

Southern Appalachian Creature Feature Podcasts

Rocky Fork Track

Greetings and welcome to the Southern Appalachian Creature Feature.

The future I-26 out of Asheville and over to Erwin, Tennessee is about as scenic of a drive as you can get on a four-lane interstate. Crossing the state line and dropping into Tennessee, I've always been fascinated by the seemingly endless forest one sees off to the west giving the appearance of a wild frontier, waiting to be hiked. Part of that view has a name – the Rocky Fork Tract.

I've spoken about the Rocky Fork Tract before – 10,000 acres that conservation groups have deemed the largest unprotected tract of land in the Southern Appalachians. That superlative has changed. In December, the USDA Forest Service and The Conservation Fund together purchased the land for \$40 million, with the Forest Service taking 2,200 acres which will protect one and a half miles of the Appalachian Trail. The Conservation Fund's portion, 7,400 acres, will be turned over to the state of Tennessee. At the local level, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy and the Southern Appalachians Highlands Conservancy helped bring the deal to fruition.

The land has long been used by hunters, but recent efforts by the previous owner to market it for ridge top-development lead conservation groups to make a hard, last effort to protect it. Now hunters, anglers, hikers, bird-watchers, and others will be able to enjoy it for decades to come.

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