

# Mountain State Sierran

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WINTER 2025

## Blackwater Canyon Becomes Public Land



BY BETSY JAEGER LAWSON

**It's not often we get to celebrate a win for our natural world.** But the Blackwater Canyon, once partially owned by a private logging company, is now entirely owned by all West Virginia residents as part of the Monongahela National Forest.

The Blackwater Canyon, one of the most sublime and photographed areas of West Virginia, was nearly lost to a logging company. Allegheny Wood Products purchased 3,000 acres on the uphill side of the rail-trail in 1997 for \$5 million.

The first battle was to stop the rail-trail, a relic of earlier logging and mining, from becoming a haul road again for logging this second-growth forest. In 2000, Friends of Blackwater, led by Judy Rodd, came into being. Through that group's efforts, 12,000 comments from across the nation were sent to the U.S. Forest Service urging protection of the rail-trail. In 2010, Allegheny Wood Products dropped their plan to haul timber along that corridor.

In 2005, when then-Governor Manchin learned that part of the canyon was still in private hands, he promised to find money to purchase it for public stewardship. As both governor and senator, he secured



*Celebrating the public acquisition of the Blackwater Canyon are Senator Joe Manchin, Friends of Blackwater Chair Judy Rodd, and Judy's daughter, Priscilla, at an October 26 event at Blackwater Lodge.*  
PHOTO BY BETSY LAWSON.

federal funding under the Land and Water Conservation Fund to buy the canyon. The Crites family, who owned the land, decided to sell in August 2024, and the deal was completed at the end of that year.

On a beautiful fall Sunday in late October 2025, about 100 people met at the lodge in Blackwater Falls State Park to celebrate the public ownership. Speakers included Friends

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# (My Last) View from the Chair

**As Chair of the WV Chapter, I have had a lot of fun the last few years.** Under our chapter by-laws, my term is up in 2026, so a new Chapter Chair will be elected from our Executive Committee. Keep an eye on your mail for the Chapter ExCom election ballot and be sure to vote.

We have had a number of great events, and I get to work with amazing volunteers—and every once in a while, we achieve important victories to make West Virginia and the world a better place. One of those quiet but important victories came this fall, in an appeal of a U.S. Forest Service permit granted to the South Fork Coal Company to haul coal on Forest Service roads near the Cherry River and the Cranberry Glades Wilderness Area. With our allies, the Sierra Club appealed the permit in January 2024. The site is impacting several endangered species and creating water-quality violations in the Cherry River. The coal company filed for bankruptcy earlier this year, and the Forest Service revoked their permit, thereby giving us the victory. But like many other victories, there is still work to be done. The mine site still needs reclamation, and we will need to keep a watchful eye in case another mining company restarts the mine.

**But constant change is the only constant.** A lot of the chapter's efforts have focused on emerging proposals for power plants and data centers. While we all use computers, and do not oppose data centers per se, we do not support use of fossil fuels to power those. Our political leaders seem to want to ignore climate change, but the effects are real, and we can stop it if we choose to.

Another important issue gaining traction is the growing concern over electric utility rates. Governor Morrissey has proposed his “50 by 50” plan to triple electric generation in West Virginia by 2050. One utility, FirstEnergy, is proposing a 1,200-MW gas-fired power plant, and we ratepayers will be asked to pay the \$2.5 billion cost. These proposals ignore both climate change and the real costs of the floods, fires, droughts, and hurricanes that come with it. If, in the near future, fossil fuel facilities need to pay the true cost of their greenhouse gas emissions, we ratepayers may be stuck with the costs of stranded power plants that cannot compete economically. Keep your eyes on this one, and keep your hands on your pocketbook!

But being involved in the chapter is not all work. Our Chapter Outings program continues to grow, often with an emphasis on conservation opportunities. From hikes in the roadless areas of the Mon Forest, to the Toxic Tours of power plants arranged by the Club's Beyond Coal Campaigns, to Chapter picnics and the Mon Group Ice Cream Social, **it is important to get out into nature and be refreshed and renewed by what we are fighting for.**

As Chapter Chair, I have had a hand in keeping our members involved in these campaigns. I want to thank the other chapter leaders who have stepped up to contribute to our community and who have made my time so much fun. I do plan to stay active with the Chapter, in whatever role I can serve, and I urge YOU to step up and join the fun.



**BY JIM KOTCON**

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**It is important to get out into nature  
and be refreshed and renewed  
by what we are fighting for.**

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*Jim Kotcon has worked hard for West Virginia's environment during his years as the chair of Sierra Club's WV Chapter. But he's also enjoyed the state's outdoors and his fellow Club members along the way. He's shown here (L) with Ed Wheelless at the Falls of Hills Creek, Monongahela National Forest, during his first time leading a chapter outing in 2025.*

PHOTO BY CHRIS CRAIG.

## FROM THE DIRECTOR

# Help Us Build a Stronger Chapter Together

BY HONEY MAY



**The Sierra Club West Virginia Chapter is powered by people like you—people who care deeply about our communities, our wild places, and our future.** Every campaign we win, every program we launch, and every policy we shape happens because members and volunteers roll up their sleeves and make it happen.

Right now, we have an exciting opportunity to grow our ladder of engagement—a pathway for more people to take part, from attending their first event to leading their own initiatives. To do that, we need your energy, your ideas, and your voice.

We want our Chapter to reflect the full potential of West Virginia's people—young and old, urban and rural, from every corner of our state. Our challenges and our opportunities cross county lines, and our movement is strongest when everyone has a seat at the table. No matter your background, skills, or schedule, there's a place for you here.

### WE'RE LOOKING FOR:

- **Volunteers** to help with outreach, events, communications, and local advocacy.
- **Member input** on the programs, trainings, and activities you'd most like to see in the months ahead. Whether it's hands-on conservation work, social gatherings, skill-building workshops, or issue-based campaigns, we want to hear from you.

### CALLING ALL SIERRA CLUB MEMBERS & SUPPORTERS:

## Join an Effective Voice for the Environment

A popular catchphrase of the 1960s was **"Think Globally, Act Locally."** Few people have the time or talent to change the world, but we all can engage with the small part of the world we inhabit. Within our families and our own communities, it is possible to make a difference for the better.

