

Celebrating Biodiversity

2022 Annual Report



MAINSRING
CONSERVATION TRUST



From the Board Chair



Today I read yet another report from a leading conservation organization about the looming biodiversity crisis. Using 50 years of data on the health of flora and fauna, they estimated that 40% of animals and 34% of plants in the United States are at risk of extinction. The Southeast was one of the most at-risk regions, its incredible diversity of life facing increased pressure from development as more people move to the region.

As a wildlife biologist, some days it can be hard to grapple with the hard fact that species are disappearing on our watch.

But there is hope.

In this report, you'll learn about Mainspring Conservation Trust's conservation of a third large tract comprising Onion Mountain — an area at one time slated for development but, thanks to generous landowners, will now be protected in perpetuity, continuing to provide a home for rare plants, endemic salamanders and colorful songbirds.

You'll hear about the Ela Dam and Mainspring's involvement as a key partner in removing the antiquated dam on the lower reach of the Oconaluftee River so that fish and other aquatic organisms, from Hellbenders to Sicklefin Redhorse, can once again migrate upstream through the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians' Qualla Boundary and into Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Finally, you'll learn about a project to inventory biodiversity on one of Mainspring's first flagship conservation projects, the Needmore Game Lands.

Thank you for supporting Mainspring Conservation Trust so that we can continue to do the good and necessary work of stewarding Creation, biodiversity and life.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Jason Love'.

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Privilege of Living

When asked to describe Mainspring's 2022 Volunteer of the Year Susan Coe, Stewardship Manager Kelder Monar lit up. "Susan's enthusiasm is contagious," he says. "Friends, family, neighbors — she's our best volunteer recruiter. She shows up ready to work and is willing to travel. She's been to work days all across our service area."

Indeed, in Susan's own words, she has "torn down and rebuilt buildings, removed invasive plants and planted trees, taken out and built trails, and torn down fences and built one." To hear more about her volunteer work, we sat down for a chat with our organization's longest-serving volunteer:

How did you first get involved in volunteering with Mainspring?

I like to volunteer in general, and I've met some interesting people while doing so. To me, it's payback for the privilege of living. With Mainspring, I had just moved here [Coe lives in Bryson City], knew very few people, and wanted to meet others in a positive way. I moved in Nov. 4, 2004 and volunteered at a Mainspring (then LTLT) event — picking up trash on the Needmore Tract — on Nov. 13.

So you've been volunteering for more than 18 years! What are your most memorable projects?

Probably the most memorable are cleaning up old houses after Mainspring purchases a property. Some of the

buildings are so foul — one had been abandoned with a leaky roof and had leftover food in it from seven years prior! In another, we found unopened Christmas presents from the 1970s. It's crazy how many dumpsters and recycling loads were created.

What advice would you give to others interested in volunteering with Mainspring?

Come on out! We're a friendly group and welcome newcomers. You'll get a bit of exercise and fresh air, meet some new people and be rewarded with cookies (we work for snacks!). You don't need to bring anything besides appropriate clothing and a willing attitude — Mainspring provides all the tools.

"You don't need to bring anything besides appropriate clothing and a willing attitude."

—Susan Coe



On the Job

MAINSRING'S 2022 LAND CONSERVATION HIGHLIGHTS include projects around the region – from protecting water quality and preserving views to creating recreational areas and conserving farms and forests.

1 Mason Branch Wetland

Cherokee County, 30 acres
Between Andrews and Murphy, Mainspring has plans for much-needed Valley River access and stream restoration on this tract. The riverine wetland is also a good candidate for a rivercane nursery.

2 Lower Lands Creek Conservation Easement

Swain County, 38 acres
The tract, owned by the late George and Elizabeth Ellison, shares a boundary with Great Smoky Mountains National Park and is visible from Nantahala National Forest and Tuckasegee River. The easement was possible due to a grant from N.C. Land and Water Fund.

