

The Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail:

Discover Virginia’s Natural, Historic, and Cultural Resources



A portion of the Peaks of Otter Loop, off of the Blue Ridge Parkway, offers breathtaking vistas from and of the peaks of Flat Top and Sharp Top.

The Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail is an exciting statewide nature tourism project managed by the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries in partnership with local communities across the state. The first statewide birding and wildlife watching trail network in the USA, the trail is comprised of a combination of private, federal, state and local land, spanning Virginia’s 43,000 square miles of diverse natural habitat.

The network is currently composed of more than 650 walking and driving trails, each of which showcases unique natural, cultural and historic resources. The sites are organized into trail networks or loops, each of which features local culture and amenities – such as the “Mountain Music” loop through the cradle of American folk music, the “Battle for Virginia” loop through the Fredericksburg Battlefield, and the “Eastern Shore” loop from Chincoteague to

Fisherman’s Island. Travelers on these loops can spend two or three days exploring all there is to see and do.

The trail will help to boost local economies with tourism, and familiarize citizens with important natural and cultural landscapes that make Virginia such an incredible, beautiful and unique place to live. Bird and wildlife watching is a low-impact activity that has minimal ecological impact on trail sites. Private landowners can nominate their properties for inclusion in the Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail. Participation in this program is an opportunity that should particularly appeal to private landholders who have an interest in sharing the experience on their land with the general public.

One of every nine trail sites on the Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail is privately owned and, to date, the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries has received no reports of abuse from landholders participating in the trail program. The Code of Virginia allows private landholders to permit access to nature tourists while protecting landholders from liability in the case of injury. Cooperation in the Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail program is completely voluntary and access to private land can be revoked by landowners if they wish. By adding their property to the trail network, private landowners gain increased public appreciation for the importance of the natural, cultural, and historic resources that they are helping to protect.

-Josh McLaughlin



Sky Meadows State Park, located on the Front Royal Loop, is adjacent to the Appalachian National Scenic Trail.

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For more information about VOF and land conservation in Virginia, see our website at:
www.vofonline.org | www.virginiaoutdoorsfoundation.org



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It is our mission “to promote the preservation of open space lands and to encourage private gifts of money, securities, land or other property to preserve the natural, scenic, historic, open-space and recreational areas of the Commonwealth.”



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VIRGINIA OUTDOORS FOUNDATION

Fall 2007 Newsletter

A Letter From The Director Of Stewardship, Martha Little

The deed is done! Another conservation easement has been approved, signed and recorded. This results in a great feeling of accomplishment both on the part of the donor and the holder of the easement. For the Commonwealth of Virginia, this means that more land is protected for future generations – vital resources such as wetlands, forests, river corridors, mountain regions, working family farms and cultural and historic landscapes will continue to thrive.

But, what’s next for the easement holder and the current and future landowners of that property? In some sense the work has really just begun, and a long-term (forever is pretty long!) partnership between the land trust and landowner begins. Like any good partnership, this means regular communication. The holder of the easement has been entrusted to protect this resource for the Commonwealth and to work closely with the landowner to ensure the integrity of the conservation values over time.

For the VOF, stewardship has become an ever-growing responsibility, with over 2,200 properties under VOF easement. As the number of easements increase, stewardship work grows exponentially. In the past year the Virginia Outdoors Foundation’s Stewardship program has made unprecedented advancements in technology and records management,



VOF Staff learn about timber operations at a Dept. of Forestry training.




VOF owns 800 acres of House Mountain, viewed from a VOF easement.

hired excellent and experienced employees in the Stewardship division, and created vital partnerships with other agencies and organizations. The VOF has made necessary investments in improved policies and procedures to withstand increased scrutiny of easements at the national level. We continue to strive to meet standards and practices set by the Land Trust Alliance – a national organization of more than 1,600 land trusts – and to stay abreast of cutting-edge practices in the field of land conservation.

The Virginia Outdoors Foundation and the Virginia Department of Forestry signed a memorandum of understanding to work together on forested properties held under VOF easement. The VOF and the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries have begun working together to encourage easement property owners to become participants in the DGIF Birding and Wildlife Trail program, and other cooperative agreements have been reached with Soil and Water Districts, localities and nonprofit organizations.

