

HABITAT HEROES: JOHN GAVITT



Good Forest Management Helps Cerulean Warbler, Other Wildlife

Three decades ago, John Gavitt bought 430 acres of hilly property in the heart of the Appalachian Mountains of West Virginia for hunting, fishing and enjoying the outdoors. Over the years, his career with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service took him all over the nation and world, where he saw the benefits of healthy wildlife habitat.

That's when he realized he wanted his land to better benefit people and wildlife. This would lead him and his wife to transform the private property into a public outdoor recreation area to bring in young people and families from the cities to experience the outdoors.

"As someone who worked in wildlife conservation for over 30 years, I saw firsthand how outdoor experiences can instill a love of nature and a conservation ethic. And I wanted somehow to pass that on," said Gavitt.

Now named North River Retreat, the land offers hunting for quail, deer and turkey, fishing, camping, hiking, and other outdoor recreation. To make these opportunities possible, Gavitt adopted a variety of conservation practices to provide a diversity of habitat for wildlife species.



HABITAT STATS

Location: Hampshire County, WV

Habitat Type: Eastern forest

Target Species: Cerulean warbler

Other Species: Black bear, wild turkey and deer

Conservation Practices: Removing select trees; enhancing declining habitat

West Virginia

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Situated in Hampshire County, West Virginia, North River Retreat contains dense oak-hickory forests, patches of open pastureland and the meandering North River.

Gavitt worked to establish wildlife corridors across open pastureland and food plots amid forests. He also worked to stabilize the banks along the North River to stop erosion. These conservation efforts have created a haven for deer, wild turkey, and small game as well as an increasing number of bald eagles and black bears.

He is also working to manage his forests for a rare bird – the cerulean warbler. The imperiled songbird's core breeding range is in West Virginia. The decline in diverse forests across much of the East has greatly impacted the cerulean warbler and other species.

Gavitt is working to thin out trees and create gaps in the forested canopy. This sustainable technique allows mid- and upper- canopy trees the growing space to form long branches and develop dense foliage. Such conditions are ideal habitat for the cerulean warbler.

Creating such gaps also benefit other wildlife who utilize space in dense forests to nest, forage, and hunt. Gavitt's efforts are part of a multi-state project by the Appalachian Mountains Joint Venture (AMJV) to help the bird. The overall goal of the project is to improve 12,500 acres of forest habitat and 1,000 acres of reclaimed mine lands for Cerulean Warblers and other wildlife in West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Ohio, and Maryland.

"I'm very enthused about this program, as my property's woodland are overstock with trees in areas



The North River runs through John Gavitt's West Virginia property, where he is managing the land to provide top-notch wildlife habitat.

that cause a lot of suppression," said Gavitt. "By opening up the forest a bit, it will provide greater nesting cover and more food for wildlife."

"I have found overtime that not only a diversity of habitats, but a diversity of management practices – from wildlife corridors to tree harvesting – lead to a very wildlife-friendly environment," he added.

The AMJV project is funded through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, administered by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Through the project, the AMJV, NRCS, and National Wild Turkey Federation, among other partners, provide landowners with technical and financial assistance help them make conservation improvements to their property, including the forest management practices that Gavitt used on his property.

"NRCS has been a true partner in much of the management practices

taken place on my land," said Gavitt. "This project is just another example of how they are incentivizing landowners to really make their farming and other operations efficient and sustainable."

If you'd like to learn more about this project and how to get involved, visit AMJV's webpage.

Story by Matthew Cimitile, AMJV Communications Coordinator. Photos courtesy of John Gavitt and DJ McNeil.



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West Virginia