

NATIONAL PARKS CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

SOUTHEAST REGIONAL FIELD REPORT

Summer 2026



**NATIONAL
PARKS**
CONSERVATION
ASSOCIATION

In Commemoration of America's 250th
Our fight to protect parks for the next 250 years.

Photo credit: Ron Sutherland

Letter From the Regional Director



Dear Park Protectors,

The work to protect and defend our national parks is ongoing and evolving, and can't happen without the support of our members. This year, as we pause to reflect on the 250th commemoration of our nation, we also consider the important role our national parks serve to connect us to the history and beauty that define this country.

And at NPCA, we've been fighting for over 100 years to ensure the legacy and impact of our national parks are protected for generations to come.

In the Southeast, thanks to the commitment of supporters like you, we helped secure critical protections for park ecosystems by defending the Okefenokee Swamp from a proposed mining development., elevated community voices in the fight to protect Reconstruction Era National Park from a golf course development, continued efforts to expand landscape protections in the southern Appalachian landscape, and coordinated a 70 year commemorative train ride from Chicago to Greenwood, Mississippi in remembrance of Emmett Till.

At the same time, our national parks are facing mounting pressures—from climate change, censorship and erasure to understaffing and funding gaps. These challenges underscore the importance of sustained advocacy, science-based solutions, and strong public engagement.

Read on for a snapshot of where we've made progress, where work remains, and how your support continues to make a measurable difference.

Together, we are ensuring that our national parks not only endure but thrive for the next 250 years and beyond.

Warmly,
Eboni Preston Goddard Ph.D, Southeast Regional Director



Rooted

An Ecology of Memory Along the Coast

By: Joshua Jenkins, Mississippi & Alabama Field Representative

Like love, “home” is a concept that is at once simple yet complex.

Home can be both a physical dwelling and a spiritual refuge. It can be a structure bound by four walls or an entire geographic region. You know home when you sense it, yet its amorphous nature means that explaining home often feels like an obstacle greater than our vocabulary can ordinarily overcome.



For Gullah Geechee people, the physical home is a roughly 500-mile-long by 30-mile-wide strip of Southeastern United States coastline – stretching from Pender County, North Carolina to St. Johns County, Florida. It is ecologically defined by barrier islands, tidal wetlands and one quarter of the entire United States’ salt marshland.

But the spirit of the Gullah Geechee home, the sense of place, cannot be easily discerned by looking at a map or conducting an ecological survey. To better understand what home is in the Gullah Geechee context, you must talk to the people.

Over the past 18 months, in collaboration with the Park Institute of America, the Reconstruction Era National Historical Park and numerous partners, friends and colleagues, I gathered oral histories from Gullah Geechee knowledge holders; people who work to retain, practice and transfer the crafts, art forms and ways of life that define Gullah Geechee culture. The goal being to layer these stories, with photos, video, and sound, thereby creating a virtual storytelling exhibit that highlights the important work these folks do; in order to expand storytelling at the Reconstruction Era National Historical Park and within the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor.

A consistent theme that permeated the stories and testimonies of the knowledge holders is that while the physical landscape provides a container for home, for Gullah Geechee folks, home is rooted in relationships.

Above: Stanley Walker on Sapelo Island, credit: Joshua Jenkins

Relationships with one another, the land, and the water.

Relationships with the past, the present, and the future.

All bound in a perpetual loop of reciprocity; of give and take.

Indeed, Gullah Geechee Elder Carlie Towne says, “We have a saying “the water bring us and the water take us.” So, with those kinds of things, we reflect on the fact that we are connected to the waterways and to the air, and we are the stewards of it.”

It is no surprise then, that some of the greatest threats to the Gullah Geechee way of life, gentrification, land loss, commercial fishing practices, and sea level rise, are all phenomena that result from breaks in the chain of reciprocity between one another and the natural world.

While, like love, home often proves to be a tough concept to grasp, like love; home requires care, maintenance, and stewardship to survive.

