

CULTURE

As more hikers flock to Virginia's Triple Crown, a plan takes shape to better manage the crowds

The segment of the Appalachian Trail that includes Dragon's Tooth, McAfee Knob and Tinker Cliffs is one of the busiest sections of the trail. The National Park Service has been working with regional stakeholders to develop a plan to protect the trail's natural resources and manage the growing numbers of visitors.



by **Mark Taylor**
August 11, 2023



During peak hiking seasons in the spring and fall, McAfee Knob sees about 600 visitors a day, contributing to an estimated 50,000 hikers who annually make the trip to what has often been called the most photographed landmark on the entire Appalachian Trail. Photo courtesy of Barry Nathan Hale.

Privacy - Terms

Hikers love Virginia's Triple Crown.

The diverse group that manages the section of the Appalachian Trail that includes the Dragon's Tooth, McAfee Knob and Tinker Cliffs landmarks in the Roanoke area wants to ensure that the area isn't going to be loved to death.

The National Park Service recently released a [draft Visitor Use Management Plan](#) for the Triple Crown. The agency will host [public meetings](#) on Aug. 14 and 15 to discuss the document and to invite feedback on its contents.

The draft plan contains a mix of strategies — some already underway, others conceptual — to address how to balance increasing crowds with the elements that draw those crowds.

“This is a framework,” said Andrew Downs, the senior regional director for the trail's South Region, which runs from Georgia through Virginia. “Independent projects will move forward within that framework, and hopefully that will make the projects work well together.”

The National Park Service's Denver Service Center facilitated development of the plan. That office is called in to help with major Park Service projects.

More than two dozen representatives of stakeholder and management groups — including local municipalities, the Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club, the Virginia Department of Transportation, and tourism and parks and recreation departments — formed an interdisciplinary team that helped with the plan's development.

“A very diverse group informed the development of this document,” Downs said. “We had standing meetings every two weeks, though sometimes it felt like it was every 25 minutes.

“Participation was excellent.”

Key ideas include improving parking and facilities at trailheads; refining and better managing camping along the trail section; encouraging preservation of viewsheds; and honing marketing, promotion and education to help make sure hikers are doing their part to help preserve the magic of one of the AT's most heavily used sections.

How to participate

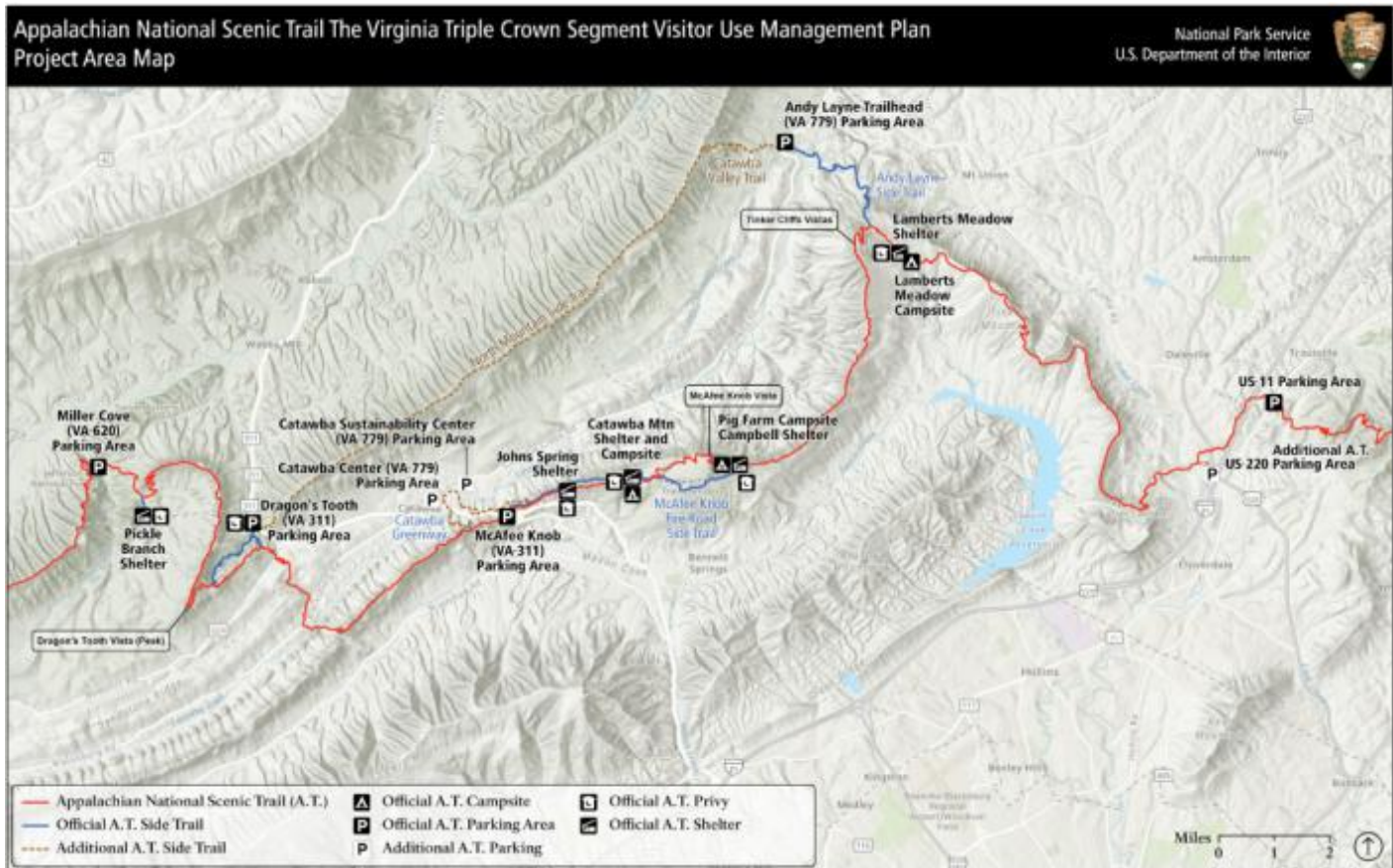
The National Park Service will hold two meetings — one virtual, one in person — to gather input on the draft Visitor Use Management Plan for the Triple Crown.

