History Gone Wild at Sky Meadows State Park

Prior to the reign of Julius Caesar in ancient Rome, New Years was celebrated in March, in conjunction with the spring equinox. Julius Caesar was responsible for the addition of January and February, resulting in the twelve month calendar year that we are familiar with today. January was so named after the two-faced Roman god Janus, whose two faces provided him with the ability to look both back into the past, and forward into the future.

Certainly, the most well-known farm at the park is Mount Bleak. Abner Settle constructed the Mount Bleak home in 1843 on a 150 acre parcel of land. By 1860, Abner had expanded the farm to include 450 acres, tripling its original size. However, the land that encompasses Sky Meadows State Park today is actually comprised of 6 historic properties.

Settlers as far back as the mid-1700s have been farming in the Crooked Run Valley. Our Lost Mountain section of the park was actually originally owned by George Washington. However, since he had Mount Vernon a few miles to the east, he never lived on the land here. Families like the Morgans, Edmonds, and Ayres all surrounded the Mount Bleak Farm at some time, which is a reason why Sky Meadows has so much pasture land today.

Sky Meadow State Parks' mixture of this pasture land, forest, and the edge lands where they meet, provide a unique mosaic of habitat that support a diverse array of plants and animals.

Beginning at the Park Office, this hike will take Boston Mill Road trail, continue onto Snowden Trail, then back into Boston Mill Road Trail to finish at the Park Office. As you hike along the highlighted route on the map included, use the numbered stops on the trail and information below to learn more about the history and nature Of Sky Meadows State Park.

1. Persimmon Tree

The Persimmon tree has its roots in American history. It served as an integral part of the Native American's diet. The name persimmon derives from the Algonquin words for "choke-fruit," referring to the astringent nature of an unripe fruit. In 1609, Capt. John Smith wrote "If it is not ripe, it will draw a man's mouth awry with much torment. When it is ripe, it is delicious as an apricot". Many early colonial orchards included the Persimmon.

In American folklore, the severity of the upcoming winter is said to be predictable by cutting open the seed of a persimmon and look at the shape inside. A fork shape is said to indicate a mild winter, a knife is for a biting cold winter, and a shovel shape indicates a lot of snow. During the Civil War, when supplies became scarce for soldiers, the persimmon seeds were used as buttons or roasted and ground to be used as a coffee substitute. The hard and heavy wood was often used to make gunstocks for the soldiers. Also used for medicinal purposes, both sides of the conflict offered 20-25 cents per pound of persimmon root.

The most popular use, however, was perhaps for the making of brandy. This was often called "possum toddy", due to the likelihood of seeing possums eating from persimmon trees. Though, the sweet persimmon fruit is a favorite of many animals.

2. Boston Mill Road

As you walk along what is today Boston Mill Road Trail, imagine it as it once was, a thriving corridor, along which farmers would transport harvested grains and crops to the nearby mills, and to the town of Paris. Established in 1823, the road was named after nearby Bosetyn's Mill.

3. Grape Vines

When the Vikings first stepped foot in North America around 1000A.D, they called it Vinland, because of the number of grape vines they saw growing.

Six hundred years later, the early colonists fervently tried to produce wines of worth from native grapes. They hoped that is would be the New World's first great export. Thank goodness for tobacco, because all wines produced from these native grapes were bitter or otherwise unsatisfactory. European winemakers were even commissioned to come to the New World to make good of the plentiful native grapes available, Thomas Jefferson gave it a similarly valiant effort, to no avail. French vines were imported to the New World to try and grow, but were killed by the harsh winters

For troops during the Civil War, native grapes sufficed just fine, and were used regularly in the making of wine.

Success came in the nineteenth century from the grafting of plump, sweet, French grape vines to the winter hardy roots of American grape vines. Today, Virginia is ranked 9th in the country in wine production, and it contributes immensely to the state's economy. The Crooked Run valley is certainly not excluded in this, as is evidenced by the sheer number of vineyards neighboring the park.

In disturbed habitats, grape vines have the potential to grow uncontrollably/aggressively, a trait that has often earned them a negative reputation. Thus, though they can be burdensome in these situations, often taking over and choking out orchards, these vines are native to the ecosystem and serve a valuable role in healthy and well balanced landscapes, benefiting birds and other wildlife. Birds will not only eat the grapes, but will use the peeling bark of the vines to construct their nests. Grape vines also help to 'pull-down' standing dead trees that are prohibiting the rise of new forest growth, and provide avenues of travel for squirrels and other canopy dwelling animals. Additionally, as they thrive primarily along forest edgelands, thick strands of grapevines provide shelter and hiding places for animals that thrive in this ecosystem of converging pasture/woodland.

