



# Damascus Tourism Events and Activities Opportunity Review

LEVERAGING TOWN OF DAMASCUS ASSETS TO ATTRACT  
TOURISTS AND SUPPORT TOWN BUSINESSES

VIRGINIA TECH CENTER FOR ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY  
ENGAGEMENT

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# Introduction

As Southwest Virginia continues to recover from the impacts of Hurricane Helene, efforts to bring visitors back to the region will be critical for economic recovery. While repairing the Virginia Creeper Trail and the Appalachian Trail is essential, communities must also focus on attracting visitors who may be hesitant to return due to perceived damage and closures. Media coverage highlighting the devastation has been important in raising awareness for relief efforts. However, it also presents a double-edged sword in which potential visitors, aware of the region's substantial damage, may assume that key amenities are closed or unavailable, discouraging them from visiting.

The Town of Damascus finds itself in this situation. Known as "Trail Town USA" due to its extensive trail network, Damascus relies heavily on the Creeper Trail and other trail assets to attract tourism dollars. While this branding has been beneficial for marketing, it could pose challenges in the coming years as trail repairs continue. If visitors primarily associate Damascus with riding the Creeper Trail, they may be less likely to visit upon learning that eighteen miles of the trail remains closed.

As the region continues to adjust to its new normal and awaits a concrete timeline for repairs to the closed section of the Creeper Trail, Damascus is shifting its focus to supporting local businesses and residents through new initiatives. The Town already has successful events that align with its culture and assets, and it is now wanting to expand its portfolio. The Virginia Tech Center for Economic and Community Engagement (CECE) worked with the Town of Damascus to explore potential events that align with the Town's assets. The goal was to identify events that could attract traditional visitors as well as engage new subgroups of tourists who may not typically consider Damascus as a destination.

# Approach

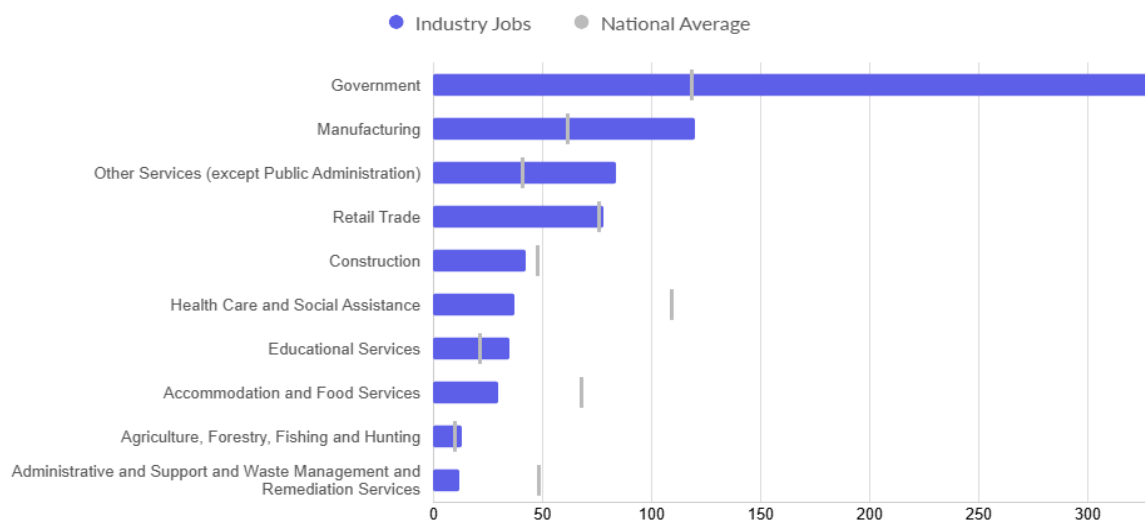
For this report, the Virginia Tech Center for Economic and Community Engagement (CECE)

- Analyzed demographic and economic trend data for the Town of Damascus, accounted for existing assets and events, and examined national and international outdoor tourism industry trends
- For events within a 100-mile radius, CECE mapped out the times of year with the highest concentration of events, such as festivals and bike rides, and identified gaps in the calendar that Damascus could fill.
- Identified localities with outdoor tourism economies and explored what events they are hosting. CECE examined how these municipalities put on the events, marketed themselves, the platforms and strategies they use, and the key audiences they target.
- Interviewed a select group of communities to gain deeper insights into their events and activities, their marketing approaches, and outcomes.

# Damascus Assets and Needs Assessment

As of 2024, the 24236-zip code area comprising Damascus had a population of approximately 3,830 residents. With about 811 jobs, the area’s largest industries are government (including education), manufacturing, and tourism. In this case, tourism is represented by the Retail Trade, Accommodation and Food Services, and some of the Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, and Hunting industries. Damascus’s Retail Trade and Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, and Hunting industries are comparable if not slightly better than regions of similar sizes in terms of employment. However, Accommodation and Food Services requires significant industry employment growth to become competitive with the national average.<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 1. Largest Industries in Damascus (Zip Code 24236)**



Located in Southwest Virginia, Damascus epitomizes the tourism traits that make the region memorable and successful in tourism. Based on data from the Virginia Tourism Corporation (VTC), the typical visitor to Southwest Virginia—particularly the Blue Ridge Highlands region—can be characterized by the following attributes:<sup>2</sup>

- **Demographics:** Visitors are often families or couples seeking a relaxing environment. The region is perceived as family-friendly and offers a tranquil atmosphere.
- **Activities:** Popular activities include scenic drives, hiking, nature exploration, camping, and visiting small towns. While the area offers fishing, paddle sports, biking, and hunting, these are less prominent in visitors’ minds.
- **Trip Characteristics:** Visitors typically travel in small groups or as families, often for weekend getaways or short vacations. They are drawn to the region's natural beauty and cultural heritage.

<sup>1</sup> Lightcast (2025.3 Data Run). Regional Economic Overview and Industry Table. <https://lightcast.io/>.

<sup>2</sup> Virginia Tourism Corporation

Why people visit SWVA:

- Natural Attractions: Scenic mountains, valleys, and rivers, including the George Washington & Jefferson National Forests and the Clinch River.
- Cultural Heritage: Rich Appalachian cultural and musical history, with attractions like The Crooked Road music heritage trail.
- Outdoor Recreation: Opportunities for hiking, biking, and exploring nature.

## Key Takeaways from Interviews and Research

These points were developed through interviews and conversations with Town staff, elected officials, and local business owners. Over the course of the project, the team visited the Town of Damascus three times as part of a broader regional effort to understand the impact of the Virginia Creeper Trail on this area of the state.

During these visits, the team spoke with businesses such as Damascus Outfitters and Wilson's Café to learn what they saw as the most pressing needs after Hurricane Helene. Through these conversations, along with input from residents, we gained a clearer picture of what people value in the Town, what they view as its strengths, from where visitors came, and where improvements could help attract visitors and encourage them to stay longer.

Based on this feedback—and further discussions with Town staff and leaders—we developed a set of actionable steps to engage residents and business owners in shaping Damascus's recovery and long-term vitality.

### **Strengths:**

- Competitive lodging and meal pricing.
- Charming, trail-oriented accommodations and dining experiences.
- Lower tax rates compared to neighboring towns.

### **Areas for Improvement:**

- Expand dining options and extended operating hours.
- Enhance online presence and real-time information for businesses.
- Improve parking signage and accessibility.
- Encourage business diversification to fill current service gaps.

### **Actionable Steps:**

- Build on existing strengths of the Damascus website with clear marketing of business information and Town events.
- Host workshops to educate local businesses on marketing strategies and available tax incentives to improve facades, expand, or open new businesses.
- Collaborate with regional partners to promote Damascus as a year-round destination.
- Invest in infrastructure improvements to enhance visitor experience and support business growth.

# Outdoor Recreation Assets in Damascus

## Outdoor recreation assets include:

- Appalachian Trail
- Backbone Rock
- Beartree Lake
- Beaverdam Creeks
- Boone Trail Highway
- Creek Junction Accessible Fishing Trail
- Creekside Park
- Damascus Dog Park (\*closed due to impacts from Hurricane Helene)
- Damascus Town Park
- Grayson Highlands State Park
- Iron Mountain Trail
- Laurel Creek Park
- Mid-Atlantic Backcountry Discovery Route
- Mount Rogers National Recreation Area
- Mount Rogers Scenic Byway / US-58
- Overmountain Victory Trail Commemorative Motor Route
- Roy Wright Park Josie's Nature Playground
- South East Backcountry Discovery Route
- South Fork of the Holston River
- South Holston Lake
- The Back of the Dragon / VA-16
- The Snake / US-421
- TransAmerica Bicycle Trail / Route 76
- TransVirginia Bike Route
- Virginia Bird & Wildlife Trail
- Virginia Creeper Trail (\*partially closed due to impacts from Hurricane Helene)
- Whitetop Laurel Creek
- Whitetop Mountain

**Trail Assets:** Damascus has seven trails passing right through its downtown area and several more near the Town. Leveraging these assets are six outfitters and other retail assets. The key trail assets that currently draw people to Damascus are the Virginia Creeper Trail and the Appalachian Trail. Residents in and visitors to Southwest Virginia frequent the Virginia Creeper Trail, bringing family and friends. Hikers of the Appalachian Trail will stop in Damascus and sometimes stay overnight. While Grayson Highlands State Park and the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area draw many tourists, many do not make it to Damascus unless they wish to use the Virginia Creeper Trail. The closest trail assets to Damascus, which could be leveraged more include but are not limited to:

- Iron Mountain Trail: Formerly a part of the Appalachian Trail, Iron Mountain is 22-miles from Damascus, VA to Hurricane Mountain in North Carolina going south, and 12.6-45.2 miles going north. The Virginia portion of this trail is mostly known for **overnight backpacking and bikepacking (mountain biking)**, with many campgrounds along the trail. However, it has the potential to be a good **mountain biking or hiking loop** for Damascus. According to one website, "The IMT traverses a long ridge in a beautiful tract of wilderness. When ridden east to west, it climbs up, then has a hearty dose of ups and downs before it finishes with 6 miles of screaming downhill, creek crossings, and rock gardens that spit you out right into the Town of Damascus".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bikepacking the Iron Mountain Trail, Virginia. Bikepacking.com. Retrieved from: <https://bikepacking.com/routes/bikepacking-the-iron-mountain-trail/>

- Mid-Atlantic Backcountry Discovery Route: “MABDR® is a scenic ride for **dual-sport and adventure motorcycles** that uses dirt, gravel and paved roads to wind through remote parts of Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. Starting in Damascus Virginia, and ending in Lawrenceville, Tioga County, PA, this 1,080-mile route, primarily uses forest roads and rural country lanes, to lead riders through the Appalachian Mountains, majestic forests, bucolic farming landscapes, Amish country, and locations that played pivotal roles in early American history”.<sup>4</sup> In the past, Backcountry Discovery Routes (BDR), a 501(c)3 nonprofit, scheduled weeklong group rides starting in Damascus, VA, but with a hotel stay in Abingdon, VA. As either an end point or starting point of this route, Damascus could offer kick-off or celebration events, providing stores opportunities to sell MABDR paraphernalia and supplies.
- TransAmerica Bicycle Trail/Route 76: This **road bicycle, motorcycle, and car** route goes from the coast of Oregon in the Pacific Northwest to the coast of Yorktown, Virginia. The trail passes from Honaker in Russell County, through Damascus, and onto Troutdale.
- TransVirginia Bike Route: The TransVirginia Bike Route is a 565-mile mostly-unpaved **backcountry cycling** route that traverses the state of Virginia from Washington, DC to Damascus, VA. It crosses National Forest, links some of Virginia’s best rail trails, and has a total climb of 47,284 ft. The route is 61% unpaved and a mixture of gravel roads, fire roads, and quiet paved country roads. In 2024, an event called the “Grand Depart” was put on in May for competitive racers and social bikers to bike the trail.<sup>5</sup>
- Virginia Bird & Wildlife Trail (hiking & walking): An organized network of outdoor sites, this trail highlights the best places to see birds and wildlife in the Commonwealth. Two trail loops have stops in Damascus: Mount Rogers Trail Loop and South Holston Trail Loop. The Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources<sup>6</sup> describes these two trails:
  - **Mount Rogers**: Many of the sites in the Mount Rogers Loop are within the 150,000 acres of the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area, a part of the George Washington and Jefferson National Forest. This entire region is often referred to as the “rooftop of Virginia,” because it is home to the highest point in the Old Dominion. The summit of Mount Rogers stands at an elevation of 5729 feet, while Virginia’s second highest peak is nearby Whitetop Mountain at 5520 feet. The high elevation range makes this a magnificent stop for nature enthusiasts and wildlife lovers. **Neotropical songbirds** typically nesting in more northern climates can be found breeding within this region. **Blackburnian warbler, black-capped chickadee, golden-crowned kinglet and even red crossbill and northern saw-whet owl** may be found here in summer. Salamander diversity includes an abundance of Jordan’s salamander, and rarities such as pygmy salamander. Visitors should anticipate cooler temperatures at these higher elevations even during summer, despite the

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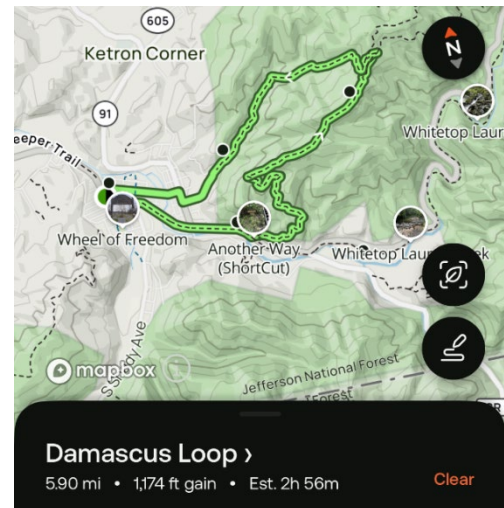
<sup>4</sup> “Mid Atlantic Backcountry Discovery Route.” Backcountry Discovery Routes (BDR). Retrieved from: <https://ridebdr.com/news/mid-atlantic-backcountry-discovery-route-june-25-july-1-2021/>.

<sup>5</sup> TransVirginia Bike Route. Retrieved from: <https://www.transvirginia.org/>; Trans Virginia 2024. Bikepacking.com. Retrieved from: <https://bikepacking.com/event/trans-virginia-2024/>

<sup>6</sup> Virginia Bird & Wildlife Trail. Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources. Retrieved from: <https://dwr.virginia.gov/vbwt/>.

warmer climate of surrounding areas of lower elevations. The Appalachian Trail meanders throughout this area as well.

- **South Holston:** Straddling the border between Tennessee and Virginia, the brick red shores of South Holston Lake offer endless surprises including migrant shorebirds, nesting cliff swallows, and bald eagles soaring high overhead. The area's history is highlighted along the Virginia Creeper Trail, an exemplary rails-to-trails project leading from downtown Abingdon onto the scenic slopes of Whitetop Mountain in the Mt. Rogers National Recreation Area. Such a high diversity of habitats results in prolific wildlife and numerous opportunities for the wildlife enthusiast. The open fields and rolling hills that surround South Holston Lake resound with the songs of **indigo bunting and eastern kingbird**, which are easily encountered along the Virginia Creeper Trail. **Wood duck, muskrat, green heron** and painted turtle can be found in the deepest recesses of South Holston Lake's swampier sections. Climbing upwards away from the heat, visitors will encounter cool, clear streams teeming with trout as **black-throated blue warbler** sing overhead and **Louisiana waterthrush** chip from stone to stone. Careful exploration is sure to unveil further treasures and add to the memorable experiences.
- **South East Backcountry Discovery Route:** This is the fourteenth route developed by the BDR non-profit organization, offering **adventure and dual-sport (ADV) motorbikers** a journey through the backcountry of the Southeastern United States, from Gulf of Mexico to Damascus VA.<sup>7</sup> As either an end point or starting point of this route, Damascus could offer kick-off or celebration events, providing stores opportunities to sell SEBDR paraphernalia and supplies.
- **Damascus Loop:** This 6-mile loop starts from 4<sup>th</sup> street in Damascus, goes 2 miles up Iron Mountain and then connects with the Appalachian Trail to return to Damascus. The loops takes 3-4 hours on average. It offers lovely foliage and wildlife in the spring, summer, and fall months and great views in the winter months.



**Water Assets:** According to its website, Damascus is, “at the confluence of Whitetop Laurel, Tennessee Laurel, and Beaverdam Creeks, which form Laurel Creek for a short distance and then join the South Fork of the Holston River just outside of Town limits.”<sup>8</sup> Already, the Town has successfully hosted an annual Trout Day and a kid’s version of Trout Day.

<sup>7</sup> South East Backcountry Discovery Trail Route. Backcountry Discovery Routes. Retrieved from: <https://ridebdr.com/sebdr/#toggle-id-1>.