Virtual: Aug. 14, 6-7:30 p.m.

- Teams Meeting link: <https://bit.ly/3NHtdgT>; Meeting ID: 282 181 355 327; Passcode: BjpgSji.
- Call-in: 202-640-1187; Passcode: 741 430 500#

Public open house: Aug. 15, 5-7 p.m.

- Salem Civic Center community room, 1001 Roanoke Blvd.



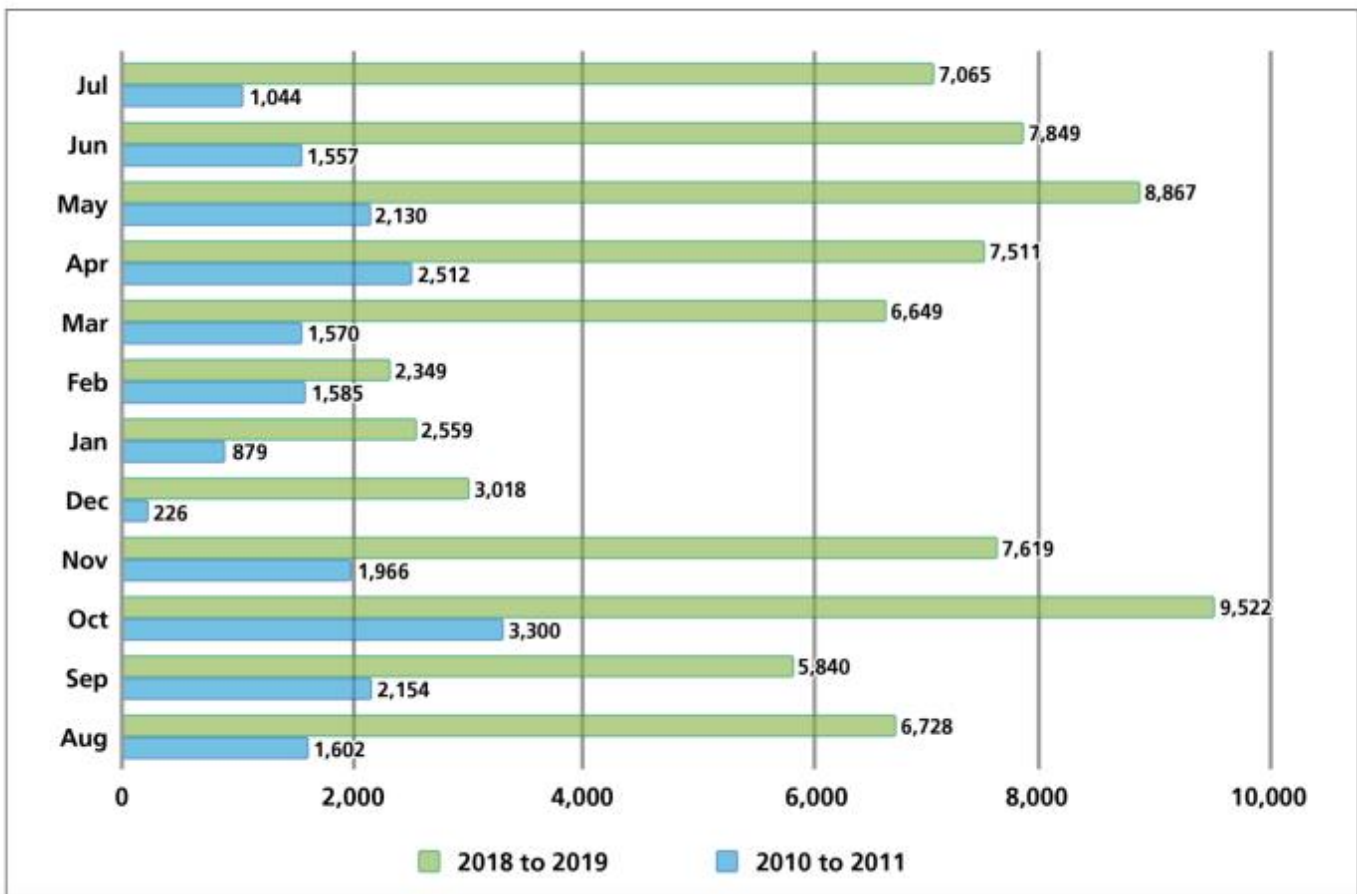
The National Park Service and a team of regional stakeholders have been studying the segment of the Appalachian Trail that's home to the so-called Triple Crown: Dragon's Tooth, McAfee Knob and Tinker Cliffs. Map taken from the draft plan.

Just how busy?

Downs says the Triple Crown section is right up there with Roan Mountain in Tennessee, Max Patch in North Carolina and Franconia Ridge in New Hampshire as one of the busiest areas of the trail.

During peak hiking seasons in the spring and fall, McAfee Knob sees about 600 visitors a day, contributing to an estimated 50,000 hikers who annually make the trek to what has often been called the most photographed landmark on the entire trail. Dragon's Tooth, just to the south, gets 20,000 annual visitors.

Figure 3. McAfee Knob Trends in Use, Infrared Trail Counter Data



The National Park Service’s draft plan includes data on just how many people visit the popular Triple Crown sites. During peak hiking seasons in the spring and fall, McAfee Knob sees about 600 visitors a day.