Evidence Based Advocacy

How science is helping to protect wildlife in the Southern Appalachian Mountains

By: Jeff Hunter, Southern Appalachian Director

One of the best aspects of working for the National Parks Conservation Association is the variety of issues that I get to work on. At the core of that work is advocacy to protect parks like Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the Blue Ridge Parkway, the Appalachian National Scenic Trail and Cape Hatteras National Seashore. Sometimes that advocacy involves lobbying Congress to ensure adequate funding for our national parks, or opposing threats to parks and the visitor experience.



While my colleagues and I often focus on what happens inside park parameters, a lot of our work takes place beyond park boundaries. That's especially true when it comes to protecting wildlife.

In 2017, I began working on a seemingly intractable issue; reducing wildlife-vehicle collisions on a 28-mile stretch of Interstate 40 outside the boundaries of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Early on, it became clear that we needed to undertake research to determine where the mortality hotspots are, and to provide solutions based upon the data that we gathered.

Problem is... NPCA has not historically conducted field research, and we did not have the skills in-house to do so. In 2018, we hired Conservation Biologist Steve Goodman and partnered with Wildlands Network to undertake research along I-40 in the Pigeon River Gorge. In addition to the Smokies, the Appalachian Trail passes beneath the highway at the Tennessee - North Carolina border, so this is clearly a park issue.



Top Right: tagging elks allows NPCA and partners to track their movements and patterns. credit: Liz Hillard, **Left:** Collaboration is key to the success of the Safe Passage program. credit: NPCA and Wildlands Network, **Bottom Right:** NPCA and partners work to deploy wildlife cameras and collect wildlife data. credit: NPCA & Wildlands Network

Steve partnered with Liz Hillard from Wildlands Network and together they spent 3 years conducting research. This involved placing 120 wildlife cameras in the highway right-of-way to determine where wildlife was encroaching on the highway. They also conducted weekly driving surveys to look for animal carcasses to determine where critters were being hit and killed. Lastly, Wildlands Network worked with state and federal agencies to place GPS collars on 13 elk to see how they interacted with the roadway. Together, the data from these activities allowed us to offer recommendations to the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT), and we did so in 2023 when we released our findings and recommendations.

That's only part of the work though. While Steve led the research side of the equation, I worked to build a coalition that includes non-profits, Tribal representation, and state and federal agencies. *Together* we have built a community of practice as it relates to wildlife crossings. That's how you get big things done.

To date, NCDOT has implemented parts of 9 of our 20 recommendations for mitigation. Funding has been the biggest obstacle to doing more. In 2023 we secured \$2 million from the legislature; and are overjoyed to share that the North Carolina General Assembly recently approved \$10.2 million in appropriation funds for wildlife crossings and mitigation strategies including underpasses, overpasses, and strategically aligned wildlife fencing. This permanent funding source is recurring every two years and is a major victory for the Safe Passage coalition.



Above: Wildlife cameras along I-40 have captured a number of species using the wildlife tunnels, credit: Steve Goodman



Above: Cerulean Warbler and Wood Thrush, credit: Pam Linge & Fernando Burgalin Sequeria, McCaulayLibrary

In 2023, building on our work along I-40, Steve began a 2-year road ecology research project along Interstate 26 in Madison County, NC and Unicoi County, TN. This time, working without a field partner, Steve deployed approximately 50 wildlife cameras and worked with local citizens to complete weekly mortality driving surveys. As I write this article, Steve and I are finalizing our research report which will provide recommendations for mitigation to the DOTs. We plan to release this document later in 2026.

This work is made possible by support from NPCA members like you! Thank you very much.

In late 2023, Steve and I hatched a plan to support our local partners who have been seeking to protect the Craggy Mountains in North Carolina's Pisgah National Forest. This beloved area is the viewshed looking west from Craggy Gardens along the Blue Ridge Parkway. MountainTrue, Friends of Big Ivy and other groups have been advocating for North Carolina's first national scenic area, which would protect nearly 16,000 acres of biologically diverse forest habitat including approximately 4000 acres of old growth

forest. We knew that the area was biologically diverse, but there were a lot of data gaps related to breeding birds.

