



Tar Heels look to continue win streak against Stanford

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Hellbenders may be added to endangered species list



Word from the Smokies
Holly Kays

By now, the story of Tropical Storm Helene is a tragically familiar one: the endless rain, the swollen rivers, the angry water indiscriminately destroying lives and homes. The storm killed more than 230 people across five states, including 104 confirmed dead in North Carolina and 18 in Tennessee.

But humans aren't the only species whose communities were ravaged by the floodwaters. Helene devastated some of the few remaining healthy populations of an iconic Appalachian species — the eastern hellbender. The species was in trouble even before the hurricane hit. Based on data gathered prior to Helene, the US Fish and Wildlife Service issued a Dec. 10, 2024, proposal to list the giant salamander as an endangered species.

"The best populations across the species' entire 15-state range were in Western North Carolina," said Will Harlan, southeast director and senior scientist for the Center for Biological Diversity, a nonprofit based in Tucson, Arizona, that works to decrease threats to biodiversity worldwide. "This was the one place where there were a few populations that were relatively stable and reproducing. Helene changed all that. The very strongholds that were left for hellbenders were exactly the same places that were hit hardest by Helene. That's just been tragic, and why this listing is even more timely and important."

Far eastern Tennessee had also held prime hellbender habitat, with populations thriving in the Nolichucky, Holston, and Doe rivers, all of which suffered Helene's wrath. This "critical stronghold" was severely damaged by the storm, Harlan said.

While Great Smoky Mountains National Park hosts several robust populations of hellbenders, many of its streams are too high in the watershed to offer prime hellbender habitat. But unlike many other parts of WNC the park was largely spared severe damage from Helene. Now the park's protected waterways are more critical than ever to the hellbender's survival.

"We're getting pinched on both sides at this point," said Jonathan Cox, wetlands biology technician for the park. "Whereas before the Tennessee side

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A hellbender stranded on dry ground during Tropical Storm Helene is rescued in Buncombe County. PROVIDED BY PHILLIP BRIGGS



An adult hellbender attempts to escape the floodwaters of Tropical Storm Helene. PROVIDED BY ANDY HILL/MOUNTAINTRUE

Visits to Great Smoky Mountains NP drop by 1 million

Damage from Helene likely reduced numbers

Devarrick Turner
Knoxville News Sentinel
USA TODAY NETWORK

The country's most visited national park got a little less popular in 2024.

Just over 12 million people visited the Smokies during 2024, according to preliminary attendance data from the National Park Service. That's still a lot of people, but it means visits to the Smokies last year dropped by more than 1 million compared to 2023.

Parts of Great Smoky Mountains National Park closed because of damage after Hurricane Helene, and remain closed, possibly keeping away some visitors.

Preliminary data shows 12,055,376 visits to the park in 2024. That is a 9.3% decrease from 13,297,648 in 2023, which was a 3% increase from 2022. The 2024 attendance is the lowest since 2018 and, at the same time, the sixth-highest in history.

Official 2024 visitor numbers will be released in the coming months.

What caused Great Smoky Mountains National Park visitation to drop?

The popular park experienced "substantial damage" in late September due to Hurricane Helene. The North Carolina side of the park was hit the hardest, washing out roads and bridges and damaging trails and historic sites. Balsam Mountain, Cataloochee and Big Creek areas, campgrounds, and roads remain closed as of Jan. 14.

Helene impacts and closures might contribute some to visitation loss. September 2024 attendance was 22% less than September 2023 and October 2024 attendance was 15% less than October 2023.

However, the preliminary numbers show Smokies attendance had dropped almost each month of the year in 2024 compared to the same month in 2023, with January seeing the biggest decrease (down 23%).

May (plus 3%) and November (plus 14%) were the only months to see attendance increases in 2024 compared to 2023.

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Israeli security Cabinet supports truce, hostage return deal

Netanyahu says ceasefire will take effect Sunday

James Mackenzie and Nidal al-Mughrabi
REUTERS

JERUSALEM — The Israeli security Cabinet has recommended approving the Gaza ceasefire and hostage return deal, ahead of a full Cabinet meeting expected later on Friday, a statement from the prime minister's office said.

The Cabinet was expected to give final ratification to the agreement, which Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said is expected to take effect on Sunday, with the release of the first hostages.

If successful, the ceasefire would halt fighting between Hamas and Israeli forces that has razed much of heavily urbanized Gaza, killed more than 46,000 people, and displaced most of the enclave's prewar population of 2.3 million several times over, according to local authorities.

It could also ease hostilities in the Middle East, where the Gaza war spread to include Iran and its proxies — Lebanon's Hezbollah, Yemen's Houthis and armed groups in Iraq as well as the occupied West Bank.

In Gaza itself on Friday, Israeli warplanes kept up heavy strikes, and the Civil Emergency Service said that at least 101 Palestinians, including 58 women and children, had been killed since the deal was announced on Wednesday.

Under the six-week first phase of the

three-stage deal, Hamas would release 33 Israeli hostages, including all women (soldiers and civilians), children, and men over 50.

Israel would release all Palestinian women and children under 19 detained in Israeli jails by the end of the first phase. The total number of Palestinians released will depend on hostages released, and could be between 990 and 1,650 Palestinians, including men, women and children.

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Kays

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was getting hammered outside the park due to development, now with the huge impact Helene has had on areas outside the park in North Carolina, I would agree that our populations within the park boundary are that much more important.”

