



New River Currents

The Newsletter of the *New River Group* of the Virginia Chapter of the Sierra Club

February 2005

Welcome from the Chair

Greetings from the new chair of the New River Group of the Virginia Chapter of the Sierra Club.

The New River Group is about 400 strong and includes all Sierra Club members who live in the New River watershed in Virginia. Our area is 3070 square miles. All of us love it here and want to preserve and improve the environmental quality in our part of the Commonwealth.

New group officers were chosen December 2, 2004 at a table of six Sierrans out of 400; eight of us attended a follow-up meeting on January 19. In the fall, we will hold proper elections. Meanwhile, though, we are working on a new website and newsletter aimed at keeping all of our members up-to-date on group activities and regional and national issues. In addition, we hope to provide information to all those in the New River Valley who might want to join Sierra Club or other Sierrans who are welcome to come and enjoy the fantastic natural resources in our area.

We have a number of hikes and meetings planned through mid-summer; see *Outings & Meetings* for details. I hope you will join us.

There are of course many serious environmental issues that need attention in the New River Valley. However, since this newsletter will be the first in a while to reach all members, we are not setting priorities until everyone has a chance to have their say; we will discuss the possibilities at our next meeting, on March 19. In the meantime, please do not hesitate to let us know what you want us to work on. Also, please visit the Virginia Chapter General Assembly link to follow environmental legislation in Virginia. Your calls and letters will make a difference.

I look forward to seeing you on a hike or at a meeting or hearing from you.

David Bernard
(540)951-2716

Local Profile

Each issue of the newsletter will profile a local individual (or group) who has contributed significantly to the environmental well-being of our area.

Beth Obenshain

Beth Obenshain's father was one of Virginia Tech's leading agriculture professors and researchers. He also put together a large cattle farm on the outskirts of Blacksburg before the word subdivision was in the dictionary.

Beth and her family were not interested in seeing the family legacy become a housing development. They sought ways to protect the land, and put a conservation easement on the farm.

Beth took her love for the land one step further. She left a long and successful career with the *Roanoke Times* and founded the New River Land Trust, which encourages and assists other landowners in our area to do what she has done. With her background as a farm owner, she is able to relate to other farmers and landowners who lament the loss of so much of the New River Valley's traditional landscape, but who are pressed themselves by rising taxes and slim profits in agriculture.

The New River Land Trust has been able to protect and preserve thousands of acres that might otherwise be developed in an inappropriate way. And the good work continues.

Upcoming National Club Election

The annual election for the Club's Board of Directors is now underway. In March, you will receive in the mail your national Sierra Club ballot. This will include information on the candidates for the Board of Directors as well as three ballot questions to be decided.

The Sierra Club is a democratically structured organization at all levels that requires the regular flow of views on policy and priorities from its grassroots membership in order to function well. Yearly participation in elections at all Club levels is a major membership obligation.

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Outings & Meetings

We've got several great hikes coming up for Sierra Club members and invited guests! All trips are rated for difficulty; please bring appropriate gear, water, and snack or lunch. Hikes will go in drizzle, but probably not in heavy rain.

Unless otherwise indicated, we will meet for all outings at the Hardee's at the University City Mall in Blacksburg, near the intersection of Price's Fork Road and US 460 Bypass.

Please check with Outings Chair Dave Jenkins (540/ 552-3747) or Group Chair David Bernard (540/951-2716) the week before the event.

Saturday March 19

Cascades in Giles County. Moderate 4 mile round trip up a southwest Virginia favorite, Little Stony Creek, to the Cascades. Meet at Hardee's at 8:30am, or be at the trailhead at 9am.

Following the hike, we will have an **Open Meeting** in Blacksburg at the Easy Chair Coffee Shop, located at the entrance to University City Mall in Blacksburg.

Sunday April 10

Proposed Brush Mountain Wilderness just west of Blacksburg in Montgomery County. This is not a long hike in miles, but it is extremely difficult, with no trail. We'll be going straight down the mountain in one hollow and then back up another hollow or on a ridge. Good boots and gloves are a must, as you will need your hands to balance in deep hollows. Meet at Hardee's at 1pm to carpool.

