

The Redbird Purchase Unit, Daniel Boone National Forest



The Redbird Ranger Station was built in 1921 by the Fordson Coal Company as living quarters for its survey crews, engineers, and draftsmen. The Forest Service turned it into the ranger station in 1967, when this was taken; in 1989, the station was listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Congress began to appropriate small amounts of money to acquire inholdings that could increase the effectiveness of the existing federal management. But the Redbird area eluded the federal foresters.

BACKGROUND

Located in the heart of the southern Appalachians' hardwood and coal country, the Redbird Purchase Unit was named for a tributary of the Kentucky River, the Red Bird River, which in turn derived its name from the legendary Cherokee chief Red Bird, who was murdered nearby in 1796.

The Forest Service's interest in acquiring lands to protect the headwaters of the Kentucky River, which provides water for one-sixth of the state's population, predates the Weeks Act. Agency foresters examined the area in 1907, 1914, and again in 1921, each time recommending it for inclusion in the National Forest System because of "its critical watershed characteristics."² Each time, though, the coal and timber companies that owned the resources both above and below ground declined to sell their lands. But federal interest never waned. Neither did the crushing poverty perpetuated in part by the very companies that were unwilling to sell.

The establishment of new purchase units typically began when the Forest Service's Land Classification staff left Washington, D.C., to conduct extensive field studies of proposed areas and submitted their findings

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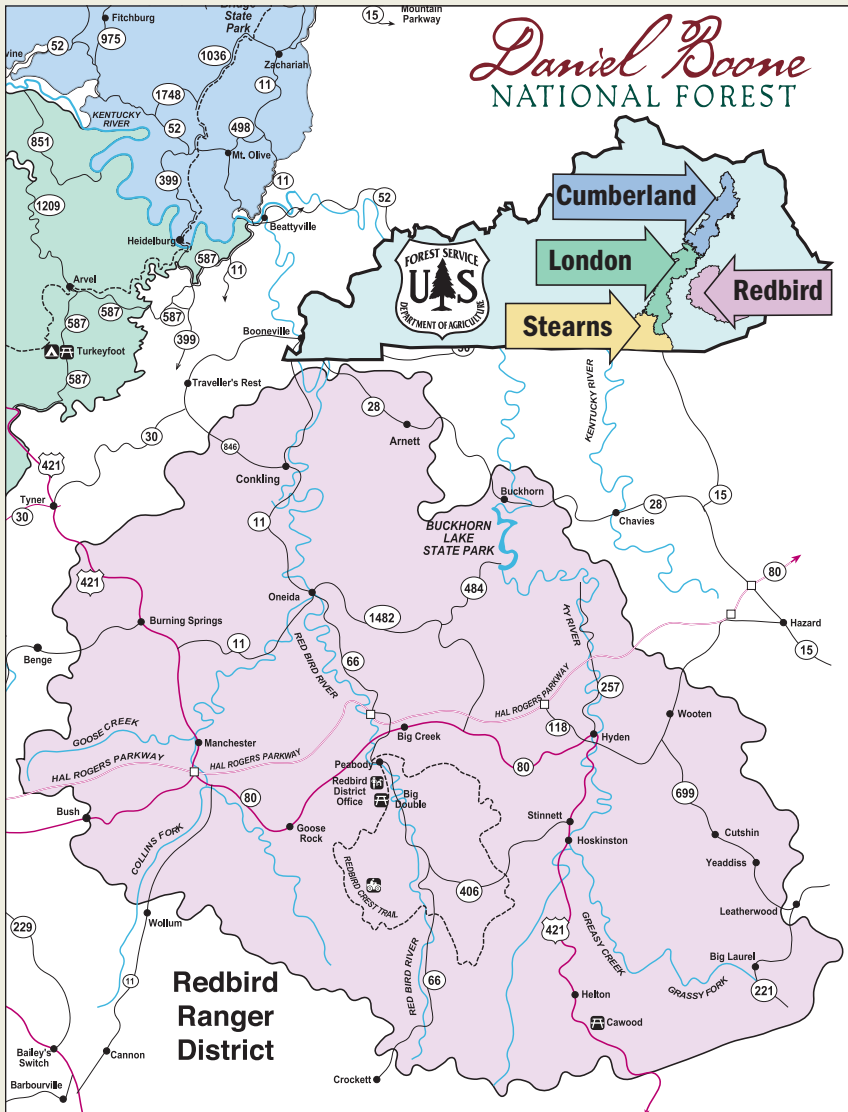
The Redbird Ranger District, part of the Daniel Boone National Forest in eastern Kentucky, is one of dozens of ranger districts created as a result of the Weeks Act of 1911. Like the others, the Redbird began as a purchase unit, the first step in what was often a swift process to creating a national forest. What sets the Redbird Purchase Unit apart is its history: it was one of the first areas ever examined and considered for protection, but it was the last Weeks Act purchase unit

