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Restaurant sets \$2.1M goal for free, hot meal program

Tiana Kennell
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE - Asheville is in a season of shifts as fall gives way to winter, restaurants reopen and revise operations, and the community enters the next stages of disaster recovery following Tropical Storm Helene.

Cheryl Antonic Suess, co-owner of Bear's Smokehouse BBQ, has launched an initiative to ensure people needing a hot, nutritious meal aren't lost in the shuffle as relief services scale back and end.

"Numbers are reducing which is good. That's a good indicator as water and electricity and utilities. ... come back online for most people," she said. "But we are still faced with winter coming and food relief organizations like World Central Kitchen and American Red Cross winding down their operations as emergency relief organizations."

See **FREE MEALS**, Page 2A

"Times feel very uncertain and I'm also extremely hopeful for us to have a great turnaround come this spring. I think it's going to be a long winter and not just the restaurant industry but a lot of businesses across Asheville and the Western North Carolina region."

WORD FROM THE SMOKIES

Christmas Bird Count marks 125 years



ABOVE: The golden-crowned kinglet is easily identifiable by its bright gold-and-orange head. PROVIDED BY DALE VANDERHEYDEN/AUDUBON PHOTOGRAPHY AWARDS

RIGHT: Keith Watson leads a birding trip in the Kuwohi area during a July Smokies Life event. PROVIDED BY HOLLY KAYS/SMOKIES LIFE

Holly Kays
Word from the Smokies
USA TODAY NETWORK

Since its origin in 1900, the Christmas Bird Count has become a holiday fixture for ever-expanding numbers of birders across the globe, giving a valuable gift to generations of wildlife scientists — a massive trove of data on bird populations in the Western Hemisphere. This annual avian census, set to commence for the 125th time, began in an era when many bird species were facing steep declines, especially waterfowl prized for their feathers. The Christmas Bird Count was the National Audubon Society's answer to the traditional Christmas Side Hunt, a team competition that encouraged participants to kill as many furred and feathered creatures as possible in a single outing.

"The Christmas Bird Count really got started as an alternative to those kinds of hunting efforts," said Curtis

See **BIRDS**, Page 2A



British sisters visit people on death row across US

Women got involved after writing letters for charity

Evan Mealins
Nashville Tennessean
USA TODAY NETWORK - TENNESSEE

NASHVILLE - When Mary Nordkvelle was 8 years old and living in Scotland, she took a trip to the zoo. She was drawn to a wolf walking in its cage, and she watched it pace up and down the cold, hard cement.

She saw its eyes. "It's like it had gone mad," Nordkvelle said. "Everybody's sort of pointing at this animal, and why am I the only one crying?"

For three decades now, a similar feel-

ing of compassion has driven Nordkvelle, 80, and her sister, 77-year-old Jean Richardson, to write and visit people on death row across the United States.

Thirty years after they first came to Music City, the sisters left Nashville for what they think was the last time on Nov. 26.

"It is sad not to come back," Richardson said during an interview on Nov. 25 at the Family Reconciliation Center, a nonprofit guesthouse in Nashville that provides free overnight rooms to anyone

See **DEATH ROW**, Page 6A



British sisters Jean Richardson and Mary Nordkvelle have been writing letters to men on death row through the organization LifeLines.

MARK ZALESKI/NASHVILLE TENNESSEAN



MOUNTAINS

Free Meals

Continued from Page 1A

Tropical Storm Helene response and food assistance

Days after the Sept. 27 catastrophic storm left many displaced, financially insecure, and without access to food and water, Bear's Smokehouse and other local restaurants collaborated with the global disaster relief organization World Central Kitchen to set up a food distribution operation to provide free meals in Asheville and across Western North Carolina.

Bear's Smokehouse's South Slope location, at 135 Coxe Ave, became a meal distribution hub for WCK powered by restaurant partners who transformed their businesses into commissary kitchens, donated ingredients, and cooked and prepared meals for pick-up and delivery.

Suess said more than 1.2 million meals had been distributed from the field by the end of November.

She said Bear's contracts with American Red Cross and WCK end on Dec. 15 and Dec. 31, respectively. The organization provided funds for the meal outreach program which will end when the contract agreement concludes.

North Carolina Communications Director Mike DeCinti said the American Red Cross will continue to work with lo-

cal partners and emergency management through December to determine the community's needs and is considering extending food assistance services in WNC. The organization's regional chapter will continue providing other outreach services.

Suess said about 7,000 meals were delivered during the week of Nov. 25 and predicted that nearly 4,000 people could benefit from a hot meal by the end of December.

Meals have included stir fry served over rice and Brunswick stew with bread.

Bear's Foundation, the company's charitable nonprofit, intends to continue the work into the new year, setting a goal to provide 360,000 meals from January to March — or 4,000 meals daily — to shelters in Asheville, Black Mountain and Swannanoa.

