

## **Introduction**

I grew up in the South Toe River Valley at the foot of Mt. Mitchell and the Black Mountains in Yancey County in the woods on a small, clear, and cold stream where as a child I spent countless hours playing with my brothers. As I got older I began to camp, hunt, fish, and explore local streams such as Rock, Locust, Shuford, Whiteoak, and Shingle Pile Creeks and follow their tributaries to their springs high in the Black Mountains and up on Seven Mile Ridge. I enjoyed seeing what was around the bend a little further upstream just as much as catching a fish. As a teeneager I worked on local farms where I learned the importance of soils and water. My enjoyment of camping, hiking, fishing, and hunting continued to grow. Each Fall I could not wait until deer season started, when I had an excuse to go sit in the woods for hours. In the days of supermarkets and drive-throughs, this upbringing instilled in me how we as humans depend on natural resources for our basic needs of food, air, and water even though it is not always easy to see.

When I graduated from Mountain Heritage High School I did not want to leave the mountains, so I went to UNC Asheville. The lessons taught by working on farms and spending time in streams and forests only furthered my interest in our natural resources. This made it easy for me to select a major in environmental studies with a focus in earth science at UNCA, the degree track that I knew would put me back in the woods. While in school at UNC Asheville and during the summers I worked as a hydrochemical lab technician testing the water quality and the biological diversity of western NC streams for the Environmental Quality Institute, a non-profit water quality laboratory, in Asheville NC. The summer before my junior year I worked on a project mapping native brook habitat in the headwaters of the Tellico and Snowbird Rivers in Cherokee and Graham County, NC for the US National Forest Service. The next summer I had the privilege to participate in undergraduate research mapping the geologic bedrock and Burnsville Fault in Haywood County, NC. After graduating from UNC Asheville in 2018, I spent time working on a fruit farm in Costa Rica and on an olive farm in Spain where I helped maintain orchard health in relation to water usage and quality, and as forestry subcontractor for the US National Parks Service on the Blue Ridge Parkway. All of these experiences continued to show me first hand how what an amazing area western NC is and how dependent humans are on natural resources, and how we affect them.

I am excited to be the Toe-Cane Watershed Coordinator for Blue Ridge Resource Conservation & Development (Blue Ridge RC&D), a position funded by Quartz Corporation and Sibelco. Blue Ridge RC&D helps the communities of Yancey, Mitchell, Avery, Watuga, Ashe, Alleghany, and Wilkes Counties of NC address the needs and opportunities in the area of water management, land management, community development, and land conservation to make the seven county area a better place to live, work, and play. I am very happy to be working in my favorite places with the Toe and Cane rivers, their tributaries and surrounding land, and serving

the amazing communities that exist in the Toe-Cane Valleys of Yancey, Mitchell, and Avery Counties.

Toe Talk is a monthly article series supported by local watershed partners highlighting watershed and community news. The Toe-Cane Watershed Coordinator position is working to improve water quality and gain associated economic benefits in the watershed by providing education and technical resources and implementing on-the-ground projects. For more information visit our website at <http://www.blueridgercd.com/> or contact:

Felix Stith, Toe-Cane Watershed Coordinator  
Blue Ridge Resource Conservation & Development  
[toecane.edu@gmail.com](mailto:toecane.edu@gmail.com), 828.279.2453

