

Elite Hearing Centers of America

YOU DESERVE IT
Go For The **UPGRADE**

LIMITED TIME UPGRADE OFFER!

Receive **\$500 OFF**
a pair of Phonak Lumity hearing aids!¹

HURRY! OFFER EXPIRES 04/19/24!

CALL TODAY!
Ask about same day care at one of our convenient locations!

1829 Hendersonville Rd, Suite 130, Asheville
828-203-9974

206 3rd Avenue West, Hendersonville
828-820-5799

15 Weaver Blvd., Weaverville
828-820-5812

¹Receive up to \$500 discount towards a pair of Phonak Lumity hearing aids level 70 or 90 technology. This limited-time offer may not be used in conjunction with any other offer or promotion. New orders only. Private pay only (not combinable with insurance or network). ²On in-store purchases of \$200+ in with the CareCredit credit card through the end of the month. Interest will be charged to your account from the purchase date if the promotional purchase is not paid in full within 24 months. Minimum monthly payments required. Subject to credit approval. Offers valid until 04/19/24.

We offer 0% interest financing for 24 months!²

Reach out to our team of experts and UPGRADE your hearing experience today!

SERVING ASHEVILLE SINCE 1870

CITIZEN TIMES

MONDAY, APRIL 15, 2024 | CITIZEN-TIMES.COM

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

WORD FROM THE SMOKIES

SEASON HATCHES



ABOVE: Baby sparrows peer out of a nest that they will soon outgrow. The process of developing feathers and leaving the nest is referred to as “fledging.” LOWER RIGHT: The grub in this Carolina wren’s beak may well be intended for baby birds in one of the up to five clutches this species may raise in a season.

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Spring is a prime time for birdwatchers

Holly Kays Word from the Smokies

As the days grow warmer and the landscape ripples with color, a growing treetop chorus drives the message home — spring is here, and new life is thriving. • The show begins sometime in March, as hatching insects and growing plants allow the hardy songbird species that have braved winter in the Smokies to shift focus from their own survival to that of the species as a whole. It’s time to mate, and time to nest. • “One of the advantages of being a year-round resident is they often get to be the first ones there when the conditions are right for them to start getting enough food to reproduce,” said Julianne Geleynse, science communicator for Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

These birds — Carolina chickadees, northern cardinals, Carolina wrens and eastern towhees, to name a few — are the first to start staking out a territory. While some species maintain their turf throughout the winter, most boundaries break down during the cold season. When spring arrives, males spend their time flitting around the borders of their newly established kingdom, belting out songs that sound delicately whimsical to human ears but send a strong message to their peers. “That song helps the females to find the males and check out the quality of their territory. Female birds can be very choosy. It also tells other males, ‘This my spot. I have claimed it, stay out of my territory,’” Geleynse said.

See SMOKIES, Page 4A



Asheville schools question NC teacher data, but acknowledge high turnover rate

Joel Burgess Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE - Local education officials are questioning state data that shows the city school system has the worst teacher turnover in the state — though they acknowledge the number of Asheville City Schools instructors quitting is still likely one of North Carolina’s highest.

The State of the Teaching Profession in North Carolina report released April 4 by the N.C. Department of Public Instruction highlighted Asheville City Schools as the top system in the state for teachers quitting, with a 30.7% attrition rate from March 2022 to March 2023.

But on April 10 ACS spokesperson Kim Dechant said the state used the wrong number of total teachers, 319, to calculate the percentage based on 98 teachers quitting. With what she said was the correct number of 362 — and assuming other data is correct — ACS would have a 27% attrition rate, the third-worst in the state.

DPI, though, told the Citizen Times the report relied on how teacher positions were coded through the state payroll system and only used those coded as “classroom teachers.”

See TEACHERS, Page 4A

New poll: Biden narrowing Trump’s lead in 2024 election

Ken Tran
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden is catching up to former President Donald Trump’s polling lead, highlighting just how close the 2024 presidential election will be, according to a new poll from the New York Times and Siena College.

Trump leads Biden by just one percentage point, with the two candidates at 46% and 45% respectively. The survey is a significant boost for the incumbent president, who has been lagging behind Trump in recent polling.

An earlier New York Times and Siena college poll released in March saw Trump leading Biden by 5 percentage points, at 48% and 43% respectively.