From 2011 to 2015, visitation to the Triple Crown section increased eightfold, and that was before a big bump during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Crowds create work. The 700-member Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club maintains about 120 miles of the trail in the region.

“About a quarter of their total volunteer service is concentrated on the 4-mile stretch from the [Virginia] 311 parking area lot to the summit of McAfee Knob,” Downs noted.

Goal numbers of visitors outlined in the plan align with current peak use, so it will take several strategies to keep visitor numbers from expanding significantly and to ensure no further negative impacts — and, in some cases, a reduction of impacts — on resources, both natural and created.

Trail managers point to several factors generating the increase in attention, including the proliferation of social media, mentions on popular hiking blogs and even the conspicuous inclusion of McAfee Knob in the book and film “A Walk in the Woods.”

The area is within about an hour's drive of the 700,000 people who live in the Roanoke, Lynchburg and New River Valley areas. Many day-use visitors hail from metro areas within four hours, including Washington, Richmond, Charlotte and North Carolina's Triad. That's a base of about 14 million people. Attention from local colleges, including Virginia Tech and Liberty University, is also increasing.

When you put tens of thousands of people on a footpath, impact is inevitable. The plan seeks to minimize and mitigate those impacts while also ensuring safety for trail users.

A major improvement is already in the works to address what is one of the Triple Crown's most vexing and public challenges: crowding at the parking lot atop Catawba Mountain where the trail crosses Virginia 311.

In 2017, the Virginia Department of Transportation secured funding to build a pedestrian bridge across the road from the parking area to the trailhead for hikers walking north to McAfee Knob.

The \$3.43 million project is to get underway in 2024. The project will provide an opportunity to improve both safety for pedestrians and the parking area.

"VDOT has to be commended for this work," Downs said. "They have been proactive. Fortunately there was no loss of life [from an accident], but they, along with the Park Service, really came out and said, 'Let's do this before there's an emergency situation.'"

Even when the parking lot is improved, the 8-acre site has only so much room. That's why planners are also enthusiastic about using a formal shuttle to trailheads. Roanoke County secured a grant for a pilot program that launched last fall, running a shuttle from a park-and-ride lot near Interstate 81 to the McAfee Knob trailhead.

In 37 days of operation, the shuttle drew 488 riders. The shuttle service resumed in early March and has been operating on Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays and holidays since.

"It's still in a proof-of-concept phase," Downs said of the shuttle. "But I think it's been a great success."

Downs said there could be opportunities to expand the shuttle operation, adding other stops and perhaps even other outdoor recreationists. Because river trips are popular in this area, shuttling is an understood concept.

"Every paddler knows the worst part about a paddle trip is the shuttle," he said, chuckling. "But you have to do it. So people around here are used to it."

Parking at Dragon's Tooth is also addressed in the draft plan. That parking lot — on land owned by the U.S. Forest Service — fills to capacity during peak seasons, prompting many visitors to park on the shoulder of the highway. There may be opportunities to expand that parking area.

"The Dragon's Tooth [parking] facility is by far the best, but it still needs improvement," Downs said.

Parking will also be improved in Daleville. Downs said the Appalachian Trail Conservancy was able to purchase a tract behind the Goodwill store that would provide a good spot for day-use hikers to head south on the trail to the Hay Rock viewpoint.

“We want that to be an amenity for overnight parking,” Downs said. “It’s a much more functional place to park a car for a couple nights than McAfee if you’re doing a backpacking trip.”

Backpackers heading north across U.S. 220 would be aided by the possible addition of a designated crossing area with safety lights.



The popularity of McAfee Knob has led to parking and safety challenges around its trailhead. A shuttle service was launched last year, and work is slated to begin in 2024 on a pedestrian bridge to carry hikers across Virginia 311 at the parking area. Photo courtesy of Barry Nathan Hale.

Overnight challenges

While an estimated 80% of the hikers on the Triple Crown section of the Appalachian Trail are day users, that still leaves a large number of backpackers on the trail. That has led to crowding at designated camping sites and shelters, as well as a proliferation of user-created campsites, many in areas where dispersed camping is not authorized.

The draft management plan recommends creating a detailed inventory of camping areas in the Triple Crown section, including both authorized sites and nonauthorized sites — although a formal inventory isn’t really necessary to know that changes are needed, as anyone who has rolled into a shelter site on a busy weekend evening can confirm.

Potential improvements could include establishing group-specific sites, and possibly setting up a reservation system for those sites.

“There are no backcountry, overnight sites that are designed and managed for groups almost anywhere in the South,” Downs said. “This helps us look at how we might look at amenities for groups that won’t detract from the AT experience.”

To alleviate crowding at current camping and shelter sites, additional side-hill tent pads could be constructed. Overnighters should also anticipate more emphasis on enforcing rules against dispersed camping in unauthorized areas.

Impact on the health of the Appalachian Trail itself, as well as connector trails, is also addressed. There may be a need for minor reroutes, for example to ensure separation from camping areas and the trail. The responsibility of maintaining trails will continue to fall to volunteers, in particular the Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club.

Volunteers with the local trail club support “Ridgerunners,” paid staff of the ATC who take to the trail to monitor conditions and mingle with visitors. There will be a continued emphasis on such outreach, to include focus on Leave No Trace principles.

Those volunteers will also likely play a role in improvements, such as the tough labor of creating those sidehill tent pads.

“Seven hundred volunteers can move a lot of earth,” Downs said. “Everything on the trail is volunteer-built and volunteer-driven.

“The AT is literally a national park that volunteers built.”

Those volunteers — who love the Triple Crown as much as, if not more than, infrequent visitors — will also play a part in another strategy: encouraging hikers to spread their love, so to speak.

That’s because a key focus of the plan will be to alleviate pressure at hot spots by encouraging visitors to explore areas beyond the Triple Crown, including lesser-used sections of the Appalachian Trail and even other trails in the region.

