

10 pilot sites to Oopen in western North Carolina

The North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, in collaboration with partners, the Blue Ridge Snorkel Trail, a unique wildlife recreation opportunity located in Western North Carolina that connects people to the fascinating underwater world through a series of publicly accessible river snorkel sites.



Ten unique sites have been identified for inclusion in the Blue Ridge Snorkel Trail, spanning across western North Carolina. The sites are hosted by partners and are slated to open in late spring. Each site on the trail will be designated by signage that provides information on water safety information and notable aquatic species that may be found at the site.

The ten pilot sites are:

- Catawba River Basin: Joseph McDowell Historical Catawba Greenway, Town of Marion
- French Broad River Basin: Canton Recreation Park Boat Ramp, Town of Canton, Haywood Waterways Association, Inc.; Mills River Park, Town of Mills River, Mills River Partnership; Black Mountain Veterans Park, Town of Black Mountain
- Hiwassee River Basin: Valley River Heritage Park, Town of Andrews
- Little Tennessee River Basin: Bryson City Island Park, Town of Bryson City; East LaPorte River Access Park, Jackson County; Joyce Kilmer Bridge Fishing Access, United States Forest Service; Queen Branch Nature Preserve, Mainspring Conservation Trust
- Yadkin River Basin: Stone Mountain State Park, N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation

“River snorkelers will get to experience our rivers through the fishes’ eyes and explore all of the unique and beautiful species that are hidden just under the surface,” according to the Western Region Aquatic Wildlife Diversity Coordinator, Luke Etchison, Ph.D. of the Wildlife Commission’s Inland Fisheries Division. “You’ll get the chance to see crayfishes, mussels, aquatic snails, salamanders, aquatic insects, and fishes you don’t normally see, even if you fish.”

Snorkeling is quickly becoming a popular alternative to the traditional uses of rivers and lakes, and participation has increased dramatically over the years with different businesses and organizations leading groups of people on guided trips. As river snorkeling’s popularity has increased so has the economic stimulus to businesses and organizations in the region.

“The Blue Ridge Snorkel Trail is a logical partnership for us, given how it showcases the natural wonders of life under the water surface in our mountain region,” said Western Regional Director Callie Moore of MountainTrue, a Southern Blue Ridge environmental and conservation organization with strong aquatic monitoring and conservation programs. “Given the excitement already generated around the pilot sites, we are hoping to secure more funding to expand this program so that there is a snorkel site in each county in Western North Carolina.”

The timing of the trail’s opening is serendipitous given the North Carolina General Assembly designated 2023 as the Year of the Trail to bring attention to the numerous outdoor recreational attractions and networks of diverse trails that North Carolina has to offer.

While still under development, information about site kick-off events with guided snorkeling, the trail, and snorkel sites will be provided on blueridgesnorkeltrail.com in advance of the trail’s launch in late spring.

Homeowners Should Prepare for Bat Roosting Season Now

Wildlife officials say to check for bats before May 1

If you suspect bats may be living in your home, biologists at the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission ask that you relocate them responsibly before pup-rearing season begins on May 1. Bat scat, called guano, is the most obvious indication that bats may be living in the gable vents, behind a shutter or in another nook around the outside or inside your home. If they’re getting inside, a licensed Wildlife Control Agent can safely evict them for you. You can find a list of licensed professionals on the Wildlife Commission’s website, ncwildlife.org.



Bats hibernate or migrate south during the winter, which is why you may only start to see them now. They are ecologically and economically valuable, providing free pest control as they nearly devour their own body weight in insects nightly. Their appetite increases even more during pup-rearing season, which runs May 1 – July 31 across North Carolina.

“Eviction methods rely on a bat’s ability to fly out of the roost, then measures are taken to prevent reentry. Young bats are initially flightless and are totally dependent on their mothers, so when adult bats are evicted, the young perish because they can’t yet leave the roost or survive on their own. To make matters worse, mother bats may end up in the living space of a building trying to seek alternate ways to get to their pups. By August 1, young bats are mature enough to fly, so eviction methods are safe to resume at that point,” stated Katherine Etchison, wildlife diversity biologist with the Wildlife Commission.

If you are unable to remove bats from your home before rearing season, it is best to leave them in their roost until the end of July. However, you can still ask a Wildlife Control Agent to seal off entryways that lead into your living space to minimize the chance of human interaction. If a bat does enter your living space and human exposure occurs, or might have occurred, contact your county health department immediately. (Anson Health Department 704-694-5188)

Bats return to the same roost each spring, so it’s important to maintain your home after evicting them. You can provide alternative roosting space by installing bat boxes 12 to 20 feet high in a place with at least seven hours of direct sunlight in the summer. For tips on building, buying or installing bat boxes, visit batcon.org/about-bats/bat-gardens-houses.

If you have questions about interactions with bats, contact the Commission’s NC Wildlife Helpline, Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. – 5 p.m., at 866-318-2401 or email : HWI@ncwildlife.org.

Energy Efficiency Tip of the Month

Do you have a home office? Set equipment like printers and scanners to automatically switch to sleep or energy-saver mode when not in use. In addition to saving energy, the equipment will stay cooler, which will help extend its life.

Another way to save in the home office is to use energy efficient lamps for task lighting. Small lamps use less energy than whole-room lighting.

