



GRAND PRIZE WILDLIFE IN NORTH CAROLINA 2020 PHOTO COMPETITION

Matt Cuda started his photography career in 1995, shooting sports, news and features for his college newspaper and yearbook. Later, he worked as a freelance photographer for local news agencies.

“That led me to photographing the natural world in the form of waterfalls and landscapes,” he said. “I photographed some birds back then, but it was a very expensive venture, as a college student, to use the amount of film needed for success.”

Fast-forward 25 years and the 48-year-old software developer has moved from film to digital, but he still finds birds in his viewfinder. A common grackle was one subject, and it was voted Grand Prize winner in the 2020 *Wildlife in North Carolina* Photo Competition. Cuda won as an “amateur” in the competition this year.

“I make enough money as a photographer to remain a solid software developer,” he quipped after learning of his win in the competition. “I was excited and humbled to realize that I was the winner in a magazine I read regularly. There are many others who probably deserved it more than I.”

Cuda said his first “real” camera was a Yashica FX-3 Super 200, a 35mm manual film camera. Film led him to the darkroom, where he developed an even greater appreciation for photography.

“My biggest eye-opener to the world of photography came the first time I saw my print magically emerge from the developer tray in the darkroom,” he said. “Honestly, I don’t even remember what the print was, but it didn’t matter. From there on out, I was hooked. I began to get my hands on any photography book and magazine that I could and took any photography course offered at the university.”

Although birds remain a favorite subject for Cuda, he has started stalking white-tailed deer and elk with his Sony camera. He also visits the “space coast” of Florida and rookeries throughout the state, as well as some places on the Gulf Coast during the shorebird breeding season. As for North Carolina, Cuda said, “My biggest wish is that photographers would have better access to the snow geese in the Pungo Unit. I think that might become one of my favorite spots, if I have good opportunities.”

“We had a wonderful selection of photographs submitted to the competition this year,” said Marsha Tillett, art director of *Wildlife in North Carolina* magazine. “The image of this grackle is no exception. Capturing a photograph of an ordinary bird in such a striking way requires experience and skill. Shooting an image of a black bird on a dark background can be difficult. It would be easy for the bird to fill in, but the exposure in this image retains details in the highlights. The way the light reflects the iridescent tints while maintaining an ominous feel to the image is well done.”

Over 1,700 photographs were entered in the competition this year. In addition to Tillett, judges for the competition included WINC graphic designer Bryant Cole, staff photographer Melissa McGaw and former Commission staffer and current freelance photographer Thomas Harvey.

All winning photographs will be on display at the N.C. Museum of Natural Sciences in Raleigh and online at ncwildlife.org.

—Mike Zlotnicki



Matt Cuda, Tobaccoville

Uncommon grackle

I am always on the lookout for ways to make the common look uncommon. On this late-afternoon summer day, I noticed that a common grackle was landing in an area where the lighting made the bird not only look more dramatic but helped to reinforce the bird’s somewhat deserved reputation. The black background and accented highlights along the feathers make the key areas of the grackle stand out. So I was still able to capture the iridescence of the bird’s feathers and yellow eyes, and also give the bird a bit of a sinister look.

(Sony Alpha a7 III, Sigma 150-600mm C at 600mm, f/8, 1/1,250 of a second, ISO 1,000)



BIRDS FIRST PLACE

Alan Clark, Raleigh

Yellow warbler on perch

Last August I was on a boardwalk over Lake Lynn in Raleigh, scanning the wooded lake edge for small birds. I saw a glint of yellow and quickly raised my lens to photograph it as it hopped from branch to branch seeking insects. It was not until I got home that I discovered it was a female yellow warbler, a first for me. I particularly liked this pose with it looking up, mouth partially agape and tail feathers slightly spread as it readied to spring to another branch.

