Conservancy nature hikes return

By Joe DePriest
jdepriest@charlotteobserver.com
Posted: Saturday, May. 25, 2013

LINCOLNTON Swollen by recent mountain rains, the South Fork River sang loud and clear to hikers in Lincoln County Saturday morning.

The Memorial Day weekend outing marked the return of hikes sponsored by the Charlotte-based Catawba Lands Conservancy. The nonprofit land trust had canceled the series of free spring/summer hikes four years ago due to financial problems stemming from the recession.

On Saturday, conservancy botanist Sean Bloom led a 1.5-mile trip along the South Fork Rail Trail near Lincolnton. Considered one of North Carolina’s most significant natural heritage regions, it’s also rich in local history.

Hikers saw the rare wild ginger plant and other imperiled plants; they saw mountain laurel from the Carolina high country and bald cypress from the coastal region.

“It was a nice, cool, crisp morning,” Bloom said. “We had a lot of inquisitive people who asked a lot of good questions.”

The Catawba Lands Conservancy has a six-county land protection area that includes Catawba, Gaston, Iredell, Lincoln, Mecklenburg and Union counties. Currently, the nonprofit conserves 163 properties and 12,811 acres. A total of 1,907 acres are in Lincoln County.
The conservancy is also the lead agency for the Carolina Thread Trail, a 15-county, two-state regional trail initiative. The South Fork Rail Trail is part of the Carolina Thread Trail.

Bloom said the hikes give people “a chance to experience North Carolina’s natural areas and to visit the properties they’re helping to preserve.”

Saturday’s outing took hikers along the 1873 Chester and Lenoir Narrow Gauge Railroad bed that reached Lincolnton in 1881. And the trail also passed near the restored and historic Laboratory Cotton Mill built in 1887.

It sits on the site of a former Confederate laboratory that made opiate-based medicine in 1863. The Laboratory Historic District is recognized by the National Park Service and was included on the National Register of Historic Places in 2003.

Hiker Sylvia Holmes, 77, of Denver said the combination of history and nature made for an enchanting morning, despite nagging mosquitoes.

“The noise of the river was like a mini-Niagara,” said Holmes, a founding member of Lincoln County’s Thread Trail. “That made for a nice effect. And there were lots of little spring flowers.”

A boy spotted wild strawberries along the path and the group paused to eat the small, bright-red berries.

“That was a poetic moment,” Holmes said. “The hike was a great start to a holiday weekend.”

Read more here: http://www.charlotteobserver.com/2013/05/25/4063832/conservancy-nature-hikes-return.html#storylink=cpy

More Information

• Catawba Lands Conservancy free hikes
• Want to go?

The Catawba Lands Conservancy will host three more hikes in the coming months:

June 29, 9-11 a.m., Pinhook Preserve/Redlair, near Gastonia. The focus will be on the big-leaf magnolia.

July 27, 9-11 a.m., Buffalo Creek Preserve, Mt. Pleasant, Cabarrus County.

Aug. 25, 9-11 a.m., Redlair preserve, near Gastonia. The focus will be on the federally endangered Schweintz’s sunflower.

For more information, go to www.catawbalands.org.