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SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS RESERVE WORKS TO REPLENISH NATIVE RED SPRUCE

BY JONATHAN AUSTIN

Sometimes, it is worthwhile to try to make things as they once were.

In a sense, that is the purpose of the Southern Appalachian Spruce Restoration Initiative at the Southern Highlands Reserve, a private non-profit that grew from the dreams of Betty and Robert Bajent, an Atlanta couple who wanted "to bring their children closer together in the mountains of their own youth."

According to Kelly Holdbrooks, executive director of the Southern Highlands Reserve, "from the 1880s to the 1950s, these forests were logged extensively, with some areas experiencing catastrophic wildfires in the logging slash. This era of unchecked logging is considered the primary reason that restoration efforts are needed, since the spruce forests have not recovered in more than 100 years."

These slash-and-burn events weakened the entire red spruce species, she said, which was further impacted by sulphuric acid rain and other air pollutants and the destruction of wide-ranging Fraser fir forests.

"The red spruce matters because it is a fundamental species to the southern Appalachian ecosystem," Holdbrooks said.

She said the red spruce is considered a "keystone species" in the region, meaning its removal portends the loss of numerous other species that thrive in the region. "Once that species falls, it's a domino effect. There are thousands of species that rely on the red spruce," she said.

So the reserve, working with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission and other regional and national organizations, is trying to help the red spruce regain its once-lusty status in the southern mountains.

"We did mapping so you could see, historically, where the red spruce was," she said.

The red spruce is best situated at or above certain elevations in the mountains, though Holdbrooks said there is disagreement about how low into valleys some believe the stately trees can thrive.

"Some research says only 5,500 feet or above, but we have found out that spruce thrive in lower environments," Holdbrooks said.

"We have them around our building" located near Lake Toxaway at an elevation of 4,500 feet.

She said the spruce can be planted at elevations as low as Asheville or Brevard, North Carolina, "but are more suited in Waynesville, Cashiers, Highlands," or in Tennessee in places like Whigg Meadow, she said.

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— Kelly Holdbrooks, executive director, Southern Highlands Reserve

ONCE DOMINANT

Holdbrooks said red spruce were once a dominant species in high elevations throughout the southern Appalachian range.

She says Mr. Mitchell, the tallest peak east of the Rockies, was once home to healthy stands of the tall trees, and that peaks around Brevard, in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and in the Pisgah National Forest were home to tremendous forests of spruce.

"I've seen pictures of gentlemen cutting down trees" that look almost out of this world, she said. "They're standing beside red spruce and they look like a sequoia."

EFFORTS START SMALL

With the Nature Conservancy, the Southern Highlands Reserve committed in 2013 to a formal partnership to focus on the restoration of the endangered high elevation forests through the reintroduction of red spruce to the mountain environments.

Working with a wildlife biologist from the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, the plan was to propagate thousands of red spruce seedlings, not only to revitalize the forest but to rebuild the wooded climate needed for the survival of the Carolina Northern Flying Squirrel, a federally listed endangered species.

Holdbrooks said many seedlings have been planted in the Unicoi Mountains along the Tennessee and North Carolina border, to support one of only nine populations of the squirrel in North Carolina, Virginia and Tennessee.

"We've got so many seeds cleaned and prepared" and parked in one-gallon containers, she said.

Once germinated, the trees are allowed to grow as tall as 20 inches before being transplanted in the wild, she said.
Volunteers carry hundreds of plantings into the forest, where they are planted based on a plan created by the non-profits and state and federal agencies.

"Planting is organized," she said. "In September, we planted 902 spruce seedlings. I think there were over 40 volunteers.

"We hiked over 17 miles hauling red spruce seedlings," using reusable grocery bags donated by Ingle’s Markets, she said.

Some volunteers did the walking and planting. Others, including local members of the Daughters of the American Revolution organization, manned information tables and handed out printed material to passersby.

"This is a multi-generational project," Holdbrooks said.

**LOTS OF OPPORTUNITY**

Holdbrooks said the survival of the red spruce ecosystem is directly tied to the popularity of the region for tourism and for those who live here.

"People come here to see the forest, they come here to hike, they come to see the waterfalls," she said, and even small populations of healthy spruce can make a difference because of their educational value.

"I think we are very fortunate in how we grew up with these trees, and the area in which we grew up," she said. We have to think about making active efforts to help maintain those forests for future generations, she said.

Organizations that are replanting the mountain peaks “are open for anybody to join. You can volunteer and be a part of anything.” Volunteers can help with paperwork or reports. “You can be involved in growing red spruce, or you can be out planting red spruce,” she said.

“Take the opportunity to get involved.”

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**Lend a Hand:**

Anyone interested in helping spread the spruce can email the Southern Highlands Reserve at info@southernhighlandreserve.org. The reserve’s mailing address is 588 Summit Ridge Road, Lake Toxaway, NC 28747.

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