

A JOURNEYS

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL CONSERVANCY / SPRING · SUMMER 2022

— CONNECTIONS EDITION —



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Photo by Steven Yocom*

ON THE COVER

Sunlight breaks through the canopy just off the A.T. in the Nantahala National Forest, North Carolina. Within this haven of a cove forest, life is both lush and fragile. The loss of a single tree can have a cascading effect on the interconnected A.T. ecosystem of nature, people, and place.

Photo by Shira Zaid



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Every year, 6,000 volunteers dedicate more than 200,000 hours of sweat and hard work to preserve one of the greatest public lands projects in American history.

Our volunteers are the glue that holds the Appalachian Trail together. But volunteerism is not cost free, and every year brings new challenges to overcome. Our volunteers depend on your donations for: gear and equipment, training and skills development, and volunteer management and recruitment.

By donating today, you'll help ensure our volunteers have everything they need to preserve the Trail for another year of adventure.

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THE ATC HAS ALWAYS UNDERSTOOD THAT THE TREADWAY OF THE A.T. CANNOT EXIST WITHOUT THE LANDSCAPE THAT SURROUNDS IT AND THAT THE TRAIL IS NOT JUST A PLACE BUT A COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCE OF ALL WHO HAVE AND WILL SET FOOT ON IT.



The organization Hike for Mental Health provided a generous donation to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy at Trail Days, received by Sandi Marra, ATC President and CEO (fourth from left). The group organizes hikes to promote the benefits of hiking while funding mental health research and trail conservation.

CONNECTIONS

I RECENTLY RETURNED FROM THE Appalachian Trail Days Festival in Damascus, Virginia. Like so many things this spring, the weekend was filled with a sense of joy and renewal even though the acts themselves — seeing and hugging old friends and meeting face-to-face new acquaintances — would in the past have seemed routine. But these last few years have been anything but routine and I think it does the soul good to acknowledge the challenges we have been through. And to celebrate these small steps back towards normalcy.

It also struck me how the work that the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) has done these past few years has helped to keep people connected and engaged, even when they could not be physically together out on or along the Trail. Visitors from all over the world stopped by the ATC's booth, in front of the soon-to-be-open Damascus Trail Center, to let us know how excited they were to be back and engaged with the A.T. and its community. Some were previous hikers, reconnecting with their fellow hiking class members, while many were currently undertaking long sections or attempting to thru-hike the entire Trail. Our international visitors were excited to finally be able to travel to the U.S. for their adventure; many had been waiting two plus years to undertake their hike. And then there were all the other festival attendees, some new to the idea of the Trail, and some familiar and looking to connect with fellow dreamers. It seems as if the isolation we have gone through the last few years only strengthened people's desire to experience all the A.T. has to offer. And it is a testament to the ATC's work that we have been able to keep people connected virtually until we were once again able to come back in person.

The success of connecting people to the Trail also comes with its challenges. Since the pandemic, visitation to all our public lands, and especially to Trails, has grown exponentially. Increased numbers equals

increased impacts to all aspects of Trail use — from overcrowding at popular entry points, to significant wear and tear on the treadway, to (at best) a change to and (at worse) a degradation of the hiking experience. The ATC, its clubs, and our agency partners are all working to mitigate the impacts, but we recognize that this is a complicated process. Significant overuse will at times require not just mitigation but also, as author Michael Garrigan puts it in this issue's feature about Max Patch, a "rewilding" of the resource (page 34). The scope and breadth of this work will take both time and resources.

By having to restrict our human interactions over the last few years, our need for interconnectedness is greater than ever. The ATC has always understood that the treadway of the A.T. cannot exist without the landscape that surrounds it and that the Trail is not just a place but a collective experience of all who have and will set foot on it. To ensure it not only continues to exist, but also thrive and adapt, will require that we all continue to connect — not just to use and enjoy the Trail, but to steward it through these and future challenges. And the ATC will continue to do what it does best: connecting the Trail to the landscape and to the individual and offering each hiker, supporter, volunteer, and dreamer a path back to themselves and each other.

Sandra Marra / President & CEO

LETTERS

I JUST FINISHED READING the Winter edition of *A.T. Journeys* cover to cover. What a magnificent issue! I usually read it online, but I am so very happy I received the print edition — this one's a keeper. My sister did a thru-hike in 2014 (Trail name "Nubbins") at the age of 69, and I was one of her Trail angels. The love of the Trail, and the community of hikers, really shines in this issue. Thank you.

Leigh Sneed
Reston, Virginia

THE ENTIRE WINTER 2022 issue of *A.T. Journeys* is outstanding. I especially appreciated David Brill's forty-third-year recap of his thru-hike. David's book, *As Far as the Eye Can See*, is perhaps the best A.T. book ever written. Reading about his Trail family reunions brings a smile to my face just as much as when my daughter reminds me how our walk to Maine has forever changed her.

Cliff "Just Dad" King
Sarasota, Florida
As Far as the Eye Can See
is available from the University of
Tennessee Press utpress.org

I SO LOVED THE WINTER "Love" edition of your magazine. I especially loved the love story of Sandi Marra and Chris Brunton. When we were novice section hikers on the A.T., Chris shuttled us many times during our very early adventures and our induction to the A.T. His stories, history, and advice were invaluable to us. It was obvious that he loved and was so proud of Sandi and her contributions to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy. We loved doing "his" Roller Coaster section and are amazed at all the work and



dedication he has devoted to the Trail. We also stayed at the Blackburn Center. To read the story of him and Sandi — about their love for each other, their marriage there, and their love of the Trail — was so inspiring. Their love story mirrored the beginning of our love of the A.T.

Kate Hasse
Painesville, Ohio

I HAVE BEEN A MEMBER of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy for more than 50 years. I enjoyed the Winter 2022 issue more than any other I have read in all that time. In fact, I LOVED IT.

Charles B. Wahler
Colorado Springs, Colorado

THANK YOU FOR THE Winter 2022 edition of *A.T. Journeys*. Initially, I was ready to toss it in the recycle bin after I skimmed a story or two. To my surprise, each of the stories urged me to the next and had me reading almost all the "journeys." It was heartwarming to read each of the tales of love for the Trail and how the experiences led to personal transformations or finding companionship and love along the A.T. Each story was so unique and touching that I cannot identify which meant the most to me. The

Trail has always been intriguing to me, yet I have merely hiked several miles where the A.T. crosses through northern New Jersey at the Delaware Water Gap or High Point State Park. On a short hike, years ago, we met two sisters walking the Trail barefoot! What a treat to talk to them and hear a bit about their trek. The beauty of the A.T. is truly indescribable. I look forward to receiving future issues of the magazine. I know I will take great pleasure from the stories. Although I am a very youthful 74 years of age, there is little chance of a thru-hike for me. But I will continue to grab sections where I can and financially support the preservation of the Appalachian Trail.

Elaine A. Seckler
Millington, New Jersey

WHAT AN ABSOLUTELY inspiring edition of *A.T. Journeys* (Winter 2022). And it comes at a time when we all need a lift in our spirits. We all have our story about how we first encountered the A.T. and how it has led to a lifelong love affair with it and its people.

H. Jay Sexton
Gardners, Pennsylvania

A.T. Journeys welcomes your comments.

The editors are committed to providing balanced and objective perspectives. Not all letters received may be published. Letters may be edited for clarity and length.

Letters to the Editor
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Gift an Appalachian Trail Conservancy membership to protect the footpath, support the work of A.T. volunteers, enhance our understanding of conservation science, provide free and critical information to ever-growing audiences, and expand our landscape protection efforts to protect the Trail's awe-inspiring vistas and vital wildlife migration corridors.

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★
TRAILHEAD
HIGHLIGHTS / EVENTS



**ATC RECEIVES GRANT
FROM LEADER IN DIGITAL
HOSPITALITY**

THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL Conservancy (ATC) is proud to announce it is the recipient of a \$400,000 grant from the Olo for Good Fund, a Donor Advised Fund of Tides Foundation. This grant will greatly assist the ATC in its mission to protect, manage, and advocate for the Appalachian Trail and its surrounding landscape.

The ATC is one of nine organizations selected for funding from the Olo for Good Fund, which was created in 2021 by Olo, a leading open SaaS platform for restaurants, as a part of their Pledge 1% commitment. Olo provides digital ordering and delivery programs that connect restaurant brands to the on-demand world.

“The Appalachian Trail Conservancy is honored to receive this extraordinary gift from Olo for Good,” says Sandra Marra, president and CEO of the ATC. “This gift will help protect one of the most biodiverse areas of our country that is enjoyed by millions of people from across the globe each year.”

“Olo is immensely proud to support the Appalachian Trail Conservancy,” says Nithya Das, chief operations officer and chief legal officer at Olo, as well as one of the Olo For Good executive sponsors. “The ATC’s commitment to preserving the natural environment aligns with our core values as a company, especially the environment so close to where many of our employees live and work.”

The ATC is proud to add Olo to our network of nationally renowned corporate partners.

Advancement Updates

**ATC BOARD ELECTION AND
MEMBERSHIP MEETING**

NOMINATIONS ARE CURRENTLY being accepted for positions on the Appalachian Trail Conservancy’s (ATC’s) Board of Directors. The deadline to submit a nomination is July 15. Under the ATC’s bylaws, the elected leadership serves staggered three-year terms, with one-third of the current seventeen board positions coming open each year. The current slate of nominees will be announced on the ATC’s website in late summer. It will then be approved by the full board and voted on by the ATC’s membership at the annual meeting this fall.

For more information about the board election, visit: appalachiantrail.org/board2022. The annual meeting date and time will be announced on the ATC’s homepage: appalachiantrail.org.

A.T. - Shenandoah National Park, Virginia. Photo by Raymond Salami III



UPDATE FROM THE HILL

PROTECTING, MANAGING, AND ADVOCATING FOR THE APPALACHIAN National Scenic Trail means the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) needs to conserve as well as steward lands and Trail values as best we can. Two pieces of legislation championed by A.T. Members of Congress provide an excellent example of how this work is done.

On the land protection side, the Highlands Conservation Reauthorization Act (H.R. 2793 and S. 753), led by Representative Sean Patrick Maloney (New York) and Senator Chris Murphy (Connecticut), would improve and recommit to an important sub-program within the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). The Highlands region is among the most densely populated in the United States, with limited public lands to recreate on. This region spanning Connecticut, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania provides drinking water for millions of people. With the A.T. skirting and winding through the Highlands region, lands protected with Highlands Act funds can have co-benefits for the A.T. and its users. This bill is ripe for final passage in both the House and Senate.

The Modernizing Access to Our Public Land (MAPLand) Act (H.R. 3113 and S. 904) has been signed into law as of this June. This Act, written by Senators Joe Manchin, Angus King, Susan Collins, and others, will re-shape how the Trail's various federal land managers share information by modernizing the digitization of records and supporting the survey of acquired tracts. Such advancements would allow co-managers to better protect the A.T. from boundary encroachments, make geographic information system (GIS) data publicly accessible, and help Trail users navigate access to the land they are on.

