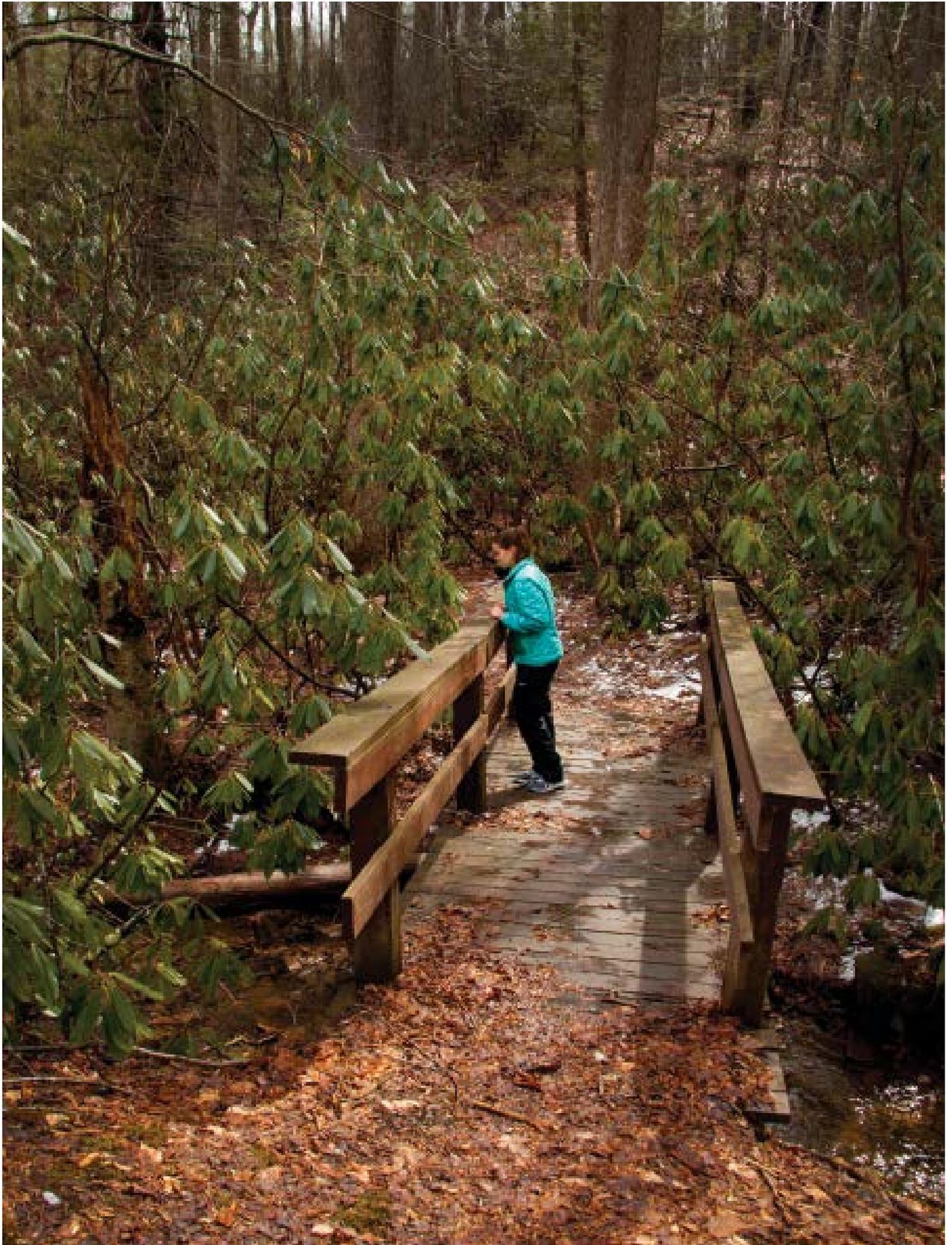


A QUIET PLACE

West Virginia's forgotten state forest holds a serene beauty for those who keep the secret.

WRITTEN BY **KATIE GRIFFITH**

PHOTOGRAPHED BY **CARLA WITT FORD**





Sitting high on a mountain, Kumbrabow State Forest claims the loftiest perch of West Virginia's state forests. The area is mid-sized for a state forest, stretching nearly 9,500 acres along the western edge of the Allegheny Highlands on Rich Mountain. Kumbrabow boasts an unusual history among the forests in the system. It's the site of New Deal-era recreation facilities and a trailblazer for West Virginia's experiment with unified recreation and wildlife management. But despite its claim to fame and proximity to the Monongahela National Forest, as well as popular outdoor meccas like Elkins, for many in the state Kumbrabow remains unknown.