(Nikon D850, Nikon 500mm lens and 1.4x teleconverter at 700mm, f/6.3, 1/2,000 of a second, ISO 1,600)

BIRDS SECOND PLACE

Kevan Sunderland, Sunrise, Fla.

Feeding snipe

During a snow event in Sea Level, all of the marshes and sounds were frozen. This drove the Wilson’s snipes out of the marsh. I decided to drive around looking for opportunities to photograph wildlife in and around the snow. Seeing the snipe on the side of the road, I positioned the car to watch them feed and photographed this one and its mirror-still reflection. I slowed my shutter speed for the low light and shot in a quick burst to freeze the subject and pull out details. It was a wonderful experience to photograph this snipe out in the open.

(Canon EOS-1Dx Mark II, 800mm lens, f/8, 1/200 of a second, ISO 800)



BIRDS THIRD PLACE

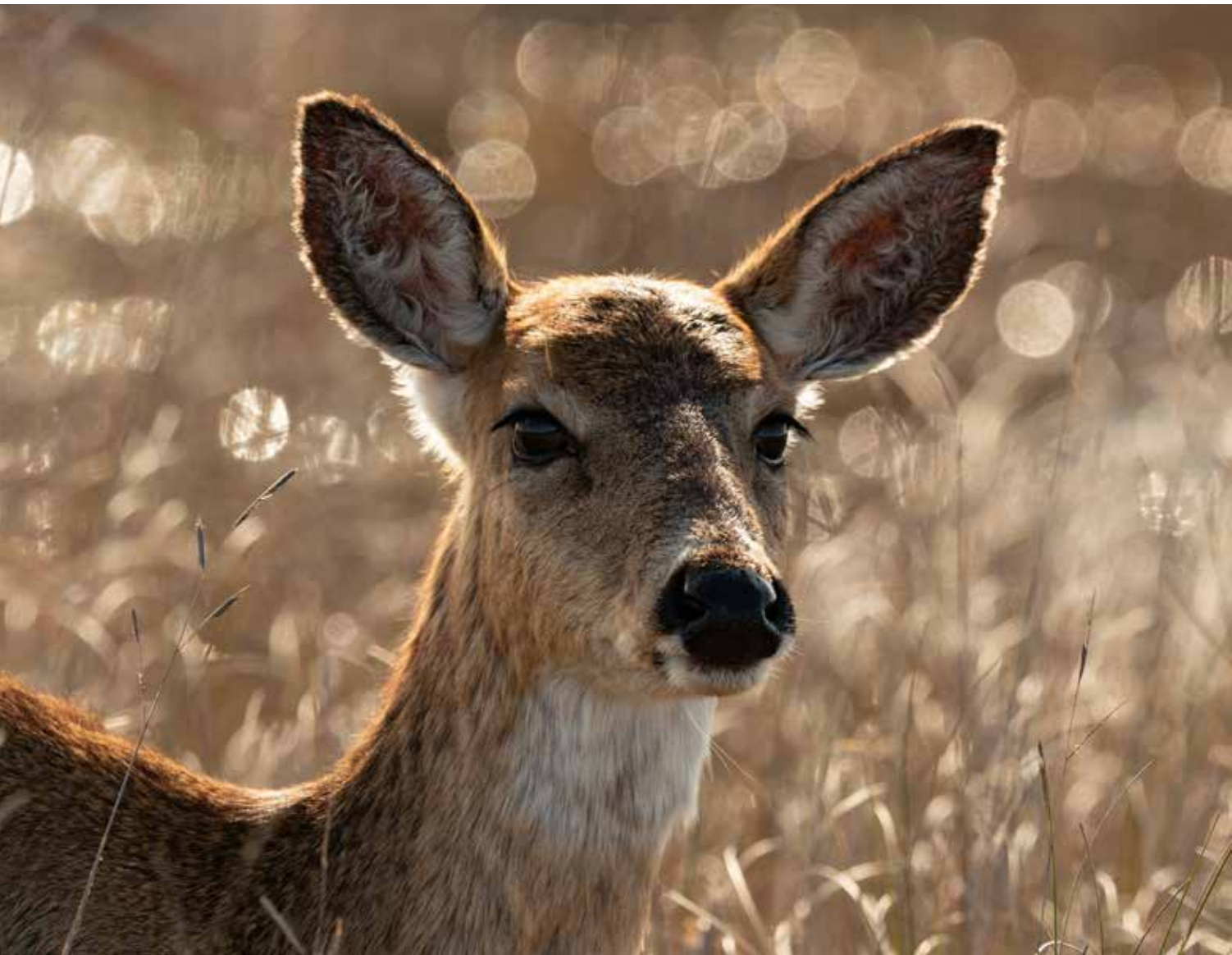
Troy Baker, Concord

Sandhill cranes in flight

Sandhill cranes are a fairly rare bird in North Carolina. They do not normally come here during the migration season. To my surprise, I heard from other photographers who said there were six Sandhill cranes at Pungo Lake. I decided to get up before dawn and try to catch them flying in at sunrise. To my amazement, there were six flying in to get a spot on the lake. It was a treat to catch them all coming in as the sun was rising.

(Canon EOS 7D Mark II, Canon 600mm, f/4, 1/8,000 of a second, ISO 200)





MAMMALS FIRST PLACE

Thomas Grant, Stoneville

OBX doe

Mid-February 2020: I took a trip to the Outer Banks with my dad and brother. We visited Cape Hatteras Lighthouse and while there decided to drive the road toward the beach. As we were driving, I saw this deer standing in a field. We turned around and were able to get within 40 yards or so of the deer without spooking her. The sun was behind it and I was able to take the picture using the vehicle as a blind.

(Olympus E-M5 Mark II, 300mm Olympus Pro lens, f/6.3, 1/500 of a second, ISO 200)

MAMMALS SECOND PLACE

John Strange, Union Mills

Beaver on the move