These pieces of legislation will advance government policies that can ultimately help strengthen the A.T. — through recreation opportunities and access for visitors near and far, landscape resiliency against climate change and natural disasters, and the ecological integrity of the Trail's natural resources — so that the Trail may continue to support human and natural communities alike.

The Trail doesn't protect itself, and it's the responsibility of all who care for it to pitch in. This is why the ATC will continue to advocate for and shape legislation such as these that impact our public lands.



CREATE YOUR LEGACY WITH THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL

Planned Giving is an easy and flexible way to meet your philanthropic goals while protecting the Trail you love. Whatever your stage in life, your financial circumstances and your charitable goals, let us show you how to make a gift that benefits you and your loved ones as well as the Appalachian Trail.

Contact: Lisa Zaid / Vice President of Advancement / lzaid@appalachiantrail.org

A.T. CONNECTICUT — PHOTO BY ALLISON DIVERDE

RETURNING TO DAMASCUS FOR TRAIL DAYS

THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL CONSERVANCY (ATC) WAS EXCITED TO HELP welcome more than 20,000 hiking and outdoor enthusiasts to Damascus, Virginia, for Trail Days on May 13-15, 2022. For the past three decades, this small town in southwestern Virginia has ballooned for one weekend each spring with thousands of hikers and other visitors. This year, the lawn of the new Damascus Trail Center, to be opened later this summer, provided the setting for attendees to learn about the work of the ATC and other local and nonprofit organizations. If you missed this year's festivities, it is not too soon to begin planning to attend next year. Trail Days 2023 is scheduled for May 19-21.



Corporate partner BearVault hosted a live demo on how to properly store food using a bear canister while on the Appalachian Trail. Increased bear activity has been reported recently in several A.T. states, from North Carolina to Massachusetts.



Clockwise from left: Visitors to the ATC booth were invited to share memorable moments along the Trail; The lawn outside the new Damascus Trail Center, opening later this summer, provided a gathering spot for the ATC and other local partners; Thanks in part to Trail Days, the town of Damascus, Virginia, has become an inseparable part of the A.T.'s identity; Raffles held throughout the three days equipped lucky attendees with free backpacking gear provided by the ATC's generous donors and corporate partners.

APPALACHIAN FOCUS

**URBAN AND RURAL
PERSPECTIVES**

THE NEW YORK CITY SKYLINE FROM the A.T. on Bear Mountain provides an excellent perspective on the Trail's often direct connection between urban and rural landscapes along the eastern U.S. The Trail is only about 40 miles from one of the most bustling cities in the country, yet its proximity allows visitors access to vast mountain views. This location's long association with the A.T. dates back to 1923, when the first section of the Trail opened to the public there. Alongside the iconic white blaze, the resting spot in this scene signifies recent A.T. rehabilitation projects, including the creation of a wheelchair-accessible section at its summit.

Photo by Julian Diamond

Julian Diamond is a full-time landscape photographer based in New York's Hudson Valley, where he was born and raised. juliandiamondphotography.com





Michele "Loon" and Dan "Griswold" Coleman complete their section-hike at Katahdin, Maine.

SOMETHING TO BE SAVORED

■ BY MICHELE COLEMAN

MY HUSBAND AND I FINISHED HIKING the Appalachian Trail on August 31, 2012. It was a long ordeal that included ten years of section hiking. It also satisfied a dream that I had since my university days when an old boyfriend had told me about the adventure he had started with his brother. I don't know if he ever finished the A.T. as he wanted to take his time and see some of the sites along the way, while his brother just wanted to do miles. That attitude meant nothing to me at the time, but I knew that I wanted to hike the Trail someday. My then-future husband and I bought our external frame Coleman backpacks in 1983 and hoped that we could start backpacking soon.

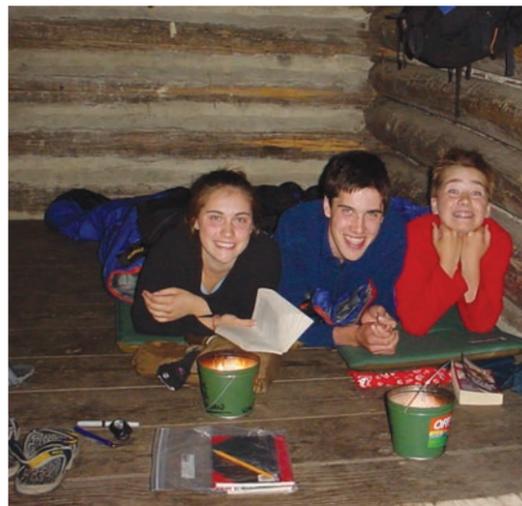
But life got in the way.

WE FOUND, OVER THE YEARS, THAT SECTION HIKING WAS LIKE KNOWING THERE WAS A GALLON OF ICE CREAM IN THE FREEZER BUT ONLY ALLOWING YOURSELF TO HAVE A FEW SCOOPS AT A TIME. EACH SCOOP OR SECTION WAS SAVORED.

We finished graduate school, moved to Canada for jobs, and started a family. We were very busy, but my dream of this A.T. hike kept me going when it seemed like everything I did was for someone else. It gave me hope. It gave me a challenge. We hiked a lot with the kids, starting when most of them were only a month old. We completed a few backpacking training hikes with them starting when the youngest was four. But we soon realized that our three-to-five-kilometer days were not A.T. worthy.

We continued to train the kids and work out our gear kinks. The first A.T. hike was scheduled in 2001 with the kids, who were then ten, twelve, and fourteen. The days were long, the mileage short, the packs heavy with Gameboys, spare batteries, Skittles, and playing cards. The hiking monotony was overbearing for the kids. The goal was to hike far enough away from them to not hear the grumbling but close enough to make sure they wouldn't go AWOL. We tried to make it goal orientated by knocking off a state with each trip. The tough trip was three years later, when we did 360 miles through New Jersey, New York, Massachusetts, and Vermont. They moaned because they never saw other families hiking, and, for the one that they did see, the kids looked equally miserable.

We found, over the years, that section hiking was like knowing there was a gallon of ice cream in the freezer but only allowing yourself to have a few scoops at a time. Each scoop or section was savored. Did I say savor? There was the one year it rained every day for seventeen days. There was the next year when we



From left: Julia, Nick, and Sam Coleman enjoy an afternoon at one of the A.T.'s iconic shelters.

caught five minutes of rain the first day and then a half day of rain seventeen days later. There was the food plan, which sounded wonderful when planning but, after the fourth cycle of Mexican rice, sun-dried tomato pesto, chickpea cashew curry, chili, and re-fried beans with salsa and cheese, everything tasted the same. But that is not what is remembered.

The kids talk about the time we met the young couple who wished them Happy Canada Day and gave them sparklers to use when they got off the Trail. And

the young hiker who named our youngest "Sassafras" in New Jersey and made him feel like he was a member of the hiking community. We marvel about the "Trail angel" in Harriman State Park, who noted my husband and me in throws of indecision about what to do about our daughter "Twisted Sister's" "sprained ankle," which was really just a "bad attitude" sprain. The solution was to give the kids cold Cokes and shuttle my husband back to our van so that we could pull off the Trail for a few days. The miserable, wet Vermont section was salvaged by a woman who set up a BBQ at a road crossing and served hot dogs and watermelon.

We dragged each child along until they were eighteen and responsible enough to stay home on their own. We thought they would later talk about the hiking trips as Mommy Dearest kind of events. Our last child left home in 2008 and we started to experience the Trail in new ways; longer hiking days, more miles completed each trip, and less whining. Without children, hiking became a much different experience; but I sometimes missed the added antics that youth could provide.

After the children had left us, the memories were different. Like the chance introduction to some fellow Canadians in Hot Springs, North Carolina with whom we found the two degrees of separation to someone we had known for years. We experienced the pride of hiking with a grandfather taking his oldest grandson out for his first long trip, the respect of hiking with young men just back from tours of duty and using the Trail to decompress. We met the typical recent graduates, people between careers, and retirees. We were affected by stories about ordinary people doing something extraordinary — people in their 70s and 80s — still living life and chasing their dreams to hike the Trail.

The A.T. was not just chestnut oak, oak, American chestnut, sassafras, uphill, and downhill. It was people. People from all over the world who come to hike a trail meant for all caliber of hikers. A trail set up so that you could pick it up almost anywhere and get off when you ran out of time, food, or had an injury. A trail with a system of mail drop locations and post offices for food and gear drops. A trail with a network of anonymous Trail angels who managed something as innocuous as a garbage can at a road crossing or jugs of water when springs were infrequent or dry. Then there were others who helped out by picking up hitch hikers — five grubby people who just realized that they had left their stove at the last shelter — thirteen miles back.

It was with mixed emotions that we finished the

Trail. The plan was to knock off 650 miles by filling in all the uncompleted pieces; summit Springer, swing back up to summit Katahdin and then be done with the A.T. As I stood on the top of Katahdin, surveying the view from the mountain that I had only ever seen from a distance for twenty-five years, watching people pose and propose while propped on that familiar Katahdin sign, I tried to collect my emotions about how I had finished with this goal. But that's not the thought that came to mind.

I wasn't finishing the Trail, I was just starting it. I wanted to hike it again but in less than a ten-year span. I wanted to hike it, not in pieces by state (easiest to hardest), but as a chain from beginning to end.

"Griswold and Loon" will be back. The Trail waited for me the first time, and now that we have retired, I know it will welcome me back the next time. I feel a need to re-hike it but I also feel that great need to give back to the Trail and the incredible people who make it possible.

Last summer, we took our granddaughters on their first backpacking trip. I can now envision taking them on the Appalachian Trail. . . another generation.

MICHELE AND DAN COLEMAN

Michele and Dan Coleman have been supporting the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) for more than two decades. The Colemans reside in New Brunswick, Canada, but they can often be found enjoying long distance hiking trails like the Appalachian Trail and the Pacific Crest Trail.

"The Trail gave me peace and a place to gain confidence in my worth and my values," says Michele, explaining her desire to give back. "It made me strong. The Trail needs to be there to allow others to have the opportunity to find peace with themselves and in this world."

The Colemans' desire to make the world "a better place in a small way" is exemplified through their recent generous support of an Atlantic salmon habitat restoration project, led by the ATC in Maine. The ATC is currently working to aid in the return of federally endangered Atlantic salmon to Maine's Henderson Brook. By removing a culvert and replacing it with a seventy-five-foot bridge, the ATC will eliminate the last remaining barrier to native fish passage within Henderson Brook. Additionally, fifty feet of streambed is being restored, which will reestablish natural stream hydrology and facilitate fish passage. Michele and Dan's support is a crucial part of the success of this project.



