

Jefferson Post

SERVING ASHE COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA SINCE 1925



Shake up in
the MVAC

Old time Ashe
rivals move to
other fields of play

See Page 6 for
more details

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Land trust event draws 300 supporters

Blue Ridge Rural Land Trust held its largest yearly gathering and fundraiser July 25, the 2nd annual Blueberry Festival at Old Orchard Creek Farm in Lansing.

The land trust's executive director and Old Orchard Creek owner, Walter Clark, initially started the event as a celebration of the local fruit's harvest for friends and area farmers, only discovering the festival's conservation fundraising potential as an "afterthought." But considering that Clark's involvement with the land trust materialized from his gift of a conservation easement on his farm property in 2006, Old Orchard Creek seemed to be a fitting and ultimately successful venue to promote and fundraise for the regional land preservation efforts.

This year's festival attracted around 300 local and regional participants who were treated to live bluegrass music, fresh



Photo submitted

In its second year, the Blueberry Festival at Old Orchard Creek Farm, held to support land preservation, raised \$14,000, helped bolster membership.

blueberries, and an opportunity to learn about BRRLT and land conservation. While attendance almost doubled from last year, perhaps the most telling statistics are the nearly \$14,000 raised for the

organization, as well as an increase in the land trust's membership to approximately 400 to 500 members. "We are growing by leaps and bounds," says Clark.

While BRRLT's largest con-

servation project to date, the 1,800-acre Pond Mountain acquisition in Northwestern Ashe County, will have cost nearly \$14 million upon its completion over the next year, \$14,000 is no small change.

These funds will go towards transaction fees as well as staff and operations costs, fueling a

See Land, Page 5

Land

From Page 1A

land trust that has protected more than 80 properties and over 10,000 acres in the last 10 years, nearly 3,000 of those acres in Ashe County.

This summer is a time of new beginnings for BRRLT. Clark is now in his second summer as executive director, building on more than 20 years of experience in coastal ecology and conservation work with North Carolina State University. Wasting no time, Clark and his team, which includes new Deputy Director Joe Potts and Administrative Assistant Maria Whaley, have tackled a variety of projects with a creative, dedicated

approach to conservation, while also spearheading a relocation of headquarters to downtown West Jefferson.

Building on the land trust's most successful year of conservation efforts in 2008, Clark and company have high hopes for 2009. As the Pond Mountain project progresses, BRRLT will focus on the completion of conservation easements on two Wilkes County properties: The YMCA's Camp Harrison at Herring Ridge, a tract preserved with a \$822,000 grant from Clean Water Management Trust Fund, as well as a privately-owned piece of property known as

Whippoorwill Academy, a community of cabins and old structures along the Yadkin River. BRRLT is the only conservancy that serves Wilkes County in the state, an area with a promising future. "The YMCA Project was the beginning for us in serving that county. It has thousands of acres of farm land, so there is huge potential there," says Clark.

Clark attributes many of the recent developments at BRRLT to positive press coverage regarding conservation in Western North Carolina, most notably a series of news segments broadcast by WLOS

Asheville that highlight significant natural areas in the region, land that BRRLT fights to protect. While the success of the Blueberry Festival and an abundance of recent acquisition and conservation projects confirm the strong standing of BRRLT, the land trust still faces several challenges in the near future.

Statewide budget cuts have already dramatically reduced the funding provided by Clean Water Management and the Natural Heritage Trust Fund. Although Clark anticipates that some of the funding will eventually be allocated during the coming year, BRRLT nonethe-

less depends on those funds for larger acquisitions and transaction costs that landowners often cannot afford. These changes call for creativity rather than despair, prompting Clark to seek out private funding and sponsorships, as well as exploring the availability of federal funding and stimulus package dollars. Furthermore, limitation creates an opportunity for cooperation, such as exploring joint projects with fellow land conservation trusts High Country Conservancy and National Committee for the New River. "Our ultimate goal is to protect land, but can we do it in a more unified, col-

laborative way?" asks Clark.

BRRLT strives not only to protect Ashe County and the High Country's surrounding lands and resources, but also to preserve the unique culture and local economy born of her farms and hills. The conservation movement began as an effort to protect what Clark calls "The pure lands": ecologically significant tracts that now comprise many of our state and national parks. But today BRRLT believes that the preservation of farmland and rural communities is an equally, if not more, vital aspect of the region's conservational future.