But Biden appears to be shoring up support among Americans who voted for him in the 2020 elections. Eighty-nine percent of his 2020 supporters say they would vote for him now, compared with 83% who said the same from the earlier poll. Trump still

See POLL, Page 5A

Design. Demo. Done.

Re-Bath offers complete remodels, not just cover ups. Our team will work with you through design, product selection, demo, and installation to create a bathroom you’ll love.

Contact us today for a free in-home design consultation.
Ask about financing options.

RE-BATH

828.220.5569

ROC# 86135, 34257



Smokies

Continued from Page 1A

The females take it all in — the brightness of his plumage, the vigor of his song, the desirability of the territory he's chosen — and they make a choice. Each factor says something about the male's vitality, genetic strength, and ability to father offspring that will survive to raise chicks of their own. The symphony of chirps and trills that fills the April air could be translated as series of high-stakes negotiations, complete with threats, bribes, and professions of love.

The performance only grows richer as the weeks wear on. By the end of the first week in May, many resident birds have already finished raising their first nest of chicks. But migrant species, which appear in ever-larger numbers throughout April, have just arrived from their winter refuges in Central and South America. The males arrive first, their bright breeding plumage decorating the treetops with shining jewels of color and their songs adding new harmonies to the unfolding symphony in the Smokies. As do resident birds, the migrant males mark their domain in song.

"If males want to mate, they have to have a territory," said Barbara Ballentine, an ornithologist and associate professor of biology at Western Carolina University.

Without a territory worthy of one of the females arriving from the south, a male bird is a genetic dead end. So these warblers, veerys, scarlet tanagers, and indigo buntings give it their all, singing their hearts out and fighting with any male that tries to encroach.

As to what piece of land is most likely to entice a lady bird, that varies immensely from species to species. Some want fields, and others deep forest. Some build their nests in tree cavities, and others in dense bushes. Some feed their young on larvae, others on adult insects. The ideal nesting site can mean as many different things as there are bird species in the Smokies — and so far, that tally is 254, according to Discover Life in America.

But not all 254 species recorded in the Smokies breed here. Some migrant birds are just passing through, looking for a safe place to rest and gorge before pressing on toward a destination farther north. For these species, food, not habitat, is the most important consideration.

"They're really going to be using the part of the park where food is available," said Geleynse.

During early spring, the still-chilly higher elevations will be mostly bereft



Birders peer into the treetops during a Smokies Life Members Weekend event in September 2022. PROVIDED BY VALERIE POLK/SMOKIES LIFE

of migrants, while lower-lying areas with fields and forest edges are popular spots — bird density tends to be higher in these edge habitats than in the depths of the forest. Good places to spot early spring migrants include Sugarlands Visitor Center, Cades Cove, Cataloochee, and Elkmont through Daisy Town and Little River Trail, Geleynse said.

As the season unfolds, that equation changes.

"One of the nice things around here for birdwatchers is you can go back in time," said Ballentine.

Cruising the Blue Ridge Parkway or climbing Newfound Gap Road through the Smokies, the clock rewinds. Birds are active in places they weren't earlier in the season, and birding is more fun than in the further-along lower elevations.

"What's really cool about this time of year is that all the migrants coming through are in their breeding plumage, so the males are bright and shiny and colorful," said Ballentine. "They're pretty easy to identify, and they're easier to see a lot of times because they're coming through before all the trees have

fully leafed out."

Birdwatching offers more than just recreation. It's a gateway to understanding the crucial role these beautiful creatures play in the larger ecosystem — and the peril their populations face.

"We're losing birds, especially migrants, at alarming rates," said Ballentine.

A 2019 research article from the journal *Science* drew from several long-term datasets to find that the number of birds in the United States and Canada had fallen by nearly 3 billion since 1970, a decline of 29%. Bird counts haven't fallen much in the Smokies, said Geleynse, both because the park remains undeveloped and because birds displaced by human activity outside the park are seeking refuge within it.

Some of the reasons for population decline are difficult to address. For example, habitat destruction in migrant species' Central and South American wintering grounds can have a big impact on populations in the United States and Canada, but addressing those issues across national boundaries is difficult. It's hard enough to do at home, where new development continually paves

over the places birds once relied on to find food and raise families.

