

Southern Appalachian Creature Feature Podcasts

In the wake of hemlock woolly adelgid

Greetings and welcome to the Southern Appalachian Creature Feature.

Hemlock woolly adelgid, a tiny Asian insect, has killed hemlock trees across the southern Appalachians, opening up the forest canopy to additional sunlight.

The plant which has benefited the most from the increased light is rosebay rhododendron, which is growing twice as fast as expected. Rhododendron grows so densely that flowering plants, ferns, and seedlings can't survive beneath its shade. It also stores essential nutrients in its leaves for years, and even when the leaves fall off, they decompose very slowly and the nutrients remain locked up in forms that are inaccessible to other plants.

Forest Service managers and scientists are studying how best to manage rhododendron stands to increase plant diversity by treating, then comparing, a string of forest plots. In some plots they're cutting and removing rhododendron; in others they are using prescribed fire; while others will see the rhododendron cut, then burned on site; and of course, these will be compared against a site where no management occurs.

The study will also monitor migratory bird and salamander response. Early findings indicate that restoring balance between rhododendron and other plants will help forests to be healthier and more diverse.

For WNCW and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, this is Gary Peeples.