In 2024, using bioacoustics recorders, Steve began a research project to study the bird populations in Big Ivy. These devices can be programmed to record the soundscape including bird song. But they must be deployed in the field, and the SD cards need to be retrieved. Once data is gathered, Steve runs it through a software program developed by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. That software creates a spreadsheet identifying the bird species found in the forest.

Working closely with partners, volunteers, students, and academics, we deployed equipment throughout the forest. In year one, we collected terabytes of data! We have several focal species including Cerulean Warbler, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Wood Thrush and Veery. All these species are neotropical migrants, meaning that they breed here in North America, but spend most of the year in Central and South America. The populations of these species are declining precipitously. Cerulean Warblers have declined by 70% in the past 50 years; Wood Thrush more than 50%. Protecting intact breeding habitat is crucial to stemming these declines.

While Steve is a meticulous planner, what we didn't anticipate was Hurricane Helene hitting Western NC in late September 2024. The storm decimated parts of the forest, including the core Cerulean Warbler breeding area. While that is truly unfortunate, we found ourselves with a golden dataset. Having pre-storm baseline data is incredibly valuable, and agencies like the US Forest Service and the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission took notice. In 2025 we completed year two of our data collection, with a twist. Because of the generosity of one of our donors, we were able to purchase bat detectors, which were deployed throughout the forest. These devices have allowed us to confirm the presence of several different species of endangered bats. Year three of our field season is ongoing through June 2026.



Just last week, my partners and I met with a staff member for Congressman Chuck Edwards. We shared information about our research and implored the congressman to introduce legislation to protect the Craggies for both present and future generations. When this legislation is eventually passed and signed into law,

local communities will have their drinking water supply protected. Birds, bears and other critters will have their habitat protected from clearcut logging. Blue Ridge Parkway visitors will be able to see and photograph the incredible views from Craggy Gardens. And hikers like you and I can continue to hike amongst the big trees and listen to the dawn chorus.

Help Defend the “Clean Air” for Parks Rule

By: Natalie Levine, Campaign Director, Clean Air Program



Regional haze, made up of a cocktail of air pollutants including particulate matter, nitrogen oxides and sulfur dioxide, scatters and blocks light which creates hazy skies that reduce visibility and jeopardize public health.

This haze pollution comes from many different industries, energy sources and vehicles, and is responsible for stripping upwards of 50 miles from our views in national parks across the country, including treasured places like Great Smoky Mountains and Mammoth Cave National Parks. Known as the ‘Clean Air for Parks’ Rule, the Clean Air Act’s Regional Haze Rule is specifically intended to clean up haze pollution and improve air quality and scenic views in 156 national parks and wilderness areas, ***the only regulation of its kind.***

For decades, NPCA and park advocates like you, have called for strong air quality protections in national parks across the Southeast and the country, through comments and testimony on proposed regional haze plans. This advocacy has been critical in achieving important clean air gains that have literally cleared our views in places like the Great Smoky Mountains. Now we need your help again to stand up in defense of the Clean Air for Parks Rule to ensure the continued decrease in air pollution harming our beloved parks and communities across the region.

Above: Mammoth Cave National Park,
credit: Zrfphoto @Dreamstime

Threats to Clean Air Protection

Later this summer, we're expecting the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to propose revisions to the Regional Haze Rule that could fundamentally change how parks and wilderness areas are protected from manmade air pollution. Through the EPA's deregulatory actions over the past 1.5 years, air pollution that causes haze is already rising by over 13% and further changes to the Regional Haze Rule could undermine past successes and worsen national park air quality, scenic views, park staff and visitor health, and visitor experiences.