3 Horseshoe Bend Divestment

Swain County, 5 acres
This entirely forested property sits within an inholding in Needmore Game Lands, on the Little Tennessee River. The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission purchased the property in 2022 to add to the more than 5,000 acres of game lands.

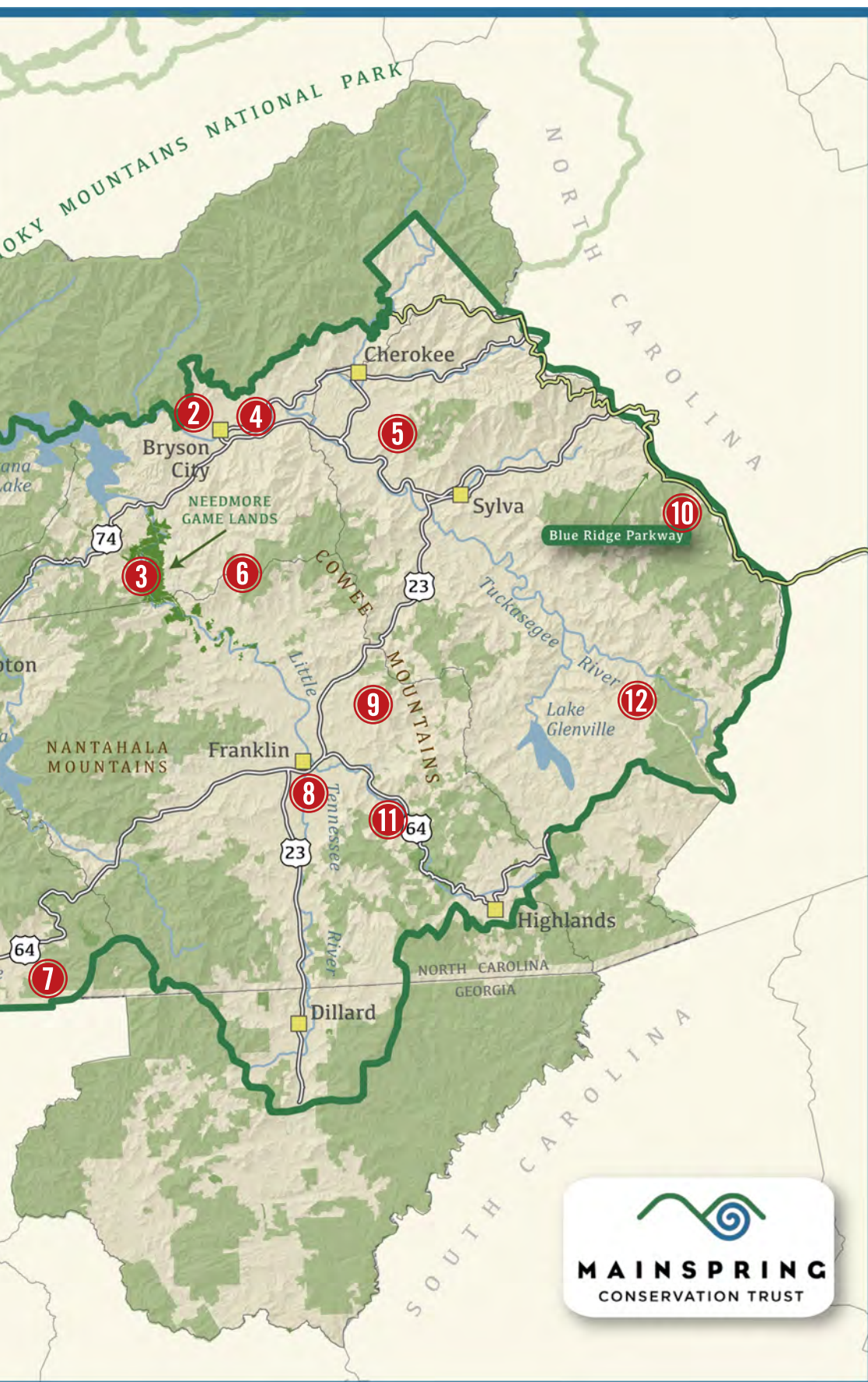
4 Darnell Farms Conservation Easement

Swain County, 68 acres
The conservation of this popular agri-tourism farm was partially funded by a grant from the N.C. Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund and private donations. One of the most productive farms in western N.C., the property is adjacent to Kituwah Mound, considered the place of origin for the Cherokee people.

