Three Cheers for Our Volunteers

MEET A FEW OF THE FACES WHO HELP THE COMMISSION ACHIEVE ITS CONSERVATION MISSION

written by MIKE ZLOTNICKI & JOSH LEVENTHAL
photographed by MELISSA MCGAW

North Carolina is well known for its diversity of wildlife and wild places. One can travel from the mountains to the coast in a day’s drive and encounter a variety of species, habitats and haunts. Look closely and you can also see opportunities to help. If you’re reading this magazine, chances are you have a passion for the outdoors. No matter your area of interest—whether it be game or nongame species, hunting or fishing, or simply being active outside—there is likely a related volunteer opportunity with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission. From monitoring sea turtles on the coast to stocking trout in the mountains to counting songbirds everywhere in between, there is a chance to put your passion for wildlife to use.

Much like the four musicians from the order Coleoptera (better known as the Beetles), we get by with a little help from our friends. The list of volunteers and partners who contribute their time to Commission programs and initiatives is too long to include everyone in this article, so we decided to share the stories of a few of our volunteer friends. We find them inspirational and hope you do too.

To learn more about volunteering opportunities with the Commission and how you can get involved, visit ncwildlife.org/volunteer.

Godfather of Hunter Education

Those in the hunting community, and especially the hunter education community, probably know of Allen Basala. A pioneer of the program, the Cary resident partnered with the Commission to teach hunter education and conservation to several generations of new hunters. He received his initial instructor certification in 1985 and was inducted into the Commission’s Hunter Education Hall of Fame in 2020.

“There is no part of the current N.C. Hunter Education program that has not been touched by Allen,” said Travis Casper, the Commission’s former hunter education coordinator and current chief of the Wildlife Education Division. “He has been a visionary in promoting courses and looking for new audiences to encourage participation.”

Basala passed away in March at the age of 75 after a courageous battle with cancer. His knowledge and dedication will be missed.

“Allen was a dedicated friend and volunteer to the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission,” Casper said. “He spent countless hours championing hunter education and other conservation causes important to him to ensure the traditions of the outdoors were passed on to future generations.”

That future generation includes Basala’s daughter, Allison Prescott, who was not interested in hunting as a child but took the course as a young adult after being encouraged by her father.

“I was 20 years old and I fell in love with it,” she said. “And then I took an instructor course and he and I started teaching it at Camp Millstone. I’m afraid to teach anywhere else because I’m afraid to be compared to my dad. I need to get over that.”

Prescott said the main satisfaction Basala got from volunteering was knowing that his students may carry on the tradition. “Knowing that [the tradition] wouldn’t die,” she said. “And that whoever got what he taught, they would pass it on to generation after generation.”

Hunter education volunteer instructors are important and valued members of the hunter education team who share knowledge and appreciation of the sport of hunting while promoting conservation and safe, responsible outdoor recreation. To learn about the Commission’s hunter education program, visit ncwildlife.org/HunterEd.

The late Allen Basala, left, was instrumental in helping to develop hunter education programs in North Carolina. His daughter, Allison Prescott, continues the path he started as a hunter education instructor.
Guy and Judy Gardner of Lillington have organized deer camps annually as volunteers with the Commission. Quality Deer Management Association (now National Deer Association) and the N.C. Wildlife Federation. Since receiving the N.C. Governor’s Award for the Wildlife Conservationists of the Year in 2009, they’ve been actively involved in the development of the N.C. Wildlife Federation’s Deer Donation Program, promoting responsible deer management on and around North Carolina farmlands.

Guy and Judy have organized deer camps and a first-of-its-kind new hunter mentoring initiative. The New Hill Hunter Education and Mentoring Program is designed for adults new to hunting and works in collaboration with, and receives support from, the Commission’s R3 program and its Law Enforcement Division. They also lead deer hunting seminars and hunter education annually as volunteers with the Commission.

Guy and Judy are also active members of the South Wake Conservationists Chapter of the N.C. Wildlife Federation, hosting a deer donation site for N.C. Hunters for the Hungry on behalf of this Chapter, taking aim against hunger in their community. In support of Commission conservation initiatives, Guy and Judy serve as Commission Deer Cooperator at this site, collecting harvest data; serving as a CWD Sample Intake Station and supporting Commission biologists as needed.

“I grew up as an avid sportsman who had no one to show me the ropes,” Guy said of his roots. “Having enjoyed a lifetime of outdoor experiences, I wanted to help others launch their hunting career by helping to reduce their learning curve.”

Judy has her own reasons for volunteering. “Taking individual responsibility of protecting and responsibly managing what nature provides has always been important to me,” she said. “History is ripe with examples of how people have negatively impacted nature’s delicate balance, often unaware that they are doing this or of the consequences that may result. Engaging anyone with an interest in the outdoors, helping each to better understand and appreciate the role they play in protecting our outdoor heritage and the satisfaction they gain in contributing toward that goal is why I volunteer in support of the [Commission’s] mission.”

Among their favorite aspects about volunteering, Guy pointed to seeing individuals get excited learning about the outdoors. He said what they learn reduces their hesitation about hunting, all the while doing their part in conserving wild places in North Carolina.

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N.C. State students.

Outdoors deer hunting workshop for Hunters and Anglers gives pointers on the least tern colony during nesting

Johnson (right) talks with Emerald Isle Top: Wildlife Diversity Biologist Carmen

May • June 2022

“I realized that what I enjoyed most was talking about hunting and going hunting with other people.”

Kevin Bernard isn’t one to sit still. “I don’t like to let the grass grow under my feet,” he said with an energetic chuckle.

Kevin Bernard’s long-time volunteer with the Commission’s Armstrong Fish Hatchery releases hatchery-raised trout into the Dan River.

Kevin Bernard grew up in southwest Virginia before moving to the mountains of North Carolina. The 64-year-old said he has been fly-fishing for the past 60 years, and it is that love of trout that led him to begin volunteering for the Commission in the mid-1990s. An auto technician by trade, Bernard puts his handy skills to use at the hatchery, helping with projects ranging from fixing valves in the raceways to repairing vehicles and equipment. When asked to pick out a favorite part of the work, he deferred to “all of it.”

“Kevin has a genuine love for the trout waters in North Carolina,” Armstrong Hatchery Superintendent Chuck Melton said. “In 21 years at Armstrong, I have never seen a more dedicated and caring person for the trout program than Kevin. He uses his experience as a lifetime fly fisherman to teach anglers about trout fishing whenever he can and his experience as a master mechanic for Toyota helps us to keep our trucks on the road and our equipment going so that we can meet the expectations of our program.”

It’s not only the fish that makes volunteering at the hatchery fun. Getting to interact with the public is one of the highlights of his duties. “There is nothing I enjoy more than pulling up in the stocking truck and there be a kid there on the shore. I get to run up with a net and throw the fish at the kid’s feet and watch the excitement.”

As much as the Armstrong staff appreciate what Bernard does, he is equally appreciative of the opportunity. “I just want to thank everyone at the Wildlife Commission for letting me a part of the process. As long as I am able, I will continue to do it.” To learn more about the Commission’s fish hatcheries, visit ncwildlife.org/Fishing/Hatcheries-Most/NCWRC-Hatcheries.

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