



North Carolina
**WILDLIFE
FEDERATION**

Journal

WILD LIVES □ WILD PLACES

Winter 2022



2021 annual
report



Making it Happen

BY TIM GESTWICKI, NCWF CEO

Putting together a year-in-review retrospective is always enlightening, and given the events of the last 12 months, both within the conservation realm and without, it was no surprise to me that a walk down the 2021 memory lane would be especially interesting. We had vaccines created for waves of Covid, an insurrection, and even an Olympics, which seems to have happened almost in a fog. In conservation, there were huge wins—for conservation funding, new park units and state trails, historic flood and resiliency legislation, and wildlife crossings.

And some things remained the same. Tom Brady won another Super Bowl. Duke versus UNC still prompts deep emotions. The internet continued its stranglehold with something called TikTok becoming all the rage. And politics and ideologies were divisive and downright ugly, ripping at the fabric of democracy like feral hogs rooting up a pristine bottomland forest. Exploitation remained the underlying driver in a sort of “new boss, same as the old boss” mentality. Hundreds of millions of juvenile fish killed in our sounds over greed and the farce of pillaging southern hardwood forests to be burned overseas as “green energy” by the European Union (they count burning old tires too!) have to end. Put simply, that dog won’t hunt.


Throughout the year, the Federation remained a voice for the voiceless species and special places across North Carolina. Our highly experienced, trained, and resilient staff, a combination of grizzled, time-tested conservation lions and youthful, exuberant wildlife warriors is arguably the best collective in the nation. These non-9-to-5-clock-punchers worked out front and behind the scenes effectively for conservation accomplishments from January through December. Add to that our grassroots network, our beating heart for actions on the ground, and the envy of many other organizations. Our steadfast investors who fund the work, a critical contribution to conservation solutions, and an unheralded group who make possible the sights and sounds of nature. It is a privilege to work alongside and for our supporters.

A gurgling brook, honk of geese in flight, snort of a buck, hoot of an owl, the cooing of a dove—these sounds are what we work for. Brilliant hues of a cardinal, rising fog over the Smoky Mountains, raindrops glistening on duck wings, sunset over the beach, a pier lined with children fishing, the glow of a campfire, plunging dives by pelicans and falcons—these are the sights we work for. Sounds and sights of awe. Working for the voiceless.

There is plenty to look back upon as hugely positive, as building blocks for further conservation work.

To be sure there is much more to do, but in recapping the year it is clear that 2021 was one for the conservation record books. Perhaps I will be accused of reviewing the year wearing rose-colored glasses, but in reading the pages of this Journal, how could I not be proud of what we have accomplished? And emboldened for the success of the future? There is plenty to look back upon as hugely positive, as building blocks for further

conservation work. To get more folks outside, more acres conserved, less species threatened, and a greater and more diverse chorus of voices championing conservation.

Making it happen is what we did together. Using a campfire analogy, sometimes there are years where the conservation fire is just about burned out. Faint embers that need blowing on and fatwood kindling to spark it back to life. 2021 was a year where the fire burned brightly. Keeping it burning is what we will continue to do, I am sure of it. Now 2022 beckons. Stand back—and join in. We’re tossing another few logs on the fire. 

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ABOUT THE COVER

Cover photograph Even the elk know they are fortunate to call North Carolina home.
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North Carolina WILDLIFE FEDERATION Journal

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2021 annual report

Any year that begins with a prestigious national organizational award and ends with historic conservation funding in the state budget can be filed in the "win" column. This Annual Report reflects many highlights from the past year, and underscores initiatives to build on and priority conservation focal areas to support. Throughout 2021, North Carolinians were excited to engage with, exuberant to support, and determined to have healthy habitats, diverse wildlife, and clean water and air. NCWF priorities include wildlife connectivity and corridors, fishery reforms, increasing populations of endangered species, implementing the Wildlife Action Plan, and engaging the young and not-so-young with nature and conservation solutions. The successes of 2021 will only propel NCWF into greater relevance and influence for 2022.

NCWF WINS THE CONSERVATION GROUP OF THE YEAR AWARD FROM THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY, THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF PROFESSIONAL FISH AND WILDLIFE BIOLOGISTS, AT ITS FALL 2021 ANNUAL MEETING.



NORTH CAROLINA WILDLIFE FEDERATION

MISSION To protect, conserve and restore North Carolina wildlife and habitat.

VISION Our stewardship will result in a North Carolina with healthy, bountiful and diverse flora and fauna that is valued by all its people, and sustainably managed for future generations.

Our strength is derived from values driven leadership – science-based decision making; non-partisan approach to policy; stewardship of North Carolina's natural resources; inclusivity of broad wildlife interests and perspectives; and partnering with organizations and individuals who share our vision and our passion for wildlife.

