

SPECIAL PLACES OF AESTHETIC AND RECREATIONAL VALUE IN THE BULLPASTURE AND COWPASTURE RIVER VALLEYS

by C. Nelson Hoy, Forester, Rancher & Conservationist

Editor's note: The following essay is the twentieth in a five-year series on water resource stewardship in the Cowpasture River Watershed, edited by the Cowpasture River Preservation Association and published by The Recorder. The goal of the series is to create awareness among students, citizens and officials of the critical need to protect our surface and ground water resources, and to stimulate interest in progressive stewardship.

The Cowpasture River of Virginia is arguably the cleanest and most pristine river basin in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Nestled among the Allegheny Mountains and bulwarked against the influences of Washington and Richmond by the great Shenandoah Mountain, the Cowpasture River flows 84 miles southward through Highland, Bath, Alleghany and Botetourt counties. The Cowpasture River then joins the Jackson River near Iron Gate, Virginia. Together, these two rivers form the mighty James River.

The primary tributary of the Cowpasture is the Bullpasture River with its headwaters north of Doe Hill, Virginia. The Bullpasture flows in a southwest direction for 26 miles between Jack Mountain on the west and Bullpasture Mountain on the east, creating the Bullpasture Gorge before joining the Cowpasture River just below Williamsville. Simpson Creek, Davis Run and several smaller runs and drafts join the Bullpasture and Cowpasture rivers along the way.

The Cowpasture River Preservation Association (CRPA) recognizes special places of aesthetic and recreational value along the Bullpasture River, Cowpasture River or a tributary that also afford public access. Beginning in the north and proceeding southward, this essay explores ten such special places.

Part I – The Bullpasture River Valley of Virginia

McDowell Battlefield on the Bullpasture River – Fought among the Appalachian mountains and valleys of Highland County, the Civil War Battle of McDowell on May 8, 1862 marked Confederate General Stonewall Jackson's first victory in his legendary Valley Campaign, which succeeded in relieving Union pressure on Richmond and saved the Shenandoah Valley, known then as the "breadbasket of the confederacy." The Bullpasture River, joined by Crab and Duff runs, bisects the McDowell Battlefield, the hamlet of McDowell, Virginia, and livestock pasture in the floodplains. It also passes along the base of Sitlington Hill on Bullpasture Mountain.

A mile-long hiking trail within the McDowell Civil War Battlefield begins at a trailhead along U.S. Route 250 east of the hamlet and ascends Sitlington Hill to the Confederate positions, where it offers a spectacular view of the Bullpasture River valley below. Public access to the Bullpasture River itself is limited to a short frontage along Virginia Route 656 and perhaps a service road to the hamlet's water towers. The McDowell Battlefield lies on both sides of the Bullpasture River and extends south of the U.S. Route 250 bridge for a mile or more. The Highland Historical Society purchased 26 acres of pastureland at the core of the battlefield, and the Society sponsors reenactments of the Battle of McDowell every three to five years.

Location: The McDowell Battlefield is located primarily east of the hamlet of McDowell and both north and south of U.S. Route 250, 26 miles west of Churchville, Virginia and 10 miles east of Monterey, Virginia. There are no public restrooms.



Reconnaissance at McDowell – The Valley Campaign
Artistic Attribution Hereby Given to Bradley Schmehl

Highland Historical Society
161 Mansion House Rd
Post Office Box 63
McDowell, Virginia 24458
(540) 396-4478

Hayfields Farm on the Bullpasture River – Hayfields Farm, a 1,034-acre working farm located in Highland County, is traversed by the Bullpasture River for a little more than a mile and bordered on both the east and west by the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF) Highland Wildlife Management Area (HWMA). With the HWMA Bullpasture Mountain Tract to the east and the HWMA Jack Mountain Tract to the west, Hayfields Farm functions as a wildlife bridge or corridor. Hayfields Farm features at least five cold-water springs that have been developed into ponds or cisterns to provide freshwater sources for cattle and wildlife. The property contains several emergent, shrub and forested freshwater wetlands.