The Virginia Outdoors Foundation is committed to its ongoing stewardship of our conservation easements across the state. Working together with organizations and landowners – our fellow stewards of the land – will be the key to long-term success of conservation easements in Virginia.

Martha Little



To buy the award winning VDGIF Birding and Wildlife Trail guide or get more information, see VDGIF’s website: www.dgif.virginia.gov/vbwt

Getting Invasive Species Out Of The Bull Run Mountains



Bull Run State Natural Area Preserve
Photo courtesy Gary P. Fleming

The VOF Stewardship staff attended a November 19 Virginia Division of Natural Heritage training clinic at the VOF-owned Bull Run Mountains State Natural Area Preserve. The clinic focused on methods to combat non-native invasive trees and shrubs in Virginia’s forests. Participants will also were instructed on safe use, handling, storage, and disposal of herbicides. After a morning of classroom instruction, the VOF stewardship crew had a chance to practice control techniques on the non-native invasive tree-of-heaven (Ailanthus altissima) in the Bull Run Mountains.

Private landowners can learn about the important role they can play in preventing the spread of invasive plants by visiting the Virginia Division of Natural Heritage website: http://www.dcr.virginia.gov/natural_heritage/invspinfo

What is a Forest Stewardship Management Plan?

The current VOF easement deed template has the language: “All material timber harvest activities on the Property shall be guided by a Forest Stewardship Management Plan.”

So what is a Forest Stewardship Management Plan? Every county in Virginia has a state forester who is available to provide Forest Stewardship Management Plans to landowners. The plans are designed to help landowners achieve their specific goals and objectives for their forest, such as improving or maintaining a healthy forest, increasing wildlife habitat, enhancing natural beauty and land values, increasing recreational opportunities, reducing soil erosion and improving water quality, protecting property from wildfire and diseases, and increasing income from forest products. Stewardship plans help landowners to maximize the benefit of owning forest land, and ensure the continued benefit of forest land through proper long-term management.

For more information or to apply for a Forest Stewardship Management Plan, see the Department of Forestry’s website at: <http://www.dof.virginia.gov/mgt/index-stewardship.shtml>, or contact your local county forester.

Would You Be Interested In Providing Rehabilitated Wildlife a Safe Home in Northern VA?



The Blue Ridge Wildlife Center is a non-profit wildlife rehabilitation organization that provides assistance to native injured and orphaned wildlife. They serve the Northern Shenandoah Valley, Piedmont, and Blue Ridge regions of Virginia including Clarke, Frederick, Warren, Shenandoah, Fauquier and Loudoun counties.

The center is currently hoping to evaluate properties under conservation easement to determine good locations for wildlife release. If you are interested in providing a safe habitat for rehabilitated native mammals and birds, please visit the Center’s website at: <http://www.blueridgewildlife.org>, or call Peggy Koontz at (540) 837-9000.



Top: This injured juvenile bald eagle will be rehabilitated and released by the BRWC on VOF easement property. Above: Blue Ridge Mountains



Forest Stewardship Management Plans help landowners get the most out of forest ownership, while ensuring the health of the forest and surrounding environment.

Stewardship at VOF: An Introduction

The Virginia Outdoors Foundation’s job isn’t done when an easement is signed and recorded. Indeed, in some ways the work is just beginning. Any agency or organization that accepts conservation easements takes on the responsibility to help landowners care for that protected land – and to care for it forever, because easements run with the land in perpetuity.

With the terrific growth in the amount of Virginia’s landscape protected in the last few years, VOF depends on dedicated stewardship staff, called Stewardship Specialists or Stewardship Assistants, to undertake the long-term care of each easement. Stewardship folks have many duties on their plates. Staff conduct site visits to protected properties and document their present conditions; create maps and write reports on the important conservation features of each property; organize detailed files on hundreds of easements; research deeds and assessments; answer landowner queries about what each easement allows on the property; and provide assistance for landowners, when requested, on land or resource management.