<sup>8</sup> Choose your own adventure in Trail Town USA! Visit Damascus, VA. Retrieved from: <https://www.visitdamascus.org/local-highlights.html>

**Camping Assets:** Assets include Damascus Creekside RV Park, Laurel Creek RV Park, and Tent City Campgrounds. The widespread damage to campgrounds in Damascus because of Hurricane Helene created disruptions to the region’s outdoor recreation economy. However, this could present an opportunity for strategic redevelopment in some spaces that aligns with emerging tourism trends. Specifically, the conversion of parts of damaged campground sites into glamping facilities—featuring accommodations such as cabins, yurts, or luxury tents—could attract a new demographic of visitors seeking nature-based experiences with additional comfort.

## Festival and Entertainment Assets

Damascus offers a good number of successful annual festivals. In this case, success is measured by the number of visitors to the Town. Festivals include:

- Art Trail
- Damascus History Tour
- Damascus Public Pool
- Damascus Trail Center
- The Crooked Road: Virginia’s Heritage Music Trail
- A Trail Town Christmas
- Appalachian Trail Days Festival
- DAM 200 Adventure Moto
- Damascus Loves Dogs Holiday Costume Contest
- Independence Day Celebration
- National Public Lands Day
- Trout Days
- Damascus Farmers Market

Outside of its trail system and annual events, the Town does have a handful of breweries, distilleries, small eateries, and shops. However, the Town offers limited activities for visitors wishing to stay longer than a few hours after using the trail, and often, the Town’s limited walkability and existing signage are not always conducive to visitors seeing and engaging in those activities. Most visitors will stay and recreate elsewhere to be closer to other amenities.

The Town could consider creating an event space with activities such as axe throwing, billiards, or arcade games, open during evening hours, which could introduce a sense of "nightlife" and encourage visitors to remain in Town rather than seeking entertainment elsewhere. Additionally, Damascus could incentivize the establishment of wellness-related businesses, such as a gym, yoga studio, or massage therapy practice. These services would appeal to trail users and health-conscious visitors, helping to retain foot traffic and increasing local spending, making Damascus not just a stopover for the trails. Finally, investing in sidewalk maintenance and expansion to make Damascus as walkable as possible would make it easier for visitors to move around town. Ensuring that sidewalks connecting lodging, eateries, and shops also provide direct access to the Creeper Trail will help visitors navigate easily between the trail and local businesses.

Damascus already has a strong sidewalk network, but regularly monitoring it for damage and making repairs as needed will further support visitor movement from the Creeper Trail into town. This is especially important at the points where the sidewalk network connects to the trail. Clear signage directing riders toward restaurants, shops, and other destinations in Damascus will help encourage visitors to explore more of what the town has to offer.

## Lodging Assets

Attracting overnight and multi-day visitors is especially important for the Town of Damascus because these types of travelers bring greater levels of economic benefits to the community. Extended-stay visitors are more likely to support local lodging, restaurants, outfitters, and shops, helping sustain small businesses and create jobs. Longer stays give visitors time to explore the trails, enjoy local events, and discover the charm of downtown, spreading spending across the community. These visitors are also more likely to return, recommend Damascus to others, and provide lasting value through positive word-of-mouth and repeat tourism. For a Town that thrives on outdoor recreation and hospitality, multi-day tourism is a key driver of economic vitality and community growth.

Considering accommodations like the Old Mill Inn, River Trail Inn, Virginia Creeper Trail Lodge, and other short-term rentals, Damascus likely offers between 100-150 beds available to visitors at competitive pricing compared to lodging in nearby communities. From available information, the pricing for a night in Damascus ranged from \$91 to \$131. This is comparable to the pricing of chain hotels and Airbnbs in communities like Abingdon, Glade Spring or Mountain City, Tennessee which typically had prices ranging from \$87 to \$154 per night. Some other regional competitors also had more budget-friendly options like Econo Lodge with rates starting at \$65 but overall, the price points in Damascus are in line with the region particularly when considering the proximity to a critical mass of trails. However, the supply of lodging has historically been lower than the national average for a Town of Damascus' size. Since Hurricane Helene, many of these accommodations have been lost, exacerbating an already limited supply.

The Town can support local lodging businesses by ensuring zoning regulations support short-term rentals and offering tax relief incentives to help with the rebuilding or development of new lodging opportunities near downtown. Additionally, Airbnb has sited “unique stays” as some of the most popular rentals. Airbnb defines "unique stays" as extraordinary, memorable accommodations—ranging from pop culture icons and converted vehicles to eco-retreats and celebrity-hosted experiences—that go beyond traditional lodging to offer one-of-a-kind travel experiences. If the Town could find a way to collaborate on or incentivize the development of unique stays such as the train car in the park this would appeal to visitors. These “unique stays” could also bring in new visitors that come for those types of experiences and not solely for the trails.

## Food & Beverage Assets

Based on available information, Damascus has seven local restaurants, two chain restaurants, a distillery & brewery, and an additional brewery just outside of town limits. Most of these establishments operate between 10 a.m. and 9 p.m., which is consistent with restaurant hours in neighboring communities. Damascus offers more competitive price points than many surrounding areas, making it an appealing option for visitors with an average price for a meal being between \$10 - \$20. However, one type of establishment Damascus appears to lack is a health-focused restaurant, such as one offering smoothies, juices, and clean food options. This could appeal to fitness-oriented trail users who visit the Town for exercise and outdoor activities.

Additionally, to attract and retain younger visitors, Damascus could benefit from businesses with extended evening hours, at least on weekends. Research suggests that communities with evening options are often perceived as more vibrant and engaging, which can help draw and keep visitors in Town longer.<sup>9</sup>

## Meals & Lodging Tax

Below are examples of how Damascus compares to other localities in Virginia.

**Table 1. Comparison between Damascus and Other Town Meals and Lodging Taxes**

Locality	Lodging Tax	Meals Tax	Notes
Damascus	4.0%	7.0%	Lower rates may attract budget-conscious travelers.
Abingdon	7.0%	7.0%	Higher rates compared to Damascus.
Radford	8.0%	5.5%	Proposed increase to 8.5% lodging and 6.5% meals tax.
Charlottesville	9.0%	7.0%	Effective July 1, 2024.
Alexandria	9.5% + \$1.25/night	6.0%	Includes per-night fee.
Virginia Beach	15.0% + \$2/night	5.5%	Higher rates in Sandbridge district.
Norfolk	9.0% + \$3/night	6.5%	Includes per-night fee.
Roanoke	7.0%	5.5%	Meals tax includes state sales tax.
Hampton	8.0% + \$2/night	7.5%	Includes per-night fee.
Hopewell	10.0%	6.0%	Higher lodging tax rate.
Danville	6.0%	6.5%	Meals tax effective since July 1, 2018.
James City	5.0% + \$2/night	4.0%	Includes per-night fee.
Martinsville	6.0%	7.0%	Meals tax includes state sales tax.
York County	5.0%	4.0%	Meals tax in addition to state sales tax.
Fairfax County	7.0%	N/A	Meals tax proposal rejected in 2016.

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.globalleadersinstitute.org/blog-post/the-power-of-the-nighttime-economy-fueling-culture-and-community-after-dark/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.globalleadersinstitute.org/blog-post/the-power-of-the-nighttime-economy-fueling-culture-and-community-after-dark/?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

# Outdoor Tourism Trends

Outdoor tourism continues to grow as a major economic driver in the U.S. and globally, reflecting shifting consumer preferences toward adventure, sustainability, and unique experiences. With its abundant natural amenities and scenic beauty, Damascus is well-positioned to capitalize on this trend.

Outdoor recreation contributed \$1.2 trillion to the U.S. economy in 2023, accounting for 2.3% of GDP and supporting 5 million jobs. The sector has grown by 36% in real terms since 2012, outpacing traditional industries such as farming and mining.<sup>10</sup> Globally, the adventure tourism market is projected to grow from \$804.51 billion in 2024 to \$1,682.28 billion by 2032, with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 9.42%.<sup>11</sup>

There is growing demand for adventure tourism, particularly for activities that challenge participants, such as rafting, trekking, and climbing. This shift is driven by travelers seeking unique and immersive experiences, along with a renewed focus on health, fitness, and outdoor recreation—trends that have continued since the COVID era. The rise in outdoor leisure activities, including hiking, biking, and RVing, further reinforces this trend, with biking alone contributing \$5.4 billion to the U.S. economy in 2023.<sup>12</sup>

The 30–50 age group holds a significant share of the adventure tourism market, driven by family travel trends and a desire for meaningful outdoor experiences. Damascus is well-equipped to tap into this growing market, with assets that support a variety of outdoor activities and the potential to attract more visitors to the region.

Below is the annual revenue for different types of outdoor tourism activities in 2023:

- **RVing:** \$56.8 billion
- **Motorcycling & ATVing:** \$19.0 billion
- **Climbing, hiking, and tent camping:** \$12.8 billion
- **Fishing:** \$12.5 billion
- **Biking:** \$5.4 billion
- **Canoeing & kayaking:** \$1.3 billion

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<sup>10</sup> Outdoor Recreation Roundtable. (2023, November 28). *New data shows outdoor recreation is a \$1.2 trillion economic engine supporting 5 million American jobs*. Outdoor Recreation Roundtable. <https://recreationroundtable.org/news/new-data-shows-outdoor-recreation-is-a-1-2-trillion-economic-engine-supporting-5-million-american-jobs/>

<sup>11</sup> Fortune Business Insights. (Jan 29, 2025). *Adventure tourism market report*. Fortune Business Insights. <https://www.fortunebusinessinsights.com/adventure-tourism-market-107924>

<sup>12</sup> Outdoor Recreation Roundtable. (2023, November 28). *New data shows outdoor recreation is a \$1.2 trillion economic engine supporting 5 million American jobs*. Outdoor Recreation Roundtable.

## Soft Adventure Tourists

Prefer low risk, less physically demanding experiences. Examples:

- Hiking & trekking
- Wildlife safaris
- Camping
- Kayaking & canoeing
- Cultural immersion experiences (e.g., visiting indigenous communities)

## Hard Adventure Tourists

Engage in high-risk, physically challenging activities. Examples:

- Rock climbing & mountaineering
- White-water rafting
- Skydiving & bungee jumping
- Scuba diving & shark diving
- Backcountry skiing & snowboarding

## Outdoor Fitness Enthusiasts

Outdoor fitness enthusiasts are individuals who engage in physical exercise and training activities in natural outdoor environments rather than in traditional gym settings. They often seek health benefits, social connection, and an immersive experience in nature while exercising.

The global outdoor fitness equipment market was valued at approximately \$1.5 billion in 2020 and is projected to reach \$1.8 billion by 2030, growing at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 4.3% during this period.<sup>13</sup>

This group is very diverse with everyone from runners to individuals that enjoy obstacle courses. The growing equipment market indicates that some individuals in the category are looking for more than just your typical run or bike ride.

Examples:

- Functional fitness exercises like tire flips or sandbag training
- Outdoor yoga and meditation in parks
- Obstacle course training (Spartan Races, Tough Mudder)
- Rock climbing and bouldering

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<sup>13</sup> Allied Market Research. (May 2022). Outdoor fitness equipment market. Allied Market Research. <https://www.alliedmarketresearch.com/outdoor-fitness-equipment-market-A16177>

## Jeep & Overland Vehicle Enthusiasts

**Underserved Needs:** Limited access to legal, well-maintained off-road trails and designated overlanding routes in the Mid-Atlantic region. The main event in the region is the Mid-Atlantic Overland Festival which occurs during early August in Pennsylvania. There could be an opportunity to provide a quainter overland festival for new riders or people that prefer smaller engagements.

**Market Size:** The U.S. overlanding market is growing, with increasing sales of off-road vehicles and gear. Overlanders range from millennials to retirees, with many investing heavily in vehicle modifications and gear. This group wants to test their vehicles on trails and push them to the limit. This group typically has a more expendable income and engages more with local businesses in the communities they visit. <sup>14</sup>

### Attraction Strategies:

- **Trail Development:** Collaborate with land management agencies to create or designate overlanding trails.
- **Events:** Host overlanding expos or trail rides.
- **Amenities:** Provide camping facilities with necessary amenities for overlanders.

Another thing to consider is how to capitalize on this market without having to develop any trails or courses. Can Damascus become a hub for overlanders to convene in proximity to nearby trails? Can Damascus be a welcoming place for overlanders to stay and eat while visiting trails?

## Obstacle Course Racing Enthusiasts

**Underserved Needs:** Few permanent training facilities and events in the region that are available year-round.

**Market Size:** OCR events like Spartan Race and Tough Mudder attract thousands of participants per event, generating significant economic impact.

### Attraction Strategies:

- **Event Hosting:** Partner with OCR organizations to host races.
- **Training Facilities:** Develop permanent OCR training courses.
- **Community Engagement:** Organize local OCR clubs or training groups. <sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Grabli, M. (2023, November 19). The popularity of overlanding in the USA: A trend analysis. Offroadium. <https://offroadium.com/the-popularity-of-overlanding-in-the-usa.html>

<sup>15</sup> Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program. (2019, September). State of Play 2019: Trends and Developments. [https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/2019\\_SOP\\_National\\_Final.pdf](https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/2019_SOP_National_Final.pdf)

## Paddlers (Kayakers & Canoeists)

**Underserved Needs:** Limited easy access points and facilities for paddling activities.

**Market Size:** Paddle sports are among the fastest-growing outdoor activities in the U.S.

**Attraction Strategies:**

- **Access Development:** Create or improve kayak and canoe launch sites.
- **Events:** Organize paddling festivals or races.
- **Rentals & Tours:** Offer equipment rentals and guided tours.<sup>16</sup>

## Bushcraft & Wilderness Survival Enthusiasts

**Underserved Needs:** Few areas designated for primitive camping and survival skills training.

**Market Size:** Growing interest in self-reliance and outdoor skills has expanded this niche community.<sup>17</sup>

**Attraction Strategies:**

- **Workshops:** Offer survival skills courses and bushcraft workshops.
- **Designated Areas:** Allocate spaces for primitive camping and practice.
- **Permits:** Implement permit systems to manage and support activities.

## Adaptive Recreation Communities

**Underserved Needs:** Lack of accessible trails and facilities for individuals with disabilities.

**Market Size:** Millions of Americans have disabilities, representing a significant potential market for adaptive recreation.

**Attraction Strategies:**

- **Accessibility Improvements:** Ensure trails and facilities meet ADA standards.
- **Adaptive Equipment:** Provide or facilitate access to adaptive outdoor equipment.
- **Inclusive Programming:** Develop programs tailored to various abilities.

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<sup>16</sup> Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Recreation and Parks. (2023). 2023–2027 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan [PDF].

<sup>17</sup> Global Growth Insights. (2025, May 19). Campervan (Camper Van) Market Size, Share, Trend, Growth [2024–2032]. <https://www.globalgrowthinsights.com/market-reports/campervan-camper-van-market-102201>

# Key Markets to Target

Data from Virginia Tourism Corporation and interviews with 13 stakeholders from businesses and government highlighted key markets to target when attracting visitors to Damascus. Below are communities with a concentration of bikers and hikers or outdoor enthusiasts that Damascus might consider for targeted marketing.

## *Mid-Atlantic & East Coast Markets*

1. **Washington, D.C. / Northern Virginia** (Approx. 5–6 hours)
  - a. **Outdoor Culture:** Huge base of active professionals. Access to Shenandoah National Park, Great Falls, and C&O Canal Towpath.
  - b. **Why target:** High income, high travel frequency, frequent trail users and long-weekend travelers.
2. **Richmond, VA** (Approx. 4.5 hours)
  - a. **Outdoor Culture:** Trail and river culture is strong (James River Park System). Mountain biking and paddling communities are active.
  - b. **Why target:** Engaged outdoor recreation audience, many of whom travel westward to the mountains.
3. **Raleigh-Durham, NC** (Approx. 4.5–5 hours)
  - a. **Outdoor Culture:** The Triangle area has a high number of college-educated, active residents who are enthusiastic about weekend hiking and biking trips.
  - b. **Why target:** Fast-growing, youthful metro area. Many already visit Asheville or Boone, so Damascus is a logical alternative as those cities become more crowded.
4. **Charlotte, NC** (Approx. 3.5 hours)
  - a. **Outdoor Culture:** Vibrant mountain biking and hiking community. Close to U.S. National Whitewater Center.
  - b. **Why target:** Nearby urban market. Many residents actively seek weekend mountain getaways.
5. **Greensboro/Winston-Salem, NC** (Approx. 3 hours)
  - a. **Outdoor Culture:** Residents frequently head west for trail access.
  - b. **Why target:** Close enough for day trips, big enough to support targeted digital campaigns or events.

## *Tennessee Markets*

6. **Knoxville, TN** (Approx. 5.5–6 hours)
  - a. **Outdoor Culture:** Strong outdoor identity tied to the Great Smoky Mountains. Active hiking, trail running, and mountain biking community. Close proximity to major rivers supports paddling culture as well.
  - b. **Why target:** Large urban populations that regularly seek out outdoor recreational opportunities. Close enough to allow for weekend trips, and possibly day trips.
7. **Nashville-Davidson-Murfreesboro-Franklin, TN** (Approx 4.5 hours)

- a. **Outdoor Culture:** Nashville has a growing outdoor community centered around Percy Warner Park, Radnor Lake, and the Cumberland River Greenway. Many residents head east for mountain experiences, including the Smokies and the Appalachian region. The city’s active young professional population fuels interest in weekend recreation.
- b. **Why target:** One of the fastest-growing metros in the Southeast, with a high concentration of young, mobile, and experience-seeking residents. The drive time is reasonable for long weekends, and Damascus offers a less commercialized alternative to Gatlinburg/Smokies trips — appealing to travelers seeking authentic, trail-focused getaways.