The Virginia Outdoors Foundation (VOF) now owns Hayfields Farm, and the Foundation has commissioned urban planners and landscape architects to study and recommend alternative uses for the

property. Facilities on the farm may be useful for agricultural and conservation research, educational programs, meetings and/or lodging. In addition to fly-fishing, outdoor recreational opportunities may eventually include naturalist studies and hiking, nature and landscape photography and painting, riparian, grasslands and forest birding, big game and bird hunting. At the time of this writing and publication, however, Hayfields Farm is **not open to the public**.



The Bullpasture River Passing Under the Hayfields Farm Bridge.
Photographic Attribution Hereby Given to Virginia Outdoors Foundation

Public access to wildlife viewing is available along Bullpasture River Road, which crosses the Hayfields property for about 4,300 feet. This scenic byway is part of the DGIF Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail, and the property lies within the Audubon Society's Allegheny Highlands Important Bird Area (IBA).

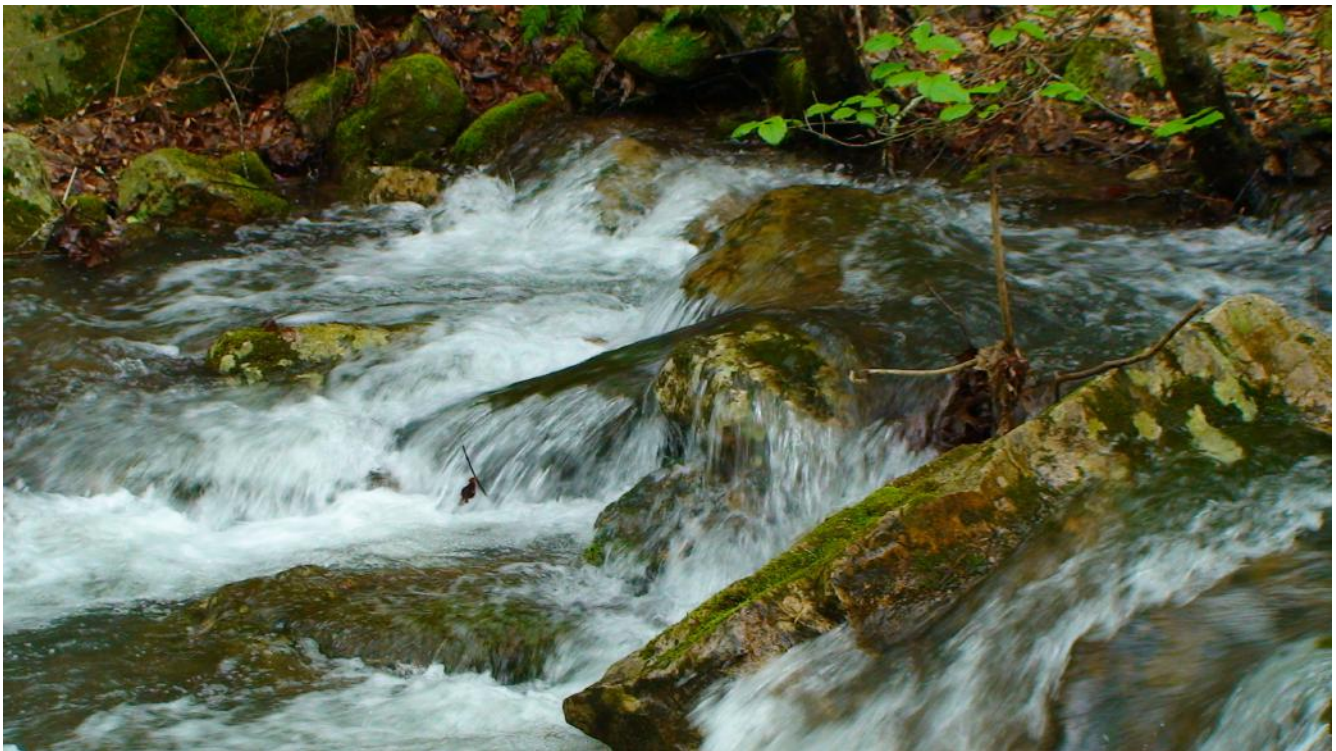
Location: Hayfields Farm is located along Bullpasture River Road (VA Route 678) at 524 Hayfields Lane, McDowell, VA 24458 – 8.1 miles south of McDowell, Virginia, and 6.2 miles north of Williamsville, Virginia.

