



UNC vs. Miami prediction and three things to watch

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Woman sentenced for string of barn fires

Ryley Ober
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE – Over three years ago, a series of fires burned down multiple barns and hay sheds in the Leicester area, including an 80-year-old chestnut barn that was cherished by one family for generations.

On Feb. 24, a jury in Buncombe County Superior Court found a Leicester woman guilty of setting the blazes and a string of related charges, according to a

news release from District Attorney Todd Williams' Office.

Ashley Debra Neal, 30, will serve no less than four years with a maximum of just over seven years in prison, under a sentencing by Superior Court Judge Alan Z. Thornburg on Feb. 24. She is now one of three co-defendants to be sentenced for the fires.

Buncombe County Sheriff's deputies responded to a barn fire on Worley Cove Road, as well as three others in Leicester and Sandy Mush, around 6:30 a.m. Nov. 3, 2021, the Citizen Times reported. The

other barns up in flames were on Old Newfound, Gilbert and Mailon King roads.

No humans or animals were injured in the fires, but the total damage to all four barns was more than \$1 million, according to then-sheriff spokesperson Aaron Sarver.

The sheriff's office led an investigation alongside local fire departments and the State Bureau of Investigation, which resulted in several charges against Neal and two co-defendants, Blake Cameron Williams, 25, of Leices-

ter, and Anthony DeWayne Boyd, 23, of Canton.

Neal was convicted of the following charges, according to the news release:

- Three counts of burning certain buildings
- Four counts of felony conspiracy to commit the arsons
- Five counts of burning personal property
- Five counts of malicious use of explosive device

See **BARN FIRES**, Page 4A



Doug Bruce, right, works with Keith Langdon, now-retired supervisory biologist at Great Smoky Mountains National Park, to document species in Cades Cove. PROVIDED BY MINDY FAWVER

DLiA marks milestone in species inventory



Word from the Smokies
Holly Kays
Guest columnist
USA TODAY NETWORK

Mindy Fawver is retired from a career in commercial photography and graphic design, while her husband, Doug Bruce, works as an industrial alignment engineer; neither has a professional background in biology, conservation or taxonomy. But together, the couple has documented more than 60 species in Great Smoky Mountains National Park never before recorded there.

"We go almost every weekend when the weather's good," said Bruce, who lives with his wife near Oliver Springs, Tennessee. "We try to choose areas that aren't very well documented already."

Fawver and Bruce aren't the only non-scientists to have made significant contributions to the growing body of knowledge about species living in the Smokies via the community science app iNaturalist. In February, park partner Discover Life in America celebrated the 200,000th iNaturalist observation to be added to the Smokies All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory project, which aims to catalogue each individual species residing in the park. Since



A middle school student uses a tablet to photograph an iNaturalist observation during an October 2024 Discover Life in America iScience program. PROVIDED BY JAIMIE MATZKO/DISCOVER LIFE IN AMERICA

the ATBI began in 1998, 22,143 different species have been recorded in the Smokies, and iNaturalist users — who include scientists and park staff but also visitors, volunteers, and even children — have logged 6,939 of them in the app. These include 280 species that had not been seen inside the park before an iNaturalist user observed them.

See **MILESTONE**, Page 3A

Mexican plant bracing for tariffs

Duties set to hit Tuesday, barring deal

Lauren Villagran and Swapna Venugopal Ramaswamy
USA TODAY

CIUDAD JUÁREZ, Mexico – At manager Armando Cadena's factory near the U.S. border, the brake lights his workers build are a result of the globalization – and job exports – President Donald Trump has railed against.

But this plant is also part of the big investment by U.S. automakers to keep their factories in the Midwest competitive and car prices low.

That bet could take a hit Tuesday, when the president's 25% tariff on Mexican imports is set to go into effect, barring a last-minute deal.

"It's going to have a huge impact," Cadena said. "At the end of the day, it's the consumer, you or me, who are going to pay the tariff."

The president has promised to slap tariffs on countries he says aren't playing fair with the U.S. A tariff is a tax on imported goods, the cost of which is typically passed on to consumers.

Trump has delayed a 25% tariff he was set to impose on imports from Canada and Mexico. Trump said on Thursday that his proposed tariffs on Mexico and Canada will go into effect Tuesday as scheduled because drugs are still pouring into the U.S. from those countries.

Trump also said China will be charged an additional 10% on Tuesday, according to a post on his Truth Social platform.

All three countries have vowed retaliatory tariffs.

In Canada, Public Safety Minister David McGuinty said on Thursday that Canada has made progress on tightening security along the border and addressing drug smuggling.

China, in a letter to U.S. Trade Representative Jamieson Greer, said it and the United States should address concerns in economic and trade fields through equal dialogue and consultation, Reuters reported.

