

Ready. Aim. Build.

Written by Josh Leventhal | Photographed by Melissa McGaw

The Commission is delivering on its mission of bringing shooting ranges to residents across the state



The morning mist rises at Foothills Public Shooting Complex in Cleveland County.



Black Friday may best be known as the time when deal-thirsty shoppers hit the malls and retail stores in search of early holiday-season bargains. Ron Newcomb, the range master at Foothills Public Shooting Complex in Cleveland County, thinks a new post-Thanksgiving tradition has begun: visiting the shooting range.

Newcomb swears the shooting complex located outside Charlotte was as busy as any store the day after Thanksgiving last year. At one point during the day, which began with a line of people waiting to get in before the complex opened, Newcomb said 80 people were using or waiting to use the 50-yard shooting range that features a dozen shooting stations.

“That was one busy day,” Newcomb said during a recent tour of Foothills, which is in its third year of operation since being built through a partnership between the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission and Cleveland County. The Commission contributed \$1.9 million to the \$3.5 million project through Pittman-Robertson



Act funds (excise taxes on archery, firearm and ammunition sales) and its Wildlife Endowment Fund, and the complex was designed by Commission engineers.

Busy days have become the norm at Foothills, which welcomed over 17,000 customers in 2017 and is on pace to top that mark this year. “We have so many different things we can offer,” Newcomb said of the complex that includes a 250-yard rifle range, a 50-yard pistol and rifle range, a 50-yard steel-target range, a 20-yard pistol range, two skeet and trap ranges and a 3-D archery course. “We’ve got a little something for everyone.”

While Foothills is arguably the grandest of all public shooting ranges in North Carolina—the 85-acre complex is among the largest in the Southeast—it hardly stands alone. Since 2014, the Commission has built or renovated five shooting complexes across the state.

Foothills opened in April 2016 and is owned and operated by Cleveland County with continued support from the Commission. Six months later, the Commission opened a \$1.5 million shooting range on Holly Shelter Game Land, paying for it with money from Pittman-Robertson Act funds, the N.C. Wildlife Endowment Fund and a grant from the National Rifle Association through its Public Range Fund. Pender County operates the state-owned shooting range, with all fees going toward maintenance and improvements.

In 2014, the Commission opened three new or renovated shooting ranges: the R. Wayne Bailey-Caswell Shooting Range, located on Caswell Game Land in Yanceyville; the Flintlock Valley Shooting Range, a partnership with the U.S. Forest Service located in the Uwharrie National Forest in Montgomery County; and John F. Lentz Hunter Education Complex at Ellerbe in the Sandhills, which the Commission took over operations from 4-H, renovated and reopened.

In total, the Commission is responsible for 10 ranges across the state, including four others belonging to the U.S. Forest Service in the western part of the state. With more on the way, the Commission is making



“Our goal is to create an opportunity for anyone in the state to be able to drive no more than 50 miles and use one of our facilities.”

progress on its goal of having ranges spread across the state to provide easy access for all sportsmen and women, recreational and competitive shooters, and beginners seeking a safe in environment for shooting activities.

“Our goal is to create an opportunity for anyone in the state to be able to drive no more than 50 miles and use one of our facilities,” Commission Deputy Director of Operations Erik Christofferson said. “We want to keep the fees economical, so anyone can go shoot. The most we charge for any of our ranges is \$10 for an entire day, so it is very reasonable for the public to use.”

Jeff Mills certainly counts as proof that the Commission is accomplishing its mission. The Kannapolis resident arrived to Foothills on a Thursday afternoon last summer like he does most every week for a few rounds of target practice with a group of co-workers. Mills made small talk with the friendly Foothills staff in the range office, paid his \$10 fee, took his target and headed off to the 50-yard range.

“I come every week. I love it,” Mills said. “The guys here are real nice and the range officers are helpful. I’d give them 5 out of 5 stars, easy.”

Filling A Need

A pair of factors contributed to the Commission’s recent building of shooting ranges. An influx of Pittman-Robertson funds from the spike in firearm and ammunition sales over the past decade combined with a growing issue and safety hazard of people legally practicing target shooting on game lands left the Commission seeking a way to accommodate a growing interest in shooting. So, the Commission set out to create the opportunity for residents to shoot safely and direct that traffic away from game lands to shooting ranges. This, in particular, is what led to the Holly Shelter Shooting Range.

