

# CITIZEN TIMES

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 26, 2017 ■ CITIZEN-TIMES.COM

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK



More than 1,000 acres of the Wildacres Retreat in Little Switzerland has been permanently protected. The owners will continue to operate the retreat center. COURTESY OF CTNC

## Wildacres Retreat gets permanent protection

Blue Ridge Parkway land conserved for water quality, hiking, wildlife

**Karen Chávez**  
Asheville Citizen Times  
USA TODAY NETWORK

**LITTLE SWITZERLAND** – The blue mountain views from Deer Lick Gap on the Blue Ridge Parkway have never been sweeter.

The scenic spot in northern McDowell County looking out over a sweeping mountain forest known as Wildacres will now look wild forever.

On Dec. 20, in a years-long collaboration, the Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina, Conservation Trust for North Carolina and Wildacres Retreat completed conservation easements, or agreements, on 1,076 acres of the privately owned land adjoining the parkway and Pisgah National Forest.

The \$1 million easements allow the mountaintop retreat to stay in operation, but with restrictions that keep the land and the views forever protected from development. They will also protect public hiking trails, water quality, and serve as a safe haven for species in the face of climate change.

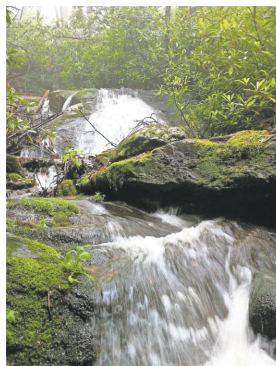
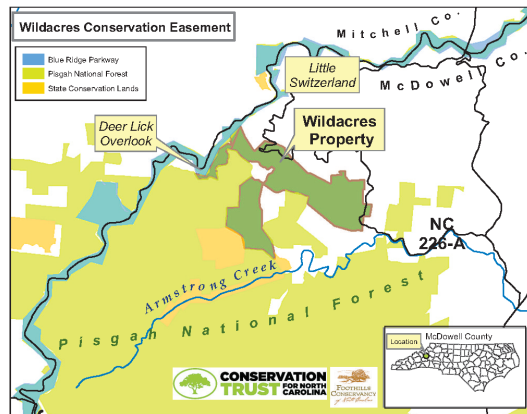
“A common misconception about the Blue Ridge Parkway and the Pisgah National Forest is that just because it looks undeveloped right now, doesn’t mean it always will be,” said Mary Alice Holley, communications director with the non-profit CTNC.

More than half the park lies North Carolina. It was built in the 1930s as a scenic byway.

CTNC’s mission also includes working with 23 other local land trusts through a revolving loan fund, Holley said.

The parkway is one of the most popular units of the National Park Service the parkway with 15.2 million visitors last year, it has a billion-dollar economic impact to the communities it borders, and not to mention, it’s a hotspot for selfies.

It is one of the most popular units of



The Wildacres Retreat Center will protect wildlife habitat and water quality. COURTESY OF RUSTY PAINTER

the National Park Service with 15.2 million visitors last year, has a billion-dollar economic impact to the local communities it borders, and not to mention, it’s a hotspot for selfies.

While surveys have shown that most of these visitors come to see the Facebook-worthy views, the majority of land in the viewshed is fragmented and privately owned.

“This is why it’s important to support lands trusts. We’re actively working to preserve these lands, not only to protect the pristine views when you’re out driving or hiking, but to protect wildlife habitat and clean water resources, which is important for all of us in North Carolina,” Holley said.

Since 1996 the CTNC and other land trusts have protected 65 properties within a two-mile radius of the parkway, including Wildacres, totaling

See WILDACRES, Page 4A

# Wildacres

Continued from Page 1A

34,452 acres.

Thirty of those properties have been conveyed to public land management agencies including the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service and N.C. State Parks, making them open to everyone.

Some of these parkway lands include more than 17,000 acres of the Asheville Watershed in Buncombe County that provides drinking water for the city; 125 acres of the Orchard at Atapass in Mitchell County allowing it to continue as a working apple orchard; and last year, more than 5,000 acres creating the Waterrock Knob Park in Haywood County.

The Wildacres property will not be transferred to the Blue Ridge Parkway but will be monitored by the land trusts.

CTNC works with local land trusts to rank properties for protection based on the amount of land, ecological significance, proximity to the actual parkway and how much the land connects to other protected property, forming seamless stretches of natural communities.

"Because of its position and how it adjoins the parkway, Pisgah National Forest and other North Carolina conservation lands, it's a unique opportunity to protect the watershed of Armstrong Creek, one of highest quality watersheds in McDowell County," said Tom Kenney, land protection director for Foothills Conservancy.

