

SPECIAL PLACES OF AESTHETIC AND RECREATIONAL VALUE  
IN THE BULLPASTURE AND COWPASTURE RIVER VALLEYS  
by C. Nelson Hoy, Forester, Rancher & Conservationist

*Editor's note: The following essay is the twentieth in a five-year series on water resource stewardship in the Cowpasture River Watershed, edited by the Cowpasture River Preservation Association and published by The Recorder. The goal of the series is to create awareness among students, citizens and officials of the critical need to protect our surface and ground water resources, and to stimulate interest in progressive stewardship.*

WILLIAMSVILLE – The Cowpasture River of Virginia is arguably the cleanest and most pristine river basin in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Nestled among the Allegheny Mountains and bulwarked against the influences of Washington and Richmond by the great Shenandoah Mountain, the Cowpasture River flows 84 miles southward through Highland, Bath, Alleghany and Botetourt Counties. The Cowpasture River then joins the Jackson River near Iron Gate, Virginia and together, these two rivers form the mighty James River.

The primary tributary of the Cowpasture is the Bullpasture River with its headwaters north of Doe Hill, Virginia. The Bullpasture flows in a southwest direction for 26 miles between Jack Mountain on the west and Bullpasture Mountain on the east and it creates in between the Bullpasture Gorge before joining the Cowpasture River just below Williamsville. Simpson Creek, Davis Run and several smaller native-brook-trout-quality runs and drafts join the Bullpasture and Cowpasture Rivers along the way.

The Cowpasture River Preservation Association and its “Aesthetics Values Committee” recognizes ten special places of aesthetic and recreational value along the Bullpasture River, Cowpasture River or a tributary which also afford **public access**. Beginning in the north and proceeding southward, this essay explores each special place by giving each a name, a description of recreational opportunities, notations of mammals, birds and fishes, aesthetic attributes, driving directions and a responsible Federal of state agency. Enjoy the Cowpasture River Valley of Virginia!!!

## **Part I – The Bullpasture River Valley of Virginia**

McDowell Battlefield on the Bullpasture River – Among the Appalachian mountains and valleys of Highland County, Virginia, the civil war Battle of McDowell fought on May 8, 1862 marked Confederate General Stonewall Jackson's first victory in his legendary Valley Campaign which succeeded in relieving Union pressure on Richmond and saved the Shenandoah Valley known then as the "breadbasket of the confederacy". The Bullpasture River joined by Crabs and Duff Runs bisects the McDowell Battlefield, the hamlet of McDowell, Virginia, livestock pasture lands in the floodplains and passes along the base of Sitlington Hill on Bullpasture Mountain.

The Bullpasture River in this section most likely harbors fallfish, smallmouth bass, and state-stocked trout. Crab Run includes a good population of both wild brook and rainbow trout. Duff Run which flows through the McDowell Battlefield along Route 250 contains a population of wild brook trout. One federally endangered species that is known to inhabit the Bullpasture River -- the James Spiny Mussel.

A mile-long hiking trail within the McDowell Civil War Battlefield and beginning at a trail head along

U.S. Route 250 east of the hamlet, ascends Sitlington Hill to the Confederate positions where it offers a spectacular view of the Bullpasture River valley below. Public access to the Bullpasture River itself is limited to a short frontage along Virginia Route 656 and perhaps a service road to the hamlet's water towers.



“Reconnaissance at McDowell – The Valley Campaign”  
Artistic Attribution Hereby Given to Bradley Schmehl

The McDowell Battlefield lays on both sides of the Bullpasture River and extends south of the U.S. Route 250 bridge for a mile or more. Conservation easements are held by the Virginia Outdoors Foundation and private citizens. The Highland Historical Society purchased 26 acres of pastureland at the core of the battlefield and the Society sponsors reenactments of the Battle of McDowell every three to five years – the next being most likely in May of 2022.

