

TOP STORY

For Love of Nature

## **For Love of Nature: Rockfish Wildlife Sanctuary a haven for orphans**

**Shannon Brennan**

Aug 2, 2023

A robin and several blue jay fledglings fluttered their wings and opened their beaks, waiting to be fed by a worker at Rockfish Wildlife Sanctuary.

She squirted a protein-packed mixture into their waiting mouths until they were satisfied, except for the baby red-eyed vireo, which continued to beg for more.

“He always wants more,” said Sarah Cooperman, executive director of the sanctuary, which specializes in helping baby animals.

The fledglings are fed every 30 minutes, 12 hours a day to imitate the work their parents would do.

Rockfish Wildlife Sanctuary is tucked way off U.S. 29 in Nelson County, a good spot to nurse and rehabilitate orphaned and injured wildlife.

Established in 2004 in Schuyler, the sanctuary moved to Shipman in 2015 to accommodate increasing numbers of animals.

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Eight years ago, they helped 650 animals. Now the numbers exceed 900. Cooperman sees two things at play.

“Due to climate change, there are longer baby seasons,” she said, meaning more batches of babies. And as more people move into the area and destroy habitat, there is less space for wildlife to move about safely.

The sanctuary also gets a fair number of fledglings that are resting on the ground while learning to fly, but people think they are injured. As with fawns, they are usually best left alone unless they don't move for 24 hours.

When in doubt, call a wildlife facility for advice.

Severely injured animals go to the Wildlife Center of Virginia in Waynesboro, but once healthy enough, some move to Rockfish for rehabilitation.

The Rockfish staff works hard to prevent their patients from imprinting on humans, crucial to successfully returning them to the wild. If they can't be paired with their own kind, mirrors are placed in their cages.

Three young foxes whose mother had been shot skittered away as we approached them in their pen.

In another nearby pen, barred owls hunkered in a corner, waiting to be released once they prove they can catch a live mouse.

In the nursery, a passel of baby opossums are fed eight times a day with a long tube to imitate the teat in their mother's pouch. She had been killed on a road.

The sanctuary cares for many rabies-vector species, so all of its workers are vaccinated.

Because it is one of few such facilities, it receives animals from across the state. By law, vector species have to be released in the same county they are found in.

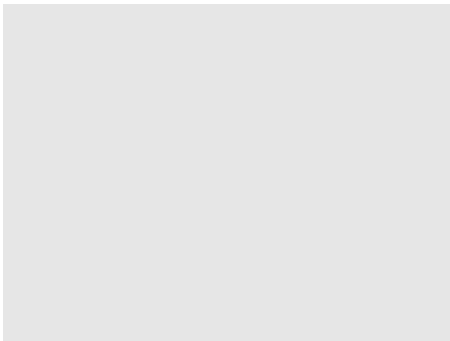
The sanctuary receives about 350 songbirds a year, which are released on the property, and 400 to 600 mammals, most released in Nelson County.

Nine educational ambassadors, animals that cannot be returned to the wild due to injuries or imprinting, greet visitors or travel to schools, senior centers and nursing homes.

A red-eared slider turtle, woodland box turtle, corn snake, eastern rat snake, black vulture, crow and red-tailed hawk are among the ambassadors at the center.

The nonprofit sanctuary relies on donations and volunteers to keep it running. For more information, check [rockfishwildlife](http://rockfishwildlife)

**[sanctuary.org](http://sanctuary.org)**.



Shannon Brennan

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TOP STORY

For Love of Nature

## **For Love of Nature: Searching for endangered mussels in the Pedlar River**

**Shannon Brennan**

Oct 4, 2023

**N**early four years ago, 219 endangered James River spiny mussels were released into the Pedlar River in hopes of giving them a chance to make a comeback.

On Sept. 25, members of the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources returned to the Pedlar to check on the mussels and to educate 11 students from the University of Lynchburg about possible careers in conservation.

Brian Watson, the state's only aquatic invertebrate biologist, told students that mussels are the most endangered species in North America.

When Europeans first arrived on this continent, mussels were thick enough to hold a riverbed together.

North America, and particularly the Southeast United States, still has the most freshwater mussels in the world. Sadly, an estimated 75% of mussels in the U.S. are in peril.

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Their crashing numbers are a result of pollution, dams, invasive species and sedimentation, which literally suffocates them.

The spiny mussel hasn't been found in the James River since the 1960s, but has survived in some cleaner tributaries, like the Pedlar, which is the source of drinking water for the City of Lynchburg.

The state has released 2,500 James River spiny mussels directly into the James at several locations near Scottsville.

Before the students enrolled in Dave Perault's conservation ecology class arrived at the Pedlar, Watson and his team located 15 of the propagated mussels. Nine were alive, five dead and one couldn't be located. They also found two that were wild.

The tagged mussels are found with a device similar to a metal detector. Sometimes, the tag, about the size of a Tic Tac, has fallen off or the mussel has died in place so each signal has to be checked to see if a live mussel is attached.

