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“Not forgotten and still exists . . . just on a different trail where we will all join him in a while. There will be no mosquitoes, he will run and not be weary, and the firewood will split just right each time.”

4 — Steve Smith, Jim's neighbor and conservation easement landowner

CLRLT EARNS ACCREDITATION COMMISSION STAMP OF APPROVAL



Cacapon & Lost Rivers Land Trust (CLRLT) has worked with landowners since 1990 to conserve the natural spaces and rural heritage of the Cacapon and Lost Rivers Watershed, and currently stewards 14,500 acres. In recognition of our commitment to land conservation and responsible management, the Land Trust Accreditation Commission recently renewed CLRLT's accreditation.

“We are stronger than ever for having gone through the rigorous accreditation renewal process,” said Executive Director Emily Warner. “That strength means special places—like our most recent project in Gunbarrel Valley—will be protected forever.”

Re-accreditation entails comprehensive third-party evaluation, for which CLRLT furnished extensive documentation. In 2012, CLRLT was the first West Virginia land trust to earn this title. Renewal evaluations are conducted every five to seven years.

“We are proud to recognize Cacapon & Lost River Land Trust's continued commitment to conservation excellence,” said Melissa Kalvestrand, executive director of the Commission. “The accreditation seal is a mark of distinction.”

**In Memoriam:
Jim Baker (1955–2024)**

On April 2 we lost our dear friend and land trust Board member Jim Baker unexpectedly after a short illness. Jim served on the Board from 2014 to 2024. A past president of the Seldom Seen Hunt Club in Morgan County, he was a seasoned outdoorsman and devoted conservationist with a passion to protect the land he loved—be it his family farm in Pennsylvania or the Club's forested, mountain land in the Cacapon and Lost Rivers Watershed. This love of land was demonstrated by his key 2013 role in protecting 917 acres of hunting grounds with conservation easements to ensure future generations of hunters can continue to enjoy the land. We will remember Jim as a big man with a gentle soul and a twinkle in his eye. His wise advice, fresh perspectives, and many helpful contributions will continue to be a boon to our organization. We will miss him dearly.

Species of Concern

Scores of species need our land stewardship to survive. Here are just a few:



Grizzled Skipper
Pyrgus (centaureae) wyando



Small White Snakeroot
Ageratina aromatica



Shenandoah Mountain Salamander
Plethodon virginia



Louisiana Waterthrush
Parkesia motacilla



Swallowtail Shiner
Notropis procne

GUIDESTAR

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CACAPON & LOST RIVERS LAND TRUST

News from the **Watershed**
Spring 2024

Protecting the forests, farms, rural heritage, and waters of the Cacapon and Lost Rivers Watershed

SEE INSIDE:

2 Wood Turtles' Cacapon Haven



2 Safeguarding Our Starry Nighttime Skies



3 Caring for the Land: Landowner Lessons



NEW TEAM MEMBER!

We're pleased to announce that board member **Dottie Eddis** is now also serving as part-time **Administrative Director**. **Dottie brings to our staff a long history with the land trust, business management experience, and an enthusiastic, go-getter spirit. She and her husband Lowell Hott are also conservation easement landowners. Welcome, Dottie!**



OF JOURNEYS AND RETURNS

In this issue we explore journeys and returns, ranging from the age-old cycles of wood turtles in the Cacapon to animal migrations guided by our pristine nighttime skies and the inspiring stories of dear friends who have made a difference with their life journeys.

We honor the legacy of our departed friend Jim Baker, celebrate the Cacapon Watershed Collaborative, and recognize this year as a pivotal moment in the Trust's history. We're invigorated by a successful re-accreditation with the Land Trust Accreditation Commission, new landowner relationships, and a long list of conservation easement prospects in the watershed.

Enjoy this issue of News from the Watershed!

Emily

Emily Warner, Executive Director



Easement Interest Soars in the Watershed

We are at a pivotal time in the history of our Watershed and our Land Trust. Easement interest among landowners has spiked over the past year, and it doesn't seem to be slowing. This is excellent news, because it brings the opportunity to expand protected lands in the Cacapon Watershed to 20,000 acres—all in the face of intensifying development pressure.

Of 22 active prospects totaling 5,584 acres, 17 expand existing “hubs and corridors” of protected land, five are farms, two contain native brook trout streams, and 12 contain habitat for other West Virginia “species of greatest conservation need.”

To meet this unprecedented easement demand, the Trust must increase staff capacity and help prospective landowner partners with easement costs. Both require significant funding. So far, the Trust has applied to three major grant programs and is appealing to institutional funders and donors for help. We are grateful to the generous donors who have already stepped up to seed this effort. We still have a long way to go. To support this effort, please go to www.cacapon.org/give or scan this QR code. You can also call 304-856-1188, or email marika@cacapon.org.



Marching Through Time: Wood Turtles' Cacapon Haven



For biologist Kevin Oxenrider the sight of wood turtles foraging in freshly blooming forests heralds the return of spring. "Seeing them amongst the flowering bluebells, I absolutely adore it," he says, noting that the bright orange of the reptiles' bodies "really

pops" against the purplish-blue

blossoms. "It's my favorite time of year."