### **Ohio Markets**

- 8. **Columbus, OH** (Approx. 5.5–6 hours)
  - a. **Outdoor Culture:** Fast-growing outdoor interest, especially mountain biking and gravel biking. Alum Creek and Metro Parks are popular locally.
  - b. **Why target:** Affordable travel hub with residents looking for drivable adventure getaways.
- 9. **Cincinnati, OH** (Approx. 5.5 hours)
  - c. **Outdoor Culture:** Active scene with Red River Gorge and Big South Fork nearby. Groups regularly travel to VA/TN/NC for trail destinations.
  - d. **Why target:** Easy interstate access to Damascus. Large trail-riding community.
- 10. **Cleveland, OH** (Approx. 6.5–7 hours)
  - e. **Outdoor Culture:** Cuyahoga Valley National Park and strong regional parks system support avid trail use.
  - f. **Why target:** Long-weekend market. Many visitors are already familiar with Appalachian destinations.

### **Kentucky Markets**

- 11. **Lexington, KY** (Approx. 4–4.5 hours)
  - g. **Outdoor Culture:** Strong hiking and climbing culture around Red River Gorge and Daniel Boone National Forest.
  - h. **Why target:** Residents frequently travel to Appalachia. Damascus offers a scenic alternative with major trails and bike culture.
- 12. **Louisville, KY** (Approx. 5.5 hours)
  - i. **Outdoor Culture:** Home to the Parklands of Floyds Fork and a growing adventure tourism scene.
  - j. **Why target:** Great weekend trip market, especially for Creeper Trail appeal and mountain town charm.

# Why Events and Festivals?

Events and festivals can have a profound impact on small towns, driving economic growth, fostering community engagement, and enhancing the town's identity. Economically, these events **boost local business** by attracting visitors who spend money at restaurants, shops, and lodging establishments. Increased tourism revenue benefits the hospitality industry, while the demand for staffing, security, and vendors creates temporary or seasonal job opportunities. In some cases, the success of a festival **inspires business growth and further investment** in the town's infrastructure.<sup>18</sup>

Beyond the economic benefits, events can **strengthen community identity** by showcasing the town's culture, history, and unique attributes. They bring people together, fostering social connections and creating a stronger sense of belonging. Additionally, many festivals rely on volunteers, **encouraging civic engagement and community service**. Culturally, events offer opportunities to highlight local arts, music, and traditions while promoting recreational activities such as marathons and outdoor festivals that encourage an active lifestyle. They also provide entertainment options that may not otherwise be available in small towns.<sup>19</sup> Over time, annual events can become **lasting traditions that shape a town's identity and legacy**. Attracting visitors and exposing them to what the town has to offer can have long-term effects—and in some cases, may even **inspire people to relocate to the area**.

While events can be beneficial, there are also significant drawbacks. No event is guaranteed to succeed, and hosting multiple events throughout the year can be financially risky. If not properly managed, these costs **can strain local budgets and resources**. Large events **may also disrupt residents' daily lives** by increasing traffic, noise, and crowding, sometimes leading to tensions between locals and tourists.<sup>20</sup>

Beyond these immediate concerns, the long-term viability of festivals is not always assured. **Changing audience behaviors and financial constraints** may threaten sustainability. Even a popular and well-executed event can face funding challenges year after year. For example, despite a resurgence in folk music's popularity, U.K. festivals like Towersey and Cropredy are struggling due to **rising costs, changes in post-COVID ticket-buying habits, and reduced sponsorships**. In 2024 alone, over 40 festivals were canceled or postponed, and 170 have closed in the past five years. Younger audiences often consume music and festivals differently, impacting festival attendance.<sup>21</sup> In these circumstances, it is crucial to **learn quickly what the market responds to and adjust strategies** from one event to the next.

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<sup>18</sup> Shelton, G. (April 2017). The economic impact of festivals on small towns. University of Tennessee Center for Industrial Services.

<sup>19</sup> University of Minnesota Extension. (2018). Community festivals: Big benefits but risks too. University of Minnesota.

<sup>20</sup> Noguchi, Y. (2013, November 29). In a small town with big events, some are tiring of tourism. NPR.

<sup>21</sup> The Times. (2023, June 15). Folk music is booming — so why are Britain's folk festivals struggling? The Times. <https://www.thetimes.com/culture/music/article/folk-music-booming-folk-festivals-struggling-mxq7wdjzd>

# Possible Events for Damascus

CECE catalogued events across the Southeast and Mid-Atlantic regions to better understand the timing and distribution of events throughout the year. While the highest concentration of events occurs during peak months, it's important to recognize that new events can still attract interest, especially when they offer an alternative to more crowded or well-established gatherings.

Damascus' temperate climate is an asset for hosting summer events. Activities like bike rides are especially popular; CECE found online information for more than 20 bike rides occurring on any given weekend between March and August. Therefore, the high density of existing events should not discourage the development of new ones. In fact, it may signal strong regional interest and opportunities for Damascus to offer a distinctive experience. In a separate document, there is a table with events we reviewed links to websites for further exploration as well as another table that ranks weekend availability number of events and proximity to Damascus.

**Table 2. Event Density Chart**

Event Type	Jan-Feb	Mar-Apr	May-June	July-Aug	Sept-Oct	Nov-Dec
Fishing Tournaments	Green	Red	Yellow	Green	Red	Yellow
Biking Events	Green	Red	Red	Yellow	Red	Green
Runs	Green	Red	Red	Red	Yellow	Yellow
Art and Culture Festivals	Green	Red	Red	Red	Yellow	Yellow
Concerts	Green	Red	Red	Red	Yellow	Green
Winter Events	Green	Grey	Grey	Grey	Grey	Yellow
Birding and Naturalist Events	Green	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Green

Green = 0-10 events on average for Friday – Sunday;  
 Yellow = 10-20 events on average for Friday – Sunday;  
 Red = 20+ events on average for Friday – Saturday.

For Damascus, this could mean an events calendar like the following:

- February: A two-week “Trail Town Treasures” Scavenger Hunt
- March: Damascus Winter Trail Run & Festival
- April: Damascus Trout Days; Plein Air and Chalk Fest Art Festival
- May: Appalachian Trail Days Festival; Go Topless Day Jeep Event (Mid-May)
- June: Damascus Adventure Moto DAM 200
- July: Independence Day Celebration
- August: Trail Town Off-Road Rally (Overland Event)
- September: Damascus Trout Days
- December: A Trail Town Christmas

## Fishing Tournaments

Virginia Tech identified 9 fishing events and examined 4 more in-depth. The Blowing Rock Trout Derby and Belhaven Trout Tournament show how long-standing traditions and community ties can build credibility and draw repeat participants, something Damascus could replicate by positioning itself as a consistent midsummer option. The Virginia Fly Fishing & Wine Festival demonstrates the value of pairing tournaments with complementary attractions (wine, local vendors) to expand appeal beyond anglers. Meanwhile, sponsorship models from events like the Blue Ridge Parkway Fly Fishing Tournament—where higher entry fees align with bigger prizes—highlight opportunities for Damascus to attract gear brand partners and premium participants. Finally, smaller-scale events like the Tim Hill Memorial Tournament show the potential for intimate, community-driven competitions that emphasize accessibility and local engagement.

**Event ideas and assets to leverage:** Already Trout Days and the Town’s newer kid’s version of Trout Days leverages Laurel and Beaverdam Creeks. Opportunities to build on these events include diversifying the appeal to a wider audience. One example is the Virginia Fly Fishing and Wine Festival, which successfully combines two components into a single event. This approach attracts larger groups by offering unique aspects that appeal to different interests.

As Trout Days continues to grow, Damascus could incorporate similar strategies. For instance, the Town could invite gear merchants to sponsor the event and host booths where they showcase products to anglers eager to test new equipment.

**Best time of year:** March – May & September – November (These times of year have the most ideal water conditions for a success trout fishing tournament. Note that tournaments in mid-summer are discouraged unless you are at a higher altitude, so Damascus could potentially fill a midsummer gap. Consult with a Fish and Wildlife expert prior to any summer events.)

**Average Entry Fee:** Many tournaments use the entry fees to cover: Permits, Prizes (cash or gear), Staff/volunteers, Insurance and safety provisions, and Marketing/registration platform costs.

Entry fees vary widely depending on who the tournament is aimed at. On average, the entry fees are listed below:

- **Amateur Tournaments:** \$25–\$50 per angler or team.
- **Semi-Pro/Pro Tournaments:** \$75–\$150+ per angler depending on prizes and amenities. Teams are typically around 2-3 individuals.

Also, note that many tournaments offer an early bird rate so they can encourage participation and get some cash on hand early to help offset costs such as stocking the streams. Many tournaments also offer a youth or learner’s option. This can either be in the form of a discount for individuals in these categories or a separate round of fishing after the main competition ends.

**Ideal Event Size:** This section is split into two groups: large and small scale. For each event, ensure that there is enough fishing area for all anglers to prevent conflicts such as line tangling or

overcrowding. Many groups cited a cap in anglers that had first come first serve when registration opens.

- **Small-Scale Tournaments:** 20–50 anglers.
- **Larger Events:** Up to 100 anglers, depending on lake/stream size and access points. Always consider assets like parking, prep area, restrooms, and ensure there will be adequate fishing space for each angler.

**Prizes and Formats:** Examples of typical prize offerings are cash payouts (tiered for 1st, 2nd, 3rd) and high-quality gear (rods, reels, tackle, coolers). Numerous events mentioned getting gear brands to sponsor the event by donating a rod or reel. This might be something feasible for Damascus, particularly if it was used as a recovery fund raiser, and local business gift cards to encourage participants to visit local businesses after the conclusion of the event.

The three most common types of tournament formats for prize purposes are longest fish, heaviest fish, and most fish caught.

For all events, make sure all regulations are followed, all necessary state permits are obtained, and that all anglers have a valid fishing license.

**Promotion:** Trout fishing tournaments are typically marketed through a mix of local outreach, digital tools, and partnerships. Tackle shops are great promoters, sharing flyers and encouraging word-of-mouth among regulars. Social media—especially Facebook and Instagram—is used to create event pages, share updates, and highlight past catches, while hashtags and posts in fishing groups help expand reach. Organizers also work with fishing clubs, youth programs, and local tourism boards to promote through newsletters, event calendars, and partnerships like “Fish & Stay” packages.

Email campaigns target past participants with early registration deals, prize previews, and referral incentives. Sponsors often help promote the event through their own networks. Local media, including newspapers and community calendars, provide additional visibility. For registration and tracking, platforms like Eventbrite, Fishing Chaos, or iAngler Tournament are commonly used, often offering built-in promotional features.

#### **Other Considerations:**

- Always have a first aid booth on site in case of any injuries.
- Consider events that can tie in with the tournament to either keep people in or bring them into the business district. Other tournaments have a tie into street fairs with fishing equipment vendors, educational materials, and live entertainment. This brings people to the business district and expands the events appeal to people beyond just the anglers.
- Find ways to collect feedback to learn what people enjoyed and what could be improved upon.

## Biking Events

Virginia Tech identified 46 biking events and examined 7 more in-depth. Events like the Tour de Fox show how cycling can be tied to a meaningful cause, demonstrating the value of pairing recreation with philanthropy to broaden participation. The Blue Ridge Parkway Ride and Gran Fondo Asheville highlight how scenic routes can serve as a major draw, positioning Damascus' landscapes as a comparable asset for destination riders. The Red Clay Ramble illustrates the appeal of mixing terrain types (gravel and paved roads), offering flexibility in course design to attract diverse riders. Finally, the Silver Comet Century shows how leveraging existing trail infrastructure can reduce logistical burdens while creating a safe, well-marketed signature ride.

### Event ideas and assets to leverage:

- **Iron Mountain Trail:** A 12.6-mile portion of the trail goes from Whitetop Road to Damascus. According to one website, “The IMT traverses a long ridge in a beautiful tract of wilderness. When ridden east to west, it climbs up, then has a hearty dose of ups and downs before it finishes with 6 miles of screaming downhill, creek crossings, and rock gardens that spit you out right into the Town of Damascus”.<sup>22</sup> After clearing up the trees that came down during Hurricane Helene, this portion of the trail could be a good option for a mountain bike race and festival between July and October.
- **TransAmerica Bicycle Trail/Route 76:** Running from the coast of Oregon in the Pacific Northwest to the coast of Yorktown, Virginia, this trail asset may be more difficult to leverage. One opportunity could be identifying and working with nonprofits sponsoring cross-country cycling tours and arranging a day or two when cyclists will come through Damascus. Often, these cycling tours have a theme or cause that the cyclists are supporting. Having an event for that cause could be a boon for the cyclist tour and the Town. Partnering with groups like Adventure Cycling Association to house cross-country bicycle tours and guaranteeing cyclists stop in Damascus is another opportunity.
- **TransVirginia Bike Route:** The TransVirginia Bike Route is a 565-mile mostly unpaved backcountry cycling route that traverses the state of Virginia from Washington, DC to Damascus, VA. In 2024, an event called the “Grand Depart” was put on in May for competitive racers and social bikers to bike the trail.<sup>23</sup> If this were to become an annual or biannual event, Damascus could develop a celebratory event for the cyclists arriving in Town. Understanding whether this TransVirginia Bike Route could become legal, well-maintained off-road trails for overland vehicle enthusiasts could be an opportunity to host an event for this niche group. Currently, an effort through Virginia Tech is also trying to encourage recreational use of this trail through community exhibitions; becoming part of this initiative could open other opportunities.

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<sup>22</sup> Bikepacking the Iron Mountain Trail, Virginia. Bikepacking.com. Retrieved from: <https://bikepacking.com/routes/bikepacking-the-iron-mountain-trail/>

<sup>23</sup> TransVirginia Bike Route. Retrieved from: <https://www.transvirginia.org/>; Trans Virginia 2024. Bikepacking.com. Retrieved from: <https://bikepacking.com/event/trans-virginia-2024/>

**Best time of year:** Biking events are very popular, and the range is wide in terms of rider types ranging from casual riders looking for a 10-mile ride to riders seeking to do 100+ miles. Events run from March to October with spikes in rides from April to June and September to October. During these months you can easily find 20 or more rides to sign up for within driving distance (~ 3 hours) of Damascus. There is also a concentration in peak summer months, but these rides appeared to cater mostly to advanced riders. Like the fishing tournaments section, Damascus' location and more temperature summers offer an opportunity to fill a gap for rides geared towards casual riders in the summer months.

**Rider Types and Preferred Distances:**

Rider Type	Typical Distance	Event Style
Beginner / Family	5–15 miles	Fun Ride, Charity
Recreational / Casual	15–35 miles	Gran Fondo (short), Club
Intermediate	35–65 miles	Metric Century, Sportive
Advanced / Competitive	65–100+ miles	Full Century, Race
Gravel Enthusiast	25–100+ miles	Gravel Race / Fondo

Depending on how the event is marketed, a combination of surfaces could be used. Damascus could utilize the open section of the Creeper and roads around Town for rides. One thing to note is that different riders prefer different surfaces, so in any market be sure to clearly communicate the surface the ride will take place on. A rule of thumb is that trail bikes can do road rides, but road bikes cannot ride on trails (gravel paths).

**Average Entry Fees:** Pricing was split into two categories casual or fun rides and competitive rides.

- Casual Rides ranged in entry fees from \$25-\$50 per rider.
- Competitive rides ranged in entry fees from \$40-\$100.

Additionally, rides will also offer an upgrade package to get a t-shirt or jersey for the ride. These fees typically range from an additional \$15-\$30.

**Ideal Event Sizes:** Small local rides are the easiest to manage, requiring minimal support and volunteers to host. These rides are typical for 25-100 riders. They need staff to help set up at the start, provide wayfinding directions to keep riders on the correct path, and volunteer to staff hydration stations. These rides could be for any distance or rider group.

- Mid-sized rides are typically between 150-500 riders. These events typically have wider paths to accommodate the increased volume of riders. Additionally, at the higher end of these rides, a group should start considering road closures or police traffic control at key intersections for safety reasons. These rides could appeal to any distance or rider groups.
- Large scale rides are typically 500 plus riders. Events of this size require police escorts or road closures for safety reasons due to the high density. A ride of this size needs more volunteers to man the hydration stations and have onsite emergency response professionals. Lastly, events of this size should have tiered starts to prevent crowding and to

ensure the start is a safe and more enjoyable start to the ride for all riders. These rides could appeal to any distance or rider groups.

Many successful rides offer a variety of distances, so all riders have a distance that appeals to them. Mixed distance rides require additional preparation and planning. These events should have tiered starts with the long-distance riders leaving first. Additionally, the events need clear marketings on the ride path to guide the different groups onto the appropriate routes.

**Ride Routes:** When designing a course, prioritize loop or point-to-point routes that feature good surface conditions and minimal vehicle traffic, or utilize closed roads to ensure participant safety. Incorporate scenic or iconic landmarks to enhance the course's visual and emotional appeal. Additionally, ensure the course is clearly marked with visible signage and includes well-placed aid stations—every 10 to 15 miles for road events or every 5 to 10 miles for mountain bike courses—to support participants throughout the ride.

