CF Natural Resources Stewardship Committee

Keeping Wildlife Wild, Protecting Water Quality, and Protecting Native Habitats

The NRSC developed the CF Natural Resources Stewardship Plan (NRSP) and adopted by the CFPOA board in 2024 as a strategic framework to promote the responsible management of Connestee Falls' natural resources. Its development was a two year collaborative effort between the Natural Resources Stewardship Committee (NRSC) and outside experts, CF stakeholders including the Board, administration and staff, permanent committees, clubs and organizations, and the membership at large.

Luna Moth
Photo courtesy of
Andrew Danner, EcoForesters

The NRSC recognized the need for the plan to be based on scientific data and contracted Equiqnox to conduct a Natural Resources Inventory (NRI), which was completed in 2022. Information and data from the inventory was used to develop the current NRSP, which identified the need for a Forest Management Plan to protect native habitats and a Lake Mangagment Plan to protect Connestee's lakes and streams.

EcoForesters conducted a forest health assessment in 2024 and recently completed a CF Forest Management Plan (FMP) that provides recommended actions to improve the health of our forests and other green spaces. Management priorities include invasive plant and native vine control, hemlock woolly adelgid (HWA) treatment (to protect native flora species), fuel load and heath shrub reduction (to promote advanced forest regenartion), free thinning (to encourage the growth of more ecologically valuable trees including oak and hickory), landowner buy-in Firewise (to reduce fire risk on private properties), trail maintenance (to provide fire breaks and erosion control), establish riparian buffers (to reduce erosion and runoff), ceate early successional habitats, and provide habitats for native pollinators.

The CF NRSP had identified invasive plant mitigation as a priority, which began in 2023 with volunteer task force efforts. With the help of CF Trail Builders and Trail Stewards, Japanese stiltgrass (JSG) was trimmed an/or pulled, bagged, and removed from along CF trail heads and trails. The NRSC has established an Invasive Plant Subcommittee to continue JSG mitigation and other invasive plants that are identified in the FMP including Japanese honeysuckle, oriental bittersweet, Chinese silvergrass, and multiflora rose.

Ultimately, responsibility for protecting our natural resources does not rest on a single committee or the Board, the GM or maintainence team alone. This effort requires ongoing community interest, involvement and action. The committee invites you to explore the NRSC website to learn more about our incrdible natural environment, what the NRSC is doing to protect it, and to discover ways that you can help.

The NRSC thanks all of the volunteers who have and continue to shared their time, knowledge, and passion to promote the NRSC stewardship goals. Their individual and cumulative efforts have helped this community to better understand the value of the native flora and fauna and to develop a desire to to keep wildlife wild, protect our lakes and streams, and protect our amazing natural habitats.

Protecting Native Habitats

By Blueghost Firefly, NRSC Volunteer Writer

Fall is a good time for gardening, both replacing existing plants and adding to current landscaping plans. When planning which plants to replace or add, it's very important to consider if a particular plant fits into our mountain area and to avoid non-native and invasive plants. Species that reproduce quickly and spread aggressively, potentially causing harm are considered "invasive." As residents of Connestee Falls, we value our roles as stewards of our environment mitigation of invasive species is critical.

According to the North Carolina State Extension, "Native plants … developed and adapted to local soil and climate conditions over thousands of years and are vital parts of local ecosystems necessary for the survival of pollinators, insects, birds, mammals, and other wildlife. Native plants form interdependent, highly specialized relationships with other organisms that are necessary for each other's survival. Replacing natives with plants from other regions cannot replicate the naturally occurring complex interactions."

As a starting point, below is a small selection of some common invasive landscape plants suggested substitutions from the NC State Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox. (Underlined links are active.)

Invasive Trees to Avoid (pictured to the right)

Princess or Empress Tree-grows rapidly, freely seeds and spread quickly, displaces native plants.

Bradford Pear-genetic and growth defects weaken branches, spread quickly by seed.