4. Snowden Entrance Gate

Here we can see the remnants of the entrance gate to the Snowden Manor. If it were still standing today, Snowden would be the oldest structure in that park. However, today it exists only in ruins. The Snowden farm, established by George Ayre, once incorporated approximately 500 acres. The home burned down in 1931. You may explore the Snowden ruins for yourself along South Ridge Trail.

5. **Emerald Ash Borer**

Due to its extremely hard wood, the Ash tree was historically used in the construction of baseball bats, axe handles, and other wooden instruments that needed to be able to take a beating.

In 2002, the Emerald Ash Borer was introduced to America from China, and it is expected to completely decimate Ash tree populations within the coming decade. Currently, it can be found in 35 states (up from 31 just this time last year). Though the adult beetle feeds on the foliage of Ash trees, it does little damage. It is the larvae that is truly destructive. Emerald Ash Borer larvae will tunnel into the phloem (FLOW-em) layer of the Ash tree, cutting off supplies of water and nutrients, and ultimately leading to its demise. The effect that you see on these trees here is called blonding.

Ash is not the first tree native to our forests to succumb to the effects of an introduced disease/pest. As the Gypsy Moth devastated Oak and other tree populations. And, at the start of the twentieth century, a blight imported from Asia decimated American Chestnut populations throughout the region. Keep this in mind, as we will revisit this topic later on in the hike.

6. **Tree Cavities (tangible: Owl Pellet)**

A dead tree is not a lifeless tree. Many incorrectly assume that a tree is only useful when it's living. After all, a dead tree doesn't photosynthesize Carbon Dioxide to Oxygen, it doesn't produce flowers for pollinators, or nuts for animals. But, in fact, dead trees serve a vital function in the forest ecosystem. The insects that quickly take refuge in the rotting wood provide food for woodpeckers who, in turn, create cavities in the trunk that provide shelter and nesting for cavity nesters, including: kestrels, bats, squirrels, eastern bluebirds, possums and a variety of other species.

7. **Fence Posts**

Imagine this forest as it once was, open pastureland. Nearby are some old fence posts that once enclosed livestock on this land. (Tagged in pink).

When the land was actively farmed, all the trees would have been cleared out. Once the farm is abandoned, the forest begins to regrow in stages. The first stage beginning with grasses and brush, then becoming the forest we see today.

8. **Old Driveway**

Here, one can clearly see a cleared depression in the earth, marking the past location of a road. We do not know what this road led to, though its high slope and lack of stone walls suggest that it was a private drive, not a main traffic route.

9. **Stone Walls**

We have now turned onto what was once Edmonds Lane, and connected to the Edmonds Lane that you drove on upon entering the park, today. Connecting to Boston Mill Road, this would have been regularly travelled by merchants, transporting their goods to local mills and the town of Paris. Notice the stone walls along both sides of the road, this is typical of more heavily trafficked roads, and continues along both sides of the Boston Mill Road, as well. You will also see stone walls such as these throughout other areas of the park, marking historical property boundaries. Constructing these walls was quite laborious, and utilized the stones extracted from agricultural fields while tilling. Historically stone walls were used as fences and could often have one or two rails of wood on top to further mark the fence, but over time those pieces of wood have been repurposed or have rotted away.

10. **Gap Run/Cattle Fencing**

As we cross over Gap Run stream, you can see fence posts evidencing the previous locations in which cattle were permitted to graze. For the historic residents of this land, this natural waterway would have provided a water source for cattle.

Sky Meadows State Park had relocated fence lines away from waterways in an effort towards more sustainable agricultural methods, preserving these aquatic habitats. Vegetated areas along the stream, called riparian buffers, help to intersect and filter soil and non-point source contaminants eroded from the hillside.

11. **Chestnut Orchard**

We spoke earlier of the plague of EAB currently affecting Ash Tree Populations, and how this in not the first of such devastations to American forests, notably the decimation of American Chestnut Tree populations at the start of the twentieth-century.

Before 1900, the American Chestnut was the most dominant tree species in these forests, and stood over 100 feet tall. It served an important economic role, as its versatile wood was widely used, and its frost resistant nuts fed livestock and humans, alike.