But other factors are "easily fixable," said Ballentine. These include keeping pet cats inside, as housecats kill billions of birds each year, and taking measures to prevent bird strikes on windows, which kill at least 3 billion birds annually.

"Think about the canary in the coal mine," said Geleynse. "If all of the birds start disappearing, that's telling us, 'Hey, there's something wrong with our environment.'"

The world can get better for birds one backyard at a time. The easiest way to start is by providing a birdfeeder and water, filled up clean every day, and reducing reflective surfaces on windows, keeping birds from running into them. Next up is planting seed- and fruit-bearing native species. Finally, Geleynse suggests replacing grass, which has very little value for birds or other creatures, with an array of native plants that benefit birds.

Learning more about birds is another way to help. To get started, purchase a pair of binoculars (a decent pair costs about \$100); download the Merlin app from Cornell Lab of Ornithology, which identifies birds by sound; and join a birdwatching group.

Communities surrounding the park offer a variety of birdwatching groups and opportunities. In North Carolina, regular group trips include Haywood County Recreation and Parks' monthly bird walks; the Franklin Bird Club's 8 a.m. Wednesday walks in Macon County starting April 17; Sylva-based Birders of the Tuckaseegee Watershed's Friday evening walks throughout the Tuckaseegee Watershed, 6 p.m. to dusk in April and 6:30 p.m. to dusk May through August; and Asheville-based Blue Ridge Audubon's walks at 8 a.m. most Saturdays. In Tennessee, opportunities include Knoxville Area Birding Group's various bird walks and educational meetings in Knoxville; birding events at Seven Islands State Birding Park in Kodak; and regular birding programs at Ijams Nature Center in Knoxville.

"The more that you know and the more that you appreciate them," Geleynse said, "the more you'll care, and the more you'll likely do to protect them."

Holly Kays is the lead writer for Smokies Life, formerly called Great Smoky Mountains Association. Reach her at hollyk@smokieslife.org.



A pair of house finches perches in a redbud tree. PROVIDED BY NEAL LEWIS/NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Teachers

Continued from Page 1A

"It's possible that districts may have considered other types of instructional roles, such as instructional support roles like curriculum facilitators, school counselors, school social workers, etc.," said DPI spokesperson Blair Rhoades. "Therefore, there may be variance in what a district shared and what we presented based on what our report requires us to define as a classroom teacher per legislation."

"We still 100% agree that retention is a problem — in Asheville City Schools, and across the state," Dechant said.

Superintendent Maggie Fehrman, who was hired July 17, 2023, said turn-

over was bad enough that the school board prioritized an increase in the local salary supplement, asking the Buncombe County Board of Commissioners for more funding last year.

"One of (the school board's) primary goals was to increase the monthly supplement by 2% across the board because they recognized the high cost of living in the city of Asheville and Buncombe County," Fehrman said in a release from the school system.

Commissioners instead approved a 1% increase, which was added to the property tax rate. The General Assembly controls most of teacher pay and raised base salaries 7% over two years. That enlarged the base pay for a new teacher with a bachelor's degree from \$37,000 annually to \$39,000 for 2023-24 and \$41,000 for 2024-25. With the

county increase, that brought ACS beginning teacher pay to \$42,510 for 2023-24.

Much of the high cost of living comes from Asheville rents, the highest in the state, according to U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which estimates a local one-bedroom apartment at \$1,496 a month, a number rivaling Washington, D.C. and Atlanta.

Dechant, the ACS spokesperson, said the strikingly high turnover came during a year when ACS had two different superintendents. In hiring Fehrman, the school board was looking for a leader who would be invested in the community and make a commitment to stay and rebuild the district "with a focus on belonging and trust," she said.

Fehrman, she said, was committed to creating a sense of belonging, challeng-

ing and relevant learning for all students and making every second count, and that would lead to a decrease in attrition.

"When you feel like you belong, and you're part of something, you really want to be invested. And that's what we want to create here in our school system," said Fehrman. "We want our staff to feel supported and a true sense of belonging in every school and every department."

If other state attrition numbers are correct, the worst in the state is 29.6% in the eastern Halifax County system, with 42 of 142 teachers leaving. Second-highest is Weldon City Schools at 28.3%, with 13 of 46 educators quitting.

Buncombe County Schools has a 16.1% attrition rate, with 257 of 1,599 teachers leaving.