As a member of the Sierra Club, you have the opportunity, the tools, and the information needed to make a difference for the better. Even if you don't have much free time or experience, whatever you can offer will be welcome.

Please complete our online survey and let us know what interests you, what environmental issues are most important to you, and what skills you may have that you'd be willing to share to help make West Virginia a better place. **Thank you!!**



This is your Chapter, and together we can make it stronger, more welcoming, and more impactful than ever. Please take a few minutes to share your ideas and let us know how you'd like to get involved. Your participation will help us create a vibrant, connected community of changemakers. You can email me at [honey.may@sierraclub.org](mailto:honey.may@sierraclub.org), call me at 304-356-8774, or even put something in the mail to us at P.O. Box 4142, Morgantown, WV 26504-4142.

### LET'S BUILD SOMETHING POWERFUL—TOGETHER!

## West Virginia Sierra Club Chapter Directory

Email contact for all officers and staff: [sierraclub.wv@gmail.com](mailto:sierraclub.wv@gmail.com)  
*Term ends at first meeting of indicated year.*

### CHAPTER EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

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Molly Martin	('27)	304-694-4192
Dani Parent	('26)	606-371-9434
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Jim Kotcon, Conservation Chair	('27)	304-594-3322
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Susan Hunter	('26)	

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Alex Cole, Membership	304-767-8687
Chris Craig, Newsletter & Outings	304-433-1260
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Audrey Bennett, WVU Sierra Student Coalition	

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Honey May, WV Chapter Director	304-356-8774
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# How Ratepayers May Pick Up the Tab for Big Tech's Buildout

BY BETSY JAEGER LAWSON

*Coal-fired power plants like this one at Madsville, WV, are getting a chance for extended life from Big Tech's buildout.*

PHOTO BY BETSY LAWSON.

**Expansion of clean, green, renewable energy has more obstacles to overcome than just the current president's opposition.**

Our regional grid operator, local utilities, and big tech companies are successfully exploiting an outdated regulatory process to con us into paying billions of dollars of their costs to do business, while doing little to encourage growth in renewable energy. We are paying for fossil fuel expansion in multiple ways.

**ENERGY SUPPLY:** The source of regional energy distribution that those of us in the Mid-Atlantic rely on and take for granted is PJM, the largest power grid operator and marketplace for energy in the U.S. PJM serves 13 states and 65 million customers, primarily through local utilities like Mon Power. But currently, PJM is a major roadblock in our fight for a future of sustainable energy.

PJM holds a capacity auction every year for the amount of energy they expect to need three years into the future. All electricity customers pay for it in their monthly bills. This covers the availability of power, not the energy already consumed, and it helps

guarantee grid reliability by compensating power generators for their commitment to supply electricity whenever needed.

However, as coal plants, the dirtiest and most expensive way to generate electricity, age out and shut down, PJM has not prepared to receive hundreds of gigawatts of wind, solar and battery projects, preventing them from plugging into the grid fast enough to help mitigate fossil-fuel power plant retirements. As the demand for more energy is soaring due to data centers, PJM is encouraging old coal plants to stay alive, like zombies, rather than bring on clean, renewable sources.

Harrison and Fort Martin Power Stations, which account for 99% of utility company FirstEnergy's emissions, had been scheduled for retirement in 2030. But according to FirstEnergy, this date was extended to 2040 and 2035 respectively, because of "future resource adequacy concerns in the PJM region and energy policy in West Virginia."

Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro announced in September that he would like to direct the utilities within the state to leave PJM. He told reporters, "We need states to have more of a say in how PJM operates. We need to move more quickly on these energy-producing projects, and we've got to

hold down costs. If PJM cannot do that, then Pennsylvania will look to go it alone.” Shapiro was joined by ten other governors, of both parties, to demand a greater role in the grid’s energy decisions and, in the end, lower retail electricity prices. (West Virginia’s governor was not one of the ten.)

**ENERGY INFRASTRUCTURE:** The Sierra Club, among others, believes that this huge buildout of the power grid called for by PJM may be overblown. A tech company may apply for several siting permits to maximize their chances to secure a permit for one data center. PJM would count all three permit applications when planning for future demand. If the tech company builds only one data center, the ratepayers are stuck paying for all three.

And that’s the kicker: For the past 100 years, utilities have been allowed to build

the infrastructure and socialize the cost to all ratepayers, who have no other options.

Utilities are allowed by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to set those charges high enough to recoup every dollar they spend building, plus a regulated rate of profit—usually about 10%. This is a huge profit opportunity. This growth in demand is a great excuse to build data center infrastructure. So, utilities make sweetheart deals with data center developers to attract them to their area by offering them a good deal on electricity. Deals between tech companies and utilities are hidden from the public. Data centers may be underpaying and not covering the cost that the utility is incurring to provide the data centers service. Utilities pass the difference on to ratepayers, which shows up on their electric bills as a delivery charge.

Big tech is the wealthiest industry in the world, and it is more than capable of paying for its own infrastructure. In the next 15 years, data centers are expected to add an additional \$160 billion to grid costs in the U.S. Data centers that build their own power sources (microgrids), like the huge gas-fired power plant planned to serve a proposed data center in Tucker County, are not the answer—unless those microgrids use wind, solar, and battery storage.

If policy makers fail to change anything, electricity rates for average households could go up by as much as 70% to pay for expanded power for data centers. Why should we subsidize Big Tech’s profits, especially when it perpetuates more fossil fuel use?

**We must demand new policy that creates a separate “high-demand customer class” and see that they pay for their own expanded power needs.** 🍃

## If policy makers fail to change anything, electricity rates for average households could go up by as much as 70%.”



### Blackwater Canyon | [CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1](#)

of Blackwater Chair Judy Rodd, Senator Manchin, climate activist Rafe Pomerance, and Peter Harnik, a national leader in the Rails-to-Trails movement.

But battles remain. The canyon is now entirely within the Monongahela National Forest, but logging is still part of their authorized agenda. It is Rodd’s goal to have the canyon and surrounding areas declared a National Recreation Area so that it is fully protected from further logging. And, of course, there are still the threats posed by Corridor H

slashing its way along the canyon, as well as a proposed data center, with all its noise, air pollution, and ugliness, overpowering the land above Thomas and Davis.