"A lot of locals don't know where it is," says Kumbrabow Superintendent Kevin Snodgrass. Snodgrass himself wasn't aware of the forest until he was assigned to run it two years ago. A native of Lincoln County, he had long been enamored with the state's northern parks and jumped at the chance to run one himself, sight unseen. The forest's visitors come primarily from Washington, D.C., Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas, and a few West Virginians who, as longtime visitors, have kept the forest and its peaceful highland landscape a family secret.

"It is very different from other forests around the state," Snodgrass says. Sitting 3,000 to 4,000 feet above sea level in Randolph County, the forest stays cool year-round. Rhododendrons and other wildflowers bloom later in the season, offering a second spring to wildlife enthusiasts searching for bursts of color. Black bear, deer, turkey, grouse, and bobcats call the forest home, hidden among hardwood tree stands and pockets of mountain laurel and rhododendron surrounding the forest's brook trout streams. "There's not a whole lot of people up here, especially after 4 o'clock," Snodgrass says. "You're out in the forest with bird and animal chatter. I've noticed that some of these state parks you go to, you still hear cars and airplanes. But here it's still quiet."

Before logging came to the area in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the forest was brimming with red spruce. By 1920 four major sawmills had arrived to cut timber from the area, which ended after the timber railroads were destroyed by floods. In 1934 the area now known as Kumbrabow State Forest was acquired by the state and named for the people who were instrumental in purchasing the land—then-Governor Herman G. Kump, Spates Brady, and Hubert Bowers.

Fires that ravaged the forest between the timber industry's departure and the state's acquisition of the land had significantly reduced the numbers of red spruce in the area, while uncontrolled animal grazing through the 1950s also kept large growth down. Through proper

Kumbrabow State Forest in Randolph County is the highest state forest in West Virginia, sitting between 3,000 and 4,000 feet above sea level.







forest management there has been an incredible surge of black cherry and oak-hickory stands across the forest. Red spruce is also making a comeback, in part thanks to the multi-use operation as a recreation, watershed protection, and forestry and wildlife management area.

By the late 1930s a New Deal public work relief program for young men called the Civilian Conservation Corps had been tasked with tending to timber stands, which later resulted in the creation of the state forest timber management programs, and turning the forest into a recreation area. Two camps of conservation corps men built access roads and winding trails, five rustic log cabins, picnic shelters, fire pits, and picnic tables, most of which are still standing. “A lot of our state parks were built by the corps, and if you ever visit one of these parks, you’ll know what it is,” Snodgrass says. “There’s not a whole lot of that left. We get a lot of visitors who come just to see that. It’s rustic. We have no running water, no electricity, all wood-burning cook stoves, propane lighting. When you come up here you’re living rustic.”

For those who know and love Kumbrabow, that’s the draw. “There’s no commercialism up there—no cell phone tower, no convenience store, no gas station. Once you pass Huttonsville, that’s it,” says longtime visitor Kathy Leary. Leary and her husband purchased property abutting the state forest line in 2003 and have been monthly visitors ever since. Both natives of Elkins, Leary says her husband visited the forest often as a child and would sing its

praises. Leary had never had that childhood relationship with the forest, but when the two were looking to settle down for retirement, they wanted nothing more than a quiet spot atop the mountain.

“I loved it when my husband took me up there for the first time,” she says. “You can take a deep breath and it is fresh air. You can smell the trees. The water is clear along

the little brooks, and it’s just a nice place to get away from the rest of the world.” When the two first bought their property, they’d pull a camper up the mountain from their home in Harrison County each visit before deciding to build a cabin in 2007. “We had the logs delivered and with family and friends we built that cabin ourselves,” Leary says. “It took a little over a year. We had a lot of fun putting the logs up, then the roof and the trusses, and the windows

and doors, and finishing the interior.”

Sitting on the porch of their cabin, Leary says they can see the cars and campers going down the main road into Kumbrabow, and occasionally a neighbor or two, but walking on the trails and through the forest they rarely see anyone. “It’s glorious. You’re sitting there listening to the chatter of chipmunks and squirrels. Crows love to fly over and squall,” she says. Coyotes howl off in the distance in the evening. Bears have scratched their backs on their cabin walls and bobcats have been seen passing through. “We love it up there,” she says. “I call it God’s hidden gem.”

Cabins built by the Civilian Conservation Corps sit next to tumbling streams at Kumbrabow State Forest.

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superintendent of Kumbrabow State Forest