

OWNED LANDS ACTIVITIES REPORT – MARCH 2017

BULL RUN MOUNTAINS NATURAL AREA PRESERVE

2,350 acres in Prince William and Fauquier Counties

New Ranger and Science Coordinator

Joe Villari has started in his new position as Preserve Ranger and Science Coordinator. Joe has worked on two contract positions with us in the recent past. He worked on the creation of a library of research studies that have been conducted in the Bull Run Mountains. He also helped to work on the internship program that will be implemented on the preserve this spring.

Joe has an undergraduate degree in Conservation Biology and graduate degree in Environmental Science and Policy, both from George Mason University. His background is well suited to developing an internship program for undergraduates. He was a teaching assistant while in graduate school and has been an intern many times himself.

Joe will also be helping to coordinate the research studies underway on the preserve. Currently we have a rattlesnake population study that has been ongoing for nearly 50 years, a decade long insect survey, and a trout reintroduction project. These studies involve researchers from Appalachian State University, the Smithsonian, George Mason University and Trout Unlimited.

Winter Closure

At the September 29, 2016 meeting the Board passed a motion to close the public access area of the Preserve for a period to enable time for planning and infrastructure upgrades.

During the closure period a mobile ranger station has been constructed and will be installed on March 17th. The ranger station will provide visibility for VOF on the property and shelter our ranger, volunteers, and interns. Additional signage will also better inform the public of preserve hours, visitor rules, and trail routes.



Mockup of potential location for the new mobile ranger station. This location is on the eastern end of the preserve parking area.

Our volunteer stewards removed 20 deer from the southern area of the preserve during the closure which is about twice the number they have taken over the previous four winters.

Reopening the Preserve

Over the nearly three years since VOF was first alerted by Lavinia Currier (owner of High Point) and Natural Heritage staff about a developing need for a closure of the High Point area with a subsequent restoration process, a considerable amount of discussion has taken place within VOF and with partner organizations about the changing use patterns of the preserve. Over the quarter century since VOF opened the preserve to public use, the surrounding population has grown tremendously. The population of the two closest zip codes to the preserve, Gainesville and Haymarket, grew nearly 500% over that time-period.

Unsurprisingly, the visitation to the preserve has also increased dramatically. Under more typical circumstances, the growing enjoyment of the preserve would be unreservedly celebrated. Challengingly for VOF, the Bull Run Mountains Natural Area Preserve has four characteristics which complicate its management and create tensions between visitor demand and conservation of the preserve resources. The preserve is located within a densely populated region with a growing need for designated open space, it lacks the ability to be properly closed when desirable, it is a natural area preserve with a high public profile, and it is a mountain with highly erodible trails where damage is quick, visible, and difficult to reverse.

Like other conservation organizations with popular public access properties, VOF needs to find ways to welcome the public while providing sufficient supervision to minimize negative impacts to the preserve. In 1995 that meant partnering with the Friends of Bull Run (now Bull Run Mountains Conservancy) to organize and oversee the public use of the property. By 2010 that arrangement was no longer adequate and VOF hired a ranger to supervise the weekends when the preserve has its greatest numbers of visitors. By 2015 even that proved insufficient: Natural Heritage staff closed High Point due to overuse and a young hiker was killed while using the train tracks as a short cut.

In 2017 it is clear a new approach is required to increase the supervision of the public and that VOF needs to do so within our current budget limitations. Until the current closure, the preserve was open dawn to dusk, every day and we had one staff person on the preserve from 9-5 Fridays-Mondays. Because the public access area of the property is 800+ acres and VOF has had no office space on or near the preserve, it was entirely possible for visitors to never encounter a VOF presence on the preserve. This lack of VOF visibility led to a perception of the property being ungoverned and uncared for. VOF's management priority should be to influence the behavior of visitors by changing this perception of the preserve.

Increasing VOF staff visibility is the critical part of improving visitor perception and preserve conservation. To achieve this greater VOF visibility, staff recommends that the organization adopt the policy that the preserve should only be open when VOF can provide sufficient staff to greet visitors and supervise the entrance and the trails. This translates to a minimum of two staff people per open period. With limited VOF resources this would mean that the preserve would not be open all day, every day. It would mean reducing the open times so that VOF can focus increased staffing on those time periods when it is open to the public.