GOALS Toward that vision, we will:

POLICY AND PROTECTION – Strongly influence state and federal policy that affects wildlife and habitat in North Carolina using established conservation models to guide our positions.

NETWORK OF IMPACT AND INVOLVEMENT – Foster a diverse, robust network of chapters, members, affiliates and partners; a network fortified by a variety of wildlife and outdoor interests.

EXPERIENCE AND LEARN – Enhance and expand opportunities for youth and adults that foster awareness and appreciation of wildlife and the important role healthy habitat plays in sustaining wildlife and humanity.

SIGNATURE PROGRAMS – Sponsor and support programs for the enjoyment and conservation of wildlife and habitat, including ethical and sustainable outdoor recreation pursuits.

Rays OF Hope



CONSERVATION POLICY—A SEAT AT THE TABLE

Being at the table is important for NCWF on a wide array of natural resource matters. If interests aren't heard, represented, and addressed, then goals likely won't be fully achieved. Being "at the table" requires a presence at many places given the scope of the organization and its mandate to work for all wildlife across North Carolina. It necessitates taking advantage of public comment periods, species conservation plan revisions, habitat management plan reviews and updates, and utilizing policies, statutes, and laws to ensure culpability and compliance by federal and state natural resource agencies.

Some of the species we worked for in 2021 may not be as iconic as flounder or wild turkey, yet they serve as barometers of how well we are taking care of water, air, and terrestrial resources. On every issue, we conduct organizational analysis of opportunity, threats, and intended and unintended consequences for our engagement.

In 2021, efforts were dominated by working to rescind or repel federal orders and rule-making efforts that undermined bedrock conservation laws in place to protect critical species, waters, and habitats for wildlife and humans alike. Many of the efforts undertaken last year will need perseverance and resilient dedication in the future to ensure enactment, dismissal, or improvements during 2022.

Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) This bedrock environmental law has underscored the nation's commitment to bird conservation since its adoption in 1918. Treaties with Canada, Mexico, Japan, and Russia were implemented making it "unlawful at any time, by any means or in any manner, to pursue, hunt, take, capture, kill...any migratory bird, any part, nest, or egg of any such bird" unless it was permitted by other regulations. NCWF opposed the previous administration's illegal interpretation of the MBTA that allowed incidental take of migratory birds and created conflicts with U.S. treaty obligations, in addition to violations of the National Environmental Policy Act and the Endangered Species Act. NCWF joined in urging the current administration to adopt a rule reaffirming the interpretation of the MBTA used by Republican and Democratic administrations for the past 50 years: That the MBTA applies to activities that incidentally take birds. NCWF recommended that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service establish an incidental take permit to save North America's migratory birds by providing assured and consistent protections for migratory birds against incidental takes as well as giving greater regulatory certainty for industrial entities.

Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) Various congressional public laws were enacted that deal with water resources in a variety of spheres, affecting environmental, structural, navigational, flood protection, and hydrological issues. The administration of these laws and accompanying projects is overseen by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps). NCWF weighed in this past year by recommending the use of natural and nature-based solutions by the Corps for implementation of the new batch of WRDA laws to respond to increasing climate change impacts. A focal recommendation was for the Corps to fully seek input from stakeholders most impacted by the WRDA including communities of color, tribal lands, and economically disadvantaged communities.

Coastal Barrier Resources Act (CBRA) The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Geological Survey released a recent report documenting numerous adverse and negative impacts from sand mining in environmentally sensitive areas. Still, the previous

federal administration reduced the protections in the Coastal Barrier Resources Act (CBRA) that protect fragile coastal ecosystems. CBRA was enacted nearly 40 years ago in order to protect undeveloped coastal areas from taxpayer-funded activities that harm the environment, spend valuable federal funds, and encourage unwise development in sensitive or flood-prone ecosystems. Congress specifically enacted, and subsequently expanded, the CBRA in order to shield some of America's last remaining undeveloped coastal areas from federal expenditures that support development. The CBRA's primary objective is to protect vitally important habitat, save federal tax dollars, and promote public safety by withdrawing federal funds that underwrite risky development. The law has saved the federal taxpayer nearly \$10 billion since its inception while protecting habitat that is crucial to birds, fisheries, and sea turtles. NCWF joined in seeking immediate restoration of this pragmatic and protective law so that its full, intended benefits can be realized through abolishing sand mining in the designated regions.

