

Governor's Conservation Achievement Award Winners

Conservationist of the Year — Wilson Laney (Raleigh) - Dr. Laney turned a childhood interest in fish and wildlife into a 39-year career with U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service dedicated to protecting fish, wildlife and habitats. His career can only be described as illustrious. Laney is widely recognized for his leadership on a diversity of conservation issues including hydropower relicensing, striped bass conservation, and interstate management of marine fish populations. His broad knowledge of biological resources and commitment to their conservation continues to generate a strong demand for his guidance and participation in numerous scientific councils and conservation organizations.

Wildlife Conservationist of the Year — Debbie Roos (Sanford) - Roos is an Agricultural Agent for the Chatham County Center of NC Cooperative Extension, supporting small farmers, and hosting educational seminars and field days on sustainable agriculture. In her early work supporting beekeepers, she became aware of the more than 500 native bee species in the state, changing her career trajectory. Her position has grown to include support for the wider audience of gardening and wildlife enthusiasts, culminating in the establishment of the Pollinator Paradise Garden in Chatham County.

Sportsman of the Year — Rocky Carter (Swansboro) - Passionate about hunting and fishing, Carter epitomizes paying it forward by working for better management and enforcement of rules for fish and wildlife. He engages youth in fishing, spearheads Wounded Warrior events, and champions habitat restoration projects. Carter relishes and practices responsibility as a sportsman to make sure our public trust resources are there for future generations to enjoy.

Land Conservationist of the Year — Three Rivers Land Trust (Salisbury) - A reputable, dynamic land conservation organization, Three Rivers Land Trust has conserved thousands of acres of land for wildlife, habitat protection, water quality, cultural significance, and public use. The Trust not only secures funds to protect lands for ecological purposes, but also values and implements unique ways to connect the public with natural resources through efforts like its Sportsman Access Program.

Water Conservationist of the Year — The Coharie Tribe (Clinton) — When hurricanes and decades of neglect blocked access to the Coharie River - a cultural and community touchstone for this southeastern North Carolina tribe - Native American leaders marshalled grant funding, the community, academia and scientists to clear the river for small-scale boat navigation, reconnecting the tribe to the ancestral waters. Bringing together cultural, historical, and natural assets, the tribe dedicated three years and 5,000 volunteer hours to restoring access to the river.

Environmental Educator of the Year — Lily Dancy-Jones (Asheville) - This high school science teacher elevated pollinator habitat and environmental awareness locally by connecting students, community members and local businesses. Dancy-Jones was encouraged by urban conservation efforts around Asheville, but found a lack of interest and action for pollinators in the nearby rural areas troubling. She founded an Eco Club for students, organized workdays and funding to install gardens on school grounds with native plants, "bee hotels" and educational signs, and currently serves as the Chair of the steering committee for Youth for Environmental Stewardship in Asheville.

Legislator of the Year — Rep. Carla Cunningham - Representative Cunningham is the House minority whip. An avid angler, she is in her fourth term in the General Assembly, and has proven to be a steadfast champion for wildlife and habitat. Cunningham sponsored bills to revamp coastal marine fisheries management and licensing, and led the chorus within her caucus and the wildlife committee on the way to the successful passage of fish reproduction legislation.

Marine Resources Conservationist of the Year — Larry Yarborough (Roxboro) - Fully understanding the value of North Carolina's marine fisheries and their potential to be the envy of Atlantic and Gulf Coast states, this avid angler worked tirelessly for fisheries reform. Knowing first-hand the great fishing in Mississippi and Florida that came out of reforms, Yarborough, undeterred by previous failed attempts in North Carolina, focused on the resource to help pass historic legislation in the House.

Wildlife Volunteer of the Year — Larry L. Capps (Gastonia) - An avid sportsman and wildlife enthusiast, Capps leaves his conservation mark wherever he goes. He has transformed hundreds of acres into wildlife sanctuary, leading the charge to install wood duck boxes, osprey platforms, fish attractors and pollinator gardens to promote wildlife and habitat in Gaston County and beyond. Capps is tireless in his conservation efforts and successfully getting youth and others engaged outdoors.