SUITE OF LIFE

THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL IS A THROUGH-LINE FOR HIKERS and the backbone to a vast, complex, and fragile ecosystem that needs continuous care to remain connected, intact, and healthy. The Science and Stewardship team at the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) works constantly to monitor and manage the health of these lands and forests by identifying threats and working to curb them. This work is crucial to maintain both the integrity of the A.T. landscape's ecology and the Trail experience itself. One significant peril is the emerald ash borer, a beetle that is decimating many species of ash trees, which are integral to the green tunnel so many people know and love.

■ BY MARINA RICHIE

A STATELY ASH TREE STANDS TALL IN A PROTECTED GROVE NEAR SPIVEY GAP, NORTH CAROLINA. *Photo by Chris Gallaway/Horizonline Pictures*



WHILE EVERY ASH IS IMPORTANT,
THE TREES THAT DWELL
AMONG A THRIVING FOREST
COMMUNITY ARE ENTWINED
WITH A SUITE OF LIFE — FROM
PYGMY SALAMANDERS HUNTING
INSECTS UP MOSS-CLOAKED
TREE TRUNKS TO BLACK BEAR
MOTHERS RAISING CUBS.



FROM LEFT: INJECTING A SYSTEMIC INSECTICIDE INTO A HEALTHY TREE IN ADVANCE OF ATTACKS FROM DEVASTATING EMERALD ASH BORERS. *Photo by Chris Gallaway/Horizonline Pictures;* THE SHADY FOREST FLOOR NEAR THE A.T. AT WAYAH GAP AND SILER BALD IN THE NANTAHALA NATIONAL FOREST. *Photo by Shira Zaid*

Crouched among ferns by a sentinel white ash, Matt Drury from the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) and Josh Kelly from MountainTrue are laser-focused on their task. MountainTrue is a nonprofit dedicated to the conservation of forests and waters in the southern Blue Ridge Mountains. Kelly serves as the group's public lands biologist. Drury is ATC's associate director of science and stewardship, out of Asheville, North Carolina. The two are professional partners who share a passion for their home forests.

Above Drury and Kelly, a canopy of buckeye, sugar maple, basswood, yellow birch, and ash pattern the sky. A fluting song of a wood thrush filters through the leaf-struck sunlight. The understory brims with shade-loving plants, from the medicinal blue cohosh to mayapples. Within this haven of a Tennessee cove forest just off the A.T., life is both lush and fragile. Today Drury and Kelly are injecting systemic insecticides into a healthy tree in advance of attacks from devastating emerald ash borers. Their life-saving efforts are part of the largest landscape-level project aimed at

preventing ash tree extinction in the Appalachian Mountains. What makes the A.T. ash project particularly ambitious is the focus on backcountry trees — far more difficult than injecting chemicals in ash near homes, on city streets and in parks, where most treatments take place.

While every ash is important, the trees that dwell among a thriving forest community are entwined with a suite of life — from pygmy salamanders hunting insects up moss-cloaked tree trunks to black bear mothers raising cubs. This ecosystem reaches beyond the A.T. footpath and its corridor. Saving ash trees is an essential component to the carefully orchestrated work to preserve the delicate, natural landscape that spans the eastern U.S.

Since 2016, the ATC and its partners have treated nearly 1,200 white ash trees surrounding the A.T., with more than 900 in the Southeast and 240 in New England. The work is costly, labor-intensive, and requires going back to dose their patients every three years and likely over the next few decades. So far, almost all those trees remain alive.

“ASH TREE PROTECTION IS ONE PIECE OF THE LARGER PUZZLE. THE SCALE AND SCOPE OF RESOURCE PROTECTION IS EQUALLY IMPORTANT, AND THE A.T. LANDSCAPE IS OF THE RIGHT SCALE FOR ADDRESSING FOREST-LEVEL THREATS.”

“Ash tree protection is one piece of the larger puzzle,” says the ATC’s Marian Orlousky, director of science and stewardship. “When paired with land protection and other resource restoration measures, we can address threats to biodiversity and encourage greater ecological resilience in the natural community. The scale and scope of resource protection is equally important, and the A.T. landscape is of the right scale for addressing forest-level threats.” She points to the importance of the Trail’s 2,194-mile-long corridor affording plant and animal populations opportunities to adapt and move north in latitude or up in elevation as habitats are altered by climate change. The more encompassing the corridor and the better connected it is to other natural landscapes, the better for genetic diversity and resilience as native species confront a barrage of threats, including invasive plants and pests introduced from other continents.

THE LETHAL EMERALD ASH BORER

Time is short when dealing with the deadly efficient emerald ash borer. A flashy metallic beetle a bit larger than a cooked grain of rice, the insect likely entered North America in the 1990s as an accidental stowaway within solid wood packing boxes shipped from East Asia. Adults hatched and got to work finding the genus *Fraxinus* (ash) as a host for laying eggs on the bark. Back in their native habitats, the borers are kept in check by predators, but not so here where trees did not

evolve with this newcomer. It wasn’t until 2002 that foresters noticed ash trees dying near Detroit, Michigan, with what would become telltale signs — a death from the top down and tall trees breaking in the middle.

Now, hundreds of millions of ash trees across North America have succumbed to the beetles. Within two to three years after the larvae hatch and bore into the cambium below the bark, their feeding galleries cut off a tree’s transport system for water and nutrients. Every ash tree with a trunk bigger than your pinky finger is a potential target.

ASH TREES IN THE WEB OF LIFE

Five of the sixteen species of ash in North America are at highest risk of going extinct and among them are the most dominant kinds — white, green, and black ash. The potential destruction could mount to the loss of eight billion trees and a cascade of unforeseen consequences within ecosystems. Ash trees range across sixty percent of the U.S. — mostly on the eastern half of the continent.

Along the A.T., primarily white ash and some green ash compose a vital three-to-five percent of shady forests. Hundreds of species of insects and spiders interact with ash and forty-four other species depend on them exclusively for survival. Wood frog tadpoles hatching in vernal pools grow larger, faster, and survive better when the leaves that fall into the water are from green ash. The trees host caterpillars



FROM TOP: MOUNTAINTRUE ECOLOGIST BOB GALE HAMMERS IN AN ARBOR PLUG IN PREPARATION FOR INSECTICIDE TREATMENT. *Photo by Matt Drury.* THE ATC’S MATT DRURY AND PARTNERS FROM MOUNTAINTRUE (JOSH KELLY) AND HEMLOCK RESTORATION INITIATIVE (THOM GREEN) TREAT AN ASH TREE AT SPIVEY GAP. *Photo by Chris Gallaway/Horizonline Pictures*





FROM LEFT: A DEAD ASH TREE NEAR THE A.T. IN NORTH CAROLINA; JOSH KELLY OF MOUNTAINTRUE MEASURES AN ASH TREE TO CALCULATE THE PROPER DOSAGE OF INSECTICIDE. *Photos by Chris Gallaway/Horizonline Pictures*; EMERALD ASH BEETLES BORE INTO THE CAMBIUM BELOW THE BARK, CUTTING OFF A TREE'S TRANSPORT SYSTEM FOR WATER AND NUTRIENTS. *Photo by Matt Drury*

so specialized to feed on them that some of the names contain the word “ash,” like the great ash sphinx moth. Songbirds like the scarlet tanager glean ash leaves for miniscule insects high up in the lofty tree canopy.

FIELD DAY: CHOOSING TREES

I listened to the whistled chirruping of a scarlet tanager on a June solstice day in 2019 within that magical cove forest just off the Trail. I'd followed every detail as the team of Drury, Kelly, Bob Gale (ecologist and public lands director of Mountain-True), and intern Olivia Votava measured, recorded, prepared, and injected a dozen trees, all with diameters greater than twenty inches. As chemicals slowly entered drilled holes, I was reminded of chemotherapy that kills good and bad cells alike but can make the pivotal difference in survival. With limited supplies of the costly concoction, Drury and Kelly often face agonizing choices. Which tree to save? Which tree to leave? Drury prioritizes choosing ash along the A.T. that are within one-and-a-half times tree height of the Trail (white ash grow about fifty-to-eighty feet tall). He considers the structural integrity, lean of trees, and position within the forest canopy. His intent is to lessen the number of hazard trees hikers might encounter as the ash borer moves through, and to assure hikers

can appreciate the beauty of the living trees.

Some treated trees with their diamond-shaped, corduroy gray bark even display the white A.T. blaze. I like to think hikers a century from now will place a hand on one of those blazes and celebrate the existence of a tree that came so close to extinction. Ash rely on wind pollination to send their clusters of oar-shaped samsara (wing) seeds into surrounding forests to plant hope for the future. Since the A.T. follows side slopes and ridges, the trees in these sections are well positioned for seeds to glide far into nearby forests.

The borers move two ways. The number one culprit for spread is transporting firewood containing the larvae that hatch to fly with an uncanny ability to detect nearby ash and lay their eggs. Educating people not to transport firewood away from home is key to prevention efforts. Once established, individual beetles can fly a half mile or so from tree to tree. The borers can advance about ten to fifteen miles per year and don't tend to double back. This trajectory helped Drury select twelve A.T. sites in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia.

Kelly had returned to the same cove in 2021 to check on the trees within this 600-acre Moffett Laurel Botanical Area in the Cherokee National Forest. The borer had arrived, and the contrast could not have been starker. Already ninety percent of the unprotected ash had died, while at least ninety-five percent of those

THE MORE INTACT THE FORESTED WILDS,
THE RICHER THE REFUGE FOR PEOPLE AND
FOR THE NATIVE FLORA AND FAUNA OF THE
APPALACHIAN MOUNTAINS.

treated looked healthy. The trees are slated for their second injections this summer. “What we are doing is working,” Kelly says. “The ash trees that remain will provide the genetic pool for reestablishment.”

Among that lucky dozen safeguarded from the borer in the special cove is a thirty-nine-inch diameter wonder, the second largest ash of all treated so far under Drury and Kelly’s leadership. It took half of a \$500 bottle to infuse this one tree. Impulsively, Drury gave the ash a name: the “Dave Richie tree” in honor of my dad who served as the A.T. project manager for the National Park Service in the 1970s and 80s, an era pivotal to securing a protected trail corridor from Georgia to Maine.

VOLUNTEER POWER

Another key quality that ups the odds for beating the borer is the people who are stepping up. The A.T. has long inspired volunteers to conserve, restore, and maintain the Trail and surrounding lands. One of those is Jim Pelletier of the Appalachian Mountain Club in Massachusetts, who for the past two decades has shared his field knowledge of the natural world coupled with trail-building and maintenance skills. Pelletier knows ash trees as companions to red and sugar maple, oaks, and black cherry. While the rapid loss is disheartening, he sees through the lens of the curious naturalist. Yes, he’s worried about the fate of delicate rare plants wedded to shade and how they

will fare with sudden sunlight as the ash trees lose their wide umbrellas of leaves, break, and then fall. But he also revels in the many woodpeckers moving in to feast on the borers. “It seems to me there’s a lot out there we don’t know and our world is full of surprises . . . so it’s best we keep learning,” Pelletier says.