Endangered Species Act (ESA) The previous administration significantly dismantled key ESA regulations, eviscerating necessary protections at a time when species are facing unprecedented threats from habitat destruction and climate change. By removing the definition of habitat and critical habitat regulations, the ESA basically became meaningless, neutering agency ability to protect habitat and ecosystems necessary for the recovery of listed species as the ESA requires. NCWF joined in the chorus of outrage calling on the new administration and the USFWS and National Marine Fisheries Service to immediately rescind the harmful actions that limited habitat protections and to expeditiously restore other affected ESA regulations.

Clean Water Act (CWA) CWA protections for drinkable, swimmable, fishable waters were in the crosshairs throughout 2021. Much work was needed to rectify the so-called "Navigable Waters Protection Rule" (NWPR), which was the most severe attack on the Clean Water Act in history. The NWPR removed federal CWA protections from more than half of the nation's wetlands and streams. At least 76 percent of the nation's streams and wetlands evaluated under the new rule have been denied federal protections. The NWPR is currently in effect nationwide, putting wildlife, communities, businesses, and drinking water at risk. Advocating for the agencies to immediately repeal the NWPR and to move swiftly to develop a new "waters of the United States" rule that lives up to the legal and scientific requirements of the Clean Water Act was prioritized for action. Upon rescinding,



JOHN MCGILICUDDY

rule-making will occur during 2022 and NCWF will advocate for the new rules to be grounded in science, consistent with Supreme Court precedent, and faithful to the objective of the Clean Water Act.

NCWF joined in efforts to curb legislative weakening attempts and urged North Carolina's Environmental Management Commission (EMC) and Division of Environmental Quality (DEQ) to address regulatory gaps created by the NWPR modifications. NCWF weighed in on the EMC revisions to state wetland rules to provide a permitting system for wetlands that were excluded from federal jurisdiction, and suggested improvements to the state's wetlands mitigation policies.

Commercial Carp Removal NCWF reviewed USFWS' draft Compatibility Determination and draft Environmental Assessment proposals for commercial carp removal at Mattamuskeet National Wildlife Refuge. Our comments and recommendations focused on maintaining the biological integrity of the lake and returning submerged aquatic vegetation—which carp devour—to the lakebed. We fully support implementing commercial removal of invasive common carp from Lake Mattamuskeet and its associated canals. USFWS personnel expressed gratitude for our stance in a note to the Federation: "Thank you

for your comments on the draft CD and draft EA for common carp removal in Lake Mattamuskeet. We found them very constructive and helpful and will incorporate and address them in our planning process. We appreciate the NCWF's continued support and interest in the efforts to restore the health of the lake!"

N.C. Coastal Habitat Protection Plan (CHPP) This effort is a long-term enhancement of coastal fisheries through habitat protection and enhancement efforts. Development and implementation of the CHPP is a DEQ effort, revised every five years to reflect changes, threats, and recommendations in the status of habitat protection in North Carolina. The CHPP review provides information on habitat distribution and abundance, ecological functions and importance to fish production, and status and trends. In analyzing and offering recommendations to the revised CHPP proposals, NCWF noted that from climate change to stormwater and development pressures, the amendment draft provides a well-documented and devastating assessment of the challenges and future of our coast unless collective actions are taken. Similar to the approach we are taking with our Sound Solutions campaign for estuarine ecosystems, underscoring habitat, management, and the use of destructive gear, we recommended a greater focus on DEQ's existing authority and the need for protective discharge and stormwater permits in addition to increased enforcement. We recommended sweeping changes to our state's water infrastructure system that allow for equitable distribution of infrastructure funding, more efficient provision of drinking and wastewater services, and less water pollution from failing or overrun systems. We supported the inclusion in the draft amendment's recommendation that "fishing gear, practices, and areas should be evaluated regularly to ensure there are no additional impacts to submerged aquatic vegetation." And finally, we recommended that the CHPP propose research into the effects of bottom-disturbing gear and activities identified in the draft amendment, as well as methods to reduce harmful effects.

Seasonal Limitations on Hopper Dredging NCWF joined a legal challenge against the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' decision to eliminate highly successful seasonal limitations on hopper dredging projects that have protected sea turtles, fish species, and other marine life for decades. Due to the fact that hopper dredging operations kill and maim coastal wildlife and disturb sensitive habitat, the Corps has historically conducted maintenance dredging at the Wilmington and Morehead City harbors during the winter months when federally protected sea turtles

and sturgeon are far less abundant in North Carolina's waters. Hopper dredges present a particular risk to sea turtles. During the spring and summer, five different species of federally protected turtles — including hawksbill, leatherback, loggerhead, green and Kemp's ridley — travel to North Carolina's coast for breeding and nesting. The beaches surrounding Wilmington and Morehead City Harbors are likely to host hundreds of sea turtle nests during these months. Because sea turtles take decades to reach sexual maturity, the death or injury of a reproductive sea turtle can have devastating impacts on population recovery, which is part of the reason that seasonal restrictions on hopper dredging were implemented in the first place. The Corps' year-round dredging plans go against strong concerns raised by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, and the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries. The lawsuit alleges that the Corps did not properly explain its reversal in agency practice under the Administrative Procedure Act and failed to conduct a full and accurate environmental review required by the National Environmental Policy Act. "Maintenance dredging plays a role in keeping North Carolina's harbors safe and navigable," said Manley Fuller, vice president for conservation policy for NCWF. "But the Corps has not provided a justifiable reason for ceasing to adhere to established winter dredging windows, which are the same windows that the Corps has self-imposed for the last three decades in recognition of their success in reducing wildlife deaths and environmental harm."