Saturday April 30

Kelly Flats and Glen Alton. Easy to moderate hike of about 3 hours through an open area of the Jefferson National Forest in the Big Stony Creek watershed. We will be looking for wildflowers and other signs of spring. If time permits, we will visit the Glen Alton area recently acquired by the National Forest. Meet at Hardee's at 8:30am to carpool, or be at the Kelly Flats trailhead at 9:15am.



Wednesday May 18

Open Meeting at 7pm at the Blacksburg Public Library, downtown Blacksburg. David Muhly will present his work on national forest policy, and we will discuss conservation priorities and other business. Please attend!

Saturday June 11

Rockcastle Gorge in Rocky Knob Area in Patrick County near Blue Ridge Parkway. Difficult hike up the gorge. Meet at Hardee's at 8:30am, or be at the trailhead at 10am.

Sunday June 12

New River Trail State Park along lower Chestnut Creek to New River Junction. This easy hike features railroad history, as you walk through a tunnel and across the New River Bridge, plus a close look at some of the best whitewater rapids on Chestnut Creek. Will the rhododendron be blooming? Meet at the EXXON at I-77 exit 14 (Galax-Hillsville exit) at 12:15pm, or be at the Gambetta trailhead at 1pm.

Saturday July 24

Mountain Lake Wilderness up headwaters of John's Creek. For this moderate hike, do not go to the Mountain Lake Lodge—you will be on the wrong side of the eastern divide. This trailhead is accessed from Craig County and goes up the westernmost source of the Chesapeake Bay. (OK, so it's not actually in the New River Group's territory.) Heavily logged a century ago, the second-growth forest and the many springs and branches are cool and inviting on a hot summer day. If all the Chesapeake Bay's watershed were in this good a shape, there would be no water pollution problems downstream. Meet at Hardee's at 9am, or be at trailhead at 10am.

Election *(from p. 1)*

Your Board of Directors is required to stand for election by the membership. This Board sets Club policy and budgets at the national level and works closely with the staff to run the Club. Voting for candidates who express your views on how the Club should grow and change is both a privilege and responsibility of membership. The same responsibility rests with the membership when ballot questions on major policy issues are to be voted upon.

Members frequently state that they don't know the candidates or the background of the ballot questions and find it difficult to vote without learning more. You can learn more by asking questions of your group and chapter leadership and other experienced members you know. Visit the Club's election website: www.sierraclub.org/bod/2005 **election**. This site provides links to much more information about candidates, their background and views and also additional information on the ballot questions.

You should use your own judgment by taking several minutes to read the ballot statement of each candidate and the pro and con statements on the ballot questions. Then make your choices and cast your votes. You will find the ballot is quite straightforward and easy to mark. A growing number of members find the user friendly Internet voting option to be very convenient as well as saving postage!

Paddling New River's Whitewater

The northeast and the western mountains are home to awesome rivers, but they are frozen in winter, dependent on snowmelt for spring runs, and still cold when they have water in summer or fall. With the right garments and good sense, southeastern paddlers go for it all year long.

OK, you say, a half day's drive will get you to Pennsylvania's Youghiogheny River or Georgia and South Carolina's Chattooga River, and a couple of hours gets you to West Virginia's exciting sections of the New River or North Carolina's Nolichucky and French Broad Rivers. But, what do you do when gasoline gets scarce and expensive? Where is the river fun then? What is close by?

Virginia's New River has some nice class 2 and a few class 3 rapids, though there is usually a lot of flatwater to be paddled between them. My favorite section is Double Shoals, which begins 2 miles below Fries and ends with a lake paddle at Byllesby. There are two miles of class 2 and low class 3 rapids with endless opportunities for surfing and eddy catching. Foster Falls is fun, and it is nice to have the state park there with an easy put-in and take-out on either end of this half mile continuous set of rapids. Watch out for hydraulics at the end of Foster Falls. When the water is high enough to go across the entry ledges without scraping, the big drops at the end form large regular hydraulics that could flip and keep you. McCoy Falls, at the village of that name in Montgomery County, is a popular park and play spot. Further downstream at Narrows in Giles County is the largest rapid on Virginia's New. It has big hydraulics on river left that are best avoided entirely. Because there is little play opportunity here, and because of the flat water above and below, this section is rarely run.

Between these few class 3 rapids are long stretches of easy paddling where practiced novice skills and good sense will give you many miles of enjoyable floating, fishing, and wildlife viewing with occasional class 2 rapids and frequent amazing views.

