



Catawba Falls, Photo by Justin Costner

Conservation of the Catawba River affords exciting regional day trips

by FRANCES FIGART

Just east of the Eastern Continental Divide lies one of the largest and most populous river basins in North Carolina, the Catawba River. Beginning in the Blue Ridge Mountains near Old Fort in western McDowell County, it flows nearly

220 miles, passing through the eight-county region of Foothills Conservancy, a land trust that has helped preserve significant areas of the river's headwaters.

"Protecting water quality by conserving forested watersheds and streamside zones is a big part of our mission," says Tom Kenney, land protection director with Foothills

Conservancy, which turns 20 this year. "When our projects expand North Carolina's state parks and Pisgah National Forest, new outdoor recreation areas that the public can access and enjoy eventually result."

Many of the wonderful parks, wilderness areas and

outdoor activities in our region exist because of the Catawba's preservation and provide convenient day trips for those living in or visiting the Asheville area.

CATAWBA FALLS

The headwaters of the mammoth Catawba watershed are nestled in the Pisgah National Forest west of Old Fort.

Nearby is what many consider to be one of the most beautiful waterfalls in the Blue Ridge Mountains east of Asheville: Catawba Falls. A convenient three-mile drive from I-40 leads to a 2.5-mile round-trip hike to this magnificent 340-foot cascade, which boasts upper and lower tiers.

"Once people experience the river, they are more likely to recognize how special it is and to support protecting it."

~Trail developer Bob Benner of Morganton

"I've always thought the hike to Catawba Falls is one of the nicest and most accessible waterfall treks in the west," says outdoor enthusiast Jamie Cameron of Nebo, NC.

This beautiful natural area was purchased and added to

Catawba paddlers and fishermen

Looking to get your boat out onto the Catawba River? The Upper Catawba River Trail (a state designated Blueway Trail specifically for non-motorized boats) begins near Marion at Black Bear Access on Lake James, runs to Lookout Shoals in Catawba County and continues all the way to Charlotte on the Catawba River, a total of some 82 miles. Later this year, several thousand acres along the Catawba below Lake James will become available for public enjoyment, providing plenty of places for boaters to stop and rest along the way.

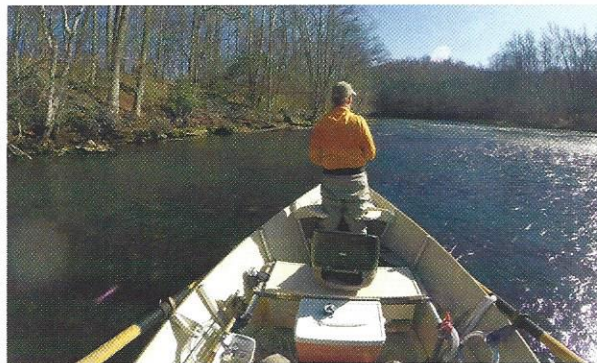
Another tributary of the Catawba, Wilson Creek became the focus of Foothills Conservancy and other partners in 2008 when a large tract of land became available in its Wild and Scenic

Corridor. The threat of a 250-home development along four miles of the creek initiated discussions with the landowners and an agreement was reached for the purchase of the land so it could be added to the state's

game lands. The result: a world-class public trout fishery, and protection for the river and surrounding Pisgah National Forest.

This 650-acre tract in Caldwell County, along with another smaller property, now provides public access for fishing and paddling upstream of the river's whitewater section in the Wilson Creek Gorge. So gather your friends and get ready to

enjoy the creek and the surrounding Pisgah National Forest lands.



Fishing on the Catawba River; Photo by Galen Kipar

Pisgah National Forest about 30 years ago. But the land hikers crossed to access the falls remained privately owned, so visitors literally had to trespass to get there.

Through fundraising efforts that took more than five years, Foothills Conservancy was finally able to purchase and transfer the 88-acre access property to the Forest Service, which then partnered with McDowell County and the land trust to develop the trailhead, parking area, information kiosk and bathroom services, all easily accessed by a new bridge.

“Visitors from all over the country stop by our visitor center for directions to this waterfall,” says Carol Price, executive director, McDowell County Tourism Development Authority. “With the Forest Service’s planned trail improvements, we anticipate the popularity of this site to increase.”

