

TRAIL BLAZER

NEWSLETTER OF THE ROANOKE APPALACHIAN TRAIL CLUB

Winter 2021

The Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club is a recreational hiking association of volunteers who preserve and improve the Appalachian Trail as the nation's premier, continuous, long-distance footpath.

In memorium



Eunice Jensen "Buz" Gordge died on October 31, 2020; she was 96 years old.

Buz and her husband Bill were long-time trail

enthusiasts and heavily involved in the RATC. Bob Peckman said, "Bill Gordge is a living legend. It is true to say that RATC would not be the same club had it not included Bill. While best known now for

the mid-week crew, his tenure on the diplomatic corps and the legal team were more important for shaping our course even though his [trail] work-i.e. on the North Mountain Trail-was a monumental contribution."

Homer and Therese Witcher were also close friends of the Gordges. "She was always supportive of Bill in his overwhelming contributions to RATC, including starting the Land Management program and leading the biannual meeting in Lynchburg in 1987," Therese said.



In 1994, Buz (left) joined Mickey and Joyce Witcher atop McAfee Knob.

President's Report

by Jim Beeson

As I write this report I am hopeful 2021 will be a new/different/better year for all of us compared to 2020. I know everyone is anxious to resume "normal" activities.

In spite of the COVID-19 pandemic and the various trail and daily life restrictions RATC was able to further our mission and I am proud to report the following 2020 actions/accomplishments;

RATC Members and Supporters raised \$44,000 toward purchase of an eight acre property immediately adjacent to McAfee Knob trailhead/parking lot. RATC funds along with ATC and Virginia Conservation funds allowed the property to be purchased with a December 17, 2020 closing date.

Under the leadership of RATC Trail Supervisor Mike Vaughn,

trail maintenance resumed in June 2020 with the following accomplishments:

- Added 24 new Trail Maintainers bringing total to 92 RATC trail maintainers, with at least 2 maintainers assigned to each of our 31 AT Sections and

HOLD THE DATE

RATC Annual Meeting will be held as a VIRTUAL meeting on Wednesday, March 10, 2021 at 6:30 PM.

Information regarding call-in access and meeting agenda will be forthcoming.

- 7 non-AT sections
- Continued weekly AT work hikes, as permitted by COVID-19 protocols, with trail maintenance volunteer working 4900 hours
- Completed major projects on

Dragon's Tooth adding 80 stone steps and on the AT south of Lost Spectacle Gap, improving trail condition and reversing erosion

- Total of 385 stone and wood steps were added to various AT sections and side trail sections.
- Refurbished three bridges, e.g. VA 785 (Blacksburg Road), Andy Layne Trail (Catawba Creek) and VA 785 (Mountain Pass Road)
- Purchased \$900 DeWalt rock drill with LL Bean and Virginia AT License plate proceeds - gaining a huge improvement in ability to cut and shape rock steps

RATC is working closely with ATC regarding purchase of several properties within McAfee Knob and Tinker Cliffs view-shed, in-

<<continued on page 2>>

President's Report, continued

cluding the purchase of 350 acre Dowd property which includes a cabin. RATC is exploring the viability of refurbishing and maintaining this cabin as a rental cabin. It is within ½ mile of the AT between Campbell Shelter and Brickey's Gap. It was sold to ATC/Virginia Conservation Fund by RATC Life Member Jay Dowd.

Shelters and privies remain closed, but RATC Shelter Supervisors Homer & Therese Witcher have maintained a close eye on these facilities and have performed minor maintenance as needed

RATC Board Meetings continued on a monthly basis via Zoom, which the ATC provided to all trail maintaining clubs.

RATC Board is fully staffed with several positions filled by new-

ly-appointed members, each with a wealth of knowledge, expertise and enthusiasm.

Long time RATC member and immediate past president Diana Christopulos accepted "ex officio" position of RATC Archivist and is assembling/organizing valuable information about the history of RATC.

I complete my third year as RATC President in March 2021. Leading RATC has been an honor and privilege; the club includes a wonderful group of dedicated members and volunteers. Our accomplishments would not have been possible without your support and willingness to volunteer. As many of you know, I completed an AT through hike in 2016; my next adventure beginning mid-March 2021 is bike-packing the Southern Tier route of the USA, i.e., San Diego, CA to St. Augustine, FL. This time my bike is

the mode of transportation and not my feet. Wish me luck!