Additional fun in Virginia's New River Valley can be had on the tributaries. My favorites are Big Reed Island Creek, Elk Creek, and Chestnut Creek. Big Reed Island Creek Gorge is a class 2-3 run that takes you through some of the most delightful scenery in the world, with rhododendron, hemlocks, and hardwoods hanging over, crowding, and growing out of the boulders that enclose the stream. Big Reed Island Creek is the New's largest tributary above Claytor Lake, and has many other sections that may not offer the same challenge or intimate feeling of oneness with wilderness as the Gorge section, but that are still fun and beautiful.

Elk Creek passes through a long-settled farming community in Grayson County, then plunges quickly to the New in almost non-stop class 3 rapids. I have seen rapids named Slicer and Hot Tub grab or flip friends. My first venture down this stream in the spring of 2001 resulted in two swims and many other inept moves that should have been swims. Now that I am fairly comfortable there, I think of Elk Creek as a whitewater jewel.

Chestnut Creek has several rapids in its 17 mile descent from Galax to the New. Beware of Chestnut Falls in the middle section. The lower section has the best rapids. After a mile or so of class 1, you enter a 2 mile section of class 2 and many solid class 3 rapids that end all too soon as you enter the same Byllesby Lake at the end of the Double Shoals run.

There are many other streams worth catching after a rain in our

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Whitewater Paddling *(from p. 3)*

area. Big Walker Creek in Giles County has 40 miles of class 1-2 water and nice scenery. Reed Creek coming out of Wytheville has some nice rapids before Graham's Forge, but beware the old mill dam at that village. Big Stony Creek in Giles County is continuous class 3-4 with no eddies—it is for advanced paddlers only.

We have hundreds of miles of rivers and streams to paddle and enjoy in Virginia's New River Valley. Good cooperative efforts hopefully will make more of them accessible and improve water and natural quality in the future. Our water is clean and abundant compared to some other places, but it faces threats from industrial and municipal withdrawals and discharges, agriculture, and development. The last is particularly worrisome, because the thirst for the imagined delights of waterfront property leaves a problem less easily fixed than most pollution sources.

If this article has given you an intriguing look at paddlesport, it has served its purpose. Remember safety is the most important aspect of enjoying any watersport. American Whitewater keeps track of paddling fatalities. Most occur at one end or the other of the paddling spec-

trum. A few die every year who are top paddlers, running very difficult class 5 rivers. Most deaths are from enthusiastic but untrained beginners, excited about the prospect of high water in a nearby stream. Flood waters, a lack of cold water clothes or a Personal Flotation Device, and strainers (trees fallen across the stream) all take their toll on the unwary. Dams get boaters too, and we have plenty of dams in the New River watershed. A good way to start paddling safely is with professional instruction or with one of our regions excellent paddling clubs. Two I recommend are Coastal Canoeists, Virginia's largest paddling club, coastals.org, or the Carolina Canoe Club, carolinacanoecub.com. The latter has an excellent instruction program. Another good source for instruction is Nantahala Outdoor Center, NOC.com, in southwest North Carolina.

We have several good outdoors stores and several river guides and outfitters here in the New River Valley who would be happy to help you get a safe and fun start on the river too.

SYOTR (See You On The River),

David Bernard

Online Resources

The Website

<http://www.virginia.sierraclub.org/newriver/>
Our website will be redesigned in the coming months. Please send suggestions and comments to Eva Brumberger at evab@naxs.net

The Newsletter—Online

Future issues of the newsletter will be available online. If you'd rather receive the newsletter electronically than by mail, please send an email to Keith Hollinger at khollinge@naxs.net

The Listserv

The New River Group maintains a listserv where we post information about meetings and activities as well as alerts on environmental issues. To subscribe to the list, send an email to:

LISTSERV@LISTS.SIERRACLUB.ORG

Leave the subject line blank, and type the following message:

**SUB VIRGINIA-NEWRIVER-NEWS
YourFirstName YourLastName**

Replace "YourFirstName YourLastName" with your own first and last name. This will be the name you will be known by on the list. If you have questions about the listserv, contact David Jenkins at jenkins@vt.edu

New River Group
P.O. Box 125
Blacksburg, VA 24063