LAKE JAMES STATE PARK

Another example of land protection leading to new public recreation areas is Lake James and its watershed. Fed by both the Linville and the Catawba rivers, Lake James State Park rests at the base of the Linville Gorge.

“At the time we started our work, it was the state’s smallest state park,” recalls Susie Hamrick-Jones, executive director of Foothills Conservancy. “It was overcrowded and they would have to routinely close the gates in the summer because there wasn’t enough parking to meet public demand.”

Starting in 2004, Foothills worked with a variety of local, private and conservation partners to help protect a total of almost 9,000 acres that involved a major expansion of Lake James State Park and additions to Pisgah National Forest and N.C. Wildlife Resources’ state game lands.

“We added almost 3,000 acres to that state park and protected about 30 miles of shoreline at Lake James in connection with partners who put conservation principles in place for development around the lake,” says Hamrick-Jones.

The expansion paved the way for new outdoor recreation activities, including more than 20 miles of mountain bike trails; a new swim beach, bath house and picnic shelter; an award-

winning interpretative trail for children; and much greater boating, swimming and fishing access to the lake.

“For nearly three decades, the park has been a place for families to come experience the natural beauty of the lake and its tributaries,” says Nora Coffey, park superintendent. “The fact Lake James State Park exists is a tribute to the surrounding communities and the importance they have placed on clean water, healthy forests and opportunities for outdoor recreation.”

LINVILLE GORGE WILDERNESS AREA

Around the same time, Foothills Conservancy added thousands of acres to Pisgah National Forest watershed lands to buffer and protect the Linville River and Linville Gorge Wilderness Area in Burke County and to expand the national forest in the Black Bear area above Lake James in McDowell County.

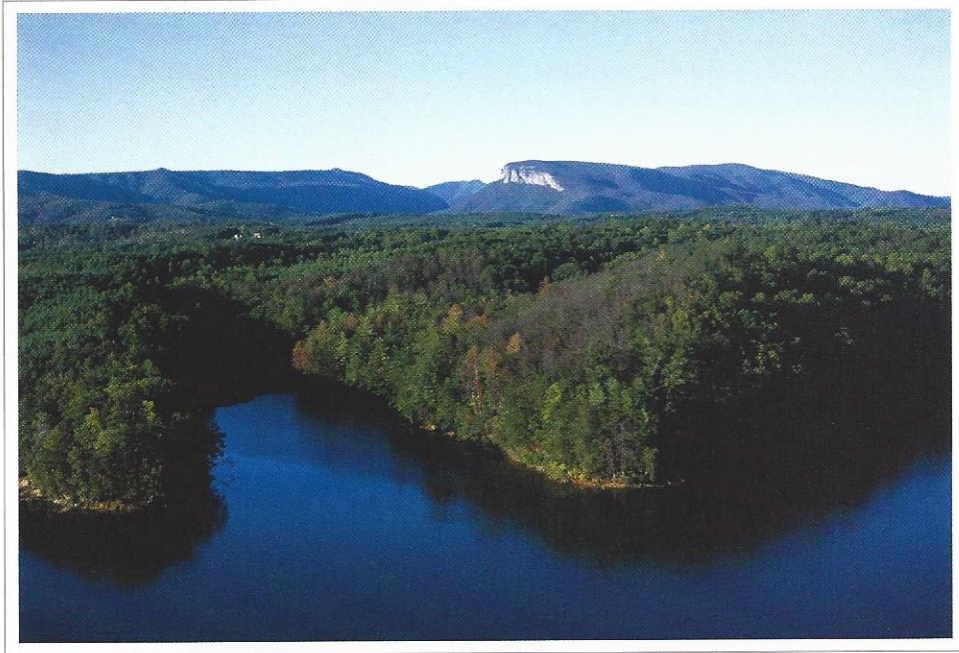
The Linville River is a major tributary of the Catawba, joining it where the two empty into Lake James. Here

Foothills Conservancy helped facilitate the purchase of additional undeveloped lands bordering the Linville Gorge Wilderness Area and the river to create the state’s Pisgah Game Land, creating greater access to hiking and views that will be preserved in perpetuity.

