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ALIVE

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CONTENTS

3 Protecting Kibale Lands and Wildlife
Andy David, Associate Curator of Social Science

7 Dear Zoo Family
Cheryl Armstrong, Contributing Editor

8 A Legacy of Leadership: The History of an Enduring Veterinary Residency
Jb Minter, Director of Animal Health and Chief Veterinarian

10 Tours, Programs and Special Events at the Zoo

12 Tails from the Trails
Brandon Rhoten, Contributing Editor

13 Wild at Heart

14 Thank Yous

15 Color a Haunting Hallow's Eve—
Vampire Bats, Garden Spider and Crocodile Monitor Lizard
An illustration by Amy Brown



On the Cover

Ngogo Chimpanzees

Credit: Kevin Langergraber

On pages 2 and 15 of Alive's Summer 2026 (Issue No. 124), the author of "Partner in Trust" and the photo credit for Sam the Barred Owl should read: Hannah Tulloch.

Please go to **nczoo.com** *to purchase any items listed in the* Alive *magazine or to make a donation to the Zoo Society. If you have questions, or need help, please give us a call at 336-879-7273.*

The North Carolina Zoo is open daily, weather permitting, except on Christmas and Thanksgiving. Zoo ticket sales begin at 9 a.m. and end at 4 p.m. from April 1—November 1; sales begin at 9 a.m. and end at 3 p.m. the rest of the year.

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Protecting Kibale Lands and Wildlife

Andy David, Associate Curator of Social Science

Kibale National Park, in southwestern Uganda, is about a seven-hour drive from the Entebbe International Airport, which serves the nation's bustling capital, Kampala. It's generally a hot, dusty, and bumpy ride westbound, which makes the arrival at Kibale National all the more striking. The arid, open landscape gives way to a dense forest canopy overhead. The air turns cool and humid. Everything is green, lush, and teeming with life.

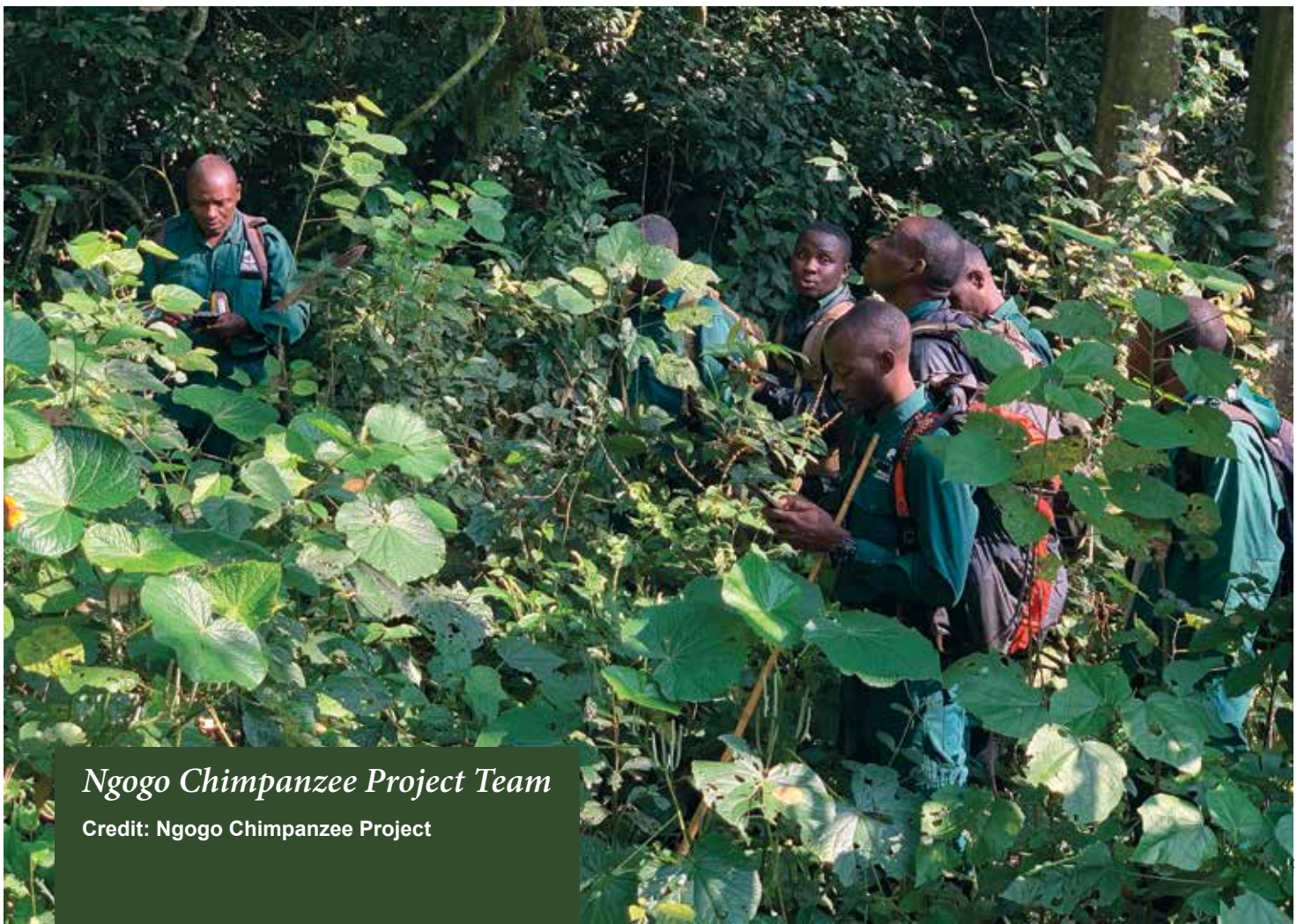
The Kibale National Park

Covering approximately 795 square kilometers (306 square miles) of tropical rainforest (roughly the size of Shenandoah National Park), Kibale is a young national park, designated only in 1993. Before that, the forest was a colonial-era timber reserve dating to the 1930s.