Offshore Wind Resources There is no greater long-term threat to the environment and wildlife than climate change, and harnessing offshore wind represents a critical clean energy resource necessary to cut carbon emissions and mitigate the effects of climate change. Ensuring that offshore wind is wildlife-friendly is the priority of the Federation. Offshore wind energy development should move forward in an environmentally responsible manner, safeguarding vulnerable ocean habitat and wildlife. Projects that are poorly sited, constructed, operated, and monitored have the potential to harm North Carolina's most valuable wildlife including whales and other marine mammals, sea turtles, fish, birds, and other species as well as negatively impacting tribal and economically disadvantaged communities.

NCWF commented on specific offshore wind leases for Kitty Hawk and Wilmington, encouraging the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) and National Marine Fisheries Service to use all available science reviews in their analyses. Consider-

ations of federally protected marine mammal species and populations in the mid-Atlantic, including the critically endangered North Atlantic right whale, and emerging evidence of dynamic shifts in the distribution of large whale habitat, require that offshore wind projects can and must move forward in a manner that is protective of vulnerable marine wildlife. Special attention must be paid to the importance of the waters off North Carolina to marine mammals when permitting offshore wind development activities. The Federation urged Governor Cooper to establish an offshore wind and wildlife task force consisting of environmental advocates, wildlife researchers, state and federal agency staff, tribal members, industry representatives, and others to support facilitated information sharing and dialogue needed to identify and resolve potential wind-wildlife conflicts off North Carolina's coast.

Cape Fear shiner NCWF opposed the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's proposal to downlist the Cape Fear shiner, a small fish species endemic to North Carolina found only within the Cape Fear River watershed. Focus of the opposition was to ensure all ongoing threats to the species are factored into a rigorous assessment of the best available science, and to apply the precautionary principle of management especially as comprehensive population data on the species may be lacking.

North Atlantic Right Whale One of the world's most endangered large whale species migrates along the Atlantic Coast and spends critical calving periods off North Carolina's coast. Current estimates suggest slightly more than 350 North Atlantic right whales remain, with only 100 breeding females. Entanglement in fishing gear and vessel strikes is the leading causes of mortality. NCWF collaborated on comments to the National Marine Fisheries Service expressing concern that current regulations do not adequately protect against eminent extinction nor violations under the Endangered Species Act.

Sea turtle Stranding and Rehabilitation Funding

NCWF requested that Congress provide funding to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration for improved stranded sea turtle recovery and rehabilitation. These funds would aid institutions to plan, maintain, and build capacity for important work that assists agencies in fulfilling their mandates for endangered sea turtle species.

Red-cockaded Woodpecker Once widespread across the Southeast, fewer than 10,000 red-cockaded woodpeckers remained when the species was added to the Endangered Species List. Currently, some 7,800

In spring and summer, 5 species of federally protected turtles — hawksbill, leatherback, loggerhead, green and Kemp's ridley — travel to North Carolina's coast for breeding and nesting.

active clusters of red-cockaded woodpeckers are known. This unique woodpecker species nests and roosts in cavities excavated in living pines. Through federal protection and oversight, scientific research, and intensive management, red-cockaded woodpecker populations have steadily grown. Unfortunately, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed to downlist the species. This jeopardizes the progress made by prematurely declaring victory. NCWF joined in rebutting the USFWS proposal to remove critical protections and oversight for red-cockaded woodpecker. Formal comments submitted point out the USFWS' rapid predetermined decision to reclassify the species without regard to the science or legally-required analyses.

Red Knot Protections This medium-sized shorebird was added to the threatened species list in 2015 due to population decreases caused by significant threats to food sources, including from horseshoe crab harvesting. Human disturbance, predation, competition with gulls, habitat destruction, and insufficient water quality also are concerns. USFWS proposed designating 120 new units along the Atlantic coast as critical habitat. NCWF supported the increased habitat designations and encouraged the consideration of designating additional units in North Carolina on and around Lea-Hutaff Island and on Masonboro Island.

