

2025 Zahner Conservation Lecture Series - Speakers

June 12: Healthy Land, Healthy People: Centering Indigenous Voices in Conservation

Bonnie Claxton (Chickasaw) Deputy Director, The Center for Native Health

Bonnie Claxton (Chickasaw) is the Deputy Director of the Center for Native Health. A member of the Chickasaw Nation who grew up in Western North Carolina, Bonnie spent a decade practicing law with a focus on access to justice and domestic violence advocacy. Her work in the legal system led her to seek upstream, preventative solutions to the issues she encountered in court, drawing her to the Center for Native Health. Understanding the deep connection between culture and health for Native communities, she is dedicated to supporting Indigenous-led efforts that restore balance between people, land, and wellness. Learn more about The Center for Native Health at www.centerfornativehealth.org.

June 19: Are You Bearwise?

Tanya Poole, Conservation Initiatives Engagement Coordinator

Tanya Poole is the Conservation Initiatives Engagement Coordinator with the NC Wildlife Resources Commission and is also the state Project WILD Coordinator. She supports educators in teaching others about wildlife and our natural resources throughout the state. She has worked for the Commission for 21 years and has a BS in Elementary Education and minor in Biology from Western Carolina University and a MS in Environmental Education from Montreat College.

June 26: Bats in Your Backyard

Rada Petric, Assistant Research Professor and Director of the UNC IE Highlands Field Site, UNC Institute for the Environment

UNC-Chapel Hill Assistant Professor and the Director of the Institute for the Environment at Highlands Field Site. Dr. Petric is a field biologist with broad interests in animal behavior, neuroendocrinology, and conservation. Specifically, her research interests focus on how anthropogenic activities alter individual behaviors and the potential consequences of those changes.

July 10: Cohabitate; Living with Nature

Sonya Carpenter, Co-founder and President of Co-habitate Inc.

Sonya Carpenter is a passionate advocate for the natural world. She loves to educate others about the diverse ecosystem of the southern Appalachians. She is the President and Co-founder of Co-habitate Inc. a new community-based organization dedicated to engaging and educating our neighbors on the intrinsic value of our ecosystem and seeking solutions to environmental degradation due to the pressures of development. In addition to their work with Co-habitate, she and her husband Cauty Worley are the co-owners of a landscape company based in Highlands dedicated to creating and

maintaining gardens in balance with the natural world. Sonya studied ecology at the University of Florida and has spent the past twenty-three years applying her knowledge of ecology to the design of planned natural communities such as pollinator gardens. She served nine years as the Director of the Highlands Biological Foundation and then directed the installation and design of the new pollinator garden at the Highlands Biological Station. She is also the President of the Highlands Plateau Greenway and the Highlands Bee City coordinator; an initiative to increase knowledge of and create habitat for our native pollinator species.

July 17: Lesser Known Medicinal Mushrooms of the Southern Appalachians

Christopher Parker, Mycologist and Co-Owner The Forest Farmacy

Christopher is a self-taught mycologist who started cultivating mushrooms at 15. Since this humble beginning, Christopher has continuously expanded his knowledge of mycology, botany, agriculture, permaculture and ecology giving him now 30 years of experience in mushroom cultivation, wild harvesting, and herbal medicine making.

He is passionate about food sovereignty and resilient local food systems and the use of fungus in innovative applications such as myco-remediation. He loves being in his mycology lab where he experiments with and expands various strains of mycelium.

Chris is a member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians and carries knowledge of ancestral food practices and skills such as arrow making, bow building, animal processing, flint knapping, and fire by friction.

He continues to be a teacher and mentor to many beginners and professionals who are interested in and share his passion for growing mushrooms for food, medicine and profit.

July 24: Understanding Helene as a geologic event in southern Appalachia...and what is a "geologic event" anyway?

Philip S. Prince, Ph.D., Project Geologist, Appalachian Landslide Consultants, PLLC, Virginia Tech Department of Geosciences

Philip S. Prince, Ph.D., Project Geologist, Appalachian Landslide Consultants, Asheville, NC
BS Furman University Earth and Environmental Sciences, 2004...learned geology along the Blue Ridge Escarpment (which Helene impacted severely)
PhD, Virginia Tech Geosciences, 2011, studying Appalachian topographic evolution
Taught at Va Tech 2011-2016
Virginia Geological Survey 2017-2019, LiDAR-supported geologic mapping
2019-present Appalachian Landslide Consultants and continued bedrock and surficial mapping with Virginia Geological Survey, research activities with Va Tech
Work focuses on combining remote sensing with extensive fieldwork

July 31: The Good, the Bad, and the BUGly

Dr. Kelly Oten, Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist, NC State University

Dr. Kelly Oten is an Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist in Forest Health at NC State University, where she addresses forest health challenges. With a Ph.D. in entomology and a minor in forestry from NC State, she focuses on the impacts of invasive insects, diseases, and plants. She leads outreach efforts like the NC Bradford Pear Bounty, which encourages the replacement of invasive Bradford pears with native trees. Kelly also studies pests like the emerald ash borer and elm zigzag sawfly, sharing research-based solutions with landowners, foresters, and communities. Her work has been recognized with awards like NC State's Outstanding Extension Award and CALS Outstanding Alumnus, but she's most passionate about connecting people with the resources they need to protect North Carolina's forests.

August 7: Finding the Fabulous Ordinary

Georgann Eubanks, author, University of North Carolina Press

Popular speaker Georgann Eubanks is the author of six books from the University of North Carolina Press, including *Saving the Wild South: The Fight for Native Plants on the Brink of Extinction*, *The Month of Their Ripening: North Carolina Heritage Foods Through the Year*, and her latest, entitled *The Fabulous Ordinary: Discovering the Natural Wonders of the Wild South*. This year Georgann has also published *Rural Astronomy* a memoir-in-poems from EastOver Press of Rochester, MA.

Georgann is co-principal with Donna Campbell in Minnow Media, LLC, an Emmy-winning multimedia production company that primarily creates independent documentaries for public television. Every year Georgann and Donna also lead the Table Rock Writers Workshop, held in August in Little Switzerland, NC.

August 14: Southern Appalachian Forest Resilience in a Post Hurricane World

Megan Sutton, The Nature Conservancy, Southern Blue Ridge Program Director

Megan Sutton is Director of TNC's Southern Blue Ridge Programs and leads a team of forest and freshwater conservation and restoration specialists who work with state and federal agencies to restore fire-adapted forests and biodiverse streams across the mountains of the Southern Blue Ridge. Megan played a leadership role in the collaborative Nantahala Pisgah Forest Partnership for US Forest Service's Nantahala - Pisgah Forest Management Plan. Sutton has a Master's degree in Environmental Management focused on Forests & Terrestrial Systems from Yale University. She lives in Asheville, NC, with her husband and two sons.