Beginning in 1891, national forests in the West were established from the remaining public domain. But the eastern United States essentially had no public land left to conserve. The Weeks Act accordingly authorized

the U.S. Forest Service to identify the headwaters of navigable waterways in the Appalachian Mountains and buy as much of that land as possible to protect them. Parcels would then be assembled into a purchase unit, surveyed, and submitted for approval to the National Forest Reservation Commission (NFRC), which managed the appropriated funds and Forest Service acquisitions. For decades, the commission avoided using eminent domain to acquire land. Where landowners wouldn't sell, private parcels, known as inholdings, ended up inside a national forest boundary.¹

Nearly all the eastern national forests were established prior to World War II under this system. Weeks Act acquisitions largely stopped during the war and for several years thereafter. With few large blocks of privately owned land available to buy, in the early 1960s,

The Redbird Ranger District is one of four in the Daniel Boone National Forest.



U.S. FOREST SERVICE

parties, Breckinridge argued that establishing a national forest and introducing “scientific forestry” were necessary, not only to preserve and develop the timber resource and provide local employment, but also to prevent disastrous downstream flooding along the Kentucky River. Breckinridge’s report, which listed eighty-seven companies and individuals holding large tracts of timberland and the value of each, was well received, and the Forest Service was supportive, even sending its chief land examiner there in 1934.³ Nothing further came of it, however, even as President Franklin Roosevelt’s administration went on a buying spree, purchasing more than 11 million acres between 1933 and 1936, including enough land to establish in 1937 the Cumberland National Forest (renamed for Daniel Boone in 1966) west of the Red Bird area.

In 1939 another team of Forest Service land examiners, David Tabbutt and William E. Hedges, visited the area. Hedges had inspected the area in 1934 and had backed Mary Breckinridge’s proposal. In any proposed area, the Forest Service always wanted to start with at least one large landowner who was willing to sell. That land would serve as a base to build on and give the agency a contiguous, manageable unit even if few other tracts could be acquired. Tabbutt and Hedges found, as others had before them, that the large timber and mining companies that owned much of the land still had little interest in selling.

The key to establishing Redbird was the Fordson Coal Company, the largest landowner in the area, with 105,540 acres. Fordson, a subsidiary

in a reconnaissance report. When the Forest Service established the Cumberland Purchase Unit in 1930, its proposed 1.3 million gross acreage didn’t include land around the Red Bird River, nor did its expansion in 1934.

About that time, Mary Breckinridge, founder of the Frontier Nursing Service in eastern Kentucky, which provided health care for children in one of the poorest regions in America, emerged as an advocate for making the Red Bird area part of a national forest. In her work as a

midwife and teacher, she had traveled hundreds of miles all over the region by horseback and was familiar with the intertwined issues of impoverished land and impoverished people. The area comprised some of the most abused land in the whole region, with small landowners and residents living in the worst conditions of Appalachian poverty.

In July 1933, she met with NFRC members and the Forest Service chief in Washington. In a memorandum subsequently sent to all concerned

of Ford Motor Company, had bought the land from Peabody Coal in 1923. The car manufacturer wanted the hardwoods for wheel spokes and other automobile body parts. If Fordson would ever be willing to sell, Tabbutt and Hedges recommended that a purchase unit be created in this area. However, World War II broke out shortly after they submitted their report, and no further action was taken. Meanwhile, mining and logging continued in the region, which paradoxically would help make the land more attractive to the federal government.

