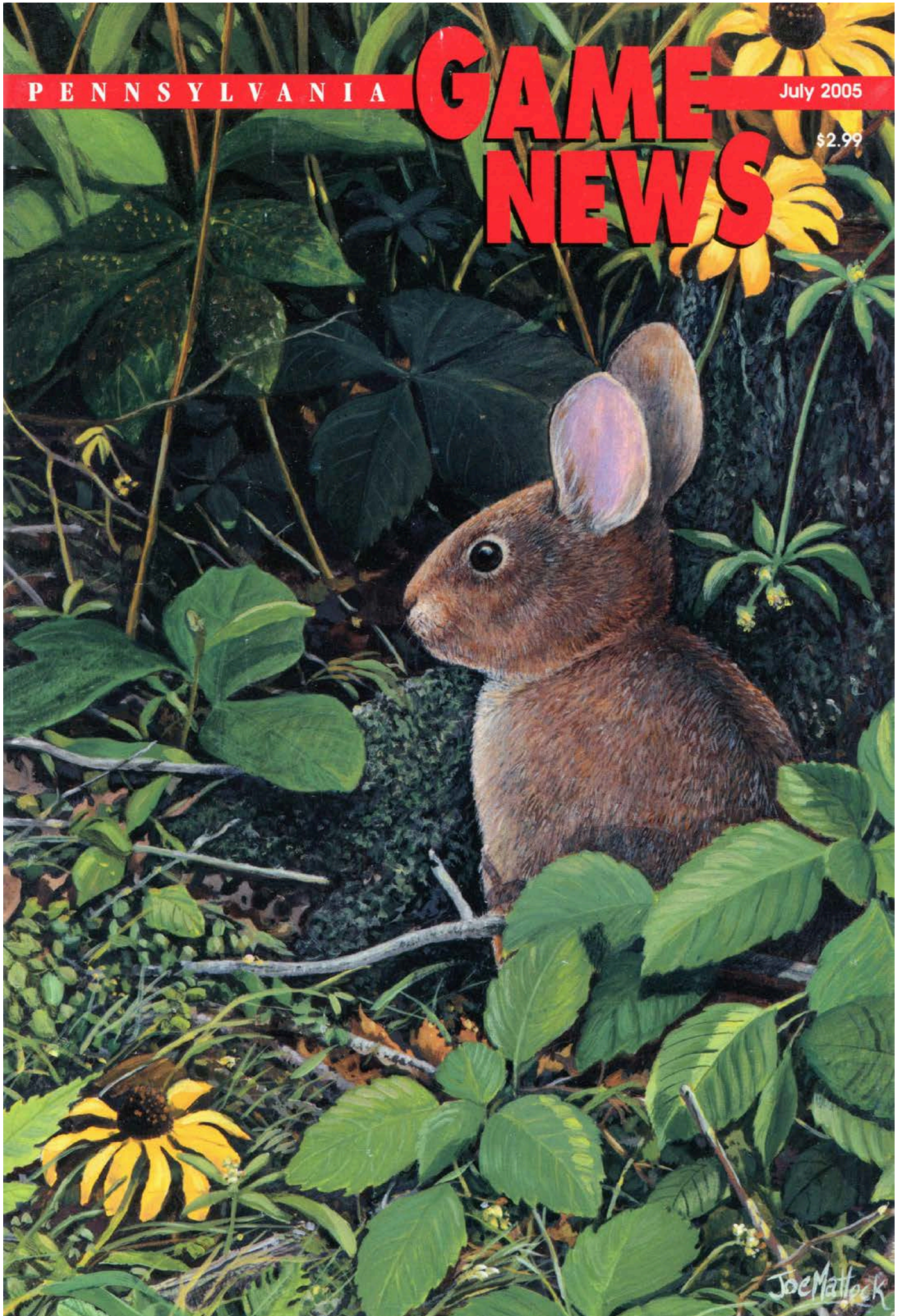


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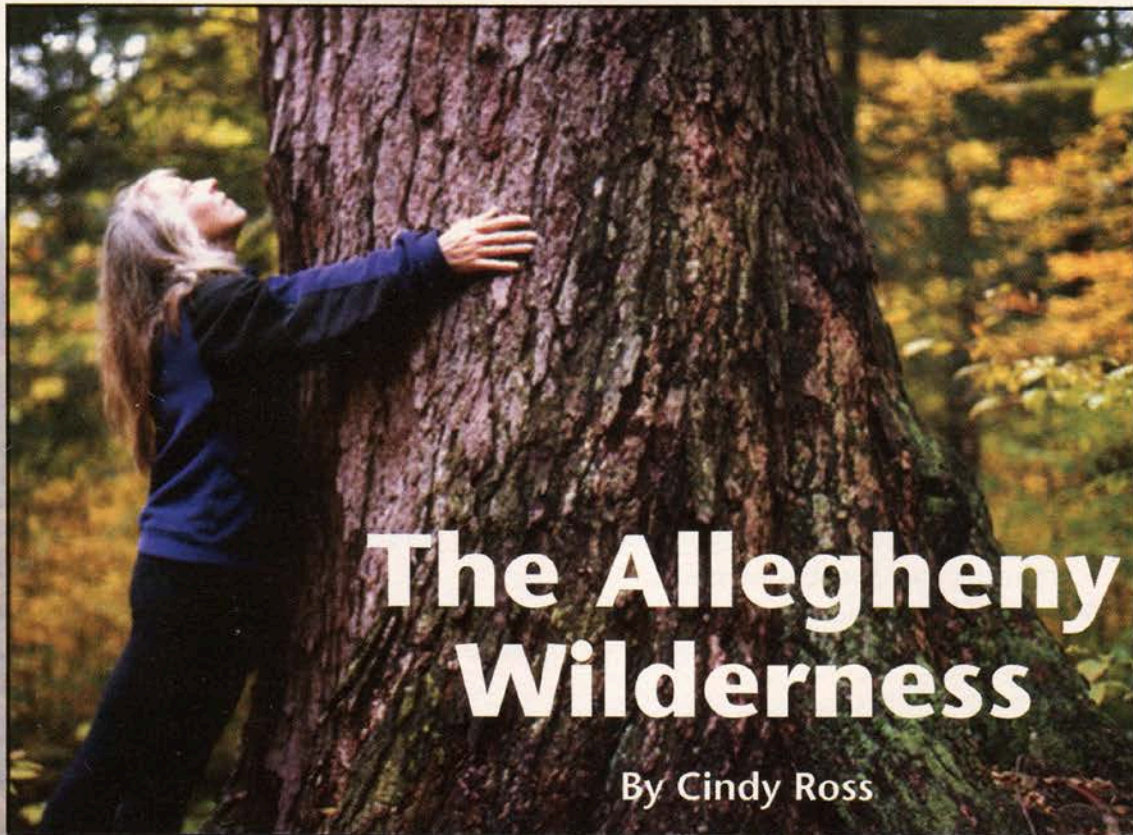
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Joe Matlack



The Allegheny Wilderness

By Cindy Ross

I TRAMP through a forest so thick and spongy my feet cannot penetrate to nor touch hard ground. Gigantic downed trees force me to get on all fours to climb over them. Tiny hemlock and birch trees are growing from the moss-covered backs of many of these fallen giants, feeding on them, using them as protection, a refuge, a natural nursery. I'm forced to stop in my tracks, sit down by one such "nurse log" and contemplate what exactly is occurring here.

My walking companion, Kirk Johnson, who is Executive Director of the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness (FAW), suggests that we take a break from our cross-country exploring in the Tionesta Scenic and Research Natural Area in the Allegheny National Forest (ANF). We have been trampling through this extremely rare, 4,100-acre pocket of native old growth contain-

ing 500-year-old, 40-inch diameter, eastern hemlocks that tower 125 feet above the forest floor.

The Tionesta Scenic and Research Natural Area shelters the largest old-growth forest in the eastern U.S. between the Great Smoky Mountains and the Adirondacks. Representing some of the last virgin forests, it lies within a day's drive of tens of millions of Americans. Here, by this nurse log, is a great place to talk about the benefits of this area and a proposal to classify it and other areas of the ANF as the "Allegheny Wilderness."

We tend to think of death as the end of production and value. Some believe that when a tree's vigor deteriorates, so does its ability to provide benefits. But in the old growth forest, we've learned, that downed giant trees are some of the most valuable elements of this ecosystem.

