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Creasey Mahan Nature Preserve's new executive director is a natural fit

Tavia Cathcart thrilled to lead Creasey Mahan

By Melissa Gagliardi

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Each morning when Tavia Cathcart arrives at work, she is greeted by the song of a mockingbird.

It's just one of many perks of her new job as executive director at the Creasey Mahan Nature Preserve in Goshen.

Many days, she takes hikes, searching for new trails or checking to see where bugs and animals have nibbled on native plants.



Photos by Pam Spaulding, The Courier-Journal

New executive director Tavia Cathcart looked at some wildflowers along the waterfall trail at the Creasey Mahan Nature Preserve in Goshen.

Just a few weeks ago, she found a new spring while out bushwhacking, and she plans to have a trail built alongside of it, called "Hidden Springs Trail." The grounds already have more than five miles of hiking trails.

"I just love being in the forest and watching the subtle changes every day," she said.

Cathcart, 44, is a naturalist at Bernheim Forest and moved to the Highlands less than two years ago following a book tour. Glenn Yost, who has served as executive director since 2001, retired last month, and Cathcart could hardly believe it when she heard about the job opening.

She was hired by the preserve's board of directors.

"I am still pinching myself," she said.

When Virginia Creasey Mahan and her husband, Howard Mahan, designated their 168-acre farm as a nature preserve, they envisioned it would be used as a haven for recreation, education and conservation. The land, which was once a working farm, was a wedding gift to the Mahans and the couple called the property Hill O' Content. It became a preserve in 1975 after Virginia Creasey Mahan died.

Cathcart is eager to get started on her plans for the property, which include renovations to an 1807 farmhouse where the Mahans once lived and planning more outreach programs, particularly for children with special needs. She wants invasive plants removed and wants to add more ponds.

She plans to have staff available one weekend each month to lead hikes and open the nature center. And she's designing a Web site.

The job, she said, is the perfect opportunity for her to use many of her skills, which range from botany to fundraising to Web design.

She also has publishing experience -- she helped write a book on Tennessee and Ohio Valley wildflowers, and she would also like to write a book on the preserve.

Last year, there were 22,010 visitors to the grounds. Cathcart thinks that number could increase with a little work. She said there are some people who live within a few miles of the grounds who have never heard of it.

One day last week, after taking a walk on the grounds with her Border Collie mix Buddy Freckles, she stopped to chat with neighborhood boys who were there for a hike. She then crouched next to a frog pond to share her binoculars with 7-year-old Andrew Cawood.

"There's frogs surrounding it," an excited Andrew said.

Mike Huff, building and grounds manager, has been impressed by Cathcart's drive.

"She's getting us on the move for doing something different with this place," he said. "We think she's a wonderful addition."

Howard Mahan had once talked to Yost about his vision of having children come to the farm for nature walks and soccer practices, and it's a vision Cathcart hopes to be part of for many years.

"I hope to be here a long time," she said. "It's such a beautiful spot."

If you go:

Creasey Mahan Nature Preserve

Hours: Weekdays from dawn to dusk. Starting in August, the nature center will be open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. every third Saturday and guided walks by an interpretive naturalist will be offered at no cost.

Location: 12501 Harmony Landing Road.

Cost: Free. Camping is allowed with a \$25 permit.

Activities: Hiking, camping, field trips, meeting facilities and a nature center.

Information: Call the office between 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. at 228-4362.

Reporter Melissa Gagliardi can be reached at (502) 582-4117.