**Promotion:** Events have been promoted using platforms like Facebook Events, Strava clubs, BikeReg, or RunSignUp, and leveraged local bike shops and clubs to spread the word through word-of-mouth marketing. Be sure to provide essential information to participants, including detailed course maps and elevation profiles, clear packet pickup instructions, and day-of check-in procedures along with emergency contact details to ensure an enjoyable and safe experience.

# Running Events

Virginia Tech identified 10 running events and examined 5 more in-depth. The Montvale 5 & 10 Mile Trail Run shows how offering multiple race distances can broaden appeal, accommodating both casual runners and more competitive athletes. The Mineshaft 10K and Grayson Highlands Half Marathon highlight how unique terrain, and scenic backdrops can differentiate events, making them destination-worthy experiences. The QUEST for the CREST, billed as “America’s toughest 50K,” demonstrates how branding a run around its difficulty can attract elite participants and media attention. Lastly, the Virginia Trail Running Festival illustrates the value of multi-day formats and festival-style atmospheres, combining athletic challenges with community and cultural engagement.

**Event ideas and assets to leverage:** Other than the Virginia Creeper Trail, the trails for races would likely require shutting down parts of U.S. 58, Route 91, or other main routes. One possibility would be to use the Damascus-Abingdon portion of the Creeper Trail for different races including a half-marathon in the spring for training adults, a kids relay race, or a race or awareness event for athletes or individuals with disabilities. Another opportunity could be using Iron Mountain, parts of the AT, or a lesser-known trail near Damascus for an Obstacle Course Race or Ultra-Trail run to draw that enthusiast demographic to the Town.

**Best Time of Year:** Running events take place nearly year-round but see peak participation in spring (March–May) and fall (September–November) due to cooler temperatures and reduced risk of heat-related health issues. Summer races do occur but are often held in the early morning or evening to avoid heat. Damascus, with its cooler summer climate and scenic trails, has a strong opportunity to host mid-summer runs targeting regional runners looking to escape the heat.

### Runner Types and Preferred Distances:

Runner Type	Typical Distance	Event Style
Beginner / Family	1–3 miles	Fun Run, Charity Run
Recreational	5K–10K	Community Race, Holiday Run
Intermediate	10K–Half Marathon	Timed Race, Trail Race
Competitive / Endurance	Half to Full Marathon+	Ultra, Competitive Race

Events can range from short, in-Town fun runs to trail-based endurance races. Trail and ultra runners particularly value natural beauty and elevation challenges, which positions Damascus well for unique, scenic trail runs.

### Average Entry Fees:

- Fun Runs: \$10–\$30
- 5Ks and 10Ks: \$25–\$50
- Half/Full Marathons: \$50–\$120+
- Optional add-ons often include T-shirts, medals, or post-race meals (\$10–\$25).

**Ideal Event Sizes:**

- Small: 25–150 runners (minimal staff, good for local fundraising).
- Medium: 150–500 runners (requires timing systems, aid stations, basic medical support).
- Large: 500+ runners (needs road closures, tiered starts, multiple aid stations, and coordination with emergency services).

**Course Design:** Use out-and-back or looped courses that reduce logistical needs and provide scenic appeal. For trail events, ensure terrain is well-maintained and clearly marked. Aid stations should be placed every 1.5–3 miles depending on distance.

**Promotion:** Running events are commonly promoted via RunSignUp, Facebook Events, local gyms, schools, and through running clubs. Use route previews, finish-line photos, and finisher medals to market on social media. Encourage early registration through tiered pricing and team discounts.

## Jeep and Overlanding Events

Overlanding and Jeep trail riding have exploded in popularity across the U.S. in the past decade, blending outdoor adventure, camping, and off-road exploration. Jeep ownership continues to grow, and overlanding (self-reliant travel to remote destinations) is attracting a new demographic: families, young professionals, and retirees seeking immersive outdoor experiences.

Major events like Overland Expo East (Virginia), Jeep Beach (Florida), and Great Smoky Mountain Jeep Invasion (Tennessee) attract thousands of attendees annually. These events generate millions of dollars in local tourism revenue, boost regional visibility, and foster strong enthusiast communities.

The Jeep community is diverse but shares several traits:

- A passion for the outdoors and exploration
- Interest in vehicle customization and gear
- Family-friendly camping and recreation
- Strong club and social networks

Damascus, with its scenic backroads, proximity to the Appalachian Mountains, and access to the Virginia Creeper Trail, is uniquely positioned to attract this market.

## Marketing Damascus to the Jeep & Overlanding Community

To become a recognized destination, Damascus can leverage digital platforms, Jeep clubs, and national event calendars. For example:

- List Damascus trails and routes on overlanding apps such as Gaia GPS, OnX Offroad, and iOverlander. These platforms are critical trip-planning tools for Jeep and overland travelers.
- Collaborate with regional Jeep clubs (e.g., Virginia Jeep Offroaders, Smoky Mountain Jeep Club) host trail runs, meetups, and volunteer days. Club events often grow into larger annual gatherings.
- Create a Damascus Jeep Trail Map & Guide showcasing trail difficulty, scenic overlooks, camping options, and local service stops.
- Submit events to national Jeep and overland calendars such as Overland Expo, Jeep Forum, Quadratec, and Trails Offroad, to reach a national audience.
- Emphasize Damascus' natural assets—rolling hills, forest roads, and nearby recreation areas—as a unique destination that combines trail riding, camping, and Appalachian culture.

## Key Lessons from Success Stories

### 1. **Strong Alignment with Audience**

Vendors and organizers talk about how the attendees are exactly the target market — curious, engaged, ready to spend. That alignment is what makes people buy, sign up for classes, and engage with content.

### 2. **Diverse Program Offerings**

Success events offer many tracks: classes, demos, panels, gear, networking, entertainment. It's not just one thing, but a layered experience.

### 3. **First-Time Attendee Capture**

Many events report high percentages of first-time visitors, which is a sign of growth potential and broader reach (not just “preaching to the choir”).

### 4. **Community & Networking Value**

Many attendees emphasize that meeting fellow enthusiasts, sharing stories, and building relationships is one of the most memorable parts. The social element is not secondary — it's core.

### 5. **Local & Charitable Integration**

Events that plug into local causes (beach cleanups, fundraising, nonprofits) tend to generate more local support and a positive reputation. It helps justify the disruption an event causes to the host town.

### 6. **Scalable Design & Logistics**

The big expos manage large numbers of vendors, media, classes — showing that even complex events are doable when well organized. Launch events like Overland Expo SoCal show that you can start a new event successfully with careful planning and outreach.

### 7. **Media & Content Amplification**

Many of these events leverage media coverage, influencer attendance, content creation, and social sharing to get exposure beyond just in-person attendance.

## Example Events

### *Trail Rallies & Club Gatherings*

- Typically 1–3 days
- Guided trail rides, obstacle courses, “show & shine” competitions, camping nights
- Good for towns starting small with limited infrastructure

### *Vendor & Expo-Style Events*

- Multi-day events with national brands, workshops, live demos, and education sessions
- Ideal for regional tourism draw and sponsorship opportunities

## ***Destination Jeep Festivals***

- Blend of trail riding, scenic convoys, camping, food/music festivals, and community fundraising
- Example: Jeep Beach in Daytona brings 200,000 visitors and raises over \$500,000 annually for charities

## ***Go Topless Day***

Go Topless Day is one of the most popular and widely celebrated grassroots Jeep events in the United States. It takes place annually in mid-May, marking the start of Jeep season, when owners remove their vehicle tops and gather for rides, community activities, and charity fundraising.

First started by the company ExtremeTerrain in 2008, Go Topless Day has grown into a nationwide celebration involving more than 500 local events across all 50 states and multiple countries. Each participating Jeep club or community hosts its own version of the event—some are small trail rides or meet-ups, while others are large parades and weekend festivals.

### **Typical Activities**

- Scenic convoy or parade rides with topless Jeeps
- Show & shine competitions
- Food trucks, music, and vendor booths
- Group trail rides and obstacle courses
- Community fundraising for local charities
- Raffles, giveaways, and club merchandise sales

### **Why It Works**

- **National Recognition:** Go Topless Day already has a built-in audience of Jeep owners who seek out events through ExtremeTerrain’s national calendar and social media.
- **Low Barrier to Entry:** Towns can start small—organizing a convoy, scenic ride, or local meet-up—without needing large infrastructure.
- **Community Spirit:** The event emphasizes fun, openness, and local pride. Many clubs raise thousands of dollars for charities during their celebrations.
- **Perfect Seasonal Timing:** Mid-May typically offers good weather and aligns with the start of tourism season in many regions, including Southwest Virginia.

### **Why Damascus Should Consider Hosting One**

Damascus is ideally situated to host a Go Topless Day event. Its scenic roads, proximity to Appalachian Mountain trails, and downtown make it well suited for a parade, festival, or meeting / starting place for a guided group ride. Additionally, there is not another event Hosting such an event would:

- Draw Jeep owners from surrounding states (VA, TN, NC, WV)
- Provide a fun and highly visible “kickoff” to the warm-weather tourism season
- Showcase Damascus’s natural beauty and local businesses
- Serve as a manageable first step toward building a larger annual Jeep festival

- Introduce them to other outdoor assets in Damascus and businesses in Town

**Key Considerations for Damascus**

- Promote strategically on Jeep and overlanding networks, not just general tourism sites.
- Start with manageable events such as guided scenic drives, trail cleanup rallies, or a weekend overland meetup.
- Partner with regional Jeep clubs for logistics, trail leadership, and marketing reach.
- Highlight lodging and camping options to support multi-day attendance.
- Secure sponsorships from outdoor brands, auto shops, dealerships, and regional tourism boards.
- Coordinate with landowners and agencies to ensure trail access, safety, and environmental responsibility.
- Entry Fees: Overland Expo weekend passes are \$90 and day passes are \$33. Trail course experiences at the events are usually an add on that costs around \$75. The Overland Expo East in Arlington has a general admission fee of \$95. These events also have a VIP package (camping, exclusives, etc.). These run from \$325 to \$485.

Type of Offering	Typical Cost Range*
Expo / Overlanding event general admission (weekend)	\$80 – \$150
Event add-on driving course / trail experience	\$50 – \$150
VIP / camping / vehicle + passenger packages at expos	\$200 – \$500+

**1 on 1 Trainings**

Across the United States, many regions have built successful Jeep and off-road training programs that teach essential driving and safety skills. These programs often cover topics such as adjusting tire pressure for different terrain, rock crawling techniques, obstacle navigation, recovery methods, and responsible trail use. Below are some examples of programs that have established strong reputations within the Jeep and off-roading community.

**Jeep Adventure Academy**

This program is operated by Jeep and Jeep Jamboree USA. It provides hands-on instruction for Jeep 4x4 owners of all experience levels. Courses typically include fundamentals of four-wheel-drive systems, how to read terrain, adjusting tire pressure for various surfaces, recovery techniques, and safe driving practices. Events are held at multiple locations around the country, including several in the Southeast.

**The FIRM / RallyPro Performance 4x4**

The Florida International Rally & Motorsport Park hosts off-road driving courses on a large, dedicated property. Participants learn how to navigate mud holes, steep climbs and descents, and articulation obstacles. Personalized instruction helps drivers build confidence and technique in realistic trail conditions.

## ***The 4×4 Center***

This program offers off-road driver training using participants' own vehicles. The curriculum includes appropriate tire pressure adjustment, traction management, low traction driving, and vehicle dynamics. The training is designed for real-world applications on diverse terrains.

## ***Discover Off-Road***

Discover Off-Road provides structured courses that include modules on tire pressure management, rocky trail driving, spotting, traction board use, hill climbs, recovery methods, and general off-road preparedness. Their programs are well regarded as blending classroom instruction with practical exercises.

## ***Off-Road Consulting***

This organization runs progressive classes such as Off-Road 101, Off-Road 201, winching and recovery, and overland training. Their introductory classes typically cover tire pressure regulation, vehicle controls, terrain reading, and foundational driving techniques. More advanced courses focus on complex trail conditions and self-recovery skills.

## ***Uwharrie Off-Road Training Center (North Carolina)***

Uwharrie is a certified training center affiliated with the International 4WD Trainers Association. They offer courses for both stock and modified vehicles, focusing on safe operation, trail etiquette, and skill-building for a variety of terrains found in the Southeast.

### Common Skills Taught in Successful Programs

- Properly airing down and re-inflating tires for mud, sand, and rocky terrain
- Reading terrain and spotting obstacles effectively
- Rock crawling techniques, including throttle control and wheel placement
- Navigating steep ascents and descents
- Managing traction on slippery or uneven surfaces
- Using recovery tools and techniques such as winching and traction boards
- Understanding four-wheel-drive systems, including low range and locking differentials
- Practicing responsible trail etiquette and environmental stewardship

**Costs:** Fees for these trainings run from \$425-\$500 per day.

## ***Links to Major Jeep & Overlanding Events***

- **Overland Expo East** (Arrington, VA)  
<https://www.overlandexpo.com/east>
- **Jeep Beach** (Daytona Beach, FL)  
<https://www.jeepbeach.com>  
<https://www.daytonabeach.com/events/festivals-and-music/jeep-beach>
- **Great Smoky Mountain Jeep Club Invasion** (Pigeon Forge, TN)  
<https://gsmji.com>

- **Jeeptoberfest** (Ocala Jeep Club, FL)  
<https://www.ocalajeepclub.com/jeeptoberfest>
- **Southeast Adventure Vehicle Expo (SAVE Expo)** (FL)  
<https://thesaveexpo.com>
- **Southeast Overland Camping Event** (TN)  
<https://tourbrushy.com/events-calendar/2025-overland>
- **Jeepin' the Coast** (Gulf Coast, FL)  
<https://jeepinthecoast.com>
- **Farm Center Jeep Rally** (SC)  
<https://www.farmoconee.org>

### ***Overlanding & Jeep Planning Platforms***

- **Gaia GPS** — Overlanding map app  
<https://www.gaiagps.com>
- **OnX Offroad** — Off-road trail maps and route planning  
<https://www.onxmaps.com/offroad>
- **iOverlander** — Community-generated camping and route information  
<https://www.ioverlander.com>
- **Trails Offroad** — Jeep & 4x4 trail database  
<https://www.trailsoffroad.com>
- **Quadrattec Events Calendar**  
<https://www.quadrattec.com/events>

### ***Go Topless Day***

- ExtremeTerrain – Official Go Topless Day Page  
<https://www.extremeterrain.com/go-topless-day-jeep.html>
- Go Topless Day Event Map & Registration  
<https://www.extremeterrain.com/go-topless-day.html>

### ***Additional References & Context***

#### *Jeep Forums and Community Clubs*

- <https://www.jeepforum.com>
- <https://www.wranglerforum.com>

#### *Tourism & Regional Resources*

- Visit Virginia: <https://www.virginia.org>
- Virginia Creeper Trail: <https://www.vacreepertrail.org>

#### *Success Stories*

- <https://rvbusiness.com/overland-expo-social-makes-history-as-most-successful/>

#### *Jeep & Off-Road Training Programs*

- Jeep Adventure Academy  
<https://jeepadventureacademy.com>
- The FIRM / RallyPro Performance 4x4 (Florida International Rally & Motorsport Park)

<https://gorally.com/off-road-driving-courses>

- The 4×4 Center — Drive Your Own Vehicle Offroad

<https://the4x4center.com/drive-your-own-vehicle>

- Discover Off-Roading Courses

<https://discoveroffroading.com/course-descriptions>

- Off-Road Consulting

<https://www.quadratec.com/c/blog/road-consulting-4x4-driving-instruction>

- Uwharrie Off-Road Training Center (NC)

<https://www.sfwda.org/uortc>

# All-Terrain Vehicle (ATV) and Utility Task Vehicle (UTV) Events

ATV (All-Terrain Vehicle) and UTV (Utility Task Vehicle / Side-by-Side) recreation has surged in popularity across the Southeastern United States over the past two decades. What began as a niche motorsports activity has expanded into a mainstream outdoor lifestyle that attracts families, adventure seekers, and enthusiasts of all ages.

Major ATV trail systems and events, such as Hatfield–McCoy Trails (West Virginia), Carolina Adventure World (North Carolina), and Iron Mountain Resort (Georgia) draw tens of thousands of riders annually. These events generate millions of tourism dollars, increase visibility for rural destinations, and create long-term repeat visitation as riders return year after year to explore new terrain.

The ATV/UTV community shares several core traits:

- A love for off-road exploration and challenging terrain
- Interest in vehicle modification and performance upgrades
- Family- and group-oriented recreation with strong social bonds
- Loyalty to trail systems and communities that provide high-quality riding experiences

Damascus, located near the Appalachian Mountains and surrounded by forest roads, logging routes, and scenic backcountry terrain, is well positioned to become a regional hub for ATV and UTV events.

