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Valley Conservation Council Announces New “Permanently Protecting Wildlife Corridors in the Shenandoah Valley” Grant Program to Protect Wildlife Movement in the Region
Program Made Possible by Major Grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation

STAUNTON, VA (December 1, 2023) – Valley Conservation Council (VCC) today announced the launch of the “Permanently Protecting Wildlife Corridors in the Shenandoah Valley” grant program that will fund efforts to establish permanent land protection for wildlife movement between the Blue Ridge and Allegheny Mountains. The project was fully funded following the receipt of a nearly \$750,000 grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation’s (NFWF) “Chesapeake WILD Grants Program,” which supports efforts to conserve, steward, and enhance fish and wildlife habitats and related conservation values in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

The wildlife corridor project aims to create chains of protected land traversing a narrow point in the Shenandoah Valley between the Blue Ridge Mountains to the east, and Allegheny Front to the west along Buffalo Creek, Cedar Creek, and Purgatory Creek in Rockbridge and Botetourt Counties. It aims to expand the permanent protection of wildlife corridors on more than 2,000 acres of private land.

Role of Wildlife Protection in Land Conservation

Wildlife corridors are stretches of protected habitat that enable wildlife to move safely between and across large areas of land. Maintaining corridors between large undeveloped areas allows wildlife populations to move freely for food, habitat, and breeding, keeping wildlife populations resilient and genetically diverse. Habitats linked by protected corridors also protect wildlife populations from the ongoing impacts of climate change.

“As development intensifies within the Shenandoah Valley, more and more habitats become fragmented,” says Taylor Evans, Director of Land Protection for Valley Conservation Council. “Without permanent land conservation in key corridor zones, the Blue Ridge ecoregion could eventually become a genetically isolated ‘island,’ unconnected to the vast areas of protected public and private lands in the Alleghenies to the west. This could lead to inbreeding, population declines and, in extreme cases, species extinction.”

The NFWF grant builds upon decades of work in land conservation within the Buffalo Creek-Purgatory Mountain Special Project Area designated by Virginia Outdoors Foundation in 2013 and sponsored by Rockbridge Conservation (formerly Rockbridge Area Conservation Council) and VCC. Past conservation successes, including conservation easements on private lands, the creation of Natural Bridge State Park and Short Hills Wildlife Management Area, and the protection of National Forest lands to the east and west necessitate another push to fill in remaining gaps within the area to permanently protect passageways for wildlife as they move across the Valley and under I-81.

Unprecedented Funding

“We are extremely grateful to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation for their support of this project,” says Evans. “This incredible investment in conservation work will provide much needed resources to further land conservation in Rockbridge and Botetourt Counties to protect an invaluable part of the Upper James watershed. This support not only benefits the wild flora and fauna of the area, but also the communities that depend on the life-giving gifts our forests and waterways provide.”

VCC and its partners will protect wildlife corridors by facilitating conservation easements on privately owned land. The NFWF grant allocates more than \$550,000 towards funding for purchased conservation easements and grants to landowners to cover the costs of protecting their property in perpetuity, thus permanently protecting these critical wildlife corridors.

Rosemary Downing will be joining the team in December 2023 to oversee this historic investment in conservation funding in the Upper James watershed. Prior to joining VCC, Downing worked for the U.S. Geological Survey. She has also worked for the National Park Service at Yellowstone National Park, conducted her thesis research in Rocky Mountain National Park, and was a graduate researcher in the University of Colorado’s Paleoecology and Climate Change Lab. Downing holds a B.S. in Biology from North Carolina State University and a M.S. in Environmental Sciences from the University of Colorado Denver.

Landowners who are interested in learning more about protecting their land with conservation easements in support of this corridor effort can contact VCC staff at easements@valleyconservation.org.

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About Valley Conservation Council

Valley Conservation Council is a non-profit accredited land trust that preserves and protects the lands and waters of the greater Shenandoah Valley region so they can continue to enrich the lives of its residents and visitors for generations, whether it be for hiking in its abundant forests, fishing in its picturesque rivers, farming in its productive soils or simply basking in the majesty of its spectacular open spaces. Since becoming an accredited land trust in 2019, VCC has secured more than 70 easements and protected over 8,500 acres throughout the Valley.

VCC is a fully community-supported organization that relies on the generosity of its members to support its land protection and outreach efforts. For more information or to donate, visit valleyconservation.org.