One of the reasons Kibale is such a valuable environment is that it is one of the last places in East Africa where both lowland and montane forests remain intact as a continuous expanse. That unbroken span from low to high elevation gives the park an unusual range of habitats, which contributes to its remarkable biodiversity.

Kibale is best known for its primates, so much so that it has earned the nickname "Primate Capital of the World." Thirteen primate species call the park home, including Red Colobus Monkeys, Black and White (Guereza) Colobus Monkeys, Grey-cheeked Mangabeys, L'Hoest's Monkeys, bushbabies, and, most famously, Chimpanzees. Kibale is one of the last strongholds for Chimpanzees in the region, with approximately 1,450 Chimps living in the park. The park is also home to over 375 bird species, 70 mammal species, and more than 200 butterfly species, making it one of Africa's most biodiverse places.

These primates draw tourists from around the world, and ecotourism has become a major economic driver in the region. In recent years, the number of eco-lodges in the area has grown rapidly, and new ones are visibly under construction along the roads around the park. Local tour guide training programs have popped



Ngogo Chimpanzee Project Team

Credit: Ngogo Chimpanzee Project

up to meet demand.

Ecotourism, when truly practiced sustainably, can be a powerful conservation tool. It gives people a stake in conserving and protecting wildlife and wild places. In Kibale, ecotourism has created opportunities for livelihoods that don't depend on extracting the very resources the forest needs to survive. Still, Kibale is very much a forest under pressure.

A Forest Under Pressure

Uganda's population has grown rapidly in recent years, more than doubling—from roughly 24 million to over 51 million—between 2000 and today. And it is projected to continue rising. More people create more resource needs, and in the rural areas surrounding Kibale, meeting those needs puts more pressure on the forest.

Wood remains the most common cooking fuel in these communities, and deforestation for firewood, charcoal, and timber is an ongoing challenge. While the Uganda Wildlife Authority permits the collection of dead and downed wood from the park at regulated intervals, this system is difficult to manage sustainably and is frequently abused. As unprotected forestland around the park diminishes and farmland encroaches on its borders, pressure on Kibale intensifies from multiple directions. This encroaching agriculture leads to more instances of wildlife raiding crops and damaging harvests, straining the relationships among the communities, the park, and the animals that call it home.

Hunting and poaching are further significant challenges in this area. Wire snares set for bushmeat catch whatever unluckily wanders into them, including Chimpanzees and other primates. As many as one-third of the Chimpanzees in the park are estimated to have sustained snare-related injuries.



Ngogo Chimpanzee

Credit: Kevin Langergraber

On Patrol In The Park

In 2010, the Ngogo Chimpanzee Project began actively monitoring a small section of Kibale National Park, deploying a three-person team to locate and remove snares and combat illegal poaching. With support from the North Carolina Zoo, that effort has since grown into a network of eight patrol teams who work in collaboration with Uganda Wildlife Authority rangers. Together they now cover most of the park. The Project also has two Chimpanzee Steward Teams who work with communities bordering the forest to prevent human-wildlife conflict and foster peaceful coexistence through monitoring Chimp movements, responding to crop-raiding incidents, and building trust with farmers.

In 2025, the Chimpanzee Project teams logged more than 42,700 kilometers (26,533 miles) on foot, roughly the distance of circling the Earth at the equator. Along the way, they collected 394 snares and traps, documented 303 signs of illegal logging, encountered 56 poacher camps, and made 21 arrests.

To track patrols, the Chimpanzee Project Team uses SMART (Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tool) to record and document observations made in the field. SMART is a freely accessible conservation technology platform that the North Carolina Zoo helped create and continues to support as a core technical partner.

In 2025, SMART patrols documented fewer poaching incidents than in previous years, an encouraging sign. Consistent patrols appear to be successfully pushing illegal activity out of the park. That said, 2025 also brought a sobering reminder of how fragile progress can be.

Despite the overall decline in snares collected, seven Ngogo Chimpanzees suffered snare injuries, an unusually high number that caught the patrol team off guard. The increase appears to be related to a territorial conflict that broke out between two Kibale Chimpanzee communities. The conflict pushed one group well beyond its usual range. There, they stumbled into an exceptionally large cluster of snares, a concentration that the Chimp Team had never encountered before.

The snares were eventually found and removed, but several injuries had already occurred. Team members believe this was a localized event, a transient hotspot rather than a sign of rising pressure across the whole park. But this incident underscores a fundamental challenge. With limited staff and resources stretched across a forest the size of Kibale, full coverage simply isn't possible. Some areas of the park will inevitably go unwatched for stretches at a time. Complete protection requires complete coverage, which in turn requires more resources.