The eastern hellbender, an aquatic salamander whose adults reach an average length of 20 inches — slightly less than two footballs laid end to end — has been in decline for decades. Feeding primarily on crayfish and breathing through its skin, the species is extremely sensitive to environmental degradation. And its long life cycle — hellbenders can live more than 30 years in the wild and need about six years to reach sexual maturity — means that populations can take a long time to recover once degraded.

One of two hellbender subspecies in the United States, the eastern hellbender was once abundant across its 15-state range, with 626 populations documented in the Appalachian region from northern Alabama through central New York; a separate population in Missouri was listed as endangered in 2021. The Ozark hellbender, which occurs in Missouri and Arkansas, was listed in 2011. In its review of the eastern hellbender’s status, the USFWS found that only 59% of the original 626 populations remain, and of those nearly two-thirds are in decline. Only 12% of existing populations are known to be stable and reproducing.

Following Helene, those numbers are likely even lower. In WNC, where hellbenders had been detected in more than 170 streams over the past 20 years, the region’s best hellbender habitat overlapped the area most affected by the flood, such as the Toe, Cane, and French Broad watersheds in Mitchell, Avery, Yancey, and Buncombe counties. While the full extent of the storm’s impact on hellbender populations is not yet known, Lori Williams, a wildlife biologist for the NC Wildlife Resources Commission who has spent much of the past two decades working on hellbender conservation, said that it’s likely severe.

“Knowing what we had with this crown jewel for this species, and then to get hammered as we did in such a short period of time, and to see so much of



Two hellbenders rest on the bottom of a mountain stream.

PROVIDED BY BEN DALTON/NC WILDLIFE RESOURCES COMMISSION

that destroyed, is mind boggling,” she said. “We have not even wrapped our brains around what we’re dealing with yet.”

The flood tore through in the middle of hellbender breeding season, blowing away nests full of eggs. Many adults were either swept along with the debris or forced to seek refuge in developed areas above the waterline, where they later desiccated and died. Williams has received “reliable reports” of as many as 100 hellbenders at a time found dead in debris piles across the region.

Due to the species’ slow rate of maturity, replacing damaged populations would be a long process under even the best of conditions. However, the flood’s aftermath is expected to exacerbate the issues that had already been spurring the hellbender’s decline. In its December listing proposal, the USFWS identified sedimentation as the biggest threat facing the species, followed by water quality degradation, habitat destruction, and direct mortality and removal due to “collection, persecution, recreation, or gravel mining.”

“I think the thing that has been driving their decline the most is sedimentation, which is really water pollution — it’s just dirt going in the streams,” said J.J. Apodaca, executive director of the Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy, a nonprofit in Louisville, Kentucky, that supports conservation in the U.S. “Many aquatic creatures need these tiny interstitial spaces between rocks for their young to survive and thrive, and once they get filled up with dirt and silt,

the next generation doesn’t survive. When you lose reproductive ability, the population starts crashing pretty quickly.”

Helene caused extreme sedimentation as the floodwaters ripped up trees and shrubs, tore up the riverbed, and carried along loose particles for deposit downstream. These particles included pollution from fuel oil, sewage, and chemical runoff from industrial sites, much of which likely settled in the waterways that hellbenders and other aquatic wildlife depend on for survival. Meanwhile, wind and water damaged an estimated 822,000 acres of forest in the region, according to a North Carolina Forest Service estimate, amplifying the acreage susceptible to ongoing sedimentation. Some of these vanished forests once grew alongside streams and rivers, shading the water and keeping it within the cooler temperature range required by species like the hellbender.

“The scars of Helene are going to keep impacting these waterways for decades,” Apodaca said.

Harlan called December’s endangered listing proposal an “exciting and well-deserved” development after years of effort from his organization. The Center for Biological Diversity first petitioned the USFWS to list the hellbender in 2010, but in 2019, the agency determined that the eastern hellbender did not meet the criteria for listing, publishing a final rule to that effect in March 2021. Five conservation organizations, including the Center for Biological Diversity, filed a lawsuit challenging the

rationale used to make this decision, and a federal court ruled in their favor in 2023, vacating the 2019 finding. The USFWS proposed the endangered listing on Dec. 10, 2024.

The agency has until Dec. 10, 2025, to either publish a final rule, withdraw the proposal, or issue an extension of up to six months. A public comment period is open through Feb. 11.

Harlan called the proposed listing a “beacon of hope” not only for the hellbender, but for the rivers and streams that are the “lifeblood” of so many communities ravaged by the storm. A designation would unlock funding to restore hellbender habitat, which would be accomplished by resurrecting the high-quality watersheds the region was known for prior to Helene.

“There’s a possibility that hellbender habitat funding could help restore clean drinking water and help restore riparian areas that have been especially hit hard by Helene,” he said. “I think both hellbenders and Helene-impacted communities can bounce back with the help of this listing.”

Though the challenges facing the hellbender are severe, wildlife professionals working toward the species’ recovery are optimistic about the future. The hellbender has a large, collaborative community of supporters and researchers behind it, with new research and conservation techniques being developed all the time. It is possible to save it, they say.

“As long as we use some common sense and our best scientific knowledge, I think we will have success in a lot of places,” Williams said. “I don’t think we’re ever going to get back completely what we’ve lost with Helene or even, bigger picture range-wide, what other states have lost over time. But we’re not going to lose this animal off the face of the earth.”

Holly Kays is the lead writer for the 29,000-member Smokies Life, a nonprofit 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 hollyk@smokieslife.org. To learn more about the hellbender listing proposal or comment by February 11, search docket number FWS-R3-ES-2024-0152 on Regulations.gov.

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