For the three months leading up to the winter closure, staff studied the visitation pattern of the preserve. The weekend days are far and away the busiest times at the preserve. On a typical Saturday or Sunday with nice weather there will be a consistent 40-50 cars in the parking lot, with some spikes of 70 cars or more. Mondays through Fridays are more variable, but generally there will be fewer than 10 cars at any given moment.

If VOF is to take the recommended approach of adjusting our operating hours to when we can provide a minimum of two staff people, the weekend days must be included. Increasing VOF supervision of the preserve increases VOF costs however, and it becomes harder to justify the staffing costs on weekdays when only a handful of visitors come. Staff recommends changing the preserve schedule to cover the highest use times and closing the preserve when demand is less. The proposed schedule is Fridays-Sundays, 8am to 6pm, from roughly March 15th-December 15th. The winter period, when our number of visitors drops significantly, would be a regular closure time for the preserve. This proposed schedule should cover the great majority of our current users and amplify VOF resources to where and when we need them.

Of course, reducing our open times alone does not meet the standard of having at least two staff people on the preserve when open. That will be accomplished by the implementation of our preserve internship program. Many public properties hire seasonal help to assist with public supervision and maintenance tasks. These positions are paid and our interns will be no exception. At a rate of \$9 an hour for the three-day week, nine months of the year schedule we have designed, the additional cost to VOF will be approximately \$18,000 a year.

Fortunately for the 2017 season, VOF received a grant from the Sacharuna Foundation for the creation of the internship program. The amount remaining on the grant will cover about 80% of the first-year cost of the interns. Part of the duties of the interns will be to gather data on the number of vehicles and individual visitors per day. This information will be used to determine if a system of entrance fees should or could be developed to offset the operational costs of the preserve.

VOF has never charged an entrance fee on any of its properties, but the changing staffing needs may make that unsustainable. A survey of the entrance fees at nearby public access properties gives some context. The nearby properties owned by regional, state, and federal agencies charge entrance fees. Department of Forestry properties are an exception, but DOF raises revenue with timber harvests.

PROPERTY	AGENCY	DAILY FEE	ANNUAL FEE
Bull Run Regional Park	Northern VA Regional Parks Authority	\$7 per car	\$30
Sky Meadows State Park	VA Dept. Conservation and Recreation	\$5/car \$10/van	N/A
Thompson Wildlife MA	VA Game & Inland Fisheries	\$4 per person	\$23
Prince William Forest Park	National Park Service	\$5/person \$7/car	\$30
Shenandoah National Park	National Park Service	\$25 per car for 7day pass	\$50

We will study initiating an entrance fee in 2018 to recover our costs for our additional staffing needs and, if necessary, potentially reduce our visitor numbers to a more appropriate number for a natural area preserve in a mountain setting. Any entrance fees would only be used to offset our staffing costs; they are not expected to provide revenue for other uses.

Staff would like to publicize the changes described above and a reopening date of April 15th. This date allows us to orient our first group of interns and insure that all the new infrastructure and signage is in place.

Summary of proposed management changes:

- Adopt a policy of having a minimum of two personnel on the property during open times.
- Reopen the preserve on April 15th, 2017 with new hours: Fridays-Sundays, 8-6
- Study the possibility of implementing an entrance fee in 2018.
- Make winter closure an annual occurrence.
- Both winter closure and spring opening dates would be decided by staff in accordance with the preserves best interests in mind.

Bull Run Mountains Conservancy Use Agreement

Any discussion of the agreement with BRMC requires some history and an orientation to where VOF is heading with its operations of public access properties

History of the relationship with BRMC

In the early 1990s, Lavinia and Andrea Currier approached the VOF trustees with an idea about the creation of a “friends of” group to help VOF open the Bull Run Mountains property to limited public use. Their proposal offered the following benefits to VOF and the public:

- To allow the southern section of the preserve to be opened on a limited basis to the public in organized groups and for BRMC to supervise the public use of the property.
- For BRMC to perform land management tasks such as providing site security, developing and maintaining trails, and removing trash.
- For BRMC to operate an educational program.

There was considerable negative reaction from the public to the proposal. There were editorials and letters to the editor in the local and state-wide press and the trustees received written comments as well. The critics of the proposal took issue with a state agency granting an exclusive agreement, in an uncompetitive process, to wealthy donors with no experience in the endeavors they were proposing to carry out. Nevertheless, VOF signed a 15-year lease with Bull Run Mountains Conservancy (formerly called Friends of Bull Run).