Highland Historical Society  
161 Mansion House Rd  
P O Box 63  
McDowell, VA 24458  
(540)396-4478

Hayfields Farm on the Bullpasture River – Hayfields Farm is a 1,034-acre working farm located in Highland County, traversed by the Bullpasture River for a little more than a mile and bordered on both the east and west by the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF) Highland Wildlife

Management Area (HWMA). With the HWMA Bullpasture Mountain Tract laying to the east and the HWMA Jack Mountain Tract laying to the west, the Hayfields Farm property functions as a wildlife bridge or corridor. Hayfields Farm features at least five cold water springs on the property that have been developed into ponds or cisterns to provide fresh water sources for wildlife and cattle. The property contains several emergent, shrub and forested freshwater wetlands. The river bottom meadows of Hayfields Farm are reputed to yield about 1,000 large round bales of hay each season.



The Bullpasture River Passing Under the Hayfields Farm Bridge.  
Photographic Attribution Hereby Given to Virginia Outdoors Foundation

The Virginia Outdoors Foundation (VOF) now owns Hayfields Farm and the Foundation has commissioned professional urban planners and landscape architects to study and recommend alternative best uses for Hayfields Farm. The Bullpasture River on the farm which has a cobble and shale bottom historically offers fishermen a pastoral setting for fly-fishing brook trout, brown trout and rainbow trout. Facilities on the farm might possibly be used for agricultural and conservation research, educational programs, meetings and/or lodging. Hayfields Farm lays within the Audubon Society's Allegheny Highlands Important Bird Area (IBA). Bullpasture River Road crosses the property for about 4,300 feet and this scenic byway is part of the DGIF Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail along which wildlife viewing is encouraged by the traveling public. Other promising outdoor recreational opportunities include naturalist studies, nature and landscape photography and painting, riparian, grasslands and forest birding, big game and bird hunting, and hiking.

Hayfields Farm is located along Bullpasture River Road or Virginia Route 678 at 524 Hayfields Lane McDowell, VA 24458 – 8.1 miles south of McDowell, Virginia and 6.2 miles north of Williamsville, Virginia. Recreational Advisory: At the time of this writing, Hayfields Farm is **not open to the public.**

Hayfields Farm  
c/o Virginia Outdoors Foundation



39 Garrett Street, Suite 200  
Warrenton, VA 20186  
(540) 347-7727

Highland Wildlife Management Area on Davis Run – The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries oversees this 14,000 acre mountainous wildlife reserve which encompasses Sounding Knob at 4,400 feet, the Davis Run watershed, the water gap between Bear Mountain and Buck Hill, diverse red spruce and boreal plant communities, oak-hickory, and mesic forest habitats and wildlife. Davis Run through its water gap is a wild native brook trout stream that falls through a mature mesic forest over ledges and among a jumble of rocks with a never ending roar. The lookout tower on Sounding Knob at 4,400 feet affords a spectacular vista of the Appalachian Mountains both north, east, south and west.



The Davis Run Water Gap – Photographic Attribution Hereby Given to Tom Mohr

The Jack Mountain Tract of the Highland Wildlife Management Area offers fine recreational opportunities for naturalists, photographers, birders, painters, fly fishermen, hunters, trappers, hikers, bicyclists and primitive campers. Because the Jack Mountain Tract covers a wide variety of forest habitats and a 2,600 foot differential in elevations, birding enthusiasts may enjoy sightings of wild turkeys, pileated woodpeckers, ruffed grouse, red-shouldered hawks, scarlet tanagers, rose-breasted grosbeaks, black-throated blue and green warblers. Forest mammals include black bears, whitetail deer, bobcats, coyotes, red and gray foxes, raccoons and squirrels.

At the junction of U.S. Route 250 and Virginia Route 615 drive south along Route 615 for about 2.3 miles to Sounding Knob Road. Parking is available in adjacent clearings. Alternatively, beginning at the junction of Virginia Route 678 and Route 615, drive west for 2.0 miles to the junction of Davis Run Road and Sounding Knob Road. Drive or hike westward into the Highland Wildlife Management Area

along Sounding Knob Road (**public access**) for approximately 6,000 feet along Davis Run and through the water gap. Sounding Knob Road fords Davis Run and it is a narrow and rough road, so it's best to have a four-wheel-drive Jeep or hiking boots and wading sandals. It's another 12,000 feet to the top of Sounding Knob at 4,400 feet.