Kevin Langergraber, the Co-Director of the Chimp Project, is always looking to expand the reach and impact of its patrol teams: "The North Carolina Zoo has been our most consistent and long-term supporter, both financially and through help with the SMART system that ensures we can monitor that our teams are working effectively. But we could be even more effective if we could hire another 2 to 4 teams. That is our long-term goal."

Despite a challenging 2025, there is reason for optimism, too. A peer-reviewed study published in 2025 looked at snaring rates before and after the Ngogo Chimpanzee patrols began. Before 2011, twelve individual Chimpanzees were caught in snares over a fourteen-year period. From 2011 to 2023, only one Chimpanzee was snared. The difference is striking and speaks to what a sustained, long-term conservation effort can achieve. Consistent snare removal is protecting Chimpanzees.



Beyond The Park's Boundaries

Protecting Kibale isn't only about what happens inside the forest. Some of the toughest conservation challenges play out along its edges, where farming communities and wildlife live side by side, and, unfortunately, often come into conflict.

UNITE for the Environment, a North Carolina Zoo program, has worked with communities surrounding Kibale National Park for over 20 years. The program is run by a Ugandan team whose members live and work in the region, advancing environmental education, conservation, and sustainable practices. Much of UNITE's work involves hosting collaborative trainings for local educators and community members, so that they can take these messages and practices back to their schools and households.



Young Chimpanzee

Credit: Kevin Langergraber

While the Ngogo Chimpanzee Project works inside the forest, UNITE works at its edges, and the two efforts reinforce each other, pairing on-the-ground patrols with education and livelihood support that ease pressure on the park. By working with schools and the broader community, UNITE helps local people acquire skills and adopt practices that lessen their impact on critical habitats in and around protected areas.

For example, UNITE hosts training on building fuel-efficient wood-burning stoves—simple structures, built from readily available natural materials—that channel and intensify the heat produced by the flames inside a stove. Consequently, less wood is needed to cook meals.

Burning firewood is still the most common cooking method in rural Uganda, and these stoves require about a third of the wood needed by the traditional three-stone method. To support this program, UNITE conservation clubs constructed over 700 fuel-efficient stoves between 2023 and 2025 and distributed them across communities, reducing fuelwood demand and easing pressure on the forest and wetland resources around Kibale.

In collaboration with the Ngogo Chimp Program, UNITE has hosted trainings focused on mitigating Chimpanzee raids on crops, helping farmers protect their harvests while reducing conflicts that turn communities against the park's wildlife. To reinforce this training, UNITE communicates these messages more widely by sponsoring radio programs aired to local communities.

While there's certainly still work to be done, we have documented the impact of UNITE's programs. Surveys conducted in 2020 and 2025 compared student and teacher households from UNITE schools with their counterparts from control schools. These surveys examined how often households followed practices championed by UNITE, including the use of fuel-efficient stoves, waste separation, tree planting, kitchen gardens, beekeeping, sustainable agriculture (e.g., organic fertilizers, multi-cropping, and agro-



UNITE team members: Tinka John, Director; Bruce Ainebyona, Education Officer; Muhindo Esther, Assistant Conservation Educator; Baluku Daniel, Community-Wildlife Steward; Bwambale David, Community-Wildlife Steward

forestry), and responsible livestock management. Findings consistently show that UNITE households adopt these practices at higher rates than control households, indicating that environmental education taught at school translates into behavioral change at home.

One illustrative example of the impact these changes make is evident when we compare the practices of households that interacted directly with UNITE to households that did not. A 2025 survey revealed a clear pattern: the more connected households were to UNITE, the more likely they were to practice sustainable behaviors at home. Households that reported being aware of and influenced by UNITE, whether or not, they directly engaged with UNITE, adopted these practices at higher levels, too, pointing to a meaningful diffusion of UNITE's championed practices across the broader community.

This kind of spillover is exactly what a human-centered conservation program hopes to achieve. Lasting change doesn't come from reaching individuals one at a time, but from shifting broader community norms. UNITE helps sustainable practices become the norm.

The vision shared by both programs is the same: that the long-term survival of Kibale's wildlife depends not just on enforcement, but on the well-being of the people who live alongside the park. When communities benefit from conservation practices that promote sustainable livelihoods and provide practical tools to reduce wildlife conflicts, these communities become conservation's most powerful advocates.

A Long Game

These two programs, the Ngogo Chimpanzee Project and UNITE for the Environment, embody the fact that conservation is a long game. Neither forests nor relationships can be protected or formed overnight.

From the patrol teams walking tens of thousands of kilometers a year, to the community members learning crop-raiding mitigation strategies, and the teachers carrying conservation messages into rural schools, all of these people are part of a collective effort to keep Kibale the place of striking beauty and biodiversity it is today. It's slow, grueling work, but it's how a forest like this survives.

The Ngogo Chimpanzee Project is co-directed by Kevin Langergraber and managed on the ground by Sam Angedakin. The NC Zoo's UNITE for the Environment program operates near Kibale National Park and Queen Elizabeth National Park in Uganda.