That lease expired in 2010 and was not renewed. This decision was made partially because some of the critics had been proven correct and partly because external factors led to changed conditions. When the number of visitors to the property was minimal and confined primarily to locals, the arrangement between VOF and BRMC was workable. As the numbers of visitors grew, the demands on BRMC grew as well, and they did not meet those demands.

To better address the changing needs of the preserve and interests of the public, VOF opted to continue the relationship with BRMC but instead of allowing BRMC to lease the property, BRMC

was given a non-exclusive use agreement. This use agreement gives BRMC permission to operate their educational and research programs on the property but there is no corresponding benefit to VOF. BRMC does not pay for the use of the property, nor do they provide other direct services to VOF.

What is the purpose of VOF owning public access land?

As VOF celebrates its 50th anniversary and looks to the future of its programs and the organization itself, certain priorities have come into focus. Among those priorities is to increase the emphasis the organization places on the tangible public benefits our conservation program brings to the citizens of Virginia. VOF has identified that our public access properties are our best opportunity to better communicate the benefits of our conservation program to the public. These properties should serve as “ambassador” lands where VOF can demonstrate its commitment to the public and educate the public on the benefits of conservation generally and the specifics of VOF’s programs. With this goal in mind, VOF desires several refinements to the operations of all its owned lands to play a more visible and central role in the management of VOF property:

- To be the authoritative source of all information relative to the operations and use of VOF property.
- To define the particular public uses that are appropriate for the Bull Run Mountains Natural Area Preserve and its other landholdings, VOF’s conservation program, and VOF’s organizational goals.
- To develop partnerships that conform with the 2002 Public-Private Educational Facilities Infrastructure Act. The purpose of the PPEA is to ensure the management and use of public assets is transparent, accountable, and subject to public oversight. VOF desires complementary partnerships that are supportive of VOF’s programs and help to deliver outcomes defined by VOF. Following the structure of the PPEA is the best way to protect the public’s interest and to clarify the roles and expectations for both the public and private entities.
- To manage VOF owned lands following recognized standards common to other public properties. These standards relate to natural resource protection, public safety and supervision, liability, and other realities like cost recovery.

VOF’s relationship with BRMC evolved at a time when VOF was a lower profile organization, and did not strive to have a public face or take measures to define its leadership role relative to partner groups. As can happen in partnerships, instead of acquiring a reliably supportive partner, sometimes a competitor is acquired instead. In the case of BRMC, the outcome has been:

- Although BRMC’s programs reach only about 5% of the annual visitors to the preserve, BRMC has thoroughly associated itself in the public consciousness as the owner and manager of the preserve.
- BRMC operates a website and Facebook page that are at the top of any google search related to the preserve.
- As a property owner on the access road to the preserve they have been unwilling to consider our request to collaborate on any options for gating the road to increase site security and public safety.
- BRMC has a de facto exclusive arrangement to operate programs and conduct research on VOF property with no requirement for approval or reporting.

Staff would like the opportunity to renegotiate the terms of the existing use agreement with BRMC. This renegotiation would aim to find a way for VOF to achieve the changes outlined above and have an arrangement with BRMC that reflects our status as neighbors with interests in common rather than partners in land management.

The termination clause in the agreement calls for a notice period of ten months. Staff requests board approval to provide that notice to BRMC. This would give both groups an incentive to work on improving our arrangement over that period.



Southern property boundary of the Bull Run Mountains Natural Area Preserve

Access to the preserve is via Beverley Mill Drive, a public right-of-way but dead end frontage road remnant from construction of I-66. BRMC and Chapman Mill, both organizations founded and supported by Andrea Currier, also are accessed by Beverley Mill Drive. Staff has requested both organizations to consider cooperating on design and installation of a gating system to provide security for all three sites; the BRMC headquarter building, the Chapman Mill historic ruins and site, and the VOF natural area preserve. Staff has not met with success to date.

Note the location of BRMC's headquarters opposite the main entrance to the trails. This is a main contributor to the confusion over the preserve's ownership and management.

HOUSE MOUNTAIN RESERVE
876 acres in Rockbridge County

The trial date is currently set for July 20-21st in Rockbridge County.