Oxenrider is the Amphibian and Reptile Program Leader for the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources (WVDNR). In that position he has found grounds for concern as well as cautious optimism about the future of the North American Wood Turtle (*Glyptemys insculpta*). Habitat loss, vehicle strikes, poaching, predation, and other factors have caused the reptiles' numbers to plummet across their range, which extends from Canada to Appalachia, prompting the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to review whether to list the species as endangered. A decision is imminent.

While designated a "Species of Greatest Conservation Need" in West Virginia, populations appear to be faring better in the Mountain State than in other parts of the range. "I would venture to say we may have some of the strongest populations throughout the range of the wood turtle, which is kind of bizarre because we are also at the southern extent of their range," says Oxenrider, who monitors their populations in West Virginia. "But that just goes to show that we have a lot of responsibility, too, to ensure that the wood turtle stays on the landscape not only in West Virginia but also in North America."

“We have a lot of responsibility to ensure that the wood turtle stays on the landscape not only in West Virginia but also in North America.”

With its abundant forests and network of streams, the Cacapon Watershed provides critical habitat for the semiaquatic wood turtle, which can live up to eighty years. Males spend the entire year in and around streams, while females venture as far as 1,000 feet into forested uplands in the spring and

summer to nest and lay eggs before returning to their streams for the winter. Because they favor clean, cool waters, wood turtles are indicators of overall ecosystem health and climate resilience.

People play an important role in wood turtles' survival, Oxenrider explains. First and foremost, these animals require healthy habitat and space from human interference. The only time handling one is warranted is if you encounter a wood turtle in the middle of the road. In such a case you may—if safe to do so—help it to the side of the road where it is headed, regardless of what the landscape looks like there. "That turtle knows better than you where it wants to go," Oxenrider assures.

Given the high incidence of poaching, it is important to not disclose turtles' locations and to keep an eye out for trespassers on your property, especially around waterways. Landowners are asked to report suspicious activity to WVDNR Law Enforcement by contacting 844-484-7367 or on facebook.com/DNRpolice.

Landowners can help by keeping livestock out of waterways and avoiding mowing in May and June when turtles are most likely to be in fields. If you must mow, it is recommended to do so in the afternoon, keeping the blade at least eight inches from the ground, and leaving an unmowed buffer between the field and forest. Putting land under conservation easement is another way to protect critical habitat and ensure that future generations will have their own encounters with beguiling wood turtles foraging for slugs and mushrooms among the springtime blooms.

For more information on wood turtle conservation, please contact kevin.j.oxenrider@wv.gov or WVDNR's district office at (304) 822-3551.

CARING FOR THE LAND: LESSONS FROM A LANDOWNER

Nick Casto, a Hampshire and Morgan County Landowner



I recall the day when my relationship with our land changed. I was in the sixth grade when my father brought in a forester to offer management suggestions. Our management to that point was simple: do nothing.

The forester suggested we implement non-commercial Timber Stand Improvement (TSI) on areas of the forest that were especially thick by clearing small areas of low value trees and planting trees that would provide cover and food for wildlife. He told us an old field of dead brambles would make a great place for a summer food plot.

Within a year we had accomplished those goals and sat back to watch the results. The deer, rabbits, quail, and grouse flourished. The night singers—whippoorwills and screech owls—were everywhere. In a few years the thinned areas responded with increased growth to the point that tree crowns began to close. We were elated at our success and sat back to enjoy the show.

Fifteen years later we had a fierce winter with deep snows. The spring thaw brought us not just spring peepers and bluebells, but deer carcasses that littered many hollows. They had died by the dozens. We were aghast. The show had ended.

A wildlife biologist who came to survey the carnage put it simply: too many deer and no browse. We had a browse line that made our woods pretty and park-like but a biological desert for many animals. He suggested maintaining mostly mature forest with a program of diversity: Create an initial clear-cut of 15 acres with others from one half to several acres every few years thereafter, in addition to select thinning cuts. He also recommended transitional, brushy edge areas around openings and planting abandoned logging roads and log landings as we would a food plot.

We got the message: create diversity.

“We got the message: create diversity.”

Today we practice invasive control with ongoing silviculture as noted above. As a wise man once told me: Your woods will change. You must decide what that change will be.



JOHN GAVITT BECOMES FIRST “BOARD MEMBER EMERITUS”

A pioneering conservationist and international protector of wildlife, John Gavitt has served our Land Trust in every conceivable role: board member, advisory board member, conservation easement landowner, donor, volunteer office painter, and overall muse. His 2019 land donation established a solid financial foundation for the Land Trust, while his sage advice and turkey-whistle chops are endless sources of wisdom and delight. Having blazed so many trails it's no surprise that John will become our first Board Member Emeritus, enabling him to remain connected to our mission. "John has been an inspiring mentor and motivator to me throughout my career, and this land trust is lucky to have had his love and support for so long," said Executive Director Emily Warner. "We are so grateful for our continuing friendship."

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— Emily Warner, Executive Director

SAFEGUARDING OUR NIGHTTIME SKIES

Did you know that our conservation work helps protect dark, starry skies in the Cacapon and Lost Rivers Watershed? By protecting large, intact tracts of land, we help reduce light pollution and its harmful effects on people, plants, and wildlife. Natural darkness supports ecosystem and human balance, allows birds like the Indigo bunting to see the stars needed to navigate

migratory journeys, and offers us that feeling of wonder as we ponder our place in the universe.

“Give me nights perfectly quiet ... and I looking up at the stars.”

— Walt Whitman