5 Peggy Gap Conservation Easement

Jackson County, 126 acres
The donated forested tract sits on the Western Plott Balsam Mountains and holds a portion of Camp Creek watershed, flowing into the





Tuckasegee River, including 6,000 feet of unnamed tributaries.

6 Polecat Ridge
Macon County, 135 acres
 An important component of the wildlife corridor between the Cowee and Nantahala mountains, this tract protects slopes along Bradley Creek, a tributary of Little Tennessee River.

7 Sharptop Ridge
Clay County, 34 acres
 This privately owned property was a U.S. Forest Service inholding and had been a priority for the Tusquittee Forest Service District. Mainspring will hold this property until USFS acquires it to add to public lands.

8 Greenway Extension Divestment
Macon County, 14 acres
 The Town of Franklin purchased the tract in 2022. The CE, owned by N.C. Land and Water Fund, allows for trails, a parking area and stream crossings for future public access. With a streambank restoration now completed, Mainspring intends to begin wetland restoration in 2023.

9 Onion Mountain III
Macon County, 124 acres
 Adjacent to the 325-acre property donated to Mainspring in 2021, this tract includes Onion Mountain's prominent peak at 3,765 feet. Mainspring intends to open it to the public by 2024. (article on page 11)

10 High Knob
Jackson County, 143 acres
 Within the headwaters of Caney Fork Creek and the Blue Ridge Parkway viewshed, the parcel has more than 3,700 feet of stream and includes High Knob's summit, 5,170 feet above sea level.

11 Fish Hawk Road
Macon County, 1.5 acres
 Donated to increase access and protection of national forest resources, this tract features steep wooded terrain and a deep gully created by Peaks Creek, a tributary of the Cullasaja River.

12 Soapstone Ridge Conservation Easement
Jackson County, 247 acres
 With help from an N.C. Land and Water Fund grant, Mainspring placed a CE on this property, which offers views of the Cowee, Balsam and Great Smoky mountains, protects resources at Soapstone Ridge and provides opportunities for recreation.



To hear Joey Owle tell it, the events leading up to potentially removing the nearly century-old Ela Dam, situated on the Oconaluftee River in Swain County, were almost serendipitous.

Big Dam Deal

Following an accidental sediment release in October 2021 that affected the downstream reach of the river, Owle, secretary of agriculture and natural resources for the Eastern Band of Cherokee

Indians, picked up his phone and called Chuck Ahlrichs, president of Ela Dam owner Northbrook Energy. “I literally googled his name,” Owle says, laughing. When Ahlrichs showed immediate interest in

removing the dam, Owle got to work. “The accidental release coincided with an unprecedented funding opportunity from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law,” Owle explains. “That, coupled with determined parties all-around ready to pursue the idea through a social and environmental justice lens, was perfect timing.”

He then quickly pulled together a coalition of federal, state, tribal, nonprofit and private partners — the EBCI, Northbrook, the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, American Rivers and the Southern Environmental Law Center, among others.

Owle called Mainspring Executive Director Jordan Smith. “I knew whatever we do, we could do it better with Mainspring,” he says.

The dam was originally constructed nearly a century ago to support rural electrification. Now, the social, economic and environmental values of reestablishing a free-flowing Oconaluftee River vastly outweigh the less-than-one megawatt of electrical output it generates for Northbrook. The company also wanted to improve relations with organizations and agencies that work to protect and improve the nation’s rivers.

