



Below the Surface

An Information Series by Scenic Rivers Land Trust

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Public Access to the Bacon Ridge Natural Area

Since its inception, Scenic Rivers Land Trust (SRLT) has believed that well-managed public access is an important and powerful means to galvanize land protection on public properties. People most appreciate what they can see, experience and feel. Active enjoyment of the outdoors breeds an appreciation for our lands and waters while inspiring political, financial and volunteer support. Our public areas need careful protection, enhancement and expansion; accomplishing these goals requires enlightened public will.

Fifteen years ago, SRLT partnered with Anne Arundel County's Department of Recreation and Parks to launch the now annual Walk for the Woods. This popular event introduces the public to the magnificent Bacon Ridge Natural Area—an area that many citizens were completely unaware of—and advocates for new public access opportunities.

SRLT holds a conservation easement on Bacon Ridge Natural Area with the Maryland Environmental Trust. The state's donation of the property to the county was contingent on the creation of a conservation easement, ensuring that its protection would remain the highest priority while safeguarding county managers against local pressure for incompatible activities. Violation of the conservation easement mandates return of the property to state ownership. Bacon Ridge sits at the heart of the South River Greenway (SRG) so exceptional care for this natural resource is well warranted.

The 16,000-acre SRG contains four headwater streams and outstanding natural resources that provide invaluable ecosystem functions ranging from wildlife habitat to stormwater protection. The area also encompasses numerous cultural resources. The SRG represents many millions of dollars of property value and is home to thousands of county residents.

The South River Greenway's natural resource attributes are:

- Undeveloped forests covering more than 6,000 acres, including 2,400 acres of interior forest;

- Two green infrastructure (GI) forest hubs and many GI corridors identified by Maryland Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) Greenprint Program;
- 15 different wetland types covering 800 acres;
- 100 miles of perennial and intermittent streams in the South River headwaters;
- Historical spawning area for yellow perch and river herring and habitat for the American eel;
- Four at-risk Forest Interior Dwelling Species (FIDS) reside in the greenway: worm-eating warbler, Kentucky warbler, wood thrush and Louisiana waterthrush;
- 17 FIDS nest in the SRG with seven of high or highest priority for conservation;
- Eight other bird species nest in the greenway and are of high or highest priority, particularly in the extensive shrub habitat which attracts forest shrub nesters, such as hooded and black-and-white warblers.

The 2000 Crownsville Small Area Plan, the 2002 Anne Arundel County Greenways Plan, the 2006, 2013 and 2017 Land Preservation, Park and Recreation plans, and the West County Regional Park Plan all recognize the SRG as a preservation priority. Due to the abundance of its resources, the greenway has been recognized as an Important Bird Area (IBA) by Audubon, a regionally important area for reptiles and birds by USGS and USFWS, and a priority area in the Chesapeake Bay Program's Resource Lands Assessment. In addition, most of the greenway's upland soils are highly erodible, indicating a high risk of further sedimentation.

Bacon Ridge is an archaeologically sensitive area. Recent surveys on portions of the land, led by the county's Cultural Resources Section, have documented 16 discrete archaeological sites with intact evidence of prehistoric or Native American campsites, 18th, 19th- and 20th-century structural foundations, and artifact scatters. One of the most significant sites—the Charles S. Waters Mill site near Chesterfield Road—contains the remnants of an 18th-century gristmill complex along with intact earthworks. The county reports that this site has been recommended as eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. Archaeological professionals have yet to systematically survey substantial portions of the land within Bacon Ridge for cultural resources, so it is likely that more potentially significant sites on the property remain undiscovered.

With so much to protect, the Anne Arundel Department of Recreation and Parks has demonstrated excellent due diligence in managing Bacon Ridge given the absence of any dedicated funding. All agree the pace toward increased public access has been glacial; given the sensitivity of the land, this pace might be well advised. Resolution of the future of the Crownsville Hospital property will prove a key trigger. The department has partnered with the National Park Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) for technical advice. It has also consulted with numerous community groups and nonprofits and maintains regular contact with SRLT and MET as the easement holders.

Hiking and equestrian enthusiasts have been strong proponents for increased access, but it is the mountain biking community that has made the most striking progress. The Department has worked with local bike communities and their large teams of volunteers to evaluate and gain approval for three phases of bike trail construction.

The first phase was a modest loop off of Hawkins Road immediately embraced by the public. An independent construction review of this first phase, funded by SRLT, guided the department toward a more detailed and informed proposal for a second phase that increased the trail to more than six miles. A third phase of 5.3 miles was approved with conditions by MET and SRLT in October of 2018. A key condition was the completion of a survey of archeology and cultural resources to ensure their protection. The county reports that they now need to pause construction to resolve concerns about two areas of possible intrusion on to private property and two bridges that were not approved by the county.

Partnerships with USFWS for a \$50,000 stream restoration project off of Bacon Ridge Road and with South River Federation for a \$600,000 stream restoration project on Bacon Ridge Branch have offset and enhanced this public access. The USFWS has also assisted with invasive species control, which remains a threat throughout the property. Volunteers from the Maryland Bird Partnership have begun a multi-year bird survey to monitor the status of bird species that were the basis of the site's original designation as an Important Bird Area by Audubon.

All involved believe that whatever the future for the adjacent Crownsville Hospital property, public access to Bacon Ridge must be viewed as both an asset and a priority. As access opportunities grow, the county's corps of professional park rangers must expand to accommodate increased usage.

As public access to Bacon Ridge evolves, protection of the resource must always remain the top priority of the county and their easement and community partners. The science of evaluating and managing public access and resource impacts is evolving quickly with a wealth of projects in every state. Trail placement and design, management of parking to distribute and limit use, rotating trail closures, seasonal-use variations and mitigation tools are all demand close consideration. For those interested in more information on this area of study, we recommend a recent meta-analysis of more than 274 scientific articles by the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Conservation Biology at Colorado State University (<http://tinyurl.com/rec-sys-review>).