

# Bland County's Appalachian Trail Ambassador



Credit: Submitted photo

Diana Billips and her dog Maddie take a lunch break on a hike that she leads from Damascus to Backbone Rock.

By: [SWVA Staff](#) |

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BLAND COUNTY, Va. --

By **JEFFREY SIMMONS**/Staff

She's a diplomat and her constituents are the animals, the trees, the rocks and the mountains.

Smyth County resident, Bland County beef cattle farm owner, horseback rider and general lover of the outdoors Diana Billips has been named a community ambassador for the Appalachian

Trail Conservancy, an organization that oversees the more than 2,000-mile-long footpath that stretches from Georgia to Maine and passes through Wythe, Bland and Smyth counties.

In her new role, Billips will serve as a liaison between the ATC and Bland County, which boasts approximately 56 miles of the famous footpath and was recently named an Appalachian Trail Community.

“The Appalachian Trail Conservancy is excited about building off its volunteer base by providing AT Ambassadors to designated AT Communities to help increase local stewardship of public lands and support healthy lifestyles for community citizens,” ATC spokesperson Julie Judkins said in a press release.

For two years, Billips, a market analyst at ABB in Bland, has organized and led monthly “fun hikes” on the AT and other Southwest Virginia trails. One of her favorite local treks ends at Chestnut Knob, which provides sweeping views of picturesque Burkes Garden in Tazewell County.

The excursions have allowed her to meet other likeminded individuals and given her the satisfaction of “seeing people also enjoying being outdoors” and discovering the peace she finds in nature.

“It’s a good way to relax and get away from stress,” she said.

She’s planning more walks for 2012 and continues to promote the “70 Mile Club,” a project that rewards hikers who complete the approximately 70 miles of the AT maintained by the Piedmont Appalachian Trail Hikers, a North Carolina volunteer group of which she’s a board member.

“People always like a challenge,” she said of the initiative which has its own rules, and rewards members with a patch. Four people, including a grandmother and grandson, became part of the club last year.

As her new year unfolds, Billips hopes to increase residents’ awareness of the AT and its impact on the community.

PATH members may come and talk to local groups and there’s an effort in the schools to promote the trail. A celebration of the county’s new AT Community status is on tap for late spring.

“The AT has been an under-appreciated asset in Bland County,” Billips said.

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