Mammoth Cave Remains at Risk

Exacerbating the problem, in June, the EPA proposed to approve of Kentucky's 2nd Round Regional Haze Plan. This action is disappointing as the state of Kentucky put forth a plan that failed to reduce haze emissions even though Mammoth Cave National Park is one of the most haze polluted parks in the country. Kentucky's very old and dirty coal plants also likely dirty the air in over 20 other protected national parks and wilderness areas across the region and need cost-effective modern pollution controls. Please stay tuned for possible action to take on EPA's proposal for Kentucky.

Take Action

Please help us in supporting a strong Clean Air for Parks Rule by contacting Natalie Levine, Clean Air Campaign Director at nlevine@npca.org.



“We all deserve clean and clear air.”

Protecting the Past

Honoring Emmett Till Through Memory, Movement, and Youth Engagement

By: Mechelle Chane, Mississippi Civil Rights Era Fellow



In communities across the Mississippi Delta, the legacy of Emmett Till remains deeply rooted. Yet, for many young people, his story is only just beginning to be understood.

Last year, local youth groups came together to commemorate what would have been Till's 84th birthday through a powerful initiative known

as the "Journey of Remembrance." For many youth participants, it marked their first time learning about Emmett Till, despite living in the very region where his story unfolded and continues to shape the cultural and historical landscape.

Building on that momentum, a new commemoration is now underway. July 25th, on what would have been Emmett Till's 85th birthday, the National Parks Conservation Association, in collaboration with community partners and local organizations, is organizing a day of programming for families and the public. At the heart of this effort is a commemorative youth bike ride organized by the Emmett Till Interpretive Center and PR Event Management.

The bike ride is more than a symbolic gesture. It is designed to bring young people, particularly those from rural and historically marginalized communities, into outdoor spaces where they can experience joy, freedom, and connection. By encouraging youth to engage with green spaces, build relationships, and participate in shared activities, the initiative creates a meaningful bridge between past and present. The choice of a bike ride holds deep significance as well. Just one week before he was kidnapped and murdered at the age of 14, Emmett Till wrote a letter to his mother in Chicago. In it, he asked her to have his bicycle repaired and promised he would repay her.

Top Left: Youth groups gathered in 2025 for the first commemorative event to celebrate Emmett Till, credit: RJ Fitzpatrick



Mississippi Delta

It was the last letter he would ever send. This small but poignant detail offers a glimpse into who Emmett was beyond the headlines, a joyful, adventurous teenager who cherished the simple pleasure and independence that came with riding his bicycle.

Honoring that aspect of his life allows today's youth to connect with him not only as a historical figure, but as someone they can relate to- a kid who loved riding his bike.



The planned day of activities is part of NPCA's broader 250th anniversary campaign, United by Parks: The Places That Make Us. This national initiative highlights the many ways public lands and parks serve as spaces of reflection, connection, and shared history. Through this campaign, NPCA aims to ensure that parks are not only preserved, but also actively used as platforms for education, storytelling, and community building.

In partnership with local youth organizations, the July event will take place at the Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley National Monument in Sumner, Mississippi. This historic site, dedicated to preserving the memory of Emmett and honoring the advocacy of his mother, provides a powerful setting for reflection and learning.

Participants will also have the opportunity to take part in a tour of the monument. The tour is designed to deepen understanding of the site's historical significance while connecting it to broader themes in American history and the civil rights movement. For many young attendees, this will be a rare and impactful opportunity to engage with history in a place where it happened.

Beyond education, the event emphasizes wellness and community. By promoting physical activity through cycling and fostering a sense of belonging, we hope to create an experience that is both meaningful and uplifting.

This year's commemoration reflects a powerful idea: that remembrance and joy can coexist. By honoring Emmett Till through activities that celebrate life, community, and the outdoors, the event aims to create a space where young people can learn, reflect, and heal together. In doing so, they are ensuring that Emmett's story continues to resonate not just as a tragedy of the past, but as a call to connection, resilience, and possibility for generations to come.