Public Lands Conservationist of the Year — N.C. Chapter Backcountry Hunters & Anglers - Established in April 2018, this state chapter of the North American public lands advocacy organization has been a whirlwind of conservation action. Kicking off its charter with a mountains-to-sea pint night tour of the state, NC-BHA has engaged in statewide public lands cleanups, led letter campaigns to state legislators, created a fund to aid fishing and hunting guides impacted by Hurricane Florence, and created a deeply active and vital network of public lands advocates across the state.

NCWF Chapter of the Year — Charlotte Reconnecting Ourselves With Nature (CROWN) - From family nature walks to organizing local paddling events, this dedicated group led the way for environmental awareness and wildlife conservation in Charlotte. Celebrating its fifth year as a chapter, CROWN achieved recognition of Charlotte as a Community Wildlife Habitat, installed school pollinator gardens and made venison meal kits for those in need in Mecklenburg County.

NCWF Affiliate of the Year — North Carolina Herpetological Society - A strong advocate for amphibians and reptiles, NC Herpetological Society is committed to providing science-based information, research, and educational resources to working professionals, its members, and the public. The Society specializes in conserving native species and biodiversity through hands-on herpetological work, including Project Bog Turtle and Project Simus, to document the natural history and distribution of numerous species like the southern hognose snake, bog turtle, and eastern chicken turtle.

Natural Resources Scientist of the Year — Dottie Brown (Raleigh) - This Senior Bat Ecologist at VHB Engineering in Raleigh performs data collection and permitting related to numerous federal- and state-listed species including northern long-eared bat, gray bat, and Virginia big-eared bat. Brown's countless hours of research and field study have illuminated the devastating effects of White-Nose Syndrome on bat colonies. An unwavering commitment to bats is a personal passion, but her interests also include the conservation of northern flying squirrels, bog turtles, hellbenders, and peregrine falcons.

Forest Conservationist of the Year — Bill B. Kane (Cullowhee) - A longtime advocate for forest conservation, Kane served on the original forest management plan stakeholder team for the Nantahala-Pisgah national forests. He is currently working on the updated plan, advocating for wildlife and healthy habitats on the 1.1 million acres. Kane has been a long-time volunteer with the Nantahala Hiking Club Appalachian Trail Maintenance Crew, and a steadfast leader in forest conservation and management for over four decades.

Conservation Organization of the Year — Cape Fear River Watch (Wilmington) - Improving water quality and protecting the Lower Cape Fear River Basin through education, advocacy and action, this group was at the forefront when dangerous levels of the emerging contaminant GenX were discovered in the river, and ultimately in the drinking water of hundreds of thousands in the Wilmington area. CFRW assisted with public education meetings for residents, provided support for official inquiries and demanded full funding for the Department of Environmental Quality to address the issue. As a result, discharges of GenX have ceased and recovery efforts are being pursued.

Business Conservationist of the Year — Kellex Seating (Valdese) - This Company's commitment to conservation is truly excellent. In addition to using recyclable and renewable materials, it made a significant financial contribution to the purchase of 300 acres for Valdese Lake Park. Company employees dedicated hundreds of hours to cleaning up debris, removing invasive plants, installing pollinator gardens and improving wildlife habitat on the site of the future park.

Wildlife Enforcement Officer of the Year — Michael D. Paxinos (Kinston) — This nine-year veteran is a well-rounded game warden with a consistent record of excellence. When Hurricane Florence ravaged his county, Master Officer Paxinos coordinated emergency response efforts and exceeded the call of duty by housing several officers for the duration of the response. More recently, he procured potentially life-saving Narcan for the entire Law Enforcement Division after a fellow officer was exposed to fentanyl during a traffic stop. Officer Paxinos works tirelessly to cultivate relationships across agencies, serves as a leader for younger officers and has been innovative in the use of equipment and techniques.

Marine Patrol Officer of the Year — Malcolm Bryan Eure (Wilmington) — Officer Eure is one of Marine Patrol's most seasoned, skilled and exemplary officers due to his strong work ethic, professionalism and good character. Officer Eure volunteered his knowledge of the region, regulations and commercial/recreational fisheries to the Rules Advisory Team, dedicated extensive time and effort to vetting new-hire prospects, and participated in lease reviews to uphold the quality of NC coastal waters. He recently earned a Life Saving Award for his quick thinking and vital intervention in administering a tourniquet to an injured man on Wrightsville Beach. He is a valued resource for fellow officers and maintains positive, progressive relationships with the larger communities of Wrightsville Beach and New Hanover County.