For now, to quote Judy Rodd: “As a refuge for rare species and as a world-class recreational and scenic resource, the Blackwater Canyon is beginning a new era of healing and opportunity. We have the tools to cherish, heal, lift up, and protect this amazing landscape.

**Let’s join together to make it happen!”**

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**DEADLINE FOR THE 2026 SPRING ISSUE:  
FEBRUARY 7, 2026**

Opinions expressed in the *Mountain State Sierran* are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Sierra Club.



# WVEC Sets Environmental Goals for the 2026 Legislative Session

BY JILLIAN WELSH

**After the 2024 West Virginia Environmental Council Fall Retreat, we realized that we had outgrown the meeting room at Tygart Lake State Park!** So this past September, WVEC members and guests gathered at the Cedar Lakes Conference Center to learn about the latest developments in environmental policy and advocacy in the Mountain State.

This year, we added a new virtual element to our meeting. We wanted to hear from neighboring states about how they're approaching similar legislative problems. A speaker from the Kentucky Resources Council spoke with us about the anti-community air monitoring bill that passed in their legislature in 2025. It's similar to the bill that has been introduced here in West Virginia in the previous two legislative sessions. Another cloned bill was passed in Louisiana in 2024. This makes it clear that community air monitoring and citizen science are under a coordinated attack. WVEC will remain vigilant against similar bills in the 2026 session.

If you're reading this, you're probably aware that HB 2014 (to develop a Certified Microgrid Program) passed in the 2025 session. This bill encourages the development of data centers in West Virginia

by exempting them from certain local regulations, provided they meet specific requirements. Our neighbors in Virginia have been monitoring data centers for years, and we were happy to have an advocate from that state join us remotely to present. Our guest, from Virginia's Piedmont Environmental Council, provided tips on the types of questions we should ask our regulators and lawmakers and encouraged us to monitor how the proposed data center buildout could raise our electricity prices. WVEC's list for data center policy reform in 2026 includes reinstating local control for data center regulations and requiring them to regularly report on their environmental impacts and water usage.



*Environmentalists gathered at Cedar Lakes Conference Center in September to set goals for the WV legislative session. PHOTO COURTESY OF WVEC.*

## Other legislative priorities for the WVEC and our member groups in the 2026 session include:



### Funding the West Virginia Flood Resiliency Trust Fund

Flooding is getting worse in West Virginia and Appalachia. Despite that, the Legislature has never dedicated money to the trust fund, which was established to protect communities and implement strategies from the state's flood plan. Following this year's disastrous flooding up and down the state, WVEC member groups are determined to ensure the legislature takes flood resiliency and mitigation seriously in 2026.

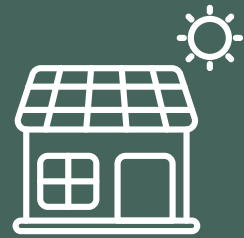
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### Addressing Unplugged, Orphaned, and Abandoned Gas Wells

An annual concern for our member groups, the thousands of unplugged gas wells in the state pose a threat to both human and environmental health. We will advocate for requiring gas producers to set aside a higher bond at the start of the drilling process to ensure that wells can be plugged when their production is finished.

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### Removing Barriers to Renewable Energy Development and Energy Democracy

Community solar is illegal in West Virginia, meaning renters and people who cannot install solar panels on their homes are unable to benefit from the low-cost and zero-carbon power of the sun. We will also monitor legislative bills that could make solar access even harder in the state, like last session's bill that would make purchase power agreements more difficult.

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## WHAT YOU CAN DO

Your support of the environmental legislative agenda in West Virginia is needed and could make a difference! Sign on for regular updates during the 2026 legislative session at West Virginia Environmental Council. And mark your calendars for E-Day at the Capitol on **Monday, Feb. 23, 2026.**

February 23, 2026

ENVIRONMENTAL DAY  
@ THE WV CAPITOL



Hosted by: West Virginia Environmental Council





# Citizens Weigh In on PFAS at Workshops in the Panhandles

BY MARIA RUSSO AND MEAGAN NIEBLER

**In September and October, community members participated in workshops and helped shape future PFAS Action Plans for their public water systems.** At the time of publication, further workshops were planned for November in the Northern Panhandle. The workshops are hosted by the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection (WVDEP) and WV Rivers. Participants were asked to help identify potential sources of PFAS in the Eastern Panhandle region and prioritize steps to reduce PFAS exposure in drinking water.

PFAS are used to create a wide range of waterproof, stain-resistant, and nonstick products. Many of these products are considered essential to modern life, public safety, and health. However, the same properties that make PFAS useful also make them extremely persistent in the environment. They have been dubbed “forever chemicals” because they don’t break down naturally and have been linked to certain cancers, birth defects, and other chronic illnesses.

Unfortunately, PFAS have been detected in sources that provide drinking water across West Virginia. The Eastern Panhandle workshops focused on public drinking water systems where testing confirmed the presence of PFAS in pre-treated public drinking water sources. The West Virginia legislature passed the PFAS Protection Act to create plans to ensure PFAS are not present in drinking water.

Eastern Panhandle residents are playing an active role in developing plans to prevent future PFAS contamination, such as the contamination that occurred at the Air National Guard Base south of Martinsburg. Studies found that PFAS-laden firefighting foam, used regularly in training exercises, had leached into Martinsburg’s drinking water source.

Workshop participants helped WVDEP prioritize actions in the plans, commenting on steps ranging from public funding for remediation to stricter enforcement of laws limiting discharge into waterways. The WVDEP will take public comments and information to form specific action plans for each affected water system.

Our organizations are partnering with WVDEP to make sure everyone has a say in their utility’s action plan. If you were unable to attend one of our in-person meetings, we will be holding a virtual meeting on December 11. **We invite you to learn more at [WVRivers.org/PFAS](https://WVRivers.org/PFAS).**



Charles Town residents gathered information and shared concerns at this October workshop on PFAS contamination. PHOTO COURTESY OF WV RIVERS.

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**Eastern Panhandle residents are playing an active role in developing plans to prevent future PFAS contamination.**

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Maria Russo speaks at an October workshop on PFAS in Charles Town. PHOTO COURTESY OF WV RIVERS.

