

## **American Chestnut Field Trip: A Great Learning Experience**

**By Adam Day**

Before I began taking Ms. Butler's Plant Life of Virginia course offered at Virginia Western Community College (VWCC), I had very limited knowledge of the American chestnut, and the fact that it had been wiped out decades ago. The only interaction I've had regarding the tree would have to be the song we sing every Christmas about roasting chestnuts on an open fire. So, to learn about its history, and the steps The American Chestnut Foundation (TACF) is taking to restore this tree was astounding, and certainly sparked something within me to continue learning about it.

To begin, the Plant Life of Virginia class I have been taking for the past ten weeks has certainly been one of the best experiences I've had in my time at VWCC. It is unlike any class you will ever take, simply because there is so much interesting hands-on field work involved. I often catch myself thinking, "Oh yeah, I'm doing all this cool stuff but I'm also getting college credits for it." Although the class is small, with only eight students enrolled, the subject is so niche that anyone taking it has some interest in it, and most wish to pursue careers involving environment and conservation. As a result, we are likeminded individuals who share an enthusiasm for the American chestnut tree. A lot of what Ms. Butler focuses on in this class is plant and tree identification within different forest communities across the Appalachian region. Thanks to her previous work in forestry, Ms. Butler has a wealth of knowledge on these topics, and is a constant source of inspiration for learning more, thanks to her unending enthusiasm.

Our interest in the American chestnut was inspired by a field trip we had taken to the Dragon's Tooth trail this summer. She had been discussing how the American chestnut suffered a blight known now as *Cryphonectria parasitica*. The result of this epidemic meant the near extinction of the American chestnut tree, which no longer grows into the might giant it once was. While hiking, we discovered an American chestnut growing halfway up the trail on our way to the peak of Dragon's Tooth. It was nice to see one growing in the wild, yet also disheartening, knowing it will succumb to the blight before it can fully mature. This discovery sparked more interest, and eventually led us to Carl Absher of TACF's Virginia Chapter.

Following a cold call and a few emails, we set a date with Mr. Absher to visit the Virginia Chapter's Catawba Breeding Orchard in Blacksburg, VA. Within the first few minutes of his talk, Mr. Absher extinguished all doubts we held, once he began speaking about his experiences with TACF. He gave us each a large packet filled with a range of information regarding the history of the American chestnut, down to a diagram of the six different breeding cycles that have been executed during his tenure at TACF. Mr. Absher covered a lot of ground in his lecture. His passion became quite clear while listening to him speak at great lengths about the tree.

After the discussion, it was time to visit the orchard. We loaded ourselves into three vehicles and headed up the mountain to the logging road that led us to the trees. Initially, it looked like any old logging road you would see in the mountains, but once we crested the hill, the entire valley of Catawba stretched below, like a painted landscape. Several minutes later, we arrived.

The orchard was impressive to say the least. Covering a few hundred square feet were numerous rows of American chestnut trees, all at different life cycles and generations. The first of the rows were the smallest, most recently planted. Many of the trees in the first row didn't show much, other than their piping cover and designated mark tied to the pipe. However, as we progressed, the trees became noticeably taller. Although the tallest of the trees stood just over six feet, it was still an impressive sight. Standing next to a functionally extinct species of tree that had died out nearly a century ago certainly evoked a feeling of astonishment and awe. Not only were we standing next to one, but to dozens that will play a part in the reintroduction of this tree back into the forests. It was inspiring to be in the orchard, witnessing the stages of this process, and being able to reach out and touch it. All the years of hard work and research cultivating into this one moment was truly moving.

After the tour, Mr. Absher took us to a private residence where a wild-growing American chestnut had been discovered. We hiked up a gravel road until we eventually came to the tree. It had several cankers on its trunk, all varying in size. The interesting observation however, was that it was still growing despite its encounter with the blight. This is important because it means that the tree has a natural resistance to the blight. Mr. Absher explained that this tree had been spotted by a resident who contacted the Virginia Chapter, and since then, a good amount of care and monitoring has been given to this tree.

All in all, the field trip proved not only to be a great learning experience about the American chestnut, but also offered significant insight into what's being done to save the species. Mr. Absher exhibited through his work with TACF and his boundless knowledge of the American chestnut, that with enough passion and support, change can happen. Life presents us with many different experiences and opportunities that we can invest in, potentially offering grand results. It is up to us to spot these opportunities, envision what sort of result we wish for, and finally build toward that outcome. On behalf of Ms. Butler's Plant Life of Virginia class and Virginia Western Community College, I wanted to thank Mr. Absher and TACF's Virginia Chapter for providing this incredible experience.