Fast-forward to 1960.⁴ That year's presidential campaign marked the beginning of the federal government's "rediscovery" of Appalachia. The attention eventually took the form of billions of federal dollars directed toward improving the area. A byproduct of that attention would be creation of the Redbird Purchase Unit.

Soon after taking office in 1961, President John Kennedy appointed a task force that identified nearly 100 Appalachian depressed areas, classified by the Department of Labor as having a "labor surplus, substantial and persistent," and 300 to 400 low-income rural areas where federal funds might be concentrated. The task force recommended that a commission be established for the 11-state Appalachian region to tackle the development problems of these areas. Kennedy appointed the President's Appalachian Regional Commission (PARC) in 1963.

Along with the effects of strip-mining, one of PARC's major concerns was the region's timber resource, which the commission believed "should provide much of the foundation for the renewed economic vigor of the region." However, fragmented ownership

proved to be one of the region's most serious challenges to good forest management, PARC reported, and "substantial acreages of forest land" in Appalachia were found so depleted as "not likely to be rehabilitated and adequately protected under private ownership." Thus, public ownership of such lands was recommended so the forests could be returned to full productivity.

Following the recommendations of Senator Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia and Governor Bert T. Combs of Kentucky, two mountain areas—one bordering the Monongahela National Forest, the other in eastern Kentucky—were studied for national forest expansion in Appalachia. The eastern Kentucky area consisted of about five million acres encompassing the headwaters of the Cumberland, Kentucky, Licking, and Big Sandy rivers. Destructive floods struck eastern Kentucky in March 1963, bringing timely attention to the region and its long-standing problems. In November 1963, PARC recommended acquiring about 1.3 million acres over a ten-year period—not only to meet timber development recommendations but also to further the general goals of PARC.

UNCLE SAM TAKES CHARGE

Nearly two years later, PARC's recommendations were realized. On February 24, 1965, the NFRC created the Redbird Purchase Unit, encompassing 591,000 acres in seven counties that included the headwaters of the Red Bird River and the south and middle forks of the Kentucky River. The hard work of land acquisition could now begin.

In July 1965, an acquisition team opened an office in Manchester, Kentucky: Tom Frazier (project leader), Ted Hensley (draftsman), Bobbie Pennington (secretary), and

the author, serving as the acquisition forester. The office was a refurbished cabin in downtown Manchester, and the team vehicles were military surplus.

The team settled in quickly and began to examine and appraise a property offered by the Redbird Timber Company, which had purchased it from Fordson just a few years before and proceeded to heavily log it. The first major step was to value whatever timber was left after years of harvesting and forest fires. The Lakes States Experiment Station developed the cruising approach, and several two-person teams were assembled to do the work, which required dealing with blackberry briars, chiggers, ticks, and snakes on steep slopes in summer heat. Beech and hickory made up much of the remaining timber, but neither species was worth much in the lumber market. The cruise was completed within a month and focus then changed to valuing the land and buildings.

The property was staged in three option blocks to accommodate annual Weeks Law appropriations. The first purchase was on December 21, 1966, when the Forest Service acquired two option blocks totaling 60,171 acres, located in Leslie, Clay, Harlan, and Bell counties, from Redbird Timber for \$2,020,000. The third option block was purchased on October 26, 1967, for \$388,425. The Forest Service was now in the land management business on the Redbird. The office moved to Peabody, into the old Fordson Coal Company office, in the heart of the purchase unit.

As the spring fire season approached—the first since the Forest Service created the Redbird—firefighting crews were put together from a variety of sources. Several fires were all quickly contained. Staffing grew as a fire control organization was completed,



U.S. FOREST SERVICE

As Vance Mosley and others discovered, cruising timber on Redbird Company lands meant dealing with blackberry briars, chiggers, ticks, and snakes on steep slopes in summer heat.

followed by a survey crew, foresters, and additional land acquisition and management staff.

