The Ecusta Trail draws people outside — from teenagers laughing with their friends after school, to kids playing on scooters, to people running after work, to couples biking

across town for a weekend brunch, to folks who need a smooth path to get around with wheelchairs or strollers.

People of all walks of life now have more opportunities for outdoor recreation — with the many health benefits that come from exercise and time outdoors. And local businesses are seeing a dramatic boost from all the trail users.

For example, the Ecusta Market and Cafe went from 8 employees to 38 in one year, according to the Hendersonville Times-News. Packa's Place in Horse Shoe, which offers a beer garden and pumpkin sales, reported a surge in customers with

the trail opening. And Venture Ecusta, in Hendersonville, has rented bikes to visitors from 20 states and 25 countries since the opening.

The Ecusta Trail is expected to provide a return of \$9.4 million every year in visitor spending, healthcare savings, and tax revenues, according to an economic impact analysis by the U.S. Department of Transportation. For its part, **the Saluda Grade Trail is expected to boost local economies by \$20 million annually** during its first twelve years (a two-year construction phase plus the first ten years of use.)



Removing the first spike to make way for the Saluda Grade Trail. By Kiko Salazar.

RIGHT Lourdes Gutierrez in Tryon. By Chelsea Gillespie.

As the first section of the Ecusta Trail shows what a rail trail success can look like, we were thrilled when — as part of the Saluda Grade Trails Conservancy — we purchased the historic Saluda Grade rail line this summer.

Conserving Carolina is the NC partner in this coalition and we worked with two SC nonprofits — PAL: Play, Advocate, Live Well and Upstate Forever — to buy the land. The purchase of this 31-mile corridor was primarily funded by the states of North and South Carolina, as well as the Polk County Community Foundation and private donors.

We celebrated this big news for the Saluda Grade on July 31 in downtown Tryon — an event that was enthusiastically attended, in spite of off-and-on thunderstorms.

Tryon's downtown director, Lourdes Gutierrez, says, **"The trail will open up visibility and new business opportunities across our towns.** It will support existing businesses and encourage new services like shuttles, bike rentals, and cafés. **It's going to create opportunities for people here in Polk County and bring a whole new audience."**

Ultimately, our vision is to see the full 19+ miles of the Ecusta Trail become a reality,

from Brevard to Hendersonville, and to see the 31-mile Saluda Grade Trail open through Inman, Campobello, Landrum, Tryon, Saluda, and Zirconia. We also want to link the two trails, so you will be able to travel on more than 50 miles of connected rail trails — through vibrant small towns and scenic countryside, with extraordinary nature preserves along the way.

Thank you for helping us make these ambitious rail trails a reality — and a big win for our communities!



Matt and Kailen Gillespie on the Ecusta Trail. By Chelsea Gillespie.



With so much momentum for these two trails, here's what happens next:

NEXT STEPS FOR THE ECUSTA TRAIL

The Friends of the Ecusta Trail — which we partnered with to buy the land and raise funds for construction — is now leading the fundraising for trail amenities and mobilizing local support for the trail. The Friends recently hired their first executive director, launched a new website, and started a volunteer Trail Ambassador program.

The remaining two sections of the trail — eight miles in Transylvania and five miles in Henderson County — are in the design and engineering phase, with the hope of going to bid for construction by late next summer. It is estimated that the full trail will be built by late 2027.

NEXT STEPS FOR THE SALUDA GRADE TRAIL

Design and preliminary engineering for the SC portion and potentially some NC segments begins this winter.

Conserving Carolina and our partners are undertaking two in-depth plans — for economic development and community engagement. To inform these plans, we gathered public input with an online survey and a Fall Forum. A Spring Forum presenting the plans will take place on April 23 at Polk County High School, from 5:30-7:30 PM.



BRINGING BACK TRAILS BY POLK COUNTY HOSPITAL

Do you remember when there were walking trails in the woods next to the hospital in Columbus, NC? There's a 56-acre forest there, protected by a conservation easement. Back in the early 2000s, Pacolet Area Conservancy (one of two groups that merged to form Conserving Carolina), worked with the landowner to open trails on the land. Those trails connected to the short Tom Raymond Memorial Fitness Trail on the hospital grounds and they were a great asset to the community — linked to the hospital, Polk County Library, and Isothermal Community College.

Unfortunately, when the land passed to a new owner, he closed off public access. The land was still protected by the conservation easement, but the trails weren't part of the easement — and they were shut down.

Now, with unexpected help from someone with deep family ties to this land, we're turning that around. Butch Weaver lives in Colorado and his interest in Polk County began after his mother's death when he dove into researching his family history.