PARTNERSHIPS — BETTER TOGETHER

Partnerships are key to success for conservation. Our partnerships with donors, natural resource agencies, and corporate partners, along with other conservation groups, maximizes shared expertise, relationships, knowledge, and strategies. NCWF prides itself on participating in various coalitions for wildlife and habitat such as Land for Tomorrow, Nantahala-Pisgah Forest Partnership, and the North Carolina Pollinator Conservation Alliance.

Coming Together for Wildlife One of the challenges facing the conservation movement is utilizing capacity for coordinated efforts to address conservation issues from state-level organizations. As an affiliate of the National Wildlife Federation, NCWF benefits tremendously from being in the nation's most significant conservation network with policy, communications, and lobbying support.

Other national-level conservation and wildlife organizations are doing good work, but their work is precisely that – nationally focused. This approach is problematic when one realizes the overwhelming amount of conservation and wildlife work done in the United States is at the state level.

As such, there's a critical need to collectively bring together healthy state conservation and wildlife organizations to drive issues and solutions. Several state organizations created a coalition in 2021 to begin working on shared conservation and wildlife issues. The goal is to bolster the current policy efforts of each state organization through additional "fire-power." This group is called the State Action Coalition.

The Coalition will function as a communications and policy co-op, with members contributing financially to hire a policy professional to represent each organization in Washington, D.C. Like a traditional co-op, the Coalition is an association of organizations united voluntarily to meet shared goals. In addition to NCWF, current members include Alabama Wildlife Federation, Arizona Wildlife Federation, Georgia Wildlife Federation, Idaho Wildlife Federation, Michigan United Conservation Clubs, Tennessee Wildlife Federation, Texas Wildlife Association, and Wyoming Wildlife Federation.

An early example of the Coalition's effectiveness was securing an increase in research and management funding on chronic wasting disease, a contagious disease that kills deer, elk and moose. Coalition members advocated for increasing multi-fold the \$5 million appropriations to combat the disease. The final Senate passage is pending.

Conservation priorities for the Coalition include:

- Removing invasive species such as feral hogs and Asian carp
- Increasing outdoor recreation access
- Supporting outdoor youth engagement
- Improving wildlife corridors and habitat connectivity

GETTING OUTDOORS Whether they take place in a back yard, open field, atop a mountain or at the water's edge, outdoors experiences provide connection. They give us purpose and remind us that wildlife and habitats must be valued and conserved. NCWF is dedicated to ensuring current and future generations have opportunities to engage with nature, and with each other, through fishing, hunting, camping, hiking, or exploring the great outdoors.

NCWF understands the benefits of connecting with the world around us. We've made great strides in expanding our outdoors programming, allowing participants to experience wild places and wildlife, and explore more traditional means of self-sufficiency such as the harvest of wild game for personal consumption. NCWF's belief that everyone should be able to experience the joys of the outdoors has led us to deep conversations about how our programming can better meet the needs of all North Carolinians through increased diversity and inclusion.

NCWF Chapters Get It Done Inside, outside, on the water and in the woods, NCWF chapters work for wildlife across the state. Our chapter network offers members almost unlimited opportunities for engaging in hands-on conservation activities, building organizational capacity while making memories and fostering relationships.



ISLAND WILDLIFE CHAPTER VOLUNTEERS GATHER AT CAROLINA BEACH LAKE TO RESTORE RIPARIAN HABITAT BY PLANTING NATIVE SPECIES THAT HELP REDUCE EROSION.

NCWF STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS HEAD OUT WITH PARTNERS TO REMOVE OVER 50,000 POUNDS OF LITTER FROM NATIONAL PARK AND FOREST LANDS.



BULL CITY TRAILBLAZERS LEAD A JUNETEENTH HIKE AT ENO RIVER STATE PARK TRACING THE FOOTSTEPS OF FORMERLY ENSLAVED FANNY BREEZE, A RENOWNED MID-WIFE WHO LIVED AND WORKED IN THE ENO RIVER VALLEY.



GASTON PAWS PARTNERS WITH LOCAL BOY SCOUT TROOPS TO INSTALL WOOD DUCK AND BLUE-BIRD NESTING BOXES ALONG THE TRIBUTARIES FEEDING INTO THE CATAWBA RIVER.

CHECK OUT OUR CHAPTERS! For more information on how you can participate, contact Tara Moore at tara@ncwf.org.



