

Redlair farm celebrates conservation Owner manages a 'work of art'

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In the Congo, U.S. State Department diplomat Haywood Rankin tries to persuade warring factions to sit down and talk peace.

At Redlair, his Gaston County farm, he's deep into another struggle: managing an important regional nature preserve. On any given day, he builds foot bridges, deals with trespassing four-wheelers or sprays harmful plants such as kudzu.

Protected by the Catawba Lands Conservancy, the property about 30 minutes from downtown Charlotte is one of the most ecologically diverse in the region. Today, the farm will be open to the public during a free Conservation Celebration sponsored by the conservancy.

Rankin has almost beaten back the kudzu, but he's still battling other bad plants such as autumn olive, Chinese privet and tree of heaven.

"It's a constant effort," said Rankin, 62, who owns the farm along with his brother and sister, Charles and Katherine Rankin. "You can't just sit idly by."

But he keeps at it because the hills and valleys along the South Fork River are "like a beautiful work of art."

A core protection area

The 750-acre Redlair farm has cattle, hay fields and rich river bottoms for growing corn and melons. About 4 1/2 acres front the South Fork, and 70 miles of trails wind through the property, which is part of Gaston County's corridor for the Carolina Thread Trail, the network of greenways that will eventually span 15 counties.

Along with adjacent property owned by the Charlotte-based Catawba conservancy, Redlair Farm & Forest totals about 1,300 protected acres.

The nonprofit Catawba conservancy began acquiring conservation easements at Redlair in 1995, and it has become the core of the land trust's 3,653 protected acres in Gaston County.

Conservation easements limit development, earn state and federal tax credits and lower property taxes because they reduce a tract's value.

From its headwaters in Burke County, the South Fork River scatters seeds that sprinkle a vegetation cover on Redlair's slopes mimicking Western North Carolina's laurel-covered hills.

Many of Redlair's ridges were never plowed, and hundreds of acres of pure hardwood forest survive.

Sprinkled through the woods is one of the largest populations of the rare big-leaf magnolia on the East Coast. French botanist Andre Michaux discovered the plants near Redlair in 1789.

A family farm

Rankin's family ties to the property date to 1810. During the 1940s, his father, Forney "Red" Rankin, began reacquiring the land in pieces. In 1954, he moved his family there. The name Redlair comes from his nickname, the red hair of his five children, the farm's red soil and red foxes living in the woods.

From 1972 until 1998, Haywood Rankin was a full-time diplomat with the U.S. State Department, serving in Africa and the Middle East.

Currently, he's a temporary diplomat, working most recently in eastern Congo, where he shuttles between war zones.

Conservancy Executive Director Dave Cable said the Redlair property is occasionally open to school groups for nature study. Also, educators from UNC-Charlotte, UNC-Chapel Hill, N.C. State University and Davidson College conduct research there.

In early May, the conservancy opened its first public canoe-kayak launch on the South Fork just upriver from Redlair. And Cable said that Pharr Yarns Inc. of McAdenville is donating 65 acres downriver from the preserve.

"This [Redlair] is one of the best managed properties in the greater Charlotte area," Cable said.

Rankin hopes his family and the conservancy can keep Redlair intact as a nature preserve.

Meanwhile, he keeps working hard to protect the land he's passionate about.

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