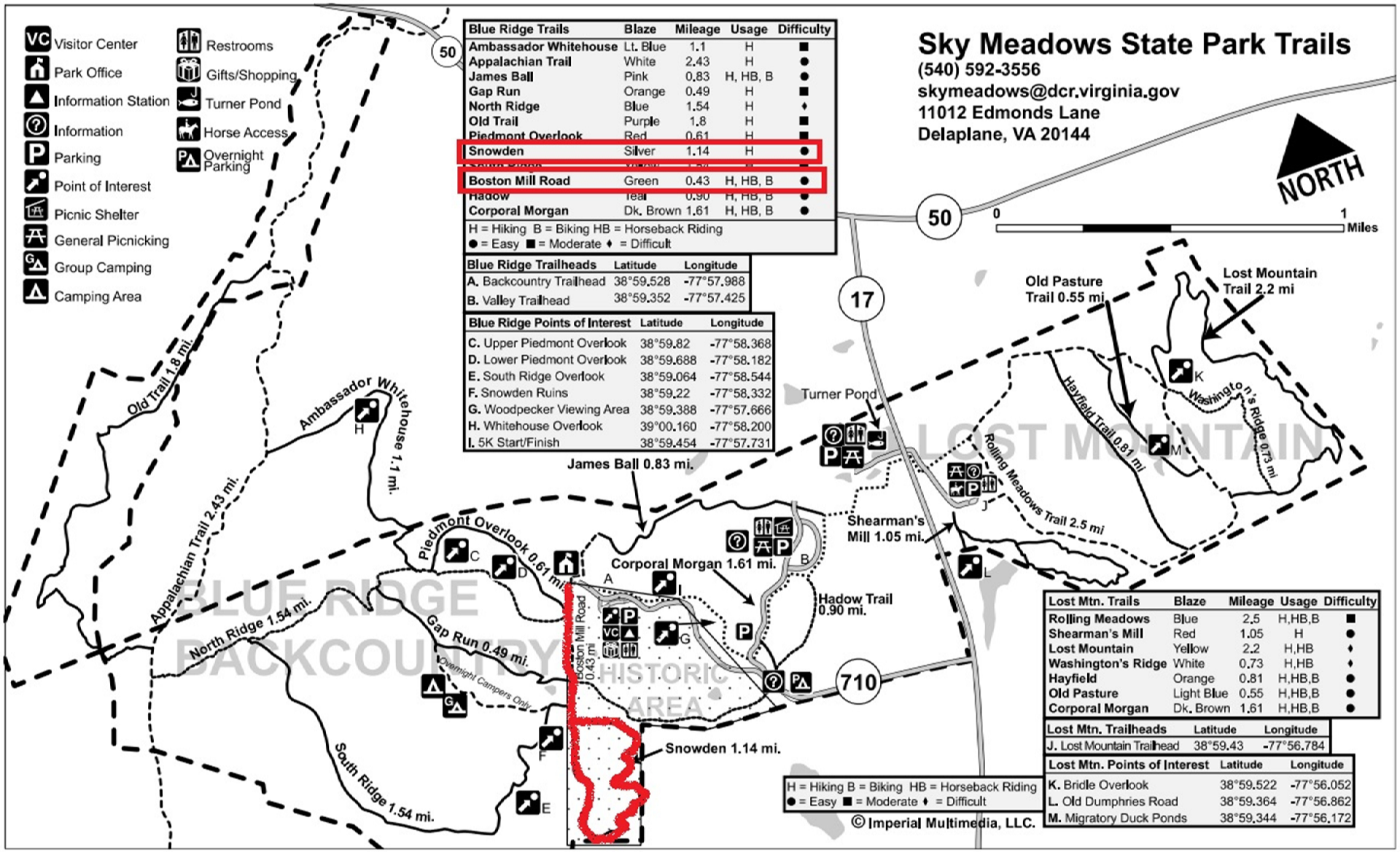
What you see here is a test orchard for the reintroduction of the American Chestnut Tree. Sky Meadows State Park has partnered with the American Chestnut Foundation for this initiative. Through a backcross breeding program, the American Chestnut Foundation has developed a Chinese-American Chestnut hybrid that is genetically 14/15ths (approx. 93%) American Chestnut. By crossing the blight infected American Chestnut with its naturally blight resistant cousin (the Chinese Chestnut), the foundation is working to reintroduce the American Chestnut back into forest ecosystems within the trees native range. This is the first of four plantings, so the orchard that you currently see will quadruple in size over the next few years. The foundation will then monitor the trees success here, overtime, and the hope is a resulting production of viable nuts that will be used to repopulate the American/Chinese Chestnut Tree throughout Appalachia.