The COVID-19 pandemic has curtailed our ability to hold in person social/meeting functions. As a result we are planning to conduct the 2021 RATC Annual Meeting with Board Of Director/Officer elections in March 2021 as a "virtual" meeting. Details with date, time and dial in information will be provided. This is not the ideal method to conduct our annual meeting, but we have all learned to adapt and move forward.

Finally, I am happy to announce that Mark Farrell has returned to Roanoke from San Diego, CA and has agreed to resume his role as RATC Membership Coordinator. In addition, Mark is now active with trail maintenance and McAfee Knob Task Force. Welcome Back Mark!

Hikemaster's Report

By Bob Peckman

While we did officially open for club hikes, and I wrote the rules for how to do it safely, I was still unable to ask volunteer hike leaders to subject themselves to this risk. Yet many of us, including me, have been hiking.

We have awarded 113-mile patches to Wilma Vargas, Susan Sanders, Connie Edwards, Rachel Ruhlen, Allison Rivetti, and Ryan Wagoner. Congratulations to all of you; it is a pleasure to send these out. How many of us remember when our section was 113 miles long? In order to get the 113-mile patch, you have to complete 120 miles. Tradition! I think that RATC maintains more miles per member than any other maintaining club.

As my tenure as Hikemaster winds down this spring, I hope that the next Hikemaster is able to restore a busy hiking schedule. Perhaps the vaccine will enable our

normal busy, fun hiking schedule to resume.

If you do hike, please take time to use my hiking list: [RATC.ORG>Regional Hiking Resources>2. Bob Peckman's Regional Hiking List](#). I am attempting to document the hikes that we do, in part to provide complete information for anyone to be able to lead a hike. I need feedback from hikers as well as leaders.

Please attempt to use the list and offer honest feedback--positive or negative. I do not need kind words, but I DO need information along the lines of "You have not provided GPS information and that needs to improve." I would like us to create a library of hikes that would be useful to both new and old members.

AT-inspired art

Matt "Sharpie" Gentry

These are two original watercolors I made on the Sugar Run section of trail I co-maintain in Giles County.

I made the paintings in plein-air while standing at my easel on the side of the trail a few yards from the turn off to Docs Knob Shelter in July of 2018. It was so fun to spend about two hours (an hour for each painting) looking intently at the forest watching the shadows change.

It was one of the best days of painting I have ever had, and I wanted to share this art and my love of our section of trail with my fellow club members.

Happy Trails!
Matt "Sharpie" Gentry
Blacksburg

Kelly Knob



A few miles out of Newport, VA on route 601 a small parking lot is bisected by the AT near Kelly Knob. The first quarter mile of the north-bound 2.1

mile hike is a fairly steep climb. On December 22, a few days after a region-wide snow event, the trail was intermittently clear of snow or ice-packed; the frozen, steep sections were a bit tenuous to transverse.

The lion's share of the elevation change is immediately adjacent to

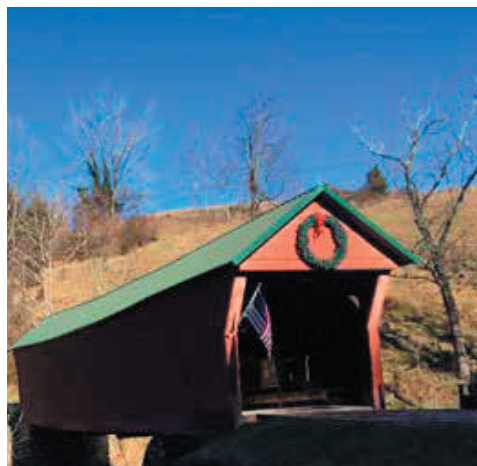


Kelly Knob offers spectacular views from exposed boulders.

the parking lot; the moderate hike turns easy after just a bit of work as the trail follows a relatively level ridge. A well-marked blue blaze trail intersects the AT and leads to a spectacular view--think McAfee without the crowds--from Kelly

Knob of the valley to the south and west.

A slight bonus for those hiking this route is the drive up the valley out of Newport. Beautiful homes of massive proportion dot a very scenic valley. A covered bridge (photo, below) offers proximate parking as well as a picnic area for those interested in a respite before or after the hike.