Despite being a nature photographer, I am not normally a fan of rising early. However, having found beaver tracks the day before at the creek near my home, I was excited to be up before the sun. I set up at the pond the creek runs out of and hoped for some luck. I didn't have to wait long. Before half an hour was up, a beaver came swimming silently toward me. I was able to photograph him for over an hour, but my favorite image remained that of the first sighting.

(Nikon D7100, Tamron 150–600mm VC G1 at 550mm, f/6.3, 1/400 of a second, ISO 180)



MAMMALS THIRD PLACE

Nicolas Devos, Durham

Gray raccoon

When the pandemic struck and North Carolina was on lockdown, I decided to hone my camera-trapping skills in the wooded area behind my home. One night, a trail camera placed in a creek revealed a possum crossing a branch over the water. I decided to set up a DSLR camera in the same place, hoping to take a quality picture if it crossed again. Instead, I captured this strange gray raccoon with no markings.

(Nikon D810, Nikon 17–35mm f/2.8 lens set at 17mm, f/10, 1/80 of a second, ISO 640, 4 Nikon SB-28 strobes, Cognysis Scout triggers)





REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS FIRST PLACE

Nicolas Devos, Durham
Salamander in the dark

I spotted this salamander during a trip to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park last September. It was perched on a rock in a mountain stream near our backcountry campsite. It was nighttime and I did not have any strobes with me. I really wanted to capture the scene, so I lay down in the water to be at the subject's eye level and asked my partner to illuminate the scene with a flashlight. I was completely soaked afterward, but it was worth it.

(Nikon D850, Nikon 70–200mm f/2.8 lens at 200mm, f/5, 1/160 of a second, ISO 1,600)



REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS SECOND PLACE

Karl Chiang, Greenville
Baby gator

I had never seen an alligator at Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge until last summer. I was driving down the road when something caught my eye. I saw two small eyes that broke the smooth water reflection. I could not believe my luck but it took almost two hours before the baby gator, less than a foot long, swam into an open spot with good lighting. I had to lie down on the ground to get this angle shot with my zoom lens.

