

In failing to protect 40 acres along the New River, we ended up protecting 1477 acres of New River watershed, contiguous to the Jefferson National Forest in Wythe County. How? And who's "we"?

The questions describe a mystery familiar to anyone involved with land conservation in our time. The mere effort (and frequent failure) to accomplish one thing seems to open unseen doors to other lands, helpers, and fortuitous events nobody could have foreseen. Land-conservation provides good exercise in walking-by-faith.

In summer of 2004, Beth Obenshain came to Wythe County to meet with NRLT member Andy Kegley about his farm's conservation easement. She took the opportunity of her visit to meet with Wytheville Realtor Jim Willis about 40 acres he was selling on New River, downstream from Foster Falls. NRLT was hoping to find a conservation buyer, as land along the river was rapidly turning from wild beauty into lit-up, lawn-mowed developments.

(Meanwhile, NRLT and Western Virginia Land Trust had just spent four collective years trying to conserve the historic, river-corridor Jackson Farm, at Ivanhoe, but had met with many setbacks. Finally, the date looming for an auction we knew developers would attend, we called Trust for Public Land.\* TPL heroically and speedily hired and sent a Wytheville lawyer to the auction with funds to bid. Although one of the heirs, Aline Jackson, ended up rescuing the land herself, we remembered TPL's heartening extension of help.)

So when Jim Willis mentioned, at the meeting about the 40 river acres, that he was also selling 1,477 acres of mountainous woods in the Black Lick near the Jefferson National Forest, we sent TPL a query for help.

TPL is able to step in and secure properties while they work with partners to identify and raise public and/or private funding for the purchase of the property, and they have helped acquire over 500,000 acres of land nationwide for the Forest Service.

TPL contacted Willis and secured a two-year option agreement with the landowners in November 2004. The land remained perched atop the National Forest Service's wish-list for acquisitions. NFS needed the purchase funds appropriated from the federal government. So NRLT and Western Virginia Land Trust members called and wrote our Virginia senators, in the spring of 2006, to request these appropriations. The effort was, to our keen disappointment, unsuccessful.

Lynda Frost, TPL's project manager for this tract, regretfully suggested releasing the option—which would be up in late November anyhow. But she agreed to a last-ditch effort to rustle up a conservation buyer.

NRLT sent out notices, David Hurt of Conservation Partners, LLC gave suggestions, and I cut-and-pasted the "to" lists from various regional e-mailers, hoping strangers would forgive the unasked-for mail if it could save any acres. This "spam" proved fruitful, even unearthing a useful North Carolina ecology fund none of us had ever heard of. Frost was heartened by the enthused response and, instead of giving up the option, began interviewing prospective buyers.

But with the option about to run out in November, Frost realized an immediate rescue was needed. She asked conservationist Richard Pritzlaff to drive with her down from D.C. to visit the Black Lick land this past October.

Pritzlaff, director of the Biophilia Foundation, buys threatened parcels, restores habitat, places the land under wildlife-friendly conservation easements, and resells. He and Lynda met on the land with Willis and Andy and Reed Kegley. Andy's father George, of Roanoke, grew up in this part of Wythe County, so Andy was able to provide the history of the land and neighboring farms.

“What makes this property unique is that it represents part of the headwaters of the Reed Creek (and New River) watersheds, and the tract is an isolated valley between two ridges,” Kegley noted. “It's not every day that a 1400-acre opportunity comes on the market, much less to be protected by a conservation buyer. It's adjacent to a large portion of the Jefferson NF, and is rich in wildlife.”

Pritzlaff saw these qualities as we explored the hilly woods, poplars flapping yellow flags overhead in the blue sky of the day, the clear creek galloping out of the mountain, vigorous and free of silt.

“It is a rare privilege to be able to step in and so quickly protect such an exceedingly important parcel,” he said in February. “By reducing habitat fragmentation along the National Forest boundary, and restricting forest management to that which only enhances wildlife habitat, this property will be managed as well as or better than the National Forest that surrounds it on three sides. Keeping it in private hands also keeps it free of changing Federal budgets and management policy.”

The Black Lick land now belongs to Biophilia and awaits a conservation buyer. Pritzlaff, Frost, and Jim Willis are working with Neal Kilgore of Virginia Outdoors Foundation, finalizing terms of the conservation easement.\*\*

“Most conservation successes are achieved through partnerships,” Frost noted, “And this one took multiple partners. The end result will be that the land will be stewarded in a way that will enhance the surrounding public lands, and improve the habitat and water quality in the area.”

Future generations of thanks go to Frost, Pritzlaff, TPL, VOF, Willis, David Hurt, NRLT and WVLT members, the Kegleys, a beautiful creek, the land, and all the unseen forces helping to link conservation efforts in our time.

Most vitally, we can take heart that the mere effort to conserve any place, anywhere, despite the daunting odds, leads to good and possibly unexpected outcomes somewhere. And so every NRLT member—by word of mouth, concern, donations, prayers, or an in-tune awareness of the land and people around them—helps protect our remaining rural sanctuaries and their inhabitants.

\*for more information on TPL, visit [TPL.org](http://TPL.org).

\*\*Meanwhile, an adjoining farm of 130 acres has come up on the market through Willis. With 500 feet of road frontage, the clear creek from Biophilia's protected land, 12 acres of bottomland, and some upper woods, this vulnerable farmland can be seen by contacting Willis at 276-228-8477 or [mwillis@wytheville.com](mailto:mwillis@wytheville.com).