He found that his ancestors owned this land from 1841 to 1931. He learned that his great-grandfather was murdered during the chaos of the Civil War, that his great-grandmother fought to keep the land in their family and won, and that they finally lost the land during the Great Depression as the family fell into poverty.

Butch learned about a small Weaver family cemetery on the property, where fading headstones tilt among the trees. Since Conserving Carolina holds the conservation easement, Butch made a connection with our land protection

director, Tom Fanslow, and learned where things stood with the property.

"I expressed interest at that point in helping Conserving Carolina acquire the land," he says. Following a successful career in tech, he believes in giving back. Butch provided half the money needed to buy the land, which was matched by the Polk County Community Foundation.

This July, we bought the land! The property has mature forests and a creek providing habitat for many kinds of wildlife, including migratory songbirds. Now that we own it, we are excited to bring back trails that support good health for hospital patients, staff, and visitors, and others in the surrounding community.

The Healing Power of Nature

Conserving Carolina recently acquired two properties next to hospitals — in Columbus and Brevard. Both are places for trails, supporting good health. And they directly benefit people connected with the hospitals.

Research shows that:

- Hospital patients with access to green space, or even a view of trees, recover faster.
- When hospital staff can go outside even briefly, it improves morale and reduces burnout.
- Time in nature is a powerful stress reliever — important for visitors whose loved ones are hospitalized.



Columbus, NC hospital. Photo by Rose Lane.



By Leila Husain.

LAND FOR PARK & GREENWAY IN BREVARD

Conserving Carolina now owns land along a greenway near Transylvania Regional Hospital — providing a stepping stone toward its future as a local park.

This 11.5 acre property is a vital link in the local greenway network and offers numerous benefits to the community:

- Includes a segment of the Estatoe Trail.
- Located near the intersection of the Estatoe Trail and the future Ecusta Trail.
- Contains part of Lamb's Creek and borders Allison Creek — both trout streams flowing out of the national forest.
- Surrounded by the hospital, Transylvania County ballfields, Pisgah Forest Elementary School, and Oskar Blues brewery.
- Part of a popular birding area called Hospital Fields.
- Potential for natural floodplain restoration.

The land was previously owned by the hospital and then by Pisgah Health Foundation. The foundation was ready to let go of the property, but the City of Brevard wasn't yet ready to acquire it. So we're bridging the gap in ownership to ensure that this land remains an asset to the community that will only be enhanced over time. Pisgah Health Foundation donated the land to us in September and we are so grateful for their commitment to the holistic health of our community!



LADY SLIPPER AWARDS

Here are our fall and winter award-winning volunteers!

STRAT DOUGLAS

Volunteering For: 4 years.
Volunteer Activities: Board of Directors and trail maintenance.

Home: Columbus. Grew up in Tryon and came back to Polk County to retire.

Profession: Early jobs as raft guide and in the ski industry. Later, economics professor. Now retired.

Fun Fact: Fought to save cross-country ski trails he made (with permission) on public land in WV. And won!

Top Environmental Issue: Public access — because direct experience motivates public support for conservation.

Hobbies: Whitewater paddling, hiking, cross-country skiing, volunteering on trails and rivers, cooking, gardening, and time with family.



AMOS DAWSON

Volunteering For: 13 years.
Volunteer Activities: Board of Directors, past president.

Home: Flat Rock.

Profession: Retired environmental lawyer.

What Motivates You? He says, "We must dispel the notion humans are somehow separate from the rest of Nature. Our non-human brothers and sisters sustain us, and we have an obligation to protect them."

Top Environmental Issue: Climate solutions and sustainability.

Hobbies: Hiking, golf, reading. Time with his wife and soulmate Gail, their four kids and five grandkids.

Fun Fact: Came to Saluda on their honeymoon, then every anniversary, moved near Saluda in 2012.



A PLACE FOR KIDS & COMMUNITY

What if we could protect a special forest in Fairview, create new trails — and have that protected land surround a campus where kids get to learn and connect with the outdoors?

That's exactly what's happening at the newly protected Fairview Community Forest!

This summer, Conserving Carolina purchased 226 acres that will become a place for the local community to hike, bike, and fish. This protected forest surrounds the campus of the WORX Project — which offers career-focused, hands-on education for students in Asheville and Buncombe County public schools.

Our next step will be to conserve most of the WORX campus, so that over 250 acres will be protected in all — including 1.3 miles of headwater streams. The land is a former summer camp, and the WORX campus at its center includes camp buildings and a lake.

At WORX, students explore career paths — and with so much of our region's economy linked to the outdoors, it makes sense to learn outside. The students learn about jobs in fields like outdoor recreation, environmental stewardship, renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, building trades, and

culinary arts. With swimming, trails, and a beautiful outdoor setting, the program is also a free camp where kids can find their joy in nature.

