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# CITIZEN TIMES

FRIDAY, MAY 22, 2026 | CITIZEN-TIMES.COM

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

## NC Senate approves income tax cap change

Lynn Bonner  
NC Newsline

N.C. Senate Republicans in the state legislature voted to put a proposed change to the North Carolina constitution on the November ballot that would cap the tax rate for individuals at 3.5%. The Senate voted 30-18 along party lines.

Democrats maintained that the proposal is unnecessary and irresponsible, putting the state in a bind when natural disasters strike, while Republicans said voters should decide the maximum tax rate.

North Carolinians are struggling with higher gas prices and food prices, said Sen. Mike Lee (R-New Hanover). "We've made a commitment to the voters, to the citizens of North Carolina, to reduce the tax burden on them," he said. "It's just one way we can do it — is to put it to them. It's not us making the decision."

Voters passed a constitutional amendment capping the tax rate at 7% in 2018.

The latest amendment would not immediately change the tax rate.

See **NC SENATE**, Page 2A

## Pakistan aims to get peace talks on track

Jana Choukeir, Asif Shahzad and Elwely Elwelly  
REUTERS

DUBAI — Pakistan stepped up diplomacy on May 21 to hasten peace talks between the United States and Iran even as Tehran appeared to harden its stance over the nuclear issue amid new threats of strikes from President Donald Trump if he didn't get the "right answers."

In the six weeks since a fragile ceasefire took effect, talks to end the war have made little progress, while soaring oil prices are stoking inflation and straining the global economy. The average price for a gallon of gas in the United States was \$4.56, according to AAA. The highest average was in California, at \$6.14 a gallon.

Trump also faces domestic pressure ahead of November's midterm elections, with his approval rating near its lowest since he returned to the White House.

Pakistan's Army Chief Asim Munir will decide

See **PAKISTAN**, Page 2A

WORD FROM THE SMOKIES

## 'Chasing the light'



When viewed from above, mist filling the valleys resembles an enormous lake. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY BILL LEA

### Photographer packs decades of devotion to the park in every frame

Holly Kays

Special to the Asheville Citizen Times | USA TODAY NETWORK

Bill Lea says he's not a morning person. Yet many days, he's up before the sun, hurrying toward the western portion of Foothills Parkway to catch its first rays as they light up Rich Mountain and swath Townsend in golden beams.

"This is what I love doing: chasing the light," Lea says, easing his Subaru into park at one of his favorite overlooks. "All the subjects we shoot, everybody shoots—the only thing that makes the subject different is the light that you capture."

See **PHOTOGRAPHER**, Page 5A



ABOVE: In an early fall scene, a shaft of sunlight breaks through the forest.

LEFT: Then an assistant district ranger for Pisgah National Forest, Bill Lea keeps a bear cub warm while assisting researchers in 1985.

5th Annual

# DOWNTOWN ASHEVILLE

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# Photographer

Continued from Page 1A

The day's forecast calls for sunny skies and warm temperatures that will verge on hot by afternoon, but the early morning air is chilly. The moon still hangs large and milky in the sky, the newly risen sun saturating every crater with illusory warmth. Lea sets up his camera and points it toward a vista of blooming dogwoods, emerging leaves, and long shadows, careful to shoot so the sun shines at a 90-degree angle to his subject. Side lighting gives depth to the image, he says, and he plans his morning outings with the sunrise's orientation in mind—along with many other factors, such as cloud cover, humidity, and seasonal progression. In the background of every shot lies an intimate knowledge of the surrounding landscape.

"That's why you concentrate on your own backyard," he says. "Chances are you know it better than anywhere else you can go."

## Reframed along the Mississippi

In a way, Lea, now 73, owes his photography career to the muddy waters of the Mississippi Delta. An avid fisherman throughout his childhood in Illinois and Florida, Lea didn't expect that inclination to change after moving to Vicksburg, Mississippi, where he landed his first job out of college as a forester for the International Paper Company. But he just couldn't get used to that murky water.

"One day, I put down the fishing pole, picked up a camera, and fell in love with the adrenaline flow of photographing wildlife," he said. "I never looked back."

That was nearly half a century ago. Since then, Lea has published multiple photo books and calendars, sold thousands of photographs to an array of publications—BBC Wildlife, National Geographic books, and National Audubon Society calendars, to name a few—and become more familiar than just about anybody else with the way light brushes the animals and landscapes of Cades Cove, his favorite place in the world. Lea first experienced Cades Cove while traveling with his wife Klari shortly after their wedding in 1975, and he immediately knew it was special. From



Color spills through the mountains on an autumn morning. PROVIDED BY BILL LEA



Bill Lea's best-selling print, called "The Kiss," shows a young cub leaning down from a tree to kiss its mother on the nose following the loss of its sibling. PROVIDED BY BILL LEA



Bill Lea sets up his camera in Cades Cove, his favorite place to take a photo. PROVIDED BY HOLLY KAYS, COURTESY OF SMOKIES LIFE



Bill Lea was photographing this young bear cub sleeping when a tufted titmouse landed on its shoulder and began plucking hair from his back to use in her nest. PROVIDED BY BILL LEA

then on, Lea filtered every job opportunity that came his way through one particular lens: proximity to the Smokies.