## Ideas for Damascus

- Promotion should focus on ATV networks, forums, and clubs rather than general tourism.
- Partnerships with local landowners and the Forest Service are essential for establishing legal and sustainable trail access.
- Infrastructure, such as parking, camping, and wash-down areas, helps attract multi-day visitors.
- Safety and regulation (permits, insurance, emergency planning) are critical for long-term viability.
- Vendor and sponsor involvement can offset costs and enhance the experience.

### Key Lessons from Successful ATV Events

- **Terrain Variety:** Offering both beginner-friendly and advanced trails ensures broader appeal.
- **Community Engagement:** Many ATV events partner with local nonprofits or host charity rides, which builds community support.
- **Multi-Day Structure:** Events that include camping, concerts, and night rides keep visitors in town longer and boost spending.
- **Vendor Integration:** Gear demos, aftermarket sales, and food trucks enhance the festival atmosphere.

- Repeat Visitors: Memorable experiences and well-maintained trails lead to high return rates year after year.
- Safety & Stewardship: Successful events emphasize responsible riding, environmental protection, and clear rules to avoid accidents and maintain good relations with landowners.

## **Marketing Damascus to the ATV & UTV Community**

To establish Damascus as a destination for ATV and UTV riders, targeted marketing strategies should focus on trail access, community partnerships, and visibility on off-road networks:

- List local and regional ATV-friendly trails on mapping platforms such as OnX Offroad and Ride Command.
- Collaborate with ATV clubs and organizations (e.g., Southern Four Wheel Drive Association, local side-by-side groups) to host rides, clean-up events, and seasonal gatherings.
- Develop a Damascus ATV Trail Map highlighting routes, difficulty levels, scenic features, and nearby amenities.
- Promote through national ATV forums, Facebook rider groups, and dedicated event calendars.
- Emphasize Damascus's strengths: forested landscapes, Appalachian terrain, and small-town hospitality that align well with ATV culture.

## **Example ATV & UTV Events**

### ***Trail Ride Weekends***

- Typically 2–3 days
- Guided or self-guided rides across public and private trails
- Includes night rides, scenic tours, and skill challenges
- Ideal entry-level format for communities developing their first event

### ***Festival-Style Events***

- Blend of trail rides, obstacle courses, vendor villages, live music, camping, and family entertainment
- Attracts large crowds and generates significant local spending
- Examples include major gatherings at Iron Mountain Resort (GA) and Carolina Adventure World (NC)

### ***Competition & Skills Events***

- Hill climbs, mud bog contests, timed obstacle courses, and endurance challenges
- Popular with more experienced riders and spectators
- Often paired with concerts or food festivals to appeal to a broad audience

### ***Charity Rides and Club Rallies***

- Organized by ATV clubs to benefit local cause

- Feature scenic rides, raffles, and group meals
- Lower logistical barriers make them good starter events for smaller towns

### Pricing Table

Type of Offering	Typical Cost Range
Basic day or weekend trail ride event	\$25 – \$75 per rider
Festival-style event with vendors & concerts	\$40 – \$120
Competition entry (mud bogs, hill climbs)	\$20 – \$50 per event
Camping / RV hookups (per night)	\$25 – \$75
Premium weekend packages / VIP access	\$150 – \$300+

### Links:

#### ATV / UTV Events & Trail Systems

- Hatfield–McCoy Trails (WV)  
<https://trailsheaven.com>
- Iron Mountain Resort (GA)  
<https://ironmountainresort.com>
- Carolina Adventure World (SC)  
<https://carolinaadventureworld.com>
- Busco Beach & ATV Park (NC)  
<https://www.buscobeach.com>
- Durhamtown Off Road Resort (GA)  
<https://durhamtown.com>
- Outlaw Trails ATV Park (TN)  
<https://outlawtrailsatvpark.com>
- Ride Royal Blue Resort (TN)  
<https://rideroyalblue.com>

#### ATV / UTV Events and Organizations

- ATV Safety Institute  
<https://atvsafety.org>
- National Off-Highway Vehicle Conservation Council (NOHVCC)  
<https://nohvcc.org>
- Southern Four Wheel Drive Association (SFWDA)  
<https://www.sfwda.org>

- American Motorcyclist Association (ATV & UTV section)  
<https://americanmotorcyclist.com>
- ATV Events Calendar (ATV Illustrated Magazine)  
<https://atvillustrated.com>

#### Trail Mapping & Planning Resources

- OnX Offroad  
<https://www.onxmaps.com/offroad>
- Polaris Ride Command  
<https://ridecommand.polaris.com>
- Gaia GPS  
<https://www.gaiagps.com>
- AllTrails  
<https://www.alltrails.com>

#### Popular ATV Community & Forum Sites

- High Lifter Forum  
<https://www.highlifter.com/forum>
- ATV Connection  
<https://www.atvconnection.com>
- Reddit — r/ATV & r/SxS communities  
<https://www.reddit.com/r/ATV>  
<https://www.reddit.com/r/SxS>
- Facebook Regional ATV Clubs & Groups (varies by state and region)

## Arts and Culture Festivals

Virginia Tech identified 20 arts and culture events and examined 5 more in-depth. The Virginia Highlands Festival demonstrates how longevity and scale (76 years, 200,000 attendees) can anchor a region's cultural identity, showing Damascus the potential of building an event into a cornerstone tradition. The Atlin Arts & Music Festival and Big Four Arts Festival highlight the draw of combining visual arts with music and performances, creating multi-sensory experiences that expand audience reach. The Bel Air Festival for the Arts and Blacksburg's Steppin' Out Festival illustrate how free or low-cost entry paired with high artist participation can maximize accessibility and community buy-in. Collectively, these models show how pairing arts with place-based identity, music, and affordability can turn festivals into signature regional attractions.

### Event ideas and assets to leverage:

- Barter Theater: While the Barter Theater is located in Abingdon, the Barter and the Town of Damascus could collaborate to bring smaller, youth-focused productions to community spaces such as the park or the mill on the creek. These accessible venues would provide opportunities for young and emerging performers. By working together, Barter and Damascus could attract families and visitors who might not typically attend larger productions, broadening the reach of the arts. This initiative would complement Barter's established programming, enhance Damascus's cultural offerings, and create a shared effort to make the arts more inclusive and community driven.
- The Crooked Road: Located along the Crooked Road, Damascus can better utilize this asset by holding more regular jam sessions, perhaps along its main street as is done in Floyd.
- Town Murals and Art Trail: Building on the Town's Art Trail, the Town could hold annual competitions to add a piece to the Trail each year, drawing artists from across the country to participate. The competition could culminate in a festival with artisan booths and presentations by the finalists. Another way of building on the Art Trail and Damascus' murals is to host a weekend chalk art competition and festival.
- Virginia Bird & Wildlife Trail: Host 1-2 birding events that highlight Damascus' identity as a location for bird and wildlife watching. Possible birds and migratory patterns to leverage: Blackburnian Warbler, Black-Capped Chickadee, Golden-Crowned Kinglet Red Crossbill, Northern Saw-Whet Owl, Indigo Bunting, Eastern Kingbird, Green Heron, Black-Throated Blue Warbler, Louisiana Waterthrush.
- Native American Heritage and Damascus History Tour: The Virginia Creeper Trail originated as a Native American footpath. The first settlers in Damascus were the Cherokee, who set up a hunting camp next to Laurel Creek just north of Damascus.<sup>24</sup> In the 1990s, Damascus held the *Drums Along the Trail Pow Wow*, which demonstrated Native American arts and crafts, storytelling, and music. Additionally, there is the Damascus History Tour, which could play a role in expounding on this history (if not done so already). If done in a culturally

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<sup>24</sup> Founders of Damascus. The Historical Marker Database. Retrieved from: [Founders of Damascus Historical Marker](#)

sensitive way, this Native American heritage could be brought back as an event to commemorate Damascus' history.

**Best Time of Year:** Festivals thrive in spring (April–June) and fall (September–October) when weather is mild and foot traffic is highest. Summer festivals are also common but require shade, cooling stations, and potential evening schedules.

**Festival Types and Typical Features:**

- **Arts & Crafts** – Local vendors, demos, family zones
- **Food & Beverage** – Food trucks, local restaurants, craft beer/wine tastings
- **Music & Performance** – Live music, dance, spoken word
- **Seasonal / Cultural** – Holiday markets, heritage celebrations, harvest festivals

**Average Entry Fees:**

- Free for community-wide festivals to encourage participation.
- \$5–\$20 per person for special access (VIP seating, tasting wristbands, etc.)
- Vendor booth fees: \$25–\$150 depending on expected traffic and booth type.

**Ideal Event Sizes:**

- **Small:** 100–300 attendees (neighborhood or park-based).
- **Medium:** 300–1,000 attendees (requires traffic coordination and portable amenities).
- **Large:** 1,000+ (requires full event logistics including police, parking, stage crews, and emergency staff).

**Layout and Flow:** Use a central hub model with clearly marked zones for vendors, entertainment, and food. Ensure ADA access, directional signage, and designated relaxation areas. Plan for parking, traffic control, and vendor load-in/load-out logistics.

**Promotion:** Festivals are promoted through Facebook, Instagram, local tourism sites, flyers, and sponsor networks. Collaborate with vendors and performers to cross-promote the event. Boost awareness with countdown posts, behind-the-scenes content, and partnerships with local hotels or Airbnb hosts.

## Mural Art Festivals

Mural Art Festivals are events where artists create large-scale, often permanent public murals, transforming the communities' hardscapes (i.e. buildings) into visual art galleries of public art and creating a sense of community identity. Many communities have used these events to bring life to somewhat derelict areas of town, beautify older buildings, and even offer opportunities to reimagine a specific space. Particularly as Damascus is looking to redevelop some of its more damaged buildings and land from Hurricane Helene, a mural festival could be an opportunity to temporarily beautify these buildings and spaces to help the community reimagine what these spaces might become in the future.

## ***Ideas for Damascus***

The core ideas behind Boulder's Street Wise Mural Festival are adaptable on a smaller scale suitable for Damascus, Virginia.

### **Community-Driven Public Art**

Invite local and regional artists to create murals on walls provided by supportive businesses or civic buildings. These murals can be permanent or temporary. Focus on themes that resonate with your community such as outdoor adventure and Appalachian trail culture. Involve schools, churches, or community groups in brainstorming or mural prep.

Because Damascus may not have as much wall space, it could host a juried competition in which local businesses, community groups, and residents vote for their favorite murals. Winning artists add their murals to Damascus' Art Trail (permanently or for a year), while other artist competitors can sell their submissions and other works during the festival.

### **Art as a Tourism Draw**

Use the festival to bring visitors into town by showcasing public art in walkable spots. Promote the event as an extension of the Damascus Art Trail. Incorporate nearby food vendors or local artisans to boost the local economy.

Event examples:

- Self-guided mural tour maps (print or digital)
- Artist talks hosted at the public library or town hall
- Donation-based walking or bike tours led by volunteers or local art teachers
- Hands-on workshops with regional artists (e.g., paint-a-tile or mini-mural)

### **Funding & Support Models**

- Apply for [Virginia Commission for the Arts grants](#)
- Partner with local businesses for wall space and sponsorship
- Crowdsource small donations via social media or local events
- Seek in-kind support (paint donations, scaffolding, food, etc.)

### **Mission-Driven Messaging Matters**

The Boulder festival has a clear mission: elevate underrepresented voices and use art to discuss social justice. In the context of Damascus, the mission might focus on rural heritage, local storytelling, environmental beauty, or community resilience.

### **Don't Over-Invest in Tech**

Boulder's digital features (augmented reality (AR) murals, projection mapping) could be cost-prohibitive. Some lower-cost enhancement ideas include:

- QR codes with mural backstories
- Pop-up exhibits in local storefronts
- Print zines or trail maps

## ***Example Festivals***

### **Boulder Mural Arts Festival**

In Boulder, Colorado, Street Wise Arts hosts an annual mural festival that reimagines Boulder’s public spaces through vibrant, socially engaged art (Street Wise Arts). The organization calls it “ARTivism,” a fusion of activism and street art, spotlighting women, BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, and emerging artists. Since 2019, the festival has transformed walls into expressive murals that ignite dialogue and community pride.

Since its launch in 2019, the festival has installed dozens of murals throughout downtown Boulder, turning the cityscape into an evolving outdoor gallery. Organizers coordinate walking and biking tours, host workshops, artist talks, and digital art exhibitions, including projection mapping and augmented reality installations, to engage the public with both art and underlying social themes.

Street Wise Boulder is a 501c3 nonprofit arts organization funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, The City of Boulder’s Office of Arts & Culture, the Boulder Arts Commission and FPA Gives (Yellow Scene). The festival also partners with more than a dozen local businesses.

Street Wise offers walking and biking tours, and donation-based experiences that help fund the festival. They also solicit contributions directly from individuals; these donations support both the delivery of free public programming and provide resources for artists.

The festival remains free and open to all, increasing accessibility and community goodwill while encouraging broader participation. Street Wise pays all of its artists and invests in enriching programming that elevates the cultural experience.

In 2024, Street Wise Arts installed 19 new murals across Boulder, focused on environmentalism and climate action (Street Wise Arts). The festival featured community programming including exhibitions, workshops, live music, and panel discussions, all aimed at sparking public dialogue through art. Findings:

- 90% of attendees said the festival enhanced Boulder’s reputation as an arts destination.
- Youth program participation grew by 89.6%, expanding into Aurora Public Schools.
- Mural tour attendance rose by 60%, with 240 participants across walking, biking, and private tours.
- Collaborations expanded with local businesses, environmental groups, and the Boulder Creek Festival, which added a new community mural project.

### **Pleasant Peninsula Mural Festival (Grand Rapids, MI)**

Grand Rapids, Michigan put on its fourth mural festival in 2025. The focus of this event is not only about creating public art and beautifying the city, but also about commemorating Michigan’s native wildlife and changing natural environment. In 2025, artists collaborated with scientists to create 21 murals of the state’s endangered and rare species. QR codes were painted alongside each mural so that viewers can learn more about each animal.

## Plein Air Festivals

Plein Air Festivals are an opportunity to support regional artists and promote the natural landscape and built environment of the community. In this case, artists come to a location for a weeklong event where they scatter and paint what they see outside. The week culminates in public engagement and support of artists, a juried competition, and art sales.

### *Ideas for Damascus*

A Damascus Plein Air Festival could celebrate the Town's scenic landscapes, historic charm, and outdoor lifestyle through live, on-location painting. Unlike Boulder's larger-scale event, Damascus can focus on local and regional artists, limit participation to 10–15 artists and use public outdoor spaces and Main Street businesses as painting and exhibition sites. The Appalachian Trail, Virginia Creeper Trail, and surrounding mountains offer scenic backdrops for plein air artwork.

### *Example Festivals*

#### **Boulder Plein Air Festival**

Another art festival held in Boulder, Colorado is the Boulder Plein Air Festival. Hosted by the nonprofit Open Studios, it is a week-long celebration of outdoor painting featuring up to 25 artists working live across Boulder County's landscapes and cityscapes (Cafe). The event combines public engagement, local scenery, and professional art sales, culminating in an exhibition and reception at the Armory Gallery in Boulder's NoBo Art District.

Selected artists must apply through a competitive process with a \$55 fee and submit recent plein air work. During the "paint-out" week (May 31–June 5, 2025), artists create new works on-site with minimal studio touch-up, all stamped and authenticated by festival staff. They can submit up to five finished pieces for display and sale, with Open Studios retaining a 40% commission on all sales (artists keep 60%).

The event includes:

- Artist housing options for those traveling from far away
- Exhibition and opening reception tied to local art celebrations
- Cash prizes awarded through artist voting
- Sales processing and logistics handled by Open Studios

This model provides a compelling art experience for the community while supporting artists and engaging tourists. It also keeps overhead relatively low by using existing community infrastructure (host homes, local galleries, volunteer support) and generating revenue through art sales.

#### **Abingdon, Virginia Plein Air Festival (Early Oct)**

Abingdon, Virginia hosts a Plein Air festival each year in early October. The festival takes place over a four-day period, with a number of agenda items for each day. Though there are structured events, such as a public art sales gallery at the Barnes at Chip Ridge and a quick draw competition downtown, the festival is designed to be largely unstructured. This gives artists the opportunity to

work at their leisure, while also providing opportunities for those interested in gathering to do so regularly throughout the week.

Artists are allowed and encouraged to choose where they paint each day. Interested spectators are invited to tour the town and visit working artists by finding them on “En Plein Air” app. This resource allows artists to mark their painting location on an app for other interested artists and spectators to join.

Additional features include:

- Painting demonstrations and mini workshops with distinguished plein air painter Scott Boyle at Barns at Chip Ridge
- Grand Finale Sales Gallery at the Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace
- Final juried competition with winners recognized at the public viewing reception of the Grand Finale Gallery on the last day of the festival

For more information, see: <https://www.pleinairabingdon.com/>.

## **Chalk Art Festival**

Chalk art festivals are a growing trend nationally, taking place in cities like Charlotte, North Carolina, Denver, Colorado, Richardson, Texas, Minneapolis Minnesota, Cleveland, Ohio, Forest Grove, Oregon, and Rock Island, Illinois. These events offer outdoor music, food & drink vendors, children's activities, local artist booths, and opportunities for attendees to make their own chalk art.

