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## **Pond Mountain: Soaring Legacies**

*Trustworthy stewards ensure that Pond Mountain's beauty and conservation will thrill future generations.*

*Written by LEIGHANN HENION*



**Depending on where you stand** on Pond Mountain, it's possible to catch a view of three different states as the mountain peers over the northwest corner of North Carolina.

*Photography by* **TRAVIS DOVE**

**E**ven when he heard Dale Shepherd wheezing over the phone, Mark Johnston wasn't terribly concerned.

Shepherd, an 82-year-old Christmas tree farmer, assured Johnston, his employee of more than 30 years, that he'd live to be 100. Given that Shepherd was still working like a man half his age and Johnston's relatives have a habit of living until they're 104, the claim didn't seem outlandish.

So when Shepherd told Johnston — a wiry guy with a Wild Bill Hickok-style goatee — that he was calling from the hospital, Johnston nonchalantly asked, "Well, when you coming home?"

The line went quiet. "I'm never coming home," Shepherd said.

"Aw, come on now ..." Johnston said, unwilling to believe that the man he considered a second father might be dying.

But Shepherd was serious. "I'm in bad shape," he said, "but there's something I've got to tell you." And that's when it happened. The landscape itself was set to shift.

Shepherd, a quirky, self-made millionaire who sometimes borrowed gas money from Johnston to fill the tank of his 21-year-old mess of a car, announced that he was leaving 1,800 acres — the whole of a mountain — to Johnston and another workman, Chris Shumate.

Shepherd's other assets would take care of his family, but Pond Mountain, located in the Lansing area of Ashe County, had a different sort of value, one he didn't quite know how to calculate. But he believed Johnston and Shumate would be good stewards. He'd witnessed the place become part of them, too.

### More than once, Shumate and Johnston

worked 60-hour weeks on the mountain's 600-acre Christmas tree tract, only to return on their day off to share the beauty of the place with their families. The men value rime ices — frozen fogs that, after reaching a certain altitude, leave glitter on everything in sight. Shumate,

**From Pond Mountain's Listening Rock,** Chris Shumate (left) and Mark Johnston (right) hear sounds miles away. It's a remarkable setting, where local herders came years ago when they lost their cattle; they could hear the cows' bells far off into the countryside from here.

"You can hear everything from here."  
— Mark Johnston



in particular, also marvels over warmer, foggy days, when he looks out over North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia and sees their landmark peaks — Grandfather Mountain, Cherokee National Forest, and Mt. Rogers — rising above settling mists. When he talks about those scenes, he sometimes compares the mountaintops to islands in a milky sea. This isn't the sort of language Shumate uses on a regular basis. But Pond Mountain is so bewitching, it can nearly twist a man's tongue.

It is a place that has always had an uncontained beauty and an influence that stretches out and luxuriates for miles. The mountain was named for the numerous cattail-filled ponds that spring on its ridges from unseen sources and its roughly 17 miles of streams and rivers that continually feed the New River. Johnston and Shumate thought the property was too much for anyone, much less themselves, to own. But own it they did. Well, sort of.

When the logistics of taxes and family buyouts were clarified, the two men realized they could not afford to pay taxes on their inheritance. They went to a local bank for assistance. "We'd never borrowed money in our lives beyond a car loan," Johnston says. "We had bankers laugh at us."

There were, however, plenty of real-estate investors who didn't laugh. A group from Atlanta, Georgia, heard about Pond Mountain's fate and started wooing the Ashe County locals with corporate helicopter rides. They talked of building ski slopes.

These staggering plans and purchase offers didn't surprise Shumate. His father — who was Shepherd's long-term friend — advised Shumate from a young age, "If you ever need a job, go work for Dale. Everything he touches turns to gold." Shepherd was now gone, but his Midas touch was still at work.

The investors promised to make Shumate and Johnston rich. Still something didn't feel quite right. The two men didn't push the deal through, but debts accumulated. Bankruptcy became a possibility. They gained more than they imagined possible, and they were in danger of losing it all.