ALBEMARLE CONSERVATION AND WILDLIFE CHAPTER



BULL CITY TRAILBLAZERS



CATAWBA RIVER WILDLIFE COALITION



CHARLOTTE WILDLIFE STEWARDS



CONCORD WILDLIFE ALLIANCE



EEDRC (ENFEDR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND REVITALIZATION COMMISSION)



HAWK (HABITAT AND WILDLIFE KEEPERS)



INNER BANKS WILDLIFE



ISLAND WILDLIFE



LAKE JAMES AREA WILDLIFE AND NATURE SOCIETY



LAKE NORMAN WILDLIFE CONSERVATIONISTS



MARSH (MARVIN AREA FOR THE RESTORATION AND SUSTAINABILITY OF WILDLIFE HABITAT)



MOUNTAIN WILD!



NEUSE RIVER HAWKS (WAKE FOREST)



NEW BERN WILDLIFE CHAPTER



PAWS (GASTON COUNTY PIEDMONT AREA WILDLIFE STEWARDS)



SOUTH WAKE CONSERVATIONISTS



SOUTHWEST RENEWAL FOUNDATION



TRIAD WILD



UNION COUNTY WILDLIFE CHAPTER

Keeping It Clean, Making it Green



Tree-by-tree and bottle-by-bottle, Federation members worked throughout 2021 to restore wildlife habitat.

- 146,000 pounds of trash collected
- 6,770 trees/shrubs/pollinator plants planted
- 3,100 Certified Wildlife Habitats are now established across North Carolina



COLLEGE STUDENTS IN NCWF'S ACADEMICS AFIELD PROGRAM EXPLORE WILDLIFE BIOLOGY, CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT. DURING RECENT OUTINGS WITH OUR PROGRAM PARTNER, WAKE COUNTY WILDLIFE CLUB, THEY LEARNED ABOUT AND EXPLORED TREE STAND SAFETY AND SET-UPS, HOW TO STAY SAFE IN THE WOODS, ARCHERY METHODS, SAFETY TECHNIQUES AND HOW TO MAKE ETHICAL SHOTS USING TARGETS.

Welcome New Affiliates Many wildlife conservation groups and organizations across the state help comprise a grassroots network for conservation. North Carolina Wildlife Federation affiliates range from youth and adult groups to statewide organizations and local chapters, or local extensions of national or statewide organizations and associations. Seven new affiliates joined our ranks in 2021. We look forward to partnering for wildlife.

- Asheville Greenworks
- Black to Nature
- Cape Fear River Watch
- Davidson Lands Conservancy
- Far Corners Garden Club
- Windsor Run Garden Club
- Women Hunters of North Carolina

Walks on the Wild Side Launching in 2022 is a new program to provide special outings to see some of North Carolina's unique species and places. From elk bugling and hawk migration to trout spawning runs and some of the world's oldest trees, Walks on the Wild Side will be offered throughout the year. For more information and timely announcements, sign up for NCWF's electronic newsletter called *Wildlife Wire*.

Getting Started Outdoors This combination of a workshop and a mentored hunt provides an energetic, exciting atmosphere of educational training and hands-on experience hosted by N.C. Wildlife

Resources Commission staff and NCWF mentors. Participants learn about archery and firearm methods and safety, how to prepare for a hunt, scouting, how to track wildlife, ethics and species management, hunting regulations, and how to safely take meat from the woods to the dinner table. NCWF and Gaston PAWS recently completed its third Getting Started Outdoors deer-focused event and is hosting its first turkey workshop in 2022, along with virtual deer hunting and processing seminars and a suite of webinars on learning how to deer hunt. GSO provided a safe and supportive environment for anyone who has never hunted and does not have a support system to engage and learn.

Academics Afield An overall decline in the number of hunters across the country shows the importance of expanding the sport to a younger, more diverse, and conservation-minded community—college students. Academics Afield aims to diversify the hunting community by introducing NCSU students to hunting and shooting sports. In partnership with N.C. State University, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, Wake County Wildlife Club, Ducks Unlimited, and other conservation groups, the program expands on recruitment, retention, and reactivation (R3) efforts to ensure a sustainable funding stream for future wildlife management.

During the pilot year of the program, 15 students had multiple opportunities to target shoot, followed by a group dove hunt on state gamelands, and deer

and duck hunts. NCWF is looking forward to expanding at North Carolina Central University and North Carolina A & T this year.

"Younger generations value conservation and want to hunt for ethical, altruistic, and consumptive reasons, but there is more demand than opportunities for them to do so," said Dr. Liz Rutledge, NCWF's director of wildlife resources. "Academics Afield and R3 help bridge that gap through social connections, educational workshops, archery and firearm safety and skill-building, mentorship and out in the field experiences."

Launch of Artemis Two-thirds of our first-year participants in the Academics Afield program was female, highlighting the need to provide more outdoor opportunities to all. NCWF's involvement in the national Artemis initiative is designed to enhance women's involvement in outdoor recreation. NCWF sees this program as another avenue to make hunting, trapping, fishing, camping, and shooting sports available and accessible to women. North Carolina's Artemis Ambassadors keep up with program participants through email and social media to host fun, informal group trips to improve skills and enjoy time outdoors with friends.