The U.S. goods trade deficit with the European Union was \$235.6 billion in 2024, an increase of 13% (\$26.9 billion) over 2023, according to the Office of the

See **TARIFFS**, Page 4A



MOUNTAINS

New nonprofit helps keep Hot Springs afloat

Johnny Casey

Asheville Citizen Times | USA TODAY NETWORK

HOT SPRINGS - A new nonprofit organization is helping Hot Springs businesses, residents and the town rebuild as the town plans for a grand reopening May 3.

Rebuild Hot Springs Area is a new nonprofit organization with a mission dedicated to providing relief and support to the residents, businesses and community organizations of Hot Springs and surrounding areas in times of crisis. The Madison County Tourism Development Authority and Rotary Club of Madison County have made donations to Rebuild.

"When the flood happened, you had people who immediately wanted to donate to help, so there was this need for having a nonprofit in town for being essentially the receptacle for that," said TJ Phillips, Rebuild Hot Springs Area's president.

So, a team of local stakeholders formed a new nonprofit, and the former Friends of the Hot Springs Library transferred the funds it raised to the new nonprofit, Rebuild Hot Springs Area.

Sonya Smith Phillips had been coordinating food, water and other goods donations from the outset of the town's rebuild efforts at Hot Springs Elementary School, while her husband, TJ, had been organizing construction and building material donations for the town.

Mary Helen Adamson is Rebuild Hot Springs Area's vice president. The team also is comprised of Benjamin Ray, Mary Dixon, Chris Donochod, Lisa Gahagan and Jodie Orozco.

Rebuild Hot Springs Area operates five funds:

- A fund for resident homeowners to help rebuild their homes.
- A fund to help businesses in reopening their doors, restoring operations and getting the community back to work.
- A fund for workers who are unemployed as a result of Helene.
- A fund that provides vital resources to first responders and law enforcement



Rebuild Hot Springs Area is a new nonprofit organization formed to financially compensate local residents, business owners and employees in Hot Springs following Tropical Storm Helene.

JOHNNY CASEY/THE NEWS-RECORD & SENTINEL

- A municipal fund to help the town and its local resources.

Rebuild Hot Springs Area also operates a general fund adaptable and distributed among our five other funds as needed on a case-by-case basis.

Rebuild Hot Springs Area's assistance helps residents in the interim period while homeowners and business owners wait to see when or if they'll receive government compensation.

"We're trying to just fund and meet the unmet needs," Phillips said, adding that many residents and business owners have yet to receive financial compensation from their insurance companies.

One of the projects Rebuild is assisting the town with is supplying portalets throughout downtown, as Hot Springs, like in Marshall, does not have a functional main sewer treatment plant.

According to Phillips, another big project the Re-

build team is focused on is rebuilding the town's public parking lot.

"There's no mechanism to get that qualified for FEMA reimbursement, because it's not a structure, or what they consider critical infrastructure, like the sewer plant," Phillips said.

According to Phillips and Sonya Smith Phillips, providing public parking will be a huge boon for local businesses as well, as Phillips referred to the local businesses reopening as quickly and safely as possible as "the engine" for helping to rebuild the town.

"Everybody gets to go back to work, the town gets tax money, it's really getting tourists to come back," Phillips said. "It helps everything to get everybody open."

Rebuild Hot Springs Area operates primarily off of private donations and utilizes signage showcasing large QR codes for visitors and residents to scan while driving through town, which sends them directly to the website.

Rebuild Hot Springs Area is also working with residents and business owners throughout the Hot Springs area, including in Spring Creek.

According to Phillips, Rebuild has received private donations as large as \$30,000.

In December, the Rebuild team donated \$115,000 to local employees who lost their jobs in Helene.

Phillips applauded the work of the local Long-term Recovery Group headed up by Community Housing Coalition Executive Director Chris Watson for its work in helping local homeowners secure long-term housing.

The service work of groups like these allow Rebuild Hot Springs Area to prioritize Hot Springs area businesses, Phillips said, adding that Rebuild hopes to distribute another round of funds to Hot Springs area employees soon.

"We are trying to get the businesses open as quickly as possible," Phillips said.

Johnny Casey is the Madison County communities reporter for The Citizen Times and The News-Record & Sentinel. He can be reached at 828-210-6074 or jcasey@citizentimes.com.

Milestone

Continued from Page 1A

"Every time we go out, we'll find things we've never seen before — it never gets boring," Fawver said. "Especially with the very small insects, most people don't ever see or notice them, so you're showing them a whole other world."

Though the park's larger lifeforms are already quite well documented, the smaller creatures — flies, wasps, beetles, moths, and the like — are more difficult to spot and identify. Bruce and Fawver concentrate their efforts on these easily overlooked animals, choosing one group of species to focus on each time they go to the park.

