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Elk Knob State Park gains more land

STAFF REPORTS

In 2008, High Country Conservancy completed four new land protection projects in partnership with Elk Knob State Park. These projects add a total of 62 acres to the expanding park, protecting scenic views, valuable habitat, and strategic lands important for the future of the park.

"While 62 acres is not a lot of land, these projects were crucial to the growing park," said Eric Hiegl, HCC's Land Protection Director.

Residents of the Pottertown and Meat Camp communities were crucial to the success of the four projects. The Hammons, Lewis, Hahn and Potter families each worked with HCC to permanently protect their land through addition to the state park.

"This project was supported by the community because they wanted to keep this mountain as it is," says Hiegl.

The four projects also protect critical wildlife habitat identified by the N.C. Wildlife Action Plan. Important habitat types include early successional, oak forest, cove forest, and northern hardwoods habitat types. Protecting critical habitat types ensures wildlife species thrive in the southern Appalachian region.

Bridge loans from the Conservation Trust for North Carolina and the **Helen M. Clabough Charitable Foundation** enabled the swift protection of the Potter tract. N.C. State Parks directly purchased the Hammons, Lewis and Hahn tracts, all of which are now under park management.

Established in 2003, Elk Knob State Park is one of the most recent additions to North Carolina's state parks. It now encompasses almost 3,000 acres in Watauga and Ashe Counties. Due in large part to the efforts of conservation organizations like HCC, the park continues to expand. Facilities at the park now include an office/contact station, picnic area, parking areas, and trail to the 5,520-foot summit of Elk Knob, second tallest peak in Watauga County.

Larry Trivette, Elk Knob State Park Superintendent, says these projects are vital for a park that continues to grow and develop.

"The views these projects protect are beautiful, but the protected land is also strategically significant for the future shape of the park," explains Trivette. "The local families who worked with HCC have benefitted the park now and well into the future."

HCC has been responsible for a number of significant additions to Elk Knob State Park, including in 2007 a 65-acre tract encompassing the picturesque summit of Rittle Knob. 2008 was HCC's most successful year ever, with 15 total projects protecting more than 700 acres of land. In 2009, HCC is looking to potentially add 350 more acres of significant land to Elk Knob State Park.

High Country Conservancy's mission is to protect the natural resources of Appalachia by conserving land with significant ecological, cultural, recreational or scenic value in the North Carolina High Country. To date, HCC has protected more than 2,750 acres of land in Avery, Ashe, and Watauga Counties.