“Removing a dam is the fastest way to bring a river back to life,” says Erin McCombs, Southeast conservation director for American Rivers. “This project is one of the most exciting river restoration efforts in the U.S.”

The overwhelming support to remove the dam due to the impact

Sediment partially obstructs the flow of Oconaluftee River downstream of Ela Dam following an accidental sediment release in fall 2021. The photo on page 6 shows the river as it looked before.



it would make on the waters was the impetus that led Mainspring to take a step it's never before taken: ownership and removal of the dam. Removal of Ela Dam will open 549 river miles of the Oconaluftee River and its tributaries. Streams across the entire Qualla Boundary and parts of Great Smoky Mountains National Park will connect once again to the lower Oconaluftee and Tuckasegee rivers. Additionally, many culturally significant fish species will have access to spawning areas in upstream Tribal waters after being disconnected from them for almost a century.

In November 2022, Mainspring and Northbrook signed an Asset Purchase Option and Sale Agreement. The agreement provides Mainspring or its assign the option to acquire the entire impoundment

structure, lands and property for nominal value if it determines dam removal is feasible given available funding — conditioned on receipt of approvals from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission and other reviewing agencies.

Smith says that, though this is an unprecedented step in Mainspring's history and uncommon with land trusts in general, it made sense, as each partner in the coalition brought their organizations' strengths to find a creative path forward. "As a land trust, we are used to owning assets," he explains. "American Rivers brings their expertise in managing dam removals, while the NCWRC and USFWS have identified and provided funding and prioritized this project within their offices. And without the leadership from the

"Removing a dam is the fastest way to bring a river back to life. This project is one of the most exciting river restoration efforts in the U.S."

—Erin McCombs,
American Rivers



Joey Owle of EBCI, Erin McCombs of American Rivers and Mainspring Executive Director Jordan Smith meet to discuss the dam removal in Swain County.

“The Tribe has cultivated an unprecedented opportunity with the support of our partners to restore the Oconaluftee River to its natural state.”

–Joey Owle

EBCI and Northbrook’s willingness to essentially contribute the property to the effort, we absolutely could not move forward. This is truly a team effort.”

Recognizing that dam ownership and removal bring unique liabilities to the table — separate from those of day-to-day land trust activities — Mainspring established the Ela Dam Project, LLC, in December 2022. The LLC will own and manage the dam after it no longer generates power, allowing the dam removal and stream restoration phases of the project to move forward in the coming years. Mainspring also retained experienced, national-level dam-removal legal counsel at Water and Power Law Group, as well as North Carolina-based legal counsel

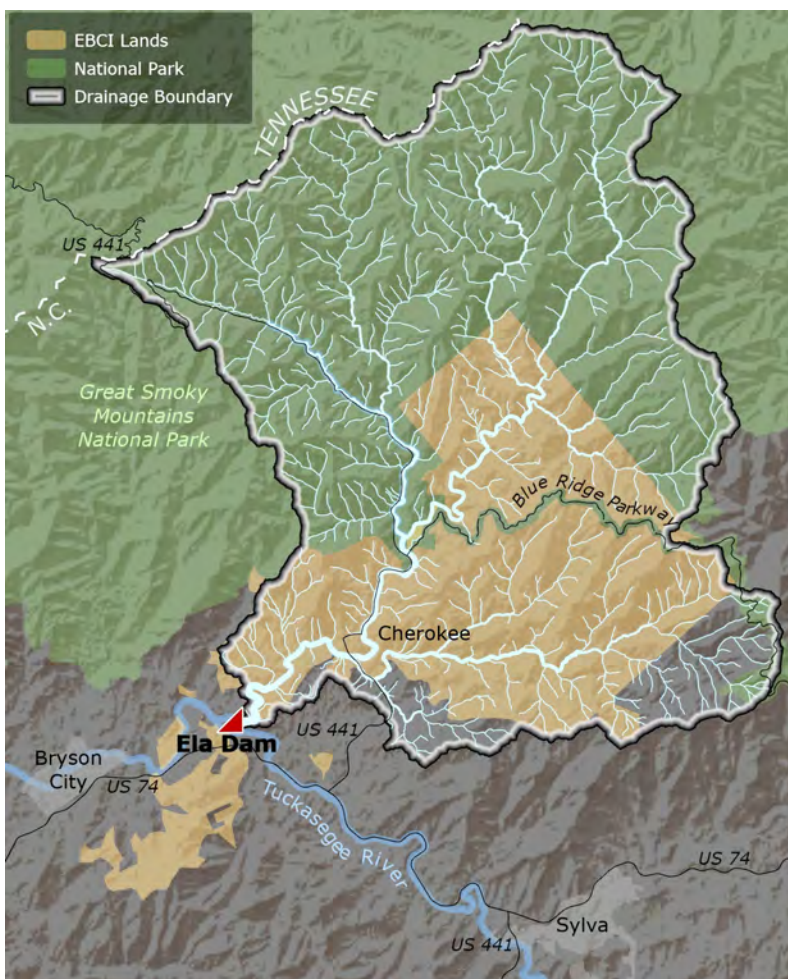
specializing in land trusts and limited liability companies, to shepherd staff through the process.

