



HIGHLANDS BIOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

Annual Membership Meeting Notes, June 25, 2025 at 3:00 PM

Sto Pavilion of the Highlands Biological Station

In attendance: Charles Tarver, Leslie Manning, Gayle Watkins, Keller Torrey, Lori Heys, William Bush, Lisa Armstrong, David Martin, Jim Landon, Vernon Skiles, Lisa Dailey, Linda Barlow, Frank Langford, Cathy Jones, Melanie Mauldin, Alex Smith, Martha Stibbs, Tom Holmes, Karen Patterson, Ruthie Edwards, Catharine Seay, Jimmy Bewley, John Helmer, Kent Wittman, Amy Patterson, Jim Costa, Jason Love, Tabby Bewley, Andy Chmar, Jamie Creola, and Marissa Nieddu.

Meeting called to order at 3:13 PM by Tom Holmes

President's Report (Tom Holmes for John Mitchener)

Tom Holmes opened the meeting by expressing gratitude to Jamie for an excellent first year as Executive Director. He also thanked the Pattersons for providing the new office space. Appreciation was extended to the board members who are rolling off this year: Cathy Jones, Frances Oakley, Melanie Mauldin, and Vernon Skiles.

Treasurer's Report (Tom Holmes)

Tom reported that the Playmore Soirée was our most successful, yet, and that we finished the year in the black. The 2023 audit has been completed, and the 2024 audit is currently underway. He noted that the current audit process is going smoothly, thanks to improvements implemented by Jamie. No issues have arisen with the 2025 budget, and investments are currently up.

Executive Director (Jamie Creola)

Jamie began by thanking everyone for their support during her first year and expressed appreciation for the community's involvement. She gave special thanks to Melanie for her work on the gift shop, including restaging the entire space and introducing new merchandise. Jamie also acknowledged the Pattersons for the new office and noted that Amy Patterson gifted the property next to it, which was successfully purchased this year. She extended her thanks to all committee chairs and members for their contributions.

She highlighted the success of last year's *Playmore Soirée* and shared that this year's *Twilight in the Garden Soirée* has a record number of hosts—48 in total. Jamie also thanked the Bestors for hosting the Patron Party and the Heys for hosting this year's *Twilight in the Garden Soirée*.

New staff members were welcomed: Marissa Nieddu as Marketing and Communications Specialist, Maddie Wikstrom as Education Specialist running the Nature Center, and returning Summer Naturalists Sofia, Paige, Nicci, and Ava.



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Jamie gave a preview of upcoming meetings and events, including the Soirée, Carpenter Lecture event, and Highlands on the Half-Shell. The Nature Center is currently open Monday through Saturday from 10 AM to 5 PM, with Tuesday programs for Nature Center Nights and Thursday Zahner Lectures.

This summer's nature camps have been expanded, with new offerings added to increase options for children ages 5–7. There are a total of 22 camps. Maddie is also looking into creating volunteer opportunities and leadership training for older children starting in the Fall.

Daily programs are underway at the Nature Center, including StoryTime with Ms. KK every Tuesday at 10:30 AM. Julie has significantly increased outreach programming, conducting 55 programs reaching over 1,000 participants through after-school activities, libraries, the Literacy and Learning Center, and the Boys and Girls Club. Jamie expressed thanks to outreach funders, including the Cullasaja Women's Club and the Church of the Good Shepherd.

The third Zahner Lecture of the season is scheduled for tomorrow, with Sonja's lecture coming up in two weeks. HBF has supported three Grants-in-Aid and three research assistantships. Additionally, the foundation continues its support for the MAPS Bird Banding project, now in its sixth year, HBS Wayfinding, and remains involved in the Macon STEM initiative, which includes programming, teacher professional development, and transportation. HBF also supports the BatPack program.

Lastly, Jamie announced that HBF completed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Highlands Biological Station in 2024, which includes \$25,000 in general operational support.

Highlands Biological Station Report (Jason Love - Associate Director)

Jason reported that the Wayfinding and Signage Master Plan has finally been completed, after beginning in 2020. Although the project is finished, the sign in front of the Nature Center will be redone. The process required involvement from the State Construction Office, as the kiosks needed hurricane-proof roofs. The next phase of this project will focus on updating the interpretive panels.