However, the focal point of these festivals is a two-day competition during which artists of different ages and skills develop chalk art murals on the designated streets and walkways. Visitors stroll down rows of chalk art murals, watch as artists make these drawings come to life, and vote for their favorites upon completion of the murals.

The Charlotte Chalk Art Festival (CCAF), for example, highlights the cultural roots of this type of event with its mission to “preserve an art form from 16th-century Renaissance Italy. This was a time when an artist, aka “madonnari” made a living from coins received from passersby watching them recreate chalk paintings of the Madonna while traveling from one village to another.”

### ***Ideas for Damascus***

A chalk art festival would require shutting down at least one to two blocks of a street in Damascus. There should be enough space for adult artists, young artists, and the public to create their art.

- Try to pull adult artists from outside the region. One way of doing this is bringing at least one famous or celebrated artist of 3D chalk art to the event. The Town could potentially give them a very large space to create a piece of art. This could draw other artists and serve as a good draw for visitors.

- To engage youth better, Damascus could host the event during the school year and get classes of students involved in co-creating art. This approach could be an opportunity to attract a larger number of families to the Town.
- Having a separate space for visitors to also make some impromptu chalk art can also be an engaging activity. In some cases, this space could be fully open to any drawing. In other cases, there could be a theme or question that the public is responding to, maybe something related to Damascus such as “What does Trail Town U.S.A. mean to you?”. Finally, there could be a pre-drawn mandala or scene, similar to a coloring book page, where the public could color in spaces by simply shading or adding their own drawings.
- For casual visitors, these events are often free but can be pay-for-entry if the Town can cordon off the one to two blocks of contestant space. Other sources of revenue would be vendor fees, sponsorships, and possible liquor sales.

This event would be a great opportunity to partner with local galleries, Friends of Southwest Virginia, Round the Mountain, Center for the Arts at Virginia Tech, and local schools.

### ***Quad Cities Chalk Art Fest (Rock Island, IL)***

The Quad Cities Chalk Art Festival has been operating for over a decade, often taking place in late May and early June, and supporting approximately 90 artists. The festival gets 3,000-5,000 people visiting annually. With rainier weather, attendee numbers around closer to the lower end of that range.

**Contest logistics.** Youth contestants have a 6x6 foot space to create their work. Adults receive a 10x10 foot space. The festival runs from Saturday morning to Sunday afternoon. Artists start work when the festival opens at 9am on Saturday. They need to finish at 3pm on Sunday, when judging starts. To keep the works preserved overnight (in case of rain), works are put under a tarp at 7pm on Saturday when the festival closes for the day. Tarps are removed at 10am on Sunday when the festival reopens.

The artists are both from Rock Island and the larger surrounding region. The festival has brought “featured artists” from across the nation and abroad with a stipend. The higher the award, the further artists come.

**Material needs and clean up.** The festival tries to have their artists draw on concrete instead of asphalt. Concrete provides a better canvas for chalk art. The festival provides artists with chalk, although many artists also bring their own. While more expensive, the festival tries to get non-toxic chalk to avoid any toxic run-off into the environment. For this reason, they also avoid having murals next to a river. Pastels are often more saturated and produce a clearer image, although they are more difficult to power wash afterwards. The festival has also provided tarps and weights for holding down tarps in the past, although more artists bring their own. Offering a list of suggested items to bring and what will be provided for the artist is recommended.

**Judges** are local muralists, artists, and art teachers from regional colleges and universities. The festival recruits 3-5 judges each year. They can walk around and review the chalk art throughout the

festival. They often come 2-3 hours early on Sunday to get a sense of the art. However, judging officially begins at 3pm. They submit their final input at 4:30 on Sunday. Also, at 4:30, votes are collected for people's choice and artists' choice awards. The awards begin at 5:30pm.

**Prizes** are awarded in different categories totaling over \$2,000:

- Best in Show Awards
  - 1st Place: \$500
  - 2nd Place: \$300
  - 3rd Place: \$250
  - 2 Honorable Mentions: \$100 each
  - People's Choice: \$250 (adult and youth eligible)
  - Artists' Choice: \$100 (adult and youth eligible) – 1 voting slip per artist/team will be provided in artist welcome bag.
- Category Awards
  - Best 3D: \$50
  - Best Reproduction: \$50
- Youth Awards (smaller murals limited to 6'x6')
  - 1st Place: \$150 to the artist/team, & \$200 in art supplies to the artist's school
  - 2nd Place: \$100
  - 3rd Place: \$50

Again, the bigger the prizes, the more artists from further away their festival gets. For people's choice, the festival does in-person voting only. They have found in the past that online voting leads to ballot stuffing.

**Other activities** include a free chalk zone for kids, face painting, and food & beverage vendors. Music is also played and serves as background. One clear draw is local students performing music and school plays. However, the festival directors emphasize that the event "really is about art".

**Financing the festival.** The festival raises \$13-14 thousand in funds annually through sponsorships from area businesses. In recent years, they have surveyed artists to see if an entry fee would be viable. Responses were 50-50 on whether artists would participate. The festival is now charging a \$10 entrance fee. Additional revenue comes from vendor fees and liquor sales. The town has its own liquor license. The town is also planning on how they can build out the festival across their downtown while also making the chalk art component closed off enough to charge a \$5 entrance fee to attendees wishing to see the art.

## Concerts

Virginia Tech identified 68 concerts and examined 6 more in-depth. The Abingdon Old-Time, Bluegrass & Gospel event and the Celebration of Traditional Music showcase how heritage genres can strengthen cultural identity and attract audiences seeking authentic regional experiences. The Mountain Music Festival demonstrates the power of combining live performances with outdoor recreation, creating a festival atmosphere that goes beyond music and keeps attendees engaged for an entire weekend. The Atlin Arts & Music Festival highlights the appeal of blending music with broader arts programming, drawing diverse audiences. Finally, the Gathering in the Gap Music Festival illustrates how mid-sized, community-driven events can celebrate local traditions while drawing steady regional crowds, offering Damascus a model for sustainable, culturally anchored growth.

### Assets to Leverage:

- **The Crooked Road:** Located along the Crooked Road, Damascus can better utilize this asset by holding more regular jam sessions, perhaps along its main street as is done in Floyd. Longer concerts throughout the year are also possible.
- **Mountains of Music:** Making sure to promote visiting Damascus during this event, having local musicians play on the street, having business keep their doors open, and maintaining a festival-like landscape during this week could bring people who would not otherwise know or come to Damascus. In this sense, the “event” is less about concerts, since they are often everywhere across the region during this week, and more about providing an additional activity for visitors to the region. During this time, bus groups from all over the world may also visit this region. Coordinating with the Crooked Road to make sure Damascus is on these bus routes, guaranteeing them a “certain experience”, could be another opportunity.
- **Potential for Growth:** The building of a permeant stage either near downtown or in the Town Park would provide a space that would allow for a consistent concert series or allow Damascus to host events in partnership with groups like the Crooked Road. This would also support the idea of bringing the performing arts to Town in partnership with the Barter.

**Best Time of Year:** Outdoor concerts are most successful between May and October. July and August are especially favorable for evening shows. Evening events are most popular and avoid direct sun exposure. Consider Friday evening concerts in the peak season and weekend headliners during festivals.

### Concert Types and Typical Setups:

- **Local Series** – Weekly/Monthly performances from local/regional bands
- **Festival Concerts** – Music is one of several components
- **Headline Shows** – Touring artists or tribute bands with higher production

### Average Entry Fees:

- Free community concerts are popular; some events noted a marginal fee of \$5 to \$10
- Paid shows typically range from \$10–\$30 general admission, with VIP upgrades (\$50–\$100)

- Food, drink, or merchandise sales generate additional revenue

**Ideal Event Sizes:**

- Small: 100–300 attendees (minimal setup, great for parks or patios)
- Medium: 300–1,000 attendees (requires staging, sound, and vendor management)
- Large: 1,000+ (professional stage and lighting, ticketing, security, parking)

**Venue and Technical Needs:** Ensure high-quality sound and lighting. Plan for power needs, rain contingencies (e.g., tents or indoor backup), crowd control barriers, and shaded or covered areas for vendors and attendees.

**Promotion:** Use a combination of social media, posters in local businesses, regional radio, and artist/band promotion. Collaborate with local breweries or restaurants to host pre-show events or after-parties. Use short video clips or teaser audio to generate buzz online. A consistent visual identity (event branding) also helps build long-term recognition.

## Winter Events and Activities

Winter is often the slowest time of year and can often be the most challenging to schedule given the unpredictability of snowfall and ice. That said, it is also a good time of year to draw specific crowds:

- Naturalists interested in observing outdoor flora and fauna in the winter
- Families needing to get out of the house and stay active outdoors
- Runners preparing for spring marathons

Winter events and activities can leverage the different outdoor assets surrounding Damascus (e.g. Creeper Trail, Damascus Loop, Damascus Town Park), local businesses that could engage in activities as visitors find brief reprieves from the cold, and indoor sites such as the Damascus Trail Center. Some of the activities described below could take place during Damascus' A Trail Town Christmas event, could constitute a different festival event during winter, or could serve as on-going, low-key activities for visitors throughout the season.

### Lights Along the Creeper

Numerous examples exist of communities lighting up zoos, parks, and walking trails during the Christmas holidays. These activities can range from electric tea candles in bags and/or solar spotlights on trees to large scale light tunnels and animated displays. Traditionally, these events are a big draw, but they require substantive planning and varying degrees of funding through town tax revenue, private sponsorships, and admission fees. [Holiday Outdoor Décor](#) is an example of a company that supports these types of events. They offer a good breakdown of key considerations for this type of event.<sup>25</sup>

### *Ideas for Damascus*

- Set up LED tea light candle bags along the Creeper for Trail Town Christmas. The bags could also create clear paths to commercial areas of Town and activity booths for the event.
- Have booths and businesses sell hot food, drinks, and seasonal items
- A complementary opportunity would be a Christmas vendor village, bonfire, and other activities in the Town Park.

## Winter Outdoors Festivals and Activities

One opportunity for getting people out to Damascus on winter weekends is having a winter rally or festival with multiple activities and events centered on the outdoors. As a family event, this rally could leverage the Town Park, Trail Center, and other spaces/businesses to have a fort building contest, a booth for edible plant identification, a station to make winter bird feeders, outdoor games like corn hole, and training for how to build and maintain a safe fire pit. For adults and naturalists, a rally could include talks and excursions along the Creeper Trail or Damascus Loop. A

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<sup>25</sup> Holiday Outdoor Décor. How to Make a Christmas Light Show: the Ultimate Guide to Creating a Great Commercial Holiday Light Display. Retrieved from: <https://holidayoutdoordecor.com/the-guide-to-building-a-holiday-light-show-business-plan/#:~:text=Local%20businesses%20value%20the%20visibility,hours%20selling%20multiple%20smaller%20sponsorships>.

simpler weekend activity could be organizing specific walks along trails and river fronts in Damascus followed by a talk in Town, catered by local businesses.

### **Mount Rogers Winter Naturalist Rally at Blue Ridge Discovery Center**

In February, the Blue Ridge Discovery Center hosts an event to “see how life persists through harsh conditions, study snowflakes and ice phenomenon, the region’s earliest flower blooms, night skies and exposed geology”<sup>26</sup>. Activities include talks, excursions, trainings, and crafts activities, all with a focus on the outdoors. The Rally is funded through volunteer time and ticket sales (\$22.50 per person). They also sell raffle tickets and meal tickets.

### **Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy Winter Walks**

The Conservancy hosts group walks at different parks in Loudoun County to explore and discuss animals’ and plants’ survival strategies in Virginia’s winters. Attendees are able to get outside, get some exercise along trails, and identify signs of life.

## ***Scavenger Hunts***

Scavenger hunts are fun for all age groups and can serve as great opportunities to draw crowds to Damascus throughout the winter season. The complexity and funding required for a scavenger hunt can vary widely. Some ideas include:

- Scavenger Hunt Checklist
  - A simple, one-page checklist of different flora, fauna, and natural objects found along a given trail in Damascus. Many of these checklists already exist online.
  - A more tailored, one-page checklist that could include specific sites, objects, or activities along the Creeper Trail, other trails, and/or in the Town.
  - A bingo card that is more focused on different Town sites and activities: grab a drink at a local coffee shop, bike the creeper trail, visit an antique store, take a picture of a Town mural, see a vintage train car/caboose, etc.
  - Checklist could be a piece of paper that is picked up at Damascus businesses, Damascus Trail Center or Town Hall. The checklist could also be online and downloaded to cell phones.
- Engage businesses in scavenger hunt
  - Have businesses or activities in those businesses be on the checklist so hunters go into stores and offices, experiencing everything that Damascus has to offer.
  - Businesses can provide stickers or stamps that prove an item on the checklist was accomplished.
- Prizes to incentivize participation
  - The Town could offer a prize to those who have completed the scavenger hunt—something as simple as a pin, t-shirt, or entrée into a raffle for a larger prize.
  - The Town could be more formal and offer prizes for first, second, and third place
  - Prizes could come from Damascus business sponsors

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<sup>26</sup> Blue Ridge Discovery Center. Mount Rogers Winter Naturalist Rally. Retrieved from: <https://blueridgediscoverycenter.org/mnr-winter>

- Asynchronous versus synchronous event
  - Asynchronous: not all participants have to do the scavenger hunt at once. Depending on the intricacy of the list, the hunt could take place over an entire month or two-week period. During that time, people could come to Damascus for a day and do the scavenger hunt while seeing the Town. Upon completion, they could submit their complete form to the Town Hall or the Trail Center with their information. Prizes could be awarded then or mailed to participants.
  - Synchronous: the scavenger hunt could be turned into a one-day or weekend event, potentially with other activities such as those described elsewhere in this section. This approach would of course require more funding and planning.

## Winter Trail Run

Winter trail runs can be an official event, like runs any other time of the year. They can also be something more informal like a winter trail run club. These activities attract hardcore runners and those preparing for spring marathons. These activities are opportunities for local businesses to sell winter apparel and accessories, or host meals and gatherings after the run.

Damascus could host a winter run in late February or early to mid-March. A short run could take place throughout Damascus. A longer run could take place on the Virginia Creeper Trail between Abingdon and Damascus or using the Damascus Loop. If using a trail further away from Damascus, bike shuttles could be used on that day to shuttle attendees to a from Damascus. Other winter runs in the region include:

- Numerous Thanksgiving runs
- Frosty 5K and Jingle Bell Mile (Dec 24; Blacksburg, VA),
- Resolution Run 5k (Dec 31; Marion NC),
- War Path 10k (Feb 21; Kingsport TN),
- Crooked Road 24 Hour Ultra (March 7; Rocky Mount, VA),

## Birding and Naturalist Activities and Events

Birding is a growing hobby amongst Americans and Europeans. According to the National Audubon Society, more than 1 in 3 American adults enjoy and spend money on birding<sup>27</sup>. Similarly, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimated 37% of the U.S. population aged 16 and older engaged in birding in 2014, over 96 million people. Birders spent as much as \$14.5 billion on their trips and \$93 billion on equipment and land in 2022, resulting in an economic output of \$279 billion for U.S. communities.<sup>28</sup>

The birding community varies, with more families exposing their children to birding activities, whether it is photographic birds or hiking in local parks and using a birding ID app. Still, birders remain mostly older and white. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service states:

While the average birder is 49 years old, participation spans all ages, with particularly strong numbers among those aged 55 and older. Birders are equally likely to be male or female, and while 75% identify as White; Asian Americans have the highest participation rate at 47%.<sup>29</sup>

This market growth in birding parallels increased interest in environmental and conservation awareness. As such, when attracting this market, it is important for the community of Damascus to embrace “a conservationist” identity in its activities and outreach.

### Marketing Damascus to the Birding and Naturalist Community

Damascus should leverage digital platforms and national birding groups to increase its presence and reputation among the birding community. For instance:

- **Make Damascus a hotspot on eBird.** eBird is a popular birding app from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society. It lets you check and report bird sightings at your location. Currently on eBird, Damascus has four community-designated birding spots: Damascus Old Mill Park, Virginia Creeper National Recreation Trail Damascus, Damascus Town Park, and Beaverdam Creek Park. None of the geotags on the eBird map are “hotspots” at the moment, meaning they are frequently used and have regular reports of different species of birds. If they were hotspots, they would be red, not blue. Turning these spots into hotspots through regular use and reporting can help **establish** Damascus as a hot birding spot for the birding community. This is also true if the Damascus community were to make other birding spots along the surrounding trails, cell reception permitting. Note **iNaturalist** is another reporting app but for a larger variety of animals and plants. It does seem to be well-used in Damascus.

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<sup>27</sup> Leffer, L. (Feb 2025). Birding is a booming hobby—and a big business. Audubon Magazine. Retrieved from: <https://www.audubon.org/magazine/birding-booming-hobby-and-big-business>.