Hayfields Farm
c/o Virginia Outdoors Foundation
39 Garrett Street, Suite 200
Warrenton, Virginia 20186
(540) 347-7727

Highland Wildlife Management Area on Davis Run – The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries oversees this 14,000-acre mountainous wildlife reserve, which encompasses Sounding Knob, the Davis Run watershed, the water gap between Bear Mountain and Buck Hill, diverse red spruce and boreal plant communities, and oak, hickory and mesic forest habitats and wildlife. Davis Run is a wild native brook trout stream that falls through a mature mesic forest over ledges and among a jumble of

rocks with a never-ending roar. The lookout tower on Sounding Knob at 4,400 feet affords a spectacular vista of the Appalachian Mountains. The Jack Mountain Tract of the Highland Wildlife Management Area covers a wide variety of forest habitats and a 2,600-foot differential in elevation. As a result, it offers fine recreational opportunities for birding and wildlife enthusiasts.

Location: At the junction of U.S. Route 250 and VA Route 615, drive south along Route 615 for 2.3 miles to Sounding Knob Road. Parking is available in adjacent clearings. Alternatively, beginning at the junction of VA Route 678 and Route 615, drive west for 2 miles to the junction of Davis Run Road and Sounding Knob Road. Drive or hike westward into the Highland Wildlife Management Area along Sounding Knob Road (public access) for approximately 6,000 feet along Davis Run and through the water gap. Sounding Knob Road fords Davis Run. It is a narrow, rough road, so it's best to have a four-wheel-drive vehicle or hiking boots and wading sandals. It's another 12,000 feet to the top of Sounding Knob. (No public restrooms.)



The Davis Run Water Gap
Photographic Attribution Hereby Given to Tom Mohr

Highland Wildlife Management Area
Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries
57 Lee Highway
Verona, Virginia 24482
(540) 248-9360

Highland Wildlife Management Area on the Bullpasture River – The HWMA Bullpasture Mountain Tract offers a wide range of recreational opportunities. The Highland Wildlife Management Area features an Appalachian oak and hickory forest, small wildlife clearings, and soft mast plantings, including apple, cherry and dogwood. The Bullpasture River is a well-stocked mountain stream that

will delight anyone fishing its cool, clear waters.

The Bullpasture River Gorge itself is a scenic waterway with cliffs and large boulders, and it presents a dangerous, sometimes life-threatening, challenge to the whitewater enthusiast. The Bullpasture River, from its confluence with the Cowpasture River north and including the Bullpasture Gorge, is eligible for designation under the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act because it is free flowing with remarkable scenic, recreational, and geologic values. Intermediate whitewater canoe or kayak enthusiasts step up to Class III, IV and V runs, rapids and falls.



WARNING: The Bullpasture Gorge Rapids and Falls Can Be Life-threatening.
The Bullpasture River Gorge Offers Class III, IV and V Whitewater Kayaking
Photographic Attribution Hereby Given to Mark Andes and www.americanwhitewater.org

Location: Approximately 2.5 miles north of Williamsville on Indian Draft Road (VA Route 678), a HWMA public access point provides parking on the west side of the Bullpasture River and a swinging bridge for crossing to the east side of the Bullpasture River Gorge. (No public restrooms.)

