



2020 ANNUAL REPORT

Comfort, renewal, inspiration.



## Letter From the President & Executive Director



Dear friends,

Early in 2020, we couldn't have even imagined the changes the year would bring. It was quite a year for us at Grandfather Mountain, as we know it was for everyone. "Unprecedented" has been used to describe it again and again, and it's certainly accurate. The year also brought many blessings.

The pandemic has been hard on many businesses, especially those, like ours, that rely on ticket sales. But, like the butterflies in our butterfly garden, as we've emerged from our chrysalis, beautiful things happened.

While we've had to stay distanced from one another, many people are turning to nature for comfort, renewal and inspiration. Grandfather Mountain has helped fulfill this need — and in keeping with our mission, we hope that as guests explore, understand and value the wonders of the mountain, we also inspire conservation.

That mission is always first and foremost in our minds. We have been deeply encouraged by the generosity of so many who've supported the Fulfilling Promises Capital Campaign for our new Conservation Campus, especially during these

uncertain times, and we're making significant progress on construction. Once completed, it will offer new ways for guests to connect with nature through state-of-the-art interactive exhibits and enhanced educational programming, along with incredible indoor and outdoor facilities. We broke ground on the project in September 2019.

**Community support for the Conservation Campus and for Grandfather Mountain from state and local leaders, donors, guests and friends during the pandemic has been inspiring. We've felt your excitement, relished your well wishes and are grateful for your support to make the Conservation Campus a reality. We have especially appreciated you sharing the gift of experiencing nature at Grandfather Mountain with your loved ones.**

Together we have weathered a difficult storm. And we're encouraged that over the past year, so many have taken solace and found joy in nature. We hope that will continue, and we will continue to pour our efforts into making that happen.

Sincerely,

Jesse Pope  
President and Executive Director



## Conservation Campus Updates

In 2020, the sounds of bulldozers and dump trucks were as common around the Grandfather Mountain Nature Museum as the sounds of Wrens and Warblers. Construction on the Wilson Center for Nature Discovery is in full swing.

With site preparation and grading complete, footers poured and early structural elements in place, the fun is just beginning! The project will almost double the size of the Nature Museum; add all-new exhibits and 10,000 square feet of new education space; restore the ADA-accessible auditorium; provide new outdoor learning spaces; and expand capacity for conferences and events.

The Conservation Campus will even feature a ChargePoint Electric Vehicle (EV) charging station, with a second station located at the Entrance Gate. Both were funded through a grant from the N.C. Department of Environmental Quality.

Slated to open in fall of 2021, the Conservation Campus is being built by Alex Johnson Construction. Johnson worked

on the Nature Museum and sees the Conservation Campus project as part of his legacy.

"I am honored to help build the new Conservation Campus and excited to be a part of this project that will provide an incredible place for everyone to learn about Grandfather Mountain and the importance of nature," he said.

The community has been very supportive of the Fulfilling Promises Capital Campaign and the Conservation Campus project, rallying behind the vision and supporting fundraising efforts, and eagerly awaiting its completion.

"Grandfather Mountain is a unique treasure and has always been an important part of the community, but never has that been more evident than in the past year," said Phillip Barrier, Avery County manager. "I look forward to seeing the impact the Conservation Campus will have on the lives of the citizens of Western North Carolina and beyond for years to come."

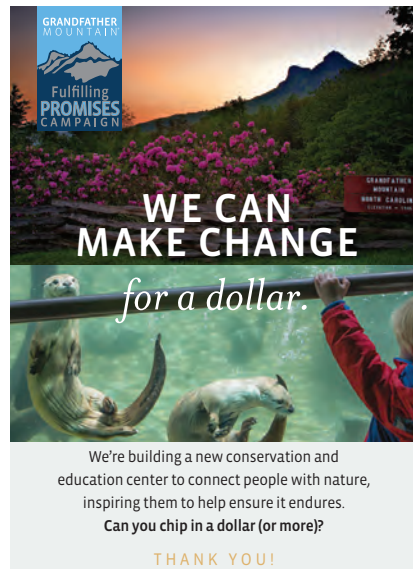


## Every Donation Counts for the Fulfilling Promises Capital Campaign

It's taken a mountain of effort to get the Conservation Campus to this point and this wouldn't have been possible without the generosity of donors. From Bob and Susan Wilson, who were naming donors for the Wilson Center for Nature Discovery, the crowning jewel of the Conservation Campus, to the many others who've given to name components of the project, to the countless local businesses, families and individuals who have donated, we are eternally grateful.