Their current subjects are leafhoppers, tiny yet incredibly colorful flying insects. Some are as small as 3 millimeters, a speck to the naked eye, so Fawver and Bruce come equipped with macro lenses on their DSLR cameras and kneepads to kneel on as they crawl around, eyes trained on the ground. Each trip yields hundreds of photos to be processed once they return home. For every observation uploaded to iNaturalist, they manually tag the location, enter any relevant notes, and identify the species as closely as possible. Then, experts using the app can verify the identification or ask any clarifying questions.

iNaturalist first launched in March 2008, and though some early users logged observations in the Smokies shortly thereafter, DLiA didn't start promoting it in earnest until 2019, when the organization established the precursor to its Smokies Most Wanted initiative. Smokies Most Wanted is a list of 100 species — some native, some invasive — for which more information is needed to aid park management decisions. Though DLiA encourages park visitors to log observations of any lifeform they see while in the park, sightings of these particular species are especially coveted.

"We were excited about the possibilities of park visitors using iNaturalist and being extra pairs of eyes around the park," said Will Kuhn, director of science and research for DLiA. "Since then, it has blossomed into this really neat dataset that represents all kinds of very common species but also some less common species."

Currently, the most-observed species in the Smokies ATBI project on iNaturalist are common yet delightful finds such as the pipevine swallowtail butterfly, great rhododendron (also known as rosebay rhododendron), mountain doghobble, and yellow wakerobin trillium. More unusual sightings make up the most-favored observations in the project — a vibrant Blackburnian warbler perched in a birch tree at Newfound Gap, a timber rattlesnake in the act of eating a chipmunk near Townsend, a gleaming saffron shiner fish found in the West Prong of the Little Pigeon River near Gatlinburg. Anyone can view these photos online, and creating a free account allows users to join the conversation and contribute their own observations and identifications.

"In a lot of the photos that are posted to iNaturalist, the subject will be interacting with something else," Kuhn said. "There are a ton of pictures of bugs on flowers or maybe pollinating flowers, for example. The data from iNaturalist is not only helping us to know what species are in the park, where they are in the park, and when they're active, but also what their associations are with other species."

This data, in turn, helps to build a bigger picture of



A stink bug nymph eats an unidentified caterpillar in an image captured near the Foothills Parkway at Walland. Observations like this showing interactions between different species help scientists better understand relationships between various kinds of animals. PROVIDED BY MINDY FAWVER

how the park's myriad ecosystems function, giving the National Park Service valuable insight into how to better protect the plants and animals they contain. Using data from the app, NPS can see where sensitive species are located and better understand where harmful invasive species occur.

Even someone who has never used iNaturalist before and has no experience with species identification can contribute. Photos can be taken inside the app or uploaded from elsewhere, and an AI algorithm uses the image and location data to generate a list of potential identifications. Observations are categorized as "research grade" only after multiple people have agreed on an identification, so novice users need not worry about being wrong — others can review their observation later to confirm or revise the ID.

"Some people will say, 'I don't even know what to observe,'" said Jaimie Matzko, director of communications and outreach for DLiA. "If nothing else, fruits, flowers, birds during migration, caterpillars, things

that are signifying seasonal changes are super valuable."

These seasonal markers contribute to a better understanding of phenology, the study of seasonal timing and cyclical patterns in the natural world. Phenological events can help reveal how changes in climate or elevation gradient impact the plants and animals living there.

Such insights are as much a part of DLiA's mission as the "inventory" component of the ATBI. Matzko compared the process to exchanging names after meeting someone new. A person's name is often the first thing you learn about them, but the name alone doesn't say much about who that individual is and how they relate to the world.

"The inventory part is the first step in getting to know life in the park, and the next step is asking questions," Matzko said. "In science, that's how you learn things — by asking questions and trying to figure out those more unique things about these species that we have found and documented."

DLiA expects future iNaturalist records to play an important role in improving scientific understanding of these connections and hopes to increase the pace of new observations. The park receives more than 12 million visits each year; if even a small percentage of visitors logged an iNaturalist observation during their trip, the dataset would expand rapidly.

Matzko said that inspiring kids to get involved and teaching them how to use iNaturalist is an important part of the effort's future. Through its iScience program, DLiA conducts regular biodiversity programs at schools across the Tennessee Valley Authority region in East Tennessee, and iNaturalist is part of the curriculum. The organization also plans to continue working with the National Park Service to educate visitors about how they can get involved.

"It's something that I think anyone can use and anyone can participate in," she said. "It's just finding a way that works for them. They might not know if the data is valuable or not, but it might turn out to be something that is really important. And even if it doesn't, they've learned something about the park, and that in and of itself is part of our goal."

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 at hollyk@smokieslife.org. To learn more about Smokies Most Wanted and get started with iNaturalist, visit DLiA.org/SmokiesMostWanted. The app is available free for Android and iPhone users.

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