(Nikon D5, Nikkor 180–400mm at 320mm, f/8, 1/200 of a second, ISO 160)

REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS
THIRD PLACE

Mark Shields, Holly Ridge
Rat snake swimming

I was kayaking on the Black River in southern Sampson County when I spied this rat snake swimming toward me from the far bank. I quietly laid down my paddle and picked up my camera, which I always carry in my lap while kayaking for photo opportunities like this. I fired off about a dozen shots in rapid succession, hoping to capture an image of the snake with its tongue flicked out, reflected in the water. Success! The snake, seemingly unphased by my presence, continued swimming past the bow of my kayak and disappeared among a tangle of roots on the near bank.

(Nikon D500, Nikkor 300mm lens, f/5.6, 1/2,500 of a second, ISO 800)





INVERTEBRATES FIRST PLACE

Paul Phillips, King

Marsh fly on a leaf

I credit my dad for teaching me as a young boy to see the beauty of wildlife, no matter how majestic or small. One can enjoy seeing and learning about wildlife by just taking a walk in one of our beautiful state parks. That's what I was doing while hiking around Hanging Rock Lake on a hot summer morning. This marsh fly was resting on a rhododendron leaf near the shoreline and allowed me to bring my camera to within inches of it.

(Nikon D810, 105mm macro lens, f/11, 1/250 of a second, ISO 400, small hand-held flash)

INVERTEBRATES SECOND PLACE

Eric Abernethy, Asheboro

Praying mantis meal

Leading up to fall each year, I anticipate with excitement the orb weaver spiders around my home and the surrounding woods. I enjoy watching them spin their webs each evening and marvel at how hard they work to survive. This praying mantis flew into the web and was being wrapped up by the orb weaver.

(Nikon D500, Nikon 105mm macro lens, f/11, 1/250 of a second, SB 800 strobe off-camera)



INVERTEBRATES THIRD PLACE

Frank Clemmensen, Durham

Raindrop ladybug

There is a patch of dogbane (*Apocynum cannabinum*) that grows wild on our 15-acre property in Durham County. It attracts an amazing number of different types of insects and always provides great opportunities for photography. But be aware that all parts of this plant are toxic. In fact, *Apocynum* means “poisonous to dogs.” On a mid-May afternoon last year, I headed to the patch right after a rain. I loved the timing to see how all the water droplets were clinging to the foliage. This ladybug was holding in place while waiting for things to dry out.

(Nikon D7200, Tamron 90mm f/2.8 macro lens, f/4.0, 1/320 of a second, ISO 100)





WILD PLANTS FIRST PLACE

Paul Phillips, King

Hover fly on spiderwort

The Yadkin Islands section of Pilot Mountain State Park is where I found these beautiful wildflowers. Along with spiderwort, you can find buttonbush, black-eyed Susans and clitoria. I was looking for snakes to photograph on this July morning, without luck. I slowed down and began enjoying the small wildflowers along the riverbank and lost interest in snake hunting. The hoverfly gracefully entered the photo and paid me no mind.

(Nikon D810, Nikon 105mm macro, f/11, 1/250 of a second, ISO 125, handheld small flash for fill light)

WILD PLANTS SECOND PLACE

David Hattori, Apex

Leaf emerging

In early spring, I took my camera and macro lens to the woods behind our house to do some photographic exploration. The bright green leaf emerging from this bud caught my eye as I looked around for subjects to photograph. I was able to isolate the subject, and the background was far enough away to blur out with a large aperture, which was ideal for a macro capture. Little did I know that my backyard would become my primary photo destination for the rest of the year.