We're also thankful for those who have helped fund the project anonymously. One such generous donor pledged \$1 million, helping Grandfather Mountain reach a fundraising milestone to launch the public phase of the campaign. What's more, over \$28,000 has been donated by countless guests of the mountain, who've given leftover change from their purchases, "rounding up" to support the project.

We knew it would take donations of all sizes to make the Conservation Campus a reality, and we've been encouraged by the participation at all levels. Every gift is appreciated and makes a difference.



**92% of the funds needed to reach our minimum goal for Grandfather Mountain's Conservation Campus project have been raised.**

**We're nearing the goal** and your support will help ensure the success of the Conservation Campus. Your gift will provide conservation and environmental education for generations to come.

If you would like to help, visit [grandfather.com/fulfillingpromises](http://grandfather.com/fulfillingpromises).

## A New Appreciation for Being in Nature

When the pandemic began, Grandfather Mountain, like much of the country and world, shut down for two months to slow the spread of COVID-19. When the park was allowed to re-open in May, it was not business as usual given capacity restrictions, social distancing measures and more. But, even amid this uncertainty, it was impressive how the Grandfather Mountain staff adapted with resilience to the "new normal," creating innovative ways for people to continue to experience the mountain and connect with nature.

Almost immediately after North Carolina's shutdown began in March, our staff knew instinctively that people would need the respite only nature can provide. They answered the call and began sharing the wonders of Grandfather Mountain to virtual guests, far and wide, through a series of videos called "Nature Minutes." These short videos provided information on many natural topics, such as the animal inhabitants of the mountain, both in the habitats and outside of them, rare species found at Grandfather, seasonal happenings and weather phenomena.

Even though people couldn't visit Grandfather Mountain in person, the

videos offered an opportunity to take a breather and enjoy the great outdoors, even from the four all-too-familiar walls of home. The series was so well received it was continued after Grandfather Mountain re-opened.

Our staff developed new ways to continue our educational work with children when learning moved online. To inspire our youngest fans to connect with nature, in early April,



**Interpretive programs** remained a favorite activity of guests with nearly 3,500 people participating.

On May 15, Grandfather Mountain re-opened with limited capacity, new social distancing guidelines and mask requirements. Staff stepped up to manage the "new normal," dedicating many hours to making sure guests stayed safe and still enjoyed their experience.

Maintaining capacity limits was a new challenge, addressed by moving all ticket sales online. While selling tickets only online was

a new way of doing business, it has helped to optimize the guest experience and maintain efficient operations. Given these benefits, we expect that online booking will continue even after the pandemic.

2020 was a year of great change. Being in nature has given folks a way to safely connect with others and has provided the renewal and healing that only nature can. While change is undoubtedly on the horizon, Grandfather Mountain will continue to work to connect and inspire guests through nature, both at the mountain and virtually.

**Nature Minutes videos** brought the wonders of the mountain into people's homes with 22 educational videos viewed more than 228,000 times.

Of course, we'd never leave out the big kids! Grandfather Mountain offered Zoom backgrounds for use in those endless online meetings and virtual postcards to share with friends. Both were hits with fans of the mountain who appreciated the distraction from the isolation in those early days of the pandemic.





**Almost 500 children were reached** through Wild Watch and other virtual science enrichment programs.



**3 innovative programs were created** to teach students about nature during COVID, including a Virtual Academy with Avery County, learning pods for homeschoolers and after-school outreach at the YMCA.



**Funds were raised** to provide teachers in 24 classrooms with science education materials. Classroom in a Box kits will provide tools, resources and curriculum to enrich hands-on learning in Title 1 schools, where 40% or more of students are from low-income families.

## The (Educational) Show Must Go On

As Grandfather Mountain seeks to achieve its mission of inspiring conservation of the natural world, we help guests explore, understand and value the wonders found here.

We offer a variety of programs to promote exploration and understanding, from talks with naturalists who provide information on natural phenomena, animal behavior or rare species to guided hikes— or in non-pandemic times, adult field courses or evening lecture series. Even in a year when education was totally disrupted, Grandfather Mountain found creative ways to continue these efforts.

Field trips were cancelled, but educating kids about the natural world was not. Our committed team of environmental educators developed a virtual program series for Avery Virtual Academy and the Wild Watch program that were available to both in-person and virtual classrooms.