Great alternatives to plant include Flowering Dogwood, Serviceberry, Southern Magnolia, Eastern Redbud, and Fringe Tree. All are ornamental deciduous trees that typically do well in CF, bloom spring to summer, and provide pollinator habitat. Several cultivar varieties are available at local nurseries.

Invasive Shrubs to Avoid (pictured to the right)

Nandina or Sacred Bamboo-high severity poison characteristics, leaves and berries are toxic to humans, pets, birds, and other wildlife.

Multifloral Rose-spreads quickly and easily from seed, forms thickets that choke out native plants.

Alternatives include Clethra (cultivar Ruby Spice) and several varieties of St. John's Wort (avoid *hypericum perforatum*.) Clethra is a late summer bloomer with yellow foliage in the fall. Native varieties of St. John's Wort bloom yellow flowers from early to late summer.

Additional resources include the Connestee Mountain Gardeners CF Landscaping Booklet and a presorted list of plants from the NCSE Plant Toolbox for Fire Resistant and Deer Resistant Plants.

Wildlife Watch

All Bees Are Not Equally Beneficial

By Judy Merrifield, NRSC Volunteer Writer

Photo courtesy of the NC Native Plant Society

The European Honeybee (Apis mellifera) is the NC State insect. However, the honeybee is not native to the United States and was introduced by English settlers in the 1600's. According to the NC Native Plant Society *Honeybees Friend or Foe* "It may surprise you to find that the beloved honey bee is an exotic, non-native, feral inhabitant of North America and as such, poses a considerable potential threat to native bees and all animals that feed on plant nectar and pollen. For the most part this threat has not been recognized nor evaluated scientifically due to the mistaken notion they are native and due to the value of honeybees in agriculture."

It is estimated that Honeybees pollinate $15B worth of crops in the US each year. However, they are not the only pollinators that can do the job. While there is fossil evidence of a prehistoric native North American honeybee (*Apis nearctica*), it went extinct long before the arrival of Europeans. However, North America is home to many native bees such as the bumble bee, mason bee, and leafcutter bee (pictured top to bottom), which are very important pollinators due to the ways that they carry and spread pollen.

The bumble bee is larger, fuzzier, and more rounded than a honeybee. It has a smooth stinger that they can use multiple times where honeybees only sting once, then die. Bumblebees are excellent pollinators because they use buzz pollination (vibrating to dislodge pollen). Bumblebees also live in smaller, underground nests and are active in cooler temperatures.

Mason bees' range in size from ⅜ to ⅝ inch and typically burrow into wood or mud to lay eggs but are strong enough to burrow into concrete. They have one generation per year with a lifespan of only 6 weeks. Masons sting only if agitated, but it is not as painful as other bee stings.

The Leafcutter bee is one of the most Important pollinators but is only active for 4 to 6 weeks. Because it is quite small (¼ inch) and dark gray, it is often being mistaken for a fly. They got their name due to the way they build their nests because it will chew a small circle from the side of a plant to line her nest, which she builds in cavities of rotting wood.

To help increase our native bee populations, plant native pollinator plants that will bloom throughout the spring, summer and fall seasons. It is also important is to avoid using chemical pesticides and herbicides, which will kill beneficial insects too. Visit NCSE Bees of North Carolina Guide and Bee City USA to learn more about native bees and what you can do to protect and promote colonies of these important pollinators.

What Bears Do in September from Bearwise.org

September at a Glance: *Bears enter hyperphagia in September and may look for food up to 20 hours a day. Berries, nuts and acorns are important fall bear foods. Bears can gain two to three pounds a day. Even bears that don't hibernate eat as if they're going to. Moms-to-be look for a good birthing den and nursery.*

Eating Goes Into Hyperdrive

In the cooler days of September, most bears are focused on finding as much food and gaining as much weight as possible. When the eating is good, a bear can put on two to three pounds a day. By hibernation time many bears will have added about 4 inches of fat and gained between 20% and 50% of their summer body weight.