As the club’s natural resource coordinator, Pelletier helps to identify the best places to protect individual ash trees along the Trail in the Berkshires of western Massachusetts. He’s motivated to give back to the Trail that offers an accessible haven for people to reflect and find renewal in wild nature. “With all that’s going on in our world, our country, and our personal and work worlds, I think having this refuge is more important than ever,” he says.

The more intact the forested wilds, the richer the refuge for people and for the native flora and fauna of the Appalachian Mountains. The sites in Massachusetts selected for ash tree treatment are known for high biodiversity and presence of species of special concern. At one of the locations, the ATC has prioritized the removal of invasive barberry over 100 acres to stop the non-native shrub from outcompeting shade-loving plants. “We conducted restoration work at the site for six years until we missed one because of COVID-19, only to return and find the ash had begun to show signs of damage due to the ash borer,” Marian Orlousky says. They moved in quickly to treat the remaining healthy ash trees in 2021 and await the outcomes with cautious



FROM TOP: SONGBIRDS LIKE THE SCARLET TANAGER FIND REFUGE AND SUSTENANCE IN THE LOFTY TREE CANOPY. *Photo by Peter Brannon*; A HEALTHY FOREST SUPPORTS NATIVE FLORA AND FAUNA LIKE RED COLUMBINE AND RED EFT SALAMANDERS. *Photos by Raymond Salani III*



NO ONE INVOLVED KNOWS WHAT'S IN STORE
ULTIMATELY, BUT WHAT THEY DO KNOW IS HOW IT
FEELS TO GAZE UP INTO A LIVING ASH TREE AS WINDS
LIFT CLUSTERS OF WINGED SEEDS AND SEND THEM
SPINNING INTO A WAITING FOREST.

optimism. “Even if we eventually lose the ash from this site, slowing the loss over time will help maintain the canopy structure, reduce the influx of invasive species, and help protect the understory community,” she says.

BUILDING RESISTANCE

While the outlook for ash is still dire, there is encouraging news. In 2020, an international team of scientists identified the genes in ash trees that are key to fighting off the ash borer and will inform efforts to grow resistant trees. Researchers also work to locate ash trees with natural defenses that keep them alive longer than others. In 2021, they began planting trees in nurseries to compare those with genetics giving the trees some ability to kill off the attacking larvae and those with none. Their goal is to cultivate more trees with some resistance.

Back on the A.T., Paul Merten, an entomologist with the U.S. Forest Service out of Asheville, North Carolina, joins Josh Kelly and Matt Drury. Merten started releasing parasitoid wasps in 2016 on sections of the A.T. closest to Asheville. The tiny stingless wasps from Asia are specialists that prey on the larvae or eggs of ash borers. “Trying a biocontrol is the Hail Mary pass in the fourth quarter. It’s do or die,” says Marten.

Some sites on the A.T. with at least twenty-five percent forest coverage of ash and contiguous forests

met Merten’s protocol for releasing the wasps. The first site he found when hiking uphill on the A.T. was staggering in its richness of ash — forty percent of the forest. When Merten trapped an ash borer, he was ready to bring in the wasps that shipped live to his office from labs run by the APHIS (Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. His first box contained 1,200 of the wasps and three different species. He continued to set more of the borer predators free as the wasps arrived in weekly batches that summer of 2016. “The web of biology is convoluted,” he says. “When you insert a new organism into an ecosystem there is a lot of shock and things we cannot measure or perceive.”

Merten released wasps every two years at four sites from 2016 to 2019, making sure those areas do not overlap with those containing treated ash. Now, he monitors for their presence — setting up traps that look like yellow party bowls for ice cream. There are introduced parasitoid wasps showing up in the traps, and that’s good news. Biocontrol takes time and patience for results.

THE LONG VIEW

From a golden eagle’s view tracing the Appalachians from Georgia to Maine, the ash tree treatments of the Southeast and in Massachusetts might seem too few and far between. However, the sites are



THE ICONIC A.T. WHITE BLAZE ON A TREE IN THE NANTAHALA NATIONAL FOREST,
NORTH CAROLINA. *Photo by Shira Zaid*

positioned on the continuum of the Appalachian Mountains and that’s significant, despite the gaps. The borer is now found along the Trail in all states. Close to the ATC’s headquarters in Harpers Ferry National Park, there were 18,500 live ash trees in 2013 and only 7,700 in 2021. Those tragic losses do not diminish the remarkable achievements in Georgia, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Massachusetts, and their promise for staving off regional extinctions.

Drury is thrilled every time he comes back on a three-year rotation. He’s coming to know individual trees like old friends. “South of Max Patch, we treated 250 trees and all but two survived,” he says. “I’m driven to roll the dice on the unknown and be optimistic about the outcome.”

No one involved knows what’s in store ultimately, but what they do know is how it feels to gaze up into a living ash tree as winds lift clusters of winged seeds and send them spinning into a waiting forest. Thanks to every champion of the A.T. from inception

to now, we can celebrate the possibility for large-scale conservation and renewal of forests and the human spirit.

A.T. hikers know what it is to persist in wind, mosquitos, mud, snow, endless uphills, and punishing heat, only to revel all the more in every beauty spot along the way. So it is with the ash tree protectors who marvel at each tree saved like another summit reached. The view could not be finer.

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Marina Richie is the author of Halcyon Journey: In Search of the Belted Kingfisher (Oregon State University Press, 2022), the first book to feature a beloved bird of North America’s waterways, including streams, rivers, ponds, and lakes along the Appalachian Trail.
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THE REWILDING OF MAX PATCH

■ BY MICHAEL GARRIGAN



*“IN TIME
STRONG GREEN GROWTH
WILL RISE HERE
TREES BACK TO LIFE
NATIVE FLOWERS
PUSHING THE FRAGRANCE
OF HOPE THE PROMISE OF
RESURRECTION”*

- bell hooks

WE ARE DRAWN TO PLACES THAT PULL US FROM OUR small worlds and open us to the expansive landscapes of intricate life surrounding us — places that bury themselves deep into our consciousness, that we can never forget, that push us to look at the world in a new way, that reorient our sense of being. We are drawn to environments that jar us out of our everyday routines and force us to fall into earth’s rhythms and topographies, where we cease to be just flesh and bone and become something more than what we’ve always been, where we become intimately connected with the world around us.

PREVIOUS PAGE: THE EXPANSIVE VIEW OF MAX PATCH’S GRASSY BALD IN NORTH CAROLINA/TENNESSEE. *Photo by Abigail Ridaught*; A MEDITATIVE SUNSET ALONG THE TRAIL ON MAX PATCH. *Photo by Steven Yocom*

Max Patch, an expansive, grassy bald in the Appalachian Mountains bordering North Carolina and Tennessee, is one of those places. Its wide-open stretch of grasses is a blunt bareness exposing the mountain's skin and offering anyone who visits a long view of the Pisgah and Cherokee National Forests. It's too warm here for this 4,629-foot summit to be alpine, so it stays a pocket of grass shouldered by forests. When wind lifts from the valley and crawls up the mountain, the horizon sways and moves and the edges of the world blur into a sway and swell of tall grass, Appalachian cottontails, and wildflowers.

Max Patch has long been a popular destination for hikers and view seekers, but that popularity has brought misuse and destruction of critical habitat. Thanks to the dedication and collaboration of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), the Carolina Mountain Club (CMC), and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), it is now undergoing a variety of restoration efforts that favor native flora and fauna while keeping it open and accessible to hikers and visitors.

A CULTURAL BALD

Max Patch is a cultural bald, a relic of our agricultural past that is now being transformed into a shared space for plants, animals, and humans. Endless mountains stretch from every viewpoint, a continuous horizon of ridges and ravines — Buckeye Ridge to the northeast, Poor Ridge to the northwest, Cold Springs drainage to the southeast, and Gulf Creek watershed to the southwest. Max Patch offers a 360-degree view of public land and many peaks including the dramatic Great Smoky Mountains National Park. In the morning, clouds cling to the foothills, fading into a smoky haze as the sun climbs. At night, after the area closes to campers and visitors, the sky grows luminous with stars. The Milky Way is dense and long, stretching across Orion's belt in the south, north towards the elbows of Cassiopeia. When you are standing on Max Patch you are standing on top of the Appalachian Mountains, able to lose yourself within its topography and geology.

Every landscape has a history and a story to tell and is inevitably shaped by those who live near it and use it. Each Appalachian bald is unique in its

being and creation. Some balds are of natural origin, others have been created for agriculture. These days, the balds are actively maintained as some of the ecological mechanisms that kept them open have been interrupted. Remnants of the last ice age, when a colder climate drove a climatic treeline in the southern Appalachians, many of these grassy balds were used for grazing areas by prehistoric megafauna until their extinction. More recently, elk and bison found their way up to these high points. When they were hunted to near extinction, many balds reverted to their original forested state; however, Max Patch was clearcut for lumber and to graze cattle and is maintained as a grassy bald today.

Cattle and sheep grazed here back in the 1800s before it became an area that barnstorming pilots used occasionally in the early 1900s. The Forest Service acquired Max Patch in 1981 in order to route the Appalachian Trail off of Max Patch Road and into the woods, which shaped it into the place it is now — a hiking destination. Max Patch has been molded and shaped by people and animals according to their needs and pursuits for hundreds of years — a place so useful and beautiful is bound to be very popular/well-loved. Yet it remains in remarkable condition.

Over the past few years, Max Patch has become incredibly popular for hikers and campers who are looking for easily accessible, expansive views and the exulting feeling of being above the valleys and among the ridges. With the advent of the internet, Max Patch was discovered as a beautiful, easily accessible destination and use began to rise. Due to this increasing use and issues it caused, in 2017 the ATC organized a planning effort using the Interagency Visitor Management Council's planning framework in cooperation with the CMC and Pisgah and Cherokee National Forests. Work to mitigate increasing camping on the summit had already started when, during the pandemic, the amount of people camping and using the area reached a breaking point. In 2020, a drone photo captured over a hundred tents and human debris scattered across the bald. With overuse came the destruction of habitat, human waste, and trash scattered where there should be tall grass and wildflowers. It looked like Max Patch was being loved to death. A Forest

A.T. BLAZES ARE IN PLACE TO HELP VISITORS NAVIGATE THE NARROW FOOTPATH ON MAX PATCH, AND TO PROTECT THE BALD. *Photo by Sarah Jones Decker*





WE VENTURE INTO NATURE BECAUSE WE WANT TO EXPERIENCE A VIBRANT WORLD SHAPED BY RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ITS PLANTS AND ANIMALS. THE CONSERVATION EFFORTS TO REWILD MAX PATCH ARE GUIDING IT INTO AN ECOLOGICALLY FUNCTIONAL BALD THAT REFLECTS OUR CHANGING UNDERSTANDING AND RELATIONSHIP TO A LANDSCAPE.