Highland Wildlife Management Area
Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries
57 Lee Highway
Verona, Virginia 24482
(540) 248-9360

Part II – The Cowpasture River Valley of Virginia

Bullpasture and Cowpasture Rivers Confluence – South of the hamlet of Williamsville, Virginia the Bullpasture River joins the Cowpasture River on its journey south through Bath and Alleghany Counties. At the junction, both rivers are transformed from rocky tumbling mountain streams into the slower, easier and meandering river that native Americans named the Wallawatoola River meaning the river that winds. The Cowpasture River valley in those times was a hunting and raiding territory that changed stewardship over the centuries among the Cherokee, Iroquois and Shawnee Nations. American Indians, long before the U.S. Forest Service introduced prescribed burns, practiced wildfire management of the valley's grasslands to improve wildlife habitat for buffalo, elk and deer. Today the Cowpasture River winds through miles of Appalachian oak, hickory and pine forests, past grazing beef cattle and sheep, and graces summer camps for boys and girls.

At this location, the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) swinging bridge No. 9000 allows pedestrians and cyclists a dry foot-crossing of the Cowpasture River near a ford across the river – a classic purpose of swinging bridges. Another one tenth of a mile south along Junction Road, motor vehicles can cross the Cowpasture River by way of a low-water ford. Hikers can continue along VA Route 628 to the northeast. Canoe and kayak enthusiasts can access the Cowpasture River for a float trip downstream to the USFS GWNF Wallace Tract.

Fishing from the swinging bridge or the riverbanks is a favorite summer pastime for residents and guests alike. But here fish species have subtly changed from cold water-dependent native brook trout, rainbow trout and smallmouth bass to species that are better adapted to slightly warmer and slower waters – large-mouth bass, rock bass, fallfish and bluegill in the upper river and muskellunge in the lower Cowpasture River. Colder tributaries – Dry Run, Jordan Run, Mare Run, and Lick Run in Bath County, and the North Fork of Simpson's Creek in Alleghany County will host colder water fishes like native brook trout.

Note that with the exception of the Virginia Department of Transportation swinging bridge and the VDOT right-of-way along Virginia Route 628, these lands are private property. (No public restrooms.)

Location: Beginning in Williamsville, Virginia along Indian Draft Road or VA Route 678 turn east on Cowpasture River Road South for 50 feet and then turn right or south on Junction Road or VA Route 628 driving about one mile.

Staunton District
Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT)
811 Commerce Road
Staunton, Virginia 24401
540-332-9104



Bullpasture and Cowpasture Rivers Confluence VDOT No. 9000 Swinging Bridge
Photographic Attribution Hereby Given to C. Nelson Hoy

Coursey Springs Fish Cultural Station at Meadow Lake – Coursey Springs is one of nine fish-rearing facilities operated by the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF). Originally known as Meadow Lake springs by local folks, this spring produces 4,000 gallons per minute of cool, clear water in dry or drought seasons and 16,000 gallons during heavy rain events. About seven miles north of the facility, the Cowpasture River falls into a karst sinkhole, and then travels through subterranean passageways and caves and under the Bullpasture River before emerging as Meadow Lake springs. During this underground journey, the waters of the Cowpasture River chill to about 53 degrees Fahrenheit – an ideal temperature for raising trout.

Constructed in the 1960s as a fish hatchery, the new DGIF-operated state-of-the-art fish cultural center draws cold, clear waters from the state's third largest spring and produces about 500,000 seven- to 18-inch trout each season. Coursey Springs does not spawn or hatch trout, but instead it serves as a trout grow-out facility by receiving fingerlings from the Paint Bank Fish Culture Station in Craig County.