Thus, there is, too, hope for the Ash tree. As scientists have recently discovered that certain Ash trees succumb to the damage of the Emerald Ash Borer at a slower rate than others, some Ash trees are less

preferred by the larvae, and some have even been shown to kill the larvae. This may point to a genetic key to save the species, only time will tell.

Conclusion

As we embark upon the New Year, it is important that we strive to preserve and celebrate the past whilst also looking forward to what lies ahead, and work to sustain a positive future.


Sky Meadows State Park Trails
(540) 592-3556
skymeadows@dcr.virginia.gov
11012 Edmonds Lane
Delaplane, VA 20144
NORTH
0
1
Miles
Visitor Center
Park Office
Information Station
Information
Parking
Point of Interest
Picnic Shelter
General Picnicking
Group Camping
Camping Area
Restrooms
Gifts/Shopping
Turner Pond
Horse Access
Overnight Parking
Blue Ridge Trails | Blaze | Mileage | Usage | Difficulty
Ambassador Whitehouse | Lt. Blue | 1.1 | H | ■
Appalachian Trail | White | 2.43 | H | ●
James Ball | Pink | 0.83 | H, HB, B | ●
Gap Run | Orange | 0.49 | H | ■
North Ridge | Blue | 1.54 | H | ♦
Old Trail | Purple | 1.8 | H | ■
Piedmont Overlook | Red | 0.61 | H | ■
Snowden | Silver | 1.14 | H | ●
Boston Mill Road | Green | 0.43 | H, HB, B | ●
Hadow | Teal | 0.90 | H, HB, B | ●
Corporal Morgan | Dk. Brown | 1.61 | H, HB, B | ●
H = Hiking B = Biking HB = Horseback Riding
● = Easy ■ = Moderate ♦ = Difficult
Blue Ridge Trailheads | Latitude | Longitude
A. Backcountry Trailhead | 38°59.528 | -77°57.988
B. Valley Trailhead | 38°59.352 | -77°57.425
Blue Ridge Points of Interest | Latitude | Longitude
C. Upper Piedmont Overlook | 38°59.82 | -77°58.368
D. Lower Piedmont Overlook | 38°59.688 | -77°58.182
E. South Ridge Overlook | 38°59.064 | -77°58.544
F. Snowden Ruins | 38°59.22 | -77°58.332
G. Woodpecker Viewing Area | 38°59.388 | -77°57.666
H. Whitehouse Overlook | 39°00.160 | -77°58.200
I. 5K Start/Finish | 38°59.454 | -77°57.731
50
17
710
Old Trail 1.8 mi.
Ambassador Whitehouse 1.1 mi.
Appalachian Trail 2.43 mi.
Piedmont Overlook 0.61 mi.
James Ball 0.83 mi.
Corporal Morgan 1.61 mi.
Shearman's Mill 1.05 mi.
Hadow Trail 0.90 mi.
North Ridge 1.54 mi.
Gap Run 0.49 mi.
Overnight Campers Only
Boston Mill Road 0.43 mi
Snowden 1.14 mi.
South Ridge 1.54 mi.
Turner Pond
Old Pasture Trail 0.55 mi
Lost Mountain Trail 2.2 mi
Hayfield Trail 0.81 mi
Washington's Ridge 0.73 mi
Rolling Meadows Trail 2.5 mi
BLUE RIDGE BACKCOUNTRY
HISTORIC AREA
LOST MOUNTAIN
H = Hiking B = Biking HB = Horseback Riding
● = Easy ■ = Moderate ♦ = Difficult
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Lost Mtn. Trails | Blaze | Mileage | Usage | Difficulty
Rolling Meadows | Blue | 2.5 | H,HB,B | ■
Shearman's Mill | Red | 1.05 | H | ●
Lost Mountain | Yellow | 2.2 | H,HB | ♦
Washington's Ridge | White | 0.73 | H,HB | ♦
Hayfield | Orange | 0.81 | H,HB,B | ●
Old Pasture | Light Blue | 0.55 | H,HB,B | ●
Corporal Morgan | Dk. Brown | 1.61 | H,HB,B | ●
Lost Mtn. Trailheads | Latitude | Longitude
J. Lost Mountain Trailhead | 38°59.43 | -77°56.784
Lost Mtn. Points of Interest | Latitude | Longitude
K. Bridle Overlook | 38°59.522 | -77°56.052
L. Old Dumphries Road | 38°59.364 | -77°56.862
M. Migratory Duck Ponds | 38°59.344 | -77°56.172