



## NEWS FROM THE RIDGE



### Wildfire on the Mountain!

Kallan called late one April afternoon, frantically shouting “There’s a fire! Bring buckets and shovels! We’ve called 911!” A tree had knocked a powerline down into brittle leaves, bone dry from three weeks with no rain, sparking a low, fast-moving wildfire.

Josh, Scot, Joel, and Kristen grabbed buckets, hopped in the truck, and raced over to join the Bensons on the slope across the road from a neighbor’s house – only to realize that there was no power and therefore NO WATER being pumped to the faucet to let them fill the buckets! Back they flew for leaf blowers and rakes to clear a swath ahead of the flames, trying to create a fire break.



The first fire truck to arrive twenty minutes later, the Blue Ridge Mountain Volunteer Fire Company from the end of Mission Rd, rapidly discovered their hose wasn’t long enough to reach the fire that had by then moved way up the steep wooded slope heading in the general direction of either the Niles Cabin or Stillpoint depending on the wind and how fast and far the fire moved. The fire chief put out a call to other fire departments saying they needed more fire fighters and more hoses.

A guy named Ryan had just arrived home from his job as a firefighter in Fairfax County, to find that Riverside was also without power. He turned on his scanner and heard the fire chief’s call. He hopped back in his truck and joined the others whom he had never met – pitching in and providing knowledgeable advice.



Two other neighbors in Shannondale, who hunt on RRC land, also heard by word-of-mouth, and came right away. But by that time, so many emergency vehicles had arrived from Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia that they were backed up all the way to the intersection of Christ Church and Mission Road. Professionals had taken over and thankfully relieved very hot, thirsty, exhausted, and anxious volunteers from firebreak duty.

Hours later the fire had been contained. Though the fire burned somewhere around five to ten acres, it didn’t rage through the woods or come near any buildings. In the middle of the burn area, a half dozen dead trees stood with trunks unscorched, but with holes 5-20 feet up that lit up the dark with bright orange flames. The hollow trunks had become perfect chimneys for the fire to climb. Firefighters cut them down with a chainsaw, sending deadwood and flames crashing down, where they then had to be doused well into the night.

At times like these, we abruptly come face to face with both trauma and grace. Because of the difficulty of getting anything more than a few cryptic, confusing texts from the folks who first went to try and help; those who stayed home – especially the kids - felt the trauma of not knowing if this would become a wildfire raging out of





control and sweeping hellbent across the forest. We worried for family and friends who were putting themselves in the line of the fire. But there was also the grace of unforeseen luck, the incredible kindness of strangers, and the community that is Rolling Ridge. What if Lisa Payne hadn't been visiting the Bensons and thereby the goats hadn't been walked back to their pen a few hours earlier than usual – right past the place where the fire was just getting started? I never thought I'd see the positive side of deer browse either, but the fire mostly stayed low to the ground with little understory to draw it vertically. We had already created an emergency communication “system” – evidence that all of us who live and work here at Rolling Ridge are more closely interconnected than ever, whether we are Friends Wilderness, Study Retreat, or the China Folk House. At times like these property lines don't matter – fire certainly makes no distinction. Everyone pitched in – friends, neighbors, strangers, volunteers, and professionals – because really, we all share this good green earth, we need each other, and people showed up.

The story doesn't end there though. The next day some of us went back to survey the damage and found that many places were still smoldering, and some had more flames. Thankfully the power had come back on in the middle of the night, so we started a bucket brigade while waiting for the return of our local volunteer fire department. They came and stayed for more hours that day and returned that night and the next day to keep monitoring.

This experience highlights the need for Rolling Ridge Conservancy to make assessment of forest resilience a top priority. The stresses we face from climate change – whether parched dry periods of heightened fire risk or flash floods that erode soil and carve gulleys into trails and roads – make effective forest stewardship and proactive conservation work essential.

We don't carry on this work by ourselves...the forest works with us; just weeks after the fire hundreds of little ferns have sprouted in the ashes. Amazing.



## Box Turtles on the Move

Hopping on the brakes and jumping out of the car, I run up ahead toward the Eastern Box Turtle I'd spotted making his way out onto the road. Keeping an eye out for movement on our roads is a common occurrence this time of year as turtles and other wildlife emerge from their preferred methods of enduring the cold of winter. I once heard a herpetologist say two big threats to box turtles are fires and tires. Uncharacteristically, this box turtle was smarter than most and had already done an about-face and hightailed it back up the slope from whence he came.

Box turtles burrow deep under soil and leaves in a state of dormancy or torpor until spring warmth draws them forth. At Rolling Ridge, we encounter them frequently on the trails and deep in the woods, and occasionally in our gardens nibbling the strawberries. In fact Rolling Ridge provides such

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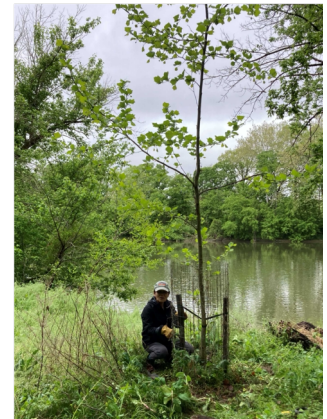
good habitat for box turtles at a time when so much of the country is losing habitat and turtle populations are declining, that the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute sent a few biologists out to tour different habitats here. They were impressed and excited about exploring the possibility of setting up a box turtle research project on RRC land.

Their beautiful carapace, the domed upper part of the shell, boasts mottled orange, yellow and brown patterns. Each section, or scute, on a box turtle's carapace has concentric growth rings that can give some indication of longevity though they are more an indicator of cycles of growth spurts and lean seasons than actual years. The bottom part of the shell is uniquely hinged so that the box turtle can pull in and "close the box" when threatened.



## Blue Mountain Hiking Group Lends a Hand – Actually Many Hands

Six volunteers from the Blue Mountain Hiking Group joined Jeff Feaga last month to carry out maintenance within an enclosure of native understory plantings and at the lower end of the Ridge-to-River trail along the big waterfall area. This beautiful riparian area of high ecological value is also an area that sees ever-increasing levels of traffic from hikers and bikers. Rolling Ridge Conservancy strives to balance the responsibilities of caring for private, protected land used by three partner organizations with the value and desire of welcoming folks onto the trails to experience wilderness for the mutual flourishing of all. To maintain the ability to monitor human impact on the land, the guidelines posted at the entry kiosks advise groups larger than eight to contact RRC. Three hiking groups have honored this guideline, reaching out to us for permission to bring larger groups on the trails and offering to send volunteer crews out to do trail maintenance. RRC is delighted to establish these connections and build an expanding network of relationships characterized by respect, gratitude, and reciprocity.



Weeding +  
mulching  
around  
native shrubs

Tending trees planted several  
years ago with Cacapon  
Institute

Transplanting  
bluebells to restore  
native groundcover  
along the streambank.