DGIF Coursey Springs Rainbow and Brown Trout Being Released into the South River.
Photographic Attribution Hereby Given to Daniel Lin of the *Daily News-Record*.

and growing them to advanced fingerling or catchable-sized fish. The Fish Cultural Station features several large trout-rearing tanks, naturalized creek-side fishing areas, riparian buffer areas and open fields.

Location: In Williamsville at the intersection of Cowpasture River Road South (VA Route 614) and Indian Draft Road (VA Route 678), drive south along Indian Draft Road for 1.3 miles, turn left or east

onto Hatchery Road and proceed for another 0.3 miles. Although the hatchery has no formal visitors center, the public is welcome to enjoy a free, self-guided tour 365 days a year from 8:00 AM to 3:30 PM. (No public restrooms.)

Coursey Springs Fish Cultural Center
Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries
300 Hatchery Lane
Millboro, Virginia 24460
(540) 925-2343

USFS GWNF Wallace Tract on the Cowpasture River – The George Washington National Forest's Wallace Tract straddles the Cowpasture River for about one mile south of Williamsville. The Wallace Tract provides public access for hiking, bicycling, hunting, fishing and primitive camping, wildlife viewing, photography and painting. The Wallace Tract swinging bridge across the Cowpasture River connects Forest Road No. 282 and primitive camping acreage in the west with substantial acreage of



The Cowpasture River Lazily Flowing Through the U.S. Forest Service Wallace Tract in the Fall
This swinging bridge demonstrates classic wooden bridge towers, deck and rails.
Photographic Attribution Hereby Given to C. Nelson Hoy

the George Washington National Forest to the east and the USFS Sugar Tree Road. The swinging

bridge features classic wooden towers, deck and rails built in 1991-92 by Sahale, LLC for the U.S. Forest Service based on a traditional bridge design supplied by the National Park Service.

The woodlands and fields found along both sides of the Cowpasture River provide a diversity of wildlife habitats, while the river itself can be experienced by canoe, kayak or tube. Spawning muskellunge, a rarity in the state, are present in this segment of the river.

Cross-country and mountain bicycling enthusiasts can enjoy a challenging loop south from Williamsville, east along Scottstown Draft, north along Sugar Tree Road and into high country, west and downward along a forest haul road, then south bushwhacking across open or overgrown fields past the antebellum Wallace House before crossing the swinging footbridge over the Cowpasture River. From the west side of the Cowpasture River, Forest Road 282 climbs back to VA Route 678 and a hard surface road climb back to Williamsville.

Location: In Williamsville at the intersection of Cowpasture River Road (VA Route 614) and Indian Draft Road (VA Route 678), drive south along Indian Draft Road for 2.2 miles and turn left or east along Forest Road 282 for another 0.8 miles. Park vehicles near a gate and walk into the Wallace Tract favoring a left fork and down to the riverbank and the swinging bridge. (No public restrooms.)

North River Ranger District
U.S. Forest Service
401 Oakwood Drive
Harrisonburg, Virginia 22801
(540) 432-0187

USFS GWNF Walton Tract on the Cowpasture River – The GWNF Walton Tract swinging bridge is owned and operated by the U.S Forest Service, Warm Springs Ranger District, and it provides public access to the George Washington National Forest on the west side of the Cowpasture River. The Walton Tract swinging bridge, most likely constructed in the late 1970s, spans 218.5 feet across the Cowpasture River, featuring 32 ft. tall steel I-beam towers and a 30-inch-wide pedestrian deck. Experiencing this swinging bridge by itself is well worth the visit.

The woodlands and fields found along both sides of the Cowpasture River provide a diversity of wildlife habitats with wildflowers to enjoy in the spring and early summer. The river can be directly experienced by canoe and kayak.

Boaters' Advisory: The signage at the USFS Walton Tract is misleading and potentially dangerous for recreational users intending to float down the Cowpasture River. The Cowpasture River below the Walton Tract and above Simpson Creek is private property; the next public take-out point is 16 miles downstream. Unless adventurers set out at dawn, they will surely find themselves on the river in the dark of night. It is recommended, therefore, that canoeists and kayakers enter the river at the northern Walton Tract access point and that they leave the river at the southern Walton Tract egress point.

