



## ATC Conservation and Trail Management Policy on Grasslands and Early Successional Habitat Areas

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The Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), a §501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, works closely with Appalachian Trail maintaining clubs (“Clubs”) and public and private partners to ensure the protection and stewardship of the natural, cultural, and experiential resources of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail (known as ANST, A.T., or “the Trail”). Approximately fifty federal, state, or other public agencies have authority or jurisdiction over lands and resources within the protected A.T. corridor. ATC has a central management role by virtue of its Cooperative Agreement with the USDI National Park Service and its close working partnership with the USDA Forest Service and other agencies. ATC’s mission is: “To protect, manage and advocate for the Appalachian National Scenic Trail.”

ATC's Trail management and conservation policies are meant to provide guidance for (a) dissemination to the public; (b) use and implementation by the ATC and the Clubs; and (c) recommendations for land-managing and other agencies. It is the agencies who work within their defined procedures to propose, administer, and enforce public policy. ATC policies are recommendations developed to support appropriate, coordinated Trail-wide management.

### Overview

From Maine to Georgia, the Appalachian Trail traverses a landscape of diverse habitats, natural areas and environments. This landscape diversity contributes in part to the overall resiliency, biodiversity, and beauty of the Trail’s landscape. Among the habitat types found along the A.T. is the broad category of early successional habitat. Early successional habitat for the purpose of this policy is defined as areas in the initial to early-middle stages of the ecological succession process. These areas are commonly characterized by herbaceous plants, like grasses and forbs, and sometimes by woody shrub species; these areas also lack a canopy of mature, long-lived tree species. Early successional habitat is created and maintained through disturbances, both natural and human caused, such as soil chemistry and hydrology, fire, flooding, extreme wind events, grazing, timber removal, and invasive pests.

Along the A.T., early successional habitat makes up just 1% of the land cover and is represented by areas such as the expansive globally imperiled Southern Appalachian Grassy Balds, the mountaintop grasslands of the Mt. Rogers National Recreation Area in Virginia, the fertile agricultural lands of the Cumberland Valley in Pennsylvania, and the stonewall bordered meadows and pastures of the New England states. Many of the non-forested areas along the



A.T. were established through clearing of forestland for agricultural purposes, but some are remnant grasslands that have naturally existed on the landscape for centuries. Regardless of their origins, many of these areas were the focus of priority land acquisition efforts undertaken specifically so the A.T. could be realigned to take advantage of the ecological, scenic, cultural and historic values of these special places.

Early successional habitat areas are an important component of the A.T. landscape, providing food and shelter for many species that require non-forested habitats for survival and reproduction during some, or all, of their life cycle. A 2019 research study published by Rosenberg et al. reported a net loss of 29% of the North American breeding bird population over the last half-century, with the greatest population losses experienced among grassland breeding birds at a 53.3% net decline in total abundance (Rosenberg et al. 2019). Habitat destruction and loss was identified as the primary factor contributing to bird population declines, making quality habitat protection and stewardship more important than ever.

These areas are equally as valuable for the incredible wealth of recreational opportunities they provide, such as enjoyment of panoramic views, opportunities for wildlife viewing and photography, dark sky experiences, learning about cultural heritage, and hunting (where applicable). These areas often draw non-traditional A.T. visitors looking to experience the Trail, sometimes for the first time. For A.T. hikers, whether day, section, or thru-hiking, these areas offer some of the highest quality and most sought after views they will experience on their entire A.T. journey.

Whereas historically the A.T. landscape included a constantly fluid mosaic of non-forested habitats that were created and lost through natural processes, human interference, like the practices of widespread wildfire suppression, habitat conversion for development, and the removal of large mammalian predators, has largely displaced these natural processes from the landscape. In the absence of natural disturbance, a “hands off” approach to management would result in the disappearance of a large portion of the early-successional habitat areas along the A.T. Thus, the continued existence of a high-quality early-successional habitat complex in the A.T. corridor from Georgia to Maine requires ongoing human intervention in the form of actions such as cutting, brush hogging, forest stewardship practices, and invasive species management. Furthermore, connectivity of these early-successional habitats is becoming increasingly important as species’ ranges shift northward and to higher elevations as they utilize new areas for breeding, migratory stopovers, and over-wintering.

## **Policy**

As a matter of policy which considers both the ecological and human/cultural dimensions of the A.T., the Appalachian Trail Conservancy recognizes that maintaining and enhancing early successional habitat across the A.T. corridor is an important aspect of conserving biodiversity, maintaining a functional and resilient landscape, and protecting some of the most valuable

scenic, historical and cultural opportunities principal to the A.T. experience. The ATC also recognizes that human alteration of natural ecosystem processes has resulted in the need for active management of these areas if they are to persist on the landscape.