(Canon 7D Mark II, Canon 100mm f/2.8 macro lens, f/3.5, 1/250 of a second, ISO 400)



WILD PLANTS THIRD PLACE

Eric Abernethy, Asheboro

Turkey tail

A subject I love to photograph is fungus. When I walked up on this turkey tail fungi in the Uwharrie National Forest, I felt like I was looking at abstract art. I also love to photograph abstracts, so it was just a matter of finding the right composition. No strobe or tripod was needed. I took it handheld.

(Nikon D500, Nikon 105mm macro lens, f/6.3, 1/500 of a second, ISO 800)





OUTDOOR RECREATION FIRST PLACE

Stan Lake, Pfafftown

Jumping on the beach

I shot this portrait of my nephew, Beckham McDowell, as he jumped over a small tidal pool on the west end of Ocean Isle Beach this past summer during our annual family vacation. Beckham seemed to remind me during our family photo shoot not to take everything so seriously and to have fun in the moment. I opted to edit this photo black and white because it just felt timeless and captured that boyish sense of adventure and wonder.

(Sony a7R III, 50mm f/1.8, f/2.2, 1/400 of a second, ISO 100)

OUTDOOR RECREATION SECOND PLACE

David Collins, Winston-Salem

Catching bait

I concentrate on bird photography and was at the Audubon Sanctuary on Wrightsville Beach at sunrise, hoping to photograph black skimmers in flight. I noticed a fisherman using a cast net to catch bait down the beach on Masonboro Inlet. The sky was clear with golden hour lighting. The fisherman's net was beautiful when thrown, and I was able to use the rapid-fire fast shutter speed that I use for birds in flight to freeze the fisherman, cast net and spray in a pleasing way.

(Nikon D850, Nikon F Series 600mm, f/4, 2,500 of a second, ISO 1,000)



OUTDOOR RECREATION THIRD PLACE

Wil Garner, Raleigh

Morning swan hunt

We were starting to pack our stuff in for the swan hunt that morning. Beaufort County fields are huge and we had a long walk with a lot of Texas Rags, hard shells and blind material. I was walking in with my head down trying not to think about how far it was. I looked up and saw the sunrise with my kids and our friends and thought, 'wow!'. The sun was hitting the frost on the field just right and it did not last long. I quickly grabbed my phone and took the picture.

(iPhone 8 Plus, full frame DLSR settings = 28mm, f/1.8, 1/1,600 of a second, ISO 20)





WILD LANDSCAPES FIRST PLACE

Karl Chiang, Greenville

Lighthouse reflections

This past February I went to the Outer Banks for a weekend getaway. I had not planned on this shot but as I was driving that night after work I noticed there was a lot of residual water on the ground from a nor’easter. I thought it would be nice to photograph the sunrise at Bodie Island Lighthouse. However, the clouds blocked the sunrise and I finally packed up. As I got to my car, the clouds parted and beautiful colors surrounded Bodie with a reflection pool in the parking area. I quickly unpacked my bag and took a couple of pictures before the great light was gone. What a magical morning that almost didn’t happen and I was all by myself.

(Nikon Z 7, Nikkor Z 24–70mm f/4 lens at 24mm, f/14, 1/10 of a second, ISO 125, tripod)

WILD LANDSCAPES SECOND PLACE

Joseph Elliott, Providence

Mountain storm

On August 16, 2019, my wife and I traveled to Lake Lure for a week of vacation in the nearby Rumbling Bald Resort. Our condominium for the week had an excellent view of Lake Lure from our deck. One evening, we were sitting out on the deck and I noticed a flash of lightning, and then came the thunder. Being a lifelong nature photographer, I immediately set up my equipment. This is the image I captured in the twilight that evening, way past sunset, which happened to be one of my best images of the whole week.

(Canon 6D, Canon EF 70–200mm f/4L USM lens at 84mm, 10 seconds, ISO 100, manual mode, Bogen 3221 tripod with Arca-Swiss B1 ball head)



WILD LANDSCAPES THIRD PLACE

Carmen Cromer, Moncure

Stumps in the ice

This shot was taken at Jordan Lake in early January. Winter is my favorite season for photography because the landscape is minimalistic and bare. The stumps jutting out of the frozen water, almost reminiscent of Stonehenge, are what drew me to this location. During the rest of the year, these stumps are usually hidden in plain sight, beneath the lake. In winter, they are exposed, as if the Earth is telling you a secret.