<sup>28</sup> U.S. Fish & Wildlife (Dec 2024). Birding is Soaring in Popularity with Sky-High Impact. Birdwatching in America. Retrieved from: <https://www.fws.gov/story/2024-12/birdwatching-america>.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

- **Get Damascus on Birdability (<https://www.birdability.org/>).** Birdability is a nonprofit that promotes accessibility and inclusion for all wishing to engage in bird watching. Birdability focuses on people with mobility challenges, blindness or low vision, chronic illness, intellectual or developmental disabilities, mental illness, and those who are neurodivergent, deaf or hard of hearing. Birdability offers a map created by the National Audubon Society, which describes in detail the accessibility features of birding locations all over the world. The map uses crowdsource data. Damascus can submit a Birdability Site Review to be added to the map. Considering the Virginia Creeper Trail, the Town Park, and several other Town sites, Damascus could be a good location for people with disabilities to visit and watch birds.
- **Provide hotspot information for Washington County on Birding Virginia (<https://birdingvirginia.org/>).** One website that beginning birders may visit is Birding Virginia. Most states have an equivalent page that offers birding basics as well as key birding hotspots. Damascus should review the Washington County description to ensure it is properly represented and perhaps put it on the Damascus tourist website.
- **Get Damascus and/or Southwest Virginia region on Audubon's Birding in Virginia site (<https://www.audubon.org/magazine/birding-virginia>).** The National Audubon Society is the leading bird conservationist organization in the U.S. They explain,
  - For 120 years and counting, the National Audubon Society has preserved bird habitats, conducted scientific research, influenced policymakers to enact commonsense conservation laws, and engaged communities across the hemisphere to protect the natural resources upon which birds—and we—depend. By "bending the bird curve," we are working to halt, and ultimately reverse, the decline of birds across the Americas.

Currently, it does not look like the Audubon Society works in Virginia. However, they do have a page on their website highlighting regions of Virginia to find birds. Southwest Virginia is not represented in these descriptions (<https://www.audubon.org/magazine/birding-virginia>).

- **Install and stream a Damascus BirdCam.** One opportunity to draw birders to Damascus is to install one or more BirdCams in and around Damascus. In this case, it would be good to work with experienced birders to understand where optimal spots could be. Posting the BirdCam on social media and maybe even connecting with CornellLabs to get onto their BirdCam website would disseminate these videos and establish Damascus as a place for birders.
- **Promote any events on national birding websites.** The American Birding Association, CornellLab's All About Birds, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Audubon Society have lists and calendars of birding events. Most highlight some of the biggest festival such as the Biggest Week in American Birding Festival (Ohio), Cote-Nord Migratory Bird Festival (Quebec), and Great Texas Birding Classic. The CornellLab All About Birds website offers an extensive list of large and small events. The Central Appalachian region—comprising southwest Virginia, eastern Kentucky and Tennessee, and western North

Carolina—does not have any events listed. To list a Damascus birding festival with CornellLab, for example, contact Susanna Lawson at [SVL22@cornell.edu](mailto:SVL22@cornell.edu) or 434-983-1771.

## Birding Festivals

Birding festivals are great places for bird watchers to mingle, improve their bird spotting skills, and be in the right birdwatching spot at the right time of year. While some birding festivals offer music, food trucks, and vendors for shopping, many birding festivals are more low-key. They will tend to focus on the natural world and ecosystem conservation. As such, their activities may include:

- Guided birding and nature excursions
- Guest speakers: ornithologists, ecologists, conservationists, etc.
- Workshops or instruction for enhancing birding skills
- Community meals with a back-porch atmosphere

## Ideas for Damascus

According to BirdCast, a bird migratory dashboard, one of the key times for bird migration in Washington County is early to mid-May. For instance, the night of May 13, 2025 saw about 377,900 birds fly over the county.<sup>30</sup> While the Town should consult with experienced birders, May seems like a good time for birdwatching in the larger region. Damascus may meet a demand for a birding festival in the region, as none are currently publicized in the Spring. Saltville is expected to have a festival in the fall.

Southwest Virginia is at the western edge of the Atlantic Flyway. In the Spring, Southwest Virginia mostly sees migratory songbirds flying north, as many of the larger birds fly closer to the Atlantic Coast. Bird will include:

- Indigo Bunting
- Scarlet Tanager
- Black-throated Blue Warbler
- Rose-breasted Grosbeak
- Canada Warbler
- Eastern Wood-Pewee
- Orchard Oriole
- Northern Parula
- Chestnut-sided Warbler
- Blue-gray Gnatcatcher
- American Redstart

As such, one festival theme for Damascus could focus on a particular species of birds, such as “Warbler Fest,” or the larger songbird population like the “Damascus Bird Song Festival.”

## Key Considerations

- Promote the event through proper organizations and social media
- Consider asking for sponsorships from national and state birding and conservation organizations (e.g. Virginia Society of Ornithology) as well as more local bird/nature

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<sup>30</sup> BirdCast (2025). Migration Dashboard, Washington County, Virginia. Retrieved from: <https://dashboard.birdcast.info/region/US-VA-191?night=2025-05-13>.

companies, public and nonprofit organizations focused on conservation, tourism groups (e.g. VEDP grant), and other local businesses and governments.

- Use multiple trails with different habitats to highlight different species of birds. Note: The Virginia Creeper itself encompasses multiple habitats. Other trails may also.
- Incorporate bluegrass and old-time jam sessions into an event activity. Keep it low-key for birders, but still entertaining.
- The case studies described above provide a wide variety of activity ideas that appeal to different demographics. Damascus should build on those ideas and the variety they offer.
- Multiday birding festivals may benefit the Town more in terms of revenue generation for businesses. It also allows for an early morning birding hike and a night hike for bird watchers. Considering the population, make sure to coordinate lodging in Town. Over the long-term, reconstructing the local campground that was damaged during Hurricane Helene into upper scale cabins, luxury yurts, or other lodging options could support events like this.
- Host a bird blitz on May 11<sup>th</sup>, Global Big Day, a worldwide bird watching event and annual celebration of birds, promoted by eBird. This can be as part of a festival or an add-on to make Damascus known more as a place for birding.
- Rely on existing partners and groups in the region to champion this effort. For example, Virginia Master Naturalists, Bob Riggs & Elain Sharp (volunteers at Damascus Trail Center), Southwest Virginia Biology Department (Biodiversity Catalogue), Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources,
- Businesses can capitalize from a birding festival by selling nature-inspired artwork; bird houses and feeders; binoculars and other birding accessories; bird-related stickers, magnets, and t-shirts; etc.

## ***Example Festivals***

### **New River Birding and Nature Festival (Weeklong Mid-Late April, Early May)**

Located in or near the New River Gorge National Park in West Virginia, this annual festival features a variety of daily bird tours that highlight more than 100 bird species. The event staff characterize the event as, “a friendly bird and nature watching vacation for everyone, offering a variety of daily guided birding and nature excursions, world-class speakers, the finest collection of guides, tasty food, and a back-porch atmosphere unmatched by any other birding festival.” They provide an all-inclusive package with cabin accommodation, meals, and activities. A typical day includes:

- 6am breakfast at Burnwood
- 6:15-7am field trips depart from Burnwood
- 11am-12pm picnic-style lunch
- 2-5pm field trips return to Burnwood
- 4pm presentation in the Meadows at Opossum Creek Retreat
- 5pm appetizers and happy hour
- 6pm dinner
- 7pm presentation

Attendees may choose a half-week or full-week registration. Per person prices range from \$948 for half-week, no-lodging to \$2,484-\$3,368 for full-week, depending on the lodging. To learn more about the festival, visit: <https://birding-wv.com/index.php>

### **Birds in the Hills Festival (Weekend in Mid-May)**

Taking place in Southeast Ohio, near Athens Ohio, this festival highlights numerous habitats to explore, which offers access to different bird species including various warblers (hooded, cerulean, black-throated green, prothonotary, blue-winged, magnolia, and Blackburnian), hermit thrush, rose-breasted grosbeak, and wood thrush. The festival offers limited vendor spots to nature-inspired artists, who may choose from five time slots throughout the weekend. While vendors receive a free weekend pass, the festival asks for a 10% contribution fee from all vendor sales. Cost of a Weekend Pass is \$40.

In addition to different nature walks and expert speakers, activities for the 2025 festival included:

- A bonfire and nature-themed movie night
- Bird banding bracelet crafting: Bird bands/rings are used to identify and monitor individual birds to support the study and conservation of bird species. In this activity, festival participants create their own unique bird band bracelets that they can wear during the weekend. At different activities, participants can collect beads to add to their bracelets.
- A presentation talk involving a real Barred Owl from Hocking Hills State Park
- Flying Heron Qigong Session: Qigong, or Chi Gong is the art of restoring balance and harmony to one's life through movement and breath. Flying Heron is a series of exercises modeled after the Great Blue Heron. While its overall effects are far reaching, it is specifically beneficial to the circulation of energy through the scapula, upper spine, neck, and head.
- An herbal tea and tincture tasting workshop
- Warblers and Cowbirds Game: A fun game for families that demonstrates nest parasitism and its impact on bird populations.
- Bird Banding: "Try your hand in collecting scientific data and have a chance to handle and get a closer look at a variety of bird species."
- DIY Upcycled Bird Feeders: Using upcycled materials like milk cartons and plastic bottles, participants will construct and decorate their own DIY bird feeder to take home! A great way to provide for your feathery friends while reducing household waste!

For more information, visit: <https://www.appalachianunderstories.com/birds-in-the-hills>

### **Pikes Peak Birding and Nature Festival (4-day event in Mid-May)**

This festival happens during spring migration, offering access to a diverse range of bird species found in short-grass prairie, forested foothills, deep canyons, and riparian forests. Festival organizers offer more than 60 field trips across the broader region, including restricted portions of national parks. The event emphasizes the recording of the different species of birds:

“Over the course of the first ten festivals, the field trips have seen, heard, and identified an amazing 273 species of birds. To put that into perspective, during one weekend each May, festival participants have recorded just over half (actually 52%) of the 520 species of birds ever recorded in all of Colorado throughout the year! In 2025, there were 204 species recorded, 75% of our 273 ten-year total, and the festival checklist grew by 5 species; Yellow-billed Cuckoo, King Rail, Willet, Black Phoebe, and Varied Thrush. We have seen 31 warbler species to date!”<sup>31</sup>

Additionally, attendees can take a photography workshop, expand their artistic side in a nature sketching workshop, learn about banding hummingbirds, and learn to identify the common raptors of the Pikes Peak region.

At the end of the day, attendees gather for the festival’s signature event, “Birds, Brews, and Bites” at a local brewery to share stories, see the list of birds identified during the day, enjoy music, and participate in a silent auction and door prizes.

Registration opens two months ahead of time and costs \$40 for adults, \$30 for veterans, and \$25 for youth. The event also has a good list of about two dozen sponsors and partners including Wild Birds Unlimited Nature Shop, Aiken Audubon, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies, Colorado Field Ornithologists, El Pomar Foundation, U.S. Forest Service, Nature & Wildlife Discovery Center, as well as several state and regional public and private agencies with interest in the outdoors.

To learn more about this festival, visit: <https://pikespeakbirdingandnaturefestival.org/>

### **BirdFest & Bluegrass Festival (One-day festival in October)**

This festival is the signature event in Ridgefield, WA, meant to bring awareness to Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge and the endangered and migratory birds that it hosts throughout the year. October is when the Sandhill Crane, a large bird with a red forehead that is endangered in Washington State, returns to the Refuge. The festival celebrates this bird and others native to the region.

Something important to note about this festival is that it takes place in two parts of Ridgefield. On the Refuge, attendees get guided tours focused on the art and science of avian photography, sharpening one’s birding skills, and geology. The Refuge also hosts an opening blessing by the local Chinook Indian Nation, presentations and talks, self-guided walks, and some family activities such as making and decorating your own binoculars. In Downtown Ridgefield, they host bluegrass music and performers throughout the day, have a Saturday Vendors market with over 60 local vendors, put on a Children’s Entrepreneur Market, and offer a bird and music-related crafts area.

In 2025, festival organizers launched their first Ridgefield Refuge Art Contest, asking for bird-themed artwork and offering cash prizes for winners across four categories: Hatchling (K-4<sup>th</sup> grade),

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<sup>31</sup> Pikes Peak Birding & Nature Festival. Retrieved from: <https://pikespeakbirdingandnaturefestival.org/>.

Nestling (5-8<sup>th</sup> grade), Fledgling (High School), and Adult (Adults). The rules include no digital works, no photography, and must be bird-themed (preferable birds found in the Refuge).

The one-day festival is free, although some activities require registration. Festival sponsors include: the National Wildlife Refuge System, City of Ridgefield, and several local organizations such as ProPhoto Supply, Carter Venture Solutions, Old Liberty Theater, Lower Columbia Estuary Partnership, Backyard Bird Shop, Ridgefield First Saturdays, and Northwest Family Daycation.

For more information, please visit: <https://ridgefieldfriends.org/birdfest-bluegrass/>

## **Biodiversity Festival**

Biodiversity and wildlife festivals are excellent opportunities for nature enthusiasts of all experience levels and ages to connect with the outdoors, learn about local ecosystems, and engage in conservation. They often combine education, fun, and hands-on activities that are centered on native flora and fauna. A common festival format is holding a “BioBlitz” where, typically over a 1-day period, participants find and identify as many plants and animals as possible. Many wildlife festivals have themes for specific species groups, and generally biodiversity festivals are family friendly, encouraging young kids to get excited about wildlife around them. Typical activities include:

- Guided walks or hikes centered around a type of plant or animal (wildflower, mushrooms, reptiles, etc.)
- Educational talks by local experts that inform the public on how to identify species and the challenges facing local ecosystems
- Hands-on experiences, especially for children, that provide interaction with animals such as petting zoos and touch tanks, as well as games, food and craft booths

## ***Ideas for Damascus***

Damascus, VA, is well-positioned to host biodiversity or wildlife-themed festivals thanks to its incredible natural assets and trail access. Its position at the heart of the Virginia Creeper Trail is ideal for events like guided biodiversity walks that could highlight the wide range of native species including salamanders, wildflowers, butterflies, shiner and darter fish species, turtles, and diverse insects and spiders.<sup>32</sup> The success of biodiversity and wildlife festivals in other small towns shows that these events can engage locals and visitors, and Damascus could use these models to develop a few different biodiversity events suitable to its landscape. A variety of festival concepts that could work include:

- “Damascus BioBlitz”: A 24-hour event where participants of all ages join naturalists and scientists to document as many species as possible using iNaturalist.
- “Wildflower & Pollinator Day”: A spring or summer event centered on wildflowers, butterflies, and bees. This could combine guided wildflower hikes, pollinator garden workshops, and art experiences like watercolor painting or pressed plant crafts.

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<sup>32</sup> <https://www.inaturalist.org/places/washington-county-va-us>

- “Salamander Safari”: This event would focus on stream life unique to Appalachian watersheds, especially the large variety of salamanders in the area. Activities could include guided creek walks, a salamander-themed scavenger hunt, and talks on aquatic biodiversity.
- “Damascus Wildlife Discovery Day”: This festival could be a family-oriented one-day event featuring wildlife exhibits with live reptiles, insects, butterflies or other native animals, conservation group booths, crafts, face painting, and food trucks.

### ***Key Considerations***

- Promote regionally by highlighting the event on outdoor and eco-tourism platforms that target other areas in Virginia and surrounding states.
- Lean into local biodiversity strengths, focusing on species that are iconic to the area (salamanders, butterflies, aquatic species, Appalachian plants).
- Utilize the existing Virginia Creeper Trail which runs through diverse habitats like streams, forests, and meadows which offers natural zones for thematic guided walks and surveys.
- Engage families with hands-on and interactive activities such as games, touch-tanks for aquatic species, nature art booths, and insect hunts which appeal to younger audiences.
- Involve local partners by tapping into local conservation groups, educators, scientists, and park rangers. Groups like the Virginia Master Naturalists, Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources, Mount Rogers National Recreation Area, and nearby colleges like Virginia Highlands Community College or Emory & Henry University, who could contribute expertise and credibility.
- Schedule around the seasons:
  - Spring: Ideal for wildflowers, birds and butterflies, and amphibian activity.
  - Summer: Great for insect biodiversity, creek walks, and family-friendly programming.
  - Fall: Cooler weather and changing habitats are great for a BioBlitz and guided walks centered on fungi and migratory butterflies in particular.
- It is important to start small like launching a one-day event and then expand over time into a full weekend. Activities like a BioBlitz, guided walk, or Wildflower Day can be a good starting point mostly involving local volunteers.
- Secure diverse sponsors for festivals such as outdoor retailers, conservation agencies, eco-focused companies, regional banks, hospitals, insurance groups, or colleges. It would be good to gauge interest among partners like the Damascus Trail Center, regional universities, the Mount Rogers Naturalist Rally, and state agencies.
- Use storytelling and art such as botanical art, nature journaling, and Appalachian plant and animal folklore to blend science with cultural heritage.