He also provided an update on the structural condition of the Nature Center. The building, made of 80-year-old chestnut wood, is experiencing water intrusion and rot. Western Carolina University facilities staff are working with Terracon on needed repairs. Planned improvements include window replacements and better drainage, focusing mostly on structural integrity. This work is expected to begin in late fall or winter. New generators are also being installed for Valentine Cottage, and a drainage project is underway to address flooding issues between the Nature Center and the cottages, which tend to occur during heavy rains.

In terms of research activity, Jason shared that the current cohort includes seven undergraduate students, one recent WCU graduate, four returning UNC Chapel Hill students (plus a fifth who is here year-round), one NC State student, and two high school students participating in various activities. Ongoing research projects include MAPS Bird Banding and debris removal efforts related to the cleanup from Hurricane Helene.



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Research on microplastics is continuing, with a paper in progress expected to be published within the next year. Notably, students have found that the average person has about a crayon's worth of microplastics in their brain. Two students studied earthworms and shrews, analyzing their guts, hearts, kidneys, and livers, and discovered that the heart contained the highest concentration of microplastics. These students returned to double their sample size and plan to publish their findings. Additional research involves using Asian clams as bioindicators, since they draw in microplastics; current data will be compared with data from 2018.

Other ongoing projects include bat detector studies in local mines and ecological monitoring of wetlands along the Little Tennessee River.

Election of Trustees (David Martin for Jennie Stowers)

Rolling Off Board in 2025: Cathy Jones, Frances Oakley, Melanie Mauldin, and Vernon Skiles

Jim Milby and Amy, returning, elected. Jonnie Swann and Marth Stibbs 2nd term, elected. Jimmy Bewley, Catharine Seay, Kent Whitman, John Helmer new, elected.

Old/New Business

Karen Patterson shared an update that the designers for the North Campus project submitted their work to the North Carolina Landscape Design awards and received an Award of Merit. There was no other old or new business to report.

Adjournment 4:10 PM

Summer Trustee Meeting, June 25, 2025 (directly following Annual Membership Mtg.)

Sto Pavilion of the Highlands Biological Station

Welcome New and Returning Trustees (Tom) 4:13 PM

Tom Holmes welcomed the new and returning trustees to the Board. Trustees beginning their second terms are Jonnie Swann and Martha Stibbs. New trustees include Jimmy Bewley, Catharine Seay, Kent Whitman, and John Helmer. Returning to the board are Jim Milby and Amy Patterson.

Election of Officers (David Martin)

David Martin announced the slate of nominees, and all were elected. Tom Holmes will serve as President. David Martin will serve a one-year term as Vice President. Bob Strickland was elected Treasurer, and Lindy Harrison will continue as Secretary.



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Strategic Planning Committee (Gayle Watkins)

Gayle Watkins shared that consultant Allison Jordan has been hired to assist with data analysis and to conduct focus groups with community members, government officials, and donors. She will officially come on board in July. Gayle thanked the board for completing the board-specific survey, noting that the responses will help guide the strategic planning process.

She reported that the community survey has received 131 responses so far but emphasized the need to double that number. Board members were asked to help by sharing the survey link and personally encouraging others to participate. The goal is to understand not only why people engage with the Foundation but also why some do not. Marissa will send the survey link and QR code to the board for distribution.

A suggestion was made to set up a booth or attend the arts and crafts fair or Saturday markets in Highlands and Cashiers to help gather more responses.

Development Committee (Keller Torrey)

Keller reported that the Spring Giving Campaign exceeded its \$20,000 goal, raising over \$27,000. This fully digital campaign directed all proceeds toward programming. She reminded board members that the Twilight in the Garden Soirée is quickly approaching and encouraged everyone to purchase tickets and invite friends. Information about the upcoming Half-Shell event will be shared after the Soirée.

Looking ahead, the Fall Giving Campaign will focus on research, followed by an end-of-year campaign centered on year-end giving. Ruthie Edwards added that the first Dam Dinner is scheduled for this weekend. This is a cultivation event designed to inform potential future donors about the work of HBF.

Adjournment 4:27 PM

Upcoming Meetings and Events:

July 28 – Summer Soiree

August 24 – Nature Center Moves to Fall Hours

September 10 - Carpenter Lecture (Zoe Schlanger)

October 5 - Highlands on the Half Shell

October 22 – Fall Trustee Meeting 3 PM

October 28 – Enchanted Forest Halloween (Volunteers Needed)



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November 27 & 28 – HBF Office Closed

December 10 – Winter Trustee Meeting 3 PM (Virtual)

December 22 - January 1 – HBF Office Closed