Supervisor's Closure Order began in July 2021, which limited Max Patch to a day use area for hikers in an effort to mitigate the user impacts. Max Patch's popularity persists and much is being done to restore it to a more pristine state.

A REBUILDING

It's one thing to mitigate user impact, it's another to steward a heavily used natural area into a rewilding. In response to its needs, the ATC, along with the CMC and USFS, have teamed up in an effort to find a balance between ecological functionality and the visitor experience. These organizations are doing incredible work to usher Max Patch into a habitat that works for all users: humans, pollinators, plants, animals, and birds. Instead of keeping Max Patch as a manicured terrain that only offers trampled paths and striking views for hikers, they are working and collaborating in order to let it grow into a biologically diverse ecosystem that supports native species and managed public use.

The CMC works hard to maintain roughly 94 miles of the A.T., including the Max Patch, along the border of North Carolina and Tennessee. With help from the USFS and the ATC, they launched a Trail Ambassadors Program in 2019 that helps educate users about and monitor Max Patch. These volunteers are trained by the club and go to the Trail at

peak user times. They collect data on user trends at Max Patch and help educate visitors on Leave No Trace ethics. It is through programs like these that we become better stewards and users of the A.T. and its surrounding ecosystems.

Along with the Trail Ambassadors Program, CMC has installed new signage along the Trail and across the bald in order to manage access and help hikers know where they are and how to get back to their starting point on sustainable designated trails. This gives the area a chance to grow back from misuse. A three-panel kiosk with a viewing platform and maps have been built in order to help educate hikers about the restoration efforts and the ecology of Max Patch. Locust rail fencing recently put in helps minimize user impact by blocking poorly located user-created trails. CMC volunteers have also worked to strengthen the footpath by hardening it, installing water diversion where needed, and building steps to build more resilient, user-friendly trails. Their work is just one example of how a natural area can be tended to and managed in a way that keeps access open for people and strengthens its biodiversity.

This isn't the only important landscape that's being protected through strong partnerships with an acute awareness of effective conservation efforts. Similar work is happening on McAfee Knob, a famously dramatic rock outcropping located in Virginia that offers stunning views of the Blue Ridge

CAROLINA MOUNTAIN CLUB VOLUNTEERS' WORK TO STOP EROSION AND STABILIZE THE SLOPE ON THE BALD HAS BEEN A SUCCESS. THE CLUB, ALONG WITH THE ATC, WORKS HARD TO MAINTAIN ROUGHLY 94 MILES OF THE A.T., INCLUDING MAX PATCH, ALONG THE BORDER OF NORTH CAROLINA AND TENNESSEE. *Photo by Matt Drury*

MAX PATCH IS A LESSON IN RESILIENCE,
COLLABORATION, AND CONSERVATION. IT IS
EVIDENCE THAT WE CAN SHEPHERD A PLACE BACK
TO ITS NATIVE, WILD ROOTS WHILE STILL BEING AN
ACTIVE PART OF ITS IDENTITY.

Mountains. Thanks to efforts of the ATC, Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club (RATC), The Conservation Fund, and the National Park Service (NPS), hundreds of acres have recently been preserved around Dragons Tooth, McAfee Knob, and Tinker Cliffs where the Trail's protected corridor is particularly narrow. A complex system of stakeholders is currently lending their collective expertise to devise a visitor use management (VUM) plan for the area. The NPS is working to ensure the management partnership has a well-supported and thorough plan that is expected to be complete later this fall. The RATC is contributing their deep knowledge of visitor use patterns and of the resource itself. They've also raised significant funds, in partnership with the ATC, to purchase a property adjacent to the existing McAfee Knob parking area, which will allow for a more thorough implementation of the VUM plan's recommendations once enacted. The RATC has been important in making sure that any developments to the Trail reflect the unique and irreplaceable character of this iconic location. These conservation efforts built around strong collaboration, much like the ones that are happening on Max Patch, will effectively manage use while also preserving the ecosystem of these incredible areas.

THE NATURAL RHYTHM

As they walk along a narrower Trail that is defined by native plants, hikers will realize that what they are looking for in an experience with nature is the same thing that the organisms around them are looking for. For example, pollinators are drawn to the same things that people are drawn to in nature — color and structure throughout the season.

Prickly native species are encouraged in areas where illegal trails frequently pop up. These bushes not only narrow the footpath and help hikers navigate; they also provide critical habitat for birds. For example, the golden-winged warbler uses these thorny bushes to build their fireman's pole nests and to hide from predators. What once was a long pasture in the hardwoods is growing into a layered, nuanced early successional ecosystem that is good for both people and animals.

When you reach the top of Max Patch, you will still be blessed with beautiful views; however, the periphery of the patch will be rougher, a scrubby habitat that holds the hues and flashes of the various native species. Where before the mowed Patch would simply end, now more beneficial plant species and spacing are being prioritized on purpose, rather than by chance. What once was a pasture and hayfield is becoming much more diverse. The buzzy notes of warblers and other birds can be heard as they flick through native grasses and pollinators flutter from one wildflower to the next. Conservation efforts have focused on replanting and reseeding Max Patch so it becomes a bald of native species. Wildflowers and flora have been planted with seeds that are not only native, but are of a locally sourced genotype. These are not just native plants, they are native seeds to the region that add layer and paint this bald with different colors each season — little bluestem, broom sedge, and purple top grass; large Coreopsis, Maryland golden aster, butterfly milkweed, black-eyed Susan, partridge pea — creating a seed lineage of wild flora that has been absent from this mountain and now has a chance to spread their roots along the Appalachian Mountains once again.

We venture into nature because we want to ex-



ALREADY, BEES AND BUTTERFLIES ARE FLICKERING ACROSS THE PURPLES AND ORANGES AND YELLOWS OF THE WILDFLOWERS THAT BLOOM ACROSS THE BALD. *Photo by Abigail Ridaught*

perience a vibrant world shaped by relationships between its plants and animals. The conservation efforts to rewild Max Patch are guiding it into an ecologically functional bald that reflects our changing understanding and relationship to a landscape. With a deeper understanding of what a native, biodiverse ecosystem looks like and how it functions, Max Patch is evolving into land that can be loved by more than just humans. Already, bees and butterflies are flickering across the purples and oranges and yellows of the wildflowers that bloom across the bald, and one day it may become a breeding ground for golden-winged warblers who nest in its native bushes. Max Patch is proof that a place can be open to managed, responsible recreation while still being allowed to grow into an ecologically dynamic landscape.

A SHARED LANDSCAPE

Max Patch is a lesson in resilience, collaboration, and conservation. It is evidence that we can shepherd a place back to its native, wild roots while still being an active part of its identity. What has been used for generations by farm animals and people is now

getting a chance to be cradled back to its wild self, growing into an intricate native space that supports biodiversity and responsible recreation. It is thanks to the hard work of these organizations and their volunteers that these places will be able to stay wild and open for all — warblers, Virginia wildrye, cut-leaf coneflower, small yellow false indigo, bumble bees, and monarch butterflies, and yes, humans too. If and when you go, step lightly knowing that this vista isn't just for you, but instead a shared place where plants, animals, and humans can experience a remarkable Appalachian bald full of native species looking out across thousands of acres of protected, public land.

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Michael Garrigan writes, teaches, and hikes along the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania. He is the author of Robbing the Pillars and his next poetry collection — River, Amen — will be published later this year. He was the 2021 artist in residence for the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area. mgarrigan.com



A DEEPER CONNECTION

■ BY KIM O'CONNELL

THE GRAFTON FOREST WILDERNESS
PRESERVE IN MAINE'S MAHOOSUC RANGE —
WHERE 21,300 ACRES OF THE A.T. LANDSCAPE
ARE NOW PROTECTED. *Photo by Jerry Monkman*

EMBRACING AND ENCOURAGING A SENSE OF BELONGING ABOUT THE A.T., AND TURNING THAT FEELING INTO ACTION, IS THE WORK OF THE A.T. LANDSCAPE PARTNERSHIP. THIS KIND OF COOPERATION HAS NEVER HAPPENED ON THIS SCALE.

THROUGHOUT THE MAHOOSUC RANGE, a rugged glaciated landscape spanning the border between New Hampshire and Maine, boulders are strewn around the mountain slopes like they were tossed there by giants. Pine trees are wizened and stunted by the wind. Exposed granite slabs mottle the green mountains, minerals sparkling under the glare of the sun. Thick, leafy forests conceal black bear and moose and bobcat, hunting for prey and shelter. In this wild place, fortitude is frequently tested, whether you walk on four legs or two. Appalachian Trail hikers consider the portion in the Mahoosuc Range to be among the most challenging of the entire 2,194-mile route.

But the greater the challenge, the greater the reward. This chiseled terrain is just one critical part of a mosaic of lands that make up the large, complex, multifaceted Appalachian Trail landscape, which stretches far beyond the footpath itself. Protecting that landscape for generations to come requires the dedication of many partners working together in new and creative ways. The Appalachian Trail Landscape Partnership (ATLP) — a coalition of more than one hundred conservation organizations, land trusts, and local, state and federal agencies — has been coordinating those efforts since 2015, seeking to connect communities, organizations, and people to each other and to the A.T. In a time of great divi-

sion, we need that connective tissue now more than ever. The Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) and the National Park Service have been the primary catalysts to the ATLP's efforts.

A PLACE OF BELONGING

Public land advocates like to say the A.T., like all units of the National Park System, belongs to all of us. However true that is on paper, it hasn't always felt true for many people. For a variety of reasons, there are countless people who haven't felt a connection with the A.T. or even the natural world at large. Embracing and encouraging a sense of belonging about the A.T., and turning that feeling into action, is the work of the ATLP. This kind of cooperation has never happened on this scale. On some level, it's about tossing out the old rule book when it comes to conservation, the one where people worked in their own tight sphere and felt they were in competition for support and resources.

The ATLP, by contrast, encourages groups to think expansively and to reach across miles, barriers, and jurisdictions to effect change and foster community. More than thirty-eight million people live in this dynamic landscape, representing a diverse cross-section of cultures and differing relationships to the Trail. Countless people have long ties to the



THE SUN EMERGES FROM BEHIND MOUNT MADISON AT STAR LAKE — ABOUT ONE-FOURTH MILE FROM THE TRAIL IN NEW HAMPSHIRE'S WHITE MOUNTAIN NATIONAL FOREST. *Photo by Jerry Monkman*

AN ESSENTIAL UNDERPINNING OF THIS WORK IS THE ATC'S WILD EAST ACTION FUND, WHICH FUNDS KEY LAND ACQUISITION AND CONSERVATION PROJECTS THAT, OVER TIME, WILL CONNECT THE GREATER A.T. LANDSCAPE LIKE PIECES IN A PUZZLE. SO FAR, THE FUND HAS AWARDED NEARLY TWO MILLION DOLLARS TO HELP PROTECT MORE THAN 80,000 ACRES ACROSS ALL FOURTEEN STATES THE A.T. TRAVERSES.