The team has also created Classroom in a Box kits to bring Grandfather Mountain and the wonders of nature to local classrooms. The kits provide scientific tools to identify and study plants and trees, a guide for teachers and more. Thanks to generous donors, who love and support Grandfather Mountain, along with a matching gift from the Luke Garrison Foundation, funds were raised to provide kits in 2021 to over 600 students in 25 classrooms in Title 1 schools.

The kits are being distributed in 2021 and will provide teachers with enhanced tools to support science and environmental education for two different curriculums and three different age groups. They include magnifiers and access to guides about flowers, trees and shrubs.

The inaugural year of Wild Watch, the Grandfather Mountain Stewardship Foundation's yearlong partnership with Avery County Schools, wrapped up in 2020, but will continue in future years and expand to other counties. The program includes a series of classroom or virtual visits to all first-grade students in Avery County elementary schools, exploring many of North Carolina's science curriculum standards through inquiry-based learning experiences. Participants received hand lenses, field guides and a monthly lesson on natural sciences to learn about scientific observation, map-making and North Carolina's unique soil types.

They were also educated about animals through interactive visits with Grandfather Mountain's teaching animals.

"Sally, Grandfather's corn snake, usually steals the show!" said Lauren Farrell, Grandfather Mountain interpretation and education programs manager.

Due to school and mountain closures, students weren't able to go to Grandfather Mountain for their final field trip, but they enjoyed a virtual visit to Grandfather Mountain's famous environmental wildlife habitats. "Thank you to the High Country Charitable Foundation for the grant they provided for this program and to Avery County Schools for their invaluable support and its first-grade teachers for making this partnership happen," Farrell said. "We hope to continue this over the coming school years."

## Is the Next Picasso in Grandfather Mountain's Animal Habitats?

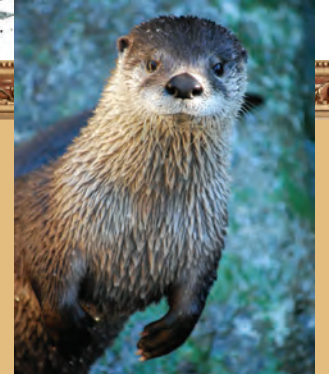
Could it be that the world's next renowned artist isn't diligently honing their skills in Paris, Rome or New York, but instead at Grandfather Mountain? Many of the resident animals of the animal habitats —otters, cougars, bears and more — frequently create works of art. You can see one by Nova, the North American river otter (right). The purpose is not only to support their artistic tendencies, but to nurture their minds and natural behaviors, as well.

Every animal in the habitats at Grandfather Mountain is here because they've had injuries or other issues that would keep them from surviving in the wild. Grandfather gives them a habitat like the one in which they'd live naturally, feeds them a healthy diet and cares for them well.

Keepers help the animals exhibit natural behaviors — foraging, manipulating objects, playing or simply moving around — by providing them with special enrichments. These are typically food, items providing sensory stimulation or toys. For instance, a cougar might be given a stick to play with that's scented with something it would prey on in the wild. Discarded jack-o-lanterns and Christmas trees are great fun for bears at the holidays. And, yes, some animals enjoy painting.

Grandfather Mountain is a non-profit organization. The proceeds from ticket sales and other purchases on the mountain help to support our animals, preserve the nature in our care and allow us to share the wonders of nature with guests.

You can donate enrichments for the animals through our Amazon Wishlist, <https://bit.ly/gfm-wishlist>, or make a tax-deductible donation at [grandfather.com/donate](https://grandfather.com/donate).



**Grandfather Mountain would like to thank** all those who donated to ensure our animals continued to receive exemplary care, nutrition and enrichments, in spite of the shutdowns and reduced visitation prompted by COVID-19.



## Remembering Luna and Gerry

At Grandfather Mountain, all of our animals are loved, and it’s hard to lose any member of our animal family. In 2020, we lost two wonderful, smart and spirited animals.

Luna the otter passed away in April, after surgery for a chronic infection. She had lived in the animal habitats since 2010, after being orphaned and found in a person’s yard in Lincoln County, N.C.



Grandfather Mountain also lost Gerry the black bear in June, following a long history of debilitating arthritis. She’d been a resident of the animal habitats for 28 years, after also being orphaned as a cub, rehabilitated and then found to be unable to survive in the wild.



Luna and Gerry will be missed by our staff and all the visitors they interacted with during their time on Grandfather Mountain.