“The AT is an anchor,” Downs said. “I used to say it’s like a Sears in the mall. Once you have the big store at the mall, other smaller options will populate it.”

Correction 1 p.m. Aug. 11: *The Appalachian Trail Club purchased land in Daleville that will be used for parking. Additionally, Ridgerunners are paid staff of the ATC. These facts were incorrect in an earlier version of the story.*

POLITICS

Craig Botetourt Scenic Trail meetings draw both fears and fans

The proposed trail is one of five priority trail projects identified by state officials. It would run for 26 miles on a former rail bed. Proponents say it will help the local economy, while opponents have raised concerns about safety and maintenance.



by **Mark Taylor**
September 21, 2023



People at the Eagle Rock hearing study some of the maps. Photo by Mark Taylor.

Looking at a satellite image of Oriskany, Lewis Hopkins found his home. Then he found something else: a label that read “Potential Trail Gate.”

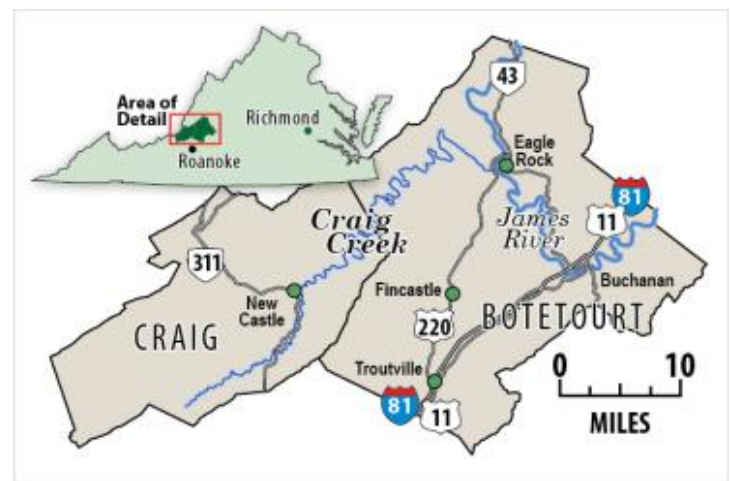
“That’s at the base of my driveway,” he said with a tone of exasperation. “How am I supposed to get to my house?”

Hopkins was among nearly 200 people who attended a public information session at Eagle Rock Elementary School on Wednesday evening on a proposed rail-trail through the Craig Creek corridor between Eagle Rock in Botetourt County to New Castle in Craig County.

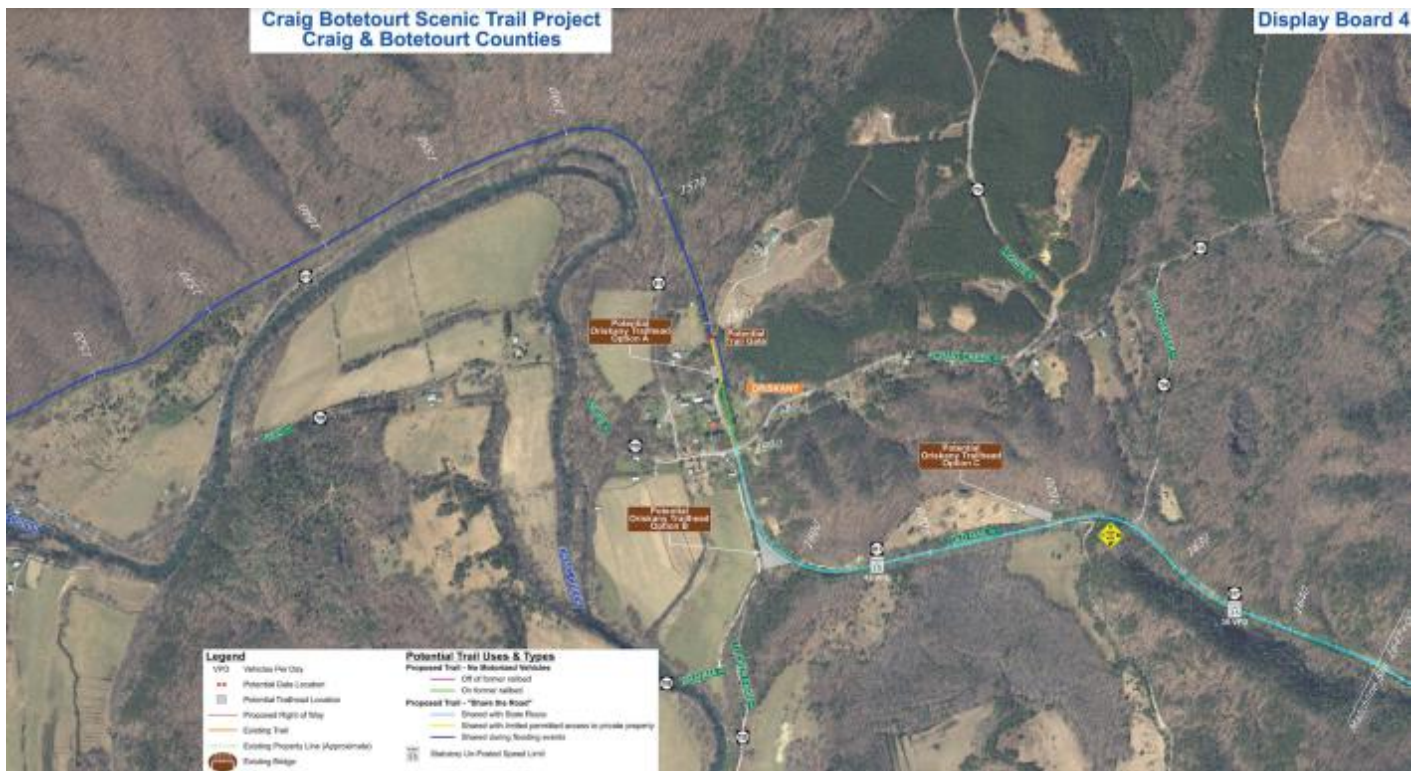
Hopkins and many others at the meeting — the first of two informational meetings organized by the Virginia Department of Transportation — not only had questions about the [Craig Botetourt Scenic Trail](#), but strong opinions.

