

Make Trails in Polk Part of Your Fit, Fresh and Friendly Lifestyle

By Seth Young

Seth Young is serving as the AmeriCorps Trails Coordinator for Polk County Recreation. He is part of a larger AmeriCorps Program called Project Conserve which promotes environmental conservation and education across Western North Carolina. A native of Pennsylvania, Seth has gained experience working on trails with the Maine Appalachian Trail Club, Montana Conservation Corps, and the Appalachian Trail Conservancy. Polk County Recreation is a strong supporter and participant in the Polk Fit, Fresh & Friendly (PF3) health coalition and appreciates this opportunity on PF3's behalf to share outdoor recreation options.

Polk County is located in a beautiful transition zone between the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Piedmont known as the Foothills. These mountains and temperate forests are teeming with life and in Polk County there are plenty of opportunities to immerse yourself in it. From the rugged and strenuous trails of the Green River Gamelands to the easier and more accessible trails such Woodland Park in Tryon or Alexander's Ford in the eastern part of the county, Polk County has something for everybody.

Polk County is fortunate to have beautiful public land and residents who have made it a priority to conserve land for trails and outdoor recreation. Many of the trails in the area have been around for two decades or more and countless feet have walked through the serene forests they traverse. Recently, however, a more focused effort has been put into creating a county-wide database of trails as well as promoting involvement and awareness in the community about the beautiful trails here in Polk.

Last year, the Polk County Community Foundation gave a grant to fully fund an AmeriCorps member to work with the Polk County Recreation Department and focus entirely on trails and outdoor recreation. Now in the second year and AmeriCorps member funded by the Polk County Community Foundation, many updates have come to Polk Trails. First, a database of county trails, complete with specific information and photos has been created. This can be found on the trails website, <http://www.polktrails.org/>, which has also been a new development in the past few months. Besides local trail information and photographs on the website, users can find the weather forecast for Polk, a calendar of outdoor events in the area, maps, and much more. Also, printed copies of the trails brochure and map created by Polk Fit, Fresh and Friendly are available at Stearns Gym.

Another exciting development in the world of Polk County trails has been the creation of Nature Navigators, an after school hiking club. Each Wednesday, a group of 8-15 sixth graders transported to an area trail. The students get a chance to exercise, see new areas of their home county, and learn about local flora, fauna and history.

In an optional essay assignment, Emily, a sixth grader in the club said “I like to hike because I like to see nature and to be in nature. Nature calms you down after a stressful day. I like seeing what lives in the forests of Polk County. My county has very beautiful places to visit and interesting animals and plants to learn about.” Many of the students had never been on a trail prior to joining the hiking club and the main intention of the club was to introduce trails as a place to go to relieve stress, get some exercise, and foster a bond with nature as they grow into adults. Who knows, maybe some of these students will become a part of the next generation of trail stewards here in Polk. Nature Navigators is run by Rowann Hoy, a sixth grade science teacher at Polk County Middle School, along with Polk Trails.

As mentioned previously, many of the trails have been a part of the community for a number of years, but this doesn't mean that the network of trails here in Polk is done expanding. Currently, a new system of trails is in the design phase as part of the recreation complex behind the middle school. Upon completion, the trail system is expected to be about 2.5 total miles of multi-use trail. We believe this trail system will be a valuable asset to the hiking club, the middle school mountain bike club (also a new club), teachers with their classes, and citizens who want to go for a hike or quick ride on their mountain bike.

There are many ways to get involved with trails here in Polk. To be added to the trails email list, shoot an email to trails@polknc.org. If you are on the email list, you will receive a monthly newsletter about what is happening with trails in the county and other announcements. Another way to keep up with what's happening is to 'like' Polk Trails on Facebook. Both of these resources will keep you updated on trail conditions and announcements of trail work days. So lace up those boots and hit the trail! Make trails in Polk part of a Fit, Fresh and Friendly lifestyle.

Polk Fit, Fresh and Friendly (PF3) is a group of 80+ community members, leaders and health professionals, all working together to plan and implement effective strategies to promote wellness in our community. We welcome any individual who is interested in joining us to make our community a healthier place

for all. For more information and a list of our 2016 meeting dates, please visit our website at www.polkitfreshandfriendly.org.