Addressing the huge range of questions that come up about property management has proven to be one of VOF’s most complex, time-intensive duties. Each easement is individually tailored to the conservation values it protects, which is one of the strengths of the conservation easement program. However, this individualized approach means that



George Sutton takes notes during a site visit in Rappahannock County.

when a question arises, Stewardship staff must carefully read the deed of easement and determine how the landowner’s future use of the land may affect the conservation values. If there are any conflicts, Stewardship folks work closely with the landowner to figure out how to resolve the matter while ensuring the long-term protection of the valuable natural, historic, and cultural features of the land. Like other divisions of VOF, Stewardship staff regularly collaborate with state and local agencies, as well as private non-profit organizations. These partnerships are critical to helping VOF serve as a resource for landowners.

With this array of responsibilities, it isn’t surprising that VOF’s Stewardship staff members are an eclectic group. They hold degrees in such disciplines as biology, urban and regional planning, landscape architecture, and environmental policy. Some are native Virginians, others newer residents. Likewise, some began their careers in stewardship, while others bring long experience in other fields to their work with VOF. This range of expertise is a key element of the resources that VOF devotes to easement stewardship.

You can learn more about the Stewardship Division on VOF’s website, including who your local Stewardship staff are and what landowners can expect during field visits. The web address is: http://www.vofonline.org/VOF_stew-overview.php.

- Andrea Reese

Congratulations! VOF Easement Donors are American Farmland Trust’s Stewards of the Year

Sandy and Rossie Fisher of Brookview Farm in Manakin-Sabot, Virginia, have received the American Farmland Trust’s 2007 Steward of the Land Award. AFT’s mission is: “to stop the loss of productive farmland and to promote farming practices that lead to a healthy environment,” and their Steward of the Land Award recognizes the American farmer or farm family who best demonstrates leadership in protecting farmland and caring for the environment.

Not only do the Fishers raise a 50-head cow and calf certified organic beef operation, house 220 free range hens, grow vegetables, operate a farm store, and compost municipal leaf waste, but they also open their farm to the public. Brookview is a destination where people from all over Virginia come to buy fresh food and spend a day on the farm, in the area west of Richmond that is rapidly losing important open-space and farmland.

The Fishers donated an easement to VOF and the Department of Historic Resources in 2001, and helped to found the Goochland Land Alliance in 2002. The non-profit alliance educates landowners about easements, and has helped protect over 1,700 acres of land in Goochland County via conservation easements, many of which were donated to VOF. In 2004, the Fishers created the Center for Rural Culture, a non-profit organization to promote sustainable agriculture in Virginia’s Piedmont. Their commitment to community, stewardship of the land, and future generations can be an inspiration to all Virginians.



Sandy and Rossie Fisher of Brookview Farm in Manakin-Sabot. Photo courtesy American Farmland Trust

Visit Brookview Farm on the web at: <http://brookviewfarm.tripod.com/>

For more information about the Goochland Land Alliance visit: <http://www.goochlandlandalliance.org/>

Review Your Easement First! You May Need to Contact VOF Stewardship Staff Before:

- Constructing any new buildings or structures
- Renovating or enlarging existing structures
- Conveying property (provide contact information on new owner)
- Subdividing property
- Signing any other encumbrances on property (i.e. rights-of-way, ingress/egress, other easements)
- Changing use of property (i.e. from forested lands to agricultural lands)
- Boundary line adjustment
- Harvesting timber

GPS Brings New Precision to Conservation Easements



The Virginia Outdoors Foundation recently took a big step to improve mapping data by investing in GPS (Global Positioning System) units. The new GPS units give easement staff the ability to more accurately identify boundaries and special property features - such as

riparian areas, natural species habitats, and farmstead areas - prior to writing new easements. Consequently, easement staff are able to write conservation easements that better protect important resources and landscapes, using tools such as building envelopes, setbacks, and riparian buffers in the easement deed itself.

The precision of GPS allows stewardship staff to complete fieldwork more efficiently by easily locating these areas, as well as photo locations and the sites of any new buildings or other features.