The Ngogo Chimpanzees have been featured in several wildlife documentaries, including Netflix's Chimp Empire series (2023), the award-winning Rise of the Warrior Apes (2017), and Disney's Chimpanzee (2012).

Zoo Society Money Matters

The North Carolina Zoo and Zoo Society began supporting conservation programs in Uganda in 1997. Initially, the support was purely financial—the Zoo Society provided grants to several local programs. Rather quickly, though, Zoo staff began working on the ground with local conservationists and educators associated with Kibale National Park. Eventually, these efforts evolved into the full-scale UNITE program discussed above.

Over these decades, the Zoo Society has invested nearly $1,350,000 in these efforts. Most of this funding (more than $800,000) was earned through membership fees, VIP programming, and other special events. The remaining funds arrived as grants from Zoo partners, including Cleveland Metropark Zoo, the Cleveland Metropark Zoo Society, and Walt Disney Parks and Resorts.

Dear Friends,

I hope you will help us keep our promise to help protect one of the most endangered and most resilient species you can imagine—the American Red Wolf.

Once down to only 14 animals, this species has made a heroic comeback. Today, its population numbers more than 300 thanks to the Endangered Species Act and to the 50 institutions working to rescue the world's only uniquely American wolf species from extinction.

This rescue has not been easy. A collective of committed conservationists and zookeepers had to learn how to manage these survivors so carefully that the final 14 could become the founding generation of a future, sustainable population of wild American Red Wolves. How could their descendants number in the hundreds without being undone by inbreeding?

Managers had to find ways to keep future wolves wild by housing them as remotely as possible. They needed quiet surroundings to keep them cautious around traffic sounds and people's voices. Keepers had to invent ways to secretly feed the wolves to prevent them associating people with easy food. Eventually, managers even learned how to trick successful wild wolves into fostering pups born in zoological settings. Wild parents know best when it comes to teaching pups to hunt and survive on their own.

These years of learning have proved successful. Today, eastern North Carolina harbors two refuges and hundreds of surrounding acres where Red Wolves roam freely in the wild. After several stops and starts, this wild population is expanding again. Just during the last few months, four litters of Red Wolves were born in the wild. They are set to go up alongside human neighbors that have come to value the wolves' presence.

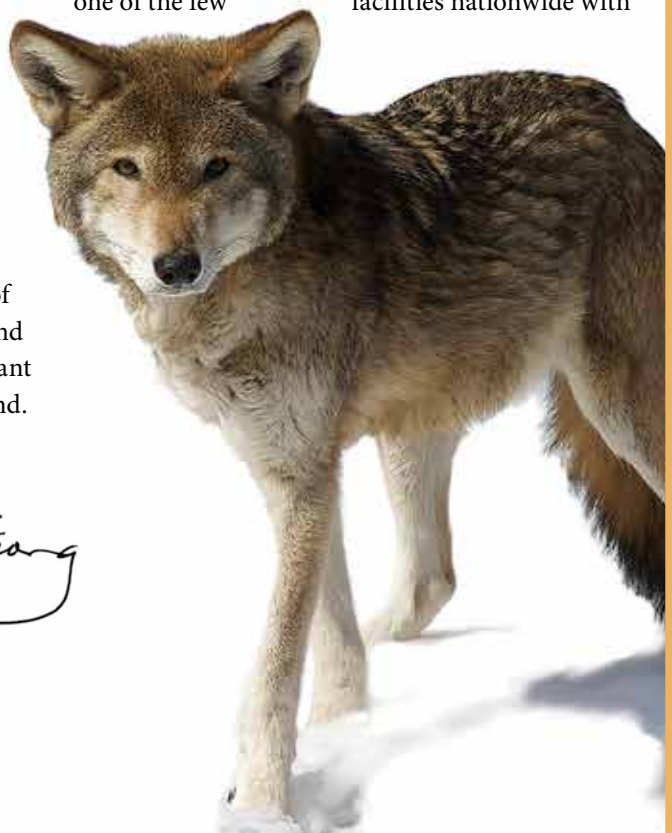
They have seen the wolves boost the local economy by attracting tourists. Local farmers and ranchers have learned that wolf packs are the best defense against Coyotes, interlopers that prey on chickens and livestock that wolves avoid. Even the landscape welcomes the wolves because they restore balance to the area by preying on small predators like Nutria and Raccoons that raid the nests and eat the eggs of endangered sea turtles and waterfowl.

Your Zoo has become a primary leader in the nationwide effort to save the American Red Wolf from extinction. We have seen how well this recovery program works and how much good it brings to this land that we love.

But the success of the program has led to challenges. The program has run out of space to house and breed the wolves in the 50 institutions devoted to this program. But more cubs are needed to continue increasing the wild population in eastern North Carolina and to jump-start a second wild population in another location eventually.

Your North Carolina Zoo is uniquely positioned to help rectify this situation. It already houses the world's second-largest breeding group of American Red Wolves, and it is one of the few facilities nationwide with enough space to build five more breeding spaces in a remote location right away.

Please join your Zoo Society in supporting the Zoo's and the nation's efforts to restore this species to the wild by donating to begin construction of up to five new breeding facilities at the Zoo. Your help will make a difference for a rare and wonderful wolf that would not exist today without the dedication and hard work of hundreds of conservationists and animal lovers, who, like you, want to see it flourish in its native land.



