

# MOUNTAINS

## NC field station enhances park research



**Word from the Smokies**  
Frances Figart  
Columnist

The southeastern corner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park lies in Haywood County on the southeastern side of the Cataloochee Divide. Researchers visiting a remote field station here on a piece of land known as The Purchase have to drive or hike a long way to get to any other part of the park.

“The geology changes considerably on this side of the Divide,” said Paul E. Super,

Science Coordinator at the Appalachian Highlands Science Learning Center (AHSLC) at The Purchase. “To the northwest of the Divide, going into Cataloochee Valley, the bedrock mostly forms relatively low-nutrient soils. On The Purchase are bands of other rocks that form relatively fertile soils for this area and elevation.”

The term “The Purchase” comes from the highest point in the immediate area: Purchase Knob. The 365 acres donated to the park by Kathryn McNeil and Voit Gilmore include the peak of Purchase Knob, but also fields and land on the adjacent Limby Birch Mountain where a house now provides lodging to visiting researchers studying the park.

“We really should have come up with a better acronym,” Super said of the AHSLC, one of the first Research Learning Centers (RLCs) in the National Park Service. The RLC concept came from a 1999 park service program called the Natural Resource Challenge and was designed to facilitate broad scientific research in parks and expand opportunities for public learning about the park’s natural resources, their significance, and their preservation.

When Congress began funding the Natural Resource Challenge in 2001, GSMNP had just received The Purchase tract from the McNeil-Gilmore family. Park managers drew up a plan to use the facility to house researchers working in higher elevations of the park and to bring them together with education groups.

Twenty years later, Super facilitates research in the park by “helping to review applications and then issuing permits, locating funding for research to address our greatest needs and priorities, and linking researchers with housing, field assistants, data, and other services that help them get their work done,” he said.

The researcher fortunate enough to secure lodging at The Purchase finds three rooms with bunkhouse-style beds



**Paul E. Super, Science Coordinator at the Appalachian Highlands Science Learning Center, collects botanical data in the high-elevation fields at The Purchase.** PHOTOS COURTESY OF NPS

that can accommodate up to 11 permitted researchers. There are two showers, a washer and dryer, a kitchen, desk and lab space, and a conversation pit to relax in.

“There is not much else in the house, and during the day we have education groups and park staff using the common areas, with visitors peaking in at the windows, so it’s not much of a private get-away,” said Super. “Some of our researchers are studying bats or salamanders, working after dark and trying to sleep during the day, so try to give them a little privacy and quiet if you hike up to the facility.”

The Smokies is so close to so many top research universities that it consistently has been one of the most studied national parks in the country, right up there with Yellowstone for the number of research permits issued. Managing that research program takes a lot of work, but it seems to be the perfect fit for Super, who admits he has wanted to work in science since first grade.

“In college I had trouble figuring what field of science to focus on, eventually



**The house on Limby Birch Mountain at The Purchase provides bunkhouse-style lodging for up to 11 permitted researchers.**

settling on parasitology, because everything either has a parasite, is a parasite, or both. But I eventually realized that science alone was not enough. There were so many cool stories I was learning about, I felt I would explode if I couldn’t share them with others. And of course, my family spent a lot of vacations in National Park Service sites. I started training myself to study all sorts of science

and how to share its stories, so when the RLCs were created, I’d already made myself the best qualified applicant for this job.”

Lest one be concerned that Super is super isolated, it should be made clear that in his science coordinator role he actually serves the whole park—not just The Purchase—as well as the Blue Ridge Parkway and other regional parks as well.

“There is something special about spending the night in one of our nation’s parks, and the view from The Purchase is amazing,” he said. “Our researchers work hard and enjoy their work here so much that they usually leave with a plan to start seeking funding for new studies that will allow them to return.”

*Frances Figart is the editor of Smokies Life magazine and the Creative Services Director for the 34,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Learn more at smokiesinformation.org and reach the author at frances@gsmassoc.org.*

## BCS extends remote learning until February

**Brian Gordon**  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Following a unanimous board vote, Buncombe County Schools will continue teaching all students remotely for at least another month.

Buncombe students could return to classrooms as early as Feb. 15, though the board said it will reconsider this date when they convene in early February.

The district had paused its hybrid in-person learning model in mid-December due to increasing COVID-19 community spread. With case numbers further rising in the county, BCS Superintendent

Tony Baldwin recommended the district continue distance learning.

Baldwin highlighted the state’s color-coded county alert system which classifies Buncombe as a “red county” with critical community spread. While he acknowledged the virus appears to affect children differently than adults, he noted teacher safety - and teacher availability - were key considerations.

“(Children) are certainly less susceptible statistically to the impact of COVID,” he said. “However, in order to provide an instructional and quality instructional environment, we must have our teachers and staff and support staff.”

All seven board members voted to extend remote learning, a departure from meetings this fall when return-to-school decisions divided board members.

During last night’s public comment, a pair of high school students and a district teacher voiced their support for remote learning.

“We’ve had this (virus) affect our school, where I work, and other schools,” said Tate MacQueen, a social studies teacher at Erwin High who urged the board to “let the data drive your decisions.”

However, not everyone agreed with the district’s decision. During the public

comment, BCS parent Jonathan Brown brought up that the state’s COVID-19 data dashboard showed fewer than 1,000 of the state’s 651,000 coronavirus cases have been linked to K-12 schools.

“This very small percentage has been the driving force for our decisions, and we can do better for our kids,” said Brown, who added his concerns about the academic and socio-emotional impact remote learning was having on students.

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