The proposed trail is one of [five priority trail projects](#) identified by state officials. It would run for 26 miles on a former rail bed donated to VDOT in the early 1960s after the rail line was abandoned.

Roughly 9 miles of the route are on secondary roads that would remain open to traffic. The other sections would likely be gated to keep unauthorized vehicles out but open for hikers, runners, cyclists and equestrians. The non-secondary road surface would be natural, not paved.



The proposed trail would generally follow Craig Creek, which starts in Craig County and eventually flows through Botetourt County into the James River just north of Eagle Rock. Map by Robert Lunsford.



A closer view of the proposed trail through the Oriskany section of Botetourt County, where opposition has been loudest. Courtesy of VDOT.

State officials earlier earmarked \$1 million for a project feasibility study, including engineering. The recent budget amendments passed by Virginia's General Assembly included \$12.5 million for actual work on the trail.

A total cost and a timeline for potential construction to begin hasn't been announced.

As state-owned property, the trail route is already technically open to the public. Formalizing the route would include adding designated trailheads, resurfacing the trail bed along much of the route, adding gates to eliminate unauthorized vehicle travel from some sections, and working on existing bridges to ensure they are sound and safe.

Trail supporters and opponents both showed up in force, with VDOT officials saying 185 people signed in. By comparison, a VDOT meeting the previous night to discuss a \$479 million project to widen Interstate 81 between Daleville and Interstate 581 drew 152 attendees.

At the trail meeting, some opponents were deliberately visible, many of them wearing neon green T-shirts emblazoned with their rallying cry: "DeRail the Trail."

While VDOT had set up a display of maps of the entire trail corridor inside Eagle Rock Elementary School, the DeRail the Trail group had set up its own tents and display placards outside the school.

Trail opponents said they planned to set up again Thursday night at the second meeting in New Castle.



The tent set up by the DeRail The Trail group at the Eagle Rock meeting. Photo by Mark Taylor.

There was no formal presentation at the meeting, an approach VDOT spokesman Jason Bond said is common for informational meetings, which provide an opportunity for citizens to not only comment on proposed projects but also to ask questions.

“We’re here to listen,” Bond said.

About a dozen people with VDOT nametags milled among people looking at the maps and filling out feedback forms handed out to all attendees. Bond said comments will all be read and tallied.

Comments are also [being accepted online](#), and via traditional mail. The comment deadline is Oct. 1.

One of those doing more than his share of listening — and offering his views in return — was Del. Terry Austin, R-Botetourt County, whose district includes the Botetourt section of the trail. Austin supports the project, believing it will not only create direct economic impact for communities along the route, but will have quality of life value for area residents.

“I’ve talked to a lot of people who want to see the trail developed and see the benefit and value of it,” Austin said. “I’ve had people ask me to define the economic value. I tell them, as an example, that my wife and I came over one Sunday to ride the trail with some friends. We went into New Castle — and we had no reason to be in New Castle that day — and we saw a little mercantile and I spent \$70 there. My friend also spent money. Had we not come to New Castle to look at the trail, we wouldn’t have spent that money.”

“I’ve ridden several of these trails around the state and I just think they create opportunity.”

Richard Amstutz was among trail supporters. He lives off Craig Creek Road between Eagle Rock and Oriskany. He said he frequently rides along the section of the proposed trail route that runs along Ballpark Road.

“We can ride all the way to Craig Creek,” Amstutz said. “There’s nobody out there. During hunting season you’ll see guys out in trucks but rarely do we see anybody.”

His son Caleb, a 26-year-old teacher at Community School in Roanoke, said he also enjoys the trail route.

“It’s stunning,” he said. “In late spring there are so many wildflowers. Sometimes I go out just for that.”

Opponents cite a number of concerns. They include questions about who will maintain the trail once it’s completed, concerns about spending money on a trail that is already technically open to the public, potential safety issues that could arise between trail users and drivers on the road sections, and burdens on public safety officials who may have to address accidents in an area where cellphone coverage is spotty or nonexistent.

Austin said that some details are still being worked out, including maintenance responsibilities. One potential scenario, he said, is that counties — likely parks and recreation departments — would handle maintenance of the trail while VDOT would oversee the bridges.

Jim Stadlander, a member of the DeRail the Trail group, has property along the proposed route. He said safety is a concern.



Lewis Hopkins, left, talks with Del. Terry Austin, R-Botetourt County (right), at the Eagle Rock hearing. Photo by Mark Taylor.

“If you’re going to spend \$12.5 million — and it’s not going to stop there — you’re going to want people to use it,” he said. “When you change the use of that road, at what point is it not safe?”

In an online FAQ, VDOT notes that sections where the trail would be shared use with vehicles are considered “low volume,” some with average daily use of just a few dozen vehicles.

Some opponents noted that a section of the trail that runs parallel to Craig Creek Road (Virginia 615) is sometimes used by Oriskany residents when high water floods the road, which is at a slightly lower elevation than the trail bed.

Todd Price, who runs the post office in Oriskany, said that section of the rail bed is also used by hunters to access adjacent national forest land. They would not be able to drive into the area if the trail is gated, as proposed, Price said.

“You’ve got guys whose dads took them hunting there 30 years ago, so that’s where they want to hunt,” Price said. “In hunting season you’ll see that section of road packed with cars.”