Deer Donations With on-going hardships caused by the pandemic on top of existing challenges, the donation of protein to individuals and families in need is critical to communities across the state. NCWF chapters including South Wake Conservationists, Concord Wildlife Alliance, and Gaston PAWS facilitated the donation of deer to local processors through the Hunters for the Hungry program. An additional 180-plus deer were contributed through other NCWF-developed deer donation networks, providing approximately 65,000 servings of ground venison to those in need during the 2021-2022 deer season. Additionally, some of our partners and volunteers on the local level were able to provide a simple chili or spaghetti meal kit to the venison recipients to ensure they could turn the ground venison into a complete meal. NCWF thanks the hunters who support the program through deer donation and we encourage new hunters to get involved. Also, many thanks go to the volunteer networks, meat processors, and food relief organizations, as the program requires many working parts to provide essential food resources to those in need.

GoU Breaks Barriers to Connect Kids with the Great Outdoors Great Outdoors University (GoU) isn't your typical classroom. There aren't any walls, desks or textbooks, and no test-taking under harsh fluorescent lights. Instead, there are green spaces, fresh air

and sunshine, and lots of opportunities to get dirty and get moving while exploring the natural world.

Since NCWF launched the GoU program in 2013, more than 106,000 kids and their families have headed outside, a living laboratory where they learned about and experienced the wonders of nature. With support from 45 community partners, such as Boys & Girls Clubs, GoU helps break down barriers and create more inclusive opportunities to get young people outside.

GoU's adventures are as diverse as the participants, who range from 4 to 18 and come from urban and rural communities. The 1,043 excursions hosted to date, at more than 40 destinations, have included fishing, hiking, biking, canoeing, gardening, bird watching, archery, scavenger hunting, hands-on experimenting, and identifying wildlife and habitat.

"GoU helps inspire curiosity about the natural world so our participants can discover its many joys and benefits, while also learning about teamwork, personal responsibility, and other life skills," said GoU program director Mary Bures. "Playing outdoors also encourages problem solving and creativity, improves physical health and boosts confidence. We hope programs like these inspire our youth and help them discover their potential. Younger generations must make lasting connections with North Carolina's wild lives and wild places. The future of conservation lies with them."

2021 GoU by the Numbers:

- 102 daytrips
- 4 Family Fun Day events
- 3 new curriculum offerings bringing total to 28
- 46 partners
- 42 program destination sites

A FOCUS ON 5

NCWF works for all wildlife and habitat. Balancing time, energy, and organizational resources to meet the needs of wildlife species takes strategy and prioritization. These five species of focus underscore our commitment to habitat protection, restoration and connectivity, supporting species in need, and solving poor public trust resource management.

Atlantic croaker *Micropogonias undulatus*

Atlantic croaker are very popular fish for both sport and the table, and young croaker are a valuable prey source for many larger fish. Annual estimates from DMF show dramatic declines over the last four decades. Peak commercial landings in 1980 exceeded 21 million pounds. From 2001 through 2020, commercial landings declined from 12 million pounds to 0.57 million pounds, a 95-percent harvest



reduction. Recreational landings have declined from 1.7 million pounds in 1989 to 0.22 million pounds in 2020, an 87 percent decline. Average size in the recreational fishery has declined from just over a half pound to one-third of a pound over the time period. DMF studies indicate approximately 125 million croaker were discarded as shrimp trawl bycatch, making waste from shrimp trawls the greatest source of mortality for croaker on the East Coast. According to the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's stock assessment, fisheries are increasingly relying on juvenile fish, jeopardizing spawning ability and indicative of stock decline. NCWF continues its marine fishery reform efforts into 2022 even though solutions offered to DMF and Marine Fisheries Commission went unaddressed.

Elk *Cervus elaphus Manitobensis*

The triumphant return of this majestic animal to the Southern Appalachians is nothing short of a wildlife success story, and one that is still being written today. Fragmentation and loss of suitable habitat, along with increased vehicles on roads, are all ongoing threats to growing the current elk population. NCWF has begun to address some of the challenges elk face by joining Safe Passage, a diverse group of biologists, wildlife managers, transportation planners, and wildlife advocates developing feasible solutions to the increasing wildlife mortality, human injury, and rising costs of damages from wildlife-vehicle collisions in western North Carolina. Safe Passage is working to make a perilous 28-mile stretch of I-40 in the Pigeon River Gorge safer for drivers and wildlife alike. While elk is one of three focal species of the effort (bear and deer also), improvements in habitat and connectivity will benefit small mammals, reptiles and amphibians, and aquatic species as well.