Saving a Piece of the World for its Wildlife

NC Zoo Society

North Carolina ZOO AND BOTANICAL GARDENS

Thank you,

Cheryl Armstrong

Cheryl Armstrong
Executive Director
North Carolina Zoo Society

A Legacy of Leadership: *The History of an Enduring Veterinary Residency*

Jb Minter, MS, DVM, Dipl. ACZM, Director of Animal Health and Chief Veterinarian

Few residency programs have had a broader impact on the field of zoological medicine than the Zoological Medicine Residency Program jointly supported by North Carolina State University and the North Carolina Zoo. Since its inception in 1991, the program has trained more than 40 veterinarians who have gone on to become leaders in zoos, aquariums, universities, conservation organizations, government agencies, and professional associations around the world. While their career paths have varied widely, this residency's core commitment to rigorous clinical training and scientific inquiry prepared each resident to pursue his or her individual interests while advancing the impact of zoological medicine on a global scale.

The roots of the program can be traced to 1989, when Drs. Michael Stoskopf and Suzanne Kennedy-Stoskopf joined the faculty at the North Carolina State University College of Veterinary Medicine. Then, zoological medicine was young, and these two veterinarians were among the first diplomates admitted to the newly established American College of Zoological Medicine. They arrived at NC State with a shared, ambitious vision: to create a training program that would prepare future specialists not only to care for animals, but also to contribute meaningfully to research, conservation, education, and leadership within the profession.

Building a Residency

Achieving this original vision relied, in part, on establishing a strong partnership with the North Carolina Zoo. Fortunately, the Zoo's director at the time, Robert L. Fry, immediately recognized the opportunities that would emerge from forming a collaboration between NC State's College of Veterinary Medicine and the North Carolina Zoo—two of North Carolina's most recently established institutions. His early support helped forge a relationship that would become one of the defining strengths of the residency program.

Equally important was the involvement of Dr. Mike Loomis, the Zoo's first full-time veterinarian. Between August of 1983 and the fall of 1985, Dr. Loomis led the Zoo's veterinary section, organizing its services, fostering its relationships with NC State, and overseeing the construction of the Zoo's Fredric Moir Hanes, M.D., Veterinary Medical Center. In late 1985, Dr. Loomis accepted a veterinary position at the San Diego Zoo, where he remained until 1990. At that time, he returned to the North Carolina Zoo to accept a position as its Senior Veterinarian and Director of the Hanes Veterinary Medical Center.

The experience he gained in San Diego infused him with the expertise and leadership skills needed to transform the veterinary school's residency concept into a reality. Alongside Drs. Stoskopf and Kennedy-Stoskopf, he helped establish a program that would become the gold standard for training zoological medicine residents.

Raising the Standards for Training

From the beginning, these founders sought to establish a residency that would do more than train clinically competent veterinarians. The program would elevate and improve the field of zoological medicine by training highly skilled clinicians who were also competent in conducting meaningful research and ready to lead and serve in their profession. Residents were expected to achieve in all three areas and to enter careers that extended their influence far beyond the walls of a veterinary hospital.

The first resident entered the program in 1991 to begin what would become a longstanding tradition of intensive mentorship and high expectations. Early residents benefited from close interactions with faculty and mentors who challenged them to think critically, pursue new knowledge, and develop the confidence required to lead. The program's demanding nature helped establish its reputation for training professionals who were exceptionally well prepared for the diverse challenges of zoological medicine. This reputation is further confirmed by the high percentage of residents (nearly 100 percent) who successfully passed their speciality boards to become Diplomates of the American College



As skilled clinicians, residents learn to handle and perform exams on diverse and sometimes highly endangered species. Here an American Red Wolf—a member of one of the world's most endangered species—undergoes a neonatal exam.

of Zoological Medicine.

The residents' accomplishments provide perhaps the clearest measure of the program's success. They have become zoo and aquarium veterinarians, university faculty members, researchers, nonprofit founders, administrators, and conservation leaders. They have directed animal health programs, established international conservation initiatives, conducted influential research, and trained future generations of veterinarians.

Among the program's earliest graduates was Dr. Lucy Spelman, whose career has spanned clinical practice, education, writing, media consulting, nonprofit leadership, and zoo administration. Dr. Craig Harms became a pioneer in aquatic animal health, combining residency training with doctoral studies before building a distinguished career in marine animal medicine, research, and education at North Carolina State University. Dr. Ted Mashima emerged as a respected leader in veterinary medicine and higher education, serving in numerous academic and executive leadership positions throughout his career.



Residents conduct, post, and publish relevant research, including studying the GI microflora of White Rhinos to improve the species' reproductive success.

Expanding Circles of Influence

The residence program's influence quickly expanded beyond North America. Dr. Felicia Nutter combined her residency training with doctoral research and went on to build an internationally focused career in wildlife health and infectious disease. Dr. Gladys Kalema returned to her homeland in Uganda to found Conservation Through Public Health, an internationally recognized organization that works at the intersection of wildlife conservation, public health, and community development. Other graduates have assumed leadership positions at major zoological institutions worldwide, contributing to animal health, conservation, and welfare on an international scale.

