

**AN INVENTORY OF THE NATURAL AREAS OF  
MACON COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA**

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## SUMMARY

This inventory of the natural areas of Macon County was funded by the North Carolina Natural Heritage Trust Fund. The inventory describes Significant Natural Heritage Areas and documents the rare species of plants and animals, natural communities, and other ecological features within these areas. Macrosites, i.e. core areas that link individual sites across the landscape, are also described. Recommendations for the protection and ideal management of these natural areas are also contained in the description of each site. The content of this document was derived from field work conducted during 2008-2009, as well as from records and reports produced or obtained by the North Carolina Natural Heritage Program over the past 30 years. This inventory report is written as a scientific document as well as a guide to Macon County's natural areas for the land trusts, local governments, and organizations working to protect them. The inventory also takes an ecological snapshot of the county at a time when its natural areas face various threats of human and natural origin.

Macon County is an important area for the biodiversity of North Carolina and the Southern Appalachians. A total of 80 Significant Natural Heritage Areas and Aquatic Habitats and four macrosites are documented in the county. All of these contain important elements of the state's natural heritage in the form of rare species of plants and animals and high quality natural communities. Among Macon County's diverse natural areas, ten are Nationally significant and 26 are significant at the state level. Of these sites, the Little Tennessee River Aquatic Habitat is renowned for its highly significant assemblage of rare freshwater mussels and fish species. The lower slopes of the Little Tennessee River valley and its tributaries also support some of the best known examples of the rare Montane Red Cedar-Hardwood Woodland natural community. The Highlands Plateau and Blue Ridge Escarpment in the southeastern corner of the county are known for Nationally and State Significant High Elevation Granitic Domes such as Blackrock Mountain/Granite City, The Fodderstacks, and Satulah Mountain. The area also harbors rocky gorges along the Chattooga River and Cullasaja River with some of the best-recognized Spray Cliff natural communities in western North Carolina. An extensive forested landscape characterizes the Nantahala Mountains and Cowee Mountains, the county's two principal mountain ranges. High elevation oak forest and cove forests dominate these ranges and include remnant old-growth forest with a diverse array of rare species of plants and animals. The county's best-developed wetlands are found in the broad floodplain of the Nantahala River, where a unique complex Southern Appalachian Bogs, Swamp Forest-Bog Complex, and unusual impounded wetlands are found.

Macon County has a high percentage of publicly owned lands, most of which is managed by the Nantahala National Forest in the Highlands Plateau, the Nantahala Mountains, and the Cowee Mountains. The Needmore Game Land, owned and managed by the NC Wildlife Resources Commission, lies along the lower Little Tennessee River and provides critical water quality protection for the river's aquatic resources. In addition to the large area of public land, many private tracts have been protected by the county's landowners with help from the local land trusts, Land Trust for the Little Tennessee and the Highlands-Cashiers Land Trust. Voluntary, collaborative protection efforts such as these are the most effective manner to conserve the unique ecological heritage of Macon County.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Cover image of Red Salamander (*Pseudotriton ruber*) at Standing Indian Mountain.

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