Highland Wildlife Management Area  
Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries  
57 Lee Highway  
Verona, Virginia 24482  
(540) 248-9360

Highland Wildlife Management Area on the Bullpasture River – Located two and a half miles north of Williamsville on Indian Draft Road or Virginia Route 678, a Highland Wildlife Management Area **public access** point provides parking on the west side of the Bullpasture River and a swinging bridge for crossing to the east side of the Bullpasture River Gorge. This special place does not include public toilets.

The HWMA Bullpasture Mountain Tract offers recreational opportunities for naturalists, photographers, birders, painters, fly fishermen, hunters, trappers, hikers, bicyclists, kayakers, horseback riders and primitive campers. The Highland Wildlife Management Area features an Appalachian oak and hickory forest, small wildlife clearings, and soft mast plantings – apple, cherry and dogwood. Game species include black bear, whitetail deer, wild turkey, grouse, squirrels and rabbits. The Bullpasture River is a well stocked mountain stream under the Commonwealth's put-and-take system with trout in cool, clear waters that will delight almost any fisherman, woman or youngster.

The Bullpasture River Gorge itself is a scenic waterway with cliffs and large boulders and presents a dangerous challenge to the white-water enthusiast and sometimes it is life-threatening. The Bullpasture River from its confluence with the Cowpasture River north and including the Bullpasture Gorge, is eligible for designation under the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act because it is free-flowing with outstandingly remarkable scenic, recreational, and geologic values. Intermediate white-water canoe or kayak enthusiasts step up to Class III, IV and V runs, rapids and falls. SOURCE: <https://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/detail/id/4374/>

**WARNING: The Bullpasture Gorge Rapids and Falls Can Be Dangerous and Life-threatening.**

Highland Wildlife Management Area  
Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries  
57 Lee Highway  
Verona, Virginia 24482  
(540) 248-9360



The Bullpasture River Gorge Offers Class III, IV and V Whitewater Kayaking  
Photographic Attribution Hereby Given To Mark Andes

**WARNING: The Bullpasture Gorge Rapids and Falls Can Be Dangerous and Life-threatening.**

Fishes of the Bullpasture River – A measure of the aesthetic and recreational value of the Bullpasture River might be the diversity of fish that inhabit this tributary. Stephen J. Reeser, Fisheries Biologist, Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries writes in a private e-mail that in 1973 Virginia Tech completed a biotic survey of the upper James River where Larry Mohn was one of the investigators. That Virginia Tech survey identified 17 different fish species at one location on the Bullpasture River about four miles north of the confluence. My professional "best guess" is that there would be 15-20 different fish species among all the locations on the Bullpasture River. With regards to trout, there are wild (naturally reproducing) populations of brook trout and rainbow trout in some of the tributaries of the Bullpasture River. There are also hatchery-reared brook, rainbow and brown trout that are stocked in the main Bullpasture River by DGIF and private landowners. Here is the list of fish species collected



by Virginia Tech in 1973: white sucker, northern hogsucker, torrent sucker, redbreast sunfish, rock bass, smallmouth bass, mottled sculpin, mountain redbelly dace, rosyside dace, cutlips minnow, bluehead chub, river chub, common shiner, longnose dace, longfin darter, rainbow trout, and brown trout. Additional species observed by Stephen Reeser include: central stoneroller, margined madtom, yellow bullhead, fallfish, and largemouth bass.



A Spectacular Native Brook Trout. Photograph Courtesy of the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries

## **Part II – The Cowpasture River Valley of Virginia**

Bullpasture and Cowpasture Rivers Confluence – About one mile south of Williamsville, Virginia and along Junction Road or Virginia Route 628, the Bullpasture River joins the Cowpasture River on its journey south to join the Jackson River and to form the mighty James River. At this location, the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) swinging bridge No. 9000 allows residents and visitors with homes or camps on the east side of the river, school children, fishermen and women, hikers and bicyclists a dry crossing of the Cowpasture River. Another tenth of a mile south along Junction Road, motor vehicles can cross the Cowpasture River by way of a low water ford. Fishing for red-breasted





Bullpasture and Cowpasture Rivers Confluence – VDOT No. 9000 Swinging Bridge by C. Nelson Hoy



sunfish and smallmouth bass from the swinging bridge or the river banks is a favorite summer pastime for residents and guests alike. Hikers can continue along Virginia Route 628 to the northeast. Canoe or kayak enthusiasts can access the Cowpasture River for a float trip downstream to the USFS GWNF Wallace Tract. NOTE that with the exception of the Virginia Department of Transportation swinging bridge and the VDOT right-of-way along Virginia Route 628, these lands are **private property**. This special place does not include public toilets.