“That one came up because we were having so many people target shooting on the game lands around there and it was causing a lot of safety issues, ecological issues, litter and issues for law enforcement,” said Gary

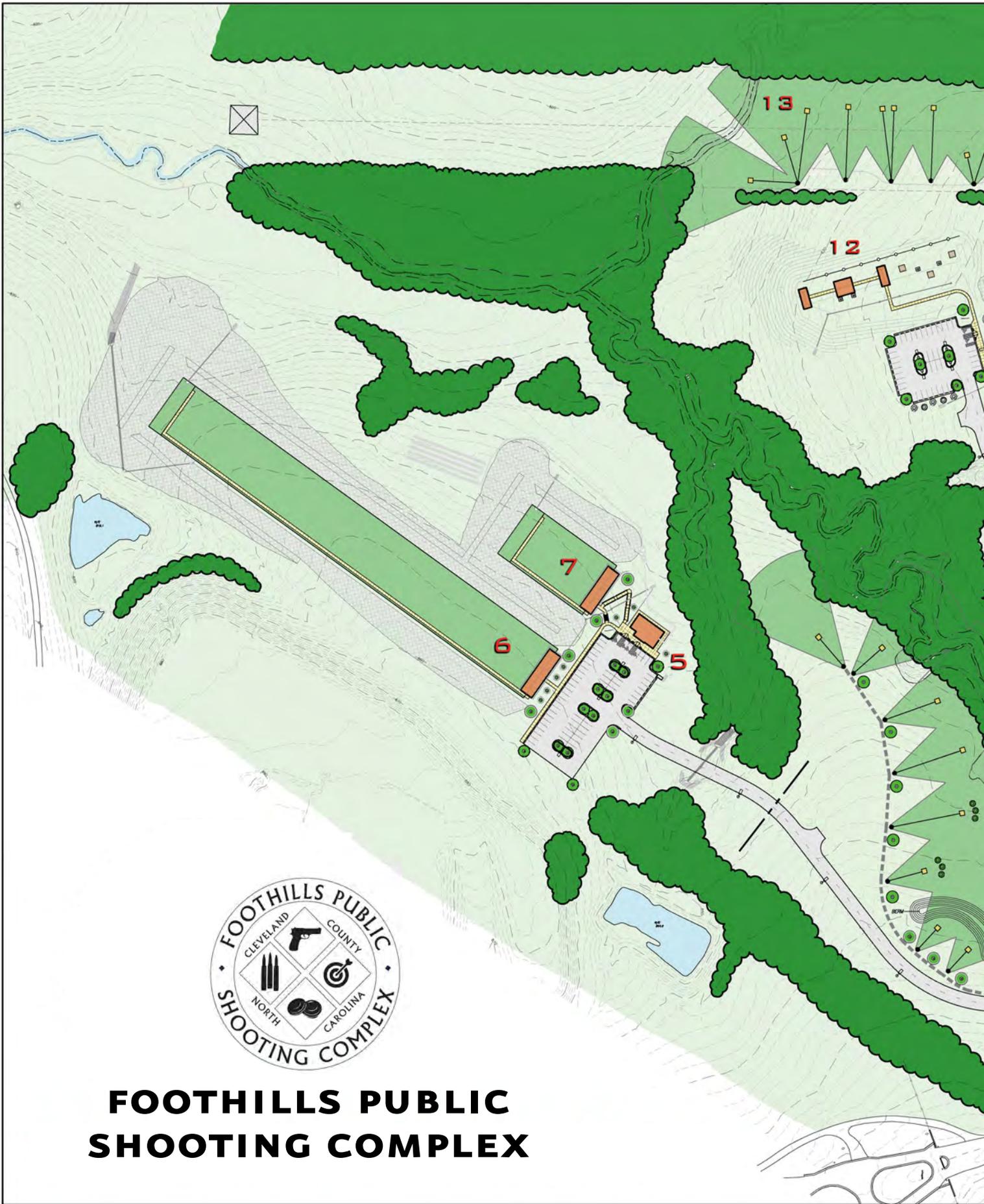


Gardner, the Commission's section chief of engineering. "People were well within their rights to do that, but it was to the point it was out of hand and becoming a problem."

The Commission found an interested partner with Pender County and soon after settled on a site for the shooting range in Rocky Point, just north of the Commission's Holly Shelter depot. The Commission funded and oversaw the construction of the shooting range before passing on the operation duties to Pender County. The official ribbon cutting took place in November 2016 and the facility has seen a steady stream of traffic ever since. Target shooting is no longer permitted at Holly Shelter Game Land, along with several others across the state, and the Commission has found success in attracting those users to their ranges.