The residency has also maintained a strong legacy within North Carolina. Several graduates have continued to train aspiring residents in zoological medicine, thereby creating a continuous cycle of mentorship that spans generations. Dr. Ryan DeVoe joined the North Carolina Zoo veterinary staff after completing his residency and served as its Senior Veterinarian for many years. During this time, he mentored Dr. Jb Minter, the current Director of Animal Health and Chief Veterinarian at the North Carolina Zoo.

Dr. Minter subsequently trained Dr. Megan Cabot. After completing her residency and becoming board-certified in Zoological Medicine, Dr. Cabot accepted a position as an Associate Veterinarian here at the Zoo. Two other former residents, Dr. Lori Westmoreland and Dr. Emily Christiansen, are employed by the North Carolina Aquariums, where they continue to mentor current residents and strengthen the program's expertise in aquatic animal medicine.

While the accomplishments of individual residents are impressive, the program's broader impact extends much further. Over the past three decades, residents and faculty have helped educate countless veterinary students, interns, graduate students, and visiting professionals. The residency has also supported advanced training for numerous veterinarians pursuing master's and doctoral degrees related to wildlife, conservation, and zoological medicine. Through these efforts, the program has influenced not only those who completed the residency itself, but also many others who have contributed to the profession.

The continued success of the residency reflects the efforts of an extraordinary community of mentors, faculty members, adjunct faculty, technicians, animal care staff, researchers, and administrators from both North Carolina State University and the North Carolina Zoo. Their collective commitment has created a training environment that is widely regarded as one of the premier programs in zoological medicine.

More than three decades after its founding, the residency remains true to the vision established by its founders. The enduring union between two highly acclaimed institutions—the North Carolina State University Veterinary College and the North Carolina Zoo and Botanical Gardens–continues to prepare veterinarians to become skilled clinicians, productive researchers, effective educators, and influential leaders. As the field of zoological medicine continues to evolve, the NC State Zoological Medicine Residency remains committed to training professionals who will help shape its future.



Residents master a broad range of clinical skills, including techniques for performing surgery on aquatic species such as this Hellbender.

Zoo Society Money Matters

North Carolina Zoo Society members and donors, take note: Your contributions fund the Zoo's participation in the residency. Society funding began at the beginning, in 1991, and continues to the present. At that beginning, The Cannon Foundation awarded a $20,000 grant to the Society to help launch the residency. Since then, the Zoo Society's annual investments in the residency have totaled $668,000. Donor and membership dollars account for this funding.

We are deeply grateful to the members, foundations, and other donors who have enabled the Zoo Society to contribute to the residency's success.

PLANS FOR OUR 2027 VIP TOURS

PUBLIC VIP TOURS

At the moment, we're planning to add some additional tours to next year's tour schedule, and we are going to try selling these tours on a modified schedule. In the past, we announced a coming year's tour schedule all at once, posting and selling 12 months of tours in late October.

As a consequence, many tours sold out quickly, and sometimes anxious buyers snapped up tours they wanted well before they knew if they could attend on the specified date. Many people ended up rescheduling their experiences or canceling them because alternative dates were no longer available.

In an effort to ease some of this anxiety and make the buying process less chaotic, we have decided to announce and sell our tours in chunks: Our January through April 2027 tours will go on sale October 31. Our May through August tours will go on sale March 1, and our September through December tours will go on sale July 1. When October 31 rolls around again, we will begin selling our January - March 2028 tours.

Tour schedules will be posted on the web and made available in your *Alive* magazine at least three months before sales begin. That should give everyone time to plan ahead to buy a tour.

Be sure to sign up for the Zoo Society's FREE Monthly Zmail to receive an early email that posts each "chunk of months" tour calendar and another email on the day that these tours go on sale. To sign up to receive the Zmail, go to nczoo.com and click on "Sign up for Z-mail" under the Alive Magazine menu item.

VIP PUBLIC AND PRIVATE TOUR BASICS

We organize our public and private VIP Tours to provide exciting, fun, and educational behind-the-scenes experiences for guests. Private tours are nearly identical to public tours: they last about an hour, visit the same locations, and take guests close to the Zoo's animals and their keepers. Many tours sell out quickly, so we urge buyers to purchase their tour as early as possible. If, for some reason, a buyer cannot attend the tour they purchased, we follow generous refund policies.

How Public and Private Tours Differ

The Zoo Society schedules all public tours on Saturdays. Up to 15 tickets are available for tours, depending on the area being visited. Tour size and minimum age requirements are noted on the tour information provided on the web.

Buyers select the date of their Private Tours, which can be scheduled any day of the week except Saturday. Tour prices cover Zoo and tour admission costs for the entire group.

Public Tour Refund Policies

Buyers who cancel their reservations at least 14 days prior to their tour date can opt to receive a full refund or be placed in a future public tour scheduled during the same or the following year.

Buyers who cancel 2 – 13 days before their tour date can choose to receive a 50 percent refund or be placed in a future tour scheduled during the same or the following year.

Buyers who fail to attend a tour or who cancel on the day before their scheduled tour are not eligible for refunds.

If the Zoo Society cancels any public or private tour, buyers may choose to receive a full refund or be rescheduled to attend a comparable tour on a different date during the same or the following year.

Private Tour Refund Policies

If a buyer requests a tour date that the Zoo cannot accommodate, we provide a full refund.