Top Right: Youth groups gathered in 2025 for the first commemorative event to celebrate Emmett Till, credit: RJ Fitzpatrick

The Okefenokee Swamp

Protecting and Enhancing for the Long Haul

By: Chris Watson, Southeast Campaign Director

At 438,000 acres, the Okefenokee Swamp in south Georgia is a national Wilderness Area and the largest National Wildlife Refuge east of the Mississippi. The Refuge is a designated Wetland of International Importance, world-renowned for the biological diversity of



its vast labyrinth of cypress forests, pine islands, lily ponds, and blackwater channels, containing thousands of species, including the imperiled wood stork, eastern indigo snake, gopher tortoise, and red-cockaded woodpecker. The Swamp's American alligator population alone is estimated at 15,000. The Okefenokee is also the source of both the Suwannee and St. Marys rivers, two largely unspoiled waterways vital to Atlantic and shortnose sturgeons and other fish species in regional decline.

In June of 2025, a long six-year struggle to prevent mining on the edge of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge reached a successful outcome when Twin Pines Minerals, an Alabama-based company, agreed to sell all of their land holdings in the area – over 8,000 acres of surface area and accompanying mineral rights – to The Conservation Fund, a national land trust specializing in acquiring at-risk lands, for just under \$60 million. NPCA became a founding member of the Okefenokee Protection Alliance (OPA) – <https://protectokefenokee.org> – to oppose this proposed mine. OPA played a key role in defending this special place by helping to lay the groundwork of public and political support that made The Conservation Fund's land deal possible.

In March of 2026, the state of Georgia announced the acquisition of more than half of the site – about 4,000 acres – funded in part by a \$7 million grant from the Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Program. This land will now become Georgia's newest state wildlife management area, slated to open in 2027 under the Department of Natural Resources and managed to provide high-quality habitat and public access for hunting, fishing, and other outdoor recreation.

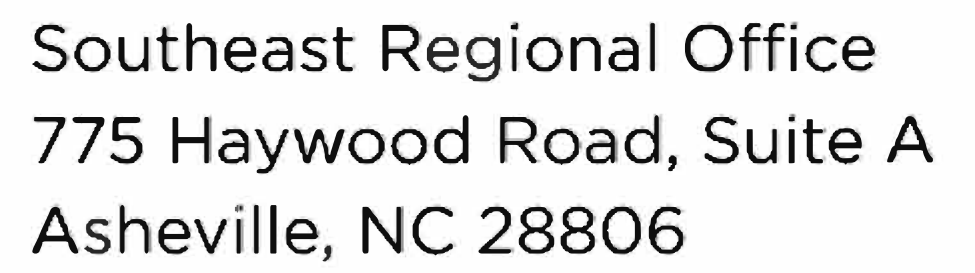
Top Right: Kayaking at the Okefenokee ,
credit: Larry A. Woodward/USFWS



And more good news is on the horizon. In December of 2024, the Department of the Interior nominated the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge to become an international World Heritage Site. This summer that nomination will be considered and voted on when the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) meets in Busan, South Korea from July 19th to July 29th. With a positive vote by the IUCN, the Okefenokee will become officially inscribed on the World Heritage List, bringing additional recognition of its exceptional ecology and biodiversity as one of the world's largest and most intact subtropical freshwater peatland ecosystems.

While the immediate threat of the Twin Pines mine has been defeated, the work is not finished. Other properties adjacent to the Twin Pines site along Trail Ridge – the geological feature that holds the swamp in place – are suitable for mining and could be threatened in the future.

Even though the Okefenokee is part of the national wildlife refuge system and not a national park unit, NPCA has recognized the necessity of helping to lead the effort to ensure the permanent protection of this biological jewel. We continue with our partners, as part of OPA, the work of crafting a permanent solution that will ensure the conservation of all of Trail Ridge and a different future for the greater Okefenokee region. The lesson is clear... Even when the situation seems most desperate, it is still possible to achieve a positive conservation outcome when people come together and tenaciously advocate for the good of the land and of the community.



Visit us at npca.org to learn more