Releasing the Balds

John Brown—Cleveland, South Carolina

A recent development in the relationship between our plant societies and the management of the Balds (National Park Service and United States Forest Service) is already producing benefits and promises even more. Heretofore, any contact between plant seekers and the rangers was very likely to produce negative results ranging from lectures to outright arrest. This relationship is changing rapidly for the better.

Recognizing that places like Gregory Bald were in danger of being overrun by encroaching plants, a plan to bring a heavy-duty mower to the top of Gregory was put forth to the Park Service administration by the Mid-Atlantic Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society. Prior to this time, Park Service employees spent three weeks per summer on the bald with weed eaters fighting a losing battle as the size of the bald was gradually reduced to 12 acres.

After the mower was driven up the Appalachian Trail, the trend was reversed and the open area is back to 20 acres and growing. The mower remains available to the work crews on the bald.

The donation of the mower was a significant event and shows evidence of intent on our part. Park Service and USFS personnel have responded by working with us and approving multiple plans for improvement of the balds.

Spearheaded by **Jim Brant**, president of the Mid-Atlantic Chapter of the ARS (and ASA member), a new program under the guidance of the Nantahala Forest Botanist (USFS) is in play. Jim wrote in a recent plea for volunteers:

> "Like many of the open balds in the Southern Appalachians, Hooper Bald is getting overgrown. Rather than staying an open meadow, the area is filling up with succession trees and shrubs which crowd out the native meadow wildflower, azalea and rhododendron populations. Without intervention, the top of the mountain will no longer be an open meadow bald, but will become pine and hardwood forestland. This invasive regression is threatening many native wildflowers, and especially the exceptional forms of the Flame Azalea (*Rhododendron calendulaceum*) which have been identified on Hooper Bald. One of those exceptional plants has been informally named 'Hooper's Copper' and is a bright, coppery orange Flame Azalea that has some of the largest flowers we have seen on this species with blossoms of more than three inches across."

In November 2008, the Species Study Group of the ARS Mid-Atlantic Chapter began discussions about this project with Forest Service officials in the region. Working in coordination with USFS administration, a restoration clean-up of Hooper Bald took place during the weekend of April 3-5, 2009. Volunteers were recruited from all over the Southeast to participate in this preservation of the important plant communities of the Bald.

Photo Jim Brant, George McLellan, and Don Hyatt

▲ The work crew clearing brush from Hooper Bald included George McLellan, Jim Brant, Ken Gohring, John Brown, Bob Stelloh, and Dirk Rankin (USFS).

▼ *R. calendulaceum* at Hooper Bald are in danger of being lost due to overgrowth of trees and shrubs.

Photo Buddy Lee

Under Jim's leadership and accompanied by USFS Botanist Dirk Rankin, a rowdy, a rowdy bunch including **George McLellan**, **Ken Gohring**, **Bob Stelloh,** and **John Brown** attacked the invading swarm of blueberry plants and tree saplings. The day's effort resulted in the release of one arm of the bald. Estimates range, but we think we effectively completed at least 10 percent of the first round of work.

Another attack on Hooper Bald is planned for June 21, 2009 as part of visits to a number of balds (Copper, Wayah,

Photo Buddy Lee

▲ *R. calendulaceum* at Hooper Bald are in danger of being lost due to overgrowth of trees and shrubs.

▼ Dr. Andy Whipple and John Brown discuss Hooper Bald.

Photo Buddy Lee

Gregory, Pace, and Wine Springs). We have permission to bring heavy-duty weedeaters, hand saws, and a mower to the bald area. Volunteers are needed and appreciated.

A third round of effort is scheduled for the weekend after Easter in 2010 (April 10th and 11th).

Discussions currently under way involve establishing plant material from Hooper Bald (*R. calendulaceum*) on other open balds in the immediate area. Details still to be determined include limits on species introduction and propagation methods. Volunteers from the ASA and ARS will be working together with the USFS to ensure a successful project.

The history and origin of the balds is not firmly known but evidence indicates that they may have existed as balds as much as 4,000 years ago Charcoal residue discovered on the balds gives rise to the idea that lightning-caused fires, or deliberate burning by the indigenous people (to provide better hunting) created the balds. They remained open as the European settlers started using the balds for grazing their livestock. The size reduction of open area has occurred only since animals were removed from the area.

If you have an interest in the project, contact Jim Brant at jandpbrant@verizon.com or the author at azaleabits@yahoo.com .

Hooper Bald is located on the Cherohala Skyway near the entrance to the Joyce Kilmer Forest in Western North Carolina north of Robbinsville. Access to the bald area from the paved parking lot (with facilities) is along a quarter mile long graveled trail with little change in elevation so that most of your energy is saved for activities on the bald itself.

Currently, Forest Service personnel are able to mow several acres of the bald area. The planned expansion is not large in size but does include most of the area significantly occupied by native azaleas.

John Brown *is Immediate Past President of the ASA.*