Trail Supervisor's Report

By Mike Vaughn

As with most things in our lives, COVID greatly affected the work on our section of trail over the past year. The main effect was that from mid-March to the end of June we were not able to perform any maintenance at all on the trail. Despite this nearly four month suspension we were still able to get in 31 work hikes during 2020. We worked on many locations on the trail, including work hikes on Dragon's Tooth, Tinker Mountain, Pearis Mountain, and Mountain Lake Wilderness Area. We installed nearly 400 steps on the trail during the year, including nearly 100 on the trail up to Tinker Mountain. The work crews, along with the trail section maintainers, put in over 4,900 hours on the trail in the past year. Overall, our section of trail is in fairly good shape, despite the difficulties experienced over the past year. Hopefully we will get back to something approaching normal in 2021.

Looking forward to next year, we will be working on several projects throughout our section of trail. Early in the year we will be back out to McAfee Knob to do trail repairs near Catwaba shelter. We will also be spending several days doing rehab work on the Andy Layne Trail. Going in to the summer and autumn, we will be working further south, including in

the Bailey Gap area and near Kelly Knob.

As you may know, the club's trail workers have put in many steps on our section of trail. Over the past four years we have installed nearly 1,200 steps. The majority of these have been installed on the "Triple Crown" loop. You may wonder why we have focused so much on installing steps, particularly rock steps. Many (if not most) hikers dislike climbing steps. They can be tiresome and are hard on the

“Hikers can help keep our trails sustainable by not trying to climb around steps and by not shortcutting switchbacks.”

legs. You probably think the steps are installed to make it safer for hikers to negotiate a steep section of trail. While this is partly true, it is not the primary reason we install steps. The main reason is erosion control.

Dealing with water erosion has

been the focus of most of our work hikes for years. Once a steep section of trail gets gullied subsequent rainstorms will quickly wash away great amounts of soil. The simple fix for this problem is to install rock steps. Rock is impervious to erosion on human timescales. Where rock is not available we are forced to use log steps. Even in these cases, the level platforms on log steps slows down the water runoff.

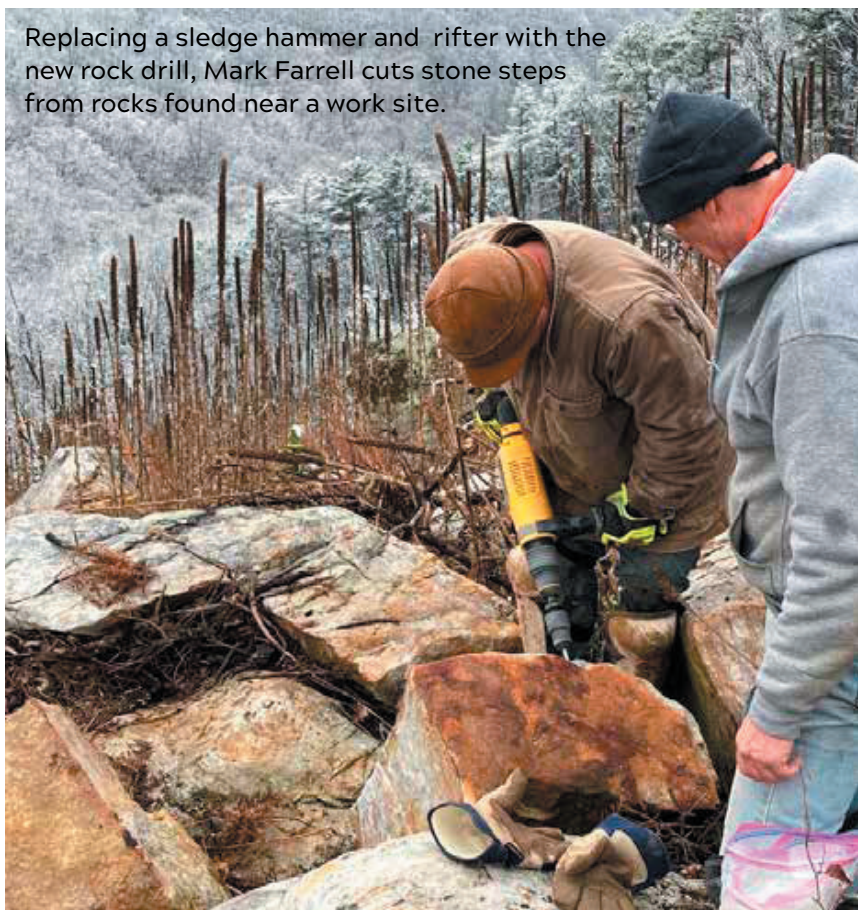
Water bars and drainage ditches are also essential features to control water erosion. Another trail feature that helps controls erosion is switchbacks. Again, while it makes it easier for hikers to climb up a steep mountain, the main reason for switchbacks is to resist erosion. Trails that go straight up a mountain will quickly become gullied and will turn into stream beds during heavy rains. While hiking up or down steps is not pleasant it is much better than the alter-