Holly Shelter Shooting Range has become a destination for sportsmen and recreational shooters in the southeastern part of the state. Its 200-yard rifle range featuring 12 shooting stations, 50-yard pistol range with 12 shooting stations, target archery range and

Left to right: Foothills Public Shooting Complex, which the Commission helped fund and design, is home to the only 250-yard public rifle range in North Carolina. The many features of Foothills include a 20-yard archery practice range, six different rifle/handgun ranges and a fully functional pro shop.



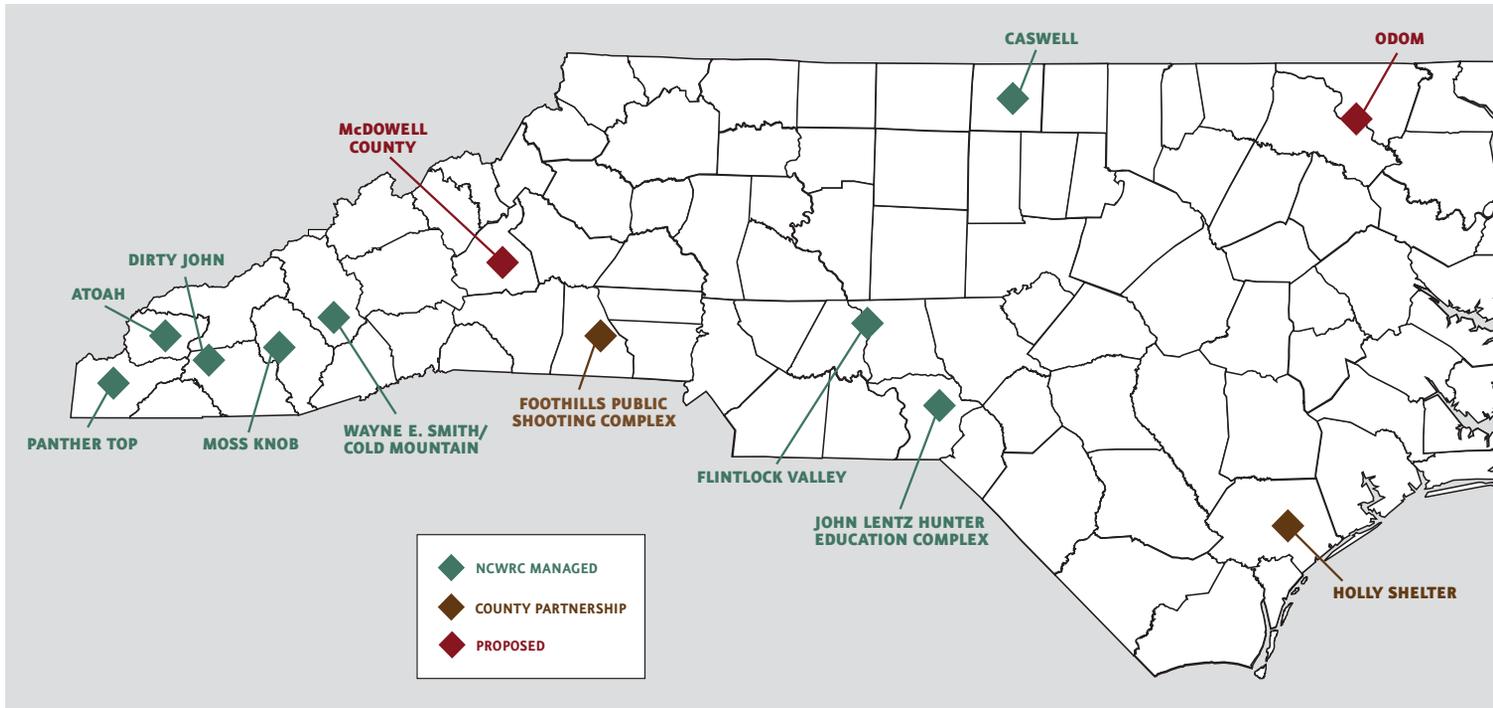
FOOTHILLS PUBLIC SHOOTING COMPLEX



LEGEND

- 1- RANGE OFFICE, CLASSROOM TRAINING FACILITIES, PRO SHOP
- 2- WEAPONS LOADING AND UNLOADING STATION
- 3- ARCHERY PRACTICE 20 x 50 YD.
- 4- 3D ARCHERY FOR TOURNAMENTS
- 5- CONCESSIONS, VENDING, RESTROOMS
- 6- PRECISION RIFLE 250 YD.
- 7- HANDGUN RANGE
- 8- SKEET/TRAP 50 x 50 YD.
- 9- SKEET/TRAP 50 x 50 YD.
- 10- MULTI-PURPOSE/STEEL RANGE
- 11- HANDGUN/RIFLE RANGE
- 12- OUTDOOR PAVILLION
- 13- 3D ARCHERY

NORTH CAROLINA SHOOTING RANGES



3-D archery course with 20 stations attracted nearly 11,000 visitors last year.

