

MORGANTON, N.C. — Wildacres Retreat, a 1,076-acre property adjacent to Pisgah National Forest and the Blue Ridge Parkway, is now permanently protected thanks to a collaborative partnership among Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina, Conservation Trust for North Carolina (CTNC), and Wildacres Retreat.

Wildacres Retreat, located in northern McDowell County near Little Switzerland, is a nonprofit conference center governed by a board of directors. The center offers its facilities and surrounding woodlands to nonprofit groups for educational and cultural programming, and for board and staff retreats.

The property is protected under two conservation easements. A state-held Clean Water Management Trust Fund easement will protect stream buffers and critical natural heritage areas, while a second easement held by Conservation Trust for North Carolina will preserve a key portion of forested lands connected to the Blue Ridge Parkway and Pisgah National Forest. Together, the easements will safeguard wildlife habitat and protect water quality in five miles of streams of the Armstrong Creek watershed in the headwaters of the Catawba River. Foothills Conservancy will monitor and steward these conservation easements on a contractual basis.

“Protection of these lands fills in a very important piece of the puzzle to permanently conserve extensive forests and habitats in the very high-quality Armstrong Creek watershed of the Catawba,” said Tom Kenney, land protection director for Foothills Conservancy. “Wildacres adjoins a Wildlife Resources Commission fish hatchery and more than 10,000 acres of federal Pisgah National Forest lands. All this conservation helps ensure Lake James has a very clean water supply source.”

There are nearly six miles of hiking trails on the property for public use, including one trail into the property from Deer Lick Gap Overlook on the Blue Ridge Parkway.

The project was primarily funded by a \$1 million grant from North Carolina Clean Water Management Trust Fund awarded to Foothills Conservancy and a \$26,000 donation from Philip Blumenthal, director of Wildacres Retreat. In addition, CTNC secured a \$50,000 grant from the Cannon Foundation and \$177,240 from the Open Space Institute’s Resilient Landscapes Initiative, which is made possible with funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. The Resilient Landscapes Initiative seeks to build capacity of land trusts working to respond to climate change. Conservation Trust for North Carolina will also provide the remaining funds for the project.

Clean Water Management Trust Fund Executive Director Walter Clark described the organization’s reasons for contributing to the project to conserve what he calls an “incredible property.”

“The Clean Water Management Trust Fund supported the Wildacres project for multiple reasons, including its protection of five miles of high-quality trout waters, which contain headwater streams in the Catawba River Basin,” said Clark. “The project also protects multiple forest communities important to North Carolina’s natural heritage.” Since its establishment in 1996, Clean Water Management Trust Fund has protected over 500,000 acres, including 2,500 miles of streams.

“The Wildacres Retreat property has been among CTNC and Foothills Conservancy’s highest priority projects for years,” said Rusty Painter, CTNC land protection director. “Conserving its ecologically diverse habitat between the Blue Ridge Parkway and Pisgah National Forest achieves the type of landscape-scale conservation that’s one goal of our Blue Ridge Parkway conservation plan. Successes like this would not be possible without the commitment of champions like Philip

Blumenthal and the Wildacres Retreat Board of Directors.”

Blumenthal added, “It’s been a long-term goal of the Blumenthal family to ensure the ecological integrity of this unique property for the benefit of Wildacres Retreat visitors and all who enjoy the Blue Ridge Parkway. We’re fortunate to have land trusts like CTNC and Foothills Conservancy who work tirelessly to save places we all love in North Carolina. They ensure our state’s most valuable assets will be protected forever.”

“Permanent conservation of the Wildacres property marks a major milestone for the protection of habitat in North Carolina,” said Peter Howell, OSI’s Executive Vice President of Conservation Capital & Research Programs. “As the climate changes, this highly resilient property will provide a long-term haven for sensitive plants and animals. The Open Space Institute is proud to have supported this project and we applaud Conservation Trust for North Carolina and the Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina for their collaboration and tireless work to seize this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

Federally protected land in this region is fragmented and thousands of acres are still vulnerable to development. Western North Carolina land trusts frequently partner to preserve National Forest and Blue Ridge Parkway lands for the benefit of all North Carolinians.

Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina is a nationally accredited, non-profit regional land trust based in Morganton. The conservancy works cooperatively with landowners and public/private conservation partners to preserve and protect significant natural areas and open spaces. Focus areas include watersheds, forests and farmland across the eastern slopes of the Blue Ridge Mountains and foothills in eight counties: Alexander, Burke, Caldwell, Catawba, Cleveland, Lincoln, McDowell, and Rutherford. Since 1995, Foothills Conservancy has protected more than 52,000 acres, including lands added to South Mountains, Lake James and Chimney Rock state parks; Wilson Creek, South Mountains and the Johns River state game lands; Pisgah National Forest and the Blue Ridge Parkway. Information about Foothills Conservancy, including ways to support its work, can be found online at www.foothillsconservancy.org or by calling 828-437-9930.

Conservation Trust for North Carolina protects the Blue Ridge Parkway natural and scenic corridor, assists 22 local land trusts so that they can protect more land in the communities they serve, and connects North Carolina families with the outdoors. Land trusts preserve land and waterways to safeguard your way of life. They work with landowners to ensure natural lands are protected for safe drinking water and clean air, fresh local foods, recreation, tourism, and healthy wildlife habitat. More information about CTNC is available at www.ctnc.org or [@ct4nc](https://twitter.com/ct4nc).

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<https://media.visitnc.com/New-Partnership-to-Preserve-Parkway-Views-at-Wildacres-Retreat>