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WORD FROM THE SMOKIES

Though small, insects are ecological giants



Jim Costa uses a butterfly net to capture flying insects for observation while leading a Smokies Life Branch Out event in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. HOLLY KAYS/SPECIAL TO THE ASHEVILLE CITIZEN TIMES

Holly Kays
Special to the Asheville Citizen Times

What initially draws my eyes to the tall, stalky plant growing near the Oconaluftee Visitor Center in Great Smoky Mountains National Park is the round, green bulge in a stem near its crown. Called galls, such growths are often caused by insects like wasps and flies, whose larvae use them as safe places to feed and grow. I'm excited to show it to 2025 Steve Kemp writer and illustrator in residence Jim and Leslie Costa, who

are leading a Smokies Life Branch Out event exploring the diversity of insects found in the area. But I've barely finished pointing out the find when a new discovery materializes in the tangle of early-fall weeds and grasses. It's a Chinese praying mantis, six inches long yet easy to miss — its green body blends in perfectly against the wingstem stalk it clings to. The longer I stare, the more creatures I see: a little brown caterpillar disguised as a stem, a green katydid whose wings have the

same texture as the tall grasses where it hides, a silver-spotted skipper caterpillar, its wrinkly green-yellow body topped with an absurdly large maroon neck and head. "People are understandably pretty smitten with large vertebrates, and I get that. We love those things too," said Jim. "But insects are just orders of magnitude more diverse, and in terms of their ecological impact, more significant."

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Despite shutdown, SNAP, WIC benefits to continue

Jacob Biba
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

North Carolina residents receiving benefits from two federal food assistance programs will continue to do so, at least through October, despite the shutdown of the federal government, the state health department announced in an Oct. 8 news release. In its release, the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services said it's awaiting guidance from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which oversees the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and the Women, Infants and Children program, on future impacts if the shutdown were to continue into November. The shutdown just entered its second week. "Food and nutrition are foundational to good health and people should not have to worry about their families and communities going hungry," the state's health secretary Dr. Dev Sangvai said in the release. "NCDHHS hopes for a quick resolution to the federal shutdown to ensure people in North Carolina are not at risk of losing critical food benefits."

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, serves 1.4 million people in North Carolina, according to the state health department. As of April 2025, more than 29,000 Buncombe County residents participated in SNAP, according to NCDHHS data. In Henderson County, more than 9,000 people were enrolled. The Women, Infants and Children, or WIC, program provides food, breastfeeding support, nutrition

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Israeli troops pull back as Gaza ceasefire begins

Zac Anderson and Francesca Chambers
USA TODAY

A huge column of displaced Palestinians streamed back through the dust and rubble toward Gaza City, Gaza Strip, on Oct. 10 after a ceasefire between Isra-

el and Hamas went into effect and Israeli troops began pulling back from parts of the territory. "Thank God my house is still standing," said Ismail Zayda, 40. "But the place is destroyed, my neighbors' houses are destroyed, entire districts have gone."

The Israel Defense Forces announced the ceasefire was in effect at noon local time. An Oct. 10 statement from the IDF said Israeli forces have repositioned "along the updated deployment lines" and were preparing for the return of hostages held in Gaza. The statement warned that troops "will continue to re-

move any immediate threat." The approval of the initial stage of President Donald Trump's 20-point peace plan represented a milestone in the effort to bring the two-year-old war to a close and came after hours of debate

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MOUNTAINS

No charges in deadly Buncombe County shooting

Ryley Ober

Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

No charges will be filed after a man was shot and killed in northern Buncombe County the evening of Oct. 8, the sheriff’s office announced.

After reviewing the evidence, the Buncombe County Sheriff’s Office determined the shooter used deadly force in

self-defense and defense of others in the Kreston Drive home, the agency said just after 4:30 p.m. Oct. 9. Detectives consulted with the Buncombe County District Attorney’s Office before deciding not to press charges, the news release said.

Just after 6 p.m. Oct. 8, patrol deputies responded to a domestic disturbance call in the Bear Creek community and were told a gunshot had been heard, according to the release.

When deputies arrived to the house on Kreston Drive, near the Madison County line, they found William Jennings Bryan Clay III, 55, dead at the scene. The Criminal Investigation Division and Crime Scene Investigation Team also responded to the address Oct. 9.

“Our laws allow individuals to defend themselves and/or third parties when in fear of their life,” Capt. Chris Stockton

said in the news release.