Even before trails open at the Fairview Community Forest, really special things are happening here — because our partners are engaging young people with nature and because you helped us protect the land!

This summer, we talked with some of the people who are making this forest a beautiful place full of learning, growth, community, and play.

Greg Hall II, the director of the In Real Life after-school program, was leading a group of eighth graders from Asheville. He said, “They get to come out into nature and experience hands-on learning. They’re not just in a classroom with a worksheet. They’re actually doing the stuff. They’re actively catching tadpoles. They’re making awesome food from scratch. They’re building things with their own hands that they get to take home.”

The kids learn about career paths they didn't know existed — including careers in environmental stewardship.

Greg says, “I had one young lady in sixth grade, a person of color, who came out last week. Afterward she said, ‘I think I want to be an environmental educator.’ So just being immersed in the environment and learning about that



Greg Hall II with eighth graders. By Kiko Salazar.

opportunity provided a new option for what she wants to do with her life.”

Savannah and Quiciyah were two of the eighth-graders at WORX that day. They told us that it's not just about what you learn and do there but about the community.

Savannah said, “Everybody tries to include everyone, no matter what. Everyone cares about your opinion and what you think about a certain topic. They take that into consideration and add more. I love that about this place. I've had a lot of fun here and I've found a lot more things that I like about myself and about different topics.”

Quiciyah added, “I would say I haven't gotten judged here. People can just be themselves and not worry about what people say about them and just have fun.”

Students told us that at WORX, they are encouraged to try new things, they have fun, they know they need to behave, and they feel like people really care about them. That says a lot about Sara Jarrell's leadership as director.

Sara says, “For a lot of kids, their learning style is not conducive to being cooped up within four walls. For me and for a lot of students, I think it's necessary to get out into the fresh air. There's a lot of research that backs up the benefits of doing education outside.”



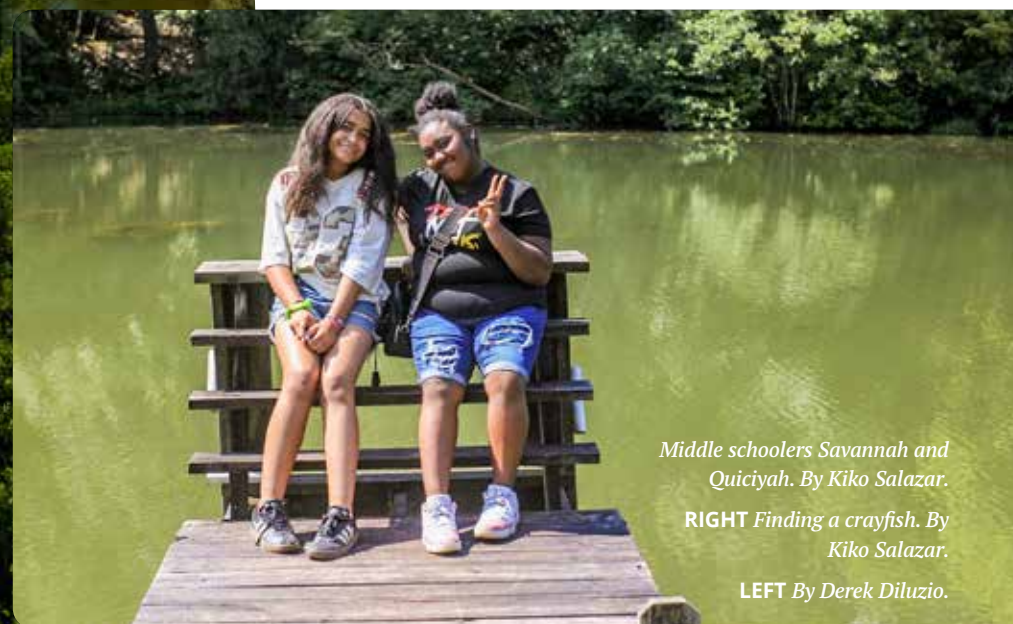
Jason McDougald. By Kiko Salazar.

The vision for the Fairview Community Forest came from Jason McDougald, who worked at Camp Woodson back when it was a base camp for kids in the juvenile corrections system who were doing outdoor service. The program helped them find a fresh start in life.

Even before the state ended that program, Jason reached out to Conserving Carolina to find a way to conserve the land—which wound up taking fourteen years!

These days, Jason is the executive director of Camp Grier, a nonprofit that includes The WORX Project. Camp Grier will also be managing the Fairview Community Forest.