Rex L. Pearce, P.E.  
Staunton District Bridge Engineer  
Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT)  
811 Commerce Road  
Staunton, Virginia 24401  
540-332-9104

Coursey Springs Fish Cultural Station at Meadow Lake – Coursey Springs is one of nine fish-rearing facilities operated by the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF). Originally known as Meadow Lake springs by local folks, the Coursey Springs produces 4,000 gallons of cool, clear water in dry or drought seasons and 16,000 gallons per minute during heavy rain events. The Cowpasture River about seven miles north of the Meadow Lake springs falls into a karst sinkhole and then travels through subterranean passageways and caves for seven miles and under the Bullpasture River before emerging as Meadow Lake springs. During this underground journey, the waters of the Cowpasture River chill to about 53 degrees Fahrenheit – an ideal temperature for raising trout.

Constructed in the 1960's as a fish hatchery, this new DGIF-operated state-of-the-Art fish cultural center draws cold, clear waters from the 3rd largest spring in the Commonwealth of Virginia and produces about 500,000 catch-able size trout seven to 18” long each season. Coursey Springs does not spawn or hatch trout but instead it serves as a trout grow-out facility by receiving fingerlings from the Paint Bank Fish Culture Station in Craig County, Virginia and growing them to advanced fingerling or catch-able size fish. The Fish Cultural Station features several large trout rearing tanks, naturalized creek-side fishing areas, riparian buffer areas and open fields.

Wildlife and birding enthusiasts may have opportunities to see green, great blue and night herons, belted kingfishers, bald eagles or ospreys, red-tailed and red-shouldered hawks, eastern bluebirds, American goldfinches, eastern kingbirds, red-winged blackbirds, eastern phoebes and Carolina wrens. Wetlands are often home for dragonflies, damselflies, blue dashers, eastern pondhawks, black saddlebags, calico pennants, and the common green darner.

In Williamsville, Virginia at the intersection of Cowpasture River Road or Virginia Route 614 and Indian Draft Road or Virginia Route 678; drive south along Indian Draft Road for 1.3 miles, turn left or east onto Hatchery Road and proceed for another 0.3 miles. Although the hatchery has no formal visitors center, the public is welcome to enjoy a free self-guided tour 365 days a year from 8:00 AM to 3:30 PM. This special place does not include public toilets.

Brad Mawyer, Manager  
DGIF Coursey Springs Fish Cultural Center  
300 Hatchery Lane  
Millboro, Virginia 24460



DGIF Coursey Springs Rainbow and Brown Trout Being Released into the South River.  
Photographic Attribution Hereby Given to Daniel Lin of the *Daily News-Record*.

USFS GWNF Wallace Tract on the Cowpasture River – The George Washington National Forest's Wallace Tract straddles the Cowpasture River for about one mile south of Williamsville. The Wallace tract provides **public access** for hiking, bicycling, hunting, fishing and primitive camping, wildlife viewing, photography and painting. The Wallace Tract swinging bridge across the Cowpasture River connects Forest Road No. 282 and primitive camping acreage in the west with substantial acreage of the George Washington National Forest to the east and the Sugar Tree Road. The swinging bridge illustrates classic wooden towers, deck and rails built in 1991-92 by Sahale, LLC for the U.S. Forest Service based on a traditional bridge design supplied by the National Park Service.