**Please reach out if you have other ideas, solutions, and ways that you’d like to help everyone in your community have clean, accessible, and healthy water!**

**Maria Russo** is Policy Specialist at West Virginia Rivers Coalition; **Meagan Niebler** is Community Democracy Program Manager at Fair Shake Environmental Legal Services. Find the link to the Dec. 11 virtual meeting at [WVRivers.org/PFAS](https://WVRivers.org/PFAS).





# West Virginians Find New Power Options in Solar Co-ops

BY CORY CHASE

WV PROGRAM ASSOCIATE,  
SOLAR UNITED NEIGHBORS



**Are you looking for ways to lower your electric bill?** The Sierra Club has teamed up with nonprofit Solar United Neighbors (SUN) to bring you the Eastern Panhandle Solar Co-op. The co-op is open to homeowners in Berkeley, Morgan, and Jefferson Counties.

## WHY GO SOLAR?

Rooftop solar can help you save money on electricity costs while powering your home with clean, sustainable energy. Solar panels are a zero-pollution alternative to fossil fuels that you can install right on your roof. A solar co-op makes rooftop solar easy and affordable by leveraging the power of group buying.

Solar United Neighbors (SUN) has hosted more than 20 solar co-ops in West Virginia since 2014. According to the group's estimates, the 176 homes and businesses that now have solar panels because of co-ops are bringing to the state: 1.4 megawatts of solar power, \$6 million in lifetime energy savings, and more than 37 million lbs. of lifetime carbon offsets. In addition, the installations have led to an estimated 37 new jobs in local communities.

"After many years of proven success in neighboring states, we're excited to bring solar co-ops back to West Virginia and offer Eastern Panhandle residents the chance to install solar in a group," said Cory Chase, West Virginia program associate for Solar United Neighbors. "As West Virginia's energy monopolies continue to raise rates for customers, harnessing the power of the sun is an excellent way to lower your electric bill for years to come."

Alan Tomson, Mayor of Davis, went solar with a West Virginia solar co-op in 2015. "Going solar with the co-op was a smooth and easy process. My solar panels have saved me money on my electric bills, and my battery backup storage gives my family peace of mind during severe weather," Alan said.



Alan Tomson, Mayor of Davis, WV, went solar in 2015 with the help of a solar co-op. PHOTO COURTESY OF SOLAR UNITED NEIGHBORS.

## HOW DOES A SOLAR CO-OP WORK?

With a solar co-op, homeowners and businesses will learn about solar from the experts at Solar United Neighbors. SUN will review your property to see if it's suitable for solar panels. You'll learn all about solar technology, financing, and what savings to expect on your electric bill.

After a competitive bidding process facilitated by SUN, which remains vendor-neutral, co-op members will select a single solar company to complete the installations. Joining the co-op does not obligate members to purchase solar. Instead, members will have the option to individually purchase panels based on the installer's group rate.

As a bonus, the co-op isn't just for solar panels—it includes an option to get battery storage and an EV charger, too. When paired with solar panels, battery storage will keep the lights on during severe weather events. If you have an electric vehicle—or are thinking of buying one—charging it with solar energy makes it even greener and more affordable.

## HOW CAN YOU LEARN MORE?

SUN will host several free information sessions to educate community members about solar energy and the co-op. Individuals interested in going solar can sign up for the co-op or one of the upcoming information sessions on the co-op web page.

Visit the co-op website to sign up:

**[solarunitedneighbors.org/wvpanhandle/](https://solarunitedneighbors.org/wvpanhandle/)**

Or come to our upcoming events:

### SOLAR 101

Learn about solar and our co-op process.

RSVP: [mobilize.us/s/45qF5i](https://mobilize.us/s/45qF5i)

WHERE: The Charles Town Library

200 E. Washington Street, Charles Town, WV 25414

WHEN: November 21, 2025 from 5:30-6:30 pm

### SOLAR OPEN HOUSE

See a home fitted with solar, battery backup, EV chargers and an EV.

WHERE: 33 Cheval Place, Falling Waters, WV 25419

WHEN: December 9 from 5pm-6:30pm

# The Wood Turtle: A Red-Legged Jewel Needing Protection



BY STEVEN KRICHBAUM, PHD

**The wood turtle (*Glyptemys insculpta*) is a red-legged jewel—one of North America’s most striking wildlife species. It lives in areas ranging from southeastern Canada and the northeastern U.S. into northern Virginia and West Virginia.** The wood turtle finds refuge on private lands as well as various public spaces, such as the northern portions of the George Washington and Monongahela National Forests. Adult turtles reach shell lengths of around 8 inches and weights of 1 kilogram. They are renowned for their intelligence and can live to be over 60 years old.

They are amphibious omnivores who use a variety of aquatic and terrestrial habitats. Suitable wood turtle habitat is lower elevation forests with clear-running, low-gradient waterways with rocky substrates. Unfortunately, the wood turtle is considered “imperiled” in every state in which it occurs and is designated as a “Species of Greatest Conservation Need” (SGCN) in the Wildlife Action Plans of all 17 states in which it lives, including West Virginia.

The wood turtle is already absent from a significant part of its historic range. Only a restricted number of creeks and rivers in the turtle’s range retain clear water, safe nesting sites, deep pools for overwintering, and associated undisturbed upland zones. As a habitually amphibious animal, the turtle is vulnerable to the degradation and destruction of both terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems.

The Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) over a decade ago to list the wood turtle under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), but no action has been taken. The good news is that with a Jan. 15, 2025 D.C. Circuit Court ruling in response to 2020 litigation, the CBD secured deadlines for the USFWS to finally decide whether the wood turtle and 75 other species warrant protection under the ESA.

The wood turtle, like most turtle species, has traits that make populations vulnerable and sensitive to increased human-caused loss and mortality: slow growth, late maturity, long lives, low reproductive potential (small clutches), and high natural mortality of eggs and hatchlings from predators. If enough adults are not protected from takings, then populations inevitably collapse. Thus, they are especially threatened by habitat loss and degradation, various forms of pollution, climate change, emerging diseases, direct mortality, and poaching and collection as pets. (One poacher was arrested in West Virginia with over 100 wild-caught wood turtles in his possession.)