(Sony Alpha a7 III, Sony FE 85mm f/1.8, f/8, 1/320 of a second, ISO 100)





ANIMAL BEHAVIOR FIRST PLACE

Frank Clemmensen, Durham

Tundra swan squabble

In 2019, I was pleased to have so many photo opportunities on a three-day trip to the Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge as part of a Winter Waterfowl of Eastern North Carolina workshop. This image of tundra swans is a good example of how migratory birds share wildlife ponds, although not without squabbling over social distancing or the general pecking order. At 7:30 on this morning, the sun was low and gave a great sidelight that provided an interesting glow.

(Nikon D750, Sigma 150–600mm f/5-6.3 lens, f/6.3, 1/1,000 of a second, ISO 1,250, Gitzo tripod and Wimberly Gimble Head)

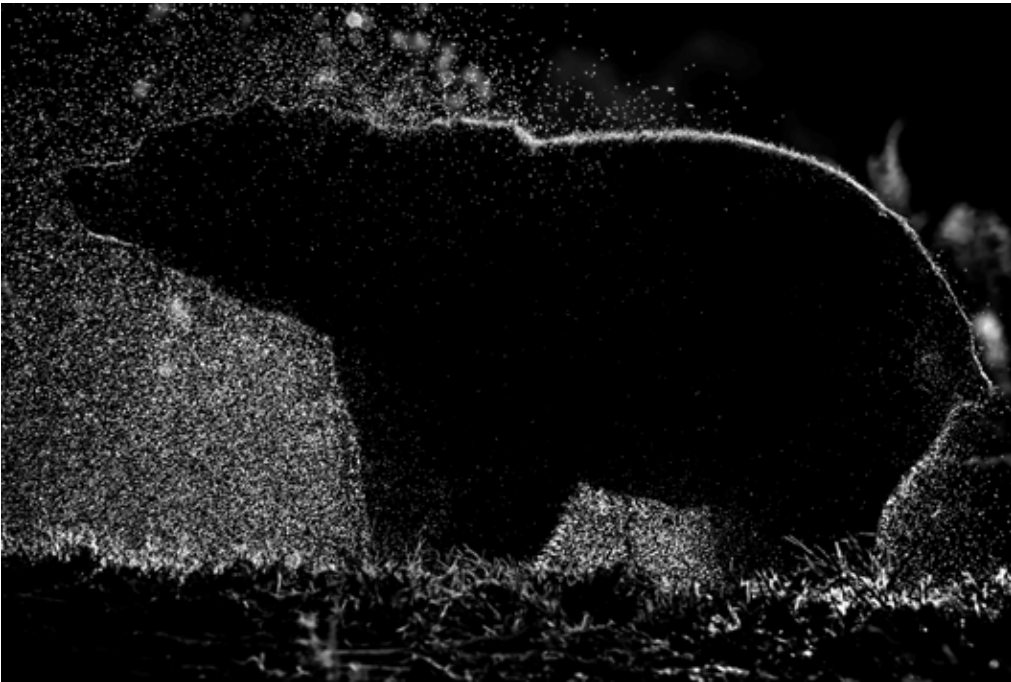
ANIMAL BEHAVIOR SECOND PLACE

Boyd Rogers, Summerfield,

Black bear shaking

I was on a trip to the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge, one of my favorite bear photo sites in eastern North Carolina, on September 17, 2019. I had been following this very large black bear for more than an hour when I was able to get ahead of him with the sun at his back. He decided to cross one of the canals in the refuge and I was in position as he emerged and shook the water from his fur. I decided to process the photo as black and white as it made the water droplets stand out in the back light.