### **When Shepherd was growing up**

on a family farm in the shadow of Pond Mountain, he often stared up at its peak. "Mama, someday, I'm going to own that mountain," he said. It seemed like a laughable claim at the time. But the power of a childhood dream,

any dream, lies in its potential to come true.

In the last months of his life, Shepherd began visiting his childhood home down the hill from his mountain. The property's new owner, Walter Clark, was always pleased to see him. The fact that Clark, a transplant from Raleigh, took Shepherd's old house and restored its whitewashed, bead-board walls and ornate, wooden railings fascinated Shepherd. He was also curious about Clark's decision to put the farm in a conservation easement, an arrangement that assured his home place would always remain as Shepherd remembered it — pastoral and lovely.

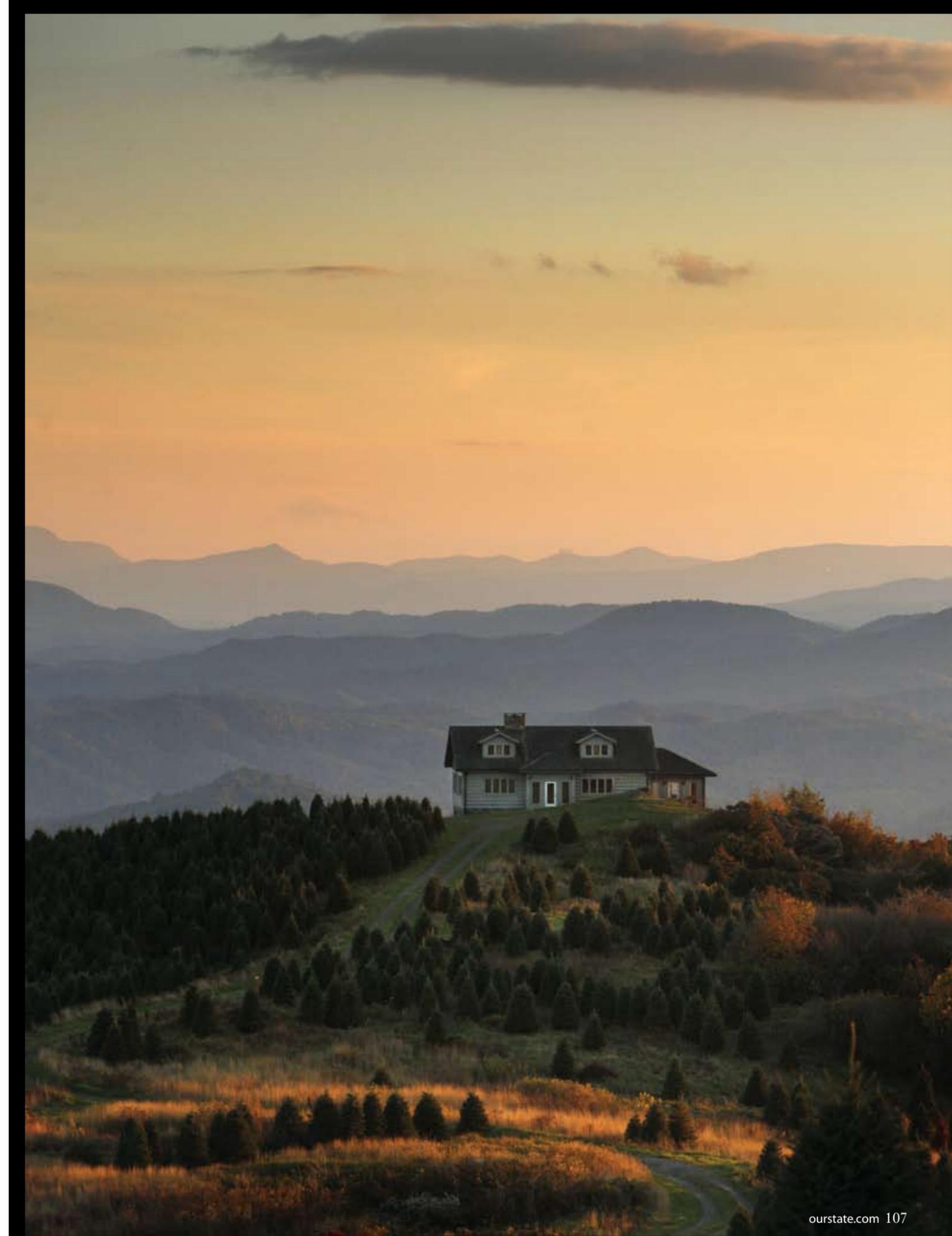
During one of their porch-sitting sessions, Shepherd told Clark that he hoped Pond Mountain would be preserved someday. Shepherd never told Johnston and Shumate about this desire — maybe because he was so confident that they would find their way to it on their own. And they did.