Jason says, “I'm not one to easily give up, I guess. It's such a great little micro-watershed and it had such good memories. It just seemed like the land needed to serve kids and serve the community.”



Middle schoolers Savannah and Quiciyah. By Kiko Salazar.

RIGHT Finding a crayfish. By Kiko Salazar.

LEFT By Derek Diluzio.





TAKE THE HIKING CHALLENGE!

The new White Squirrel Hiking Challenge is here!

Discover some new trails and deepen your personal connection to conservation. If you complete all eight hikes shown here and you are a Conserving Carolina member, you will earn your White Squirrel patch.

We'd love to see photos of your adventures! Please send pics of your Hiking Challenge hikes to kiko@conservingcarolina.org or tag us on social media with [@conservingcarolina](https://www.instagram.com/conservingcarolina).



Scan the QR code or sign up online at: [CONSERVINGCAROLINA.ORG/CHALLENGE](https://www.conservingcarolina.org/challenge)

Explore Nature Your Own Way with the Flying Squirrel Challenge!

Nature is about more than hiking. We also offer the Flying Squirrel Outdoor Challenge, which you can adapt to your interests and abilities. Choose eight of the 17 possibilities. Waterfalls, greenways, birding, fishing, nature walks, volunteering — you choose! Nine options are accessible to people with disabilities, so it's open to everyone.



Scan the QR code or sign up online at: [CONSERVINGCAROLINA.ORG/FLYING-SQUIRREL](https://www.conservingcarolina.org/flying-squirrel)

White Squirrel Hiking Challenge Hikes

- 1 Bearwallow Mountain**
A Hiking Challenge classic with panoramic views, on a Conserving Carolina trail that is always worth revisiting.
- 2 Bell Park**
Check out this park that Conserving Carolina helped open just last year, near Saluda, offering hiking trails and a waterfall.
- 3 Little White Oak Mountain Trails**
You can hike or bike these new trails on land Conserving Carolina helped protect, right next to Polk County Middle School.
- 4 Ecusta Trail**
Enjoy the first 6 miles of this planned 19+ mile rail trail! You choose — on foot or by bike.
- 5 Rumbling Bald**
Hike through an extraordinary landscape popular for rock climbing, with large boulders and sheer cliffs.
- 6 Cat Gap**
Enjoy a loop in Pisgah National Forest near Brevard, crossing paths with beautiful rivers.
- 7 Mine Mountain & Laurel Ridge in DuPont**
Discover a less well-known section of DuPont on trails enjoyed by hikers, mountain bikers, and birders.
- 8 White Oak Mountain**
Experience part of Headwaters State Forest, just opened in 2018 with over 6,700 acres of new public land!

JOIN US AT UPCOMING EVENTS!



Go to our online calendar to see upcoming events where you can join us for nature walks, speaker series, films, forest bathing, volunteer days, and more!

Scan the QR code or sign up online at: [CONSERVINGCAROLINA.ORG/CALENDAR](https://www.conservingcarolina.org/calendar)



Rumbling Bald. By Kiko Salazar.



A LEGACY OF LAND & WATER

For generations, people have found peace and inspiration in these mountains, forests, and rivers. Their care has allowed us to experience the same beauty today.

By including Conserving Carolina in your will or estate plans, your legacy will help ensure these cherished landscapes endure for those who follow. To discuss how you want to leave a legacy, please reach out to Sierra Hoisington at 828-697-5777 ext. 220 or sierra@conservingcarolina.org.

If you let us know that Conserving Carolina is part of your estate plans, this helps us plan for the future and allows us to honor you as part of our Land Legacy League.

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY FOR YOU TO GIVE?

We gratefully accept donations in whatever form fits your sense of purpose, financial goals, and tax situation. Options can include:

- MONTHLY GIVING
- BUSINESS SPONSORSHIP
- GIFTS OF STOCK
- DONOR ADVISED FUNDS
- IRA DONATIONS
- ESTATE GIFTS

Scan the QR code or visit us online to learn more: [CONSERVINGCAROLINA.ORG/WAYS-TO-GIVE](https://www.conservingcarolina.org/ways-to-give)



Please contact our development director, Jenn Tutor, with any questions! Jenn can be reached at 828-697-5777 ext. 209 or jenn@conservingcarolina.org.

WISHING YOU MANY BLESSINGS THIS HOLIDAY SEASON!

In this special time of year, we hope that you and your loved ones enjoy the blessings of nature.

We are truly grateful for everything you do to protect places that give peace, joy, and wonder to so many.



Winter sunrise. By Kiko Salazar.

ABOVE By David Campbell.



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*FernLeaf Community
Charter School field trip
on Bearwallow Mountain.
By Kiko Salazar.*