Location: The USFS GWNF Walton Tract is located approximately 5.5 miles south of Millboro Springs along VA State Route 42 and 1.6 miles west along Grizer's Gap Road (VA Route 632) and then Wallawhatoola Road. River access and the swinging bridge are by way of the northern fork in the road. Four-wheel drive and/or high clearance vehicles are recommended. (No public restrooms.)



A Northern River Otter as Seen from the Walton Tract Swinging Bridge.
Photographic Attribution Hereby Given to Nan Mahone Wellborn.

Warm Springs Ranger District
U.S. Forest Service
422 Forestry Road
Hot Springs, Virginia 24445
(540) 839-2521

Alleghany County Sharon Park & River Access on the Cowpasture River – Sharon Park includes a Cowpasture River boat ramp and access, picnic pavilion, children's playground and picnic tables. The playground and pavilion are rented out seasonally by the Alleghany County Department of Parks and Recreation for the morning, afternoon or the whole day.

The Cowpasture River in this section offers fishing opportunities for muskie, smallmouth bass and sunfish. A float trip from the Sharon Park boat access point south to the USFS GWNF Evans Tract boat ramp is about 6 miles.

Location: Beginning at the intersection of Longdale Furnace Road (VA Route 269) and Nicelytown Road (VA Route 635), drive northeast on Nicelytown Road for two tenths of a mile to the Sharon Park and Boat Access, which is on the right. (Public restrooms available.)



Public Picnic Pavilion at the Sharon Park & Boat Access on the Cowpasture River
Photographic Attribution Hereby Given to Nan Mahone Wellborn

Alleghany County
Department of Parks and Recreation
9212 Winterberry Avenue, No. B
Covington, Virginia 24426
(540) 863-6622

USFS GWNF Walter L. Robinson River Canoe Access Point (Evans Tract) on the Cowpasture River – The U.S. Forest Service Evans Tract provides access to Cowpasture River and its adjoining fields and woodland. Grasslands, forested areas, the riparian buff and river banks in this area support a variety of birds, butterflies, and other wildlife species. Departing from the USFS Evans Tract, a 3.2-mile float trip covers remote sections of the Cowpasture River and offers good fishing opportunities. The Cowpasture River eventually joins the Jackson River at Iron Gate to form the James River, and canoeists and kayakers can use the take-out at Glen Wilton on the James. The U.S. Forest Service Evans Tract is built-out with an earthen ramp to the river and a parking lot.

Location: At the intersection of US Route 220 and VA Route 633, proceed east on Route 633 for 2.5 miles. The GWNF Walter L. Robinson River Access Point (Evans Tract) is on the left just after crossing the Cowpasture River. (No public restrooms.)



A Classic Summer Float Trip Down the Cowpasture River.
Photographic Attribution Hereby Given to the Cowpasture River Preservation Association (Photographer Unknown)

James River Ranger District
U.S. Forest Service
810 E Madison Street – A
Covington, Virginia 24426
(540) 962-2214

Country Etiquette – For many of us living along or near the Cowpasture River, our life savings are invested in the special rural place we've created for our families and ourselves. Please respect our right to the quiet enjoyment of our properties.

Post Script – *With this 20th essay, the editor of this Water Resource Stewardship series bids his readership a fond farewell. The essay series now covers the value of water, conservation, aesthetics, recreation, swinging bridges, water-powered mills, caves, springs, bears, birds, fishes and more. I leave you all with our great blue round home known as planet earth careening forward into almost certain oblivion because politicians value most getting re-elected and private corporations value most making obscene profits both in the here and now. Do whatever is in your power to reverse the triple catastrophes of climate change, run-away population growth and collapsing agricultural production.*