“At the same time, this incident forever changed the lives of several community members. Again, our hearts go out to them as they navigate this complex time.”

Ryley Ober is the Public Safety Reporter for Asheville Citizen Times, part of the USA Today Network. Email her at robber@gannett.com and follow her on Twitter [@ryleyober](https://twitter.com/ryleyober)

Insects

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From elephants and earthworms to algae and aloe, there are 2.1 million named species on planet Earth — and more than half, 59 percent, are insects. In Great Smoky Mountains National Park, insects account for 48 percent of the 22,795 species documented so far. Though black bears and elk are the favored subjects of photographs and vacation memories, insects are far more numerous and far more foundational to the ecosystems they serve.

Trained as entomologists, Jim and Leslie Costa both have a passion for insects. Jim is a biology professor and executive director of Western Carolina University’s Highlands Biological Station; his wife Leslie Costa specializes in scientific illustrations. Together, they’ve cultivated a lifelong appreciation for the insect world and the many mysteries it still holds. As this year’s writer and illustrator in residence, they’re bringing that passion to bear on a singular mission: to craft a unique guide inviting others to gain an understanding and appreciation of insects in the Smokies—and by extension, everywhere.

“Insects are such a big part of the ecology here, and it’s such an interesting group,” Jim said. “There’s so much diversity, a lot of really beautiful and cool species. While the park has a wonderful field guide series, with the exception of butterflies and moths there are none on insects, yet that is the largest and most diverse group of animals in the Smokies. I was excited about the prospect of filling that gap and in the process helping park visitors better understand what really is a significant facet of park diversity.”

Each year, the Steve Kemp residency offers a chosen writer the opportunity to

spend six weeks living in the park working on the project of their choosing. The Costas, who reside in Cullowhee, North Carolina, split their 2025 residency into three two-week stays, dividing their time between the spring, summer, and fall seasons in order to observe a larger cross-section of the park’s insect species.

“The best thing for us has been just being out in the park, on the Tennessee side especially, since we live on the North Carolina side and have explored there more — being out and being able to explore trails that we haven’t visited and documenting the incredible insects that we’ve seen,” said Leslie. “Every time we’ve gone out, we’ve seen things on our list that we wanted to see and other things that were a surprise.”

Once complete, the Costas’ insect book will be markedly different from Smokies Life’s existing catalogue of field guides, because while it’s no problem for a single volume to include all 70 species of mammals found in the Smokies or all 85 species of reptiles and amphibians, no printed book would ever be able to describe the nearly 11,000 insect species known to occur there. For the Costas, designing the approach is as important as developing content, and it will take time to pull off—the book is still more than a year away from publication.

“One of the things that we wanted to include in this guide from the get-go was insect signs,” Jim said. “The idea being that people will notice insects to some extent, especially the more obvious groups like butterflies, but to give them a better sense that insects are really everywhere, all around us, we want to draw attention to their signs — insect calling cards, from galls and nests to tracings left on leaves and bark.”

Branch Out participants got a glimpse of some of the material these essays might include during the presentation Jim gave before the bug search moved outdoors. He offered an over-

view not only of which species might be visible in the park that day, but of how they interact with each other and why they’re important. Insects are the foundation of the food web and perform an array of jobs without which the ecosystem wouldn’t function: pollinating flowers, decomposing fallen leaves, and serving as an indispensable food source for countless species, including birds.

“The base of the ‘Great Pyramid’ of ecology, in terms of biomass, in terms of diversity — the interface between all that energy plants harvest from the sun and the whole world of the animal kingdom — is insects,” Jim said. “It’s pretty amazing to think about how important the group is. And for that reason, I think that we should really take note of what has now been very well-documented as a pretty significant insect decline worldwide.”

Though there are no definitive answers as to why insects are declining, recent studies make it clear that they are — and quite dramatically. A 2017 study in Germany documented a 76 percent decrease in the biomass of flying insects over a 27-year period, while a more recent US study found a 72.4 percent decline in insect diversity between 2004 and 2024 in the “fairly pristine” alpine meadows of Colorado.

“I think that that gives our book a new a sense of urgency, and how we want people in the park but also elsewhere to better understand insect diversity, better understand what is, after all, the biggest proportion of the animal kingdom,” Jim said.