The woodlands and fields found along both sides of the Cowpasture River provide a diversity of wildlife habitats with wildflowers to enjoy in the spring and early summer while the river itself may be more directly experienced by canoe, kayak or tube. Wildlife viewing opportunities for bird enthusiasts





The Cowpasture River Lazily Flowing Through the U.S. Forest Service Wallace Tract in the Fall  
This Swinging Bridge Demonstrates Classic Wooden Bridge Towers, Deck and Rails  
Photographic Attribution Hereby Given to C. Nelson Hoy

along the river banks include green and great blue herons, wood ducks, belted kingfishers, pileated woodpeckers, blue jays, American crows, white-eyed vireos, red-tailed hawks and turkey vultures. Reptile enthusiasts can enjoy spotting bullfrogs, eastern painted turtles, occasional northern water snakes and black rat snakes. Game species include black bear, whitetail deer, wild turkeys, rabbits, racoons, squirrels, muskellunge, sunfish, perch and smallmouth bass. Spawning muskellunge, a rarity in the state, are present in this segment of the river.

Cross-country and mountain bicycling enthusiasts can enjoy a challenging loop south from Williamsville, east along Scottstown Draft, north along Sugar Tree Road and into high country, west and downward along a forest haul road, south bushwhacking across open or overgrown fields past the antebellum Wallace House, before crossing the swinging footbridge over Cowpasture River. From the west side of the Cowpasture River, the Forest Road 282 climbs back to the Virginia Route 678 and a hard surface road climb back to Williamsville.

In Williamsville, Virginia at the intersection of Cowpasture River Road or Virginia Route 614 and Indian Draft Road or Virginia Route 678; drive south along Indian Draft Road for 2.2 miles and turn



left or east along Forest Road 282 another 0.8 miles. Park vehicles before a gate and walk into the Wallace Tract and down to the river bank and the swinging bridge. This special place does not include public toilets.

North River Ranger District  
U.S. Forest Service  
401 Oakwood Drive  
Harrisonburg, Virginia 22801  
(540) 432-0187

USFS GWNF Walton Tract on the Cowpasture River – The GWNF Walton Tract swinging bridge is owned and operated by the U.S Forest Service, Warm Springs Ranger District and it provides **public access** to the George Washington National Forest on the west side of the Cowpasture River for naturalists, photographers, birders, painters, fly fishermen, hunters, trappers, hikers, bicyclists and primitive campers.



A Northern River Otter as Seen from the Walton Tract Swinging Bridge.  
Photographic Attribution Hereby Given to Nan Mahone Wellborn.



The Walton Tract swinging bridge, most likely constructed in the late 1970s, spans 218 ½ feet across the Cowpasture River, features 32 feet tall steel I-beam towers and the pedestrian deck is 30 inches wide. Experiencing this swinging bridge by itself is well worth the visit.

The woodlands and fields found along both sides of the Cowpasture River provide a diversity of wildlife habitats with wildflowers to enjoy in the spring and early summer while the river itself may be more directly experienced by canoe. Wildlife viewing opportunities for bird enthusiasts along the river banks include green and great blue herons, wood ducks, belted kingfishers, pileated woodpeckers, blue jays, American crows, white-eyed vireos, red-tailed hawks and turkey vultures. Reptile enthusiasts can enjoy spotting bullfrogs, eastern painted turtles, occasional northern water snakes and black rat snakes. Game species include black bear, whitetail deer, wild turkeys, rabbits, racoons, squirrels, muskellunge, perch, sunfish and smallmouth bass.

Recreational Advisory: The signage at the USFS Walton Tract is misleading and potentially engenders public safety risks and exposures for recreational users about to embark upon a 16-mile float by canoe, kayak or raft down the Cowpasture River. The Cowpasture River below the Walton Tract and above Simpson Creek is private property and the next “public” take-out point is 16 miles down stream. Ladies invariably must do their toilet. Men invariably must relieve themselves. All except the most physically fit may become cramped and debilitated. And unless these adventurers of the Cowpasture River crack dawn in the early morning mists, they will surely find themselves on the river in the dark of night. It is recommended, therefore, that canoeists and kayakers access the river at the northern Walton Tract access point and that they egress from the river at the southern Walton Tract access (or egress) point.