"This is looking forward and trying to be proactive and get a plan in place because Dec. 31, the need is not going away," Suess said.

Fundraising to address food insecurity

Suess said the Bear's Foundation initiative is budgeted at \$2.1 million for meal production, logistical coordination and establishing a larger, dedicated commercial kitchen for its nonprofit partner Equal Plates Project. Bear's Smokehouse will transition the work to the nonprofit, which sources ingredients

from local small farms to provide nourishing meals for the community.

She said the foundation is seeking corporate and private donors. Bear's Foundation and its Linked4Life charitable arm are accepting donations through GoFundMe.

Suess said the long-term plan will equip Bear's Foundation with "the infrastructure, training, and operational capacity to sustain food security efforts for years to come" and develop a "replicable framework to address future food crises in WNC and beyond."

Suess said Bear's averaged 100 volunteers per day during the height of Helene response, but the staff is handling current operations to maintain consistency.

Bear's Smokehouse BBQ reopens

She said an estimated 20 people are employed and assisting with the food outreach service, including previous Bear's employees and others contracted through WCK.

She said Bear's had about double the staff before Helene, but many remain laid off or have relocated.

Staff increases will be based on customer volume once the South Slope restaurant reopens.

"Times feel very uncertain and I'm also extremely hopeful for us to have a great turnaround come this spring. I think it's going to be a long winter and not just the restaurant industry but a lot of businesses across Asheville and the

Western North Carolina region," she said.

On Dec. 5, Bear's Smokehouse's South Slope restaurant closed due to Helene and will reopen with regular services from 11:30 a.m.-9 p.m. Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday, and 11:30 a.m.-10 p.m. Friday and Saturday. The bar will open at 4 p.m.

Bear's Smokehouse inside Sweeten Creek Brewing, at 1127 Sweeten Creek Road, reopened on Nov. 12. The eatery's hours are 11:30 a.m. Tuesday-Saturday and Noon on Sunday.

"Asheville is a place that people from all over travel to and come to love and has a special place in a lot of people's heart," Suess said. "We have such a strong and resilient community that we're going to get through this as long as we stick by each other and do it together."

To donate and for more information, visit bearsbbq.com or linkedforlife.org, follow @bearsasheville and @linked.4.life on Instagram, or contact Cheryl Antoncic Suess at (860) 878-2014 or cheryl@bearsbbq.com.

Tiana Kennell is the food and dining reporter for the Asheville Citizen Times, part of the USA Today Network. She is a graduate of Michigan State University and covered the arts, entertainment and hospitality in Louisiana for several years. Email her at tkennell@citizen-times.com or follow her on Instagram @PrincessOfPage.

Birds

Continued from Page 1A

Smalling, executive director of Audubon North Carolina. "This year is the 125th annual Christmas Bird Count, and that makes it the longest-running community science project in North America."

Anyone can participate in the CBC, regardless of their birding skill level, by joining one of the thousands of circles, each 15 miles in diameter, that comprise the event. The organizer of each circle chooses a day between Dec. 14-Jan. 5 to conduct their count. On the appointed day, all participants in the circle have 24 hours in which to tally as many birds as they can. In addition to listing the individual species spotted, they also count the number of individual birds seen and participant hours logged.

Participation in the Christmas Bird Count has grown dramatically over the past 125 years. The first one in 1900 involved 27 people conducting counts in 25 locations within the United States. Last year, the Audubon Society marked a new record of 2,677 count circles and 83,186 participants, with counts held not only in the U.S. but also in Canada, Latin America, the Caribbean and the Pacific Islands. The Great Smoky Mountains region includes circles in Gatlinburg, Cades Cove, Knoxville, Franklin, Highlands, Waynesville, Hot Springs and Asheville, to name a few.

"It's just fun," said retired migratory bird biologist Keith Watson, who has organized the Gatlinburg circle since 2020 and participated in it regularly for decades. "It's an opportunity to spend all day out in the field, watching birds and counting them."



A pileated woodpecker searches for insects inside a small tree branch. PROVIDED BY EVAN KIDD

On count day, "out in the field" can mean a lot of different things. People who live inside a count circle can participate by simply watching their bird feeder and sending their observations to the count compiler. Half of the Gatlinburg circle lies within Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and half lies



A male, left, and female common merganser perch on a rock in a river. PROVIDED BY WARREN BIELENBERG

outside it, so Watson tries to make sure that some of his participants — in recent years, more than 30 of them — get out on trails in the park to look for birds beyond eyeshot of the road. Some observers drive U.S. 441 through the Smokies, pulling out at each overlook to watch for birds, while some make the rounds in the lower-elevation areas outside the park, driving around until they find a place where they're allowed to pull over and walk around. Night shift counters are welcome too — after dark is the best time to call for owls.

All that data helps paint a comprehensive picture of how birds are faring over time — not just in the Great Smoky

Mountains but across the continent as well. The overall picture is quite bleak. Dubbed the "three billion birds report," a 2019 research article published in the journal "Science" used a variety of datasets, including the CBC, to show that bird populations in the U.S. and Canada had declined by 29% — or nearly 3 billion — since 1970.