When acquiring land under the Weeks Act, the Forest Service sought to avoid local opposition to its efforts. Consequently, with the purchase of Redbird Timber's tract, the Forest Service assumed responsibility not only for the land but also for 115 families that had been tenants of the company on a

year-to-year basis. Most of these families lived in substandard housing on remote, unmaintained roads. The eventual goal was to relocate them, but not much changed for them after Uncle Sam became their landlord. Under the Forest Service, residents could continue farming under special-use permits; like the timber company before it, the Forest Service would not maintain the roads serving the homes. The agency, however, required "that the permittees clean up the premises and keep them clean"—something the tenants weren't accustomed to doing. Managing special-use permits, trash disposal, and other issues became ongoing challenges for rangers.

Several public works programs started to make a difference in the lives of people in the Redbird area, and the Forest Service provided opportunities for effective conservation work. One of the first projects was to clear the Big Double Creek, which ran by the Forest Service's Peabody office, of the sediment originating from eroded skid trails and rough roads. Many roads went straight up the steep slopes; they dumped large volumes of silt in the stream every time it rained.

The Forest Service's hydrologist developed a rehabilitation plan that included creating check dams and applying seed and fertilizer on exposed, eroding slopes. One year later the water was clean enough for trout, which were then regularly stocked in the creek. This accomplishment was followed by the first Forest Service public recreation area on the Redbird. Job Corps crews also completed many timber stand improvement projects and other important work.

DETERMINING SURFACE AND MINERAL RIGHTS

Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, the NFRC invested attention and money in building and consolidating the Redbird Purchase Unit. From 1966 through 1972, more than half of the Weeks Act funds went to Redbird. In 1972, the commission approved extending the Redbird Purchase Unit by 96,061 acres of land that was "forested although heavily cutover" in Owsley and Perry counties. The acquisition would help protect the area's watersheds and improve the water quality of an existing reservoir. A few large purchases formed the nucleus: 71,012 acres from Redbird Timber Company, 15,991 acres from Atlantic Lumber Company, and 8,550 acres from Mayne



Lumber Company.⁵ Of the many smaller purchases, one was just 1.19 acres. From its creation in 1965 until 1978, an average of about 7,500 acres was added to the Redbird each year. In 1977 the net acreage of the purchase unit was almost 135,000 acres, and in 1981 it was just over 140,000 acres.

Prices for land in the Redbird were far below those in the other southern Appalachian national forests. In fiscal year 1977, for example, tracts acquired in the Redbird averaged \$85.97 per acre; those in the Nantahala and Pisgah national forests in western North Carolina averaged \$441.27 per acre, and those in the Cherokee in eastern Tennessee, \$635.22 per

acre. The Redbird Purchase Unit now includes 682,150 acres, of which 146,444 acres are national forest.

The problem of mineral rights, which had prevented efforts to establish a national forest in eastern Kentucky for half a century, challenged the later work as well.⁶ To pass the Weeks Act and to facilitate the sale of company-owned lands, a compromise had been struck that allowed subsurface rights to be handled separately from surface rights. Thus, landowners could retain the right to minerals (or sell them to a third party) after selling surface rights to the Forest Service. Much of the land in the Redbird is covered by the Kentucky

Surface mining in the mid-1960s in the Red Bird River watershed created challenges for those in land acquisition and for land managers.

broad form deed, which allows strip-mining and gives the deed holder wide discretion on how to remove the coal. At first, the National Forest Reservation Commission was reluctant to purchase lands with outstanding mineral rights held by a third party with a broad form deed. Gradually, however, it recognized that because so much Redbird land was of this type, some would have to be acquired to create a manageable national forest district.

Many tracts in eastern Kentucky have been purchased with mineral rights held by third parties. However, the state has since substantially strengthened surface mining requirements, the Tennessee Valley Authority transferred about 40,000 acres of mineral rights it held to the jurisdiction of the Forest Service, and coal mining has contracted as major power plants convert to natural gas. Mineral rights have also been separately purchased, where possible, to facilitate Forest Service control. For example, in 1971 NFRC authorized \$10 per acre to purchase the mineral rights to the old Fordson lands. Ultimately, of course, the commission could obtain the mineral rights with the commission secretary's condemnation, an option that was entertained more frequently in the 1970s as recreation and wilderness advocates collided with mining interests on the Daniel Boone National Forest. When the commission was dissolved in 1976 and the Redbird Purchase Unit was added to the national forest, acquisition of large tracts at major stream headwaters came to an end.