Decomposing nurse logs provide a moist elevated, pile of fertilizer — an

ideal environment and a tremendous source of nourishment on which seeds and sprouts can grow and thrive. These tiny seeds do not have to compete on the forest floor with faster growing seedlings, be smothered by leaf litter, nor succumb to fungus pathogens of which they are very susceptible. Nurse logs provide greater warmth, longer snow-free periods, and act as a "savings account" of nutrients as they are recycled back into the soil. Because many nurse trees are huge, an entire line of mature trees can be found growing along the path of where a nurse log that has since rotted away used to lie. In some forest systems, nurse logs are the only place where new woody plants are able to get a start.

Holding moisture like sponges, nurse logs are vital to the survival of amphibians, such as wood frogs. They provide hiding places for squirrels and songbirds, drumming sites for grouse, preening sites for birds, places for turtles and other amphibians and reptiles to sun, and runways for mice and voles. In the northeastern U.S., 23 species of amphibians and reptiles take refuge in decaying wood.

Nurse logs play a key role in forest food webs by providing cover, thermal protection and egg-laying sites for centipedes, beetles, fungi and ants which, in turn, are fed upon by skunks, bears, woodpeckers and a host of other animals.

Large trees that fall into streams play a critical role in aquatic environments. They diversify habitat by creating deep pools, shady areas and shelter, thereby supporting a greater variety of fish, invertebrates, plant life and other organisms. And in an old growth forest, these are the benefits of just nurse logs. Being in a special place like an old growth forest feeds your soul, which is an extremely important consideration in our fast-paced, empty-feeling, materialistic world.

The Wilderness Act defines a wilder-

ness as "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."

There is a different kind of peace that exudes from a forest such as this, a quietness, a sacredness. It's obvious here that the planet thrives when the natural cycle of life is allowed to go on without man's interference. We need wilderness areas: We need places that remind us that we are not the only species on earth.

Kirk Johnson hails from Bradford, PA, and just a few years ago he wrote his masters thesis essay — for Evergreen College in Olympia, Washington — on the ANF. It was entitled, "A Sleeping Giant — Recreational and Ecological Potential on the Allegheny National Forest, Pennsylvania." It was good timing.

By law, approximately every 15 years, each national forest must examine its resource management plan. In this upcoming year, important decisions will be made regarding future land use within the ANF. Although the United States has vast wilderness areas, only two-tenths of 1 percent are found in the Northeast. Johnson spearheaded the grassroots, non-profit organization, Friends of Allegheny Wilderness, and with its 900-strong membership, the group is working to ensure that increased wilderness protection is a priority in the upcoming land-use plans for the ANF.

The ANF is broken up into management areas. When doing his land evaluation survey, Johnson was very deliberate and careful of which areas were recommended for wilderness status. He specifically avoided significant timber areas, ATV trails, developed campgrounds,

anything that would conflict with wilderness standards. He was surprised to discover that when the final analysis was finished, 54,000 acres (roughly 10 percent of the ANF) were suitable.

Sportsmen will be glad to know that a wilderness designation does not limit hunting, fishing, hiking, camping, and other forms of non-motorized recreation.

Friends of the Allegheny Wilderness are soliciting public input, and clubs should write letters of recommendation to the National Forest Service and members of Congress in support of this wilderness proposal. "The Record of Decision," the final environmental impact decision, could occur in 2006.

Kirk and I finish our break by the nurse log and pick our way down the slope towards East Fork Run, a tributary of

Tionesta Creek. Along the stream bank stand the largest sleeping giants. Their massive, maroon-colored trunks rise like cathedral columns. Not a branch is in sight until 50 feet up in the forest canopy. Nurse logs are everywhere. Kirk shows me a 46-inch diameter eastern hemlock along the bank, the largest tree in the Tionesta old growth tract. I attempt to encircle it with my arms and wonder at all the events it has lived through on this planet.

Kirk points out a "tree dam," where a downed tree created a dammed pool. A Clarion University student studying the native brook trout here in 1998 discovered that while the numbers were not as



Tree seeds landing on NURSE LOGS such as this one, left, have a higher chance of surviving. In the ANF, it isn't uncommon to find several mature trees that once shared a nurse log growing in a row, above.

high as in second and third growth forests — where streams run clear, without obstacles and variations — trout here grew to be huge. The ANF contains a wide variety of animals. In fact, there are five threatened or endangered species, including the bald eagle, that make their home in or near the ANF.