The students donned waders and bent over scopes, peering beneath the surface of the Pedlar River to get a glimpse of these unique creatures, along with a second endangered species: the notched rainbow.

They found 31 of that species, but saw hundreds if not thousands of the non-native invasive Asian clam, demonstrating the problem with exotic species.

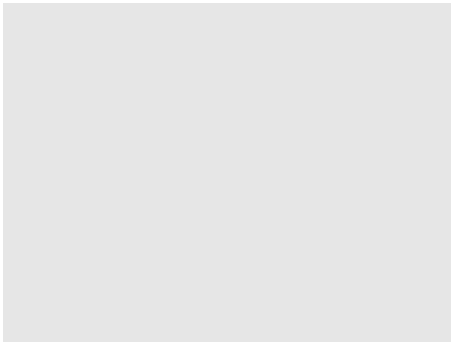
Mussels are ecologically important because one mussel can filter up to 10 gallons of water per day. They also provide food for fish, reptiles, birds and mammals.

When not disturbed by man, mussels can live up to 100 years. In Virginia, most of our 82 species survive 15 to 40 years.

To propagate, mussels have a variety of tricks. Males release sperm and females siphon it in. Developing larvae hang out in the female's gills until they are ready to be released. Many species latch onto fish until they mature. They parasitically suck blood from their host, while getting a ride to a new location.

Some mussels are host-specific and need to lure a specific species of fish. Amazingly, these sightless invertebrates can send out a lure that looks like crayfish or insect larvae to attract their host.

Mussels can be found a mile or more from where they are placed in a river. Hopefully, many spiny mussels are making it safely downstream.



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TOP STORY EDITOR'S PICK

For Love of Nature

## For Love of Nature: Checking out the Matts Creek fire damage

**Shannon Brennan**

Dec 13, 2023



As we walked across the Foot Bridge over the James River off U.S. 501 last week, the smell of charred wood filled our nostrils.

Though we couldn't yet see any signs of the fire that burned more than 11,000 acres in the James River Wilderness in mid-November, we knew it had been there.

Like many fellow hikers, Michael and I call the stretch of the Appalachian Trail from the Foot Bridge to Matt's Creek Shelter one of our favorites.



And like many hikers, we needed to see it for ourselves.

We love this hike for its proximity to the James and Matts Creek. We love it for the incredible variety of spring wildflowers. We love it for the mountain laurel and rhododendron that grow along the banks of the creek and the edges of the trail.

We love it for the signs of beaver that cut down trees, leaving tooth-marked artwork along the trail.

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As smoke filled our yard in November, we started mourning the losses we feared the fire would leave behind.

We hiked in a few hundred feet before we actually saw the blackened earth, devoid of fallen leaves or green or any sign of life, save for a few hardy ferns and mosses.

It was eerie to look up the mountainsides and see rocks on the charred ground and nothing more.

But it was also heartening to see that most of the mature trees appeared unscathed. Most didn't even show signs of having burned, though all the snags (dead trees) and fallen trees were baked black.

Michael aptly described the scene as a giant brush fire.

As we turned upstream along Matts Creek, it was soon apparent that the mountain laurel had been hit hard, as had some of the rhododendron. Time will tell how much survives.

We knew Matts Creek Shelter and privy were unscathed thanks to the efforts of the U.S. Forest Service. Eric Anderson, who leads the weekly maintenance hikes for the Natural Bridge Appalachian Trail Club, was relieved his volunteers would not have to rebuild those structures.

He said firefighters used a leaf blower to clear the ground around the shelter and pumped water out of Matts Creek to dampen the earth.

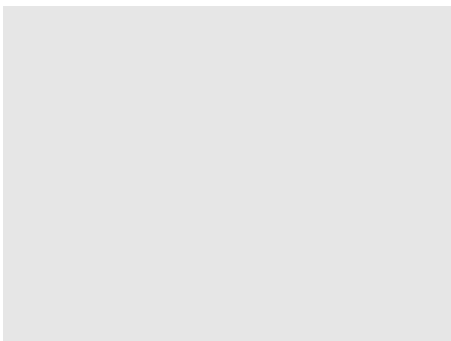
The NBATC maintains 90 miles of the AT, including the portions that were burned.

Sixteen volunteers joined the Forest Service on Nov. 29 to help clear fire-damaged sections on the AT and adjoining trails.

About half the volunteers cleared the old AT, on the trail now called Matts Creek Trail, and found badly damaged trees at the high point of that trail, where the fire burned much hotter.

Another group cleared the Piney Ridge Trail. Both groups used crosscut saws on a number of sizeable fallen trees, but overall the cleanup was relatively easy. “It was not anything as bad as the ice storms we’ve had or the derecho back in 2012,” Anderson said.

We are looking forward to hiking along Matts Creek in the spring and hopeful that the fire will prove more beneficial than harmful.



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