The USFS GWNF Walton Tract is located five and a half miles south of Millboro Springs along Virginia State Route 42 and one and six tenths miles west along Virginia Route 632 or Grizer's Gap Road and then, Wallawhatoola Road. River access and the swinging bridge are by way of the northern fork in the road. Four-wheel drive and/or high clearance vehicles are recommended. This special place does not offer restrooms.

Warm Springs Ranger District  
U.S. Forest Service  
422 Forestry Road  
Hot Springs, Virginia 24445  
(540) 839-2521

Alleghany County Sharon Park & River Access on the Cowpasture River – Sharon Park includes a Cowpasture River boat ramp and access, a picnic pavilion, and a children's playground with swings, a jungle gym and slide, and picnic tables. The playground and pavilion are rented out seasonally by the Alleghany County, Department of Parks and Recreation for the morning, afternoon or the whole day. This county park features portable toilets.

The Cowpasture River in this section offers fishing opportunities for musky, smallmouth bass, and sunfish. A canoe paddle or float trip from the Sharon Park boat access point south to the USFS GWNF Evans Tract boat ramp is about six miles.

Beginning at the intersection of Longdale Furnace Road or Virginia Route 269 and Nicelytown Road or Virginia Route 635, drive northeast on Nicelytown Road for two-tenths of a mile to the Sharon Park

and Boat Access which is on the right.

Alleghany County  
Department of Parks and Recreation  
9212 Winterberry Avenue, No. B  
Covington, Virginia 24426  
(540) 863-6622



Public Picnic Pavilion at the Sharon Park & Boat Access on the Cowpasture River  
Photographic Attribution Hereby Given to Nan Mahone Wellborn

USFS GWNF Walter L. Robinson River Canoe Access Point (Evans Tract) on the Cowpasture River – The U.S, Forest Service Evans Tract provides access to Cowpasture River and its adjoining fields and woodland. Grasslands in this area support a variety of open country bird species such as northern bobwhite, indigo bunting, and song sparrow. Forested areas are habitat for red-bellied and pileated woodpeckers, blue jay, American crow, Carolina wren, northern cardinal, American robin and



American goldfinch. Riparian buffer areas and the river banks are often home to the great blue and green herons, wood ducks or belted kingfishers. Damselflies, powdered dancers and American rubyspots are frequently seen along the river. The pastures and hay fields along the river attract a variety of butterflies including eastern tiger and spicebush swallowtails, eastern tailed-blue, duskywings and skipper.

Departing from the USFS Evans Tract, a three and two-tenths mile float trip by canoe or kayak will cover remote sections of the Cowpasture River and offer fishing opportunities for musky, smallmouth bass, and sunfish. The Cowpasture River eventually joins the Jackson River at Iron Gate to form the mighty James River and thereafter canoeists and kayakers can use the take out at Glen Wilton on the James River. The U.S. Forest Service Evans Tract is built-out with an earthen ramp to the river and a parking lot, but no restroom facilities.



A Float Trip Down the Cowpasture River.

Photographic Attribution Hereby Given to the Cowpasture River Preservation Association

At the intersection of US Route 220 and Virginia Route 633, proceed east on Route 633 for 2.5 miles. The GWNF Walter L. Robinson River Access Point (Evans Tract) is on the left just after crossing the Cowpasture River. This special place affords **public access**.

James River Ranger District

U.S. Forest Service  
810 E Madison Street – A  
Covington, Virginia 24426  
(540) 962-2214

Country Etiquette – Citizens of the Cowpasture River Valley, homesteaders, farmers and ranchers in most cases have invested their life-savings in a special rural place for themselves and their families. Please respect their wishes and rights to the quiet enjoyment of their properties. Note further that:

- The Code of Virginia makes trespass upon someone else's property and particularly, upon posted lands a Class 1 Misdemeanor punishable by a fine up to \$2,500 and 12 months in prison.
- The Code of Virginia makes the killing, chasing or otherwise harassment of horses, cattle or sheep by a dog in essence an attack against the livestock owner and the rancher may kill the dog in the act of deprivation and on the spot.
- Code of Virginia makes littering or dumping trash a Class 1 Misdemeanor punishable by up to 12 months in jail and/or a fine up to \$2,500.