Shumate realized that conserving Pond Mountain might be the best way to move forward. In a serendipitous twist of events, he approached Clark, who'd been hired by the Blue Ridge Conservancy, a nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting land and water resources. Pond Mountain would be Clark's first project on the job.

Clark set up an office in Shepherd's boyhood home and got to work writing the first land grant he ever attempted. Part of him felt silly. It was such a far-reaching request. If funded, it would be the organization's largest acquisition to date. Clark lacked the declaration-spouting confidence of the boy who lived on that patch of land before him, but his mission was clear. He and the Conservancy were going to own Pond Mountain, and the people of North Carolina were going to be designated heirs.

"It was a dream," Clark says. "I never had any idea it could actually happen." But it did. In 2010, the Blue Ridge Conservancy — aided by the National Committee for the New River, Foundation for the Carolinas, Blue Ridge Forever, Clean Water Management Trust Fund, Natural Heritage Trust Fund, and an individual donor — transferred nearly 1,800 acres on and around Pond Mountain to the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission.

"People think it's wild that I live in Dale's old house, and it does seem meant to be in a way, but I didn't see this as an important project because I lived there," Clark says. "It was more than that. A lot of people weren't really interested in helping with Pond Mountain because



DALE SHEPHERD BUILT A CABIN ON POND MOUNTAIN, A PLACE THAT OFFERS ONE OF THE BEST VIEWS IN THE STATE. >>>



it was a Christmas tree farm, but that made it all the more important to me.”

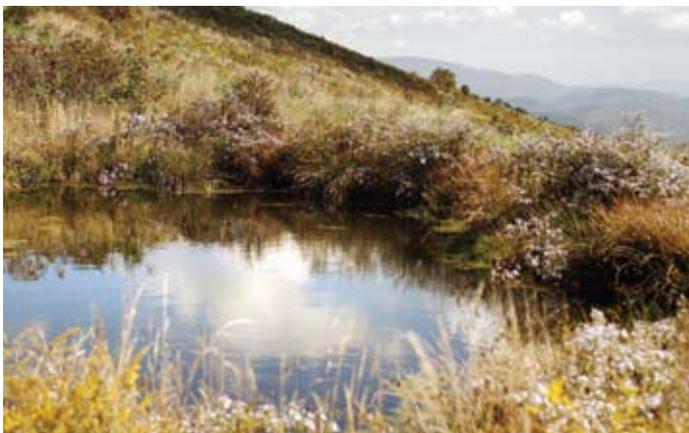
Some environmentally minded people are only concerned with virgin forests and pristine landscapes, but to Clark, part of Pond Mountain’s beauty lies in the fact that its conservation will take a chemically dependent agricultural site to turn it back into an organic ecosystem. Halting fertilizer and pesticide use on the property has the potential to better the water quality of residents downstream. And, given that the mountain’s pinnacle stands at nearly 5,000 feet, we’re all downstream.

In the end, the conscientious Pond Mountain deal was less lucrative than the one Johnston and Shumate could have had if they’d gone with absentee investors, but Clark has an inkling of what inspires such generous decision-making. “Even if I don’t do anything else in life, I’m able to look at this mountain and know I’ve played a role in protecting it, and that’s something special,” Clark says. “Land has a permanency that we lack in our lives. This is just the beginning of the story for Pond Mountain.”