Typically, a dozen different research projects are going on at any given time in this forest. Many universities, including Cornell, Penn State, Yale School of Forestry, Clarion U, as well of dozens of other schools have used the Tionesta



KIRK JOHNSON,
Executive Director
of the Friends of
A l l e g h e n y
Wilderness, pauses
to take in the
magnitude of the
ANF.

Natural Area to conduct studies, resulting in more than 100 scientific papers. It is all passive research, and some are long-term studies of the old growth that have been going on for 40 consecutive years.

The concept of the Tionesta Wilderness, one area being proposed by Friends of Allegheny Wilderness, is to create a 15,000-acre wilderness area surrounding and including the Tionesta Scenic and Research Natural Area, which would encompass and buffer this important grove. The Tionesta tract presently has no statutory protection. Currently, this area has proposed timber sales and is being drilled for oil, both activities that threaten the integrity of the forest.

The Campaign for America's Wilderness, a national organization, singled out the proposed Tionesta Wilderness Area to be included in its report, "Wild, for How Long? Twelve Treasures in Trouble." Friends are not trying to halt logging in the national forest, just protect the old growth that remains and reduce and eliminate some threats. In addition to the Tionesta Wilderness being proposed by Friends, seven other areas totaling 39,000 acres areas are also being proposed for wilderness designation.

From Tionesta Natural Area, we walk on the National Scenic North Country Trail (NCT) in the

Tionesta Scenic Area, the northern portion of the old-growth tract. With, when completed, a proposed length of 4,000 miles, from North Dakota to New York, this trail holds the potential for being the nation's finest long distance footpath.

Other national scenic trails, such as the 2,100-mile Appalachian Trail, passes through 24 wilderness areas; the Pacific Crest Trail and the Continental Divide Trail each travel through more than 30. The North Country Trail, however, passes through only three, small wilderness areas along its entire length. The wilderness experience is grossly underrepresented where this trail traverses the ANF.

As a professional long-distance hiker, I have hiked all three of the previously mentioned trails in their entirety, and can say from experience, Tionesta holds some of the prettiest forest in all of America. We do have the opportunity to increase and permanently establish that wilderness resource along the NCT.

The next day, Kirk takes me to Rimrock Overlook and Jake's Rocks on the Allegheny Reservoir to show me more proposed wilderness areas. The uncommon Virginia Pine grows here, and in the proposed Chestnut Ridge Wilderness the American chestnut is doing well. This area has no manmade trails, so we explore by simply following the contours of the land, hugging the ridge.

We weave along a deer trail

amongst moss-covered rocks and blueberry bushes and begin to spot American chestnut trees. The 20-year-old trees reaching 9 to 12 inches in diameter are not yet affected by the killing blight. In one area, we find a dozen trees within a 25-yard radius. The trees that have begun to die from the blight are already sending up sucker shoots. These trees will invariably produce fruit that is susceptible to the blight.

The hope of perpetuating the species and allowing it to come back hinges on allowing forest areas like Chestnut Ridge, where chestnut trees are still reaching a relatively large size, to remain unhindered by human encroachment. Designating places such as Chestnut Ridge a wilderness area will give the chestnut a fighting chance to survive and prosper.

On our walk out, Kirk mentions that the town of Tionesta so happens to be the homeland of Howard Zahniser, the author of the National Wilderness Preservation System Act of 1964. Forty years ago this act began to protect 107 million acres of wilderness on federal lands across the country. If we, as citizens, let it be known that we favor a small part of this vast national forest to be designated as wilderness, we could leave a unique wilderness experience for future generations of hunters, fishermen, backpackers and others to enjoy. Nurse logs nourish and feed future generations, we can choose to leave a legacy for our children and feed their souls, which is of no less importance than food, water and shelter. □

Contact Friends of Allegheny Wilderness at 220 Center Street, Warren, PA 16365. 814-723-0620, alleghenyfriends@earthlink.net or www.pawild.org. Mr. William J. Connelly, Forest Planner for the Allegheny National Forest can be reached at P.O. Box 36, Warren, PA 16365 or r9_anf_fpr@fs.fed.us.