"The species that seem to be doing the worst are the birds that are highly specialized and need large blocks of habitat," said Smalling.

Grassland birds like bobwhite quail and eastern meadowlarks, for example,

See BIRDS, Page 3A



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MOUNTAINS

Birds

Continued from Page 2A

have seen drastic declines over the past 50 years — in North Carolina, their numbers are down 98% and 70%, respectively. But more than 40% of species in the state are trending upward in population, Smalling said. This includes waterfowl species that have benefited from successful conservation efforts as well as species that adapt well to the kinds of changes humans make to the environment, like urban development and forest fragmentation. Some birds fit both categories.

“The bird that has increased the most in North Carolina is the Canada goose,” said Smalling. “We do a great job of making Canada goose habitat.”

Every year, more land is developed, leaving spots that were once reliable contributors to the CBC list is devoid of birds. But Great Smoky Mountains National Park — and much of the hundreds of thousands of acres of national forest land adjoining it — remains undeveloped.

“The mountains act as a stronghold for many interior forest birds,” Smalling explained. “Some things that are external to the region, like acid rain, can still impact birds, but in general those big blocks of forest really make this an extremely important area for conservation and species persistence.”

This habitat has become even more important in the face of a warming climate, with CBC data revealing how some birds’ winter ranges are shifting northward. Over the past five years, Watson said, the Gatlinburg circle has started logging brown-headed nuthatches and yellow-crowned night herons, species previously found in nearby counties but not recorded in the Smokies until the 2020 Christmas Bird Count. Smalling said changes like these are likely related to shifts in the climate.

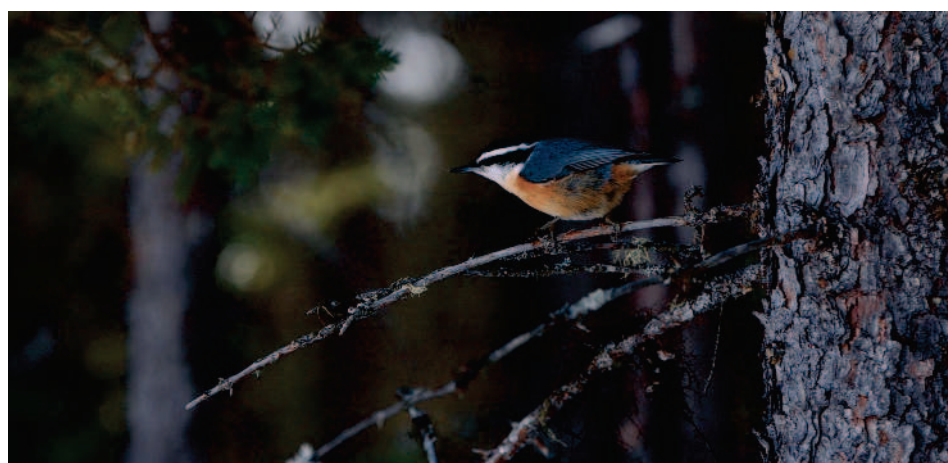
“We’re staying a little bit warmer, and there’s less snow than there used to be, so the birds are responding to that,” he said. “The Christmas Bird Count is a great way to quantify those changes.”



A belted kingfisher perches in Herbert Holt Park, located within the Gatlinburg Christmas Bird Count circle. PROVIDED BY EVAN KIDD

The Smokies, with their great variation in elevations and ecosystems, are an important refuge for many species — avian and otherwise — that may find their traditional home range a little too warm for comfort. Set to mark its 50th count this month, the Gatlinburg CBC circle has averaged 58 species over the years, ranging from a high of 75 species in 2020 to a low of 38 in 2004. Last year’s count recorded 64 different kinds of birds. A greater number of species may be spotted in the Smokies over the course of the calendar year, as some reside there only in the warmer months. The Christmas Bird Count captures only year-round and winter residents, while the All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory, managed by park partner Discover Life in America, lists 254 species that have been seen in the park at least once.

Count results can vary significantly based on participation and access to counting sites. If the park closes for inclement weather on the day of the count, then CBC teams can’t look for birds there. But the count goes on regardless. Whether the day dawns bright



The red-breasted nuthatch is a relatively common winter resident in high elevations. PROVIDED BY KATHY WEBB/NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY

and sunny or gray and wet, for many birders it’s one of the best parts of the year.

“I go out no matter what the weather is, even if it’s raining,” said Watson. “I know a lot of other people do too.”

Holly Kays is the lead writer for the 29,000-member Smokies Life, a non-

profit dedicated to supporting the scientific, historical, and interpretive activities of Great Smoky Mountains National Park by providing educational products and services such as this column. Learn more at SmokiesLife.org or reach the author at hollyk@smokieslife.org.



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