Roads, logging, drilling operations, agriculture, and other development all play a part in these issues. They not only alter habitats in harmful ways, they also result in large numbers of direct mortality due to squashing and burning of turtles and other slow creatures who cannot run or fly away from harm. With pressures on these species mounting, sites on relatively undeveloped public lands grow increasingly crucial as refuges for the turtles.



*The wood turtle is a red-legged jewel of West Virginia, but it needs some tender loving care and protection from threats to its habitat and to the climate. PHOTO BY STEVEN KRICHBAUM.*



Some turtles never  
make it across the road,  
and superhighways like  
Corridor H only increase  
the threat to their safety.

PHOTO BY STEVEN KRICHBAUM.



Unfortunately, efforts are underway to alter the ESA and streamline or eliminate National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) reviews, thus preventing well-informed decision-making and meaningful public participation. Additionally, the Trump Administration has issued an executive order to massively increase logging in our national forests.

Amidst all of this, West Virginia now proposes to extend Corridor H through wood turtle habitat in the George Washington National Forest. I have observed road-killed wood turtles on small roads passing through these areas. A four- or six-lane highway is precisely what turtles don't need.

**Because of the past and present threats to their viability, wood turtles need protection.** Existing regulatory mechanisms for their protection are clearly inadequate: Wood turtles should be listed under the ESA so they are fully and fairly considered in conservation and development planning. The wood turtle's core habitat (300 meters from both banks of waterways) should be protected from logging, burning, and road building.

Beyond this, we need to think big and protect some entire landscapes of our public lands. A multitude of other flora and fauna, as well as human communities, will benefit when we protect wood turtles.

Your comments in support of protecting wood turtle habitat can help. To support ESA listing and protection, contact Julie Thompson-Slacum at the USFWS Chesapeake Bay Ecological Services Field Office at [julie\\_thompson-slacum@fws.gov](mailto:julie_thompson-slacum@fws.gov).

A Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement is due out on November 21 for the Corridor H Parsons to Davis section. A public comment period will follow, so please watch for emails to submit your comments. Public comment is essential to protect this region and its prime wood turtle habitat. 🍃

**Steven Krichbaum**, PhD is a herpetologist and conservation biologist who lives in Virginia and has worked with grassroots groups for 35 years seeking protection of wildlife and public lands. He's never met a turtle he didn't like. The above article is an abbreviated version of Steven's more extensive version with citations. To read the complete article, go to [tinyurl.com/good-news-for-turtles](https://tinyurl.com/good-news-for-turtles).





# An Unexpected Gardener's Guide to Sustainable Backyard Gardening

BY JENNY THACKER



**At the suggestion of a young man who was staying with me, I decided to grow an organic garden last winter that could supplement our food supply.**

A monumental task. I couldn't wait. There were things that worried me: a lawn full of tenacious crabgrass where the garden would have to go, potentially poor soil, and an unbridled deer population. Rabbits, moles, raccoons, squirrels, and groundhogs lived here too. And they all like to eat vegetables. Here's a step-by-step guide to how I made a backyard garden that not only provided organic vegetables, but also helped foster a sense of community in my neighborhood.

## Eliminate grass with cardboard.

It's important to start building your garden during the winter by covering grassy areas so that grass won't grow. We chose cardboard because it is biodegradable and kills grass without destroying the soil. And it's free and available everywhere. As we scrambled for rocks to hold the cardboard down, a wonderful thing happened. Neighbors, even strangers, saw the project and wanted to join in. They brought us things they found in their sheds and garages to repurpose. Someone gave us old tires to hold the cardboard down, others gave us cinder blocks, wooden pallets, and old cabinets with the backs removed to build raised beds. Our garden became a community effort!



*It takes a tall and sturdy fence to keep deer out of Jenny Thacker's garden.*

PHOTO BY JENNY THACKER.

## Save the worms.

I learned from podcasts that tilling the soil destroys its structure. Worms would die. We saved the worms by putting bottomless raised beds full of 10-12 inches of leaf compost over the now-dead grass covered in cardboard. The open bottoms of the beds allowed worms to come in and any excess water to drain away. The result: exuberant plants.

## Fence in your garden.

We needed a fence before we could plant anything. White-tailed deer can jump seven and a half feet. That meant an eight-foot fence. Neighbors gave me old chicken wire, rabbit wire, green woven plastic fabric, and mismatched posts—even bright orange snow fencing. We covered it with blackberry, raspberry, and blueberry bushes as well as honeysuckle, morning glories, and giant sunflowers—anything to make it so deer couldn't see the other side.

## Plant herbs that deter pests.

But deer weren't the only pests, and no fence in the world will keep out rabbits. Poison wasn't an option, so I chose herbs. The stronger smelling the better. I started them from seeds indoors: lavender, rosemary, sage, oregano, marjoram, garlic, thyme, parsley, basil, horseradish, marigolds and more. I put



*Raised beds make for a worm-rich and well-drained garden for Jenny Thacker.*

PHOTO BY JENNY THACKER.

a few in every bed, and even though I saw rabbits regularly on my lawn just outside the fence to my garden, I never saw a single one inside it. Keeping insects away by planting marigolds and garlic everywhere helped too. And mulching the strawberries with straw kept slugs out of them.





Jenny Thacker's neighbors like Donny (in foreground) and his sister Kenzie provided a helping hand in her garden. PHOTO BY JENNY THACKER.

## Plan and plant in the permanent beds.

We started with the permanent beds. Strawberries can be in the same place for twenty years. Rhubarb is forever. Asparagus takes three years to the first harvest. Most herbs are long-term, so while we put some in every bed to keep the rabbits away, we had an herb garden for regular use. Then we made beds for plants that must be rotated, like potatoes, melons, tomatoes, and squash.

## Choose compatible plants.

Companion planting is key. Certain plants grow better when planted with others. For example, we set aside a corner of the garden for corn, squash, and beans. We grew them in mounds, the way the native Americans did, with corn providing the structure for climbing beans to grow on; beans offering the nitrogen for the squash and corn; and squash with its large, rough

leaves growing all over the ground and keeping out deer and creatures by being uncomfortable to walk through.

Tomatoes grow better with basil. Squash can't be grown next to cucumbers. Watermelon can't grow near blackberries. Okra and peppers do great in the herb bed. Peanuts grew well with tomatoes until the tomatoes blocked out all their sunshine. I googled "companion planting for \_\_\_\_" for everything I put in the ground.

