



HIGHLANDS
BIOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

HBF Spring Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, April 15, 2025 at 3:00 PM

Virtual via Zoom

In attendance: Tom Holmes, Alex Smith, Gayle Watkins, Jim Milby, John Mitchener, Lindy Harrison, Jennie Stowers, Jonnie Swann, Karen Patterson, Jimmy Bewley, John Helmer, Lisa Dailey, Lori Heys, Amy Patterson, Keller Torrey, Linda Barlow, David Martin, Lisa Armstrong, Jason Love, Robert Strickland, Ruthie Edwards, William Bush, Catharine Seay, Leslie Manning, Jamie Creola, Marissa Nieddu, Maddie Wikstrom, and Alex Waite

Meeting called to order at 3:09 PM by Tom Holmes President

President's Report (Tom Holmes)

Tom opened the meeting by making a motion to approve the meeting minutes from HBF's December Board meeting, motion granted - David Martin and Karen Patterson with all in favor.

Operations & Education (Jamie Creola, Marissa Nieddu, Maddie Wikstrom, Alex Waite)

Jamie shared an update on the upcoming closure of the Nature Center for much-needed repairs. The last day open to the public will be August 15, with programming concluding the week prior (last programs held by August 8), followed by a week of packing and moving animals, staff, and materials beginning August 17. Construction is scheduled to begin on August 24, with limited operations and daily programs offered during the transition period starting August 10.

She also shared updates on new staffing for the season, including Education Specialist Alex Waite, who will support summer camps and outreach efforts. The team will be rounded out by four Summer Naturalists leading camps and programs, along with one part-time staff member supporting the Nature Center.

Marissa highlighted key communications and development efforts, including the release of the Annual Report along with updates on successful platform transitions to UltraCamp and Bloomerang to streamline registrations, fundraising, and volunteer coordination. She also shared the Zahner Conservation Lecture Series speaker line-up and noted that the Summer Program Brochure is currently in production and will be available soon. Finally, she announced the launch of the Spring Campaign, aiming to raise \$20,000 in the next month to support free community programming, and encouraged board members to help spread the word.

Alex shared updates on organizing, optimizing, and digitizing materials for Summer Naturalists, including the creation of a standardized binder to support camp leadership. Outreach efforts continue to expand through partnerships with organizations such as the Boys & Girls Club in Highlands and Cashiers, the Gordon Center, Hudson Library, Highlands Community Child Development Center, Sylva Homeschool Co-op, Literacy Learning Center, Chestnut Hill Center, and Highlands School.



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Maddie reported on increased winter accessibility at the Nature Center, which has been open two Saturdays per month and has welcomed 1,426 visitors year to date. She also launched a new volunteer program, hosting three orientations and onboarding five new volunteers, with a Junior Naturalist orientation scheduled for this weekend. Additionally, she is aligning Nature Center programming with ecoEXPLORE and Science Across NC initiatives, with daily programs planned for the summer season.

Strategic Planning Committee (Gayle Watkins, Jamie Creola & Allison)

Gayle shared that Phase 1 of the strategic planning process has been completed after 15 months of work, resulting in a refined vision, mission, and set of values. The plan was presented to the board for feedback, approved by the Executive Committee, and formally adopted by the board following a call for comments.

Looking ahead, Jamie will connect with each board member to better understand their skills and committee interests. The goal is to gather this input ahead of the Nominating Committee meeting at the end of the month in order to identify any gaps and inform recruitment of new board members.

Treasurer's Report (Jamie Creola Executive Director & Bob Strickland Treasurer)

Bob reported that for the 2025 year-end budget, individual contributions exceeded expectations by \$16,000, following a concerted effort to reengage donors from the past decade. Jamie explained that the first quarter of 2026, finances are tracking well overall, with most expenses at or under budget and program revenue exceeding projections due to expanded offerings and adjusted pricing; some increased expenses are attributed to facility needs, event deposits, and higher payroll costs as staffing grows. Additional updates included the creation of a GIA investment account to improve transparency and clarity, as well as progress on the 2026 audit, which is underway and on track to be completed ahead of the annual meeting for the first time.

Development Committee (Jamie Creola)

Jamie shared updates from the Development Committee on upcoming fundraising events, including the annual Soirée, which will be held on Tuesday, July 28 at Flat Mountain Farm, with PPR, Epting, and parking secured. She also noted plans for the Patron Party on Wednesday, June 17 at the home of Elizabeth and David Martin, which will serve as a gathering for Soirée hosts and supporters.

Nomination Committee (John Mitchener/Jennie Stowers)

The Nominating Committee will meet on April 28 to review the current board's collective skills, areas of expertise, and availability in order to better understand how members are currently engaging and where additional strengths may be needed. Jamie has circulated a document outlining the procedures in advance of the meeting. Jennie suggested Board members think about possible candidates and share those with the committee (for review) before formally initiating outreach.



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Highlands Biological Station (Jason Love)

Jason Love provided an update from Highlands Biological Station on several facility and infrastructure projects, including selected bids for Nature Center improvements such as bird-friendly windows, basement sealing, and regrading, with construction set to begin mid-August through November. Additional work includes a new generator for housing, drainage improvements, South Gateway upgrades, and updated garden interpretive signage.

He also shared early planning for Valentine House ahead of its 100th anniversary, including potential redevelopment to support expanded housing capacity, with preliminary discussions with Western Carolina University and ongoing consideration of infrastructure constraints like water pressure. Staffing updates included welcoming Canty Worley as the new horticulturist, as well as Foundation support for two research assistant positions and six GIA-funded research projects focused on topics such as salamanders, endangered plants, bats, and microplastics. Summer staffing is at full capacity, including IE students, WCU and NCSSM students, garden assistants, and returning staff supporting research and programming.

Other Business

A question was raised about what will replace the Half-Shell event. It was noted that the Development Committee will be exploring options next, with early ideas including a possible Oktoberfest-style event.

Adjournment 4:24 PM

Upcoming Meetings and Events:

May 25 – Nature Center Opens for Summer Hours (M-Sat, 10-5)

June 25 – Annual Membership Meeting + Summer Trustee Meeting 3 PM

June 17 - Patron Party

July 28 – Summer Soiree

August 15th to EOY – Nature Center Closed for Renovations

October 4 - Highlands on the Half Shell/Oktoberfest

October 21 – Fall Trustee Meeting 3 PM

October 27 – Enchanted Forest Halloween

November 26 & 27 – HBF Office Closed

December 9 – Winter Trustee Meeting 3 PM (Virtual)

December 21 - January 1 – HBF Office Closed