“Although Mainspring was in a position to help with this innovative project, we have an obligation to ensure that it would not jeopardize the strength and longevity of Mainspring’s other conservation work,” Smith says. “The power and determination of the coalition members to work as partners to see this restoration through is remarkable and makes it an honor to be a part of this effort. We are also grateful to have a willing seller in Northbrook, which is very uncommon, as is the opportunity to have the funding available to see the project through. It is an amazing intersection of organizations and opportunities, yet it’s far from a done deal. Still, we’re hopeful.”

Mainspring and Northbrook’s signing of the Asset Purchase Option and Sale Agreement allows the coalition to continue its work on the next phase of project planning. With funding from the NCWRC, American Rivers is leading the design and engineering studies for dam removal while the coalition moves forward with planning and fundraising. Mainspring’s purchase option will expire in August 2023.

“The Ela Dam has disconnected our river and aquatic relatives for nearly 100 years,” Owle says. “The Tribe has cultivated an unprecedented opportunity with the support of our partners to restore the Oconaluftee River to its natural state.

“I do not think we realize the breadth of benefits of this restoration, given that it has been generations since the dam was first constructed,” Owle continues. “This project truly represents an outlook of seven generations and what we aim to accomplish for our future community members.”





Bloomin' Onion

The end of the year brought the beginning of a 124-acre expansion to Mainspring's newest public preserve on Onion Mountain.

The tract, adjacent to the 325-acre Macon County property donated to Mainspring in 2021, includes the mountain's peak, and two large geodesic domes. The domes had been abandoned for years and are the only structures on the property, which was otherwise primed and ready to be developed. "We made an offer the same day another buyer made a higher offer," says Mainspring Land Conservation Manager Emmie Cornell. "Thankfully, the seller wished it to be conserved, so they selected Mainspring's offer and conservation strategy." Mainspring purchased the property through a combination of donations and a no-interest loan from major supporters of the organization, which will be repaid by grant funds.

At 3,765 feet, Onion Mountain is a locally prominent peak within

the Cowee Mountain range in the Little Tennessee River watershed. The terrain around the mountain peak ranges from steep to gently sloped and is almost entirely forested. The Onion Mountain Natural Heritage Area extends onto this tract, and several rare species call it home. Visible from the Blue Ridge Parkway, future visitors will find numerous intermittent streams, seeps and ephemeral drainages that flow into Ellijay Creek.

"Mainspring has conserved more than 490 acres along the slopes and in the hills of Onion Mountain over the past 16 years," says Cornell. "To conserve the peak of the mountain — an incredible landmark in Macon County and home to 124 acres of unique and special habitat — is really the 'onion' on top!"