With careful financial stewardship and generous support, we were able to retain all staff members and sustain the highest quality of care for our animals and their habitats. Staff members dedicated more than 3,500 hours to ensure the safety of guests by modifying the flow of foot traffic at habitats and the swinging bridge, ensuring mask compliance and social distancing, and sterilizing spaces.

## Wild Weather

Grandfather Mountain is no stranger to unusual weather — or to incredible displays of the power of Mother Nature.

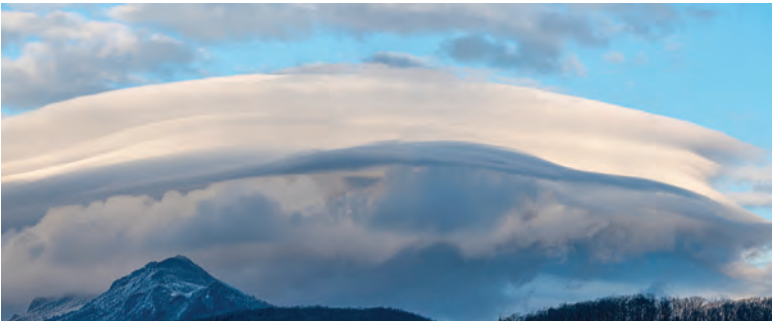
On Jan. 26, 2020, a unique weather phenomenon at the mountain attracted attention far and wide. Lenticular clouds, technically known as “altocumulus standing lenticularus,” formed over the mountain, creating a truly otherworldly appearance.

These clouds, also called “lens clouds,” form when strong winds blow over and around rough terrain, creating a white glaze of frozen fog. The lenticular clouds at Grandfather Mountain could be seen from at least 40 miles away, and people

who saw them were amazed and bewildered.

These clouds can resemble a UFO, and the one over Grandfather Mountain was no exception. **Jim Magruder**, a Linville photographer who captured a popular image of the clouds hovering over the mountain, said, “The sky did remind me of a scene from the *Independence Day* movie, when the invading alien space ships appeared over major cities and blotted out the sun.”

The clouds, a rare spectacle to behold, created quite a stir in social media and were also covered in the media. For those who saw them, they won’t be forgotten any time soon.



## OUR VISION

At more than a mile above sea level, Grandfather Mountain offers its guests a unique vantage point to the natural world. By bridging outdoor fun with education, the mountain provides an experience in nature unlike any other, filled with wonder, warmth and adventure.

### GRANDFATHER MOUNTAIN STEWARDSHIP FOUNDATION

#### BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Gordon Warburton, Chairman  
Jon Barrett  
Bob Biggerstaff  
Michael Leonard  
Catherine Morton  
Judy Morton  
Mary Rinehart

## OUR VALUES

### PASSION

Ignite wonder in our guests, volunteers, donors and employees by sharing our knowledge of and excitement for the incredible scenery and ecosystems that thrive at Grandfather Mountain.

### COMMUNITY

Provide a positive, uplifting atmosphere that embraces employees, guests, volunteers, donors and partnering organizations as valuable members of a larger team.

### CONSERVATION

Continue to protect Grandfather Mountain’s remarkable natural resources, including globally imperiled flora and fauna.

### SUSTAINABILITY

Challenge our staff to seek out best practices to improve our organization’s environmental and economic security.





## OUR MISSION

To inspire conservation of the natural world by helping guests explore, understand and value the wonders of Grandfather Mountain.

**Thank you** for being a part of the Grandfather Mountain family and for all you do to advance the mission, vision and values of the Grandfather Mountain Stewardship Foundation. We are grateful for your commitment and partnership.

Over 30,000 people hiked the trails at Grandfather Mountain in 2020, with record numbers of hikers in June, July, October and November.

## The Long View

They say Grandfather Mountain is 300 million years old. Today, when things seem to move and change so quickly, it's a great comfort to be reminded that nature endures. Together, we are the stewards of this special place. If it's important to you that guests today and for generations to come will be able to experience the wonders of the Grandfather Mountain — and to learn about the environment and conservation, please consider making a gift to the Grandfather Mountain Stewardship Foundation.

You'll find more information on giving opportunities, from the Adopt-an-Animal or Boulder Club programs to estate planning, here: [grandfather.com/estate](https://grandfather.com/estate).



Place FSC  
logo here



[grandfather.com](https://grandfather.com)

Grandfather Mountain Stewardship Foundation  
P.O. Box 129 | 2050 Blowing Rock Highway | Linville, N.C. 28646