In addition, succession planting gave us a chance to plant more than our space would normally allow. Broccoli goes to seed the moment it gets too warm, and asparagus doesn't get big until the broccoli is gone. They could share space but at different times of the season. Potatoes need to be in the ground early but they don't surface right away, so I planted lettuce and spinach over the potato beds.

## Involve your friends and neighbors.

There were so many things I never expected in my unexpected garden. I knew I wanted berries and some familiar herbs, but from okra to potatoes to peanuts to corn, I grew things that people suggested that I wouldn't have considered. Companion planting and succession planting made this possible. Neighbors donated berry bushes, potatoes that had started growing in their cupboards, extra plants that they had too many of, heritage tomato seeds, and wildflower mixes. They gave advice and even labor. I gave them smiles and produce. We got all kinds of wonderful food, but the best thing that my garden grew was unexpected community.

*Jenny Thacker makes her home and tends her garden in Jefferson County—near the Potomac River. In addition to helpful neighbors, she cited several helpful sources in her garden project:*

- *Carrots Love Tomatoes* by Louise Rotte (Storey Publishing, 1998).
- The West Virginia Extension Agency and its Master Gardener program
- Local nurseries
- Podcasts, including "No Till Gardeners"
- Lots of web searches, especially to help find companion plant pairs

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**We got all kinds of wonderful food, but the best thing that my garden grew was unexpected community.**

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# The WV “Toxic Tour” Also Eyes Clean Alternatives in Tucker County

**Most of us don't know where, exactly, our electricity comes from, even though we likely live within a few miles of a power plant. For many of us, it takes seeing these coal-fired behemoths up close to understand just how massive and polluting they are.** That's why the Sierra Club West Virginia Chapter started doing “Toxic Tours” at coal-fired plants around the state, so everyone has a chance to learn about the plants that burn coal to keep our lights on, even though there are many cleaner and more economical sources of electricity. It's all part of our plan to combat the dominant, and failed, narrative that “coal is king” in West Virginia.



*WV Chapter Chair Jim Kotcon speaks in front of Mount Storm Power Station and Lake during the Toxic Tour stop there in November.*

PHOTO BY LISA DI BARTOLOMEO.

We know that there's a cleaner, brighter future out there for us. The second outing in our Toxic Tour took place November 8 and centered on Tucker and Grant counties. We decided to invite all our chapter members to come with us on this trip, since the area is such a popular destination for recreation and tourism. We even had a crew from the news organization “100 Days in Appalachia,” who joined our group and filmed parts of the outing.

We started the day meeting with the grassroots organizers Tucker United (TU), a local group fighting a proposed data center in Tucker County. Tucker United has mobilized and built a movement, going from zero to sixty mpg in no time, and it was inspiring to hear from them

directly. One highlight of this encounter was hearing a simulation of the noise pollution that normally accompanies a data center. TU members used a loud blender, like one you may have in your kitchen, to simulate the decibel levels that a data center would impose on its peaceful Tucker setting. The noise, light, and other types of pollution coming from any data center are one reason for opposition to such constructions. After our time with the TU folks, we drove to Mount Storm Lake. The 1,200-acre lake was created as a cooling pond for the coal-fired Mount Storm Power Station. Because its waters cool the plant's generating systems, they stay warm (between 60 and 90 degrees Fahrenheit) year-round. Our group learned about the coal-fired plant, as well as its resultant thermal pollution. This part of the tour offered attendees a look at the “toxic” aspect, as we discussed the coal-burning process and resulting pollutants.

But because we didn't want to leave folks feeling too toxic, we then headed to Sugarlands Road, where an easy pull-off spot enabled us to get close to some of the many wind turbines dotting the landscape.

After hearing TU's noise demonstration, it was a relief to hear the wind turbines. Despite their giant size, they produce much less noise than the data centers. Instead, each turbine can generate up to 2 to 3 MW of electricity, enough to power hundreds of homes. Afterwards, chapter chair Jim Kotcon and I spent some time canvassing in Davis for our coalition, West Virginians for Energy Freedom ([www.energyfreedomwv.org](http://www.energyfreedomwv.org)). We shared our petition for the Ratepayers Bill of Rights, a set of rights we believe every West Virginian should have to protect against unfair shutoffs and rising electricity prices. (If you have not signed it, please find it and sign on at [www.energyfreedomwv.org/bor](http://www.energyfreedomwv.org/bor).) With West Virginia's governor determined to build more coal- and gas-fired infrastructure and invite more data centers to pollute our natural environment, it's important to learn more about what that would mean for us and our state.

If you weren't able to attend this tour stop, we're planning more. The next one is tentatively scheduled for January 10 at the John E. Amos Power Plant near Charleston. We hope you can join a tour near you and learn how you can help in this fight to move our state beyond coal.



**We know that there's a cleaner, brighter future out there for us.**



*Members of Sierra Club and Tucker United discuss concerns on the Toxic Tour visit to Tucker and Grant counties in November.*

PHOTO BY LISA DI BARTOLOMEO.



**BY LISA DI BARTOLOMEO**





Environmentalists gathered in November at Morgantown's First Presbyterian Church to share ideas and discuss collaboration. PHOTO BY MICHAEL ATTFIELD.

# Morgantown Environmental Gathering Offers Opportunity to Exchange Ideas & Resources

BY CANDICE ELLIOTT

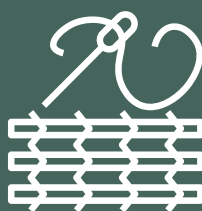
On November 6, the Monongahela Group of the Sierra Club West Virginia Chapter welcomed the public to "An Evening of Conversation with Local Environmental Voices" at First Presbyterian Church of Morgantown to hear a brief message from Delegate Evan Hansen (D-Morgantown) as well as introductions from 15 local environmental groups. About 50 people enjoyed a chili dinner prepared by volunteers and, after hearing from the various representatives, broke up into smaller groups to brainstorm common goals. Attendees left with more awareness of common challenges and goals facing environmental activists and the opportunities for collaboration among the organizations.



Delegate Evan Hansen (D-Morgantown) reports on the legislative outlook in West Virginia at a November environmental gathering in Morgantown.

PHOTO BY CANDICE ELLIOTT.

