

# TRGT Welcomes Rick Huffines, New Executive Director

Drawing inspiration from childhood memories and stories helps **Rick Huffines**, the new Tennessee River Gorge Trust (TRGT) executive director, build a case for how he landed in Chattanooga and on Signal Mountain.

He was heavily influenced by his mother and grandmother, who possessed a certain love for the natural surroundings of their Old Hickory, Tenn. home. He recalls being fascinated by birds at the age of 6, in particular,

the Scarlet Tanagers which migrated through the area during springtime. His quest for knowledge was whetted with a first glance at the "Peterson's Field Guide" in his local library. Later, in his middle school years, he remembered being impressed by a classmate's announcement that he wanted to be a wildlife biologist when he grew up. "I didn't know such a career existed and that you could make a living doing it," he reflected.

The next phase of Rick's young life

seemed to set the stage for precisely how he conducts his professional life today. Although he enrolled at MTSU and requested a major in wildlife biology, no such degree existed. He found a sympathetic professor, demonstrated his deep and specific interests, and went to work persuading the professor to create a personalized course of work.

This led to his graduation in 1986 with a B.S. in Plant and Soil Science with an emphasis on Wildlife Management, which he worked on in the summers.

From that point forward Rick said, "I based my career on where the opportunities existed," meaning he took the tough jobs no one else wanted to do and found them to be the types of challenges one takes on to hone himself. "Those were the best jobs for growth, learning from controversy, and through adversity!" he said.

One such challenge for Rick was the establishment of the Clark's River National Wildlife Refuge, an 8,000-acre preserve in Benton, Ky. He recounted the story of protecting his first tract of land by reaching out to a neighboring husband and wife. "She could understand the concept of protecting land in perpetuity, but it was her father's farm – a very emotional hurdle." As time and many discussions passed, the woman finally found herself trusting Rick enough to add the farm to Clark's River with caveats that the fields be maintained. Rick made sure they were bush hogged routinely, until a later date, when she made the call that they be allowed to naturally revegetate.



*Rick Huffines*

Indeed, it was a foreshadowing story to highlight the challenges of filling the very big shoes of **Jim Brown**, who is retiring after having led the TRGT successfully for the last 18 years, and who has helped to protect some 17,500 acres within the gorge. To make the transition smoothly, Rick said connecting with people where they are, understanding where they are coming from helps to

establish rapport. "Fortunately,

Jim has made a lot of introductions so far," he said.

As Rick begins to tie the laces of those large shoes, he looks toward the future of TRGT and its new challenges. "The first thing we always ask is 'what uses are appropriate and compatible?'" Access, recreation and education are top priorities with their own set of inherent complications. Rick also wants to emphasize science and how the gorge fits into the southeastern landscape. "It's a living laboratory...we want to partner with other organizations like the Tennessee Aquarium, Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, The Nature Conservancy, UTC as a means of promoting scientific research," he said.

When asked about his passions, an interesting circle forms. "I'm passionate about people, being able to share what's out there. I'm passionate about birds and fostering the next level of conservationists."

Rick and **Judy Huffines** have been married for 23 years and will reside on Signal Mountain. They have a 21-year-old son, **Gus**, who is a sophomore at the University of Georgia studying biological engineering.

*by Mike Pollock*