



A NEW TRAINING CENTER FOR APPALACHIANS CONSERVATION

Demand for new training facilities is intensifying as TNC programs at Warm Springs Mountain Preserve and Hobby Horse Farm have converged, provided unparalleled opportunities to exchange expertise, and put our Allegheny Highlands Program on the national map as a catalyst for Appalachians-wide conservation.

Over the past year, TNC has hosted myriad staff and donor workshops with the Virginia fire team, land protection practitioners from Virginia and West Virginia, the Virginia board of trustees, and the leadership of our Central Appalachians program to advance initiatives involving all seven states through which the range passes.

By converting a portion of the farm's rustic horse barn into additional training space, TNC will transform our Warm Springs Mountain complex into a central hub for Appalachians science and conservation.

The planned renovation will feature flexible configurations for up to 32 participants, digital presentation technology and an outdoor gathering space around a fire pit. Working with architects Bushman-Dreyfus, we are now soliciting bids from contractors. As this project requires resources beyond our basic endowment fundraising, additional philanthropic support is essential to bring our vision for the farm to full fruition.

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The Nature Conservancy is finding ingenious ways to use the land and the facilities, from gathering partners there for collaborative work to restoring the land for the benefit of plants and animals. I am inspired by the possibilities being explored here for long-lasting, impactful conservation.

—Truman Semans, Land Donor, Hobby Horse Farm



COUNTING ON WARBLERS

Golden-winged warblers are vibrant and acrobatic songbirds, often spotted dangling upside down from branches as they feed. Unfortunately, this sight has become much rarer over the past 50 years, as populations have declined throughout a large portion of the warbler's Appalachian breeding range.

The birds prefer open shrublands near forest cover and above 200 feet in elevation—making Hobby Horse a good candidate for harboring the warblers. And, in fact, we confirmed their presence on the farm in 2023, leading us to conduct systematic point counts this May. In partnership with researchers from Virginia Commonwealth University, we detected

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Warblers Cont.



Golden-winged warbler survey © Laurel Schablein/TNC

eight breeding males, suggesting 16 birds—far more than initially expected. (Females do not respond to surveyors' playback of calls.)

The survey followed an earlier site visit with a Natural Resources Conservation Service golden-winged warbler habitat coordinator, with whom we outlined a 10-year plan to improve and expand habitat. First steps may include converting fescue to native warm-season grasses and forbs, increasing shrub structure and managing non-native invasive species—improving conditions not only for the warblers, but also for countless other species that rely on open habitat. Longer term, we hope to see the farm serve as a demonstration site to highlight bird-friendly grazing practices, meaningful fire impacts and, of course, a flourishing population of golden-winged warblers.

BURNING BLUE PANTHER AND BEYOND

The Blue Panther controlled burn was first envisioned in 2008, when TNC and the U.S. Forest Service began our joint Warm Springs Mountain Restoration Project. Since then, our controlled burns have grown steadily as we combine adjacent units for greater efficiency and ecological benefits. Our shared capacity, skills and trust also have grown, enabling our partnership to complete one of our most ambitious projects to date: burning 6,670 acres encompassing Blue Panther, Middle Mountain and Mare Run (see map).

With nearly two decades of forest monitoring informing our work, we can accurately track progress toward the healthy forest conditions we set as our goal. Moreover, burning at this scale exemplifies the power of public-private collaboration, raises the profile of our fire program, and enables us to pioneer new approaches and showcase them through the national Fire Learning Network.



Blue Panther burn © Kyle LaFerriere Photography

A BOTANICAL BOUNTY

We are working with a local wildlife and forestry contractor to conduct a botanical survey of Hobby Horse Farm. Starting in early spring and running through the end of the growing season, the survey will involve at least four multi-day visits to the farm. The survey crew is able to lodge onsite at Hobby Horse, thanks to Truman's generosity.

The first site visit is already generating excitement over findings such as rich cove communities and some special botanical areas, so we are looking forward to seeing what may be coming up later in the growing season.

WIRED FOR WORK

We recently added another open bay to the farm shop, increasing storage for fire gear and other equipment. We are also running electricity to the shop. Adding electrical power will create a more functional and comfortable workspace, especially during the winter months.

NEWSBRIEFS

In 2023, our staff completed rehabilitation of the historic Ingalls Trail, which starts on Hobby Horse Farm and runs up the western slope of Warm Springs Mountain onto our preserve. While hikers and horseback riders have used the trail in recent years, we improved sections of the trail to enable UTV access. TNC guests and staff now have a quick and scenic route from the farm to the mountaintop, connecting to our premier visitor destinations at Bear Loop and Bald Knob.

Also in 2023, we planted two dozen American chestnut trees at Hobby Horse Farm. These trees were grown at the American Chestnut Foundation's experimental orchard in Meadow View, using hybrid seeds that are 90% American chestnut and 10% Chinese chestnut. This is a small step toward restoring the iconic American chestnut to its once-prominent place across our Appalachians landscape.

RECENT WILDLIFE SIGHTINGS

Golden-winged warbler (*Vermivora chrysoptera*)

Ruffed grouse (*Bonasa umbellus*)

American kestrel (*Falco sparverius*)

Golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*)

Black bear (*Ursus americanus*)



Black bear © Cassidy Girvin/TNC Photo Contest 2021

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