Appalachian Mountains, such as Indigenous groups and rural families who lived in the mountains long before the national parks were created, but have felt unheard and unseen in the environmental and conservation movements. Others have felt unwelcome and unsafe in these wild places because of systemic racism and bigotry. "Whose land is this anyway?" asks Dr. Carolyn Finney in her book *Black Faces, White Spaces*. "And is ownership only about a piece of paper, or can it mean something more?"

Since the ATLP's inception seven years ago, conservation projects have occurred up and down the A.T. corridor, in places where there is a real interest to work with communities, including community members who are not always engaged in conservation but may be interested in ecosystem benefits, including recreation. Some great examples are the New River Land Trust project in southwest Virginia that is protecting forests while expanding a trail network to the NDPonics project — an Indigenous-founded and Indigenous-led foundation that aims to restore Monacan lands.

An essential underpinning of this work is the ATC's Wild East Action Fund, which funds key land acquisition and conservation projects that, over

time, will connect the greater A.T. landscape like pieces in a puzzle. So far, the fund has awarded nearly two million dollars to help protect more than 80,000 acres across all fourteen states the A.T. traverses. Conservation projects range from a nine-acre plot in Calf Mountain, Virginia, to seventy-nine acres in Salisbury, Connecticut, to more than 1,500 acres at Indian Pond in Orford, New Hampshire. Every parcel makes a difference.

In the Mahoosuc Range, the ATLP has recently helped to protect 21,300 acres of the A.T. landscape in Grafton Forest, a dense forested tract that is punctuated by crystalline ponds and the curling ribbon of the Swift Cambridge River. These forested uplands foster populations of martens and weasels, reptiles and amphibians (such as the threatened wood turtle), and larger mammals like the black bear and Canada lynx. It's not uncommon in these forests for hikers to hear the familiar rat-a-tat drumming of three-toed woodpeckers or the scratchy chick-a-dee-dee call of the boreal chickadee.

But, like many other areas along the A.T. corridor, the Grafton Forest also faces increasing development pressure and habitat loss. The forest abuts already protected lands including Grafton Notch State



A LUPINE FIELD WITH A VIEW OF THE WHITE MOUNTAINS AND MOUNT WASHINGTON IN NEW HAMPSHIRE. Photo by Jerry Monkman

THE
APPALACHIAN
TRAIL
LANDSCAPE IS:

THE MOST IMPORTANT
REGION OF BIODIVERSITY AND
CLIMATE RESILIENCY IN EASTERN
NORTH AMERICA

THE LARGEST, MOST RESILIENT
STOCK OF FOREST CARBON IN THE
CONTINENTAL U.S.

THE SUPPLIER OF WATER RESOURCES
TO 119 MILLION PEOPLE

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR INVESTMENT
IN SURROUNDING COMMUNITIES

A UNIFIER THAT BRINGS PEOPLE
TOGETHER ACROSS POLITICAL AND
REGIONAL DIVISIONS



THE BASIN IN FRANCONIA NOTCH STATE
PARK, NEW HAMPSHIRE, IS AN EASILY
ACCESSIBLE TOURIST SPOT ABOUT ONE-HALF
MILE FROM THE A.T. *Photo by Jerry Monkman*

THIS IS VITAL WORK, NOT JUST BECAUSE IT RECONNECTS THE NATURAL WORLD AND PROTECTS THE TRAIL AND THE EXPERIENCES WE SEEK ON IT, BUT ALSO BECAUSE OF THE BONDS IT CREATES.

Park in Maine and the adjacent Mahoosuc Public Reserved Land. Due in part to the efforts of ATLP partners, the Forest Society of Maine and Northeast Wilderness Trust, with the ATC providing essential funding through the Wild East Action Fund, this major area of forest will be stitched together with these existing public lands, creating a critical conservation corridor that will ensure more habitat for native plant and animal species, numerous recreational opportunities, and stunning viewsheds for A.T. hikers and other users.

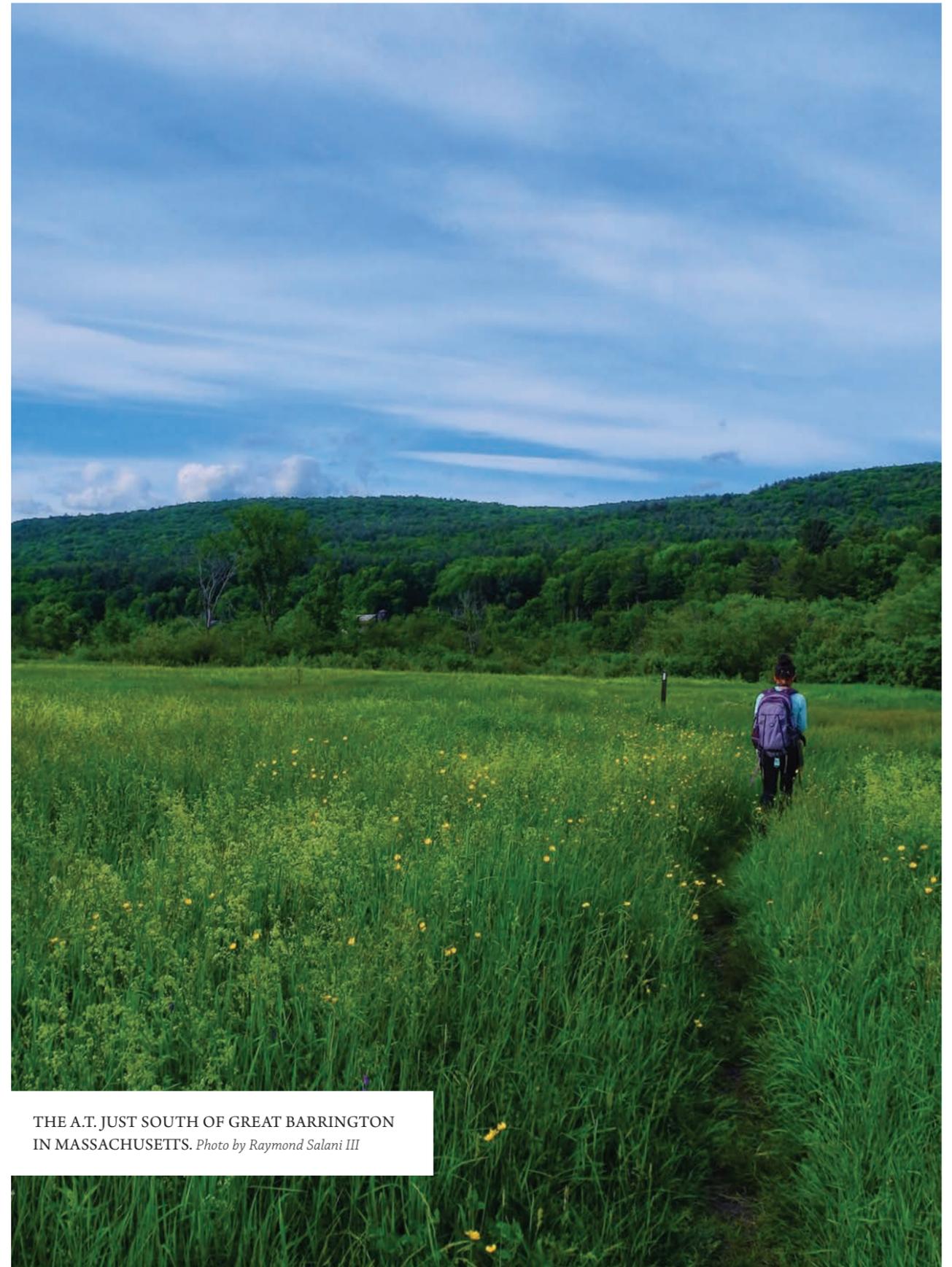
This is vital work, not just because it reconnects the natural world and protects the Trail and the experiences we seek on it, but also because of the bonds it creates. A century ago, when Benton MacKaye envisioned a long-distance hiking trail in the Appalachians, he recognized the divisions that he saw growing between people — saying that we “civilized ones... are potentially as helpless as canaries in a cage” and lamenting the “weakening wall of civilization,” compared to the freer, more open-hearted existence that comes from living closely with nature. MacKaye’s “realm” would be in contrast to urbanization and focus on “cooperation and mutual helpfulness.” To MacKaye, the A.T. would be a recreation camp writ large, an opportunity to foster cooperation and helpfulness on a much larger scale.

MacKaye was speaking more literally, of course, about the interactions of recreational users on the Trail. But the ATLP is, in a way, an expansion of

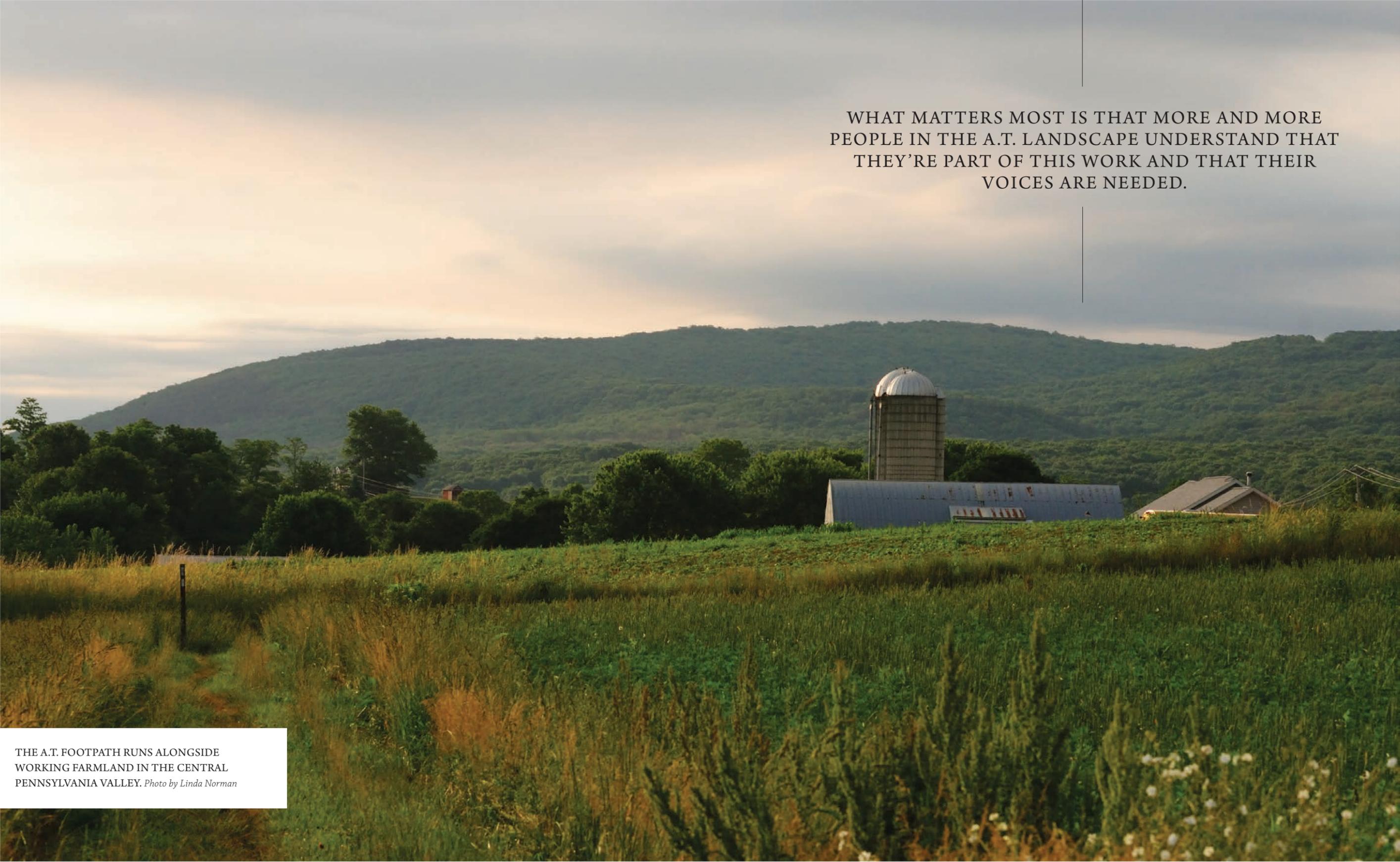
MacKaye’s vision of cooperation and inclusion. He wanted more people to access and enjoy these mountains for the betterment of all, and he knew that access and enjoyment require conservation. This is why the ATLP is working to identify high-priority lands with important conservation values, such as resiliency to the effects of climate change, important biodiversity, access to clean water, or rare or threatened habitat. We have seen that a warming planet will cause migrations of animals and plant species, and people, seeking more habitable places. It’s already happening in the southern Appalachians. The pressure on this mountain corridor will only increase in the future, and we all should have a vested interest in determining what happens next.