native, hiking a steep, slick slope full of loose rocks and exposed roots.

Hikers can help keep our trails sustainable by not trying to climb around steps and by not shortcutting switchbacks. Both of these actions cause trail damage that take many hours to repair each year.

Please make note of any problems you see while out hiking on our section of trail. Text me at 540-992-1350 and let me know of any problems you encounter. These could include trees fallen across the trail, overgrown sections of trail, or vandalism or trash along the trail. Send pictures if you can.

Replacing a sledge hammer and rifter with the new rock drill, Mark Farrell cuts stone steps from rocks found near a work site.





Before and after photos dramatically show trail improvements; typically hours of hard work are preceded and followed by a significant hike to or from the work site. Bill Neilan, Jim Webb, and Libby Blankenship worked near Hay Rock.

Notes of appreciation...

Dear Roanoke AT Club,

A few weeks ago, I met up with a friend at the McAfee Knob trailhead to complete a section of the AT. We were pleasantly surprised by the beauty of SW Virginia and also the great condition of the trail. It is in fabulous condition! We even met two volunteers removing invasives near Daleville and another kind volunteer near Fullhardt Knob Shelter. We had a nice trip and wanted to express our gratitude for the great volunteers. Also, I almost forgot, the new bridge coming out of Troutville is fantastic!

Thank You!

Andrew (& Jennifer Orr)

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Mr. Beeson,

Our hike was great and Homer shuttled us and he was a very, very nice man. Thank you for that recommendation and all the help you gave us to make this hike a success. We had a great time hiking one of the most iconic portions of the AT.

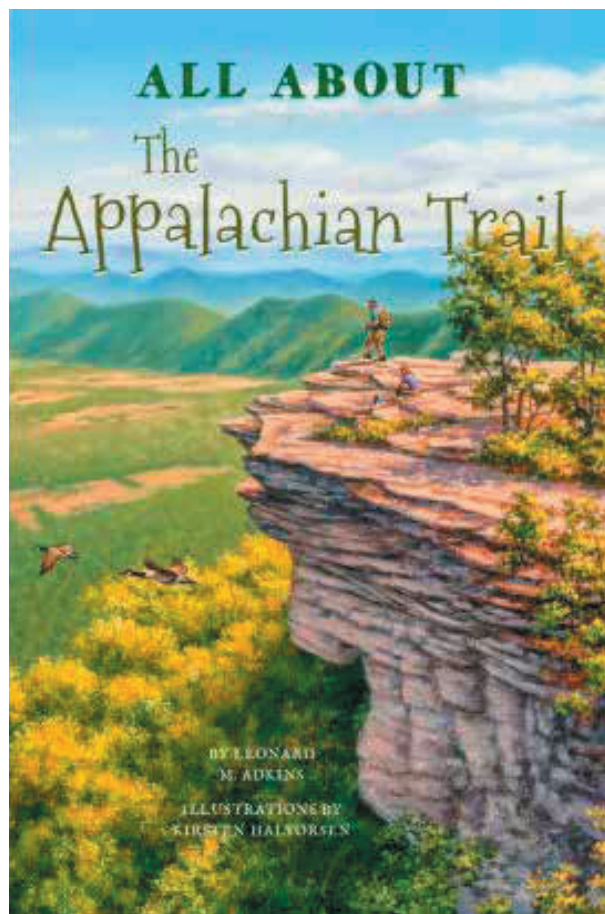
I also made a donation to your club via PayPal and the link you sent me. It's the least I can do. The trails we in excellent condition and the shelter/privy was great. I know it's a lot of hard work to maintain these things.