## Quilting for Community



We all love Sierra Club *outings*, but here's a new idea: *innings*! WV Chapter Director Honey May coined the term, and we're using it to describe a new project undertaken by Lisa Di Bartolomeo for the Beyond Coal Campaign.

The idea is basically a revival of the old quilting circle, where folks gathered in the dark evenings or wintry weather to quilt, chat, sing, and tell tales while they worked on a quilt with the scraps they had on hand. Our new "Quilting for Community" idea centers on finding joy in fighting climate change, as well as working to build grassroots connections through art. Local artist and quilter CJ Helenski (<https://www.instagram.com/cj.sews.wv/?hl=en>) and Lisa are hosting two quilting events. On January 7 at The Co-Op, an arts venue on Pleasant Street in Morgantown, we'll watch a brief video for inspiration before diving into planning our community quilt.

Then, on January 21, we'll get to the actual quilting, with CJ's expert instruction. If all goes well in Morgantown, we hope to replicate our quilting evenings elsewhere in the state, so stay tuned! For more details, please contact [Lisa.DiBartolomeo@sierraclub.org](mailto:Lisa.DiBartolomeo@sierraclub.org).



The Mon Group once again sponsored a scarecrow in the West Virginia Botanic Garden's Annual Scarecrow Spectacular. This year, a pumpkin-headed coal miner makes his way out of a shaft with caged canaries in hand. But above him shines the sun—perhaps signaling the shift to solar energy forthcoming. Thanks to scarecrow creators Lisa Bridges, Stephen Lawson, Betsy Lawson, and Lisa Di Bartolomeo.

PHOTO BY LISA DI BARTOLOMEO.

# Outings

FOR MORE DETAILS on each outing,  
and to register online, visit:  
[sierraclub.org/west-virginia/events](http://sierraclub.org/west-virginia/events)



## DAY HIKE

**Saturday, November 22, 2025**

**Appalachian Trail & Hosack Run,  
Caledonia State Park, PA**

We'll climb out of the state park on the AT, passing the notable Quarry Gap Shelter before completing a loop on fire roads and local trails. We'll be in mixed forests and cross several streams. Total elevation gain is 1,236 feet. There is no charge for this hike, but donations are welcome.

**Distance:** 6.9 miles

**Difficulty:** MODERATE

**Duration:** 4.5 hours

**Leader:** Chris Craig  
[ccraig@laurellodge.com](mailto:ccraig@laurellodge.com)  
304-433-1260

## DAY HIKE

**Saturday, December 13, 2025**

**Tuscarora Trail, Great Northern Mountain,  
Capon Springs, WV**

Our exploration of the Tuscarora Trail continues with this stretch atop the ridgeline of Great Northern Mountain. Climbs are gradual. We will have several impressive views. From the meeting place, we will carpool to the hike start, so reservations are required, and we ask you to notify us if your plans change. There is no charge for this hike, but donations are welcome.

**Distance:** 7.8 miles

**Difficulty:** MODERATE

**Duration:** 5 hours

**Leader:** Chris Craig  
[ccraig@laurellodge.com](mailto:ccraig@laurellodge.com)  
304-433-1260



*The Western Maryland Rail Trail near Hancock, MD provided the perfect place for these bicyclists to enjoy an autumn ride. PHOTO BY TAMMY VINCENT.*



*In August, Sierrans gathered at Harpers Ferry NHP to explore Schoolhouse Ridge South trails and historic sites. They're shown here at the ruins of an old farmhouse on the grounds.*

PHOTO BY CHRIS CRAIG.

## DAY HIKE

**Saturday, December 20, 2025**

**Shannondale Springs Trail, Shannondale  
Springs Wildlife Management Area**

This loop hike has 482 feet of elevation gain on a trail popular with birders and hikers. Dogs are welcome but must be on a leash. There is no charge for the hike, but donations are welcome.

**Distance:** 5.4 miles

**Difficulty:** MODERATE

**Duration:** 3.5 hours

**Leader:** Tammy Vincent  
[tammy.vincent.id@gmail.com](mailto:tammy.vincent.id@gmail.com)  
208-866-8422



*Bird watching was the theme for this gathering in September at Snake Hill Wildlife Management Area, near Morgantown.*

PHOTO BY ADRIENNE EPLEY BROWN.

## DAY HIKE

**Saturday, December 27, 2025**

**Cool Spring Battlefield, Bluemont, VA**

We will walk the paved path around the Cool Spring Battlefield at the River Campus of Shenandoah University. We will have nice views of the Shenandoah River and the surrounding countryside, along with some Civil War history. There are two loops around the battlefield, so you can join us for one 2.5-mile loop or the entire 5 miles.

**Distance:** 2.5 or 5 miles

**Difficulty:** EASY

**Duration:** 1.5 or 2.5 hours

**Leader:** Ken Kendall  
[kekendall65@gmail.com](mailto:kekendall65@gmail.com)  
304-433-9537



*Hikers in Cacapon State Park in Morgan County discovered "Almost Heaven" at the top of the Ziler Loop Trail.*

PHOTO BY TAMMY VINCENT.





September brought a great day to discover Cheat Mountain Wildlife Management Area. PHOTO BY JIM KOTCON.

#### DAY HIKE

**Thursday, January 1, 2026**

**C&O Canal Towpath, Dargan's Bend to Mountain Lock, Sharpsburg, MD**

Continue our Sierra Club tradition since 2018 and start out 2026 in healthy, outdoor fashion on our New Year hike along the C&O Canal Towpath. This year we will start at Dargan's Bend (just upstream from Harpers Ferry) and walk along a quiet section of the canal to Mountain Lock and back. Expect lovely winter views of the Potomac and perhaps some waterfowl and other birdlife. There is no charge for this hike, but donations are welcome. Well-behaved dogs on leashes are welcome.

**Distance:** 5 miles

**Difficulty:** EASY

**Duration:** 3 hours

**Leader:** Chris Craig  
ccraig@laurellodge.com  
304-433-1260

#### DAY HIKE

**Saturday, January 10, 2026**

**Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, Harpers Ferry, WV**

We will meet at the park visitor center and hike to the lower town, visiting the Shenandoah Canal and the remains of the old water power industry on Virginian Island along the way. Once in lower town, we will gather at one of the town restaurants for some refreshment or a light lunch before returning on a more rigorous walk to Jefferson Rock and along the Appalachian Trail. Those wanting only the easy half of the hike can ride the park shuttle back. On both walks we'll share a bit of history and get some nice winter views of the Shenandoah River and the area. Note that admission to Harpers Ferry NHP requires \$20/car or park passes.