BOUND BY THE LAND

The work of the ATLP is limited only by the creativity and commitment of participants, which is why the partnership is seeking to broaden and diversify the range of voices providing input on the A.T. Landscape. One example is the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA), the state wildlife organization. In addition to permitting and overseeing hunting and fishing in the state, the TWRA has led numerous efforts to protect wildlife habitat and species, including the reintroduction of elk to east Tennessee, where they once roamed in abundance. Along the state’s eastern edge, the A.T. traverses the



THE A.T. JUST SOUTH OF GREAT BARRINGTON IN MASSACHUSETTS. *Photo by Raymond Salani III*



WHAT MATTERS MOST IS THAT MORE AND MORE
PEOPLE IN THE A.T. LANDSCAPE UNDERSTAND THAT
THEY'RE PART OF THIS WORK AND THAT THEIR
VOICES ARE NEEDED.

THE A.T. FOOTPATH RUNS ALONGSIDE
WORKING FARMLAND IN THE CENTRAL
PENNSYLVANIA VALLEY. *Photo by Linda Norman*



THE SHENDANDOAH AND POTOMAC RIVERS CONVERGE ALONG THE TRAIL IN HISTORIC HARPERS FERRY, WEST VIRGINIA. *Photo by Raymond Salani III*

Great Smoky Mountains National Park and crosses some of the highest peaks along the route. In national parks like the Smokies and Shenandoah to the north, hunting is prohibited. But sometimes it surprises hikers to learn that hunting is permitted along some 1,250 miles of the A.T. as it snakes through and near national and state forests, recreation areas, and private game lands. With their immense respect for and understanding about the outdoors, hunters are important conservation partners, and finding common ground between the hiking and hunting communities is essential. Without question, hunters belong to the A.T. landscape.

In Maryland, similarly, the Heart of Maryland Conservation Alliance is a network of people and organizations taking a collaborative approach to the region's farmlands, forests, waterways, and historic resources. Planners in Frederick and Washington counties also play key roles in these efforts. Here, the A.T. offers a comparatively soothing respite from the harder, rockier sections to the north and south, including the flat Chesapeake & Ohio Canal Towpath for three miles, and passing significant public lands such as Gathland State Park, whose crenellated stone monument to Civil War correspondents is one of the most distinctive historic structures along the footpath. Here, too, are the wide-open fields of the Monocacy and Antietam battlefields, the glassy serenity of Antietam Creek and the scrappier, often muddier Catoctin creek, and the striking Sugarloaf Mountain, an isolated monadnock with its many trails winding up to spectacular views.

Rural families and farmers with long ties to this region go back generations and have the same goals of protecting the lands and waters of the Appalachians that traditional conservationists do. Farmers and rural denizens belong to the A.T. landscape.

Elsewhere in Maryland, the National Aquarium in Baltimore may not seem like an obvious collaborator in Appalachian Trail conservation, but as a highly visible institution in an urban setting, it offers a great example of how city dwellers, especially young people, can learn about and play a role in the greater A.T. landscape. With 1.5 million annual visitors, the aquarium is the most popular tourist attraction in the state, representing far-reaching educational opportunities, especially for a diverse cross-section of people. One permanent exhibit traces the water cycle in Maryland from its source in the Allegheny Mountains, which the A.T. traverses in West Virginia, Maryland, and southern Pennsylvania, down through a tidal marsh and a

seaside beach before it flows out to the Atlantic Ocean's continental shelf. What exhibits like this teach, and what the ATLP can help leverage, is that city folks also belong to the A.T. landscape.

Sustaining all this conservation work is a commitment to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI). In its strategic plan, the ATLP acknowledges that even this broad-based partnership cannot on its own eliminate all existing barriers and exclusionary systems; doing so will take much sustained work across many sectors. But the ATLP has committed to three main JEDI goals: advocating for environmental laws, regulations, and policies that are free from discrimination and are rooted in equity; ensuring that place-based initiatives provide leadership opportunities for populations that are disadvantaged, economically distressed, and underrepresented; and recognizing that climate change will continue to perpetuate inequities without a critical examination of traditional conservation practices.

The ATLP has begun with a broad coalition of more than one-hundred organizations, their boots on the ground, their people working hard to identify and reach out to other partners and take small and large steps towards a more inclusive style of conservation. Each of those organizations represents countless members, donors, and constituents, including many people who may never hike a single foot of the A.T. That's okay. What matters most is that more and more people in the A.T. landscape understand that they're part of this work and that their voices are needed. Going forward, maybe we won't talk as much about how the Trail belongs to all of us, but about how all of us belong to the Trail, and to the beautiful and vital landscape that surrounds it and sustains so much.

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TRAVELING NORTH

TWO HIKES 10 YEARS APART

■ BY SETH ARIEL GREEN

DANNY CRAMER AND I RAN TRACK AND cross country together at Swarthmore College from 2009 to 2010, the year I graduated. Danny was in his sophomore year. Swarthmore is not exactly an athletic powerhouse, but it's a great place to run around in the woods. The campus is an arboretum with miles of wooded trails and the surrounding streets are lovely in a genteel, mainline, Pennsylvania way. Through the Crum Woods and over a bike path is a

Quaker retreat that Danny and I liked to visit.

I have a photo of the two of us, and the rest of the men's cross-country team from fall 2009 that I cherish. When I look at that photo today, what I see, 12 years later, is a lot of men touching each other affectionately. I like that we're mostly barefoot. During the height of the pandemic, I ached for this kind of intimacy, and I looked at this photo with pain. And when Danny died by suicide in September 2014, I



From left: Danny Cramer at Swarthmore College; The 2009 Swarthmore Men's Cross Country Team.

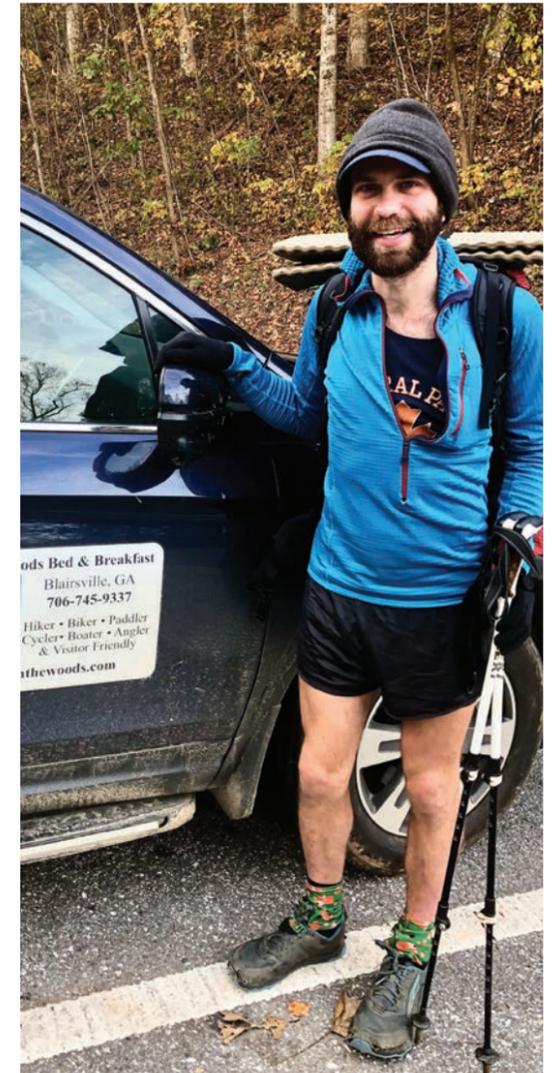
didn't know what to do — I didn't "know where to put my hands," as the singer Mitski says — so I posted it on his Facebook wall with the caption: "missing one of ours today."

I had lost touch with Danny after I graduated, though I recalled him fondly. I did know — perhaps through social media — that he had hiked the Appalachian Trail in 2011, in lieu of the spring semester of his junior year. My friend Chris says that Danny dropped out the semester before, midway through a grueling seminar in history the two of them were taking. It was, I learned later, a very difficult year for Danny; but at the time I had no idea. Frankly, Danny's photos never made hiking look very fun, lightly dressed in the snow as he was. But then, track races aren't always so fun either.

When I heard about Danny's death, I was in grad school in New York, and had recently done a ten-day section of the A.T., from Pawling, New York, to Williamstown, Massachusetts. Soon after, his parents hosted a memorial service for him in Central Park. It was overwhelming to meet them. I wanted to say something nice like, "I'm glad we could all do this," but what actually came out was something incredibly awkward like "it was good of you to make it," as though they had someplace better to be. One of Danny's classmates scoffed as I fumbled through a clarification. I found it especially heartbreaking that Danny was an only child, as though it was unusually cruel to leave your parents alone. I didn't understand depression, or my friend. I never understood at all.