Hunters could still potentially park along Craig Creek Road, or walk the trail or ride a bicycle to access national forest land. Price contended that hunter use could lead to other issues, such as a non-hunting trail user being offended when encountering a successful hunter with dead game.

Frank Maguire, greenway coordinator for the Roanoke Valley Greenway Commission, said many of the arguments he hears against the trail are similar to those he heard at his previous job working on trail projects in Pennsylvania.

“As far as the fears, it’s what I’ve been hearing for years,” said Maguire, who added that he understands how residents could be uncertain and concerned about change. “The opportunity to do 26 miles point-to-point is unique and this is an opportunity to make a positive [community] impact.”

Uncertainty is one of the things that gnaws at Price.

“They want to bring development and growth, and I get that,” Price said. “What we’re suffering from is a lack of details. More than anything, we want answers.”

If there was one certainty to come out of Wednesday’s meeting, it was that the trail will not preclude residents from driving to and from their properties.

“There are property owners who use [the trail right-of-way] to access their property,” Bond, the VDOT spokesman, said. “We don’t know how that happened, but they will be able to continue to access their property.”

CULTURE

Deer populations in Virginia’s cities and suburbs are increasing while the number of hunters declines

Virginia’s deer population presents management challenges and it’s not going to get easier. Over the past few years, VDOT crews have received about 20,000 calls for road-killed animals annually — most are deer.



by **Mark Taylor**

December 11, 2023



A mature whitetail buck beds down in a Roanoke alley. Photo by Mark Taylor.

On a recent chilly morning, Robbie Whitehead was getting ready for work when she heard a commotion outside.

When she looked out the window she expected to see her 11-month-old puppy, Oakley, chasing a squirrel. Instead, the frisky Aussiedoodle was face-to-face with a just-as-frisky young white-tailed buck deer, one of two in her backyard.

Pets and deer often come in contact in rural settings, but this was in Roanoke's Raleigh Court neighborhood, far from the nearest large tract of woods or agricultural land.

"I rushed out there in a panic and tried to get the deer to run away," said Whitehead, a pharmaceutical representative. "They just looked at me."

Eventually the young bucks sauntered down the overgrown alley behind the home, leaving Whitehead shaken and wondering if Oakley had been in danger or if the dog-vs.-deer sparring match was just a case of boys — animals in this case — being boys.

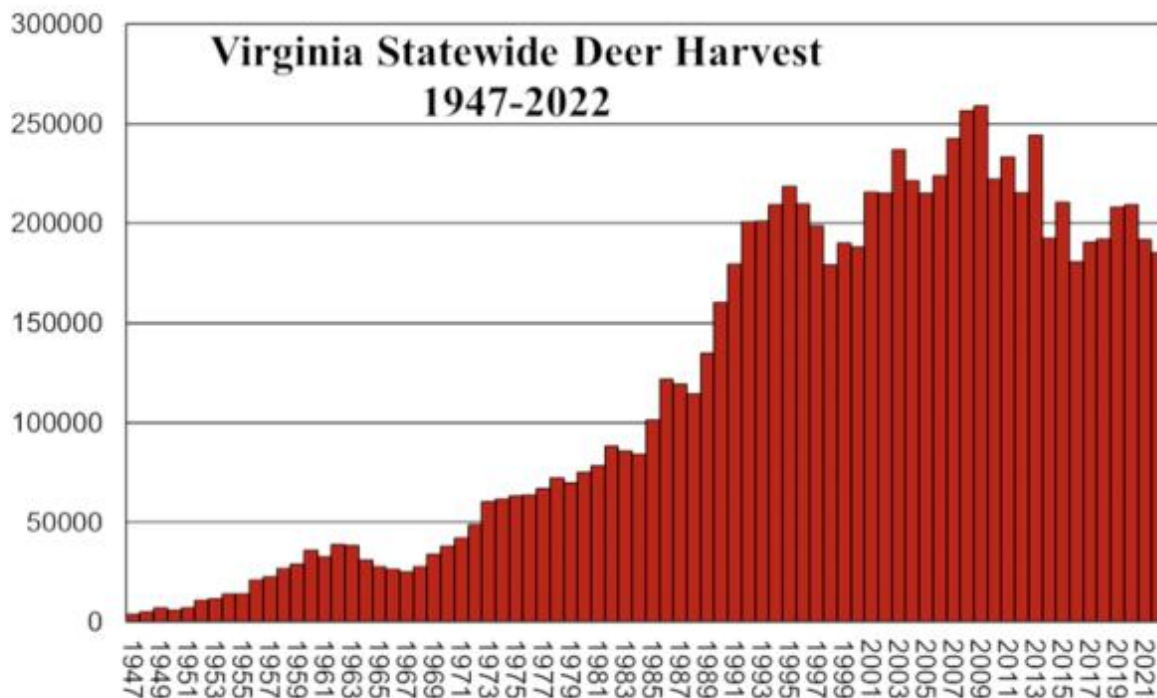
Late fall and early winter is mating season for whitetails — the time of year when the animals are often most visible and most likely to cross paths with humans. Mostly the interactions are relatively benign, like the one Whitehead had recently.

Sometimes, such as when drivers collide with deer, things are more serious.

Driver fatalities from deer collisions are rare, but collisions are not. Over the past few years, Virginia Department of Transportation crews have received about 20,000 calls for road-killed animals annually. The vast majority are for deer.

With deer populations expanding in suburban and urban environments across the commonwealth, those interactions are becoming more frequent and happening in areas where deer haven't been a traditional part of the landscape.

Virginia Deer Harvest, 1947–2022



Virginia's deer kill peaked at more than 250,000 animals in 2009. It has averaged about 200,000 for the past decade. Graphic courtesy of the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources.

A million whitetails

The [Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources](#) (formerly the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries) manages Virginia's white-tailed deer. The agency sets hunting seasons and relies on legal hunting as the primary method to

manage deer populations.