To help preserve the scenic, historical, cultural and biological integrity of the A.T., the ATC has adopted a set of policy guidelines for protecting and enhancing early successional habitat areas. While the wide range of non-forested and early successional habitat types across the A.T. necessitates that stewardship priorities and management approaches vary from site to site and region to region, these areas share the same overarching values and management purpose rooted in protecting and enhancing the A.T. experience, character, and resources.

### **Policy Guidelines**

1. The management of early successional areas is critical to the protection of Appalachian imperiled species and the protection of the visitor experience along the A.T. The ATC will work cooperatively with A.T. maintaining clubs, the relevant land management agency, and other non-profit and academic partners to responsibly manage the scenic and habitat quality of these areas.
2. The ATC will develop adaptive management plans for A.T. early successional habitat areas that 1. Identify the primary and secondary values for which an area is managed and 2. Outline a science-based, site-specific management approach to protect and promote those values. These management plans should be supported by the cooperative management system and include input from the local A.T. maintaining club, the land management agency, and the ATC.
3. The ATC will utilize peer-reviewed science, vetted principles, and the knowledge and resources of land management agencies and other partners to ensure management decisions and actions follow best management practices.
4. Management considerations should include evaluation of the visitor experience, resource protection, ecological sensitivity, historic and current visitor use patterns, and agency law and policy; including the Endangered Species Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, and Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. In cases where there are differing priorities for management, resolutions must always prioritize protection of rare, sensitive, threatened and endangered species, and critical natural and cultural resources (see ATC Policy on Rare, Threatened and Endangered Species).
5. Management actions will be specifically tailored to each site according to its unique blend of historical, cultural, biological, geographic, scenic, and other qualities and limitations. Primary management goals for a specific site will be balanced with ancillary goals to best meet the objectives of all management partners. Methods, including mowing, grazing, prescribed fire (see ATC Policy on Prescribed Burns), forest stewardship practices, brushing, and the use of herbicides, should be evaluated and employed considering the above site characteristics as well



as safety, site accessibility, cost, long-term management feasibility, agency policy, and potential environmental and user experience impacts.

6. The ATC, in consultation with clubs and management partners, will conduct periodic assessments of early successional areas along the A.T. Assessments will include an evaluation of current site conditions, desired future conditions, the efficacy of past and present management actions, and need for adaptation of management activities.

7. The ATC will maintain and update a record of site management plans, site data, and site photographs. To the extent possible, photographs should be taken at the same location, in the same direction, and same focal length to provide for comparability over time and should adequately represent attributes of interest.

8. High elevation early successional areas provide critical habitat to a unique suite of species that are particularly vulnerable to climate change impacts. These sites are a high priority for species monitoring and survey efforts as habitat usage shifts and migratory patterns change in response to a warming climate, changes in air quality, changes in precipitation, and changes in nutrient cycling. To the extent possible, ATC will make every effort to monitor and improve the health and resiliency of these habitats in the face of climate change.

9. In areas where access roads to early successional habitats are visible from the A.T., care will be taken to minimize impacts to the visitor experience. Where possible, the ATC supports the protection of access roads to early successional habitat areas through land acquisition, deeded right-of-way easement, or conservation easement. Where formalized access isn't possible, ATC will work to maintain ongoing relationships with local landowners to support the continuation of management activities (see ATC Policy on Road Closures and Access Control).

10. The ATC will work with the A.T. clubs, land management agencies and other partners to mobilize resources for the responsible management of non-forested and early successional habitat areas, including scientific expertise, local knowledge, financial support, and labor.

### **References Cited**

Rosenberg, K. V., Dokter, A. M., Blancher, P. J., Sauer, J. R., Smith, A. C., Smith, P. A., Stanton, J. C., Panjabi, A., Helft, L., Parr, M. J., & Marra, P. P. (2019). Decline of the North American avifauna. *Science*, 366(6461), 120–124.

*THIS POLICY AND THE VISUAL RESOURCE POLICY (2023) SUPERSEDE THE FOLLOWING EXISTING ATC POLICY:*

*OPEN AREAS AND VISTAS (1985)*

For questions related to this policy please contact the Appalachian Trail Conservancy at [www.appalachiantrail.org](http://www.appalachiantrail.org), or P.O. Box 807, Harpers Ferry, WV, 25425-807.

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy's mission is to protect, manage, and advocate for the Appalachian National Scenic Trail.