

## 2026 Zahner Conservation Lecture Series - Speakers

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### **June 11: Weird and Underappreciated Arthropods of North Carolina**

*Dr. Matt Bertone, Entomologist and Director, NC State Plant Disease and Insect Clinic (NCSU)*

Dr. Matt Bertone is an entomologist who specializes in arthropod biodiversity, taxonomy, and systematics. He is the diagnostic entomologist and director of the NC State Plant Disease and Insect Clinic at North Carolina State University, where he identifies arthropods for clients and trains extension personnel on insect identification. Matt is also an avid macro photographer, taking images for both professional purposes and for pleasure.

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### **June 18: Story: Red-cockaded Woodpeckers, Conservation, and the Science Inside the Nest**

*Lauren D. Pharr, Ph.D., Postgraduate Researcher, North Carolina State University*

Dr. Lauren D. Pharr is an avian behavioral ecologist and award-winning science communicator whose work bridges bird behavior, conservation, and inclusion in the outdoors. She holds a Ph.D. in Fisheries, Wildlife, and Conservation Biology from North Carolina State University and co-founded Field Inclusive, a nonprofit supporting marginalized voices in fieldwork and nature. Lauren's writing has appeared in National Geographic, WIRED, PBS SciNC, and The Nature Conservancy's Cool Green Science blog. Her leadership and outreach have earned her multiple honors, including the 2023 Governor's Conservation Achievement Award for Young Conservationist of the Year from the North Carolina Wildlife Federation.

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### **June 25: The Blue Wall: What we know--and don't know--about southern Appalachia's enigmatic weather-making landform**

*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

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### **July 9: Southern Appalachian Freshwater Resilience and Recovery Post-Hurricane Helene**

*Julie DeMeester, Ph.D., Director of Freshwater and Coastal Programs, The Nature Conservancy, North Carolina Chapter*

Julie DeMeester graduated with a Ph.D. in environmental science from Duke University in 2009. After finishing her Ph.D., she worked in the U.S. Senate and then the U.S. EPA. She spent time abroad working on international sustainability issues in Paris, France and worked at the Nicholas Institute upon her return. Julie became the Director of Water and Coastal Programs for The Nature Conservancy's North Carolina Chapter in 2016.

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### **July 16: The Venomous Snakes of Western North Carolina**

*Carlton Burke, local naturalist and wildlife rehabilitator, Carolina Mountain Naturalists*

Carlton Burke is a local naturalist, educator, and wildlife rehabilitator who resides in Mills River, NC. He operates an educational service called Carolina Mountain Naturalists which presents live wildlife presentations for various schools, camps, and other organizations. Among other endeavors, Carlton also teaches various nature-related classes for the Blue Ridge Naturalist program at the NC Arboretum in Asheville and also serves as a field instructor with the Cedar Mountain based organization Mountain Roots which works with area elementary schools getting students outdoors to learn science topics. Carlton is also the co-host of Nature News, a weekly Saturday morning radio program heard on WTZQ 1600 AM out of Hendersonville.

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### **July 23: André Michaux in North America: Revealing the Botanical Treasures of the Carolinas**

*Dana Beach, Founder and former Executive Director, SC Coastal Conservation League, Board Member, Butler Parklands*

Dana is the founder and former director of the Coastal Conservation League, based in Charleston. He is currently a board member of, and consultant to, Butler Parklands. The mission of Butler Parklands, a New York-based charitable foundation, is to create world class nature parks in some of the most beautiful parts of the Western hemisphere, from southern Patagonia to the Canadian border of Maine. <https://www.butlerparklands.org>.

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### **July 30: Connecting Appalachia: Wildlife Connectivity, Corridors, and Road Crossings**

*Liz Hillard, PhD, Senior Wildlife Biologist-Appalachian Region for Wildlands Network*

Liz is a wildlife biologist and connectivity scientist whose work focuses on advancing conservation across the Appalachian region. She uses a combination of road ecology research, spatial modeling, and applied conservation planning to better conserve wildlife and inform infrastructure and habitat management decisions. Her research spans projects on elk movement, wildlife crossing effectiveness, and regional connectivity initiatives.

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### **August 6: Plastic Pollution on the Plateau: An Overview of Microplastics Research in the Southern Appalachians**

*Jason Love, Associate Director of Highlands Biological Station, Western Carolina University*

Jason Love serves as the Associate Director of Highlands Biological Station, Western Carolina University, a position he has held since 2019. He is also Adjunct Assistant Professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he serves as an instructor for the Institute for the Environment Program Highlands Field Site. Jason worked for 12 years as the Site Manager for the Coweeta Long-Term Ecological Research (LTER) program, a program based at the Coweeta Hydrologic Laboratory and funded by the NSF, where he coordinated and assisted with ecological research with the University of Georgia, US Forest Service, and multiple universities and colleges. Jason has a B.S. in Forest Resources with a Major in Wildlife from the University of Georgia and an M.S. in Wildlife and Fisheries Resources from West Virginia University. Jason has authored or co-authored several scientific papers on a broad range of topics and is author of the children's book *Shady Streams, Slippery Salamanders*.

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