

Grassy Hill Natural Area Preserve

In Honor of Henry and Elizabeth Lee

1295 acres – Franklin County, Virginia



The Site: Encompassing much of a three-mile long ridge in the western piedmont, Grassy Hill Natural Area Preserve harbors several rare plant species and a series of rare plant communities. The property was acquired through a charitable sale from Charles Carter Lee and a generous gift from Alice Lee Melchor in honor of their parents, Dr. Henry Lee and Dr. Elizabeth Lewis Saunders Lee. The Nature Conservancy assisted with establishing the preserve and the project was funded by the 1992 Parks and Natural Areas Bond.

Natural History: Now almost entirely wooded, Grassy Hill seems a misnomer for this preserve. However, the name dates to at least the 1700s and there is other evidence to suggest that the site had more open, grass-dominated communities than it does today. For example, open-grown oaks with low spreading crowns are found amidst younger, closely spaced trees. Also, sun-loving species, such as grass-leaf blazing-star (*Liatris graminifolia*) and glade wild quinine (*Parthenium auriculatum*), can be found growing in scattered partial openings in the forest canopy.

The presumed former open habitat may have been maintained by fire, as suggested by charred scars on older trees in the preserve. Prior to the early 1900s, when fire suppression practices became more effective and widespread, wildland fires were much more frequent than they are today. Across Virginia, lightning strikes caused natural wildfires and local residents, both Native Americans and European settlers, used fire to enhance conditions for game and to maintain travel corridors through the wilderness.

Other factors, such as wind and ice storms, likely helped create and maintain open conditions on Grassy Hill. Additionally, the thin, drought-prone, magnesium-rich soil creates stressful growing conditions for many plant species. Thus trees growing here may be more susceptible to drought-induced disease and insect damage. The magnesium-rich soil, however, provides habitat for rare species and unusual plant communities.

Resource Management: Resource management plans are now under development. Stewardship activities at Grassy Hill will include prescribed burning, forest thinning, invasive species control, biological monitoring and limited public access.

Natural Heritage Program-
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Public Access: Five miles of hiking trails traverse the preserve allowing for hikes up to 6.5 miles. The trailhead for the hiking trail system is located approximately 500 feet northeast of the Franklin County Family YMCA at 235 Technology Dr. in Rocky Mount. Trail users may park at the YMCA or The Gereau Center for Applied Technology and Career Exploration (150 Technology Dr.) after school hours.

Compatible Uses: Grassy Hill is well suited for environmental education and passive recreational activities such as hiking, nature photography and bird watching. Some uses are prohibited, including camping, mountain biking, horseback riding, off-road vehicles, and the collection of plants, animals and minerals.

Location: Grassy Hill is just west of the town of Rocky Mount.

Directions from Roanoke: At the intersection of US 220 South and State Route 419 (Electric Avenue) in Roanoke, go south on US 220 towards Rocky Mount. Pass the Blue Ridge Parkway entrance at 1.8 miles. At 18.6 miles exit US 220 South at the first Rocky Mount exit. Go 0.7 miles south on Business US 220 (North Main St.), passing through one stoplight. Turn right (west) onto Technology Drive and go 0.1 miles downhill to the trailhead kiosk on the right (north) side of Technology Drive.

Natural Heritage Resources

Plants

Carolina thistle (*Cirsium carolinianum*) G5/S1

Piedmont fame-flower (*PheMERANTHUS piedmontanus*) G1/S1

Community

Piedmont / mountain basic woodland

For more information contact:

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Natural Heritage Program Mountain Region Steward
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