

CMC Members – Albeit Wearing Other Hats – Win Top Honor from NC State Parks

John Whitehouse, Jake Blood and the Burnsville hiking club they formed 10 years ago to maintain neglected trails in the Black Mountains have received the 2019 Locke Craig Award for work at Mt. Mitchell State Park. The cited work includes a major rehab project on the CMC's MST section of the Mt. Mitchell Trail.

By Mike Williams

When Burnsville residents Jake Blood, a retired Air Force Lt. Col. who worked as an intelligence officer, and John Whitehouse, a retired nuclear engineer (Phd), joined CMC in the mid-2000s, they quickly became active members of the club's trail crews, work they truly enjoyed. So much so that Whitehouse went on to become the Monday Crew Chief, while Blood served a term on the Board of the Friends of the MST.

As much as they enjoyed that work, however, both were frustrated that CMC did not maintain most of the trail network that covers the Black Mountains, the tallest mountain chain in the Eastern U.S. Far afield and very rugged, the Blacks require a huge investment of time and energy when it comes to trail work. Simply hauling tools to the Crest can require a 3-hour hike and a brutal climb of 3,000 feet.

But as Burnsville residents, Whitehouse and Blood quickly fell in love with the Black Mountain Crest Trail. The 26-mile-long track runs from Cane River Gap above the Big Ivy to Bolen's Creek near Burnsville, along the way taking hikers over a dozen peaks topping 6,000 feet. The path offers spectacular rock formations, stunning views to as far away as the Charlotte skyline and an immersion in verdant high-altitude spruce/fir forests akin to those of Canada.

For all its unique beauty, though, the Black Mountain Crest Trail in 2010 was in terrible shape, largely neglected by the US Forest Service due to staffing shortages. Some sections were so overgrown that hikers could not see their feet; in other places trekkers had to use their arms to part 10-foot-tall curtains of briars.

To remedy this situation, Whitehouse and Blood eventually joined with another Burnsville hiker, Alan Orovitz, and formed a Burnsville-based hiking club, the NC High Peaks Trail Association. Now, a decade later, the club has 150 members – many of whom also belong to, hike with, and do volunteer trail work for CMC. Best of all, longtime hikers will tell you the trails of the Black Mountains are in the best shape they have seen in decades.



Craig Award: L-R John Whitehouse, Jake Blood, NC Division of Parks and Recreation Director Dwayne Peterson, Alan Orovitz.

Fittingly, High Peaks has just been named the 2019 recipient of the Locke Craig Award, the highest honor bestowed annually by the NC State Parks System for public service and conservation work by a private group or individual. The Award is for work the club did at Mount Mitchell State Park, but includes an ambitious effort to rebuild the badly eroded Mt. Mitchell Trail, which also happens to be part of the MST that CMC maintains.

The award was presented in person Jan. 16 by NC Division of Parks and Recreation Director Dwayne Patterson, who attended a High Peaks monthly Board meeting in Burnsville.

“It is with pride and gratitude that the North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation presents to your entire organization the Locke Craig Award for your exceptional spirit of dedication to public service and the commitment to conservation represented by the accomplishments of North Carolina Gov. Locke Craig,” Patterson told the group. “What you have done for our trails and all the other things really has meant a lot to this park and the state parks as well.”



Whitehouse, currently the High Peaks president, accepted on behalf of the Burnsville club, which is the official “Friends of Mount Mitchell State Park” organization.

“We are very honored to receive this award,” he said. “We’re committed to helping the staff at Mt. Mitchell State Park provide the best experience possible for park visitors while promoting the cause of hiking and conservation in the Black Mountains.”

High Peaks was nominated for the award by Mount Mitchell Superintendent Kevin Bischof.

“High Peaks has been a great help to us at the park,” Bischof said. “They have undertaken a number of high-profile projects that have resulted in significant improvements. The dedication of the club’s leadership has been remarkable, and our staff has often worked side-by-side with High Peaks members on many tough physical jobs.”

Key among the group’s contributions has been the time-consuming task of applying for and then administering three grants from the NC Division of Parks and Recreation for the Mt. Mitchell trail rehab project. The 6-mile-long track leads from the Black Mountain Campground in the South Toe River Valley to the summit.

“The trail is the main route hikers take when they want to climb Mt. Mitchell,” said Blood, who spearheaded the group’s initial efforts to win the grants. “It’s so eroded in places that hikers are literally walking down a muddy wash that’s cut four- or five-feet deep into the mountain.”

High Peaks has won three successive grants of \$60,000 each to fund the hiring of young AmeriCorps workers from the American Conservation Experience, a trail-building outfit. The crews spend several weeks during the summer camping out and putting in long days building

water-control structures, steps and other improvements. The work has brought noticeably better footing and water control to nearly half the trail, and the club hopes to win more grants to complete the entire 6 miles.



AmeriCorps workers from the American Conservation Experience trail-building crew installing a crib on the Mt. Mitchell Trail in 2017, work funded by grants obtained by High Peaks

But High Peaks members didn't leave all the "grunt" work to the young ACE volunteers. The club – including some CMC Monday Crew members – contributed 600 hours of "matching" time doing similar work on the section for each of the three grants.

In other projects at the state park, High Peaks installed a state-of-the-art weather station, with Orovitz tackling the job of figuring out how to connect the remote station to the Internet and make the information available in real-time. Reports from the station and breathtaking video images from Internet cameras the club installed are often used by television station WLOS in Asheville during weather reports.

Most recently, High Peaks helped the park research, locate, purchase and install a low-power AM radio station that will be used to broadcast traveler information to park visitors. The \$13,000 project was funded largely by donations from the public left in collection boxes at the park, money the club manages in cooperation with the park.

"The radio station will be a big help," Bischof said. "We can transmit everything from emergency road closures to basic information that visitors frequently ask about. You wouldn't believe how many people think there is a gas station someplace high on the mountain."

The Locke Craig Award is named for a long-ago NC governor who was the driving force behind the 1915 formation of the state's first state park at Mt. Mitchell. Craig was known for his commitment to conservation.

High Peaks received a letter of appreciation and a plaque bearing the inscription: "For exemplary contributions to the North Carolina State Parks mission of stewardship, public service and education." The group will permanently display the plaque at the park.

Whitehouse continues his work as CMC's Monday Crew Chief, all the while putting in dozens of additional hours each month working on non-CMC trails in the Blacks and other High Peaks projects.

"Doesn't matter to me which hat I'm wearing," he said. "We are lucky enough to live in one of the most beautiful natural areas in the country. Every day on the trails is a gift, so the work both CMC and High Peaks do is simply giving something back in exchange for that gift."



MM Radio Tower: John Whitehouse rides a lift to install and adjust the antennae on a Traveler Information Radio Station tower that High Peaks helped Mt. Mitchell State Park purchase and install in 2019

