SPEAKERS

Elizabeth Culp is a master's student at North Carolina State University in the Fisheries, Wildlife, and Conservation Biology Program. She is from Chattanooga, Tennessee, and attended Sewanee: The University of the South, where her passion for herpetology was ignited working with Spotted Salamanders. She also collaborated with the Tennessee Aquarium Conservation Institute, investigating competitive interactions between introduced sunfish and the endangered Laurel Dace, as well as the conservation implications of escaped farm fish entering headwater streams. After earning her Bachelor of Science in Biology with a concentration in Ecology and Biodiversity, she worked closely with a variety of herps, spending much of her time rearing Hellbenders at the Chattanooga Zoo in collaboration with the U.S. Forest Service. She is now pursuing her master's degree in Mali Lab, working on the conservation and management of Spotted Turtles in the southeastern United States. She has spent much of her time in North Carolina, leading the survey efforts for Spotted Turtles in the Coastal Plain ecoregion, taking a particular interest in how the effects of sea level rise and saltwater inundation will affect freshwater turtles along the coast.

Mary Diez joined North Carolina State University's Department of Applied Ecology and NC Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit as a master's student in Spring of 2023. Working under Jaime Collazo and Nathan Hostetter, she graduated with her Master of Science in Biology in the fall of 2025 after having spent the last couple of years counting tiny frogs in a swamp. She is currently working as a research associate under Nathan Hostetter in the NC Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, where, along with planning out future coquí frog projects, she is expanding her quantitative ecologist skills with Canada Lynx occupancy modeling. Mary currently lives in Raleigh, NC.

Faith Dunlap is an M.S. student at Clemson University focused on assessing the impacts of catastrophic flooding on Eastern Hellbenders and their habitat in western North Carolina. She holds a B.S. from the University of Florida, where she majored in Zoology and minored in Wildlife Ecology and Conservation. Since graduating, Faith has garnered a diversity of field and lab experiences serving as a lead technician for the U.S.G.S in south Florida where she addressed invasive reptile conservation issues, and as a technician at Purdue University where she assisted with hellbender recovery and conservation translocations in Indiana streams.

Aubrey Greene started working for the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission in November 2023 as the Herpetologist for the Sandhills/Piedmont regions. Since joining the Commission, she has been working on a variety of conservation projects for Species of Greatest Conservation Need, including Gopher Frog and Tiger Salamander head-starting, Neuse River Waterdog and Pine Barrens Treefrog surveys, upland snake monitoring, and the Box Turtle Connection. She also assists with fieldwork for projects with other species, including Hellbenders, Bog Turtles, and Spotted Turtles. Aubrey has also worked to engage the public in herp conservation through citizen science reporting of Northern Pinesnakes, Spiny Softshell Turtles, and Rainbow Snakes. Aubrey and her husband Matt live in the pines of Aberdeen, NC with their dog Herty Cup.

Skylar Hopkins is a disease ecologist who works on many taxa, including snakes in the Southeast. Her team dissects dead-on-road snakes to quantify baseline parasite biodiversity and conduct ongoing surveillance for invasive parasite species. They also survey live snake populations in the North Carolina Piedmont for parasites, including emerging fungal disease. Skylar received her PhD in 2017 from Virginia Tech and was just promoted to Associate Professor at NC State University in 2026. She is the PI on the newly funded grant from the Southeast Climate Adaptation Science Center, along with co-PI Jeff Lorch (USGS National Wildlife Health Center) and co-PI Craig Lind (Stockton University).

Cathy Jachowski is an Associate Professor of Wildlife Ecology in the Department of Forestry and Environmental Conservation at Clemson University. She holds a Ph.D. in Fish and Wildlife Conservation from Virginia Tech and an M.S. in Wildlife and Fisheries Biology from the University of Missouri. She conducts research at the intersection of conservation biology and freshwater ecology, where her work is broadly aimed at understanding how amphibians, reptiles, mussels, and other organisms respond to environmental change at both the individual and population level.

Terry Meyer has been involved with the Karen Beasley Sea Turtle Rescue and Rehabilitation Center since 1996. Over her history with the organization, she has served in every volunteer role, from turtle care to life support systems to gift shop. She currently is the organization's Deputy and Conservation Director, as well as its Treasurer. As such, she also serves as CFO and COO, managing KBSTRRC's finances and physical facilities. Terry may be best known for her work on the beach. She leads and directs the Topsail Turtle Project. Experienced in bookkeeping, accounting, and HOA management, Terry is a past Treasurer for the International Sea Turtle Society and continues to assist them with bookkeeping and accounting.