REDBIRD TODAY

Forest Service crews from the 1960s would easily recognize some aspects of the Redbird Purchase Unit today. The old Fordson office in Peabody has become the Redbird Ranger Station, and it still has its original maple, oak, and walnut woods visible in different rooms; the main office (now the district ranger's) is still paneled with American chestnut. The 1927 building has been listed in the National Register of Historic Places, along with the large log house that Mary Breckinridge built as her home and midwifery school in 1925; it's about twenty miles east, outside Wendover.

But the old-timers would not recognize the land. The badly cutover, eroded, unproductive forests, mostly owned by companies bent on natural

resource extraction, now grow some of the finest southern Appalachian hardwood timber in the region. The 100-mile-long Redbird Crest Trail is a popular and challenging multiuse trail. The Redbird Wildlife Management Area, managed cooperatively with the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, comprises more than 25,000 acres of woodlands. The Big Double Creek picnic area has fields for baseball, volleyball, football, and other activities, plus facilities for community picnics and family outings. The Cawood Recreation Area includes a hemlock-shaded creek at the site of an old Job Corps camp, with facilities for various outdoor pursuits.

Perhaps the best indicator of the condition of Redbird's forestland after a half-century of management is found in the comeback story of a species that hadn't been seen since 1847. That's when John James Audubon wrote that no elk could "be found within hundreds of miles."⁷ One hundred fifty years later, the Kentucky Elk Restoration project, with major financial assistance from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, undertook a complex, multiyear effort to return elk to southeastern Kentucky. Redbird Ranger District lands proved crucial to the reintroduction of elk in these mountains. The project exceeded expectations, and by 2001, elk populations were abundant enough to permit hunting. Subsequent research has "suggested that elk primarily used reclaimed surface mines for feeding, and used the surrounding intact timberlands for thermal and escape cover."⁸ Moreover, elk habitat management has also benefited white-tailed deer, black bear, wild turkey, ruffed grouse, and other game species.⁹ Nongame terrestrial and aquatic species have thrived, too. The condition of the land and waterways has been vastly improved. To borrow a phrase favored by John Kennedy, whose focus on improving the lives of those living in Appalachia

sixty years ago eventually led to the establishment of the Redbird Purchase Unit, a rising tide lifts all the boats.

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NOTES

1. Lincoln Bramwell and James G. Lewis, "The Law That Nationalized the U.S. Forest Service," *Forest History Today*, Spring/Fall 2011, 12–13.
2. Robert F. Collins, *A History of the Daniel Boone National Forest, 1770–1970* (Winchester, KY: USDA Forest Service—Southern Region), 252.
3. Mary Breckinridge, *Wide Neighborhoods: A Story of the Frontier Nursing Service* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1952, 1981), 345–48. Collins (*History of the Daniel Boone National Forest*, 201) reported that she personally knew the secretary of War. Breckinridge, however, says in her memoir that she called on her friend Senator Alben Barkley, who arranged a brief meeting for her with the secretary in which she asked permission to speak with the Forest Service chief.
4. Much of what follows draws heavily on Shelley S. Mastran and Nan Lowerre, *Mountaineers and Rangers: A History of Federal Forest Management in the Southern Appalachians, 1900–81* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1983), chap. 7, <http://npshistory.com/publications/usfs/region/8/history/chap7.htm>.
5. Many thanks to Tracy Adkins for tracking down these figures.
6. For more on mineral rights and the Weeks Act, see Dave Fredley, "Surface and Mineral Rights and the Weeks Act," *Forest History Today*, Spring/Fall 2011, 32–35.
7. Quoted in Dave Baker, "The Elk Decade," *Kentucky Afield*, Winter 2007, 23.
8. Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, "2015–2030 Kentucky Elk Management Plan," <https://fw.ky.gov/Hunt/Documents/20152030ElkManagementPlan.pdf>, 6.
9. U.S. Forest Service, "Elk Viewing on Redbird Ranger District," <https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/dbnf/specialplaces/?cid=stelprdb5285244>.