**The mountain is no longer under** threat of commercial development; human hands still shape it — most notably, the sun-freckled fingers of Jim Keeper, who oversees the construction of a small parking lot open to hunters, hikers, campers, and intrepid sightseers. Although his grasp does not extend far past the site’s gravel roads, Keeper’s job as a N.C. Wildlife Management Crew leader often requires bushwhacking paths into woodlands. “This is the opposite,” he says. “Here, we’ve been given an opportunity to watch it all grow.”

This growth lies in the native grasses shooting forth on patches of land that nature has already reclaimed from cultivated fields, but growth is also visible on maps. Pond Mountain’s acquisition led to the purchase of additional



**Top:** A solitary tree turns a redish hue as the sun sets on Pond Mountain. **Middle:** Chris Shumate inspects a tree atop Pond Mountain. **Bottom:** Pond Mountain was named Pond Mountain for a reason — there are as many as 14 ponds dotting the 1,800 acres.



**A thick morning fog** covers the trees on the elevated land of Pond Mountain.

land tracts, including 220 acres that give wildlife a secure corridor from Pond Mountain to the Cherokee National Forest in Tennessee. The benchmark of the property now forms the actual corner of North Carolina, the specific point where it touches Tennessee and Virginia. “Pond Mountain is sort of the center of everything,” Clark says.

The mountain is officially designated as game land, but the species it protects aren’t all hunting prey. A songbird — the golden-winged warbler — is actually the central focus of wildlife efforts as the mountain transitions to brambled territory. The bird, which has near-threatened status with the International Union for Conservation of Nature, is

known as an indicator species. “When that bird is here, it will mean the habitat is right for other game — cottontails, quail, rough grouse,” Keeper says.

He runs a hand across his military-grade buzz cut before waving over Shumate and Johnston. They’re on the mountain today because they want to give Keeper a key to Shepherd’s cabin; they still have trouble calling it theirs. Shepherd always took care of the people who tended this land, and it’s a job that’s now fallen to them. Keeper sometimes bunks in their privately owned cabin with his crew. Occasionally, he returns on weekends with his young family, like the laborers before him.

Someone has already offered Shumate and Johnston more than twice what they think nonprofit or state agencies would be able to pay for Shepherd’s cabin, but they just can’t bring themselves to sign it over to anyone who might restrict access. The tree farmers hope that — when they’re finished harvesting in 2016, as required by their agreement with the state — someone will come forward with a pledge to make up at least part of the difference. They’d like to work with the Blue Ridge Conservancy to organize protection of the house, as a conference or welcome center, along with an adjacent 40 acres.

The structure itself — which has a 360-degree view of what is arguably one of the most stunning long-range views in the country — is wrapped in logs and silvered wood and topped with a cedar-shake roof that’s beginning to loosen and split under the harsh elements of altitude. To its right lies an outcropping.

“This,” Johnston says, hopping onto the stone, “is what’s called the Listening Rock.”

The Listening Rock, located on what is — for now — private property, is a place where local herders went if they lost cattle long ago. They sat on the stone and listened for the cow’s bell tinkering in the distance. “You can hear everything from here,” Johnston says, shaking his head. “It’s weird.”

He says that he has experienced the aural power of the stone himself. “One day,” he explains, “I was out here, and I heard people talking, and I kept thinking: Where are they?” Finally, Johnston took out his binoculars and scanned the valley until he found two farmers engaged in conversation roughly a mile away. “Everybody who grew up around Pond Mountain has a Listening Rock story like that,” he says.

The wind is too strong to allow for nuanced listening this afternoon, but Johnston maintains that seemingly impossible things happen here when conditions are right. From this perch at the top of the state, it’s not hard to imagine a golden-winged warbler’s song amplified by the Listening Rock. Keeper doesn’t think it will be long until their population begins to rise. And when those birds take flight from the growing thickets of Pond Mountain, they will leave streaks of gold in the sky — indicators of a precious, living sort of wealth. ■

*Leigh Ann Henion’s debut book is forthcoming from Penguin Press. Visit [leighannhenion.com](http://leighannhenion.com) to learn more about her work. Leigh Ann’s most recent story for Our State was “Mountain Dancer” (September 2011).*