But Jim’s message wasn’t just alarm bells. He encouraged his audience to help support their insect neighbors by landscaping with native plants and shared some of the wonderous ways in which insects interact with plants, predators, and each other. Some species of flowers can be pollinated only by insects that buzz at just the right frequency to trigger a shower of pollen. Certain

bee species clip perfect circles out of tree leaves to build nests for their young. And an array of adaptations help various types of caterpillars avoid becoming the snack of a hungry bird. These are all topics Jim hopes to delve into further as he writes the book.

“Programs like Branch Out make me think about how to communicate these ideas to a general audience,” Jim said.

He and Leslie have also written several pieces for the Smokies LIVE blog.

“Ultimately, we hope to inspire visitors to just be curious and learn something about a whole new dimension of the park too,” he said.

And, perhaps, experience the joy of an autumn afternoon spent experiencing it firsthand.

“There’s nothing better,” said Leslie, “than getting out and seeing what insect surprises await you.”

Applications for the 2026 Steve Kemp Writer’s Residency are open until November 1. The selected writer will live in Great Smoky Mountains National Park for six weeks in 2026, learning about the park, working in their chosen genre, and having the opportunity to spend one-on-one time with Steve Kemp. Housing and a small stipend are provided. Visit SmokiesLife.org/the-steve-kemp-writers-residency-to-apply.

Branch Out events are open to participants in Smokies Life’s Park Keeper membership program. From birdwatching to nature journaling, a variety of programs led by knowledgeable and experienced guides and naturalists remain on the calendar for 2025. Learn more at SmokiesLife.org/membership.

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.

Benefits

Continued from Page 1A

education and other services to approximately 262,000 people across the state, according to the department. There are 4,651 WIC participants in Buncombe County and 2,166 participants in Hen-

derson County, NCDHHS said.

“Poor access to nutrition is linked to poor health outcomes for infants and children,” Yvonne Copeland, the department’s director of child and family well-being, said in the release. “We hope there is progress in passing a federal spending plan to ensure WIC continues to provide crucial support to North Carolina families at a time-critical stage of

early childhood development.”

The federal shutdown comes just three months after Republicans in Congress passed a sweeping tax bill that is expected cut more than \$250 billion from SNAP over the next 10 years.

The state health department said the bill, signed into law by President Donald Trump in July, could put North Carolina on the hook for \$420 million in extra cost

share. It could even force the state to withdraw from the program entirely, which would further strain food banks and non-profits already facing a surge of need in the aftermath of Tropical Storm Helene, the Citizen Times previously reported.

Jacob Biba is the Helene recovery reporter at the Asheville Citizen Times, part of the USA TODAY Network. Email him at jbiba@citizentimes.com.

Ceasefire

Continued from Page 1A

by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s Cabinet which went into the early-morning hours of Oct. 10.

The exiled Gaza chief of Hamas, Khalil Al-Hayya, said he had received guarantees from the United States and other mediators that the war was over.

Multiple attempts have failed to defuse the war that began on Oct. 7, 2023, when Hamas attacked Israel and killed 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and took

251 people hostage.

The first phase of Trump’s plan called for the release of Israeli hostages within 72 hours of an agreement being reached in exchange for 250 Palestinians serving long terms in Israeli prisons and 1,700 others detained in Gaza during the war.

U.S. special envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff wrote Oct. 10 on social media that the 72-hour period has begun.

Of the 48 remaining hostages in Gaza, 20 are believed to be alive.

The first phase also calls for Israeli forces to withdraw from some of Gaza’s

major urban areas, though they will still control roughly half of the enclave’s territory.

Netanyahu said in a televised address that Israeli forces would stay in Gaza to ensure the territory was demilitarized and Hamas disarmed in future stages of Trump’s plan.

“If this is achieved the easy way then that will be good, and if not then it will be achieved the hard way,” he said.

In Khan Younis, in the southern Gaza Strip, some Israeli troops pulled back from the area near the border but tank shelling was heard, according to residents in contact with Reuters.

The United States is preparing to deploy up to 200 troops to help monitor a ceasefire and support a stabilization force in Gaza, White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt confirmed in a statement.

No U.S. troops are intended to go into Gaza, according to an official familiar with the planning.

The joint task force is likely to include Egyptian, Qatari, Turkish and United Arab Emirates armed forces, a senior official added.

Trump said he hoped to visit the Middle East in the coming days.

Contributing: Reuters

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