Using in-depth population reconstruction, the department estimates that Virginia's whitetail population currently stands at about a million animals.

That number reflects an increase of nearly 4,000% from the estimated population of 25,000 in 1931, a point at which deer had started recovery from being nearly completely wiped out due to over-exploitation that started soon after the arrival of European settlers 300 years earlier.

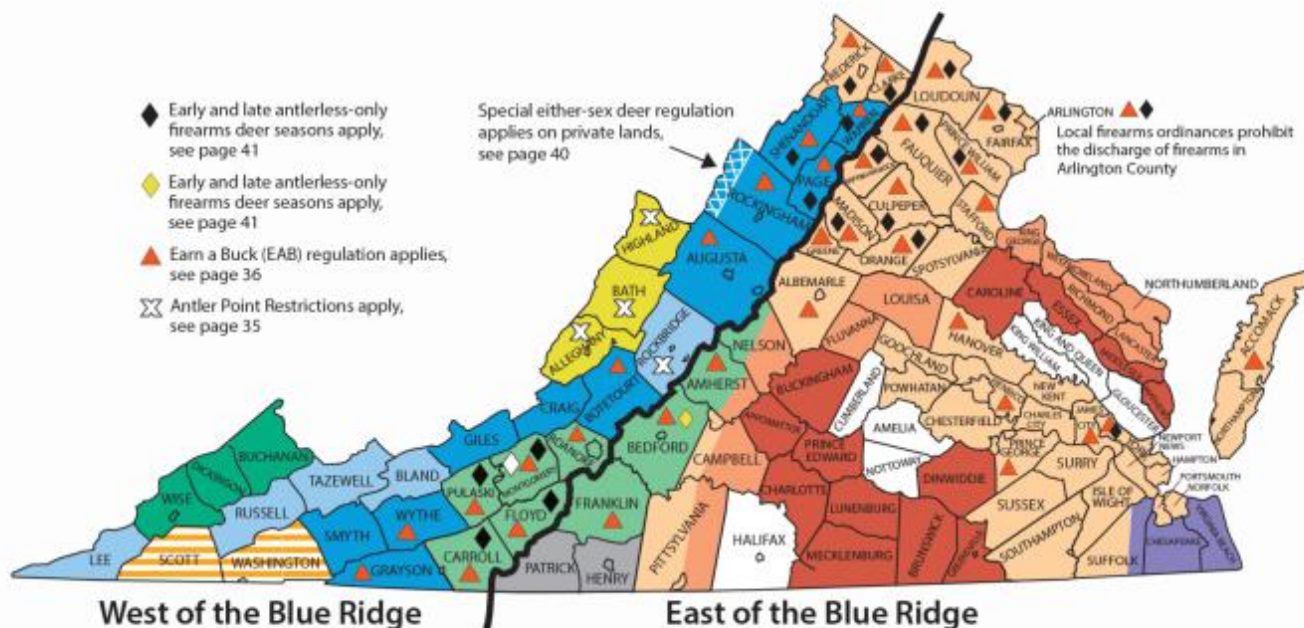
Because Virginia's landscape is so diverse, managing the statewide herd is a challenge — one that requires a patchwork of regulations that are reviewed and updated every other year.

Because a single buck can breed with many female deer, or does, the key to reducing or expanding populations is to manage the take or protection of does. In short, increasing the number of female deer taken by hunters in an area should reduce the overall population. Protecting does should increase the population.

The Department of Wildlife Resources' current statewide deer management plan, which runs through 2024, generally seeks to reduce or maintain deer populations across most of the state. Primary exceptions to increase herds are found in counties in the southwest corner of the state (Buchanan, Dickenson and Wise) and in Virginia's highlands (Alleghany, Bath and Highland), where deer numbers are relatively low.

The statewide record deer kill peaked at more than 250,000 in 2009. It has averaged about 200,000 over the past 10 years. The tally does not include deer killed on roads or by other means.

Firearms Deer Seasons



Antlered deer may be taken every day of the season. Antlerless deer may only be taken on designated either-sex deer hunting days. Special Youth and Apprentice Deer Regulation applies statewide.

The Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources manages white-tailed deer with a complex patchwork of hunting regulations, based on biological information and reviewed bi-annually. Map courtesy of the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources.

Shifting herds

Over the past century, there has been a marked shift in where the state’s deer are found, and where hunters target them.

Over roughly the past three decades, deer populations — and hunter pressure — have shifted from public lands, such as state-owned wildlife management areas and the million-plus acres of the Jefferson and George Washington National Forests, to private lands.

From 1994 to 2014, when the [DWR’s current deer management plan](#) was implemented, the annual deer kill on public land west of the Blue Ridge range dropped from 14,000 to roughly 4,000.

Only part of that decline is likely attributable to public land deer numbers. During that same period, the number of hunters using those lands fell from more than 100,000 to just 60,000.

Justin Folks, the new head deer biologist for the department, grew up hunting with his father on family land in Highland County.

“I remember as a kid driving up 250 west from Staunton and going through national forest land to get to Highland County and every pull-off spot was full of trucks, campers and that sort of stuff,” recalled Folks, who started his position this past June. “Then it seemed like every year after that there were fewer and fewer vehicles.”

The primary reason is simple: Private land now has higher deer densities and better opportunities for hunter success.

Across much of the state, hunters can target deer from October through December, at a minimum, and take nearly unlimited antlerless deer on private lands with proper licenses and tags. Those liberal seasons and bag limits have enabled the Department of Wildlife Resources to be largely successful in meeting management objectives.



Several does feed in a yard in Roanoke's Greater Deyerle neighborhood. Photo by Mark Taylor.

Suburban urban whitetail explosion

But while hunters do a good job of helping keep deer numbers relatively in check in rural Virginia, suburban and urban areas are a different story.