I'm doing okay now, but the past few years have been pretty bad. The last clear moment when I remember being unambiguously happy, pre-pandemic, was at a plant medicine retreat in the Catskills in September 2018. A lot of people in the ceremony were reliving difficult moments, crying, throwing up. I found that distressing, so I went outside and lay down on a bench and looked at the stars. I'd failed out of grad school in 2015, but went on to receive my M.A. in political science. After that, I found what felt like a good, new track with a tech job at a science-based startup in Manhattan. I meditated on my place in the fabric, and a relationship that I hoped was heading towards marriage, and thought: stay the course, Seth. Just keep moving forward.

Three months later, that relationship ended, and I spiraled. It was winter 2019, and I knew the cold and the dark would be trying, so I aimed to just maximize friend time and reading time until the weather got better, at which point I assumed I'd feel good again. And then the summer came, and I kept



Seth "Finch" Ariel Green during his thru-hike at Neels Gap in Georgia.

feeling bad. By that fall I was mostly staying at home and playing videogames all day unless someone actively sought me out. In early March 2020, a few weeks after my job and I parted ways, I retreated to my parents' house for what I thought would be two weeks of COVID-19 sweeping through the city.

Fast forward to April 2021. I'd lived with my folks for seven months, then gotten another tech job, and had just come back to New York City after spending the winter and spring out west as a digital nomad. It was, in some ways, a best-case scenario for surviving a pandemic, but I rarely felt good. I found work

IT HAD BEEN SO LONG SINCE I'D HEARD MY INNER VOICE CLEARLY THAT IT FELT, AND SOMETIMES STILL FEELS, LIKE AN EXTERNAL FORCE, A GUIDING SPIRIT, AND IT TOLD ME TO KEEP ON.

draining and meaningless, but weekends were worse. My body hurt and my dreams were of things I couldn't have: togetherness, proximity, adventures, meaning. The day I got my vaccine, I had a particularly stressful conversation with my then-boss. As I lay awake that night, feverish and my heart racing, I thought, more or less, "forget this! I should walk." And then I thought, "I should literally walk," as in, walk the Appalachian Trail, a place where I'd found peace and wonder in the past. A few weeks later, I put in my letter of resignation and began acquiring the gear I didn't yet have.

My plan was to start in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, go north for a month, and stop near my parents' place in New York. I chose Harpers Ferry, in part, because it was accessible via public transit and, in part, because Danny's parents had placed a memorial to him at the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) headquarters in town. When I got there, on May 9, 2021, the office was closed due to COVID-19; so, I got lunch and set out.

Like most thru-hikers, Danny was a NOBO (northbound thru-hiker). When I started, I hadn't heard of flip-flopping (hiking north or south, and then "flip-flopping" back to a starting location and hiking the opposite direction to finish the Trail) but by the morning of the first full day, I was hiking with a fellow named Scott who was planning just that. Within a week, he and I were part of a "Tramily," and I had a Trail name, "Finch," because I sing a lot, and

my companion "Hot Minute" connected that to a dream she'd had about Darwin.

Danny's Trail name was "Mile Hi." Our mutual friend Harold recalled the moment when he got that name. He said that on one of Danny's first few days on the Trail, he encountered some rough weather and quickly found a spot to camp. The only other person at the campsite was an older man who immediately tried to sell Danny illegal drugs. After Danny declined, it came up in conversation that he was from Denver. The old man started laughing and said, "I know your Trail name," paused and then said, "Mile Hi."

The thing that feels very Danny about this exchange is that he was happy to keep conversing with the man. Danny was sweet like that. His smile was infectious. His sense of humor had an acerbic edge. As a college student taking time off, Danny would have been part of a solid demographic of thru-hikers. A second mass comprises recent graduates; a third, recent retirees. The rest of us were pretty well identified by Danny's mother, Kathi, in an interview with the ATC, as people who want to "buy some time, to discover themselves, or because they don't know what they want to do next, because they don't know where they fit in the world."

It took me about two weeks to realize that I was happy. I didn't want to go back to New York, and I didn't have to. Walking across farmland in the Cumberland Valley, between Boiling Springs and

Duncannon, Pennsylvania, I asked myself what I wanted. It had been so long since I'd heard my inner voice clearly that it felt, and sometimes still feels, like an external force, a guiding spirit, and it told me to keep on. I felt clear-sighted, hopeful, energetic, joyful, grounded, alert, and awake. It was a lovely, spring day. So, after a brief stop at my parents' house in New York, I kept on. I reached Katahdin in August and Springer in November. This year, I returned to the Trail to complete it. I have now walked 2,194 miles in Danny's footsteps to get there.

"Traveling north, traveling north, to find you," Vashti Bunyan whispers to us. I called my dad one day, taking shelter in the ski patrol hut at the top of Mount Bromley in Vermont, and he asked if I had found what I was looking for. But the question had stopped making sense. There was no superordinate goal, nothing for which the Trail was or is an instrument. The point of the day is to travel north. Nothing else.

A lot of my fellow travelers were unabashed, full-time "hiker trash," (a term of endearment in the hiking community) or "dirtbags" in the lingo of rock climbing. These folks live to be outdoors. They work seasonal jobs, sleep in their cars, or bounce around with friends in the winter. I feel a deep, unexpected affinity with them. They show imagination and courage in committing to something that has no clear mapping to American political or social life. I'm not saying I want to adopt their way of life. Though maybe I do. Or perhaps something in between, like taking six months off every few years to go on adventures. One possibility is that I am at the limits of good sense; another is that I am finally sensing a constraint on the collective imagination that calls for a serious, thru-hike-sized detox.

And what sucks is that the person I really want to hear from about all of this is Danny. After college, he worked as an A.T. ridgerunner for a few summers. My impression is that his depression worsened after he moved back to Denver and pursued a more traditional job. I wonder what he thought about it all. Back when he passed, the kind of despair that swallows up game, player, and all was too far out of lived experience for me to imagine. I was mystified that he would want to leave us. Today, I understand better. But I am keeping on, Danny. I haven't lost hope. I just wish that we could talk about it.

Dying young in our modern world means that you are everywhere frozen in amber: Danny on social media, his photos available to hundreds (thousands?) of people, forever a youthful twenty-four, no facial hair, and a guileless smile. I have met many

hikers who remind me of Danny, and though we often quickly develop an intimacy born of shared purpose, the truth is that their inner lives are a mystery to me. I hope the Trail brings them the joy and meaning that it brought me, and that it brought my friend.

—
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Steve and Kathi Cramer with Danny in Central Park, New York during his thru-hike.

DANNY CRAMER
APPALACHIAN TRAIL STEWARDSHIP
MEMORIAL FUND

To commemorate their son, Kathi and Steve Cramer launched the Danny Cramer Appalachian Trail Stewardship Memorial Fund. In dedicating a plaque, now displayed in the Harpers Ferry Visitor Center, Steve said, "We believe that hike gave Danny a few more years to live, and we would like people involved with the Trail to know that they helped prolong his life a little bit; a treasure beyond value."

A SHARED CAUSE

~ BY HAWK METHENY

“HOW CAN THAT BE?” I ASKED MY DAD WITH wonder and intrigue as he pointed south and explained to me that the trail we were standing on extended to Georgia. Then he switched arms, pointed north, and explained that it also stretched to Maine.

We were traveling in the Berkshires in western Massachusetts and had stopped at an Appalachian Trail road crossing to ceremoniously set foot on the A.T. I was a young boy with an inherent love for being in the woods and a growing sense of geography. I paused and further pondered that this line in the woods made up of dirt, rocks, and roots extended all the way to places I had heard of, but not yet been to. Georgia and Maine seemed so far away, how could it be possible that a trail connected them?

And so began my fascination and lifelong connection with the Appalachian Trail: a relationship that has deepened, been redefined, and endured throughout my personal and professional life — in multiple ways. I’ve had the benefit and privilege of thru-hiking the A.T, maintaining it, managing it, protecting it, advocating for it, testifying on its behalf and living on and near it. I’m even married to a thru-hiker.

Twenty-nine years ago this spring, I stood at the bronze plaque on Springer and made a promise to myself that I would walk to Katahdin — no matter what. Throughout my thru-hike, as the Trail presented its varying challenges and displayed its full character of figurative and literal highs and lows, my motto was, “no doubts, just details.” Several months later, I stood silently at the large cairn on Katahdin’s Baxter Peak and reflected on the accomplishment. At that moment it became clear that while I had just completed walking the Trail in its entirety, I was not “done”

with it. I also equally realized that while the Trail would continue to provide a sense of purpose for me, I was being called to fulfill a sense of duty to continue to care for and steward this much-cherished and one-of-a-kind resource.

My ensuing career with the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) has evolved over the past thirty-two years from a seasonal employee working on the A.T. in the White Mountains as a backcountry caretaker to Trail crew member and leader, program manager, ATC board member, Stewardship Council chair and most recently senior regional director in the Northeast. The tools I have used to accomplish the tasks on a given day have ranged from mattocks and rock bars, backpacks, laptops, helicopters, bear canisters, business suits and briefcases, chainsaws, and — in recent years — hundreds of Zoom meetings.

Which brings us to today. I have been selected to serve the ATC in a new role we have created as the vice president of regional and Trail operations. I am honored and energized to serve in this role and for the opportunity to lead this important foundational work of the Conservancy. The ATC created the new VP role to continue to provide sustained focus on our core Trail management responsibilities including the treadway, overnight sites, volunteer support, visitor management, and agency partnerships. Meanwhile, the ATC is investing additional resources to our growing and important work with landscape-level land conservation, science and stewardship, and federal policy and advocacy.

While we have rich opportunities ahead of us, there are plenty of challenges. Our nearly 100-year history of success provides a solid foundation to build



Hawk with his dog Lucie on A.T. lands in Vermont with the New Hampshire ridgeline in the background.

from while we address some of the of the most complex work yet to accomplish. Climate change and the associated impacts to the Trail’s physical and natural resources is a real, current, and future threat. The Trail’s popularity continues to grow, and we will be developing and implementing both proven and innovative management techniques to ensure that the Appalachian Trail experience is available and sustainable for all. We will continue to strengthen the Cooperative Management System — a public-private partnership — so that current and future volunteers have the support they need to excel in their work, and to ensure that our partnerships with the Trail’s land management agencies are fully thriving.

My confidence lies in our history of proven success. Since we are all working together towards a shared cause, I trust that the relevancy and necessity of the Trail experience will remain as essential

in the next 100 years as it has in the past 100 years. Perhaps even more so.

Having worked across the full spectrum of A.T. management over the years, I can now answer the “How can it be?” question either with brevity, or in deep detail — depending on who asks (and how much time they have). Vision, cooperation, dedication, planning, passion, and grit begin to answer that question. We might now ask; “How can it *continue* to be?”

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Hawk Metheny is the ATC’s Vice President of
Regional and Trail Operations
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*A.T. north of Lehigh Gap, Pennsylvania.
Photo by Raymond Salani III*