"Wildacres completes a large piece of the puzzle for the protection of high quality watershed. The ecological integrity for the forest, wildlife species and streams is now secured forever," he said.

## Wild history of Wildacres

In addition to the parkway, Wildacres adjoins a Wildlife Resources Commission fish hatchery and more than 10,000 acres of federal Pisgah National Forest Service lands. It is completely forested with a range of elevations.

"All this conservation helps ensure Lake James has a very clean water supply protection source," Kenney said.

There are nearly six miles of hiking trails on the property now open to the public, including one trail into the property from Deer Lick Gap Overlook.

For at least the last century, most of the land has remained in its natural state. Philip Blumenthal, director of the Wildacres Retreat, and his family have owned the precious land since 1936 when his uncle, I.D. Blumenthal, purchased it for \$6,500, considered a bargain even in then.

Before I.D. Blumenthal, a businessman from Charlotte, purchased Wildacres, it was owned by Thomas Dixon, of Shelby, a lawyer, preacher and well-known author.

In 1915 his book, "The Clansman," was made into the controversial film, "Birth of a Nation," romanticizing the Ku Klux Klan.

"With the royalties, he bought Wildacres in the 1920s," said Blumenthal, chairman of the Blumenthal Founda-



**The Wildacres Retreat, a haven for artists and nonprofit educational programs, sits atop the scenic Pompey's Knob in McDowell County. The land adjoining the Blue Ridge Parkway is now protected forever.**

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE CONSERVATION TRUST FOR NORTH CAROLINA



**Wildacres Retreat is a 1,076-acre property adjacent to Pisgah National Forest and the Blue Ridge Parkway.**



**Philip Blumenthal is the director of the Wildacres Retreat off the Blue Ridge Parkway in Little Switzerland.**

tion in Charlotte.

Dixon built lodges for his planned resort, but when the Great Depression hit, he lost everything, including Wildacres, Blumenthal said.

I.D. Blumenthal bought the property from the bank. He and his brother, Herman Blumenthal, who was 21 years younger, ran it as a summer hotel.

In a fitting twist of fate, in 1946 the Blumenthal family dedicated Wildacres to the "betterment of human relations" to encourage people "to learn to live together in harmony," Philip Blumenthal said.

Wildacres Retreat thrives today as a nonprofit conference center governed by a board of directors. The idyllic mountaintop retreat offers its facilities to nonprofits for educational or cultural programs on topics such as music, art, science and religion. Blumenthal lived at the retreat as its director for 15 years.

The retreat retained 115 acres on top of the 3,300-foot-high Pompey's Knob at the end of a winding gravel road off N.C. 226A. The buildings, including lodges, art studios and a 200-seat outdoor amphitheater, are not part of the easement.

Most people who get on the parkway and who come to Wildacres are looking to reconnect with nature and disconnect from technology for a while, said Blumenthal, who approached the Foothills Conservancy about a conservation easement three years ago.

"Having our piece of property adjoin other properties in public ownership and other protected land, like the orchard, the better off for the Wildacres Retreat visitors and all who enjoy the Blue Ridge Parkway," he said.

"We knew we wanted to place the land in conservation for a long time. We

didn't have to do it now, but we didn't see a reason to wait any longer."

The property was valued at \$3 million, but Wildacres sold the easement for a third of that, he said.

Wildacres is now protected under two conservation easements, one held by the state Clean Water Management Trust Fund and one held by CTNC.

Together, the easements will aim to protect wildlife habitat and water quality in five miles of streams of the Armstrong Creek watershed in the headwaters of the Catawba River.

Foothills Conservancy will be responsible for stewardship of the Wildacres Retreat property, while Wildacres Retreat staff will continue to maintain the existing public hiking trails.

The project was primarily funded by a \$1 million grant from the Clean Water Trust Fund awarded to Foothills Conservancy and a \$26,000 donation from Blumenthal, a \$50,000 grant from the Cannon Foundation, and \$177,240 from the Open Space Institute's Resilient Landscapes Initiative, which is made possible through the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation.

The Resilient Landscapes Initiative seeks to build capacity of land trusts working on climate change response.

"This property has tremendous conservation values with its five miles of high quality trout waters, which contain headwater streams in the Catawba River Basin. There were also lots of partnerships that brought matching dollars to help protect the property," said Walter Clark, executive director of the Clean Water Management Trust Fund.

"From the Clean Water perspective, that's incredibly important."