Cataloochee Ranch Announces New Guided and Self-Guided Tours of Their Experimental American Chestnut Orchard

In contrast to its peaceful and stunningly beautiful high-mountain setting, Maggie Valley's Cataloochee Ranch has been at the forefront of a battle — a battle to restore the American chestnut, the iconic Appalachian tree devastated by blight in the mid-20th century. In 2007, working in partnership with The American Chestnut Foundation (TACF), Cataloochee Ranch became the host site of a test orchard of potentially blight-resistant American Chestnut trees, and starting in June, they will open this orchard to the public for tours.

"These mountains were once blanketed with stands of American chestnut, and this orchard, in many ways tells the story of the century-long battle to return this beautiful tree to our forests," says Dr. Paul Sisco, a retired geneticist who volunteers at Cataloochee Ranch on behalf of The American Chestnut Foundation.

Cataloochee Ranch’s orchard is mainly composed of fourth generation back-crossed American chestnuts which provide potential resistance to the deadly blight that killed over 4 billion American chestnut trees. Now in their sixth growing season, the trees will be tested for resistance to chestnut blight by inoculating each tree with the fungus that causes the blight. TACF scientists can then determine which trees carry resistance.

Guided tours of the orchard will begin on Wednesday, June 13 and be available every Wednesday throughout the summer. The guided tours include lunch, and cost $15.00. Reservations are required. Please call (828)926-1401 to make your reservation. Self-guided tours of the orchard are available at any time beginning June 13. Donations are greatly appreciated.

Cataloochee Ranch is a guest ranch located high above Maggie Valley, NC that opened its doors to guests in 1934. Tom and Judy Alexander were the original owners/operators and they set the tone
of genuine hospitality and warmth. The ranch offers horseback riding, hiking, fishing, lawn games, fantastic views, three nutritious meals a day, and lots of loafing. The property adjoins the Great Smoky Mountains National Park so that all the park trails can be enjoyed on foot or by horseback. Now the ranch is in the competent hands of the third generation of Alexanders and they are continuing the warm and hospitable atmosphere set by their grandparents. In addition to caring for the guests, the current owners are strong in their conviction of caring for the land and the forests. Much of Cataloochee property has been placed into a conservation easement with Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy holding the agreement. This easement protects about 300 acres of ranch land from development while allowing all recreational and agricultural activities.

Once the mighty giant of our eastern forests, American chestnuts stood up to 100 feet tall, and numbered in the billions. In 1904 a blight, accidentally imported from Asia, spread rapidly through the American chestnut population. By 1950 the blight fungus had killed virtually all the mature trees from Maine to Georgia. Several attempts to breed blight-resistant trees in the mid-1900s were unsuccessful.

Then in 1983, a dedicated group of scientists formed The American Chestnut Foundation (TACF®) and began a special breeding process, which in 2005 produced the first potentially blight-resistant trees called Restoration Chestnuts. Now assisted by nearly 6,000 members and volunteers in 23 states, the organization is undertaking the planting of Restoration Chestnuts in select locations, which include reclaimed mined land, throughout the eastern US as part of the Foundation’s early restoration and testing efforts.

TACF is a 501(c) (3) conservation organization headquartered in Asheville, NC. For more information on TACF and their work to restore the American chestnut tree, contact Paul Franklin at (828)713-9547 email: pfranklin@acf.org. Or visit www.acf.org.

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