ABSTRACTS

Effects of Increasing Salinity on Freshwater Turtle Relative Abundance and Body Condition in a Region of High Coastal Vulnerability

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North Carolina, at the epicenter of freshwater turtle diversity in coastal systems of the USA, faces accelerated sea level rise (SLR). The state harbors disproportionately more Spotted Turtle (*Clemmys guttata*) populations than the other states in the Southeast, and more than 60% of known North Carolina sites are coastal. This study examines the relationship between wetland salinity and freshwater turtle relative abundance and body condition in coastal North Carolina, focusing on Spotted Turtles while also assessing co-occurring species to distinguish species-specific sensitivity. Relative abundance of Spotted Turtles was negatively associated with increasing salinity, with the model including only conductivity outperforming all other environmental covariates tested. Among five co-occurring species, only the Eastern Mud Turtle (*Kinosternon subrubrum*) showed a comparably strong salinity relationship—but in the opposite direction, where relative

(*contd.*)

abundance increased with increasing salinity. The remaining species showed no significant relationship. Spotted Turtle body condition showed no significant relationship with conductivity for either sex, suggesting salinity affects Spotted Turtle populations primarily through habitat avoidance rather than individual physiological condition. These contrasting patterns suggest Spotted Turtles may be particularly vulnerable to salinization relative to other freshwater turtles in coastal North Carolina, informing habitat loss projections and conservation planning as SLR continues to alter coastal wetlands.

Tiny Frogs, Big Questions: Factors Influencing Distribution and Abundance of an Endangered Frog in a Coastal Freshwater Wetland in Puerto Rico

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Eleutherodactylus juanarirveoi (Coquí Llanero) is a federally listed endangered species of coquí frog endemic to Puerto Rico. First described in 2007 and only known from three isolated populations in fragmented wetlands along the northern coast of the island, we aimed to answer the question of why are these frogs here? What environmental factors contribute to their distribution? And how many of them are in this swamp? Using extensive field surveys on the Arecibo population, in 2024, we asked which component of habitat suitability, framed as alternate microclimatic covariate, vegetation composition, or mix covariate hypotheses, exerted greater influence on Coquí Llanero abundance, occupancy, local colonization and extinction probability. I will introduce you all to the Coquí Llanero and the wetland it calls home, highlight some the challenges we faced in the field (and beyond), and discuss the results of this work and how it will inform future conservation efforts.

Southeast Ophidiomycosis Network: A Newly Funded Project

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In 2026, the Southeast Climate Adaptation Science Center provided new funding to convene a network of scientists, land managers, and conservation practitioners to collect and share knowledge on ophidiomycosis and other snake fungal diseases in the southeastern United States. This includes compiling existing data into a single searchable database, collecting new data on fungal strain distributions and temperature-dependent growth, assessing best surveillance practices, and building an evidence-based management toolbox for managing snake populations impacted by disease and climate change. In this presentation, I'll share the detailed aims of the new community of practice and ways for interested people to get involved with data sharing and quarterly partner meetings.

Reflections on the Life of a Sea Turtle Advocate and Legend, Jean Beasley

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[*no abstract*]

Two Years of Public Reporting – So Many Softshells!

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In Spring 2025, the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission put out a call to the public to report Spiny Softshell Turtles to help staff better understand the status of the state's two subspecies. The Eastern Spiny Softshell (*Apalone spinifera spinifera*) is believed to have a limited range within the Mountains while the Gulf Coast spiny softshell (*Apalone spinifera aspera*) ranges throughout much of the southern Piedmont and into the Coastal Plain. Both species are listed as Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) in the new 2025 State Wildlife Action Plan, so understanding where each subspecies occurs will help NCWRC plan management and conservation efforts to benefit them. With over 200 reports in just two years, we are beginning to get a clearer picture of where these turtles are found, and where they are successfully reproducing, with many hatchling reports! I will share the details of this project, including possible county records, oddities, and the benefits of citizen science to North Carolina's herps.

Assessing the Response of Eastern Hellbenders to Hurricane Helene to Inform Recovery

Cathy M. Bodinof Jachowski [(1)], Faith Dunlap [(1)], Nicole D. Hernandez [(1)], John R. Connock [(1)], Kaitlin M. Dirr [(1)], Sarah I. Ebenhack [(1)], Oliver-Dalton Everette [(1)], Daniel D. Knapp [(1)]

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Streams of the southern Blue Ridge, especially throughout National Forests, have historically served as a stronghold for Eastern Hellbenders (*Cryptobranchus alleganiensis alleganiensis*). In September 2024, Hurricane Helene caused catastrophic flooding, landslides, and forest blowdowns across this region, raising concerns that many historically healthy hellbender sub-populations may now be in jeopardy. In close partnership with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, our team at Clemson University is currently leading a large-scale effort funded by National Forests of North Carolina to assess hellbender status and advance species recovery in the aftermath of Helene. As part of this effort, we are identifying geographies in Pisgah National Forest in need of recovery and applying strategies to recover affected sub-populations and improve their resilience to future disturbance. More specifically, we are leveraging pre-existing data to quantify changes in the distribution, abundance, and demography of hellbenders, and have partnered with the Tennessee Aquarium to head-start hellbenders hatched from eggs collected in the wild. Long term plans are to release juveniles to bolster remnant populations that were most heavily impacted by the storm. As our work is still largely in progress, we will report preliminary findings from field efforts that began in summer 2026 as well as provide more in-depth findings from our monitoring efforts in one stream that has been the focus of long-term capture-mark-recapture efforts.