**Distance:** 4.5 miles

**Difficulty:** MODERATE (with 2-mile option)

**Duration:** 3.5 hours

**Leader:** Chris Craig  
ccraig@laurellodge.com  
304-433-1260



*These bikers on the Western Maryland Rail Trail were lured off their bikes to explore some of the rocks along the old rail line.*

PHOTO BY TAMMY VINCENT.

#### CROSS COUNTRY SKI TRIP

**Saturday, January 31, 2026**

**Blackwater Canyon Rail Trail**

Cross country ski along the Blackwater Canyon Rail Trail. The trail is about nine miles, and we may set up a shuttle, or we may only do a part of the trail, depending on snow conditions. This may turn into a day hike if snow is inadequate. This is a great outing for the beginning skier, as the trail is relatively flat with only 1-2% slopes. The trail has been the focus of conservation efforts for over 20 years, so come to learn all about it, or just to enjoy the beautiful canyon.

**Distance:** 9 miles

**Difficulty:** MODERATE

**Duration:** 5 hours

**Leader:** Jim Kotcon  
jkotcon@gmail.com  
304-594-3322

#### DAY HIKE

**Saturday, February 14, 2026**

**Appalachian Trail, Keys Gap, VA to Harpers Ferry, WV**

After meeting in the upper town of Harpers Ferry, we will carpool to the hike start at Keys Gap. The trail follows the Blue Ridge and is fairly level until its descent to the Shenandoah River. Crossing the river on the US-340 bridge, we will make the short ascent back to the cars, with an optional stop at Appalachian Trail headquarters. Due to the carpool, reservations are required, and we ask that you let us know early if you change your decision to attend. You must be willing to drive or ride with others. There is no charge for this hike, but donations are welcome.

**Distance:** 5.6 miles

**Difficulty:** MODERATE

**Duration:** 3.5 hours

**Leader:** Chris Craig  
ccraig@laurellodge.com  
304-433-1260



*Tammy Vincent leads some hearty hikers on the Ziler Loop Trail, Cacapon State Park, in September.* PHOTO BY TOM S.



## DAY HIKE

**Saturday, February 21, 2026**

**Yankauer Nature Preserve, Berkeley County, WV**

The Yankauer Nature Preserve is owned and managed by Potomac Valley Audubon Society on 104 acres of historic farmland along the Potomac River that is now forested. It provides habitat for birds and other wildlife and is famed for its spring wildflowers. We will hike its easy trails on rolling terrain in winter, on a loop along the perimeter of the preserve. The hike is appropriate for anyone able to complete a short winter walk on unpaved trails. Dogs are not allowed in the preserve. There is no charge for the hike, but donations are welcome.

**Distance:** 2 miles

**Difficulty:** EASY

**Duration:** 1.5 hours

**Leader:** Ken Kendall  
kekendall65@gmail.com  
304-433-9537



*Bird watching was the theme for this gathering in September at Snake Hill Wildlife Management Area, near Morgantown.*  
PHOTO BY ADRIENNE EPLEY BROWN.



*Eleven Sierrans found a long-abandoned coal mine and other treasures on this August hike in Sleepy Creek Wildlife Management Area, Berkeley County.*  
PHOTO BY TAMMY VINCENT.



*This deck provided views of Stauffer's Marsh and its wildlife for a group on this October hike in the Potomac Valley Audubon preserve. PHOTO BY CHRIS CRAIG.*

## DAY HIKE

**Saturday, March 7, 2026**

**Paw Paw Tunnel, C&O Canal National Historical Park**

The Paw Paw Tunnel was a 19th-century engineering wonder, taking C&O Canal barges through a rugged mountain and avoiding miles of the Paw Paw Bends along the Potomac River. We will hike on the C&O Canal towpath through the Paw Paw Tunnel to the Sorel Ridge Hiker/Biker Campground. We will then return by going over the Tunnel Hill Trail, enjoying some good views of the Potomac River.

**Distance:** 4 miles

**Difficulty:** EASY

**Duration:** 3 hours

**Leader:** Ken Kendall  
kekendall65@gmail.com  
304-433-9537

## DAY HIKE

**Saturday, March 21, 2026**

**Tuscarora Trail – North Mountain, VA/WV**

Our exploration of the Tuscarora Trail in West Virginia and northern Virginia continues on this walk atop North Mountain between the villages of Gore and Lehigh. There will be some good views, including the one from the Pinnacles rock cropping. We may also see a small waterfall. This woodland hike involves 1900 feet of climbing—mostly gradual—and one low-water crossing. Because it involves a carpool, reservations are required, and you must be willing to drive or ride with others. There is no charge for the hike, but donations are welcome.

**Distance:** 12 miles

**Difficulty:** DIFFICULT

**Duration:** 7 hours (including carpool)

**Leader:** Chris Craig  
ccraig@laurellodge.com  
304-433-1260



*Cannons were quiet as Sierrans walked the trails at Schoolhouse Ridge South, Harpers Ferry NHP in August. PHOTO BY CHRIS CRAIG.*



*A perfect autumn day brought out a force to discover the trails and wildlife at Stauffer's Marsh, a Potomac Valley Audubon nature preserve in Berkeley County. PHOTO BY CHRIS CRAIG.*



# No Kings Rally

October brought people out for No Kings rallies all across the nation, including West Virginia. Around 2400 people gathered in Shepherdstown.

PHOTOS BY JENNY THACKER.





## Sierra Club

West Virginia Chapter

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## Winter 2025



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## You're Invited to the Next WV Chapter ExCom Meetings

**Get involved. Meet chapter leaders.**

**Learn about issues and opportunities.**

The WV Chapter Executive Committee (ExCom) will meet via Zoom at 7 p.m., Thursday, December 18. The first meeting of 2026 will be from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., Saturday, January 10, in Morgantown. A Zoom link will be available for both by contacting Jim Kotcon at [jkotcon@gmail.com](mailto:jkotcon@gmail.com).

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