Mainspring intends to remove the domes on the property before conveying a state-held conservation easement and incorporating the conserved tract into the Onion Mountain Preserve, and to have it open to the public in 2024.



The geodesic domes designed for habitation will be removed in 2023.



"The more we can understand and know about the natural world, the better equipped we are to preserve and maintain it."

–Jason Meador

The 13-mile stretch of Little Tennessee River that runs through Needmore Game Lands is widely appreciated for its recreation and scenery, but it also holds significant biological importance: it is believed to contain all aquatic wildlife present before the impacts of colonization. In the early aughts, the effort to protect its biodiversity became Mainspring's flagship conservation project, and the land surrounding this area is now managed by the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission.

Around the time that Needmore was purchased, the Gatlinburg-based nonprofit Discover Life in America was ramping up its All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory to catalog

and understand every species living in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. While DLiA's work has focused solely on the park, the example has become something other scientists are interested in replicating, including in Needmore.

"Needmore is a natural site to extend the ATBI concept," says Mainspring Senior Scientist Bill McLarney. "The assemblage of aquatic and riparian species that once occupied much of the region were wiped out by Fontana Reservoir, but they still exist just upstream from there, in and along the Little Tennessee River at Needmore," he explains. "Needmore protects a unique set of biodiversity; to manage it properly, we need to



know and understand it.”

One key element of that biodiversity — fish — has already been well-documented for more than 33 years thanks to Mainspring’s stream biomonitoring program, led by Dr. McLarney. With adequate funding, DLiA has expressed interest in extending that work to all different forms of life at Needmore, eventually creating a complex database of species locations, habitats, genetic diversity, population density, symbiotic relationships and predator-prey interactions.

Mainspring’s role in this project would be to recruit and coordinate investigators, students and local volunteers to help generate scientific knowledge and share it across all

sectors of the community. “You can play Pokémon GO on your phone and capture imaginary critters, or you can get outside in the woods and make a meaningful impact by documenting real plants and animals — many of which are rare or poorly known — through apps like iNaturalist,” explains Mainspring Aquatics Program Manager Jason Meador. Mainspring will also be working with partners to host BioBlitzes, where volunteers can join experts to search for particular taxa.

“The more we can understand and know about the natural world, the better equipped we are to preserve and maintain it,” says Meador. “And Needmore is a perfect place to extend this scientific work.”



Needmore is home to the Eastern Hellbender, Sickleafin Redhorse and endangered mussels.

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Mainspring gratefully acknowledges the following contributors for their generous support.

Donors with names in **bold** have given for ten years or more.
Donors with an * have given for fifteen years or more.

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Clubmosses — also known as princess pine or ground cedar — are not mosses at all, but relatives of ferns. Previously towering as tall as trees in the era predating dinosaurs, their small stature today makes them easily overlooked. Still, you can find species of clubmosses in virtually every habitat in western North Carolina.

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Like poison dart frogs in the Amazon, this bright red eft, the juvenile stage of the **Eastern Red-Spotted Newt**, signals that a toxin in their skin would make them a poisonous snack for any predators who dared approach. The little guy in the photo was found on Mainspring's King Meadows property in Graham County.



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In Honor of Sharon Fouts Taylor

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Like humans, **robins** eat different types of food depending on the time of day — more earthworms in the morning and more fruit later in the day. Because the robin forages primarily on lawns, it is vulnerable to pesticide poisoning and can be an important indicator of chemical pollution. *Photo: Bob Appleget*

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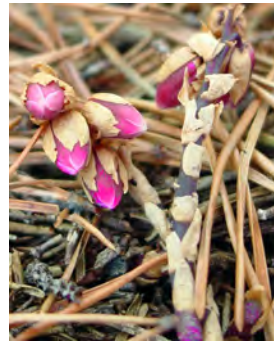
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Monotropsis odorata, or **Sweet Pinesap**, has a sweet smell compared to nutmeg, cinnamon or violets. This rare plant lives on the mountain ridges of our service area, and they bloom in both the early spring and late fall.

