

Big Canoe Hemlock Helpers: Fall Program

Residents are working with Mountain Stewards to conserve hemlocks in the Wildcat Tract forest



New trail, by Randy Lewis

By John Ross

This past spring, a group of Big Canoe residents helped protect hemlock forests against the Hemlock Woolly Adelgid (HWA) in the ravines and along the hiking trails in the Wildcat Tract Wildlife Management Area (WMA) just north of Big Canoe. These volunteers, known as the Hemlock Helpers, worked with the Mountain Stewards to conserve 10,000 native hemlocks in the Wildcat Tract forests contiguous to Big Canoe. Their work will resume this fall.

The fall treatment is planned for October/November. The Hemlock Helpers join the Mountain Stewards on Tuesdays and Thursdays, leaving Big Canoe by car at 8:00 a.m. Crews usually return between 1:00 - 2:00 p.m.

The preservation work involves injection of a chemical adelgicide into the soil at the base of each hemlock tree. The hemlock forests are often on irregular terrain and in ravines with steep slopes. Workers need rugged footwear, agility, a sense of balance and a degree of physical fitness.

If you are interested in joining the Hemlock Helpers this fall, please contact John Ross at rossj1@windstream.net.

The Wildcat Tract Hemlock Conservation Project receives technical guidance from the Georgia Forestry Commission. The Georgia Department of Natural Resources provides logistical and material support, and private funding through the Mountain Stewards covers the majority of the costs. However, it is primarily the dedication of volunteers like the Hemlock Helpers that make a hemlock forest saving project possible on public land such as the Wildcat WMA.



A hemlock infested with the Woolly Adelgid pest

The Hemlock Helpers and Mountain Stewards, in just 15 spring mornings, treated a biomass of hemlock trees nearly double that of the entire native hemlock population in Big Canoe. They did so at the remarkably low cost of 75 cents per tree. Contracts let by state forestry agencies to commercial arborist firms to treat hemlock forests in a wild land setting have run as high as \$46 per tree.

This conservation project is designed to maintain the health of a native hemlock forest while forestry scientists work to develop a complex of natural predators and pathogens that will control the HWA in a natural biologic balance. Such ongoing research is promising, and vigilant hikers can see predator beetle release apparatus at research sites along Wildcat WMA hiking trails.

The native hemlocks on approximately 180 acres have been treated so far, and an additional 80 acres have been set aside for adelgid predator research. The project goal is to bring about 500 acres under active management combining biologic and chemical means until biologic measures alone are adequate to maintain hemlock forest health.