

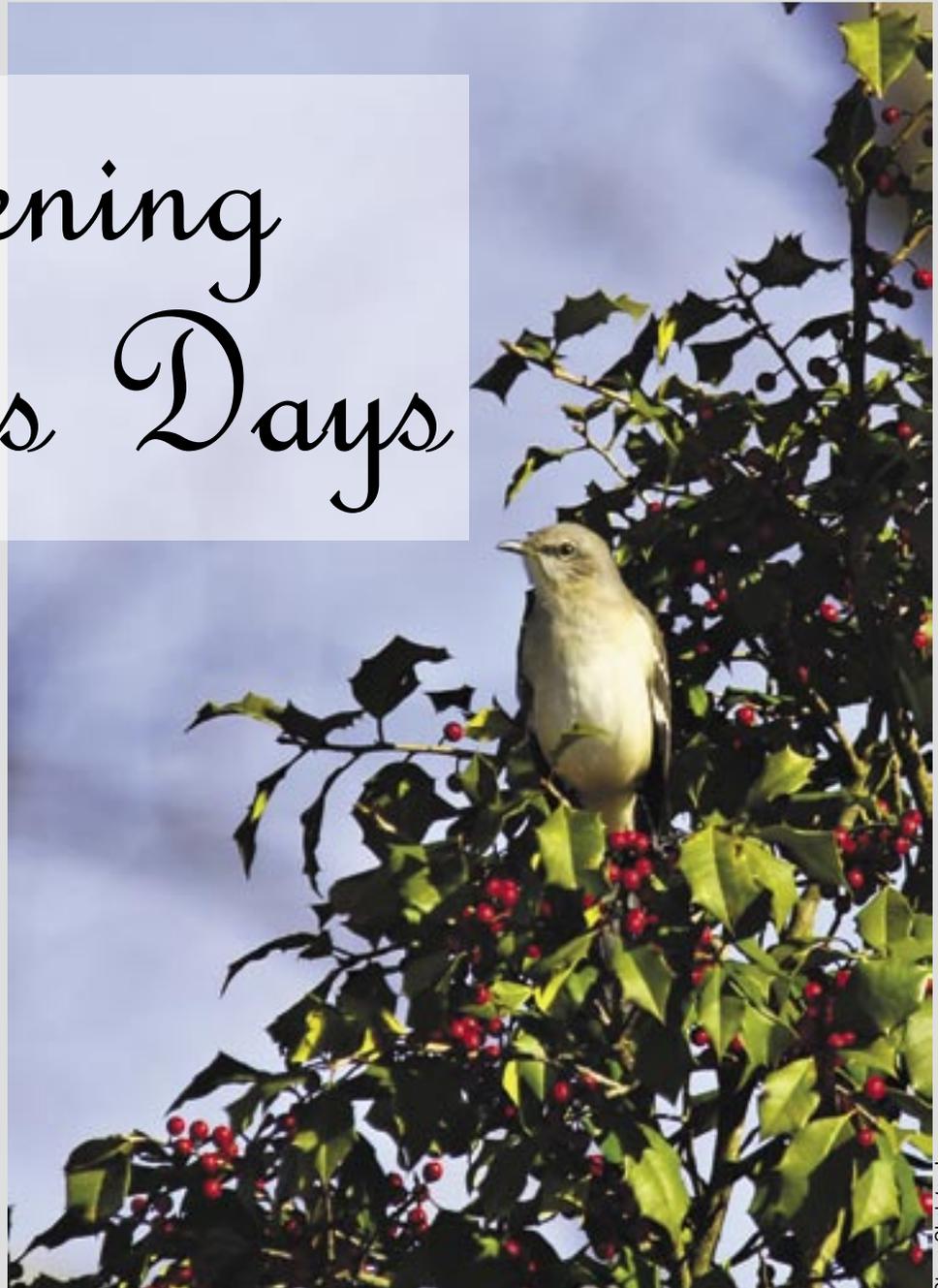
# Brightening Winter's Days

By Nanci Bross-Fregonara

With deep scarlet berries and rich green leaves, the hollies found throughout the Mountain State bring out the spirit of winter, providing a colorful contrast to winter's gray palette. Even those hollies that are deciduous serve as a food source, attracting brightly colored birds to their dark gray branches. But their attractiveness is more than skin deep. From the ancient Druids to Native Americans, the folklore surrounding these shrubs and trees reflect the religions and traditions of different cultures.

One of the first traditions related to hollies goes back to the Druids of the British Isles. Because the European holly found there is an evergreen and therefore one of the few trees in the forest to bear green leaves all year, the Druids believed the sun never deserted it. They revered the plant as sacred and decorated the inside of their simple homes with sprigs of holly so that woodland spirits would have a warm place to survive winter's cold.

The tradition of decorating one's home with holly later spread to Europe where it had links to Christianity. One belief is that the holly berries were once light yellow, but after being used for the crown of thorns, the berries were permanently stained red. In the popular



*The American holly, shown here with a mockingbird, is West Virginia's only native evergreen holly.*

Christmas carol, "The Holly and the Ivy," there are numerous references to the holly's attributes from the "white flower" and "blood" red berries to the "prickly thorn." The similarity of the words holly and holy is not an accident, many believe; the Middle English spelling of the holly tree is *holi*. During the Middle Ages, churches were often decorated with sprigs, wreaths and even entire holly trees.