Lynn, Beverly
 Macauley, Kimberly
Mack, Ann*
 Manning, Tanya
 Martin, Adrian

Meadors, Helen*
 Midgett, Russell & Beverly
Miles, Vanessa*
 Miller, Lulu & David
 Millitello, Debbie

In Memory of

Patricia Barnett
 Ted & Nell C. Blaine
 Suzanne Brock
 Adam Clawson
 Bonnie Faye Collins
 John H. Conover, Jr.
 Wilford Corbin
 Hazel Davis
 Willis P. Davis
 Agnes DeHart
 Disner Family
 Sylvia Hardaway
 Sara Jo Hedgepeth
 David B. High
 Dr. Trent Johnson

Donor

Teresa Falzone
 Hugh & Gaynelle Blaine
 Denise Tulloh
 Anonymous
 Sweet Georgia Lacemakers at Monticello, Georgia
 Ken Conover & Lynda Anderson
 Marilyn Crawford
 Susan Wiesmayer
 Bruce & Jane Riggs
 Edward & Bo Bryant
 Sue Disner
 Jean Carey
 Sylvia Walbolt
 Joann Clark
 Brett Riggs
 Edward & Bo Bryant

In Memory of

George Kaye
 Sally Kesler
 Jeffrey Lawson
 Wendell Ligon
 Verlon & Annie Poindexter
 Margaret Ramsey
 Dave Rehling
 Stu Ryman
 Walt & Dee Smith
 Virginia & Edward Sobek
 Dr. Lucille & William Stickel
 Hoop Tebault
 James Turpin
 Dick Wallace
 Mark Wiggins
 Nancy Wiley

Donor

Connie Kaye
 Barbara White
 Vanessa Miles
 Vanessa Miles
 Robert Poindexter
 Joe & Theresa Ramsey
 Connie Rehling
 Nancy Ryman
 Gibson & Patricia Smith
 Chris Sobek
 Richard & Nancy Coon
 B. J. Tebault
 Wanda Willis & Bruce Lockaby
 Gloria Wallace
 Jill & Michael Stillwagon
 Judith Loeffler

Mainspring Legacy Society

David Adams

John Beckman & Jane
Finneran

Gary Bradshaw

Chris Brouwer

Paul Carlson

Peter Carlson

Sarah Carothers

Mary Dodson

Mike & Betsy Fleenor

Bob & Judy Grove

Nancy & Bill Grove

Phil & Connie Haire

Jean Hunnicutt

Terrie & Martin Kelly

Carol Litchfield

Kenneth & Diana McKinney

Carla Norwood & Gabe
Cummings

Donna Orford & Jerry
Cheek

Cathy Ramos & Steve
Barnes

Larry & Kendra Rasche

Marilyn Reid

Susan Reinheimer & Greg
Coyle

David & Ann Setzer

John & Cathy Sill

Craig & Ann Smith

Ramelle Smith

Sharon & George Taylor

Sylvia Walbolt

Larry Warren

Karen Youngblood

Donors listed are those who have included Mainspring in their will or estate plan that we are aware of as of Feb. 15, 2023. If your name has been inadvertently omitted, we apologize. Please contact us so we can correct our records.

Monar, Kelder & Heather

Moore, Robert & Julie
Hotchkiss

Munday, Doris*

Murphy, Pamela*

Neely, Andrew

Newcomb, Rachel

Nobel, James

**Norton, Anne & Gary
Kauffman***

Ochsenfeld, Michael

Olson, Candy

Olson, Janis

Owens, Ben & Hygie Starr

Pangle, Luke

Penland Contracting Co.,
Inc.