Buyers who cancel a private tour at least 4 days prior to the event can receive a full refund or be rescheduled for a comparable tour later in the same or the following year.

Buyers who cancel a private tour 2 – 3 days prior to the event can receive a 50 percent refund or be rescheduled for a comparable tour later in the same or the following year.

Buyers canceling on the day before or the day of an event are not eligible for refunds or rescheduling.

If the Zoo Society cancels any public or private tour, buyers may choose to receive a full refund or to be rescheduled for a comparable tour on a different date during the same or the following year.

Remaining VIP Tours for 2026

North Carolina Zoo Society members pay $115 per person for public VIP Tour tickets. Non-members pay $139 per person — To order tour tickets, visit nczoo.com and select "VIP" tours under "Special Programs."

Our VIP Tours have posted age restrictions and are unsuitable for young children. A paying adult must accompany children younger than 18.

Remaining Public Tour Tickets Available for 2026

AVIAN (BIRD) PROPAGATION VISIT
Visit the Zoo's secluded bird breeding site. Minimum Age: 10
Date: Sept. 26

BLACK BEAR & GRIZZLY BEARS
Training two bears. Minimum Age: 10
Begins at 1:30 p.m.
Date: Oct. 3

CHIMPANZEES IN TRAINING
Exclusive photo opportunity not ADA accessible. Minimum Age: 12
Begins at 2 p.m.
Date: Oct. 17

GORILLAS - CARE & TRAINING
Keeping Gorillas Healthy
Begins 1:30 p.m. Minimum Age: 8

Remaining Openings for Private Tours

Buyers choose private tour dates. Tour size is limited to six.
Member price: $545 for most tours. Non-members add $50.

AVIAN (BIRD) PROPAGATION VISIT
Visit the Zoo's secluded bird breeding site. Minimum Age: 10
Months with openings: Sept., Oct., Nov., Dec.

PRIVATE BISON & ELK SAFARI
Begins at 1:30 p.m.
We offer this safari ride through the Bison and Elk habitat only as a private tour. Limited to 4 people. Price: $475 (members), $515 (non-members)
ADA Accessible
Months with openings: Aug., Sept., Oct., Dec.

CHIMPANZEES IN TRAINING
Minimum Age: 12
Begins at 3 p.m.
Months with openings: Nov., Dec.
Mostly ADA Accessible.

COUGAR CLOSE-UP
Minimum Age: 10
Begins at 1:30 p.m.
Months with openings: Sept., Oct., Nov., Dec.

MEET AND FEED GIRAFFES
All behind the scenes.
Minimum Age: 6
Begins at 3 p.m.
Month with opening: Sept.

GORILLAS' CARE & TRAINING
Keeping Gorillas Healthy
Minimum Age: 8
Begins at 1:30 p.m.
Month with opening: Nov.

Learn more about these events and other Zoo Society events at https://nczoo.COM



Upcoming Special Events and Quiet Days at the NC Zoo

The Zoo plans its events and programs to showcase its natural surroundings and engage guests in exploring the outdoors and wildlife. Ideally, these experiences can be sensory-friendly every day. But, fun and human nature being what they are, mean that sometimes crowds, laughter, and exuberant children can generate enough excitement to overwhelm some guests.

To help meet the needs of its serenity seeking visitors, the Zoo schedules specific days during the year, called "Quiet Days," when it takes steps to keep the Park especially serene and calm for everyone.

On Quiet Days the Zoo limits the size of groups entering the Zoo by not accepting reservations for school field trips or other large groups. It also turns the volume down when it broadcasts messages or music in the Park. As a special treat, Zoo educators also set up quiet, sensory-play experiences in Kidzone on Quiet Days. These calm, muffled play activities are available from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m. on Quiet Days.

QUIET DAY DATES

Times are 9 a.m. - 5 p.m.
Tue, Aug 18
Tue, Sep 15
Tue, Nov. 17



Zoo Special Events

October 5: KidFest 9 a.m. - 4 p.m.
A day filled with exploration and play. Visit *https://www.nczoo.org/events/kidfest* to learn more

October 18-19 & 24-25: BOO at the Zoo
9 a.m. - 4 p.m.

November 1-8: Beloved Pet Ofrenda
9 a.m. - 4 p.m.

November 8-9: Pumpkin Palooza

Learn more about Zoo events at https://nczoo.ORG

Tails from the Trails:

A Most Unconventional Nursery



Brandon Rhoten, Society Donor Relations Officer

There are countless factors one should consider when selecting a nursery.

Safety.

Accessibility.

Proximity to food.

The presence or, ideally, absence of alligators.

And yet, each spring in Cypress Swamp, a Green Heron arrives at the North Carolina Zoo and appears to disregard that final consideration entirely.

Perched above the habitat of Gator Boy and Liv, our American Alligators, sits what can only be described as one of the most unconventional nurseries on Zoo grounds. Year after year, a determined Green Heron builds her nest above the water and proceeds to raise her family directly over two reptiles that can only be described as enthusiastic carnivores.

I would not make this choice.

To be fair, nobody asked me.

Every year, I watch this tiny bird settle into her nursery and think, "Surely there was a less dramatic option."

Every year, she ignores me.

And every year, she proves me wrong.

Now, before you assume our feathered friend is making reckless life decisions, I should mention that Green Herons are among North Carolina's most remarkable native birds.