Bears will go to great lengths to get their paws on natural foods. (Photo by Karen Davis, courtesy of Great Smoky Mountain Association)

The quest for calories keeps bears active and foraging up to 20 hours a day. This annual feeding frenzy called hyperphagia is driven by bears' ticking biological clocks counting down to hibernation, when most bears in colder climates retire for the winter and live off the fat they're working so hard now to accumulate. Bears also need much more water now, up to two to three gallons a day, in order to process all those calories and eliminate nitrogenous waste.

Even bears that don't hibernate chow down. Bears are biologically driven to gain weight in the fall even if they live in warmer climates where many bears don't really hibernate, just take it easier and nap a lot. Bears that rely on dependable year-round human food sources often don't hibernate either. But they still eat as if they're going to hibernate.

Fruits and Nuts

In the cool Northeast and upper Midwest, berries and other soft mast crops are at their peak in September and will remain an important bear food into late fall if they're available. In September, blackberries, black cherries, serviceberries, dogwood berries, wild plums, highbush cranberries, nannyberries, black gum fruit and mountain ash are all favored bear foods. Bear scat with mountain ash berries is easy to see because the berries are bright orange. Apples, both wild and domestic, peak in many parts of the country in late summer and early fall and are another favorite bear food.

September also brings a bonanza of nuts (hard mast), including acorns, beechnuts, chestnuts and chinquapins, black walnuts, butternuts, hickory nuts, pecans and pine nuts. There are more than 60 species of oak trees in North America, and every one of them produces edible acorns. Hazelnuts are also a highly prized September mast crop for bears.... but bears are hard pressed to beat the red squirrels to the bounty.

Fun Fact: *Oak trees produce more nuts than all other nut trees combined, both wild and cultivated. No wonder bears hang out in oak forests and on slopes covered with Gambel oak in the fall.*

Nesting Bears

Bears begin climbing into beech trees in early September and make themselves comfortable so they can sit and eat. They also "nest" in oak trees and eat acorns all day. Bears hate to leave any food behind and will sometimes break branches in their quest for both calories and the perfect perch. These "bear nests" are easy to spot from the ground.

About-to-Be Moms Binge Eat, Den-Hunt

"Almost pregnant" female bears that mated in early summer can gain up to 50% of their weight if the eating is good; the more weight they gain, the better the chances their cubs will thrive. These soon-to-be moms industriously search for the perfect birthing den that will also provide a safe sanctuary in spring and early summer when newborn cubs stick close to home. That's why they often choose den sites near large "sanctuary trees" that give cubs a place to rest in the shade when mom is out foraging and scoot up if there is danger. In some areas mothers-to-be pick sites near a body of water or a wetland where early spring foods like skunk cabbage grow.

Never Feed Bears

Do not feed roadside, park or neighborhood bears! You may think that feeding a bear will encourage bears to appreciate you or other humans. But bears don't see it that way.

- Feeding bears includes "unintentional" feeding such as allowing bears to get into bird feeders, barbecue grills and pet food.
- If you see anyone feeding black bears, report the incident to authorities before the bear becomes a problem for everyone.

A fed bear *does* learn something from getting fed. It learns to overcome its instinctive fear of humans. In essence, feeding bears "rewards" bears for approaching people in the same way a treat rewards a dog for coming on command.

Curious Cubs

Cubs are now independent enough to wander a distance from mom to nose around, play, feed or just check things out, but they stay close enough so they can quickly retreat if they sense danger or feel threatened.

Are You Heading into the Woods?

Remember that bears are moving about many hours a day, so pay attention to your surroundings, and be a good loser if a bear beats you to your berry patch. Check out our fall hiking tips article for more tips and download our free materials for easy reference including:

- BearWise Outdoor Safety Tips
- Backcountry Food Storage & Safety Tips

Thanks for being BearWise and helping to keep bears wild.

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