NCWF helped craft and submit comments to the North Carolina and Tennessee Departments of Transportation to make roadways more wildlife-friendly. NCWF acknowledges these measures come with a large price tag and is dedicated to raising awareness and supporting policy that will provide funding. 2021 saw congressional passage of a large infrastructure bill which included \$350 million for wildlife road crossing projects around the country. NCWF continues to lease prime elk grazing habitat to provide food and open areas, free of roads, where elk can convene and interact. While the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission has not detected chronic wasting disease in white-tailed deer or elk in the state, NCWF supports federal legislation to reduce the risk of disease transmission and increase funding for disease testing efforts in cervids.



NCWF JOINS NORTH CAROLINA POLLINATOR CONSERVATION ALLIANCE TEAM MEMBERS FOR A COMMUNITY POLLINATOR GARDEN PLANTING IN APOLLO HEIGHTS IN RALEIGH.

Monarch butterfly *Danaus plexippus*

The monarch butterfly highlights NCWF's pollinator priorities. Along with other pollinators, it has been in severe decline due to habitat loss, misuse of pesticides, and climate change. In order for monarchs and other pollinators to thrive, a diversity of native plants must be added to the landscape to restore suitable habitat. Similar to other pollinators, the monarch butterfly relies on a single group of plants for reproduction, milkweed (*Asclepias spp.*), which emphasizes the importance of plant diversity to expand reproduction potential and foraging opportunities. NCWF supports these initiatives through policy work and our Butterfly Highway program, a statewide initiative to increase and conserve pollinator habitat. NCWF also has partnered with other organizations through the North Carolina Pollinator Conservation Alliance. Webinars, pollinator field days, and native plantings are ramping up in 2022 to support pollinator conservation and preserve iconic species like the monarch. We also will be advocating for pollinator elevation in scoring for landowner cost-share, sources within the Farm Bill, Natural Resources Conservation Service funding, and land acquisition priorities.

Red wolf *Canis rufus*

The critically endangered red wolf once ranged across the eastern and south-central portions of the United States, but is now found only in eastern North Carolina. The species weighs between 45-80 pounds, has distinct reddish coloration along its body and legs, and has noticeably longer legs and larger feet than other canids on the landscape. At present, there are fewer than 25 individuals in the wild with only a few hundred wolves in captivity across the country. With low public awareness of

red wolf existence, lack of suitable habitat, pockets of human intolerance of the species, and myths circulating misinformation on wolf behavior, the species is at risk of becoming extinct in the wild again. NCWF is devoted to providing this species all possible resources necessary for a shot at survival. The Federation conducts red wolf education and outreach efforts and collaborates with multiple partners on projects supporting red wolf recovery. Projects include:

- Improving wildlife corridors and habitat connectivity
- Prey for the Pack program, administered by NCWF and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners Program, is a cost-share initiative to build relationships with landowners and create and improve habitat for red wolves on private lands. As of 2021, the Prey for the Pack program has approximately 1,000 acres enrolled in habitat improvement and management. In 2022, we will continue to enroll landowners and properties with the intent to increase species awareness, cooperation, and continuity of red wolf habitat across the five-county red wolf recovery area.
- Helping USFWS implement a fire break project on Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge to reduce wildfire risks and increase prey availability for red wolves and other species.
- Purchase electronic message boards to alert drivers to slow down in areas where there may be increased wildlife movement near the refuges.
- Continued support of programming at the Red Wolf Center in Columbia.
- Purchased a new acclimation pen to ensure wolves could be held in a low-stress environment for the appropriate amount of time prior to release into the wild.



NCWF FUNDED AN ELECTRIC BEAR-PROOF ACCLIMATION PEN FOR WOLVES SLATED TO BE RELEASED INTO THE WILD.



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Southern Flounder *Paralichthys lethostigma*

The plight of southern flounder underscores failed management by state fishery managers. Southern flounder were historically the most sought-after and valuable finfish to both commercial and recreational fishermen in North Carolina. Commercial landings and value peaked in 1994 at 4.8 million pounds worth \$8 million. Due to severe declines in the stock and only modest management efforts, reported commercial landings in 2020 were 480,145 pounds, reflecting a 90-percent decline. The most recent stock assessment for southern flounder revealed that overfishing was occurring and that the stock was severely overfished, with the majority of the harvest being immature female southern flounder that have never spawned. Amendment 3 to the Fishery Management Plan is currently being developed and fails to recommend the necessary actions to rebuild the fishery by the statutory deadline of 2028. While commercial and recreational interests feud and fight over the crumbs of our remaining fisheries, hard science-based resource actions must be taken, even halting the harvest of flounder temporarily while stocks rebuild.



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