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KNLT Expands to Cumberland Mountain with Panther Gap Preserve

The 426-acre preserve in Harlan County is named in honor of a missing species

Berea, KY November 16, 2023 – Kentucky Natural Lands Trust (KNLT) is proud to announce the establishment of the Panther Gap Preserve on Cumberland Mountain. The 426-acre preserve on the north face of the mountain is named in honor of the mountain lions that once called Kentucky home but were driven from the state and disappeared from the Eastern United States by the 1930s. The preserve’s name includes “Gap” as a nod to both geologic features of mountainous terrain and the gap in biodiversity due to the missing species.

Although the wildlands of Panther Gap Preserve are no longer the home of their namesake, they continue to provide habitat for numerous plant and animal species. The preserve is known summer habitat for the endangered northern long-eared bat, and protects the headwater streams of Martins Fork of the Cumberland River. The river and its tributaries hold an extraordinary amount of biodiversity, including a globally notable number of mussels, crayfish, fishes and invertebrates.

“I am thankful my family’s land is now protected and safeguards a portion of Cumberland Mountain. I believe in Kentucky Natural Lands Trust’s mission and am grateful to partner with them.”

~ Blanche Bennett, landowner

Cumberland Mountain is a 97-mile forested ridgeline that parallels Pine Mountain to the southeast. The mountain is critical habitat for thousands of plant and animal species including 139 that are considered rare. Cumberland Mountain is partially protected by a matrix of conservation lands that include Cumberland Gap National Historic Park, Jefferson National Forest and several state parks, preserves and wildlife management areas.

In recent years, KNLT has assisted with the protection of tracts added to some of these conservation areas, but this is the organization’s first preserve on the mountain. Panther Gap Preserve is located within what had been one of the longest stretches of Cumberland Mountain without an existing conservation area.

For more than 25 years, KNLT has safeguarded wildlands in Central Appalachia through partnerships with landowners, conservation organizations and communities. In 2023, KNLT conserved more than 2,200 acres of wildlands across Kentucky.

KNLT is grateful for the support of individual donors, foundations, and partners. We thank the Imperiled Bat Conservation Fund (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Kentucky Field Office) for making this project possible.

About Kentucky Natural Lands Trust

KNLT is a nationally accredited nonprofit working to protect biodiverse and climate resilient landscapes in ways that benefit communities. Through partnerships with government agencies, nonprofits, businesses, and individuals, KNLT has protected more than 56,000 acres of wildlands throughout the Commonwealth. For more information on how you can help KNLT protect wildlands, visit [KNLT.org](https://www.knlt.org).