(Nikon D500, Nikon 600mm f/4 lens with a 1.4 teleconverter at 850mm, f/8, 1/1,000 of a second, ISO 1,260)



ANIMAL BEHAVIOR THIRD PLACE

Dustin Smith, Asheboro

Playing dead

I encountered this Eastern hognose snake in the Sandhills Game Land. It immediately responded as expected, by playing dead (aka thanatosis). When threatened, they will flatten their heads and necks and hiss as a defensive mechanism, but that acting doesn't compare to their writhing around and pretending to be dead. The Eastern hognose snake piqued my interest after I first saw one as a kid, and that excitement of seeing one hasn't changed.

(Canon 6D Mark II, Laowa 15mm f/4 wide angle macro, f/16, 1/160 of a second, ISO 320, 580 EX Canon Speedlite strobe)





YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER 13–17 **FIRST PLACE**

Anshu Shah, Pineville

Early track

I woke up at 5 a.m. with my cousin. We ran to the beach, hoping to catch the early morning sun ascending over the sea. I looked around, enjoying the serenity and beauty of the setting. The crowds had not arrived yet, so the sand was mostly undisturbed. Then, I noticed some tire tracks stretching across the shore, still smooth and unruffled. The crack of dawn had created a beautiful paint palette among the clouds in the sky. To take this shot, I lay across the sand, angled the camera and captured the intense perspective of the dazzling moment.

(iPhone 11; Dual 12mp, 26mm equivalent: f/1.8, 1/97 of a second, ISO 125)

YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER 13–17

SECOND PLACE

Maylee Collins, Wake Forest

Skipper on zinnia

I was visiting the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh when I took this photo. My family and I had come to see the sunflower field the museum had on display, and it was truly breathtaking. I was particularly attracted to this little skipper butterfly because of the blue hue of its wings and because it was a species I'd never seen before. I love the personality the butterfly displays perching happily on its zinnia, and, of course, just how cute this little guy is.

(Canon EOS Rebel T2i, Canon EF-S 60mm f/2.8 macro lens, f/11, 1/100 of a second, ISO 200)



YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER 13–17

THIRD PLACE

Kaitlyn Molnar, Cary

Climbing snail

We were out for a walk in Umstead State Park, so happy that the trails had reopened. We started noticing a lot of snails on the trees. I happened to look up and saw this snail. I loved how the sunlight shone through his shell, making the shell look translucent. I remember looking all the way up the tree and thinking that snail had a long way to go.

(Canon PowerShot SX530 HS, f/4, 1/160 of a second, ISO 200)





YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER 13–17

HONORABLE MENTION

Maggie Davis, Newport

Ruddy to hunt

Decoy carving is a unique artform and I wanted to capture it in my photo. This decoy is an antique style ruddy duck hand-carved by my dad for the Core Sound Decoy Festival. I love photographing his work because it brings our hobbies together. Through this photo, I hope to preserve the craftsmanship and history of carving wooden decoys.

(Canon EOS Rebel T7, Canon EF-S 18–55mm f/4-5.6 lens, f/5.6, 1/250 of a second, 1,600 ISO)

YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER 13–17

HONORABLE MENTION

Kaitlyn Molnar, Cary

Camo toad

While walking in Umstead State Park one weekend, I stopped to see a perfect little mushroom. Out of the corner of my eye I saw movement and noticed this little toad, camouflaging so well with his mossy log. He sat there motionless; I think he thought we could not see him.

(Canon PowerShot SX530 HS, f/4, 1/40 of a second, ISO 500)

YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER 13–17

HONORABLE MENTION

Isaiah Lilly, Oakboro

Insects snacking on tomato

My family and I operate a farm called Sprouting Acres Farm and grow lots of tomatoes. One day while picking some I noticed a very large beetle nibbling on one that had fallen. I quickly gathered several things to help me photograph the beetle, including a handheld light, a tripod and of course my camera. I got several shots after getting closer to ground level. One thing I really like about this photo is that it shows a curious fly enjoying a meal as well.

