

Jim Brant Honored for His Role in the Hooper Bald Restoration Project

By Carolyn Beck—Oak Hill, Virginia

On November 2nd, 2017, at the Regional Forester's Honor Awards Ceremony held in Stone Mountain, Georgia, Jim Brant received an award in the category of Restored and Resilient Landscapes for his role in The Hooper Bald Restoration Project, National Forests of North Carolina. [See Photos 1 & 2.]

Dr. Duke Rankin, who was the United States Forest Service (USFS) Chief Botanist for the Cheoah District of the Nantahala National Forest during the project's formative years, nominated Jim for this award based on the following criteria:

1. Improvement to landscape restoration for threatened and endangered species.
"The project addressed habitat needs for at least four sensitive and one federally-endangered species on 40 acres of early successional habitat that has proven to be unstable without active management. The project also improved conditions for pollinators and recreational users."
2. Innovation shown in achieving results.
The innovation shown was in "crafting an agreement among the five agencies" with a vested interest in the project. Funding issues were overcome by actively recruiting volunteers and donations.
3. Significance and duration of stewardship activities.
"The Hooper Bald Project united five agencies into a single project/mission that addressed multiple issues, none of which could have been addressed unilaterally by the Forest Service. In terms of volunteers, work hours, and donated resources, the Hooper Bald Project is the largest restoration project attempted on the Nantahala National Forest in at least twenty years. The project recently concluded its tenth year."
4. Geographical applicability.
"The actions taken, and the lessons learned can be applied to any grassy bald in the Southern Appalachians, an endangered community type directly threatened by a combination of lack of historic management and climate change."
5. Scope of prevention, environmental considerations, adaptive management, and improvements of ecological health.

This project "addressed the loss of high elevation early successional habitat for at-risk species" by restoring and maintaining native plant (*Rhododendron calendulaceum*, flame azalea) and animal [*Glaucomys sabrinus*, northern flying squirrel, and *Phyciodes batesii*, tawny crescent butterfly] species diversity. It has reduced "the rate of species endangerment by contributing to species recovery and



▲ Photo 1—US Forest Service Award to Jim Brant. Shown (l to r): Frank Beum, Deputy Regional Forester; Jim Brant; John Crockett, Acting Deputy Regional Forester; Anna Briatico, Acting Deputy Regional Forester; and Allen Nichols, Forest Supervisor for National Forests of North Carolina.

▼ Photo 2—Jim Brant shown with his 2017 Regional Forester's Award.



augmenting populations of at-risk plants [*R. calendulaceum*] and habitat for at-risk animals [*Picea rubens*, red spruce, nesting sites for the northern flying squirrel].

A Little History

The concept of a restoration effort emerged as a result of a visit to Hooper Bald by members of the Middle Atlantic Chapter (MAC) of the American Rhododendron Society (ARS) Species Study Group in 2006. During their trek over the bald, they felt both excitement and distress. The discovery of a large population of *Calendulaceum*, which boasted unusually large flowers in a wide range of colors, was exhilarating. But the fact that these azaleas were being

overgrown by encroaching vegetation brought the realization that these exceptional forms would probably not survive if left unattended.

The concept took form during a meeting later that year with various state and federal agencies, all with a vested interest in the area: US Forest Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, NC Fish and Wildlife Service, the NC Wildlife Resources Commission, and Southern Highland Reserve. By participating in a forum where each agency could define its objectives and discuss ways to problem-solve, Jim and George McLellan, as representatives of MAC, were able to obtain an agreement that outlined how the project was to proceed.

The project was formally implemented in 2007. Jim's leadership skills were effectively used to formulate goals, design and implement a plan of action, enlist volunteers, arrange for financial assistance, and maintain the required reporting and paperwork.

Progress Report

As of this report, the following original goals set for the project have all been met:

- Clearing the encroaching vegetation from around the azaleas using hand tools. At least two workdays per year have resulted in the release of about 5 acres of the bald. Mowing by USFS staff has kept the area from reverting back to forest.
- Evaluating the response to actions taken.
- Observing and describing the various *Calendulaceum* forms.
- Tagging and mapping individual azaleas.
- Providing an attractive destination for visitors with the hope that this would inspire them to become stewards of our native treasures.
- Contributing to the ASA and ARS seed exchanges to sustain this important gene pool.
- Propagating the most magnificent forms.
- Augmenting populations of *Calendulaceum*. Approximately 1000, grown from seed collected on Hooper Bald, were planted onto Hooper and a nearby bald in 2011 and 2013.

Future goals

- Educating the public, including by guided tours of Hooper, to encourage their appreciation of native azaleas so that they could become stewards of this campaign.
- Assigning GPS coordinates for the various *Calendulaceum*.
- Creating a database to maintain the information gathered over the course of the project.

Volunteers

It is Jim's expressed view that this award represents the inspiration, dedication, and determination of many others who worked to make the Hooper Bald Project a great success:

John Brown, Vaseyi ASA	Ken Gohring
Kim Hainge	Don Hyatt
J Jackson	Lindy Johnson
Bob and Audrey Stelloh	Revonda Williams

In particular, George McLellan is to be recognized as an equal participant in all phases of this project. Jim notes that "without George's efforts and expertise, the results would not have been the same. He is sharing this award with me in all ways that count."

In addition to the above-listed individuals, many groups have participated, including Boy Scouts, local residents, students at local public schools, the Sierra Club, USFS staff, members of the ARS and ASA from across the county. Collectively, the Hooper Bald team has contributed more than 5,000 volunteer hours. Jim and George have personally donated over 1,500 hours each.

Conclusion

R. calendulaceum has long been recognized as a highly desirable plant: William Bartram, the famous American naturalist, considered it "the most celebrated species of Azalea..., certainly the most gay and brilliant shrub yet known." Frederick Pursh, a German botanist, considered it "without exception, the handsomest shrub in North America."¹ So, we, who are passionate about azaleas, are eternally grateful to Jim for reaching out to the US Forest Service and establishing a successful working relationship with them that has enabled the Hooper Bald Team to make the Hooper Bald Restoration Project a fabulous success.

If you would like join in the workdays on Hooper or would like more information on the Hooper Bald Restoration Project, please contact Jim Brant at jandpbrant@verizon.net.

References

- 1 Andrews, Charles. Spring 2018. "The Southern Appalachians: An Azalea Paradise". *The Azalean*. 40(1): 4-10, 18-21.
- For additional reading related to native deciduous azaleas:
- Beck, Carolyn. Fall 2012. "Hooper Bald Native Azalea Project." *Journal American Rhododendron Society (JARS)*. 66(4): 184-190.
- Brown, John. Summer 2009. "Releasing the Balds." *The Azalean*. 31(2): 43-44.
- Hyatt, Donald. Fall 2001. "Best of the Best: In Search of Native Azaleas." *The Azalean*. 23(3): 52-57.
- Towe, L. Clarence. *American Azaleas*. Timber Press, 2004.
- See also Don Hyatt's website at <http://www.donaldhyatt.com/natives>.

Carolyn Beck is a retired Registered Nurse. She is an active member of the Northern Virginia Chapter and is currently in charge of fund-raising. Carolyn and her husband, Paul, are concentrating their efforts on the chapter's Legacy Hybrids (see NV-ASA.org for more information on their Legacy Project).