They are small, only about the size of a crow, but they carry themselves with the confidence of something considerably larger. Their wings shimmer emerald green in the sunlight, their neck glows chestnut, and their bill looks less like a beak and more like a precision instrument designed by a team of engineers.

Which, in a way, it was.

Green Herons are among the few birds in the world known to use tools.

Actual tools.

While I occasionally spend several minutes looking for my golf cart key only to discover it's hanging from the lanyard around my neck, Green Herons have mastered the concept of bait. They have been observed dropping feathers, insects, twigs, and other objects onto the water's surface to lure fish within striking distance.

The fish fall for it.

Repeatedly.

They also possess a specialized neck that coils into an elegant "S" shape before launching forward with astonishing speed. It's essentially a spring-loaded fish-catching device wrapped in feathers.

So, by every available measure, this bird is intelligent, patient, resourceful, and exceptionally good at problem-solving.

Which only makes me more confused about the nursery.

Then the babies arrive.

And that's when my annual concern reaches peak levels.

At only two or three weeks of age, young Green Herons begin venturing away from the nest. This is an important part of their development. They strengthen muscles, improve coordination, and prepare for eventual flight.

Those are the scientific terms.

The less scientific description is that they begin participating in a series of aerial negotiations with gravity.

One moment they're standing confidently on a branch.

The next moment they're standing on a smaller branch.

Then a thinner branch.

Then a branch that appears to have been selected specifically to test my emotional resilience.

I watch these tiny birds inch their way through the trees with the same expression many parents wear while watching a toddler climb something they absolutely should not be climbing.

The chicks, meanwhile, seem delighted.

Their mother remains unbothered.

I remain unconvinced.

Yet nature, as it often does, has a way of revealing that there is method behind the madness.

Nesting above water provides protection from many predators that might otherwise raid a nest. Raccoons, snakes, and other opportunists often have a more difficult time reaching young birds in such locations.

And if those predators must also navigate a habitat occupied by alligators?

Well.

Suddenly the neighborhood begins to make considerably more sense.

I remain mildly anxious.

But considerably more informed.

Of course, life in the wild doesn't always go according to plan. In previous years, staff from the Valerie H. Schindler Wildlife Rehabilitation Center have occasionally stepped in when young birds needed assistance. Their dedication provides an invaluable safety net for native wildlife facing unexpected challenges.

Thankfully, this year's youngsters required no intervention.

One by one, they mastered their balancing acts, strengthened their wings, and successfully fledged.

The tiny tightrope walkers of Cypress Swamp graduated with flying colors.

Quite literally.

What I love most about this story is that the Green Heron is not part of the Zoo's collection.



She has no habitat sign.

No keeper talks.

No place on the Zoo map.

And yet she returns every year, reminding me that the North Carolina Zoo serves as a sanctuary not only for the animals in our care, but also for the countless native species that choose to call these grounds home.

Some arrive quietly.

Some stay only a season.

And some raise their families above alligator habitats while causing nearby humans unnecessary levels of concern.

So, if you find yourself strolling through Cypress Swamp next spring, take a moment to look up. You may spot one of North Carolina's most skilled hunters, one of the world's few tool-using birds, and quite possibly the most confident mother I've ever encountered.

I still wouldn't choose her nursery location.

But after another successful fledging season, I'm beginning to suspect she knows exactly what she's doing.



Wild at Heart

PARTY WITH A PURPOSE

Celebrating Conservation and Community

We want to express our heartfelt thanks to everyone who worked with the Zoo Society to make our 2026 Party with a Purpose a resounding success for wildlife and the Zoo. This year, ***Wild at Heart*** raised a record-breaking $142,000 from sponsorships, ticket sales, and a live auction flush with one-of-a-kind wildlife experiences available only at the North Carolina Zoo. These funds will support the Zoo's ongoing efforts to bring Australian and South American habitats as well as a re-envisioned tropical aviary to the site.

We thank you all, from the bottom of our hearts, for working and celebrating with us to support Zoo wildlife, conservation, and education. Thank you, too, for uplifting our spirits and inspiring us to work even harder next year to support the Zoo and its programs.

We look forward to seeing you and some new friends, too, next year at our 2027's ***Wild At Heart***. Again, same time, same Zoo, next year.

Save the date: May 15, 2027.

THANK YOUS

Thanks go out to the very generous donors who provided gifts of $1,000 or more from April 1 through June 22, 2026.

The Thank Yous list on page 12 of Alive's Spring 2026 (Issue No.123) should have included

Pamela Townsend & Bill Jenkins.

We apologize for our error and want to recognize their generosity by properly listing them above.

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North Carolina ZOO
AND BOTANICAL GARDENS

Thanks to the wisdom of the North Carolina General Assembly and Governor Josh Stein, the Zoo received funding to hire the majority of employees it requested to staff its new Asian continental region. Since learning the good news, Zoo staff has been busy interviewing and attempting to fill the much-needed positions to operate this new habitat region.

With this good news in hand and the Zoo's new Director, Dr. Mark Penning, in place, the Zoo has high hopes for inviting the public into this exciting new Zoo addition in the near future.

While the opening date has not been settled for sure, it appears that spring may turn out to be the perfect season for taking a trip into Asia.
It will be spectacular.