(Canon 6D Mark II, Canon 24–105mm lens at 105mm, 1/125 of a second, f/7.1, ISO 400)

YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER 12 & UNDER

WILDLIFE IN NORTH CAROLINA 2020 PHOTO COMPETITION



YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER 12 & UNDER

FIRST PLACE

Zoe McCorquodale, Kernersville

Slugging around

Last summer, while visiting my grandpa in Kings Mountain, my grandpa, mom, sister and I stopped by my aunt's house to pick up some plants to take home with us. My aunt began to pick the slugs out of the plants and I asked her to leave them so that I could hopefully snap some good pictures. I started to take pictures of a gigantic leopard slug on an elephant ear plant, and that's when I got this amazing shot! I just love the perspective and the pop of colors!

(Canon EOS 20D, Canon 28–135mm lens at 70 mm, f/4.0, 1/320 of a second, ISO 1,600)



YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER 12 & UNDER SECOND PLACE

Tucker Mauser, Hubert

Horsing around Shackleford

Late last summer, my family and I visited Cape Lookout to see the lighthouse and stopped by Shackleford to see the wild horses. One island was filled with people. We joined them as they were taking photos of a wild horse family. We, too, took many photos of the wild horses. The horses stopped roaming in front of the lighthouse. I steadily shot the photo of the horses before they left. When reviewing the photos, I was particularly proud of this one.

(Canon Rebel T7, Sigma 150–600mm f/5-6.3 Contemporary Lens at 150mm, f/6.3, 1/1,000 of a second, ISO 400)



YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER 12 & UNDER THIRD PLACE

Rohan Yadav, Morrisville

Molting vulture

One misty morning, my mother and I went to Lake Crabtree to enjoy some bird photography. We were coming through a trail and found this group of black vultures sunbathing on the pier. A few of them were fighting, and some of them were flying back and forth from the trees. Some of the vultures were going through a molting phase, so I thought their heads looked cool. I had my sight on this one because it was molting and its head looked nice. It was pretty secluded from the others, so I thought that when I took the shot that I would get the rest of them as a background.

(Canon EOS Rebel SL2, 200mm, f/5.6, 1/640 of a second, ISO 1,250)

YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER 12 & UNDER HONORABLE MENTION

Rina Lavinder, Pittsboro

Sun-splashed mushrooms

My dad and I were outside right before dusk. These mushrooms were growing low to the ground on the side of a tree and they caught my eye. When I crouched down to get a closer look, I saw the photo I wanted to capture. I love how the sun peeks up over the horizon and highlights the edge of the mushroom.

(Canon EOS Rebel XSi, Canon 18–55mm lens at 43mm, f/7.1, 1/80 of a second, ISO 200)



YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER 12 & UNDER HONORABLE MENTION

Sam Huggins, Chapel Hill

Climbing snail

We were at Price Lake Trail on the Blue Ridge Parkway when I saw a snail. I took a photo at the best quality I could and also tried make it so the snail was easier to see. I always like to take pictures so I can remember them as memories. And my mom usually says I notice things others walk right past.

(Nikon D40, Nikkor 18–55mm lens at 55mm, f/5.6, 1/60 of a second, ISO 400)



YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER 12 & UNDER HONORABLE MENTION

Marin Peele, Arden

Lady slipper

I found this plant in the woods in my yard in Arden. I wanted to choose the lady slipper because I know it is very special. It only grows in a few places and it is protected. My yard is full of them and we get at least 50 flowers a year. I think the flower is pretty because it is pink and a different size every time. Whenever we see them, I have to remind my friends not to pick them.

(iPhone 10, 52mm equivalent, f/2.4, 1/60 of a second, ISO 25)

