

## **THE GEORGE WASHINGTON NATIONAL FOREST'S NICHE**

The George Washington National Forest includes approximately 1 million acres of NFS land. The Forest is divided into five ranger districts located in thirteen counties in Virginia and three counties in West Virginia.

In 1911, the Weeks Law provided the authorization for purchase of lands in States where enabling legislation was passed. Less than a month after the passage of the Weeks Law, purchases on the headwaters of the Potomac, along Massanutten Mountain, and in the Natural Bridge area were approved. Most of the largest purchases were from land companies. Subsequent additions brought the George Washington (originally called the Shenandoah) National Forest to its present size. Its formal proclamation date is 1918.

George Washington National Forest ownership totals approximately 956,264 acres in Virginia and 104,861 acres in West Virginia. Of the gross 1,796,142 acres within the proclamation boundaries, approximately 59% is National Forest System land.

The George Washington National Forest (GWNF) has played and continues to play some distinct roles or contributes uniquely within a regional or national context. The George Washington National Forest:

- Contains the headwaters of the Potomac and James Rivers and contributes to the drinking water supplies of over 25 communities including Washington, DC and Richmond, VA.
- Is the largest single landowner in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.
- Provides a diversity of recreation opportunities to both the local communities and to the highly urban areas of the mid-Atlantic.
- Contains some of the most extensive remote backcountry recreation opportunities east of the Mississippi River.
- Provides tremendous opportunities for hiking, horseback riding, and mountain biking on trails jointly maintained by the Forest Service and partners like the Appalachian Trail Clubs.
- Contains the scenic backdrops to the Shenandoah Valley and many local communities. Provides access to outstanding scenic vistas across the Forest.
- Contains one of the largest blocks of forested lands under federal management in the eastern U.S. where habitat for a wide diversity of species needing closed, open or interspersed habitat can be managed to meet long term habitat objectives.
- Provides an important component for biological diversity in the landscape of the eastern U.S.
- Contains most of the known occurrences of the Cow Knob, Shenandoah Mountain and Big Levels salamanders in the world.
- Contains Laurel Fork, a unique area in the state of Virginia that has given rise to a forest of northern hardwoods and red spruce, unlike the Appalachian oak forest that dominates the rest of the George Washington National Forest. This area contains one of the finest examples of northern boreal natural community complexes in Virginia and is the only representative of the Alleghany Plateau Ecoregion within the Commonwealth.
- Provides access to public lands for hunting and fishing in areas enhanced by cooperative management between the Forest Service and the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries and the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources. Had the first Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with any state agency in the Nation on management of fish and wildlife, when it signed an MOU with the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries in June of 1938. This partnership plus a similar one

established with West Virginia Division of Natural Resources have resulted in a long-term commitment to cooperative management of the wildlife and fisheries resources on the Forest.

- Surrounds the Shenandoah Valley, which holds much of this nation's history. Thomas Fairfax, George Washington, Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee all walked through this land. The George Washington National Forest contains land that was part of the "Breadbasket of the Confederacy" and housed iron furnaces where cannon balls were made for the southern armies.
- Was instrumental in releasing America from the tight grip of the Great Depression, when, on April 17, 1933 the first Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp in the nation, Camp Roosevelt, NF-1 brought 200 young men to a wooded area on Edith Gap, VA. Thus began one of the most successful of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's (FDR) New Deal Programs. Over the nine-year life of the CCC, other camps sprang up throughout the nation eventually employing over 3 million young men to work as a peace time "tree army". FDR's New Deal program instituted bold changes in the federal government that energized the economy and created an equilibrium that helped to bolster the needs of citizens. The CCC was the single greatest conservation movement in history and it served as a catalyst to develop the very tenants of modern conservation. It was a program to recruit thousands of young men to work in forests, parks, lands and water in the preservation and use of basic natural resources. The work of America's young men dramatically changed the future and today we still enjoy a legacy of natural resource treasures that dot the American landscape.
- Provides opportunities for nature-based education to a wide variety of local and area residents.