This use of holly provided the red and green color scheme for

Christmas that is accepted even today. Other traditions, however, have become part of the past. Jerry Parsons, a horticulture specialist with the University of Texas, says that "early Europeans believed that holly repelled all evil spirits and also defended the house against lightning. Other superstitions included the belief that if prickly hollies were brought into the house, the husband was in command, but if smooth-leaved hollies decorated the

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The globally rare long-stalked holly is a fall treasure that can be viewed along the boardwalk in Cranberry Glades. Its bright red berries (inset) are on long stalks.

home, the wife was in command.”

Even the timing of taking down the holly was linked to superstitions. “It was considered unlucky in parts of England to leave holly in the house after New Year’s Eve,” according to Parsons. “Others believed the holly had to be taken down before Shrove Tuesday and burned in the same fire on which the pancakes were to be baked, lest misfortune befall.”

Native Americans used various types of holly leaves and bark for several different purposes. “They wore sprigs of holly during childbirth to ease pain and assure delivery of a healthy baby,” says Parsons. “Others brewed a holly tea from the southern yaupon holly which allegedly restored lost appetites, kept them in good health and gave them courage in battle.”

Although it was once believed that planting a holly tree near one’s house would protect it from lightning, it is now planted for its ornamental and more utilitarian properties. West Virginia is home to several native species of hollies which all provide excellent food and cover for wildlife: American, long-

stalked, mountain, winterberry and catberry. Most hollies prefer moist areas, with some preferring damp woods and others more open areas or glades. Only one—American—is evergreen.

Native holly species occur only in the eastern, southeastern and south-central regions of the United States. The most popular introduced holly species, the English holly, came over with the colonists and, like its American cousin, keeps its green leaves all year. The fruit or berries of all hollies are found only on the female trees or shrubs.

One of the rarest in the United States is the **long-stalked holly**. This unusual holly is found in only 12 counties of Virginia, North Carolina and West Virginia. In our state, it is

found at high elevations in Randolph, Tucker, Pocahontas, Webster and Nicholas counties which are at high elevations. The reason for its relatively small distribution area is something of a mystery. It may be related to the special climatic conditions in the central Appalachian mountains, or to the particular combination of forest and wetland habitats that the long-stalked holly prefers. Another theory is that its distribution is related to flight paths of birds that eat its berries and disperse the seeds. Some scholars have suggested that it once was widespread, but became isolated on mountaintops following the warming and drying of the mountains at the end of the last ice age.

The long-stalked is a shrub that grows to 15 feet tall in round-topped clumps. It has slender twigs that are gray to greenish and bright red berries on long stalks. For botanists, finding this rare species of holly is exciting, for it means this unique plant continues to survive.

**Mountain holly**, found in the more mountainous counties of the



Catberry, sometimes called mountain holly, bears brilliant scarlet fruits in the fall.

state, grows to be either a tall shrub or tree, up to 20 feet tall. It has open, wide-spreading top branches. Its leaves are very long with pointed tips that are sometimes clustered on short, stubby branches. After its leaves turn yellow and fall during autumn, its bright orange berries, the largest of all the hollies, become more visible. They can be up to a half-inch thick, making them a great food source for a variety of wildlife, including woodrats. They stay on through mid-winter when food gets scarce.

Another holly with a different species name is also sometimes referred to as mountain holly or **catberry**. It is smaller than the other mountain holly, growing only 10 feet tall, usually in round-topped clumps. It is found in the higher elevations of Grant, Mineral, Pendleton, Preston, Randolph and Tucker counties. It has elliptic leaves with very fine teeth and its berries are more scarlet. The catberry favors cold sphagnum bogs, but can sometimes be found in damp, cool woods.

The **winterberry holly** is common from Newfoundland to Florida. It can be found in swamps, bogs and other wet areas of West Virginia along with sycamores, maples and other lowland trees. The winterberry is often used in holiday decorating because its bright red berries last throughout winter-- giving this holly its name. Birds, including the brown thrasher, robin, catbird and bluebird also take advantage of the fact that the berries last even until early spring. Its deciduous leaves can be up to 4 inches in length and



Elizabeth Byers

*Mountain holly grows in moist woods in our mountain counties.*

are densely hairy underneath.

The **American holly** is the largest of all the native holly species found in West Virginia, capable of growing to almost 50 feet tall. Like the other hollies, it is slow-growing and long-lived. Its lush evergreen leaves make it extremely popular as an ornamental, but it also serves as a food source for over 20 species of game and song birds. It has spiny, leathery green leaves with tiny white flowers in the spring and provides good winter cover.

President George Washington was so

enamored with the American holly that he planted many on his estate at Mount Vernon, Virginia. Today, 13 of those trees still remain, more than 200 years later, and have been cloned for posterity. In West Virginia, hollies still serve as reminders of winter's beauty as they have for generations before us.

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Gary Kessler, Westborough Community Land Trust  
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*Winterberry holly bears bright red berries in the fall, right, and is found along streams and in many of our shrubby wetlands. In winter, above, the berries are plentiful and bright.*