“For me, the Linville Gorge Wilderness stands out from other Blue Ridge Wilderness Areas,” says outdoor photographer, writer and conservationist David A. Ramsey of Jonesborough, Tennessee. “This wild

region was chosen as one of the original, natural treasures to receive federal Wilderness Area designation in 1964, the same year the Wilderness Act was signed into law.”

Gaining the new conservation lands allowed for a needed rerouting of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail across the Linville River and for construction of The Linville River Connector trail, which runs 2.5 miles from NC 126 to the Mountains-to-Sea Trail on the slope of Shortoff Mountain. Its creation by volunteers provided access for hikers from the highway near Lake James

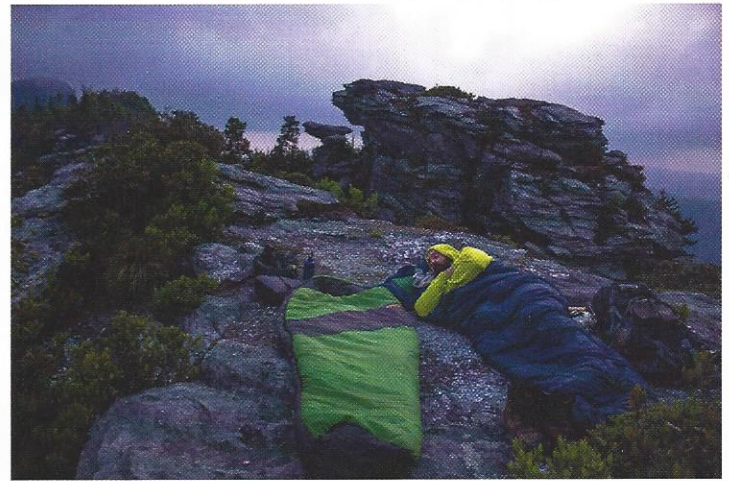
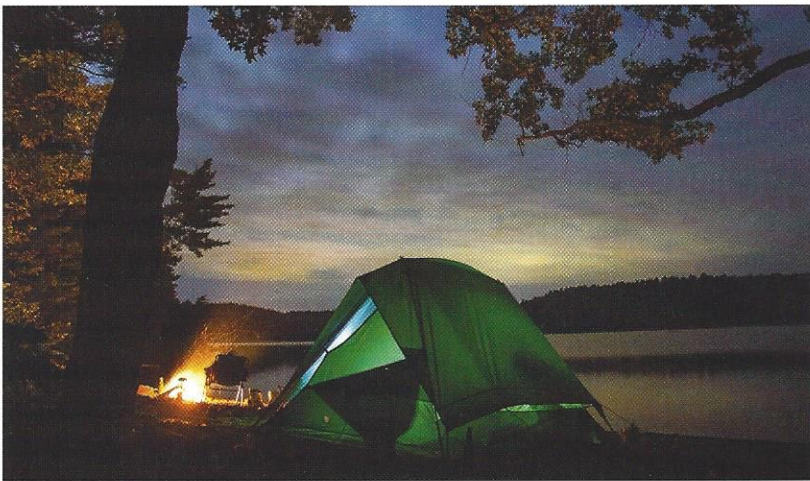


Breathtaking beauty

The Paddy Creek Area of Lake James State Park; Photo courtesy of Crescent Resources

Evening adventures

Starry night at the Linville Gorge
Wilderness Area's Chimneys;
Chimney sleepover; camping
beside Lake James. All photos
by Justin Costner.



State Park directly to the Linville Gorge.

Spearheading the trail's development was one of Foothills Conservancy's founding board members, retired outdoor recreation teacher Bob Benner of Morganton, who had previously helped develop and maintain 74 miles of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail.

"As one who loves the outdoors, I find this a great place to live, what with the Catawba River, Pisgah National Forest, Lake James and Linville Gorge all close by," he says. "Developing the

river trail was a very important step toward drawing attention to the river as an outstanding natural resource."

After snaking out of the Foothills Conservancy region, the Catawba River turns south to pass Charlotte and enter South Carolina, where it finally drains into the Atlantic. Even here, the effects of Foothills Conservancy's work in the Catawba River's upper basin are evident. Protected water quality all along this mighty river allows wildlife to thrive and people to more fully enjoy the beauty of our mountains and foothills.