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2023 Easement Update:

Filling in the gaps and protecting threatened resources

BY TAYLOR EVANS, DIRECTOR OF LAND PROTECTION

Conservation can take many shapes and sizes – as we meet with landowners across the Shenandoah Valley and Allegheny Highlands, we often say that VCC's easements range from 2 to 2,000 acres. They protect farmland, wildlife habitat, historic landscapes, and scenic vistas. Each property has its own unique conservation values, and they contribute to the conservation of the Valley as a whole. As such, we look forward to working with landowners to protect what is most important to them, and what is most important to the region.

As I sit here writing this brief article on our successes thus far, VCC has completed seven conservation easements with our landowner partners. Each of these easements represents their own unique investment in conservation. It appears that 2023 has been a year of protecting lands under threat, properties with rare

resources that were prime candidates for development, and a year of growing blocks of protected lands, filling in missing pieces of the conservation puzzle.

From protecting a tributary of Tinker Creek, to preventing development on top of important cave ecosystems, to filling a gap in a 2,300 acre block of easements to create a nearly continuous chain of protected lands between Shenandoah National Park and The George Washington National Forest, each of these projects have been important investments in the conservation of prime farmland, open space, water quality, and wildlife habitat that will benefit the Valley for generations to come.

We look forward to closing out 2023 with several other exciting projects that we can share with you in 2024. As always, thank you for your support – without it, none of this would be possible.

There has never been more interest in conservation projects in Virginia, and VCC is working to make sure we turn that interest into on-the-ground conservation. We have already closed seven easements in 2023, making this another successful year for saving land, but we still need your help.

It is members like you who provide the most consistent support for our staff, our mission, and our vision for this beloved region. Direct member support ensures that we can get projects completed, easements filed, and land and water protected.

Thank you to all our loyal supporters; together we are making real progress for the people, land, and wildlife of the Shenandoah Valley.



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Making Way **FOR** Wildlife

Wildlife Corridors across Southern Shenandoah Valley



BY JOHN RICE, VCC BOARD MEMBER

In 2024 VCC will be focusing additional attention on land protection efforts for the sake of ensuring biodiversity and resiliency in wildlife populations in our region. In fact, VCC is expecting a significant additional funding source to be announced soon that will greatly help to advance work on this important project.

Prior to settlement, wildlife had hundreds of thousands of acres of uninterrupted open space to meet their needs. Now, however, what areas of large open space exist are fragmented, which can leave populations of wildlife isolated or will force them to cross man-made obstacles to meet their basic needs.

Here in western Virginia, we are lucky to have large existing areas of protected land, thanks to Shenandoah National Park in the Blue Ridge, and the George Washington-Jefferson National Forest in both the Blue Ridge and the Alleghenies to the west, but as