## ***Example Festivals***

### **Berkshire BioBlitz (24-hour event in September)**

This BioBlitz is held in the Berkshire region of Massachusetts and is a community science event focused on documenting the biodiversity in the local habitats over a one day period.<sup>33</sup> It brings together scientists, naturalists, volunteers, families, and students to survey plants, animals, insects, and fungi in designated natural areas. The schedule for this year's BioBlitz ran from 12pm to 12pm and included<sup>34</sup>:

- 12pm - Demonstration on how to use the iNaturalist app for the biological survey
- 12:45pm - Guided walk looking for hawks
- 2:15pm - Guided walk on the diversity and social lives of bees
- 3:30pm - Guided walk looking for reptiles and amphibians
- 5pm - Presentation and demo on bats and surveying techniques
- 6pm - Dinner for specialists and volunteers
- 7:45pm - Guided walk looking for owls
- 8pm - Demo on lightsheeting for moths
- 7am - Demo on bird banding
- 10am - Demo on how to preserve and mount plant specimens
- 11am - Guided walk looking for butterflies
- 12pm - Conclusion and tallying observations

Participation in the BioBlitz is free and open to anyone. Sponsors of the event include: Berkshire Environmental Action Team (BEAT), Greylock Glen Outdoor Center, Greylock Federal Credit Union, and Mass Audubon.

To learn more visit: <https://www.thebeatnews.org/BeatTeam/event/2025-berkshire-bioblitz/>

### **Big Sky Wildflower Festival (2-day festival in mid-September)**

Held in early July in Big Sky, Montana, this week-long festival celebrates native wildflowers and mountain ecology. It features guided nature walks, educational talks from botanists and ecologists, and creative workshops led by local artists and small businesses. Taking place in the Crail Gardens and nearby trails, the programming is designed to encourage personal engagement with local flora through art, trail exploration, and storytelling. Workshops include nature journaling, pollinator education, and wildflower identification walks. The festival cultivates a deep connection to place and plant life, with an emphasis on preserving the biodiversity of the region. Throughout the five-day festival, activities include:

- Guided hike on stream restoration
- Identifying wildflowers and weeds
- Learning about urban tree care

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.thebeatnews.org/BeatTeam/event/2025-berkshire-bioblitz/>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.thebeatnews.org/BeatTeam/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/SCHEDULE-for-BERKSHIRE-BIODIVERISTY-DAY-2025.docx.pdf>

- An educational talk on Big Sky’s Bighorn sheep
- Creative workshops like floral arranging and water coloring

The event is hosted by Grow Wild and participation is free and open to the public. The festival is sponsored by Lone Mountain Land Company and partners include: Crail Gardens, Alpenscapes, Sacajawea Audobon Society, Big Sky Community Organization, Gallatin River, Arts Council of Big Sky, Hungry Moose Market & Deli, Resort Tax, and Bozeman Forestry.

To learn more visit: <https://www.bigskytowncenter.com/event/grow-wild-big-sky-wildflower-festival/>

### **Elachee Wildlife Festival (1-day in September)**

The one-day wildlife festival takes place in Gainesville, Georgia, at the Elachee Nature Science Center from 10:00 AM to 2:00 PM. The event is marketed as a “family adventure” celebrating both native and exotic species with opportunities for close encounters with wildlife, education, hands-on experiences, and community engagement. Activities that take place throughout the day include:<sup>35</sup>

- Interactive wildlife exhibits: Organizations bring live animals for viewing and interaction. Attendees get to feel snake scales, observe reptiles & amphibians, see birds of prey, and visit petting zoo setups.
- Conversations with experts: Conservation groups, master gardeners, and ecology experts provide information, awareness, and hands-on booths.
- Family and kid-friendly activities: The festival includes face painting, mascots, crafts, food trucks, and small musical performances.

Participation is open to people of all ages and experience levels. Ticket price information was not currently available (likely between \$0-\$50 based on other Elachee Nature Science Center events). The proceeds of the festival supported future family programming at Elachee. The festival had a large list of sponsors including: Northside Hospital, ArborCare Tree Specialists, Caldwell Electrical Contractors, Flowery Branch Animal Hospital, Jackson EMC, Lanier Federal Credit Union, Mar-Jac Poultry, Inc., Milton Martin Toyota, Peach State Bank & Trust, Publix Super Markets Charities, Rushton, Subaru of Gwinnett, Syfan Logistics, Turner Wood & Smith Insurance, and WDUN AM550 FM102.9.

To learn more visit: <https://www.elachee.org/wildlife-festival>

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<sup>35</sup> <https://www.elachee.org/wildlife-festival>

# Promising Practices When Hosting Events

The following offers insights from Virginia Tech’s research and interviews with event coordinators.

## Planning and Fundraising

Key planning steps include setting clear goals, developing a realistic budget, selecting accessible venues, creating engaging programming, and marketing strategically through social media and regional organizations. Volunteer coordination and planning for public services (e.g., police, sanitation, and maintenance) are also essential, along with ensuring compliance with relevant regulations.

Fundraising should begin early and include a mix of public funds, private sponsorships, and event-generated revenue. Sponsor fatigue can be avoided by staggering sponsorship requests throughout the year. Local businesses often contribute through cash or in-kind donations, and naming rights can incentivize sponsors. Events can also generate income through vendor fees, ticket sales, merchandise, and activity entry fees.

State grants—such as the Virginia Special Events & Festivals Program and Virginia Tourism Corporation funding—can provide valuable support. Investments in local assets, such as trails, parks, and waterways, further enhance the potential for successful events. Historically, events have also played a key role in community recovery, as seen in places like New Orleans and Christchurch.

## How Small Towns are Marketing Themselves and Their Assets

Small rural communities across Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, West Virginia, Maryland, and Ohio are increasingly turning to strategic marketing to boost outdoor tourism. These towns often serve as gateways to national parks, forests, and scenic outdoor attractions, and they compete to attract visitors seeking hiking, biking, rafting, festivals, and small-town charm. Effective marketing is important for their economic vitality, and many have adopted promising practices to promote their unique assets, leverage regional partnerships, and run targeted campaigns.

Digital media and traditional outreach blend in most small-town tourism campaigns. Common marketing platforms include official websites, social media, visitor centers, print collateral, and even billboards or events to draw drive-by traffic. These tools are used in combination to tell a community’s story and reach different audiences.

Many smaller towns often lack the budget to do their marketing on their own, so developing relationships with key county and regional marketing groups is critical to successful marketing in

small towns. Additionally, the Town should routinely check in with the groups to ensure that their information is always up-to-date and new events are shared in a timely manner.

**Official Tourism Websites:** Virtually every community maintains a dedicated tourism website or landing page highlighting attractions, events, and trip planning. For example, Tucker County, West Virginia’s CVB runs GetTuckered.com, promoting the Canaan Valley area (Davis, Thomas, etc.) with information on outdoor recreation, dining, lodging, and events. These sites often funnel people to local assets. Smaller towns in this region rely on this type of site to capture audiences and introduce them to the communities they represent.<sup>36</sup>

**Social media:** A strong social media presence is a cornerstone for small towns. Most actively use Facebook (which reaches a broad, often older demographic) and Instagram (for younger travelers and visual impact). For instance, Blowing Rock, NC’s official Facebook page has over 75,000 followers, and its tourism team runs seasonal campaigns like the “Glow Time” winter theme via social media and paid targeted ads. Communities post photos, videos, and live updates of scenery and events to engage followers. Increasingly, destinations are also utilizing short-form video – e.g. Hocking Hills, Ohio expanded from Facebook/Instagram alone into YouTube Shorts and Instagram Reels to leverage captivating nature footage. Many also grow email marketing: Hocking Hills’ tourism e-newsletter doubled to 60,000 subscribers under a recent digital strategy. These platforms offer a free avenue to market local assets and share the overall beauty of a town like Damascus for anyone with the given platform to discover. Additionally, these platforms often allow for paid target ads to reach certain demographics or geographics’ regions to maximize returns. Many communities said they used target ads sparingly; many used them for events to target groups that would have interest in the event or at certain times of year. For example, targeted ads in the fall for individuals that would enjoy the changing of the leaves. Lastly, many biking, hiking, running, and other groups have dedicated pages to their passions. These communities offer an opportunity to reach a target audience for free with some outreach to the target groups to share information on assets that align with the group’s interests.<sup>37</sup>

**Visitor Centers and Print Media:** Brick-and-mortar visitor centers remain important in rural regions; they not only serve travelers on-site, but act as marketing hubs. Towns often stock them with brochures, maps, and branded merchandise. Towns like Front Royal have used visitor centers successfully to drive travelers to local businesses.<sup>38</sup> Visitor centers often reach older travelers that stop in to learn more about what opportunities are available in the region. Damascus should be sure to have information in all local visitor centers and work with the local community to ensure information about them is also available at the centers. A subgroup of this is hotels or other lodging establishments. Hotels often have a display of brochures highlighting local amenities or activities.

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<sup>36</sup> Tucker County Convention and Visitors Bureau. (2025). About. GetTuckered.com. <https://gettuckered.com/about/#:~:text=The%20Tucker%20County%20Convention%20and,tourism%20economy%20in%20the%20county>

<sup>37</sup> CrowdRiff. (2025, February 4). Turning passion into impact: A DMO marketer’s approach to responsible tourism [Blog post]. Retrieved June 30, 2025, from <https://crowdriff.com/resources/turning-passion-into-impact-a-dmo-marketers-approach-to-responsible-tourism/>

<sup>38</sup> Royal Examiner. (2020, March 6). Tourism in Front Royal: Fact versus Fantasy – land. Royal Examiner. Retrieved June 30, 2025, from <https://royalexaminer.com/tourism-in-front-royal-fact-versus-fantasy-land/>

Damascus could share their print materials with hotels in the region to display if the Town is not already doing this. Even in the digital age, print is effective – for example, Garrett County, MD saw visitor guide requests jump ~10% year-over-year with renewed print marketing, indicating sustained interest in tangible travel information.<sup>39</sup>

**Traditional Advertising (Billboards, etc.):** To capture passersby and regional audiences, some towns invest in billboards or highway signage and regional magazine ads. For instance, highway travelers approaching Luray, VA can see billboards for Luray Caverns and Shenandoah National Park. Blowing Rock’s tourism authority integrates paid media buys in target markets as part of campaigns like “Glow Time,” which included seasonal paid ads directing traffic to a special web landing page. Local radio and print ads in nearby cities are also used around special events (e.g. festival announcements).<sup>40</sup>

**Content and PR Initiatives:** Many communities generate custom content such as blogs, videos, and itineraries to showcase their story and assets. They also engage in public relations outreach to earn media coverage. A great example is Townsend, TN, which bills itself the “Peaceful Side of the Smokies.” In 2023, Townsend and Blount County partners executed a targeted PR campaign that yielded significant media buzz: a collaboration with travel writers (through a hosted familiarization tour) introduced Townsend to an audience of 435 million via articles in major outlets, boosting county tourism tax revenue by 20%. Such earned media can far exceed the reach of paid ads. Communities also leverage user-generated content – e.g., Hocking Hills’ marketers curate visitor photos to share authentic experiences, rather than only polished professional shots. This type of marketing gives a community a more authentic feel as prospective visitors can see that people like them are going to this place and having fun.<sup>41</sup>

## Marketing Expenses and Budget Considerations

Marketing expenditures in these small communities are typically modest relative to total budgets, but they punch above their weight by tapping dedicated revenue streams and grants. It’s common for tourism marketing to be funded largely by lodging taxes and state tourism grants, rather than a large chunk of the town’s general fund. For example, in Front Royal, VA, the tourism department’s operations (marketing and visitor center) are 85% covered by lodging tax fees paid by visitors, with the remaining 15% coming from Visitor Center souvenir sales. None of the tourism staff salaries or promo costs come from local general tax dollars. In many North Carolina mountain communities (e.g. Asheville/Buncombe County or Jackson County), state law mandates that occupancy tax collections go to a Tourism Development Authority for marketing and tourism development – effectively isolating those funds from other municipal uses. The result is that tourism marketing

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<sup>39</sup> CrowdRiff. (2025, February 4). Turning passion into impact: A DMO marketer’s approach to responsible tourism. CrowdRiff. <https://crowdriff.com/resources/turning-passion-into-impact-a-dmo-marketers-approach-to-responsible-tourism/>

<sup>40</sup> Blowing Rock Tourism Development Authority. (n.d.). Marketing & promotional opportunities. Retrieved April 1, 2025, from <https://blowingrock.com/marketing-amp-promotional-opportunities/>

<sup>41</sup> Blount Partnership. (2024, November 21). Townsend, Tennessee: A hidden gem stealing the spotlight. Blount Tourism. Retrieved July 1, 2025, from <https://www.smokymountains.org/townsend-tennessee-a-hidden-gem-stealing-the-spotlight/>

often represents well under 5% of a small town’s total budget when measured, and in some cases (like Front Royal) the net contribution from the general fund is near zero. While exact percentages vary, a rule of thumb is that a few percent of municipal resources (or less) go into tourism promotion, supplemented heavily by external revenue. Of the communities examined the range of tourism spending as part of the budget was from 0%-2%. <sup>42</sup>

**Cost-Effective Strategies:** Given limited funds, these communities focus on high-ROI tactics. Digital marketing (social media, online content) is relatively inexpensive compared to TV campaigns, so it’s a staple. Also, free publicity through PR stunts or unique events is a cost-effective way to get coverage. The consensus practice is to spend strategically – even if it’s only 1–2% of a budget – and to seek cooperative funding (state grants, regional pooling of funds) to augment what a single town could afford alone. <sup>43</sup>

## Partnerships

One key theme across all interviews and data collection was how no community markets in a vacuum. Partnerships are crucial in extending reach and resources. Small municipalities forge alliances with tourism boards, chambers of commerce, businesses, and other communities to promote themselves more effectively.

Towns often rely on local Chambers of Commerce, which frequently serve as or collaborate with tourism authorities, to promote events and amenities. Examples include the Luray-Page County Chamber and the Garrett County Chamber in Maryland, both of which act as Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) and manage tourism assets.

They benefit further by partnering with state and regional tourism agencies, like the Virginia Tourism Corporation or VisitNC, which provide funding, marketing campaigns, and branding support. Regional collaborations, such as Mon Forest Towns Partnership in West Virginia, demonstrate how pooling resources allow towns to undertake ambitious projects like gravel biking trails and coordinated marketing. <sup>44</sup>

Local businesses—lodging, restaurants, outfitters—also play a key role, often contributing to marketing efforts or hosting journalists to boost publicity. Examples include joint promotions in Luray and hospitality-driven PR efforts in Townsend, Tennessee and Brevard, North Carolina.

Cross-sector collaborations (e.g., between tourism and economic development offices) have proven effective. Campaigns like “Make It in the Mountains” in Maryland or the New River Gorge

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<sup>42</sup> Royal Examiner. (2019, March 6). Tourism in Front Royal: Fact versus fantasy – land. <https://royalexaminer.com/tourism-in-front-royal-fact-versus-fantasy-land/>

<sup>43</sup> Osborne, K., Cottingham, S., Hatcher, K., & Glass, M. (2021, December). Growing tourism in Grafton and Taylor County: Tourism assessment. Downstream Strategies. <https://downstreamstrategies.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Grafton-Tourism-Assessment-.pdf>

<sup>44</sup> AmeriCorps. (2025, February 20). Country roads, time to roam: Partnership announces new gravel and bikepacking route project across National Forest [Blog post]. Mon Forest Towns Partnership. Retrieved July 1, 2025, from <https://monforesttowns.org/gravel-bikepacking/>

regional alliance in West Virginia show how joint strategies help small towns manage tourism growth and attract investment.

Different coordination models each have their own benefits and drawbacks. Town-led efforts provide legitimacy and access to resources but may face bureaucratic hurdles. Citizen-led initiatives foster community engagement and innovation but can lack structure and funding—especially if there is no clear leadership within the group. Collaborations across towns can expand regional impact, though they often require complex coordination. Third-party professionals bring expertise but may reduce community ownership and increase overall costs.

The table below provides a sample of potential collaborators:

**Table 1: Example Partners for Town Events**

<b>Group</b>
Appalachian Trail Conservancy
Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy
IMBA (International Mountain Biking Association)
Blue Ridge Outdoors Magazine
Virginia Bicycling Federation
Visit Southwest Virginia
Virginia Tourism Corporation
Friends of Southwest Virginia
Blue Ridge Highlands
Local Chambers of Commerce
Hiking & Outdoor Facebook Groups (Facebook groups related to the event)
USA Cycling & Running Clubs
WJHL & WCYB
The Bristol Herald Courier & The Roanoke Times
Virginia Living Magazine

## Measuring Impact

As Damascus continues to use events and other strategies to attract visitors and support local businesses, it will be important to gather feedback from the business community to understand which efforts are having the greatest impact. This input will help the Town prioritize and refine its initiatives, focusing resources on the strategies that most effectively benefit local businesses.

This could be done in a formal way like a survey shared with business after an event or informally by just visiting local businesses and talking to them about what they experienced. Below are examples of question that could be asked:

- Have you noticed an increase in foot traffic or sales during or after specific events? If so, which ones?
- How do Town events affect your business operations (e.g., staffing, hours, logistics)?
- Do you feel included in or represented by the Town's promotional materials or event marketing?
- How effectively does the Town communicate with local businesses about upcoming events or initiatives?
- Would you be interested in more collaboration with the Town on event planning or cross-promotion?
- What types of visitors (e.g., bikers, hikers, festival-goers) seem to be most valuable to your business?
- What resources or support from the Town would help your business better take advantage of increased visitor activity?
- Are there any events you think the Town should expand, change, or discontinue based on your experience?
- Do you have any ideas for how the Town could better align visitor activities with local business needs?