N.C. Forest Service Emergency Response Capabilities go Well Beyond Just Wildfire

The N.C. Forest Service is known for promoting, managing and protecting forest resources for the citizens of North Carolina. This mission is carried out through a variety of programs and services that many are familiar with such as forest health, financial assistance, nursery and tree improvement, education and outreach and water quality. Most notably, the N.C. Forest Service is known for its role in emergency response, predominantly as the lead agency for the prevention and control of wildfires. However, our response goes far beyond the parameters of fire.

The North Carolina Emergency Management Act designates the N.C. Forest Service as an emergency response agency to respond to all-risk incidents. As such, staff are trained in the Incident Command System (ICS) and the National Incident Management System (NIMS) to provide a standardized, yet flexible approach to any emergency. The forest service applies this training to counter a wide variety of all-risk incidents such as winter storm events, tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, search and rescue efforts, public health events and agricultural emergencies.

Depending on where you live, travel or choose to spend your vacation, emergency response to natural and human-caused disasters may look a little different. For example, you probably won’t see an avalanche in Florida, or a tsunami in Kansas, or an erupting volcano in Oklahoma. Influenced by elements such as location, climate and weather patterns, geographical landscape and population, training for all-hazard emergency response varies. For North Carolina, one of the more frequent emergencies requiring attention is wildfires.

In 2022, the N.C. Forest Service responded to nearly 6,400 wildfires that scorched more than 27,000 acres. Equipped with hand crews, fire engines, dozers, tractor-plows, fixed wing aircraft, helicopters, pumps and other resources, the N.C. Forest Service aggressively suppresses wildfires across the state’s diverse forest ecosystems, wide-ranging terrain and extensive wildland urban interface. For larger, more severe wildfires such as the Grindstone Fire at Pilot Mountain, Ferebee Road Fire, Juniper Road Two Fire and Jackson Road Fire, the N.C. Forest Service has the ability to assemble an Incident Management Team (IMT) to oversee and manage the flame. The size of the IMT can expand or contract as necessary to meet the needs of the incident.

With the winding Appalachian Mountains to the west and the waves of the Atlantic Ocean joining the Coastal Plain to the east, North Carolina exhibits significant regional variations that are notorious for bearing winter storms and hurricane activity. The N.C. Forest Service is proactive about providing guidance and recommendations for citizens on how to not only protect themselves, but how to also protect trees and property before, during and after storm events.

“Our staff are highly trained to respond to weather events and provide a variety of services during times of need,” said Greg Hicks, assistant state forester for forest protection with the N.C. Forest Service. “We provide boots-on-the-ground in the form of receiving goods such as water, supplies and resources for community distribution.”

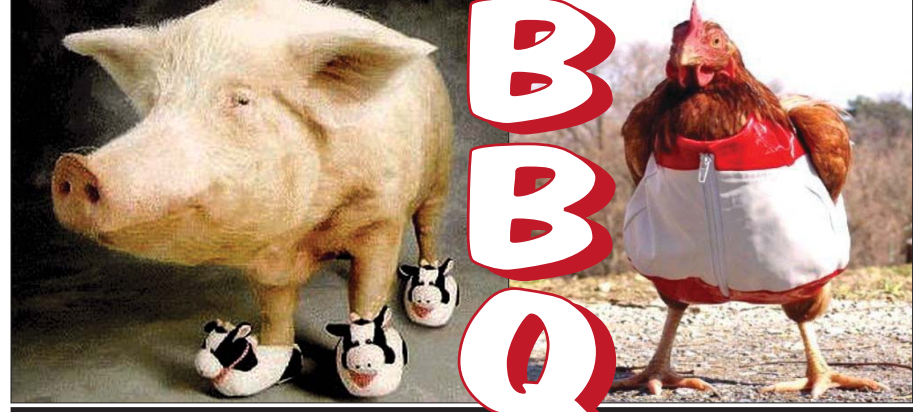
When it comes to downed debris and storm damaged trees, the N.C. Forest Service will assemble personnel units from counties outside the impacted area to provide specialized heavy equipment services such as forklifts, skid steers and chainsaw operations.

Beyond ground forces, forest service staff may plug into local and state emergency operation centers to assist with the capacity that large-scale response operations demand.

“Unlike a wildfire incident where we are the lead agency, our staff are also trained to serve in several different positions within an IMT where we are filling a support role,” Hicks said. “Our county rangers may be called in by local emergency management to help organize an incident and fulfill an IMT responsibility such as planning chief, operations chief or logistics chief.”

In the same capacity, the N.C. Forest Service will also assist with search and rescue efforts, or ground wilderness rescues, to help locate lost hikers and other recreation mishaps.

Whether it’s a large-scale incident requiring outside and partner resources, or a smaller spectrum being handled on a local level, the IMT configuration is a flexible system that can be applied to any incident. The N.C. Forest Service recognizes the importance of having as many staff members trained in the IMT structure as possible and invests countless hours into its training programs. This became even more evident during the coronavirus pandemic, where everyone found themselves reckoning with new and uncertain circumstances. Yet, because of the extensive training forest service staff receive, the agency was called upon to assist with operations such as vaccine distribution. While the N.C. Forest Service continues to run point on the prevention and control of wildfires, the priority of protecting and serving the citizens of North Carolina will always remain high.



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Funny, Random & Weird Holidays this Week

- March 2 Thursday - Old Stuff Day
- March 3 Friday - I Want You to be Happy Day
- March 4 Saturday - March Forth and Do Something Day
- March 5 Sunday - Learn What Your Name Means Day
- March 5 Sunday - Cinco de Marcho
- March 6 Monday - Dentist’s Day
- March 7 Tuesday - Alexander Graham Bell Day
- March 8 Wednesday - Proofreading Day