Perry, Vic & Margaret*

Piazza, Charles

Posey-Davis, Sara & Ryan
Davis

Powers, Becky

Pritchard, Joseph & Paige

Putman, Will & Barbara

Pyron, Doug & Kathleen

Ramsey, Joe & Theresa*

Ratcliff, Kathy

Reed, Kevin & January

Rehling, Connie*

Reid, Marilyn

**Reisdorph, Tom & Sue
Ann***

Riggs, Bruce & Jane

**Ritchie, Bruce & Sue Ellen
Smith***

**Roe, Chuck & Charlotte
Jones-Roe***

Rogers, Bob & Betty

Rogers, Philip & Helen

**Smith, Janet & John
Mordhorst**

Smith, Tom & Olga

Sobek, Chris*

Sperry, Paul

Staples, Phil & JoAnn

Stewart, Debi



River otters are very flexible and can make sharp, sudden turns that help them catch fish. Made for semi-aquatic living, they can stay underwater for up to eight minutes and run at speeds of up to 15 miles an hour on land. This makes them susceptible to both habitat destruction and water pollution.

Ross, Jackie

Russ, Don*

Russell, Janet

Sakowski, Carolyn & Alton
Franklin

Schmidt, Maggie & Dick

Schweizer, Louis

Sharp, Mike

Sharpe, Diane

Shelton, Ellen & Jim

Simpson, Georgia

Smith, Gibson & Patricia

Stork, George

Sullivan, Dave & Ellie*

Sullivan, Dorothy

Suminski, Claire & Joe*

Sumner, David

Sussman, Stuart & Carol
Sweet Georgia Lacemakers
at Monticello, Georgia

Swift, Lloyd & Mike

Tebault, B. J.*

Tilley, Rex

Timan, Andrew and Jacque

Tolbert, Laurie

Towers, Eric & Patricia

Traverse, Richard & Patty*

Trevathan, Bob & Sandie

Tribble, Arthur & Lori

Tucker, Robert & Corbin

Tulloh, Denise

Tyler, Dan & Linda

Unitarian Universalist
Fellowship of Franklin

Unity Church of the
Mountains

Upson, John

Van Horn, Bill & Sharon

Wallace, Gloria*

Wallace, Karen

Weldon, Richard

White, Barbara*

Wiesmayer, Susan

Wikstrom, Judith & Pat

Wilde, Kathy

**Wilkinson, Gary &
Lynne***

Willoughby, Lynn

**Winchester, Leonard &
Susan***

Woodard, Eric









Wooten, Toni & Rick

Wright, Clark & Johanna*

Wright, Whitney

2022 Mainspring Finances

2022 Source of Funds

Restricted Giving	\$2,622,527	46.1%	
Government Grants	\$2,112,293	37.1%	
Unrestricted Giving	\$659,809	11.6%	
Land Sale Proceeds	\$85,695	1.5%	
Stewardship Fund	\$71,811	1.3%	
Organization Grants	\$68,313	1.2%	
Rent/Interest/Sales	\$47,531	0.8%	
Program Services	\$18,323	0.3%	
TOTAL	\$5,686,302	100%	

2022 Use of Funds

Land	\$4,831,521	85.9%	
Water	\$333,949	5.9%	
Administration	\$223,056	4.0%	
Communications	\$118,497	2.1%	
Fundraising	\$67,128	1.2%	
Cultural Heritage	\$47,707	0.8%	
TOTAL*	\$5,621,858	100%	

Pre-audit figures

*Amount released from restrictions and included in 2022 expense = \$674,323



MAINSRING CONSERVATION TRUST

P. O. Box 1148, Franklin, NC 28744

Conserving the waters, forests,
farms and heritage of the
Upper Little Tennessee and
Hiwassee river valleys in
western North Carolina and
northern Georgia.



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Bag Some Mainspring Merch!

Visit mainspringconserves.org and click “store” at the top right to check out all the hats, water bottles and T-shirts we have for sale — or head to mainspringconserves.org/events to purchase goods in person at any of our upcoming events! All proceeds support conservation in the Southern Blue Ridge.