Thanks again,

Bryan

Local author publishes

Long-Time RATC Member Leonard Adkins Announces Publication of his New Book for Children: **ALL ABOUT THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL**



There are now hundreds of books concerning the Appalachian Trail, including a few fanciful picture books for children. However, All About The Appalachian Trail is the very first written for readers in grades 4-8 that provides a complete overview of the world's most famous hiking trail. All About the Appalachian Trail is designed for children 9-13 years of age and their parents, teachers, and librarians to enjoy together. Leonard covers it all: the route, history, geology, and animals of the trail, along with chapters about hiking equipment and Leave No Trace ethics. There's even a profile of the trail's most famous users—thru-hikers—and quotes designed to not only in-

spire everyone to take a hike, but to also volunteer to help maintain and protect the trail. In conjunction with the book, there is an available downloadable Teacher's Guide with Common Core Standards, sample questions, and activities to stimulate further discussion and knowledge of the trail.

"All about the Appalachian Trail by Leonard Adkins is a small book aimed at the 9- to 13-year-old market. Adkins explains that the trail is not just a walk through nature; it's also an introduction to American history and geology. Adults, and not just adults with children, could learn a lot from this book. All about the Appalachian Trail is 5 by 7 inches with exquisite line drawings by Kirsten Halvorsen. It's been published in a modest manner and lists for \$5.99.

It's the book to give to your children or grandchildren - but get one for yourself to read." - National Parks Traveler

Published by Blue River Press (ISBN: 978-1-68157-099-0; \$5.99), the book is available through local bookstores and online. Leonard will donate a portion of proceeds from each book sale to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy when ordered through his website, www.habitualhiker.com. Signed copies may be obtained by emailing him at habitualhiker@verizon.net.

A Grandfather's Tale

by Tim Gillow

After 12 years living in Christiansburg, I moved to Mebane in central North Carolina to pursue retirement in earnest. Although there's plenty of local hiking in this area, there's nothing quite like the Roanoke AT segments we once lived nearby, so we find ourselves making occasional treks elsewhere for more challenging hiking. And there are few things better than a long hike to help keep us socially distant!

This fall we headed to Grandfather Mountain at just about peak fall color time, and spent several days hiking the busy and not-so-busy trails there. There are several challenges to overcome on the trails I'll discuss here, but the trail rewards are well worth the effort. The "strenuous" indications on the trail maps are definitely realistic!

The Grandfather Mountain trails (Day 1) were very busy at that time, with the plentiful parking there still slim pickings at the most popular trailheads. The mile-high bridge, a short easy walk from the visitor center parking area, is a main attraction so arrive early to beat the crowds and take mostly unobstructed photos. Go into the visitor center (or to the trailhead signage across the parking lot from it) and fill out a hiking permit, which is required for some of the trails. The permit pockets and pencil holders at the trailheads were empty when we were there, so people were making their own on scraps of paper.

The Bridge trail initiating at the Visitor center leads to an overflow parking area just down the hill from the Visitor center which sports the trailhead to two

other substantial trails. The trail maps (www.grandfather.com) show two trailheads (Black Rock and GT Extension) terminating at that parking lot, but it's actually one trailhead that splits - obscured - a hundred yards into the woods. We and a dozen other hikers puzzled that discrepancy for several minutes before simply jumping in. I left a comment card suggesting some future signage clarification for good measure!

Grandfather Trail includes some substantial rock scrambling upward shortly after departing the visitor center trailhead. It appears very daunting to some, and we saw hikers turn back after deciding not to tackle the rocky obstacles there. Entering Grandfather Trail (Extension) from the overflow lot trailhead is much easier, though you will later be scrambling down those very same daunting rocks on your way back to the visitor center. We hike with our Shelties, and hand-carrying them over the rocks is necessary in several places, as well as over the multiple wooden ladders you will likely encounter. Some of the ladders are horizontal, traversing rock boulders. If you sometimes use hiking poles for assistance, do take them with you on these hikes. Also note that the weather can change quickly there, even on "nice" days. We took great photos upon arriving at MacRae Peak, only to find the views mostly obscured in cloudy fog just 15 minutes later.