Lea was "never good at wanting to cut trees," and at the first opportunity, he left International Paper for the US Forest Service, landing a job with the Ouachita National Forest in Arkansas. Then he began looking for positions near the Smokies. In 1983 Lea moved to Brevard, North Carolina, to work for Pisgah National Forest, and he finished his career as an interpretive specialist for the National Forests in North Carolina stationed in Franklin, North Carolina—about 45 minutes from the nearest park entrance and less than three hours from

Cades Cove. Now retired, he lives just 20 minutes away from his favorite spot.

In recent years, Lea's become enamored with landscape photography, but he's perhaps best known for his work with bears and other wildlife, creating iconic photos that offer a window into the everyday lives of these magnificent creatures. Though snapping the shutter takes only a moment, making a photograph can take all day.

"So many of my best photos are just pure luck—being at the right place at the right time," he said. "But you have to be out there for the luck to occur."

## A change in perspective

Leaving Foothills Parkway, we come back through Townsend and turn onto Laurel Creek Road toward Cades Cove.

Ordinarily, Lea tells me, he would never visit the cove on a clear, sunny morning like this one. It may be optimal weather for hiking and biking, but for photography the lighting conditions are "very boring."

He waits for the cloudy days, the rainy days, the days where the air is so humid you could just about wring it out like a rag. That's when he drives to the cove, finds a place to park, and walks through the woods, hoping to see a bear. But if he sees one ambling along the road, he drives right by—it upsets him when he sees people crowd or disturb these bears, and besides, he prefers to portray the animals' natural behavior. That only happens when they're relaxed and comfortable.

Lea became acquainted with his first black bears in 1993, when a friend told him about a place in northern Minnesota where he'd be sure to see a lot of them. The homestead of a retired logger, the place is now known as the Vince Shute Wildlife Sanctuary, which Lea co-founded. He and Klari had planned on three days for that first visit but ended up staying two weeks. It was a transformative experience.

See PHOTOGRAPHER, Page 6A

5th Annual

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A blooming dogwood tree seems to glow against its backdrop of mist-covered mountains during a springtime storm in Cades Cove. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY BILL LEA



A bull elk nuzzles a young calf.

## Photographer

Continued from Page 5A

"I guess because bears kind of look alike to the untrained eye, you tend to think that they're all alike," he said. "But they're individuals as different as every human is different. And so we just came to know them. When each one is such a unique individual, then that gives value to that life, because he or she is one of a kind."

He brought that philosophy back to the Smokies.

### Focus on the subject bear

When asked whether he has any favorite bears, Lea responds that he's "never met a bear I don't like" and tells story after story of the animals he's known over the years.

One "sweet, easy-going bear" he calls Hazel is the subject of his best-selling print, titled "The Kiss." Lea began photographing Hazel and her two cubs in spring 2015, but when he returned a couple days later, one of the cubs was missing. The remaining cub slept in a walnut tree while Hazel, still on the ground, made a "soft little grunting sound" intended to call her cub down to her.

"When the cub got to a crotch in the tree, Hazel stood up on her hind feet and the cub leaned down and kissed mom on the nose," Lea recalled. "Coming from both mom and cub, the feeling was, 'Oh man, I am so glad I have you,' because they had lost such an important part of their life, the loss of that other cub. It was just such a special moment."

Park rules require visitors to stay at least 50 yards away from wild animals like bears. But bears, like people, have differing requirements for personal space. Amiable Hazel was always perfectly comfortable with Lea's presence at that distance, but a bear he dubbed "Shadow" lay at the other end of the spectrum.

"Shadow was not an easy-going bear," Lea said. "She was uptight, and man, you could be much more than 50 yards away from her, and she'd still give you the eye."

Over the years, Lea has learned how to communicate his non-threatening intentions to the bears he encounters.

"Just like a dog, a bear can tell a lot about your intentions through your tone of voice, and predators don't announce their presence," he said. "They know you're there, so if you want the bear to relax and exhibit natural behavior, talking to them eases any potential tension."

Lea's love for bears eventually grew



A red fox sits in a meadow, spring blooms all around.

to rival his love for photography. He's become their advocate, using the scientific and experiential knowledge he's accumulated to conduct educational talks and appear on networks and programs including Dateline NBC, National Public Radio, and Animal Planet.

"We tend to fear what we don't understand," Lea said. "And once people have a chance to know what bears are really like, it changes their whole perspective."

*This story was originally published in the spring 2026 issue of Smokies Life Journal, a twice-yearly magazine that is the primary benefit of joining Smokies Life. To read more stories like this while*

*supporting Great Smoky Mountains National Park, visit [SmokiesLife.org/Membership](http://SmokiesLife.org/Membership) and become a Park Keeper. For more of Lea's work, visit [BillLea.com](http://BillLea.com). His newest photo book, Great Smoky Mountains: Memories of Mystic Mountain Moods, will be published this summer. For purchasing information, contact him at [BillLea.com/contact](mailto:BillLea.com/contact).*

*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](http://SmokiesLife.org), or reach the author at [hollyk@smokieslife.org](mailto:hollyk@smokieslife.org).*

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