

# Bailey Mountain Preserve develops as popular destination

**Johnny Casey**

The News-Record & Sentinel | USA TODAY NETWORK

MARS HILL - Madison County boasts many different hiking destinations throughout its three towns. Increasingly, Mars Hill's Bailey Mountain Preserve has become one of those spots.

Access to the preserve is at 889 Forest St. in Mars Hill. Bailey Mountain is the highest peak visible from the town of Mars Hill and figures prominently in the history of the town and Mars Hill University. The preserve consists of two adjoining properties that are owned by The Richard L. Hoffman Foundation and the town of Mars Hill. The town of Mars Hill is the manager of the property with advice from the Friends of Bailey Mountain.

The preserve encompasses more than 250 acres, including much of the southern slope of the mountain, including: to the west of Connor Ridge, the headwaters of the White Oak Branch and Hamp Gap, and to the east of Connor Ridge, the Smith Farm parcel.

The approximate 5 miles of trails are a work in progress. Volunteers from the community have improved existing trails and added features for drainage, built steps in the steep stretches and cut new trails to extend the trail system and guide hikers up to the peak safely. The trails are marked with blazes on the trees and signs at junctions.

Benches are strategically placed along the trail to allow hikers to rest and enjoy views. The primary trail crew is a group of retired men who affectionately call themselves the "Geezers." The Geezers meet once a week but many spend several days a week on the trail.

The Bailey Mountain Preserve offers much more than hiking trails. The Smith Farm portion of the preserve has a house and three barns. From 1870 to 2004, the crop was tobacco, and in 2004 the farm transitioned to beef cattle. The largest barn is a typical mid-20th century burley tobacco barn. The next largest barn is a livestock barn, and the small barn is a multi-purpose bank-barn. Plans for the house include ADA accessible facilities and an environmental discovery center.

In October, Appalachian Barn Alliance commemorated the organization's receipt of grant funding during a ceremony in which new signs were unveiled at three barns on the Smith property.

The Smith Farm portion of the preserve encompasses 300 yards of both sides of Banjo Branch stream. The vegetation at the time of the 2019 acquisition was dense privet and multiflora rose along the stream and fescue grass in the uplands. An interagency management plan was developed by North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, U.S. Fish and Wildlife services, Mountain Valleys Resource Conservation and Develop-



**Bailey Mountain Preserve offers three Mars Hill-owned barns at the Lower Smith Farm.**



**This chair swing sits at the start of the Bailey Summit trail at Mars Hill's Bailey Mountain Preserve.**

ment and the Shade Your Stream Project.

The plan called for removing the non-native invasive vegetation (privet and multiflora rose) along the stream and planting native trees and shrubs. For area away from the stream the plan recommended replacing the perennial grasses with native grasses, shrubs and wildflowers that will support wildlife and pollinators. In 2020, the N.C. Forest Service conducted a management fire to help control the non-native grasses prior to the planting of native grasses and shrubs.

Volunteers assisted a contractor in planting 250 saplings and live stakes along Banjo Branch. During the summer volunteers cut the grass and weeds around the saplings to help them thrive. The vision is for Banjo Branch to be a stream shaded with native vegetation the adjacent field that is appealing for the community to explore, picnic and provide for educational opportunities.