Future Plans

Foothills and Holly Shelter were each built and are operated as part of a partnership between the Commission and local municipalities. In each one, the Commission contributed funding and design expertise for construction while continuing to provide support for the counties that staff and operate the ranges. It is a formula that the Commission plans to replicate with future ranges.

The partnerships are “instrumental for us. It allows us to do more with less,” Christofferson said.

“More” is exactly what the Commission has in store. Plans for partnering with McDowell County on a range located in Marion continue to move ahead. The proposal calls for the construction of a 100-yard rifle range, a 20-yard pistol range and possibly a 3-D archery course.

The Commission is also in the process of building a shooting range on the Odom County Prison site in Northampton County. The land for the multi-purpose project, which would also include a boating ramp with access to the Roanoke River, was provided by the N.C. Division of Prisons. Plans call for the shooting range to include a 100-yard rifle range, a 20-yard pistol range and a 50-yard rifle/pistol range.

A renovation of the shooting range at the John Lentz Hunter Education Complex in Ellerbe is scheduled to begin this winter. The Commission has been operating the shooting range since taking it over from North Carolina 4-H in 2014. The updated complex will include more capacity to accommodate the Youth Hunter Education Skills Tournament that the Commission helps operate at the Lentz complex, an event that has been increasing in size in recent years. The updated complex will include 100-yard, 50-yard, and 15-yard ranges, as well as a skeet and trap field and a 20-station 3-D archery course. Expanded parking and improved access to the facility will also be part of the renovation.

Changes coming to Foothills Public Shooting Complex in the near future include moving the skeet and trap range to a new 100-acre field and adding six shooting positions to the 12-station, 50-yard range.

An Open Invitation

It does not take long to realize just how passionate Newcomb is about Foothills Public Shooting Complex and how much he believes in the service they provide. He points to one of the range safety officers working with a patron at a 50-yard range.

“I like the word coaching,” Newcomb said when asked how much instruction range safety officers provide. “We don’t





Opposite: Holly Shelter Shooting Range, the state's newest shooting complex, includes a 50-yard pistol range with 12 shooting stations and a 200-yard rifle range with sound-dampening tubes. Below: Holly Shelter's 3-D archery course, featuring 20 stations, provides a challenge for archers of all skill levels.

teach people how to shoot, [instead] we coach people on how to be a better and safer shooter.”

The 250-yard range is arguably Foothills' calling card since it is the longest at a public range in the state. A handful of shooters are there on this weekday afternoon, a setting that is certainly more crowded on weekends. When asked, Newcomb rattles off the most popular calibers used on the 250-yard range. “.308 and .223 are the most common calibers,” he said. “A 6.5 Creedmoor has gotten more popular of late.”

The 250-yard range is not for beginners and use of it only comes after a customer has proven he or she is ready. All users must first go to the 50-yard range to zero-in on a target. Newcomb points to a sign outside the 250-yard range as an explanation. “Precision Rifle Range,” it reads. “No rapid fire. Only aimed and controlled shots.”

Foothills makes an effort to be part of the local community through a variety of events and programs. The range partners with Cross Trail Outfitters of North Carolina to host a Cops and Kids skeet shooting competition.

A local 4-H group and a Boy Scout troop are regular visitors. The range hosts instructional classes in a newly built classroom area, including a “Gals and Guns” basic instructional course that splits time between the classroom and the range, an AR-15 cleaning class and required training for North Carolina probation and parole officers.

Each of the state's public ranges is helping the Commission provide access and opportunities to sportsmen and women, and recreational shooters, said Christofferson, the Commission's deputy director of operations. That trend will continue to increase as the construction of new ranges and renovations to existing ones continue across the state.

“It provides a place for our sportsmen to sight-in their rifles and hone their skills, but it also provides an opportunity to expand our constituency base,” Christofferson said. “The recreational shooter now has a place to go and shoot safely.” ♦

Josh Leventhal is the editor of Wildlife in North Carolina. He can be reached at josh.leventhal@ncwildlife.org.