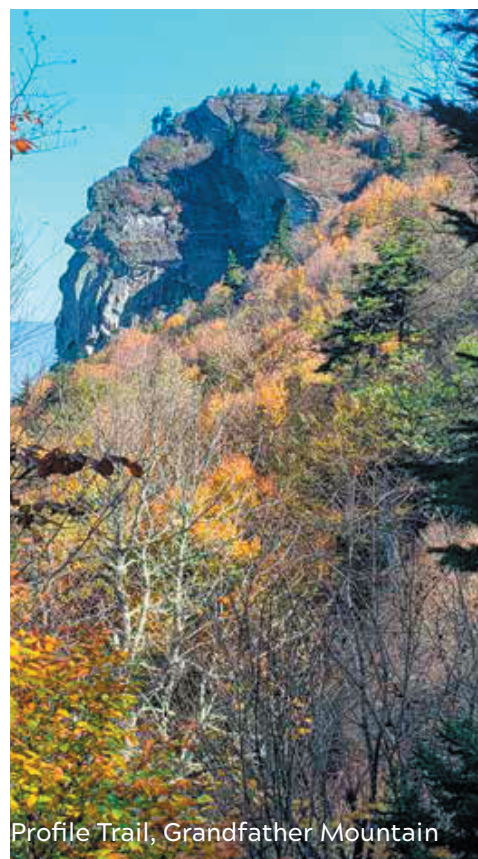
The Profile trail can be reached from both Grandfather Trail (after a somewhat strenuous hike) and from its own trailhead on Route 105, which is how we hiked it on day 2. The first mile of Profile Trail is some of the best pristine brook water features I've encountered, nearly a mile of babbling water, small waterfalls and such along a mildly inclined/rolling area. At the mile mark the trail turns decidedly upward, and becomes quite challenging later where the trail turns rocky. That trail is being reworked in one difficult area where hikers struggle while navigating the rocky runoff chutes. Eventually the trail levels near the ridge and joins the Grandfather Trail for a short hop to Calloway Peak and Daniel Boone trail.

On day 3 we hiked some shorter trails (Otter Falls) near Grand-

father Campground where we camped, and then hit Blowing Rock for some well-hyped but alas less-than-awesome walking there. The Blowing Rock legend itself is worthy of some attention, but I found that a Hershey's ice cream cone was my favorite part of that short visit, so definitely not a must-see for hikers. We did see one unexpected (and somewhat awesome) sight - a helicopter trimming trees along the power lines. Imagine a giant gas-powered hedge trimmer dangling from a steel cable attached to the belly of the helicopter. Fun to watch!



Maintaining power line cuts



Profile Trail, Grandfather Mountain



TRAIL BLAZER
Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club
PO Box 12282
ROANOKE VA 24024-2282

CHANGE SERVICE REQUESTED

Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club Application

IF ACCEPTED FOR MEMBERSHIP, I AGREE TO:

1. Support the objectives of the RATC
2. Abide by the rules of the national and state parks and forests
3. Respect the interests of the owner when on private property
4. Keep trails and woodlands free of litter, and
5. Abide by the instructions of the leader on group hikes and trips

New and Renewal

| | | | |
|---------|----------------------------|---------|--|
| Name(s) | New Member Packet Fee: | \$5 | |
| Address | Individual # of years | x \$15 | |
| | Family # of years | x \$20 | |
| City | Individual life membership | x \$250 | |
| State | Family life membership | x \$300 | |
| Zip | Donation | \$ | |
| Phone | | | |
| Email | Total Amount Enclosed | \$ | |

Dues are payable in January of each year. Make checks to "RATC" or use PayPal at ratc.org

Please send dues and any questions about money or membership to:

Treasurer, PO Box 12282, Roanoke, VA 24024

RATC membership includes an annual subscription to Backpacker Magazine, at no cost to you. RATC is a 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization. Membership dues are tax-deductible minus \$6 for Backpacker Magazine.

Please Note: To save costs, the Trail Blazer is provided electronically via email/link. Paper copies may be obtained via mail. Request a paper copy via treasurer@ratc.org or by calling 540-521-5435