“There are oodles of incorporated cities and towns that are overrun with deer,” Folks said.

That leads to more deer-car collisions, and lots of complaints about deer damage.



Male white-tailed deer rub tree trunks with their antlers to mark their territory and show their dominance over other bucks. This rub was on a small tree in Roanoke's Raleigh Court neighborhood. Photo by Mark Taylor.

“Most of the calls we get are for deer damaging landscaping,” said Bob Cowell, Roanoke’s city manager.

Urban and suburban areas can offer excellent habitat for deer — plenty of food and cover and few natural predators. But hunting can be impractical if not impossible.

“Houses can be on top of one another,” Folks said. “And many of those localities have ordinances that restrict the discharge of firearms and other weapons.”

“Deer are not stupid. They are going to go where they are not bothered and where they have plenty of resources available.”

Many cities and towns, and even a few suburban counties, have opted into [special urban archery seasons](#), which allow for bowhunting antlerless deer in September before regular seasons begin, and from January through March after those seasons end. About 50 municipalities across the state participate in the program.

Those seasons, however, have a minimal impact. Of the 184,968 deer killed by hunters in the 2022-2023 hunting season, for example, only 722 deer were taken by hunters during special urban archery seasons, according to Folks.

Trying to keep urban deer numbers in check, then, can force municipalities to implement culling programs, primarily using trained sharpshooters.

More than two decades ago, a citizens work group in Roanoke recommended using a combination of urban archery and sharpshooters to address the city’s growing whitetail population.

Folks said that is his preferred management approach.

“I see hunting and sharpshooting going hand in hand,” he said. “Allow hunters to do their best, and if it’s not enough then sharpshooting can occur after the hunting season.”

Roanoke officials opted not to join the special urban archery program but contracted with a private company for sharpshooting culling.

Cowell said sharpshooters helped keep the city's deer population in check, typically taking more than 100 deer annually.

If it seems like the city's deer population is on the rebound, it's almost surely because the program was put on hiatus during the COVID pandemic.

"With their ability to reproduce as efficiently as they do, deer numbers can jump up exponentially pretty darn quickly," Folks said. "Once you start [a culling program] you've got to keep after it."

This October the city signed a contract with a private wildlife management company to renew the program, with culling to start in January.

The contractors will not be on call to address individual residents' specific deer complaints, Cowell noted. Rather, they will identify tracts where they can connect with property owners to operate.

"The program serves a couple of purposes," Cowell said. "It is not only to reduce the deer population, but the venison is donated to the Rescue Mission for their feeding program."

The \$40,000 contract equates to taking about 150 deer, which works out to more than \$260 per deer, including the cost of processing the deer at a butcher.

In short, while sharpshooter programs are effective, they are not inexpensive.



Deer hang in a cooler at Arrington Orchards in Bedford County during the 2020 hunting season. Photo by Mark Taylor.

Diminishing hunter numbers

If suburban and urban deer management isn't challenging enough, Virginia and most other states are facing what may be the biggest threat to deer management — and one that creates an impact on their being able to manage non-game wildlife. That problem is a steady and steep decline in hunter numbers.

In the mid-20th century, Virginia had about 35,000 licensed deer hunters. By 1973, that number had topped 300,000, which is where it stayed until the mid-1990s. Since then, the proverbial bottom has dropped out.

In 2021, Virginia had approximately 185,000 licensed deer hunters. And the trend isn't softening.

In an article in the DWR's Virginia Wildlife magazine, Virginia's recently retired longtime deer biologist Matt Knox reported that modeling by Penn State University's Duane Diefenbach predicts that Virginia will have only 118,000 licensed deer hunters by 2030, and about 75,000 a decade later.

The reasons for the decline are varied but include the transition of rural landscapes into suburbia, changing interests of both adults and youth, and the fact that baby boomers who helped drive the increase in hunter numbers are aging out of the activity.

Changing attitudes about hunting don't seem to be a problem. Countless surveys have shown that public support for legal hunting remains strong. For example, a [2019 survey by Harrisonburg-based Responsive Management](#) found that 80% of Americans approve of legal hunting, an increase from 73% in 1995.

State wildlife agencies, with support from hunter advocacy groups, have implemented initiatives to retain existing hunters and recruit new ones, but those efforts are falling short. In his Virginia Wildlife article, Knox noted that a survey of 37 states and four Canadian provinces found that nearly 80% are experiencing deer hunter declines.

“There is no way Virginia will be able to consistently harvest 200,000-plus deer annually with falling deer hunter numbers,” writes Knox.

That trend doesn't just spell trouble for the already difficult challenge of managing deer herds across the entire landscape.

In Virginia, deer hunting has long been the driver for hunter numbers overall, with hunting-generated revenue playing a key role for the agency, which doesn't receive any general fund tax revenue.

In 2022, hunting license sales, including federal grants based on hunter numbers, was \$22.5 million. But that was a drop from \$26.4 million just four years earlier.

Declining hunter numbers were the culprit.

Because total resident and non-resident license sales — numbers that include special tags and licenses such as for archery, bear and waterfowl — fell from 529,181 in 2019 to 428,770 in 2022, federal grants fell from \$12,792,000 to \$8,460,000.

Falling hunter numbers means the agency will not only have less money to manage deer, but also less to put toward its vast array of other programs, such as managing non-game wildlife, including threatened and endangered species such as the peregrine falcon and northern flying squirrel.

Federal legislation, such as the [Recovering America's Wildlife Act](#), may help states account for some budget challenges created by declining hunter numbers.

“If that goes through, it will help,” Folks said. “But if it doesn't, then you know we're still going to be left scrambling to get all the funding we need.”

Folks is blunt with his concern about the future.

“It’s definitely going to be a huge issue,” he says of the decline in deer hunter numbers. “Not just in Virginia, but across the United States.”

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