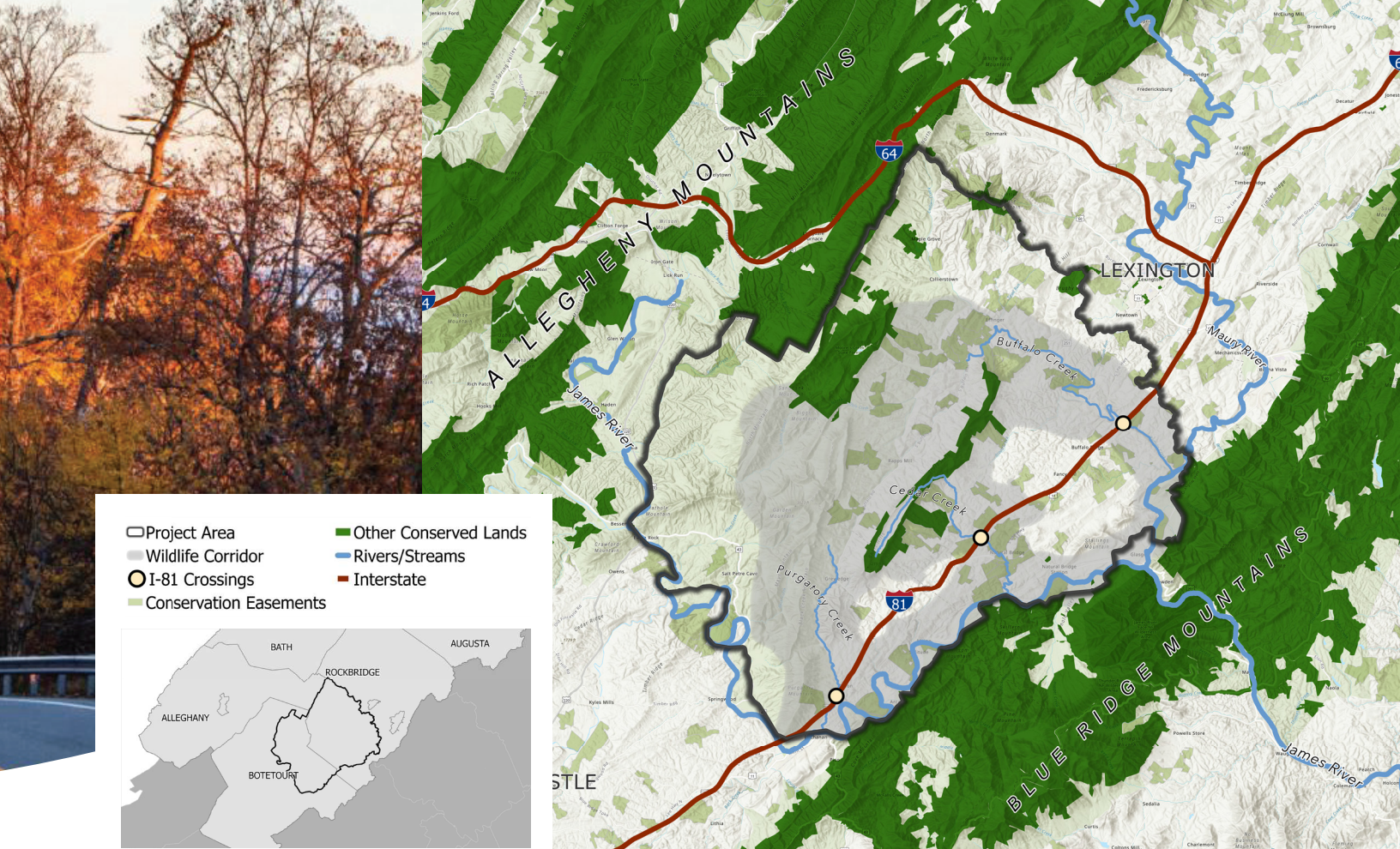
development in the valley increases, we risk the Blue Ridge becoming isolated from the Alleghenies as safe wildlife migration pathways become severed. Isolated ranges leave wildlife at risk, as it is more difficult for them to meet their needs, including the possibility of genetic isolation, which risks the long-term health of the population.

The protection of key private lands from excessive subdivision in known wildlife migration corridors offers a solution to this problem. Wildlife corridors are areas of protected land that offer wildlife the opportunity of safe passage between larger core habitats, such as those found in our vast public lands in the Blue Ridge on the east and in the Allegheny's on the opposite (west side) of the Shenandoah Valley. Over 20 years ago, VCC and other partners identified several candidates for regional wildlife corridors in our service area. Our work has recently been confirmed through a multi-year analysis by a multi-agency team of

State scientists, as documented in Virginia's Wildlife Corridor Action Plan (WCAP), released earlier this year.

A very important wildlife corridor zone long recognized by VCC and our partners and confirmed through the state WCAP is the Buffalo Creek-Purgatory Mountain Wildlife Corridor in Rockbridge and Botetourt Counties, which encompasses 178,000 acres. The goal of VCC's corridor-protection work in this area is to work with willing private landowners to place conservations easements on key working lands, including farms and forest land within this area, so that wildlife that use this area for regional scale movements can continue to do so forever.

This corridor zone stretches from public lands in the George Washington – Jefferson National Forest in the Blue Ridge, westward across private lands in the southern Valley, connecting to Allegheny



Buffalo Creek-Purgatory Mountain Wildlife Corridor

Mountains on the west side of Valley and public lands including the Short Hills Wildlife Management Area and National Forest lands.

Importantly, this large corridor zone includes 3 identified safe crossing points under I-81. These crossings, at Buffalo Creek, Cedar Creek above Natural Bridge, and Purgatory Creek, have been identified as important chokepoints where migrating wildlife can utilize existing bridges to move safely under the busy Interstate. VCC is already working with willing private landowners to protect their properties from excessive development in the vicinity of these important crossings, so that wildlife can use these crossings without having to put themselves and motorists at risk by crossing 4 lanes of I-81 traffic.

Protection of these regional scale corridors is immediately beneficial for animals that exist at low densities and require large ranges, like bears and bobcats; however, having large areas of protected and interconnected habitats benefits a wide range of wildlife. For example, many species of birds prefer connected forest land, instead of the forest edge habitat that is more common with fragmented habitat. Even plants can benefit from interconnected habitats in the face of changing climate conditions.

Landowners who are interested in learning more about the benefits of protecting their land with conservation easements within this large wildlife corridor area can contact VCC staff at: easements@valleyconservation.org



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